Beauty and the Beast
31st Anniversary 2018

Together Forever Volume II:
Pacem Muros: Peace Between Walls

Online Convention@TreasureChambers.com
September 25, 2018
Pacem Muros
(Peace Between Walls)

Anything is possible in our imaginary world
Every fan is a welcome friend
Opinion and open discussion are our lifeblood
We celebrate our differences as inspiration
We share without prejudice with everyone
We support those who keep this fandom vital
We let honesty, truth and openness rule
We respect everyone, deny none
We always encourage the dreamers
Though we may not be together, we are never apart
Beauty and the Beast
31st Anniversary 2018
Together Forever
Volume II:
Peace Between Walls

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Featuring stories, art, and poetry, inspired by the characters so beautifully brought to life by Linda Hamilton and Ron Perlman from 1987-1990.
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Dedicated to the memory of Roy Dotrice, known as, “Father” to all of us here. You were a vital part of a beautiful dream. Your dedication, and your love for your craft, made believers of us all.

...and to the memory of Joseph Campanella. You appeared only briefly, but you created a character that was so much more. Peter Alcott lives on in our hearts, our minds, and on the printed page.
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Who could have ever imagined that a show that was canceled after only two and a half seasons would have garnered a following of fans so loyal that, even after thirty-one years, there are still many who gather in person and online to celebrate it?

But here we are, proof that there is power and strength in a dream... as long as it's the right dream. The fact that we are still here at all says something.

Let’s face it, in a world where attention spans are short, and people move from fad to fad, few things seem to last very long. But die hard BatB fans continue to come together for conventions online and off. We continue to create art, costumes, music videos, and fan fiction. For several years fans have looked forward to one zine each year that is faithfully produced for the annual July convention. But there seems to be a resurgence of imagination in this fandom these days and, for the past two years, two zines have been published... both of them large and full of gorgeous offerings from fans around the world.

It’s unbelievable but true that there are still insights and aspects of the show to be explored. And we do that gladly, even eagerly. This need to explore the endless possibilities of our unfulfilled dream has inspired a body of work so prolific that it would be a monumental task to even try to read it all. But what fun it is to try!

Being prolific is a gift to us all.

Is there anyone out there who would complain that we have been given “too much” fan fiction this year? It would be like complaining that Ghirardelli makes too much chocolate, or your vacation in Hawaii was too much fun.

I think not!

At first, I wondered if we would be able to pull it off again. Could we make a zine as wonderful as the one we made last year? Could lightning really strike twice? But one by one, authors, poets and artists, beta readers and editors contributed what talents they had to offer, and the result is this wonderful zine. I hope you all love it as much as I do.

I offer here a heartfelt thank you to the amazing OnZine team at Treasure Chambers; Angie, Allison, Linda, Cindy, Janet, and Judith, without whom this volume of “Together Forever II” would never have been possible. You are all amazing and wonderful! When we share what talents we have, we prove that, somehow, we are greater than the sum of our parts.

Thank you to everyone who has shared this amazing ride with me!

~Barbara Anderson
Once Upon a Time …

in the

City of New York …

Two worlds became one.
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Invitation
By Anony Mouse

Do you love an Anniversary?
Do you love the march of days?
Do you love that He loves only Her,
And in so many ways?

Do you hope in breathless wonder?
Do you swear that “It’s all true?”
Is your fairy tale much more than that?
Is the best eye color blue?

Do you mark September 25th
April 12th and Winterfest?
Does a mouse mean “Mouse” to you, my friend?
Is January 12th the best?

Does a drainage culvert call you home?
Do candles mean more than light?
Does “Once Upon a Time is Now”
And Shakespeare sound, just right?

Then come to “Peace Between the Walls”
And happily, sneak right in.
“Together Forever,” adventure calls.
And so, shall we begin?

If you embrace the impossible, you may find you are in exceptionally good company. Below is a collection of quotes by some of those, and they’re all, in some way, quotes about embracing the impossible, and making it so.

We do that. Or at least, when we’re at our best, we mean to.

So, for whatever it is worth, please help yourself to this small sampling of inspiration, imagination, and dreaming. It’s about that which is impossible, yet possible. Unreal, yet real, thanks to those who helped make it so.

I hope it brings you closer to the first principle of Pacem Muros, “Anything is Possible, in Our Imaginary World.”

Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth. – Pablo Picasso

Nothing is ever lost – Antoine Lavoisier

You’re not a stranger to me... And You, well, You’re something to see... Stevie Nicks, Beauty and the Beast

Time is an illusion, albeit a persistent one. – Albert Einstein

Heresy, in one age, becomes Orthodoxy in the next. – Helen Keller

It always seems impossible, until it’s done. – Nelson Mandela
No Matter where you are in your own fairy tale. I wish you love. – Cindy

God is in the Gaps. – Neil DeGrasse Tyson

I have stood on the shoulders of giants. – Sir Isaac Newton

Science has not yet taught us if madness is or is not the sublimity of the intelligence. – Edgar Allen Poe

Perhaps all the Dragons in our lives are Princesses – Rainier Maria Rilke

Once Upon A Time, in the City of New York... – Ron Koslow

Shakespeare Knew Everything – Inscription from Vincent to Catherine

Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. – Lewis Carroll

Imagination is more important than knowledge. – Albert Einstein

Blunders may amount to the opening of a destiny. – Joseph Campbell

Learn to Measure Time a Different Way. – Vincent

Everyone, Everywhere, for Everything – Garden sign at Treasure Chambers

I love those who yearn for the impossible. – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Neverlands vary a good deal. John’s, for instance, had a lagoon with flamingos flying over it... while Michael... had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it. – J.M. Barrie

Only those who attempt the absurd will achieve the impossible – M.C. Escher

Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed. – Invictus, W.E. Henley

Real isn’t how you are made. It’s a thing that happens to you. – The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams Bianco

Impossible is a word only to be found in the dictionary of fools. – Napoleon Bonaparte

Monsters will always exist. There’s one inside each of us. But an angel lives there, too. – Jacqueline Novogratz
An Angel was in the marble. So I carved until I set him free. – Michelangelo

Go not to the Elves for council, for they will say both “no” and “yes.” – J.R.R. Tolkien

In order to attain the impossible, one must attempt the absurd. – Miguel de Cervantes

No boundaries exist within my breast. – Rumi

Anything can happen. On a flimsy ground of reality, imagination spins marvelous patterns. – August Strindberg

Rage is a powerful energy that with diligent practice, can be transformed into fierce compassion. – Buddha

You are always free to change your mind and choose a different future; or a different past. – Richard Bach

Without faith, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible – Mary McLeod Bethune

One way or another, we all have to find what best fosters the flowering of our humanity in this contemporary life, and dedicate ourselves to that. – Joseph Campbell

Realize there is nothing more artistic than to love others. – Vincent Van Gogh

Life is either a great adventure, or nothing. – Helen Keller

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes. – Walt Whitman

“Is our world, down here…”

… in our Imaginary World.

It truly is.

We push the edges outward, not because we love the edge, but because we love what we see, on the other side. We push to discover. We push to create.

Pushing the limits of what you’ve ever done, (or what others have done) isn’t always easy, but it is always worthwhile. “There is no life without limits, says Catherine.”

---

\(^1\) Vincent, Beauty and the Beast. – From the pilot episode, ‘Once Upon a Time in New York,’ written by Ron Koslow
And Catherine is right. But then, too, so is Vincent. We all “deserve a life without limits.” Or at least we deserve the chance to explore those, both in our fictions and in our realities.

And so, we run to where the limits are, and push through them, hoping we will love what we see, what we make, and what we feel, on the other side. We do it so often, we give it names. “Alternate Universe,” or “Re-imagined Season.” “Classic.” “Crossover.” “She Never Died” is a re-imagined season. We “tweak canon” and we change relationships, timelines, seminal events, and the fate of characters. We can deepen relationships, or end them entirely. We can introduce new characters, or change how old ones react. We can build. We can explore. We can push not just one edge, but every edge.

Or… we don’t. We don’t do any of that. We play in the show just as it was presented, richly drawn, as it was, and change nothing, in particular, leaving that very familiar foundation just the way it was laid out for us. We can do that, too. We are creative, that way. And in that very same way, we are mighty.

All that, too, is ‘pushing an edge.’ It’s just a familiar edge.

We can do anything. We can do everything. It’s our world, in these pages. It’s our world, down here.

Welcome to Pacem Muros, and its ten guidelines, for the delight and pleasure of all. Always remember that...

Anything is possible, in our imaginary world.
Survival
by Angie

Vincent strolled quickly across the park, feeling what Father called 'a nip in the air' now that it was early Fall. He was late... or early... and there was much to do today. Duty called.

He entered the gloom of the culvert entrance then stopped to listen. The sound got louder and louder. He couldn't see them, but he could imagine a large 'V' of Canada geese flying across the Park.

Survival dictated the cycle of their days, just as it did for the tunnel community, he mused. His steps were lighter now as he returned below.
The rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the rose

William Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality*

Happy birth-day, Dear Fa-therrrrrrr. Happy birth-day to youuuuuuu!" The chorus died out amid group applause, as the song's fading notes echoed off the decorated stone walls. Vincent applauded with them, the room so crowded he had to stand well back from the table, rather than close to it.

There was not an inch of wall or table space in the big Dining Chamber that did not contain a banner, a sign, a homemade birthday card, a drawing, a paper chain, several poems, multiple gifts, and at least six very carefully "in my best penmanship" printed essays from the older children. The longest of the written tributes were mounted on a corkboard or strung on lines, and they hung across the gift table, banners of acknowledgment, and of love. It was quite the celebration.
All of it served to express the fact that Dr. Jacob Wells was absolutely vital to the tunnels, and just why that was, to the inhabitants therein. The flotsam of Father’s 65th birthday party cluttered the space almost as much as the party-goers did, and good will filled the brazier and candle warmed air. The atmosphere was as cheerful as its august guest of honor.

Jacob blew out his candles, decreasing the temperature in the room only slightly. The level of applause went from polite to raucous, and Jacob chuckled jovially at this, his latest accomplishment.

Tunnel residents and supporters of every age had taken the day to celebrate how (and how much) Father had contributed to their lives, and to tell him how they all felt about him. More good wishes (and at least a few more cards and gifts) were coming down from Helpers even now, as they all celebrated in the room they normally used for communal dining.

Jacob’s special party had been a day-long affair and was still going strong, hours after it had started.

Father basked in the glow of the well-wishers, as well as the tinier glow from the embers of his spent candles. Some twenty or so had been scattered on a good-sized sheet cake with a ‘six’ and a ‘five’ written in blue icing. Mercifully, they had ‘spelled’ the number with the frosting and not forced him to blow out that many birthday candles. Jacob doubted his lungs could have taken it. Not to mention the fact that he’d declared it a fire hazard over the age of fifty.

The look on his very content face said it all. He was a happy man today.

He’d been receiving gifts and gift-givers since after breakfast. Gifts, fond wishes, cards, and congratulations flowed to him. Even a telegram came, from Devin, delivered by Clarence the sax player, complete with the latter’s saxophone and a little light jazz. Devin was mountain climbing in the Himalayas and promised to plant a flag for Jacob on whatever summit he reached that day. The thought made Father smile.

The children’s chorus had sung his favorite songs. William had made him his favorite dinner: roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The cake was for everyone to share, and a very fine bottle of scotch sat close by Jacob’s elbow, a gift from Peter Alcott.

Yet, there was more, and in a way, that seemed to be the point.

Elizabeth had done a very impressive portrait of him. Vincent had gifted him with an inlaid chess board, scrounged from the refuse bin, and refinished with Cullen’s help. Catherine had sent down a first edition William Wordsworth. The list seemed all but endless.

Vincent knew that for, as laden as the gift table was, there would be at least a few more presents added to it, as late-comers wended their way through the mob. Some of the
Helpers were still making their way down as they got off work, closed up their shops, or tended to other Topside business, then managed to make the long trek on foot.

It was a day (turned into an evening) for celebrating. One everyone had been looking forward to. And for all the plans that it would be a “big event,” seeing it all in action was different than planning it out on paper. The room was full to capacity and then some, and Mary’s smile couldn’t dim. This had largely been arranged by her, with a good deal of help, of course. No one had actually “intended” the celebration to become so huge. That was a thing that had happened, almost organically, as each group, each person invited, took pains to make sure it was indeed remembered as a special day.

Vincent’s sky-blue eyes took in the scene. The tunnels were bubbling with pleasure, and its patriarch was at its center, trying to deflect at least some of the adoration.

"Now, now, everyone must make sure to have a piece of this excellent cake William has made for us,” Jacob instructed them all, making the cut that made the wish.

"What did you wish for, Father?” Samantha asked, near his elbow.

Jacob plated a piece of cake and tugged her brunette braid. "Now, Samantha, I must tell you, I have nothing to wish for since I have all of you," he said, with characteristic deference to one of his many children.

"And you can't tell, dummy!” Zach scolded her. "Or else, it won't come true!"

Samantha stuck out her tongue to an adult chorus of "Now, Zach...Now Samantha..." and the sound of clattering plates clinked over the conversation, as birthday cake was sectioned out and passed along.

Vincent watched Jacob cheerfully wield the knife, unable to shake off a certain sense of disquiet, as Eli accidentally bumped Vincent’s elbow, trying to pass by him. Vincent stepped aside, and let the older man pass.

The dining hall was full to overflowing, literally. There were people standing in the hallway, chatting with each other pleasantly, as new arrivals shouldered their way through, and old ones made their way out, just trying to ease the crowded conditions of the room.

"We should have done this in the Great Hall, Vincent thought, just to accommodate the Helpers and well-wishers who stopped by. It had been months since he’d seen some of them.

But even as Vincent thought it, he knew that Father would never permit something so ostentatious-sounding for his birthday. The Great Hall was saved for Winterfest, and that was that as far as Jacob was concerned.
Still, that didn’t stop Jacob from taking a certain amount of vain pleasure in the paper chain that ran around the room, each link saying “Father” in various shades of crayon. The children had spent days, making it. It sported varying degrees of penmanship.

*Crayon-ship*, Vincent amended mentally, eying the links that festooned the room walls. The day’s guest of honor couldn’t quite hide his soft smile, each time he looked up at it. Vincent knew that all of Jacob’s “children” had made the links and added to the chain. Each guest was invited to do the same, as strips of paper and boxes of used crayons sat on a side table. The colorful chain crossed the room and draped down. It threatened to touch the floor on one end, and as new people came in, it was still growing.

“My heart leaps up when I behold A rainbow in the sky: So was it when my life began; So is it now I am a man,’” Vincent mused, wondering if Jacob remembered the Wordsworth quote and applied it mentally to the colorful, cascading chain. Whether he recalled it or not, Jacob was certainly happy about it.

And Father was *certainly* (not secretly) pleased that Brigit O’Donnell, now a friend to the Tunnels, had sent him a bottle of Irish whiskey from as far away as Ireland, or that Eli had found a baseball that may or may not have actually been signed by Lou Gehrig, or that Mary had spent the day polishing a fine set of tortoiseshell men’s brushes, presented in a soft, fabric lined box, or that Pascal had awoken everyone this morning with the message "It's Father's Day!" ringing down the pipes, or... well.

‘To me alone, there came a thought of grief,’ Vincent mused, quoting Wordsworth mentally, again.

*This day is suited to “Intimations of Immortality”, though they’re of mortality, too.*

Father continued to grin, still serving the cake. Everything about him said, it was good to be him today!

Vincent watched Jacob turn over cake cutting duties to Olivia, as Old Sam thumped the guest of honor on the back and whispered something congratulatory in his ear. Both men nodded and smiled.

*It must be hard to be completely humble in the face of so much well-wishing.* Vincent thought Father was pulling it off rather nicely, as Nana accepted her piece of cake with a “thank you” kiss to Jacob’s grizzled cheek. Old Sam moved along. Sarah was the next adult to step up behind him and offer her heartfelt good wishes of the day.

Vincent, from his position across the room, stepped aside to let Mr. Wong and several friends from Chinatown slide by, as he continued to take it all in, watching Jacob lean down so that he could admire a picture frame from Eric, one that had been decorated with glued-on pieces of pasta, painted white. Jacob declared it priceless treasure. Everything was. Father ruffled the bespectacled boy’s hair, appreciatively.
Thoughtful blue eyes continued to scan the room. Everyone was happy, bubbling, and cheerful, as they surrounded their “father,” and chatted with each other. Ellie chased after Kipper, who was chasing after Geoffrey, with frosting on his extended index finger. William was enjoying a glassful of punch as he talked with Cullen. Brooke was flirting with Robert, who was flirting right back, as each of them passed a newly learning to walk baby Cathy back and forth between them. They were all laughing, smiling, talking, or playing, and the room was full of a convivial kind of joy which simply fed on itself, causing more of the same.

It was a thing which made Vincent all the more aware that the day was tinged with a warning kind of sorrow.

*We love you, Father. We love you so much. I love you so much.*

There was a reason the Tunnel traffic had been so congested all day, a reason that somehow this birthday of Jacob’s seemed "more special" than others. He was sixty-five. The next time the celebration was this large, he would likely be seventy...then seventy-five...then...?

There was something about those odd and even numbers, over a certain age. Something that didn't necessarily happen at twenty-five, or thirty-five, or forty-five, or even fifty-five, really, but somehow began to take on an awkward kind of significance, once it was quietly understood that there were far fewer years left in front of a man, than there were behind him.

Vincent wondered at the nature of the celebration. *It is as if it seems imperative somehow, to mark such occasions by hearty festivities, as if to allow the recipient to say, "Look, I am here, and this is another year the grim reaper doesn't have me!"*

Vincent realized that the course of his thoughts was turning absolutely maudlin and he excused himself without taking a piece of cake. The room was full to capacity anyway. Some of the people in the halls were trying to press forward, while others were simply trying to avoid the crush of well-wishers, as Jacob enjoyed his due. Vincent wove
through them patiently, turning his big body sideways so he could pass through the festive crowd.

He stepped into the hall, where the spill of party-goers stood talking, many taking in Elizabeth’s handiwork as they entered or left the room. Her portrait was garnering almost as many compliments as its well-loved subject today.

*She must have spent hours doing this,*

Vincent thought. He knew Jacob would never agree to “sit for a portrait.” As with all of her creations, Elizabeth had worked largely from memory.

Peter Alcott stood with Rebecca, admiring the painting, until she excused herself.

"What do you think of Elizabeth's portrait?"

Peter asked Vincent, as they stood together in front of the artwork. It sat on a sturdy easel just outside the dining chamber entryway. The likeness was similar to one she had put on the walls of the Painted Tunnels, but this one had the virtue of being painted on a flat piece of scrounged canvas and having more detail: Jacob stared straight ahead, cupping his bearded chin with one gloved hand. He was wearing a dark red sweater and a thoughtful expression. Elizabeth had judiciously removed some of the grey from his hair and beard.

"I think she was a bit... generous with his grey," Vincent replied, looking fondly at the resolute face that had been depicted perhaps ten to fifteen years younger than Jacob truly was.

"Wait 'til it's your turn," Peter said, smiling, as he indicated his own shock of grey hair. "Then you'll want a fairly flattering portrait artist, too."

Peter thought nothing of the jibe, knowing Elizabeth had not only painted Vincent as both an infant and an adult on the Tunnel walls, but that Kristopher Gentian had created a very vigorous likeness of him as well.

Try as he might, Vincent could not picture himself as a sixty-five-year-old man.

"Perhaps my kind does not go grey," Vincent mused.

"Said by every man in his thirties, ever." Peter glanced from the portrait to Vincent’s expression, noting his friend’s somewhat somber demeanor, as the larger man took in the flattering portrait of the only parent he’d ever known.
Peter, what are the chances we will be celebrating with Jacob in five years? In ten?
Much beyond that? And if he is even here, will he be capable of leading us?

But of course, Vincent could not share such dark thoughts with his longtime friend, who at sixty-seven had a couple of years on Jacob.

“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown?” Peter guessed, taking in his friend’s sober expression.

Vincent shrugged, mistaking him. “Father sleeps well, as far as I know. And if he has any concerns, they are... not apparent today.” He glanced back toward the Dining Chamber entrance, as he said it. Michael was giving Old Sam an enthusiastic hug as the latter asked about college life.

“I wasn’t thinking of Jacob. I was thinking about you,” Peter replied, drawing Vincent’s attention back.

Blue eyes cut in the physician’s direction. “No one here is Henry the Fourth. I wear no ‘crown,’ Peter.” Vincent answered, uneasy with the charge.

Peter shrugged dismissively, as he studied his leonine companion. “Perhaps, but that doesn’t save you from being the ‘heir apparent’,” he paused, and let the words sink in, “Does it?”

They both knew it wasn’t exactly a rhetorical question, even though it was presented as one.

The two men looked up and glanced through the open doorway toward Jacob, who by now was enjoying eating his own piece of cake. Chocolate frosting dripped from his fork, as he claimed the corner piece. He was smiling at something William was saying.

"He's fine, Vincent," stated Peter, as if reading his unique friend’s mind. "His hip is getting stiffer as the arthritis binds it, but other than that..." The physician shrugged and let the sentence trail away.

Vincent let a flicker of surprise cross his features. "If I was that obvious, I'm glad I left the room," Vincent replied, stepping away from the portrait so that others might admire it. Peter followed him, snagging two cups of apple cider off a side table that had been shoved against the tunnel wall. He gave Vincent one.

"One of the hardest things for any child to face is his parent's mortality. Considering the burden that will place on you, it's perfectly natural you should be feeling... reflective, I assure you." Peter kept his voice low.

"Burden?" Vincent asked, sipping the drink with his friend.

"Of who will take care of all of them, once Jacob is gone, or... retired." Peter lifted an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you haven't been thinking about it."

The child is the father of the man, Vincent thought. It seemed to be his day for William Wordsworth.
Vincent's thoughtful gaze moved across the mass of well-wishers. It was almost too big to comprehend, the idea that he would be responsible for all of them. Or at least most of them. He was grateful for Peter's honesty.

"I have been thinking about it," Vincent admitted. "But it is almost too much to grasp. I have to let the thoughts go, or they make me... morose," he confessed.

Peter simply sipped from his cup and nodded understanding, the gesture meant to invite greater confidences if Vincent chose to share them.

Vincent did, his deep voice laced with memory. “Last year, when we were in the cave-in together, Father... well. He made me promise to do whatever I had to do, to keep the dream of this place alive.” The ebb and flow of humanity pulsed all around them. “It seems that created an... understanding between us.” Vincent set the cup down, not really wanting the drink. “Since then I’ve had time to... reflect on at leisure what I seemed bound to in haste.”

Peter nursed his own libation, as he considered the statement thoughtfully. He cupped the glass and stared into the liquid a moment, pondering what Vincent had just revealed.

"If it makes you feel any better, I do think we’re talking about many years yet," Peter replied, after a long moment. "You’ll have time to take care of some other things first. Where is Catherine, by the way?"

"Flying back in from Denver later this evening," Vincent informed him, noting the nature of the transition in Peter's conversation. "Something about transferring a witness. She wanted to be here by now but said she could only get a later flight. She will be back quite late, owing to the time change.”

Peter nodded. “If I know Cathy, she did everything she could to be here.” A trio of little girls scampered past them. Nana looked like their ringleader.

Vincent nodded, watching them go. “Catherine wanted to come down and wish Father a happy birthday, but then found out that her flight wouldn’t arrive until the hour was prohibitive. It will likely have to wait a day.”

Peter finished his punch and returned the cup to the side table. Then they stood back from the doorway, watching the revelers inside the room. Most of them seemed to be enjoying cake. Sebastian was near Jacob’s side, and the two men were sharing a laugh over something.

"She told me about the Wordsworth book," Peter nodded his head in the general direction of Jacob's bounty. The book had a place of honor atop a stack of those. "She says Mr. Smythe assured her the 'very refined dust' came free of charge."
Vincent held his head at a familiar angle, as he considered her gift. "Catherine is generous with all of us," Vincent replied, watching Zach, as he wolfed down a slice of cake.

*Catherine. And how will it all affect her, if I am one day saddled with the responsibility of caring for dozens of people? More, perhaps, by then?* William had already teased that last Winterfest the Great Hall had barely contained them.

Vincent knew that some of the children would seek a life in the Topside world, as Laura, Devin, and Michael had done. Yet, moving Topside didn’t mean he felt no obligation to any of those people, nor had none. And there were others, like Olivia, who chose to continue life Below.

More might do that, and raise a family, as she was doing. Something about Jamie told Vincent that she might never leave, even if she could. As for Mouse, it was not even possible, not really. For little Katie, the Tunnels were all she knew, and Lena seemed very disinclined to leave, as she, too, was raising her child Below.

Blue eyes continued to scan the room, sorting those who would (or should) stay, from those who might leave. Zach was Pascal’s apprentice and was showing a love for the pipes. Samantha wanted to learn from Mary, from him, from Elizabeth... everyone she could. He pictured her as the ‘Tunnels’ next teacher when she grew older. She seemed disinclined to go Above. Many of them did.

And that wasn’t even considering the people they would take in, as time went on. How many more might that be, in the next few years alone? Five? Fifteen? There was no way to know for sure.

Vincent’s responsibilities loomed large, and he felt them as a literal weight on his shoulders.

"If you'll pardon me, Peter, there is something I must see to," he said, excusing himself, aware that for whatever reason, this was simply not the place for him right now. "There are some... things that need my attention," he tacked on, by way of excuse.

Peter gave a nod, knowing it was best to let Vincent simply go. "I'm planning on sitting down with Jacob for a game or two of chess on your new board later. I think I'm supposed to let him beat me, for his birthday," Peter replied, eying his uneasy friend.

"He has been studying Anatoly Karpov. If he has not opened his gift from you or Brigit, he may give you a good game," Vincent intoned, nodding toward the bottles of liquor.

Peter chuckled at that, in spite of Vincent’s somber mood. "Vincent, the entire point of giving a man a good bottle of Scotch on his birthday is the excuse of drinking it with him," he replied in parting.

Vincent nodded farewell, then wove his way through the scattered well-wishers in the hallway, and into what were now the less populated confines of his Tunnel home.
After only a few hundred yards, the hubbub died down, as the crowd grew more distant. The quiet proved calming, as Vincent realized the noise of the party room had been slowly jangling on his already tightly stretched nerves. Striding almost noiselessly through the hallways, Vincent noticed that the arched passageways seemed almost ghostly, by comparison to the area he’d just left.

Since almost everyone was gathered in the Dining Chamber for the celebration, the usual tapping sound on the pipes was all but nonexistent. Most of the Tunnels’ inhabitants were at the party. With that as a given, they had little need to send messages to each other.

*Pascal must feel lonely,* he thought, knowing the Pipe-master preferred his Pipe Chamber to almost any other room in this stone kingdom. He’d dropped in much earlier and was now back in the place he loved.

Vincent neared the entrance to Father’s wide chambers. As living areas went, it was one of the few with an upper floor. Quietly, he stepped inside, feeling a bit as if he were invading Jacob’s space, but not meaning it as an intrusion.

With everyone else down the hall, and Father temporarily absent from the room, it held a certain, somber stillness right now. Vincent went down the short flight of steps but then simply held the rail, advancing no further, just looking at a room which was as familiar to him as it was to every other Tunnel resident. The room embodied its owner. This was where Jacob lived. The space was clearly his.

And in a way, it wasn’t... because in a way, it belonged to everyone.

It was a large area, almost as high as it was wide, and the vault of the upper floor ceiling made it seem even more cavernous than it actually was; no mean feat, considering the amount of clutter that occupied it. It was an impressive space.

For the first time in his life, Vincent wondered at its location. Jacob’s quarters seemed like they were almost centrally positioned here. He wondered if his father had chosen the rooms for that purpose, or if, as he sat here, the Tunnels had simply expanded out, around him, almost like spokes on a wheel. Not until you reached the hub did that effect occur again.

*We all expand out around you, in our way,* Vincent mused. *All of us. How many times have I sat in this room, listening to you read, needing your advice, simply sharing the time with you?*

He knew this chamber was strategically located, with quick access to the chamber where Jacob stored his extra medical supplies and the area where Pascal stored certain maps, ones Jacob often referred to for different reasons. The man everyone called “Father” was more, far more than just the Tunnel physician.

*Heavy lies the head that wears the crown?* Perhaps. *Perhaps it does.*
Jacob's writing table still held the pot of tea he had enjoyed for his morning's breakfast and an open book. A spare pair of fingerless gloves sat to one side of his cup.

Vincent stepped closer and simply let his mind wander, and wonder. *Will I be expected to occupy this room one day?* It was a testament to his distraction that the question even arose and that he had no idea as to what the answer would or should be. Would his Tunnel kin let him simply stay in his current chamber, which he loved, but which was more distant? Was there a choice? *How could I not be sure of the simplest thing, yet lead them?* He mused. Formally transferring leadership had never been done before among them. Was there a clear way to even accomplish that? He was already on the Council. Was that all it would take?

*"Your voice is the truest."*

Jacob's words echoed in Vincent's ears.

Vincent knew that though they were all essentially governed by a Council of Elders, Jacob was the de facto head of that council. It was not a position Father had sought, so much as one that had been placed on his shoulders, as time had gone on, sometime after John Pater's exile.

Someone among them had to make the tough (and immediately required) decisions, and while Mary had no peer when it came to managing hordes of children or assisting in childbirth, she was no leader and had never wanted that job for herself. Winslow was gone. Pascal was all but a hermit in his Pipe Chamber, more shy in his way than almost anyone else. He had no peer when it came to understanding their communication system, but that didn't mean he wanted to make decisions which would affect others.

Vincent ran down more people on his mental list: Peter Alcott, though he was invaluable as Jacob’s fellow physician and friend, was... well, to put it bluntly, Peter was older than Jacob and lived Above. Michael, though young, might always decide to stay Topside. William would likely always stay Below, but shouldered enough responsibility just keeping them all fed.

*“Our world must continue,”* Jacob had told him. *“A lot of good and trusting people depend on this place ... it's all they have.”*

Yes, that was true. And to some degree, Vincent knew it was truer for him than it was for anyone.

*“Your voice is the truest...and the strongest.”*

Vincent crossed to the wide chair Jacob often occupied. The battered but sturdy desk stood before him, patiently supporting its plethora of items. As Vincent drew closer still, he realized that a medical book sat open to a section on skin maladies. Vincent wondered who Jacob was treating, and realized he didn't know.
Perhaps Father was just browsing through his books for the pleasure of it, Vincent thought, though he couldn’t imagine that a section on red rashes would accomplish that. Vincent flipped the page, then returned it to where it had been.

A book on joint ills was nearby, next to a thin volume of poetry by John Keats, and the chess one on Karpov. *The Iliad* sat close to the teapot, Vincent recalled being taught from that very volume. Rolled up maps stood in a nearby basket. Vincent had no idea what Jacob was consulting them for. Considering their work schedules, it could be any number of things.

Jacob knew so much. The books both near Vincent’s hand and over his head in Father's library, testified to that fact. It was good that he did. There was much he needed to know and to understand.

*His chair does not look much like a throne. But it might as well be one, for all the responsibility it bears*, Vincent thought.

Though it was ridiculous to declare Jacob a "king" in this space (and Vincent knew it was a title John Pater had absolutely coveted), there was no doubt that Jacob was their leader, and only managed to ameliorate the burdens of that care by insisting that the Council was ultimately responsible for their governance.

That was a true statement, as far as it went, but often a somewhat specious one. The Council did not convene every time a false wall needed to be put up, or a burst pipe needed to be repaired, or a duty roster needed to be changed, or one of the children began spiking a fever, or some few things ran short, supply-wise. Functioning efficiently would be impossible if that were the case.
Vincent knew that not all of Jacob’s decisions were “important,” like the one to admit Lena into their society had been. Indeed, most were downright mundane by comparison.

But the decisions needed to be made, so Jacob made them, just as any good leader would.

*What are all the things you do in a day that I’m not even aware of?* Vincent wondered. Jacob, often seated in this very chair, looked almost deceptively still at times, as he seemed to go through his day with an almost leisurely competence.

Vincent knew that looks could be deceiving. There was nothing “leisurely” about any of this.

Father seemed to take charge of many things, in addition to all their medical care. Not for the first time that day, Vincent wondered whether or not he would be able to handle it all when the time came. Or even, for that matter, if he was qualified to. There was a difference between “having the soul of a doctor” and actually *being* one. Vincent, the good student, was no fool.

*Can I do this, if I must?*, he wondered. He knew he had handled portions of it, certainly. Jacob wasn’t the only person who knew how to compile a duty roster or wrap a sprained limb. *But... all of it? Every day? And... without Father there to help me?* He felt unsure.

Council members were aware of certain generalities about Tunnel life, of course, but they only met when the need for that was obvious; to discuss the admittance of new members, or to give voice to certain pressing problems.

For the most part, every area of concern had a person in charge of it. William, for instance, was always aware of the condition of the food supplies, and Jacob was always aware of their supply of medicine, and Mary of the need for children’s clothing or shoes. Pascal kept their communications sorted, and made sure messages got delivered, and acknowledged. It was a monumental job, and it grew as the community of Helpers and Tunnel residents did.

But the one did not necessarily know much about the concerns of the other, unless there was a problem of some sort. The council might meet to come up with ideas to solve more persistent shortages, or more sudden ones, or to solve some other problem. But the ”day to day running of things” seemed to have a much looser structure. Somehow, most of it seemed to revolve around Jacob, the one person who knew everyone’s concerns.

Vincent marveled at how much Father handled as part of his normal routine, as he also provided for all of their medical care. Work assignments, the needs of some of the Helpers Above, rounds of vaccinations for the children, as those became available... who Above needed medicine delivered, like Sam Denton, and who Below, needed to be checked in on occasionally as well, like Narcissa. Seeing to the sick or the injured, the pregnant, or the depressed was always on Jacob’s plate; as well as seeing to the healthy, that they might remain that way.
All on top of keeping Mouse’s raccoon from running across the table, and Eric from wandering off into the maze. Trying to ensure they were getting everything from enough produce to enough penicillin. Anticipating what they might need next, be it better, more detailed maps or more blankets for the newcomers.

*No wonder Father is sometimes short with Mouse, or for that matter, with me.*

Mouse’s “tube of many colors” sat near a pillar candle. Beside it was the copy of *Tom Sawyer* Jacob had read to both him and Devin when they had been boys. A slip of paper was holding Jacob’s place in the middle of the book. Vincent wondered who he was reading it to now. *Kipper, perhaps? Or maybe Eric? Or Nana? Who knows?*

A clipboard Father used to list the medicines they had sat upright in a box. There was a note attached to it about Sam’s blood pressure medicine, and something about Sarah’s arthritis. Jacob’s presence was everywhere, not just in this room, but in many others, along with all the things he did.

*It’s a marvel he ever finds time for chess,* Vincent thought, glancing at the old, battered board his gift might replace. Jacob was playing a mock game with himself, the book on Karpov nearby. *He never stops learning. Never stops... doing,* Vincent realized.

Memory took him backward. He stopped seeing the half-done game, and the large room that contained it. Instead, his inner sight grew dark, and the walls, rather than being far-flung, pressed close.

He and Jacob were in the cave-in together. The air was running out. And Jacob was cradled on his lap.

“I haven’t much time left, Vincent.”

“Father, please...”

“No, please listen to me. Our world must continue. A lot of good and trusting people depend on this place... it’s all they have.”

“Our world will continue, and you’ll live to see it for many years to come.” To this day, Vincent wasn’t entirely sure which one of them he’d been trying to convince.

“If I don’t, your voice will be needed.”

“Mine is not the only voice.”

“It’s the truest, and the strongest, promise me you’ll keep ...”

“Shhhh Father...”

“No, no... please, please promise me you’ll keep our dream alive.”
“I promise.”
Vincent inhaled deeply, remembering the moment the promise was given. He also recalled Jacob’s gasping reply:
“It won’t be without sacrifice…”
No. No, it won’t be, he thought.

Vincent snapped himself back to present concerns, and the walls expanded back out to where they should be.

It did nothing to lessen his sense of disquiet. Not for the first time that hour, Vincent realized that the task of having to fill Jacob’s shoes seemed daunting in the extreme.

Peter Alcott’s voice intruded. “You’ll have time to take care of a few things before that happens. How is Catherine, by the way?”

For the first time, Vincent connected the very specific dots of Peter’s comment.

The "few things" Vincent was supposed to "take care of" in the next few years centered around his personal life, obviously. If there was to be anything more between him and Catherine than currently existed, now was the time to decide that, and pursue it. The meaning of Peter's casual comment now became clear.

Vincent looked around the intimidating space and ran a thoughtful hand across his mouth, thinking. Realizing...
If I’m going to... to... be part of someone... to marry, to start a family... Vincent rolled the incredible sentence fragment through his brain... the time to start making those decisions is likely now. Now, while there are years left to tend them.

He looked forward and blinked at the amazing power held in the sentences. Had he just thought that? He knew he had.

There are things I should... know...before my life belongs as much to other people as it belongs to me.

He knew that being responsible for the care of a not inconsiderable population would fall to him to some degree or other someday, and it would do that whether he was ready for it or not.

“It won’t be without sacrifice.”

Vincent didn’t resent the idea of helping his tunnel family to thrive and survive. Indeed, that had always been his first priority and was part of why he so gratefully accepted the role of "teacher" among them. An ignorant populace was of little good anywhere, much less down here, where every talent and ability the residents had was pushed to its limit and used to the maximum. But he knew there was a difference between “caring for them” and feeling absolutely responsible for them... all of them.

Vincent caressed the back of Jacob’s chair, running his work-roughened hands across the smooth wood. This was not a burden he wanted, not yet, not ever really, but certainly not now.
He left the wide space that was so full of books, and clothes, and mementos, and just plain... "Father," and went through the passageways, looking for someplace else... someplace to think, and to be alone.

More alone than this place, which surely seemed far too full of Jacob, and a future Vincent could barely contemplate.

I scarcely know what I am thinking, or where such thoughts will lead me, he mused. He wanted “emptiness,” rather than “fullness.” His feet almost naturally guided him in the direction of the bridge that spanned the Abyss.

by Rosemarie Hauer
Vincent was sitting near the beginning of the bridge, looking down, when Peter found him a few hours later. The elderly doctor moved close to his very large, very lost-in-thought companion.

“I see you found a quiet place to think,” Peter began.

"Did you... enjoy your game?" Vincent asked politely.

"Hasn't happened yet.” Peter settled his weight on the rickety bridge and allowed his sexagenarian legs to dangle.

“Some of the younger children asked that Jacob read their birthday cards out loud again,” he explained. “Then Kipper pushed Treasure Island into his hands. He's reading them the first couple of chapters. Packed house.”

“Robert Louis Stevenson.” Vincent gave a small smile of remembrance. “I recall the first time he ever read it to me. Devin and I played “pirates” for weeks afterward.”

Peter smiled. “I remember.”

Vincent recalled Jacob reading the book to not just him and Devin, but to Pascal, Ike, and a small group of other children. The setting had been more intimate than a dining hall, but the feeling of being... swept away, remained.


"Devin loved that book. So did I,” Vincent reminisced. He glanced at Peter, Jacob’s friend since medical school. You both must have been so young then. “Will you wait, and play later?"

Peter shrugged, looking over the edge, and into the grey maelstrom, below. Vincent picked a very uncomfortable place to contemplate mortality, he thought.

"Some other time, perhaps,” Peter allowed. “Plans don't always go the way we think they will. Do they?” Peter nudged, ignoring the view.

"I have no... plans," Vincent said, staring off into a blankness he’d been studying for far too long.

"Wishes then. It's a birthday, a day for those." Suddenly, Peter wished he'd brought the bottle of Scotch along, for either one of them, or both. No, that wouldn’t do. Vincent rarely drank, and never hard liquor, liking neither the taste nor the effect of strong alcohol.

Vincent's eyes flickered at the word "wishes." He might as well have held up a sign with Catherine's name on it. “Am I so obviously in need of a wish, Peter?”

Peter decided to mince no words. "A king needs a queen, Vincent. Jacob's life would have been far less lonely with one of those to help him."

Vincent sighed. "Brigit said much the same thing to me, last time she visited," he allowed.
"Och, and it's sure your bonny lass will be here to help you when the time comes,"
Brigit had told him. "What's a king without a queen at his side, but a lonely man with
too much time for regret, and not enough for anything else?" Her lilting voice echoed in
his brain.

Peter’s already high estimation of Brigit rose a bit more. “I bet she did. She has a sense
for what ails people.” He glanced at the chasm beneath them. “The wisdom that comes
from having loved and lost,” Peter opined.

Vincent was slow to answer. "Is it even... fair that I wish for such things?" Vincent
asked. He’d been wrestling with the revelations in Jacob’s chamber for over two hours,
with no conclusion. It all seemed overwhelming, or worse, impossible.

"Fair to whom?" Peter asked. "To yourself? Of course, it is. To Catherine? I think that's
her choice to make, don't you?" Peter eyed the very large, very lost being, seated beside
him.

"It's okay to want it, you know," Peter prompted him gently.

Hadn't Catherine said words to that effect, as well?

Is it? Are you both very, very sure of that?

“Don't be afraid to want it.” It was a soft, earnest plea, locked inside his memory.

Vincent felt the older physician’s hand squeeze his shoulder. "Women give our lives
balance, Vincent, among all the other blessings they give us. It's been said by more than
one person that women civilize men. That sounds a bit chauvinistic, I grant you. But to
a certain, very real extent, it's true. To the extent we can be civilized, anyway.”

Peter gave the words a moment to settle, aware that they were talking about “balance” in
one of the places in the Tunnels where it was deadly to lose yours. Peter realized that it
was a small wonder Vincent felt drawn to the bridge, where balance was so necessary,
and infinity seemed so close. Childhood’s simplicity loomed large in places like this;
memories of Jacob were there, along with memories of everything else.

Vincent had used a place not unlike this one for hide-and-seek, decades ago, and years
after, to contemplate some of his more difficult situations.

What answers are you looking for now? Peter wondered.

“Jacob has had... a lot of help keeping this place together,” Peter consoled, trying to
make the job sound less daunting. “I don't think he 'runs' it, so much as he embodies
what it is, in spirit: A place where those who seek justice, seek safety and peace, can
stand as equals, and find that for themselves."

Peter eyed Vincent meaningfully. "I'm more than glad he did it when John got out of
hand. But I'll be the first to tell you, he never should have done it alone."

Having never known Father to be part of a "couple," aside from the brief week with
Margaret Chase, Vincent wasn’t sure how to respond to that.
"I think Father will tell you that he has never been alone; not for a day, since coming here," Vincent replied, after a few moment’s consideration. “If you look in his chamber, you’ll see proof of it.”

Peter was quick to reply. "Ah... so then you’ve felt that way too? Never alone?” he asked, his thick eyebrow raised. "You’ve also never been by yourself, Vincent, unless it was by your own choice."

Touché.

Vincent knew he’d often felt alone. And for whatever reason, Peter Alcott seemed more aware of Vincent’s struggle with that feeling than most had been. The physician in him had always been an intuitive person, as much as anything else.

Peter had been “reading” him correctly since they’d stood in the hallway together earlier, admiring Jacob’s portrait. They both knew it.

Vincent sighed. “I once told Mouse that Catherine was the end of my aloneness. But it is a different thing to say it to Mouse than it is to...” he let his voice trail.

“To say it to Catherine?” Peter finished for him.

“To wish it could be real, forever,” Vincent replied.

Peter gave Vincent’s broad shoulder another squeeze. “There aren’t that many wishes worth making, not really.” He dropped his hand. “That’s probably one of them. No matter how it comes out,” Peter hedged, realizing Vincent needed something and was only just now figuring out what that was. “You can only try, Vincent. That’s all any of us can do, really.”

Vincent respected the wisdom of his friend, even if he couldn’t entirely accept his conclusion comfortably. But he knew that Peter was a canny soul, and had been pegging Vincent’s disquiet correctly all evening.

"I am glad I’m not the one playing chess with you tonight," Vincent said, rising.

Peter smiled at that, standing with him, aware they were done. "I'm going to go check on Jacob. See if I can wrangle his attention, yet. If not, I’ll see you next time I come down."

Vincent nodded to his longtime friend, as he stepped away from the bridge and back onto more solid ground.

Peter kept his voice gentle. "If it helps, don’t ask yourself what you want, Vincent. You were never very good at that anyway,” he advised. “Ask yourself what you need. Then go from there.”

The elderly doctor wound his way back toward the center of activity, as Vincent stood, taking in his words.
Two hours later, all the revels ended, most of the guests either asleep in their beds or put up in a guest chamber, Vincent sat at his writing table, his journal open before him. Candles of all sizes covered the desk, speaking to a need to “push back” against the darkness.

He'd written several pages about the party. About seeing old friends, the list of gifts, Jacob's obvious pleasure with all of it, the eventual games of chess between Jacob and Peter (one win each and the third a draw, as a bottle of good whiskey was half-consumed, and no one could keep track of the game by then), and much of the rest of it.

Vincent wrote in detail about the events of the day, not very much about his own inner musings. For the moment, that felt “right.” As if he would record the day as any diarist might, but leave off the other, deeper meanings for later.

But the journal had always been a place where Vincent could confess his secret thoughts, a place where he could say the things he needed to say, even if he could say them to few others... or no others.

He turned to a blank page, ready to take on his somber attitude, ready to face the feelings Jacob's mortality had wrought in him, when he could no longer avoid the obvious answer to his disquiet.

"You can only try...don't ask yourself what you want... ask yourself what you need.” Peter's voice echoed in his thoughts.

"I need Catherine," Vincent said it aloud, and with great certainty. He said it without writing it but knew if he had written it, it would be that one, same sentence, over and over, all down the page... I need Catherine. I need Catherine. I need Catherine... Like a list with one item, again and again.

He knew it was true. He also knew it was not negotiable, and could not be replaced by anything else. This was not a wish for chocolate that could be ameliorated by a gift of caramel or buttercreams. And it was also not simply a "want." Peter had been correct.
The tenure of Tunnel life often made “wants” unnecessary things, things best not dwelt on, during times of austerity. “Wants” were hard for Vincent to indulge, and sometimes Catherine seemed to fit into that category too. But she was not a “want.” She was a need, and for perhaps the first time, Vincent acknowledged the difference, even as he understood its awful power.

The phrase “I need Catherine” thrummed in his brain and filled his heart with its imperative truth.

_Catherine... You’re like air to me. Like the air I breathe. I need you that much._

Peter’s advice had been spot-on.

_I need you, Catherine. I need you so much... with me._

It was more than a string of simple sentences, more than just a set of monosyllables, framing her beloved name. It was an instinct, a feeling that would not be put aside. And it spurred him up and out of a chair he now felt he’d spent too long sitting in.

He extinguished the candles and slammed the journal shut, then reached for his cape, slinging the heavy wool around his broad shoulders in mid-stride. There was no sense in sitting here, writing. No journal entry was going to bring him to her, or her to him.
"I need Catherine," he repeated to no one, winding his way with increasing speed, through the Tunnels.

*Catherine. Catherine. My Catherine. My beautiful, beautiful Catherine.* His heart's salvation, and his mind's comfort. Her name tripped like a metronome beat across his conscious mind, both soothing him and urging him on. He knew he needed her... badly. And right now.

It was nearly one a.m. The flight that had left Denver after six o’clock on the West coast would have deposited her in New York after midnight, Eastern time. She would need time to collect her luggage, get a cab and...

He cast *The Bond* out, knowing she was on her way to her apartment. When he sensed her, he paused, letting the “sensation” of her beautiful mind wash over him as she rode home in a taxi.

*There. There you are. I love you.*

She was distracted and tired... and coming home... and aware of him, on some level. His feelings were intense, and just as they had been when he’d been trapped in the cave-in, they communicated themselves to her. She knew he was in no danger. But she also had at least some inkling of his turmoil, of his anxiousness.

He raced through the Tunnels, needing to get to her balcony, needing to get to her.

The drainage culvert held a trickle of Spring rain, and he carelessly caught part of the dripping flow, running through the center, rather than stepping judiciously around the wet edge. Heavy feet hit the ground, and splashing water arced outward from his careless boot falls, each step sending showers out, around him. The ground began to slope gently upward, and the rain-damp air smelled good, smelled fresh, and clean.

The cool wetness of the park was a welcome balm to his warm, coppery skin, and only prohibitive caution kept him from racing in a straight line, clean across the open grass. There was no fog, the way there had been the night he’d found Catherine. And there was a decent gibbous moon in the sky, lighting the way.

*Go with courage. Go with care. And at least a little caution.* He knew he had to, though he didn’t want to indulge the latter.

For a reason he couldn’t name, the stricture of needing to stay in shadow and move with at least some hesitancy made him even more anxious. He wanted to run, to bolt to her, all the way from the culvert to her building, in as direct a route as possible. He wanted to tear across the open grass in a sprinter’s burst, straight as an arrow, shot from Jamie’s bow.

He couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. It was foolish and far too risky. The moon was nearly casting shadows, it was so big, and the night was far too clear.

Trying to settle the impulses that tightened his muscles and fired his brain, he traveled as he usually did, in the more cautious, more circuitous route. He looped around the park and kept to the tree-lined areas near the greensward, irritated at the delay.
I want to reach you. I want to be there, now. But in this, like in everything, I can’t simply do as I wish, can’t be like other men, to go to where you are, where you’ll be.

Open land beckoned. But he knew he’d have to scale one of the closer buildings and then take to the rooftops. It was the safer way to go.

He knew the route to her like he knew the one between his chamber and his classroom. But it rankled still, to have to stand in a cluster of pines, while a group of teenagers prowled the sidewalk, laughing as they went, or to stay hidden behind an oak while one of the addicts or working girls looked for a late trade.

He wanted to growl in frustration as he concealed himself in a tall stand of pines, while a policeman strolled through the area, making his rounds.

*She’s getting closer to home.* Vincent’s body longed for the swiftness of a straight line, and for the ground-chewing run of an open field. Yet he knew he had to stay where he was, pinned behind the sheltering branches of a tree.

*Catherine. You’re coming home. Home to me. Home to us.* Catherine. My Catherine. Her name was like a ringing bell in his mighty heart.

*She’s coming. She’s close.* His questing mind felt her weary one. *She’s tired. Jet lag. Flying against the sun. She needs rest.* No. No, that’s not right. That’s not what she needs. *She needs me. She needs me, just as I need her.*

He remained concealed behind the interlocking branches, not sure if the latter conclusion was correct, or if he was just projecting, as the cop passed by his position. He watched the officer’s steady progress, once more chafing that it kept him pinned here, standing, when he wanted to be running to her; running to her the way she’d run to him when she’d told him they were worth everything.

The sensation of “need” clawed at him, and he knew he needed her with a firm kind of desperation that startled him, in its gnawing intensity. It was almost like admitting it as a fact had also set it loose, in his head and heart.

*Catherine. I need you in my arms.* And he knew he needed to make sure she stayed there, somehow, even as he understood the difficulties associated with that.

The police officer ambled on, then curved out of sight.

Vincent moved cautiously away from where he’d been, then broke cover and tore through the rest of the park, daring fate to stop him.

Fate, as his luck would have it, decided to leave him alone tonight. It was just as well that it did.

He was on her balcony before her key scraped the lock, though to be fair, only moments before.
Still, he was through her unlocked balcony doors, and to her, before she'd barely had time to set down her luggage and turn on the living room lights.

"Why, Vincent, I –"

"Catherine." He cut her off, enveloping her in an all-but-crushing embrace.

"I missed you, too," she said, a couple beats behind him. *Is that what I sensed? He just... missed me?* The answer sounded correct, even as it seemed... incomplete. It was after one in the morning. She had not thought she'd see him until tomorrow night, at the earliest. And... he was inside her apartment?

Her arms went around his neck, and much to her surprise he lifted her. She was beyond pleased he was here, and at least a little confused that he'd come striding into her home, to greet her. Normally, he waited on the balcony. And now he was lifting her against him?

"I guess it's a good thing I was only gone for two d..."

The rest of the sentence was cut off by a rather startling kiss. A hard, and somewhat untutored one, but one that told her she'd stepped into something unexpected. *Has something happened?* She wondered, as his unique mouth covered hers.

She had an instant to ask herself if this was just absence making the heart grow fonder. *No. Not after only two days.* They’d had far longer separations between them. Times when he'd been enveloped by Tunnel responsibilities or had felt a need to go off by himself; or she'd gotten caught up with her own work concerns, or her personal ones. Catherine tasted the underlying desperation in his kiss. Something was not right with her love. The kiss broke, and she gave him a gentle squeeze.
"Hey. It's okay. I'm safe and sound. Did something happen?" she asked, as he gently set her feet back on the carpet, but refused to let her go. Her green eyes searched his blue ones, as her question hung between them.

"I need you with me," he told her, brushing her cheek with the back of his clawed hand. "I know it's late. I know you're tired. Come down anyway, Catherine. Please."


After her convalescence, she’d stayed Below overnight only rarely, like when she’d helped out during the time illness had swept through the Tunnels, or mourned her father’s passing. That time she’d stayed in his rooms, she’d not stayed another night Below since then.

Before that, when she’d slept there, she’d occupied one of the guest chambers, as she’d needed to. Still, it seemed like an odd request right now, and had no pressing need which accompanied it. Or at least, it had no pressing need she knew of.

"I don’t think Jacob expects me to say 'Happy Birthday' at one in the morning..." She tried to discern what this was about. Had there been a plane crash in the news, and he thought she’d been involved? Something else that had... agitated him?

His expression remained intensely... earnest, for lack of a better word. "Not for Jacob. For me. Come down for me. Just to be near. Just to be with me. I know you’re exhausted. But, please. Please." He planted a kiss on her forehead, leaving his lips there a moment, as he breathed her in. "Stay Below tonight. I know you've had a long day, and it's unforgivable to ask. But... please."

Was he going to tell her what this was about? Did she even care, considering what he had just said?

Catherine took him in. He was clearly agitated about something, and he’d been running to reach her. His heart was still pounding from it, and his color was high. But this was more than just physical. The look in his sky-blue eyes told her more than words could. Something had struck him, made him feel... tense... lonely even.

"Of course," she soothed, running her hands down his vested shirt front. "I should pack an overnight bag. Oh, look. Here’s one." She tapped her train case with her foot. Whatever this was, he would tell her. Was someone sick? No. Surely, he would have said, or was about to.

"You could go down through the basement," he offered, by way of apology for the request. At least she would not have to cut across the nighttime park.

"You could follow on top of the elevator," she suggested. “It's late. I think it would be okay.” He gave her another quick, hard kiss as he left the living room for the balcony and the roof access to the elevator shaft.
Catherine waited a moment, wondering at his mood. Then she picked up her train case, re-locked her door, and walked the short distance required to hit the call button on the elevator. *What in the world is this about?*

It was a unique thing to ride down in the metal box, knowing he was standing right above her head. He probably could have ridden in the car, considering the hour, but there was no sense in taking the chance.

When they reached her basement, he dropped through the ceiling plate of the elevator and kept near her as they stealthily made their way to the back area near the wall. This was rare for them. While he often met her at the ladder Below, he almost never went down with her from Above. It was a measure of whatever was driving him that they were doing this at all.

He moved the boxes stacked in front of the wall panel for her, and preceded her down, taking her train case from her hands so she could descend more easily.

*She probably thinks I've gone mad,* he thought. He wasn’t certain he cared if she did, as long as she was near. He plucked her off the ladder as soon as his reach allowed it, and set her down, but only after holding her for another long moment.

“Vincent, you’re worrying me. At least tell me whether or not something is wrong.”

Where to even begin to answer that one?

“Oh nothing is wrong. All is... all is well.” *I think.* “I just... come. Please.”

He carried her case, and they walked swiftly, and he kept his free hand either entwined with hers or at her elbow. He was quiet as they leaped over the gap that divided his world from hers and quieter still as they wove their way through the halls. His face bore an intense, almost inscrutable expression.

Catherine eyed the decorations that still bedecked the walls outside the dining chamber, as they passed it. A lot of the homemade confetti was still strewn on the floor, waiting for tomorrow’s broom brigade.
"Looks like you all had quite a party. I'm sorry I missed it," Catherine said, aware they'd walked without saying much since the elevator. Was that what all this was about? They'd had a large gathering, and I wasn't able to attend? It was possible that such a thing might bother him, but... but that didn't sound right.

Jacob's portrait was still in the hallway, on the easel.

"Elizabeth's gift! She's amazing," Catherine complimented, as they wound past. She was still trying to decipher Vincent's mood.

"You are amazing," was all he answered, tugging on her hand. Apparently, whatever this was, he wasn't going to tell her while they were standing in a hallway. Then he shifted his hand so that their fingers locked, and his warm palm pressed against hers. It felt like an intimate thing, and he'd never held her hand that way before. She realized then that he hadn't even bothered to wear his customary gloves. He gave her hand a squeeze as they walked.

Yes. That's me. Amazing. And thinking I should fly to Denver a lot more often, she thought.

The heels of her boot-clad feet clicked on the stones just a little behind him, as he tugged her along. It took him a moment to realize he should shorten his stride. It took him another moment to realize he was impatient with the notion of walking slower.

So, he simply picked her up.

Denver. First thing in the morning, I'm getting a year-round pass, Catherine promised herself. Can you get a year-round pass to a city?

It would have been humorous, had she not by this point been deeply concerned that something terrible had happened.

"Vincent, not that I don't adore the Scarlett O'Hara treatment, but... what happened?" she asked him, ducking her head as they passed through one of the lower doorways.

"Jacob turned sixty-five," he answered shortly, before he achieved his chamber.

She actually looked past it a moment, thinking he'd at least allow her to drop her things in a guest chamber first, before they visited with each other. Catherine's mind was still processing his last statement.

Jacob turned sixty-five. Yes. That was true. And she was truly sorry she'd had to miss the big day. It was why she'd sent the book down to him early, along with her good wishes and the delivery of Brigit's Irish whiskey. Work wise, it was definitely her turn in the rotation to fly out, so, short of a death in the family, she couldn't get out of it.

But what did Jacob's birthday have to do with anything? she wondered.

"Yes, Father had a birthday," She tried to pick her way through the morass of what was driving him. "A very nice one, judging by the mess I saw as we passed the Dining Chamber. Is he all right?"
"He's fine. Good for years. *Years*, Catherine." His mighty arms gave her a squeeze as he walked to the middle of his room.

"Ahh," she said, in an "I see" tone, which meant she really didn't see at all. He set her train case on his writing table.

"Time enough." He set her down as he said it, then held her by the elbows until she steadied herself.

Her eyes held the question. *Time enough for what?*

Vincent took in a deep breath. "Catherine, we've world enough, and time. Two worlds, enough, counting yours and mine. And time. We do have it. Or at least we have some." He kissed the crown of her head and wrapped his arms around her to hold her close, keeping her head tucked beneath his chin. It was clear that he didn't want to allow an inch of space, between them.

"Okay," she said, the sound a bit muffled by his shirtfront. She didn't want to say more. At least he was talking to her finally, and telling her what this was about... maybe.

"I need you... *with me.*" The words rumbled under her ear. It was not the first time he'd said that this evening. He took another deep breath, and let it out like a man about to make a confession, which, in a way, he was.

"Catherine, I want you in my life. Under whatever terms and conditions you deem fair," he said. "Deem livable. I want you... *with me.* Every day you can manage it." He released her enough so that she could lean back to face him.

She held a long pause between them, as she met his eyes, searching them for meaning. "And every night?" she asked, needing to be clear. She looked a little confused. And so dear he wanted to kiss her senseless.
He leaned his great head down. His blonde hair made a curtain, between them, and gave the impression of privacy. "I want you no farther from me than you are right now." He said it firmly, but a little softer. He was worried. Not terrified, but concerned.

When she didn’t reply immediately, he drew her back against his chest. She felt his voice rumble again, beneath her ear. "You are not a guest in these Tunnels, Catherine. I do not know what you are. You are what you say you are. But you are not a guest," he said, referring to the place where temporary visitors often slept.

She lifted her head from its firm pillow. She drew back again, without trying to draw away. She needed to see his eyes and needed him to see hers.
"I was, before." It wasn’t an accusation. It was a fact.

She had been. Both when he’d first found her, and she’d convalesced in his bed, and then later, when she’d helped them all fight the plague, and even after that, when she’d grieved the loss of her father. Her stays had been temporary, for different reasons.

The fact that she’d sometimes slept in his bed hadn’t changed that any. The fact that they’d “put her up” in one of the guest chambers after the last Winterfest and some few other nights wasn’t lost on either of them. Guest chambers, for a guest. Because she was a guest Below. A Helper, yes, and a welcome one at that, but a temporary visitor, nonetheless.

It was a definition that had not bothered her. But she’d been aware of it, just the same.

"You aren’t a… a guest, here. Perhaps you never should have been. But you aren’t. Your life is still your own. I just ask… that you… share it with me? More? Much more?"

Very well. She was not a guest. And she was not a convalescent patient, or a grieving daughter, seeking solace. Very well, then. That was that, and those days were behind her, behind them.

How much of their prior situation had lent itself to the “why” of why she’d felt she’d had to return to her world after her father’s passing neither could say, but that sensation of “just being here as a guest” was perhaps part of it. But that was done. "Vincent’s Catherine" was now invited to be a part of this place, as much a part as Olivia or Rebecca or Mary. He squeezed her hands, and she kissed the furred backs of his.

"Vincent…” her voice sounded tentative, and for a moment, he was afraid she was going to refuse him. “…not that this isn't even better than almost every fantasy I've dared to conjure over the last year... but are you telling me that you want me to define the limits of what we are?” Her green eyes searched his blue ones. When he gave no immediate answer, she continued:

“Because I have to tell you... I think I want a lot more for us, right now, than you do. And that's all right. I mean... I won’t push or make demands. That isn’t who we are. The only thing I ever asked of you was that you not be afraid to want it. I didn't expect you to actually...”

"Do you want us to be together, always?” he interrupted. “Because I do. I have wanted that since the day I found you." He took a step back, giving her space. "Do you want to be a part of this world, perhaps even the most vital part, in time?”

That could never be her, and she knew it. That was his role, almost by definition.

"I think that is for you. To be the most vital part," she said, lest he think she was refusing him.

He reached for her hand, and pulled her toward the huge bed and sat on its edge, drawing her down so she sat next to him.

"I can’t be that.” He realized how true it was, and why, for the first time. I actually can’t be. Not unless certain conditions were met. Peter was right... About everything.
“Catherine, I just... I can’t, I don't think.” He shook his head in negation. “Not if it’s a curse. Not if it's a cage. I’ve... fought against those, one way or another, all my life.”

She squeezed his hand in understanding, listening.

“I can’t do this if it's a trap. I can’t do it, if it’s a...snare." He shook his head and looked out into the room, seeing a future he could barely stand contemplating. She wasn’t in the room. But he was.

Catherine watched his expression, and interpreted it correctly.

No, no, of course you can’t. Not under those circumstances. Your life holds limits enough, cages enough, as it is, she thought.

“I understand,” she said softly.

“Do you?” he asked, returning his gaze back to her. There were worlds in the simple question. His world and hers, to be exact.

Catherine heard the longing inside him and at least some of the fear.

“I think I do,” she answered, still softly. She thought they would stay sitting there, but he moved back on the huge mattress, just as he did when they sometimes read together. Their hands remained linked. She had no choice but to follow. He settled them against the bolster pillows, cradling her against his chest, needing her near.

"I am asking you to share an almost terrible responsibility with me, Catherine. To take on my life as your own. Someday, in the future, Jacob will pass from this world, and I will bear most of the hardships he leaves behind.” His sigh was a heavy one, as he brushed the crown of her head with yet another kiss.

Ah. Jacob turned sixty-five. I see, Catherine thought, realizing the riot of emotions Vincent had likely faced this evening.

“It will confine me... and constrain me as few other things have. And... I am asking you to share that with me so that I do not have to bear it alone." He looked to a distant point, then back to her.

"It is the most selfish, self-centered thing I have ever asked of anyone, and I am asking it of you. Begging, if you want me to. He drew one knee up, restlessly. "I bring you burdens, not blessings. You should have so much more, beautiful Catherine."

The age-old line of discontent between them.

She placed a gentle hand on his blonde, furred cheek. "If you stop saying that, and perhaps more importantly, stop thinking it, stop feeling it... you will see that I have exactly what I want, right at this moment," she said solemnly. She held his gaze, and she could see the turmoil in his blue eyes. Eyes she'd sell her soul for. "Do you need me?" she asked.

Don’t ask yourself what you want. Ask yourself what you need.

Of course, he did. Irrevocably and irreversibly. And... and he'd never said that before, he just realized. He'd told her he loved her. That there was strength inside her, and
generosity and beauty both inside and out. That he respected what she was. But... need her? He'd never said it. He'd never dared. Peter Alcott suddenly seemed prescient.

"I need you more than anything else, in this world or any other. I need you like I need my heart to beat." He dropped his great head, a little. "I think I need you more than any man has ever needed any woman," he confessed.

She took the words in with a bowed head, humbled by them. Vincent realized that lovely as she was, few men had likely "needed" her, even those who had claimed to love her. To suitors like Tom Gunther or Stephen Bass or even Elliot Burch, she was a lovely ornament. To her boss, she was a good friend and a useful soldier, but a replaceable one, as all soldiers were, as they had to be. To her friends, she was one of many. But to him...

She tucked her head beneath his and simply breathed in her contentment.

"Sometimes... I think my whole world is right here. That I'm never really happy any other place but this one." She referred to the huge room, to his broad chest, and the thumping heart that beat against her scarred cheek. She kissed the area over his heartbeat, as a signal of her acceptance.

Vincent closed his eyes and felt contentment wash through him. You're not my queen. You're my goddess. And he felt as if he was a bit of a wastrel in her presence. He felt humbled by her generosity, as he always did.

"I have already wasted time between us," he confessed.

I disagree, she thought but didn’t say it aloud.

“Nothing between us has been wasted, I don’t think,” she replied. “Not time, or... or anything else.”

Be that as it may, clearly, he’d felt time's whip today. Catherine was aware that the sting of that was hurting him. She had to help him. Had to help him to know that while he wasn't wrong about some of what he said, no harm had been done. And if there was blame to place for taking a slow approach toward each other, she owned responsibility for that, as well.

“Perhaps... ‘wasted’ is the wrong word,” he mused, rubbing his cheek across her crown, gently. Time is a thief, Catherine. We mustn't let it steal from us, any longer.

"Perhaps," she said, though she didn't refute him entirely. "And I was no better," she added. She lifted her head and her soft, amazing hand reached up to push back his hair a little. "We had to come to this place when we were ready to, Vincent," she pulled away from him enough to cup his hard jaw. “Besides. I don’t think we've ... lost... too much time, she offered him a small smile.

"An hour apart, when we can avoid it, is too much time," he replied. He turned his head to kiss her palm, then placed it back against his cheek. "And I ... discarded... far too many of those hours. And looking at it, now, I don’t even know why.” He shook his head. “You loved me. More deeply than I ever thought possible, and with more patience than I
even realized sometimes, I think. I knew it; I could sense it in our Bond, and damn me for the things that made me cautious, I could even see it in your eyes.”

He looked away, then back. “And I was ... I don't know. Afraid of it, I think. Like it was something I could look at as long as I promised never to touch it, promised never to try to have it, and keep it for my own."

"And now?" she asked, studying him.

She felt the rise and fall of his huge chest. His sigh was deep. "Now I know what I always did. That I can only have what you will spare me. That I have no right to ask you to make any sacrifice on my behalf, but I am still... asking. I know all the sacrifices will come from you. I know all the benefits of those will come to me. I know it isn't fair. And I know I can't... breathe, I don't think, unless we can find our way to it."

She kissed his cheek, gently.

"You are wrong to think you bring me burdens without blessings. Mouse is a blessing. Jamie is a blessing. Geoffrey and Eric and Zach and Mary and Pascal, and William and all the rest of them... they are all blessings, Vincent. This place is a blessing." She looked around the room that had once sheltered her, when the world Above had savaged her, and she looked beyond it, to its myriad hallways. So much... life, within those. So much good life, which needed tender care. She returned her gaze to him.

"And you are the greatest blessing of my life. You always have been." Her green eyes were sure. "What you think is a sacrifice, I think is a willing gift. You give me so much more than I would ever be giving up. One day I will help you to see that," she said with conviction.

"I am ... late to this beginning, Catherine. Not too late, thank God, but late. I want..." he faltered, and she knew the words were caught inside him, somewhere.

"Say it," she whispered. "Don't be afraid to want it, and don't be afraid to say it. We've both wasted months, years, maybe, over what we're each afraid to tell the other, to want from the other. To demand, even. I don't know unless you tell me, Vincent. Not about this."

His next words stunned her:

"I want to be a family, with you. Start a family. One day." He closed his eyes, aware he'd just been hedging. He gathered his courage. "One day soon, if we could."

There. He'd said it. His most secret wish, the one he was terrified to have, terrified of the possible consequences. He wanted something impossible, to add to all the other "impossibles" she had brought to his life since she'd entered it. He had laid his soul bare, and even now was bracing for her gentle but tacit refusal.

"You said I could define our limits, that I could say what we were. Do you mean that?" she asked.

"I do. I love you, Catherine. Be gentle with a...dreamer."
She was planning on it. She drew his head down and kissed his forehead.

"I want to be your wife then, before I am a mother to your children. And I want to have as many of those as we can, if we can. Being an only child is lonesome. I want a large family. If we can’t have our own, we’ll raise all there are, here. But I want to be married first. I’m old-fashioned that way. I think my father would have wanted that for me, that understanding. Can we do that?"

She felt the heart-filling emotions that her words evoked slam into his chest. He lifted his head and buried his mouth over top of hers, and kissed her for what felt like forever. His face was damp with tears as he held her mouth with his, again... and again. So was hers.

"Yes. Soon," he told her, clutching her fiercely. His blue eyes glimmered. "A wedding night... soon."

"You're not afraid?" she asked him.

"I am all but panic-stricken. But I know there is no other way for us, Catherine. I do not even want there to be another way for us. Not anymore. I just wish that it somehow... gave more to you. I'm aware that I am no merchant's bargain."

She gave him an almost sassy smile. "If just half what I think is going to happen between us is going to happen between us, I’m going to remind you that you said that, come our wedding anniversary," she told him archly.

A marriage. Children. Their wedding anniversary. A wedding. A wedding night. His heart thrummed, and sang, and trip-hammered at all the implications of those words. Yet, here she was, almost playful in her serenity, with all of it. He had to trust in her extreme confidence. He had to. He would. There is strength in you. I feel it. He knew it wasn’t the first time he’d ever thought it... nor, for that matter, the fifth.

All of this was a thing he was going to have to start getting used to. Not just loving her, or finding her wise, but trusting what she felt sure of, even when he couldn't see his way clear to it. He’d always told her he sensed the strength in her. Now he was seeing some of it, and it humbled him. Her strength had a purpose when he put her to a cause. He would have to learn to trust that, as well.

Her accepting smile was an aphrodisiac, as it overcame his fears.

“You can stay the night.” His voice was honey and velvet. “Now that that is settled.”

The loving smile changed immediately, and her face was one of “all business.”

“I can ‘walk off the pyramids of Egypt,’ to quote Jane Eyre, but I don’t think it’s going to happen.” She eased out of his embrace and scooted down the bed.

"Catherine... we’ve just become engaged. Surely there are things to discuss..?" he reached for her, but she was fast.

"Like your etchings? Oh, no you don't!" She jumped up off the edge of the bed rapidly, then turned, making sure his reaching hand grabbed only air. "As you mentioned. We
are now, delightfully, engaged.” She leaned back in across the bed and planted a chaste kiss on his nose before she stood up and smoothed her skirt.

“My etchings?” He was a beat behind her but catching up.

“And to use the farm euphemism, you are not going to get the milk for free.” She pointed a well-manicured finger at him, then turned to collect her tiny bit of luggage. 
*I’ve made that mistake too often to be comfortable with it. This time, I’m doing it right. We both deserve that,* she thought.

Vincent was well aware of the euphemism to which she referred.

"But, Catherine..." he cajoled, seeing her pick up her train case. *Oh, no you don’t.* He was over top of the quilt and blocking her way before she could take another step.

"No. With me. All night.” She bumped into the wall of his chest. “All night, as we planned. I will be good,” he cajoled.

Catherine couldn’t help but suppress an inward smile. *Good? Ah, my love. Of course you will be.* Her voice became soft and agreeable. “Yes. Yes, you will. You’ll be glorious, and I happen to believe, so will I.” *We will, you know.* She cupped the cheek of her loving, steadfast giant.

He sensed capitulation... incorrectly.

“But not tonight,” she added. She gingerly stepped to the side and maneuvered past him. “I’m going to the Guest Chamber.” She swung around to deliver that news, then headed toward his doorway, the case in her hand.

“But you said you aren’t a guest,” he reminded her, still trying to intercept her slight form before she reached the doorway.

“And I’m not a wife yet, either. Good night, Vincent.” Her voice was gently resolute.

"The Guest Chamber... is cold from no brazier, and it is not ready." He reached for reasons to convince her to stay. It wasn’t working. She was only a few feet from the doorway.

"The bed... doesn't even have linens," he told her, coming up behind her and scooping her back up before she could protest at being manhandled. Beast handled. Whatever. "You flew in a plane all night, and you are tired. Sleep in my bed. I promise to keep my hands to myself, Catherine," he coaxed, setting her back down near the bed.

The attorney in her knew when she was being schmoozed. "If I stay, you have to sleep on top of the sheet, while I stay under it," she dictated.

"Catherine!" He had no idea what else to say, to refute her.

She could not believe they were actually having a conversation where she had to make him promise not to make a pass at her.
"Moo," she told him, wiggling her bare fingers. "My mother's bridal set is coming out of the safe deposit box in the morning, and we can make plans after. Good night, Vincent." She stepped around him and started for the doorway again.

He scooped her up before she could make the hall. She might have to get used to this. "As you will," he grumbled, temporarily put off. He was starting to appreciate why her win percentages were so high on her cases. "You are a... persistent negotiator. And you are under the sheet," he acceded. "Drop the case and pull the covers." He tipped her down. She did so.

"I do not promise I will not kiss you, however," he said pointedly. He would show her that he had a few negotiating skills of his own.

Catherine raised a well-sculpted eyebrow. "Is that supposed to be some sort of threat?" "Take it for what you will." She could have clapped her hands in joy at the success of reverse psychology.

"I suppose I can live with that." Her grin told him it was a bargain she was more than willing to make. His answering one told her the same.

Vincent spent the entire night in both as joyous and uncomfortable a state as he'd ever been in. His love, his engaged love, was beside him, in his bed, a thin sheet and clothing all that barriered their two bodies.

He did kiss her. And found that it made them both want. He discovered he could feel desire for her, even to the point of extreme frustration, and not lose control to his darker side. He was canny enough to realize that was one of the things Catherine had likely wanted him to understand; it was one of the things she'd wanted, that he hadn't seemed quite ready for.

And there was more. Alongside his own desire and perhaps more startling even, he felt hers. Her want was a sweet, insistent strumming through her veins. If pushed, it could become as fierce as his, and just as sharp, with a salty, demanding edge.

_I thought little girls were made of sugar and spice?_ It was a question he barely had time to think, before she drew his mouth back to hers, again, and again.

Her soft tongue brought the gift of nectar, but her need scented of brine. _There are oceans in you_, he thought, understanding the female ability to bring forth in an incredibly primal way, and for the very first time. _You are made for this. We are made for this_, he realized, loving her more deeply than he thought he ever could.

She let him, no, encouraged him, to touch her lithe body, everywhere, between the bedclothes. When he brought her to an extreme level of frustration of her own, she reached over to pull his heavily muscled leg between hers and rose against his form as
he lay half over on her, the sheet between them. His erection was pressed to her thigh. Passion was a heat in the room, between them.

"It is going to be... so exquisite, between us," she promised raggedly, and he felt it was true. And why not? Everything else was.

Yes, yes, it’s going to be, he thought, incapable of speech. It’s all true. Everything is.

He had to still her, or they would both go mad. As he did, she knew she was being gentled, being led. She followed his lead, letting him know it was him doing the leading.

I’ll follow you anywhere. I’ll follow you everywhere, she thought. He nearly heard it as a sentence, inside his Bond-drenched mind.

Rest, he replied, stroking her hair and settling her. Rest with me. Tomorrow is time enough. Time enough, to begin a new life.

He had no way to know if she’d “heard” him the way he knew he’d almost heard her. But she did as he wished, and that was enough.

I can coax you. I can calm you. And you can do the same with me. It is enough to know for one night, he thought.
Intimations of Mortality by Cindy Rae

The long day and the amazing night sent her spinning dreamward, weighed down by a mixture of passion and fatigue. She felt sleep stoop to take her, almost as if he were passing his singular hand over her eyes, giving her the gift of darkness. Catherine settled herself in the crook of Vincent’s shoulder, then used his arm for a pillow. Her eyes drifted shut and he cradled her, adoring her, as she drifted off.

He brushed a chaste kiss across the top of her forehead, knowing they would always be together.

For no merchant’s bargain could make him see them differently now.

“No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

Pacem Muros

“Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind.”

William Wordsworth, Intimations of Immortality
Every fan is a welcome friend. That is a great rule, and it's so pervasive in this fandom, it's almost a given. (Or it should be.) We attend conventions, both online and in person. We hold celebrations all year. Nothing is more joyful than the appearance of a new fan, come in from the cold. Cyber hugs are given. Real ones too, when it's possible. No one is excluded. Or at least, no one should be. We all remember our “first welcome” from someone who reached out to us. We all remember how that made us feel.

In the day to day, people are people, and they rarely agree with each other right down the line. There are many I disagree with. There are many who disagree with me. Some of us can't seem to find anything we agree on.

But every fan is a welcome friend.

Fandom (in general) is an amazing thing. It's a place where two strangers come into a room and they automatically know they have "something" in common. They love the same thing. They're fans.

But the Beauty and the Beast Fandom (in particular) will "see" that impulse, and do it one better. (Or at the very, very least, it should.) We are not "just fans." We're fans of one of the most eloquent, erudite, heartfelt and soul-deep shows to ever air on prime time television. There's a philosophy of tolerance here, of acceptance, and it's worth embracing. There's an ideology based on love, understanding, and friendship. We're all "strangers on the road." We're all "loose in the tunnels, with each other."

Every stranger is a fan, if they are here. And every fan is a welcome friend.

The show gave us a microcosm of people who had to live with each other. They often disagreed. But they never hated each other for holding different opinions. Such a thing
has proven dangerous in both real life and fan life. (In the show, “Fever” shows us the terrible price that can be exacted when we forget we’re friends and think we’re something less.) In the heat of a sharp exchange, it’s Vincent who (firmly) reminds everyone that they will discuss this and settle it “like friends.” And so we all should.

I can disagree with my friends. We're not identical in our ideologies. That's part of why we're friends. My friends open my eyes to what they see when they look at a thing. I try to do the same. We might still not agree. We might never do that. But we can still live together in friendship, still understand each other. Or we seek to, when we're good.

When we treat people badly, that may reflect more on us than what that person ever said, or did. Most are here to create and share. Those are noble goals, ones worth treasuring, and holding onto. It's easy to be friends with someone who agrees with me. It's a bit tougher when we agree on very little. But every fan is a welcome friend.

We don't have to agree with each other to love each other, and be protective of each other. In truth, there would be no way for us to see completely eye-to-eye, across the board. We're too different. Like Vincent, we're all quite unique. Our paths have taken us different places. And some of those are walked on in different continents, by people who grew up in different generations.

But no matter what we think about the politics of the day, or where the show should have gone, (and we all know we differ on that, to whatever degree) we all know we have something wonderful in common. We all feel strongly about Beauty and the Beast.

What a wonderful place to start a friendship. What a carefree given that we’ll probably like each other just fine. It seems that “certain” kinds of people tend to be drawn to this show. Good ones. Introspective ones. Outliers and rebels, in touch with what they think, as well as what they feel. Kind hearts, and sometimes fierce ones.

