

## Welcome Home

by Janet Rivenbark

*This was the first fan fiction I wrote. I think I had the idea that fan fiction kind of had to be SND, so that is what I wrote.*

Catherine stood at the window in the sterile white room overlooking the city of New York. It was late afternoon, and she was just back from another degrading prenatal exam if that was what you could call it. It had included an ultrasound, which had almost made it worth the humiliation this time. She had seen her baby!

Catherine had lost count of how many days she'd been here. From what she could see of the ground below, it looked like it might be late summer, but it was hard to tell, she couldn't really see any parks from this spot and very few trees at all.

One of the reasons she was so confused about the date was that for a while after she had first been kidnapped she had been kept in a windowless cell and had been drugged so many times that she had lost count of the days. She didn't know how long she had been there before they had moved her to this building. It could have been one day, or it could have been many more, she really didn't know. She did know that she had been in this room at least 23 hours a day for at least 6 months. She also knew pretty much where she was. What she could see from the window told her that she was somewhere just south of Central Park and probably between 8<sup>th</sup> and Madison Avenues. So close! She could have walked back to Vincent if she could have gotten out. Her room faced south, and she felt like she was close to the top of one of the taller buildings in Manhattan. She could identify several other buildings from her window, like the World Trade Center Towers, but couldn't really get a fix on exactly where she was, not that it would do her any good if she could; the place was a fortress!

Another thing that Catherine was sure of was that she was pregnant; couldn't miss that one. She'd found out only a few days before she was kidnapped, and she'd overheard the doctor commenting to the nurse that the pregnancy was nearing its end and that she should deliver within the next week.

And the last thing that Catherine fairly sure of was that she probably wouldn't live much beyond the birth of her child. She instinctively knew that the man everyone around here called Gabriel wanted her child. She vaguely remembered thinking that she'd heard Vincent when they had hurriedly moved her from her first prison to this one, so he likely knew about Vincent, and had somehow figured out from all the tests that the doctor had done that the child she was carrying was his. He probably wanted the child for all the reasons that Father had always worried so much about when Vincent came Above; he likely wanted to do medical testing, and God knew what else. The very thought was terrifying.

During the long months in this room, she had spent a lot of time talking quietly to the child in her womb. She had talked about Vincent, Father and Mary and all the rest of the wonderful people Below. She had also talked about her own parents, Jenny, Nancy, Joe and Peter. And at times,

especially lately when the baby had been very active, doing what felt like somersaults inside her she had sung her mother's lullaby to it until it quieted.

Catherine sighed then deserted her spot by the window to go sit on the bed and wait for her dinner tray to be delivered.

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As soon as he was finished with the exam, and the woman had been returned to her room, the doctor removed his lab coat, put on his suit jacket and went to Gabriel's office with his report.

After the report was duly delivered and all Gabriel's questions were answered the doctor had a question for Gabriel.

"Why the child?" he asked.

Gabriel paused for a moment as if he wasn't going to answer, then he said, "I think it was *Schopenhauer* that said *'the best of all possible worlds is not to have been born.'*" He turned away from the doctor and continued "When I was seven years old my father sold me... Children have an immense capacity for hatred; immense... I used to lie awake at night and taste it in my mouth... Kept me warm... When I was fifteen, I came back home and strangled my father while he slept... I cherish that day. That day I realized what is truly possible.

"I can never have children; I made sure of that. I wanted to give my child the greatest gift; never to have been born...

"I know what hunger tastes like... I know how far a man can travel on rage...

"Why does a dying man always cry out for his mother?"

"The world is a very simple place... Gravity; the fear of falling. That's all there is..."

"Do you believe in gifts? And things coming to you in their own time? I never did... I do now..."

"I own seven Rembrandt's; I have much to give..."

"This is no ordinary child... The child is a gift... to me." He stopped, his back still to the doctor.

The doctor hesitated before he spoke. "Sir, you said once before that the woman was only the vessel; does that mean that you want the woman disposed of after the child is born?"

Gabriel turned and looked at the doctor, "Exactly, Doctor."

"But, if I may express a professional opinion..." The doctor sounded hesitant.

"By all means." Gabriel nodded.

“Well, I’m not a pediatrician or an obstetrician, but in the last months I have done my best to brush up on those skills, and I feel that it might be in the best interests of the child to keep the mother alive.”

“And why is this?” asked Gabriel quietly as he moved to his chair and sat down.

“We know that the nature of the pregnancy is out of the normal range; we also know that the probable father is... not an ordinary human, so to speak. We don’t know anything about the physiology of the father, and we don’t know how much the child may be like him. We can’t know ahead of time whether or not the child will be able to tolerate any of the formulas that are made for fully human babies. It might be a good idea to keep the mother around so that she can breastfeed him.” As the doctor was saying this, he wasn’t even sure himself if that was his only reason for trying to convince Gabriel to keep the woman alive. Even he thought he might be doing it partly for the sake of the woman herself. To give the two some time together before she was *disposed* of.

“How long do you think the child might need her?” asked Gabriel.

“What I have read recommends that a baby be breastfed for at least 6 months. In this case, she should probably be available for the child until he is able to take all his nourishment from solid food rather than from a bottle or breast. How long that takes depends on how quickly the child develops. Considering the apparent abbreviated gestation, I would hazard a guess that the child wouldn’t need her longer than a year.”

Gabriel was quiet for a few moments. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I want you to ready her to be moved to my estate. And have all the medical equipment readied to move also. We will leave first thing in the morning.” He leaned over and punched a button on the intercom in front of him. “Pope, I will see you in my office immediately. Doctor, you’re dismissed.”

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The next morning breakfast was served at the usual time, but this time the nurse actually spoke to Catherine. “Please finish your breakfast quickly, then put on your robe and slippers. We will be taking a little trip.” That said, she turned and left the room.

Even though she wasn’t very hungry, she did manage to get down most of the scrambled eggs, toast and fruit juice, and she was obediently sitting on her bed in her robe and slippers when the nurse came back about 20 minutes later. She indicated that Catherine should follow. In the hall, they met the doctor. He told Catherine to follow him. They walked down the hall to an elevator where they were joined by a guard with an Uzi. They boarded the elevator and rode up to the roof where a helicopter was waiting.

Compared to the quiet of the last months, this seemed like being dropped into the middle of Times Square on New Year’s Eve. The sun was warm, and the doctor removed his suit coat, and loosened his tie, then indicated that Catherine should walk across the roof to the chopper with him, when they got to it he helped her into a seat in the back against the far window and then joined her.

Catherine’s nerves were getting the best of her; this was the most activity and noise she had experienced, and the first time she had been outside in months. The sunlight was blinding. As she

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leaned her forehead against the glass of the window, trying to steady herself as an involuntary shudder swept through her body. The doctor noticed it and thought she might be cold, so he draped his coat across her. This startled Catherine, and her eyes popped open just in time to see another man, one she'd never seen before get into the seat in front next to the pilot. In a matter of seconds, they were airborne.

Catherine's mind was going a mile a minute as she watched through eyes slit against the glare as the city passed below them. They were heading roughly south, but she had no idea where they might be going. As she shifted a little under the jacket, her hand came in contact with the doctor's wallet in the front pocket. Without really thinking about it, or about why she did it, she stealthily removed the wallet from the pocket, blindly removed several bills, and then replaced it in the pocket. She wadded the bills up, wrapped them in a tissue she held in her hand and jammed them into the pocket of her robe. A few minutes later she noticed that the chopper was beginning to descend, and she identified the landing place as somewhere on Staten Island.

They left the chopper before the blades quit spinning, and as she slid out of the back seat, the doctor again offered his hand to help her. She took it, but released it as soon as she was on solid ground, then she jammed her hands into the pockets of her robe, mostly to keep the money she had just stolen hidden.

The man who had been in the front seat was already across the lawn nearly to the house when the doctor told Catherine to follow the guards; they would take her to her room.

The room that they took her to was as different from the previous room as night was from day. The room she had just left was white: white walls, white ceiling, white doors, white vertical blinds at the window, narrow white bed, white nightstand, and white bedding. This new room was very nicely furnished. All dark wood, full sized bed, a couple chairs, a chest of drawers, a desk, nightstands, window seat, drapes. It had a heavy masculine feeling, but anything was better than where she had been. There were three doors in addition to the hall door, and it didn't take Catherine long to check what was on the other side of each. The first one was a closet, one of the others led into a small bathroom, there was no tub, but there was a good sized shower and the usual toilet and sink. The last door led into a small room that had been set up as a nursery. Again here all the furniture was dark and masculine, but there was a crib, changing table and a dresser full of all the things that a baby would need, everything from diapers to footed sleepers. As she explored her new surroundings, she also noted that there were two surveillance cameras in the nursery, but there didn't appear to be any in her room or the bathroom. Either they were pretty sure that she wouldn't try to escape without the baby or, these rooms hadn't originally been prepared with her in mind. As she was looking around the bedroom again, she glanced at the lamp on the desk. She picked it up and looked at the bottom. It had a piece of felt that was starting to peel a little. She peeled it a little further and stashed the money she had stolen from the doctor's wallet (she had been lucky and found she had four twenty's) in the bottom of the lamp.

She was sitting on the window seat gazing out the window when the doctor came in with a stack of books.

"You might want to take a look at these," he suggested as he put them on the desk. "There won't be an exam today," he added as he opened the door to leave, "all the medical equipment hasn't arrived yet."

After he closed and locked the door, Catherine went to the desk to see what he had brought. There were books on natural childbirth and a couple of books on child care and breastfeeding.

*Better late than never, I guess; maybe they are planning to let me live a little while after all,* she thought; then carried the books back to the window seat and opened the one on natural childbirth.

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It was just after lunch when Father met Mary in the corridor outside Vincent's chamber. Mary was carrying a lunch tray that looked like it had hardly been touched.

"Did he eat anything?" he asked.

"Not much, some fruit, a piece of bread, some tea," she said shaking her head. "He has lost so much weight. Most of his clothes are just hanging on him."

Father shook his head too, "Thank you, Mary. We all keep trying, but I don't know that we are doing any good. This obsession is killing him." He patted Mary's arm as she resumed her trip to the dining chamber and Father turned to go into Vincent's chamber.

He stood in the door watching Vincent, who was at his table, elbows on the table and his head resting in his hands.

"Good afternoon, son. I'm sorry I wasn't up when you returned this morning; how did the search go last night?" He crossed the chamber and sat in the chair across from Vincent.

"As usual, Father. I felt no trace of her." He didn't look up as he spoke.

"Have you slept since you returned?"

"No, I haven't even tried." This time Vincent did look up, and the weariness on his face was obvious.

"Why not, Vincent? You have been relieved of most of your duties; you should try to sleep."

"Most of the time I can't sleep. My mind just keeps replaying the same images, and then if I do sleep, I keep having the same dream, over and over again. I can't rest." He leaned back, and his head rested on the back of the chair as he stared at the ceiling of the chamber.

"What kind of images; what kind of dreams?" asked Father.

"Images of Catherine, as she was when I saw her last, or from Winterfest or from the times we spent listening to concerts in the park. Images of her on her balcony tending her plants. There are many of those, but the dream is always the same."

"What is the dream, Vincent? Maybe it means something, you know you've had meaningful dreams before," he prompted.

“This one isn’t prophetic; it is more like a memory except that I am sure it is not possible.”

“Tell me, Vincent.”

Vincent sat up straighter in his chair and looked at Father, and Father could have sworn that his complexion darkened in a blush. “I dream that Catherine and I... become... intimate.”

“But Vincent, those are normal dreams; nothing to be embarrassed about or to worry about,” Father assured him.

“No, Father. Not like that. I’ve had *those* dreams many times, and they always vary. Every time this dream it is the same; exactly the same. I dream that when Catherine came to me in the cavern when I was ill, we made love... At first, I don’t see anything; then I realize that I am flat on my back on the ground and Catherine is leaning over me. She is sobbing and saying “No, Vincent, not without me.” And then she begins kissing me. At first, I only respond to her kisses, but before I know what is happening we are in each other’s arms, and she is the one who is on her back, and I am looking down at her. I won’t go into details, but we definitely made love in the dream.”

“What do you think it might mean?” asked Father.

“I don’t know, but I was wondering if it is possible that it is a memory, not just a dream; that it could have happened that way.”

“I don’t know, son, anything is possible, I imagine. We were all waiting outside that chamber, hoping that all the awful sounds would stop, but finally, Catherine couldn’t stand it any longer, and she said she was going to you. I asked her not to, but she went anyway. The sounds went on for a while, then suddenly we all heard Catherine shout your name, then everything went quiet. The quiet was just as unnerving as the growling and roaring had been. I don’t know how long I waited; it seemed like forever, but it wasn’t long, maybe thirty to forty-five minutes, surely less than an hour; then I went in. I found Catherine sitting on the ground holding you. Your eyes were closed, and I wasn’t sure what to expect. I asked her how you were and she looked at me and smiled and said that you were alive. That was when you opened your eyes and looked at her.”

“Did she look like she was hurt or upset?” asked Vincent.

“Not that I noticed, but then I wasn’t really looking at Catherine. She could have been wearing clown makeup, and I doubt that I would have noticed. I’m sorry.” Father shook his head and reached over and patted Vincent’s hand where it rested on the arm of his chair.

“Is it possible?” asked Vincent, more of himself than of Father.

“It could be Son, but don’t let it eat at you so. It is obvious, that whatever happened in that cavern, Catherine was not harmed.” Father rose to leave, and Vincent rose also. He stepped over and embraced Father and thanked him for listening.

“Try to rest, Vincent. The dream doesn’t sound that disturbing, after all.”

“I’ll try, Father.”

Father left the chamber and made his way slowly back to his study where he met Mary as she arrived with a fresh pot of tea.

Mary poured two cups as they made themselves comfortable at the table.

“Were you able to get him to talk to you?” asked Mary.

“A little. He said that he hasn’t been sleeping because he keeps dreaming of Catherine.”

“Isn’t that to be expected? She is all he is thinking of right now, has been for months.”