We’re in good company then, aren’t we?

And we delight in each other's company, and rejoice when more "friends" come home. The Tunnels are large. There is room for all, because...

...every fan is a welcome friend.
She could wreck me. Ruin me.

She could break his heart, that was a given, but more, she could change him... would change him, forever.

Vincent knew it was all true. He clutched Great Expectations. Irony.

She was in her apartment. She was... intent and focused; doing something that required work’s concentration.

She could destroy me.

This was no sure thing, this love, this unrequited burning; no path to glory, and no reasonable risk.

‘Reasonable risk.’ There’s an oxymoron.

He donned his cape.

“Vincent, where are you going?” Father asked, passing him.

“Out.” Vincent replied. No other explanation was given.
Above All Else
by Deidre Lockyer

“From the moment I saw her, she touched my heart; with her beauty, her warmth, and her courage”

She
She is in the wind, it speaks of her vulnerability
Like a rosebud just beginning to open
A heart so fragile that tiny thorns must rise, like swords, to protect it.
She is in the clouds, her softness is like feather down
And she is my safe place to fall,
My sanctuary is in her arms, her care.

That bright flame, flickering there...can you hear it?
This is her laughter, rising, ever warm.
Her voice is music and I never quite catch the melody, the song
Each day the lyrics change, the verse, the chorus
She is an unfolding masterpiece,
Whatever the form, her theme is love.

Here, in the Tunnels, in the chambers of this heart
This enclosed world we call our home
I find her in the shadows, in a million tiny echoes of movement
That see me look up, expecting her strangely solemn smile,
And when I see it, I know my home
Is in truth wherever she is standing.

“And now, wherever I go, he is with me, in Spirit”
He walks towards me every day, though he is elsewhere. His spirit follows me about my world. There is no day, no moment lacking his presence...he is right here.

And his eyes, so bright yet so vulnerable, they see me I feel him watching from afar with tender concern, And the gravity of his care is my anchor.

In this city there are pockets of him everywhere I go... Wherever I see beauty, wherever I see goodness When it brings me to tears I know he shares it, and this...this gift To never be alone again, to be understood It is every poem of yearning fulfilled, every wish And touch...it will follow, as is only right.

There are days when I know his mood by the way my skin feels Goosebumps? He is nervous, a tickle is his laugh The roaring fire is his voice, deep and warm, and it brands my heart I am his, it is here in this line on my palm One love, true and strong, beyond simple logic Somehow, we are both mystery, and answer.

“...we will never, ever be apart”

They Once upon a time there were two who became one Once upon a dream there was a story and a wish and a promise Love can hold such complexity, and so They hold hands and walk together even when apart... They hold each other’s hearts with such tender care.

Above all else...they love.
"Hey Radcliffe, can I see you in my office for a minute?" Joe asked as he passed her desk.

"Sure. I'll be right there."

Catherine entered Joe's office a few minutes later. He gestured for her to have a seat. As she sat down, he stepped from behind his desk and handed her a large envelope.

She opened it and Joe watched as her face paled.

'Listen kiddo, I don't know who you're standing with on your balcony, and I don't care. I know he's the one who saved you from the watcher. I'll keep your secret. Just tell him, thanks.'

"Thanks, Joe."
Catherine quietly descended the service stairs to the basement of her apartment building, eager to see Vincent after a very long, exhausting week. It never mattered how tired she was, she had come to know that a good strong helping of Vincent was just what she needed to pick her up. She had laughingly come to realize that Vincent was even better for her than any strong cup of coffee had ever been.

*Who would have thought that possible?* she often wondered.

As she reached the basement storage area, she looked carefully around, making sure no one had seen her, and quickly descended the ladder into the subbasement. She didn’t realize anyone was there until she turned toward the threshold.

She froze in sudden terror, and breathed in sharply, barely stifling a scream. Momentarily speechless, her eyes were glued to him as he sat there on a dilapidated, cast-off office chair. Even in the dim light, his identity was unmistakable.

He nodded slightly. “How are you, Cathy? Fancy meeting you here.” The sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

Her intense fear turned quickly to burning fury. “Elliot?” Trembling with anger, Catherine could barely speak. “You nearly gave me a heart attack! What are you doing down here?” she demanded, trying not to speak too loudly.

“Waiting for you,” he said calmly, with a grim smile. “I suppose I could ask you the same thing... that is, if I didn’t already know.”
Her eyes narrowed. “And just what is it you think you know?” Catherine asked, fearing the worst. “I’ve been upstairs in my apartment for the last two hours. If you wanted to see me, you could have just knocked on my door.”

“Yes.” He tilted his head to one side. “I could have done that. But then you aren’t meeting him up there, are you?”

“Meeting… him? Meeting who?” she asked, trying her best not to betray Vincent or his world.

Elliot looked disappointed at her feeble attempt to lie to him. “Is that the best you can do? Come on, Cathy. I deserve better than that, don’t you think?”

She glared at him in stony silence, her eyes all but burning a hole through his head.

It was the first time in his life that he was thankful looks couldn’t kill. “Please, Cathy. Don’t you think I deserve some kind of an explanation? Give me something … anything… so I can understand. Can’t I at least meet the man who stole you from me?”

“I’ve already told you all that I can tell you, Elliot. And he didn’t ‘steal’ anything. You never ‘owned’ me. You make me sound like a piece of furniture or something else your money can buy.”
“Why can’t you just tell me, Cathy? Are you in some kind of trouble? Is he? Do you need a lawyer? Are you being blackmailed? Come on! Give me something here!”

“I’m not being blackmailed, Elliot. That’s ridiculous. And no, I am not in any trouble.”

“You broke my heart, Cathy. You shredded it... then you crushed my dreams.” The accusations hung in the air between them. He looked up at the ceiling in desperation. “I just want to understand. I need... to understand why.” His eyes pleaded with her for answers.

Catherine could hear the pain in his voice. She could see it on his face. It filled the small space they now occupied. The rage began to drain from her, and she suddenly felt exhausted and sick. Exhausted from the lies she’d been juggling for so long, and sickened by the gnawing guilt she felt for using him so thoughtlessly. It had plagued her since the first time she used his feelings to convince him to help her, but even more so since the night she had shown him the way out through the Park entrance.

She backed up and gripped the side of the ladder to steady herself. She nodded, acknowledging his pain, and the part she had played in causing it. “Elliot, I’m... I’m very sorry. Truly, I am,” she whispered. “I’m not sure what I can do to show you how sorry.” Elliot visibly relaxed a little in his chair. It surprised him that she finally admitted she had been wrong about something.

“Whatever you might have done...” she continued. “You didn’t deserve that... I had no right to hurt you the way I did.”

Elliot nodded, feeling some relief from her admission, but he still didn’t speak.

“I hope you can believe me when I say it wasn’t intentional... I... I know that sounds trite, but I never meant to hurt you, Elliot... please believe that. Things just... got out of control.” She sighed deeply, realizing her excuses were woefully inadequate and completely unacceptable. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Did he know?” Elliot asked with a tinge of bitterness in his voice. “Did he know what you were doing? Or have you lied to him too?”

“No,” she insisted, shaking her head. “I haven’t lied to him. He did know what I was doing, and he... he didn’t always agree with it. I wouldn’t listen. When I told him I was going to accept your marriage proposal, I... I hurt him deeply.”

“Ahhh...” he said, nodding in realization. “So, I’m not the only one you don’t listen to. I suppose that counts for something.”

Catherine closed her eyes and tried to remember all the twists and turns that led them both to this place. She was beginning to feel like a hapless spider, caught in a web of secrets and lies of her own making.

She recalled the day she told Vincent that she was going to accept Elliot’s marriage proposal. The pain she caused, not only him, but to herself, had been excruciating.
She looked toward the opening in the basement wall, thinking she had heard a sound in the outer tunnel.

“Elliot, please. You’re right... I do owe you an explanation, but not here. I don’t know how you knew I would come here, but we need to talk about this... someplace else.”

“But you are meeting him here, aren’t you? Can you at least admit that?”

She looked at him pleadingly but refused to confirm or deny that he was right.

“For weeks I’ve been asking myself, how does someone like Catherine Chandler know her way around the tunnels and sewers beneath New York City? Then I wondered what in the world would have brought you down here in the first place? The only answer I could come up with was that this is where he lives. Either that, or this is where he... hides.” He paused for a moment to see if her face would betray her secrets.

“Do you know there are hundreds of miles of tunnels down here, below the city?” He continued. “I have a feeling that you do. When I found a map that showed one runs right under your apartment building... I don’t know how, but I had a feeling you would come here. I was sure I was right. I’ve been sitting here for hours... waiting... and here you are.”

He could tell by the expression on her face that his arrow had hit its mark.

“Elliot... please,” she pleaded.

The silence between them was so profound that it rang in her ears. The air in the room felt oppressive. Catherine’s heart was beating wildly, and she felt as if she was suffocating.

“Catherine?” she heard Vincent whisper. “Are you all right?”

At the sound of Vincent’s voice, Elliot stood and they both sprang toward the threshold.

Before Elliot could reach the opening, Catherine tackled him and pushed him against the wall.

“Elliot, NO!” she exclaimed. Grabbing his arm, she swung him around to face her.

Before he could speak Catherine commanded, “No... Don’t you dare move! I’m going to speak to Vincent...” She backed away from him but didn’t take her eyes off of him.

“Vincent?” Elliot’s eyes gleamed with triumph. Now, at least I know his name, he noted silently.

Catherine realized she had let it slip. It only fueled her desperation. “I swear to you Elliot, if I so much as see one whisker peer around this wall, I will strangle you with my bare hands.”

He considered the look in her eyes and decided to heed her warning.

She slowly backed toward the threshold, making sure that Elliot stayed put.

As she came around the wall, Vincent gathered her into his arms. She willingly melted into the safety of his warm embrace, burying her face in the quilted softness of his vest.
by Rosemarie Hauer
“I’m sorry, Vincent. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I...”

“Shhh,” he said, holding her a little tighter. “Shhh... It’s all right, Catherine. It isn’t your fault. It isn’t anybody’s fault. It just... is.”

She looked up at him, her deep regret seeping into him. “How long have you been here? How much did you hear?”

“I’ve been here since shortly after Elliot arrived. I heard everything.”

She pulled away from him a little. “You’ve been here since...? I don’t underst... Vincent, you shouldn’t be here. It isn’t safe for you to...”

“The sentry sent word that there was an intruder at your threshold. I suspected from the description that it was Elliot. I came to make sure he didn’t wander.”

Catherine looked up at him, clearly confused at his words. “What?”

“Catherine, these tunnels aren’t safe for people who are unfamiliar with them,” Vincent explained. “I didn’t want him to get lost, or injured... or worse.”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed as she tried to comprehend what he was saying. “You were worried about Elliot’s safety? You were protecting him? What about your safety? Who’s protecting you?” she asked incredulously.

He smiled sadly, and tenderly brushed the hair from her eyes. “Apparently, that would be you, Catherine. And I must say, you are doing a wonderful job.”

“If I’m doing such a wonderful job, then why is Elliot Burch standing on the other side of this wall?”

“Because Elliot Burch is a brilliant man. He’s in pain, and he’s searching for answers. That is something I understand all too well. I feared it was only a matter of time before he would find his way down here looking for those answers. He is trying to make sense of all that has happened... all that he has... lost. He has managed to piece together the merest of clues... and they led him here.”

“Clearly.” She nodded. “But what are we going to do about it?”

Vincent was silent for a moment, unsure how she would react to his suggestion.

“I believe that we should give him the answers he is looking for,” he said simply.

“What?” Catherine wrenched herself out of his arms. “Vincent... No! What are you saying? That you want to trust him with... with... everything?”

Vincent began pacing a short section of the wall. “Catherine... what choice do we have? We must trust him. He has already deduced enough to do us great harm, if he so chooses. Perhaps... Elliot is a man of reason... perhaps if he... if he knows everything, he will understand how important it is to keep our secrets.”
“That is not a risk I’m willing to take. Vincent! This isn’t like the situation we had with
Brian. Elliot is… dangerous. No… I’m afraid.”

“I know you are, Catherine. But we owe him... I owe him... Catherine... I owe him my life.”

“And he owes you his... We would have died on the waterfront that night, if it wasn’t for
you! You have already taken great risks to help him and keep him safe. Your wounds have
barely healed.”

“Catherine... you once trusted this man.”

“And he betrayed that trust.”

“Yes, but even after that, you went to him for help... and he tried to regain your trust by
helping you... freely, without question... and by helping me, even though he didn’t know it.
You said yourself that he didn’t ask you for anything in return. You were once willing to
marry him. Catherine... some shred of trust must remain in your heart... if you were willing
to do that. Then when he came to you for help with getting his father out of the hospital...
you trusted him again...”

“But Vincent... this is your life... It isn’t just Elliot. He is never alone... He has body
guards... always. His body guard is probably around here somewhere now. How can we
even begin to trust him?”

On the other side of the wall, Elliot could only hear parts of their conversation. Most of it
made little sense to him, but he clearly understood her last statement. Perhaps if I allay
Cathy’s fears, it might help, he thought.
Speaking from beyond the wall, Elliot said, “My body guard isn’t here, Cathy.” He paused to gauge her response. “I came here alone, I swear... in a taxi. You can ask your doorman. No one knows I’m here.”

Catherine darted through the threshold just enough to see his face. “My doorman knows you’re here? Did he see you come into the basement?”

“No.” Elliot shook his head. “I was careful, I promise. He said ‘hello’ when I came into the building, and he watched me get on the elevator and go up to your floor. Then I took the service stairs down to your basement to have a look around. As far as he knows, I’m still up there with you.”

She looked doubtful.

“Scout’s Honor,” he said, raising his right hand. “No one saw me.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “Have you ever actually been a Scout?” she asked. Elliot gave her a crooked smiled and shrugged. “It’s a figure of speech, Cathy.”

She was positioned so that she was able to see both Vincent and Elliot at the same time, with only a few inches of brick wall between them, but the two men were unable to see each other. After a few moments of trying to gather her wits about her, they simultaneously said, “Catherine, please.”

Looking at the pleading expression on both of their faces, she suddenly realized why her heart had once been torn between the two of them. Even though she had chosen Vincent, there was something about Elliot that still had the power to pull at her heart strings.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath while both men held theirs. “You stay right there, Elliot,” Catherine ordered, as she moved closer to Vincent and once again sought the security of his arms around her. In that moment she felt the need for his strength more than she ever had before. “Are you sure you want to do this, Vincent?” she asked.

“Catherine, we must.”

She took a deep breath and let go of him. Leaning her back against the wall for support, she said, “You can come out now, Elliot.”

Both men moved toward the opening in the wall, until they stood face to face.

Elliot’s eyes narrowed, as he saw what appeared to be a very large creature step into full view.

His eyes went wide in disbelief as he looked intently at Vincent’s face and then at the size of the “man” standing before him. At least he thought it was a man. What else could he be? Elliot wondered.

Elliot froze, then retreated back a step or two. He blinked his eyes and shook his head. Surely, I’m hallucinating, he told himself. But no, the figure standing before him appeared to be very real.
Vincent stood very still, hoping not to frighten Elliot too much. He was well aware that he appeared intimidating at first glance (and for some unfortunate few, even more intimidating at the last). He was also very aware that he was risking everything by doing this. The next few minutes would be critical, not only to his future, but the future of everyone who called these Tunnels home.
“Elliot,” Catherine finally said. “This... is Vincent.” She moved close and slipped under Vincent’s arm, resting her hand lovingly on his chest. “Vincent, this is Elliot Burch.”

Vincent extended his free hand.

Elliot, still in shock, looked at the “hand” of the incredible being that stood before him. “Your hands... they’re... remarkable.” He looked questionably at Catherine and then at Vincent. “Those men... on the waterfront... the Coronistas... you... killed them?”

Vincent nodded, remembering the fear, the rage, and the pain of that night. “Yes, I did,” he confessed, with a tinge of shame in his voice.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Mr. Burch.”

Elliot Burch was a man who relied heavily on his instincts, and in the quiet suspense of the moment, his instincts told him that Vincent was telling the truth. As he came to that realization, he felt himself relax and wondered how long it had been since his last breath.

Sensing Elliot’s concerns, Vincent assured him. “You must have... questions.”

Elliot nodded. “Yes, I must... I mean... I do, but I think I need a moment.”

None of the three were quite sure what to say next. It was Vincent who finally spoke. “You must have... questions.”

Elliot nodded. “Yes, I must... I mean... I do, but I think I need a moment.”

Vincent and Catherine stood together, allowing Elliot all the time he needed.

As Elliot watched the two of them leaning on each other, it was clear to him how much they loved each other. The way Vincent held her protectively under his arm. Her worried look and the way she absently played with the tassels on his vest.

They are so different, he observed. And yet, they clearly belong together.

The revelation was almost physically painful.

“How did... the two of you even meet?” was the first question that came to his mind.

“Vincent found me... unconscious and bleeding in Central Park,” Catherine explained. Catherine’s mind reluctantly went back to the horrifying events that had brought them together. “The night I was attacked, and my face was slashed by...”
Vincent pulled her closer. He could feel how difficult it was for her to remember the terror of that night. He nuzzled his face in her hair, lightly kissing the top of her head before picking up the thread of the story. “As a rule, we don’t bring strangers to our … home. But I feared she might die if I didn’t get her help as quickly as possible. So, I brought her below, to my father. He is a doctor. Catherine was badly injured… too injured to be moved Above, so she stayed with us until she was strong enough to return Above.”

“Your ‘father’? Are you saying there are more… like you? And you live down here… below the city?”

Vincent shook his head. “No… and yes… I mean… No, there aren’t any others like me… I was abandoned as a baby. Someone found me and brought me here. This is where I was raised. There has been a community of people living down here since before I was born. The man who adopted me and raised me is one of the community leaders.”

Elliot thought for a moment. “I don’t understand, Cathy… You and I… we didn’t meet until quite some time after all of that.”

Catherine nodded. “That’s right. We met several months later.”

“So… the two of you… you were already… involved when we met?”

Catherine and Vincent were silent.

“I’m confused… Cathy… I know I felt something between us when we met…” For a man who had learned to trust his instincts, he was beginning to wonder how he could have been so wrong. “You felt something for me, Cathy… I was sure of it. Was I imagining it? Why would you lead me on… if there wasn’t any chance…?”

“I’m sorry, Elliot.” Catherine tried to explain, “I was confused… I thought--”

“It was my fault,” Vincent interrupted. “At least… in large part.”

Elliot listened.

“Look at me.” Vincent swept his hand the length of his body. “I know what I look like. I know what I am. And I know what I am not. I never imagined that anyone would ever… could ever… care for me. Sometimes, I still don’t… I all but pushed Catherine into your arms. I wanted her to have the life… the life I believed she would have had…if we had never met. The kind of life I could never offer her… or anyone.”

“I’m not sure I…” Elliot began.

Vincent interrupted, knowing what he would ask. “I told her to find someone… someone to love… someone to be a part of… someone who wasn’t… me.”

Catherine picked up the thread. “When I met you, Elliot… you swept me off my feet. I felt like you and I… we connected somehow… That wasn’t a lie. I believed I was falling in love with you too. That was real. But at the same time, I ached, knowing that I was hurting Vincent. I didn’t want to lose him. I felt like I was being torn apart. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do until you…”

Revelations by Barbara Anderson
“Aaahhh.” Elliot began to nod his head, as the truth revealed itself to him. “Until I ruined it. Now I understand.” He took a deep breath and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Catherine asked.

“I came here for answers, and you gave them to me.” He retrieved the suit jacket he had hung on the back of the chair.

“No, Elliot. You can’t leave, not yet,” Catherine said forcefully.

“What do you mean?” he asked, wondering if they might try to stop him.

“You came here for answers,” Vincent said. “We have decided to give them to you. There are a lot of people here... people who depend on this place remaining a secret. People whose lives would be affected, if... if word got out that they live here.”

“You mean there’s more?” he asked, wondering if he could handle any more. “Like your father and that odd young man who tried to sabotage my building site?”

“It’s imperative that you know everything,” Vincent explained. “I want you to meet my family... see my world, so that you may understand how important it is... to keep our secret.”

Elliot considered Vincent’s invitation.

“You’ve asked me more than once to trust you, Elliot,” Catherine reminded him. “Now we’re offering you that trust.”

She’s right, Elliot realized, considering her words. At times I’ve hungered for her trust almost as much as I’ve craved her love. Well, he decided, if I can’t have one, at least I can accept the other.

He quickly donned his jacket and followed Vincent and Catherine’s lead. At first, as they walked, he attempted to memorize the ways they were turning, and where the tunnels seemed to lead deeper into the earth. At some point, he realized that, without help, he would never find his way out. He understood that, with not a little consternation, as the brick lined walls turned to huge cement pipes, and an ancient spiral staircase led them even deeper down to crudely carved out tunnels. As they seemed to move deeper beneath the world above, he was surprised, not only by the sights, but also the sounds around him. He expected the city sounds to be silenced this far beneath the city. But there was a constant rumble of subway trains as they raced beneath the city and intermittent clanging pipes that brought back old memories.

“It almost sounds like Morse Code on the pipes,” he remarked, to breach the silence from Vincent and Catherine. “I swear, every now and then, I think that clanging actually spells out a word. If I didn’t know better, I’d think someone was sending messages about us.”

Vincent and Catherine both stopped and turned toward Elliot. “You know Morse Code?” Vincent asked.

Elliot was unsure how to answer. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

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Revelations by Barbara Anderson
Catherine smiled a little. “Neither, I guess it’s just a surprise. How did you ever learn Morse Code?”

He smiled a little, as he recalled, “When I was a kid, my friends and I used to send each other secret messages on the pipes in our apartment building. It turned out to be useful. It helped me land a job as a radio operator in the Merchant Marines after I left home. That’s how I earned enough money to pay for my architectural degree.”

“I thought you went to Cornell,” Catherine remarked.

“I did.”

She looked surprised. “And the Merchant Marines paid well enough to cover the tuition?” Elliot laughed and shook his head. “No... not exactly. But I happen to be a very good poker player.”

Catherine waited, knowing that there must be more.

“The men on those ships get very bored. Drinking and gambling are common ways to relieve that boredom. I used that to my advantage.”

Catherine looked surprised at the new revelation about the man she thought she knew.

“What?” Elliot asked. “They were going to lose that money anyway. I figured they might as well lose it to me.”

Catherine laughed, cocking her head to one side. “You know, Elliot, whenever I think I know who you are, you show me a side of you that’s... unexpected.”

“Perhaps you tried and convicted me too quickly...” he suggested.

Catherine looked at him thoughtfully. “Perhaps I did,” she replied, as she resumed walking.

As they neared the hub, Elliot couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. But every time he turned to see who was watching, there was no one there.

Vincent steered them toward his chamber.

“Aren’t we going to see, Father?” Catherine asked.

“I think it’s best for Elliot and Father to meet privately, before we go into the study. Most of the community is already in the study,” Vincent explained.

“How do you know that?” Elliot asked.

Vincent smiled and reached out to touch the pipes that ran along the tunnel wall. “You were right. The sounds you heard on the pipes were code. It’s our Tunnel code. By now everyone down here is aware that you are here, and they no doubt want to know why. An urgent meeting has been called in Father’s study.”

Elliot nodded. “I understand.”
“We don’t usually bring strangers here, Elliot.” Catherine explained. “If this place became known... it would destroy a lot of lives.”

“Catherine, would you please take him to my chamber, while I go and get Father? I’ll be there soon.”

As they entered Vincent’s room, Elliot was struck by the “opulence” he saw around him. Though the walls were rough, they were lined with books. More books and souvenirs seemed to cover every flat surface. A round, antique, tiger oak table stood in the center of the room. He noted that in addition to the candles lighting the room, there were also what appeared to be antique, tiffany lamps, indicating that they had access to electricity.

*I wonder if they have running water too?* he asked himself.

Though the room had a definitely “shabby” feel to it, Elliot could tell that the person who lived here had exquisite and refined, if eclectic, taste.

Catherine stopped and turned to face him.

Reaching to straighten his jacket, she said, “You should probably tie your necktie.”

“My tie? Why?”

“Because, I want you to make a good impression.”

“A good what?” He laughed, condescendingly. “What are you talking about? I need to make a good impression on... homeless people?”

Catherine’s demeanor changed in an instant. She tried to contain a flash of anger. His disdain only served to remind her of every other time he had disappointed her.

“They *aren’t* homeless, Elliot!” she snapped. “They *live* here. *This is* their home. They are gentle people, who live here with dignity, mutual respect, and kindness. They help each other. They help others who need their help, and they accept help when it’s offered. Please understand... these people are my friends, and they deserve respect.”

Elliot was taken aback by the passion in her voice, as she spoke of her friends.
Catherine closed her eyes and sighed. “Elliot... please... just do it. Believe me... you want to make a good first impression... I want you to make a good first impression.”

Elliot silently obeyed.

“Happy?” he asked, as he tightened the crooked knot.

She approached him, first straightening his tie, then reaching around his neck to smooth the collar of his shirt.

As Vincent and Father entered the chamber, Vincent was taken by surprise at the site before him. Catherine had her arms around Elliot’s neck and Elliot was looking at her adoringly. He observed her as she gave Elliot’s lapels a final brush and a tug, and then nodded approvingly.

“Are you satisfied now, Cathy?” Elliot asked.

She stepped back to give him one more sweeping look. “Yes, I think that will do just fine,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“AAAhem!” Father cleared his throat loudly, to announce their arrival.

He scowled at Catherine, as he entered the room.

From the look on the older man’s face, Elliot suspected he was not going to make a good first impression, no matter how straight his necktie was.

“How could you do this, Catherine?” Father said, accusingly. “You actually brought this... this man here, to our HOME? We trusted you, and now... now... this?” He asked, making a sweeping motion with his hand in Elliot’s direction.

“This is one of your friends?” Elliot asked, giving Catherine a skeptical glance. “So much for a good first impression,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

Before Catherine had a chance to respond to either of them, Vincent stepped in, putting his hand on Father’s shoulder. “Father, it wasn’t Catherine that brought Elliot here. It was me. She tried to convince me otherwise, but I insisted. Believe me, this is not her fault.”

Father looked at his son, clearly confused by the admission. “YOU?” he asked, squinting in disbelief.

“What were you thinking, Vincent? This man cannot be trusted! And now he knows... HE KNOWS... where we live! He knows that you... exist! Do you have any idea the power you have given him? He could destroy everything... everything. That is what he does!”

Not used to being spoken of in such terms, at least in his presence, Elliot stepped up to defend himself. “Name one thing I have done to deserve that assessment,” he challenged, assuming that a homeless man who lived in caves underground would know very little of what went on above him.
Father didn’t hesitate. “We know all about you, Mr. Burch, and what you did to Mischa Langer and the other elderly people who lived in that apartment building... and... and... You and your selfishness nearly destroyed our world with your... your... dynamite and that blasted tower... Who knows how many other lives you have destroyed?”

Elliot could feel his ire rising, as his face began to burn. “Is that what Cathy told you?” he demanded, looking angrily in her direction.

“That is what I know! Vincent was in the alley when your thugs threw a fire bomb into the Langer’s apartment building, and when they attacked the Langer’s on the street. I read the newspapers, Mr. Burch. You are a shrewd business man, and abominably selfish. Poor people like us are nothing to you and your rich friends. We are nothing more than garbage to be removed, so that you can have whatever it is you want. Our lives, our homes, mean nothing to someone like you.”

Apparently, they do know what goes on up there, he chided himself for his misjudgment.

Changing tack, he continued to defend himself. “How can you blame me for anything that happened here? I had no idea anyone even lived down here!”
Not one to back down, Father countered his defense. Fifty years of playing chess had made him sharp, and given him the ability to respond quickly. “And what about the lives of those you were aware of, Mr. Burch? What became of them? Do you even know?”

“They were generously compensated,” he said dismissively, folding his arms obstinately across his chest.

“Compensated?” Father bristled at the very word. “Is that what you call what you did to the Langers? **Compensated?** How do you compensate someone for destroying everything they have built in a lifetime? Perhaps what they had looked worthless to you... to **you**... *The Great Elliot Burch*... who has much grander schemes.”

Father paused to take a breath, but not long enough for Elliot to respond.

“Believe me, *Mister* Burch... I have known men like you...” Father waved his finger in Elliot’s direction. “I have watched them destroy good people that stood in their way. Perhaps I was even one of them... once upon a time. But who are you to say that your dreams are more important, and must come at the cost of the dreams of all others? Why, if it hadn’t been for Catherine... and her willingness to... to... **sacrifice** herself for the good of us all...”

“Father... don’t!” Catherine tried to stop him from continuing.

Jacob suddenly fell silent, realizing he had said too much. Looking sheepishly at Catherine, he began to address her. “I... I suppose I shouldn’t have said that last bit... ahem... Catherine... I ... Please accept my apologies...”

Elliot was taken aback by the sudden change in Father’s tone. Quickly rewinding the conversation in his head, he turned to Catherine. “What did he mean... your willingness to sacrifice yourself?”

Catherine was silent, but Elliot could see that her face was flushed.

“How did you sacrifice yourself, Cathy?” he insisted.

Catherine nodded. “You came here looking for the truth, Elliot. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

He nodded. “Yes... yes I do.”

She took a deep breath and began. “The blasting from your construction site... it was threatening... all of this. The lives of everyone here were in jeopardy... especially Vincent’s. Without these tunnels, Elliot... without this community... There is nowhere for him to go. Most of the people here could go Above if they lost their home here, but not Vincent... He **couldn’t** live up there. The people up there... would destroy him... *Our world*... would **destroy** him.”

Elliot gazed at Vincent and had to admit that she was probably right.

“When you confessed your love for me... and then proposed... I... I thought that perhaps... if you really **did** love me... I could convince you to give up the building project... if I consented to marry you. But that’s not how it... worked out.”
Elliot nodded. He had assumed that since she had accepted his proposal, she must have had some feelings for him, even if they weren’t as ardent as his. It was a gut punch for him to realize that he had been wrong about that.

“So, you were willing to marry me... even though you didn’t love me... or even care for me... to save him?”

Catherine nodded. “Yes... I didn’t know what else to do. I thought... I hoped... that as long as you loved me, in time I could learn to love you too. That it would be enough, as long as I knew that...”

“As long as you knew that the man you really loved was safe?” he said, finishing her thought.

“Yes.” She swallowed hard and nodded her head. “But I misjudged you...”

“Because when you gave me an ultimatum, I didn’t choose you...” he finished her sentence again.

She shook her head. “No, you didn’t. It turned out that you loved your tower more than you loved me. I hadn’t anticipated that. So I...”

Elliot laughed bitterly. “So, it was a test?”

“No... it wasn’t meant to be. But it did show me that you didn’t really love me after all.”

Elliot bristled. “That’s not true, Catherine. I did love you... more than I have ever loved anyone,” he insisted.

But Catherine would have none of it. “No, you didn’t. I’m not as young and naïve as I once was. I’ve finally learned the difference between someone who wants me and someone who truly loves me.”

She paused and looked lovingly at Vincent.

Vincent could feel the strength of her love wash over and through him.

“You wanted me, Elliot. Perhaps even more than you’ve ever wanted anything else. You wanted to possess me. What you call love is no kind of love at all.”

“It felt like love to me,” he countered.

“You loved me like you love your art collection. You surround yourself with beautiful, expensive things to show the world that you are better than all of them, that you can acquire whatever you want. I would have just been one of your acquisitions. Something beautiful, that you could show off to the world.”

She could tell Elliot was reluctant to admit that she was even a little bit right, but she noticed that he didn’t refute it either.

“But, I realized all of that,” she continued, “when I accepted your marriage proposal. I was willing to accept that kind of love, as long as it meant I could save this world, for Vincent and everyone else who lives here. The pain you felt from losing me wasn’t because you loved me, it was because you lost me... and then you lost your tower too, because of me. It was just the pain of defeat. You lost, and you hate that. I know it caused you great pain, but
it wasn’t love. If you really think about it, Elliot, you will know that what I’m saying is true.”

Elliot stood silent, wanting to dispute her conclusions, but knowing in the depths of his heart that much of what she said was true, at least to some extent.

When he didn’t speak, she continued. “I’m ashamed to admit that I felt a certain level of satisfaction when you lost your tower. I thought you deserved it, because you were willing to hurt people, even destroy them. You lied and did underhanded, shady things… so that you could fulfill your dream. But did you care at all about the dreams of the little people who stood in your way? Did you ever, even once, wonder what their dreams were? Or how many lives you were destroying?

“When I accepted your marriage proposal, I was trying to defend the dreams of those people… I felt that I should at least try.”

Vincent moved closer to her, knowing that she needed to express these truths to Elliot, but worried that she might dash any chance they had of securing his loyalty and confidence.

“She leaned back against Vincent, suddenly tired, and overcome with regret for her own actions.

“I realize that doesn’t excuse what I did.” she said. “I traded on your emotions and that was wrong. I’m sorry, Elliot. I know we brought you here to convince you to protect all of this... to keep our secrets, but you said you wanted to hear the truth. What I’ve said is part of that truth... at least, as I see it.”

Elliot took a deep breath, trying to recover from her onslaught. He nodded, as he pondered the things she had said.

“Is there anything you would like to say, Mr. Burch?” Father asked.

He was filled with sadness as he recalled the day he had chosen to let this beautiful woman slip through his fingers, and all that he had lost since then.

“The day you said you’d marry me, you told me that people were more important than things. I suppose it took my father’s death to hammer that lesson home, Cathy, but I finally got it. I’m just sorry we all had to lose so much before I did. The truth can be a hard thing to learn, sometimes...”

He smiled wryly. “My mother used to say that my father would rather choke to death on his pride than swallow a healthy portion of the truth...” He laughed ruefully. “I guess I’m a little more like him than I realized. I must say, that’s a revelation I didn’t expect when I came here tonight. I hate to admit it, Cathy, but I can’t deny that there is some truth in what you’ve said. Most people would never have the guts to say those things to my face.”

Perhapat there is hope for this man yet, Father thought.

“Well, I must say, Mr. Burch,” Father said. “Just being able to admit that, could be an indication that you are not as much like your father as you fear.”
Elliot looked shocked by the old man’s words. “I could be mistaken, but that almost sounded like a compliment, Mr... I’m sorry, I... I don’t know your name.”

A little bit flustered, Father extended his hand. “Jacob... my name is Jacob.”

“Nice to meet you, Jacob,” Elliot said, shaking the man’s hand, still unsure if it actually was.

“This is your Father?” he asked, turning his attention to Vincent.

“Yes, he is the man who raised me,” Vincent answered. “Father, I brought Elliot here so that he could meet the others. I want him to see that we are a family here... then perhaps he will understand how important it is to keep our home a secret. I hope you will allow that.”

“Well, I must say, Vincent. You haven’t really given me much of a choice, have you?” Father replied.

“I suppose that’s my fault, Sir,” Elliot admitted. “I didn’t really give them much of a choice. You see, I suspected that Cathy might be meeting someone in the tunnel beneath her apartment building. I was determined to get some answers... so I waited for her there.”

“Yes, Father, he had already deduced parts of the truth on his own. He knew enough to pose a danger to us, so I decided that it might be best if we answered all of his questions... and showed him where and how we live...”

“... and who I have been protecting,” Catherine added.

“Father please understand,” Vincent began. “This is not something I was planning when the day began. It happened very... suddenly. I had to decide what to do.”

“Yes, yes.” Father was suddenly feeling very impatient with them all. “Well, we might as well get it over with. I suppose I don’t need to tell you that this has caused quite a stir. People are quite unnerved by it all. Most of the community are anxiously awaiting you in my study.”

“Yes, I know. We gathered that from what we heard on the pipes as we came down.”

“Well then, I suppose we’d better get on with it. Please follow me, Mr. Burch.”

“I'd prefer it if you would call me Elliot.”

“Yes, yes, all in good time.”

As they approached Father’s study, the din of chatter could be heard in the hallway, and from the sound of it, people were very agitated. The cacophony of voices stopped suddenly as they entered the room, and all eyes turned in their direction.

Elliot looked around the large room, noting that, like Vincent’s room, it also had an air of opulence to it. Aside from the rough-hewn, rock walls, he was astounded by the antique furniture, the well-used Tiffany lamps, and hundreds of books that filled bookshelves and table tops everywhere he turned. A spiral
staircase, currently populated by curiously dressed people, led to an upper level that was also crowded with overflowing bookshelves.

*These people must hold education in high regard,* he concluded. He noticed a chess set on top of a very cluttered desk, standing ready for two challengers.

As he began looking around at the people, he realized that none of them looked very welcoming.

“Is somebody going to tell us what’s going on here?” Cullen demanded.

“Yeah, why is this stranger here?” someone yelled from the back of the room.

A few people called out in affirmation, and the room began to clamor again.

Father stepped forward, standing at the edge of the steps leading down into the room and holding out his hands as if to calm everyone down. “Yes, yes,” he began. “I realize that this is... disconcerting to everyone. And I will explain it, if you will just quiet down.”

When the room became quiet, Father began.

“As you may already know, this man standing behind me is Catherine’s friend, Elliot Burch.”

“What is he doing here?” William asked gruffly.

“Well... he is ... that is... he came here, looking for some answers.”

“What kind of answers?” William demanded. “Since when are strangers allowed to just show up here asking questions? This isn’t the first time one of Catherine’s friends has shown up here, uninvited.”

The crowd was becoming agitated again.

Vincent stepped forward and spoke loudly. “Please. Please... if you will just hear me out.”

He waited for quiet in the room again.

“I am the one... who invited Elliot to come here. And I am the one who brought him here... to meet all of you. In the past Mr. Burch and his business dealings have unwittingly intersected with us.”

“You mean he nearly blew us all to smithereens with his high and mighty tower project!” Jamie interjected.

Vincent nodded. “Yes, Jamie, that was one of the times. But may I remind you that he is also the man who very generously gave drilling equipment to Catherine after the cave-in that nearly took my life and Father’s life as well. If it weren’t for Elliot’s help, we would have died.”

“Mouse helped too!” Mouse interjected.

Vincent smiled. “Yes, Mouse. Your expertise was also essential. Thank you.”

Jamie seemed to calm down a bit at his recollection.
Ahhh, Mouse, finally a name I recognize, Elliot thought, the singular young man from Ruritania. He strained to try and see the face of the eccentric man who had once briefly crossed his path.

Vincent continued. “A few weeks ago, when Catherine and Elliot entered the tunnel system seeking safety, Elliot became curious about why Catherine was able to show him the way back to safety Above, as if she had been here before.

“Tonight, he decided to come back down into the Tunnels to explore... to see if he could find some answers. The sentry’s alerted me, and I went to investigate. I convinced Catherine that, since he had already figured out enough on his own to possibly cause some trouble for us, perhaps if we brought him here to meet all of you, he might understand how important it is to keep our secrets.”

“What are we to do now, Vincent?” Mary asked. “What will become of us if he chooses not to keep our secret?”

“I thought that perhaps we should introduce ourselves to him. The same way we did with Brian, when he found his way down. Tell him something about ourselves... how we came to be here, and why we need to keep this place a secret from the world above.”

The room was uncharacteristically quiet, as the crowd considered Vincent’s request. Even the pipes had gone silent. Everyone stared past Vincent to Elliot Burch, trying to size him up.

Elliot decided that perhaps he should step forward.

He cleared his throat and brushed his jacket nervously. “Perhaps, if I begin by introducing myself, it might help,” he began. Looking around for a friendly face he spotted Mouse in the middle of the crowd, grinning at him. “As you already know, my name is Elliot Burch. When I came into the tunnels tonight, I didn’t know what I would find, but I can assure you, I... I certainly wasn’t expecting anything like this. Now that I am here, now that Vincent and Catherine have trusted me enough to show me this place, I assure you... I have no intention of causing you any harm.”

“He sounds like an alien from outer space,” Kipper said, laughing. “I come in peace, take me to your leader.”

Yeah,” Cullen added. “Except in those science fiction books, the humans never end up faring too well in the end.”

Mary scowled at Cullen. “For heaven’s sake, Cullen. I can understand that coming from Kipper, he is a young boy after all, but you are a grown man. If Vincent and Father trust this man, then so do I.” With that, she made her way through the crowd and stood at the foot of the steps.

“Mr. Burch, my name is Mary. I came here more than twenty years ago. I had lost my husband... and my son... They were everything that meant anything to me. I wanted to die.”

She stopped for a moment, fighting back tears. “The people here took me in. They didn’t have much, but what they did have, they shared with me... a stranger. How many people up there do you know who would do that? They gave me a safe place to heal. Gradually, I
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began to find a reason for living again, and I decided to stay. These people aren’t just my
friends, Mr. Burch, they are my family.” She held out her hand and Elliot descended the
stairs to accept it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mary,” he said.

Following Mary’s example, Mouse pushed his way to the front of the room and thrust out
his hand. “I’m Mouse!” he declared. “Came here...” He crinkled up his face. “Not sure...” he
said, rubbing his chin. Brightening up he continued, “Long time ago. I was little. All alone.
No food. No family. No friends. Vincent found me. Brought me here. Brought me home.
Taught Mouse to trust. Taught Mouse to talk. Taught Mouse to do a lot of things!”

Elliot smiled at the strange young man, and tentatively accepted the outstretched hand.
“It’s nice to finally meet you in person, Mouse.”

As Jamie came forward, she looked at Elliot sideways, not ready to trust the man who had
nearly destroyed her home. She certainly had no intention of shaking the man’s hand. “I’m
Jamie,” she said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jamie,” Elliot replied offering his hand to her in vain.

She put her hands firmly on her hips. “You don’t impress me... with your expensive suit
and that fancy silk tie.”

Elliot looked back at Catherine. So much for making a good impression, he thought.

Jamie continued. “I betcha we could eat for a month on the money it cost to buy those
clothes.” She paused for a moment. “But your fancy clothes and your money don’t make
you any better than us, Mr. Burch.”

“Jamie!” Father exclaimed. “That is no way to speak to our guest!”

Elliot responded quickly. “That’s all right, Jacob. She’s right.” Then turning back to Jamie,
he smiled and said, “You’re right, Jamie, I’m not any better than you are. Not one bit.
You’ve got spunk, I’ll say that. I bet you stick up for all your friends here.”

She softened a little at his compliment. “I do. I don’t like anybody who hurts my family.
That’s what they are now.” She reached out and accepted his hand. “And, thank you... for
saving Father and Vincent from the cave-in.” She hesitated, and then added, “And for
letting Mouse go that one time.”

“You’re welcome.”

One by one, most of the people in the room came forward and introduced themselves. Most
were more guarded than Mary and Mouse. It was clear to Elliot that trust from these
people would not be easily won. He realized that their friendship and their trust, if he
decided he wanted it, would have to be earned.

He was impressed by the dignity with which these people carried themselves. He noted
that, despite the ragged and extensively patched condition of their clothes, they were all
clean and well groomed. As some of them spoke of how they came to live in this place, he
was humbled by the tragic circumstances that many of them had overcome. Despite their
humble circumstances, all who chose to speak to him expressed themselves clearly and
with grace. Even the children were well-mannered, articulate, confident, and clearly well-educated.

After Father was sure everyone had had an opportunity to come forward, he stepped up. “Now, everyone, normal procedure is that the council would take a vote as to whether or not a person is to be accepted as a Member, or a Helper, or a friend to this community. But this is not a normal situation. Mr. Burch has not come here for our help or our shelter or even to become a Helper. Although, it is true that he has unwittingly helped us greatly in the past.”

Turning in Elliot’s direction, Father said, “Vincent and I are possibly more grateful than any of you, since his help saved our lives. In light of that, I think it would be appropriate that we all, as a community, show our appreciation by voting to, at the very least, acknowledge him an honorary friend of this community.”

“What about the fact that he nearly blew us all up when he was building that tower? Are we supposed to just forget about that?” Cullen asked.

“That is a good question, Cullen. But as Mr. Burch pointed out to me a short time ago, at the time, he had no idea that anyone was living down here.”

“What does Mr. Burch have to say about it?” William asked.

Elliot went back to the top step so that everyone could see him better. “I’m not sure what to say, except that I am very sorry that my building project impacted all of you. I didn’t know that anyone lived down here. And I wasn’t aware of how extensive the tunnels beneath the city were. Now that I do know, I promise you, I will make sure to bear that in mind in the future.”

“Before we vote,” Father asked, “is there anyone in the room who wishes to speak up for Mr. Burch?”

Catherine stepped forward and spoke for the first time. Elliot looked surprised. “I just want you all to know, that when Father and Vincent were trapped, I was desperate, just as the rest of you were. When I went to Elliot and asked for his help, he gave me everything I needed, without a price tag, and without asking for anything in return. Vincent and Father are alive because of him. For that, I am eternally grateful.” As she turned, she reached and squeezed Elliot’s hand.

He nodded his appreciation to her.

“Is there anyone else?” Father called.

Mouse came up the steps and turned to the crowd. “Elliot’s a good man. Better than good. Gave Catherine dynamite… and blasting caps… and drills… and plastic explosives. Saved Vincent… Father too. Even let Mouse go when the mean men caught Mouse… could have put Mouse in jail… but didn’t. Yep…” he said, nodding. “Elliot’s good. Better than good.”

Vincent put his arm around Mouse’s shoulder and whispered in his ear. “Thank you, Mouse.”
Mouse just shrugged, and blushed from his head to his toes.

Father stepped forward again. “Now, if you approve of accepting Mr. Burch as a friend to this community, then all you have to do is remain facing this direction. If you do not approve, then simply turn around and face the back of the room.”

Vincent watched, wondering how the community would respond.

Elliot realized, with surprise, that it seemed to matter to him, what this ragtag group of people thought of him. He nervously waited to see how many would turn their backs on him.

Both men were stunned when not one of the community turned away. Every single person voted to accept Elliot as a friend, even William and Cullen.

“The vote appears to be unanimous,” Father declared.

Mouse leaned toward Vincent and Elliot. “Told you,” he said, smiling smugly. “Elliot’s good... better than good...” Then turning to Elliot, he asked. “Got anymore dynamite? Plastic explosives? Mouse could really use some.”

Elliot laughed at the odd young man. I think I’m going to like this kid, he thought, as members of the community came forward to shake his hand and welcome ... some more enthusiastically than others.
Catherine, Vincent and Elliot walked back to her apartment building in a comfortable silence, pondering all that had happened during the course of the evening.

As the trio neared Catherine’s threshold, Vincent stopped.

“Are you coming the rest of the way, Vincent?” Catherine asked.

Shaking his head, Vincent replied. “No. The two of you should go ahead without me. I’ll wait for you here.”

She looked at him curiously, wondering what he was thinking.

Elliot turned. Clearing his throat, he addressed Vincent. “Thank you, Vincent, for trusting me... with everything. This evening has certainly been a night of revelations beyond anything I could have ever imagined. But can I ask you something?”

Vincent nodded.

“What does it mean to be a friend to your community?” Elliot asked.

“It means you are now considered one of us, Elliot,” Vincent said. “If you are ever in need, you can call upon us and we will help you in any way that we can.”

“You will help me?” Elliot asked in surprise. “And what is expected in return for that help?”

“Nothing, just that we are trusting that you will not betray us to the world Above.”

Elliot extended his hand to the extraordinary man that stood before him. “I won’t betray your trust. I hope you believe that.”

Vincent took his offered hand. “Thank you.”

Vincent watched as Catherine and Elliot disappeared from sight into the subbasement beneath her building. He stayed far enough away, so that they would have the opportunity to speak privately. Though he trusted in Catherine’s love, he couldn’t bear to see them together as they said their goodbyes.

As Elliot grasped the first rung on the ladder, he turned back to Catherine.

She could see regret and sadness in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Catherine... for disappointing you... for not being the kind of man you could love.”

“I’m sorry too, Elliot... for hurting you the way I did. I was trying to help people here, and I hurt you deeply in the process. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Do you think that if things had been different... if we had met before... before you met Vincent... that things might have turned out differently between us?” he asked.

“No, I don’t,” she answered, without hesitation. “You must understand, Elliot, I’m not the same person I was before I met Vincent. Back then, I was just like all the other socialites you’ve ever known. I was shallow, conceited, self-centered, frivolous... The Cathy you fell for... the Cathy you thought you loved... she didn’t exist back then. I don’t think you would have looked twice at the old Cathy. I have become this person... because of what happened to me... because of what Vincent and others here gave to me. They taught me to be strong. They taught me to look outside of myself and outside of my safe, privileged world. They
helped me find my purpose in life. They showed me that there are things that are much more valuable than anything our money could ever buy.”

He nodded, acknowledging the truth of her words. “You made me realize some hard things about myself tonight, Cathy. But you are wrong about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“What I felt for you... what I still feel for you ... it is love.”

Catherine opened her mouth to protest, but Elliot cut her off.

“Perhaps it’s not the best kind of love... or even the kind of love you need. But it’s the only kind of love I know how to give, and it is real.”

“I... I’m sorry, Elliot... I don’t know what to say.”

Elliot reached for her and wrapped her in a huge bear hug. “Thank you, Cathy... thank you for trusting me tonight. I do forgive you. I’m not saying I like it, but I actually do understand why you did what you did. And don’t worry... I will keep your secrets... I promise.” He kissed her sweetly on the top of the head, turned without another word, and climbed the ladder.

Catherine watched as Elliot ascended the ladder, returning to the world Above, the world where he was a ‘king’ in his own right. As he closed the trap door, she rushed back through the threshold and into Vincent’s waiting arms.

They stood there for a long time, letting their love wash away the stress and the worry of the evening. As he held her, Vincent realized how much fear had been gripping his heart and mind all evening.

*Does she understand the power her love has to soothe the storms that sometimes rage within me?* he wondered.

“Do you think he will keep his promise, Catherine?” he asked. “Do you think he will keep our secret?”

“I don’t know.” She could still feel the nigging doubt about the man she had almost married. “I want to trust him, but...”

“But he has let you down before.”

“Yes.” She sighed, knowing they had taken a great risk.
“There was a moment tonight, Catherine, when I entered my chamber and saw you with your arms around Elliot’s neck.”

She cocked her head to one side, trying to recall the moment he was referring to.

“You mean when I was straightening his collar?”

Vincent nodded.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Vincent.”

“When I saw you standing there like that... and the way he looked at you... It was as if I saw a small glimpse of what your life might have been, if you had never met me.”

“And...?”

“I felt overwhelming jealousy and at the same time I felt... tremendous guilt... As if I had stolen something from you... and from him, as well.”

Catherine knew she must proceed with caution. Vincent’s struggle with these feelings was one of the things that stood in the way of their dream. It was one of the fears they had yet to overcome, together.

“Vincent, you cannot ‘steal’ something that is freely given... You do realize that, don’t you?”

Vincent looked deeply into her eyes as he digested her words.

“Do you remember what I said to Elliot in your chamber?” she asked.

“Which part?”

“That I’ve learned the difference between someone who wants to possess me and someone who truly loves me...”

“Yes, I do remember that.”

“Would you want me to live in a loveless relationship with Elliot? Is that the destiny you want for me?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“How can you believe that anything Elliot could offer me would be better than all that you have given me? If that is still what you believe, you are wrong! It doesn’t even compare.”

“But Catherine,” he protested. “I have nothing to offer you... nothing of value... nothing at all.”

Reaching up to stroke his cheek, she asked, “You have no idea what you give me, Vincent... Do you?”

He could see the urgent question in her eyes, and she could see the awestruck wonder in his.

Not knowing how to reply, he waited for her to explain.

“Vincent,” she breathed, “You give me everything... everything that you have, everything that you are. Besides my parents, no one... no one... has ever given me what you give me so freely. You have so much to offer. Please don’t devalue that.
“How can I make you understand that Elliot was never my destiny? It has always been you. If you hadn’t come into my life... I would be dead. Death... is what my destiny was... before you found me, and on many occasions since. Not Elliot, nor anyone else up there in that world. Something led you to me that night, I know it. I lived a shallow and meaningless existence before that. I found my life here, in these Tunnels, with you. My life began the day you brought me down here. You gave me my life... in more ways than one. There is nothing more valuable than that.”

Vincent sighed. “Value’ is such a difficult thing to measure, for me. Here, it is what we can find, or make, or bargain for. It’s not that I think I am less. But we both know your life would have taken a very different track if--”

“Yes, it would have.” She was quick to agree and to disagree at the same time. “If I had never met you, it would have. A worse track... much worse. Even if I had survived the attack, being with Elliot would not have been a cure for that. It would have been the proof of it.”

Vincent had never considered her life in those terms. That he was the salvation of it, in more ways than one, and not its hindrance.

He let that epiphany sink into his heart.

He looked at her again in wonder. “It has been a night for... revelations, Catherine.” he said, with hushed reverence.

“Yes, it has,” she whispered.

They stood, in the cool of the tunnel, embracing each other for a long time, both warmed by the miracle of their love...

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Never stop believing in “Happily ever after...” – Barbara

*Many thanks to the artists who inspired this story with their amazing and imaginative creations.
It’s impossible to know how many times, or in how many ways, the show has been discussed over the last thirty one years. Even after all this time, there are still lively chats online and off over the minutest details and nuance of the show.

Each episode has been studied and dissected to within an inch of it’s proverbial life, and still we never tire of exchanging ideas, sharing insights and revealing observations.

It’s understandable that, at times, these discussions have become heated. After all, there are those who believe that Lisa is a sympathetic individual who deserves to be treated with compassion, while others blame her for hurting our beloved Vincent. Some have never accepted the reality or the finality of Catherine’s death or any of the events of Season 3, and yet many others cannot deny or discount what they witnessed with their own eyes.

Who is to say that one or the other is wrong?

Happily, in this world, no one is wrong. There is room in these Tunnels for every perspective and every opinion. And perhaps even some we have not yet considered.

Along the way we have discovered that opinion and open discussion leads to amazing and often unexpected conclusions.

Whenever we allow unfettered discussion, we have discovered that plot bunnies abound.

And where plot bunnies abound, amazing stories are sure to follow, because...

...Opinion and Open Discussion Are Our Lifeblood.
A Little Litany
by Angie

(an expansion of the poem by G.K. Chesterton)

When God turned back eternity and was young,
Ancient of Days, grown little for your mirth
(As under the low arch the land is bright)
Peered through you, gate of heaven -- and saw the earth.

Where had he come from? Vincent wondered, not for the first - or thousandth - time. Or perhaps it was more relevant to ask; who had birthed him? The why of his being abandoned was probably related to this last, although he likely would never know for sure.

Or shutting out his shining skies awhile
Built you about him for a house of gold
To see in pictured walls his storied world
Return upon him as a tale is told.

Father was also thinking of Vincent, and wondering why he had been abandoned as a baby, but more importantly perhaps, how had their community come to find him, against all odds, on the coldest day of the year? It made one muse upon destiny, divinity. Certainly, had Vincent not become part of their community, in truth its very heart, the tunnels would be a very different place. Paracelsus would have likely been leader, there being nothing to drive him away and the normal differences of opinion among them would not have done so. Vincent was the motivation, and the reason they had built their community around him. He represented everything they had left behind in the world above, someone who needed their safety, and his story was one that always needed to be told.

Or found his mirror there; the only glass
That would not break with that unbearable light
Till in a corner of the high dark house
God looked on God, as ghosts meet in the night.
Peter thought about Vincent, on the years he had known him, and how his face - at once so strange, yet strong and magnificent - had come to be a mirror; his and Jacob's, even Catherine's. Yes, when they looked at Vincent, they did not just see a face that resembled a lion's, and the canine teeth he tried not to show. They saw themselves reflected as a people, a community, a family who accepted what others would deem impossibly strange, even dangerous and try to destroy. Yes, in those dark halls and tunnels, Vincent was truly at home, perhaps closer to the god of all things, however that was defined. He himself was godlike in the tunnels, needing neither light nor weapons, having been gifted with natural talents no other could claim. And did Vincent see god in the stone world he had to live in? What would they think if they saw each other? Would they just pass in the darkness, needing no other acknowledgement?

Star of his morning; that unfallen star  
In that strange starry overturn of space  
When earth and sky changed places for an hour  
And heaven looked upwards in a human face.

Catherine. He thought of her as his star, in daylight and at night. She represented his heaven on earth, unfallen, an angel come to life, a dream, a hope, a love. And she made him more human than he had ever been. She didn't care that he looked different, had to live below the streets, or avoid sunlight. She brought all that he was to their meetings, and he saw himself in her eyes. She gave him humanity and bade him look to the sky.

Or young on your strong knees and lifted up  
Wisdom cried out, whose voice is in the street,  
And more than twilight of twiformed cherubim  
Made of his throne indeed a mercy-seat.

Indeed, mused Father, Vincent's was the voice that often ended their discussions. Always he voted for compassion, speaking up for the hurt, the sick, the lost ones. Father knew that at least part of that innate sense, the wisdom, arose from his son's wanderings in the world above at night. Vincent witnessed both the good and the bad there, but always gave his hand to the old, the poor, the children, and so many others who could not speak for themselves. His was the hand of mercy. He did not judge quickly, and he was always fair.

Or risen from play at your pale raiment's hem  
God, grown adventurous from all time's repose,  
Or your tall body climbed the ivory tower  
And kissed upon your mouth the mystic rose.

And as the sunset dimmed into dusk, Vincent waited. And as he saw the shadows deepening from the culvert, he returned to the tunnels and made his way to the threshold and Catherine's elevator. He stood atop it, a tall, windblown knight in handmade garb. Then, in the darkness of a New York night, he softly climbed down the fire escape to Catherine's balcony. There he would find her, and kiss his rose, the lips that he daydreamed about, to feel her warm on his, and bring her close to him once more.

END
“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.”
Confucius

“Yours is the light by which my spirit's born: you are my sun, my moon, and all my stars...”
E.E. Cummings

by Judith Nolan
The Ghosts of Roses
by C. J. La Belle

“We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorns have roses.”

Alphonse Karr
The Ghosts of Roses by C.J. LaBelle

Prologue

(Author’s note: Katherine and Vincente originally appear in both The Diary of Kate the Chandler and Catherine the Chandler, by C.J. LaBelle. And while this story is not ‘about’ them, they do make an appearance.)

For at least two generations, every bride of the Chandler family carried a bridal bouquet of red and white roses. The sons of Vincente and Katherine Chandler wooed their wives with roses from their mother’s garden, and the flowers in the bouquet were a given.

Two of the four Chandler wives added other flowers as well (Elizabeth Sheridan Chandler added apple blossoms from her favorite tree, and Annabelle Wind Singer Chandler loved the irreverence of dandelions, tucked among the blooms), and one (Marie Constance) wanted far more red roses than white, but the understanding that at least some bridal blossoms would come from a very specific rose bush and from a certain secret garden, was a given.

As was often done, some of the flowers were preserved (as wedding bouquets are wont to be) by having select blooms pressed in books, a thing of which Vincente heartily approved. Chandler family diaries, Bibles, ships’ logs, books of poetry, sketchbooks, and later, portrait albums, almost all carried the scent of Kate’s roses.

Marie even experimented with having her entire bouquet dried and preserved, but the march of time did to it what the march of time usually does: the blossoms eventually fell to dust inside a cedar chest. The day the chest was emptied, their remains scattered to the wind.

Such is life. Especially rose life. Sometimes, only a ghost of their fragrance remained to tantalize those with the keenest of noses.

The four sons of Vincente and Kate the Chandler, (who grew to be fine men, all) were generally considered just as adventurous as their mysterious father, and at least as
intelligent and kind as their loving and talented mother, though none of them seemed to inherit her gift for carving wax. They were insightful, inquisitive, hearty, healthy, and (at both parents' insistence) educated men, for the time. But none were great artists of any caliber.

There are some who say such talents tend to skip a generation or two, and so it was with the Chandlers.

One, however, James Charles, the third of the four boys, was better than average at getting things (many things) to grow. He had a deep love for the New York land, and while his brothers often wandered a bit, (one became a ship’s captain, the other a military man, the third part of the westward expansion) James Charles loved the sylvan places, loved tending the forestland, and buying great lots of open property for the timber that stood there. He grew corn and apples near his home, but it was in shipbuilding that he made his fortune, and he grew that fortune, carefully.

It was said that JC Chandler could make anything increase, make anything prosper, and some hid a smile behind their hands and pointed to his gorgeous wife and six offspring (three boys, three girls, all handsome and fairly bright, one particularly so) when they said it. JC’s family garden was said to contain only the best of blooms.

But time takes away many things, and so it was that as Kate and Vincente’s family grew, James did not elect to remain in the home of his birth. (None of the Chandler children did, or could. The Chandler residence was a commune of sorts, for a collection of mostly French refugees from the Reign of Terror, a time few of the home’s residents cared to speak about.)

The original Chandler home site expanded and was left to those who still inhabited it, while the boys moved on. It became a refuge for those in need, even after Kate the Chandler stopped making her wares. It expanded some more and became known as a place of shelter for the poor. It was understood that Kate had strong ties to Catholicism (some gossiped that she’d been a nun in France), and so the place always had a bit of that church’s cachet attached to it.

If there was ever a formal deed on the property, it was lost to time, though everyone knew the name “Chandler” over the front door. (The heavy oak sign still exists. Adam Vincente Chandler nailed it to his third ship, as a way for his grandmother to travel. It’s a seafaring token to this day, passed down among his descendants.)

When the homestead formally became a shelter for those in need, everyone knew Vincente and Kate Chandler would have approved. Both of it and the Sisters of Mercy Dedicated to Our Lady Regina, who ran it, long after Vincente and Kate’s eventual passing.
But our story is not about the homestead, or what became of it, or the Chandlery, or even Kate and Vincente, whose spirits are said to still be chasing each other through the deep forests, where twining rose vines thrive. (More than a few of which were put there by James, thanks to cuttings from the original bush.)

This story is about the roses, and how the tradition of a red and white rose bouquet eventually (and almost entirely by chance) made its way back into the Chandler family, after being a thing long absent from it.

Now, it is understood that roses aren’t as sturdy as oak signs and that any garden fades, and changes. Weeds and briars move in to choke the flower beds, or construction happens overtop of them, a garden wall being almost all that remains, as either the forest takes back its own, or progress takes up the land and the green spaces.

It’s also understood that living things have progeny, each in their way, and though some things might be lost, that which is lost can be found again.

It’s been said by the native people (and Vincente was very close to them) that every living thing has a spirit, a life force that never dies. And therefore, every living thing has a ghost.

It’s a way to explain the essences of all living things, and that they are still present, all around us. You have only to understand, see, and accept this truth: “Everything that exists has a spirit.”

It’s a saying Vincente and Katherine both understood.
This picture by Judith inspired this bit of whimsy. Many thanks to her for letting me borrow it, and her character, Verity, who first appeared in the Batbland Challenges story, “Begetting the Rose.”
“You surprise me with your continued devotion to this walled place. I’d have thought you hated gardening. Wasn’t it used as a punishment for you, at the convent?” Vincente asked his industrious wife. Her hands were covered with rich, loamy soil, and she was carefully tending a struggling bush, helping to free it from a root-bound pot.

“It was,” she answered, with a nod. “But as with many things, I find much pleasure in tending what is mine.” She gave him a sweet smile that let him know she spoke of more than the bedraggled plant she was set on moving.

“That one may not be worth saving, Beloved,” he said gently. “It had been cast aside near the docks when I found it. It was probably brought from some distant land to sell, or it arrived with some wanderer, who left it to die. If it was meant for barter, it’s clearly not worth the trading.”

“Then it’s a refugee, just like us,” Kate declared firmly. “And I am not giving up on it. I’m going to try putting it in a spot where it gets the good morning sun. Not too much, mind you, just enough.”

Vincente bent down near his wife and helped her move the earth and pot over to where she indicated. “Ma Belle, as roses go, I think you have finer ones. The wild blooms are lovely…”

“This one will be lovely too, Belle Homme. You’ll see – Oh!”
Kate Chandler snatched her hand back from her labors. A single drop of blood welled on her index finger then mixed with the soil near the plant.

Vincente took her hand in his immediately and kissed away the hurt. “Be careful, my love. This particular stray has sharp thorns. It knows how to defend itself.”

“And all I’m trying to do is save it.” Her voice was all love and memory. “That doesn’t mean we give up. I remember when something far larger than this straggling bush left a mark on my skin.”

She pushed up the flounced sleeve of her white cotton blouse. Concentric, pink lines indicated a scar on her upper arm. One she considered an accidental love token, considering she’d gotten it the first time he’d ever rescued her from danger.

“I remember that day.” Vince’s deep eyes warmed, recalling the wound with a mixture of contrition and gratitude. He deeply regretted ever causing her harm, however unintentionally it had been done. But he also blessed every star in the heavens that the beautiful woman before him had consented to become his.

He looked down at the rich ground. “Your blood is mixed with the soil. Superstition says the blooms will now be red,” he said.

“I was hoping for white. Like the fitful moon, the first night I met you.” The damage to her finger was inconsequential, and she traced her love’s bearded cheek with the back of her gentle fingers.

Brown eyes held her green ones steadily, his leonine features darkly handsome. “Perhaps you will have both. This will bear blooms almost the same time you do,” he predicted, eyeing her rounded belly. “Give or take a few weeks.”

Her smile was beatific. “It will be a magnificent summer, then. Will you draw water from the well for our refugee?” she asked.

“Better from the stream,” he said, wrapping her finger with his neckerchief. “There’s an old mystic who lives with the Algonquin. They say she has magic in her, for growing things, and some certain mixture she uses for fertilizer. Fish heads and dried corn silk. Egg shells and... fairy dust,” he said, letting her rest, while he drew the earth around the little plant with his firm, haired hands. “She says it works best when mixed with running water, not still.”

“You’ll bring me some?” Kate asked, loving him utterly.

“I will. She might want to barter for her potion. Will you carve her something in exchange?” he asked.

“Yes! Tell her I’ll carve her a fine rose. So that when the bush blooms, I’ll have one kind of blossom, and she’ll have another.”
“She will like that,” Vincente approved. “Go in and clean the cut. I’ll go to her and make your bargain and get what we need. I should be back in time for supper. We’ll finish this tonight, by the light of the full moon. We will ask the Gods for a blessing for our orphan.”

“I think the rose will like that.” Kate looked over at her little plant.

Settled in the spot near the wall, flanked by thyme and wild rosemary, and in the perfect spot for the morning sun, she thought it looked better already.

“Gardening at night?” Her sandy eyebrow arched. “You really are inviting something magical to happen, my love.” She smiled, rising to do as he had bid her, looking back at her growing garden, and the incredible man who was making it all possible.

_Thyme and rosemary. Courage and remembrance. And roses are for love. How... fitting that those three things should be together._

Vincente brushed the dirt from his unusual, taloned fingers. “Beautiful Katherine, something magical has been happening to me since the moment I met you.”

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**Vignette Two**

**Spreading Magic**

~ James Charles and Annabelle, Spring, 1825 ~

“...the day we’re married, I’ll bring you a dove,” James Charles Chandler told his bride-to-be. “It will be my first gift for my beloved wife.”

They stood together in the narrow gateway of Annabelle’s home. The darkness of early evening surrounded them, relieved only by a few flickering street lamps at the junction further down the block. They had walked too far together, and as a consequence, he was late returning his love to her home.
James sensed there was more than one set of eyes fixed upon them. The lifting of a curtain at the parlor window of the house said they were being close-watched, but he didn’t care.

They were to be married. Soon, he wouldn’t have to share her with anyone. That was all that mattered.

Turning his back to the house, he drew closer to his love. “A pretty white dove. It will sing a cooing song for you, every morning.”

“You’re very sweet.” Annabelle reached up to touch his darkly bearded cheek. “But I don’t like the notion of keeping some poor creature trapped in a cage, James. It will not sing, because its poor soul will be crushed.”

James knew his love was sensitive about such things. “You’re right, of course.” James smiled his understanding.

His future bride was a wild little thing, with a doe’s eyes and a sharp mind. Her grandfather was an Iroquois priest, her grandmother a teacher, who was good with numbers. He loved her mind, and he adored the ebullience of her loving spirit.

She had told him she often saw things, mystical things. Things he couldn’t always grasp or understand. But, given his own heritage, and his father’s unique gifts, he’d learned to judge nothing, and no one, at face value.

He understood the deeply spiritual beliefs of Annabelle’s people: Name everything unknown as mystery, and if some things choose to reveal themselves to you in time, either through dreams or some other device, then you are blessed.

He knew he had been very blessed.

“Very well, my love. I can see we will need to build a dovecot for the doves in the garden, and leave the door open. Then the choice to go or stay will be theirs. Does that ease your mind?”

She frowned, considering his proposal. “That might work. And now you speak of more than one dove.” She didn’t miss his use of the words “doves” and “theirs.”

She looked up into his handsome face. It was hard to see him in the darkness, and sometimes her vivid imagination played tricks, but there were times when she saw those who had come before, looking back at her from his expressive eyes. James and all his brothers were human featured. That didn’t mean some in this land didn’t know who his father was.

Their families had long been friends and companions, both in trade and in the battle to stay independent of the increasingly busy world around them. Annabelle’s people knew what that was like, intimately.
She shivered slightly, in the evening’s chill, but felt the warmth of loving regard all around her. As always, she felt the presence of unseen others nearby. She felt their love and knew they wished her well.

She knew that her husband was an exceptional man. As the child of Vincente and Katherine (Kate) Chandler, and though human featured, many of his traits were his father’s. He was intuitive and physically strong. Dark hair and a firm jawline dominated his fine visage, a gift of his Portuguese ancestry. Yet Kate Chandler’s green eyes were framed by his dark lashes, the green a slightly lighter color on him than they were on his mother. They looked almost uncanny, beneath his dark eyebrows, even as they reflected nothing but pure love at the moment.

“Dovecotes are for more than one bird. ‘Theirs?’” she asked. “So now there will be more than one?”

“If there’s one thing that meeting you has confirmed for me, Annabelle, it’s that nothing... absolutely nothing should be alone in this world,” he replied. “We all need someone to love, and to keep us warm in the night...”

He caught her around the waist and drew her against him for a swift, socially frowned-upon kiss. They were not yet married. He could well imagine the sudden disapproval in the house behind him.

But no light appeared, and no one came to the door. He took that as a good sign.

“And if raising doves doesn’t work out, we can always serve them for dinner, if times get hard,” he teased her.

Her laugh was infectious and immediate. “So, you’ll bring me a poor bird and call it a gift for me. Then you’d have me clean it and cook it for you when you get hungry?” She patted his trim waistline. “It’s difficult to see how that is a present. You’re not fooling anyone, James.” Her ability to size up the situation quickly was one of her chief virtues, as was her ability to make the normally serious James Chandler smile, more than a little.

He took her hand in his, and closed his fingers around it, keeping it where it was, with her fingertips brushing his midsection.

She didn’t mention that such poverty was an unlikely thing between them. He had orders through next year for the tall ships, the sale of which increased his odds at prosperity.

Other countries were running short of good timber, thanks to their smaller size and overdevelopment. The Americas were a treasure trove of natural resources. Ones that had made some of the nation’s founding fathers – and those who came after – very wealthy men.
“Not fooling anyone is my intention.” He tightened his grip on her hand a moment, just for the sweet pain of having it there. He longed for the day she would become his wife, and they would have children together. “It’s you I want, Annabelle, only you. Tell me what I can bring you. I long to please you, to keep you smiling.”

He released her hand and brushed a darkly honeyed lock of hair away from her fair face, already pining to hold the beautiful daughters she’d make... and the handsome sons, to follow him.

“What I wish for, you cannot buy.” Annabelle gave him a sweet look. “For it is priceless.”

Her tawny hair and fair skin made her the image of her Dutch mother, except for her deep brown eyes, a gift from her noble father. James knew she loved her family. Also that she loved him, and by extension, his own unique family. Annabelle loved sitting with Vincente almost as much as she loved being with Kate. That was no small consideration, for James.

“Tell me,” he commanded, with gentle force.

“Are you sure it wouldn’t make you smile to go adventuring?” She posed a serious question, lightly. “Your brothers are all but vagabonds and explorers. You know how you all love to travel. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather sail ships than make them? Like Ethan?”

“Loving you is all the adventure I need.” His tone was deadly serious, and the green eyes held hers, for emphasis.

Annabelle swore they seemed to all but lighten when he felt something intensely, and they nearly did so now. She accepted his pronouncement and let the moment pass.

She turned away from her own home, to gaze at the impressive new structure that had recently been built on the large plot of land next to it. It was a big house that was even now, settling in on its foundations. The large structure and open land behind it would be good for her children, and for her. It looked like it intended to stand for years uncounted. It gave her a good feeling of security and permanence.

“I was thinking that this fine new home you’ve made for us needs a garden, but aside from wildflowers, there isn’t very much. Do you think we might have a cutting or two from your mother’s place? Some of the roses, perhaps?” She asked, knowing she was about to get just that.

“I’ll speak to her at the earliest convenience,” he replied, already planning it. “If it will please you, my love.”

“It will please me very well, sir.” Annabelle smiled, and to James Charles, that was a gift all its own.
"I think my mother is almost as in love with you as I am," he said, holding her to him for a longer, more intimate kiss.

Annabelle returned it, then pushed him away, gently, with obvious regret. "They watch us, still. My poor mother will be having seventeen different kinds of blue fits by now. We must not make her think she has to send my father out to talk to you."

Though her skin was fair, she was nobility among her father's people, and princesses had to comport themselves with a certain level of decorum. Especially around handsome rogues like James Charles.

James spoke from his heart. "It's that, when I am with you, I can think of nothing else but the sweetness of you, mixed with the wildness. You bewitch me, woman. I am spellbound in love."

"You flatter me, sir. Come to call on me in the morning, and take me out for another walk." She held out her hand again, one he immediately took. "The spring rains were heavy last night," she explained. "There's a meadow full of dandelions down near the river, or there should be. I would love to see it. I have plans for them."

"You love the roses as well as you love the weeds," he chided her, smiling.

Her answer was a sure one. "Everything has a right to live, and love. They are plants you can make a wish on, come fall. Indulge me tomorrow, and I'll show you how to make a chain of them."

She reached up to kiss his lowered cheek swiftly, before gathering her skirts and walking away towards the house. The front door opened almost immediately, and she was briefly illuminated by candlelight, before being firmly whisked inside. The heavy wooden door was snapped shut, and the lights soon extinguished.

"Bonne nuit, dors bien, ma belle..." James watched until Annabelle’s bedroom window showed light before he turned and walked away, whistling a jaunty tune.

One day, nothing and no one would come between them, ever again.

The next day they spent the afternoon together, wandering the river meadow. The dandelions were indeed in place, and he watched her make both bracelets and crowns, for herself. James swore no gemstone could enhance her sweet beauty more.
As soon as he set her on her horse for home, Annabelle knew that James would go visit his parents that evening, and he’d bring a rose or two back to her by tomorrow, the next day at the latest. It was a glorious thing, to be loved by him.

Not everyone treated those with Native American blood kindly, though of course when it came to being of mixed blood, James was in a category all by himself. (Or if not “all by himself,” one populated only by himself and his siblings.)

Such things didn’t matter to Annabelle and her family. Vincente was a welcome guest in her father’s home. He was a respected and fearsome warrior, and his sage counsel was sought by many. It always had been. Annabelle felt blessed to be loved by his son.

She would make a wish on the dandelions when their yellow petals turned to whispering grey seeds. She knew the gift James would fetch would be bearing blossoms in time to make a wedding bouquet.

And so it did.

Vignette Three

The Law and the Magic

~ William Lee Chandler, Summer, 1858 ~

And so, throughout the years that followed, James Charles Chandler acquired; his cuttings from Kate’s secret garden, his gloriously fair wife, and the children he longed for, very much in that order.

Sometimes, life works out very much as you plan it, and James was proof of that. If you considered things carefully and left nothing of consequence to la belle chance, good things tended to come. Especially if you worked for them, and tended to them once they arrived. So it was with James Charles Chandler and his family, and so it was, with the roses.
The carefully tended offspring of James and Annabelle’s impressive rose bush wandered a bit, and many of its cuttings went travelling with those who requested them. And though they did well enough in other climes, it was patently true that only the New York blooms really thrived. Those carried to other places seemed to not like the dusty Midwest or the humid South.

Taken away from New York, it seemed that they would bloom infrequently, or not for very long. That the blooms themselves seemed to shrink outside the Empire State, and make themselves somewhat less desirable, away from the place where Kate Chandler had first cultivated them from a sad, little shrub her loving husband had brought her.

The roses’ tacit refusal to do well outside their place of origin was a thing that kept them rare. The beauty of the blooms was unquestionable, but for a reason no horticulturalist could clearly explain, the red and white blossoms only did well near the tangy Atlantic air, rooted deep within good, northern soil. They did better near a wall than away from one, a nod to the need for shade, and the unusual plant never really caught on in gardening circles, even though several attempts were made to duplicate it outside New York.

The rose bush was very choosy, you see. It liked to save its love and beauty for those who understood it and loved it, despite its thorns, and sometimes irascible behavior. It seemed to wait for just the right place and time to bloom. That was when it showed off its true magic...

When the first rose bush became twiggy and uncooperative, one of James’ children (or one of his nieces or nephews) would show him that at least one of its descendants was doing well and thriving. It was a thing that gladdened his heart, always.

The day his youngest son, William, announced his intention to pursue law, Annabelle gave her child two roses bound with a gone-over dandelion and told him to make a wish for his future, as he blew on the wispy dandelion seeds and scattered them. It was a tradition, in their family, and one of the reasons she’d insisted on carrying the mercurial weed in her bridal bouquet.

William did as she asked, and hugged her hard, for her support.

“This thing you wish for. It will make you a great man, William. The law is a noble thing,” she advised.

“I come from a very long line of great men, and noble people, Mother,” he replied, loving her.

Annabelle could only nod at his statement, as she watched the seeds scatter in the wind. “You are brilliant, and will go far,” she pronounced, feeling the omens borne by his wish. A gusty breeze carried the dandelion seeds even more distant than she expected. “Very far,” she added.
He brushed a loving kiss on the crown of her head, watching the same thing she did. He never questioned her gift of prophecy. William Lee considered himself the son and grandson of mighty, singular men. The scholar in him burned to know more, to be all he could be, as a gesture of respect to his forebears, and as an acknowledgment of his own gifts.

He’d enter Columbia College in the fall, the place of higher learning that would one day be known as Columbia University. The college was about to open a School of Law, and he wanted to be one of its first graduates.

Most people said the sandy-haired young man with the firm jaw and green eyes was very much the image of his grandmother, Kate. The year was 1858.

The coming years bore witness that he would achieve all he planned and more. The day he graduated from Columbia, a brilliant red rose was pinned to his lapel. It was descended from the same bush that had provided his mother’s wedding bouquet.

His aunt Marie swore she’d never seen a bloom so crimson.

And as chance would have it, it caught the eye of a very beautiful girl seated in the third row, at his graduation ceremony. Her name was Beth, which was to say, it was Elizabeth Forbes Caldwell, but she was content with “just Beth.” She’d come to watch her brother George graduate. William Chandler and George Caldwell had spent much of their school days sitting near each other, owing to the alphabetical arrangement of their seats.

Beth hoped for an introduction. The deep red rose on William’s lapel seemed to draw her like a siren...
Catherine Chandler (who’d obviously never met William, but bore at least some resemblance to him, thanks to Kate’s strong genes) had been feeling restless of late.

The concrete jungle (which really was feeling like a jungle, complete with people who insisted on behaving worse than animals) was beginning to wear on her usually steady nerves.

Every building seemed like a huge confederation of brass and glass, mixed with concrete and steel. Incandescent light bulbs seemed too plentiful, too harsh, and too bright.

She knew she could go where the light was softer, where hard, straight lines were all but nonexistent in the architecture. Vincent’s world held amazing places of beauty, it was true, but for all that, it did not hold flowering plants, or much in the way of green spaces, and Catherine felt she wanted more of those.

*This is ridiculous,* she thought, as she found a parking space for her car. Getting out, she crossed the pavement and opened the door to Panache Flowers, a well-reputed nursery and florist shop. *I have Central Park right outside my door if I want to go look at plants, they’re there. Most people would kill just for the green view I’ve got.*

But, once inside the shop, she inhaled the fragrance of multiple plants mixed with good earth, and felt herself relax. Bags of potting soil and river rock reminded her of some of the scents of the tunnels. A wrought iron planter reminded her of the gate just inside the tunnel entrance from the park, and a wooden one reminded her of Cullen’s workshop. She drew another deep breath, and briefly closed her eyes. The only missing ingredients were the mingled aromas of candle smoke and beeswax.
She sighed, as she looked around, helplessly. The choices were many... so varied, and perhaps a little... intimidating.

Who am I fooling? I can barely keep things like this ivy alive. She grimaced, frowning at a huge hanging basket full of the trailing plant. It put hers to shame.

Maybe that’s what I need. Another bunch of ivy, or another palm. Just something green and alive, to cheer me up.

But the moment she thought that, she knew it was wrong. She didn’t want just “green.” She wanted something with color, some kind of flower. Hopefully, one she could cultivate successfully.

Her frowning gaze strayed to a shelf full of potted cacti. That was the coward’s way out. They were green, and some had flowers. Surely, they’re not so easy to kill...

Catherine took a couple of steps towards them, already singling out her choice, and then she stopped moving. In the back of her mind, she heard her mother’s soft voice, saying, “Gardening is an activity that takes practice. But once you know how, Catherine, it’s like magic. It’s so easy, darling...you just have to try...”

Try...if only it was that easy... Catherine sighed, giving up on the notion of adding a cactus to her balcony. They looked too “unwelcoming,” and out of place.

But what should I get? she wondered.

Her father had once lovingly chided her that, like him, anything green she attempted to look after usually did not do so well. He confided they had both somehow missed out on the renowned “green thumb” of the rest of the Chandler clan. It was their shared burden of regret.

Catherine’s mother had loved tending growing things, however. It was part of her loving nature to help things succeed; flowers, her only child, her husband’s fledgling law firm...

And Caroline Chandler adored roses. With thorns or without, she loved them all. The ivory rose she’d given Catherine was proof of that, and she loved to spend warm Spring days in the sun, tending to various plants.

She attempted to teach her daughter some skills. Catherine grew up knowing the basics.

But then life engulfed her, and plants, even as undemanding as they sometimes were, seemed to ask for time she often didn’t have.

“I guess I can’t really go wrong with some more ivy...” Catherine turned back towards the pots at the door of the shop. “Or something artificial...” she acknowledged the latter with a wry twist of a half-hopeless smile. She knew she was running out of time to make her selection. Work demanded her attention, as it always did.

Her critical eyes strayed to a lovely piece of artwork depicting an exquisitely detailed painting of a flowering rose bush set against a dawn sky. Gleaming droplets of early
morning dew seemed to quiver on the rose’s velvet, red petals. It was one of a series of small paintings that hung above the shelf of potted plants. They were all beautifully detailed. The unknown painter obviously had talent.

Catherine’s mouth quirked wryly. There would be zero upkeep with any of them. She almost reached for the first one, then sighed. *Coward. No, you can’t buy a picture of a plant rather than a real one...*

*Maybe if I need a Christmas present, I’ll come back for one of these,* she thought. They were that good. But that holiday was still a few months away. And now more time was ticking past, and she was no closer to making a real selection.

“Can I help you, Miss?” a young man’s voice asked, from behind her.

“Busted...” Catherine muttered as she turned to face him.

She saw he had red hair that looked as if it would be right at home on a carrot; it was so golden. It was long too, tied neatly with a leather thong at the nape of his neck. Dressed in old blue jeans and a baggy, black t-shirt, he had more the look of an artist, than a gardener. There was even a white paint smear on the knee of his denims. She wondered if the paintings were his.

His welcoming smile was warm and entirely genuine. It reached deep into his dark blue eyes and made them dance with knowing humor.

“Do you need help making your selection?” he prompted.

Her eyes scanned her verdant surroundings. “I don’t...” Catherine swallowed her trepidation. “I... I’m not sure. I was just passing. Someone told me this was a very nice shop; that the owner is very good with different kinds of plants... ones that do well in the city?”

“I’m afraid Verity’s out right now. You just missed her. You’ll have to make do with me. I’m Roddy, her best assistant... which makes me her only assistant.” He flashed the friendly smile again. “I make the deliveries and do the grunt work, mostly.” He held out a large hand, which Catherine took, briefly.

She glanced pointedly at her wristwatch, hoping he got the message that she was running out of time. *Maybe the cactus or the ivy would have to do...*

“T’m looking for a plant. I think.”

“We’ll soon get you settled,” he promised, indicating the shop’s wares with a sweep of his hand. “We aim to please.”

The man’s widening smile was as bright as his hair. She liked him immediately. There was something disarming about him. And he didn’t seem to be the kind of man who’d judge her unkindly if she confessed her limited capabilities.
Roddy hooked his thumbs into the side pockets of his jeans. “And you’re entirely right about our rep. I know a lot about what we sell. Was there something in particular you were looking for? Or would you just like to browse?”

“Just browse, I think,” Catherine answered quickly. She cast one last look at the row of small paintings, before moving resolutely away. “I want to get my bearings. But... don’t go too far. I’m probably going to ask a lot of ridiculous questions.” She huffed a dissatisfied sigh. “My mother was a good gardener. But in a way, I’m very new to all of this.”

Roddy grinned sympathetically. “Well, for starters, there’s no such thing as a ridiculous question. And there are only two kinds of answers, according to Verity; the right one and the other one.”

“There are, indeed.” Catherine nodded quickly. The mysterious Verity sounded like a very practical woman.

It had been Lady May who first mentioned this particular shop. The old woman said she knew the owner, a fine girl. Catherine had come in, hoping for help. It looked like Roddy was going to be that help.

“Okay, for starters...” Roddy tilted his head, watching her indecision about where to begin. “There’s a lot in this section you can enjoy, but... for the very special stuff, you might want a peek back there.” He indicated a slatted plastic curtain of a doorway, one that led to another area of the shop.

The doorbell jangled, and another customer came in. Roddy immediately returned to his “best assistant” mode, guiding the newcomer towards the rows of potted plants they’d asked to see. He seemed at ease and very knowledgeable.

Catherine watched him work for a few moments, as she continued to browse the shelves. *Petunias... no. Too delicate. Too... impermanent,* she decided, looking over row after row of flowering plants.

Marigolds had too-sharp a fragrance and violets, though lightly scented, seemed too small. She guessed she was looking for a statement piece. Something to boost her confidence.

The geraniums were mostly single-toned, and the many-colored mums weren’t aromatic enough. Catherine nodded towards Roddy as she moved near the plastic curtain, and he nodded back, as he continued to help the choosy female customer.

*Hope she’s having more luck than I am,* Catherine thought, as she pushed aside the clear, dangling strips of plastic.

It was warmer in the back, and Catherine knew she was standing in an area that was built to be a greenhouse. A cloth-screened plastic roof let in the sun and kept the space
feeling balmy. The room was large and very verdant. Orchids trailed and lilies bloomed, and a massive staghorn fern dominated the space. The whole room smelled divine.

And way beyond her limited skills.

In the middle of the room, a small, stone fish pond, complete with tinkling fountain, bubbled happily. Inside, tiny speckled fish shimmered, orange, black, and white. Water lilies floated and dipped gracefully. An electric blue dragonfly skimmed the surface.

Catherine stared at all this life, all this... abundance on show. She wanted to turn and leave, but she was not a coward.

Drawing in a deep breath, she decided to do a quick tour of the area. What could it hurt? She had about fifteen minutes yet before she had to run back to her car. Joe had been held up in court, so no one would notice if she was a few minutes later than usual.

This whole place looks like it’s protected from the chill. Like only something that likes the heat would do well here, she thought, aware that while it wasn’t hot in here, it was indeed warmer than it was in the shop area.

The abundance of choices made things seem worse, rather than better, and again the niggling feeling that she’d be no good at any of this persisted.

Maybe I just need to buy a bouquet and stick it in a vase, she thought dispiritedly. Might as well turn around and just...

It was then that she spotted them. Roses. Her mother’s favorite flower. Dozens of bushes of them, all lined up on one side of the room, close against the plastic “wall.”

A yellow one vied with a deep pink one for attention, the size of the blooms looking huge, to Catherine’s wondering eyes.

“Roses!” she said it out loud, as she drew toward the blossoms as if pulled by an unseen magnet. Of course! She thought, remembering her mother’s ivory rose, the one Vincent currently wore around his neck in the leather bag she had made. Why haven’t I ever thought about growing roses?

But she knew why. Roses needed a good amount of care, and the New York climate was sometimes hard on them. Too much moisture would blight the leaves, and not enough would kill the plant. Roses were known for being difficult to cultivate, anywhere, much less on a New York balcony, and by a woman who barely had time to remember to water the palm.

She remembered her mother’s small, neat rose garden, and the ordered rows of stunning color her father’s gardener had managed to produce through the years. Her heart sank right to her shoes. Roses took a great deal of time and care, priceless commodities she did not possess in her busy life as a Manhattan D.A.
“Ah, I see you’ve found our best treasure,” Roddy remarked, appearing right at the wrong moment, in the plastic doorway. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

He turned to tie the strips aside so that Catherine could feel comfortable being in the room alone with him, and so that he could listen for more customers. Catherine realized he must have finished with his other client.

“They are,” she exclaimed, lovingly stroking the petals of a yellow rose. “But, I’m afraid all I can do is look. These are way beyond my skills.”

“Well, those are very special.” He walked over to one of the larger bushes. “Yellow roses mean friendship. And that particular bush came from Robert E. Lee’s garden, according to its provenance. Do you like it?” he asked.

Catherine smiled and inhaled the heady fragrance. “I do. I just don’t know if I’ve got the talent to grow something so… demanding,” she said, trailing her way down to the pink ones. She moved on to a peach-colored bloom. It looked deeply ruffled.

“These are lovely.”

“The lady likes antiques! That’s an Adam rose. Hard to find them around here. 1835 on the original blooms. They’re one of the oldest varieties of tea roses ever produced. Most people like them as hedges since the blossoms are so large.”

“I barely have enough room for a pot.” Catherine shook her head, impressed with his knowledge. “I didn’t realize roses had dates attached to them.”

“The more highly prized ones do, the particular varieties. Were you interested in this one?”

Catherine considered it but shook her head. “I’m not really interested in growing a hedge. I live in an apartment. And... I’m not really much of a gardener.” She stepped down the row and touched her hand to a pink petal so light it was nearly white. “Does this one have a name?”
“Antoine Rivoire. 1890’s. She’s younger than Adam but just as pretty. But... the names of them aren’t so important. It’s more how they make you feel, to look at them. At least... that’s how I always felt about it. Horticulturalists might disagree.”

Catherine liked him more and more. “I agree with you.” She studied the last few bushes, one of which had no open blooms.

I guess you have a secret, she thought. She smiled to herself, knowing she had a few of those as well.

She turned back to Roddy. “I think these are making me feel inferior, to tell you the truth,” she confided. “It must take a lot of time to do these justice. I don’t think I have that.” She glanced at her wristwatch, again. Time was ticking by. She needed to leave very soon if she were to make it back to her desk in time.

Roddy folded his arms and smiled. “Now, don’t you go thinking that. A plant grows itself, it doesn’t need you doing anything too special. Most people get all intimidated by the flower snobs, thinking if they don’t tend the plants 24/7, they’ll all just up and die. Truth is, a plant needs sun and water, and to be fed a couple of times a year.”

He indicated the small fish pond. “Keeping these goldfish alive is much more demanding.”

He drew closer to the remaining bushes. “Roses aren’t so picky. They just want to know you love ‘em.” He squatted down. “Water them from down near the roots and keep them where there’s plenty of morning sun, and they’ll be good to you. Let ‘em dry out in between the watering, and feed them a little bone meal twice a year to make up for the fact that they’re in a pot, and they should do well. I can sell you a small bag if you want, but not right now. Ours have all been fed.”

Catherine walked quickly to a stand of pretty American Beauty roses. “I don’t know...” She doubted herself.

Roddy stood, but remained still, letting her look, not wanting to pressure her. “We still have those pots of ivy in the front...or there are the cacti... if you’d rather take the safe option.”

Catherine frowned. Was that a challenge? She knew it wasn’t. He was too polite for that, and he wanted to make a sale. Yet the words spurred her on a bit.

“What about this one?” she asked, eyeing the last rosebush on the end. It was the one with buds, but no open blooms. “What color will it be?” she asked.

Roddy’s blue eyes tracked to where she indicated. “Oh, that one. That one is a bit of a mystery yet. Kind of special. Verity says even she doesn’t know for sure. We’re waiting.”

“You don’t know?” Catherine asked. “Isn’t that a little odd?”
He gave the bush a long look. “Some things we get have a long provenance. Others, not so much.” Roddy shrugged. He looked at a clipboard hanging on a hook near a set of shelves that held large, empty pots. He checked a description he’d read once before.

“It says it’s a New Yorker and does well in the area. Must not mind the cold come winter, though of course it will be pruned back by then.” He maintained his position opposite Catherine, and near the mysterious rose bush. “Must be a late bloomer,” he said, tracing a careful hand up one of the stems. The leaves were lushly green. “It’s healthy, though,” he proclaimed. “The paperwork on it says it might even have more than one color of bloom.” He looked at the plant with a bit of a question in his blue eyes, as he said it.

“Isn’t that … unusual?” she asked.

He turned back to the clipboard and flipped the page, looking for more. There wasn’t anything. “All but unheard of, if they mean two really different colors, and not just variations on the same shade, like different pinks.” He looked at the closed buds, wonderingly.

“How is that possible?” she asked.

Her tall companion shook his head. “It shouldn’t be, but you know nature. Something exceptional happens every day.” He moved back, leaving her to admire the least lovely rose bush they currently had. Roddy knew that most people wouldn’t buy a bush if it wasn’t blooming. Especially if you couldn’t tell what the colors were.

_Something exceptional happens every day._ Catherine thought. _Especially in nature. You have no idea, Roddy._

She stepped closer to the plant. “My terrace gets morning sun…” Her eyes remained on the vigorous green rose bush. It was dotted with closed buds. “And shade from the hottest part of the day…”

Roddy watched her face closely. Her eyes had the look of a woman who was falling in love, just a little. Or who was thinking about it.

_She’s intrigued_, he thought.

“Should be perfect for just about anything,” he said, as she looked all the way around the bush to confirm that there were tightly closed buds on all sides. There were.

She knelt down next to it, adopting Roddy’s earlier pose. The area near the bottom of the plant gave her no information she didn’t already have.

“Any idea what part of New York it came from?” She asked.

Roddy checked the clipboard, again. “Not really. Just that it’s local. Kind of a native.”

“Like me. So it should do well here,” she surmised, trailing her hand up a long stem.
“Careful. She’s got some thorns. She’s an old-fashioned girl. She hasn’t been stripped of all her protection, like the more modern roses.”

Catherine gave him a slight smile. “That means she’s a scrapper. I like that.” Green eyes followed the path of the stem to where a tight-closed bud gleamed. “She was born, and she survived…” she whispered.

Roddy’s eyebrows rose, but he made no reply to that.

Catherine stayed right where she was. The bush shouldn’t seem attractive to her, and yet it was. The green color of the leaves seemed just the right shade of green, as did its New York status, and the fact that it was both rare, and not entirely known, as a commodity.

Take a chance, Catherine thought. Though it was her thought, she swore she could almost hear Vincent’s voice, in her mind. She smiled. Life is for living...

“This one.” She decided before she could question the instinct. “I’d need a large pot?” she asked, rising quickly and stepping back.

“Great choice…” Roddy smiled, knowing that sometimes, the plants seemed to call out to their prospective owners. Clearly, this was just such a time.

“There’s a big one right here. Oh, look. It’s on sale,” he said, hefting the large clay pot.

Catherine assessed her needs, checking off a hastily-compiled mental list. “I’ll need some potting soil.” She glanced at her watch one more time and exhaled a dissatisfied sigh. “I have to go, very soon. Work calls.”

“Okay, we’ll make this quick. We have the best soil for roses. I’ll get you some.”

He carefully placed the rose bush inside the clay pot, before adding a bag of soil. They both heard the bell over the shop door jangle, as the owner came in. Both Catherine and Roddy emerged from the greenhouse area, together.

“Hey, Verity. Just taking care of this lady right here. Looks like she’s getting your mysterious rose bush,” Roddy said, taking the pot to the counter.

“Oh, that one! She keeps her beauty a secret. Came in with a shipment from just outside of town. She’s a local girl, but I don’t know much more. I’m surprised you’re getting her. I can’t say for sure even what color she’ll be... colors maybe.”

“Roddy says it might not do that?”

“Hybrids tend to produce one color, though you’ll get varieties of that. Like when you mix a yellow and a red to get an orange or peach colored bloom. The new bush makes only that color, though you might get some nice shade variations of it. It rarely throws back to visit its parents,” Verity confirmed. She looked at the bush speculatively, as Roddy rang up the sale and took Catherine’s offering of money.
“Good luck with it. Did Roddy tell you everything you need to know? You really do need to be aware of her thorns.” She held up one forefinger. “She even bit me last week. My own fault.”

“Roddy has been most helpful,” Catherine replied. “I guess I’ll find out if I can manage, soon enough. And I’ll be careful to give her the respect she deserves.”

“Thanks for shopping with us. Let us know if we can be of help.” Verity smiled.

“My pleasure,” the young woman replied. “Your... assistant was very helpful. But, I really need to run now. Or my boss will kill me.”

“Come on, let’s get you sorted out, then.” Roddy followed her out with a handcart and loaded up her car, placing the pot and bush very carefully, in the foot space of the back seat.

On a last-second impulse, he dragged out one of the rumpled business cards he carried in his back pocket. It advertised the name and address of his art studio, which was really his tiny apartment down the street. He figured a well-connected patron might be good for business, and he’d noticed her giving his paintings an appreciative eye.

“There you go,” he confirmed, closing the rear door for her.

“Thanks,” she replied.

He stood back and watched as his customer got in and started the engine, pulling her sedan seamlessly into the stream of impatient traffic with the ease of long practice.

Roddy watched the rapid flow of cars swallow her up before he returned to find Verity straightening the day’s paperwork, near the register.

“Nice job,” she complimented, checking the register tape. “You’ve been busy while I’ve been at the bank.”

“No problem,” he said, wrestling the handcart back through the shop door. “I think that makes us officially cash flush for the week. Want to close early and go grab a pizza? Celebrate?” he asked.

“Sorry, I can’t.” Verity shook her head in the negative, sending her own red curls to dancing. Her shade of red was much darker than Roddy’s, though they teased that they might be related. A thing Verity doubted, given her circumstances as a tunnel-born woman.

“I have... someplace I really need to be this weekend. And I have so much I have to do, yet. I still have that new order for those wedding bouquets to get finished before tomorrow. But, go ahead and flip the sign,” she said, noting the clock on the wall now indicated it was nearly three o’clock; almost quitting time on Fridays. “…if you want to get away early,” she added.
She liked to close early on Friday afternoon. It cleared the way for her important weekend wedding duties. And Roddy had places he preferred to be, like out of town, on any given weekend. He usually could be found at the beach, watching the waves roll in. He said he needed the space to breathe, and think.

Besides, Verity knew Vincent sometimes liked to stop by, but never when the shop was open. If he was going to do that this evening, she wanted the place clear for him. Perhaps he would want another rose for his lady. The one Verity thought she had yet to meet. One or two of the American Beauties would make a fine courting gift.

Verity was still waiting for him to request a bunch of red roses. He had once asked her for a single red rose, and Verity knew it had been for someone special. But, time had passed, and the expected order had not yet eventuated.

The holiday season was a few months away, but still. That didn’t mean Vincent wouldn’t get his new love something. Maybe there was hope, after all. Perhaps Verity thought she just needed to make a little extra push, to focus his attention.

She still held out hope her adopted brother would open up and tell her more about the mysterious woman he loved. She could work on her wedding bouquets while she waited to see if he would arrive. She never retired to bed until well after midnight. Sleeping was such a waste of precious time...

“You’re always so mysterious about where you get to,” Roddy complained. “Is this that same ‘someplace’ you vanish off to sometimes? The one that doesn’t even have a phone?” he asked, storing away the cart. “How do I contact you?” he added. “I mean, in case of fire, or something like that.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” she deflected.

The fact that her last customer had walked out of the shop with what was their only non-blooming rose bush tickled a sensitive spot of awareness, in Verity’s puzzle-loving mind.

“Odd choice your last customer made,” she commented, purposely diverting him. “In a nursery full of blooming plants, she picked the one with no flowers on it yet. Hope she doesn’t get impaled on a thorn, and change her mind before Monday. I’ll be ... busy, until then.”

Verity liked the strange rose bush and had gotten one of her odd “feelings” about it, from almost the moment she’d taken it off the truck. She wanted to see if it really would produce two different colored blooms. And if it did, she wanted it gone to a good home, with a good caretaker. She wasn’t sure if the chic young woman who’d walked out of here with it could provide what it needed.

“Yeah,” Roddy agreed. “She seemed... drawn to it. And she appeared okay,” Roddy said, straightening the bags of potting soil near the register.

*Drawn to it? Was she now?* Verity wondered, liking the idea of that.
Roddy shoved one bag on top of the other so that the pile was more even. “She has the kind of face made to be captured in oils. But I don’t think she’s an artist’s model. Too classy for that. Pity, though. I’d surely like to paint her.”

“Do you think she’s a local?” Verity asked, trying to disguise any real curiosity. Roddy didn’t know about her family “gifts,” other than that she seemed very intuitive and good at matching people with the flowers they favored.

Roddy shrugged. “Probably. She made some remark about being a native. She had New York plates and the car was in good shape. She looked like Park Avenue. No wedding ring, though. Divorced, maybe?”

“Nope.” He shrugged casually. “Paid with cash. It’s in the till. I’m gonna go straighten up in the back, then leave. You sure you don’t want pizza? I haven’t had a chance to eat today, and I’m starving.”

Verity opened the cash drawer to total up the day’s take. “No, thanks. I really do have something to d—”

The last vowel died on her lips as her fingertips contacted the twenties in the old-fashioned metal till. The notes on top belonged to the mysterious young woman, the last customer of the day. And a sensation similar to a mild electric shock raced up Verity’s arm. The fine hairs on the nape of her neck rose.

Well, well, she thought, leaving her fingertips where they were, right over the picture of Andrew Jackson. Her hand fairly hummed. Mild tremors of sensation pulsed through her.

Maybe somebody very special took that bush home, after all.

Though Verity possessed a certain amount of sympathetic magic, thanks to her great-grandmother, it was a rare thing when money sent her such a vibe. Money was often handled, and rarely sentimental. It was usually only a piece of jewelry or some special memento that sent her this kind of feeling.

The ivory rose Vincent wore in a leather pouch around his neck fairly shouted at her, and the king on Father’s chess board had had Jacob’s fingers on it more times than she could comfortably count, so she “felt” him, if she handled it. But cash? Not usually. Almost never.

Unless she’s somehow connected to money. To wealth. And now to the rose bush...

Verity looked up toward the shop door. She closed her eyes, still able to “see” the young woman, and her soft, winsome beauty. There had been something about her she could not quite put her finger on. Some mysterious connection that was yet to be made.
For a reason she couldn’t identify, she now wanted a name and an address to go with her last customer.

_The last time my hand felt like this, Vincent let me see the rose he wears around his neck. The one the woman he loves gave him on the night of their first anniversary..._

Verity shook her head. _In time, all things revealed themselves, if left alone to do so._

She knew she hadn’t sat down with her family to gossip in a good long while, and the time had just slipped by her. For reasons she couldn’t quite name, it seemed like it was past time for another reunion.

“Good thing I’m planning on going down soon,” she whispered, adding up the drawer, mentally exchanging the words “day after tomorrow” for “soon.”

Roddy drew the blinds on the shop window and adjusted a row of African violets away from the window ledge.

“Roddy, that woman that was in here, that last customer. Can you tell me anything more about her?”

Roddy shrugged. “Not sure. Why the curiosity?”

Verity frowned, still holding the twenties from the drawer. “Just humor the woman who signs your paychecks.”

He straightened from his task. “I’m a struggling artist.” He laughed back at her. “I work for tip money from the deliveries, and the small wage you now pay me. But you couldn’t do without me now, and we both know it.”

“Says who?” Verity frowned as she considered him. His face that was not quite handsome, but was indeed kind, settled into a thoughtful smile.

“Says me,” he teased, then shrugged. “Not much I can tell you about her. She was really afraid of trying a rose bush at first, then left with that one. Says she’s got a terrace, and-“

“A terrace? Like... an upstairs balcony kind of terrace?”

“I think that’s what she said, yeah. She said she lives in an apartment.”

“Anything else?”

“She said it gets good morning sun. What’s this about, Verity?”

“Good morning sun would mean her face places east. She’s getting the morning sun as it lights that side of the city. Did she say anything else? Anything about living off the park?”

“No. Me saying ‘she’s Park Avenue’ is just an expression. Why? Is one of the bills she gave me fake?” he asked, suddenly concerned. He’d been trying to help out. He didn’t want to cost Verity any money.
“No, no,” she said, holding up the cash. “As a matter of fact, I get the feeling that this is the most real money that’s been spent in here in a while.”

Roddy had no idea what she meant. Verity often said odd things like that. “I haven’t got a clue as to what that—”

“It means once you’re real, you can’t be made unreal. Like it says in the book.”

“What book?” Roddy stared at her. He shook his head. His employer was sometimes a mystery to him. One he’d like to know better. But she had more thorns than the old-fashioned roses she sold, sometimes. “Still clueless over here.”

Verity pushed the cash register drawer shut, and wrote down the total on a piece of paper. They could go now. There wasn’t enough cash to warrant a second trip to the bank.

She lifted her gaze to frown at the clock on the wall. “You know, I’m rethinking that pizza. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Maybe I’ll have time to share a slice or two with you, after all. And while we sit there, I’ll tell you the story of The Velveteen Rabbit. Your literary education needs some major revising.”

“Okay…” Roddy brightened.

“I’ll be back in a minute.” Without further explanation, she retreated through the heavy curtain that screened the steps into the basement area of the shop.

She wrote a note on a small chalkboard and hung it up for Vincent to find, warning him she was going to be busy tonight. She wouldn’t be free for a visit.

She returned to the shop level and reached for her coat. “But, since we’re going out now, Roddy, it means that later, your time is mine. You’re going to have to help me with all those bouquets. It’ll take the two of us if we’re to be done before midnight. We’ll upgrade your literary education, while we work.”

“Sure!” Roddy replied, counting his good fortune, quickly dismissing the idea he had of going surfing for the weekend. “My grandmother grew a lot of flowers. But she was always too busy to tell me many stories.”

Verity nodded, understanding that her own upbringing was fairly different. She’d been raised longing for green places, but awash in tall tales, myths, legends, and just plain “good stories.” They were opposites in many ways.

“Looks to be a nice afternoon out,” she said, waiting while he shrugged into his coat. “There should be a pretty moon, tonight.”

Her hand still tingled, and now, so did her other sense of awareness. Roddy was pulling on a Mets baseball cap, both as headgear and to cover his bright hair.

“There should be,” Roddy agreed, holding the door open for her. “Maybe even good for planting roses.”
“Planting roses at night, by moonlight? That would be just begging for something magical to happen,” Verity replied, stepping out onto the street.

Vincent stood near the balcony wall for several long moments, indulging his enduring need to watch his love. She was on her knees, packing earth around the stem of a budding rose bush. The clay pot was a large one, and her hands were pushed deep into the dark, loamy soil.

Her hair was mussed, and smudges of soil marked her old sweater. Vincent had not seen her looking so relaxed and happy in a long time. The set of her shoulders and the shimmering of their mutual bond told him this. It tugged at his heart and made him sigh.
For a reason Vincent couldn’t quite name, it didn’t seem right to interrupt her. Like a person reading a particular page from a book, or a musician in mid-song, she was focused, and intent to her purpose.

He looked closer. Though her back was to him, he could sense her smile, and Vincent found that he didn’t want to interrupt that either, as he felt her through their bond.

*She’s happy about this. Pleased with herself, and her plans. Don’t stop, Catherine. You have no idea how lovely you are, like this. I wish...*

Still unaware of being observed, Catherine rose up on her knees to pack down the good earth, her hands as bare as the nape of her soft neck, her hair pulled back in a haphazard ponytail. The sweater she wore was washed to aged softness. She’d dressed in old clothes to do this, not the chic, business-like styles she normally favored. She didn’t look like she normally looked. And she didn’t feel like she normally felt.

Though often content, and regularly engrossed in her work, Vincent knew that Catherine rarely did something like this. *She’s having an adventure, some small bit of fun. She’s happy with herself, and feeling... connected to something, even as she’s not quite sure what.* Vincent could explain the feelings coming from her no better than that.

Her hands continued to pack the soil around the base of the plant, and her feeling of pleasure continued to shine, both in her face and in their bond. Her happiness was tinged with nostalgia, as if she’d done this before, with someone she loved.

Tightly closed green buds hid their scattered treasure, but Catherine was smiling at them as if they were the rarest blooms, in full and stunning flower. Her hands drew a half circle around the base of the plant, liking the feel of Roddy’s potting soil under her fingertips. It reminded her of childhood. It reminded her of her mother.

A new pair of gardening shears gleamed near her right hand, the price tag still glued to the handle. A plastic bag with the word “Panache Flowers” scrawled on the front sat to one side, now devoid of potting soil.

Vincent smiled. “Panache” was a very French word, and a flower shop he knew quite well. Catherine had been to see Verity. *Coincidence, perhaps.* But just maybe serendipity had also played its part in their meeting.

Vincent pondered how much each woman knew of the other. He decided he needed to see Verity again, and soon.

In the same instant, Catherine took up the shears, reached around the plant, and caught her hand, on a thorn. Yelping in dismay, she turned her head and saw him watching her...
From down in the park, two spirits looked up at a couple who might have been echoes of themselves, almost two hundred years ago.

“She is concentrating, and only now does she see him there,” Vincente told his wife. “Do you think he loves her as I love you?”

Kate Chandler smiled, as she beheld her very great-granddaughter, and the descendant of her own, beloved rose bush.

“I am sure of it, mon belle homme. His eyes hold nothing but love. Look how still he stands. Like you, in the doorway of a barn. He likes to observe, and dream of their future, together. But he holds those dreams close, fearing they may evaporate with the light of day…”

“Yes, I was watching you, as you walked down the pathway. And I dreamed the same. I remember, Beauty.” Huge arms enfolded her in an ether-wrought cloak. “You were far beyond every one of my most impossible dreams.”

“Ah, then what are the odds our granddaughter would find one so featured?” Kate mused. “She dreams, as he does. They dance like two lovers who are yet to truly embrace each other.”

Vincente smiled at that, a hint of long fangs showing. “What are the odds she wouldn’t find one such as he?” he returned. “I think it is more of a miracle that she and the child of your rose bush found their way to each other.” His soft chuckle was a whisper through the rustling leaves of the New York night.

“And why is that?” queried Catherine’s very great grandmother.

He planted a kiss on the crown of her head. “Simple, little one. Rose bushes do not have legs. He does.”

Kate laughed at her husband. “And only a fool would not find his way to our granddaughter, and realize she is very special.”

Catherine chose that particular moment to reach for the gardening shears and jabbed her finger on a thorn.

Vincent was at her side, immediately. The two spirits watched him kneel beside her, and take her hand in his.

“Ah, see, they are like us.” Vincente’s smile widened. “And now the ground has been consecrated, again. All will be well, in the end. You will see.”
“Serendipity?” Kate’s eyebrows arched, lovingly.

“Of course…” Vincente hugged her close. “Everything is a mystery until something chooses to reveal itself.”

They both watched Vincent care for his love, as he held her hand, then placed the small wound against his loving mouth, to tend her hurt.

“And this one… he looks like he is no fool.” Vincente approved of the gallant gesture.

“They’ll need courage,” Kate said. They both knew that was true.

“The original bush was planted next to thyme. Thyme is for courage; for facing your fears. Do you remember?” he asked.

Of course, she did. “Between thyme and rosemary. Love, between strength and remembrance. It was just chance.”

“As is everything. And… nothing is,” he remarked, taking in the scene, as he caressed his wife’s shoulders.

“I wonder, where he does come from? Where does he live?” Kate pondered the man her granddaughter loved, as he lifted his leonine head from tending her small hurt. “The rose bush drew us here, and now I am deeply curious to know more. He does not appear to be of this place. Mayhap there is another? Some… world of his own?”

“You always need to know, ma belle,” Vincente chided gently. “Is it not enough to know that this one loves our grandchild? Do the details of his truths matter that much to you?”

Kate’s fair head nodded. “It could be important. We should follow him and discover those truths.” She turned within his embrace, reaching up to kiss his bearded cheek, before moving on to caress his full mouth with her own. “Are you ready for a new adventure, my love? Because I am. I feel so alive, so needed, in this New World.”

“Wither thou goest, there too, go I…” Vincente settled his mouth over hers, and the soft wind drifting through the park found no hindrance in their joined forms.

For they had dissolved slowly, as ghosts often do. But there remained in the air, the merest hint of roses.

The enduring ghosts of roses...
"When you have planted
the rose of Love into your heart
your life has not been in vain."

Omar Khayyám

No matter where you are when prodigal magic comes home to you, I wish you love. ~ C.J.

For the further adventures of Roddy, Verity, and our couple, please see the accompanying story “Loving Verity,” by C.J. LaBelle, on Treasure Chambers.

***Illustrations for this story were provided by the author.
Who inspires us? Certainly, it is not someone who is exactly like us, but someone who is different, or at least has different ideas, a different view on life, or perhaps has disabilities. At its heart, inspiration is a form of respect, recognizing that someone has given you something no one else could – whether they knew it or not.
Catherine sat in a chair on the mezzanine above the Great Hall dance floor and watched the ballroom dance class with growing amazement.

Of course, she knew that Vincent was graceful. She had danced with him herself, so she knew he was incredibly light on his feet for such a big man. And she knew he loved to teach and was a favourite with all the children. But she had never connected the two.

Her brows knitted together slightly as she caught herself before she frowned. Her reaction was unfair she realized. Why should she be surprised at the success of anything Vincent put his mind to? For all she knew, he had always been the tunnel dance instructor. A false assumption had triggered her surprise and it shocked her.

Was it because it meant she didn't know everything about him? She accepted so much about him, without question. It wasn't just his physical differences. She had never questioned or cared about those after she first saw him... truly saw him. And he knew it.

Okay then, was it because she had often seen him in a more ... feral light; a man of action, the tunnel protector? Was it because, when he saved her life he made her realize the futility of her 'uptown girl' lifestyle – a lifestyle that did not fit well with her damaged face. She had seen Vincent, and all that he was, after hearing only his voice for days as he cared for her. Returning above with her ruined face had given her insight into his situation. She had been forced to look deeply into herself... for the first time. Her face had been 'fixed'... Vincent had no such option. His acceptance and grace, his trust in her, had made changing her life mandatory.

She gazed down at her favourite man and couldn't help smiling as he helped Samantha get her feet in order for waltz steps. Samantha was as tall as Catherine now, a teenager, with all the gawkiness that implied. Samantha admired Vincent... that was plain to see on her face. And who would not?

Perhaps that was the key, she thought. No matter what you did in life, there had to be someone you could admire, who inspired you to be more understanding, to be better.
You admire them because of their talent, or ability to overcome challenges, or because they made a difference... because they were different.

Catherine sighed. Vincent was someone one could never completely understand. How could she really know what it took to be Vincent, to be what he was, who he was, to everyone? Father once asked her exactly that, rhetorically... he had no answer.

Perhaps that was why she loved Vincent. He was intelligent, patient, and slow to anger. Most importantly, he accepted everyone for what they were... and he didn't hold grudges.

Because he did not demand, because he trusted first, he brought out the best in people, as he had with her. People wanted to be respected by Vincent, to be better, to try harder, to earn his praise. That respect had to be earned. Vincent was always fair.

That was the inspiration she had taken away from the tunnels into her work above. She tried to allow everyone the benefit of the doubt, to try to truly understand them.

Vincent's physical differences were also an inspiration. Despite not being able to show his face in public, he did not bemoan his life or its restrictions. Instead, he was a true member of the tunnel community, giving where, when, and to whoever had a need.

Catherine knew that she had become a better person through knowing Vincent. But trust was a difficult lesson. It wasn't easy to trust so unequivocally above - it could even be dangerous. She couldn't change her character completely when she came below... although she was learning to adapt.

Vincent deserved all the trust she could give, and he represented a unique community, also deserving of her trust. He always trusted her. Did she trust him completely? That was a difficult question. She thought she did, but had proven otherwise several times.

“Penny for your thoughts?” a deep voice said at her elbow.

Catherine started, then realized the dancing lesson below had ended and the Hall was silent. She had not even noticed when the music from the old windup gramophone ended.

“My thoughts aren't worth that much,” she told him as he helped her to her feet.

“You looked very deep in thought. Is anything wrong?”

She sighed as she leaned against his chest and felt his arms surround her. How could she tell him any of this? Could she find the words?

“I was watching you dance with Samantha, and I was surprised that you were a dance instructor... on top of all your other talents. I ... um ... realized that I shouldn't have been surprised.”
Vincent surprised her with a chuckle.

“Catherine, if you knew half of the 'talents' I have ... all of us have ... you could write a book. It is how we survive here.”

“I know that, Vincent, but I suspect you'll never cease to amaze me. You are a constant source of inspiration. You have taught me so much.”

“Enough that you will dance with me now?” he asked. “I want to see if I remember how to do the tango.”

Catherine's mouth dropped open.

Soon, after finding and winding up a suitable recording, Vincent was giving her an object lesson in surprise, inspiration... and trust. He was a VERY good dancer...and he knew some moves she would remember for later.

Celebrate our differences as inspiration...
Catherine stood at the railing that ran the perimeter of the veranda of her 25th floor penthouse. It was on the roof of the building, and most of it was open to the sky.

_I might not love this penthouse, she thought with a wry smile as she looked down on the park, but I am rather fond of this view._
It had been her father’s place, and she’d inherited it when he died. Now she lived in it, because it had been easy. Circumstances had changed when she adopted Caroline, and she needed more than the not quite eight hundred square feet of her old apartment. With her job and all her other responsibilities, she hadn’t had the time to look for another place. She’d barely had time to redecorate.

It was late, but as often happened, she couldn’t sleep. She looked out over the park and wondered what Vincent was doing tonight. He was probably out there, somewhere. Maybe even in the park. There had been a time when he would have joined her on the balcony of her apartment, and they would have sat, wrapped in his cloak, and talked or read until the wee hours. Those days were long gone. It had been over a year since she’d last seen him, and she wondered if he would even know where to find her if he ever changed his mind. Maybe Peter had told him of her move; she didn’t know, she had never asked.

Vincent walked through the park keeping to the shadows. In the days right after he had sent her away, he’d often felt and shared her sadness. There were times when it nearly overwhelmed her… and him too. He knew that in those first months there were many nights when she had cried herself to sleep.

He had felt her denial; he could almost hear her thoughts. He knew she had been sure he would eventually go to her. After a time, she had decided that she would go Below to him, and he had felt it when she made that decision. He had been on the other side of her re-walled threshold, and later at the threshold in the park when she tried to find a way Below. She had been angrier than he’d ever felt from her before; and he knew when she found out that Helpers, including Peter, had been asked not to let her use their thresholds, she’d been livid.

“I told her that I’d pretend I didn’t know if she decided to use my threshold sometime when I wasn’t home,” Peter told him. “I thought for a moment she might even do it. There was hope in her eyes, but it was quickly replaced with a look of total defeat when she realized that, even if she showed up in your chamber, you wouldn’t want her there.”

Peter had been angry, and after he told Vincent off, he seldom spoke to him again unless absolutely necessary.

Her depression of the next few months had been very hard for Vincent to share. He’d come very close to going to her several times. Only the conviction that he was doing the right thing had kept him away.

She had gone through all the stages of grief that he’d read about: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance.

She had given up, and he’d breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t like the general feeling of apathy that he felt from her, but she stayed busy and didn’t let it take over her life.

A few months ago her feelings changed completely. He felt love flowing from her in waves. Had she met someone? The idea hurt, but it was what he had told her to do.
Out There, Somewhere by Janet Rivenbark

But when he analyzed the feeling more closely, it was obvious that it was not the same kind of love she’d felt for him, but he knew it was love. After that, there were even times when she was happy again.

Her location seemed to have changed shortly after her outlook changed. During the day she was in the same places: her office, court and various other places around the city. But at night, it was different. He had come Above tonight expressly to find out where she was.

He followed his sense of her north through the park, until he came to a grove of trees on the east side of the park. He looked up at a building that was visible through the branches. It was similar in size to the building she’d lived in before; only this was on 5th Avenue across from the middle of the park. He could sense her up there, somewhere near the top of the building. He wondered if she was living with a man, but somehow, he didn’t think so. There was something missing in the Bond that should have been there, if she was in love with someone. He wondered if Peter would tell him, if he asked.
Catherine was in her office early to take advantage of a quiet hour before everyone else began to arrive. She was engrossed in a witness statement, when the phone rang. She looked at the clock.

*Who is calling me here before regular work hours?* she wondered, as she reached for the phone. *Only a handful of people know my private number, Jenny, Nancy, Peter, Helen...Helen!* The thought that something might have happened at home and her nanny was calling, made her grab the phone.

“Chandler.”

“Catherine Chandler?” asked a female voice.

“Speaking.” She focused her attention on the voice on the phone.

“My name is Andi Willetts. I’m the social worker in the ER at Lang Memorial. A patient was just brought in. He told us that we should call you as his next of kin. I called your home number and was given this number.”

“Who?” she asked with trepidation.

“Dr. Peter Alcott. He said that you would know what to do.”

“Peter? What happened?” she asked.

“He had a fall on the ice outside his office. The doctors are still evaluating him, but it was serious enough that he was brought here.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” she said, wedging the phone between her ear and her shoulder as she started stacking the papers and putting them back in the file.

“Just ask for me when you get here,” Ms. Willetts told her.

Catherine hung up, dropped the files into a desk drawer, grabbed her coat and purse and headed across the bullpen from her office to Joe’s. He was in early, also trying to get a head start on the day. His door was standing open when she reached it, and he was just hanging up his phone.

“Joe, I have an emergency I have to take care of. I’ve got to leave.” She finished buttoning her coat as she stepped into his office.

“It’s not Caroline, is it?” he asked in concern.

“No, it’s Peter. He slipped on the ice and fell. He’s in the ER at Lang. He told them to call me, so it must be serious.”

Joe waved at her. “Go on.”

“Thanks, Joe.” She turned to go.
“Let me know how he is,” he called after her.
She waved her hand in the air and sprinted for the elevator.

She went straight to the information desk just inside the ER waiting room doors.
“I’m here regarding Peter Alcott; I was told to ask for Andi Willetts,” she told the receptionist, who nodded and reached for the paging system microphone.
She heard the page for Andi Willetts, and a few seconds later a young woman came around the corner.
The receptionist pointed her out to Catherine, and the two women met in the middle of the hall.
Ms. Willetts took Catherine’s arm and drew her into a family waiting room off the main hall.
“Are you Dr. Alcott’s daughter?” she asked.
“I’m a close friend of the family. His daughter lives in New Mexico. I’ll contact her as soon as I have something to tell her.”
Ms. Willetts nodded, satisfied. “Dr. Alcott is in x-ray at the moment. He said that the fall didn’t seem all that bad, and he managed to get up and go into the building, but he collapsed before he could get to his office. One of his staff found him when she came in, and called an ambulance.”
“Has he broken something?” Catherine asked.
“The doctors aren’t sure of anything yet, other than it seems to be a spinal injury. The EMTs immobilized him, and as soon as his doctors get the x-ray results, they should know more. You can wait in here, and I’ll tell them where you are.”
Catherine took off her coat and looked around the room. She shivered. It was creepy. It was the same room she had waited in for what seemed like hours, after her father’s stroke.
Forty-five minutes passed. She knew it was only forty-five minutes, the clock told her that, but it seemed like hours.
Two doctors entered the room, and Catherine dropped the magazine she was pretending to read.
“Miss Chandler, I’m Dr. Blair and this is Dr. Sadowski. I’m a friend of Peter’s, he asked for me when they brought him in.”
She shook hands with both doctors who sat down on chairs facing her.
“How is he?” she asked.
“He’s conscious and in good spirits, despite the news we had to give him.” He paused, as he watched Catherine take a notebook and pen out of her purse.
“As you know, he fell and the result seems to be generalized weakness and at least partial paralysis of his lower extremities. The x-rays confirmed our suspicion. There is swelling and a possible fracture in the lumbar area. The paralysis is not complete, and he has sensation and some movement. We think it’s being caused by the swelling, or at least we hope that is what is causing it. For now, we are going to keep him immobile and see what happens when the swelling goes down. If he doesn’t regain more movement in his lower body, then we will reevaluate. There is a possibility that he will need surgery. He’s stable; his life is not in danger.”
“Can I see him?” she asked.
“We are moving him to ICU. Someone will come for you as soon as he’s settled.”
Catherine thanked the doctors, and after they left, she picked up the phone and asked the operator for an outside line to make a long-distance call.
Susan answered the phone on the second ring.
“Hello,” she said. Catherine could hear voices in the background.
“Hi Suze,” she said in as pleasant a tone as she could. “It’s Cathy.”
“Hi, Cathy. You’re calling early... well, it’s not that early where you are. It is here. We just got up.”
“I know. I’m calling to tell you that Peter has had an accident, and he wanted me to call you.” It came out in a rush but at least adding that he wanted her to call Susan would let her know he was conscious and alive.
“What happened? How is he?” Susan asked. It sounded as if she’d moved into a quieter part of the house.
“He fell on the ice and hurt his back. It was bad enough that his staff called an ambulance to take him to the hospital.” She went on to give Susan all the facts.
“Just a minute, Cath. Let me fill Rob in.”
Catherine waited, and Susan was back on the phone in a couple of minutes.
“Rob says he’s going to call work and then call and book a flight. He’s going to come with me, and we’re bringing the kids. We hope to be on our way to New York within a few hours. I’ll let you know.”
The social worker stuck her head into the room and signaled Catherine that she could see Peter.
“I’m not sure where I’ll be, so call my home phone and leave a message with Helen or on the machine if no one answers,” she told Susan. “They’re going to let me in to see him for a few minutes. I’ll tell him I talked to you.”
“Give him my love, and tell him I’ll see him as soon as I can get there.”
Catherine hung up and followed the social worker down the hall to the ICU. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know the way. Her father had been in the same ICU when he died.

“He won’t be allowed any more visitors today,” Ms. Willetts told her when they reached the door. “They want to keep him asleep as much as possible, so he won’t try to move around.”

“I doubt that his daughter will be able to get here today anyway,” she said.

Ms. Willetts handed her a card. “These are the unit visiting hours,” she told her. “They are 30 minutes on every even hour from eight in the morning until six in the evening. The ICU numbers and my contact information are on the other side.”

Peter looked pale and tired when Catherine entered the room. He was wearing what looked like an old-fashioned whalebone corset, one that went from just under his arms and disappeared under the sheet that covered him, but he still had a ready smile. Catherine crossed the room and kissed his cheek.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I’ve been better, but they have me on some painkillers,” his speech was a little slow, and his eyelids drooped a little.

“I called Susan,” she told him. “I told her everything that Dr. Blair told me, and I gave her his name and the number here. She sent her love and said that she hopes to be on a plane on her way here sometime this afternoon.”

“I suppose it’s too late to call her and tell her to stay home,” Peter commented.

“Even if it wasn’t, you know you wouldn’t be able to stop her,” she told him with a smile.

She was about to leave fifteen minutes later when Peter called her back.

“Would you see that a message is delivered for me?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “Who to?”

“Would you let Jacob know? He’s expecting me down for dinner tonight, and I don’t want to worry him. Oh, and tell him that the box of medical supplies is in the basement on the workbench. He can send someone for it whenever it’s convenient.”

Catherine leaned over and kissed him again. “I’ll see that the message is delivered,” she promised. “Now you just take it easy, and try not to give the nurses too much of a hard time. I hear doctors make the worst patients.”

She left her name and contact numbers with the ICU nurse and asked that she be called if there was any change. She also gave the nurse Susan’s name, in case she called. The nurse
assured her that they would call if she was needed, and that there was no reason for her to stay, so she headed back to the office.

In the back of the cab, she quickly jotted a note to Jacob, folded it and printed FATHER across it. She wrapped it in a twenty-dollar bill and secured it with a paper clip. She hoped the regular message delivery method was available today.

Clarence the sax player was in his usual spot, around the corner from the entrance to her office building. She dropped the clipped note into his hat, smiled, nodded and moved on.

By early afternoon, Joe declared her worse than useless and told her to go home.

“Face it, Radcliffe. You are distracted. I know Dr. Alcott means a lot to you, especially since your dad died. Go home or go back to the hospital, whatever works for you. Take a few days until you know what’s going on.”

She thanked him, kissed him on the cheek and headed home.

Chapter 2

Even after living in this building for almost three years, she sometimes had a hard time thinking of it as home.

Her dad bought the penthouse when she was in her freshman year at Radcliffe. He had a room for her, but she had only used it on holidays, and for a few months between moving out of the house she’d shared with Steven and moving into her apartment on Central Park West. She never really thought of it as home.

She walked into the kitchen and found Helen, the nanny, cleaning up after lunch.

Helen looked up and smiled. “You’re home early.”

“Family emergency,” she told the young woman. “Dr. Alcott had an accident and is in the hospital. I contacted his daughter and let her know, but I was so distracted at work that Joe sent me home.”

“That must be what this is about.” She handed Catherine a piece of note paper. “She was leaving the message on the machine when we came back from our walk. I hope Dr. Alcott is going to be OK.” Helen had met Peter when she’d taken Caroline to the doctor.

“The doctors aren’t sure what’s going on yet, but he’s stable. I talked to him before I left the hospital and he seemed to be in pretty good spirits.”

Catherine opened the note, and the nanny went into the laundry room. Susan and her family were leaving Santa Fe on a 6:30 pm flight that evening, there would be an almost three-hour layover in Phoenix, and they would arrive at JFK just after five tomorrow morning. She didn’t envy Susan and Rob making that trip, overnight, with rambunctious five-year-old twins and a toddler. She hoped that they’d sleep. There was an added note that they’d get a cab from the airport to Peter’s.
“Helen,” Catherine called out. “I'll be in my home office. I have to make a call.”
“Take your time,” Helen called. “Caroline is sleeping. She just went down, so she won’t be up for at least another hour.”

Catherine called Louise Froh, the woman who cleaned for Peter twice a week. Louise was usually there Tuesdays and Fridays. Catherine wanted to let her know about Peter and ask if the guest rooms were prepared. Louise had done some work for her on several occasions, and Catherine knew her well. She called Louise’s home first and left a message on her answering machine, but then, just in case, she called Peter’s home number. The answering machine picked up, and after the message, Catherine called Louise’s name.
“Louise, this is Catherine Chandler. If you are there, please pick up.”

The phone was picked up after a few seconds.
“This is Louise, Miss Chandler. What can I do for you?”
“I’m so glad I caught you,” Catherine said. “Dr. Alcott had an accident, and he’s in the hospital. I just wanted to let you know and to ask if the guest rooms are prepared. His daughter Susan and her family will be here in the morning, and they will be staying at Peter’s.”
“I’m so sorry to hear about Dr. Alcott. Is he going to be OK?” Louise asked with concern.
“The doctors sounded pretty optimistic, and so did Peter,” she told her. “And I’m thinking positively. I’ll let you know when I hear anything.” She went on to explain his injury.
“Thank you. I’ll check the guest rooms before I leave. Will they need all three of them?”
“Yes, they will. There will be Susan and Rob, the twins and their daughter. Would you also check to make sure that there are things like coffee, milk, and cereal? I’ll be over in the morning and will make a run to the store if they need more than that, but call me if I need to bring something with me.”
“I’ll check and call you back if anything is needed.”
“Thank you, Louise. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything about Peter, and at the very least, someone will catch you up when you are there on Friday.”
“Thanks, Miss Chandler.”

Catherine hung up and leaned back in her chair. This room was the only one she hadn’t made many changes to when she moved in. It had been her Dad’s home office, and she liked the masculine, homey feel of it. The leather furniture, dark wood, and walls lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves all reminded her of her dad. She had replaced some of the books. There had been a whole wall of law books, all outdated, but collectible. She’d given them to Charles’ partner at the law firm, Jay Coolidge. She filled those shelves with her own books and the two lowest shelves near the door were filled with Caroline’s story and picture books. They probably spent as much time in here as they did in the living room.

She took advantage of the few quiet moments to open the mail that Helen had left on her desk. She wrote a couple of checks for bills, sealed and stamped the envelopes, then headed back out into the kitchen just as Caroline was getting up from her nap.

She took the little girl from Helen and covered her giggling face with kisses.
“You can have the rest of the week off, Helen,” she told her. “You haven’t had a real vacation since you started working for me. I’m not going to work. Susan is bringing the kids with her, but she can’t take them to the hospital, so she’ll need someone to stay with them at Peter’s. Caroline will enjoy being around other children for a change. I’ll call you on Sunday and let you know the plan for next week.”

Once Helen left, Catherine set Caroline down on the floor with some toys and flopped down on the sofa. She looked at the clock. It wasn’t even dinnertime yet, but it felt like it should be at least midnight.

Playing with her lively, almost three-year-old daughter revived her somewhat, and she was able to find the energy to cook dinner. They were just finishing when the phone rang. She got up and walked to the other side of the room to answer it, leaving Caroline in her high chair placidly eating and finger painting the tray table with butterscotch pudding.

“Hello?”

“Cathy, it’s Susan.” Susan sounded out of breath.

“Hi, how’s it going?”

“We are just getting ready to leave for the airport. I called the ICU at Lang, and the nurse said that Daddy was resting comfortably. She said that they were keeping him asleep?”

“Just until tomorrow. The doctors hope the swelling goes down and to speed that along they want him to move as little as possible. They’ve immobilized him, and this is just an added measure,” Catherine assured her.

“I’m so glad you are there Cath, I’d be going crazy if all I had to go on was what the nurses told me,” Susan sounded tired, and the trip hadn’t even begun yet.

“I’ll help however I can,” she told her. “I’ll see you over at Peter’s early tomorrow. You can’t visit him until eight, so that will give you time to get to the house and get some breakfast. I’ll stay with the kids while you and Rob are at the hospital. Lang is only a few blocks from the house, so you won’t have to hang out there all day, you can go back to the house between visits.”

“Thanks. I didn’t even think of what I was going to do with the kids. There is no one to leave them with here, so we have to bring them, and Rob didn’t want me to make the trip alone.”

“I understand. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She hung up the phone to see Caroline happily rubbing butterscotch pudding into her ebony ringlets.

“Caro, what are you doing?” she asked, stifling a laugh.

“Put ‘ditioner like Mama,” she stated as she added another dollop of pudding.

Catherine couldn’t help laughing as she lifted her daughter out of the chair. “Is that so, young lady? Well...” She wiped a bit of pudding off Caroline’s eyebrow and dabbed it on her nose. “It almost matches your eyes.” She looked into the toddler’s chocolate-colored eyes. “Looks like you’re going to need another bath and a shampoo.”
She started the water running in the tub and stripped the pudding spattered t-shirt and coveralls off the little girl. She dropped them into the sink where they wouldn’t do any more damage, then plunked Caroline into the tub.

This child never ceased to amaze Catherine. She wasn’t yet three, and although her pronunciation of some words sometimes missed the mark, her vocabulary was well above her age level. Peter told her that it was probably because she spent so much time with adults, and no one talked baby talk to her.

An hour and two stories later, Caroline was asleep, and Catherine backtracked her earlier route to repair the damages. She cleaned pudding off the tiles and rinsed out the bathtub, then collected the clothes from the sink. She dropped them in the washer with a few other things, added some detergent and started it. Back in the kitchen, she went to work putting everything back to rights.

When she’d brought Caroline home nearly three years before, no one had told her how much work a baby would be, or how she would love every minute of it.

Catherine arrived at Peter’s house just after seven the next morning. It was clear that Susan and her family hadn’t been there long. Susan took time out from explaining to her five-year-old twins, Peter and Robert, Jr. and her daughter, Janine, who was the same age as Caroline, why they had to go to bed when it was morning and greeted Catherine with a hug.

“But mom, at home we’d almost be ready to leave for school right now,” said one of the twins.

“No, at home it’s only five in the morning, and you’d still be sound asleep. I know you guys slept some on the plane, but I want you to get a little more sleep now. Aunt Cathy will be here when you wake up.”

The children, who were already in their pajamas, greeted Catherine, hugged their mother, then reluctantly went back upstairs, the boys helping their little sister between them. Catherine peeled off Caroline’s snowsuit and then took off her own coat.

Susan watched the children until they reached the bedroom, then leaned down and said hello to Caroline.
“Susi from phone?” Caroline asked, remembering the monthly calls her mom made.
“I am, and you’ve become a big girl since the last time I saw you. If your mom hadn’t sent me pictures, I wouldn’t recognize you.”
“I’m almost three!” Caroline informed her, holding up three fingers.
“Are you hungry, Sweetie?” Susan asked, as they walked into the kitchen.
“Had breffess.” Caroline informed her.
Rob was in the kitchen pouring coffee when they entered.
He hugged Catherine and offered her a cup.
“Yes, thank you. I always underestimate the time it takes to get both me and a toddler ready to leave the house, and I didn’t get my second cup.” She took the cup he handed her and sat down at the table with Susan. Caroline, who was still a little sleepy, climbed into her lap, leaned against her and closed her eyes.
“I’m going upstairs to clean up and check on the kids,” Rob told Susan. “I won’t be long.” He turned and left.
“How long are you going to stay at the hospital?” Catherine asked.
“For the morning at least. We called as soon as we got here, and the nurse said that the doctor will be in to see Daddy around 8:30, and he hopes to make the decision regarding whether or not surgery will be needed. If it is, they will do it this afternoon. We definitely want to be there to talk to him and Daddy before that. We might be there all day. Will you be able to stay here with the children?”
“That is what I’m here for. You just make sure that you keep me posted on what’s happening.”
“So, how have you been?” asked Susan. “I know we’ve talked, but we haven’t seen you in ages.”
“Pretty good,” Catherine said with a slight smile. “Busy. Joe still tries to get me to work fifty or sixty-hour weeks. But I manage to cut him off at about forty-five most weeks. Since they promoted me to Deputy DA and put me in charge of investigations, I don’t have to do the legwork anymore. I just assign it to the Assistants.”
“So, you’re liking the new job?”
“Most of the time. The paperwork gets a little tedious. I don’t get as much courtroom time as I’d like, but at least the hours are better than they used to be. I don’t have to take work home that often, and it’s safe.”
“Can I pry a little?” asked Susan.
“Pry? What about?” Catherine was puzzled, in their monthly calls, she and Susan talked about everything.
“About you and Vincent. What happened there? Daddy wouldn’t talk about it.”
Catherine was speechless for a moment. She hadn’t realized that Susan knew about the Tunnels and Vincent. “Me and Vincent? What do you mean?” she asked.
“I never wanted to talk about it on the phone, in case you weren’t alone, and quite often we had company. I was surprised when Daddy told me he’d found out that you were a Helper.
I guess he didn’t tell you that I know about everything,” she laughed. “I’ve known since I was old enough to understand what a secret was and why theirs had to be kept.”

“You’ve known Vincent all your life?” asked Catherine.

“A good bit of it,” Susan agreed.

“So, was he always like he is now?” asked Catherine with a sigh. “I mean bound and determined that he doesn’t deserve to be happy or to have any of the things every other man takes for granted.”

The smile disappeared from Susan’s face. “Not always. Until Devin left, he was pretty much the same as all the boys. Then there was an incident with a girl that really messed with his mind. He was sick for a time not long after that, and when he recovered, he was much quieter and more subdued. He’s always been smart, but he really started to study then; it seemed he’d rather study or read than do anything else.

“I was thrilled when Daddy told me that you had met Vincent and that the two of you were an item. I figured that if anyone could convince him that he could live a life like any other man, it would be you. What happened?”

“Everyone but Vincent seems to agree with you, except maybe Father, but to make a long story short, we disagreed, and he sent me away,” Catherine told her succinctly.

“But Daddy said that Vincent adores you and that you two had been through a lot together. You were always there when he needed you. He said you had some kind of a psychic connection, and for Daddy to say that is something. He doesn’t believe in that sort of thing.”

Catherine had to smile at that last comment. “Not exactly psychic. He can’t read my mind, but he does, or at least he did know what I was feeling, and often from that he could figure out what I was thinking.”

“Then what happened?” prompted Susan.

Catherine shook her head and sipped her coffee, as she turned events over in her mind. “I think it just got to the point where it was too much. I’m just not sure what it was too much of. Did Peter tell you about the time in early 1989, when a group of violent people threatened the Tunnels?” she asked.

At Susan’s nod, Catherine continued. “They were evacuating the children to Helpers’ homes Above, and they asked me to escort a group from the threshold in the park, to the Helper who was going to take them in. When I talked to Vincent the night before, he was adamant that I not go Below. He said it was dangerous, and I understood that he couldn’t protect me and do what he had to do to protect his family. Father had asked me if I had a gun he could borrow. He didn’t intend to use it but thought just showing it might be a deterrent. He didn’t want to have to send Vincent out to face the intruders and possibly have to kill. I was supposed to give the gun to Pascal when he brought the children to me. I went to the threshold, and I waited long past the time Pascal was supposed to be there. I thought maybe he was delayed, so I went in hoping I’d meet him, but I didn’t.

“Then I got lost. Father had ordered the ways changed to confuse the intruders, and I was the one who got lost. I ran into one of the strangers, and I used the gun. Then I ran into several more of them, and Vincent came to my rescue. He killed all of them, and he got
shot in the process. They had a young boy with them, who got hold of the gun I had, and shot Vincent.

“The killing bothered Vincent, but I think the knowledge that at least one of the people he killed was a woman, and that he would have killed the boy if he’d threatened me with that gun, was what finally got to Vincent.”

“He always was sensitive,” Susan agreed.

Catherine nodded and went on with her story. “I realized after only a few months working for the DA that I was taking stupid chances trying to prove myself. I was putting not only my own life in jeopardy, but Vincent’s, and I did my best to avoid those situations whenever possible. It had been going pretty well, but that time it was a dumb move on my part. Vincent told me not to go Below, and I went anyway. I could have found another way, but I thought I could help on my own. All I did was make things worse.”

“It might have been possible that Vincent would have run into those people even if you hadn’t been there.” Susan suggested. “At least you could have distracted them long enough for Vincent to get the upper hand, and you were there to help him after he was shot.”

“But if I hadn’t been there in the first place, there would have been no gun for that boy to get hold of, and Vincent wouldn’t have been shot. Although anything is possible, I still think I should have listened to him. One of the problems is that the Bond we have... had, I don’t even know if it still exists on his side... doesn’t go both ways. There were a few times when I had some idea that something was wrong, or that something was happening to him, but most of the time I didn’t feel anything from him.”

“I had no idea how compelling it was for him when he felt my fear or pain. I think I learned something about it that night, but he didn’t give me a chance to use what I learned. After he was shot, I managed to help him back to Father. He treated Vincent’s wounds and afterward I wanted to stay and comfort him. Just hold his hand if that was all he would allow, but he asked me to leave. He didn’t even want me to look at him.”

“So, you left, just like that?” asked Susan.

“I didn’t want to upset him any more than he already was. I didn’t see him again until he showed up on my balcony a couple of weeks later, after he had healed. It was then that he told me that it had to end. He told me that I wasn’t welcome Below, and he said he wouldn’t visit me.” Susan reached over to squeeze Catherine’s hand. “He repeated what he had said so many times, that I needed someone who could love me in the sunshine; I deserved more than the cold shadows he could offer me.”

Suddenly Catherine couldn’t stop the tears she’d been holding back for three years. “He didn’t even let me speak to argue my side.” She looked up at Susan and snatched a paper
napkin out of the holder in the center of the table and scrubbed at her face with it. Caroline stirred on Catherine’s lap. “He didn’t care that I loved him and that he was tearing my heart out. I know he was hurting too, but he seemed to think that I could just stop loving him.”

“But you didn’t.”
Catherine shook her head. “I couldn’t. He is always here. I always wished I could feel the Bond as he did. What I wished for when we were together, finally came after he was gone.”
“‘You can feel the Bond?’ Susan asked incredulously.
“I know it’s not as strong as it was for him, but I can unquestionably feel him when I’m quiet. Right here.” Catherine placed her hand over her heart. “It’s faint, but it’s there. When I’m upset, all I have to do is concentrate on it, and it calms me.”
Rob walked into the room, and Susan rose and walked around the table to Catherine where she bent and hugged her, carefully so as not to waken Caroline.
“Maybe it will work out,” she said. “I could give him a kick in the pants next time I see him.”
“No, Susan, don’t mention that I talked to you if you see him. I don’t want to coerce him in any way. If it happens, it happens; and if it doesn’t... well, I have Caro.” She hugged the child sleeping in her lap.

Susan and Rob left a few minutes later. Catherine settled Caroline down on the sofa and made a phone call to the messenger service where Benny worked. She requested that he come and pick up a message as soon as he was available. The dispatcher told her that it would probably be around ten.

Susan called just before nine and told her that they were going to operate, the surgery was scheduled for eleven, and the doctor expected it to take three to four hours.

Caroline roused and began taking some of her toys out of her bag, playing with them on the rug.

Catherine was writing a note to Jacob when, as so often happened, she was distracted by the child playing quietly in front of her. She blessed the cold January day when someone walked into St. Vincent’s ER, just as she was getting ready to leave.

She had gone to the ER to get statements from several nurses and a doctor for a case she was researching. She had been talking to the nurse at the reception desk, and was putting on her coat preparing to leave, when a young man walked in with a baby. He said he had found it on top of a trash can just outside. When the security guard approached, he shoved the baby into Catherine’s arms and ran. The guard didn’t chase him very far. It was cold, and the ice and snow on the ground made it dangerous.

The guard came back inside, grumbling about people not taking responsibility and dumping their kids in the ER.

When she pulled the blanket away from the baby’s face, she called one of the nurses over to look.

“I don’t think he’s related to this baby,” she said, as she turned so the nurse could see.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

Catherine shook her head at the denseness of some people. “Did you look at him?” she asked. “He’s got bright red hair, blue eyes, and freckles and he might be all of 14 or 15. I think we can agree that this child probably isn’t related to him. It’s not Caucasian.”

The baby was tiny, with skin the color of café au lait, jet black hair and dark brown, almond shaped eyes. It seemed to be alert and healthy, at least to Catherine’s inexperienced eyes. It didn’t seem to have a fever, was clean and was wrapped in a clean, if ragged, blanket.

Someone called Child Protective Services. The nurse seemed reluctant to take the child from Catherine, but asked her to carry it to one of the rooms to be
Out There, Somewhere by Janet Rivenbark

examined. Catherine decided to hang around as a representative of the city, at least until CPS took custody.

In the exam room, Catherine watched, as the nurse that they called down from pediatrics removed the blanket and diaper. They discovered it was a little girl. The only time she protested was when the cool air hit her skin, and she protested very loudly.

A staff pediatrician came down to the ER to examine her. He estimated her age as probably not more than twenty-four hours. A social worker showed up a short time later and wanted to carry the child off then and there, but the doctor said that, although the baby seemed to be full term, she was small, barely five pounds. He wanted to keep her there in the Neo-Natal Intensive Care Unit, in isolation, until they were sure she was healthy. The social worker wasn’t happy, but she consented.

Jane Doe 110, as she was called, stayed in the hospital for a little over two weeks, until she had gained some weight. During that time, Catherine visited often; at first on the pretense of helping trace the family, but then because she had, quite literally, fallen in love with the child.

She ran into the social worker assigned to the case a few days after the baby was admitted and asked about becoming a foster parent in preparation for adopting the baby.

“But she’s mixed race,” the woman said, harshly.

“She’s a baby, and she needs a family just as much as any baby,” Catherine pointed out, trying to keep her temper.

The woman sighed. “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out the way it was supposed to. You got time to sit and talk?”

Catherine nodded. They found a quiet corner in the hospital cafeteria, got two cups of weak coffee, and sat down.

“I know that sounded awful a few minutes ago, and I’m not really like that. It’s just that I’ve been dealing with a lot of these kinds of cases lately, and the mixed-race babies, especially the ones where nothing is known of their background, are the hardest ones to place. Our Baby Doe’s mother was probably Chinese. She had a Black boyfriend, and her parents were probably the ones who disposed of the baby. I’ve searched all the hospital records, and there are no unaccounted for baby girls. She may have been born at home and doesn’t have a birth certificate. In my opinion, she’d be lucky to have you adopt her. So if you are serious, I will push through the paperwork, and when the Doc is ready to release her from the hospital, you can take her home. I would just as soon not see her go to one of the foster homes; the babies never seem to get what they need there.”

Remembering how she’d found Eric and Ellie Peterson, Catherine had to agree.

The social worker reached into her briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers and her business card. “Just fill all these out and drop them off at my office.”
Catherine took the papers and flipped through them. “The doctor said that she will be released in a week to ten days. Can you get this approved in that short a time?”

“Luckily, you are well known,” the woman said with a smile. “You work for the DA, you’re a lawyer, and your dad was a well-known lawyer. Sometimes it’s a little more difficult to get a single person cleared for adoption, but you can clearly afford the best for this baby; more than she could ever hope to get anywhere else. I’d try to talk you into about half a dozen more if I thought I could.”

The woman’s sudden grin transformed her face, and Catherine had to smile back. “Obviously, you won’t be able to adopt her right away, there will be a waiting period, in case the birth mother shows up, but I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that.”

Catherine shook herself out of her reverie and was finishing her note to Jacob when the doorbell rang.

“Long time no see, Beautiful,” Benny said, when she answered the door.

“I’ve seen you a few times,” she said with a grin as she handed him the envelope and some money. “It’s hair-raising to watch you weaving in and out of traffic on that bike; especially this time of year... That,” she said pointing to the envelope, “is for Father.”

“It takes talent,” he declared, as he bounded down the stairs and jumped onto his bike. “And a lot of luck.” He gave her an impudent grin and pedaled off.

Catherine spent a quiet morning with Caroline. She gave her lunch and put her to bed for her nap before she woke the other children. When they sat down for lunch, she explained what was going on at the hospital. They were a rather subdued group after that. She wasn’t sure if the twins understood, and she was sure Janine didn’t, but they knew something wasn’t right and they weren’t nearly as high spirited as they’d been earlier. She assured them that everything would be OK and was serving soup and grilled cheese sandwiches when the doorbell rang.

“You stay at the table and keep an eye on your sister,” she directed the twins.

She went to answer the door and found one of Peter’s neighbors. Mrs. Mariotto had been a neighbor since she and Susan were children. Catherine saw her now and then when she visited Peter. She swore the woman hadn’t changed at all over the years. She’d always been a bit of a nosy neighbor, but Catherine knew she had a good heart.

“Oh Cathy, I was wondering if anyone was here,” she said when Catherine opened the door.

“Won’t you come in, Mrs. Mariotto?” she invited.

Mrs. Mariotto followed Catherine into the foyer. “I’ve been out of town and just heard about Peter’s accident. I thought I’d run over to see if anyone was here to tell me what happened and how he’s doing.”

Catherine told her briefly what had happened and that he was in surgery.
“I imagine he will be back in ICU for a while after surgery and he won’t be able to have any visitors, except family,” she told the woman. “But as soon as he’s in a room I’ll let you know the number. If you want to send a card, I’m sure if you address it to Peter Alcott in the ICU at Lang, he’ll get it.”

Mrs. Mariotto was thanking her when Catherine heard squeals and laughter coming from the kitchen. Mrs. Mariotto looked toward the sound with her eyebrows raised.

“Susan’s children,” she explained. “I left them eating lunch; I guess I should check on them.” She opened the door and held it for Mrs. Mariotto, who took the hint and left.

Catherine hurried into the kitchen expecting to see nothing less than a full blown food fight, but was stunned almost to the point of breathlessness to see Vincent, spread-eagled, flat on his back on the kitchen floor, with Janine sitting on his chest while her brothers tried to pull her off.

“Hey, you guys! What in the world is going on?” she shouted over the din when she got over her shock of seeing Vincent on the kitchen floor with three children, who were apparently overjoyed to see him. She didn’t know why she was surprised that they knew him.

She walked over and managed to lift Janine off of Vincent, only to have the boys descend on him, arguing about who would help him up. Eventually, Vincent got up without assistance from either of them. Catherine made everyone sit back down at the table and finish their lunch.

“Would you like to join us, Vincent?” she asked, feeling very awkward, but trying to sound normal.

“Ah... no, thank you. I’ve had lunch,” he declined.

“I’ve made a pot of tea, would you like a cup?” She wasn’t willing to let him go so quickly. He did accept the tea, and as Robby and Pete shifted their chairs, he pulled another chair over to sit between them.

The children dominated the conversation, asking Vincent all kinds of questions, and Catherine let them. She was trying not to stare at him. He’d changed very little in the three and a half years since she’d last seen him. He was thinner and looked tired, but that was all. Maybe he was just worried about Peter. She assumed that was the reason for the visit.

When everyone was finished with lunch, Vincent suggested that they go out to the living room while he talked to Catherine.

“I’m sorry that I just walked in like this, but I didn’t expect anyone to be here,” he said, after the children had left. Sounds of the TV drifted in from the next room. “Father wanted me to pick up the medical supplies and leave a message for Susan, asking her to keep him updated on Peter.”

His comment about not expecting anyone to be there made her wonder if his side of the Bond was gone, or if he’d suppressed it somehow.

“Did he get my note from this morning?” she asked.

“Yes, he did, and the one yesterday. He is very grateful that you would think to let him know what was going on.” Vincent hardly looked at her.
“Peter asked me to, but I would have done it even if he hadn’t,” she said. “Jacob is one of his oldest and dearest friends. I’ll let him know when Peter can have visitors, and if he likes, he can come up and I’ll take him to the hospital.”

“I’ll let him know.”

Catherine looked over at the clock. It was barely one. “Peter should be out of surgery in an hour or so,” she said. “Susan said she’d call as soon as they knew anything. Would you like to stay until we get word? Or I could send another note below.” She was reluctant to let him go, but short of tying him to the chair, she couldn’t force him to stay.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll stay,” he said. “I’ll go watch TV with the children.”

He left the room and Catherine sighed. That hadn’t hurt quite as much as she would have expected it to, it was good to see him.

She rose and started straightening the kitchen. She was putting the last glass in the dishwasher when the phone rang. She rushed to it and snatched the receiver off the hook. Vincent came through the door just as she put it to her ear. Their eyes met and held, and she was momentarily distracted by the strange warmth she felt along her tenuous connection with the Bond.

“Cathy?” came Susan’s voice when Catherine didn’t say anything.

“Yes, I’m here,” she answered. “How’s Peter?”

“The doctor said that it went perfectly. It didn’t even take as long as they expected. They are almost positive that they’ve corrected whatever was wrong.” Catherine looked at Vincent with a smile and gave him a thumbs up.

“He is in recovery now,” Susan continued. “They have to keep him immobile for a little while longer, so they expect he will be in ICU for another two or three days, and then in a private room for another week to ten days before he can come home. But the doctor says that he fully expects Daddy to be able to walk into his house when he gets home.”

“That is wonderful news!” said Catherine in relief.

“I was thinking. Maybe we should let our friends downstairs know what is going on. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Don’t worry,” said Catherine, understanding Susan’s reference. “I sent a message yesterday and another this morning. And it just so happens that Vincent is here right now. He’ll be able to let Jacob know the good news.”

“He’s there? I thought you and he were... well, you know.”

“You are correct; he came up to leave a message.”

“OK. We’ll talk later,” Susan promised. “We’ll be home right after the last visiting hour. Daddy should be awake and back in the ICU by then. Rob says that he’s going to take us all out to dinner tonight.”

“I’ll let the kids know,” Catherine promised before hanging up.

She followed Vincent back into the living room and told him and the children the good news.

“I should be getting back below,” Vincent told her. “Father will be glad to hear that Peter is doing well.”
Catherine followed him to the basement door, and when he turned as if to speak, she interrupted him.

“Don’t forget the box of medical supplies Peter left for you.”

“I’ll take them when I leave,” he told her. “Catherine... I’d like to talk, but now doesn’t seem to be the best time. May I come to your home sometime?”

“I don’t live in the same place,” she told him. “I moved a few years ago.”

“Yes, I know. I learned you were in a different place when Peter mentioned it to Father. He said you had moved into your father’s apartment. I know the building, and it’s easy to get up to the top and the penthouse. I used to go there often, when I was younger.”

“Then come anytime,” she told him. She hoped she didn’t sound too eager. “I’m home most evenings.”

“Thank you! Perhaps tonight?” he gave her one long, indecipherable look. When she nodded, he turned and was gone, closing the basement door behind him.
Vincent went straight to Father’s study to tell him the news. Jacob was very relieved to hear that his old friend was going to be all right.

“Did you see Susan? Did she give you the news?” he asked.

“No, Catherine is at Peter’s looking after Susan’s children, while Susan and her husband are at the hospital.”

“That surprises me, but then I was surprised to get two messages from Catherine in the last two days.”

“Why would that surprise you, Father?” asked Vincent. “She and Peter are very close; she and Susan were good friends growing up.”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really surprised to get the messages, but I suppose I just didn’t see her as the type who would volunteer to look after children,” said Father.

“Why not? She loves children. You saw how she was with our children here Below. She and Geoffrey were very close, and he and Eric still miss her.”

“I know you think that I underestimate her, Vincent,” said Father, “but I’ve found that in some cases, if I don’t have high expectations for people, then I’m not disappointed.”

Vincent didn’t appreciate his father’s insinuations, and for once, he told him so.

“Catherine was never the one who was wrong, Father,” Vincent told him in a harsh voice. “She was the one who was wronged. You’ve always underestimated her. I let you influence me when I told her to leave. I let you make decisions for me… a grown man… decisions that I have regretted.”

“You aren’t going to become involved with her again, are you?” Father asked, obviously upset.

“I don’t think that I was ever truly uninvolved, Father,” Vincent told him. “The Bond would never allow that to happen, but after the way I treated her, I wouldn’t blame her if she told me to leave and never darken her door again.”

Father was quiet for a few moments; he was obviously thinking before he spoke. “Will you go to her?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” said Vincent. “Tonight, as soon as I know she’s home.”

Catherine spent the afternoon in a bit of a hopeful haze.  
*What does he want to talk about?* she wondered. She knew what she hoped, but dare she hope?

Dinner that night was a rather wild affair. Luckily, Rob picked a family-style Italian restaurant where the children were taken in stride.

When they got back to the house, Rob volunteered to see that the children got to bed. Caroline was looking at a picture book on the other side of the room, when Susan pulled Catherine over to the couch.
“You’ve got to tell me,” she told Catherine.
“Aren’t you tired?” asked Catherine, trying to avoid the questions she knew were coming.
“When was the last time you slept?”
“Exhausted, but I’m past caring about that. I have to hear what happened.”
“What do you want to know?”
“About Vincent. Why did he come up to the house?”
“I told you, he came to leave you a note and pick up some medical supplies that Peter left for them.”
“Did you get a chance to talk?”
“Not really, but he did say he wanted to talk to me, and he asked my permission to visit me at home. He knows where I’m living and said he could get up to the penthouse.”
“What do you think he wants?” asked Susan.
Catherine shrugged. “I know what I hope he wants to talk about, but I don’t have a clue.”
“I’m pretty sure I know what you want, and all I can say is that I’m right there with you. I hope he’s going to ask if you’ll take him back.”