“Yes, but he says he keeps having the same dream. He says that he dreams that he and Catherine made love when she went to him in that cavern when he was ill.” Father looked at Mary with a question in his eyes. “Do you think that is possible, Mary?”

“That he is dreaming it or that it actually happened that way?” she asked.

“That it really happened. Do you think she would have confided in anyone?”

“Her friend Jenny, maybe; Livie possibly, but I don’t really see Catherine as one of those women who shares all the intimate details of her life with her girlfriends.”

“If she would have confided in anyone, I would have thought it might have been you,” commented Father.

“She did talk to me a little about what Vincent had been like when she found him and how he first charged at her, poised to strike, but then collapsed, and didn’t breathe for what seem like forever. She never said that anything else happened.”

“Oh well, Mary. I just hope that talking about it might have defused it somewhat so that he can sleep. I have the terrible feeling that he must prepare himself for the worst and if he is in as bad shape as he is right now, he just might not survive bad news.” Father raked his hand across his face and back through his hair.

Mary patted his hand when it dropped back to the table between them.

“I’m praying, Jacob. We all are. And I can’t help feeling that although Vincent says that the Bond has disappeared, that he is right when he says he would know it if she was dead. I think the Bond is still there, just diminished in some way.”

“I hope so, Mary. I certainly hope so.”

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Catherine's labor started in the early morning hours two days after the move to the estate on Staten Island. She told the nurse when she brought her breakfast a couple of hours later, and her water broke while she was being taken to the room that had been set up as a delivery room.

No one was more amazed than Catherine was when she gave birth to a 6 pound 2 ounce boy a few minutes before noon on the same day. Her amazement was caused by how quickly it all went. In fact, it was so quick that Catherine barely had the time to think about the pain.

After he was cleaned up the nurse allowed Catherine to hold him and she was finally able to see him. Except for what it looked like would eventually become green eyes that stared back at her solemnly it was obvious he was going to be the image of his father.

When Catherine was returned to her room, she found that someone had moved a small portable crib to a spot at the foot of her bed. The nurse stayed with her for a while, showing her how to go about feeding him. There was some concern that the cleft lip might make feeding difficult, but after a few minutes, he put that concern to rest.

After his first cuddle, Catherine put him in the crib at the foot of her bed and then crawled into her own bed for a much-needed rest.

She woke some time later to see the man from the chopper, whom she had learned was Gabriel, standing next to the crib looking down at her son. He noticed her watching him and looked up at her with an empty smile.

"He is a beautiful, child, Miss Chandler. Looks like his biological father."

She didn't speak, just nodded.

"His name is Julian." He looked back at the baby; he didn't seem to expect an answer. "He has a great future ahead of him. He will have the best education, the best care, the best of everything." He turned to leave the room. "Rest well, Miss Chandler." And he was gone.

Just looking at the man had sent a chill down Catherine's spine. She rushed to pick up her son. She moved over to the easy chair and hugged him to her. He started to fuss a little, and she quickly opened her gown and put him to her breast, and he quieted.

*"You know he is wrong," she told him as he stared up into her eyes. "Your name is not Julian; it is Jacob. Jacob Charles, I think. After both of your grandfathers."*

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Over the next few weeks, Jacob thrived. Every few days, Gabriel would stop in to see him, but that was the only blot on the days. Jacob slept in the crib in the nursery only during the day. Catherine preferred to keep him near her at night. When she was asked about it, she told them that she was a very sound sleeper and she was afraid that she wouldn't hear him when he woke during the night if he was in the other room. That seemed to be an acceptable reason to everyone concerned, and she was allowed to continue.

That wasn't the real reason. She was working on a plan to escape, and she felt that she had to keep Jacob near her and out of the room with the surveillance cameras if she was going to be able to do that.

As the season progressed, the leaves dropped off the tree that was growing right next to the porch on the back of the house below her room. She could sit in the window seat and see a drive that was used primarily for deliveries, at the back of the property. There was a guard shack, but no real gate, just a pole that swung across the drive.

The small window in the bathroom had no screen, and Catherine found that if she opened it, it was only a couple of feet down to the roof of the porch, and the branches of the tree actually overhung the roof near the corner. The tree looked as if it had been made for climbing, with forks and branches in all the right places and the lowest one only a few feet above the grass below.

Gabriel himself solved part of her remaining problem when he decreed that 'his son,' she cringed when he said it, needed to spend time outside in the sunshine and fresh air. The next day she was provided with several pairs of jeans, blouses, underwear, socks and shoes, an oversized quilted jacket and a baby carrier that went over her shoulders. She could put Jacob in the front, keeping him close to her body, but her arms were free.

After several walks around the grounds, she more or less had her bearings and knew which way she should go if she managed to get out of the house without being caught. There were formal gardens, but she didn't spend much time there; Catherine preferred to wander, in what looked like an aimless fashion, but over the first week she counted at least 20 armed guards around the estate. She also noticed that there were fewer guards, actually only two, one in a guard house and one on foot, in the back section of the grounds that she could see from her room.

During her wanderings, she tried to give the impression that she was just your average, rather ditzzy blond socialite who had no interest in anything but herself and her baby. She didn't know what Gabriel thought about that pose, but the guards seemed to be buying it.

She took to sitting in the window seat where she would watch and time the patrol of the guard on foot. There were three different ones, they obviously rotated their positions, and they were very predictable. Whoever was on duty passed under her window every 12 minutes or so.

While observing the guard house at the rear gate, she noticed that the guard who had the weekend night duty wasn't as diligent as the guard who worked the weekday nights. She watched, as on both Saturday and Sunday night, he propped his feet up on the desk, pulled his hat down over his eyes and appeared to go to sleep. This happened two weeks in a row. She decided that she would have to make her break on a weekend that was overcast or had no moon. She watched the moon for the next few nights and figured out that the next new moon was going to be in about two weeks and it would be close to a weekend.

The next two weeks were the longest of her life. By the time that Sunday finally got there she was pretty much a nervous wreck. She hadn't slept well all week, but she was still determined to do what she felt she had to do.

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*“At least everything is done on a schedule around here,”* she said to herself as she was mentally going over her plan. She knew that someone would look in on her around 11pm and then she would be left alone until just before 6am when the outgoing shift of guards would check on her again. If she was lucky, no one would even know that she was gone until then and she could have as much as a 6-hour jump on them. She could possibly even be safe Below, with Vincent before they even knew she was gone.

She had put a lot of thought into just that part of her plan: Where to go? She had considered and rejected several options. Jenny, Joe, Peter or any of her friends were out because she didn't want to put any of them in danger. A police station of any kind was also out because she didn't know who could be trusted and who couldn't. If Gabriel had John Moreno, the D.A. in his pocket, then there was no telling who else he'd bought. The only place she could possibly go was the tunnels. She just had to make sure that no one followed her and saw her enter.

When the guard checked on her at 11:00 she was sitting in the easy chair in her nightgown, feeding Jacob as usual. The guard gave her a slight smile, nodded and then closed and locked the door. When Jacob was finished, she burped him, changed his diaper, put him in a pair of warm footed sleepers and put him in the small crib. Then she dressed herself and put on the baby carrier. She picked up Jacob and tucked him into the carrier. He was oblivious to everything; he was sound asleep. She tucked a light blanket around him, put a knit hat on his head, and then put on the oversized jacket and zipped it up around both herself and the baby. The last thing she did was retrieve the money from the lamp base and put it in one of the zippered pockets of the jacket.

As she raised the bathroom window, her hands were shaking, but she managed to keep steady enough to get through the window.

*Don't even think about it, just do it!* she urged herself. She closed the window from the outside then slithered across the roof and to the tree where she waited in a shadow for the guard below to pass. When he disappeared, she knew she had at least 10 minutes. The tree proved to be a little more difficult than she had expected it to be. It had been a while since she had climbed a tree, and she was out of shape. But she managed to get to the ground intact. She quickly moved into the shadows and made her way to the rear gate. Again she hid in the shadows until the guard passed before she made her run for the gate, staying on the grass so the gravel wouldn't crunch under her feet.

The *dependable* guard was sound asleep, and she was able to step over the gate, and then move quickly back down into shadows. The adrenalin was pumping, and she almost broke into a run then but thought better of it.

*Steady Chandler,* she admonished herself. *The last thing you need is to step in a hole or trip over something. No need to let them drag you back with a broken bone when you've managed to get this far!*

She moved at a steady pace until she got to the road at the end of the drive. She looked both ways. There was more light in the sky toward the right, and it looked like the road was worn more from vehicles turning in that direction also.

*OK, so right it is!* She turned and headed in that direction. Here she was able to move faster. She stayed on the edge of the pavement, concentrating on the line and putting one foot in front of the other. She only had to move off the road into the shadows a few times when cars passed. She estimated that she had gone about three miles when she came to a 24-hour gas station and

convenience store that had a pay phone in the back. She went in and using one of the \$20's she had she bought a bottle of juice and then took her drink and change and went to the pay phone. She found a number for a cab company in the phone book. She told them where she was and requested a cab to take her to Manhattan. It was one chance she felt she had to take, there was no way for her to make it that far on foot, and calling anyone else was out of the question. There must not be many fares out here this late at night because the cab was there in less than 5 minutes.

The only thing left was the decision on what tunnel entrance to use. Most of the thresholds in Helpers homes and businesses would be inaccessible at this time of night. She knew of a few manhole covers that led to the right places but didn't think she would have the strength to shift one of them. She didn't want to use the threshold in her own building, because, just in case it was discovered that she was missing, it would probably be the first place Gabriel's men would look for her. So she decided the best bet would be the culvert in the park. She gave the driver an address on Central Park West about a block from her apartment building. She could walk to the culvert from there, and it would look less strange than asking to be let out in the middle of Central Park in the middle of the night.

As the cab pulled away from the convenience store, she glanced at the clock up front on the dash. It was only 1:45am. She was surprised that it had been less than two hours since she had crawled out the bathroom window. She was almost giddy, but still scared spitless that someone would grab her before she made the safety of the tunnels.

She unzipped the jacket and checked on Jacob who was sleeping soundly. She didn't expect him to wake and demand to be fed until sometime between 3:00 and 4:00, so he would be fine for a while.

The drive into the city took a lot less time at this hour than it would during the day and before she knew it the cab was pulling up to the curb. She paid the cabbie, thanked him then got out of the cab. She waited for him to pull away before she ran across the street and tried to melt into the shadows in the park. She kept running until the culvert came in sight; she only slowed long enough to make sure no one was around before she ran straight into the culvert. All the way through the park she kept envisioning men with Uzis jumping out from behind trees and either grabbing her or opening fire. *"Keep going! We'll make it. Vincent, I'm coming!"* she kept repeating under her breath; praying that the Bond was back and that he would be waiting on the other side of the door.

Her hands were shaking as she tripped the lever that opened the door on the other side of the gate. She pulled the gate open, stumbled through, pulling the gate closed behind her, then tripping the inside lever to close the gate. Only when the door ground closed did Catherine let out the breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. No Vincent, so the Bond wasn't back, but that wasn't important. What was important was that she had made it. She leaned against the wall, then slid to a seated position and finally allowed the tears of exhaustion and relief to flow. This disturbed Jacob, who also started to cry. Still crying, Catherine unzipped the jacket and took Jacob out of the carrier so she could see his face better in the dim light from a torch further down the tunnel. As she managed to control her tears, Jacob also quit crying. Soothed by his mother's voice, he quickly went back to sleep. Catherine leaned her head back.

*I'll just rest a little while, catch my breath, then get moving again,* she promised herself.

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Around the corner and up a side tunnel the sentry on duty, Kanin heard the gate then what sounded like someone crying. At first, he rationalized that it must be a cat that had got shut in the tunnels, but that wouldn't have explained the sound of the gate. As he crept closer, he was sure it was a woman crying, and a baby. Normally, with an intruder, the first thing the sentry was supposed to do was send a message over the pipes and then wait for backup, but Kanin was sure that a crying woman and baby was no real danger, especially since he was just going to peek around the corner to see what was happening.

When he looked around the corner he could see a woman sitting on the sandy floor up against the wall, she looked like she was holding a bundle of some sort and from the way she was holding it, it looked like it was a baby he'd heard. The woman took a deep breath and then leaned her head back against the wall. Her eyes were closed, so she didn't see him, but he could see her face clearly. He stepped out into the tunnel and took several steps toward her.

"Catherine?" Kanin was stunned at what he was seeing before him.

Her eyes flew open in momentary panic, but when she saw Kanin and managed a weak smile. "Oh, Kanin! Am I glad to see you!"

She moved, starting to get up. Kanin rushed over and helped her to her feet. He was holding her upper arms, supporting her and looking into her face.

"Where have you been, Catherine? Where did you come from?"

She looked at him, and he could see how tired she was. In answer to his question, all she said was "Hell, Kanin."

He put his arm around her and started urging her toward the lighted tunnels. He stopped long enough to tap out a short message on the pipes before they continued. After walking only a short distance, they ran into Mouse and Jamie who had heard the message while they were patrolling. After verifying that it really was Catherine, Mouse ran off up the tunnel leaving Jamie to hug Catherine.

Jamie offered to carry the baby and Catherine trustingly handed him over. Jamie was curious, and one look under the blanket answered all the questions she didn't have time to ask.

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Vincent stood looking at the manhole cover at his feet. He was almost too tired to move it so he could return to his world Below. It had been another fruitless search; and even though he didn't even understand why he felt that he had to end it early this night and go back home. He leaned down to move the manhole cover. He descended the ladder a few feet before he replaced the cover and continued down the ladder. He had only moved along the tunnel a short distance before a report from one of the sentry stations under the park caught his ear.

*FIND VINCENT AND FATHER ... CATHERINE RETURNED... KANIN.* Was all it said, but it was enough to set Vincent off at a run in that direction.

\* \* \* \* \*

They walked in silence for another 5 minutes, Kanin and Catherine walking in front with Kanin supporting Catherine, who seemed oblivious to much of anything, and Jamie bringing up the rear with the baby. They came into a lighted intersection of three tunnels when Vincent appeared out of the tunnel on the right. He stopped when he saw Kanin and Catherine approaching.