Chapter 4

Susan’s words stuck with Catherine all the way home. After she put a very sleepy Caroline to bed, she walked through the rooms picking up some of the clutter from their hasty departure that morning. She was in her bedroom, in front of the dresser taking off her watch and earrings, when she heard a familiar tapping on the French doors from the roof garden.

At first, she wasn’t sure she’d really heard it, but then it repeated. She rushed to the door and opened it. Vincent had stepped away from the door and was sitting on a stone bench with his back to her. Just as she stepped through the door, the cold breeze caught his hood and blew it back.

“Vincent?” she called.

He didn’t turn, he just continued to stare at the skyline.

“Catherine, I’ve come to beg for your forgiveness,” he said simply. Then he dropped his head to stare at his hands hanging limply between his knees.

She walked around in front of him, and when she was close enough to touch him, she dropped to her knees. She rested her hands on his for a moment, then put her arms around his waist and pulled herself in close to his chest.
“I’ve missed you so much.” The words were so low she probably wouldn’t have heard them if her ear hadn’t been pressed against his chest.

“I’ve missed you too,” she answered, just as quietly.

No other words were said, but Vincent didn’t need to hear them. The Bond told him that he’d been forgiven.

They stayed like that so long that the cold began to penetrate the cloak that he had wrapped around both of them.

“You’re cold, you should go back inside,” he said, when he felt her shiver.

Not willing to let him go so quickly, she rose, took his hand and pulled him to his feet. “You will come in, won’t you?” she asked. “I can make some tea. I still buy the herbal blend you like.”

Vincent didn’t say anything, but let her lead him inside, through her bedroom and out into the living room.

“Hot tea does sound good,” he finally said when he stood in the middle of the room.

It was a large, open space. The living room was at one end with the kitchen and the breakfast bar in the middle and a formal dining room at the far end.

“Take off your cloak and make yourself comfortable. I just got home, so the fire isn’t lit. It’s gas, and if you’d like, go ahead and flip the switch on the right side of the mantle.” She knew she was babbling, but she couldn’t seem to stop.

When she returned to the living room with the tray a few minutes later, she was happy to see that Vincent had turned on the gas logs and had made himself comfortable on the sofa. He held a book in his hands. It looked like one of his journals.

“Your entire old apartment would fit in this one room,” he observed, as she set the tray on the coffee table and sat down on the opposite end of the sofa.

“Daddy liked the open space. I found it kind of intimidating when I first moved back in. He bought the place while I was in college and back then it had a more typical layout. He renovated after I moved into my own place. It cost a fortune, but he managed to get the open concept he wanted.” She handed him a mug of tea and pointed to the plate of cookies. “Oatmeal raisin,” she said. “William’s recipe.”

He declined the cookies but sipped his tea.

“What’s that?” she asked, indicating the book in his hands.

He looked down at it, then back at her. “It’s my journal. There’s something I want you to read...” he moved as if to hand it to her, then pulled it back before she could take it. “That night you said you loved me... said the words out loud for the first time. I don’t know what came over me... I had known for a very long time that you loved me, but hearing the words... I just don’t know what it was...”

He didn’t move to hand her the book.

“Maybe if you just read it to me?” she suggested.

That seemed to jog him out of the memory. He nodded and opened the journal to a page marked by a piece of black ribbon.
“That night, she truly walked alone,” he read. “Deep within me, I felt the cold and terrible truth of all that kept us apart. Fate had left me adrift... with no wind to carry me to the safe shores of her love.”

“Oh, Vincent,” were the only words she had.

He could hear the tears in her voice. He finally looked up at her and smiled slightly.

“I never dreamed that I would get the welcome you just gave me,” he said. “I thought you would make me work harder for it. Devin said that you should.”

“Vincent, what happened was as much my fault as yours. It hurt; it hurt like hell, but part of me almost agreed that you’d be better off without me. Everything about me, our relationship, was stressing you to the breaking point.”

“But the other part?” he asked softly.

“It was dying a slow, painful death. I loved... love you. It hurt so bad for a very long time. The only thing that kept me from giving up was the possibility that you’d change your mind. Finally, I reached a point where I could put that part of me aside, and I got on with my life. But before I reached that point, I spent several days trying to get Below. Then Peter told me that you’d asked the Helpers not to let me use their thresholds.”

“I’m sorry Catherine. It was self-preservation. Or at least that is what I told myself. I knew when you were trying to get Below. When you went to your basement, I was on the other side of the wall, and I knew that you would go to the threshold in the park, and I was on the other side of that door when you arrived. It took everything in me not to open it.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked, with tears in her eyes. “Obviously we were both in pain. Why did you allow it to continue?”

“I honestly thought I was doing what was best for both of us. I knew that you loved me and that your love was genuine, but I guess I thought that if I treated you badly enough, you would eventually lose the love you felt and move on.”

Catherine’s arm was stretched across the back of the sofa, and he reached over and put his hand over hers.

“Not possible,” she said, with a shake of her head. She turned her hand over so she could grasp his.

“After you sent me away I finally got one of the gifts that I’d longed for.”

He looked puzzled. “What is that?”

“I can feel you in the Bond,” she said simply. “It’s not nearly as strong as what you sensed from me. I can’t feel your feelings, but I can feel you... here,” she placed her other hand over her heart, “right next to my heart... I was wondering, can you still feel me?”

“Yes, Catherine!” He reached out and pulled her across the sofa and into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his torso and buried her face in his vest. “I missed you so much. Please tell me that you’ll never do that again. I can’t bear to be separated from you anymore.”

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2 The Outsiders, Beauty and the Beast, air date: 24 February 1989
“I promise, Catherine. It wasn’t right of me to make that kind of a decision for you. I was taking my cues from Father, and he has a habit of making decisions for people when he thinks it is in their own best interest, even when they don’t agree.”

“He is a master,” she agreed, as she relaxed in his arms. She didn’t want to talk, she just wanted him to hold her. No one could have been more surprised than she was when he put his fingers under her chin, tilted her head back and looked into her eyes... just before he kissed her.

He kissed her without hesitation. At first, it was just a brush of his lips on hers. She could tell he was assessing the effect through their Bond, and when he was sure she liked it, he repeated it and lingered. She leaned in closer and brushed her tongue across his lower lip. She was thrilled when his tongue met hers, and she finally tasted him. She was sinking deeper into the sensuality of his kiss, when a voice penetrated the haze.

“Mama... Mama!” Caroline was calling her and sounded frightened.

Catherine pulled away from a startled Vincent.

“I’ll be right back,” she dropped a kiss on his mouth, then jumped up and ran out of the room.

Vincent sat for a moment, stunned.

Mama? he thought. Catherine has a child?

Surely, he would have known something like that; he would have felt something... the act that led to conception, or the birth. He knew that Catherine had learned to shut down her end of the Bond, but not to that extent.

Catherine hurried up the short hall that ended at Caroline’s bedroom door. When she went into the room, the toddler was standing up in her crib, crying. When she saw Catherine, she held up her arms. “Mama!”

Catherine gathered her up and held her securely as the child sobbed inconsolably. This had happened a few times in the last month or so and when Catherine talked to Peter about it, he said that it was merely night terrors. A lot of children had them, and they were nothing to worry about. He told her that most kids would get over it in a few minutes then go right back to sleep.

Caroline was different. She seemed to get over it quickly, at least the terror part of it, but she wouldn’t go back to sleep until she had gotten a little bit of what Catherine called Mommy Time. They’d sit on the couch, and after ten or fifteen minutes Caroline would go back to sleep.

Now she hesitated... she didn’t want to leave Vincent alone, she was still a little worried he’d leave. She knew he was probably wondering about her having a child; she hadn’t gotten to that part yet. She decided that it was time for Caroline to meet Vincent.

She waited for her to calm down and when she did, she turned on the bedroom light and sat in the rocker.

“Caro, there is someone in the living room that Mama would like you to meet. His name is Vincent, and he is a very good friend. Do you want to meet him?”
Caroline was a very outgoing little girl, and she nodded enthusiastically, her curls bobbing wildly around her head.

Catherine stood, settled Caroline on her hip and walked back out into the living room. Vincent was on his feet examining some photographs of Caroline that were on the mantle. “You have a child?” he asked, as she came back into the room. He didn’t look at her.

“How...?”

“Adoption,” she said with a smile. “She was a foundling, like you. Your birthdays are just days apart.” She nodded at the picture he was holding. “That was taken when she was almost six months old.”

Vincent visibly relaxed at her words, but when he saw that she had the child with her, he started to turn away.

“Don’t, Vincent,” she said. “You are going to be in both of our lives, at least I hope you are, so she’s going to have to see you eventually.” She sat back down on the couch and turned Caroline, so she sat on her lap. “Come sit down.” She patted the sofa cushion.

Vincent slowly crossed the room and sat down. Caroline watched him closely but didn’t show any fear.

Once he was seated, Catherine spoke to Caroline. “Caro, this is my friend Vincent. Can you say hello?”

“Hello,” the little girl said softly. Her eyes never left his face.

“Hello Caroline, I’m very pleased to meet you.” He smiled slightly, and both the adults were pleased when Caroline returned the smile.

Vincent held out his hand, and she put her tiny one in it.

“She is so tiny,” he commented.

“Peter says she’s healthy and growing at a good rate, but she is just at the bottom of all the growth charts for her age. She’ll be three in January.”

As Catherine was speaking, Caroline pulled Vincent’s hand up to her face and was rubbing her cheek against it.

“Sof, Mama,” she said when she finally let go.

“Yes, Love, very soft,” she looked over at Vincent, her eyes aglow.

Then Caroline surprised them both by holding out her arms to Vincent.

Catherine shifted the little girl into Vincent’s lap where she settled back so she could look up at him. As Catherine related Caroline’s story, the object of the story went back to sleep, lulled by her mother’s voice.

“Looks like Vincent Time is just as good a cure for night terrors as Mommy Time,” Catherine commented as she stood. “Would you carry her back to her bed for me?”

Vincent rose and carried her back to the bedroom and put her in the crib. Catherine covered her and led the way out of the room.

“I really should move her into a regular bed,” she commented, as they walked back into the living room, “but she’s still so tiny and she looks lost even in a youth bed.”
Vincent took her hand and pulled her around to face him. “I’m sorry I doubted for a moment,” he said. “I can see why you fell in love with her. She is a beautiful child; she has a beautiful soul.”

“I had a lot of love to give,” she said as she leaned against him, “and so did she.”

They went back to the couch and picked up the conversation where they had left off. They occasionally took time out for kisses and cuddles, and when the grandfather clock in the foyer struck six, they were both shocked.

“Darn, I’m supposed to be over at Peter’s by seven so Susan and Rob can go to the hospital. I should be leaving in the next fifteen minutes.”

Before she could jump up and start running around frantically, Vincent made a suggestion. “Why don’t I call Susan and suggest that she take the children Below today. Mary would be glad to look after them. Maybe we can join them later.”

“Do you think that would be all right? I mean, I’m not going to be able to get any sleep anyway, at least not until Caro takes her nap. And what about you? Will you be stuck here all day?” She really wasn’t sure how he’d gotten to the roof the night before.

Vincent assured her that it would be fine and if he needed to get back Below, he could go without any danger. He went to make the call as she headed for the kitchen to start a pot of coffee and put the water on for tea.

Vincent joined her a few minutes later.

“Susan said that Rob has decided not to go to the hospital today. He wants to take the children home, so they don’t miss too much school. They have Christmas break coming up, and he will bring them back then, so they can see Peter. She was getting ready to call you.”

“Good, now I can at least relax, even if I can’t sleep.” She smiled at him across the breakfast bar. “How about some breakfast? It’s Wednesday, that means we have waffles for breakfast.”

“Waffles? Every Wednesday?” he asked.

“Yes, we have a system. Mondays we have muffins and something like fruit or eggs. Tuesday’s feature is toast of some kind; sometimes with cheese on it made under the broiler, and sometimes cinnamon toast and eggs. Wednesday is waffles, Thursday is tomato omelets, Friday, French toast, Saturday is sausage with something, and Sunday is scrambled eggs.

We started this about a month ago as she was going through a phase where she only wanted to eat eggs, eggs for every meal. She is growing, so I thought that was likely why she was craving the protein, but I wanted to try to get some other foods into her as well. So I came up with the idea to assign a different breakfast food to each day. When I said, ‘How about waffles on Wednesday?’ she picked up on the W sound and it evolved from there.”

Catherine walked to the freezer and pulled out a box. “I cheat on the waffles. I have a waffle iron, but I seem to get as much batter on the counter as I do on the iron. I use frozen waffles and put them in the toaster.”
Catherine moved around the kitchen, efficiently putting out the ingredients for their breakfast. She explained that Caroline had an internal clock that woke her every morning within a few minutes of seven. “I’ll start cooking when she wakes up.”

She took her coffee cup and joined Vincent on the other side of the bar.

“I’ve dreamed of cooking breakfast for you; of seeing you in my kitchen in the daylight. I never thought I’d see that dream come true.” She didn’t mention that the breakfast she’d dreamed of was served in bed, after a night spent loving each other. She didn’t want to push her luck.

He leaned toward her and was losing himself in her kisses when they were interrupted by Caroline, who was trying to climb into her mother’s lap.

“Ooh, kisses. Caro wants kisses, too.” She turned to Catherine with her lips pursed for a kiss. Catherine gave the kiss with a laugh; then Caroline turned to Vincent. “Kisses, Vin!” she demanded.

Vincent was surprised, but he gave the kiss.

Then Caroline turned to the next item on her agenda. “Waffle day, Mama!”

“How did you get out of your crib, Caro?” Catherine asked, suddenly wondering.

“Climbed,” Caroline told her nonchalantly, as if it was just the thing to do.

Catherine looked at Vincent with a wry smile. “My little gymnast. I guess switching to the youth bed is in order, no matter what.”

Catherine pushed the high chair up to the bar, and Vincent lifted Caroline into it. Then Catherine went to work putting together a sumptuous breakfast. She added eggs and some fruit because she knew that waffles probably wouldn’t be enough for Vincent. Caroline insisted on having her chair next to Vincent, so she wound up between the two of them. Vincent shared his fruit with her. She wanted to sample his tea, but he convinced her that her milk was much better.

They finished eating, and Catherine was on her way to the bathroom with Caroline, when she turned to Vincent.

“Will you stay, or do you have to go back?” she asked.

“I’ll stay for a while,” he told her. “Then I thought I’d take you and Caroline below later this morning. Would that be all right?”

“I’d love it! But are you sure about Caro? She’s a bit young to understand that she needs to keep a secret.”

“From what you told me, the only person she sees on a regular basis that doesn’t know about us is the nanny. Caroline isn’t even three, and I doubt that she’ll notice that much of a difference. It will just be another place that she visits. By the time she’s old enough to express what she knows, we will be able to explain to her that she’s not to talk about it.”

Catherine accepted that. It made sense. When she came back from bathing and dressing Caroline, Vincent had cleaned up the kitchen.
“You didn’t have to do that,” she said.
“No, I didn’t, but I wanted to. You cooked.” He came back out into the living room. If you like, I’ll keep an eye on Caroline while you bathe and change.”
Vincent settled on the couch to watch Caroline, while Catherine bathed and dressed. He had surprised even himself the night before, when he’d kissed Catherine. He had intended to look at her, but before he had realized what was happening, he was kissing her. And since that moment, he couldn’t seem to get enough of her kisses. He felt Catherine’s pleased astonishment, and he was almost as surprised as she was.

Later, Catherine was finally satisfied that she had everything. Caroline was dressed warmly in her favorite bright purple hooded sweatshirt (which clashed with her Kelly green cords), pale yellow t-shirt and red sneakers. Vincent’s only comment was a slight smile and “She’ll add some much-needed color Below.”
Catherine was more muted in jeans, white sneakers and t-shirt, and a blue Columbia University sweatshirt.
“How are we going to get Below?” she asked.
“Through your basement here,” he told her. “There is a threshold similar to that in your old building. I’ll ride down on the top of the elevator and meet you in the basement.”
“You don’t have to ride on top,” she told him. “The penthouse has a private elevator. I use a key to access it in the lobby or basement parking. Won’t you have to be careful in the basement?” she asked, as she picked up the bag she used for both her and Caroline’s things.
“I’ll be cautious, but not many of the people in this building go down to the basement, since there’s no storage there for owners or tenants, and we won’t be going out into the garage area. It just so happens that the maintenance manager, who has an apartment in the basement, is...”
“Let me guess,” she interrupted with a laugh. “He’s a Helper.”
“He is. He was one of the children Below when I was a teenager. He grew up and came Above, but he wasn’t comfortable. Harry was about to come back Below when he got the job here. It’s a good job, he makes a little money, and has a place to live close to his family Below.”
They stepped into the elevator, Catherine pushed the button for the basement, and they started to descend. They reached the basement, but before they went to the threshold, Vincent found Harry and brought him to meet Catherine and Caroline.

“Miss Chandler,” he greeted her. “I wondered if the Catherine Chandler in the penthouse was Vincent’s Catherine.” He looked at Vincent and grinned conspiratorially. “I promise not to notice if she comes down and uses that threshold.”

In the tunnels, Catherine watched the route they took closely.

“You don’t have to memorize it,” he told her. “I’ll know you’re coming, and if I don’t meet you, I’ll send one of the children.” He stopped at the sentry post and asked the sentry not to announce his arrival. The young man was someone Catherine had never met. He looked curiously at her, but didn’t comment.

“We’ll go straight to my chamber. I can watch Caroline and you can take a nap, if you like.”

“I’ll wait until she has her nap,” Catherine told him. “That’s usually after lunch.”

They spent the morning talking and reading to Caroline. At noon Vincent escorted them to the dining chamber. He seated them at a small table then went to get lunch for them all.

Mary saw Catherine and ran over to greet her.

“And who is this?” she asked, turning to Caroline.

“This is Caroline, my daughter. I adopted her when she was only a few months old. Caro, say hello to Mary.”

Caroline looked solemnly up at Mary. “Hello,” she said. Then she grinned. “You knows Vin?” she asked.

“I certainly do!” Mary stepped aside as Vincent set a tray on the table and began to set out food.

“Mary,” he asked, “do you have an empty crib or cot in the nursery, where Caroline can take her nap this afternoon?”

“There’s always room for one more,” she assured them. “Just bring her down when she’s ready.”

They were starting their dessert when Father entered the chamber. He looked toward the table he usually shared with Vincent and saw what he was hoping he wouldn’t see. Catherine and Vincent were sharing an intimate lunch, and the glow around them fairly lit up the chamber. He noticed that the others kept looking at them and smiling. He went and got his own lunch, and as he was walking toward the table, he noticed a child sitting in the high chair to Catherine’s right. Even he had to smile back when the little girl flashed a grin up at him as he approached.

He set his dishes on the table and put his hand on Vincent’s shoulder. “Good afternoon Catherine,” he said with a curt nod. “I missed you at breakfast this morning, Vincent.”
“Hello, Father,” Catherine said, with a hesitant smile. “I’m sorry. I was responsible for Vincent’s absence. He was at my place. We talked all night and didn’t notice the time until the sun came up.”

“I see,” he said stiffly, but then he unbent a little and held his hand out to Caroline, as he sat down. “Who is this lovely little lady?”

“This is Caroline, my daughter,” said Catherine.

Father’s head jerked up, and he looked from Catherine to Vincent, then back to Catherine. “Your daughter?”

“Yes, Father, her daughter. Like you, Catherine fell in love with a child found dumped near the trash outside St. Vincent’s.”

Father’s demeanor changed abruptly. “Who would do that to this beautiful child? For that matter how could anyone do that to any child?”

Catherine shook her head. “My thoughts exactly, the instant I laid eyes on her.” But she wasn’t looking at Caroline, she was looking at Vincent.

Father surprised them both by reaching across the table and patting Catherine’s hand. “You did a good thing, Catherine,” he said, then he began to eat.

Catherine and Vincent exchanged confused looks but picked up their conversation where they’d left off.

After lunch, they dropped Caro off in the nursery and headed back to Vincent’s chamber.

“How did you settle on ‘Caroline’ for her name?” Vincent asked as they walked.

“It was my mother’s name,” she confided. “And it means beautiful woman. My mother was beautiful, and so is Caro.”

Vincent was quiet until they reached his chamber.

“Now you can take your nap,” he told her, as they entered.

“What about you?” she asked, as she stifled a yawn.

“I’ll probably just wait until tonight. I usually don’t sleep more than about six hours anyway, so missing a night now and then doesn’t bother me.” He went to turn down the bed for her. “Make yourself comfortable. I need to talk to Father, then to Mouse. I won’t bother you, but I’ll make sure you’re up in plenty of time for dinner.”

“But Caro will only sleep about two hours,” she protested.

“Mary can keep her occupied. If she needs you, she’ll let me know.”

Vincent leaned down and kissed her lightly. “Now sleep!” he ordered, then smiled and kissed her again.

She sat on the side of the bed and started taking off her shoes. “I’m too tired to argue,” she told him as he left the chamber.
She debated how much to take off, but since she would be alone, she decided she would be more comfortable without the jeans and sweatshirt. She left on the t-shirt and her panties and crawled into bed.

She buried her face in the pillow and breathed in his scent. It was better than a sleeping pill; she was asleep in minutes.

Vincent went to Father’s chamber, who was lecturing Mouse about something. Mouse looked up, relieved to see Vincent.

“What did you do now, Mouse?” Vincent asked, placing his hand on his young friend’s shoulder.

“Nothin’, just told Father that I found some stuff. Didn’t take it, just found it, and wanted to know if we could use it Below,” Mouse said, tossing a sullen look in Father’s direction.

“What did you find?” Vincent asked.

“Big wooden spools. Huge. They had cable on them, but are empty now. They’re just sitting there in the meadow in the park.”

“They must be left from the wiring project for the new lights in the park,” Vincent commented. “Mouse, I think they reuse those things. They probably have a deposit on them. Like on old soda pop bottles. If they return them to the manufacturers of the wire, they will probably get a deposit back.”

“Only a nickel?” Mouse had no real concept of money.

“I imagine it’s more than a nickel, more like at least several hundred dollars each,” said Father.

Mouse looked at Vincent, who nodded agreement. “And even if they don’t, I don’t see how you could possibly get them Below without being seen.”

“Could take them apart; got big bolts holding them together. All Mouse needs is a wrench.” Vincent was doubtful, but he couldn’t discount the find completely.

“I can see where something like that might be useful down here,” he told Mouse. “Let me ask first. We have a few Helpers who work for the city. I’ll find out what the city plans to do with the spools. If they are planning to just discard them, then I’ll let you know, and you’ll get your chance to dismantle some and bring them Below.”

Mouse grinned, happy that someone had taken his find seriously. “Good. Been there a few days already. Won’t stay forever,” he warned, then bounded out of the chamber.

“You certainly have a way with that young man,” Father said in a relieved tone.

“I don’t judge him,” was all Vincent said.

Father looked at the man standing in front of him.
“I suppose I am a bit judgmental,” he admitted reluctantly, “but there are times when decisions have to be made quickly, and conclusions are sometimes easy to jump to.”
“Like your conclusions about Catherine?” Vincent asked as he sat in the chair Mouse had vacated.
“I apologize for that.”
“Don’t apologize to me. You need to apologize to her.” Then he looked down at his hands.
“But I will admit to jumping to almost the same conclusion when I heard she had a child.
“You truly do love her.” It was a statement of fact, not a question.
“I’m surprised you ever doubted it. I never stopped. We’ve both been miserable since I saw her last. She managed to occupy herself with Caroline and her job.”
“And you immersed yourself in work down here,” added Father.
Vincent nodded. “And now it’s time we both stopped this nonsense and admitted that avoidance isn’t going to work.”
“You’re sure?” asked Father.
“Absolutely! I don’t know how we will manage it, not yet anyway. I’m sure Catherine will have some ideas.

I just wanted to make sure that you and I are all right. I don’t want to have to choose, but if you force it, I will choose Catherine.” Vincent’s blue gaze was level and unwavering.

“I would never ask that of you, Vincent,” Father assured him. “If her feelings are still so strong after all this time, then I’m willing to admit that I was wrong. I have always liked Catherine, but I’m afraid my distrust of the world Above sometimes clouds my judgment. I really should have understood, after I spent that time with Margaret before she died. She said that her love never died, but it was a different time, and she didn’t have much choice. Catherine does have a choice, and it’s obvious that she chooses you. When I see her next, I will happily welcome her to the family.”

The two men sat quietly for a while.

“Where is Catherine?” Father asked.

“Napping. We were up talking all night, and she was tired. Caroline is in the nursery, and I insisted that Catherine take a nap too.”

“You were up all night too,” said Father. “Why don’t you go take a nap?”

“Tonight will be soon enough for me,” said Vincent.

“Vincent, I just suggested that you go take a nap,” Father insisted, raising his eyebrows and looking pointedly at his son.

“Father?” Vincent wasn’t sure he understood.

Father sighed in exasperation. “Go lay down next to the woman you love, and hold her in your arms. It is a very healing experience, I know. I’m not saying you have to make love to her, just hold her for now, you may be surprised.”

Vincent wasn’t sure he was hearing correctly, but he stood and started toward the stairs, almost on autopilot. Then he turned back to Father.

“You’re sure that this is all right?” he asked.

“I’m not infallible, but I’m pretty sure about this... Go!” he waved his hands at Vincent. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Vincent started toward the stairs again, then turned back to Father once more. “Catherine has offered to take you up to visit Peter when he’s out of ICU.”

“Thank her for me. I appreciate it.”

Vincent walked slowly back toward his chamber. Was Father right, would Catherine welcome a move like this on his part? His gut told him that Father was correct, and he quickened his pace.

Catherine was sleeping soundly. She had wrapped her arms around one of his pillows, and her head rested on another. She was on the far side of the bed with her back to him, and the covers were pulled up so that all he could see was the top of her head.

He sat down on a chair and started to remove his boots. He kept removing clothing until he was down to only his jeans and t-shirt. He blew out all but one candle and got into the bed beside her, sliding over until he was up against her back. He slipped his arm around her
Catherine woke, and it took a few seconds to remember where she was. She sighed in contentment and smiled to herself, but then she noticed that she wasn’t alone. She put her hand on the larger one that rested on her stomach, and her smile became even broader. She eased over onto her back, holding his hand in place and found him smiling at her.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“The best nap I’ve had in ages. What time is it?” she asked, giving a little stretch and turning on her side to face him.

“Not late. We still have a little time before dinner is served.” He hadn’t moved his hand, and her turn had shifted it to her hip.

“I hope Mary doesn’t mind that I dumped Caro on her all afternoon,” she said, with a slight frown.

“She has several children around Caroline’s age, and Wednesday afternoon is story time with Father, so she’s had help.”

“Then we can talk?”

“If you like.”

“I was just wondering what made you decide to do this?” she indicated the bed. “You wouldn’t have dreamt of doing this three years ago.”

“I would have dreamt of doing it,” he corrected with a slight smile, “but I wouldn’t have done it. When I got that greeting from you yesterday evening, I vowed not to make the same mistakes. You are willing to give us another chance, so I have to be willing to give too. And then there was what Father said.”

“What did Father say?” she felt her stomach sinking, sure that Father hadn’t said anything good.

“When I told him that you were napping, he told me to come in here and lay down next to the woman I love and hold her in my arms. He said that it would be a very healing experience and he was right.” She cuddled closer and slipped her arm around him. “Father is always surprising me.”
Vincent’s hand had found its way under her t-shirt, and his fingers were making lazy circles on her bare back.

They exchanged a few leisurely kisses, but Catherine reluctantly backed off.

“If I’m not mistaken, I think I just heard the 5:00 check in on the pipes, and that means dinner will be announced soon. We should probably get up and get dressed. I need to collect Caro.”

Vincent dropped one last kiss on the end of her nose then rolled over and sat on the side of the bed. Before he had a chance to reach for his boots or get up, Catherine spontaneously hugged him from the back. He put his hands over hers and held her.

“What is it Catherine?” he asked. He was getting some pretty chaotic feelings through the Bond.

“I just want to say thank you, that’s all. This has been the...” She laughed. “I don’t even know how to describe it.” She stopped, completely at a loss for words.

“I think I understand,” he said, turning his head so that he could almost see her out of the corner of his eye. She let go and moved to the side of the bed next to him.

She stood and picked up her jeans from where she’d left them on the chair. When she leaned over to put them on, Vincent glanced over and caught a wonderful view of her silk-clad bottom, just before she pulled her jeans up. He didn’t look away, and he assured himself that there was nothing wrong with enjoying what he’d seen. He had felt her enjoyment when she looked at him, even though he’d never exposed much of his body to her. When she did catch a glimpse, she’d always been quietly appreciative.

It only took a few minutes for them to dress. Catherine borrowed his hairbrush, then handed it to him so he could use it. They were on their way to Father’s study, when the dinner announcement rang out over the pipes.

Father was finishing the story he was reading aloud when they arrived. He was surrounded by a group of children ranging in age from about two to five. Most of them sat on the floor. One was sitting on a footstool next to Father’s chair, and Caroline was sitting on Father’s lap. Every once in a while, she’d look up and lightly touch Father’s beard, then she’d look back at the book he was reading.

The story ended, and Mary started to herd the children toward the door. Caroline caught sight of Catherine and called out to her.

“Mama, Drampa reads.” She reached up and patted Father’s bearded cheek.

“I know Caro,” she answered as she looked up at Vincent with raised eyebrows. “What did he read?”

Dreen Edds and Ham. You ever had dreen edds, Mama?” she asked, as she slid off Father’s knee and ran to her.

“I can’t say that I have.” Catherine picked her up and settled her on her hip, as she looked across the room and mouthed “Drampa?” at Mary.

Mary just smiled and shrugged as she continued to usher her charges toward the door. Father saw the exchange between the two women.
“I hope you don’t mind, Catherine, but when Mary and the children called me Father, I
don’t think Caroline quite understood that it was just a name, and that I wasn’t everyone’s
father. She’s quite bright; very articulate and advanced for her age, and she knows what a
father is. I asked her if she knew what a grandfather was...” he saw her nodding vigorously.
“Tell your mother what you told me, Caroline,” Father suggested.
“I told Drampa that I had a Drampa, he was your Daddy.”
Father picked up the story when she paused. “I told her that someone can have more than
one Grandfather and that she could call me Grandpa.”
“Drampa’s Vin’s Daddy,” Caroline informed her mother.
“Yes, he is.” Catherine noticed that Vincent was looking at Father with an unreadable
expression. “It’s dinnertime. Are you hungry?”
Caroline’s head bobbed up and down again. “Mary made me a dram cracker with nut butter
when I woke up.”
“Graham cracker with peanut butter is one of my favorite snacks,” said Vincent, as he took
Catherine’s arm and propelled her along to the entrance of the chamber. “And Mary makes
the best ones, don’t you think?”
“My Mama makes the best ones,” Caroline insisted loyally.
“Then I’ll just have to get her to make me one, so I can decide which one I like best.”
In the dining chamber, Vincent and Catherine sat at the same table they had used at lunch.
Father arrived a few minutes behind them, but joined Mary at her table.
Caroline was eating quietly, and neither Catherine nor Vincent had much to say.
“I really hate to put an end to this wonderful day,” Catherine said, smiling warmly at
Vincent, “but I should probably head home when we are done eating. Caro got to bed a
little late last night, so I should try to get her to bed on time tonight. I’d like to talk to
Susan, and find out how Peter is too.”
“I understand,” said Vincent. “May I come up later? There are a few things I need to do
after I walk you back to your threshold, but I could be there around nine.”
“Yes, please come up.” She reached into her pocket and took out her keys. She separated
one from the others, took it off the ring and handed it to Vincent. “This is a spare, you can
use it to get up to my place, and you won’t have to ride on top of the elevator and come in
from the roof. It also unlocks my apartment door.” After dinner, the walk to the threshold
was slow. They were reluctant to part, even if it was only going to be for a few hours. He
walked her all the way to the elevator, where he kissed her lightly. Caroline demanded
equal time, and they parted, laughing.
Catherine spent some time playing with Caroline and listening to her tell stories about her
day. Vincent was right, Caroline didn’t realize that where she’d been all day was any
different from anywhere else, and the names of the people she mentioned would mean
nothing to a stranger. She was satisfied that the secret would be safe, at least for the time
being.
After a bath, Catherine put Caroline to bed.
It was only a little after seven when Catherine called Susan for an update. They didn’t talk much, just long enough for Susan to tell her that Peter was feeling well. Further tests had gone well and the doctor expected to have him up walking around sometime over the weekend.

When they hung up Catherine decided that she had more than enough time for a shower. She washed her hair and dried it. Back in her bedroom, she was about to put on the usual knit pants and tank top, but she stopped mid-reach and redirected her hand to the drawer where she had all her pretty silk nightgowns and robes. She hadn’t worn any of them in ages; at least not since shortly after she’d brought Caroline home. Middle of the night feedings and diaper changes were better handled in something that could be thrown in the washer if it got soiled.

She didn’t know what Vincent had in mind for tonight, he might be planning to stay only an hour or two, but she wanted to look good for him, and she knew he always enjoyed the feel of silk. A pretty peignoir set might bring back memories.

She was looking for something to pass the time as it was still early, when she noticed the light flashing on her answering machine. There was a message from Joe. She picked up the receiver and dialed Joe’s number. She sat on the side of the bed when it started to ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi Joe, it’s Cathy,” she began when he answered.

“Hi Cath. How is everything?”

“It looks like Peter is going to be all right,” she told him, then she filled him in on all the details.

“Sounds like he lucked out,” said Joe.

“He did. I guess it helps that he’s a doctor and knows who is the best in the field. Susan and Rob came. I just spoke to Susan. She’s going to stay on, but Rob left with the kids this afternoon.”

“It will be nice for you to have her in town for a while,” Joe had met Susan once, on a visit.

“It will,” Catherine agreed. “I might even ask for a little more time off.”

“I don’t blame you,” Joe said. “This is the first time you’ve taken off since you first brought Caroline home. In fact, I just got the list from payroll. You have so much vacation time accrued that if you don’t take over three weeks before the end of the month, you are going to lose it. To tell the truth, this is probably going to be the best time, workload wise. You are between cases and the holidays are coming up.”

“Then it looks like I’ll see you in January,” Catherine said. She wondered if Helen would appreciate the time off. She had plenty of paid vacation time coming too.

When she hung up, she called and left a message on Helen’s machine.

All her calls made, she wandered out into the living room and was surprised to see Vincent standing at the French doors to the roof garden, looking at the view.

She went to him and slipped her arms around his waist. He turned and pulled her close.

“I heard you on the phone and didn’t want to disturb you.” He reached into his pocket and held the key out to her.
“Keep it. Right now this is probably the safest place Above for you to be. Once I go back to work, the nanny will be here during the day, but it will OK in the evening.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“You don’t seem to have the same phobia about entering this apartment that you did in the other place, and you’re welcome anytime. I hate the idea of you riding on top of the elevator; it can’t be very safe. If you can come up inside it, you won’t have to be outside when the weather is bad. The wind can get pretty strong up here.”

He pocketed the key and put his arm around her again.

“Come sit down,” she said, pulling him gently in the direction of the couch. “Would you like something? Some tea or a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you.”

He sat down, and she sat next to him.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she observed. “Is something wrong?” She wondered if he regretted the closeness they’d achieved that afternoon.

He looked into her eyes. “You needn’t worry,” he told her, sensing her disquiet. “There’s nothing wrong. I’m just trying to come up with the right words to make a request.”

“Don’t worry about the words,” she told him. “Just ask.”

He took a deep breath and looked around the room, then his gaze came back to her. “I was wondering... well, I’d like to... stay here tonight. Not like last night, when we talked all night, but to... sleep with you, in your bed, like we did this afternoon.” The words came out a bit clumsily, and he looked worried, but his eyes never left hers.

“Like we did this afternoon?” she repeated. “Just like that, just cuddling and holding each other?”

“Well, yes... at least to begin with. I do want to move forward, Catherine, but we’ve been apart for a long time. Our lives have changed, and I don’t want to rush you into anything.”

She smiled at him. “And I was worried that I would be trying to rush you into something you weren’t ready for.” She kissed him lightly. “Yes, you can stay. You can stay every night from now on, if you’d like. And we will take it at whatever speed we are both comfortable with. It was wonderful waking in your arms this afternoon. And I’d love to wake up that way every day for the rest of my life...” she looked over to where his cloak was thrown over the arm of a chair. “Did you bring anything with you?”

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous. I do have cotton pajamas. They are too thin to wear Below, but they’d be just right for here. I thought I would just leave them, if you agreed.”

He looked embarrassed, and Catherine almost laughed. She threw her arms around him.

“I love you, Vincent!” she declared. She rose and pulled him to his feet. “Even though I had a nap this afternoon, I think I’d like to go to bed early tonight,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

He picked up his cloak and the parcel it concealed, then she took him through the bedroom into the bathroom, where she showed him where everything was.

“There are spare toothbrushes in the cabinet. You can use one of them and just leave it in the holder with mine. If you want to shower; soap, shampoo, and conditioner are in the
shower and next to the tub. Clean towels are in the closet behind the bathroom door. And I’ll see about getting you a bathrobe.”

She left him in the bathroom, closed the door, and went back into the bedroom. She removed her robe and turned down the bed, wondering what this night would bring. He was back before she had a chance to think. He was wearing a pair of dark blue cotton pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt.

“I left my clothes hanging on the hook on the back of the bathroom door. Is that all right?” he asked.

She nodded. He was standing awkwardly, about halfway between the bathroom door and the bed. She rose and started in his direction, and he looked like a deer in headlights, not sure which direction to go.

“I need to brush my teeth,” she told him. She gestured toward the bed. “Make yourself comfortable. I usually sleep on the side closest to the bathroom, but it doesn’t matter, you can have whichever side you like.”

She took her time brushing her teeth and brushing her hair. When she went back into the bedroom, Vincent was sitting in bed. He had turned off the overhead light. The lights on the nightstands illuminated the room.

He was reading the dust cover of the book she’d left on the nightstand.

“Have you read this?” he asked.

“Not yet. When Jenny found out that I had never read anything by Stephen King, she decided I needed to be educated. She gave it to me for my birthday. It’s been on my nightstand ever since.” She climbed into bed and leaned back against the pillows propped against the headboard.

“We could start it tonight,” he suggested. “I’ve heard that it is very good.”

She nodded her assent, but her thoughts were going in an entirely different direction.

\textit{Vincent comes up and wants to spend the night with me. I know he said that we might not move very quickly, but the last thing I expected was to spend part of it reading a Stephen King novel.}

He opened the book and started to read:

\textit{The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain.}\footnote{\textit{It} by Stephen King, Chapter 1}

Catherine had heard that Stephen King’s books could be kind of gruesome, but by the end of the first chapter, it didn’t sound too bad, so Vincent continued.

By the end of Chapter Two it was still all right. It just seemed to be a story about a couple of young boys, brothers. Vincent commented that they rather reminded him of him and Devin.

By the end of Chapter Three, they were in agreement; Stephen King was not their cup of tea.
“I wonder if there are Cliff’s Notes on this book.” Catherine mused, as Vincent closed it and put it back on the nightstand. “I’d hate to hurt Jenny’s feelings by telling her I couldn’t make it past poor little Georgie’s death.”

Vincent chuckled. “Maybe someone Below has read it and can give you a synopsis, so you can discuss it intelligently with her.”

“I heard that there was a TV mini-series made out of it. Too bad I don’t watch much TV.” She giggled. “I guess a hundred and fifty years from now, Stephen King will be considered the Mary Shelley of our time.”

Vincent considered for a moment. “I guess you could say that Mary Shelley was one of the first people to write in that particular genre.”

Catherine slid down, then rolled over and turned out the light on her nightstand, then turned on her side and faced Vincent.

“Vincent, this afternoon you held me. It was a wonderful feeling to wake up to. Would you allow me to hold you?”

Her request took him by surprise. He turned out the light on his side of the bed, moved closer to her and started to take her in his arms.

“No, Vincent, I want to hold you.” She drew his head down to her chest. “Get comfortable.”

He hesitated then slipped one arm under her pillow and put the other across her waist. It took him a few moments to relax, but he eventually did.

“I’m heavy,” he told her.

“Not that heavy,” she assured him.

They lay quietly as Vincent allowed himself to rest. Catherine stroking his hair was very soothing. His eyes drifted closed, and he lost himself in the feelings flowing through the Bond.

“I’ve imagined doing this.” Catherine’s voice was soft and dreamy. “I’ve imagined making love with you, but more often, I’ve fantasized about just lying with you and holding you like this... Scientists have been researching the importance of touch in our lives. Babies who aren’t touched enough don’t do well. People who aren’t touched enough get depressed.”

“Catherine.” Vincent’s arm tightened across her waist. “I’ve just been reminded that there is something I’ve neglected to say.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

Vincent moved his head so that his lips were against the top of her breast. She felt him kiss her there.

“You’ve said it over and over. You’ve said it several times since yesterday, but I’ve never said it... I love you, Catherine. I’ve loved you since the beginning. Even before you loved me. When you were falling in love with Elliot Burch, I was dying inside. When you said you would marry him so you could save me and my world...” This time she plainly felt his pain.

“Shh, my love,” she whispered. “Nothing like that will ever happen again!”
He finally raised himself up on an elbow, so he could look at her. “I don’t know how we will manage it, Catherine, but we will be together.” He sealed that promise with a kiss.

The kisses escalated to touching. He rolled over onto his back and pulled her on top of him. He was working her nightgown up over her hips when the phone rang.

At first, Catherine thought she could ignore it, but Vincent felt her unease.

“It could be important,” he whispered in her ear.

“I know,” she said with resignation as she rolled over and reached for the phone.

“Hello?” she answered when the receiver was against her ear.

“Cathy?” It was Susan. “I’m sorry to call so late, but the hospital just called me, something has happened. The nurse wouldn’t tell me on the phone. I just called a cab, and I’m on my way over... can you come? If it’s bad news, I don’t think I can face it alone.”

Catherine looked at Vincent as she answered. “Of course! I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’ll meet you at the hospital.”

She hung up and looked at Vincent. “I’m sorry. I have to go. Something has happened at the hospital, and Susan doesn’t want to be alone.” She jumped out of bed and started pulling clothes out of drawers. “Would you stay with Caroline?”
“Don’t worry,” he quickly assured her. “Go! I’ll stay with her.”
She pulled panties on under her nightgown, then turned her back to him and pulled the
gown off over her head. She deftly put on a bra then pulled a sweater on and reached for
her jeans. She pulled them on then sat down to put on socks and slip on her shoes. She
stood, then leaned over and kissed him as she zipped up her jeans and straightened her
sweater.
“Do you want me to call you with news?” she asked
“Yes, please. Now go, and be careful.”
Catherine stopped at the closet long enough to grab her purse and a coat. She put the coat
on as she went down in the elevator. Her car was in the parking garage under the building.

It was late enough that there was very little traffic to slow her down and she easily found a
parking spot. She found Susan in the hall outside the ICU.
“Susan, what is it? Have you talked to the doctor yet?” She asked, as she hugged her friend.
“I just spoke to the nurse. The doctor is on his way. Daddy’s temperature suddenly went up
to about 101. She said that he already diagnosed himself.” She choked on a half laugh, half
sob. “He said that it’s probably a bladder infection. He’s had a catheter in for several days.
He suggested Amoxicillin, but she says that she has to clear that with Dr. Blair. She doesn’t
seem too worried, so he’s probably right.”
Cathy led her over to a bench against the wall and made her sit.
“I’m sorry I called you out so late and probably for nothing.”
“It’s not that late, it’s not even midnight,” Catherine assured her as she sat beside her.
Susan looked around. “Where’s Caroline?” she asked.
“At home. Vincent is with her.”
“Vincent is with... Oh God, I’m sorry, I did disturb something!” Susan gasped.
“Don’t worry about it, Susan. We have the rest of our lives.” Catherine hugged her friend
again.
“Did you spend the whole day with him?” Susan asked.
“Yes, we went Below with him. Caro made a hit with Father and Mary. When we left she
was calling Father, ‘Drampa’ and Father was OK with it. In fact, he suggested it.”
“Wait until Daddy hears that. He won’t let Father rest on that one.”
They were laughing when Dr. Blair came out of the ICU.
They looked up at him expectantly.
“Your Dad is an excellent doctor,” he told Susan with a smile. “His diagnosis is correct, it’s a bladder infection. We’ve removed the catheter and started him on Amoxicillin and an antipyretic. His temperature is already starting to come down.

Susan didn’t want to leave the hospital until Peter’s temperature was back to normal, so Catherine said she’d stay with her. They headed down to the snack bar. Catherine stopped at a pay phone and called Vincent. She filled him in on the news, then returned to Susan.

“Did Rob and the children get a flight?” Catherine asked as they sat down with coffee and muffins.

“A better one than we got on our way here,” Susan said. “They left at noon and flew to Chicago, then to Santa Fe. They were home before dinnertime there. Rob said they stopped for pizza on the way home, and the children were in bed at their normal time...” She studied Catherine over the top of her paper coffee cup as she took a sip. “You have to tell me.”

“Tell you what?” asked Catherine innocently.

“You and Vincent have patched things up?”

“Yes,” Catherine smiled happily. “He came up Tuesday evening. We talked all night. We were both surprised when the clock struck six. He stayed for breakfast and then suggested that we go Below with him for the day.”

“Caroline has met him? What was her reaction?” asked Susan.

“What has any child’s reaction ever been?” Catherine asked with a laugh. “I’ve never heard of a child being frightened of him. She loved him on sight; was on his lap within minutes.”

The snack bar closed at 2AM, and the two women went back to the ICU waiting room. The nurse came out every hour or so to update them. When she came at 6AM she told Susan that Peter’s temperature was back to normal.

“I can let you in to see him for a few minutes,” the nurse told Susan. “Dr. Blair wants him moved to a regular room right after breakfast this morning. I suggest that you go home and get some rest, then come back at normal visiting hours this afternoon.”

Catherine dropped Susan at Peter’s house and headed home. As she sat in morning rush hour traffic, she added up the amount of sleep she’d had in the last 48 hours. It didn’t take much adding because it was less than four hours. She hoped Vincent had been able to get some sleep.

It was after eight when Catherine walked into her apartment. She was stunned at the scene that met her eyes. Vincent was laughing as he set a plate in front of Caroline, who was sitting in her high chair at the breakfast bar. He never took his eyes off what he was doing, but he acknowledged Catherine’s presence.

“Your mother is here,” he told Caroline. He finally looked at Catherine, and his eyes smoldered. “I knew you were on your way. Do you want coffee?”
She dropped her coat and purse on a chair and joined Caroline at the bar. She kissed the little girl and turned to Vincent. “Yes, please. I need to stay awake a while longer.”

“Peter is doing well, then?” asked Vincent. He needed all the details to give to Father.

“He’s fine. It was a mild infection. They are going ahead with their plans to move him into a regular room this morning. You can tell Father that I’ll take him to visit any time after noon today.”

“Tomorrow will be soon enough,” Vincent told her. “You need to sleep today.”

“I’m a mother,” she told him, then took a drink of her coffee. “What I need is enough caffeine to keep me awake at least until Caro takes her nap.”

“I will look after Caroline,” Vincent assured her, “You are going to sleep. You are almost asleep on your feet. I just ask that you dress her before you go to bed. We’ve already disagreed on her slippers. I don’t think I would prevail on clothing.”

Catherine looked at Caroline’s feet and started to laugh. She was wearing one fuzzy pink bunny slipper and one bright green Kermit the Frog slipper, and they were both the left ones.

Catherine ate some breakfast, and when Caroline was done, she took her to get dressed.

“Sweetie, Vincent is going to take care of you for a few hours while I take a nap. Is that OK with you?”

Caroline nodded. “Mama, why’s Vin fuzzy?”

Catherine thought for a moment, not sure what to say. “I don’t know, Caro. He just is.”

“He’s sof,” she stated.

“Yes, he is,” said Catherine remembering the previous night. She was tired, and her willpower was at a very low ebb. It was a good thing Vincent was going to be looking after Caroline. She carried her daughter out to the main room, where Vincent was finishing in the kitchen.

“I’m going to go take a shower, then fall into bed,” she stated as she put Caroline down. “Wake me if you need anything... and I probably shouldn’t sleep more than four or five hours, not if I want to sleep tonight.”

Vincent walked with her to the bedroom door. “Sleep as long as you want. Father knows where I am. I’ll send him a message later to let him know about Peter, and I’ll find out when he wants to go visit.” He bent and kissed her lightly. “Sleep well.”

Catherine did just that. Vincent had obviously spent the night in her bed, but it was now neatly made, and the nightgown she’d left on the chair was folded on the dresser.

She took a shower, pulled on an oversized t-shirt and crawled into the bed. She barely had time to pull the pillow that Vincent had used under her head before she was asleep.
The building Catherine lived in was on the opposite side of the park from where she used to live, and the French doors from her bedroom into the roof garden faced west. It was nice in the mornings because the sun didn’t wake her. It woke her now, as it was fairly low in the sky, and she rolled over to turn her back on it.

Then she remembered. She looked at the clock. It was almost 5PM. She’d slept almost eight hours! She felt much better. She got up and splashed some water on her face and brushed her teeth. The apartment was ominously quiet, and she wondered where Vincent and Caroline were. She suspected that Caroline could possibly have become a bit of a handful, and he might have taken her Below to Mary. She smiled at the thought. Her tiny daughter could become a bit willful at times.

The sight that met her eyes when she entered the living room almost had her laughing out loud. It looked like a tornado had struck the room. Most of the toys that Caroline owned were strung about the room. Several of Catherine’s precious objets d’art were curiously missing. And stretched out, flat on his back on the floor, was Vincent, sound asleep, with the tiny Caroline curled on her side, with her back to him and her head pillowed on his arm.

Catherine wished that she could take a picture of it, but she’d have to commit it to memory. She tiptoed through the living room into the kitchen, where she put water on for tea. She prepared the teapot then went and knelt at Vincent’s head. She leaned over and kissed him upside down. His eyes drifted open, and he smiled up at her.

“I thought I was dreaming,” he commented. “He started to move, but when he realized Caroline was using him as a pillow, he relaxed.

“How long have you been asleep?” she whispered.

“I’m not sure. What time is it?”

“After five.”

The teapot started to whistle, and Catherine went to turn it off. She poured the hot water into the teapot.

Caroline started to stir, and Vincent picked her up and put her on the loveseat.

“We were playing, and the last time I looked at the clock it was almost four,” he told her. “I couldn’t get her to take a nap, but I guess it caught up with her.”

Catherine saw that Caroline was waking up, so she added a small cup of milk and vanilla wafers to the tea tray.

“I can see that you were playing,” said Catherine with a laugh as she carried the tray into the living room.
“I had planned to have it cleaned up before you woke,” he said, rather sheepishly. “But when Caroline fell asleep, I guess I did too.”

Caroline climbed off the loveseat and joined them on the couch.

“Mama had a long nap!” Caroline observed.

“Yes, I did,” Catherine agreed.

Caroline stood on the couch between them and patted her mother’s cheek. “Feel dood now?” she asked.

“Much better, Sweetie.” Catherine hugged her. “Did you have fun today?”

Caroline nodded. “We played catch,” she said.

“What would you two like for dinner?” Catherine asked, as she sipped her tea. She looked at Vincent. “You are staying for dinner, aren’t you?”

“Chicken, Mama?” Caroline asked, “and mashy taters and beans.”

Catherine mentally inventoried the contents of the freezer. “I think we can handle that,” she said.

“Sounds good?” Vincent didn’t sound convinced, and Catherine laughed at him.

“Oh, ye of little faith. I’ve always known how to cook, I just never had the opportunity to do much of it. But since my promotion to Deputy DA, my hours have improved, and I have that great kitchen,” she gestured behind her, “so I’ve started cooking again. I was going to fix pot roast tonight, but I forgot to put the roast out to thaw. Maybe tomorrow. I can thaw the chicken in the microwave.”

When Caroline finished telling her mother about her day, Vincent got a chance to speak.

“Susan called around noon. She wanted you to know that Peter is out of ICU and will be ready for visitors, within reason, tomorrow.”

“Good. Did you let Father know?”

“I did. He’ll let you know when he wants to go.”

When they finished their tea, Catherine went to dress, and Vincent and Caroline got to work picking up the clutter in the living room. Vincent made a game out of it and had Caroline giggling delightedly as she ran back and forth between her room and the living room. By the time Catherine finished dressing, the living room was back to normal, and Vincent was placing the last glass figurine on the shelf next to the fireplace.
He’d turned on the fireplace, and Caroline was climbing onto the couch.

Catherine walked to the end table, picked up the remote, and turned on the TV. She found the channel Caroline wanted, and the room was flooded with music, the screen was filled with purple.

Vincent watched the TV with a strange expression. “What is that?” he asked, plainly shocked.

“That is Barney the Purple Dinosaur. It has most of the children who watch it mesmerized; I think it must have subliminal messages or something,” Catherine said, as she dropped the remote and headed to the kitchen. “One of the local stations runs it at this time. I think it is expressly to give mothers the chance to cook dinner.”

“Subliminal messages?” Vincent questioned, as he followed her to the kitchen.

Catherine looked at him and laughed. “I was joking. I don’t let Caro watch much TV, but it is handy that there is something on that keeps her occupied right at the time I usually fix dinner. The way this room is laid out, I can keep an eye on her while she’s watching and I’m working. It’s not on TV over the weekend, so I have some videos for her to watch.”

“Whatever happened to Looney Tunes, Porky Pig, and Bugs Bunny?” he asked as he leaned against the end of the counter.

“You got a chance to see those?” she asked, as she took the chicken out of the freezer and popped it into the microwave.

“I did when I was at Peter’s. It was a great treat to go to his house on Saturday mornings to watch cartoons. Some Saturdays he had a whole living room full of children from Below, avidly watching cartoons and shows like Rin Tin Tin and Sky King,” Vincent reminisced.

“Did Janine make you her famous chocolate chip pancakes?” Catherine asked, as she picked some potatoes out of the bin and put them in the sink.

“She did,” he said with a smile. “I had forgotten all about those. She’d make stacks of them, and cook enough bacon to feed an army.”

“I have her recipe,” Catherine commented offhandedly as she started peeling potatoes. “You do? Do you, by any chance have a pancake breakfast day?” he asked.

“There isn’t a day of the week that begins with a P,” she said. “And the batter, at least with the chocolate chips in it, doesn’t work in the waffle iron. It burns the chocolate. Smells terrible.”

Vincent looked at Caroline. “I wonder if I can convince her to give up her French toast tomorrow morning in favor of chocolate chip pancakes.”

“You might be able to if you tell her that I’ll also cook bacon. She love’s bacon.” She looked at him sideways as she continued to peel and cut up the potatoes. “Does that mean that you’re planning on staying the night again?”
“If I want chocolate chip pancakes, I’ll have to,” he said. Then his voice changed. It was lower and more serious. “I enjoyed sleeping in your bed last night, but it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I asked to stay.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Thank you for staying with Caro.” She dropped the potato and the peeler and moved toward him. “And playing with her all day while I slept.” She leaned on his chest and put her arms around his neck.

Vincent bent his head and kissed her, and she forgot all about potatoes and chicken.

She was brought back to reality when he whispered in her ear. “Catherine, I want to love you, but there is chicken in the microwave, water running in the sink and a three-year-old child not ten feet from us.”

She groaned and bounced her forehead off his chest several times. “I wish I hadn’t been teaching her to tell time. I’ll never convince her to go to bed early, and her bedtime will not come quickly enough.” She stole another kiss and went back to the sink. Vincent went around to the other side of the bar and sat on one of the chairs facing her.

They were halfway through dinner when Vincent realized that Catherine was flirting with him... and that he was flirting back. The light touches, half smiles, and smoldering looks were something that Catherine had never indulged in before, at least not with him. Spirits were light, and Caroline caught the mood. She didn’t want to leave for her bath after dinner.

“I think I’ll take a shower, too,” Vincent told Catherine when she finally convinced Caroline that it was time for her bath.

Caroline ran ahead of her to the bathroom, and Catherine leaned over the back of the sofa toward where Vincent was sitting. “Since she didn’t have her usual nap this afternoon, maybe she’ll go to sleep on time,” she whispered, then dropped a kiss on his cheek.

Not only did Vincent take a shower, but he finished it off by turning the hot water off and standing under the cold spray. He felt like he had to calm his intense libido. The talk before dinner and the subsequent flirting had gone straight to his... well, he didn’t want to think about where it went, or he’d have to stand in the cold shower even longer.

He was standing in front of the French doors in the living room, looking at the view, when Catherine came back from Caroline’s room.

The sight that met Catherine’s eyes was beautiful, in her opinion. Vincent was silhouetted against the city skyline. He wore his dark blue pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. The pajama bottoms were a bit snug, but they showed off his butt very nicely, and she liked what she saw.

“Let me finish cleaning the kitchen,” she called out, as she crossed the room.

“Did she go to sleep?” he asked as he turned.

“After only one story,” she told him. “The shorter than usual nap caught up with her.”

Catherine had cleaned as she cooked so all she had to do now was put a few things in the dishwasher and hand wash the cookie sheet she’d cooked the chicken on. Even that wasn’t much, because it had been soaking.
She put some dishes in the dishwasher, added detergent, closed the door and turned it on. Then she moved to the sink and started scrubbing the cookie sheet. Vincent watched her. Even doing these mundane chores, she had a grace and efficiency of movement.

“Did you take dance, Catherine?” he asked, out of the blue.

She looked up at him and smiled. “As a matter of fact, I did. I took ballet when I was little, but I didn’t like it, so Mother let me quit when I was about eight. In my private high school, we had the option to take ballroom dancing instead of physical education. Naturally, all the teenage girls wanted to take that, because we didn’t have to put on the ugly gym suits, or take showers afterward. The only problem was that none of the boys wanted to take it, or at least not many. A few realized that it was a good way to get to know girls, but there still weren’t enough boys to go around. Why do you ask?”

She rinsed the cookie sheet and picked up a dishtowel.

“I was just watching you move. You are so graceful.”

She had to laugh at that. “Then can you explain why I constantly have bruises on my shins from running into the coffee table?”

She put away the cookie sheet, drained the sink and started wiping counters.

“Perhaps you move it slightly when you clean, and don’t realize it,” he suggested.

She looked at the coffee table thoughtfully. “You know, that’s possible,” she said. “I do move all the furniture once a week when I vacuum. Maybe I’m not putting it back in exactly the same place. Just an inch or two could make a big difference.”

She dried her hands and hung up the dishtowel. “Now I think I’ll take my turn in the bathroom.”

Catherine didn’t take a shower, she’d done that before she went to bed that morning, but she washed her face and brushed her teeth. A little moisturizer and lip balm were all she felt she needed. Although Vincent had seen her with makeup, both for her normal daytime work and the evening versions, she felt he preferred the natural look.

She had picked up her nightgown on her way to the bathroom. She slipped it over her head and let the silk slide down her body.

*Now that Caroline’s older and doesn’t require diaper changes or feeding I really should start wearing my nice sleepwear again,* she thought, as she let her hand drift down her thigh. She loved the feel of the silk.

As soon as Catherine left the living room, Vincent was on his feet, pacing. His reaction to her was so intense that it was almost frightening. He’d always had a physical reaction to her, but had been able to suppress it most of the time. On the occasions that he hadn’t, he had been able to hide it until he could get away. Last night had been a revelation. He had definitely reacted physically to their kisses, and he was sure she’d known. There was no way he could hide it in the thin cotton pants he’d been wearing. She felt so good in his arms and when he’d pulled her on top of him... the phone had done nothing to cool his ardor, but his common sense prevailed.

He wandered into the bedroom and stopped in front of the French door. He wasn’t sure he was ready to deal with those feelings just yet.
Out There, Somewhere by Janet Rivenbark

When she left the bathroom, Vincent was standing in front of the window, staring out again, but he was in the bedroom this time. He never seemed to get enough of the view of the city, from just about anywhere.

“What do you see?” she asked, as she went up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“The park, and...” he pointed off toward the west, “I can just make out the building where you used to live. There are lights on in your old apartment.”

She peeked around him and squinted in the direction he was pointing. “You can see that far? In the dark?” She looked closer. “I think I can make out the building, but only because I know its shape. I’ll have to look in the daylight.”

Vincent took her hand and tugged her around in front of him and into his arms. She relaxed against him with a sigh.

“We are considering a huge step, Catherine,” he said.

She was quiet a moment; trying to sense anything she could from the Bond, but he was unusually quiet, even his heartbeat was pumping slowly along at its normal rate.

“Are we moving too fast, Vincent?” she asked, her intuition giving her the clues. “We were apart for over three years, and the two days since you came here we’ve been together almost the whole time.”

“Perhaps,” his hands were wandering aimlessly over her back.

“We can go more slowly,” she suggested. “We don’t have to do anything tonight. We can just hold each other.”

“I feel your disappointment,” he said quietly, looking down at her.

“I won’t deny it, but unless it’s right for you, then it isn’t right for me.” She told him.

“You’re sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure. Know that whenever you are ready, whenever you want me, I’ll be here, or there, or where ever you need me to be.”

He sighed, and she could hear the relief in it.

She took his hand and led him into the living room. She turned the fireplace back on as she passed it. She looked calm, and she was trying to project that calm through the Bond. She was sure of where they were going, she just didn’t know the speed at which they were traveling.

A couple of hours later, Catherine wasn’t surprised when Vincent announced that he was going home.

“You are right in what you said earlier. We might benefit from taking a little time. I should probably go home.”

“What are you afraid of?” she asked.
He almost smiled at her insight. “Many things,” he admitted. “The same old fear of possibly losing control and harming you is still there, but I think I’m also afraid that I will disappoint you or that you might be disgusted with the way I look.”

“Vincent!” she was a little exasperated. “I’ve seen most of you, and what I’ve seen is gorgeous! I always thought you were bigger and bulkier, but that was all clothes. You are perfect, in my opinion. You don’t have an ounce of fat on your body; you are lean and muscular. I love the way you look and what I feel when I touch you. And if you think that you are too hairy then just quit thinking! I love it. I love you. And as long as you are built like all men, then I don’t think there is anything to worry about.”

“I suppose I’m like everyone else. I haven’t done any real comparisons since I was a boy…” she could hear the amusement in his voice. “…and I haven’t used the common bathing chambers in years…”

“OK, you don’t have to go into detail,” she said with a laugh. She could feel his discomfort. “I really do think I should go home tonight. Perhaps you can come down tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget to remind Father that I can take him to the hospital to see Peter tomorrow, if he’d like,” she said as they were rising. “Maybe I could leave Caro with Mary while we’re Above.”

“I’m sure she will welcome her.”

Vincent went back into the bedroom to change, and Catherine sat down and stared into the fire. When Vincent came back out, she stood and went to hug him.

“I’m sorry I’m disappointing you,” he said, as he returned her hug.

“You aren’t disappointing me,” she assured him. “We’re just going to wait a little bit longer.” She stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed him, then walked with him to the door and out into the short hall to the elevator. At the elevator, he kissed her again, lingering. She finally pushed him into the elevator. “You’d better go,” she said, with a wry smile, “before I drag you back to my bed…Go!” She gave him a little shove. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

Catherine slept surprisingly well that night. She hadn’t expected to. She spent a little time at her desk catching up on a few things, and went to bed just after midnight.

Caroline woke her the next morning, a few minutes after seven.

“Mama, up!” she said, as she jumped on the bed. “French toast day!”

“It’s Friday already?” She mentally noted that she had to see to getting that youth bed for Caroline.
She got up and convinced Caroline to let her go to the bathroom before being lead out into the living room.

“Where’s Vin?” Caroline asked, as they went.

Catherine was amused to think that Caroline was already expecting to see Vincent there when she got up. She wondered if she should tell him. She decided she would, but not right away.

“So, what kind of French toast do you want this morning?” Catherine asked, as she turned on the coffee pot and headed for the refrigerator. “We have plain bread, cinnamon swirl bread or raisin bread.”

“Raisin!”

Catherine pulled raisin bread, eggs, and milk out of the refrigerator and turned around to see her tiny three-year-old climbing nimbly up into her high chair at the bar. She held her breath until she was settled. She set the bread on the counter and got a bowl.

“Got syrup, Mama?” Caroline asked.

“Maple or apple?”

“Apple!”

She went back to the refrigerator for the syrup and set it in the microwave to warm. She made conversation while she mixed eggs, dipped bread and put it on the electric griddle.

“How would you like to go visit Vincent, Grandpa, and Mary today?” she asked, as she sipped her coffee.

“Yes! I had fun there,” said Caroline with enthusiasm.

“I know you did. And I’m glad. I might be taking Grandpa to see Uncle Peter in the hospital today. If I do, you can stay with Mary again.”

Caroline seemed thrilled at the prospect and was very cooperative about getting dressed and waiting patiently. She watched TV in Catherine’s bedroom while Catherine showered and dressed.

Catherine wasn’t sure if she’d be bringing Father back above so she dressed for any possibility: simple red turtleneck sweater, black slacks, and low heeled shoes.

It was still early, so Catherine settled Caroline on the couch with a picture book and did a few household chores before it was time to leave. She was very happy with all she’d accomplished when they got ready to leave an hour later.

She put Caroline into her hoodie again and put on her winter coat. She got her purse and put it in the bag with Caroline’s things, and they headed Below.

They exited the elevator in the basement, and Caroline looked around with interest.

“Uncle Peter’s and Uncle Joe’s house is outside, but Drampa’s isn’t.”

*Uh oh, the questions are starting earlier than I thought they would,* Catherine thought as they walked toward the door in the back of the basement.

“Well, Vincent and Grandpa don’t live in a house,” she told Caroline. “They kind of live... well, it’s like a basement, and it’s easier to get there by going through our basement.”
“What’s a basement?” Caroline asked, as she and Catherine went down the stairs from the basement to the subbasement.

“Where we got off the elevator, the place where we met Harry the other day. That’s a basement. A lot of houses and buildings have them underneath. Uncle Peter has one under his house.” She waved her hand at the dark room around them.

Catherine picked Caroline up and settled her on her hip as she stepped through into the tunnel beyond the subbasement. They’d only gone a short distance when Geoffrey came around the corner.

Catherine hugged him with her free arm and let him take the bag from her.

“Goodness, you’ve grown, Geoffrey!” she exclaimed as she looked up several inches at him.

“I’ll be fourteen my next birthday,” he told her with a grin. “Father says that I’m growing just like Vincent did.” She could tell he was thrilled to be compared to his hero.

“You’re at least two inches taller than me now; you’ll easily be as tall as Vincent if you don’t stop growing. William must be feeding you Miracle-Gro or something.”

“Father says that the vitamins probably have something to do with it. And the additional meat we’ve been getting the last few years.”

Catherine smiled to herself. She had talked to Peter right after Vincent sent her away. She still wanted to help but didn’t want anyone to know that she was doing it. Peter had given her a list of what was needed most often Below, and she’d seen to it that it was delivered once a week, anonymously. She and Peter were the only ones who knew.

“I heard about you,” said Geoffrey as he held his hand out to Caroline. “You’ve been calling Father, Grandpa.” He looked over at Catherine plainly asking a question with his eyes.

She laughed. “Don’t look at me like that, Geoffrey. I had nothing to do with it. It was Father’s suggestion because Caro was confused.”

Caroline reached out to Geoffrey and patted his shoulder. “Pretty, Mama.”

Catherine laughed. “Yes indeed, Caro, but when a boy is pretty, we call him handsome.”

Geoffrey blushed and then laughed with Catherine. “Thank you, Caro. I appreciate that.”

“So, is there anyone else Below who thinks you’re handsome?” she asked.

“Um, well, Sammy kinda likes me... that is when she’s not mooning over Kipper.”

“Oh, Geoffrey, let me tell you a little something about teenage girls; I used to be one, you know.” She winked at him when he looked over at her. “They can be very fickle, but just remember that she will eventually grow up. Be her friend now.”

They had reached the more heavily traveled tunnels, and Catherine figured that Geoffrey didn’t want everyone to know that she was giving him advice on his love life, so she just smiled at him, then followed him to Father’s study.

Vincent and Father were bent over a map on the large central table when she entered.

Vincent left the table and crossed the room to her. He held out his arms to Caroline, and she nearly leaped into them, then he surprised everyone by leaning toward Catherine and kissing her on the cheek.
Geoffrey set the bag on a chair and turned to leave. “I have a math class. I’ll see you later, Catherine.”

“Good morning Fa....” Catherine stopped mid-word. Father looked completely different. He was wearing charcoal dress slacks, a matching turtleneck and a tweed sports jacket. He even had on black loafers. “Father!” she exclaimed. “You look like you just stepped off the cover of GQ!”

“GQ?” asked Vincent.

“Gentlemen’s Quarterly,” Father supplied. “It’s a men’s style magazine.”

Vincent just raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

“Thank you, Catherine,” Father said to her. “I’ve gone Above a few times since you left us, and Peter, among others, decided that I needed to look a little more up to date, shall we say.”

“Then I take it we will be going to see Peter today,” she said with a smile. “Good. Would it be possible for us to go up a little early and maybe have some lunch? We can go up through Peter’s. It’s only a few blocks from the hospital, and there is a great mom and pop deli on the way.” She leaned toward Father and kissed him on the cheek. “I want to talk to you about something,” she whispered.

Vincent would have heard her, but Caroline chose that moment to start talking, telling Vincent about the French toast she had for breakfast.

Father raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

“What were you studying on the map?” Catherine asked as she glanced over at it.

“I was showing Father where your building is. Those tunnels don’t get used often, and aren’t on the regular inspection circuit. We were adding them, so we will know that it’s safe.”

“What time were you planning to leave, Catherine?” asked Father as he crossed the room to a cabinet, where he exchanged his usual cane for a more dapper-looking walking stick. He also pulled out an overcoat.

She looked at her watch. “Visiting hours start at 12:30, so we can get there any time after that. It’s after 10:00. If we go now, we might be able to beat the lunch rush at the deli and have plenty of time to talk. It won’t be too much of a walk for you, will it?”

“No, I still move slowly, but I move better and with hardly any pain these days. Peter has given me some medication for the arthritis in my hip, and one of our newest residents used to be a massage and physical therapist. She’s given me some exercises to do that have helped a lot. Peter has been trying to talk me into surgery, but I’m not so sure I need it.”

Catherine said goodbye to Caroline and told her to be good, then she kissed Vincent on the cheek and told him she’d see him later.

The walk to Peter’s was uneventful. Father told her stories about some of the things they passed as they walked. They reached Peter’s, went through the house and out onto the sidewalk. Catherine led the way to the deli.
“So, what would you like?” she asked, as they entered. “We give our order here, pay, then they will bring the food to us when it’s ready.” Father was reaching for his wallet, and she waved it back into his coat. “This is my treat.”

Father studied the menu as Catherine gave her order. He stepped up behind her and placed his order as if he did that kind of thing every day. The cashier was ringing it up, and Father went past her into the dining room.

“Do you have any preference on seating?” he asked.

“Anywhere is fine,” she said as she joined him.

He chose a booth, and the waiter showed up with a pot of tea and two mugs as they got settled.

“What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Catherine?” he asked as they sipped tea.

She wasn’t sure where to start, so she took a deep breath and jumped right in.

“I don’t know how much Vincent has told you, and I know it’s only been a couple of days...” she began.

“Vincent has confided in me,” Father interrupted. “He was rather ardent about it, in fact. He told me that he’d made mistakes in the past and that he was done listening to me, and was going to make his own decisions.”

Catherine was hard pressed to keep from laughing.

“I’m sure he was more polite than that,” she said, “but Vincent is an adult, and he can make his own decisions.”

She was surprised and very relieved when Father smiled at her fondly.

“Catherine, my son loves you. He hasn’t been very happy the last few years, when he wasn’t seeing you. He told me that he doesn’t want to repeat past mistakes. I will not oppose anything he wants to do. As you say, he’s an adult, and I must let him do what he feels is best for him, and I’m quite convinced that he thinks you are best for him. I’m inclined to agree... May I be a nosy old man...”
and ask if you two have... um... well, you know what I’m talking about. I know it’s none of my business.”

“It isn’t any of your business,” she readily agreed, “but we haven’t. We’ve decided to go slowly, but that is why I wanted to talk to you. You would know better than anyone if something started to bother him.”

“I just want Vincent to be happy,” he told her. “And it seems that to be happy, he requires you. He was content before he met you, but I don’t think he was truly happy. I don’t think he had been since Devin left. Life with you in it was a bit chaotic,” he smiled to soften his words, “but he was happy, and he’s been happier in the last few days than he has been any time since he sent you away. I accept that. No matter what I’ve led you to believe, Catherine, I do admire you. I will admit that there were times when that admiration was a bit begrudging, but it was always there, nonetheless.

I will be forever grateful to you for giving Margaret back to me, even though it was only for a short time. I was happier during those few days than I had been just about any time since her father took her away from me. I can no longer deny that kind of happiness to Vincent.”

Catherine looked across the table at him with tears in her eyes.

“Thank you, Father,” was all she said.

They finished their lunch in silence and didn’t resume any conversation until they were on their way to the hospital.

Susan was sitting on the side of the bed and Peter was in a chair when they walked into the room; they were both laughing at something.

“It’s so good to see you looking so well, Peter!” Catherine exclaimed, as she crossed the room to kiss him on the cheek. “The last time I saw you... I don’t know... it was just scary.”

“Susan put it pretty well,” Peter said, as he extended his hand to Father. “I looked like warmed over dog poo.”

“A very apt description,” she agreed, and hugged Susan.

The four of them talked for a while, then Catherine and Susan moved to the other side of the private room to let Father and Peter talk.

“So...” said Susan, as they sat on the small plastic couch. “Tell me! How’s it going?” It had only been a little over twenty-four hours, but she still wanted all the details.

“Tell you what?” asked Catherine, pretending not to understand, but her eyes were twinkling. She understood perfectly.

“You and Vincent! Did you get to pick up where you left off when I disturbed you?”

“No, but we talked. We’re going to take our time. Caro is with him right now. He went home last night, and when he wasn’t there this morning, she wanted to know where he was.”

Susan lowered her voice. “What does Father think of him spending the night?”
"I took him to lunch before we came here, and he surprised me. He seems to be backing off his original assumptions about Vincent. He admitted that Vincent is happier with me in his life, and he thinks a normal, or at least as normal as we can make it, life is possible for him. He all but admitted that he was holding Vincent back; he said that he could no longer deny Vincent the kind of happiness that every man should have."

Susan sighed, sat back and beamed at Catherine. “That is wonderful. I’ve always loved Father, but I learned very early on that he can be stubborn. For him to make that kind of statement is something.”

“I agree.”

“When are Rob and the children coming back?” Catherine asked.

“The kids’ Christmas break starts on the 21st. They will be here the Sunday before, so we will be able to go to Winterfest with Daddy this year.”

“I’m looking forward to Caro’s first Winterfest.”

They rejoined the men and spent a pleasant afternoon. It was almost dinnertime when everyone decided it was time to leave and let Peter rest.

They were gathering their things when Peter asked Catherine to stay behind; he wanted to speak to her.

“Sure, Dad,” said Susan. “Father and I will see you back at the house, Cath.”

They left, and Catherine took the chair next to Peter.

“What is it, Peter?” she asked curiously.

“All this has been a real wake up call,” he told her. “I’ve worked hard all my life, and I’ve been retirement age now for several years, but I keep putting it off. I couldn’t see myself retired. I didn’t know what I’d do with myself.”

“I think Daddy would have been the same way,” she said with a smile. “And look at Father, he hasn’t really slowed down either.”

“Well, I’ve decided that I am going to retire. I’m going to sell my share of the practice to my partners; I’ve already talked to Stan about it, and he says that he and Brad can do it. I’m going to liquidate all my property here, and move to Santa Fe.”

“I bet Susan is thrilled!” Catherine exclaimed.

“I haven’t told her yet,” he admitted. “She’s tried to talk me into it several times over the last few years. She wants me to move in with them, but I don’t think I’m so old and doddering that I need to do that just yet. I’ll get my own place, close to them. But that is what I’m beating around the bush about. Before I put my house on the market, I thought I’d offer it to you. I’ve heard you say more than once that you don’t like the penthouse, but it’s convenient and secure, and a good size for you and Caroline. I know you’ve always liked my house. It’s in good shape, doesn’t need any major repairs, has a small walled backyard where Caroline can play, and last, but not least, it has a threshold. Years ago, Janine made the house secure for Vincent to visit. There are shutters on the inside of all the street-facing windows...”

“You don’t have to talk me into it!” she exclaimed, then hugged him. “That is a wonderful idea. When you’re ready, let me know what you want for it, and you have a sale. And I
won’t give you one penny less than fair market value!” she warned. “When are you going to tell Susan?”

“Keep it a secret from everyone for now. I plan to talk to Susan when they spring me from here next week,” he told her.

“And I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone either. Please ask her not to tell anyone Below that I plan to buy the place.”

“I won’t even tell her that you are going to buy it. I’ll tell her that I plan to put it on the market once I’ve finished my physical therapy and am ready to move.”

“If they ask me what you wanted to talk about, what should I tell them?” she asked.

“Tell them I talked to you about my will,” he suggested. “I do have one, but it’s very generic, I did it after Janine died. It needs to be updated.”

“I’ll put together something that should be good just about anywhere,” she told him. “You can take it to an attorney in New Mexico when you get settled there and make sure it will be OK there too.”

He told her where to find a copy of his old will, and they agreed on their plan before Catherine left and hurried back to Peter’s house. Susan, Father, Vincent, and Caroline were in the kitchen drinking tea when she got there.

Caroline looked up and smiled at her.

“Hi, Mama,” she said, but seemed content to remain where she was, on Vincent’s lap.

Vincent sensed Catherine’s surprise and rushed to reassure her.

“Caroline just doesn’t want to give up her cookies and milk,” he said.

“I think I’ve been replaced,” Catherine said, with a feigned pout.

“Not replaced,” he told her, “just augmented.”

Catherine took off her coat and joined them at the large family table. Susan got up to get her a cup and to add some more snacks to the plate.

“What did Daddy want to talk to you about?” Susan asked, as she sat back down.

“Just legal stuff. He said that everything that has happened has been a wake up call. He wants to update his will. Don’t let me forget to get the copy of the old one from his desk here, so I know where to start. I’ll start with something basic, and then, when he’s feeling better, we will get more specific.”

They were getting ready to leave a little while later, when Vincent turned to Susan. “Are you going back to the hospital tonight?” he asked.

“No, I think I’m going to go to bed early.”

“Would you like to join us Below for dinner?” he asked.

“Tempting as that sounds, I don’t think so. Not tonight. I’m bound to wind up talking to someone and before I know it, my plan to get some sleep tonight will be blown. Besides, I’m supposed to call Rob before the kids go to bed. Maybe I’ll come down over the weekend,” she suggested.

Catherine had dinner Below, then afterward, Vincent walked her back to her threshold.

“Can you come up?” she asked, as they crossed the basement to the elevator.
For a while,” he told her. “But I have sentry duty tonight at midnight, so I can’t stay.” He sounded disappointed.

When they reached the apartment, Catherine took Caroline to get her ready for bed and Vincent made himself comfortable on the couch with a magazine that Catherine hadn’t had time to read yet.

She came out a little while later and sat down next to him.

“You wore her out again,” she told him. “She fell asleep before I finished the story.”

He looked contrite. “I have to admit, I was enjoying her so much that I forgot to take her to Mary for a nap.”

“That explains why she was so quiet through dinner. She is usually a much livelier dinner conversationalist if you don’t mind talking about Barney and her stuffed animals.”

“What’s on your mind, Catherine?” he asked. “Something has been bothering you all day. And when you said that Peter just wanted to talk about a will, that wasn’t the whole story.”

She smiled at him. “I can’t put anything over on you, can I,” she said, as she slipped off her shoes and pulled her feet up on the couch. Her toes were cold, and she slipped them between the couch cushions, like she used to do when she was younger.

“What I said about Peter was just part of it, but I’m not at liberty to talk about the rest yet. As soon as Peter tells me it’s OK, I will, but he will probably tell you first.”

Vincent reached over and pulled her feet out of the couch cushions and rested them on his thigh. He started to rub one of them. It pulled a groan and a surge of pleasure from Catherine that startled him.

“Oh God, that’s wonderful! I’ll have to make sure to remember to see you after a long day on my feet in court.” She relaxed, closed her eyes and slid down a little so that Vincent could reach her feet better.

“So, what did you talk to Father about?” he asked, after a couple of minutes.

“Us,” she said simply. “I just wanted to make sure that Father knew where I was on the subject. He really does seem to have changed his mind about me.”

“He never disliked you, Catherine,” Vincent started.

“I know that, but he had a basic distrust of women from my social strata, because of Margaret, and even after he and Margaret reconciled before her death, it was like she was the exception to the rule; he still couldn’t bring himself to trust me… at least not with you. He was so frightened that I would hurt you.”

“And as it turned out, I was the one who hurt you,” Vincent said. “I’m so grateful that you accepted me back into your life.”

“I never let go of you, Vincent. Don’t you understand? I never gave up hope. Sure, I was living my life and even enjoying parts of it… Caro, my job, my friends, but without you… there was a huge hole.”

Vincent surprised her by lifting her from the end of the couch and settling her on his lap.

“I wish you didn’t have sentry duty tonight,” she whispered.

“My wish too, Catherine,” he said, nuzzling her neck.
Catherine snuggled closer, and when she wiggled her bottom into a more comfortable spot she found something hard digging into her hip, but it didn’t feel quite right.

“Um, Vincent... what is poking me in the butt?” she asked.

His head came up, startled. Then he blushed and dropped his eyes. He shifted her a bit and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a broken Winterfest candle, the wax held together only by the wick.

“It seems a little worse for wear,” he said offering it to her. “I can get you another one.”

“No, this one will do just fine. I can fix it,” she assured him. “I’m looking forward to Winterfest this year!”

Over the next few weeks, it seemed that the fates that had been smiling on them had suddenly turned against them.

Catherine had time off, and she and Caro spent a lot of it Below, but Vincent was usually so busy that he seldom had time to do more than have a meal with them. The few times he was able to get away from the pre-Winterfest chores Below, he could only stay a short time; long enough for dinner and a bedtime story for Caro, if he was lucky.

“Why don’t you plan to come down for Winterfest and stay a few days?” He suggested one evening. “Winterfest is on Monday and Christmas is on Friday. I won’t be nearly as busy that week. You could spend the whole week, if you don’t have anything else planned.”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t have anything else planned,” she told him with a grin. “Since Susan and her family are here, I wanted to spend some time with them and Peter, but I’m sure that they will be Below a lot, and Peter’s house is easier to get to from Below than my place.”

“Good, I’ll make sure that the guest chamber is ready for you,” he told her, before he had to rush off again.

She was a little disappointed at his suggestion of the guest chamber, but since she’d have Caro with her, she guessed it made sense.

“What’s a Win’fest, Mama?” asked Caro, while Catherine was picking out clothes to pack for their stay Below.
“It’s a big party,” Catherine told her. “There are a lot of pretty candles like the one on the mantle, lots of goodies to eat, and music, dancing, games. There will be a lot of children for you to play with.”

“And Vin?” she asked enthusiastically. She seemed to have missed his presence as much as Catherine had.

“Yes, Vincent will be there. And we will stay a few days after, so we can spend more time with Vincent.”

Caro clapped her hands and giggled. “Kisses!” she squealed.

Catherine giggled at that. “I hope so, Sweetie, I certainly hope so!”

Later that morning, Jamie met them at the basement threshold.

“Vincent wanted to meet you,” Jamie told her as they walked along, “but at the last minute the men who were carrying one of the tables back down to the Great Hall dropped it. One of them was pinned under the table on the stairs.”

“I hope no one was hurt!” exclaimed Catherine.

“A broken leg,” Jamie said, with a shake of her head. “It’s Stephen, but Father said it was a clean break. He’s setting it and putting the cast on now. Vincent went to carry Stephen up to the hospital chamber, then he went back down and helped them with the table. It survived the fall better than Steven did.”

Mary met them in the guest chamber.

“I just wanted to make sure that you have everything you need,” she said. “Vincent is going to try to meet you in the dining chamber for lunch. It will be a cold lunch today, since William is busy getting everything ready for tonight.”

“Can I help anywhere?” Catherine asked as she put her and Caro’s bag on the bed.

“Well, William can always use an extra pair of hands in the kitchen. The children are always there to help, but most of them are too young to do some of the things he needs help with,” Mary told her.

“My knife skills are pretty good; I can chop, dice and mince almost like a pro. That is if Caro can stay with your little ones.” She looked down at Caro, who was prowling the chamber.

“I was going to ask you about that,” said Mary. “There is a small bed in here,” she pointed to an alcove. “But if you like, Caro can stay in the chamber with the other children her age, at least tonight. That way she can come up with the rest of them early, and you can stay on and enjoy the party.

Caro had been listening intently to Mary, and when Catherine looked down at her, she was smiling.

“What do you think, Caro? Do you want to stay with the other children?”

“Yes, Mama,” she said, nodding vigorously. “They tell good stories there.”

Catherine went to their suitcase and pulled out Caro’s pajamas and her toothbrush, and handed them to Caro.

“I’ll pick her up and bring her back here to dress for tonight,” she told Mary.
Catherine quickly unpacked and put away their things, then hurried off to the kitchen. “Mary said you could use some adult help,” she said, as she entered William’s domain. “Can I ever!” he exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to get the ingredients for the potato salad cut up, but people keep rushing in here with other things that I need to do. Can you cut them all up? They’re on that table over there.”

Catherine looked at the old stainless steel prep table in the back of the kitchen. There were enough potatoes, hard boiled eggs, celery, and onions to make potato salad for an army. It was daunting.

“Cut the potatoes first then dump them in the pot of water on the stove; it should be hot by the time you get them ready. Let them cook while you cut up everything else. Don’t worry about getting it all together; I’ll take care of that, but put everything in separate bowls as you cut them up. They all need to be chopped pretty fine. There’s a good knife over on the board.”

Catherine got to work, and by lunchtime she had made a good enough dent in the pile of vegetables that she felt she could take a break for lunch with Caro. Vincent joined them at the table.

He looked closely at her as he sat down, noting her red-rimmed, swollen eyes. “Have you been crying, Catherine?” he asked with concern. He hadn’t felt anything in the Bond.

She laughed and dabbed her eyes with her napkin. “Chopping onions for William’s potato salad,” she told him with a grin. “I think I’m going to get him a food processor for Christmas.”

Vincent looked relieved. “It will be worth the effort,” he told her. “William makes the best potato salad I’ve ever had. It’s the onions that do it.”

After lunch, Catherine was back in the kitchen. She finished in plenty of time for William to put everything together and set the bowls to chill in the chamber they used as a refrigerator.

Catherine picked Caro up from Mary, and they spent an hour splashing in the small bathing chamber around the corner from the guest chamber. Mary had told her that there were several groups being led down to the Great Hall, so as long as she was in the dining chamber any time between six and seven, she could join one of them.

Caro was dancing around in the guest chamber admiring her new red velvet dress, while Catherine finished dressing.

“You like your dress?” Catherine asked, as she helped her put on her coat.

“It’s a pwetty color. Like yours too.” She patted the sleeve of Catherine’s dark green velvet. Catherine helped Caroline with her coat, then put on her own black velvet opera cape, and they started toward the door.

“Wait a minute, Caro,” Catherine said, stopping. “I think I should probably wear different shoes.”

She had put on heels, but remembering the long stairs leading down to the Great Hall, she decided that they were not the best choice. She kicked them off and went to the armoire for
her black ballet flats. They made the dress and cape a little too long, but she’d just have to remember to hold it up when she walked.

Caro was spellbound by every aspect of their trek down. She greeted and talked to perfect strangers like they were long lost relatives, she charmed everyone and had Catherine laughing outright at her fascination with Sabastian.

They were with the last group to be led down, and when they reached the bottom of the stairs, they were at the back of the crowd. Catherine was holding Caro, and they were standing a little off to the side, when Caro spotted Vincent and Father in front. She immediately started bouncing in Catherine’s arms, as she waved and shouted at them. Her voice was just high pitched enough to carry over the noise of the wind.

Vincent turned and smiled, then motioned them to come to the front of the group. The crowd parted to let them through, making Catherine feel a bit self-conscious.

After he’d performed the yearly ritual of removing the plank and opening the doors, Vincent returned to them, took Caro out of Catherine’s arms, took Catherine’s hand, and led her into the dark chamber.

The evening went much quicker than Catherine expected. Mary and several of the older girls took the younger children back to their chamber around nine; then the next group left about an hour later. The older ones, the teenagers, were allowed to stay on, and they were also the ones who would be doing the cleaning up.

Vincent and Catherine left right after the closing ceremony, a little after midnight.

“I know a shorter route,” he told her, as he led her up the stairs past the tapestries. “We don’t use it much, because it’s narrow in places and we can’t get the larger things through, but it cuts the walk time in half and avoids the wind.”

They had walked about five minutes, hand in hand, when they came to a ledge about three feet wide, that sloped down around a large, still pool.

Catherine looked at it and shivered.

“What is it?” he asked, stopping at the edge.

“It looks a lot like the mirror pool, but without anything to reflect, it looks rather sinister.”

“Nothing sinister, but it is very cold. It’s deep, and spring-fed, and stays just a few degrees above freezing,” he told her, as he started out along the ledge in front of her. “Be careful, the rocks are sometimes wet and can be a little slippery.”

No sooner had he said that when she stepped on the hem of her dress. It made her stagger, and she reached for his arm. The soft leather soles of her shoes slipped on the wet rocks, and she started to fall. Vincent had let go of her hand just long enough to gather his cloak up to keep it from getting wet. When he turned back to her, it was just in time to see her fall. He grabbed for her and missed her by inches.

Catherine felt herself falling, and afraid of possibly hitting the rocks, she let go and let herself fall. She knew the water would be cold, but she also knew that Vincent would be there to pull her out. She wasn’t counting on the heavy velvet cape and dress she was wearing. As soon as it got wet, it started pulling her down. She tried to kick back toward the surface, but her legs tangled in the heavy, wet fabric and her arms were useless too, because they were tangled in the cape. She started to sink like a rock.
Vincent was shocked to see her sinking so fast. He could see her struggling and felt her panic. He threw off his cloak and jumped in feet first after her. He propelled himself deeper until he saw her. Then he wrapped his arms around her hips and kicked them back to the surface.

He swam to the opposite side of the pool where there was a narrow beach that made it easier to get out. He felt it when she blacked out under the water.

Once on the beach, he did a quick assessment, and although she had a pulse, she wasn’t breathing. He knew she must have taken in some water, so he started rescue breathing, pressing his mouth to hers and pushing air into her lungs. After a few breaths, she choked, sputtered up some water and started to cough. He helped her roll to her side and then finally over onto her hands and knees, and he held her as she coughed up the water.

When she finally seemed to have cleared it, she was shivering so hard she couldn’t stay still, and her lips were blue. He left her only long enough to go back for his cloak. He wrapped her in it, picked her up and carried her back to his chamber. The tunnels were quiet, and it was only a short walk. The hot pool in his private bathing chamber would be perfect to warm her up.

He carried her into the pool fully clothed; they were both already soaked. He carried her to the warmer end of the pool and put her down on the ledge there. He held her head above the water as she slid down.

Her color started to come back within minutes, and she stopped shivering. She was able to sit up on her own and insisted on getting out of her clothes. Vincent helped her, and she only stripped down as far as her underwear, and for that he was grateful.

“If you think you’ll be all right for a few minutes, I’ll take these wet things, and get some dry clothes,” he said, as he headed back to the steps out of the pool. “If the water gets too warm there, just move back in this direction.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him.

He gathered all the wet clothes and went back into his chamber, where he bent to remove his wet boots. His hands were shaking so badly he could barely undo the laces. He had to stop and take several deep breaths to calm himself. He took off the rest of his wet things, quickly dried himself, then put on a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved knit shirt, and dry shoes. The drying chamber next to the laundry was just down the corridor, and he returned to his chamber just as Catherine was coming out of the bathing chamber, wrapped in a large towel with another towel wrapped around her head.

“Are you warm?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’ve never been so cold in my life,” she commented as she picked up his comb and sat on a chair next to his table.

Vincent stirred up the fire in the brazier and added some more wood, before he moved to stand behind her and took the comb out of her hands. He had to do something, had to touch her somehow, to reassure himself that she was all right. He removed the towel from her head and started combing out her wet hair.

“You’re tired,” he stated, once all the knots were combed out.

“Yes, I’m exhausted,” she said. “I think I’d like to sleep for a while.”
“You should probably dry your hair before you lay down. You don’t want to get chilled again. Is there something to dry it with?”

“There’s a blow dryer in my suitcase,” she told him. “I should probably go back to the guest chamber; I need my robe and pajamas.”

“It’s cold in the corridor and probably cold in your chamber. I’ll go get everything you need and bring it back here.”

He was back in a few minutes. He plugged the dryer into the one outlet in his chamber and showed surprising expertise at using it to dry her hair. He combed the fingers of one hand through the wet hair and held it up as he aimed the dryer at it, letting the hair fall back into place. He did this over and over, until every lock was dry. The movement was soothing and almost put her to sleep.

He helped her slip the nightgown over her head and took the towel she pulled out from under it.

“You can sleep here tonight,” he told her. “It’s warmer.”

She didn’t protest. She just went to the bed and crawled in. He had a heating pad that he retrieved from the bottom of the armoire. He plugged it in and put it in the bed under Catherine’s feet. She was soon asleep.

He sat for several minutes watching her, assuring himself that she was safe.

Once he was sure that she was resting, he went to the kitchen to make some tea. He was a bit chilled too, but knew that it had more to do with Catherine’s brush with death than with the actual temperature.

_The tea will help_, he reasoned. There was still a lot of activity in the kitchen, and he worked around it, trying to stay out of everyone’s way.

While the water heated, he carried a load of wood back to his chamber. He returned to the kitchen, made his tea, then went back to his chamber. He straightened things and blew out all the candles. He was purposely trying not to think, and doing mindless chores was exactly what he needed. He started to relax. He sat, staring into the fire, until he dozed off. Suddenly, a lance of fear from Catherine woke him and he heard her call him.

He rushed to the bed to find her sitting up, just waking from a dream; a nightmare. He sat on the side of the bed and pulled her into his arms.

“It was just a dream, Catherine,” he whispered. “You’re safe. I have you.”

“I was so cold,” she sobbed. “Thank God you were there.” She clung to him as she quieted.

“You should sleep some more,” he told her, as he tucked her back in.

“Will you stay with me?” she pleaded. “Please?”

He hesitated a moment, pulled off his shoes, then slid in beside her. She rolled toward him and nestled into his arms.

“Thank you, Vincent,” she sighed, and was asleep again.
Catherine woke and lifted her head high enough to see the clock on the mantle. It was early morning, and she finally felt warm. She remembered having a bad dream and calling out, and Vincent coming to her. He had stayed. He was curled close to her back, and that probably accounted for some of the delicious warmth that had finally returned to her body. She sighed in contentment and leaned back against him. His arm encircled her, and she felt him nuzzle her hair.

“I felt your fear, Catherine,” he whispered. “I thought I’d lost you.”

She turned in his arms and cuddled as close as she could. “Just hold me, please,” she whispered back.

He held her tighter as she snaked her arms up around his neck and turned her face up to his. He kissed her, and she tried to lose herself in those kisses. She wanted to lose herself in his love, in the heat of his body as it curved against hers, protecting her. When he released her lips, she breathed in deeply the heady, intoxicating scent of him.

Eagerly, as if by mutual agreement, they started to shed clothing. All she had on was the nightgown. Vincent was still wearing only jeans and a shirt. It didn’t take long to rid themselves of it all.

Once bare, they came together with a hunger that surprised them both. Vincent spoke her name, repeating it over and over, in the way that only he could say it. He only stopped when his lips took hers again. He loved her, and he wanted to show her how much. He wanted to love her slowly and gently.

Catherine couldn’t believe what was finally happening. She was suddenly energized. She didn’t realize she was crying until she felt him kissing the tears away.

“My love...Catherine... I thought I’d lost you.” He went very still. He could feel their hearts beating in unison. “I thought I’d lost you,” he repeated. This time she could hear the pain in his voice.

His kisses were reverent. His caresses almost worshipful. She returned each kiss and each touch with the same feeling.

Slowly, carefully, he rolled his body over hers, until almost all of his weight was pressing her into the mattress. She sighed at the wonderful feeling; it was a delightful pressure. She felt him gently probing, seeking entrance. She reached down and guided him inside her; their bodies finally merged.

She was reveling in the sensation, when she was shocked to feel his shoulders heave. His face was buried in the curve of her neck, his mouth against her skin. She felt tears on her
skin but didn’t think that was the problem. He was breathing hard, taking long slow
breaths as if to calm himself.
She held him, her hands tenderly stroking and touching him, trying to comfort him. He
finally lifted slightly off her and raised his head to look down at her.
“Catherine, are you all right?” he asked. “I... I didn’t mean it to happen this way.” He
seemed at a loss for words.
“Shh,” she said, smiling up at him. “Just love me. It doesn’t matter how it happened, just
that it has. Love me, Vincent.”
He moved his hips, pushing himself even deeper into her, and the expression of pure bliss
that appeared on her face was his reward. She arched closer to him, closing her eyes and
savoring the feel of him.
He dipped his head and captured her lips again. His kiss deepened, and it wasn’t long
before Catherine’s hands found their way to his back, then lower to his bottom, as she
urged him to move faster and harder. Need was quickly turning into white-hot desire.
Vincent’s possession of her mouth and her body was driving her almost senseless. She’d
nearly given up hope of ever feeling him nestled between her thighs, as he was now. She
wanted to say something, but the incredible feelings that were coursing through her blotted
all coherent thought from her mind.
“Vincent, please,” she finally managed. It was a plea, a plea for release, for the climax her
body had wanted... no, needed, for so long.
Steadily, but tenderly he moved inside her, pulling out then plunging deep. He used the
Bond and sought her responses to him, rejoiced in her acceptance of him. His body covered
hers and filled it. He couldn’t believe it was really happening.
Her skin was like satin. It tasted of salt and smelled sweetly of Catherine. He was finally
able to release the tenuous hold he had held on his passions since the beginning. He
plunged into her over and over, losing himself in her.
Catherine gave herself up to him. She’d always known she was made to love him, and now
she held the proof of it in her arms, in her body. She wanted to hold him there forever. The
upward spiral had started. For a split second, she wondered if he knew what he was doing
to her, then she remembered the Bond... he was experiencing it all with her. He would
experience not only his pleasure, but hers. She wished the Bond was that strong for her.
She could control it no longer. Her body was meeting his on every thrust. She cried out.
Her climax was just out of reach; she was trying to grab it and hold on, then it flooded her
whole body. She convulsed, and then her world exploded. Her body clamped down on his,
squeezing and holding tightly. He thrust once more then followed her into oblivion. Wave
after delicious wave of pure pleasure crashed over them.
The first thing that Vincent became aware of when his brain returned to earth was that
Catherine was crying. Her face was pressed tightly into his shoulder, and her arms were
wrapped around his neck. He held her tenderly.
He briefly thought of loving her again and again, spending the rest of the night and most of
the day inside her, pushing her over and over again to the release they had just
experienced, but he had to find out what was causing her tears. The feelings in the Bond were totally incomprehensible.

He kissed her forehead then her cheeks. “Why are you crying, Catherine?” he asked, his body tensing in anticipation of her answer.

She looked at him, smiling through her tears. “Thank you, Vincent; that was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever experienced. I love you so much.”

He sighed and relaxed. “It was all right?” he asked uncertainly.

“It was better than all right,” she assured him. “It was...” she searched for a word, but nothing was adequate.

Catherine woke again several hours later to find herself alone in the bed. The pipes were active, so she knew it was daytime. She squinted at the clock and saw that it was almost ten.

Vincent was sitting at his table with his back to her. He was writing in his journal. She found her nightgown and managed to get it on. She slipped out of bed and padded up behind him, barefoot.
He was unusually underdressed, in jeans, socks, and t-shirt. His journal was open in front of him, his pen was in his hand, but he’d stopped writing and was staring off into space. She slipped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him. Vincent was startled and dropped his pen.

Catherine laughed. “I snuck up on you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he admitted, as he turned toward her. “My mind was elsewhere.” He pulled her into his lap.

“Where?” she asked.

“With you,” he admitted.

She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her. “In bed, I hope,” she said.

He didn’t answer, but she thought she detected a blush darkening his skin.

“Lunch will be ready soon,” he told her.

“What is William serving?” she asked.

“Something easy, since he’s been working so hard for the last week. He said it’s a stew,” he answered. “It’s one of his grandmother’s recipes; she adapted from an old German recipe.”

“Sounds like it should be hardy,” she said. “I guess I should go put some clothes on, so we can go eat.”

Vincent stood and set her back on her feet.

She was following his lead, and it was obvious that he was a little ill at ease. She grabbed an afghan off the end of the bed and wrapped it around herself.

“I’ll meet you back here in a little bit,” she told him, and headed back to the guest chamber. Luckily, she didn’t meet anyone in the corridor on the way. That would have been interesting.

When she returned, Vincent was dressed, but had foregone his usual layers. He had on a t-shirt with a denim work shirt, jeans, and his boots. She liked the look.

She thought he might be getting over his unease at the change in their relationship, because he took her hand and held it all the way to the dining chamber. He didn’t let go as they entered and joined the line.

“Smells wonderful,” Catherine told William, as the savory smell drifted up and made her stomach growl...

“It’s real simple,” William told her. “I’ll give you the recipe sometime.”

Caro was in the dining chamber and joined them at the table. She babbled, mostly incoherently, at least to Vincent, about all the things she’d done.

“Do you want to come with us after we eat?” Catherine asked, when Caro stopped for a breath.

“NO!” Caro insisted. “Drampa’s gonna read, and I like sleepin in big room.

Catherine looked at Vincent, who just raised his eyebrows and shrugged. She looked across the chamber at Mary, who smiled and nodded that it was OK.
“All right then,” Catherine agreed. “One more night in with the others. But I want you to stay with me tomorrow night. I miss you!” She hugged her daughter, who squirmed away and ran back to her friends.

“I thought she’d be at least five or six before she got to be that independent,” she mused as she watched Caro run back to Mary.

“She’s mature for her age,” commented Vincent before he went back to his stew.

After they ate, Vincent insisted that they go back to his chamber, where it was warm. He seemed obsessed with keeping her warm.

He’d straightened the bed, and now they went to cuddle against the pillows. She sighed and relaxed against him.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“In less than twenty-four hours, my life has totally changed,” he told her. “I can’t believe that yesterday at this time, I was afraid that intimacy with you might endanger you.” He dropped a kiss on top of her head. “I’m just sorry that it happened as it did. I wanted to take more time. The way it happened... it just seemed so rushed.”

She laughed quietly and rubbed his chest. “Oh, Vincent... we have our whole lives to take our time. In fact, that was actually rather remarkable for a first time. The important thing is that we love each other, and that we are now free to express that love in every way.”

She hadn’t looked at him since she’d cuddled up to him. Now she pulled away, and sat back so she could see him.

“You are OK, aren’t you?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes... yes, I’m fine. All my fears are gone; you’ve assuaged them.”

She burrowed back into his chest then turned her face up for his kiss.

“Vincent, may I ask a favor?” she asked, after a time.

“Of course, what is it?”

As she tried to figure out how to word her request, she was startled to see a deep flush spread from the neck of his t-shirt, up his neck to his face. Vincent was blushing.

“Do you know what I want?” she asked curiously.

“Not exactly, but I know what you’re feeling.”

“Would you take your shirt off?” she asked. “I love the feel of your skin against mine. Your hair is so soft.”

He swallowed and looked away for a moment. His eyes came back to hers before he got up and went over to the entrance, where he rolled down a rug that hung above the door. He hooked it at the bottom and came back to sit next to her.

“I never had one of those, before,” he told her. “I never felt the need for privacy. But in the last year, I found that I sometimes just didn’t want to be bothered. The hooks at the bottom hold so that no one can come through it. Mouse has bounced off it a few times.”

She nodded, satisfied that they wouldn’t be interrupted. She moved away from him and watched as he removed his work shirt and undershirt, and dropped them on the chair, then joined her on the bed again.
She started pulling off her socks. Then, in a very businesslike manner, she pulled her shirt off over her head and removed her jeans. She left her bra and panties on. She wadded all the clothing up and tossed it over onto a chair. She remained on her knees, sitting back on her heels in front of him, as he finally allowed himself to look at her.

“I didn’t realize that you meant to undress too,” he said.

He opened his arms. She went into them, and he lifted her to sit on his lap. She turned her torso so that their chests met.

“Mmmm,” she hummed contentedly. “That feels so nice, but...” she reached behind her and unhooked her bra. “That’s better.” She tossed the bra after the rest of her clothes.

Although she could feel him growing against her hip, he seemed content to hold her and let his hands wander over her back and legs.

“My dreams are coming true, Catherine,” he whispered against her ear.

“We must have been sharing dreams, because mine are too,” she whispered back. Then she sighed as he lifted her off his lap and laid her down on the blanket next to him.

He stretched out on his side and continued stroking her. Sometimes, it was the pads of his fingers, and she could occasionally feel a light scrape from a nail. Other times, he used the backs of his fingers. The layer of fur was extremely erotic.

Vincent was fascinated by the effect that his caresses had on Catherine. He watched as her body reacted physically and felt what she was feeling, in the Bond. A rosy flush spread up her body; his fingers left a trail of goosebumps, and when he brushed her nipple, he watched in fascination as it pebbled up and grew hard and erect.

Catherine closed her eyes and gave herself up to the sensations. She wanted to do some exploring of her own, but decided to let Vincent do this, uninterrupted. She gasped when his mouth covered her nipple.

He jerked away, and her eyes popped open.

“Catherine?” he questioned.

“It’s OK,” she said with a sigh. “Your hand was on my hip, and my attention was there; I just didn’t expect that. Please don’t stop.”

“I didn’t hurt you?” he asked.

“What does the Bond tell you?”

“I was feeling your pleasure until you were startled.”

“Sometimes gasping is a good sign, Vincent,” she said with a small smile, as she held her arms out to him.

He settled back beside her, and this time he covered her breast with his hand and explored its contours and textures, before he took her nipple into his mouth. After a time, he found his way back to her mouth and kissed her deeply, before turning his face into her neck and breathing deeply.

“I can’t believe that I can give you this much pleasure with such a simple touch,” he whispered. “I always considered myself at the very least too different, and at worst an abomination; I never thought I would ever be with you like this... I dreamt of it, but I never really thought it would happen.”
“Oh Vincent, I love you so much!” She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

As he pulled away to look at her, she captured his left hand and kissed it. When she let go of it, he placed it on her stomach and gazed down at her lovingly, but there was a hint of uneasiness in his eyes.

“What is it, Vincent?” she asked.

“There is another place I’d like to touch, and I sense that you want me to touch you there, but I’m afraid that I might injure you.”

She knew what he meant and offered encouragement.

“Go ahead, my love,” she told him. “You’ve been so careful, and your touch has been so delicate so far that I’m sure it will be OK.” She spread her legs ever so slightly to let him know she knew what he was referring to.

“Will you show me?” he asked.

She guided his hand down but left him to do his own exploration. He did, and when his finger connected with her clitoris she gasped again, but this time, he trusted the Bond and didn’t stop. His touch was light at first, offering very little stimulation, but at Catherine’s whimper, he increased the pressure. Only moments later, Catherine exploded in his arms. He held her tightly, reveling in the fact that he could do that for the woman he loved.

He continued to hold her, and when her body finally relaxed, she kissed him lightly and nuzzled his chin.

“You are magnificent, Vincent,” she said. “And the next time that happens, I want you inside me.”

She was surprised by his chuckle.

“What?” she asked, pulling back slightly to look at him.

“I’m astonished at your boldness,” he told her. “You are never afraid to ask for what you want.”

“Does that bother you?” she asked, with a slight frown.

“NO! Absolutely not. I love it. I need guidance, and you are not shy about giving it.”

“Good, then I have some more guidance for you,” she told him with an impish grin. “Take off your pants and make love to me.”

He almost laughed out loud, as he did just that.

Chapter 11

Christmas was never as much of a big deal for the community Below, as Winterfest. There was always a tree in the dining chamber and gifts for the younger children after breakfast,
Out There, Somewhere by Janet Rivenbark

but after that, families celebrated in their own ways. William served a festive meal for those who preferred to eat with the community, but the crowd was usually thin.

Catherine decided to cook dinner for everyone at her home. She had a house full with Peter, Susan, Rob, their children, Father, Vincent, and Caro. She’d never served dinner for ten before.

Susan and Catherine presided over the kitchen with occasional dubious assistance from Janine and Caro, while the males managed to find a college football game on TV and were enjoying that.

Vincent, who wasn’t a football fan, divided his time between the women and the game, making himself useful wherever he could. He supervised the girls setting the table, carried snacks and drinks to the guys in the living room, and tried to stay out of everyone’s way.

“Wow!” said Susan, as she jokingly fanned herself with a dishtowel while he was helping the girls set the table. “The way he looks at you; it could melt Siberia... Rob never looks at me like that anymore.”

“He does too!” Catherine argued, as she mashed the potatoes.

“No, he doesn’t. Vincent is smoldering. I’ve never seen blue eyes look that hot before.”

Susan started pulling serving bowls out of the cabinets, as Catherine giggled.

“More than his eyes are hot!” She dropped the potato masher in the bowl and clapped her hand over her mouth. “I can’t believe I just said that.” Then she laughed outright.

“Well, you both deserve it!” Susan told her.

Later, when dessert was served after dinner, Peter surprised everyone by standing up and clapping his hands.

“Everyone, I have an announcement to make.” They all turned to look at him. “I’ve already spoken to Catherine and Jacob, but now I want to let everyone in on my news.” He looked over at his daughter and smiled. “I’ve decided to retire. It will be official on January 4th. I have found a buyer for my house here; a realtor has found me a townhouse in Santa Fe.” He looked pointedly at Susan as she started to speak. She stopped before she had uttered the first syllable.

“Don’t worry, it’s within walking distance of your house.” He assured her. “I’ll be moving just as soon as the doctor releases me from my physical therapy. That should be about the middle of January. The physical therapist here is referring me to someone in Santa Fe for follow up.”

“The kids have to be back to school the first Monday in January, but do you want me to stay and help you here?” asked Susan.

“You’ve been away from your family long enough,” Peter told her, “I can manage. I’m only keeping a few pieces of furniture. The townhouse is about half the size of my house here.
You and I can go through the house and decide what to have shipped. You can pick what you want to keep. The rest will go with the house, and the new owner can decide what to do with it.”

When Peter finished, everyone crowded around, congratulating him. Catherine opened a couple of bottles of wine to celebrate.

“You knew he was doing this?” asked Vincent, as he picked up the tray with the glasses.

“He needed some legal advice about the sale of the house. We talked about it when he was telling me about wanting to redo his will.” Catherine wasn’t ready yet to tell Vincent that she’d bought Peter’s house. “He told me that he was going to talk to Father about it too; to let him know that he might have some things to send Below and about the possibility that the threshold in his basement might need to be closed.”

Catherine spent most of the rest of the evening avoiding Vincent. She could tell that he knew she was keeping something from him. But he didn’t bring it up, not even when everyone left, and he helped her straighten up.

“Caro went to bed so late; she might sleep in tomorrow. Would you like to stay?” she asked, as they were admiring the shimmering Christmas tree that stood in front of the windows that looked out over the park.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Miss Chandler?” he asked as he nuzzled her ear through her hair.

“Nope,” she said with a sigh. “I’m outright propositioning you, Sir.”

“In that case, I’d love to stay.”

Catherine woke the next morning to find Vincent on his side, facing away from her. That was unusual, because when they shared a bed, he was never not touching her. When she looked past him she realized why; it was snowing and it was near white-out conditions, at least on the roof.

“It always looks worse up here,” she whispered, as she snuggled close to his back.

“What?” he asked, rolling to his back and pulling her closer.

“You weren’t watching the snow?” she asked.

“No, actually, I hadn’t even noticed it until you mentioned it. I was just thinking.”

“What about?” she asked, as he settled her head on his shoulder.

“I was wondering what Caroline must think. Does she think it’s odd that sometimes I’m here when she wakes up and sometimes I’m not? Or why you are allowing me to sleep in your bed?”

“Where did that come from?” Catherine asked.

“Just something she said to me yesterday.”

“What did she say?”
“It’s not important,” he assured her. “Just something a child would say, but it made me wonder.”

Catherine wanted to try to wheedle it out of him, but knew that if he was determined not to tell her, he wouldn’t.

“I can’t read her mind,” Catherine told him, “but I am her mother and after those first two mornings when you were here, when you weren’t here the next morning, she missed you. She wanted to know where you were. I don’t think she’s old enough think anything beyond that she’s got both of us here. Since I got her the youth bed, she has stopped having the night terrors, and she can get out of bed any time she wants. I haven’t been working so she always comes in here and crawls into bed with me in the morning. Having you here just gives her twice the cuddles.”

“What is she going to think when she’s old enough to notice my differences?” he asked.

“She already notices,” Catherine told him, “and like me, she loves them. Where are you going with this?”

Vincent drew in a deep breath then looked at her and smiled. “Nowhere.” He nuzzled her neck. “How long do you think we have before Caroline wakes up?”

Catherine giggled. “Not long enough.” And the truth of her words was proved when Caroline bounced into the room and crawled up from the foot of the bed, to snuggle between them.

“Saturday Mama. Sausage!” she announced.

“And we have two kinds of muffins, blueberry and apple cinnamon.”

“Are we going to see Drampa and Mary today?”

“Later, Honey.”

“When, Mama?”

“Not for a while yet,” Catherine assured her. “We still have plenty of time for breakfast.”

Catherine caught the little girl in mid-bounce and set her on her feet on the floor. “Would you like some scrambled eggs with your sausage?” she asked.

She and Caroline headed for the kitchen and Vincent followed them out a few minutes later. He was completely dressed.

“You have to go back so soon?” Catherine asked as she was starting breakfast.

“Yes, I promised Father I’d go check on some repairs that were made last week. He’s afraid that they were done in too much haste and aren’t up to our usual standards.”

She handed him a cup of tea and poured herself a cup of coffee.

“What time should Caro and I come down?” she asked.

“My inspection shouldn’t take long,” he told her. “I should be done well before lunch.”

“We’ll come down for lunch then,” she promised.

“I’ll meet you at the threshold if I can.”

She served breakfast, and Vincent left shortly after. Catherine wondered off and on all morning what it was that Caro had said to Vincent to make him that concerned.
Vincent inspected the repair and found that it had been done well. He went back to the study to report to Father.

Father noticed his preoccupation.

“Is something bothering you, Vincent?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” he answered.

“Not exactly? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said, nothing is really bothering me; I was just thinking about something.”

“Then what are you thinking so intently about?”

“I was just thinking that I’m not setting the best example for the children, lately.”

“How’s that?” asked Father.

“More often than not, I’ve been spending the night at Catherine’s.”

“Oh, that. Well, I doubt most people here even know that. I mean, everyone knows that you and Catherine are back together, but I doubt that anyone even realizes that you’re doing anything different from what you’ve always done. You’ve always roamed at night.”

He nodded. “I suppose you’re right, but there was something else on my mind.”

“What is that?”

“I’m thinking about asking Catherine to be my wife. I’m just not sure how to go about it or how it would work with her life Above.”

Father was surprised by Vincent’s announcement, but he recovered quickly.

“I can’t answer that,” he admitted, “but if you love each other, and I know you do, you’ll make it work.”

Father rose and went over to his desk. He opened a bottom drawer and rummaged until he found something, then he went back to the table. He set a small, dark blue velvet box on the table next to Vincent’s left hand. “Margaret gave me these when she was Below. I think you might have a use for them.” Vincent picked up the box and opened it. It contained two rings: a vivid blue round sapphire, surrounded by small diamonds, set in white gold, and a plain, white gold band.

“These are beautiful, Father. Where...?”

“They were the rings I gave Margaret. When her father had the marriage annulled, he insisted that she get rid of them. She didn’t. She kept them, but she hid them. She never wore them again. The settings are a little old-fashioned, but they are in good shape. I picked a sapphire because it reminded me of the blue sky that day when I first saw Margaret. When she gave them to me, I thought that one of my sons might have use for them someday.”

Vincent was almost overcome. “Are you sure, Father?”
“Yes, I am. In fact, when Margaret gave them to me, she suggested that you might want them for Catherine. Margaret was a very wise woman.”

Vincent rose and hugged Father before he tucked the box safely into his pocket. “Thank you, Father... I’ve still got some things to do before I meet Catherine. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Caroline was dressed and ready, and had been sitting on Catherine’s bed, watching her agonize over what to wear for almost an hour.

“I like the red one, Mama,” said Caroline, pointing to the red sweater that was folded on the dresser.

Catherine had six outfits hanging or laying in different spots, all over the room. There was a regular rainbow of colors. The red was lovely, and Catherine knew she looked good in it, but there wasn’t enough of it. It was a sweater, but it was off-the-shoulder and even though most of the chambers Below were warm... well, she just didn’t think the red was quite right. Maybe for New Year’s Eve. She put the red one back in the drawer.

She did the same with the peach turtleneck, the aquamarine cashmere twin set, the black velvet and gold blouse. She was down to the cream colored silk blouse and the green cashmere cowl neck. They were both beautiful, and she’d never worn either of them. She was reaching for the green one when Caroline reached out and touched the white blouse.

“Feels dood, Mama.” Catherine remembered how much Vincent liked silk. He liked it so much that she was having a shirt made for him. It was a heavy silk poet’s shirt, and she planned to give it to him for his birthday. She hung the cashmere in the closet, took the silk blouse off the hanger and slipped it on. It was a simple style: long sleeves, slightly fitted, with a scooped neckline. It had a hemmed bottom that was designed to be worn untucked.

Caroline wanted to help, so Catherine let her button the cuffs for her.

“Now, I hope these pants are short enough that I don’t have to wear high heels,” she said, as she slipped into the cream colored wool slacks that matched the blouse. She dug around in the back of the closet for a pair of white leather boots. She checked in the mirror, and the hem of the pants hit in just the right place.

“I think we are finally ready,” she announced to Caroline, who clapped her hands and headed for the door.

“Wait, Sweetie. We have to have our coats. It’s going to be cold until we get where we’re going.”

She bundled Caro into her dressy coat and put on her own white wool. *Might as well keep with the theme.* She picked up the usual bag she carried everywhere she and Caroline went, tucked a silk shawl in it, and they left.

Samantha was waiting patiently at the threshold.

“Where’s Vincent?” asked Catherine.
“There was an intruder alert under Belvedere Castle. He’s checking it out. He said he’d meet you in the dining chamber.”

When Catherine got to the dining chamber, Caro informed her that she wanted to eat with Luke and Caty. Catherine let her go, and went to get her own meal. She found a seat at an empty table, where she could watch the door.

Vincent came in a few minutes later. He scanned the chamber and met her eyes; then he walked to the table where Caro was seated. He leaned over and dropped a kiss on the top of the little girl’s head and then leaned over and said something to Mary, who smiled and nodded.

He got a plate and joined Catherine.

“Was Caro eating?” she asked, before he sat down.

Vincent chuckled. “I think so. When I looked, she had a chicken leg, some fruit salad, a cupcake with chocolate icing, and a very large pile of mashed potatoes.”

“She loves ‘mashy taters,’” said Catherine, with a laugh. “No gravy, just butter.”

Vincent looked down at her. She looked up, smiled and reached for his hand.

“What is it?” she asked.

He smiled back. “I was just thinking how blessed I was to have found you in the first place, and how lucky I am that I found you again.”

“You always knew where I was,” she reminded him.

“I did, but I was trying to work up the courage to go to you and plead for your forgiveness. I’m afraid it would have taken me a while. If fate hadn’t stepped in as it did, I might still be sitting by myself, lost in my memories.”

Catherine was about to speak, when Vincent surprised her by dropping to one knee in front of her and taking both her hands.

From across the chamber, Father noticed Vincent’s action, nudged Pascal and nodded in their direction. It traveled around the room like wildfire. The conversation didn’t stop, but the noise level dropped considerably. Neither Catherine nor Vincent seemed to notice.

“What...?” began Catherine.

“Catherine, please, before I lose my nerve.”

Catherine closed her mouth and looked into Vincent’s eyes. At her slight nod, he spoke.

“I know that I’m asking a lot; I have nothing I can give you in return, but I love you, Catherine... will you honor me by becoming my wife?”

Catherine was surprised, but she didn’t hesitate. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at him.

“Yes, Vincent,” she said loud enough for those standing near to hear, but then she leaned forward and whispered, just before she kissed him. “You’ve already given me the most valuable thing in the world... yourself.”
It wasn’t until they broke the kiss that they realized that all eyes in the chamber were focused on them. Catherine blushed and started to stand, but Vincent tugged her back down to the bench.

“One more thing,” he said, as he reached into his pocket. He drew out the sapphire and diamond ring that Father had given him. He slipped it on the ring finger of her left hand. It fit perfectly.

“Oh my, Vincent! It’s beautiful!”

“Father gave it to Margaret when they were engaged. She gave it to him and suggested that I might have a use for it.”

As soon as the ring was on her finger, applause started all around them. Vincent stood with Catherine beside him.

Caroline came running across the chamber to them.

“Mama, Mama, we gonna marry Vincent?” she asked, as Catherine bent to lift her into her arms.

“Yes Sweetie, we are,” said Catherine, kissing her soft curls.
Caroline’s brow wrinkled, as she thought hard about something. “Then I can call him Daddy!” she finally announced.

Catherine laughed and looked up at Vincent as she leaned against him. “Well, I suppose so, if he wants you too.”

Vincent kissed Caroline’s cheek. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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**Epilogue - April 12, 1993**

Catherine looked around the living room at all the people who had helped her pull off this surprise: There were Helpers and people from Below. Even Mouse was in the door to the hall, shifting excitedly from one foot to the other.

Peter had left in the middle of January and changes had been underway ever since. Furniture had been moved, walls had been painted. The community Below were the recipients of a lot of furniture, both from the penthouse and from Peter’s house. Catherine didn’t keep much of her furniture, just some from her dad’s home office, some of her mother’s things, and Caroline’s room. Almost everything else from her place was tagged to go Below.

Catherine didn’t change everything in the house. She kept all the guest room furniture, and the kitchen and bathrooms were the same. Her mother’s dining room furniture was in the dining room here, but everything else was new. She’d always loved the fourth-floor master suite, and found furniture that was just perfect.

The house was huge, she admitted to herself, once she got started. Peter and Janine had bought it planning to have a large family, but fate had limited them to one child. The downstairs had a large kitchen, with a butler’s pantry and a laundry room. There was a formal dining room and a large, formal living room.

The second floor had a family room that had been Peter’s home office, which was now Catherine’s, and a guest room.

The third floor had two guest rooms and a larger guest suite. After Janine’s death, Peter had moved out of the master suite and into the guest suite on the third floor.

Catherine didn’t think that she would need a formal living room, so she planned to use the one on the first floor as the main family room. The office and the second-floor family room were right next door to each other in the front of the house, and Catherine had made one huge change there. She had Cullen and his crew knock out the wall between the two rooms and line the walls with bookshelves. The room was big enough to accommodate two desks and a small sitting area. She allocated her father’s office furniture for Vincent’s use and found smaller, slightly more feminine furniture for herself. The two desks were facing each other across the length of the room, with the sitting area between them.
Catherine thanked everyone as they were leaving. She made her way to the kitchen, where Mouse was waiting.

“Thank you, Mouse,” she said, as she hugged him. “I know how hard it’s been for you to disobey Vincent’s order to close the threshold in the basement here.”

“Not a lie when Father knows; just a secret,” he told her confidently.

“But if he found out, he would have been upset with you,” she said.

“Vincent doesn’t get mad much, but when he does... Wow!” Mouse grinned impishly. “Just had to make sure he didn’t find out.”

The two of them turned and went to the basement to follow the others, who were heading back Below for lunch.

Catherine joined Father and Mary at their table. She glanced around the chamber as she sat down.

“He’s on another wild goose chase,” Mary told her with a smile.

“You’ve gotten very good at that,” Catherine told Father.

“I have had help keeping him distracted for the last week, while you moved. Sentries put out false intruder alerts. We’ve had several of our able-bodied men suddenly fall ill, so that Vincent had to pull extra sentry duty or patrol shifts. Keeping him away from Caroline while she was down here has been the hardest part.”

“Telling him that she was exposed to measles and had to be kept away from any of the children who haven’t had it, and that he couldn’t see her because he might carry it to one of the others, was a stroke of genius,” Catherine told him.

“We couldn’t risk that Caroline would let something slip, not after all the work you’ve done to keep it secret.”

“He told me just this morning how much he missed you, and how much he’s looking forward to tonight,” said Mary. “How do you plan to get him up there without giving it all away?”

“I told him that I had a special evening planned for us, and that I’d meet him in his chamber at seven. I hinted that we’d be going somewhere else.”

“Once you get him into that last corridor, he’s going to know where he’s going,” Father warned. “The only place it goes is to Peter’s... um... your basement.”

Catherine pulled a red silk scarf out of her pocket. “I plan to blindfold him and to combat that uncanny sense of direction; I’ll spin him in a circle at the main intersection and every intersection after that.”

“He won’t know which end is up,” said Mary, with a girlish giggle.
“That is what I’m hoping.”
“Don’t you worry about Caroline,” Mary told her. “She’s fine with us, and after tonight she will be in her new room and have a whole new house to explore.”

Catherine spent the afternoon getting dressed and after much thought, she decided to wear a midnight blue panne velvet dress with a plunging back that was very much like the dress she’d worn on their second anniversary. It was a bit daring, but since she and Vincent hadn’t been alone together in weeks, daring was probably a good thing.

Just before she left, she turned on the small lamps she’d placed strategically in the master bedroom and the dining room. As much as she loved candles, they just weren’t the best choice in a house with a toddler.

She walked into Vincent’s chamber just as the 7PM sentry check-in sounded on the pipes. Vincent rose as soon as she entered.

“It might be advisable to get out while we still can,” he said in a hushed tone. “The way things have been going around here lately, I’ll be called out on an emergency any minute.”

He took her arm and ushered her out the door.

“So, where are we going?”

They’d reached the main intersection of five tunnels, and Catherine pulled the red silk scarf out of her sleeve and held it up.

“That’s a surprise. I need to cover your eyes.”

He raised an eyebrow, but turned and allowed her to tie the blindfold over his eyes.

“Can you see anything?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he told her.

She made him spin around several times, while she walked around him in the opposite direction. She wasn’t taking any chances he’d figure out where they were going. She’d even had Mouse show her an alternate, longer route.

Twice more, she made him spin when they reached intersections.

When they reached the door to the subbasement under the house, she gingerly pushed it open. It had squeaked earlier in the day, in fact, it had squeaked since she’d known about Peter’s threshold. She was sure that Vincent would recognize the sound, so when she’d left a short time before, she’d completely saturated the hinges with WD-40. It had been silent when she was done, but now, when she pushed it open, it emitted a low groan. At least it wasn’t that high pitched shriek from earlier. She carefully led Vincent up the stairs, and as they reached the top, she realized that he might recognize the smell of the house; she hoped not.

Vincent didn’t speak until they were in the dining room. “I smell fresh paint, and food,” he commented.
Henry and Lin Pei had done their job well. The dining room table was set and the food was still steaming. They must have gone out the front door just as she and Vincent had entered the basement.

“You can take off the blindfold now,” she said, as she stepped back.

Vincent took it off and looked around.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Home,” she told him.

“Home? Who’s home?” He knew it didn’t look like Catherine’s penthouse.

“Mine… ours if you want to share it,” she said hesitantly.

Vincent looked around, then walked to the door into the living room.

“This is Peter’s house,” he said.

“Was Peter’s house. It’s ours now.” She pulled out a chair at the table and urged him to sit. “It’s so much easier for you to get here. You could even live here after we are married, and commute Below.”

Catherine knew that it was a lot to take in, but she’d expected a little more enthusiasm. It was a very quiet meal, and by the end of it, she was worried that maybe she’d sprung too much on him all at once. Maybe she should have let him in on it all from the beginning. And considering what else she had to tell him tonight, she hoped she hadn’t put him into overload.

After they finished dinner, she took his hand. “Come, let me show you the rest.”

The office did get more of a reaction from him. He browsed the books and ran his hand over the highly polished top of the desk.

She showed him Caroline’s room, then the guest rooms.

They took the stairs and went into the sitting room of the master suite, and she showed him the walk-through closet/dressing room, and the bathroom, then took him into the bedroom, where the lamps threw a soft glow over everything.

“It’s overwhelming, Catherine,” he finally said, turning to her.

“I did it for us, Vincent, for us and Caroline. We can come and go so much more easily this way; anytime, day or night.”

“What about your nanny?” he asked.

“I’m going to have to find a new one,” said Catherine, with a grin. When Helen was off in December she went back home to visit her family, and she ran into an old friend, and things started happening. By the time she came home, she was engaged. She gave her notice and left a few weeks later.

Brooke and Jamie have been helping me out, and Caro has been spending much more time Below.” She was getting worried. “Is it OK, Vincent?” she asked.
Vincent shook his head as if shaking something off. “Yes! It’s wonderful Catherine!” He smiled and pulled her into his arms. “It’s just, as I said before, a bit overwhelming.” Catherine sighed and relaxed in his arms. He was nuzzling her ear when she finally spoke. “Can you take one more surprise?” she asked hesitantly. He could feel her anxiety in the Bond. He pulled back and looked down at her. He didn’t speak, he just nodded.

“Maybe you should sit down for this one,” she told him, as she pushed him toward a chair. He sat as she stood in front of him and took a deep breath. He looked up at her expectantly.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out.

Vincent’s eyes glazed over for a moment, then he reached out for her and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her waist and burying his face in her midriff. She wrapped her arms around his head.

“I knew there was something different,” he whispered. “I could feel something else every time I touched you.”

“You knew?” she gasped.

“I wasn’t positive,” he told her, as he swept her off her feet and deposited her on his lap. “But I’ve occasionally been known to know when one of the women Below, or a Helper was pregnant, even before she realized it. You’re almost three months, right?” She nodded. “I can’t surprise you with anything,” she said, with a relieved laugh.

“You surprised me with this.” He waved at the room.

“How do you feel?” she asked, referring to the baby.

He understood completely and smiled at her.

“Amazed… blessed. I’m in love with a beautiful woman who loves me, and she’s going to give me a child… another child. We already have Caroline… All my dreams are coming true.”

“All our dreams, Vincent,” she whispered.
Some people believe that humans are hardwired to be prejudiced. Anything different from what we know or anyone different from us, or from what we are familiar with, can be the thing or things we are prejudiced against.

When a person hears the word prejudice, he or she might think only of racial prejudice, but prejudice runs deeper than that. It can be against gender, religion, culture, geography, as well as race. People have discriminated against others based on these things since the beginning of time. We can be prejudiced and not even realize it.

Prejudice continues to be a complex problem in our society today. Much of our world’s history is based on those prejudices. We in the BATB community seem to have overcome some of these prejudices and are generally nonjudgmental. This is one thing that draws people here.

In our community, we share freely with each other. We share our talents. We teach each other to do the things we do. We encourage people who are just starting out to write or draw or craft or do anything.

In our fandom we are good at overcoming preconceived notions. We don’t care about the color of someone’s skin, their nationality, their religion (or lack thereof), their gender or gender orientation, their physical or mental disabilities or attributes. People of all educational levels mingle on an even playing field. We don’t care about how much money you have or if you buy your clothes at some upscale store or at the thrift shop. Everyone is welcome because we share a common love.

We welcome butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, not to mention, doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, nurses, accountants, bank tellers, veterans, sales people, clerks, teachers, pharmacists… and we...

... share without prejudice with everyone.
“Dad?” The term felt strange on Devin’s tongue. Jacob looked startled, to be addressed in that way. “Is it... okay...” Devin hesitated, “...to call you that?” Flustered, Jacob tried to answer. “Ahem... Devin... My Boy...” (For that is exactly what he was.) “Of course... it’s... uhm... fine... It’s just that I’m not used to... I mean to say... that...”

For pity’s sake, what in Heaven’s name is wrong with me? Jacob wondered. Devin chuckled softly, clapping his hand on his father’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Old Man, I know exactly what you mean. It’ll take some getting used to... eh?”
Beauty knelt over the prone figure of her beloved Beast. The rain drenched her hair, running in cold rivulets down her cheeks...the muddy ground soaked through her dress, staining the front of her skirt and her stockings. She felt none of this... only the tears that welled in her eyes and the pain in her heart as she took in his ruination: his hair, matted with dirt, his curled hands with their bleeding claws, his clothes ragged where he had torn them in his grief.

“Beast...” she whispered, and her heart shattered as the word fell into the cool air, “Come back to me...” She swallowed, tasting the weight of the words as she said them “...I love you.”

And the rain hushed as it fell.

In the years that followed she would remember it this way: the sun exploded...Beauty flinched, lifting her arm to shield her face from the light...slowly the glare receded, fading, fading away...until gentle twilight ruled once more. At last Beauty dared to glance up.

A golden figure stood before her, a Prince of wealth, resplendent in satin and velvet, impossible in his radiance. His eyes held hers and he reached out his hand.
Beauty would remember hearing a stream of words, fine words to explain his story, to assure her, “I am he...”. Words that spoke of spells and fate, and Beauty felt the ghost of a frown come over her face as she listened.

Gone were the lush, velvety tones of her beast. Something altogether different played in this voice. What was it? Perhaps a note of victory... an unwelcome inflection of smugness and... arrogance... a certain echo of the fault that had first seen him cast in fur and claw? It hurt her ears to listen.

Declining the proffered hand, she stepped back.

“Beauty?” Her name sounded wrong on his tongue.

“No,” she heard herself say.

His brow creased, “Beauty? What is this?” A tiny flame of anger danced in his eyes.

“No...” Beauty tilted her head to one side, listening to the sizzle of stars and the voice of the moon whispering in her ears. “No. You...are not my Beast.” Her voice caught in her throat “And you...do not know my name.”

She turned and walked away...

Behind her the bright Prince scowled, fumed, astounded at the rejection. But the spirit of her Beast had begun stirring from its sleep, deep inside the Prince’s vain heart. Hearing her retreat, the spirit fought for release, clawed free from the radiant, empty shell, let the soft skin and fine clothes fall to the ground.

Across the wild night garden this Beast flew. His voice called out a single word: “Catherine”

Scooping his Beauty up, together they ran...into the moon, into a future all their own...escaping the ink, the page, the old, known story, a story too tame to hold such wild souls as theirs...

Free, at last.
“Did you remember to make a wish?” Rebecca asked. The little tapers on Vincent’s 23rd birthday cake had been dipped by her.

Vincent settled the box that held his small pile of gifts on his writing desk. The first one he picked out was a small, white, carved elephant. It was an animal he’d never actually seen. Something in him knew he never would.

Of course, I could say that about a great many animals. And for that matter... much else, he mused silently.

For some reason, this year, that bothered him. More than it had when he was seven... or twelve, or even sixteen, when his adolescent blood had burned hotly in his veins, and the urge to “see” and “do” and “go” had felt like it was all but consuming him. He set the elephant on an already crowded shelf. It had been Olivia’s gift to him.

“Thank you for making the candles,” Vincent replied, knowing they were extra work. Though they weren’t thick, the wicks all needed to be tied off, so the wax could be dipped, however briefly. Obviously, she’d had to do that twenty-three times for him this morning.

Twenty-three. Next year there would be twenty-four.

“I see Mary made you a nice shirt... again.” Rebecca smiled as she said it. A shirt from Mary was a standard birthday gift. Come Winterfest, it would be a good, thick pair of socks for all of them; ones she’d spent the year knitting. Mary was a creature of habit.
"I needed one," Vincent said, knowing it was true. The adolescence that finally seemed to stop bringing increasingly thicker hair on his body a few years ago, was not quite done broadening his shoulders, it seemed. Vincent knew he was testing the seams of his current shirt. He put the new one away in his wardrobe, then settled a pair of books on his shelf. They were from Father. *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, by Homer. Again, Vincent felt a touch of sorrow. The books would be the only way he would ever travel... to Greece, or anywhere else.

Rebecca watched the long reach of his arm as he put the books up high. She knew that his arm had been just a bit shorter last year, and that the lean gangliness of Vincent’s youth had given way to a taller, broader frame. His chest had deepened. His waist was compact. Though he might need a larger shirt, His vests still fit him fairly well. The soft, golden outline of hair on his jaw was filling in. He was a young male in full possession of his early adulthood.

And for some reason, “loneliness” was exuding from him. Rebecca, more sensitive than most, picked up on it.

“I’m sure you did,” she replied to his comment about needing the shirt. She loved him like a sister. A sister who knew something was bothering her brother. “Pascal says he had to hunt for your boots. That your foot is becoming impossible to fit,” she commented, as she tugged Pascal’s gift from the box.
All of me is becoming impossible to fit. Vincent knew the thought was a self-indulgent one. And it had nothing to do with clothing, or footwear.

“I’m... glad he didn’t give up,” Vincent said, realizing she was still standing there, expecting some sort of reply about the boots. Vincent appreciated the somewhat used brogans, which did indeed come in what was now his correct size. Foraging was another thing others did better than he, thanks to what he was. Central Park was not known for the clothing in its refuse bins.

“Look! New laces at least.” She admired them, as she passed the boots over.

Am I supposed to respond to that?

“Yes,” he replied perfunctorily, taking them from her. Perhaps now, she would go?

For the world, Vincent didn’t want to hurt her feelings by being abrupt. But he’d put on a good face for everyone else today, and he was dead tired of pretending this day wasn’t bothering him as much as it was.

“So...?” Rebecca prompted.

So... what? Was he supposed to make conversation about the bootlaces, some more?

“Thank you, Rebecca.” He guessed at the response she wanted.

“You’re welcome. And no... not that. You didn’t answer my question.”

Didn’t I?

Putting away his last gift, a canvas tool bag from Winslow, he turned to her.

“I’m sorry. I must be tired. If you’ll... “

“What did you wish for? I always used to tell you mine.” She smiled an inviting smile.

And to be fair, she did. Rebecca was never one who was very good at keeping secrets. And from roughly the age of eight years old on, she’d always whispered her birthday wish to him. One time, it had been for a pretty dress. One time, it had been that Ben would ask her to dance come Winterfest. Another time, it had been that her mother would allow her to make the Winterfest candles, all on her own.

As Vincent recalled, her wishes tended to come true. Lucky her.

“I... I think we’re not supposed to tell,” he said, stalling, because he truly didn’t want to answer.

“Oh, don’t be silly. I told you mine. I think you might even have had a hand in making sure I got a certain satin blue ribbon for my hair, one Winterfest.”

Be that as it may, (and it certainly was) this had been a very ... particular birthday, when it came to wishes (or lack thereof), and Vincent was truly in no mood to discuss it.

“How are things with Ben?” he asked, hoping that diverting her to her favorite topic would help things.

“He’s taking me ice skating at the pond, later. He says January ice is best. And you’re dodging.”
He was indeed, but only Rebecca was canny enough to not only catch him at it, but to translate his sour mood, at least a little.

She moved toward the other edge of his desk. What he’d been reading as well as what he’d been writing in sat on the corner. “More books, yes? A new journal? Is that the same as a book?” she asked. She stepped near to where the closed book lay. It was a testament to Vincent’s edginess that he reached around her and grabbed it off the table, before she got too close to it.

“Hey! I wasn’t going to read it. I’m not that rude!” she protested.

No, no you aren’t. You aren’t that rude. And since he loved her like a sister, but nothing more, she also wasn’t a great many other things. Things he was coming to realize he might never have. Along with all the other things he was thinking he’d never have, today.

“I didn’t say you...“

“You implied it. I’d never read your private thoughts without your permission, Vincent!” Now he’d offended her. And considering he hadn’t asked for her help in the first place, that bothered him even more.

“I mean for pity’s sake! All I asked was...“

He turned to her, as he put the journal back down on the writing table. The look in his blue, hopeless eyes gave her the answer to a teasing question that she had meant to be lighthearted.

His eyes were sad... and more bleak than she’d ever, ever remembered seeing them.

She had asked what he’d wished for. She now realized something was wrong with that.

Her low voice dropped to a whisper. “Is it that you think it won’t come true?” she whispered.

He squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height, which was considerable. She remembered how he’d shot up in puberty. That it seemed like one day, his head was well below Father’s but only a few months later, they were looking eye to eye. Now he was even taller, and the long, lanky frame of his youth was giving way to the well-muscled physique of a broad-shouldered, powerful, young man.

Except that the word “man” didn’t quite fit Vincent. They all knew that.

The low voice was deceptively soft. “No. It isn’t that. It’s more the opposite. I’m positive it will... come true. There is no reason why it shouldn’t.” Because this year, I stopped. This year, I didn’t make one. The “nothing” I wished for is the “nothing” I’ll get.

“You’re cross with me.” It wasn’t an accusation; just an unexpected fact between them.

He sighed, and sat on the corner of the desk, the journal still behind his back, yet still between them as a subject. For the world, he didn’t want her to read the melancholy tone contained in its pages. Especially those he’d penned recently.

But now, she thought he was annoyed with her, and she had no idea why.
“Rebecca... Do you remember the year you wished to be allowed to make the Winterfest candles? He asked.

She nodded. “Yes, Mother approved my first designs, I remember, but other than that, she let me do what I wanted. I’d been helping her for years.”

“And the year you wished Ben would ask you to dance? And he did?”

She nodded. She had been fourteen at the time. In a way, they’d been “dancing” ever since.

“Of course,” she answered.

He tilted his head in a way they were all coming to recognize.

“And that Mouse might be found, and helped? That Elizabeth might include a portrait of your father on the walls of the painted tunnels? Do you remember those wishes?”

She did, but she wasn’t sure what that had to do with his current mood.

He pushed the book backward, just a bit.

“The year you were wishing for Ben, I also had a wish,” he said. She knew he was almost the same age she was. So, he’d have made the wish when he was... what? Fourteen?

He stood and gave the journal, and her, some distance. “I wished that Devin might be found. That he might... return home... somehow. I know, because it was a wish I’d made for several years,” he said.

Rebecca’s lovely eyes filled with sympathy. Of course, that is what you would wish for. Of course, it was. While she’d been wishing for pretty bows and permission to be given more responsibilities, he’d been wishing for something entirely different.

The deep voice continued. “Then there was Lisa. And another wish that didn’t... that couldn’t come true,” he said. He crossed to the bookshelf and laid his hand on the two new volumes of treasure there. Lisa would see Greece. Lisa would see... everything.

“I think I only wasted one year wishing she’d come back, though I wished it for months. Only one birthday wish,” he said, not sure if it was true, and not really caring one way or the other. He caressed the leather spines, then turned to her.

“I swear I bear you no ill, Rebecca. I’m... proud of all you’ve accomplished. Your mother says she’s turning The Chandlery over to you this year. That her arthritis is bad, and that you’ve worked hard for the honor. You must know I truly want only the best for you and Ben, always.”

She knew he meant every word. But that didn’t disguise the deeper realities he was trying to hide.

“But... but you’ve stopped wishing. Haven’t you?” she asked, knowing that for Vincent, such ground was dangerous indeed. That it was more treacherous than the labyrinth, and twice as likely to collapse under his weight. There was peril here for him; peril that she recognized, even if he didn’t.
Vincent softened his tone. “It isn’t that I have no blessings, Rebecca. Or that nothing I ever wanted came to pass.” He checked her expression. She was riveted on him. “I think I may have wished Mitch Denton gone one year. And that happened.”

It had. And that had been a long time ago.

“Vincent... you mustn’t give up hope. You have to make a birthday wish. Promise me.”

He sighed, and shook his head subtly, feeling that he simply didn’t have the strength for that kind of hope. Not anymore. No. It’s a childhood thing, and a painful one. Let it go.

Rebecca had long ago paired off with Ben, and Olivia was with Samuel. And while both women were dear to him, neither was the romantic love he longed for anyway. No one was.

“I don’t think so.” He refused her.

Her soft, paraffin treated hand reached out and held his elbow. “Vincent... You know what Ben went through. How he was when we found him.”

Ben had been beaten half to death by an alcoholic father. Yes, Vincent knew his story, and it was a tragic one. Vincent tugged his arm away gently. “Ben is very lucky to have you, Rebecca, to have your love. I wish nothing but good things for the both of you.” He stepped away from her, and she followed him.

“Yes. You wish. That’s just it. You wish, Vincent,” she said to his retreating back. “And I do too, and so does Ben. There’s power in a wish. You’ll wish something for me, or for Olivia, or even for Devin, and I pray he’s still out there too, but... not for yourself? No. That can’t stand. You can’t do that. You can’t give up.”

She crossed to the piece of cardboard that held the remains of his birthday cake. The wax candles she’d dipped for him were set to one side of it. She knew they were destined to go back into the box every candle dweller saved for candle stubs, so that the wax might be reused. “Waste not, want not.” It was the tunnel way.

Well, these aren’t going back to the Chandlery, she thought. She fished the candles out of the box, dropped them into a tin cup, and held it over a brightly burning pillar.

“I want you to go out tonight,” she said, as the thin candles melted, and ran together. She fished out the wicks with the spoon he used to stir his tea. “I want you to keep wearing your cape, and keep going Above. Wherever love is for you, I don’t think it’s here. I think duty is here... and obligation.”

She set the strings to one side. They were still wax coated, and they hardened to a misshapen kind of stiffness in the cool tunnel air. She tugged them straight.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m making you a candle. One candle. One candle for one wish,” she said, pouring the clear, melted wax into a small glass cup that often held a votive. She twisted the wax covered strings together and dipped them in the liquid wax.

“You’ll burn yourself,” he cautioned, as her delicate fingers sat close to the hot wax.
“I’m fine,” she returned, holding the wick by her nails, as the wax around it began to change from clear to white as it hardened. “It’s you we need to save.”

They both stood there for a moment, and watched the wax cool and whiten inside the clear glass. It was a very unconventional way to make a candle, but Rebecca was determined.

She blew gently on the wax, helping to dissipate some of its heat. “Ben was held hostage by a monster for years. He told me that there were days when he had no hope for a better life, too.” She let go of the wick, knowing it would remain upright, in the bowl. “I think we all feel that way, sometimes. It’s all right, Vincent. It is.”

Was it? Vincent wasn’t sure Rebecca understood, or even could understand, the forces he knew were gathering inside him. How deep the feelings of aloneness went. Or how frightening that was for a being who knew something dark waited inside him, and sometimes even wrestled with him, for control.

“I don’t think you understand just what it is I want,” he said, his voice unshakably firm. “I want... a woman who I don’t even believe exists.”

“Why don’t you believe she exists?” Rebecca asked.

Vincent spread his hands wide. “I want her to love me. Me. To look at... this...” he gestured to his own unique visage, “and see past it. I need her to be braver than she’s ever been, because all of this will require that.” The hand extended to encompass the Tunnels.

“We know many brave women. They are out there, Vincent.”

He shook his head in the negative. “That may well be. But I know I don’t know her now, and that means we’ve never met. This is no childhood friend, Rebecca. No Helper who sends us food. It’s no one I know now. That means if she exists at all, she’s from the world Above.”

Rebecca shrugged politely, dismissing his concern. “So was Ben. Wouldn’t be the first Topsider to come down here and...“

“I want her to be in love with me. In love. With me. Do you know how impossible that is?” He leaned across his writing desk, fists planted on it. “I know I can’t expect it, but I want to be able to feel it, someday. Can you possibly understand?”

She blew on the wax again, and nodded. “I think I can,” she answered.

“I want her to... to one day, do something... some small something... or a great thing... and look at me, at me, and say it was done for love.” He paced the room, seeing an impossible dream in his mind’s eye. “She’ll have to be able to understand what this place is, and keep its secret. She’ll have to be able to stand up to Father. And heaven knows what else. Can you even understand how... impossible all of that sounds? For me?”

Rebecca set the wax down to cool some more inside the glass. “I do. And I know you can’t stop wishing for it, Vincent. The day you do...” Her eyes grew sad, and she couldn’t complete the sentence. She didn’t have to.
She took a taper from its holder and lit the candle she’d just created. “There’s still a wish left in here. If you can’t make it, then I’ll wish it for you... just until you’re strong enough to do it again.”

She picked up the clear glass bowl and cupped it lovingly. “I wish that Vincent finds true love... with a brave woman, a kind one. One who is strong, and beautiful. And when she looks at him... she sees what’s best in being human... and loves him with her whole heart.”

She held the glass higher. “At least blow it out with me,” she requested, convincing him with her lovely blue eyes.

He leaned over and did as she requested, feeling a bit foolish, but... hopeful, just the same. Maybe the fact that she’d wished it for him would help. He had no idea. He only knew he didn’t have the heart to make the wish himself any longer.

“And what will you do when it doesn’t come true?” he asked, feeling very certain it wouldn’t.

“I’ll just make the wish for you again, next year... and the next. I’m going to make all your birthday candles from now on. Some year it will happen. You’ll see.”
Rebecca stood inside her Chandlery and stretched. The day had been a long one, and to that end, a very tense one. There had been a cave in. The children had escaped the maze, but for several long, tension-filled hours, Father and Vincent had been trapped.

It had turned out all right. Mouse had made a digging machine. Plastic explosives had brought down a wall of rock. There would be much to do tomorrow, by way of cleanup, and hopefully, making the area safer.

There was work to do... candles that needed dipping, pillars that needed pouring. Tunnel light depended on her talents, and even when other things happened, that was still true. She’d begun work as she always did this morning. At the very least, she wanted to finish up what she’d started, before she had a simple dinner and went to bed.

“You won’t be long,” her husband prompted, slipping up behind her for a caring hug.

“No, Ben, just a few minutes. I poured the pillars and I want to take them out of the molds at least.”

“Leave the tapers for tomorrow,” he instructed, knowing there was no sense in trying to talk her out of anything she was determined to do.

“I need to cut the ones I was working on off the rod. I was only half done when it happened.” She sighed. “It will put me that much more behind tomorrow.”

“I guess we all will be behind.” He gave her a squeeze. “Tell you what... I’ll get up early with you and help tomorrow.”

“You’ll all be clearing the rubble from that passageway. Work enough for everyone.”

“I’ll still help you,” he replied, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll fetch supper and take it to our chamber. I think William said we’re all having sandwiches. He had no more time to cook than any of the rest of us had for chores.”

Rebecca nodded her understanding, and returned his quick kiss, as he released her. The gangly youth she’d met long ago had matured into a plain-featured man with a crooked nose, thanks to his father’s abuse, but a kind heart, and a wiry sense of strength.

“I think we’re all too tired to eat,” she said to his retreating back. He waved the comment away. They both knew he’d sit in their chamber at the table with her, prompting her to take in some kind of nourishment before they went to bed.

Rebecca sighed, knowing that the day had been a very trying one, but that things definitely could have been so much worse. Father and Vincent had been saved. And though she’d lost a day in the Chandlery, she was ahead enough so that the tunnels would have their usual amount of light tomorrow. It was her day off that might suffer a bit, not her friends’ need for illumination.

Oh, well. It will all work out, she thought, knowing that it would. Ben would help her tie off the wicks and mind the low fire that kept the wax liquid. Brooke might drop in to lend a hand as well. She was not without support. No one who lived in the tunnels was.
Intent on removing the pillars from their makeshift molds, she barely registered Vincent’s long shadow, until it fell across her.

“Rebecca?” He announced his presence with a soft utterance of her name.

In spite of the fact that they’d all been working all day to save him, Rebecca had to confess that Vincent was literally one of the last people she expected to see right now.

He filled the room, as he always did, even without his customary cape. He was fresh from a much-needed bath, and dressed in clean, soft, worn, tunnel clothing. His left hand sported a deep cut that had been bandaged. And Rebecca suspected that the long sleeves of his tunic styled shirt and oft-mended slacks hid several bruises. Still, he was all right. And so was Father. Or they both would be, in a few days.

“Vincent! I have to admit you’re one of the last people I expected to see in here today. Did you... need something?” She wondered about that. If there was one thing he hadn’t had time to do today, it was burn the candles in his chamber, reading a book, or doing some other chore there.

“Yes. Yes, I think I do. I need to return something,” he replied, turning over the bandaged hand so she could see there was something in it.

It was a glass votive cup... a small one, nondescript from any other, really. Except Rebecca thought she knew what this one was, and why it was here.

“Oh. Vincent...” she sighed, not knowing what else to say. It was the candle she’d hastily made, years ago. The one she’d made a wish on, for him.

“It came true,” he said, placing it in her soft hands. “It came true, Rebecca.” The deep voice was low with emotion. There was just a touch of unsteadiness in it, as if he couldn’t quite believe it himself.

Rebecca struggled to remember the words she’d said over the cup with him, almost ten years ago: “I wish that Vincent finds true love... with a brave woman, and a kind one. One who is strong, and beautiful. And when she looks at him... she sees what’s best in being human... and loves him with her whole heart.”
“There’s surely no doubt that without Catherine, this day could have ended up a whole lot worse,” Rebecca said, accepting the tiny glass globe. “I didn’t think you actually kept this.”

“I know I should have returned it. Let you use it, again. But...”

“But you couldn’t. I understand. She said it?” Rebecca wanted to make sure that the lovely Topsider woman had given her brother the gift of the words.

“She said it. She didn’t need to, but she did,” he confirmed. ‘It was love.’ The words still rang, in Vincent’s sensitive ears.

Rebecca looked from the old candle to him. He’d had it a long time. There was dust on the glass.

_Did you say it back?_ It was on the tip of her tongue to ask it, but she knew she didn’t dare. Vincent was a private person, and to be fair, the answer was more Catherine’s business than it was hers. Besides, there was no doubt that he felt it, whether he’d said it or not.

“That’s good. That’s good, then,” she said, setting the little piece of glass and leftover wax down.

He inclined his head, knowing the wish his tunnel sister had made for him had come true, and that it was changing his life.

“Thank you,” he said, knowing he needed to. “Thank you for wishing for me.”

She threw her arms around him, in a huge hug. _He’s bigger since I did this last. And he’s surely stronger. Stronger now than he even was a few months ago,_ she thought, realizing that the power in Vincent’s heavy muscles had increased, since he’d begun climbing to Catherine’s balcony. And the strength in his heart had as well.

_There’s nothing like the feeling of a wish, when it’s coming true,_ she thought.

“It’s what sisters are for,” she replied, squeezing him with all her loving might.

He whispered a confession: “I didn’t... say it back. Not yet. I think I’m too... overwhelmed by it all still. But I’m going to... and more. I feel it, Rebecca. I _feel_ it. From her. From myself. It’s wonderful. And... terrifying.”

Rebecca maintained the hug and blinked back a tear at that. _Yes. Yes, it is. Wonderful and terrifying. Oh, Vincent..._ She kept them together, prolonging their embrace. “I know,” she whispered.

He couldn’t help but smile, just a little at that. _You do, don’t you?_ He thought.

She maintained her steadfast grip on him. “Then I won’t melt this wax down, won’t stick it back in the vat,” she said, eying the little globe and its scant leavings. “There’s a bit of birthday magic in there yet,” she declared, knowing she would warm the cup until the wax melted, then form it up again, with a new wick.

He relaxed his arms, but kept her near. For some reason, the words seemed to want to be said in low, reverent tones. “This love it... it warms everything I am,” he declared. _Like a candle._
“Love does that. Welcome to the club,” she added, understanding completely how beautiful and frightening love could be.

“I don’t think I’ll ever lose my way again,” he murmured against her soft curls, then he let her go. “But if I do…”

She released him and took a step back. “If you do, I’ll always be here. Always to remind you how to make a wish on a candle,” she replied, wiping away a happy tear.

“Thank you, Rebecca. You’re a good sister. Go, now. I’m sure Ben is waiting for you.”

“And you? Will you go to your Catherine?” she asked, setting aside the tapers.

He looked out at a landscape he could see only with his mind’s eye. One … littered with possibilities, and wonders. He might never see a real elephant. But then again… who knew, in a world as wondrous as this one was turning out to be?

“As soon as it’s full dark,” he replied, replaying Catherine’s declaration, in his mind.

“I felt like I was losing the best part of myself. I would have done anything ... it wasn’t courage Vincent, it was love.”

“Full dark then, and not a minute after,” Rebecca scolded, knowing he didn’t have long to wait.

“Nothing could keep me from it,” he promised. *Not now that I truly remember how to wish again.*

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*No matter where you are when you make a wish, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*
"Everything you can imagine is real."
-- Pablo Picasso

New fans often express surprise that the Beauty and the Beast fandom is still around after all these years. What is it, they ask, that has made this fandom last when others have not?

Perhaps it is the unique way BatB fans have tried to live up to ideals that were so beautifully, and graciously portrayed in the show we all love.

I say “tried,” because over the course of thirty years there is no doubt that there are some who have been hurt or offended by others. It is inevitable that some fail to live up to the ideals they believe in. But this fandom is still here because, for the most part, we have attempted to support those who keep this fandom vital.

Support is manifested in many ways. We offer all new writers, poets, and artists encouragement to spread their wings, and let their muse take them on the journey of discovery in the world of BatB. We sing the praises of all of those who have graced our zines and online fandom with their marvelous talents.

And since it’s impossible to create in a vacuum, we couldn’t thrive without the support of the website administrators and zine editors, who give our many and varied creations a place to shine. These wonderful, unsung individuals give us all a place to share, as well
as partake of all that the fans have to offer, and all that we crave to keep the “Dream” alive.

Support is every effort that brings things “out” and gets them where others can see and enjoy them. Money is support. Editing for someone is support. Encouragement is support. Friendship is support, and can be offered on a personal level as well as a “Let’s talk about BatB” one. Contributing is support, by definition. When someone throws out a challenge, mentions an anniversary is coming up, puts out an all-call for submissions, what they’re asking for is “support.” Acceptance of all seasons is support. (It upholds the entire show, not just a certain part of it.) Recommending fics on sites like “I recommend” is support. Maintaining a database of online stories or a library of zines that are not available online is a wonderful show of support.

In our own way, we each keep this fandom vital for each other. It is still a living, changing, and growing thing. Everything we add to this thing, no matter how small, keeps it “vital.” Anything that encourages unfettered growth and sharing, joy and creativity is by its very definition, providing “vitality” to the fandom. Anything that limits these, goes against it.

"Support" and "Vitality" probably aren’t interchangeable, but they surely go hand in hand. The one tends to beget the other, and without either, this fandom, like the plants in my garden, would wither and die.

May we all continue to ...

... Support those who keep this fandom vital

“The reason that art (writing, engaging, and all of it) is valuable is precisely why I can’t tell you how to do it. If there were a map, there’d be no art, because art is the act of navigating without a map.” ~Seth Godin
Each gazed into the other’s eyes.
At last he said, “Every moment since that night, I’m reminded of what a gift life is.”
She stepped forward into his embrace. He held her as she slipped her arms around his waist. They stood quiet on her balcony amid the dozens of candles she had set alight. The April breeze flickered the candle flames, and the nighttime shadows quivered all around them. She believed this was going to be a perfect anniversary night. Their perfect first anniversary of the dark night they had met. As perfect as his words.
“Hmm.”