When Catherine saw him, she used the last of her strength to move the last few steps into his arms. Both Kanin and Jamie were wiping away tears as they gawked at them. They only stood that way for a minute or less before the last of Catherine's strength left her, and her knees gave way. Vincent swept her up into his arms and headed back along the left-hand tunnel toward the main community and his chamber. Jamie trotted along behind, and Kanin returned to his sentry post.

When Vincent got back to the home tunnels, he was met by Father and Mary. Mary had been up, tending to a baby in the nursery when she's heard the message on the pipes; she'd rushed to Father's chamber and woke him. Before Father could even ask, Vincent answered his unspoken question.

"She is fine Father; she's just exhausted. I am taking her to my chamber." He started to move past them.

"Are you sure, Vincent?" asked Father with a worried look.

"Very sure, Father. The Bond reappeared completely as soon as I touched her. She's only sleeping." This time Father stepped aside and let Vincent pass.

As Father and Mary turned to follow, Jamie called out.

"Mary? Father?"

They stopped and turned toward her and Mary noticed the bundle Jamie carried.

"What is it, Jamie?" Mary asked coming toward her with her arms out to receive the bundle.

Jamie pushed the blanket back from the baby's face, "Isn't he beautiful!" she stated as she handed him to Mary.

Mary couldn't contain the small gasp of surprise as she looked at the sleeping child. She turned so Father could see.

"Jacob, look."

Father leaned so he could get a better look and then he too let out a surprised gasp.

"Well, I would say that it looks like the dreams weren't just dreams after all."

He looked into Mary's eyes, and they both smiled. Father thanked Jamie and then he and Mary made their way to the nursery where they gave the newcomer a quick wash, diaper change, and cursory

medical exam. When Father was satisfied that he was healthy, they made their way to Vincent's chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Vincent passed Father and Mary, he went straight to his chamber where he gently put Catherine on his bed. The covers were still turned down where he had left them when he had left earlier in the evening. He quickly removed his cloak and lit a couple of candles before he turned back to Catherine. She looked exhausted but all he could feel through the bond at the moment was deep dreamless sleep.

He gently removed her shoes, then her jacket and a strange contraption that she had strapped across her chest. Thinking it might be a sling, he quickly checked to make sure she didn't have any broken bones but found nothing wrong. He pulled the blankets snugly up under her chin and then pulled his chair over so he could hold her hand and watch over her as she slept.

That was the way Father and Mary found him when they entered his chamber with the baby a little later. Mary had been surprised that the child had slept through the clothing and diaper change and was now still sleeping soundly. She had a suspicion that he was sharing his mother's exhaustion.

"Vincent," Father called as they stood there.

"I told you, Father," said Vincent a little shortly, without looking up, "she is fine, she's just exhausted. She needs to rest."

"As do you, my boy. But that is not what I am here for." He and Mary had crossed the chamber and were now standing next to Vincent's chair. "Tomorrow will be soon enough for me to see Catherine. But there is something you need to see. She brought someone home with her."

Vincent finally tore his eyes off Catherine's sleeping face and made an effort to focus on Father.

"What, Father?"

Mary stepped forward and offered the bundle to Vincent, who automatically took it, looking at her with a question in his eyes before he looked down at what she had handed him.

As he looked, what he was seeing dawned on him. Father repeated what he had said to Mary earlier "I would say that the dreams weren't just dreams after all. It's a boy."

Vincent's jaw dropped in shock then he looked up at Father then over at Catherine and then back at the baby.

"My son?" he asked.

"You look at him, and you tell me, Vincent," was all he said as Mary hugged Vincent and then Father.

Vincent was trying to find his voice say something when the baby opened his eyes and stared up at the man holding him.

“He has Catherine’s eyes,” he said as he found his voice.

Father and Mary leaned over his shoulder to look, and they both agreed that he had his mother’s eyes.

After a few minutes spent staring at his father the baby closed his eyes and simply went back to sleep.

Vincent stared in awe for several minutes, thoughts and snippets of the dream churning in his head, then he closed his eyes, and a slight smile touched his mouth as he took a deep breath and relaxed.

“Vincent, we can take him back to the nursery so he won’t disturb Catherine,” offered Mary.

He looked up at her and smiled, “No Mary, I think he should stay here. Something tells me that he should be close when Catherine wakes.”

“You’re probably right,” agreed Father. “We’ll bring you some diapers and other necessities.” He took Mary’s arm and urged her toward the door.

After Father and Mary left, Vincent watched his son sleep for a few more minutes; then he placed him carefully in the middle of the bed next to Catherine. He went around the room putting out all but the bedside candle before he removed his boots and padded vest and crawled onto the bed between the baby and the wall. He turned onto his right side and propped his head up on his hand so he could watch both Catherine and the baby sleep. Before long, he slept too.

\* \* \* \* \*

At Jacob’s first whimper Catherine pushed herself up on the pillows. She barely opened her eyes as she unbuttoned her blouse, undid the front catch on her bra and then reached over and picked Jacob up. She crooned to him as she put him to her breast. As he started to nurse, she closed her eyes and relaxed back against the pillows.

Suddenly it hit her that Jacob shouldn’t have been in the bed with her.

*“Where the hell am I?”* popped into her head. She sat bolt upright, her eyes flew open, and she looked around the room in a panic. The sense of her panic woke Vincent, and before she realized where she was, he had taken her in his arms.

“You’re safe, Catherine!” he said as he pulled her and Jacob toward him. “You’re home!”

She burrowed her head into his shoulder as best she could without disturbing the baby. “Thank God!” she whispered. “It’s over.”

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Vincent's arms tightened as he felt her tears soaking through his shirt. He brushed the hair out of her eyes as he tried to look down into her face. She shifted to look up at him and gave him a weak smile.

"There is so much to tell you," she said, "but I'm just so tired, and I don't know where to start."

Vincent shifted to lean back against the pillows pulling Catherine back to lean on his chest as he surrounded both her and the baby with his arms.

"What's his name?" he prompted.

"Jacob Charles."

"Father will be pleased. When was he born?"

"September 21<sup>st</sup> I had lost track of the date, so I asked."

She sat up for a moment and shifted Jacob to her shoulder to burp then she moved him to her other breast, before settling back into Vincent's arms.

She moved so she could see his face.

"Oh, Vincent, it has been so long! I should have told you as soon as I knew, but the time just never seemed right. I'm so sorry." She started to cry again.

"Shh, Catherine, hush. Don't cry. It is all right. What happened before isn't important. What is important is that you are both here now, and you are both safe." Vincent kissed the top of her head and held her tighter. "Now I know what you meant when you said that when one gift was taken away another would come in its place."

As Jacob was finishing Catherine heard the 7am sentry check-in go out over the pipes. She was burping him when a voice called out hesitantly from outside the chamber.

"Vincent, are you awake?"

Vincent pushed himself over to the side of the bed where he grabbed an afghan and pulled it over Catherine and the baby.

"Yes, Kanin. What do you need?" he called back.

"Nothing, but Livie thought you might need this." He was carrying Luke's cradle when he came into the room. "Where would you like me to put it?"

Vincent jumped up to go help him. "Thank you, Kanin, this is very thoughtful!" he turned to Catherine. "Where would you like it Catherine?" he asked.

Catherine smiled at Kanin, "Thank you, Kanin. How about down by the foot of the bed?"

They placed the cradle where Catherine told them.

“Livie put clean linens and a clean blanket in it, so it is all ready for the little one.” He started backing away quickly. “I won’t bother you, I know you are exhausted, Catherine. We will see you later.” He turned to leave the chamber. “Welcome home,” he called back over his shoulder.

“Kanin,” called Catherine, “thank you again. And thank you for picking me up out of the dirt down in the tunnel. If you hadn’t, I would probably still be sitting there trying to find the energy to make my way here.”

Vincent came around to the side of the bed and pulled the afghan away from Catherine and Jacob and then took the baby from her and carried him over to his table. Catherine was hooking her bra and buttoning her blouse as she watched Vincent deftly change Jacob’s diaper.

“You look like you’ve done that before,” she commented as she moved to sit on the side of the bed.

“I’ve done a few shifts in the nursery.”

Vincent finished and carried Jacob to the cradle and tucked him in. He sat down on the side of the bed next to Catherine, who looked up at him with a tired smile.

“I know there is a lot we need to talk about, but I really don’t have the strength or the sense to speak very coherently at the moment. Can we wait until Jacob and I have rested?”

“Of course, Catherine,” Vincent gave her a wry smile, and Catherine noticed that he looked as tired as she felt. “I could use some rest myself.”

She reached up and touched his face. “You look exhausted, my love.”

“We will talk about that later too,” he said.

She nodded. “I think I would like to bathe and change, though,” she said. “I think I can stay awake that long.”

“You probably would rest better,” agreed Vincent. He went over to his wardrobe and pulled out a robe, nightgown, and pair of slippers that she had used when she had stayed after her father’s death. “These are yours,” he handed them to her. “Use the private bathing chamber; I’ll stay with Jacob.”

She left the chamber and slowly made her way down the short corridor. The bathing chamber was small, but warm and steamy. “If I’m not back in 20 minutes, come get me, I will probably be asleep,” she called back.

Less than 20 minutes later she was back in the room still looking exhausted, but she told Vincent she felt better. He made her sit in a chair while he helped her dry most of the water out of her hair.

After he saw her tucked into the bed, he left to bathe.

He thought she was asleep when he came back into the room in his night clothes and robe carrying a large canvas wrapped parcel that he put down next to his table. He finished drying his hair, checked on Jacob, then picked up the parcel and started to assemble it into a cot.

Catherine had scooted over to the far side of the bed, and now she rose up on one elbow and looked over at him with sleepy eyes.

“What are you doing, Vincent?” she asked.

“I’m putting together a cot.”

“Why?”

“To sleep on.”

“Why?” she asked again.

“So I won’t disturb you.”

“Vincent, this is your chamber and your bed. If anyone is going to sleep on the cot, it will be me. Just put it over there close to Jacob’s cradle.” She wearily started to crawl out of bed.

“No, Catherine, stay in bed,” Vincent insisted.

“Only if you sleep in it too,” she said.

“Catherine, I don’t think... ” he started.

“No Vincent, that is the problem, you think too much. Just quit fooling with that thing and come to bed!” her voice was taking on a panicky sound that he had seldom heard from her. She scooted back over to the far side of the bed. “I’ll stay away from you, I promise.”

Vincent heaved a sigh, rose and went around the room extinguishing the candles again until the only light left was what came from the stained glass window over the bed. He took off his robe and put it on the end of the bed with Catherine’s and then got into the bed. He lay down close to the edge and was determined to stay there until he heard snuffles coming from Catherine’s side of the bed.

That did it; he couldn’t listen to her cry. He rolled over to the center of the bed and pulled Catherine into his arms, and she pushed her face into his chest. She was asleep almost before Vincent had a chance to finish saying “Sleep well.”

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Catherine and Vincent slept through most of the next 48 hours, waking only when Jacob woke to be fed. At the first sound from him, both Catherine and Vincent would wake. Vincent would get up, take Jacob to a changing table that had miraculously appeared as they slept, change his diaper then take him back to Catherine to be fed. After Jacob finished, Vincent would take him, burp him, then

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put him back in the cradle. Sometimes he and Catherine would stay up for a short time, to eat a light meal and talk a little, but then they would put out all the lights and go back to sleep.

Mary and Father sneaked in several times to leave food, or things for the baby. A couple of times they actually took the baby out with them to show him off to the other tunnel residents, and Peter.

Finally, on Wednesday morning Catherine woke feeling really rested for the first time since the last time she slept in her own bed. She rolled over to see Vincent sitting in his big chair with his feet on a rung of a chair pulled up in front of him. He had a cup of tea in his left hand and was playing with Jacob who rested on his thighs. Jacob had a grip on the index finger of Vincent's right hand and was trying very hard to guide that finger into his mouth. And he had both his feet firmly planted against Vincent's abdomen and was pushing.

"He's strong!" Vincent observed, without even looking up.

Catherine laughed, "I swore that he was using my kidneys as footballs when he was still inside."

Vincent looked up at her and smiled sadly. "I'm sorry I missed that part."

Catherine rose from the bed and went to lean against the arm of Vincent's chair. "I am too," was all she said. Then she leaned and dropped a kiss on Jacob's fuzzy little nose then one on the top of Vincent's head. "Is he hungry now, or do you think he will give me time to wash up and get dressed?"

"He seems quite content with my finger at the moment. You probably have time. Mary left you some clothes," he pointed to the stack of tunnel style clothing on the chair.

Catherine made a quick choice and ducked out of the chamber. "I'll be back in a few," she called back.

When she returned, a breakfast tray had appeared, and Vincent was setting the table with one hand as he cradled Jacob in the other arm.

Catherine smiled and took Jacob so Vincent could finish and so that she could give Jacob his breakfast. She went over to the stack of baby things and selected a soft, faded receiving blanket before she sat in the chair that Vincent had been using as a footstool earlier. She deftly opened her blouse, and her bra had Jacob eating and had the receiving blanket covering the whole process before Vincent even had the chance to notice enough to get embarrassed. Catherine had noticed that after the first time she had fed Jacob in Vincent's presence when he had held them both, he had always moved to the chair at his table with his back to them during the process. She didn't question it now but filed it in her mind as one of the things that they would talk about later.

Vincent quickly ate a little breakfast then excused himself to dress. Catherine managed to eat while she fed Jacob and had him tucked into his cradle when Vincent returned to the chamber. She was sitting in her chair enjoying a cup of tea.

"You look happy," observed Vincent.

She rolled her head to look at him and give him a crooked smile. “I am. If I could keep everything as it is right now, I would.” She put down the cup and rose from the chair. She busied herself, stacking the dishes on the tray which she picked up and carried to the door where she set it outside. She’d left the teapot, and the cups and Vincent sat down and poured himself another cup.

When Catherine passed him, he reached out and grabbed her and pulled her into his lap. Catherine was stunned at this move but didn’t hesitate to wrap both her arms around him and bury her face in his neck. They held each other tightly for a long time. Their eyes were on the same level when Catherine lifted her head to look into Vincent’s eyes. She could see a storm brewing in their deep blueness.

“Tell me, Vincent,” she said running her fingers down his cheek.

His arms tightened around her waist. “There were times when I thought I had lost you forever,” he sighed, lowering his head and cuddling into the curve of her shoulder.

Catherine held him tighter and ran her hand through his unruly hair. “I almost got to that point a few times, but I just couldn’t let myself feel that way. I had to *know* that I would see you again, or I don’t know what I would have done.” She took a deep breath trying to clear the tears from her voice. “For the first 6 months, I was sure that they were planning to kill me as soon as our child was born, but then suddenly things changed. I don’t know what it was, but out of the clear blue they moved me to another location and gave me a stack of books on natural childbirth, and child care. I had almost lost hope before that point. That gave me back my hope.” She reached down and put her hand under his chin to tilt his head back so she could see his face. “Vincent, when did the Bond return?”

“Not until I touched you the other night in the tunnel, then it was as if it had never left.” He stopped a moment as if in thought. “Actually, I don’t think it did leave completely. I knew you were alive, but there was nothing else. Your life force was like a candle far off in the distance. I knew it was there, but I could sense nothing more from it.”

He unwrapped his left arm from around her waist and reached over to pick his journal up off the table. He handed it to her. “Read what I wrote on September 21<sup>st</sup>,” he directed.

Catherine took the book and flipped through it until she found the correct date:

*September 21, 1989-afternoon*

*Today has been a surreal day.*

*I returned from my search early and went to bed. For a change, I actually went to sleep, but I woke in the early morning hours to a strange sound. At first, I thought it was something in the tunnels, but then it seemed to be more in my dreams. It was like a heartbeat, but it only lasted a few seconds. I had dozed off, and it started again, only to last less than a minute. This happened on and off all morning, even when I was awake, coming at quicker and quicker intervals until just about an hour ago when it suddenly stopped.*

*After it happened the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> time, I rose, dressed and tried to figure out what was happening. I thought at first that it might be Catherine’s heartbeat I was feeling, hearing, that somehow she needed me, but it didn’t*

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*seem so. I tried to follow the sound, to see if it got stronger or louder if I went in a particular direction, it didn't, but then the tunnels limit the distance and direction I can travel, and since it was daylight, I could not go Above.*

*It was not Catherine; I am certain of that. I can still feel the faint sense of her life force, and it was separate from this 'heartbeat.'*

“You wrote this on the afternoon of September 21<sup>st</sup>?” she asked.

“Yes, around 1:00. The heartbeat had stopped as suddenly as it started about an hour before. I had been sitting here waiting to see if it would start again.”

“Jacob was born just before noon on the 21<sup>st</sup>; it must have been his heart beat you were sensing. Is there a Bond with him?”

Vincent looked at her with half a smile and a twinkle in his eye that she hadn't seen very often. “Yes, I think so, but it appears to be projecting no more than hunger and contentment or discomfort. If it isn't him, then I don't know why I suddenly feel hungry every four hours and seem to have an unusual fixation with your breasts.” He blushed and dropped his eyes to study his hands.

Catherine laughed and hugged him.

“Well, the breast thing could be purely male; I haven't met many men who weren't fixated on them. Or at least on other women's, I never had much to be fixated on, until now.”

Vincent looked up at her, gave her a sheepish smile and mumbled something that sounded like “No comment,” before he continued with his narrative.

“After that day, I could sense two points out there somewhere, but try as I might, and I did try, night after night, from places all over the city, I just couldn't get a fix on them. I also couldn't interpret what it was.” He shook his head. “The dreams should have given me some inkling, though.”

“What dreams?” she asked.

“Several months ago, I started having dreams, very detailed dreams, about what happened in the cavern after you came in after me. That should have been enough for me to figure out what was going on...”

“But you wouldn't let yourself believe the truth of the dreams, am I right?”

“You know me too well, Catherine,” he admitted, looking a little sheepish.

They spent the next hour exchanging stories of the time they had been apart. Finally, Catherine told Vincent that she really needed to get information to Joe about what had happened.

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She was on her feet, pacing like Vincent did when he was agitated. “But I don’t want to go above to his office, to speak to him, Vincent. The idea of setting foot anywhere outside the tunnels right now scares me to death,” she looked like she was about to burst into tears again.

Vincent went to her and put his arms around her. “Do you think you could go Above into the home or business of a Helper who has a threshold?” he asked.

“I might be able to do that. Does Peter have his own private threshold?” she asked.

“Yes, he does. Father and I will talk to him and set it up. Don’t worry, we will get Joe to Peter’s sometime soon, and you can relay all your information to him then.”

Catherine hugged him. “Thank you, Vincent.”

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Later Catherine and Vincent decided that it was time they introduced Jacob to the rest of the community, so they took him with them when they went to dinner with Father and Mary that evening.

William, who was delighted to see them both, but especially delighted to see Vincent in his dining chamber for the first time in months, produced an infant carrier to put Jacob in so that they could eat without having to hold him. With Jacob sitting happily in his seat of honor on the bench between his parents the evening meal turned into the closest thing to a Welcome Home Party that William could come up with on short notice. He even managed to produce Catherine’s favorite dessert by the end of the meal.

In spite of the fact that nearly every tunnel resident and most of the visiting Helpers stopped at the table to welcome Catherine home, congratulate Vincent and to look at and coo over the baby, everyone managed to eat a substantial amount of food. Catherine was groaning by the time they rose to leave.

“All the meals I got were probably healthy, and adequate, but it all tasted pretty much like cardboard. This has been wonderful!” She exclaimed as she linked her arm with Vincent as he carried Jacob and they walked back toward Vincent’s chamber.

They stopped in Father’s study to discuss setting up a meeting with Joe at Peter’s house then the conversation turned to the baby’s name and a naming ceremony.

“Have you named him, Catherine?” asked Father.

“Yes, I have, and Vincent agrees that I made a good choice.”

“What is it?”

“I thought that the tradition was that no one but the parents knew the name until the naming ceremony,” she said innocently.

“Well, that is the way it is usually done,” he agreed. “But don’t grandfathers have special privileges?”

“Not this time,” she laughed. “How soon can we do the naming ceremony?” she looked at Vincent.

“Is Sunday too soon, Father?” asked Vincent.

“No, I think we can do that; and I guess I can wait that long.”

Catherine and Vincent left his chamber laughing over their little conspiracy.

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Catherine had just finished feeding Jacob and was preparing to go to the dining chamber for her own breakfast when Vincent came in to tell her that the meeting with Joe had been set up.

“Joe doesn’t know exactly why he is going to Peter’s house this evening, but he has agreed to be there. I think Peter told him that he has some information about you.”

“Good. I was just wondering how much we should tell him. He is going to want to know why Gabriel held me for so long. It would have been easier just to kill me to shut me up if he had been holding me just because of the information in the book Joe gave me.” She looked up at Vincent as they walked through the corridors toward the dining chamber. “If I tell him it was because he wanted my baby, then he is going to want to know why Gabriel would want *my* baby; then he is going to want to see the baby, or if I tell him that the baby isn’t there, he is going to assume that Gabriel still has him and then there will be hell to pay. He will leave no stone unturned trying to find the child.”

“I was thinking about the same things. Joe might need more information than we would ordinarily feel free to give him, but I am going to trust your judgment, Catherine. If you and Peter feel that it is necessary to tell Joe about me, or even about the tunnels, then if that is what it is going to take to put Joe at ease then do it. I’ll wait in another room with Jacob and will join you at any point if you want me to.”

“That might be the answer, but then you realize that Joe is going to start putting a lot of things together and might come up with some pretty hard questions. I would really rather not put him in a position where there is any conflict of interest.”

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The meeting was scheduled for 7pm, and Vincent, Catherine, and the baby were in Peter’s kitchen a little early. Peter hugged Catherine and welcomed her home, then took Jacob and started reminiscing about when Vincent was a baby.

The doorbell rang promptly at 7:00 and Peter went to answer it. He led Joe into the living room, took his coat and offered him a cup of tea from the pot on the tray before he took a seat in the chair across from the sofa Joe was seated on.

“You had better have something good, Dr. Alcott,” he said. “I was suspended in September and Moreno isn’t going to give me the time of day unless I have something that can be substantiated.

Peter didn’t have a chance to open his mouth before Catherine walked into the room.

“Would the victim in the investigation be enough to make him sit up and take notice, do you think?” she was asking as she walked over to where Joe had jumped up from his seat on the couch.

“Cathy!” was all he could say at first. He grabbed her hands and then pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. “My God! You look like you have been through hell,” he said, referring to the dark circles under her eyes, “and you’re nothing but skin and bones.” He sat down on the couch and pulled Cathy down to sit beside him.

“Thanks, Joe, you always were one to make a girl feel great about herself!” she laughed.

“Where have you been Radcliffe?” he asked.

“Well, what you said about Hell comes pretty close,” she said, settling herself more comfortably and taking the cup of tea that Peter offered her. “I hope you brought a notebook because it is a complicated story and you aren’t going to like hearing some of it.”

Joe reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small notebook and a pen. “Always prepared.” He said with a boyish grin. “Go ahead, start at the beginning. But first, seriously, how are you?”

“I’m fine now, Joe. My doctors,” she smiled at Peter, “have pronounced me healthy, if a little underweight, but essentially I am fine, just in need of rest.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t try to talk you into coming back to work,” he grinned. “At least not until you say you are ready. Now, tell me your story.”

“As you know, I was in the parking garage. I was pulling out of the space, and someone walked up to my car and pulled a gun. I didn’t recognize him. I floored it and got away. There were two of them and they were shooting at me, and I probably should have kept going, but I thought I would be safer if I went back inside the building, so I left my car and ran to the elevator. After the doors closed, I got my gun out of my purse. The elevator stopped at a floor I didn’t push, and I had my gun pointed at the door when it opened. I was relieved to see John, and what I thought were two plain clothes police officers standing there, so I relaxed. Then John nodded, walked away and the guys grabbed me.”

“Wait a minute, Cathy. John Moreno?” asked Joe incredulously.

“I told you that you weren’t going to like some of what I had to say,” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re trying to tell me that John Moreno, the DA, kidnapped you and held you for 8 months? I find that hard to believe, Cathy.” It was Joe’s turn to shake his head.

“No, what I am telling you is that John *allowed* it to happen. He sicced his goons on me and then walked away. They took me to someone else who tried to get information about Hanlon’s book out

of me.” Cathy put her hand on Joe’s arm, “Please Joe, just let me tell you the story; this isn’t easy. After I’m done, then you can ask all the questions you want.”

“I’m sorry, Cathy. I can see that you haven’t been on vacation in the Caribbean; I didn’t mean to jump on you like that. I’ll keep my yap shut until you are done.”

It took Catherine a quite a while to get the whole story out; she told it as succinctly as she could. Vincent was in the kitchen listening and could feel her fear, anxiety, and pain through the bond as she told it. He wished he was where he could give her more physical support, but settled for holding Jacob in the kitchen.

Catherine ended her story at her escape and the cab ride to Manhattan, letting Joe assume that she had come straight to Peter.

“Cathy, I’m in shock. I don’t know where to begin my questions. I’ve got a million. Did this guy, Gabriel, get any information about Hanlon’s book from you?” he asked.

“I really don’t know Joe. I didn’t really have any information to give. I left the book with Elliot, and he was going to have an expert look at it to see if they could decode it. From what I know about those drugs the person who is being questioned is asked specific questions, and they usually answer only those questions, they don’t volunteer information.”

Joe nodded “I’ll see about getting the book from Burch. I wonder why he didn’t hand it over when you went missing.”

“If they were able to decode the book, it might have had Moreno’s name in it; Elliot wouldn’t have known who he could trust with the information.” She pointed out.

“Sounds reasonable. You said that when they found out you were pregnant, they quit using the drugs to get you to talk?”

“Pretty much,” she hedged.

“Why do you think they did that?”

“I’m not really sure. All of a sudden Gabriel decided that he wanted my baby.”

“Why would he want your baby? Hell, let’s go back to the beginning here. I didn’t know you were pregnant, who is the father?”

“*Damn, I was afraid he would ask this,*” she said to herself. She glanced at Peter, who smiled encouragement. “Joe, actually, no one knew I was pregnant. I didn’t even know until I gave blood at the hospital when you were hurt. The nurse told me that I shouldn’t have and when I asked why she told me I was pregnant. I didn’t even have the time to tell the father before I was kidnapped.”

“Like I said, who *is* the father?” Joe persisted.

“Well, I know how you always suspected that I had someone in my life.”

“Yeah, but you were so secretive... and please tell me the mystery man isn't Burch.”

Cathy laughed, “Rest assured, Joe. My mystery man isn't Elliot.” She took a deep breath and decided to keep the story as close to the truth as possible. “His name is Vincent. I met him during that time I disappeared after my face was slashed. He found me in the park where those men had dumped me. I was bleeding heavily, and he was afraid that I would bleed to death, so he took me to his home to his father, who is a doctor. His father treated me, and they nursed me and took care of me until I recovered enough to go back home.”

“I'll accept that for the time being. Let's get back to the reason that this Gabriel guy wanted your baby.”

“I'm not sure Joe,” she dropped her eyes and studied her hands. It was hard to lie to Joe, and she was afraid he would see it in her eyes. “Maybe he couldn't have his own; I don't know. I only saw him a few times, but he struck me as being more than a little strange; it's hard to tell what his motive might have been.”

“And you said that from the beginning you had the feeling that they were planning to kill you as soon as the baby was born, but something changed their minds. What?”

“Not *their* minds, Joe. I don't think there was a '*they*' behind any of this. I think it was all this Gabriel. I think I was just kept alive for the baby. Something made Gabriel decide that the baby would need me after he was born. He probably did still plan to kill me, just not right away.”