She turned her face upward. He looked magnificent. She saw he had brushed most of the curls from his mane for the evening. His fine golden hair flowed in waves past his shoulders. Indulging herself, she reached up and smoothed his tresses, then outlined the strong angles of his jaw, elated by the textures she felt.

He stood enraptured by her greeting, entranced by the sparkle in her exultant green eyes. Her affection delighted him. Her desire beguiled him. He felt through his empathic attunement to her emotions the pleasure she received from touching him. He felt her trust, and her admiration for him, even as he admired her familiar features and reveled in his own feelings for her. She fairly glowed in his arms. And now she smiled at him.

“Kiss me?” she asked. Irresistible.

He bent down, gentled his mouth upon her lips. Her hands drew him closer still. She felt his left hand glide upward along the silky lace of her gown to sweetly cradle the back of her head. This was the second kiss of their peculiar romance. Neither ever wanted it to end.

Nonetheless, breathing remained essential. They retreated, smiled at their mutual breathlessness, recovered, advanced again, amplified their sharing. She stood up on her toes, raising her hands to twine her fingers through that glorious hair. He wrapped his arms entirely around her, his heart blazing with wonder, with passion, with joy.

Her perfume intoxicated him. Amber, vanilla, bergamot, and rose. Her beloved underscent, the unique fragrance of her, herself, inscribed its signature upon his dazzled senses. Her heartbeat pulsed in his ears. Her hunger for him hummed through his bones. The roughness of his tongue surprised her, lightly abrading her lower lip. The shape of his mouth was strange, mysterious. He yielded to her investigation. The fur on his face felt like velvet to her, his skin exquisitely warm. He tasted of honey and cloves and cinnamon. She sensed his clawtips press against her scalp, sharp points delicately restrained. How could a body so masterful as his yet offer her such softness, such receptivity?

He withdrew first, resting his brow upon hers, still holding her tightly to himself. She lowered her heels to stand flat upon her terrace floor once more. He pulled back enough to look adoringly into her eyes.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered.

Her smile radiated happiness. “Come inside,” she invited. “I have more beautiful things to add to our celebration.”

He cocked his head a little. Considering her invitation, perhaps. His blue eyes returned her smile: measure for measure, brightness for brightness.

“We’ll leave the balcony door open,” she added, knowing he did not like to be shut up inside closed rooms Above.
In answer, he relaxed his hold on her. She took his hand and led him through the open French door, and past the sheer curtains, into her bedroom. It was only the third time he had entered her apartment.

She quickly switched off the electric lamp in her room. Dozens more candles welcomed them with warming light. They stepped down together onto her carpet. He went with her cautiously. The candlelight was kind to him, but her home remained a foreign domain. He could never belong here.

She paused, stood on tiptoe again, and kissed his cheek. Now his eyes crinkled with amusement. These warmhearted liberties she was deciding to take with him tonight—it was new.

“May I take your coat?” she asked her guest.

He considered again, then slipped out of his mantle and handed it to her. She draped it across the bench at the end of her bed. Turning, she brought him through the louvered bedroom doors into her living room. Candles glimmered there, too. She went up the low steps into her small dining area, where she switched off another electric lamp. He saw that her glass-topped pedestal table had been set for two. A clear crystal bowl, containing water and a floating candle, made a lovely centerpiece. Light reflected off the glass and chrome furnishings around the room, and from mirrors on the walls. Standing now beside her antique side table, she touched the neck of a bottle she had prepared. The bottle lay upon a bed of ice chips inside a small, silver-plated pail.

“Would you like champagne?” she asked.

He stepped up into the dinette, joining her. He glanced at the champagne bottle, then shook his head. “Thank you, no.”

He felt her disappointment like an ice shard, puncturing his breast. Minute, swiftly dissolved—but cold with sadness, all the same. He tried to further moderate his refusal.

“When I go Above,” he explained. “I do not drink alcohol. It isn’t safe. For me.”

She looked down at the bottle, chagrined. She supposed his custom made sense, considering the dangers he faced in her world. Still, she had not expected it. She liked social drinking. It relaxed her, and she especially associated champagne with parties, special occasions—and romantic interludes. She could scarcely imagine attending a celebration of any consequence without sipping the delicious effervescence during the festivities. She smiled regretfully as she met his gaze.

“I’ve been offered beer and wine when I’ve visited the Tunnels. So I know you’re not teetotalers down there.”

“No. We’re not teetotalers.” Privately, though, he realized he might be becoming one. From childhood, from his friends and mentors, and through personal experience, he had learned
never to needlessly risk the health and well-being of himself and his community through intemperance of any kind. His habit kept him careful with when and how he imbibed distilled or fermented drinks.

Now, however, he was unsure how to explain to anyone that since his terrifying tribulation with the street gang in February, he could not abide the smell—let alone the taste—of beer. And since last month’s narrow escapes from two separate drug-saturated plots of deranged Columbia University professors, he had avoided every possible intoxicant. Even William’s excellent wines and mead and cider.

Strong drinks did not feel safe anymore. These days, he found he craved safety more than ever before. He could not predict how long he might need to continue applying his lifelong rule for his forays Above to his everyday life Below.

“Do you drink alcohol when you’re at home?” she asked, curious.

“Sometimes,” he replied, which was accurate enough. “Usually on holidays.”

“You can’t make an exception for our holiday?”

He had never tasted champagne. He knew letting her provide his first experience with carbonated wine would please her. But he shook his head a second time. “You may still enjoy some champagne yourself,” he suggested.

She nodded, wondering what else to offer him to drink. “Would you like mineral water instead?”

“I will try it.”

“Just a moment.” She took one of the coupés from the table and hurried into the kitchen. She filled his glass, trying not to marvel at his implication that he had never tried sparkling water before. Sometimes, it seemed far too easy to forget how different his world actually was from hers. Easy to forget the strangeness of his world when he visited her own world, anyway. She always found herself markedly aware of the differences whenever she ventured Down into his subterranean realm.

She returned to the dining room and saw that he had spent his time alone filling her glass for her. He replaced the champagne bottle in the ice pail. She grinned at him. They traded glasses.

“To hope,” she said.

“To hope,” he agreed.

They raised their glasses in salute and sipped. The water tingled on his tongue. Mild, tasteless carbonation: a novelty. He knew he must drink it slowly though, mindful of his stomach. She watched her companion handle his unfamiliar beverage in its unfamiliar vessel with admirable aplomb. His large hand miniaturized the coupé. While they drank, he smelled the aroma of her champagne
as it melded with her perfume. He found this a heady combination. Pleasance from her glass refreshed her. She had been looking forward to this all day.

“Sit with me,” she said then. They moved toward the dining chairs. He set down his glass to seat her, then seated himself beside her at the table. He felt like a large bird perching upon a narrow twig—an unusually plush twig, at that. The metal chair felt small beneath him, and it was cushioned with plump padding. He surveyed the refreshments she offered. Berries mounded in a small crystal bowl, stuffed mushrooms arranged on a glass plate, around tiny rounds of pale cheese. Cubes of pink cake occupied another plate, set near a dish of chocolates: white, brown, and black. Bite-sized appetizers, all.

He wondered whether the berries had been treated with pesticides. Maybe he could risk tasting one of the dark chocolates; he could usually discern by taste if candies contained harmful industrial sweeteners. His nose detected onion in the mushrooms, which rendered them inedible to him. And he couldn’t eat cattle cheeses or conventional cakes.

She noticed him hesitating.

“Don’t tell me you don’t eat, either, when you go Above,” she said.

“Some things I can eat,” he said slowly. “Other things, I can’t.”

She cultivated calmness, so she wouldn’t blush. It had never occurred to her that he might not be able to share the same party tidbits that she liked. “Oh, dear,” she murmured, even more disappointed than she had felt over her mistake with the champagne. “I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

“You wanted to surprise me.”

She nodded. “Is there anything here that—?” Her hand hovered uncertainly over the food.

“Maybe you could tell me more about the ingredients,” he answered.

As it happened, she did not know whether or not the fruit was pesticide-free. Or what sweetener the chocolatier had used, or if the dark chocolate contained any dairy. She suspected that, yes, the cake was artificially colored, and she was certain milk and butter had gone into its batter. And then it shocked her to learn what horrible maladies alliums inflicted upon her companion’s body.

“I’ve served you a table full of poisons!”

He touched her hand. “You didn’t know.”

“I really should have asked,” she repeated.

“You’ll remember to ask next time.”

She winced. “You trust me enough to let there be a next time?”

Chuckling, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “This is not the worst crisis we have faced,” he told her. “And I will gladly accept any ‘next time’ you choose to offer me.”
“I still feel foolish.”

“I know,” he said. “I feel it. But I don’t think you are foolish. Your heart intended only the best for our evening.”

She sighed at his generosity, and drank from her glass. “So, now I’m dying to know,” she said. “What can you eat?”

He folded his hands on the table. “I can eat most of the foods that other people eat,” he said. “But it must be real food, and it must not contain chemical additives or processed fillers.”

“Not junk food,” she summarized.

He nodded. He briefly explained that he had trouble with most starchy plants, with unsprouted legumes, and with tropical fruits. Other food types were outright dangerous to him: cow dairy, alliums, nightshades, avocados, macadamia nuts and citrus fruits. He also had to be sparing with chocolate, coffee, tea, salt, sugar, and alcohol. She already knew from conversations with his father that most drugs and various chemicals were toxic to his system. As they talked, she began to understand that she had never given much thought to how adulterated her world’s food supply had become in the modern era. With her own food choices, she worried most about the number of calories and grams of fat she consumed.

“How exactly does your community get ahold of—real food?” she asked.

“Our Helpers know what kinds of edibles we need,” he replied. “And we know which shops and markets sell the best natural foods—and which days they dispose of their unsold produce. We are good at foraging in the city. We also grow a few small-scale crops of our own in the Tunnels. Maybe someday we can learn how to grow more. Nutrition is important in our world. Many of us have suffered hunger and malnourishment in the world Above. We are careful about the quality of our meals Below.”

She listened, fascinated, becoming aware that she, like many of her Topside peers, harbored some rather high-handed assumptions about the food that poor or homeless people would—or should—be willing to eat. She felt a little ashamed of several donations she knew the director of her mother’s charitable foundation had recently arranged for some of the city’s homeless shelters and food banks.

“And I am not the only one Below who must avoid certain foods,” he concluded. “We keep a list of people’s allergies and dietary needs posted in the Kitchen, and we store our supplies with care, to avoid contaminating anything with ingredients that someone might be sensitive to.”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” she said.

“It’s life-saving work.”

She nodded again and admitted, “I’ve just never known anyone who has this kind of problem.”
“Oh, it’s likely you’ve known people,” he replied. “But they may not have shared their needs with you.”

He was most likely right.

She entertained the possibility that it might be a good idea to start paying more attention to where her food came from, and how it was made. In fact, she must pay closer attention, if she ever wanted to offer any hospitality to her beloved friend that would not injure him. All the more so because she had never been much of a cook, and she felt no special inclination to improve her skills in the culinary arts.

“Are there foods you don’t like to eat?” he asked her, ending her ruminations.

“Let’s see,” she replied. She reoriented her thoughts to answer his question. “I don’t like maraschino cherries at all. Fruitcakes and mincemeat fall into the same boat, there. And I don’t like slimy vegetables. Okra, boiled cabbage, stewed tomatoes, canned spinach, things like that. I hate charred meats. Oh, and also pickled meats. Most snack foods don’t appeal to me—it’s the grease.” She reviewed memories in her mind, looking for any more unpleasant meals or tastes. “Cheap beers or wines or liquors, too,” she added after a moment. “I like good brews and vintages too much to settle for poor imitations.”

He wondered how she would judge the products of William’s work. Below.

“You like good beers and wines,” he said. “What are your other favorite things?”

She smiled. “I enjoy pretty much everything else. I’ve never been a picky eater. Hmm—I do especially love good coffee. Ice cream is my favorite treat. Although crème brûlée is my favorite dessert. I think sushi is delicious. I adore just about every kind of berry. And fillet mignon, cooked medium-rare, never fails to cheer me up.”

He nodded, pleased with this insight into her tastes. He would remember them in the future.

The thought of fillet mignon gave her an idea. Brightening, she asked, “If I served a steak dinner next time, would you enjoy that?”

“I—don’t know. Probably.”

Many dampening emotions flitted through her mind. She couldn’t settle on just one to feel. Astonishment led the charge. “You’ve never eaten steak?”

He shook his head, no.

Their worlds were incredibly estranged.

“Next time, then,” she promised him. “Steak for two.”

He chuckled again. He appreciated her zeal. “Next time,” he agreed.

“Well,” she said. “For the time being, I guess you’ll just have to come with me.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.
She stood up from her chair. “The kitchen. I am determined to find something I can safely serve to you tonight.”

Bemused, he also stood. She took her glass with her into the kitchen, so he brought his glass as well. After all they had survived together during the past few months, he recognized by the set of her shoulders that she had taken a new mission upon herself. She would not feel satisfied until she had met this challenge squarely, and done her utmost to conquer it.

She began with her refrigerator, opening the door wide, and urging him to peer inside. He obliged her. “This looks promising,” he said, pointing to a pale melon on the bottom shelf.

“The honeydew?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not worried about pesticides on the melon?” she asked.

“Less worried about pesticides on melons than about pesticides on berries,” he replied.

“How do you know what to worry about and what to worry less about?”

“Research,” he said, then added, “When Mary first joined our community, she taught us what she knew about the poisons the world Above puts into the food it produces. She and Father studied how the poisons can harm the humans and animals who eat these foods, and how the poisons also harm the Earth. Our community decided to make better choices for our world—a decision that we hope, in its own small way, helps your world, as well.”

“Mary,” she said, mulling over the few facts she knew about the Tunnelwoman. “She was part of the counterculture in the ‘60s.”

“Yes.”

She shrugged. Her family and friends had always been dismissive of the environmentalists and flower children and civil rights activists. Mary, now the Tunnels nurse and midwife, was the first friend she’d ever known who had genuinely lived that life, twenty years ago.

“Well then,” she said, “I suppose Mary would know a lot about the subject, and I suppose natural foods might be important to her.”

He said, “And now, it is important to all of us.”

She extracted the melon and closed the refrigerator door.

“I always wait until my other fruit is gone before I slice a melon,” she confessed. “They’re just big and bulky to cut. And the seeds are slimy. But my mother always said melon is good for me.”

He set his glass on a counter. “Can I help?” he asked.

A half-smile tickled at the edge of her mouth. “Are you volunteering?”

“Yes.”
“All right.” She set down the melon to locate a cutting board, a large knife, and a spoon. He went to the sink and quickly washed his hands, scrubbing them damp-dry on a fresh towel. She raised one eyebrow at him as he joined her in front of the cutting board. “So hygienic,” she commented.

“I am my father’s son,” he replied dryly.

She laughed, and watched his strong left hand clasp the knife handle. He made swift and efficient work of the melon. After halving it, he scooped out the seed beds with the spoon, and sliced the fruit into long, narrow wedges. She stared at his hands as he worked, surprised by his skill. One by one, he picked up each wedge and cut away its rind in a single, smooth arc, arranging the finished morsels in a neat row on the board.

“I’m impressed,” she told him with total honesty. Not a scrap of melon flesh went to waste.

He said nothing, but he did not think he had done anything impressive. He cut the wedges into smaller crosswise portions, then set down the knife. He picked up a piece of the fruit. Catching her eye, he silently held the bit of melon near her lips.

She smiled, opening her mouth. He fed her a bite. It was out of season, straight out of the refrigerator, the flavor somewhat wan—yet juicy and sweet enough nonetheless. He put the remaining bite into his own mouth, and his eyes smiled.

They shared half the melon in this way, standing together in the kitchen, feeding fruit to each other, in between sips of her champagne and his mineral water.

“This is not what I had in mind when I imagined our evening,” she said.

“No,” he concurred with a smile.

“I like this better,” she said.

“Good. I like it very much, myself.”

He watched her scrape the seeds and rinds into a garbage bin beneath her sink, reflecting upon the uses the Tunnelfolk found for such perfectly edible ingredients, but he made no remark about her action. They both rinsed melon juice from their hands. She placed the remainder of the sliced melon in a bowl and set the bowl inside her refrigerator. He washed the knife, spoon, and board, and dried them while she refilled his glass with more mineral water. They went back out into the dinette, where she refilled her glass with champagne.

“You’re quite handy in the kitchen,” she commented.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked.

She couldn’t think of any particular reason. “Well, I thought William was your chef Below.”

“William prepares scheduled community meals, and keeps the Kitchen and Pantry organized,” he said. “We are all taught how to cook for ourselves, though. It’s part of a Tunnels education. Anyone can use the Kitchen anytime they want to. And everyone takes turns completing cooking and cleaning tasks, under William’s guidance.”
“I stand instructed,” she said, and raised her glass to his superior culinary experience. “William must be a good teacher.”

He smiled again, shaking his head. “William did not teach me.”

She lowered her glass. “Oh.”

“I learned to cook from Julia, Winslow’s mother. William joined us Below when I was sixteen.”

She wondered if she would ever manage to connect all the details of his life together into one understandable whole. “Your community is so full of life,” she said. “Always changing, adapting.”

“It’s a world,” he said. “A secret miracle, ever evolving.”

“You’re finding perfect phrases again.”

He bowed in answer to her praise, happy that she loved his family’s world, too.

“Did you have someone special who taught you kitchen skills?” he asked her.

She thought about it. “Not really. I ‘helped’ our cook, Pamela, sometimes, when I was little. Mostly with breads and desserts, because those recipes were the most fun for me to knead or stir. My mother and grandmother taught me how to entertain, how to evaluate tastes and plan menus, how to supervise household staff. I didn’t do much of my own cooking until after I left home to go to college. And even then—” She shook her head. “Pre-packaged foods and take-out were always my easy go-to solutions. On my own I can fend off starvation, but I have no gift for meal-making. I’m best at—at salads.”

“I like salads,” he said.

She laughed to hear his earnest tone of voice. “Don’t make fun!”

“I’m not. In my world fresh greens are a delicacy.”

She shook her head again, marveling again. “Since you’re trusting me with a next time, maybe next time I’ll also make us a salad to share.”

“I’d like that very much,” he said.

“One without any onions in it.”

“Wonderful.”

“Steaks and salads. It’s a plan.”

They smiled at one another. She stepped close to him and took him by the arm. Still smiling, she led him down the steps from her dinette into her living room.

“I have more to share with you tonight,” she said, turning on her stereo. “Would you like some music now?”

“Certainly,” he answered.
She pressed the “play” button and looked up at him, eager to see his reaction. Piano notes flitted through the air from her stereo speakers. A half dozen notes, and he sighed, already transported.

“Rachmaninoff.”

“I knew you would love it!” she exulted. “His piano concertos.”

He did love the music. But even more did he love the stunning woman at his side. He loved the treasured moments she was sharing with him: her home, her food, her music, herself. Tenderly, he put one arm around her and pulled her closer. “You’re the one I love,” he murmured.

She drained her glass and set it on her square coffee table. She also relieved him of his glass and then hugged him tight. Orchestral instruments joined the piano as the music expanded. Their spirits soared with the melody, each rejoicing in the nearness of the other.

“I never knew how lonely I was,” she breathed, “until you came into my life and gave me your love.”

He whispered her name. And he whispered her name.

“You are my secret miracle,” she told him.

She felt him kiss the crown of her head.

They did not quite dance. It was not dancing music, nor was her recently redecorated living room furnished to accommodate dancers. But they swayed slowly in the candlelight, secure within one another’s arms, during the languid flow of sound between the energetic flourishes. Their sway-dancing moved them gradually across the room from her stereo system. Whenever they moved together, he felt the new, faint tug of the precious amulet she had made for him as it hung from the leather strand around his neck. She felt the shape of the crystal pendant he had given her after he arrived tonight, warmed now by her body heat, through the lace of her gown.

They had so much to feel. So much to dream. So much to discover, and give, and cherish. They had never known such warmth, such happiness.

“Would you like more water?” she asked him.

“No.”

“I’d like more champagne.” She gently disengaged herself. “You can sit down if you’d like.”

He did not move from his place in front of her fireplace. He did not want to sit. He knew he was too tall for her furniture, knew he was ultimately too alien to fit into her luxurious world. She wore her wealth and power as easily and unconsciously as she wore any of her graceful evening gowns. He could not do the same. He knew she longed for him to feel comfortable in her world, in her home. But he could not feign an ease he did not feel. Their worlds were not the same, and neither of them, each a native resident of their own domain,
would ever find lasting comfort in the other’s abode. For his part, he found his greatest upperworld comfort in simply being near to her.

She took her glass across the room to the dinette’s side table again, availing herself of the chilled bottle in her pail. He admired the elegance of her form as she moved. She savor the fruity nose and creamy palate of her champagne. He was still standing where she had left him. She returned to his side. He considered his sense of her for a moment.

“Take care,” he gently warned her. “You’re becoming a little giddy.”

How could he tell? His formally attired presence in her candlelit apartment inspired giddiness aplenty. But she had spent her past months learning to trust his insights.

“You can feel this affecting me?” she asked, raising her glass a little.

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you always?”

“Feel the influences that affect you?”

She nodded.

“Yes. Every time.”

She looked down into the pale gold drink she held. “Does feeling my—influences—affect you?”

“Mm-hm. Not to the same degree, nor in the same ways you feel them. But I am affected, yes.”

She remembered her many outings and celebrations during the past year. She remembered being exorbitantly wined and dined by Elliot Burch. She remembered her humiliating ordeal under the influence of the unlikely Vodou bokor, Dr. Alexander Ross. She suppressed a shiver.

“I think you are now remembering—unpleasant things,” he said softly.

“I’m remembering the Vodou cult,” she specified.

He took her empty hand. She squeezed his fingers gratefully.

“Alexander drugged my champagne,” she said, “and he urged me to drink as much of it as he could get away with, without rousing my suspicion. Then he drugged my morning tea. We both know how that influenced me.” She looked into his eyes. “What did it do to you?”

He regarded their joined hands. “That night—I felt your fear begin to grow, to intensify. First in your dreams, then after your waking. Your fright unsettled me, but that first night you faced your fear. You did something concrete about the things that frightened you.”

“Yes. I killed two whole tarantulas,” she replied, grimacing. “I imagined that I saw more. A lot more.” Her shiver became a shudder, unsuppressible. “Ugh—all over my bed. In my bed! I only found the two. I spent the whole night searching for the rest. But they weren’t
physically real enough to be found.”

“Nevertheless, you were brave to hunt for them.”

Until then, they had not spoken so openly about the events of that time, nor about the dreadful details.

“But the day after,” she murmured. “The day after—I was not brave at all.” She gazed up into his face. He met her eyes. She saw no judgment there.

“When you began hallucinating,” he told her, “I was talking with Father in the Library. I felt sudden, terrible pain. Here.” He touched his temple. “And then also here.” He lowered his hand to cover his heart. “At first, Father feared I was suffering a heart attack.”

“My God,” she breathed.

He said, “I did not share your visions, but I shared your agony. Your vertigo, your panic. Burning, like fever. Fracturing and lacerating like broken glass. You wandered the city alone. The visions hammered at both of us.”

“You didn’t know they were—visions.”

“No. Not then. Narcissa helped me to understand what was happening to you, and to my own mind and heart. But that was after—after I spoke with you on your balcony, after nightfall. After I saw with my eyes, and heard with my ears, the danger you were in.”

She felt this was a very generous way of describing that conversation.

“And when I am not in such great danger? If I am at a party, or just having a drink with a friend?”

“Then my mood often begins to answer your mood, much more insistently than at other times. Your emotions—thicken, somehow. They simplify. I might feel lightheaded—or lighthearted—in answer to your body’s signals. When doctors have given you medicine for pain, I felt a kind of dullness or sleepiness in the background of my sensing.”

“Our bond is so strange,” she mused. “So subtle, yet so powerful.”

“There have been times when, through our bond, you have also sensed me,” he said.

“True.” She recalled those rare moments. All of them thus far were life-threatening occasions. She sipped from her glass to ease the dryness in her mouth. “I felt your fear and your pain after the cave-in. The rockfall hurt your head, I think. And bruised your back and shoulders.”

He blinked, intrigued. He had never told her that. “Yes.”

“When the stones fell, you were stunned for a little while. You felt the weight crushing your chest as you came to.”

“Yes,” he said again. “After my wits returned to me, it took some time to free myself, and Father, from the rock piles. It took even more time to regain my bearings.”
“I think something happens whenever your consciousness is altered,” she said, trying out the idea for herself as she spoke. “It’s not something that happens inside me, in these moments. I’m just up here, going about my daily life.” She gestured with her coupé at the apartment around them, and at the city beyond, surrounding her apartment.

“But you—” she went on. “I think you unknowingly broadcast your distress. And perhaps you only do this ‘broadcasting’ when your mind is tuned out of your everyday frequencies.”

“Tuned out,” he repeated, thoughtful.

“The cave-in was the first time I remember feeling that kind of distress call from you. I might have sensed your broadcasting on the night the Silks attacked us—but I was so overwhelmed by my own fear for you, and my own guilt, that I doubt I’d have noticed anything I could be sure came from you.”

He sighed. Both the night of the Vodou ritual and the night of the gang’s onslaught had been two of the worst nights of his life. “I would not have wanted you to come to me after I woke in the gang’s stronghold,” he said. “When I did wake, I was terrified that they had caught you as well. I felt—indescribable relief to sense that you were elsewhere, blocks away from me. And away from my attackers.”

“Your tormentors,” she whispered.

He looked away and made no reply to that.

“Do you think, if you do not want me near when you are in danger, that something in you refuses to reach out for me through our bond?” she asked.

“It is possible.”

“I wonder if I could learn to do that. Intentionally.”

He tilted his head to one side. “I already feel when you want or need me to come to you during moments of danger, and when you do not.”

She knew this was so. He excelled at reading the nuances of her needs. She also knew how useful it might be, ultimately to both of them, if she developed the skill to turn off her end of the psychic homing beacon.
“Would you want our bond to become silent only during certain times of danger?” he asked. “Or—or is, perhaps, ordinary privacy something you desire, as well?”

Although she had known of their bond for a mere three months, the connection had actually existed between them for a whole year now. She had not gotten around to thinking about their bond in terms of privacy. She tried to imagine what it must feel like to possess a constant awareness of someone else’s emotional life. The experience she imagined did not appeal to her.

She told him, “There is nothing ordinary about our bond. I’m learning to trust your tact with regards to my privacy. Never once this year have you abused or broken my trust.”

“Your trust is sacred to me,” he said, his eyes shadowed by the gravity of truth.

“I know it is,” she said. “In any case, most of the time I am simply in awe of the power of our intimate sharing. Remember the night we reunited Eric and Ellie.”

He did remember the euphoria of her triumph. He remembered, too, her joy and wonder as she began to understand that he could feel with her, and within her, the intricate bliss that words alone could never communicate. For her part, she savored the remembered expression on his face: the rapture, the peace she saw there that night. The ecstasy that found a new incarnation in the moment they were creating together now, for themselves, for their anniversary.

“I suppose the bond itself is a complete mystery anyway,” she said. “Maybe it doesn’t have rules or reasons. Maybe it can’t be—activated or deactivated from either end. It just works.”

He suspected that their bond did have some kind of internal structure, and that it had a purpose beyond their present understanding. His personal empathic ability had definite patterns to its functioning, patterns that only emerged over time, through careful observation and reflection. His bond with the woman he loved must employ similar tendencies and patterns. They had yet to discover and interpret them all.

He said, “I think you may be right, though, about the way I seem to ‘broadcast’ when I know I am in peril, but am not fully aware of myself.”

“I’d like to say I’d be interested to test our theory in the future,” she said. “But I do not like the circumstances that provoke your broadcasts.”

He smiled ruefully. “Nor I.”

She emptied her glass. And now she did feel it for herself: the fizzing luminance of a fine vintage, warming and expanding her from the inside out. The music filling the air sounded smoother too, the Andante cantabile more tranquil and fluid than the first movement had been.

“How is your sense of me affecting you now, tonight?” she asked him.

In truth, he realized that he felt increasingly less cautious than he usually did inside an upperworld room. Lightsome. Full. She had so thoroughly welcomed him, he felt himself
enchanted.

“Tonight you have kindled dancing light within me,” he said. “How shall I determine which gleaming comes from you, and which from me, when we both stand bravely here together, our hearts aflame?”

She set her glass down upon the table. She reached for both his hands. Strong, gentle, kind hands. She called him by his dear and noble name. “Keep romancing me,” she commanded him. “For my heart is burning with my love for you.”

She believed that the trials they had endured together only sweetened the essence of the fire they shared.

“Do you feel it?” she asked, but did not let him answer. She kissed the corner of his mouth. He bowed his head and her lips found ways to speak to him that required no words at all.

He let her steal his breath away.

Long minutes later, wordless, she pulled his hands toward herself once more. In answer he stepped even nearer. She moved backward, drawing him with her. He had forgone the sofas and chairs in her living room. Perhaps he would find the furnishings in the room behind her more appealing.

He halted them beside her bed. He looked deep into her eyes, and into her heart, testing what he saw therein, challenging dreams in conflict with realities. “What do you wish of me?” he whispered.

“Celebrate me,” she said. “Celebrate us. We are neither of us in peril tonight. Celebrate our hope with me.”

“And our love,” he breathed.

“Yes. Our love above all. Here. Tonight. Even if only for tonight. This is our night.”

With great care, he pulled his hands from her grasp. Slow, deliberate, he bent toward her slender figure. He took her into his arms, lifting her off her feet. He laid her upon the bed. She slipped her feet out of her shoes. He moved her shoes to the bench, beside his cloak, and reached down to loosen the laces of his boots. Stepping out of them, he settled onto the bed himself and stretched out beside her.

Melodic chords streamed in from the living room. The night breeze billowed the bedroom curtain inward from the balcony. Candlelight shimmered in the lovers’ eyes.

He had dreamed of this. He had dreamed and dreamed alone for so long. Her small hand touched his face. Her heart did not cringe away from his heart, his face, her touching. The old yearning awoke within him—the hunger he must watch and and bridle, even as he warily opened channels within himself, to allow that hunger to surge cleanly through his soul at last; to surge and brim and to reach for the satisfaction of its desire. And, with faith in love’s providence, to seek to satisfy his beloved’s hungers in the undertaking.

He turned his head and kissed her palm. She smiled up at him. She caressed his cheek in
passing as she moved to curl her hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to her. His velvety muzzle found the sensitive skin above the collar of her gown. He began his requested celebration there.

His hands explored the length of her, memorizing spans, curves, proportions. Her hands measured the breadth of him, pressing at the fabric of his shirt beneath his vest to feel the slide of whip-stitched cloth over hidden fur, and to map the contours of muscle, the inner framing of bone. She enjoyed his creativity; he was playful in his passion. He embraced and nuzzled with impunity, easily lifting her into new positions, cushioning her limbs with his own body while his wide, heated hands sought out the parts of her he’d never dared to touch before. But for his quickened breath, he loved her silently.

She took advantage of an enthusiastic roll that pinned one of his arms beneath her to untie the knot of his cravat. She unwound the handstitched fabric, and let it drift where it would from her grasp. Her fingertips traced swirling lines upon his long neck. She mouthed the bared skin along his throat, down to his collarbones. He shivered in her arms, uttering a voiceless moan she had heard many times before in other settings: the strange, gentle man who loved her, receiving the affectionate touch of his goddess.

Gratified by his pleasure, she pushed lightly at his shoulder. He responded at once, rolling onto his back and steadying her ascent with hands that encircled her waist. Her airy skirt floated down across his legs. She leaned over him, emanating fervor. The necklace he had given her winked and glinted as it hung suspended between them. Her precious, priceless keepsake from the underworld’s deepest chamber. She shifted her weight. Her fingers came to rest upon one of the burnished metal plates of his belt. She leaned closer, bringing calculated pressure to bear upon him in a poised and practiced movement that she had always loved to perform.

And she stopped short.

He watched her eyes cloud with puzzlement, felt incredulity jolt her out of her evocative humor. He froze in place beneath her beautiful, startled body. How had he offended her?

She lowered her hand from his belt to confirm the fact which her poised and practiced maneuver had already revealed to her. Where she had expected to find ample evidence of her partner’s ardor, she found nothing to speak of happening instead.

She looked into his questioning face. She abruptly saw that he had stopped breathing. His eyes were darkening with unanticipated anxiety. She withdrew her hand—but too quickly. His quiet gasp told her that her gesture came across as a recoil, an abandonment. Bewilderment, even fear, slunk into her thoughts for the first time that night. Her kneeling and leaning felt awkward now, her right thigh held in pause between his thighs, the arm supporting her upper bodyweight beginning to ache with the tension of arrested motion.

She straightened her back and retreated from him, feeling lost. His breathing, at least, had resumed. He sat up. It shamed her to see alarm in his expression.
“Have I hurt you?” he asked.
She shook her head firmly. “No. No. Never.”
His left hand reached for her, but hesitated. He did not touch her. He asked, “What is wrong?”
“You—ah—you’re not—you don’t seem—invested.” She fumbled and blurted the words, feeling about half her age. He stared at her as if she’d gone utterly insane.
“Invested?” he repeated, blankly.
“You’re not aroused,” she tried again. “I—I expected—you to be otherwise—at this point.”
His heart pounded. His blood steamed. His whole body vibrated with vim and vigor. The most beautiful woman in the world had been making bountiful love to him all evening, and then she had encouraged him to love her—quite bodily—in her bed. He had never felt so aroused in his entire life.
Third time’s the charm? she wondered silently, a little desperately. Aloud she said to him, “I expect a man’s body to respond to me. To meet me—in—in readiness.” Tentative, she touched the canvas pant leg closest to her, resting her hand near his hip.
He closed his eyes, understanding. He exhaled. “Oh.”
She felt herself blush in sheer relief. She removed her hand.
He murmured her name and opened his eyes. “This body responds—differently—to you. To everything. This body is—something Other than a man’s.”
She knew that. She did. But now she was staring at him, confronted anew by the truth that his differences from her, and from everyone else, were not—and never had been—the superficial differences she often wished they were. All the same, she hated hearing him talk this way. Her first impulse always led her to deny, or to correct, his beliefs about himself. Her own beliefs about him throbbed rigorously in her mind.
“Oh course your body is a man’s!” she hurried to reassure him—and her unnerved self, as well.
“My body is what it is,” he said stolidly. He sat taller on the bed. “And I think the responses—the rhythms—of my body do not naturally share your chosen tempo.”
“We can share anything we choose to share,” she rebutted. “Perhaps you only need a little, well, assistance.” She knew next to nothing about male difficulties of this nature. She refused to recall the contemptuous jokes and jibes lurking in the back corners of her social repertoire, which now threatened to flood her mind at the worst possible moment. She tried to think of basic therapies instead. “There are—techniques—” she got out.
“Medications—stimulants—”
His gaze was cooling as she spoke. The fuzzy luminescence in her head was not helping her make her case. She knew she wasn’t making sense. She wasn’t sure how to make herself
make sense. She felt woefully flustered and disoriented! The differences between them were suddenly too different. She had never encountered this situation before.

Her hasty words sent a chill down his spine. Had she forgotten so soon what two abductors’ upperworld “techniques,” “medications,” and “stimulants” had done to him only weeks ago? He instantly submerged the rising memories of his captivity back down into the realm of his most hideous nightmares.

“The rhythms of my body are different, not diseased,” he insisted.

She did not want to refute this point. She did not want him to be diseased or disordered. She did not want to insult his dignity.

“I’m sorry,” she said, chastened. “I don’t want to judge you, or to compare you with—um—I guess—I just don’t know what to do, if—when—” She shook her head, frustrated. “I’ve always assumed that the mechanics of intimacy are—consistent. Predictable.”

“You value predictability,” he said.

“I do.”

“Me too,” he said softly.

They both looked away from each other.

“Maybe—I’m still too attached to my favorite routines. Romantically speaking,” she said.

“Is a man’s erection so important to you?” he asked. “To your routines?”

She looked swiftly at his face, surprised by his frankness. He was gazing, with some longing, she thought, at the hands she held folded in her lap as she sat on the edge of her bed.

“It’s what I’m used to,” she told him with equal frankness.

He looked up into her eyes. “I cannot give you what you’re used to.”

His statement was so true, it hurt them both.

“I think I learn that lesson all over again every time we meet,” she said, thwarted. “I wish I were a better student.”

Sorrow dimmed his countenance. “I don’t want to be your teacher,” he said.

Of course he didn’t. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, hoping to quell the flush that must still be blooming there. She thanked God for the generosity of the candlelight.

“It’s just that I like to determine a partner’s sexual sincerity, his passion, by the way he—participates—in my—routines,” she explained. “It’s how I gauge the status of a relationship.”

And also, she thought to herself, but could not quite bring herself to speak aloud, it was how she’d learned to quash her doubts about the quality of her own attractiveness.
For if a man’s body proclaimed her inherent desirability, even if sometimes against his conscious will, then his words or actions could matter less to her, in the end. Such proof of her physical beauty reassured her of her value to others—or her power over them—in at least this one arena. And so her inevitable disappointment in the failure of a relationship might just hurt a little less.

He was astonished by the inherent absurdity, and the naiveté, of her habitual discernment method. “Do you measure the sincerity and passion of your partner’s intentions by this standard? Do you measure the quality of your partner’s affections this way?” he asked.

“Historically, yes,” she replied, nonplussed.

She could tell by the look on his face that the next question he was not asking her went something like: And how has that worked out for you thus far?

Self-disgust began to burrow its way into her awareness. No, he wasn’t judging her. She was judging herself. Again. Besides, she knew, it was not as if she had been doubting his sincerity, or his passion, or his affection for her—up until the precipitous rupture of her great and grandiose expectations.

He watched her try to collect her thoughts, while her churning emotions tackled this newest challenge to her worldview. In the meantime, he worked to process his own shock at the cessation of their frolic. She had freely touched him wherever and however it had pleased her to touch him, and her touch seared like a blessed flame that burned him without wounding. His flesh now ached acutely—hungrily—everywhere—with the loss of her kisses and caresses. Breathing sensibility into that absence, he turned his attention to the impressions that were forming in the wake of her retreat and revelations. Sumptuousness. Safety. Sensuality. He also pondered her word: Sexual. She had accepted him totally, if only for a moment. One perfect, poignant moment. She had gladly received the love which his soul and his body offered to her. His psyche—and his skin, his mouth, his hands—the very marrow of his bones—would cherish that acceptance, and their felicity, forever.

But for now? For the remainder of this night? He sighed to himself. She was not quite sober. And he was disconcerted by the resurgence of fear between them. He regretted that what he was and what he was able to give her could not satiate her appetites as she desired.

Their anniversary celebrated the mutual end of their aloneness, and the dawning of new hopes and dreams. It was enough. It was abundant. He drew in another deep breath and felt thankfulness overflow from his heart. Even in her confusion, she still looked like an angel to him.

She cleared her throat. “The things I’m used to—my private expectations—they keep getting us into trouble, don’t they?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Other times, they get us out of trouble.” He twisted around on the bed and set his feet on the floor.
“Have I spoiled our celebration?” she asked his back.

“No,” he answered, and the warmth in his voice offered her comfort she wasn’t sure how to receive. “But we’re not ready for this.”

Bleak, she told him, “I wanted us to be ready.”

“So did I. But we’re not. So—let this remain a dream we share.”

Her vision blurred with tears. Dreaming was hard for her. But, “A dream,” she conceded. “For now.”

“May I use your bathroom?” he asked bluntly.

“Of course.” She wiped at her eyes.

He stood up. She called after him. He stopped.

“Tell me what you’re used to.” she said.

His shoulders sagged. How could he explain?

For he was used to bearing and forbearing many things to which he could never become fully accustomed. He sustained the brutal knowledge that his infant self had inspired someone to immediately discard him after his birth. All his life, he brooked unthinking dismissal from the society of his friends, as he watched each of them dream engrossing dreams that of necessity excluded him from the dreaming. As a child, he had also braved his older brother’s tumultuous fellowship and adventuresome ambitions, grieving both Devin’s bullying and his eventual desertion. And he mourned always the damning remembrance of feeling his own ravenous adolescent claws exert bloody, wrongful force to pillage one he had claimed to love.

He was all too used to battling annual bouts of crushing aloneness, or befuddling madness, or mute despair. He tolerated the condescension of those smug acquaintances at the periphery of his life who adjudged his faculties deficient in comparison to their own, because they could not imagine his contentment with his personhood. Time and again, he bore the weight of experiencing too many people—including the beloved occupant of this apartment—scream and sob at their first sight of his face. Or their second sight, or even their third. He had also—somehow—survived sensing from afar those occasions when this woman he loved forever made passionate love to another man, Up in the world she shared with her suitors. He coped with battle, generally, and with his memories of battle. He had long endured the virulent mockery of small-hearted men. He had suffered the petty cruelties the Silks women had inflicted two months ago, alongside senseless torture at the hands of their strutting male associates. His entire being still fought to surpass the violations of two feckless scientists who had recently caught and caged him, and, but for the intercession of his beloved friend, would have killed him. He strove daily to come to terms with his beloved’s oft-strained efforts to piece together some way of relating to him that would not
altogether devastate one or both of them.

He sighed again. Over his shoulder, he told her, “I am used to horror.”

Dismayed, she watched him stride away into the next room. The electric light stayed off. He did not close the door. She didn’t think he liked doors. She heard water running from the sink’s faucet. She got up and crossed the room to stand at the threshold, looking in at him.

He bent over the vanity countertop, dashing handfuls of cold water over his face. As she watched, he reached for the spigot and shut off the flow. Still hunched over the sink, he braced his hands on the countertop surface and blew out a long breath. She saw that the ruffled cuffs of his sleeves jittered around his wrists.

“You’re trembling,” she observed.

“I’m—deescalating,” he replied.

“I think I’m deescalating, too,” she said.

“I know.”

She took a hand towel from her wall cabinet and gave it to him. He pressed the towel to his face, then dried his hands. The washing seemed to restabilize him. He placed the towel on the countertop between them.

“You’re disappointed,” she murmured.

He turned his head and looked at her. In the dim room, his eyes glinted gold behind swaying locks of his hair. His rich voice came to her, calm and clear. “You are the disappointed one.”

She waved a hand at the doorway, at the fluttering curtain and flickering candles beyond the doorway, at the rumpled bed, and the dining table out there, laden with uneaten dainties, and at the now-silent living room. Her music CD must have ended some while ago. “I just—I wanted to include you—in my world, in my life. Tonight, more than ever before. The way you’ve included me in your world, and in your living, your loving. I hoped you could sample—” She found herself near tears again. She lowered her hand to her side.

He stood upright. She could really only see his shadow, and his vague image in the bathroom mirror. She wondered if he had even glanced at his reflection. She wondered what he thought of his own reflection. She couldn’t bring herself to ask. Now he came to her, steady and unhurried.

“You hoped we could share beauties after horrors,” he said.

“Yes.” She sniffled and looked down.

His long fingers touched her chin, pressing lightly upward, prompting her to lift up her head. Their eyes met. He spoke her name like a blessing.

“Don’t lose heart. You’ve succeeded. Your hope for us is fulfilled. And very beautifully.”
The perpetual outpouring of grace from his spirit never ceased to amaze her.

He said, “I believe it’s necessary for people to risk testing the known limits of our lives. Sometimes we must scale the walls enclosing our worlds and dare to peer over the parapets. The risk must be taken, and the work must be done, to honor hope and unveil new possibilities. It is necessary. It is the only way to truly learn and grow. I will never forget your courage in taking this risk with me, tonight and always. I’ll never forget your hospitality. I treasure every single moment I share with you, come what may.”

His hand cupped the scarred side of her face. He touched his lips to her lips. His touch was so fine and so deft, it felt like a kiss from a butterfly, or a rose: a wisp of eternity unfurling fragile petals, or fanning gossamer wings.

“I am not disappointed,” he whispered to her.

She clasped his hand, leaning into the strength of his convictions. His words assuaged her blazing, blasted fears. Her uncertainties remained, but they quieted down. She pulled his hand from her cheek and led him back out into the bedroom. She glanced at the bed and realized that her residual curiosity about his differences embarrassed her now. She wondered if he felt any curiosity about what she had in desperation termed her “routines.” What a ridiculous word she had chosen.

She seemed stymied. Yes, she was calming, but her feelings still whirled through his sense of her. One feeling hurt her most of all. It grieved him to feel her in pain.

In the spirit of risk-taking, he decided to ask her a question. She tended to became upset with him whenever he tried to talk with her about fear. He did not know how she would respond to an attempt to talk about the swollen emotion he sensed glowering at the forefront of her thoughts. If he did not ask, he would never know. This night might afford his only opportunity to broach the subject.

He flexed his fingers within her grasp. She looked away from her bed, over at the candles glowing upon her nearest bedside table.

“I feel that you are ashamed,” he said.

“That’s unfortunate,” she replied.

He touched her shoulder with his free hand. “I often feel the shame you feel—about your love life. I’ve sometimes heard shame in your voice, when you’ve spoken of your
romances.”
She looked up at him, troubled.
“Why do you feel ashamed?”
She took a deep breath, held it, let it go. “Looking back, I’m not sure my love life has ever
had very much to do with love,” she said.
“If not love, then what?” he asked.
His eyes were full of interested compassion. He truly wanted to know. She tried to find
words.
“Infatuation?” she suggested. “Greed, sometimes. Or obsession. Loneliness. Habit.” She
sighed. “Expectations. My own, yes, but also the expectations of others. My parents’
especially. My father most especially. He expected me to marry soon after my debut. That
was twelve years ago. He still wants me to marry. He’s put up with years and years of my—
disconnected adventures. He even had to rescue me from a couple catastrophes. He wants
grandchildren—honorably, legitimately begotten grandchildren. I think his
disappointment looms constantly over my own. In my heart of hearts—I just don’t know.
I’ve never felt ready for any of that. A marriage, a household, a family. Someday—yes. And
some days I do dream of a husband and children more wistfully than other days. But not
just now. Not just yet.” She gazed at the wonderful, inhuman hand she held.
“So, there must also be a lot of rebellion in my—flings and flirtations,” she said. “My
rebellious little routines. It always feels like love at the time. It always feels like heaven to
fall in love with the ideal of an attractive man, and then to share some intimate moments
with him. But the man himself can never live up to my dream of him. No one ever
understands who I am. Me, least of all. No one stays. I think most of the time, my love life
has been about two people using each other to feel a little better about themselves, for a
little while. It doesn’t last, though. We can never connect to each other, in the end. Surely,
these are things I ought to feel ashamed of.”
She looked up. In his mind, her sorrow soughed a pained lament. The pattern she
described revealed a lack of self-respect. This trustful gift of her confidence in him was
tremendous.
He told her, “There’s nothing wrong with being with someone you care about. There’s
nothing shameful about finding pleasure in a willing lover’s company. Troth protects
emotive and sexual integrity, true. But not all commitments, and not all dreams, last
forever. Not all are meant to. Things change between people, as people themselves change
and grow over time. Everyone moves through seasons and cycles of life, each in their own
way. I don’t believe sex provides a—a shortcut—to intimacy. Neither is it ever a substitute
for commitment or love. And yet, love does not always need to thrill at romantic pinnacles
to still be love. Isn’t companionship a blessing too? Isn’t play?”
She stood still, thinking his perspective through. The mercy he extended was
unprecedented in her life. “I’ve never thought about love—or sex—that way,” she admitted. “I always assumed love must be—monolithic. All-or-nothing. Ultimately out of my reach, even if I could never stop myself from reaching. I thought lovemaking was supposed to happen in certain ways, too, for it to—well, count. For it to be in any way connected to love.”

“Many forms of love exist,” he said. “And there are many, many, myriad ways of expressing each one.”

She managed a feeble smile. “Erotic love must be the most dangerous love to attempt.”

“Eros is the highest, brightest form of love,” he replied. “It is infinitely compelling.”

She felt her smile begin to thaw, like the passing of winter into springtime. Sometimes, he seemed an utter innocent. Other times— “I didn’t expect you to hold such opinions,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Well, as you said. You are your father’s son.”

He blinked. “This opinion is one Father imparted to me from my youth. It’s an opinion he maintains to this day, and I agree with it.”

“And wholeheartedly, too,” she said, enjoying everything that made him the man she loved.

“Yes,” he answered. He thought for a moment. “You don’t judge only your relationships, or your partner’s devotion, by your ability to—arouse your lover. You judge yourself, too.”

“True,” she said sadly.

“Do you know that I find no fault with your allure?” he asked.

She consulted her memory and intuition regarding her companion. “Yes,” she said, and hoped with all her might that she would never forget the truths his heartfelt words and actions were solidifying for her now. She only wished she had not so blunderingly found fault with his appreciation of her charms.

Freed of her shame, she engaged her curiosity. She said, “There’s something—very personal—I would like to ask you now.”

“You can ask me anything,” he told her sincerely, as he had told her more than once before.

She glanced around the room and found the low steps in front of her balcony doors. “Come over here,” she directed. “Sit down.”

They sat side by side on the edge of the top step. The curtain wafted behind them, revealing a brief glimpse of the city lights outside. The light from the candles continued to flicker and dance.

He was watching her, waiting for her question.

“What I want to ask is twofold,” she began. Plunging in, she asked, “Is tonight the first time
you’ve ever—made love with someone?”

Silent, he nodded.

She had long suspected as much, and she found his sure-handedness, even boldness, all the more enviable in light of his confirmation.

“You say you are—simply different,” she said. “I accept that. But—how do you know—for sure—that—everything—?” She left her sentence dangling in midair.

“That everything works properly?” he asked.

It was her turn to reply with a silent nod, relieved of the burden of articulating her thought.

He went quiet for a while, thinking how to answer. He felt her thoughts and feelings hesitatingly graze various possibilities, unwilling to land upon any one explanation without further facts from him. He felt grateful for her efforts to suspend her disbelief. She was both a skeptical attorney and a survivor of numerous crimes, and he knew trust and patience were difficult for her.

“I’ve always been drawn to beauty,” he said at length. “I trust and relish my thirst for beautiful things, and places, and ideas, and persons most of all. But this love of beauty is a very different feeling from the pull—and the hunger—that the entirety of myself feels for you. The pull is like a magnetic force. Bare physics. Or perhaps—biology.” He exhaled a ragged sigh.

“The pull is not our bond. It is entirely of myself. Yet it does seem—informed by our bond. Or perhaps—oriented toward our bonding. The pull I feel is very strong, and it is strongest, and bears the most potential, whenever my senses bring your cycles to my awareness.”

“My cycles?”

He nodded, saying, “The cycle of your moods, which encourage or discourage amorous approaches—” And then, spoken much softer— “And the cycle of your fertility.”

She gaped at him for a second, before she was able to master her surprise—and her face.

“You can sense my monthly cycle,” she finally said.

“Yes.” He risked explicit terms. “I know when you menstruate. I know when you ovulate. I know all the fluctuations in between. It is deep knowing, beyond thought. My body knows. My body answers, and echoes you.”

He waited again, listening at all levels of their love for her reaction.

At last she came up with: “That’s amazing to me.” And she meant it.

He relaxed into her renewed acceptance. “My body is a conservative system. The way I exist in the world is—delicate—demanding—expensive—efficient—all at the same time. I think—I think the response you were looking for tonight would be available to you during a different phase of your cycle. And it is possible it might also only be available during certain seasons of the year.” His voice fell to a low murmur. “I know my overall energy
reserves wax during spring and fall, and wane in summer and winter. My body’s sexual energy may well follow suit.”

He finished speaking. She thought he looked extremely vulnerable.

“Then,” she said very gently, “we’re fortunate that right now it’s spring.”

His still-adoring blue eyes smiled at her, turning upward at the corners. The look was endearing, both masculine and feline. Unique to himself.

“And the mechanical—or the arousal—component?” she persisted.

The smiling faded from his demeanor. “I am capable,” he said. “I—I have not myself explored the boundaries of my capability, but—recently—last month, I—I did learn—” He struggled, and she witnessed the struggle. Its intensity frightened her a little. She perceived sudden dire woundedness in his voice, his posture—in the depths of his eyes.

A woundedness she recognized from the day she unlocked the door of a mad scientist’s cage.

She told herself that “Oh, my God,” would be the absolute wrong reply to this moment and successfully kept her mouth shut.

She took his hands instead. She spurned nascent pity and focused on condolence. He would sense the choosing. She wanted him to feel from her the most loving emotion she could muster.

“Last month?” she prompted, hoping to clear the way for him. “The professor and his student?”

He had fixed his gaze upon his hands held in her hands. He breathed slowly around the raw scars within his mind and soul, refusing to see any other view than this. “They experimented,” he said.

She’d half-known it. She hadn’t demanded details from the man she loved, nor from the family and friends who had cared for him after his rescue. She did not want to know the details. The horror was too much for her.

She loathed dwelling upon past horrors, and spared no effort to banish her remembrance of them, as quickly and thoroughly as possible. This was how she had mobilized her courage and learned to be strong during the past year. It was how she had rebuilt her sense of self after her previous April’s life-altering assault. But if she found last month’s outrage against the one she loved unthinkable, unendurable—what must it be like for him?

She wondered what their adventure—or misadventure—in her bed had cost him tonight. She wondered what she owed.

Her eyes filled with tears—yet again—as she understood that she had—yet again—broken a secret vow she kept trying to make to herself. She had taken him, and his love, and his body, and her expectations, for granted. She knew him well enough to believe that he
would not mind being thought of as so ordinary and familiar to her, that he could be taken for granted. Still, she berated herself for her appalling forgetfulness. She didn’t know what her distractibility meant. She didn’t understand why she could not more consistently appreciate his presence in her life. She also didn’t know why she couldn’t notice the sacrifices he made to be with her. She didn’t know how to repay him for his life-saving love.

His hands left her hands. She felt the thick pads of his thumbs smooth away her tears as they fell. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to grieve you.”

Now she laughed softly, and shook her head. “Your heart is still perfectly beautiful, even after horrors,” she told him. “Perfectly gallant. Let me grieve with you, if I may.” Grieving would ease her furtive sense of indebtedness. But she wouldn’t tell him that.

This was a subject she disliked bringing up in conversation with him. She knew she owed him her life, a dozen times over now. She owed him everything. He always tried to convince her that the debt did not exist. He also always resisted her every attempt to convince him that it did. She believed that only through great effort and persistence would she ever convert him to her way of thinking. It was easier to simply give things to him without disclosing the reasons why she needed to give them. He might be able to feel her feelings, but he could not read her thoughts. His Tunnels culture of share-and-share-alike predisposed him to humbly receive her giftings and sharings without question.

Her tactic worked on him tonight. She gave him her tears. She took for herself the meager consolation of claiming a portion of his confided suffering for her own purposes.

He embraced her, cleansing his heart’s haunted pain with his faith in her kindness. “Grief and joy,” he mused into her hair.

“Two recurring themes of our eros,” she replied, nestling.

“Perhaps that is what makes it ours,” he said.

“Doubtless.”

After a moment he reiterated, “The point is: I am different, but I am functional. We must journey into our future with great care. But—”

“But at least impotence is not the problem I feared it was,” she finished for him.

“Yes.”

“Thank you for explaining. I know—that wasn’t easy for you.”

His quietest wry chuckle rumbled in her ear. “Nor for you.”

He had explained the unfathomable pull he felt of body to body. It was good she knew about it now. He was also thankful she did not ask him about his hunger. If she asked, he would answer. But he would rather not have to describe his hungers to her—not at the present time. He did not want to cause her any further hurt, or fright, or perplexity tonight. And, deep down in the riven shadows of his heart, a forlorn voice reasoned that if even garment-shielded contact with this one intimate part of his body had so astounded and
upset her, had so shattered her expectations of who and what a rightful lover ought to be for her—then he dreaded enduring her reactions to this one most intimate part of his soul.

Body and soul, he felt himself more alien than ever in her world. He wearied of surprising her. And he felt far more than tired of horror. Safe in his arms, she tucked her newfound knowledge of him into the storehouse of her mind. She let the upheaval of the last half hour melt away from her thoughts. He seemed content to simply hold her for a quiet while. So she let him.

It was peaceful to rest her cheek against his chest and listen to the slow, steadfast beating of his mighty heart. Comforting. They had done this before. He had comforted her this way before. She broke their silence to share a memory.

“We sat just like this, right here, after I came home from the hospital in February,” she said.

“Yes.”

“That was the first time you came inside with me.”

“Yes. It was cold that night. Too cold for you to stay outdoors for long. Your wounds were aching.”

He meant the gunshot wound the mob enforcer, Mitch Denton, put into her back after she had escaped from his car, and the lingering headache from the concussion she had sustained when his shot felled her.

“You held me and held me. I listened to your heartbeat, and the quiet. It was so good to be home. I felt safe. Protected.”

“Mmm.” Noncommittal punctuation.

“Then my back needed me to stop sitting on the steps, and you brought in a chair from the living room for me. I sat in the chair and you sat on the steps and we talked long into the night. About all kinds of things. But only a little about Denton and the Flynn case.”

“I remember.” It hurt to remember. The night Mitch shot the woman he loved was another night he numbered among the worst of his life. The evening she finally came home, alive and healing, and had let him hold her and hold her, he’d felt dizzy with relief and gratitude.
“It still strains my imagination to think that Denton grew up with you in the Tunnels,” she said.

He wished this truth could strain his own imagination. But his memory recorded all the particulars of a long and troubled history with the boyhood friend who had grown into a bitter, resentful enemy.

He had not known Mitch was the violent criminal his beloved was hunting during her investigation of the longshoreman’s murder. Not until he’d arrived in that dark alley near the docks, too late to protect the one he loved from harm. Not until he’d seen the face of the man who gunned her down.

Since then, she made sure to mention to him the names of the suspects and perpetrators in her most dangerous cases. Just on the off chance that he might have heard of them before, or that he might catch a useful rumor from the streets, and could provide her a little forfending information.

He said, “We offered Mitch a chance for a better life. He did not accept it. He betrayed us all.”

She had never heard his voice sound so cold. She wondered why her poet-warrior had let the man live, if he hated him so much. He had located Denton’s hideout and slaughtered three flunkies. There would have been four if she had not herself shot Rado, Denton’s right-hand man, with Denton’s own gun during her escape attempt. The authorities never found Rado’s body. Either he’d survived and slithered off into the urban wasteland, or mobsters had stopped by the alleyway and cleaned up the mess before the police got there.

But her special friend had let Denton off.

She had speculated upon several possible motives during the past two months, ranging from morbid nostalgia to misguided compassion to miserable cowardice, and none of her suspicions either made much sense or made her feel very good about herself. Violence was another subject she did not like to discuss with her protector. The few times she had tested the waters in that direction, she had discovered the vast variance between their two separate perspectives on crime and punishment. She also discovered that their two worlds fostered two utterly different worldviews. Granted, her secret savior and his people did readily cooperate with her, even alerting her at times to street-level word of problems that needed to be solved in the world Above. But she and he had—not fought, no, but—argued more than once about what crime was, what it meant, who was responsible for preventing it or for stopping a crime in progress, and how best to respond during and after each crisis. Criminal litigation was still very new to her. Underworld mores were even more uncharted.

She did not know what to do with the fact that Denton was still alive. She didn’t want him to be.

“The last I heard of him, they had settled him into his long-term accommodations in Lewisburg,” she said. “That’s a federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania. I had expected him to
have a much longer stay locally, in the MCC, for his trial, but he stunned me and everyone else in law enforcement, by pleading guilty to all charges as soon as the marshals arrested him. He made no defense or protest at all.”

He knew the sequence of events, although the location of Mitch’s prison was news to him. He said nothing in response to her reflections. She stirred in his arms. He released her. She sat up, searching his face for he knew not what.

“Did you have something to do with Denton’s—attitude adjustment?” she asked.

A vision of Mitch the last time he’d seen him flashed before his inner eye. “You know that after I brought you to the hospital, I confronted Mitch,” he said. “Anything he chose to do after that confrontation was his own decision.”

“You took a great risk, then, letting him go free,” she said. “Maybe too great a risk, considering Denton’s history.”

His gaze sharpened. “Do you believe I risked your life?” he asked.

Now that he put it that way, she knew it was exactly what she believed. And this belief had been nagging at her from the back of her mind for months. She nodded. “My life, yes, and the lives of those I had placed in witness protection. I put them in witness protection because Denton wanted to kill them—my witness and his wife and children. Denton came after me to get to them.”

He had never heard her voice sound so cold. It numbed his heart. The three dead faces of Mitch’s pawns rose up in his remembrance, joining the image of Mitch’s livid, anguished face. He looked at them, noted them, honored what he could honor, rejected what he must refuse. He let them sink back down into his inner morass.

“I confronted Mitch to protect your life,” he said. “I confronted him to protect many lives, and to avenge many losses. I disarmed him and forced him to look into the mirror of my face. What he saw there ended him. I saw it happen, I felt it. I witnessed his ending. There was nothing left of him. I walked away. I went to you. Mercy let us both go free from that place.”

“Mercy let us?” she asked, her brow furrowing. “Us being you and me?”

His voice intoned in its deepest register, “Me and him.”

She did not like hearing him put himself on par with a monster like Denton. “You have nothing in common with him. He’s a relentless murderer and racketeer.”

The numbness was spreading from his heart to his ribs and shoulder blades. “Yes. He was that. He may still be. Or maybe he’s becoming something else now.”

“Sure. A convicted relentless murderer and racketeer, rotting in prison. I don’t share your outlook about this. Just because you risked showing him mercy doesn’t mean I have to.”

Mildly he replied, “Yes. That is true.”
“I don’t think Mitch Denton deserved mercy,” she said, speaking a thought she had long wanted to say out loud.

He nodded slowly in reply, acknowledging her words and emotions, she understood, but this was not his nod of agreement or affirmation. She knew he was softhearted. She also knew how few of their opponents walked—or ran—away from a fight with him and lived. His skill with a kitchen knife was nothing compared with his prowess in hand-to-hand combat.

“Did you judge you owed him leniency?” she asked. “Clemency? Because of your friendship in the past?”

“No,” he said. It was a very firm and decisive no. “I owed him nothing.”

“Then why mercy for him, after everything he’d done?” she asked.

He pondered her question. He pondered the definition of mercy she seemed to espouse. He pondered her doubt in his powers of judgment.

“Because I believed mercy would accomplish the most good and redeem the most evil,” he said.

“Don’t you think your belief was colored by the history you shared with him?”

“Of course history colors all my beliefs,” he answered. “I do not claim impartiality. Can anyone?”

She just looked at him askance.

It was important for every person to doubt those beliefs that conflicted with the ethics of their own conscience. This was simply good sense and strong self-protection. It was equally important that a request to take foreign beliefs into consideration be accompanied by cogent reasons for entertaining those beliefs. He plumbed their shared past for an instance of mercy toward a criminal that her conscience had deemed acceptable.

“You believed Jason Walker deserved mercy,” he reminded her softly.

“That was different,” she said. The so-called Subway Slasher had been a vigilante, not a parasite. “Jace was different.”

“You wanted Jason to show mercy to muggers,” he said. “So the muggers must have deserved mercy they were not receiving from him.”

“They were stealing. He was killing. His crusade had gotten out of hand. He should have just let the police do their job. He should have trusted the legal system.”

He left the prickly subject of the police alone. “Yet you wanted your system to be merciful to Jason when it caught him,” he said.

“Of course! What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying Jason did many merciless things, yet you wanted mercy for Jason because you
admired him. You got to know him as a person, as the friend of a friend, before you uncovered his secret. He was courteous to you. Even charming.”

She did not like where she felt he was going with this line of reasoning.

“You hated Mitch,” he continued. “He had no secrets from you. Everything you needed to know about his character was written down for you in his case files. In his criminal record. You didn’t know he was the one-time friend of a friend. He was crude and savage.” He paused. “Each had his own motivation for his actions, yes, but you also formed impressions of each according to your personal affinities and preferences. This is only natural. But didn’t your own outlook color your judgment of what each man deserved?”

“Denton kidnapped me to preserve his criminal enterprise!” she cried.

“So did Jason Walker.”

She almost retorted that Denton had murdered her colleague in a car bombing, and that he’d intended to kill her like he’d killed many other people, that he had yanked her hair with one cruel fist while he ordered her to tell him exactly what he wanted to know before he killed her—whether quick and easy, or slow and ugly, he said he’d leave up to her. But then she remembered Jace holding his Tekko-Kagi to her skin, threatening to slash her throat if she didn’t tell him exactly what he wanted to know, while his female minion, Suki, twisted her arm and his male accomplice, Red, breathed rancid garlic fumes down the back of her neck.

Jace had attacked a subway policeman prior to sending Suki and Red to abduct her, and although he had not killed him, he’d sent the officer to the ICU, and the man had later been forced into early retirement, due to disability. And then Jace had come after her, to get to the Beast the street people and IRT engineers talked about: the terrible, fierce Creature who haunted the city’s dark places, a Thing with the face of a demon and the soul of an angel. She abandoned this example.

“Why are you defending Mitch?” she demanded instead.

“I’m not. I’m defending mercy.”

She glared at him.

He enunciated his words carefully to get them past the numbing coldness that was creeping now from his chest and shoulders to his neck and skull, down his arms, and along his spine. “Mercy is what it is because it is not necessarily deserved,” he said. “Therein lies its virtue. Its grace. It is the offspring of wisdom and humility. It honors the inherent value of every life. It hopes the best for every outcome, presumes the best it can of every soul. It hearkens to possibility and mystery, even in the face of great evil. Mercy upholds the dignity of both the judge and the judged.”

She had somehow forgotten that among many other things, her companion was a philosopher.
“The concept of just deserts is central to my moral code,” she told him. “You must know that by now. I have to reserve the most mercy for people who register closest to the law-abiding end of the behavioral scale. The more depraved the crime, the less mercy I can allow.”

“Even when an outlaw might need more mercy than a paragon?” he asked.

She felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. The person she was talking to right now was both an outlaw and a paragon. One to whom her world granted no mercy whatsoever. She rubbed her forehead in concentration, but could think of no adequate reply.

“Did I deserve Jason’s mercy?” he asked then.

She inhaled slowly. “Yes. You did.”

“Jason Walker stood over me on a high, derelict bridge, just as I later stood over Mitch Denton.” His words husked as quietly as a mild April wind through distant leaves. “To strike the killing blow against someone who cringes defeated at your feet, who begs you with words or with eyes not to die by your hand—” He closed his eyes. She suddenly realized that he was in terrible pain.

He suddenly realized she truly did not know what she kept requiring of him, time and time again.

“—Or to refrain from dispensing just deserts—” he rasped. “If just they be. The choice must be made.”

His face had gone ashen gray, she saw with growing unease.

He had just implied that whatever had happened between him and Denton, it had involved the threat—or temptation—of killing blows, and had resulted in cringing defeat and terrorized pleas. She decided that, philosophy aside, this had to be good enough for her. He’d obviously scared the bejeezus out of his quarry, and now the mob had one less enforcer to do its dirty work out on the waterfront. She didn’t want to see him empathizing with Mitch Denton this way. Nor did he need to suffer the memory of whatever had happened between himself and the Subway Slasher.

She reached for him. He gasped at her touch and looked at her a little dazedly. His eyes seemed dark again, and not remotely tame.

She told him, “When I deplored Jason’s lack of mercy, you in your mercy told me he’d found it again, in the end. You told me this to comfort me, after his end—after his fall from the bridge—this passionate, frustrated killer I admired. As you said, he was the friend of my friend, and a man who could have become my friend too, maybe, under other circumstances.” She shook her head. “I never knew mercy could be so complicated.”

“Justice and mercy both are complicated,” he said hoarsely.
She thought hard for a moment, still gripping his forearms. “I suppose,” she said, trying not to sound grudging or harsh, “that your mercy is what made my world’s justice possible in the Flynn case. Mitch Denton submitted to prosecution. He was convicted and sentenced and now he’s out of everyone’s way. Surely he wouldn’t have submitted to us without his—confrontation with you.”

“No,” he said, certain.

“So I get to be right, after all. You had more than merely ‘something’ to do with Denton’s change of heart.”

She had hoped to equalize the heavy atmosphere with a little understated victory for herself and a lot of understated credit for him. Her victory rang hollow. It was clear he didn’t want the credit. And now he was projecting that deer-in-the-headlights attitude she recognized from his earliest visits to her balcony.

This was why she hated talking with him about several specific things.

He was studying her beautiful face and remembering how she had looked under fluorescent lights in her hospital room. How pale and small she had appeared, weak and sedated after surgery. He had wept over her as she slept and as he prayed. She broke his heart with her smile whenever she surfaced out of her murmuring dreams. A smiling that was all and only for him. For him.

“All I wanted that night was to be with you,” he remembered. “To stay beside you. Always.”

“You are with me, in spirit, forever,” she declared.

“I came so close to losing you,” he said.

“But you didn’t lose me. You saved me.” She ran her fingers down his sleeves to find his hands.

“That almost happened again,” he said. “Four days ago.”

“No,” she said, frowning, and she had to work to keep up with the leap in their timeline he had made. It felt like a leap of illogic to her. She deliberately relaxed the irked frown from her face. “No, it didn’t. You were there for me when I needed you. You’re always there for me. I wasn’t hurt. We protected another witness on Wednesday, you and I. Together. You protected me. You saved me. And this witness’s testimony saved my friend at work: Joe.”

“I nearly came too late,” he said. The coldness had devoured the rest of him. It was all he could feel. The hit man in the narrow stairwell was pointing a gun at his beloved’s head, ready to fire.

Deer-in-the-headlights was transforming into something else. Something she had never seen before. He wasn’t seeing her in front of him anymore, for one thing. She spoke his name, concerned, trying to call him back to her.

He was losing himself in his race to reach her, in his fury to end the new menace to her life. Race to reach her, end the menace. Race, end. He squinted at the room beyond the steps
where they sat. It was a riot of squared corners
and shifting shadows, folding doors and
abstract paintings. A Topsider’s lair.

That thought was not good at all. Not right. He
could not breathe.

She called him by name again. He turned back
to her. She looked worried. She was fearing for
him. Not fearing him—yet—but—

“You’re shaking now,” she said.

And that remark got through. He understood
what was happening, and what he needed to do.
Understanding snapped his self-control back
into place. He straightened himself, pulled his
shoulders back, raised his breastbone, gave his
diaphragm space to expand. His lungs filled
with air. And the air, too, was its own riot, full of foods he could
not eat, and intoxicating perfumes, hair spray, detergents, candle
smoke, nail polish and acetone, champagne, melon, wood varnish, wood polish, glass
cleaner, tile cleaner, carbon paper, leather, books old and books new, dry cleaning
chemicals, live electronic circuit boards, commercial toothpaste, sweat, tears, soap and
shampoo, evaporating tap water, dust, aged paint and fresher paint, lotions, lipsticks, face
creams, cosmetic powders, carpet powder, ghosts of coffee vapors, hot paraffin wax, her
body, his body, the musk of their aborted lovemaking—

“I must go out,” he grated and half-sprung, half-stumbled out the balcony door and onto
the terrace.

“My God,” she whispered to the empty room.

On the balcony, he planted his feet and absorbed the cityscape. His eyes beheld the skyline,
glinting beneath the nearly full moon. His hands clutched the solid masonry of her outer
balcony wall. His nose and tongue scented the wind, which tonight brought him more
sensory intelligence from the Hudson River than from Central Park. His ears heard all the
open, active clamor of Manhattan at night. Turning inward, he felt his body eagerly accept
this impersonal spaciousness. His muscles loosened. His inmost regions recentered,
reestablishing his balance and spatial awareness. He stopped trembling. His senses
reconnected him to the here and now he was supposed to be residing in.

In the bedroom, she arose from the steps and crept to the French door. She saw him
standing perfectly still at the farthest border of her terrace, gazing out at the night. He had
moved like lightning to get there. His speed had astonished her: as swift as a cobra’s strike
or a tiger’s lunge. His speed always astonished her. It was a quality of his wildness that he
usually kept well-concealed beneath his chivalrous civility. She looked back at the room he
had vacated. After an exit like that, she didn’t think he’d be coming back in. She turned and walked toward her bed.

On the balcony, he began a breathing meditation he had learned in his youth from one of his oldest friends, Dr. Wong. It was good discipline. It helped him reset his mental space, like rearranging chessmen after a game, returning each playing piece to its original square on the board. Flesh and airflow, numbering breaths. Narrowing attention. Knowing himself as himself. Recovering his mindfulness.

In the bedroom, she scanned the floor around her bed for his cravat. She found the Tunnels-style necktie lying crumpled between her bedside table and her closet door. She retrieved it, gathered up his long, hooded cloak from the bench, and picked up his boots. Quietly, she made her way out onto the balcony and placed his clothes on one of the outdoor chairs. She picked up her lighting taper from the table and relit the seven candles that had blown out. He was a golden shadow, a silent sentinel, standing at attention among her potted plants. The silence did not feel hostile. It felt pregnant. She did not know what might be born between them when he acknowledged her presence at last.

The numbness in his body and in his thinking had defrosted and was departing. He concluded his full attentiveness to breath, letting the common miracle of respiration recede from his immediate focus. Now he anchored his emotional sanity as his godfather, Peter, had not long ago suggested he try to do more frequently: by revisiting a memory of great beauty. He relived his expedition to the wondrous Crystal Cavern. His heart steadied and began to smile again. It was well. She was safe. They were together. All was very well. She was very beautiful. Her beauty glorified the beauty of the necklace he had brought to her. The quartz crystal he had journeyed far to find, and the gold setting and chain he and his friend had wrought and assembled after he returned home. A tangible image of everlasting devotion. His token of his love for her.

She watched him bow his head a bit, relinquishing his tin soldier stance. One clawed hand found the leather pouch that hung hidden among the ruffles of his shirt, and reverently clasped it. The pouch she had sewn to contain the ivory rose she had treasured from her childhood. The most potent talisman of goodwill and lovingkindness she possessed, now his to carry with him. Her token of her love for him.

She approached him. He angled his shadowed face half-toward her, letting her know he knew she was there. She touched his shoulder. He released his talisman and took her hand.
“Are you all right?” she asked.
“Yes.” He sounded like himself again. As he turned to face her squarely she saw that he looked like himself again too.
“What happened?” she asked him.
“A moment of—disorienting anxiety. I’m sorry you had to see it.”
“Oh, no. Don’t be sorry. Just—” She gazed up at his becalmed and becalming features. “I’ve never seen you—lose track of me before.”
“I—lost track of myself for a moment,” he said.
Hesitant, she asked, “Does this—happen often?”
Define “often,” he thought, but did not say. He settled for murmuring, “More often than it used to.”
“You were imagining what didn’t happen on Wednesday,” she suggested.
“No. I was remembering what did happen. And remembering how I felt that night, in concert with how I’ve felt in the past.”
“But it was a victory!” she protested. “That night, I felt grateful to you and proud of us both.”
He sighed her name. “We were lucky. I was already Above that evening, and already in Midtown, visiting a Helper at her shop on Eighth Avenue.”

This had been his friend, Maria. He went Above to meet with her, and to thank her for the immense help and support she had provided during the Tunnelfolk’s citywide search for him in March, and to bring the gifts he had prepared for her. He had harvested many pretty stones, gems, and crystals from the Crystal Cavern for his loved ones. He had already made special deliveries Below, to Mouse and Rebecca and Mary. He had presented Peter with two small amethyst clusters, one to keep for himself and one to pass along to his daughter, Susan. On Wednesday, Maria received a hand-polished lace agate from him, along with the encaustic painting he had just finished, which depicted her mother’s violin as she had once described it to him. And then the woman he loved had urgently needed him in the Fifth Avenue high-rise.

She agreed, “Yes, it was lucky you were so close by.” She didn’t know what else to add.
“It was thin luck,” he said gravely. “As I raced toward you, I discovered that—that I cannot run as fast as I did before.”
She tightened her hold on his hand. “Before what?”
“Before the cage. Before my illness,” he said.
Abashed, she computed dates. Yes, as of Wednesday he had only been well enough to leave
his sickbed for a grand total of nine days. Twelve nights prior to this, their anniversary night, she had rebuked him for showing up on her balcony so stunningly soon after his near-death experience. How long did it take her to recover from her own injuries and illnesses? Her stomach clenched with what seemed like her own bout of disorienting anxiety. In the midst of cementing the Taylor case and rescuing her ensnared friend, Joe Maxwell, from his whirlwind-romance-gone-very-wrong, her beloved’s process of recovery had completely slipped her mind.

“I’m sure your strength will return soon,” she told him. The words felt inadequate, but it was the best she could do. She didn’t think he would want to hear her assessment of his swiftness when it came to scrambling out her bedroom door.

He looked upon his fierce, exotic ladylove with tenderness and pity and trepidation. “My greatest fear is—”

“No!” She snatched her hand free and pressed her fingers to his lips. She paused to douse the ire in her voice. Then she quietly decreed, “Don’t say it. No more fear or talk of fear tonight.”

He obeyed her, but he turned his face away from her silencing hand.

As ever, her conduct proved that she despised fear—both in herself and in others. Thoughts upon thoughts dashed through his mind. He studied the nearest revived candle. Smooth white wax housed the wick that tethered its tiny tongue of fire. His sense of her flamed too. He felt as though her hand had scorched his mouth, as though her touch had incinerated the words she had ordered him not to say.

Yet the truth spoke for itself. He still reminded her of what she was most afraid of. She was doggedly attempting to love him despite all their fears. But she had not yet found her balance. Could he say that he’d found his? And regardless of whether either or both of them could claim balance or imbalance, her rejection of fear’s stark realities did not bode well for the future of their love.

He did not know any other person, Above or Below, who hated fear like this. Her smoldering antipathy had baffled him for months. He was beginning to accept the possibility that this inclination of hers might be a deeply rooted attribute of her identity. An attribute he did not understand. He wanted to be there for her always, to learn to understand her better, so that he could love her better, and so he could hearten her for living the life she was born to live. Their relationship endangered many beliefs and values he lived by. He asked himself: how did such endangerment impact her?

He had worked hard to adapt himself to her priorities as much as he was able to. In her turn, she expended great effort to accommodate him. At the same time, she did not appreciate nor reciprocate all of his priorities. And his fears invariably scandalized her. The powerful part of him that befriended the frightful darkneses of life and contended with the inscrutable shadows of death violated her idea of who he ought to be. It was the part of him she did not understand. The part of him she might never accept.
He did not blame her for rejecting him, whether in part or in whole. He knew what he was. He knew well the emotions he activated in people from the world Above. Her world. Her world that was built on fear. Worldly fear was fundamentally all she knew, all she had ever known. Fear itself was everything she did not want to know. It was everything she did not want to feel, but could not stop herself from feeling. He suspected that were it within her power, she would stop everyone, everywhere, from feeling fear—or at the least from collaborating with its exhortations.

Yet to revile fear was also to repudiate fear’s gifts of discretion, aegis, and vigilance. Ignoring fear substantially diminished one’s own ability to keep oneself alive. Repudiating fear in others meant isolating oneself from many tasks and trials that forged alliances and wove communities. Defying every fear, just as much as surrendering to every fear, limited one’s opportunities for freedom, peace, and happiness. Confronting the causes of fear whilst eschewing fear’s prudence actively courted destruction.

He could not live this way.

But she was trying to.

And tonight, she was teaching him to believe that she relied upon him to keep her alive while she tried. Her lesson did not sit well. He wondered if they neared a stalemate. He wanted to address fear in the manner the Tunnelfolk did. She wanted to defeat fear by any means she could apply. In this disconnection between them, he felt he was becoming habituated to subordinating his desires to hers. And she had never yet compromised. Her fears always took precedence over his. He did not know what to do with this disturbing trend. He must soon give the matter some careful attention.

She lowered her hand, watching him think. He had not physically fled from her this time, but he had withdrawn himself, and turned his focus inward again, traveling to regions of the spirit where she could not follow. She believed she had seen hurt in his eyes. Hurt bestowed by words? By her touch? She wasn’t sure. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, or to disappoint him. The wind teased invisible fingers through her hair. She looked down at her candles. Several guttered for a moment, but they all stayed lit. The gust passed.