“By the way, where is the baby, you did manage to get it out with you, didn't you?”

“Yes. He is fine. He is with his father right now.” Cathy smiled.

“And that is?” he prompted.

“In a safe place, Joe.” She looked at him pleadingly.

“You're sure of that?”

Cathy looked at Peter.

“Joe, I can assure you that Vincent will keep Cathy and their son safe,” said Peter. “They are his world, and if their hiding place is ever found, he knows of places they can go where they will never be found, believe me!”

Joe looked from Peter to Cathy, assessing the situation, “OK, Cathy. I'll leave it for now, but eventually, I want to meet this guy, and I sure want to see your baby,” he finished with a grin. “It is hard to picture you with a baby, especially since I never saw you pregnant. Now that would have been a sight.”

“I promise, you will see me the next time,” she assured him picturing just how different the *'next time'* would be; sure there would be one.

“What do you know about this Gabriel guy?” Joe asked.

“Not much. It is obvious he is quite rich and has a lot of resources at his fingertips; helicopters, people, facilities. I’m hoping that it all shows up in that book. That Hanlon worked for him and put it all down in black and white.”

Joe ran through the rest of his questions and took meticulous notes.

“This isn’t going to be easy, Radcliffe,” he said as he pocketed his notebook and pen. “The hardest part is going to be finding out who can be trusted. I know that Greg Hughes is OK and Diana Bennett is probably clean.”

“Diana Bennett?”

“Yeah, a cop with a special investigations unit of the NYPD.” She has been on your case for a couple of months. I haven’t talked to her lately, ‘cause Moreno suspended me almost two months ago. Now I know why; I was probably getting too close to the truth. I’m due to go back to work in a couple of weeks, and when I do I’d better not even think about you around him, or he will have me bounced again. I’m going to need to find some people I can trust before I spring all this information. I’d like you with me when we arrest John. Do you think you can do that?”

“Joe, I’ll do what I have to, but you should have it set up so you can move on everyone at the same time or as close to it as possible. If you move on one without the other then you are going to lose someone, they will run. Talk to Elliot; you can tell him I’m OK, if he doesn’t believe you, remind him of the time I asked for the *explosive favor*, then he’ll know you are on the level. Just tell him not to tell anyone about me. Find out what they found out about the book.

“There’s a judge, he was a friend of my father’s, and I would bet the farm that he isn’t in anybody’s pocket. His name is James Carlyle. He is as honest as they come. You can probably get all the warrants you need from him. I’ll talk to him if you want me to. If not, just use my name.”

“OK, sounds like a plan. You should probably stay out of sight until it all comes to a head. Hell, I would put you in protective custody, but I don’t know who I can trust,” he ran his hand through his hair.

“Don’t worry, Joe, like Peter told you; I have a place safe to go. If you need to reach me, just contact Peter, and he will let me know.”

Joe looked at her closely, observing again how thin she was and how tired she looked.

“You sure you’re OK, Kiddo?” he asked, taking her hand.

She gave him her trademark Cathy smile and patted his hand. “I will be. I’m healthy, just beat. I’m getting plenty of rest... Is there anything else, Joe?”

“About this guy, you’re involved with.” He looked from Cathy to Peter and then back at Cathy. “Are you sure he’s OK, he’s going to look after you and your baby?”

“Positive, Joe,” she assured him.

“Actually, come to think of it, I heard the name Vincent a couple of times. Diana has been working the case, and she went through stuff in your apartment looking for clues, and she said she found books and notes with his name on them. She came and asked me who he was, and I didn’t know. He was pretty much our prime suspect, our only one actually.”

“Don’t worry Joe; Peter knows Vincent, has known him as long as he has known me, longer really. Vincent is one of his patients too.”

“I thought you said that Vincent’s father was a doctor, why does he need another one?”

“Most doctors don’t treat their own family members,” put in Peter. “Plus, Vincent has had some special needs over the years, and two heads are always better than one.”

“So why hasn’t anyone met him? Diana talked to both Jenny and Nancy, and only Nancy said that she had even heard the name.”

“We just didn’t feel the need to broadcast it to everyone, Joe,” said Cathy with a shrug.

“He married, or something?” Joe bristled.

“Joe, I don’t need a big brother,” she smiled to soften the words. “Vincent is not married!”

“You plannin’ to introduce him to anyone?” Joe was getting a little pushy.

Cathy jumped up and started to pace. Peter noted with wry amusement that she had acquired some of Vincent’s habits.

“Joe, Vincent... well, he’s different. He stays away from strangers because sometimes people find him frightening. He just doesn’t go out much.”

“Frightening? How so?”

Cathy looked at Peter, “Well, he’s tall.”

“How tall?”

“Maybe 6’4” – 6’6”, right Peter?”

“That sounds about right.”

“And he is very strong,” she added.

“Well so far he sounds like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and not many people find him too frightening,” observed Joe.

“And, well... his face is different.”

“Birth defects? Accident? Scars? What?”

“I don’t know how to put it, Joe, just different. Can you just accept that for now and leave it be?”

Joe studied her for a moment, then rose to take her hands again. “I trust your judgment, Radcliffe,” he smiled as he hugged her again. “I’m just glad you’re back, safe and sound. Are you going to let Jenny or Nancy know?”

Cathy heaved a sigh of relief at the change of subject. “Not just yet. I want to get all this cleared up first. I’ll let everyone else know soon.”

After another hug, and his thanks to Peter, Joe left.

Vincent entered from the dining room as Peter came back into the living room. Catherine looked exhausted again as she went over and slid her arms around his waist and put her head on his chest.

“How do you think that went?” asked Vincent as he wrapped his free arm around her.

“I think it went well. Joe still has questions about why Gabriel wanted our baby, but he is willing not to push it at this point.”

Peter agreed that it had gone well and added, “Before he left he remembered that he needs to get a deposition or a statement from you. He said that since you are a lawyer, you will know what he needs and asks that you just write it out in longhand, sign it and have it witnessed and then see that he gets it.”

Catherine nodded. “He’ll probably need it to get the warrants. I can do that. I’ll take care of it tomorrow and get one of the Helpers to witness it for me. Then we’ll get someone to take it to him.”

Catherine was clearly exhausted, and Vincent suggested that they go Below. They thanked Peter for his help and made their way back.

As they were passing Father’s chamber, he called out to them and asked them to come in.

“How did the meeting with Mr. Maxwell go?” he asked as Catherine sat down and Vincent handed Jacob to her.

“I think it went pretty well,” said Catherine, glancing at Vincent. “He wants me to write up a statement for him; I’ll do that in the morning. He said that he would move on it as soon as he can gather enough people he knows he can trust and gets all the proper paperwork.”

“Did you have to go into any details?” asked Father anxiously.

“No. I told him a little about Vincent, but only that he was ‘different’ and didn’t go out much,” said Catherine. “I think we gave the impression that Vincent lives with you somewhere secluded, but no specifics.” She and Vincent exchanged smiles.

“Eventually, we may have to let him in on the rest of the secret,” said Vincent. “But we will cross those bridges when we get to them.”

Catherine stifled a yawn, and Vincent was immediately at her side.

“Father, Catherine is tired; it has been a trying evening. I think I should put both her and the baby to bed. Is there anything else you need to know? I can come back.”

“No, no. Go, you need your rest too. You both have a lot of rest to catch up on. I will see you tomorrow. If I think of anything else, it can wait until then.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Catherine returned from her bath and was moving around the chamber tidying up and putting away things when Vincent startled her with a question.

“Catherine,” he looked up from his journal. “Are you too tired to talk?”

She turned from tidying the changing table, “No, Vincent. What did you want to talk about?” She went over to the bed and sat down on the side of it.

Vincent turned his chair to face her. “You’re sure you’re not too tired?”

“Not too tired to talk to you. What is it?”

Vincent looked down at his hands, loosely clasped on his knees. “When you were talking to Joe, I noticed that he came pretty close to offering your old job back to you.”

“But he didn’t. I kind of expected him to, but I’m glad he didn’t.”

“Why? I thought you loved your job.”

“I did, then, but I’m in a different place now; my priorities have changed, and saving the world isn’t that high up on my list right now. In fact, when I asked you to meet me before I was kidnapped, that was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.” It was her turn to stare at her hands.

Vincent moved from his chair to sit on the side of the bed next to her. He took one of her hands in his. Then reached over and tipped her head up so he could look into her eyes.

“Tell me, Catherine,” he said with a smile.

She took a deep breath and smiled back at him.

“Well, naturally I was going to tell you that I was pregnant, and give explanations for that if they were needed.”

He could feel her tension. “Catherine, surely you realize that I know where babies come from?” he said to break the tension.

She gave a little giggle. “Of course, I knew that you understood the mechanics of it, but I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to convince you that you had actually engaged in the required activity since you had no memory of it.” She patted his hand then scooted up to lean against the pillows piled against the headboard. Vincent turned to face her, drawing his leg up onto the bed and leaning on it.

“If it had turned out that the news that you were going to be a father hadn’t been too overwhelming then I as going to spring my plan on you.”

“What plan?”

“Well, it is still what I would like to do,” she grinned. “Only now I don’t have to worry as much about talking Joe into to letting me quit... I was going to ask you and the Council if I could be allowed to move below.” She paused and was surprised when Vincent didn’t protest that. “My plan was to live below, here with you and our child. Knowing the possibilities, I knew he couldn’t be born in a hospital above...” She hesitated a moment. “Let me begin this at a more logical place.” She smiled at Vincent again. “When my father died, he left me a rather large estate. Before I had a small trust fund from my Grandmother; I owned my apartment, Daddy gave it to me as a gift when I graduated from law school and my car. I also had pretty hefty savings and investment accounts.”

“In other words, you were a wealthy woman in your own right,” put in Vincent.

“Well, I guess you could say that. Before Daddy’s death, I didn’t have any problem paying my bills, even before I met you and changed my ways; when I treated shopping as a recreational activity. A couple of weeks after Daddy died, I had an appointment with his financial advisor, and he filled me in on everything. I was in shock. Not only was I to receive an income or settlement from his law firm, but he had investments that were doing very well, and he had substantial real estate holdings. In addition to the place in Connecticut, and his place here, he had purchased several properties all over the city. There are a couple of apartment buildings that he had planned to renovate and offer as low-income housing; several warehouses that I am not sure what he planned to do with, and an office building.

“Almost before I left the financial advisor’s office I had a plan. I wanted to start right away, but I wanted to have it all thought out and on paper before I started. Then circumstances put things on hold. I wanted to go ahead with the low-income housing, but also thought I would hold some of the apartments out for people and children from Below who were going to move Above to find jobs or go to school. The office building will be the perfect place for free medical and law clinics for the people of the neighborhood and for Helpers. The top floor of the building has a large loft style apartment that I can use as an Above address. When I get the yen to practice law, I can work at the law clinic. We could have it checked to see if we could access it directly from Below.” Her eyes were glowing, as she related her plans to him.

“Are you still planning to go through with this?” he asked.

“Yes! If nothing else delays me, then I want to get started as soon as all this with Gabriel and Moreno is over.”

Vincent nodded.

“What about me moving below?” she asked anxiously, expecting the usual arguments. “What do you think?”

“If that is what you truly want, Catherine, I will not try to change your mind.”

Catherine had been ready with all her usual arguments and was surprised when she didn’t need them.

“That is certainly a change of heart that I am grateful for. Tell me why Vincent.” She rocked forward to sit cross-legged on the quilt, resting her elbows on her knees.

“While you were missing, I had a lot of time to think, and I realized that it is not my place to tell you what is good for you.” He moved a little closer and took her hands in his. “Every time you wanted to move forward, I pushed us back, and my reason was always that it was for your own good. But you are a grown, intelligent woman, not a child who must be protected from making ill-considered decisions. You had every right to expect our relationship to progress; for me to allow you to think for yourself instead of imposing my fears on you. While I searched for you, Catherine, I promised you and any God who was willing to listen, that if I ever found you... *when* I found you, that I would no longer try to put those restrictions on you.”

“Vincent, I understood.”

“I know you did, but it still wasn’t fair to you. You were very patient with me.”

“And you with me.”

“I just wanted to be certain of your plans; that you did want to stay Below with Jacob and me,” he dropped his head, and the last words were so low that Catherine nearly missed them.

“Oh, Vincent! I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to be so vague. I came here with every intention of staying for as long as you would have me stay. I don’t want to ever leave again, not permanently. And if you will allow it, I want to stay here, in your chamber, with you, if you don’t find Jacob and me to be too much of a disruption.”

Vincent swiftly moved closer and took Catherine in his arms. “A welcome disruption, to be sure. The kind I never want to live without again!”

Catherine sighed contentedly. Although Vincent was talking like he was willing to keep moving forward in their relationship, she wasn’t going to push or try to rush anything. She was going to let him make all the moves. “*At least if they happen at reasonable intervals of time,*” she thought to herself with

a small smile as she nestled in his arms. Then she made one quick decision. She pulled back a little and looked up at Vincent. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything, Catherine."

She gave him a devilish smile, "Oh, you don't know what you might be leaving yourself open for, saying that," she said as he started to look a little uneasy. "Don't worry," she assured him, "I won't ask for much."

"What is it?"

"Would you kiss me, please?" She pointed to her lips, "Right here, not on the top of my head or my forehead or cheek; on the lips. Do that now and continue to do it regularly, and I will be content; at least for a while," her eyes twinkled at him as she tilted her chin up and turned her face toward him, expectantly.

He studied her face, and her lips for a moment before he slowly lowered his head toward her. There was a slight tingle as his lips met hers. It was a chaste, almost brotherly kiss; lasting only milliseconds longer than the one she had given him that time at her threshold after her father's death, but it was a kiss, and when it ended he didn't look away or look uneasy. He initially pulled away a little to look at her then he pulled her back into his arms and held her for several minutes, before insisting that she needed her rest.

As she snuggled down into the comfortable bed, she smiled to herself "*Welcome home, Catherine,*" she told herself.

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After making sure that both Catherine and Jacob were settled, Vincent made his way to the bathing chamber where he readied himself for bed. On his way back he stopped at Father's chamber.

"I thought you were going to sleep," commented Father as Vincent entered.

"Soon, Father, I was just on my way there." He sat in a chair across the table from where Father was reading. "I have a question."

"What is it, Vincent?" He asked, closing his book.

"Do you think it would be possible to enlarge my chamber? There is a little-used storage chamber next door. If I could make an entry from my existing chamber into it and then block the door from the passageway, it would make an ideal nursery. And Kanin once told me that the chamber behind mine could probably be accessed with very little work. It would make a good sleeping chamber, leaving my existing chamber as more of a living area or study."

"She is staying, then?" questioned Father.

"Yes, she says she is."

“It will have to go before the Council, you know.” Father pointed out.

“I know, but I don’t really see any problem; they will agree. I hope you do, Father,” he added as an afterthought.

“Of course I do, son. I may be getting old, but I am not senile, and I do finally see what has been in front of me for several years now. I should have seen it when Catherine went to such lengths to rescue us when we were trapped in the maze.” He placed the book on the desk then leaned forward to pat Vincent’s knee. “She is a wonderful woman; she has gone through hell to be with you and to make sure your son is safe. She loves you, and I don’t know how or why I ever doubted it.” He sat back in his chair, putting his elbows on the arms and clasping his hands across his chest. “So when are you going to marry her?” he asked with a merry twinkle.

“Father!” Vincent’s head snapped up, and he looked at his father in shock.

“Or, as they used to say back when I was young, ‘make an honest woman of her?’”

“Father!” if possible the second time he sounded even more shocked.

Father just chuckled as Vincent looked down at his knees and shook his head. “I don’t know if it might not have been better when you were warning me to stay away from her.” He rose and turned toward the door.

“I would say it is a little late for that,” he said with a smile as they both heard young Jacob wake and begin to cry.

Vincent turned and smiled at his father before he left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the next few days, Vincent fulfilled Catherine’s wishes by kissing her at odd intervals; he was finding it easier each time he did it. One time he had even surprised her, and himself when he had kissed her on the back of the neck, in public, no less. They had been standing inside the entry of the dining chamber talking to Kanin and Livie. Catherine’s hair had grown quite long while she was gone, and she had taken to braiding it and pinning the braid up; the back of her neck just looked too tempting, and before he knew it he had succumbed to that temptation and kissed her. Catherine’s surprise and pleasure surged through the Bond, and the intensity of it had amazed him even more than the fact that he had actually done it. Catherine’s reaction had distracted him so that he didn’t notice when Livie quickly hid her smile behind her hand and gave Kanin a quick, meaningful look.

Later, in their chamber, he was surprised again when Catherine thanked him.

“What for?” he asked as he helped her get Jacob ready for bed.

“For that very pleasant, public, display of affection,” she said with a smile as she picked Jacob up and moved toward the cradle.

Vincent, smiled, even blushed a little. “I don’t know what came over me.” He admitted.

“Well, whatever it was, I hope it comes over you a lot.” She put Jacob in the cradle then changed the subject. “Kanin came in this afternoon and took some measurements. What is going on?”

“I have permission to turn the storage room next door into a nursery chamber for Jacob, and there is a chamber behind this one that I thought we could open an access to and make into a sleeping chamber for us. It would be more private than this one, since, as you’ve often said, it is a lot like Grand Central in here on some days.”

“That is wonderful!” she hugged him from behind where he sat in his chair. He reached around and guided her in front of him and into his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him again. “I didn’t know there was another chamber behind this one.”

“There is, and it is about the same size as this one.” He nodded at the stained glass window. “That is the only opening into it at the moment. Father had the window put in when Devin and I were young because we were always crawling through into the other chamber and he said he was afraid one of us would get hurt doing it. We always thought it was probably more because it was a place we could get to that he couldn’t follow, because of his injury. We considered it our private clubhouse or lair.” He smiled at the memory. “Kanin said that he can make an opening where the window is. We will carve out a niche in the wall behind where we decide to put the bed and put the window in it. We can keep it lit with a long burning candle just like we do now. We plan to start work on the opening to Jacob’s chamber first. Kanin said he will drape a tent over the area where we will be working to keep the dust and chips out of the rest of this chamber, even though we will be doing most of the work from the other side; then once we get that done and make that area livable, we can move our bed in there temporarily while we work on the opening to the other chamber.”

Catherine smiled and rubbed her cheek against his. “I like the sound of that.”

“Of what?” he asked.

“Our bed,’ you said ‘our bed.’”

He tipped her head up and kissed her lightly, “It has been ‘our bed’ since you returned,” he pointed out.

“I know, but it is just nice to hear it from your lips. ‘Our son,’ ‘our bed,’ ‘our chamber’; ‘our’ is such a lovely word,” she sighed and nestled closer.

His arms tightened possessively, “I have been thinking ‘our’ for quite some time, I just haven’t said it... I love you, Catherine,” her arms tightened, almost convulsively. “I guess I don’t say that enough, either,” he conceded.

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As many members of the community as possible were gathered in Father’s study on Sunday afternoon for the Naming Ceremony. Everyone, including Mary and Father, had been trying to get Catherine or Vincent to tell them ahead of time what they were naming their son. They had even

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resorted to trickery, but nothing had worked. The baby's name was still a mystery when the ceremony started.

Father's table, which was usually piled high with books, had been cleared and was now piled with gifts. Father stood behind the table and Vincent, holding the baby was on his right with Catherine beside him.

When the crowded room quieted Father began:

*"It has been said that the child is the meaning of this life. Today we celebrate the child - this new life that has been brought into our world. We welcome the child with love, that he may be able to love, we welcome the child with gifts, that he may learn generosity, and we welcome the child with a name..."*

Father and everyone else in the room turned to look expectantly at Vincent.

"We name our son..." and he turned to Catherine who smiled and finished "Jacob Charles, after both his grandfathers."

Father was startled, and then smiled and looked at his feet for a moment. Before he looked up, Catherine was hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. Then the whole community was crowding around to officially welcome little Jacob home.

Later, after most of the people had left, the children helpfully carried all the gifts to Vincent and Catherine's chamber. Father had called an emergency council meeting to consider Catherine's petition to be allowed to move Below.

"This meeting of the council is to consider a request to move to the tunnels. The request is being made by Catherine." He looked at her. "Catherine, would you please give us your reasons for wanting to join our community?"

Catherine stood, looked around at the faces of the people gathered in the room.

"As you know," she started.

"I vote 'yes'" said William.

"As do I!" put in Mary.

"Me too!" added Rebecca.

"Ahem!" father cleared his throat. "We usually listen to the petitioner, before we vote."

"We don't really need to listen to this one," said William. "We all know her, and I vote 'yes!'"

"Alright then, all who are in favor of Catherine joining our community please signify by saying 'yes.'"

A resounding unison 'yes' rang through the chamber.

“Anyone against?” Father asked.

There was no sound.

“Then I guess it is unanimous,” he rose and opened his arms to Catherine who rushed to hug him. “Welcome to the family, my dear.”

The council meeting was over very quickly, and finally, Father, Mary, Vincent, and Catherine were able to gather around father’s table with the faithful teapot and cups. Mary was holding Jacob, and Catherine was pouring the tea for a change.

“Thank you, Catherine,” said father, after they all had their cups.

“For pouring the tea, Father?” she asked.

“Well, for that too, but actually for my first grandchild. He looked pointedly at Vincent with one brow raised; Vincent suddenly took a great interest in his tea.

“My pleasure, Father,” said Catherine with a big grin, also glancing at Vincent.

Mary stifled a giggle then spoke up. “It is a good thing that very few here use Father’s given name; we could have some confusion.”

“Even so,” said Catherine, “I have actually been calling Jacob, Jake lately. I can’t imagine anyone ever calling Father, Jake.”

Father smiled, “In college, some of my mates called me ‘JW,’ but that is as close as I have ever come to a nickname.”

“Devin sometimes calls you ‘Pops.’” reminded Vincent.

“And ‘the Old Man,’” added Father, “but I would hardly call that an endearing nickname.”

“We could really get confused around here once Jake starts talking,” pointed out Catherine. “We all call you Father, so will Jake call you Father, or Grandfather, or Grandpa, or Gramps?” she chuckled. “And what will he call Vincent? Father? Dad? Daddy? Papa?”

“I like Daddy,” put in Vincent. “That is what you called your father.” Vincent reached over and took her hand and squeezed it.

Catherine was surprised that Vincent would like the more informal name.

Later, after Jacob was in his cradle and his mother and father were relaxing Vincent commented on Catherine’s surprise.

“Why are you surprised that I would choose ‘Daddy?’” he asked.

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“I don’t know, only that I would have expected something a little more formal, that’s all. I like ‘Daddy’ too. I like picturing you as ‘Daddy.’ I can’t wait to hear Jake call you that.”

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The next day, Peter sent word that Joe wanted to meet with Catherine at Peter’s house on Tuesday at 2PM. Vincent was teaching a literature class, so Catherine left Jacob in the nursery with Mary and had Geoffrey accompany her to Peter’s. Peter wasn’t home, and she arrived early and was waiting in the hall when the bell rang. She checked through the peephole and after assuring herself that it was Joe and an attractive redhead, she had Geoffrey open the door as she stepped back.

Joe looked at the boy with surprise but didn’t hesitate. He and the woman came in, and Geoffrey closed the door behind them, then Cathy stepped out of the shadows. The woman gave her an assessing look as Joe hugged her.

“Cathy, you are already looking better than you did last week,” he said as he stepped back.

“Thanks, Joe, I’m feeling much better too.”

“Cathy, this is Diana Bennett, she has been on your case since about the middle of September.”

Cathy offered her hand and smiled. “I’m happy to meet you, Detective Bennett.”

“Call me Diana,” came the response. “I’m afraid that I have been through so much of the stuff in your apartment that I feel like I know you.”

“Then, by all means, call me Catherine, or Cathy.” She led everyone into the living room.

“Catherine, would you like me to go make tea?” asked Geoffrey.

“Thank you, Geoffrey, that would be nice.”

Geoffrey left the room, and Joe looked toward the door the boy had just gone through and raised his eyebrows.

“Geoffrey is a friend, and very trustworthy,” assured Cathy. “He knows all about what is going on.”

Joe nodded and got down to the business at hand.

“I got in touch with Burch right after I talked to you, and his expert had deciphered most of Hanlon’s book. It was like you said, he didn’t know who to trust once he saw the names in it. But it helped Diana and me figure out who we *could* trust as we put together this task force.

“We went to the police commissioner, and he brought in the mayor and a few others, so we have the right authorization to go on with our plan.”

Diana broke in, “I was amazed at the amount of corruption in the city government. I’m sorry you got caught up in the middle of it all. This Gabriel guy’s machine is huge! It has arms that go

internationally. So far we figure that once we bust it here, the FBI and the CIA will probably wind up being involved. Possibly even INTERPOL.

“But you have found people that you can trust?” asked Cathy.

“Yes,” answered Joe. “More than enough to take care of this. Our plan is to move on Gabriel first. We found the building that you described, the one where he held you for all those months. It looks like that his organization only had the top 4 floors. One of his holding companies owns the building, but the other floors appear to be legitimate businesses, but they will all be checked out thoroughly, believe me. The floor where you were and the other’s that they used are all now deserted. Looks like they moved out pretty fast. We had warrants, but we sent in an undercover unit, disguised as a cleaning crew, to go over it. There is not much left, but we did find some stuff that we were able to get prints off. And we were able to get a perfect set of your prints off the window in one room, so we can prove that you were there,” he said with a grin.

“Any other prints?”

“Lots, but none that we can find on file anywhere. Maybe we can get some matches once we clean out the place on Staten Island.”

“When do you plan to do that?” asked Cathy.

“We have a ‘go’ from the Police Commissioner,” said Diana. “And everyone who will be involved is on standby, but we haven’t set a date yet; more for security reasons than any other, but I don’t think it will be more than a week. We plan to move on Gabriel in the early morning hours, just before dawn, then as soon as we get that wrapped up, we will move on Moreno in his office.”

“That’s where I want you involved, Cathy,” said Joe, “but I need to be able to get in touch with you at a moment’s notice.”

Catherine thought for a moment. “Call Peter, here at his home number, and he can get a message to me very quickly.” She scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Joe. “I can get ready then come here and wait. Call me here, and I can be at the DA’s office in 5 minutes, 10 if I have to walk.” She gave it another moment’s thought, “Actually I can probably walk it faster than if I wait for a cab. The offices are only a few blocks from here.”

“Why do you want Catherine in on this bust?” asked Diana.

“I have to admit it is more to rub his nose in it,” said Joe. “I want him to know right out of the chute that we have him cold, and there will be no worming his way out of this one.”

Geoffrey brought in the tea tray, and the trio sorted out a few more details before everyone agreed that they had a plan. Catherine left Peter a note, detailing his part in it as Geoffrey cleaned up the tea things.

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After dinner, Catherine and Vincent discussed the plan.

“Are you sure that it won’t trouble you, Catherine?” he asked.

“I have to admit that the very idea of walking even that short distance to the DA’s office building is a bit daunting; just being in a crowd like that, in the open makes my heart flutter a bit, but I think I have to do it. Seeing John Moreno arrested will give me closure on that part of my life. I felt so betrayed by what he did. I trusted him.” Her eyes teared up.

Vincent moved to sit on the side of the bed with her and put his arms around her.

“And so did Joe,” said Vincent. “I guess you both need to see this through. We can ask someone to walk with you,” he suggested.

Catherine nodded. “That might actually help. Do you think Jamie would be willing to do it?”

“I’m sure she would, we’ll ask her.”

Catherine thought for a moment, “I think I am going to have to get Peter to retrieve a few things from my apartment. I also want to look my best for this little production; I just hope my clothes still fit.”

“Give me a list of what you need, and I will go pick it up.” He tipped her face to his and kissed her lightly, “I think you are lovely in whatever you have on, but I do agree that jeans, running shoes, and a shirt, or tunnel clothing probably will not give the impression you are striving for.”