She wondered all over again if she had indeed disappointed her beloved friend. She wished she knew how to reach across the gulf of all that separated them, to reach him and keep him close to her forever. In a way, she knew they would always be closer to each other than breath itself. In another way—oh, the gaping chasm was sometimes more than she felt she could bear! It hurt her to peer into that dark abyss for any length of time. It frightened her. Mostly, she tried not to think about it. She guessed he thought about it often, though. How could he not? What must it do to someone, to ponder such things so deeply as he did? Pondering was another activity that was still very new to her. She looked up at his face. Pondering is a strenuous exercise, she thought, startled by the insight. Thinking and feeling, being real, excavating truth. It was damned hard and heavy labor.

He was thinking that all he could say for certain in the present moment was that her fear of
fear continually divided them. Perhaps more so than did the unalterable disparity between species. And he did not know how to bridge the divide. Likely it was impossible for him, alone, to do so. She must keep constructing from her own side as well, and someday meet him somewhere in the middle of the gap. They must each reach out toward unknown possibilities. They must both share all the necessary risks of reaching. And all the fears. He longed to talk things through with her. He wished it were not so difficult for both of them to examine their feelings and formulate their thoughts about their separation and their bridge-building.

She began to believe that she was going to have to be the one to break this silence. He wasn’t going to start talking again of his own accord. But then, she supposed that would be only fair. After all, she was the one who had told him just now to stop talking. She thought again of unmapped territories, of yawning pits, canyons, ravines. Never before had she needed to develop such specialized skills to converse with so quiet a person!

He accepted and reaffirmed the nature of their difficulties almost before he finished wishing for their dissipation. The problem was real. It wasn’t going away. No, he could not, and would not, force her to talk about something she refused to discuss. But events kept bringing the issue to the foreground of their relationship. Avoiding the issues of risk and fear wasn’t going to help them. But she didn’t seem sensible of this fact. Even when she brought it up herself in conversation, she would not hear him out beyond those few words she wanted to hear him say: words pertaining to his regard for her courage, or his answer to a direct query. She preferred him to not ever question her motives or strategies, nor to bid her reconsider any decision she made, and to never, never counsel her to heed people’s fears, to learn what truths they might impart. At these times, she desired his silence more than his speaking. Even tonight.

Even tonight.

This was the shadow-side of their love. A whispering from her heart that she chose to neglect. A feature of his existence that he could not verbally describe. The source of a recurring quarrel they had yet to resolve. He only hoped she might one day be willing to truly listen to the things her heart tried to tell her about this subject, and to things he needed to say, and to the questions they both needed to ask. He would have to try again, later, some other time. His glance fell upon the clothes she had brought outside for him. He swallowed hard. His throat felt parched.

She noted his discomfort. “Can I get you something to drink?” she asked. “More water, maybe?”

He nodded. “Ordinary water, yes, please.”

She went inside to get some for him.

He watched her go. “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart,” he recited to himself, voicing luminous words from the book Father had sent with him on his journey to the Crystal Cavern, “and...try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like
books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot
be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live
everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day into the answer.”³⁴

She stopped in at her living room on her way to the kitchen. She switched off her stereo
system and collected the two champagne glasses from the coffee table. As she went up the
steps into the dinette, she eyed the champagne bottle, but passed it by. Her vintage-
induced glow had worn off somewhere between her withdrawal on the bed and his
evacuation from the bedroom. It was just as well. She felt things had gotten too serious for
champagne anyway.

She set the coupés beside the kitchen sink. “How do we even begin to celebrate what we are
and what we do?” she muttered to her cabinet door. She opened the door and took out two
water glasses. “There are no appropriate rituals for us to fall back on. We have to invent
everything as we go along.”

They also had to negotiate and renegotiate every one of their innovations, every single step
of the way. Spinning straw into gold. And half the time working with broken or nonexistent
spindles.

She took the full water glasses outside.

She found him still standing amid her container greenery, serenely retying his cravat. He
did it by feel, not needing a partner or a mirror. He had already reclaimed his boots.

“I’ve had a thought,” she told him.

“Just the one?” he asked, looking at her from the corner of his sparki

Caught off guard, she laughed.

He reached for the nearest of the glasses and she handed it over before she spilled it.

“What am I going to do with you?” she asked, shaking her head.

He grinned wide enough to reveal his sharp eyeteeth. “Something lovely, I hope.”

She placed her glass on the patio table. She liked it when he smiled that way. He did not
often do so. He drank cool water, delighted by the sound of her laughter. It was balm after
heartache.

“I was just wondering if I could tell you about something I’ve learned since I began working
at the DA’s Office,” she said.

“Please, do share.”

Carefully she began, “Well, in my world, psychiatrists have been making inroads toward
treating the kind of disorientation I think you’re experiencing. There’s a condition that’s

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being recognized now. It’s called PTSD. That stands for Posttraumatic—”
“—Stress Disorder,” he said, his voice overlapping hers.

“Oh. You’ve heard of it?” she asked, deflating.

His bristling eyebrows lifted. “Alternatively known as Battle Exhaustion or Fatigue, Gross Stress Reaction, Shell Shock, Soldier’s Heart, Battered Woman Syndrome, Adjustment Disorder—”

“Let me guess,” she interrupted. “You’re still your father’s son.”

He drank more water and looked out over the park. “That, and more than that. Most of the people I’ve known have struggled to overcome terrible hardships and traumas.” He turned to her. He knew her own struggle manifested itself in a much different form. The way she spoke of PTSD confirmed that she considered it extrinsic to her own experiences.

She asked, “So—this condition—this struggle—is common in the Tunnels?”

“It’s common everywhere,” he answered her, taken aback by her unawareness. “It is more ancient than Epizelos the Athenian, and as current as the child who shrinks from affection because she cannot forget affliction.”

She was shaking her head now, not in negation, but wonderingly. Their worlds—their worlds!

“Tell me, sweet lord, what is’t that takes from thee
Thy stomach, pleasure and thy golden sleep?
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,
And start so often when thou sit’st alone?
Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks;
And given my treasures and my rights of thee
To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?
In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch’d,
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars...”5

His profound acquaintance with the passage was unmistakable.

“Shakespeare did know everything,” she said softly. “He described every human struggle.”

He inclined his head. “Some would say that is the purpose of poetry. But your world chooses to call this struggle a disorder, or a syndrome, or an ailment. The uncommon

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disturbance of an unhinged soul. An unnatural dysfunction—or a crime. In the past it was called cowardice, or mental frailty, or character deficiency. It was believed only those few ignorant or dishonest fools with ‘inferior moral fiber’ were susceptible. They were humiliated and persecuted. Even killed.”

She could not deny it. Her world was too often stingy with its charity toward the sick or the wounded. She winced at the word “cowardice,” though, abruptly recollecting—and ruing—the times she privately labeled him “frangible,” “shy,” “inept,” or even “craven.” Which, she perceived in light of his patient elucidation, tended to happen whenever he followed his heart toward some course of action that she disagreed with, or did not understand. She used such words to rationalize to herself why he might decide to do or say those things she disagreed with—or did not understand. —Or else she flat out let her assumptions and expectations lead her into some ghastly new misjudgment of her friend. She’d been wrong about him more often than she cared to account for. Hindsight kept showing her how woefully her labels distorted her view of him—not to mention her view of his folk Below. He had just designated similar labels as belonging to the sphere of unjust Topsider prejudices. He had just assigned her layman’s diagnosis of PTSD to that category, as well.

Now almost growling he said, “People deemed ‘guilty’ of these ‘weaknesses’ continue to be marginalized, demonized. Disbelieved. Condemned and disgraced. Feared. Shamed. Cast aside.”

She was mentally shaken, but hoped he wouldn’t take notice. “Your world takes our outcasts in.”

“Some of them. The ones who need us most, and who find no place for themselves in the world Above. The ones willing and able to abide by our laws and customs.” The city lights attracted his gaze once more. “There are so many wanderers,” he said, sorrowful. “Lost. Abandoned. Alone.”

She had met more of these during the past year than she had in all her previous years of life. “What do you call the struggle in your world?” she asked.


“Sanity? I don’t mean to be—insensitive, but how do detrimental symptoms reflect sanity?”

He contemplated the sky, the glass he held, the candles on the table—and, last of all, her sympathetic self.

He said, “It bespeaks pure sanity of body, mind, or soul to acknowledge and seek to escape violent madness. It is sane to be hurt when injured or wronged. It is sane to feel everything horrible, and to trust the feelings; to accept that evil is real, and try to reject evil’s imperatives. It takes great courage to learn to live sanely after surviving great harm, however long it may take to learn such living. It is the warrior’s greatest sanity and solace
to lay down his arms after war.”

His words rang in her heart, resounding because his descriptions were personal to both of them.

“Some ‘symptoms’ are actually stepping-stones back to wholeness,” he explained further. “Others offer signs and signals that warn a traveler away from danger, or point the way forward, towards home. That’s how I think of it: as homecoming. My people know many methods for following these signs, and traveling these paths. We’ve shared and developed many practices throughout many lifetimes. I’ve used five of these practices tonight, just now on your balcony.”

She thought: And here I’d believed you were at a disadvantage, for having never eaten steak. His world held untold stores of riches. Her Social Services fact sheet data seemed paltry by comparison.

But no wonder he maintained such consummate command of himself whenever he took action! No wonder he recuperated so quickly after surviving hate and harm. And no wonder his world felt so fabulously quiet and peaceable to her, that her best nocturnal dreams were of visiting his Undercity community.

“That’s how you knew what to say to me last year, to encourage me and restore my hope,” she said, awakening to the idea. “That’s how you and your family knew how to care for me so well.”

“Yes.” He set his empty glass beside her glass on the table. “The lore that nurtures everyone’s well-being Below taught us how to care for a Stranger who needed sanctuary among us.”

She picked up her glass, toyed with the facets in its base. “At the time I assumed it was just—you. Your majesty. Your magic.”

“I am no king, no magician,” he said. “I am only what I am. But the magic is simply everywhere, waiting to be found by those who seek it.”

She smiled once again at his phrasing, and at his humble benevolence. “Oh, how I enjoy you.”

She heard the soft rush of breath that told her he was smiling too. He sensed the warmth she harbored for him well up in her heart, flowing lavishly from thence into his soul.

“And don’t worry,” he assured her. “My world does well enough without psychiatrists.”

She felt her smile go a little crooked as she commented, “Your people are definitely doing better than my world in many ways. Okay—in most ways, really.”

“Will you remember that sentiment, the next time our worlds collide?” His voice sounded appraising.

She sighed. “Probably not in the heat of the moment. I like to win too much.”
“You fight to win at all costs.”

“That’s me, isn’t it? The queen of convoluted contests.”

“I could be your court jester,” he proposed.

No doubt he could cut a most entertaining caper, if he chose to. She imagined him tipping his head to one side as he liked to do, smirking that point-toothed grin while wearing a three-cornered cap that jingled with silver bells. She covered her eyes and giggled helplessly.

He rescued her water glass.

After she recovered her composure, she moved his cloak from the seat of her patio chair to the chair’s arm, and sat down. She gestured for him to take the chair beside her. He sized up the petite chair for a second, but he complied, returning her glass. She drank from it and lowered it to her lap, clutching the glass tight between her palms, for something neutral to hold. When she felt able to look at him without hearing bells, she gazed into his courtly eyes.

He thought her the most marvelous and bewitching creature he had ever seen.

She said to him, “You once told me that we must do the only thing we can do: endure the pain, and savor every moment of the joy.”

“Yes?” he asked softly.

“I just want you to know—I believe the joy is worth every moment of the pain.”

Tears misted those blue eyes. And yet the smile in them deepened too. Her eyes looked like stars to him. Unspoken promises to wish upon.

He said, “Tell me more about the things that give you joy. Tell me about the ordinary things in your life. Things that let you walk in daylight, unencumbered by pain.”

“Things that aren’t so ordinary for you?” she asked.

He canted his head sideways, in his substitute for a shrug.

She sat back in her chair. It was plenty fine with her if he wanted to shift the subject toward lighter fare. But where to begin?

“All right. Then I’ll tell you about some of my earliest joys,” she said, “and we’ll see where we go from there.”

He leaned forward, attentive.

“Just to warn you, though. I’ve told you I’ve lived in luxury most people could never imagine.”

He listened.

“What has been ordinary for me is often extraordinary for a lot of other people.”
He nodded. “Most of what I know about your world, I know from books. But I do understand that, in its way, your mode of life seems as spectacular to others as mine does.”

She sipped her water. Their worlds represented opposite poles of life and livelihood. Her world was polarized by its material wealth and spiritual poverty; his world, by material poverty and spiritual wealth. The one basic condition that both worlds held in common was the fact that each world remained populated by fellow human beings. She believed human sympathy was the greatest, surest portal between all worlds. She also believed that the empathic—man—listening to her now was the most human being she had ever known.

And he did look curious to hear what she might say.

And she had become fond of his style of curious courtesy.

So, smiling, she told him first about how she used to sit between her parents when she was a little girl, all three of them snuggled onto a sofa with a huge storybook spread open across their laps, how her love of reading blossomed during those family storytimes together. She told him about shining Christmases in Manhattan and Zürich and San Juan, the magic of Christmas trees and beribboned packages, with snowscapes or ocean vistas decorating her horizons. She told him about the laughter she loved to share with her nanny and with her parents, and later, with her father and their friends, at holiday parties.

She spoke of her family’s magical keys to the Gramercy Park gates, how it was her job to turn the key in the lock when they went in, and how she had delighted in the formal green spaces and immaculate pathways inside, the statues and tidy borders. Exclusive access gave it the aura of a secret garden, especially after her mother’s death. Not until her law school days did self-consciousness creep into her relationship with the park, as her estimations of wealth and scarcity began to change. She visited rarely now, but her memories remained joyful and comforting.

She told him about her childhood toys and treasures, especially her dear Charlotte doll-companion. She told of her imaginary sister and the year she required other people to make way for a second daughter in the house. She recalled how when she was very small, her mother would sometimes slip into her room while she was playing, and join in her game or her make-believe, whatever it happened to be at the time, with tender mirth and imagination. Daddy never quite learned the knack for child’s play, but it was her one of her mother’s superpowers.

He drank it all in. Every word and phrase. Every gesture of her hand and expression of her
face. Every story, every image. He rejoiced in the joys she had known.

She spoke to him of her family’s vacation homes. Both sets of grandparents owned getaway properties scattered across New England. Until the passing of her elders, weekends spent at any of them were common. She tried not to dwell upon her ambivalent relationships with her extended relatives. Still, those little pockets of familiar elsewheres were dear to her child’s heart. She always looked forward to those journeys.

She described vacations to amusement parks and resorts around the world, how excited she felt to step into each curated fantasy land, to discover her favorite rides and treats, to look and wander, shop and applaud. Later in life, she carried that sense of carnival magic within her during her many travels to cities, beaches, forests; to deserts and mountains; to islands in both hemispheres; to renowned landmarks and museums. It all swirled together in her mind, forming her personal sense of adventure. Of magic.

She was proud that she could usually find magic where she looked for it. When she remembered to look for it. But magic had come in short supply during the past half-decade of her life. Her childhood love of enchantments had been replaced by a jaded suspicion of the world’s cons and cheats. She did often find magic in the Tunnels now, although it was a darker and more mysterious variety than could be purchased in any theme park or tourist destination of the sunlit world.

He seemed unsurprised by her comparisons and conclusions. But, of course, she thought he must experience magic as a kind of clean, pure oxygen: always present in the general atmosphere, albeit more concentrated in some places than in others. She believed him rarely, if ever, incognizant of magical possibilities. He was a die-hard romantic in that regard.

This notion brought her favorite great romances to mind. Romeo and Juliet. Arthurian legends. Orpheus and Eurydice. She paused there, remembering.

“You’re feeling sad now,” he remarked. “Why?”

She raised her head. “I was just thinking of my father, after Mom passed away. When I look back at that time, Daddy reminds me of Orpheus—the way he was, for a while. Then I got to thinking about your father. About Jacob. And Margaret.”

“Yes,” he murmured. “There is much of Orpheus in Father.”

“How is he doing now?” she asked.

He looked up at the sky above the city. The night was clear. He could see stars twinkling in the firmament. “It’s been little more than a month,” he said. “And so much has happened since she died. He is doing as
well as he can, I think. We play many more silent games of chess than we used to. He takes more walks alone through the Tunnels. But he also laughs more often with his friends. Something has loosened inside him. He’s been telling me stories of his life Before. He’s begun visiting our Helpers, Above.”

“Oh! Oh, that’s wonderful!” She could scarcely imagine Father making social calls around the city. “I’m so glad.”

He read her underlying surprise, of course. And it made him smile. “Things change. Sometimes people’s habits change, too, with their changing circumstances.”

“Yes. Sometimes they do,” she agreed. She returned her glass to the table beside her. The wind had picked up again. She rubbed her arms.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“A little,” she said. “It’s getting late.”

“You have work tomorrow,” he said.

“And Monday work at that.”

They glanced around at the balcony. The candles had burned low. The smaller ones had gone dark.

“It’s been—quite a night,” he said.

“It’s been quite a year,” she replied.

He basked—for just a few precious moments more—in her beauty. “The most miraculous year of my life,” he said.

She sighed. “Even miraculous years must end.”

“So that a new year can begin.”

At this, she smiled and stood up. He stood too. Each gazed into the other’s eyes.

“What can I say to you?” she asked. “How do we part now?”

“With the promise of shared hope burning bright in our hearts, like candles or stars.”

“Guiding lights in the dark before dawn.”

“Yes. Always.”

He offered his hand. She placed her hand in his broad palm. He bent gracefully. His lips brushed her skin.

“Will you give me an anniversary poem, before you have to go?” she asked.

He straightened. He looked long into her eyes and into his store of memorized literature, searching for suitable words. At last he enfolded her in a warm embrace. He recited radiant lines for her. Tennyson. She closed her eyes, steeping herself in his resonant voice, his
protective arms, his ardent love.

It was she who released him, looked once into his beautiful face, then turned to view the city skyline, resting her hands on the balcony wall. She did not want to see his departure. He would go as swiftly and softly as he had come.

He etched her silhouette into his mind. He put on his cloak. He breathed a parting word of blessing. On silent feet, he moved to the end of the terrace. He swung one leg, then the other, over the parapet, and began his homeward climb.

She stood where he left her for a further half hour. It took time—gentle, moveless time—to settle certain things into their rightful places within the human heart. Their night of celebration was one such certain thing. Then she returned to herself, shivering a little. It was chilly now, and time to sleep. She reached for the pendant of her necklace, just as he had reached for his rose, earlier, his strong hand cherishing her promise of connection. She looked down at her new treasure.

Her underworld crystal gleamed in her hand. The last of the evening’s firelight awakened a secret sunrise within the stone. Her very own piece of eternity. His promise of many more celebrations to come.
Everywhere North of Thebes and South of Leontopolis
By Cindy Rae

Myths are history, too; the history of the human imagination.
– Yahia Lababidi
With thanks to Barbara Anderson, whose vacation picture inspired this little story, and to all who encouraged it.

We are all a part of each other.

Chapter One

Ancient Egypt

The big room, with all its amazing clutter, seemed even larger now. Vincent couldn’t help the impression, as he looked at the chair Devin had been sitting in, just a few days ago.

Devin. So...active, so busy, so... in motion. Always a person to become, and a new city to visit. Always... a game to play.

They were both old enough to play adult games now.

Had it really been 20 years? Vincent mused. Yes. Yes, it had, he answered himself.

Vincent had gone from being reconciled to the fact that his only brother was utterly lost to him, to now knowing that not only was Devin alive, but he was also fairly good at impersonating anything from an attorney to a bushman, to a pilot, to a doctor.
'I'm a fraud. But I'm a good fraud.' Devin’s last note to Catherine lingered in Vincent’s brain.

You’re not the only one, Devin, the big beast thought, sitting on the edge of his bed. You’re not the only one. And most people think I’m a fairly honest man.

Vincent sighed, and wondered for a moment. A memory he’d forgotten he’d forgotten, surfaced, and his large, clawed hand reached back and down, between the bed and the wall. I hid you well.

Anyone might find something hidden on the floor beneath the bed. For that matter, it would even be easy to find something stuffed between the mattress and the box spring. Indeed, had what he sought been hidden there, he himself would have rediscovered it, long before now.

But he hadn’t hidden this in any of those places, he hadn’t tucked it in one of those “easy-to-find” spots. He’d been afraid that Devin might hunt for it there, so he’d been more cautious, more furtive in his larceny.

I lied. To Devin. Perhaps the only time I ever did that, that I know of, Vincent recalled, and I stole from him. Because I couldn’t stand the idea of giving it back.

Vincent leaned down a little farther and groped around in the area between the box spring and the underlying slats that held those in place.

Anything hidden there wouldn’t have been readily visible to a quick search under the bed. And flipping the top mattress, or even replacing it, never would have revealed what was snugly hidden.

I wanted you concealed. I was stealing you, and I knew it.

The statue of Sekhmet, the one that sat in front of his window since the summer he’d read about her, looked down at him, her feline eyes accusing him, gently.

You’re a thief, they said.

I know. But I’m a good thief, Vincent replied mentally.

For a moment, Vincent wondered if his memory was playing some sort of trick on him. His hand found nothing but the box spring and the bed frame. He couldn’t locate what he sought. And in twenty years’ time, there was always the possibility that he himself had moved it, then forgotten about it.

But he knew he hadn’t.

It took some groping, but after a moment more, his hand contacted exactly what he sought. A familiar tingle raced up his long arm.

Strong fingers, (much stronger than they’d been the day he’d pushed the book under) hooked the hardback binding and tugged it out of its hiding place. In a moment, it was free and in his hand. He pulled it up.

He stroked the cover, knocking off nearly two decades worth of dust and cobwebs. Everything about the book was familiar, from its bumped top corners to its cracked spine. If it had ever owned a dust jacket, that had long been lost to time.

Devin had fished the old volume out of a box full of library castoffs. The slender pocket where the checkout card went was still there, pasted inside the back cover.

Vincent held the book to his nose and inhaled, the scent of the old paper taking him back, bringing up memories he hadn’t thought of in decades.

**Ancient Egypt**

... the cover proclaimed redly. A faded picture of the Great Pyramids at Giza sprawled across it.

Carefully, Vincent settled the book on his lap and opened it up.

**This Book Belongs To:**

**Devin Vincent**

... the bookplate declared. Vincent remembered the day he’d scratched Devin’s name out and put his own inside. It had been a sin to do that.

*Thou shalt not steal,* Vincent mused now, much as he had then.

Like most children, he’d known the words. But Vincent had shattered the old commandment and drawn through Devin’s name with an ink pen Jacob had given him for Winterfest. It was the one he’d gotten the year he turned twelve; the one that had come with his first journal. Somehow, that seemed to make it a greater transgression: to use a loving gift to help take something that truly wasn’t his.

**Ancient Egypt** was an obviously titled book meant for a middle-schooler’s library. It was full of sketches, simple blueprints, maps, photographs, brief histories, stories, and some descriptions. A stylized map graced the title page; one Vincent had spent hours staring at, as an early adolescent. Striped red sails adorned long boats, as they sailed on the Mediterranean Sea. Sketches of pyramids and temples abounded, and the mysterious Nile bisected a land Vincent could only dream about – and had.

Captioned pictures were everywhere inside, with chapter headings to boot: The Pharaohs. Life on the Nile. The Cities. The Pyramids. The Deities.

It was the last to which Vincent had turned most often.

And while Vincent held no “formal” religion as his own, he knew he was crossing from Jacob’s loose version of Christianity into something else, with his choice of reading material here. He couldn’t help it. Especially not back then.
There you are. An odd, fantasy-filled kind of nostalgia washed through him, as the cracked binding fell open to one of its most often stared at pages.

There were people similar to him, carved into the ancient walls, several of them. Vincent, old enough to know how different he was and young enough to feel he’d stumbled upon some sort of ancient secret, remembered feeling enthralled by this wondrously unexpected find.

There were half-nude male and female forms, with cat-like heads and sun crowns, scattered across the pages of the last chapter: Bastet, Maahes, Sekhmet. Some names were for the same deity, in different parts of Egypt. The names were exotic and foreign-sounding, and he’d rolled them through his sensitive mind until he felt he knew all about them.

And then, by extension, he fancied that he knew something about himself, in a way.
Her name means “She Who is Powerful.”

And while the world of Below was utterly brimming with books, and Vincent and Devin’s shelves had been heavy with them, no other book had been like this one for Vincent: No other book had given Vincent the power to dream secretly, about who he was, and where he might have come from.

As he’d turned the pages, walls of unusual art had exploded across his blue eyes.

And then, across his entire consciousness.

Like me. They’re like me. At the time, he couldn’t stop thinking it.

For long, glorious weeks, the Classics had been all but ignored. Stories of Tom Sawyer sat unopened, along with Huck Finn and Ivanhoe. For here, here in Ancient Egypt, here was treasure.

Treasure, and the power to imagine.

For long hours, he had stared at pictures of stylized busts, stone birds, carvings on walls, and stiffly painted anthropomorphic figures. Some of them seemed like odd reflections of himself, and the resemblance was more than just passing. He was enchanted.

Maahes of Leontopolis

He was not a “freak” as Mitch Denton sometimes accused, or even “different,” like Ike often tactfully stated. Here, in the pages of this narrow tome, he was (he could barely think it at the time) royalty. Royalty with touches of divinity even. At least some of either, and more than a little bit of both, perhaps.
It would explain much. Like why he was so different from others, and in more ways than just physically.

According to the book, His People (like him) had certain powers and abilities. Similar to his own sense of empathy, they knew what was in the heart, so that they could give out correct judgments and verdicts. They were strong and clever.

His People had position and titles. They were respected to the point of being worshipped, and their images were carved on temple walls, engraved on jewelry, and painted on vases everywhere. An entire civilization had glorified them. They were held in reverence. They were held in awe. It was said that they protected the Pharaohs and helped them rule.

Impressions from two decades ago filled Vincent’s consciousness.

_It has been a long time since I saw your face_, Vincent thought to a beguiling image of Isis.

Vincent gently flipped the book to near the end, knowing which page he’d see when he did. Maahes. Maahes had been his favorite, if for no other reason than that he was both distinctly leonine and male. There was a picture of him, seated. More than just a painting on a wall, he was a magnificent statue.

Hirsute fingers that were now much longer than they’d been the last time he’d touched this page, traced the image, with tender familiarity.

_I know you_, Vincent thought. And indeed, the sensation of “reunion” was unmistakable.

Maahes, the Warrior God

_His name means “He Who is True Beside Her.”_
A brief description followed, along with that of several other gods and goddesses.

*How often did I stare at you?* Vincent thought. *How often did I simply just... wish? And wonder?*

At twelve years old, Vincent was mature enough to know he wasn’t truly descended from an Egyptian god or demi-god. But right then, at the beginnings of puberty, it had been oh-so-tempting to hold the old book in his hands and keep it as a marvelous secret; to simply... yearn, and project a little.

He remembered his old thoughts as clearly as if he’d opened the book just yesterday: *I’m a lost prince. A foundling child. Somehow, I got separated. I fell through, like the sound in the Whispering Gallery. They left me behind. I’m the son of Maahes. I’m the grandson of Ra and Bastet. Our city is Leontopolis, the City of Lions. Bastet is also Sekhmet. I’m a war god, and I protect the innocent. I’m ... special.*

He knew at the time that he couldn’t share these wonderful, powerful thoughts with others. That the other boys, even Devin, would probably laugh, or deride, or make fun.

This had been his thing to know. And it was an idea he had shared with no one... ever.

Nor had he ever confessed his petty crime, to anyone.

“*Vincent? Have you seen my book?”* Devin had asked.

“*Which one?”*

“The Egypt one. I thought we’d go down by the falls and pretend it was the Nile. Maybe drag some of the stones over. See how the pyramids were built.”

“No, I haven’t seen it.”

“You sure? I thought you had it last.”

“No. You did.”

It was a child’s lie, meant to misdirect. And it had. No matter what struggles the two boys had had with each other growing up, Devin knew that Vincent had never stolen anything, from anyone. So, Vincent’s theft had gone unsuspected by Devin.

Narcissa, interestingly, had known.

“*Chile, what for you sell your honor?”*

“I haven’t sold my honor, Narcissa,” he’d lied grumpily.

But somehow, some way, some secret way, Narcissa had known. Vincent remembered how uncomfortable the question had made him.

“You steal old pages and tell a lie to your brother. But you can’t fool old Narcissa.”

“Leave me alone.” It had been the only way Vincent could refute her.

*She had lowered her voice and softened her tone. “You already alone.” But her thickly accented voice had grown gentle, at his stubborn expression. “Keep it, chile. Keep it, if it helps.”*

*He had. And to some extent, it did.*
The memories drifted away, and Vincent closed the old book, leaving it on the rumpled covers of his bed. He didn’t want to put it back in its hiding place. And for some reason, having it near helped him not miss Devin quite so much.

_Ah, but I didn’t miss him the summer I found you ... did I?_ he recalled, remembering a time when he’d wanted to play and explore more by himself than he had with Devin, or with any of the other children. His body was changing. And sitting alone with the book wasn’t the only way he’d begun to isolate himself.

He knew that throughout most of childhood, Tunnel children usually swam and played together, naked, in the pools.

_That summer, it was a thing he began to avoid._

While Devin, Stevie, Ike and the others had gone down to the water and whooped and hollered, Vincent had known he could be alone with his precious, secret book, without fear of discovery, or questions. Isolating himself had been the best way to avoid being found out, as a thief. It also let him avoid questions about how the pattern of hair on his body was thickening and changing. How his nails were growing harder, and tougher. A line of hair down his back itched. And while sexual changes hadn’t happened yet, Vincent could sense that that too was only a matter of time. Puberty was coiling up inside him, like something that was waiting to spring. Devin, a few years older, knew all about that. But things between the two of them had been tense, as Devin had been obsessed over owning a pocket knife.

_With or without the book, Vincent knew the days of bathing in the pools with the other boys were drawing to a close; he knew his childhood was leaving him, or at least that he was leaving it. The book had helped with that. Other things had as well, of course, but mostly, it had been the book._

Vincent chased down distant thoughts, trying to remember all he’d dreamed of at the time. The veil of years parted, and he remembered a few fleeting impressions from that time.

_I’m part of an ancient family. A goddess is my mother, and she searches for me, still. She can’t find me down here. She’s part of the sun, while I can only come out for the moon._

_It was all right to be changing. Especially when I thought I was changing into something... wonderful._

It was fantasy and fancy. And though, even as a youth, he’d known it wasn’t strictly true, it had fed something inside him he’d never acknowledged was starving. He’d felt that he now had a story, as contrived as it was. He now had a _history_, and a lineage, no matter how far-fetched it seemed. Vincent wasn’t sure he needed it to be true or even particularly plausible. But he needed it to be “there,” at the time.

After all, in some ways, it wasn’t hard to see the parallels between himself and the subjects of his book.

_Like his own growing ability to cower some animals, His People had powers no other people had. Like his unique face, His People were animal-featured, and part of a community. They were strong, and swift, and sharply intelligent._ Vincent remembered indulging in a touch of pre-pubescent hubris at the time.
The dry pages had come to life for him, and he’d memorized every fact, to blend it with his fictions.

*Bastet was beautiful and slenderly feline. She was the goddess of cats, and he fancied he was one of her favorite beings. Sekhmet, as leonine as he was, was fierce and protective of the just. Sturdy Maahes devoured the guilty, while he upheld the innocent. In his city, Leontopolis, lions roamed free and were revered. If he ever went, he’d be welcomed there, and allowed to roam as freely as they did. The lion-headed people were equated with the pharaohs. The lion-headed people were equated with Gods.*

It was powerful stuff, for his twelve-year-old self. And the ideas were strangely comforting, even as he understood them to be rooted in the most ancient kind of myths.

Thoughtfully, he rose from the bed and tugged on his cape, tucking the book inside its deepest pocket. He knew there was only one place he wanted to be right now, and it was not in the world Below.

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**Chapter 2**

*A God of War and Battle*
“... and so, I kept it, all these years. I never even thought of it, until now,” Vincent said, handing Catherine *Ancient Egypt*. The book opened almost naturally to the picture of the statue of Maahes.

She read the caption and the brief description of him, silently. ‘*Maahes, the lion-headed God. God of war and battle, his task is to separate the innocent from the guilty, for judgment. Though fierce, and often bloody, he is not evil. A companion of Ma’at, the Goddess of Justice, his name means “He who is true beside Her.”*

“I’m sure this must have been... fascinating for you,” Catherine said, catching on immediately to why such a book would have been an absolute treasure to a young Vincent.

She turned the page. Another photograph, this one of stone walls, came into view, but these were not like the dark, rocky walls of his home. These more closely resembled the Painted Tunnels, for all their art. Sacred beings conducted business with each other, and with mortals. Symbols of their divinity marked their features and floated above their heads. A lion-headed deity sat on a throne, offering judgment. It was a rich tableau.

“You must have spent hours looking at this,” Catherine said, touching her fingers lightly to the page.

“Hours... days,” Vincent said, stepping closer. He looked over her shoulder, helpless to stop a fresh wave of nostalgia. “I’d dream they were mine,” he confessed. “My ... people; that I was somehow a part of them. That I’d become... separated from them... somehow.”
“That must have been a very... intoxicating idea,” Catherine said, flipping back some pages. The damaged face of the Great Sphinx stared back at her, head of a lion, body of a man. He was the reverse of Vincent in some ways.

“Intoxicating’ may be the correct word for it, for a time,” Vincent agreed, noting the page on the pyramids at Giza. It was the picture on the cover, repeated. “I think I was... obsessed at the time. But I was also soothed by the idea that I was a part of something.” He touched a fingertip to the old page. “Even if I was a lost part,” he added.

Catherine turned around to face him and nodded her comprehension. “I understand. We all want to be a part of something, Vincent.” She carefully handed the book back to him.

“My path was an ill-conceived one,” he confessed. “It prompted me to take something that wasn’t mine.” He flipped to the inside cover, to show her the writing on the bookplate.

Catherine acknowledged his transgression. “You must have hated the idea of giving it back,” she said, understanding.

“I did indeed,” he agreed.

She watched him close the cover, and he set the book to one side with the reverence of a man handling a family Bible. They both knew it wasn’t one. But that didn’t mean he didn’t feel an obvious connection to what was printed on the pages.

Her voice softened. “I think... none of us knows what it is to be you, Vincent. No matter how much we sympathize or think we empathize...” Catherine struggled for a way to explain what they both knew she was feeling. “Culture is a ... powerful force. An identifier, for most people,” she said. And here you are. Unique. A culture of One. How you must have... yearned for something like this.

Catherine had seen that yearning bewilder some of the foster children she’d known to have come through her office.

“I only know I struggled with the idea of letting it go, once I had it,” he replied.

Catherine could well imagine he had. “In most cases, the most... abandoned infant grows up knowing it is part of a group, part of a race,” Catherine commiserated. “Skin color, eye color... they give hints.” She spread her hands helplessly, knowing he had no such advantages. “The child knows that there’s history there, even if it’s not sure which history it can claim, specifically, as its own. You never had even that.” She placed her hand on the faded cover of his book. “This might have been your way of coping with all of that.”

Like the Sphinx, you’re a riddle, she thought. Even to yourself. One none of us has the answer to.

Vincent well understood what she was driving at. If anything, he’d dealt with far more foster children than she had. He well knew their curiosity on the subject.

“When the children Below are old enough to ask, one of the questions they want answers to is where they came from, and who do they belong to. Not just who their parents were but their... group,” Vincent said. “Of course, we tell them they are all part of us now. But it doesn’t keep them from wanting to know.”
“Seems reasonably instinctive enough,” Catherine replied. “I think... perhaps... this gave that to you. Perhaps it was even... necessary for you to have it, for a time.” She shook her head in wonder that this simple, history-filled volume would mean so much to him.

“It did ... fill a part of me that had been empty for many years,” Vincent replied. *She does understand. Of course, she does. My Catherine.* He was warmed by her perceptiveness, as he felt the sweet, spring air wash over him.

“You say you were only twelve?” she asked.

“Mmm. It was a difficult year. Never again,” he said, shaking his head at his own adolescence, and at memories too painful to share. “Which isn’t an excuse for taking it,” Vincent said, glad to be above the ground this evening. The height of Catherine’s balcony was a wonderful place to gain perspective, and in more ways than one.

“Well, they say puberty is... a time for seeking identity,” she said, picking the book up and handing it back to him. “It only makes sense that you would have been drawn to such a thing. I’d be surprised if you hadn’t been,” Catherine expanded, watching the old volume disappear, as Vincent slipped it back inside the deep pocket of his cape.

“For whatever sense of comfort it gave you... I’m glad of it, Vincent,” she said.

Vincent felt the weight of it, as it settled. “It’s been... years... decades, since I thought about it. I only recalled it at all because of Devin’s return.” Her clock chimed on the mantle. The hour was growing late. They both knew what that meant.

“I’m sure his visit is stirring up a lot of old memories,” Catherine said cannily, giving him a goodnight embrace. It was time to part.

“I’m sure it is.” *For all of us,* Vincent thought, including Father. He wrapped his huge arms around her shoulders.

“You need to sleep,” he intoned. “And I need to return home.” Still, he was in no hurry to release her, despite his words.

She kept her arms around his waist, likewise keeping them close. *It feels so good to be held by you.*

“Where do you suppose he’s gone?” Catherine asked, wondering. They both knew she was talking about Devin.

Vincent stared out over her head to the lights beyond the park. A twinkling panorama cast itself before him. It, like Devin, was full of stories. “North of Oz. South of Shangri-La,” Vincent answered, indicating he had no idea, other than that one.

He felt Catherine smile against his chest, then saw it, as she lifted her head and leaned back to look up at him.

“Or Egypt. I hear it’s lovely, in the Spring.”

“Have you ever been?” he asked, curious to know.

“To Egypt? No. I toured Europe with Susan Alcott after I graduated from law school. And I’ve been to parts of Asia. But I never made it to Egypt.”

*I think I did, and many times,* Vincent thought. *Though it was only in my dreams.*
Chapter Three

Nile Delta

The dream that night, when it came, was unsurprising for Vincent. It was another nostalgically familiar series of visions, at least at first.

He was in Egypt, and the path was utterly familiar. He was walking on sunbaked hard pack, the ground ascending, steadily. To his left, dunes of sand rolled away in shimmering, golden waves. Ahead of him, and slightly to his right, The Great Sphinx loomed. The sun was hot on his shoulders, inside his cape.

He didn’t have the book open before him, but he didn’t need it. The map beneath the title page had been memorized, long ago. The old book’s knowledge had stayed inside both his mind and in his heart, and even now, he felt like he could find his way across this landscape blindfolded. He knew right where he was. He was walking north, toward Giza, and the pyramids glistened in the distance.

Giza was a plateau, near Cairo. Cairo was built on the Nile, but there was no hint of water here, not yet. The great river flowed just a few miles to the east. The Egyptian monument sat like an ancient mile marker, and Vincent’s boots were kicking up sand as he went.
Historically, this land was important, of course. Artistically, it was priceless.

But even with no great tombs upon it, geographically, it was vital. The fairly linear river that dominated the region was about to become decidedly un-linear, just north of here. This was where the mighty Nile forked, and branched out multiple times.

“Nile Delta,” Vincent thought, knowing that the famous river split dramatically, and spread out before it emptied into the Mediterranean Sea. The map in his book had told him so. Maps were a thing he well understood, having been raised in the tunnels.

He would follow this path, and go where it took him. He already had a good idea where that would be. He’d keep traveling north. Past Giza, past Cairo... he’d follow the river until he reached, what was for him, a holy city.

‘Just past here, the river changes.’ He thought as he dreamt. ‘Delta. That word has more than one meaning. A delta is a place where things branch out and divide; a place where... all the possibilities are realized’ he mused, stepping nimbly through the arid landscape.

‘How many times has my own life done that, from childhood to now?’ he wondered. ‘How many times has it... changed course, and shifted, seemingly driven to sudden, important changes by an invisible hand?’

He knew that even meeting Catherine, the most important single event in his life, had been sheer chance. The river of his life had been flowing in one direction, and then it had forked and changed dramatically. And he’d been carried away by its flow.

The dream continued. And after a few more paces, he realized he was not alone. But it wasn’t his dearest love who now accompanied him across the sand. It was his brother.

Devin strolled beside him, almost casually kicking up the sand, as they went. Vincent remembered that his irrepressible brother had also been there with him the first time he’d ever dreamed this dream.

‘Devin dreamed dreams that included me. It looks as if I am returning the favor.’ Vincent mused as they ambled along, together.

“We did this before,” Devin said.

“Once or twice. A little more often, perhaps,” Vincent answered, knowing that for himself, he’d had this dream many times one summer. It was as if he had almost willed it to come.

“So... this is the place, yeah?” Devin asked, looking not as he had in their mutual youth, but looking very much as he had a few days ago when he’d left New York for God-only-knew-where.

“Yes. This is the place,” Vincent replied, looking down at himself, realizing that he too, was no longer a young boy. His long legs were moving easily, and the warm wind was playing with the strings on his cape. The bright sun pierced an azure sky, and on the ground, their shadows walked together.

‘When I used to have this dream, I was twelve. And you were a few years older,’ Vincent mused, as he dreamed.
“Ancient Egypt. Who knew?” Devin asked rhetorically. It was the same thing he’d said twenty years ago, in Vincent’s dreaming mind.

This time, Vincent had an odd thought, one he’d not had before. ‘Are you naming the place? Or the book?’

And then the dream took on a different tack. Whereas before, as boys, they would often break into a run and race each other to the pyramids, now they didn’t do that. As adults, they simply continued to stroll, two men in an almost casual lockstep, as they paced across the sand.

Devin’s arms swung easily in a walking rhythm, as his expressive brown eyes took in the landscape. “Impressive,” he said, nodding toward the Sphinx. It wasn’t a word he’d used, when they had been younger together.

Vincent accepted the difference that twenty years had created in his dream. “Very,” he replied, in simple agreement.

“It’s quite the kingdom you have here,” Devin observed. It was.

“Two Kingdoms. Upper and Lower,” Vincent corrected.

“Sounds like they’ll need two kings, then,” Devin replied, with a wink and a grin. Vincent was fairly sure who Devin had in mind for those two jobs, and let the comment pass, without response. They walked a hundred yards farther, in brotherly silence.

“I guess I’m here because there’s something you want to tell me,” Devin prompted, as the landmarks grew a little closer.

Vincent knew there was. ‘Delta... change. I’m about to do something I never did before. Something long overdue.’

“There is. I... took something from you,” he confessed. “A book. It... showed me things...” He produced the book from inside his cape pocket.

“See, when you say ‘I took a book of yours and it showed me things,’ this isn’t exactly the kind I’m thinking of,” Devin commented, glancing at the cover.

He didn’t study it but seemed not surprised to see it appear. Neither did he reach for it. He kicked up some more sand with his booted foot and watched the wind take the golden grains away.

“Egypt. Ancient cities. Crocodiles and pyramids. Temples and cat gods.” He looked at Vincent as he said it and smiled, as he added “Bird gods, too. Cows, for Hathor.” He was sweating in the heat, and the scar on his face gleamed, whitely.

Vincent knew that no amount of time in the sun would darken the damaged skin. But, rather than being annoyed or accusatory, Devin had a bit of a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and the look was an utterly familiar one.

“God, Vincent, what we could have done here! Just look at this place!” He swept his arm wide, to encompass the vistas before them. “Lost gold and buried treasure. Kings, queens, and the Rosetta stone; we’d have had fun excavating all of it,” he said.
Though they were now both men, Devin was speaking as if they were still boys, to some degree.

‘Perhaps, to some extent, you’ll always be one, in your way,’ Vincent thought, as he continued to dream.

“Yes. Yes, we would have,” he replied, striding on. He pictured the two of them excavating the pyramids together. The old tombs drew only a little closer, in spite of their fairly constant pace.

‘They say that in the desert, the distance plays tricks on you,’ he thought.

“We’d have played a trick or two, ourselves,” Devin answered his unspoken impression. Dream logic.

Vincent gave him a rare smile in return. “That we would have,” he agreed.

Devin lifted both arms, and extended them, to take in the totality of the landscape. “You and me, always the adventurers. Huck and Tom on the Mississippi. Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, unearthing the tomb of King Tut.”

He was already creating a fantasy. One Vincent knew they’d have enjoyed as brothers - if he hadn’t hidden the book.

“Can you imagine it?” Devin prompted. “We’d have taken Winslow’s favorite pick and shovel, and had ourselves a time.” Devin clearly had plans for Ancient Egypt.

In his dream, Vincent knew that Devin was pretending a particular scene, as he always had done, and was including Vincent in the possibilities. He was dreaming dreams that included both of them. It was a thing Devin did. It was the thing Devin did. The thing Devin had done that had endeared him to Vincent, so very much.

And as important as that had ever been, for Vincent (and he knew it had been absolutely vital to him while growing up), he knew that for him, Ancient Egypt hadn’t represented a way to play the desert version of “Huck and Tom on the Mississippi.” All his thoughts about the long-ago prized book and the utterly foreign landscape before them were nothing about that.

They were nothing about a thing the two of them would have “shared” together, at all.

If anything, the book and the fantasies it inspired, were a bit of the opposite. The tales and descriptions listed in the old volume were things Vincent had wanted to keep for himself and himself alone. They were not to be shared. The ideas gleaned from Ancient Egypt had been his, and his alone; and though Devin had appeared with him in his earliest dreams about them, he’d been gone soon after. Both in Vincent’s dream life and in his real one, as it had turned out.

The ground was rising more sharply, as they continued to mount the famous plateau. ‘Plateau. A plateau is a place above,’ Vincent thought, knowing that these images, these fantasies weren’t things he’d ever “played with,” in his youth.
‘This was never about finding an ancient mummy together, or building a way to raft down the Nile,’ he mused. ‘The games of boyhood were in those dreams. This was none of that.’

These imaginings had a different quality. These fantasies were adolescent flavored, and Vincent had felt the difference keenly, at the time.

To that end, he’d kept them, and the book, private.

“You’re thinking again. You always do that,” Devin accused, almost jovially.

Vincent watched the pyramids grow closer.

‘This was faster when we were boys, and we used to run to them.’

“I was thinking that your book changed me. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that when I found your book, I was changing, anyway,” Vincent replied, realizing he’d never considered it from an adult perspective.

He’d needed those far-fetched fantasies. And he’d needed to keep them to himself. They were things he’d… hoarded, though that word went against every instinct he was raised with.

“I never told you. This is something I … needed… just for myself.” Vincent tried to explain it. In a way, that confession felt far more personal than the one where he’d admitted to taking the book. “It was… more than just a simple fantasy to me, Devin. How much more I cannot tell. But it was… more.”

“Of course it was,” Devin replied, understanding immediately. Devin always did that. He always understood, and very quickly. Better than Father had done, sometimes. Better than anyone. Devin looked down at the book Vincent still carried in his left hand.

Vincent gave a long-owed apology. “I’m sorry I kept it from you. I know it was yours.”

Devin shrugged. “It meant way more to you than it was ever going to, to me. Keep it. Keep it, if it helps.” They were Narcissa’s words, in Devin’s voice. He wiped the perspiration from his handsome forehead.

“It was a long time ago,” he added.
Vincent opened his cape so he could secrete his prize, knowing that the sun was making him sweat as well. Ancient Egypt was blisteringly hot, and a bit windy. The old book disappeared inside the lined fabric, as the edge of his cape fluttered in the desert breeze.

“I don’t like to think about those times. They’re... difficult,” Vincent shared, knowing they had been.

“Nobody likes to remember the beginning of puberty, little brother,” Devin agreed. He changed the subject, as he eyed the pyramids. “How long do you think it took to build the big one?” he asked, pointing toward Khufu’s tomb.

“Twenty years,” Vincent replied, noting the coincidence in the time span. Twenty years to build that. Twenty years to build me, to build you. I wonder which one was the more difficult task?’ he mused.

“I’m glad you made it here. Even if it was only in a book; only in a dream,” Devin said.

“I’m not really... headed for Giza,” Vincent revealed. “This is just... a path. It’s just a place I’m passing through,” he said, knowing he wanted to see other cities, other cities, farther north.

“Just passing through. That makes both of us, then,” Devin said. Like Vincent, he too was just ‘passing through.’

Vincent shifted restlessly, in his bed. Pipe tapping became a distant staccato in his ears. And it wasn’t dream sound. This was real. The Tunnel day was starting. It was time to get up.

One part of Vincent’s mind tried to rouse itself, while the other refused to let go of the dream. He rolled over, and pulled the blanket up.

“So, did you want to be a Pharaoh?” Devin asked, beholding the spectacle before them. “A ruler, like them?” He gestured toward the pyramids. “No Mitch Denton to pick on you, no Father to tell you to do your chores. Be a king, and have what a king has?”

Vincent couldn’t deny that certain aspects of that scenario had their appeal; especially when he was younger.

“Vincent, they’d have loved you,” Devin chuckled. “King Vincent the First, ruler of the two kingdoms, upper and lower. Long may he reign.”

Vincent shook his head at his older brother’s temerity.

“Did you ever want that?” Devin’s voice had an almost wistful edge. “Be a king, a real king? Rule your own... kingdom?” Devin paused to put his hands in the pockets of his battered leather jacket. It was a casual gesture to go with the casual question, as they still walked through the landscape. ‘Dreamscape,’ Vincent’s mind amended.

“Did you?” Vincent answered the question by asking one.
Devon shrugged, and shook his dark head in the negative. “Nah. I think I wanted to see them all, rather than be a part of them. You can’t own something when you’re always moving. It isn’t me.”

Vincent well understood that.

“But I stay in one place,” he replied, seeing the ready difference.

Devon acknowledged it. “You were always better at being the one who made and followed the rules; helped others. Built… things.” They both looked at the great, rising tomb, as he said it. “So? Is that why you liked all this? You wanted to be a king? Have what all the kings have?”

Tapping again. Vincent ignored it and answered Devon.

“I don’t know. I might have,” Vincent replied, scanning the landscape.

‘King and country. A sense of belonging. Acceptance. Kinship.’ It was undeniably tempting.

“Would that have been such a sin, if I did?” he asked.

Devon’s smile was quick. “A sin. You mean like… stealing?” He chuckled at the charge, letting Vincent know that the theft was of little consequence.


The tapping grew louder, and just a touch more insistent.

In a golden mist, the dream faded and wisped to nothing. The present asserted itself, and Vincent rose, remembering the feeling of walking with Devon. It had been a good dream. But it left him aware that he still had something to do.

He knew he hadn’t really apologized to his brother, not yet. It was a thing he’d think on, later.

The pipes over his head rattled to morning life, as messages raced along their length. He paid scant attention to them, as he moved to pour water into the bowl on his nightstand. The clear, cold liquid wasn’t the mighty Nile. But it made a pleasant, familiar sound, as it tumbled out of the pitcher and splashed into the bowl.

‘Nile Delta. The delta is where things change,’ he recalled, for no particular reason he could name.

He washed his hands and face and then began his day.
Chapter Four

Recollections and Returns

The work was long, but fairly mindless, and left him time to consider the events of the prior day. *I stole a book. In my dream, I offered to return it. How... long ago it all was*, Vincent thought, feeling the march of the years when he was awake far more than he had when he’d been asleep.

*Twenty years.* He still shook his head at that. A rock flew by his head, not close, but close enough.

*Pay attention,* he chided himself, tossing a few of his own into the growing pile.

Carving out a new chamber meant man hours spent hacking through solid rock, then carrying that away. Olivia Evans was due to give birth any day. She and Kanin would need a larger living space. It was heavy work.

After trundling the fifth load of rubble into the Abyss, it was Kanin who called a halt to it.

“Hey! Time,” the handsome father-to-be had declared, crossing one hand on top of each other in the “time out” gesture used in football.

“That’s enough for one day. What say we go grab something to eat?” Kanin invited.

“You go ahead,” Vincent replied. “I want to finish up h-“

Vincent’s agile mind immediately “clicked” on a memory.

“Hey! Timeout. What’s say we grab something to eat?” Devin asked, from his side of their shared bedroom. A white bandage covered his scar. The wound was fairly fresh.

As was the long forgotten memory, as it now resurfaced.

“You go ahead. I want to finish this,” Vincent remembered replying.

*They were in his Chambers, but it was their Chambers then. There was a screwdriver in Vincent’s left hand. He’d been fixing the wooden carousel, making sure the toy worked as it should. Or at least, that’s what he’d been pretending to do.*

“One. Catch up later?” Devin had asked scooting off his bed.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll save you a plate,” Kanin said, not noticing Vincent’s faraway look.
“Yes,” Vincent replied, chasing wisps of the long-past day down, in his mind. Why is this important?

Kanin put down his hammer, and left the room. That left Vincent free to pursue the long-ago day in his mind. Vincent sat down on a nearby bench, and struggled to remember.

*Devin had gone, and I... I set down the screwdriver, Vincent recalled. I was... concerned about something. No. More than concerned.* The blue eyes searched and found what they sought. He remembered that though his outside had seemed calm, inside he’d been in turmoil, and he was about to try and do the right thing, even if it meant he was about to do it the wrong way.

‘If I tell him I took his book, he'll only be mad at me again,’ Vincent remembered thinking it, as a youth.

He rubbed his forehead and remembered the scene. His room, not as it was now, but as it had been then, swam before his inner sight. There were two beds in the room, and a pair of low bookshelves.

Vincent envisioned himself as he had been, on that distant day.

*Devin’s sneaker-clad footsteps had receded, as he’d moved farther down the hallway. Vincent had pretended to work until the sound was utterly gone. Then, he’d set aside the screwdriver and pulled the book out from its hiding place, under his bed. *Ancient Egypt* felt heavy, in his hands.*

Vincent blinked, remembering how he’d felt then. ‘No. I didn’t want to be a king and have a kingdom. In that moment, I just wanted to return the book, and right the wrong of taking it.’

Vincent saw his younger self struggle with what to do.

*Owned by the guilt of being a thief, he’d wanted to return *Ancient Egypt*. He knew he owed Devin an apology and an explanation. But so close to the time of having marred his brother’s face, he’d taken the coward’s way out, as to how to do that. Tempers had been flaring often enough between them, lately.*

*Crossing to Devin’s side of the room, he’d slid the book in place on his brother’s bookshelf, putting it down low, where Devin rarely looked. The next time he scanned the titles, he’d either find it or he wouldn’t. If he mentioned wanting it again, Vincent would “help” him locate it.*

*It wasn’t an entirely honest thing to do. But at least it got the book out from under his bed, and back in Devin’s possession. Perhaps, after Devin healed, they’d take it back out and look at the pictures, play the games Devin had planned. Perhaps time together would heal the rift caused by Devin’s false accusation and harsh words. They were brothers. Surely, everything would be all right.*

*An odd detail came to mind. Vincent remembered sliding the book between *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Crime and Punishment*, the latter title seeming more than ironic, now.*

‘I’ll tell you later, say sorry later,’ he remembered thinking. ‘When things are back to normal, and we’re all good again.’
Vincent remembered that he’d had every intention of confessing his crime. Just not right now. Not when things were still somewhat...delicate, between them.

It was only later when Vincent realized that Devin was, at that moment, also deciding to mend some fences. He was planning to meet with the other boys about including Vincent on a carousel ride. The ride was Devin’s plan to both include Vincent, and to apologize for the incident over the pocket knife.

It would be a thing Vincent didn’t know about until later when Devin suggested they sneak out.

Vincent blinked and snapped back to present concerns. He knew what had happened afterward. The night of the carousel ride had occurred, and Devin had quarreled with Father. Furious and sulking, Devin never looked for the book.

Not long after that, he was gone. He had taken nothing with him.

Vincent, however, had taken something back.

Alone in the suddenly too-large space, he had tugged out the book, needing the escape of it, seeking the comfort of its pages. Never had he felt like he wanted to escape more, than in that moment, that terrible, “alone” moment.

But the old pages didn’t work their magic that time. They brought little distraction and no comfort. The room was deadly quiet, and Vincent remembered very much fearing that it was going to stay that way.

He once more tucked the book back between the slats and the box springs. He had fallen asleep and arisen early in the morning, to join the search parties for Devin.

They hadn’t found him, that day, nor the one after that. Nor the one after that. And in the turmoil that had followed, the book had been utterly forgotten.

Vincent sighed, remembering the upheaval of that time, and the sadness of it. It was a familiar pain, one he’d revisited the day Devin returned home.

They were old memories. They no longer had the power to wound as they once had. For the most part, they were poignant, rather than painful. After all, it was no small comfort to find out that Devin was still alive, after all this time.

And not only alive but healthy, vigorous, and full of charm, and plans and dreams... as much as he had ever been. That was a reason for joy, not sorrow. If anything, Devin and Father would have things to work out (or not) between them, as they both chose.

Yet, the image of his twelve-year-old self trying to return the book, remained.

I wanted to do the right thing but wasn’t sure how to do it, without causing trouble. You and I may have more in common than you know, Devin, Vincent mused, realizing that gave him something in common with not only his brother, but his father, as well.

Vincent didn’t begrudge Devin the life he’d chosen. And he surely didn’t begrudge Jacob his. They were his family. And it felt good to know he had a brother again, even if he was out in the world Above, rather than here.
Everywhere south of Oz and north of Shangri-La, Vincent thought, rising from the bench. There was a chore to finish. He picked up the rickety wheelbarrow, determined to take the load of stones where they belonged.

As he pushed the heavy burden, it felt both odd and strangely comforting to remember that he’d tried (however surreptitiously) to right the wrong he’d once committed. *Perhaps it was time to make sure that got done, once and for all.* Vincent concluded.

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Chapter Five

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Cities of Bastet, Cities of Ra

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“I’ve had you bring me the same book more than once, but it’s usually poetry,” Catherine said, handling *Ancient Egypt* once more.

“I was wondering if you could... find out where Devin is. Send this to him?” Vincent asked, leaning against the balcony, as he did so. He folded his arms across his chest, his pose a relaxed one. “I remembered today that I actually tried to return it, once. I’d like to find out if such a thing is possible.”

Catherine looked unsure about that. “I’ll check with HR. He wasn’t here long, but they might have a place he wanted his last paycheck forwarded to. And if he’s traveling under his own name, there’s always a chance,” Catherine replied.

Vincent nodded, indicating his understanding.

“Or, you could just wait until he comes home for a visit. Vincent... what is this about? Can you tell me?” she asked.

Vincent knew he wasn’t quite sure if this was a thing he could easily explain. That finding the book and all its accompanying memories had dominated his thinking the last few days. “What can I say that will make sense, other than I am not even certain myself?” He tugged the book back from her and scanned its battered cover. He knew every stray mark on it, by heart.

“This was once... the most important book I owned, yet I didn’t own it. It was Devin’s. He found it Above, and brought it down for the two of us to share.” He flipped through the pages again.
“And you ... appropriated it. For your own reasons,” Catherine said, understanding. Like Devin, she seemed to have a gift for that.

“I did.” He eyed a photograph of the pyramids of Giza. “I had a dream last night. One inspired by the book. One I used to have sometimes, decades ago.”

“Really?” Catherine asked, curious. She stepped closer to him.

“In my dream, I’m walking through the desert. I’m in Egypt, and I know where I am, I’m... sure of my steps. I am... not lost,” Vincent said. Catherine had the idea that he meant that in more ways than one.

“The sand is... hot under my boots, and it stretches away from me. I can see the Great Sphinx in the distance. But in my heart, I know what I’m really journeying to see.”

“And what’s that?” Catherine asked, covering his hand with her own. She gave him a gentle squeeze.

He gave a heavy sigh. “Everything. I’m going to see... everything. Cities of Bastet. Cities of Ra. All the things there are in these pages.” He caressed the book like the old companion it was. “Canopic jars, hieroglyphic walls... tombs and monuments... the great statues, and the old scrolls...”

She knew he could see all he described, in his mind’s eye. She’d known him too long not to understand how important books were to him, how much he imagined himself inside the pages.

“In my dream...there will be ancient boats with red sails, bright fans, and crocodile carvings. I’ll see them all, on the way to where I’m going.”

“Where you’re going?” she asked, looking at the page.

“In my mind, they’re all on the way, like they’re leading me... mile markers on a special road. There’s a place I have to see. It’s the temple, at Leontopolis. And I’m going there.”

“Leontopolis?” Catherine asked. She didn’t need a translation of the word.

“The path through Giza leads to Cairo. North of there, and on the east bank... on one of the Nile branches, I’ll find it,” he said, pointing to a place on a map of Lower Egypt.
"In my dream, I know I'll see... all of them, all the Gods. People who look like me, people who don’t... Horus, and Isis. Ma’at and Maahes. The throne of Egypt. Lions will walk in the streets. The Nile will flow by the door, and... and...” His voice trailed away. Perhaps something else. Something I always wanted to see but never did.

“And?” Catherine prompted, wanting to know still more about this, his most fondly remembered fantasy, from his youth.

He shook his head, clearing it of dreamlike specters. “It doesn’t matter. Not really. Last night, my dream wasn’t as it was when I was a boy.”

“What changed?” Catherine asked.

“For one thing, I was grown, as I am now. And... Devin was beside me.”

“Had that ever happened before?” She raised an inquisitive eyebrow. *My friend Jenny would have such a time with you,* she thought.

“When I was a child he was with me, yes. Sometimes,” Vincent qualified. “But that was when we were boys. If he was there, he’d ask me to race him. We’d run through the sand, laughing. He was older, and the better runner. But in my dreams, I was faster. I always beat him.” It was said with fond remembrance.

“That sounds like a lovely dream, Vincent,” Catherine said.

Vincent smiled, and it was full of memory. “It was. We were... wild boys then, and the whole of the ruins was our plaything. We were going to discover incredible... wonders there, bring back great treasure.”

*“Out there. There’s a world of... possibilities, and wonders...”* She remembered him saying it to her several months ago when she’d been destined for Providence. It looked as if he’d always felt that way. Knowing this helped her understand him, so much better.

She asked a question she hadn’t dared to ask, last week.

“If you could have stopped Devin from leaving, would you have?” she queried, fairly sure she already knew the answer.

*You wouldn’t have. You’d have told him he had to go. That there were things he had to do, had to be, had to... see. Just as you did me.*

“No,” Vincent confirmed. “He needed to go. As much now as he did then, though for different reasons. Now, it’s the life he desires. When we were boys...I’d have wished for a... a different way for him to leave, rather than over a quarrel with Father. But I wouldn’t have stopped him from going. His life was... meant for journeying,” Vincent said simply, glancing at the map, as he did so.

Catherine could only silently agree.

*So was yours,* Catherine thought, looking at the page the same time he did. *You just did it a different way.* She took in the faded blue color of the Mediterranean. *This book must have meant the world to you, for a while.*

“The two of you must have been... quite the pair, back then,” Catherine commented, touching her fingers to the old page.
“We were. There was nothing we didn’t... imagine together,” he said. Except this, he amended silently. I never gave us the chance to. He turned the page. The picture of the statue of Maahes came back into view again. Vincent smiled at it, though the smile was a wistful one.

Catherine’s expression matched his. “That sounds like something the two of you very much liked to do, to pretend,” Catherine said, understanding that Vincent’s nighttime dream about his boyhood completely reflected the relationship he’d shared with Devin.

*What an amazing thing it is to have a brother. I’m so sorry you miss him,* Catherine mused.

“Did you often race each other?” she asked.

The wistful smile changed to a small chuckle, as he turned the page back again. “All through the tunnels. And all through my... dreams.” He trailed a taloned finger up the Nile.

“When I used to dream of us in Egypt... It was like there was a long racecourse, and it was set up for just us two. We would run so hard, kicking up sand as we went. The air was hot, and I thought surely I’d lose.”

“Did you?” she asked. He shook his leonine head.

“We’d jump over the stones together, run past the landmarks. I was always in the lead, at least a little.”

“I take it Devin didn’t give up easily.”

“No. We’d pass through Giza and even through Cairo, sprinting up the banks of the Nile. We’d follow the river up...” The finger stopped at Leontopolis. “But when I got to my special place... I was always ahead of him. When I looked back, he was seldom still with me.”

“Do you think that meant something?” Catherine asked. She could tell by his expression that it did. His head tilted toward a familiar angle.

*I think it meant that whatever was there, I wanted it all for myself,* he thought.

“I... wanted the book to myself. By extension, I think I wanted the entire place to myself. They were all... things I was unwilling to share,” Vincent explained, flipping the book to a page full of hieroglyphic writing. “It’s as if I thought the messages in here were all for me. Me, and me alone,” he said, running a heavy nail beneath the ancient writing.

“That must have been a powerful fantasy for you,” she said.

He could only agree. “I had... such dreams, in these pages, waking and sleeping” he replied. “I was... afraid, I think, at the time,”

*What an odd choice of words.* “Afraid? That doesn’t sound like you.”

It didn’t. But then, neither did stealing a book from Devin. “I think... I didn’t want anyone, anyone to tell me it was all... impossible,” he concluded with a sigh.

“So that’s why you kept the book secret.” Catherine empathized with the longing of the boy he no longer was.
Vincent nodded. “This was my world, my Egypt. My... kingdom,” he said, feeling the word wasn’t quite right, but repeating the one Devin had used, last night.

“But you say the dream you had last night was different?” Catherine asked.

Vincent nodded. “Last night, we didn’t race. Devin and I walked as adults. I told him I’d taken the book, and apologized. He accepted. But... it isn’t the same as actually doing it.”

“And now you want to make sure he gets this,” Catherine confirmed. “Why don’t you write him a letter, and tuck it inside?” she suggested. “You can... tell him as much as you wish that way,” she reasoned.

He turned over her suggestion in his mind and decided it had great merit. “Do you think he’ll forgive me for stealing it?” Vincent asked.

Catherine was mentally trying to figure out how much she was going to need to bribe Edie for the chore of finding Devin Wells. Or Jeff Radler. Or whoever Devin had pulled out of his hat this week.

*He left on Wednesday. I can check the cab companies. And from there, the airports.* She was already making plans.

“I think he’ll smile when he sees it,” she replied, knowing she’d be grabbing hold of Edie first thing in the morning.

**

Chapter 6

“I Hope You Find Shangri-La”

**

Vincent’s day was full of more work with Kanin. But by dinner, he’d mostly decided what he wanted to say in his letter.

Dear Devin,

When I was a boy, I dreamed of the two of us together, often. We were in Camelot or Oz, in India or on the Mississippi. We fought battles with King Arthur and followed pirate maps to Treasure Island. Good things. Boyhood things. Adventures that... even now, own a piece of my heart, and helped shape who I have become.
I’m glad you got to go and do those things in reality, in your way. I hope you find Shangri-La or some other lost paradise. I hope it finds you.

But I never dreamed of us any other way than as we were the day you left, until last night. We were in Egypt, together. And we were grown men.

Please forgive me for this little bit of larceny. I hid your book. At the time, I think part of me needed to.

In my dream last night, you came to me, walked with me across the hot sand, and you asked me a question I haven’t been able to dismiss. Did I want to be a King? Did I want to rule a kingdom? Was the notion of being a pharaoh, a worshipped demi-god, was that appealing to me?

In youth, it would have been a thing we both played at. And I probably would have said “yes” to you. It would have been a thing that made us laugh, and rejoice together. We’d have spent the day playing at it.

The boy in me possibly did want those things, in some ways.

But I’d like to think that the man in me knows better.

There are few joys in leadership and multiple burdens. “Heavy lies the head that wears the crown.” Father “rules” here, as much as anyone does, or can. But his cares are many. His charges are many. In ways I don’t think even I understand, his life is not his own. Perhaps it never has been. I know you, and we have much to discuss on that score the next time you are here. But that is a thing for the two of you. I only ask that you both continue to be gentle with each other, as you find your way.

I hope this book finds you well. I hope it reminds you of when we were young together; of the times when all we needed was a good book and an hour to play.

I think this is the only thing I ever knowingly stole, from anyone. It gave me a strange sense of comfort when I looked at it. When you examine the last chapters, you’ll know why.

Travel safely, Devin. Come home, soon. Bring this back with you, and tell me where it’s been.

Be well, Brother,

Vincent.

Vincent folded the letter in half and tucked it inside the book’s front cover. If things went as planned, this would be the last night the old tome would stay in his company.

You have far to go, he thought, settling the book at the edge of his writing table. He didn’t know if it would be difficult to locate Devin, or easy. But he had absolute faith in Catherine; that she’d be able to find out where he’d gone.

Be well, my Angel. Be well, he thought, sensing her through their bond.

On the ledge in front of his window, the little statue of Sekhmet looked on, approvingly.
“You’ve been... distracted of late,” Father said, as Vincent pretended to peruse Jacob’s bookshelves, later that evening. He knew he was probably feeling too restless to be able to find anything of interest.

“I know I have. I’m sorry,” Vincent said, glancing across titles he knew by heart. “Devin’s visit seems to have stirred up more than a few old memories,” Vincent said. He relayed the story about Ancient Egypt to Jacob.

“The two of you were always very... active,” Jacob said, regretting the times when that had resulted in a scolding. My boys. As much as I wanted you to push, sometimes you pushed too far. He suspected that same sentiment was true of all parents.

“You always encouraged us to explore. That must have been... difficult for you, at times,” Vincent acknowledged.

Jacob set up the chess board, hopeful that they’d play. “No more for me than it was for any parent, I suppose,” he said, putting the white pawns in a row. He glanced up at Vincent, to see that the look on his son’s face was one of slight disbelief.

“Well. Perhaps sometimes,” Jacob qualified, knowing it was true.

Vincent knew that Father and Devin had talked long into the night, the day before Devin left. Whatever it was they’d said, it seemed to content them, at least for now. If Jacob wanted to speak of it, he would.

“It’s not so hard to imagine why you’d want to picture yourself in such a book,” Jacob opined. “The notion of being somewhere... out in the sun. Safe, yet... active.” He rubbed his whiskered chin. “Either with Devin or without him, it isn’t hard to see the appeal.”

Perhaps.

“I’ve asked Catherine to try to find Devin for me. Is there a message you’d like to send?” Vincent asked.
Father shook his head. “I... imagine I’ll hear from him again... when he’s ready. And see him, the same,” Jacob replied. He considered the pieces before him, then raised his eyes to his youngest son’s face. “You’re a good brother, Vincent. Better than I was a father to him. I’m glad he had that. I’m glad you both did,” Jacob said forthrightly.

Vincent merely nodded in acceptance, of that.

“You... you do think we’ll see him again? Before another twenty years goes by, I mean?” Jacob asked. Vincent noted that Jacob was staring again at his chessmen, and avoiding his gaze.

So you are worried. Don’t be. He’ll return to us. Vincent was sure it was so.

He crossed the room and placed a steadying hand on Jacob’s shoulder. “I’m sure of it. He’ll come back with some wild tale about the Klondike. Or how difficult it is to ride a camel across the desert, or an elephant through the jungle. You know Devin, Father. He has to wander. But...he’ll be home.”

Jacob gave a weak smile and patted Vincent’s hand. “Yes. Yes, I’m sure he will. He’ll not be able to resist the urge to tell you about it all. Perhaps he’ll even bring pictures this time.”

“Perhaps,” Vincent replied, moving to sit for a game he wasn’t sure he felt like playing. He wanted to go see Catherine, to find out what she’d discovered.

Give her time to find him, he chided himself. It’s only been one day.

“So, you say this... book you confiscated...” Father nudged.

“Ancient Egypt,” Vincent supplied.

“You say you didn’t want to share the contents with anyone. Do you know why, Vincent? Why you felt you couldn’t?” Jacob held out his closed hands, asking Vincent to choose a pawn so they could start the game.

Vincent shrugged and tapped the left fist. Jacob opened it. Vincent would play white.

“I’m not sure, other than I felt keenly, at the time, that I must keep it private. I’m sure I feared being laughed at by some of the other boys.”

Jacob nodded, understanding. He also felt that it was unlikely that Devin would have done that. The boys sometimes disagreed. But they rarely teased each other, at least not cruelly. Jacob couldn’t say the same for some of the others, however. Mitch Denton’s heart had been hardening, even then.

“I’m sure you made the choice you felt was right, at the time,” Jacob replied simply.

Vincent advanced a pawn two spaces. Opening gambit. Jacob followed suit.

“I remember... feeling close to the book,” Vincent shared. “Wanting it for my own, and not wanting to share it. It’s like a wish; one I felt wouldn’t come true if I ever said it aloud, at the time.” Vincent advanced another pawn.
Jacob remembered such a time in his own life. A time when he’d told no one he was about
to do something secret, certain others would think him foolish. It was the time he’d waited
in the same place for a year, just for the chance of seeing Margaret Chase again.

He wanted Vincent to know he understood.

“When I first saw Margaret, when I … waited to see her again…” He paused, his finger on
his queen’s pawn. “I … never told anyone. I just… stood there... hoping,” Jacob said. “It
seemed important that I do that; seemed... important that I not tell anyone how... fanciful I
was being,” Jacob confessed. He moved the pawn.

“And yet your patience paid off,” Vincent said gently. They’d buried Margaret several
months ago. He knew that Jacob, understandably, still mourned her passing, in his quiet
way.

Vincent put his hand on his knight, but then pulled it back. He decided against playing an
aggressive game. He moved his rook’s pawn up one square.

“Patience has its virtues when it comes to women... and chess strategies. And sometimes...
a secret can be your best friend,” Jacob replied, moving out his own knight. It seemed they
were about to play a faster game after all.

“I’ve heard the truth of that, but sometimes failed to believe it.” Vincent smiled
and put
forth the queen’s knight. *A quick game it is.* “And I could hardly have been keeping a secret
about Catherine. I didn’t even know her, back then.”

Jacob seemed to ponder the board for a moment, and he idly put a fingertip on top of his
queen’s bishop. “Perhaps your head didn’t know her. But your heart did,” Jacob said,
uncaging the piece.

Vincent’s eyes flickered at the statement, and he considered it, while he was considering
what to do about the offense Jacob was mounting.

*Perhaps,* he thought but didn’t say. *But nothing in that book can be about Catherine. We
didn’t even know each other.*

“You’re going to lose your rook early,” Vincent diverted, advancing on it with his wily
knight.

Jacob sighed. He’d moved the bishop out too far. Now it was either pull it back or lose it, in
two moves. Meanwhile, his rook was indeed exposed. Father pulled back the more valuable
piece. “The next time you take a book, you might see fit to make it one on chess, and let me
read it before you do,” Father complained.

Vincent tried to hide a smile. “Only if you think it will help,” he replied, taking the rook.
Two games later, (One victory for Vincent, and one draw) Vincent paced restlessly through the nighttime park. Catherine had sent down a message, through Clarence, the sax player.

Nothing for certain, yet. Tomorrow should be better. It looks like Anchorage. C

It was hopeful, even as it was inconclusive. And it made it seem like Vincent’s notion about the Klondike was closer to correct than the one about India.

A damp mist rose from the springtime ground, and it reminded him of the first night he’d found Catherine. That had been a little more than a year ago. His hand went to the pouch that held her gift to him, almost reflexively. A rose. A rose, because you were once afraid of the dark. And what was I afraid of, Catherine? But of course, he thought he knew.

Vincent broke into a loping run, leaving the question unanswered, for now. There was a skyscraper that wanted scaling, and he suspected he knew why.

From above, the city spreads out. The lights look tiny, like pinpricks of torchlight, in the distance. From the top, the world looks... small, again. Primitive.

A long ride up an elevator later, and a stealthy climb, he had the view he sought.

Alexandria must have looked like this, once upon a time, Vincent mused, watching the lights thin, and separate, as they rolled away from him. He wondered if the view from the top of the pyramids was anything like this; then he wondered how he’d ever know.


“Perhaps your head didn’t know her. But your heart did.”

With one casual comment, Jacob had hit on something Vincent himself had only begun to suspect.

My heart did know. Almost from the first. It knew what it had been looking for, for so long. What it thought never to find, never to have. I love you, Catherine. And I’ve wished for you since... since... well, since I stole a book from Devin. Before, perhaps. But by then... definitely.

He turned his eye inward, and now saw not the city of New York, but the city of Leontopolis. He imagined statues of lions at the front gates, and big cats roaming free,
down the hard packed streets, even at nighttime. *Torchlight lit the way, and a lioness lazed on the wide stone steps of a temple, cleaning her paws. She was beautiful, and a great, shaggy-maned male sauntered up to her. They touched noses, and played, for a moment, huge paws, batting back and forth, claws retracted. She rolled on her back and gently swatted his nose, before getting up and wandering off; into the night. The big male reclined in her spot and cleaned his own paws, certain of her return. There were a mated pair. Vincent knew it, without questioning it.*

*High walls rose behind the reclining beast, the images carved into them already familiar ones to Vincent. Most of the images had the head of a lion and the body of a woman. Their breasts were round and enticing. A circular disc was carved above their heads, indicating royalty, and a connection to the sun.*

‘I didn’t want to rule it,’ he recalled. ‘But I did want something from it.’

Vincent struggled to remember the particulars of a dream he hadn’t had in twenty years. This was where the road from Giza had led. This was what he’d really been walking to, in last night’s nighttime fantasy.

*He remembered that the lioness had come back, and other lions, male and female, had joined her. Another pair of full-grown adults twined around the tall pillars, searching for a spot to lie. Playful cubs tumbled over each other on the stones, and a rangy adolescent scented the night air.*

‘Pride.’ Vincent thought, naming the word for a group of lions. It fit.

*The lioness had settled herself near her husband, and he’d given a satisfied growl of approval, as she’d done so. Secure in her position; she’d stretched out, elongating her claws and laid her head down, near his. Her long tail had flipped, indolently.*

‘You have a wife,’ Vincent thought.

*Steady, golden eyes tracked him. ‘It is the way of our kind.’ He could almost hear the big animal think it to him.*

*He mounted the steps, and the big male rested his head near his mate’s. The other great cats barely acknowledged him. He was no intruder. He belonged here as much as they did.*

‘You have a beautiful family,’ he thought to them all. The big male yawned, in response. *Fatherhood was hard work.*

*One of his cubs pounced on the dark fluff of his twitching tail. He allowed it, not protesting. All of them knew the youngster wouldn’t take things too far.*

‘I was a boy the first time I imagined this place,’ Vincent recalled, fascinated all over again.

Fifty stories up, the wind toyed with the ends of his hair and tossed them behind his shoulder. But Vincent barely felt it and didn’t “see” anything that was actually before him. The temple at Leontopolis had always been the goal of his journey. Every street in the city led to it. Every citizen knew its significance.
A red carpet extended outward, from a doorway, a clear sign of welcome. Vincent walked its length and came to the huge, open archway. There were no doors here. There was nothing to keep the lions out.

He knew that sometimes, he’d imagined that the people on the walls had come to life and that they moved around him, busy with their tasks. Falcon-headed Horus had once walked among lion-featured women, or jackal featured ones. This was Egypt. There were no limits. Everything was possible. Especially in a city devoted to an animal-headed god.

And now he was walking there, too. Free as anyone to do so.

‘For Devin, all this would be about the adventure of it. When he looks at the world, that’s what he sees. Adventure. Father thinks this is about the luxury of being safe Above. It’s the thing he’s always concerned about. Catherine thinks it’s about having a culture to call my own, and about being part of one. That makes sense. It’s had a powerful influence on her.

All of them are wrong, though she’s the closest to right about it,’ he mused. Seeing himself as he stepped closer to the entryway.

Vincent tried to conjure the images of other people, strolling through the nighttime streets, trying to remember how he thought they’d looked. But aside from the lions, nothing came this time. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t what prowled around the gleaming marble he’d hoped to meet.

It was what’s inside the temple I’d thought never to find.

In no dream, waking or sleeping, was a person waiting for him, inside the sacred place.

Now, he knew there was. When he stepped inside, he confirmed it.