She smiled and hugged him around the waist before getting up to find a piece of paper to make her list.

The next morning, everything she had asked for, plus a few extra items were stacked on the table in the center of the room. How Vincent had managed to get in and out, between feedings and never even be missed by Catherine was a mystery to her. There was a note on top of the stack.

*Jamie says that she would love to be in on the ‘bust of that sorry #%^%\$#@ who betrayed you’ (her words) and will help in any way you want her to.*

V.

Catherine smiled at the loyalty of her young friend.

She hadn’t chosen anything special, just a pair of black tailored slacks, comfortable shoes, a red turtleneck sweater, her trench coat, a pair of leather gloves and a scarf. All the cosmetics that she had requested were there in a box, along with a bottle of her favorite cologne that she hadn’t requested; she hoped everything hadn’t dried out and was still usable. On top of what she had asked for, Vincent had also brought several pairs of her jeans, some sweats, sweaters, just about all of her panties and bras and a couple of her prettiest nightgowns and robes. She smiled as she looked at the pile of lingerie, picturing Vincent as he made the selections.

## WELCOME HOME

She had almost finished putting it all away when Kanin and Vincent entered the chamber carrying stone working tools and several large tarps.

As they moved things to clear the wall where the planned door to Jacob's new nursery was to be cut, Catherine took Jacob to the main nursery for Mary to look after.

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The message came over the pipes from Peter just as Catherine was finishing up feeding Jacob in the early hours of Friday morning. Catherine was putting the finishing touches on her light makeup when Jamie arrived. She was wearing her Above clothing: jeans, a turtleneck sweater, and a denim jacket. She sported a bright red scarf and gloves and looked more like she was going to a party than being Catherine's security blanket for her walk to the DA's office.

Catherine went to Vincent in his chair and kissed him lightly. "Wish me luck," she whispered.

Vincent's hand went up to the back of her head, and he pulled her back down to him, "Godspeed, my love. Be careful. I will be with you every step of the way." Then he kissed her very thoroughly, causing Jamie to clear her throat and step back out of the chamber.

The sun was just rising when Catherine walked into Peter's kitchen, followed by Jamie. Peter was there, drinking coffee. After removing their coats, Catherine and Jamie helped themselves and joined him at the table.

"I have a feeling we won't have to wait long," she observed. "I was usually in the office around 8am and John was almost always there when I arrived."

Sure enough, the phone rang at 7:15. Peter answered then handed it to Catherine. It was Joe.

"You ready Radcliffe?" he asked.

"As I'll ever, be. Joe," she said a bit unsteadily.

"You got a way to get here? Sorry I can't send a car, but we are playing this one close to the vest," he told her.

"It is only a few blocks, I'll walk, and it is quicker than waiting for a cab. I have someone to walk with me."

"Ok, then get your butt over here. We just saw John go up. I'll be in front of the building, just outside the doors. I'll meet you there. We have people, mostly plain clothes, stationed all over our floor. We will all gather outside John's office. We move no later than 0745. If you aren't here, we go without you. Got it?"

Catherine giggled a little nervously, "You sound like you're back in the Army, Joe," she observed.

"I kind of feel like I am. You comin' kiddo?"

“On my way, Joe,” she cradled the phone and reached for her coat. She put it on as she headed for the front door with Jamie right behind.

Catherine hesitated slightly before taking a deep breath and skipping lightly down the stairs of the stately old brownstone. She moved and looked a lot more light-hearted than she felt. The morning foot traffic was light here, but she knew that the crowd would grow as soon as she turned onto 64<sup>th</sup> a couple of blocks away. She glanced at Jamie who was right beside her.

“You doing OK?” Jamie asked.

“Just a little shaky.” She smiled. “I just hope I don’t break out in a panic attack or hives or something. It’s hard not to look over my shoulder.”

Jamie linked her arm in Catherine’s as they hurried down the street, trying to look inconspicuous. Catherine’s common sense told her that there was no way that any of Gabriel’s or Moreno’s people could possibly know where she was, but her paranoia kept her moving quickly as she slid sidelong glances at the people who moved around and past her.

At 64<sup>th</sup> the crowd on foot had grown, New Yorkers making their way to work on a nice, sunny, late autumn morning. They turned to the left and joined the throng, hurrying toward their destination.

It was chilly, but Catherine was sweating inside her trench coat; *nerves*, she chided herself. Her mouth was starting to feel dry and cottony, and her heart was beginning to pound and work its way up into her throat. She stopped on the sidewalk and took several deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Jamie stopped next to her.

“You can do this, Catherine,” she said. “Just think of what he did to you, you need to help put him away.” This was drawing the kind of attention she knew she didn’t need or want right now, so she forced herself to move on even though the noise of the traffic and the people was beginning to overwhelm her. Jamie stayed close and kept talking all the way.

They arrived in front of the building had been nearly a second home at times, to see Joe standing by the entrance, as promised. He made eye contact, glanced at Jamie with a frown then nodded and indicated that she should follow him inside. She glanced at her watch; it was almost 7:40; it had taken longer to get here than she had thought it would. She turned to Jamie before she followed Joe.

“Thanks, Jamie, I don’t know that I would have made that walk without you. Tell Vincent I love him and that I’ll be home as soon as I can.” She hugged Jamie and ran up the steps after Joe.

She pulled the collar of her coat and her scarf up around the lower part of her face as she stepped onto the elevator behind Joe. They stood shoulder to shoulder pretending not to know each other. As they stepped off the elevator on their floor, Catherine noticed there were an unusual number of people just hanging about nonchalantly; they all looked toward the elevator as she and Joe stepped off. Diana fell into step beside them as they made their way to the office of the District Attorney.

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## WELCOME HOME

John Moreno was on the phone when Joe Maxwell and two women walked into his office unannounced. He nodded to them, he recognized Detective Bennett, but the other woman had part of her face covered and was keeping her head down. He finished his conversation and hung up.

“Joe, what are you doing here? You aren’t due back to work for another week.” He noticed that neither Maxwell nor Bennett looked happy.

Joe wrapped his fingers around Cathy’s arm and pulled her forward as she raised her head and unwound her scarf. “John, I just wanted you to see somebody before I turn you over to one of New York’s finest... Cathy, say ‘good morning.’”

Catherine stepped in front of Moreno’s desk. “Good morning, John.” She said quietly. “Although I will venture to say that we have just effectively ruined your Friday, and probably your whole weekend.”

Moreno stuttered as he tried to dissemble, “C-C-Cathy! This is fantastic!” he started to move out from behind his desk toward them, Diana drew her weapon and motioned for him to stop. “What’s going on, I was just going to welcome Cathy back. We’ve been worried about you!”

“Come off it, John,” said Joe, looking like he had a bad taste in his mouth. “Don’t try to feed us that crock. I have Cathy’s statement.”

Cathy had been watching every move Moreno made; now he leaned tiredly against his desk, looking defeated.

“I trusted you, John,” she said quietly. “When those elevator doors opened, and I saw you standing there, I was relieved, I thought I was safe, but you betrayed me.” Cathy moved aside as Joe opened the office door and beckoned to one of the uniformed officers waiting outside.

Diana kept her weapon drawn until the officer had Moreno cuffed. As the officer and Moreno were leaving, Moreno stopped in front of Cathy. He raised his head and looked at her. “For what it is worth, Cathy, I’m sorry for what you went through.”

“Yeah, right!” sneered Joe, “Get him out of here, Talbot.”

Joe stepped over to where Cathy was leaning against a chair and put his arms around her.

“You OK, kiddo?”

“I am now,” she returned the hug and stepped back. She looked from Diana to Joe. “Thank you. It would have been good just knowing that both Gabriel and John were behind bars, but actually being in on this part was better. I feel for John’s family, though.” She added.

Diana shook her head, “He is the one that should have thought of them before he got involved in this.” She shook Joe’s hand and then turned to Cathy and took hers. “It was nice working with you both. I hope I get the chance to put away some more bad guys with you again soon.” She smiled at them both and left, closing the office door behind her.

“I ask again,” said Joe, noticing that Cathy was trembling a little, “you OK?”

Cathy sat, rather abruptly, in the chair she had been leaning on.

She nodded, “I think so. Now that the adrenalin has quit pumping, I think my blood sugar has dropped. I was too nervous to eat anything before I left Peter’s.”

“Be right back,” Joe left the office and returned a couple of minutes later with a paper bag that he dropped in her lap. “Eat something.”

“Please tell me that it isn’t something you left in your desk two months ago,” she looked at the bag like it might bite.

“No, actually, Sammy, the lunch guy is out there with his cart, only a few hours early, and he said to give it to you. On the house.” Joe looked a little puzzled.

Cathy smiled and opened the bag, pulled out a bagel with cream cheese and a note. She opened it:

*Catherine,*

*I’m proud of you. I love you.*

*V.*

She smiled, put the note in her pocket and as Joe watched she polished off the bagel in record time.

“Do you still have that really bad coffee around here?” she asked, looking up at him with a smile.

As they emerged from the office, they were buried by an avalanche of friends and coworkers all wanting hugs and explanations. Joe was trying to supply the explanation when Rita fought her way through the crowd.

“Joe, there’s a phone call for you,” she turned to hug Cathy. “It’s the mayor’s office.”

“Thanks, Escobar.”

Joe made his way to his office leaving Cathy behind to try to field the rest of the questions. When he returned, he had a very odd look on his face.

“Joe, now it’s my turn to ask if you are OK,” said Cathy as the crowd parted to let him through.

“Yeah, I am. Just in shock. That was the mayor, not just his office. He is appointing me interim DA to fill the rest of Moreno’s term. He wants me down at his office for a news conference; he wants you there too, Cathy.”

The room erupted, people congratulating Joe and shaking his hand. “I always dreamed of sitting at that desk some day,” he admitted as people started to drift back to their desks, “but I didn’t want it to happen quite like this.”

Cathy stopped and hugged him, “You’ll make a great DA, Joe. Will you run for the office when the term ends? I’ll vote for you!” she grinned.

“I have a couple of years to make that decision,” he said.

“Before we leave, I need to make a phone call,” said Cathy. “I need to ask Peter to call Jenny and Nancy and give them a warning. I don’t want them to hear about my return and everything that has happened on the TV. I have a feeling the Mayor is going to tell the whole story at this news conference.”

Cathy used Joe’s office and made a quick call to Peter and told him about the news conference and then asked him to relay the news to her friends. When she exited the office, Joe grabbed her hand and led her to the elevator.

As they were leaving the building, Cathy spotted Sammy in the lobby. She asked Joe to wait a minute and ran over to the cart.

Sammy smiled at her and handed her a scratch pad and a pencil. Cathy grinned and scribbled out a note and handed it all back to him. “Thanks,” she said and ran back to Joe.

Joe hailed a cab and he and Cathy were on their way to the mayor’s office as Sammy handed the note off to another Helper who delivered it to another who handed it off to a sentry Below, who gave it to Mouse who delivered it to Vincent, in a classroom, less than 15 minutes later. He left the class reading aloud and stepped out into the corridor to read the note.

*Vincent,*

*Thank you, I needed that; the bagel and the words. Lots of news, Joe is the new DA. I have been summoned to the Mayor’s office with him. I will be back as soon as I can.*

*Love,  
Catherine*

Vincent smiled and put the note in a pocket and returned to his class.

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After a news conference, lunch with the Mayor and a job offer to fill Joe’s Deputy DA job, Catherine finally managed to get Joe off by himself.

“Joe, I really do have to go,” she glanced at her watch; it was after 2pm.

“You haven’t given us your decision on the job, Radcliffe,” he protested.

“And I really can’t just now, I need to talk to Vincent about it,” she started to put on her coat.

“But do you really have to leave now?” he asked.

“Joe, let me be honest. I am breastfeeding, I last fed Jacob around 5am, and I am really getting uncomfortable,” she actually winced as she buttoned her coat over her aching breasts. “To be frank, I am in pain.”

Joe blushed bright red, causing Cathy to laugh in spite of her discomfort. “I didn’t realize,” he mumbled.

“Please, make my excuses to everyone. I’ll talk to you on Monday about the job, but right now I have to go.” She made a dash for the door and was out on the street before anyone, but Joe noticed she was gone.

She quickly surveyed her surroundings; she didn’t know any of the tunnel entrances in this part of the city, although she knew they were here. She hailed a cab and gave him the address of her apartment. The threshold in the basement would be safe to use this time.

When she started down the ladder into the sub-basement, Vincent was there waiting, with Jacob.

“I sensed your discomfort,” was all he said as he handed her the baby and led her over to a secluded spot where she sank to the floor and prepared to feed Jacob.

When Jacob was settled, and feeding, Catherine looked up at Vincent with as much gratitude and relief in her eyes as love.

“I had a heck of a time getting away.” She smiled, “I finally had to tell Joe exactly what the problem was to get him to let me go. I think I embarrassed the poor man.”

“I can sympathize with him,” said Vincent as he looked into her eyes, avoiding looking lower.

“You know, Vincent, you can look,” she told him gently. “In fact, what you did that first time, right after I got home when you held both of us while I fed Jacob; I really liked that. It felt like you were sharing the experience. That is the only bad thing about breastfeeding; you don’t get the opportunity to feed him.”

Vincent smiled down at her. “I fed him several times today,” he said as he moved and sat down beside her. He didn’t put his arm around her as he had that first time, but at least he was closer than he usually was when she fed Jacob. “And, if I allow myself to, I can share the experience empathically.”

They sat quietly for a few moments then Vincent prompted. “Tell me about what happened today.”

As she fed Jacob, Catherine relayed the details of what had happened.

“The Mayor made a good choice appointing Joe the interim DA,” she stated as she handed Jacob to Vincent and straightened her clothing.

Vincent just nodded, he could feel that there was something else she hadn’t spoken of, but knew that she would talk as soon as she worked it out for herself and that would be soon enough.

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Soon enough, came later that evening in their chamber after Jacob was down for the night.

Catherine was straightening up the baby things, and Vincent was going over a lesson plan for Monday's Literature class.

"Vincent?"

He looked up to see Catherine leaning on the changing table twisting a receiving blanket between her hands.

"Catherine?" he said with a twinkle.

She smiled and dropped the blanket on the changing table and moved to sit at the table across from Vincent.

"There was one more thing that I didn't tell you about today."

She had considered not even mentioning it but felt like he had to know all the facts.

"What is that, Catherine?" he asked, closing the book he held.

"Well, at the Mayor's instigation, Joe offered me a position as a Deputy DA." Catherine watched as Vincent's lips compressed and he closed his eyes.

*At least a Deputy DA stays in the office and courtroom and isn't often in danger,* he thought.

"What did you tell him?" he asked.

"I told Joe that I had to talk to you before I could make any decisions."

Vincent opened his eyes and looked at her, "What do you want to do, Catherine?" he asked. His feelings were being pulled both ways. *She is so good at what she does as a lawyer, and she loves it, I want her to stay here with me, with Jacob, but I can't be that selfish and ask it of her.*

She leaned forward and caught his hand that was resting on the desk.

"What I don't want to do is hurt you, Vincent," she said. *He's always been so proud of what I do for the world Above, but I hope he doesn't want me to take this job!*

Vincent removed his hand from under hers, got up and walked to the other side of the chamber and stood with his back to her. "I think that should be secondary, Catherine," he said. "You are talking about your career here. You worked hard to become a lawyer, and you've always done good work at the DA's office, you could do more as a Deputy DA."

"Do you want me to take the job, Vincent?" she asked.

“What I *want* is for you to be happy. If taking that job will make you happy then you should take it.” He still didn’t face her.

“But I need more than that, Vincent,” she prodded. “Do you want the mother of your son to be a Deputy DA, or do you want her to be a ‘stay at home mom’ who runs a neighborhood law clinic in her spare time? What would make you happy?”

Vincent finally turned to face her. His expression was as stone like as any on Mt. Rushmore. “What I want; what makes me happy isn’t important.” He stated flatly.

“But it is! It’s important to me. If you aren’t happy, then I can’t be,” she was almost in tears, but Vincent stubbornly stayed on the other side of the room.

“I could say the same thing, Catherine.”

“Do you remember when I told you about the plan that I have for those buildings Daddy left me?”

Vincent nodded.

“Well, that is what would make *me* happy. I would be happy being a mom, living here with you and working on a case here and there when one caught my interest. But you’ve always told me that my place is Above because I do a lot of good work in my job at the DA’s office. But I can do good work at a neighborhood law clinic too. Vincent, I don’t want to be a Deputy DA,” there were tears in her voice when she made the last statement.

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, she found herself on her feet with Vincent’s arms around her. She could hear his chuckle as she pressed her cheek to his chest.

“I think we have a small misunderstanding here,” he said as he tipped her head back so he could look into her eyes. “We both seem to be arguing the same side of the question: you don’t want to be a Deputy DA, and I don’t want you to be a Deputy DA unless you want to be one. So I don’t think we have a problem.”

Catherine studied his face for a moment then burst out laughing and rested her forehead on his chest. “I’m going to have to get used to the ‘new Vincent,’” she said. “I’m so used to having to argue that point with you. First, you agree without an argument that I should live here with you, now you agree that I shouldn’t take Joe’s job offer.” She gripped his vest and shook him a little, then grinned, “Who am I going to argue with? I’ll have to call Joe once a week just to get a good fight.”

“You could always debate politics with Father, or go try to tell William how to organize his kitchen, that should give you a few hours of good argument,” suggested Vincent. “I prefer not to fight with you...”

“What would you prefer to do with me?” she waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I left myself wide open for that one, didn’t I?” he threw one of her phrases back at her.

“Yes you did,” she grinned and hugged him.

Vincent pointed at the chair she had been sitting in, “Sit, now it’s my turn.”

Catherine sat and looked up at him expectantly as he paced back and forth a few times before coming to a stop in front of her.

“I’ve been waiting for just the right time for this, but it just doesn’t seem to come.” He smiled at the worried look on her face as he squatted down in front of her and took her hands. “Catherine, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

The look of love and hope glowing from his eyes was blinding, and she just sat looking at him with her mouth hanging open for a moment.

“Catherine?” the glow was fading, and he was starting to look worried again.

Catherine blinked twice, gulped once and launched herself out of the chair at him, pushing him over onto his back on the floor.

“Oh my God! Yes, yes, yes!” she was punctuating her words with kisses all over his face.

Vincent, remembering the last time they were in this position reached up and was pulling her lips down to his when a summons came over the pipes; Catherine recognized his name, but nothing else. He diverted his aim and placed the kiss on her forehead and heaved a sigh. “Hold that thought,” he said rolling to his side and getting up, then helping Catherine to her feet. “We will continue this conversation when I return,” and he was gone.

He was back a few minutes later, “There is a problem. There has been a small cave-in in one of the seldom used tunnels on the outer rim of the community, no one was hurt, but several people took shelter in a side chamber and are now trapped. There is another route, but I am the only one who knows it. I will have to go get them and guide them back here to the hub.” He picked up his cloak.

“I understand,” she kissed his cheek. “Be careful and hurry home.”

Vincent caught her chin and gave her a quick, passionate kiss that left her slightly weak-kneed. “As I said, hold that thought. This shouldn’t take long.”

Catherine didn’t quite know what Vincent meant by that; it was one of those times she wished that the Bond went both ways so she would have more insight into his feelings.

About two hours later, Jamie came to tell her that they had just received a message that Vincent, Mouse and a couple of others had reached the trapped people, cleared the entrance to the chamber they had sheltered in and were on their way back. It would take them about 2 - 2 ½ hours to make it back to the main tunnels. Catherine glanced at the mantel clock; it was after 11 pm. He wouldn’t be back until very late. She got Jamie to stay with Jacob while she made a quick trip to the bathing chamber, then she fed Jacob and crawled into the big lonely bed by herself.

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She woke when someone sat on the side of the bed, she could smell Vincent's soap and could hear Jacob just beginning to fuss.

She rolled over and stretched, "Umm, what time is it?" she asked.

"Nearly three." Vincent turned to hand Jacob to her.

She struggled up sleepily and took him from Vincent. She was then surprised when Vincent snuggled up next to her to hold her while she fed Jacob.

She relaxed against him as he put his arms around them both.

"This is nice," she said with a smile.

"You said you liked when I did this before. I liked it too, but thought you might want a little more privacy."

"There you go, thinking again," she said with a little laugh. "Did you get everybody back OK?" she went on to ask.

"Yes, it was a Helper bringing back a group of children from a museum trip and dinner. No one with them knew anything but the regular route. The Helper is safely back home, and the children are all in their beds."

"It's awfully late, don't you have a work detail early in the morning?" she asked.

"Father assigned someone else to it. I don't *have* to be anywhere tomorrow until late afternoon." As he was talking his left hand was making seemingly random circles on her stomach where he rested it under her arm that held Jacob.

"That's nice," he didn't know if she meant the work reassignment or what he was doing with his hand, so he moved his other hand to her shoulder and started to move it up and down her right arm.

By the time Catherine shifted Jacob to the other side, she was slightly breathless, and she was wondering what was going on. She didn't dare hope, did she? She was resting against Vincent's chest, his heartbeat had remained even and steady, his breathing was normal, and from what she could tell, he was totally relaxed. She, on the other hand, was reacting in the extreme to his casual caresses and the occasional kiss she could feel him dropping on her hair; there was a fire building low in her belly, and her confusion was growing just as quickly. She leaned forward to burp Jacob, as Vincent slid to the side of the bed ready to take him and change his diaper.

After placing Jacob in the cradle, Vincent put out the candle he had lit when he came in then returned to the bed; the only light came from the stained-glass window.

Standard procedure for the past couple of weeks of sharing a bed had been for Catherine and Vincent to retire at different times, Catherine usually going earlier. And when they did both retire at

or near the same time they would each stay strictly to their own side of the bed, even though that invariably changed after they went to sleep and quite naturally gravitated toward each other. They often woke in each other's arms. This early morning started out no differently; Catherine moved to the extreme inside of the bed facing the wall, but when Vincent joined her in the bed, he laid down facing the center of the bed for a change.

"Do you remember what I said before I left this evening, Catherine?" he asked quietly.

"Um, I think so," she mumbled.

"What was it?"

She rolled over and faced him, still leaving at least a foot of space between them. "You told me to 'hold that thought,' but I was wondering exactly what thought that was."

He scooted to the center of the bed then leaned toward her and kissed her. "That thought," he said, combing his fingers through her hair.

"That's a good thought," she agreed, cuddling closer and fitting her head into his shoulder, she hugged him; still not pushing her luck too much. She placed one hand tentatively on his chest but didn't move it. He tucked her head more securely under his chin and returned her hug. The feel of her in his arms -- it felt right. She trusted him. She had trusted him from the beginning; she'd seen him at his absolute worst, and her trust had never failed. More than that, he could sense across the bond that she loved him and desired him... only that had the power to frighten him.

He tilted her head up toward his and kissed her again; this time it was more like the one he'd given her before she left to join Joe's task force, only it lasted longer. They were both breathless when they pulled apart.

They gazed at each other for a few moments, then Catherine reached up and cupped his cheek with her hand. "Make love to me, Vincent," was all she said.

He was a little clumsy; Vincent was, after all, an inexperienced lover. He was a little awkward, and still scared that he might lose control and hurt her; because of that he was gentler than he probably needed to be, but he took the initiative. Catherine felt him relaxing his vigilance as they touched. They took their time; there was no rush now. He could feel her response through their Bond, and it encouraged him toward the passion and intimacy they both wanted. She could almost feel the dark shadows receding from his soul.

Finally, they both shuddered to completion, collapsed then lay breathing hard, eyes closed. He had one arm around her waist, and his head rested on her shoulder. She stroked his hair back from his face as he tilted his head up to smile at her. Just before he drifted off to sleep, he slid a leg across her. She snuggled into his embrace; he was holding her as if he never wanted to let her go.

Three hours later, like a little wind-up clock, Jacob woke and was demanding to be fed. Vincent was still half asleep as he disentangled himself from Catherine and crawled out of bed to get Jacob and

take him to the changing table for a fresh diaper. He was halfway to the table before he realized he was naked.

Catherine watched the whole scene from her warm nest in the bed and had to stifle a giggle when she saw that it had just dawned on Vincent that he didn't have any clothes on. Watching him, trying to be nonchalant as he changed Jacob's diaper was both amusing and endearing.

Catherine was ready for Jacob when Vincent brought him over to the bed. As soon as Catherine took him, Vincent snatched up his robe and put it on, and it was none too soon. No sooner had he tied the belt when Mary called out from the open chamber door. Vincent turned and snatched a blanket out of Jacob's cradle and draped it over Catherine to preserve her modesty as he called out for Mary to enter.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so early," she smiled at Catherine. "But Lily said that she left her backpack in the chamber they were in last night after the cave-in. She is very upset because the book she is reading for your Literature class was in it."

"I think I remember seeing it; I thought she picked it up before we left. Tell her a group is going to that area today to clear the fall, ask them to look for her backpack. She'll have it back in plenty of time for class on Monday," said Vincent.

"I can catch them in the dining chamber before they leave," agreed Mary. "Thank you, Vincent."

Catherine had just shifted Jacob to her other side, and Vincent had settled back on the bed with her when Mouse bounced into the room unannounced.

"Vincent, going with us?" he asked, referring to the group going out to clear the cave-in.

"Not this time, Mouse. I think Cullen is in charge of this work crew," answered Vincent.

"But Vincent always goes to help clear rocks," Mouse looked a little disappointed at not being able to spend the day with his friend.

"Not this time, Mouse," he said rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling. "I didn't get back here until very late, and I'm still tired. I need to get some more sleep."

Mouse brightened at that. "OK, good. Sleep is good, make up for all the sleep you didn't get while Catherine was gone." He turned and rushed out of the chamber.

"Does he ever go anywhere at a normal speed?" asked Catherine with a laugh.

She was burping Jacob when they heard Father call out at the entrance to the chamber.

Catherine rolled her eyes and mouthed "Who else?" as Vincent smiled and invited his father to enter.

## WELCOME HOME

“I quite expected you to still be asleep, after your late-night rescue,” he said, as he stepped into the chamber.

“I did too,” commented Vincent as he sat on the side of the bed. “But Jacob had other ideas,” Vincent glanced back at his son and Catherine. “I intend to go right back to bed as soon as he is done.”

“I’m glad I didn’t disturb you, if you hadn’t answered I was going to leave a note.” Father smiled at Catherine. “Joe Maxwell just called Peter and gave him a message to pass to you. He said that they matched fingerprints from the building you were held in with people, including Gabriel that they arrested at Gabriel’s. Joe said they’ve been able to charge Gabriel and his people with a ‘list of things that is about as long as your arm,’ and John Moreno has agreed to ‘sing’ in return for being allowed to plead guilty to a lesser charge.”

Catherine smiled and thanked Father for delivering the message. Father turned to leave, and Vincent rose to follow him out. “I’ll return in a few minutes,” he said to Catherine as he left.

He left Catherine puzzling over Vincent; she just didn’t know what was going on in his head this morning.

She had placed Jacob in his cradle and returned to bed when Vincent came back into the chamber. Before putting out the candles and crawling back into the bed, he placed his chair in the open door of his chamber.

“What is that for?” she asked as he pulled her over to cuddle against him.

“I told Father that we wanted to plan a wedding and that you would let him know when. Then I said we didn’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the day, and I asked for his assistance in both matters. He said he would, but suggested the chair as an extra deterrent,” he kissed Catherine thoroughly and pulled her even closer. “I am looking forward to having that new chamber opened up so we can move our bed out of Grand Central.”

THE END

NOTE: Gabriel’s monolog in the doctor’s presence is taken word for word from the Beauty and the Beast Episode *Though Lovers Be Lost*.