She was beautiful, and she was Catherine. Vincent let his imagination go, as he pictured her in a gleaming satin robe, similar to the ones she often wore to bed.

She looked glowing and regal. He had no clear idea of her rank here. Queen, or High Priestess, perhaps, or simply a follower of Ma’at, or Sekhmet. Gold-embroidered cats patterned the cuffs and hem of her robe, and the soft fabric shimmered as she moved. She’d been waiting for him. Somehow, it always seemed that way between them. They parted, and came back together, like the lions outside. But always, they were waiting for each other, striving to stay close.

“Vincent. I knew you’d come.” She sounded happy, like she so often did, when they reunited.

He approached her with the ease of long familiarity. This was his Catherine. Completely his.

“I know why I hid the book. I thought of you, and wished for you. But I never imagined you could be mine,” he told her.

“I suppose the world has some surprises waiting for all of us,” Catherine replied.

He glanced behind her. A familiar bust dominated the space.
“Sekhmet rules these halls. The warrior goddess. She’s the arbiter; she judges right from wrong.”

“Like a lawyer?” Catherine smiled.

“Like a lawyer,” he agreed. “No woman is more fierce... like you, again,” he allowed, watching her move. Her eyes looked so green. It was then he realized that the female lion he’d just passed had owned eyes the same color.

“So... you didn’t want to rule,” Catherine said, indicating an empty throne. He knew he could sit there if he wanted to. He didn’t.

“Father says I won’t have a choice... one day.”

“But it isn’t something you ever sought,” she clarified. “It’s not why you dreamed this.”

“Never. That was never my goal. In all the long days and nights I spent dreaming about that book... there was only one thing I truly wanted to feel from it. And it wasn’t power. It was... possibility.”

“And this place... this is where the possibilities seemed most... likely?” She asked.

He inclined his head in the positive.

“Being a part of a people would grant me something. I didn’t want it so there would be a society of people like me. Or an adventure. Or safety. I wanted it so I could ... one day... hope to have a... wife.”

It was that word. That One Word. The one that whispered like an enticing dream across his consciousness. The one thing he’d thought never to have, on what seemed like an impossibly long list of those.

“That’s an incredibly powerful dream.” Her green eyes never looked more clear.

“A boy’s wish. For the man I would one day become. It was fantasy. But there was heart in it.”
“Perhaps your heart knew her before your head did,” Jacob’s words echoed, in Catherine’s voice.

“Perhaps it did. And... perhaps it’s why I knew you from almost the first moment we met.”

She smiled and reached up for him. In a vision he hadn’t even dreamed about, she gave him a soft, accepting kiss.

Vincent blinked, to clear himself from the images that were part memory, part wish, and part vision. Much of it was from decades ago, while some of it was for “now.” He breathed in, deeply, and the night air filled his lungs. The wind that had been tugging on his hair for the last half-hour was now picking up.

Catherine. Even before I knew you... everything was about you, he realized.

He rose from the high ledge, taking a moment to look back toward the East River. It was no Nile. But it would do.

He knew it was time to go home. He would see Catherine tomorrow... later today.

The journey back seemed like a long one, and he was beyond tired by the time he reached his chambers. His earlier restlessness had utterly vanished. He knew he would sleep well.

He did. He slept a hard, deep, dreamless time.

**

Chapter Nine

He Who Is True Beside Her

**

Catherine’s message the next day, was short and to the point.

*Anchorage confirmed. Bring your book and anything else you want to send. C.*

Nothing could have kept him from her side that evening, yet as he approached, he felt a strange sense of trepidation.

*It is no small thing to confess to the woman you love that you have, perhaps, been dreaming about her since boyhood,* he mused, swinging his legs over the balcony wall.

He rapped on the glass, and she came out immediately, carrying a cardboard box. The mailing label was already on it, as was her return address.
“I think I have everything we need,” she greeted him brightly, setting the open box on the balcony table. “Just set the book in there, and I’ll post it tomorrow.” She gave him a smile as she watched him produce the book from his pocket, and set it gently in among the packing paper. He eyed the address.

“So, you were right about Alaska. You did find him,” Vincent remarked, wondering at how very far this small package was going to travel.

Catherine nodded, holding the flap so they could both see the address. “He flew out under his own name the day he left here,” Catherine said, proud of her prowess. “Once he reached Anchorage, he wasn’t that hard to locate. There are only a few taxis in the city. I found the one that took him to where he wanted to go. He’s staying in a rental cabin, on a lake. At least he is, for now.”

Her robe sleeve was before him, as she held the box flap down, so he could see Devin’s new address. But it wasn’t the cabin listing that caught his attention, so much as the gleaming sleeve of her robe did.

_This should be embroidered with gold thread_, he thought. _With a reclining lioness encircling the cuff._ It was simply fancy.

Vincent nodded at her assertion, as he checked to make sure his letter was still inside the front cover of the book. It was. He dropped the cover closed and left a lingering hand where it was, touching the picture of the Sphinx. There was no reason to hold onto the book, further. Still, his fingers kept contact with the cover.

“Having a hard time letting it go?” she asked, studying his body language.

“This book. It’s a thing I didn’t even remember I had, until recently,” he said. Still, both of them noticed he hadn’t moved away from it.

He sighed a little and ran his fingers over the lettering on the cover. “Perhaps I am having difficulty … reconciling everything, I think,” he replied, thinking of Devin living on a lake in Alaska. _No doubt he’d try his luck at fishing. Huck Finn goes north_, Vincent mused, the thought giving him a ghost of a smile. He let his hand drop and settled some white packing paper over Ancient Egypt.

“I know that Devin’s visit… well, it brought up a great many things for you,” she said, thinking about his story of the carousel ride.

“Hmm. More for Father than for me, I think,” he said, pushing the box back from the table’s edge, so it wouldn’t fall. “I did write to him. Asked him to take the book with him, then bring it home one day, and tell me where it’s been. I think that’s fitting.”

Catherine stepped up to the box and pushed the packing paper aside, wanting to see the old volume again. In many ways, and not all of them clear to her, she knew it had been keenly important to Vincent’s early adolescence. She stroked the cover farewell. _Vincent… I wish you could go where this goes_, she thought, knowing it was a vain wish.

“Don’t be sad for me.” He picked up on the tenor of her inner musings. _You have no idea how much more I have than Devin does. I think he’s still chasing a dream. I know I found mine._
“I’m not.” She brushed her regret aside. At his look, she knew she had to qualify that.
“Well. Perhaps just a little. But I... I’m also wondering what story Devin’s making up now,” Catherine said, wondering if the man she’d known as Jeff Radler would continue to use the name Devin Wells.

*Perhaps he’ll remain “Devin” while he travels in Alaska. As time passes, maybe he’ll need to pull out Jeff Radler – or someone else again.* Catherine realized there was no way to know, for sure. That they’d all have to wait until they saw Devin again, to know.

“He’ll tell us when we see him again,” Vincent said, echoing her thought.

“I’m sure he’ll come back and bring you some tall tales,” she concluded.

“I’m sure he will,” Vincent answered. “No taller than the ones I imagined, while I held onto this,” Vincent said, indicating the book with a nod of his head. *Everywhere north of Thebes and south of Leontopolis*, he thought.

“No taller than those,” Catherine replied, simply agreeing with him.

“It’s good of you to help me... redeem myself,” he said, the smile still there.

“I’m not sure how much redeeming you needed,” she returned. “This sets all ills to rights, I know. Still... I can’t help but think that you’re sorry to see it go?” she asked, settling the packing paper back over the cover.

He tilted his head in consideration of her comment. “I am. And yet... no. It’s time, Catherine. For all of it. For everything.”

Her softly puzzled look told him she wasn’t sure what he meant.

*You are royalty in your world. Last night, you were royalty in mine.* He set the thought aside, for the moment.

“In my dream the other night, Devin asked me a question. But in a way, it was too obvious a one, and it was the wrong one,” Vincent said, closing the lid shut to indicate he wouldn’t be keeping the book.

“What question was that?” Catherine asked.

“He wanted to know if I had ambitions to be a king. If I wanted the book because I wanted a sense of what it was like to have power. Be respected as someone with authority. Perhaps even... be revered, for that.”

“I know most girls pretend they’re princesses.” Her smile told him she counted herself in that number. “Isn’t pretending to be a king or something a common fantasy, for boys?” Catherine asked.

“Perhaps,” Vincent answered, realizing it was true. Often, when he’d played with the other boys, they’d pretended to hold positions of authority, of respect. They’d played at being a king, or a president, or even a parent. It was hardly a rare fantasy to have.

“But in my case, I don’t think I longed for Ancient Egypt so that I could rule over it,” he said, able to understand the source of his boyhood longing a little better, now that he was
grown. “Having influence...that had little to do with it. I think I simply wanted to feel...” he said. “That’s... perfectly understandable, you know,” she replied, sending him all the sympathy she could. You must have felt so... isolated sometimes. In a room full of people, people who loved you. Yet, you were... so alone, in some ways.

“I suppose it was,” he allowed. He knew he was about to make a confession.

“Catherine, I didn’t dream of Egypt, so I could rule a kingdom, or even to be among others like myself. I... dreamed of being in Egypt, had thoughts of being a king, a lesser god...” He reached out and entwined his fingers with hers. “... so I could know what it was to have a queen in my life.” He tugged her forward, gently.

She felt a tremor of warmth run up her arm. Oh, Vincent.

“In a way, I think I’ve been searching for you, just you, since I was twelve years old, Catherine. Before that, perhaps.”

She laced her fingers through his, and let him draw her forward. “Those must have been some pretty... interesting fantasies,” Catherine said, not sure how much she could say the same. While it was true, she’d had her share of “princess daydreams” as a young girl, she surely hadn’t dreamed of ever having someone like him.

Or did I? She turned the question over in her mind, realizing that in a way, she utterly did.

His soft voice remained low. “I used to imagine a city of lions, where I could walk down the street, day or night, and no one would tell me I had to hide,” he said, remembering the lions lazing outside the temple at Leontopolis. “But... it wasn’t just that I was moving freely through the streets, or that no one was challenging me. It’s that I was... headed for something. Making my way.”

“And what were you making your way toward?” she asked, picturing him strolling down a street where live lions roamed free.

He drew her closer still, bidding her to put her arms around his waist, as he put his around hers. “You,” he said to her crown, brushing a kiss across it. “Someone like you. Someone like the ancient lion goddesses. Someone who upholds the law, protects the weak, sees that justice is done. Someone... brave... fierce and strong.”

She smiled at his flattery and kept herself close. “You helped me to be that, you know.”

He shook his head in denial. “It’s a thing that was always inside you. It cannot be taught. Only... unleashed,” he replied, smiling at the image of letting the lioness in her loose. “Sekhmet and Bastet, Ma’at... others... they personify courage and strength. And the law,” Vincent said, making the obvious connection for her. “They are sun connected because the sun isn’t just the light of day. It’s the light of truth. Of justice, and fairness. I’ve... had those dreams for a very long time, Catherine.” He let the words go and simply held her, soaking in her nearness.

Catherine nestled closer. “I know that... when I used to have dreams of who I’d be with... It was always someone... strong.” She leaned back, then reached up and cupped his bearded
“Someone strong both inside and out. Someone kind. Someone fair.” His blue eyes met hers, and for a moment, blue swam in green. He remembered the odd eyes of his indolent lioness and wondered if the male’s eyes had been blue.

_They should be_, he thought, a moment before he lowered his forehead to touch hers. _Thank you. Thank you for being what you are. For being... everything you are_, he thought, knowing he would wish her to be no other way.

“It sounds insane to say I’ve been thinking of you since I was a boy,” Vincent said.

“It’s not insane to wish, Vincent. We all do that,” she whispered.

Perhaps, but Vincent knew things she didn’t. Like how when their bond had formed, he’d not felt overwhelmed, so much as he’d felt at peace. Connecting with her had felt the same as what he’d imagined connecting with his ancient goddess would have felt like. There had been a sense of homecoming, in their union. Even from the first.

_My earliest fantasies prepared me for you. So that I would know you when we met_, he mused, loving her all the more.

“Devin can have the book. And whatever else he likes,” Vincent whispered back. “I don’t need it now. Not now that I’ve found you,” he said, keeping them close.

“I think we’re both lucky, then,” she said. “After all, we both got very much what we always wanted.”

He drew them apart, a little at that. He was well aware that there was no way that he could be something someone had “always wanted.”

She’d have none of it though, and sensed his disbelief, as she cupped his strong jaw again. “Someone strong,” she repeated. Someone brilliant. Someone amazing. Someone...

_beautiful_,” she finished her list, and felt his startled awareness at the use of the word.

Yes. Yes, Vincent. _I think you’re beautiful_. She thought it so loudly he could almost hear the words, through their bond.

He raised a hand to touch the silk of her hair. “Part of me thinks you belong in an ancient temple. One with a million followers. And who could blame them, for loving you?”

“I don’t think I care who loves me, as long as you do,” she replied, adoring him, utterly.

“I can see you as a beautiful priestess, in a white gown. You’re in flowing silk, stitched with lions,” he said reverently, telling her a little of his nighttime imaginings. “You belong... where you will be respected.”

“And I think I belong wherever you are,” she replied softly, knowing it as an unshakable fact.

Vincent pictured the lion and the lioness outside the old temple, lazing together.

“I think you do, as well,” he replied, tugging one edge of his cape around her, to ward off a springtime chill. “I think that you will always belong there, always belong with ‘He who is true beside her.’”

Catherine, as she gently brushed her lips against his, couldn’t agree more.
Everywhere North of Thebes and South of Leontopolis by Cindy Rae

**

Illustrations for this story were provided by the author.

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

Pacem Muros
We have never withheld the truth from each other.”

Catherine said it to Vincent. But did she really believe those words? Were they really true? Is complete honesty, truth and openness even possible to achieve? Perhaps not. But it is always a worthy goal.

Here, within the BATB Tunnels that we adore, honesty, truth, and openness are essential. No matter who we are, we must always be honest about what we are and why we’re here. Close-mindedness, selfishness, petty differences divide and diminish us. Here in the BATB Fandom Tunnels we should feel safe, whatever our differences may be.

Should we be completely honest with a writer or an artist when their creation doesn’t suit our taste or our personal vision for the show we love? Probably not. Instead, may we ever strive to temper our honesty with mutual respect and encouragement. If we offer constructive criticism (when asked for) and sincere praise for artists and writers who touch our hearts and capture our imaginations, we will be on the right track. We need not be stingy with encouragement or compliments. So many here are already generous with not only praise, but with talent. Experienced editors generously donate their time and advice to help authors become better. Fans support budding artists and writers, giving them the courage they need to share their creations.

Honesty and truth, when tempered with love and respect, will promote not only creativity, but the openness we hope for.

May we always nurture openness by encouraging all visions and opinions and…

...Let honesty, truth and openness rule.
"Catherine, what the hell happened to you? Joe asked in concern, seeing her bruised face and swollen lip.

"Someone caught me in my apartment last night and warned me off the Jackson case."

"Maybe you should take their advice and stop defending a cop killer," Joe said, sarcastically.

"You don't care who did this?" Edie asked, walking in on the conversation.

"I'm sorry, Edie... not really."

"You're gonna regret you said that Joe, when Cathy proves you wrong."

"I honestly don't care if she can prove it. He's a killer and he's gonna pay."

"Even if he didn't do it, Joe?" Catherine whispered.

"He's just like the kids who killed my father. He should burn in hell like the rest"
Dearest Catherine,

Tonight, at the park gate, you said, “We’ve never withheld the truth from each other.” Your words continue to echo within the deepest reaches of my soul, haunting me, accusing me, convicting me.

I now realize the most terrible of truths, the truth: that we have always withheld the truth from each other. At least, I have always withheld the truth from you.

I remember in those first terrible/sweet days together, when you were frightened and healing. Your face was bandaged, and you asked me to be truthful. I promised that I would never withhold the truth from you.

But even then, I was withholding the truth, the truth of what I was ... what I am... what I will ALWAYS BE.

I justified the deception by telling myself that you had already been through too much, and I didn’t want to frighten you further. As long as you couldn’t see me with your waking eyes, I realized that I could pretend that I was just like any other man, and I began to wish that somehow it could be true. In those precious days of grace, as we were getting to know each other, I began to dream, that even for someone like me, love might be possible.
I know now how much you love me. I can see it in your eyes, I can hear it in your voice, I can feel it so completely from you every moment of every day. Even in your sleep I am aware of how that love warms you.

You can’t begin to know how the sweetness of your love has filled every broken part of me.

But I have no right accepting it from you, because even though I have withheld the truth of what I am from you, I can never keep it from myself.

Our dream has been the most beautiful dream I’ve ever known. But no matter how beautiful it is, it can never change the truth of what I am, and that I was never meant to give love or receive it. I ache to know that our dream is a dream that can never be.

There is one truth that I cannot reveal to you, and that is the truth of how completely, how deeply I love you. How I have longed to tell you, to whisper those hallowed words in your ear, to shout them from the rooftops. But I know that if I ever said the words, they would only bind you more completely to me than you already are. I won’t be the one to rob you of the life you were meant to have, Catherine.

The best thing I can do to show you my love, is to let you go, but I don’t have the strength to do it.

My weakness, and my selfishness shame me. You deserve better.

At the very least, you deserve to know the truth.

Forgive me,

Vincent
Dear Vincent,

You left me standing there at the portal alone ... again. You closed the door to me, but even worse, you closed yourself to me.

I believe that if you knew the pain it causes, you wouldn’t do it... but it’s not the first time.

What is it, Vincent? Who has hurt you so deeply that you shrink from my touch, from my love? Was it Lisa? You told me she left, because you loved her. Why? How could she? What happened? I find it impossible to understand that your love could ever drive anyone away.

I promise you, Vincent, that I would never, could never, shrink from your love. I would welcome it, and cherish it, gratefully... always.

How can I convince you of that? How can I reach into your heart and heal this pain? This wound that is so deep and so wide that it keeps us from fully realizing what I know we both dream of? Sometimes, you become so lost in it, that I cannot reach you.

You looked so vulnerable, so lost, so alone, standing there in the tunnel, trying to tell me, needing to tell me, but too afraid to fully explain ... unable to even look at me. Your fear and your pain filled that space and nearly sucked the oxygen from the tunnel.

What is it that you’re so afraid of, Vincent? Do you believe you might tell me something that would frighten me, or change the way I feel about you? How can I convince you that there is nothing in this world that could ever do that?

I love you. I LOVE YOU, Vincent, and all that you are. How can you think, after all this time that you are not worthy of that love? After everything you have done for me. After all you have risked for me. After all you have been to me? How?

Please forgive me if I have ever given you a reason to doubt. I know there have been times that I have.
Tonight, I said that “We have never withheld the truth from each other.” That was unfair of me to say. I’m sorry. I’m sitting here at my dressing table, as I have so many times in the past year, looking at a stack of letters filled with all the ‘truths’ that I have withheld from you.

I’ve poured my heart out to you in these letters, from the very beginning. In them I tell you everything … everything I wish I could say to you directly, everything I wish we could be to each other. But whenever I try to explain to you the depth of my feelings, something stops me.

It’s fear. Pure, unadulterated, stark staring, FEAR.

My instincts scream to me, to keep these feelings from you, at least as much as I can, considering the bond we share. I’m so afraid that if I were ever to speak of how deeply I love you, that it would destroy the beautiful, fragile dream we have built together, and you would send me away.

I don’t know if I could survive it if you did. I’m not sure if my heart could even continue to beat if I ever lost you, Vincent. The thought alone fills me with such pain that I can barely breathe. I know in the deepest part of who I am, that we are meant to be together… truly and completely together. Perhaps it was always meant to be so.

Do you believe in soulmates, Vincent? Because I have come to believe that you are mine.

At the moment, I can’t see how we will ever find our way.

Though you have never said the words, I know that you love me. You say it, every time you whisper my name, every time you hold me in your arms, every time you climb to my balcony, every time you risk your life to save mine.

Whatever it is you are keeping from me, I want to hear it. But it’s your truth to tell. I’ll be here waiting for you, whenever you’re ready.

Please, please, trust me with your truth.

Always your,

Catherine
Define 'Catherine has married Elliot Burch in secret.' Vincent's voice was sharper than the pickaxe he was using to break stone.

Kipper knew enough to take one step back. Vincent’s blue eyes looked... uncompromising. There was rubble all around them... in more ways than one, it would seem. "It's in the papers, and they have a picture. I'm really sorry, Vincent," Kipper said, holding up the page from the newspaper.

The headline was unabashedly informative:

BURCH'S NEW BRIDE VISITS MUSEUM, CONCERT HALL, AND BURCH MEGASTRUCTURE
There was a picture of a smiling Catherine, as she exited a limousine. The brief article was not terribly specific and written in a loose style. It was devastating for Vincent. “On again, off again... on again, Burch watchers! The lady who had been keeping Elliot Burch waiting kept him waiting no more, as a Burch publicist confirmed that New York Attorney Catherine Chandler said "I do" to the multi-billionaire, sometime in the Spring. The happy couple has been spotted touring the Middle East and parts of Europe, and they were reported to be on honeymoon in Nice for at least part of April.

Photographed more than once in Burch's company in the past, Catherine Chandler is the only heir of Charles and Caroline Chander, of Chandler and Coolidge, New York, NY. The heiress, long considered a jewel of the New York social scene, was spotted lunching with her husband at a lakeside resort, then off to visit...”

Vincent flipped the page front to back. There was no more. "Where did you get this? What is the date?" The snippet of a newspaper was little more than a torn out piece. “It's today's newspaper. The day before, maybe,” Kipper replied. “I got it from Eli.”

Vincent was stricken. Yes, she'd gone to Europe and yes, things had been strained between them, at least partly thanks to the loss of their Bond after his illness. But he had wanted her to go, and had urged her to it. He had pushed her to accept Nancy Tucker's invitation. He wanted her to see the things he couldn't see, to not let her life be limited by the narrow scope of his.

*Apparently, she decided that meant something besides just taking in the sights. Or had she?* Vincent’s head spun with the news. He literally didn’t know what to think. And without their Bond, there was nothing more he could know empathically.

*This... it can’t be true... can it?*

“It was in the trash. Eli saw it, and gave it to me.” Kipper was worried for his huge friend. Very. "I know you guys were kind of fighting, but..."

"We were not 'kind of fighting,'" Vincent corrected. *We disagreed but came to an understanding. “And how could she??"* Vincent’s hand sliced the air impotently, as he turned to face the walls of his tunnel home. He’d been busy hewing out stone for a new chamber for a soon-to-be-married couple. The irony of that wasn't lost on him.

He clutched the piece of article in his hand. *Married? To Elliot? How could this be?*

In the months since they'd lost their Bond, she had kept close to him. Too close sometimes, and he admitted that at some strange point, her almost daily presence had gone from comforting to crowding. She’d read to him, brought him soup, told him about her day, at least what he suspected was a highly sanitized version of it. For obvious reasons, she had not wanted him to worry about her, or anything else.

And she had constantly, repeatedly asked the same question Jacob, Mary, Peter Alcott, William, Pascal, and virtually every other tunnel resident asked when they first saw him these days, "How are you?"
It was a question Vincent became so tired of answering, he almost blessed the days when his work meant he had a stack of papers to grade, a wall of stone to move, or a map to redraw. Everyone meant well. But he was tired of the inquiry.

Because he knew that deep down, they were all asking "Are you back to your old self yet? Can you sense things empathically, like you used to? Do you have your Bond with Catherine again?"

And to their spoken question (and all the unspoken ones), Vincent always said, "I am well." But he knew that what he actually meant was: "No. No, I have no sense of the Bond and no sense of Catherine. In a way I dare not speak of, I am as alone as I was before she entered my life. More so, for now, I know what it is I used to have. And I no longer have it. And I hate it." It was a thing he never said but often thought.

And now... this?

Kipper was still standing there, silently. His dark eyes were huge.

Catherine’s voice rang in Vincent’s ears before they had parted. “You want me to go to Europe? In April? You do remember what that is, for us?... Vincent... do we care so little for such things now?”

Vincent didn’t remember exactly what he’d said in reply. Something about caring more, rather than less, and wanting her to go just the same.

He opened the crumpled newspaper clipping and looked again. Catherine was smiling, and so was Elliot. As he helped her exit from the car, it was clear they were both wearing wedding bands.

*Perhaps none of what I thought I cared about matters now.*

“Vincent?” Kipper prompted.

"If there is any more, you must bring it to me. I want to see it, Kipper. Anything about either Elliot or Catherine. Do you understand?" He was undeniably emphatic.

Kipper nodded, his large brown eyes showing his sympathy. "I will. I'll bring it right here. Vincent, it's a mistake, isn't it?" Kipper asked.

*Was it? It was, wasn't it?*

Vincent lowered his great head. "Perhaps not." He couldn’t believe he was saying the words out loud, could not believe the defeat of his position. Dread owned his heart. The newly-hewn cavern walls felt suddenly too close, like there wasn’t enough air in the space.

“But perhaps? Perhaps yes? Perhaps no?” Kipper asked, hope in his voice.

“Just bring the papers, Kipper, if you will. Please.”
Chapter 2
The Barren and Bereft

According to the press, Elliot took her to Egypt to show her the pyramids. They were photographed there together, hands entwined. Each wore a gold band. It was the only other photograph of her Vincent could find in any paper, though the business papers regularly mentioned Elliot.
Burch Holdings was a publicly traded company. He was on a buying spree. And a philanthropic one, apparently.

Along with the art collection he’d given to the museum in New York, it seemed he was underwriting a season of classical music in Vienna and a dance company in Prague. In a gesture that could only be ascribed to a rich, besotted bridegroom, he had ordered the programs of all to read simply: "For my beautiful Cathy" in the dedication line.

Vincent sat with each bit of news, each scrap, and poured over the lines he read. At any picture of her wearing a wedding band, he simply wept, and as to the rest of it, he either raged or brooded.

*How could she? How could she do this to me, to us?*

April. She would have married him in early April, if they were honeymooning there. Mid-April was our anniversary. It was now a bit past that.

*But...how could she?* It was an endless refrain.

"Vincent, you must stop this. I’ve ordered Kipper to bring you no more papers, and no one is to speak of this to you," Jacob was beyond concerned at the small pile of clippings and half-folded articles that littered Vincent’s desk.

"Whether or not I receive more word of this... *disaster* is rather immaterial at this point, wouldn’t you agree?” Vincent’s tone was biting, and his volume was loud.

Jacob watched him pace the cluttered room.

“Vincent...”

“Father, how could this happen? *How?’* Vincent interrupted. He stopped to hit his fist on the desk, then resumed pacing. He asked the question on the turn. “After... everything, after all of it, how could she...” Vincent wore a path in the carpet of his chambers, as he let the sentence hang. The rooms seemed to have suddenly grown almost dangerously too small for him.

Vincent’s mind spun. *The aloneness. I can’t. Not again. Not after... after knowing a life without it. How can I live this way? How can I even pretend I can?*
Jacob could see his son all but coming out of his furred skin. The doctor in him feared a relapse of his illness. The parent in him feared more. He knew he couldn’t change the circumstances. But perhaps he could help his son understand the “why” of things, since that was the question that seemed to be dogging him.

"Vincent," Jacob held up his hand and kept his voice at a soothing tone. "I know you are hurt. I know you don’t really want my opinion. But were things not... strained between the two of you, before she left?"

Strained. Yes. That’s a polite word for it.

"We... discussed certain things at length. I do not think it correct to say we quarreled, though we disagreed about some... particulars." Vincent fought for some sense of equilibrium.

"Some particulars?" Jacob prompted.

"Catherine’s friend, Nancy Tucker, was very excited," Vincent recalled. “She was going to travel to Europe and parts of the Middle East, to be with old friends, and take up photography again, now that her youngest child is in school.” He gestured in the general direction of Europe with one hand. “She wanted Catherine to go with her. Elliot was opening up an office in London and might see her there. Her friend Jenny had arranged to be off work to meet them in Paris. It was an incredible opportunity for Catherine to travel, to be with the friends of her girlhood."

Jacob knew how Vincent had likely felt about that. He had no doubt his son would have supported such a venture.

"But?" Jacob prompted.

"But Catherine felt the timing was... wrong. The trip was scheduled for very late in March, with several weeks abroad."

Jacob looked confused. "And that was a problem because...?"

Did Jacob really not remember?

The deep voice dropped even lower. "Because... it meant she would be gone for our anniversary," Vincent said, with a defeated sigh. “Catherine didn’t want to leave at that time but could think of no excuse her friends would accept. Joe Maxwell had already told Jenny she was owed the time away from work, and since her father’s passing, she had no obligations in that direction, so..."

Jacob added two and two. "So... Catherine didn’t want to leave, yet couldn't think of a reason she could tell her friends, especially since Nancy had invited her specifically." Jacob understood the situation more clearly now.

The leonine head dropped a fraction, at Father’s assessment. "That was the ... thrust of things, yes," Vincent conceded.

"And you said...?" Jacob prompted, looking for the source of their conflict.
Vincent’s broad hand swept the room, encompassing great space. "I told her that there was no pressing reason to stay, to miss this opportunity. That she should go and see all the things she was meant to see, with her friends. To be a part of that world again, to..."

Jacob covered his weary face with his gloved hand, the gesture stopping Vincent’s explanation.

"Oh, Vincent. I... don’t think I need to even ask how Catherine took such a declaration." Jacob might have had an annulment to show for his time in the romantic trenches, but he had been a married man.

Vincent dropped his extended hand. "Father, I used to know how she felt." The big beast’s fist hit the table again for emphasis. His writing pen jumped and rolled across the articles stacked there. "Know before I even spoke to her."

His palm came up, in a plaintive gesture of someone trying to explain. "But all of that is... dark to me now, that place inside me where she... where we used to be. It’s barren." He shook his head and looked down at the scattering of newspaper clippings on his writing desk. He paused, and it was a considered one.

Jacob could all but see Vincent gathering his thoughts. Father simply sat, silently.

"Yes... she was angry," Vincent allowed. "She said something about me putting distance between us since I lost our Bond. It is a thing I denied." He picked up the pen and set it to rights, his hand straying over a newspaper photograph of her, smiling. A long-nailed finger touched her printed cheek.

“We... said what each of us was thinking, as we parted beneath her basement. Then she went home and packed her bag.” His voice dropped lower still. “She stayed a few days with her friends, and... then the three of them went to the airport together... as far as I know."

Jacob watched Vincent touch the picture of Catherine, and knew his son was caught somewhere between desperate sorrow and utter disbelief.

*Perhaps saying it all has made it more real to him, Jacob thought.*

"So, you did... disagree. And now this news with Elliot Burch?" Jacob asked.

Vincent sighed, glancing at the top article. "He must have met them in London. He has always been in love with her. Always wanted her for his own. And who could... blame him?" Vincent looked as hopeless as he felt.

Jacob’s tone remained gentle, even though he knew the words would be cutting ones for Vincent. "Some part of you... didn’t it always... suspect, perhaps even know this day would come? That somehow, Elliot Burch might even be at its center?"

Vincent stayed where he was. His lowered head was all the answer Jacob needed. Vincent didn’t need to admit the words or utter one of his deepest fears aloud. Not now. Not now, when speaking about it was no longer necessary. It had happened. It was done.

“I’m sorry, Vincent. I truly am. I really did always dread this day... for you."
Vincent planted his hands on the table.

"But why, Father, _why?_" The question would not leave him. “Catherine... _loved_ me. I _know_ she did. I... I held her, we would listen to music, I’d read to her, and she adored it. Even without the Bond, I _know_ it. Father..." Vincent’s voice trailed away, and he shoved himself away from the table, then faced Jacob, palms up. He was grasping at straws and searching for understanding. “She would have at least come to tell me. But this... _help me understand_,” Vincent begged.

Jacob tried to be as helpful as possible in that direction, without being intrusive or unkind. The older man sat down in the chair opposite the huge one Vincent usually occupied.

_Where to begin? And how, about this?_ Jacob wondered.

Jacob’s tone was a careful one. "Perhaps... she didn’t want to come and rehash something that had already been decided. Perhaps she... perhaps she did something rash. We’re... none of us are perfect people, Vincent. And from what we both know of Elliot Burch, well... powerful men can be very... persuasive.” Jacob had his own ex-father-in-law as proof of that.

“And... Vincent... not to be indelicate... you and Catherine always had an... amazing... even a transcendent relationship. It reminded all of us of the best in ourselves. It was a beautiful thing to watch, really."

_Had_. The use of the past tense didn't go unnoticed. "How is that indelicate?" Vincent could not divine what the old man was driving at.

Jacob hoped his next words were tactful ones. "That you could... be together for that length of time, yet maintain your love as a... a courtly thing, a spiritual truth. It was inspiring, you know... to... to all of us."

Vincent thought he understood what the older man was driving at. "Apparently, it was no longer inspiring to Catherine," Vincent said darkly.

Jacob sighed. "Vincent, about the 'indelicate' subject... Catherine is a woman of a certain age. And three years older now than she was when you first met her."

That was true. It was true of him also, and for that matter, for all of them. Vincent could add well enough, time hadn’t stopped for any of them.

"Yes? We are all that. And so?" _What does Catherine’s age have to do with this? We are both three years older. So?_

Jacob tried to avoid flinching. "I take it you’ve never heard mention of a woman and her... er... biological alarm clock."

Vincent searched Jacob’s careworn face. It took him a moment to penetrate Jacob’s meaning.

"Are you saying Catherine left me because she wants to become a mother?" _Would this pain never stop growing worse?_
Jacob tried to choose his next words even more cautiously but was wholly unsure of whether or not he succeeded.

"I am saying that Catherine... married... a very handsome, very dynamic man, a wealthy man who is still young." *I'm so sorry, my son.* "And yes, such men... often... do want to have a family. Someone to leave it all to. Someone to preserve their sense of... dynasty."

Jacob let the words sink in, then he continued, knowing the same thing he knew when he first met the beautiful young socialite who had graced his son's life. That for all her beauty and all her heart, they were far from an ideal match.

“There are things he can offer her. There are things she can offer him. We both understand the world he’s a part of, and the one she is a part of.” *For the world, I wouldn’t hurt you. But denying the truth won’t change it.*

Vincent became stone-faced, while Jacob explained further. For all his son’s education, there were things he was wholly unfamiliar with personally.

"Catherine is an only child and heir to a fortune. There are certain... pressures on her that neither you nor I could imagine.” Jacob tried to make it sound like he wasn’t “blaming” Catherine for her choice, because in truth, he wasn’t. He just thought he understood some of the forces that were possibly driving her.

“Vincent, you must consider... What will happen to all Charles Chandler worked for eventually, if Cathy doesn’t marry, doesn’t...” he couldn't comfortably finish the sentence.

"If Catherine doesn't begin taking steps to ensure she becomes pregnant," Vincent finished for him. His defeat felt immeasurable. He sank into his chair. He had to.

Jacob sighed, as he rose. "It isn’t fair. I know that. If there’s anyone who deserves to be happy, it is you.” He crossed to stand near the son of his heart and put a steadying hand on Vincent’s shoulder.

“You have no idea how sorry I am that it came to this. I know this has felt like the worst kind of... betrayal to you. But I also know you weren’t intimate, or at least I assume you never were."

"No," Vincent said, amazed that he could have been so blind. Catherine was a single woman over thirty. Well over it, at this point. *Biological alarm clock.* It made sense. Vincent tried to massage away a headache he’d had now for two straight days.

"No, we weren’t. We... I was always... reluctant, and Catherine... understood. Made no demands... I thought we were fine, as we were."

"And perhaps that's so," Jacob said for the sake of agreement. "But... time, well, it does march on. And it marches a bit differently for a woman than it does for a man."

Vincent shook his head. "She never said. She never told me..." Vincent scrambled, mentally, trying to see if there was some hint he’d overlooked.

"You must know that this is no one's fault, nothing you did, and nothing you could do,”
Jacob hastened to explain. “Once women reach a certain age... well... many of her friends are already settled, already raising their own children.”

Yes, that was true. One of them had even invited her to go.

“And what could she say to you, when you think about it?” Jacob pressed. “Should she have returned to you, and told you that she wanted to become a mother now? What could you do?”

Jacob knew the words were awful. But he also knew that Vincent had been driving himself half-sick over the question, the “Why?” question. The one that had been robbing him of sleep, of appetite, of surcease from this deep sorrow. Jacob could only conclude that having some reason to blame it all on might be better than not having one, all things considered.

Vincent knew that his father wasn't trying to be cruel, but the words cut like daggers. His shoulders slumped, as the weight of the problem bore him down.

"Of course. Of course, Catherine would not want to have a child by me. Even if such a thing were possible." Vincent was harder on himself than anyone.

"That's not what I meant..."

"Of course it is!" Vincent’s volume rose, and he stood, shaking off the comfort of Jacob’s hand. The words were biting, as they were meant to be. "And which of us is to say you are wrong, Father?" Vincent felt engulfed by the hopelessness of his position.

What so many other things could not have done, could not have served to sever our relationship, time has done anyway. The irony of it was not lost on Vincent, who, when he and Catherine were at their best, thought them invincible.

Jacob turned the topic to something else. "Benny says she's is due back within the week, according to her desk calendar. Do you think she'll come down? Do you want her to?" Jacob asked. "We can tell the sentries to forbid her entry..."

"No." The reply was immediate. "No, if she comes down... we should say goodbye to each other. Perhaps try to... try to salvage whatever remains of our... friendship." Vincent tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, as he held onto the shelf that held the reflector she’d once heaved at him when they were new. Irony, again. Vincent felt surrounded by it sometimes.

Jacob moved sadly toward the exit to the chamber. “I'm sorry, Vincent,” Jacob repeated. “Truly.”

Vincent was torn between the urge to accept Jacob’s condolences and the urge to throw something. And the second urge had arisen more than once this day.

"Why can I not feel her?” he asked, feeling impotent and hating that. “Why did this happen to us? Would it have happened if we’d still had our Bond?” Vincent couldn't help but wonder about the question. In a way, it was one that had dogged him for months.

"Considering she's another man's wife... that may well be a mercy.” Jacob hated that he
had to be the one to say it, as he remained standing in the doorway.

Vincent, for his part, said nothing in return. He simply turned back toward the desk, clenched a tight fist and planted it amid the clippings.

Father kept his voice low. "She may not stay in Manhattan for long," Jacob wasn’t sure if that was a blessing or a curse, considering. "The papers say Elliot Burch is setting up offices all over Europe. His business is rapidly expanding."

Yes. Good. Good for Elliot. The king in her world is expanding his kingdom. Time to breed an heir.

The thought turned Vincent's stomach.

"If Catherine comes down, please tell her I would like to see her. In my chambers. Privately." Vincent punctuated the sentence with the word.

Jacob could only nod silently, then leave.
The word “hourglass” was actually a misnomer, Vincent realized, as he turned the sand around again. The one he had was good for no more than some forty minutes, though it was an impressive piece. He sometimes used it to time essay tests.

It now seemed like it was timing his life.

It had come off a ship from the 1930's, Vincent wondering at all the ports of call the old timepiece must have seen, prior to making its way down to the tunnels in a donated box of junk. The glass was heavily scratched and the design inscribed on the top piece was long ago lost to tarnish and rough handling. It was chipped in one spot, and dented in another, hence its fate as refuse.

Vincent had wanted it from almost the first moment he saw it. Now, he wasn’t sure if it wasn’t mocking him.

Forty minutes: The time it took to make and eat your breakfast and clean up after that, or to take a bath and change clothes. The time it took to finish the last chapter of a book, as long as it wasn’t Great Expectations, which took far less. Forty minutes: The time it took for a yellow taxi to take you across town, or for a plane to cross the tarmac after it landed, and disgorged all its passengers from a Trans-Atlantic flight.

She was back.

Or at least the helper who delivered sandwiches to her office said that according to all he could discern, she was due back today.

Vincent turned the hourglass again, wishing he could find her, in his mind. He used to know when she was coming to him, used to know just where she was. It used to make his heart skip a beat, as she ran across the park, or as she descended the ladder that led from her world to his.

It was the sensation of drawing closer to something... something warm, vital, and alive. The sensation of nearing shelter when it rained. The sensation of seeing a light on in the window, when you’d thought it would be all dark. It had meant so much, so much to him, that sensation, that “Catherine was getting close” sensation.

Now it was all dark. A heavy “blankness,” where their Bond used to be. There was no use wishing for their Bond back. There was no use praying for it either. He had tried both.
The sand continued to trickle down. *It’s not just the amount of sand in the glass. It’s the narrowness of the opening,* he realized, watching the weight of the granules crowd each other for space, as they fell through the narrow tube. *Was that what went wrong with us? Was our... opening too narrow? Our chances too slim?*

He had no answer for it. He wondered if you could narrow the thin neck so that it would allow just one grain of sand to fall, how much sand it would take to time eternity; because this wait felt like he was doing just that.  

*Catherine, I miss you. God, how I miss you, in our Bond. I suppose it's no small mercy I couldn't feel you on your wedding night, but I miss you, still. I miss you so much. It's so... empty in my mind. So alone. So... dark... where you used to be.*

He had once told Mouse that meeting Catherine meant to him something astonishingly personal and special, that she was the end to his aloneness. That though love meant something different to each person it touched, to him, that had been it... the end of his aloneness.

At the time, Vincent had marveled that he, singular though he was, was now part of a couple. Part of something wondrous, and rare, and heart-filling.

*And over.*

In a way, he still wanted the Bond back, still wanted to hold her in that place in his mind that had been empty for what now felt like a thousand years. He knew he wanted to hold her in his arms and see the shimmer of her pleasure in his mind's eye, as he once had.  

*And that will never happen again,* he reminded himself.

Over the last few months, mourning for their Bond grew to grieving for it, in a place that was both deep and hard. Now, sorrow was a chasm, and its aftertaste was bitter as old
tea leaves, broken out of the bag. Sand still trickled down. *How could we go so wrong, Catherine? How?*

Time. The thing they'd run out of, as the hourglass had had its way with him... again.

He got up and pulled his cape over his shoulders. According to tunnel gossip, Peter Alcott was supposed to give Catherine a ride home from the airport in his car. She was due to touch down in Newark at around nine o’clock that evening.

He decided not to wait until she came to him.

**

Catherine was struggling to get her luggage in the front door, having brought in several shopping bags besides. Peter Alcott was helping her, as she wrangled her way in.

"And then there was this camel. Peter, you never smelled such a stink! And rude! I think they spit more than a mad cat in a tub of water. Oh, but the art! It's ama..."

She caught sight of Vincent, standing on her balcony, just as she was about to tell Peter Alcott how amazing the art was. The French doors were open, and he was standing in the entryway, filling up the space.

"Vincent... I... didn't expect to see you until tomorrow." For a moment, something flickered across her green eyes. "You knew I was back? Is the Bond...?" She let the sentence trail.

"No. I knew you were back because Joe Maxwell leaves notes on his desk calendar, and so do you. And because Nana went to deliver a message to Peter, but was told he would be collecting you." His voice was flat.

Ah. Well. Catherine set down her train case and several bags of Trans-Atlantic loot.

"Elliot wouldn't let us get into a cab in London," she told Peter, taking out a tin of English toffee for him. "His private driver took us everywhere." She held out her gift.

"You remembered!" Peter smiled, setting down the largest of her cases.

"Susan says hello, of course," Catherine relayed. "And she'll see you at Christmas."

“But for being tied up in medical conferences, I’d have joined you,” he said, accepting her present. Peter looked as if he were about to settle in for a chat about Catherine’s adventures in Europe.

Vincent’s next words headed off any such intention. "Peter. I wonder if you would not mind leaving Catherine and me alone." Vincent knew his words were abrupt. Both Peter and Catherine looked at the large presence framed in her balcony doorway, questioningly.

*I see we're still fighting*, Catherine thought. Suddenly, the fact that she'd just come in on
an hours-long flight was a very wearying thing. Vincent could see her look of resignation.

"Of course, I... I have to get along myself, at any rate," Peter smoothed. "Clinic opens early tomorrow. Cathy?" Peter held up her remaining bag.

"Over by the table, please." Catherine gave him a small smile. "Do I owe you a tip, Mr. cab driver?" she asked.

"Hialeah in the fifth," Peter joked, setting her things down on the floor where she had indicated.

They hugged a fond farewell, and Peter left with his gift.

"That was rude." Catherine was exhausted, and in no mood for continuing their disagreement. What would the point be, now? "Peter was helping me. I'd still be waiting for a cab in New Jersey, if not for him."

"Perhaps you could have had Elliot send you a limousine." Vincent's tone was dark.

Her small shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It's a long drive from London, but maybe. Vincent, I'm really very tired. Could we pick this up after I've had some sleep? It's not that I'm not happy to see you, it's just..."

It's just that I'm not happy to see you, they both thought it at the same time, and were both a bit startled by that.

"Something went wrong between us," Vincent said, still standing in the doorway.

Catherine sighed and rubbed her neck. "It's just a rough patch. Everyone has them." She began taking things out of one of the bags. Brightly colored scarves spilled across her table.

Everyone has them? Really? Did everyone get married, also? The tan line from Elliot's ring still gleamed whitely, on her finger. She must be planning to put it back on after she tells me.

"Catherine..."

She pulled out some picture postcards and set them on the table. "Vincent, when I went to Versailles... they had such beautiful roses there. Red and white ones, in one area, though not like our plant. But it made me think of you, so much. Made me wish I could..."

Did she really think they were going to discuss rose bushes, now?

Vincent actually entered her apartment from the terrace, a noticeably rare thing in their relationship. He stopped only a few feet from her.

"Catherine, your news precedes you. And while part of me is... is struggling to accept it, you must know that the other part is... is sick with the knowledge."
Catherine stood looking up at him, waiting for him to finish the sentence. "Sick with what knowledge...?" she asked.

He reached over and held up her left hand.

"This." He showed her her own hand.

Catherine felt a step behind. She followed to where his eyes were staring, at the place where her wedding band had sat.

"That. Oh. It's just a tan line. It will fade. It's hot in Egypt. Really hot."

He had never known her to be cruel.

"Do you still have the ring?" he asked, dropping her hand. His voice was cold. She looked confused.

"Of course. He said I could keep it. It might come in han..."

"The newspapers carried the story." Vincent's interruption was terse. And Catherine's expression was still bewildered, for lack of a better word.

Her phone rang. She was going to ignore it and let the answering machine get it until she heard Elliot's voice. It sounded urgent.

"Cathy, it's me. If you're there, pick up. Pick up the phone, Cathy."

Catherine shot Vincent a puzzled look and held up a "waiting" finger as she crossed to the phone and picked up the receiver.

"Elliot?"

Vincent stood and watched her talk to her husband.

"Me?... No, I just got in. You?" She was nodding and smiling into the phone.

*No doubt they were planning on when and where they would next meet. Would she list her apartment? Leave New York, entirely?* Vincent's vitals clenched at the thought.

"She did what?... Oh... Ohhhh... I seeeee." The last vowel sound came out on a long note. Catherine glanced Vincent's way, and her eyes held his. "No. No harm done..." She said into the receiver but kept staring at him. "That paper is a rag, anyway... No one will believe it. No one with any *sense*, at least."

She held Vincent's gaze while, she continued to listen to whatever Elliot was saying, on the other side of the world. Vincent swore she barely blinked.

"Goodnight, Elliot... No, that's right, I'm sorry. Good afternoon. Be good, yes? ... No. No, I'll tell Jenny you miss her already... Goodbye, Elliot." Though she was speaking to one man, she was staring at another.
She turned and hung up the phone, softly. Carefully. Too softly and too carefully, perhaps.
When she turned back to him, she was fighting both for control and to stave off sorrow.

"You... you think I got married. To Elliot Burch."

Vincent hadn't moved.

"Didn't you?" he asked, not quite capable of keeping the accusatory tone out of his voice.

You can’t. You can’t think that. She barely seemed to have the strength to shake her head in the negative. It was a tiny gesture, as she kept her gaze fixed on his face.

"No." It was a whispered word, more mouthed than spoken. The sound was barely there, for the hoarseness that suddenly gripped her voice.

She blinked, and then she processed it all or tried to. She took a step back as if she’d been struck, then put the foot forward again, reclaiming her balance.

I feel hit. Physically hit. I’m still... what? Flighty, fashion-law Cathy? The girl Joe Maxwell figured wouldn’t last a week? God, that can’t be right.

She blinked again and looked at him. Oh, Vincent. I know there are people who still think that of me. But not you? Surely... not you? Not after all we’ve been through?

She grew paler, as she struggled with her own thoughts. I thought you believed in me. I thought we believed in each other. Surely, I’m not wrong about that? His doubts fed hers. It gave her a terrible feeling.

She swallowed. Her next words came out a bit more strongly. “No,” she repeated the
denial. “But you and I are in a horribly sorry place if you think I could have.” The tear that began its trail down her cheek was dashed immediately away. It was an angry tear, not a sorrowful one. Maybe.

And now it was Vincent who struggled to catch up. *She wasn't married? But...*

"The papers brought the news. And you were photographed with him, wearing a wedding band."

Her tone was exasperated. "Vincent, it was Egypt. In some of the smaller towns... a woman can't walk down the street there without drawing stares unless she has a wedding ring on. She's taken for a prostitute. I didn't feel like getting... stoned in the village square that day, or something." Her tone was biting, and her arms came up in a defensive posture, folded across her chest. The hand with the tan line was tucked into the crook of her elbow.

*Say... what?* Vincent was still processing her words. And somewhere, he had the feeling that the hourglass had just run out on him, again.

Her eyes were bright, but she blinked back any further tears. "We were going to use brass ones, but they turn your finger green."

It took Vincent a moment to realize she was still talking about the ring she'd worn.

“Elliot bought cheap gold bands for himself, Jenny and me. Nancy didn't need one, since she's already married. He toured with us for a few days, before he had to get back. He joked that we were his harem, while he scouted out building sites around Cairo."

"The newspaper *said* you'd gotten married." Vincent was insistent on this point. Right now, it was the only leg he had to stand on.

Her eyebrow lifted. "Is this the same kind of newspaper that says aliens have landed, and the Loch Ness Monster is real?" She tried to keep the bite out of her tone. And almost succeeded. *I can't believe I'm having to explain this.*

Vincent didn't know which paper the first report had come out of. Kipper had only brought him part of a page. Besides, other newspapers had carried the story as well. Credible ones. Or at least, they'd published the photos, and mentioned Elliot's largesse.

"It said Elliot's people confirmed it."

Catherine glanced toward the phone, though her arms remained crossed. "That's what the call was about. His secretary in New York had no idea what to say when the pictures showed up. She knew we were together before, and that Elliot used to think he was in love with me. When the initial article hit, she couldn't reach him to deny it, so some places took her 'No comment' as assent. It was a mistake. *Obviously.*" She punctuated the sentence with the word.

Vincent had to explain further. "The paper had a photograph of you wearing his ring."
Her disgusted look spoke volumes, and the disgust was with him, Vincent knew.

She turned and then began taking items she'd no longer need out of her purse... Her boarding pass. Her passport. She slapped both down on her dining room table, hard. Clearly, she was just looking for something to do with her hands. Probably to keep from strangling him.

*Flighty Cathy did something flighty... again. Of course.* Catherine was trying not to let her anger build. It wasn’t quite working. A pack of Wrigley’s spearmint gum hit the table, the antidote for ear pain while the plane was landing. Vincent watched it slide across her table, and nearly topple off the well-polished edge.

“They ran the story that the two of you had gotten married. Probably in Paris.” He gave her the details he thought he’d known.

"Yes. Because the newspapers that sell that drivel can't actually say 'we took a picture and made everything up.'" Brochures from the Louvre hit the glass, then scattered, thanks to the force with which she was emptying her handbag.

Vincent didn’t need the Bond to realize that not only was she angry, her anger was rising. And it wasn’t at Elliot, his secretary, or the newspapers.

Catherine tried (and failed) to keep her tone level. "Elliot questioned his staff. No one officially released such a statement. He's considering suing, but he's flattered." She raised an eyebrow at that. “He just thought I’d like to know, in case I got any questions.”

Clearly, Vincent had his share.

Her cheeks were reddening with ire, while his were touched with embarrassment.

"Kipper brought me only a page, at first. The page with the article."

"And you believed it." Her tone was accusatory. Foreign coins scattered across her table, as she dumped out her change purse.

"He dedicated a concert season to you. He underwrote the orchestra." That news had been in a reputable paper, though that was all it had said.

She tossed the kisslock bag down. Her hands went to her hips, a gesture he rarely saw on her.

"He knows I like music and we're never going to be more than friends. Am I to blame when Elliot makes a grand gesture? It would hardly be his first one."

Vincent realized that was true. She had first met Elliot the night he'd donated a room full of art to the city, after all.

He stepped closer, trying to bridge the distance between them, both emotionally and physically. "Catherine... I... it would not be wrong to say that things between us have been... difficult of late," Vincent said, trying to explain, even as his mind processed the
truth.

*She was not married? She was not married. She had a wedding ring, and she had an explanation.* “Very difficult, sometimes,” he tacked on.

"More difficult than I must have realized, considering. Maybe if I’d have been home for our anniversary, we could have discussed it.” It was a pointed barb, and she was content to let it fly. Her tone grew increasingly frosty. "And you were rude to Peter by the way," she added.”

"I will apologize."

"Good." She tugged on her purse and zipped it up, and Vincent caught that her hands were shaking, as she did so. She was fighting something inside herself, and her beautiful jaw was clenched. Whatever she was thinking, he could see that she was trying desperately not to say it.

She heaved a huge sigh. "Good night, Vincent," she concluded.

She turned her back to him and picked up her train case. He’d been dismissed... in a way that only a former debutante could do... thoroughly.

"Catherine, I..."

"I said 'good night.' Please. I really am exhausted." Taking the train case with her, she opened the door to her bathroom and then closed it behind her. On the other side, Vincent could hear the rattling sound of her putting away items in the medicine chest. Loudly.

Having no other choice, he was about to turn to go, when he heard her sob.

It cut like a razor across his consciousness. Clearly, he didn't always need the Bond to know she was miserable, and that he had hurt her, deeply. And if the sounds coming from the other side of the door were any indication, he knew he had.

*I keep fearing hurting her physically. Now I've done so... mentally.* He had no idea which one was worse; only that both of them were their own kind of horrible.

He cursed, inwardly. It was after ten o'clock at night and she was exhausted, annoyed, jet-lagged and... despairing. The sound of her weeping was unmistakable, as was the twisting feeling inside his own chest.

Without giving it conscious thought, he stepped closer to the bathroom door. She’d muffled her crying, and was running water from the tap. *Probably to wash her tear-stained face. What have I done?*

The distance between them felt huge; larger than it ever had. "Catherine." He put his large hand on the white door. It looked like it didn’t belong there. The long nails seemed to make a mockery of any attempt he might make to be gentle. He ignored the image.
"Catherine, please. Please don't. Please don't cry. And please don't send me away from you."

There was no response for a moment, other than the sound of her turning the water off. For a minute, he thought she was either going to say nothing or simply have a conversation with him through the wooden door.

But he heard the knob turn before the door swung open, slowly. Once it did, he saw her reddened face, devoid of makeup and tired from the long day. Her body clock said one thing, while the clock on her mantle said another. Her heart told her one thing, while her keen lawyer's mind told her something else.

"Are you... losing faith in us?" she asked softly. The words hit him so hard he had to take a step back, just as she had done.

"No. Catherine, no." He held out his arms and believed the words, but he also knew they weren't entirely true ones. He had believed the worst. Or at the very least, he had feared it. "Please. I'm sorry. Please."

There was a world of regret in the simple apology, and Catherine knew that whatever the fault was, he'd spent the better part of a week in pain and fear. She knew all about pain and fear, and how much he'd helped her through hers, when they'd first met, and sometimes since.

She fell against his chest, as much as she walked into his embrace. A fresh round of nearly silent tears dampened his vest. His arms came around her, holding her slight form while she wept. He could feel the shaking in her body.

No. No, no. No. This is not what we are meant to be. This isn't how this night was supposed to unfold. This isn't who we are to each other. Vincent castigated himself in general, and certain members of the press in particular.

"Jealousy is a poison for me," he offered. It was the same description he'd given her when Michael had kissed her. "And it clearly makes me incredibly ... stupid."

"Jealousy." She lifted her head up. "Vincent, I know nothing is perfect, and neither are we, and that this last year has been very hard for you... for us. But... have I truly given
you cause to doubt us, so much? To think I was going to go off on vacation and get... married? Of all the ridiculous things?"

She looked into his worried blue eyes, hers red from crying. He wasn’t sure how to respond, or even what the right response would be. Right now, standing with her, an explanation in hand, the entire thing seemed absurd. But when Kipper had shown him the paper...

"Do I do that to you?" she pressed. "Do I make you feel... I don't know... insecure? Like I've been playing some kind of sick game the last few years?"

He shook his huge head, and it sent his blonde hair to moving across his shoulders. "You don't. You know you don't." He lifted his hand and his furred thumb brushed at her tear-reddened cheek. "But we had... disagreed before you left. And the story was in the papers... and then there was even a picture. And... I... feel so cut off from you. Every day. I hate not having the Bond... and...”

He paused, hesitant to confess the last. His voice dropped, careful not to sound like an accusation. “...and I even remember what it felt like, long ago."

"What it felt like?" she sniffed, echoing him. What the Bond felt like? Or...?

"You. What you felt like,” he clarified. “When you were falling in love with him. With Elliot."

She stepped back from his large form and wiped her cheeks with her palms. For a moment, she held them to her eyes, wanting the pressure and the soothing sensation of darkness.

"It's almost funny that you do,” she said. “Because I really don't.” She lowered her hands and grabbed the wet washcloth from out of the bathroom sink and pressed its cool dampness to her fevered skin. When she lowered it, she looked no better.

"I know it... happened. I know I felt it, once,” she confessed. “But I can't really remember it. It's like it happened to someone else."

She sat down on the edge of the sofa Joe Maxwell had once dubbed “dinky.”

"You sent me away.” She was looking at her knees, when she said it, the wet cloth resting in her hands. “The month of our anniversary, and you sent me away.” She shook her head, still not believing it.

"I know." He also knew that was a sore spot between them.

But I wasn't trying to send you away. I was trying to send you toward something. Something important. "It's just... your friend was experiencing something wonderful, and you might never have the chance again to take such a trip with the friends of your youth. This was important, Catherine. Very."

She twisted the washcloth. "It was important that I stay, too," she said, but she knew he
was right.

“I understand that,” he replied. They both knew he did.

"I didn't want to go," she said, her voice sounding weak. "But... even I have to admit... part of me is glad I did, glad you made me do it," she admitted. "Nancy was beyond happy, and ... even I confess it was good for me to go."

Vincent moved closer and then sat near her, on the edge of the couch. "If I hadn't insisted, you wouldn't have gone. You would have missed it, Catherine, missed it all. Because of me. Because you wanted to be with me."

"Is that such a sin, though?" she asked, almost plaintively.

He inhaled deeply, trying to find the words to explain it to her. "It may be. It is the fear of my existence that there are so many things you'll not have, not experience, if you align your life with mine."

She was about to protest, but he held up a staying hand.

"Trust me that one of us knows what it is to live Below, with only so many... opportunities. How... limiting it is. How... how much you are cut off from ... everything.” He made a slicing motion with his hand across the air. “I do not want that for you, Catherine. I never want that for you."

She sat quietly, absorbing his explanation. They’d had words before she left, about this very topic. She had not wanted to go. And then, she’d wanted to cut the trip short, and come back over a week early. He’d all but forbidden it, promising that if she did, he would be nowhere she could find him on their anniversary.

"I know you don't want me to feel your limits." She tried to let him know she understood that much.

"Not just feel them. *Live them,*" he corrected. “Lose pieces of your life to the ... confines that are sometimes mine. Watch the... sand run through the hourglass.

“Catherine, if there are times you feel you need to go... or even times you're not sure if you should... it would ... relieve me to no end to know you are still living the life you were always meant to. At least... much of the time."

She set the damp rag on the table, and her sigh was a considerable one. "Vincent, it was April in Paris, and all I could think of was that I wanted to be with you when the 12th happened," she said, resigned to the fact that the trip had been one of many contrasts for her.

His tone was a seductive one. "Ah, but then the 13th came, and you had a lovely day. You did, didn't you? With your friends? It's all right that it was so, Catherine. It's what I wanted for you. I could give you no more precious a gift."

Catherine nodded her head, beset by an attack of sheer honesty. "Nancy shot two rolls of
film between breakfast and lunch. An artist on the left bank wanted Jenny to pose nude for him. He offered to buy her lunch." She chuckled, even as another tear escaped.

Vincent exhaled with relief, and his voice dropped half an octave. "Yes... there it is. There are your memories. Tell me, Catherine. Take me there with your words." He moved off the couch and settled near her feet. "Tell me about April, in Paris... Please."

Catherine gathered her recollections, trying to do as he asked. "It's an amazing city. Dirty. Busy. Everyone is... making something, everywhere. Baking bread, painting, hawking postcards. Jenny's artist followed her halfway down the left bank. 'Lunch for you! Lunch for a picture. I make you immortal! And I feed you lunch!'" She tried not to laugh at her bad impersonation of Jenny's stalker, but couldn't help it, entirely.

"And what did your friend, Jenny, say to that?" Vincent asked.

"I believe her exact words were: 'Not even for dinner with a good dessert and a bottle of champagne.'"

He settled his great head on her knees, and simply closed his eyes, letting the incredible tension of the last week flow out of him. She was not married. She wasn't. Not yet, anyway.

"Did you visit the museums?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her calves.

She settled a hand on his back, loving him. "Every single one we had time for. You wouldn't believe the Louvre."

"Was it beautiful?" He lifted his head to ask it.

"So beautiful. The Mona Lisa is smaller than you think. Just a portrait of a beautiful woman."

"Yet, it's the most recognizable piece of art in the world," Vincent said wistfully, as he set his head back down in her lap.

She sighed, bending over to embrace as much of him as she could reach, as he draped across her knees.

"I know." Her voice was a soft sound, near his ear. "Do you think Leonardo knew, when he painted her? That it would become the most famous painting in the world?" she asked. He felt her soft breath, against his hair.

He considered the question, and how much it related to them. Do any of us know what we're in, while we're there? Or is that the gift of hindsight?
All We Take Away and All We Leave Behind by Cindy Rae

We're still making something wonderful... aren't we?

"I don't think any of us know when we're making something truly great. We're too close to it at the time," he replied. "We can't see it clearly. Not until later."

Her hands rubbed at a knot of tension between his shoulder blades. "Do you think we're like that? Sometimes? Can't see what we've got, because we're in it?" she asked.

He kissed her slack-clad knee and settled his head back down. "Perhaps. I miss you, Catherine. I miss you so much. I miss our Bond." It was a truth that could sometimes be ignored. But other times, like this past week, it had haunted his days and nights.

He closed his eyes and remembered when he'd lost it. He'd run into the deep places of his home, fearing his darker self, and the destruction it might do. Catherine had come after him, and he'd… collapsed, torn between the man he was and the beast he was becoming.

When he'd awoken days later, in his own chambers, he'd immediately known something was wrong. Many things, as it had turned out: He was weak, physically. There had been gaps in his memory. And… the Bond was utterly lost to him.

Most of the ailments time had repaired. All, as it turned out, but one.

"I know you miss it," she answered. Her hand rubbed a small circle on his back. "I know you... think about it being gone... often," she said.

It wasn't something the two of them hadn't said to each other before. But she had no cure for this particular thing. None at all.

"You're starting to think it will never come back," she whispered, knowing it was true. She could feel his despair.

"I started thinking that the day I woke up without it," he admitted, adjusting his position so that he was leaning back against the sofa she sat on, while they both looked into her empty fireplace. It was too warm for a fire.

"Vincent, you have to stop obsessing about this. It isn't healthy." She reached for his hand, which he gave her.

"I remember when you said there might be another gift waiting for us. If there is ... I don't think I've found it yet," he answered.

All the fight drained out of him, and he felt it go. She was still his. They were still "them." Battered, tired, jet-lagged and more than a little disillusioned with life in general perhaps, but “them.”

"Forgive me?" he asked punctuating the request by kissing her hand.

She squeezed his fingers, and he felt his exhaustion take hold. "Of course, I do," she said. "I'm just sorry you had to feel that way for... days." Now that her equilibrium was
restored, she could see he’d not been well, thanks to the erroneous news he'd been trying to grapple with.

For all his seeming return to wellness, she knew that a part of him still felt sick inside. And he’d clearly had a horrendous week, which had only made things worse. “You need to get home. You're tired.” She knew both statements were true.

"Tired" wasn't the word for it, and for once, he didn’t mind that she had implied he was less than his old self. The adrenaline crash was bringing him down, and it was bringing him down hard. If he was home already, he'd be collapsing onto his bed. But he wasn't.

It was one of those nights when he dreaded the long walk back to the tunnels, either across the park or down the spiral staircase. He rose to his feet, slowly. She rose with him. *At least I'll be going down, not up,* he consoled himself.

“And you woke up on another continent, and are no better rested than I,” he replied, rising. “I do need to sleep,” he admitted, not wanting to tell her that the thought of her married to Elliot Burch had utterly kept him awake for several straight nights.

“Go home. Rest,” she said, wisely not questioning him about his fatigue. It didn’t take a MENSA standard bearer to know why he hadn’t been sleeping well.

“Perhaps I’ll come down tomorrow. I brought a few gifts back.” She rose with him. He nodded at that, without asking for details.

“Tomorrow, then. I’m... sorry, Catherine,” he said again, feeling he still owed the apology.

She gave him an accepting hug. “It’s all right. Be well, Vincent.”

*And you.* He thought it but didn’t say it. With a nod, he exited the balcony and made his way out through the dark April night.

**Chapter Four**

**Shard**

The winding parkway path home seemed longer than usual, and Vincent’s fatigue only increased. He made his way back slowly, knowing his strength was half-spent, thanks to the stresses of the last several days. Though the relief of the truth was a huge comfort, it was not energy. If anything, comfort too, bid his body to relax and to move more slowly. *Not married. She is not married. We are not... as we once were, within our Bond. But at least we are not... injured beyond all repair.* The thought kept spinning in his head.
Already tired from the turmoil he’d endured, he was distracted and lost in his thoughts. That was why he got spotted by a woman lounging near a tree - or so he thought, at first.

“There is a reason you thought she was married,” the woman’s voice said. And that voice sounded more than a good bit like Catherine’s.

Her shape literally detached itself from the deep shadow of a linden tree. The trunk wasn’t that large. Vincent knew he should have seen her. A filmy, silken hem swirled around her calves.

Vincent startled, and then processed her words. “I... what did you say?” He was so astonished that the woman knew his recent history, he didn’t even stop to dive for cover. **Who is she?**

“I said, ‘There is a reason you thought she was married.’ And to Elliot Burch, no less.”

*How in the world does she know...?* The woman was lovely, and perhaps in her mid-thirties. She wore an elegant dress, nearly white, but tinged with pink. When she moved, her gait was almost familiar, as well. *Catherine?*

But she was not Catherine. **What in the...?**

Her hair was darker and fuller. And even in the shadows, Vincent could tell her eyes weren’t quite the same shade as his love’s smoky green. But the resemblance between the two women was unmistakable, and her reply was firm. “She was *supposed* to marry him,” the woman explained. “Maybe,” she qualified the pronouncement. “Before you. Before... everything.”

Vincent stood, staring. It was all he could do.

She brushed at her dress, and it shimmered. Near the hem, it actually became opaque, before it “solidified” back into existence.

“Of course, that’s only one possible future. One that didn’t come to pass, actually.”

“You are... her mother.” Vincent’s startled brain struggled with a memory. Her face was almost... familiar to him.

She confirmed what he thought. “My name is Caroline. And yes, I am most definitely Catherine’s mother.”

Vincent took in the filminess of the gown she wore. It wasn’t simply silky, and elegantly cut. It was... almost translucent in spots. He knew he was addressing a ghost.

And that she was an almost familiar one. He’d seen her before, one memorable time; seen her standing, arms outstretched, at the gateway between this life and the next. He’d had barely a blinding glimpse of her before he’d snatched Catherine away. But he had seen her.

“How can you...”
“How can you?” she interrupted, answering a question with a question. He had no idea what she meant. His expression must have told her as much.

She gave him look for look. “My husband says he met you, right before the end. That you love her, and that you’re a good man. Are you a good man, Vincent?” She walked toward him, and he swore he could smell her perfume. Roses. Not unlike the ones from Catherine’s balcony.

Regretfully, he shook his head. “We both know I am not a man. As to whether or not I am good...”

“There are questions. I know,” Caroline replied, looking more than a little upset with him.

“You took her from me,” the annoyed spirit charged.

Vincent stepped back and blinked. He was hopelessly fatigued. He’d been under incredible pressure. Now he felt he was going mad. Or having a conversation with Catherine’s deceased mother, who seemed irritated with him for saving Catherine from a watery death. *What... insanity is this?* he wondered.

“I... had to. There was no choice,” he replied.

Caroline Chandler scoffed at him. “Oh, Vincent. There is *always* a choice, no matter how terrible. I wanted a long life for her too, but...” She looked wistfully forlorn. “When it all happened, when you took her... I didn’t know whether to be sad or relieved. Or angry. I knew she was there too soon. But... we were there, Charles and I. Ready to help her; to welcome her.”

*Yes. Yes, they had been.*

“Then... you came.”

Vincent nodded, remembering clearly that when he’d pulled Catherine away from death’s door, that there had been a very bright light, and kind people, waiting for her. Caroline’s arms had been extended in welcome.

Vincent, however, had had a slightly longer reach and had been just fast enough.

In a vision he wasn’t even sure he understood, he’d felt Catherine leave this world, as she’d drowned in the trunk of a car. Then he had dived down through their Bond, grabbed her before she could cross over, and taken her back up with him.

The next thing they both knew, she was coughing up lake water, on the sandy bank. And he was holding her like he’d never let her go.

“But you did have to let her go. You always have to let her go,” the spirit prompted.

Vincent realized she could quite easily read his mind and had just done so.
“No matter what you take away with you... or what you leave behind... You must leave her.”

Vincent eyed her, not sure of her meaning, or even if there was one.

“I do,” he admitted, considering the words. “I do have to let her go. Have to... leave her to the life she was meant for. There is... no help for it.”

Caroline nodded and stepped back near the tree she’d popped up near. She placed a slender hand on its dark trunk. “I know this tree. Cathy knows this tree. Do you?”

Vincent looked up at the tall linden, its leafy branches spread to the sky. The straight trunk split into a deep vee roughly ten feet off the ground, and from there, the branches proceeded upward and outward. He shook his head. “No. Should I?”

“Cathy climbed it once, when she was a girl,” Caroline explained. “Then again, after Charles died. He was terrified. More the first time than the second one, I think.”

Vincent looked where she meant him to. The first place she could have sat was quite high up. “Catherine can be... impetuous,” he said, visually measuring the distance from the first divergence in the branches to the ground.

Caroline Chandler regarded him. “Yes. Yes, she can be.”

She turned around and gave him her back. Vincent saw her reach for something like a person might do if they were removing a thing from their breast pocket. She turned her head so that he saw her profile.

“You took something from me,” she said, clearly referring to Catherine. “And I think I took something from you.”

When she turned back again, she had a closed fist. When she rotated her palm upward and opened it, he could see a ball of light, floating just a few centimeters above her palm. It was beautiful and bright.
“I didn’t mean to take it. I think we traded.”

“Traded.” Vincent simply repeated the word and didn’t ask it as a question. He was trying to understand what she meant.

Caroline explained. “I was reaching for Catherine. My arms were out, my hands extended. I didn’t want her to be afraid, I didn’t want her to feel alone. My hands were reaching for her, and she was ... coming toward us, toward Charles and me. She was so close.” Caroline held her free hand out, in the same posture she’d held when Catherine had been walking toward her. Vincent remembered the moment she was describing, remembered seeing both of her hands outstretched. And he remembered being terrified, for Catherine.

He looked at the gleaming sphere, as it hovered there. Caroline hadn’t taken Catherine that day. But clearly, she’d taken something. And it seemed that the “something” was a thing none of them had bargained for. He regarded the ball of light, in her palm.

“I had to hold it for a year,” Caroline continued. “I don’t know why. Those are the rules, I suppose.” She dropped her free hand but kept the other one right where it was, aloft.

Vincent was fascinated. The ball of light shimmered and glowed. After a moment, the pulse of it was a steady, rhythmic thing. It was a heartbeat, made light.

After a moment, Vincent knew whose heartbeat it was. It was his.

“Is that... is that what I believe it to be?” he asked, lifting a hand to reach, yet keeping his feet right where they were. Something told him he couldn’t snatch it from her hand, even though he very much suspected it belonged to him.

Eyes a shade darker than Catherine’s own met Vincent’s, and she didn’t answer immediately. “She could marry Elliot. Still. She could be safe, be protected. Wealthy.
Loved. He does love her, Vincent.”

“She does not love him.” He reached forward anyway, and Caroline stepped back, taking the pulsing sphere of light with her.

“You do know what this is,” she confirmed. “I didn’t mean to take it. I think it’s because she was standing so close to me when you took her. She was about to step through, and then...” Caroline let the sentence trail.

They both knew what had happened then. He’d grabbed hold of Catherine, and kept her with him. Scooped her up, whirled away and... returned them both to this world.

“Perhaps you had to leave something... spiritual behind or you couldn’t take her back,” Caroline said. “I don’t know. If those are the rules, I don’t know why...“

“You’re holding a piece of our Bond,” he interrupted. “You have it. Right in your hand,” Vincent said, certain it was so.

Caroline looked down at the steady, glimmering light.

“I am,” she confirmed. “I... I think... I have to offer to give it back to you. Or... you could tell me to keep it. And I’d hold it for you. Until we see each other again one day... on the other side.” She looked from the pulsing ball of shining light to him.

*Keep it? Why in the world would I tell her to do that? I thought I lost it in the cave!* She held his gaze steadily, looking so much like Catherine, and yet... different. “Because if you take it back, you’ll never be disconnected from my daughter. You’ll have to stay a part of her. Under those terms... she’ll never choose anyone else, Vincent. Never,” Caroline explained.

*Why in God’s name would I want her to choose anyone else? I’ve spent the week feeling desperate, afraid that she had!* Vincent reviewed her words as he looked from the steady, glowing light a fraction above Caroline Chandler’s palm, to her face. It was lovely. And tear-streaked.

“Charles said that you loved her.” The feminine voice trembled a little. “I can feel that you do. Please, please understand. She’s my only child. I have to offer her whatever protection I can.”

*Protection?* Vincent was struggling to discern her.

“I’m not... impetuous, like she is. I’m... more cautious,” she explained. “Perhaps motherhood does that for us. Perhaps it’s the way my... the way my childhood made me. I... I don’t really know, Vincent.”

The spirit before him was weeping, even as she struggled to explain herself. “I loved a
man. I gave him a beautiful child. And then…” She looked to the side and steadied her voice. “Fate was less than kind,” she concluded.

The pulsing ball of light increased its rhythm, as Vincent knew his own heartbeat was doing the same. It was an unusual thing to see.

“I know a thing or two about having an unkind fate,” he replied evenly. Could he simply take the thing from her after all? It did belong to him, didn’t it? Did he have to bargain for it? He had no idea.

Catherine’s mother inclined her head, in agreement with his claim. “You do know about an unkind fate. You truly do. That’s why I beg you to consider, Vincent. Consider, before you decide.”

His mind was still grappling with the circumstances. Our Bond. He’d somehow… left a piece of it behind, the night he’d saved Catherine from the Watcher. “You had it. All this time, and you…”

“Only a part of it,” she defended. “Just enough.” She closed her fist, then opened it again. The small bit of light was still there, still pulsing with the internal rhythm of its owner.

“Enough so that I could no longer feel her, by degrees.” Vincent knew it was true. And knowing that, it explained so much of what had happened between them, after that terrible night.

Vincent searched his memories. “I knew something was wrong when I pulled her from the lake. But… I still had a connection with her. I know I did.”

“You still had part of it, yes,” Caroline acknowledged. “It’s like... a piece of your soul. The part that binds you to hers.”

More memories flooded in. “I saved her that night. We... rejoiced about that.” He knew they had. But then...

“But then?” Caroline prompted him, clearly still reading his thoughts.

“But then... things started... happening. Going wrong. Terribly wrong. Every time I was called to defend her, I felt... weaker. Like the Bond was... struggling, somehow. Bleeding.” Because it was. I felt that something was wrong. I just didn’t know what.

“I told her the night I saved her ... ‘I felt you go.’”

He only just now understood how true that was, and on how many levels.

“You must have been very... upset,” Caroline acknowledged.

Upset? That is the epitome of all understatements, considering. Vincent knew he’d lost control of himself afterward; lost control of his beast. “I felt as if I were losing a piece of
myself.” He stared at her palm. “How... apt that description turned out to be.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t... leave from where I was, to return it to you. There are ... rules.” It was a word she’d used before.

Vincent had to tell her what the loss of even this small piece of the Bond had put him through. “You... the things that happened to me, once it was gone. It’s like I was... injured, somehow. Like I was bleeding, inside. Everything that happened after that day... I just couldn’t cope with it, couldn’t cope with anything. The Darkness inside me rose up, and I found I no longer had the strength to hold it down. The effort... exhausted me. Helping her... depleted what strength I had left. I couldn’t... face our challenges.”

Caroline’s expression said she understood.

“I went... mad. Lost my mind. I nearly lost her. Was that your doing?” His voice rose. He wanted to know. He needed to. Suddenly... it explained so much.

Caroline shook her head, and it sent her soft hair to moving. Hair that was just a little darker than Catherine’s own. “I swear I wished you no harm, and I still don’t. As to what effect this has...” She looked at the round, pulsing light. “I don’t know. I only know I couldn’t return it. Not until tonight. A year had to pass. Spirits are... tied to anniversaries. To times... to places... It’s all so different, on the other side.” She could explain herself no better than that. Perhaps because it was a thing he wasn’t meant to know.

“It has been more than a year. Our anniversary was over a week ago. The night she died... only a day or so later.”

“She was traveling, and only just now returned. You had to be back together.”

“Why?” His tone was sharp, his manner insistent. He wanted to know all he could about this. About why he’d had to be miserable for the better part of a year.

The slender shoulders shrugged. “Because you were together when I took it, I think... Perhaps.” She shook her head, clearly confused. “I’m not an old soul, Vincent. I’m not even a very old ghost. I don’t pretend I know why things are as they are.”

She wiped her cheek with her free hand, and closed her fist over the shining ball of light again. Vincent watched it disappear.

“I want it back. Now,” Vincent said, aware he was ready to growl at her.

She didn’t open her palm, though he sensed the light was still there in her fist. “And I must give it to you,” she acceded. “Tomorrow, and before midnight. We have the day to decide it. But... I can keep it if you tell me to.” Her expression was an earnest one, a pleading one. “I’d keep it safe. I’d hold it for you. All would be well, Vincent. She could choose a different life, a different path... as could you.”
“Catherine would not willingly leave me...“

“No, but you could help her do it,” Caroline tried to persuade him. “You could make the choice for her. It wouldn’t have to be a huge scene. Things between you... they’re already strained, already... difficult.”

She was bargaining with him, and they both knew it. “In time, you could... let it just... end.” She shook her head again, and the light brown hair shifted, in the late night breeze. “It would... give her the future she once had. Give her a way to bear children with a mortal man again. She’s my only child, mine and Charles’. Please, please try to understand.”

Vincent did. At least part of him did. And it was a part that brought him no joy. Caroline must have sensed that as well.

“Tell her it’s time the two of you parted, at least for a while. It would be like this trip she just returned from, only... different. Or... just let things end as they will... naturally.”

Vincent stood in the path and took in the implication of her words.

Caroline continued speaking, and her voice became sympathetic. “It would hurt her for a while. I don’t pretend otherwise. I know she loves you. I do understand.” Again, the hazel eyes were full of tears. They gleamed like faint starlight.

“If you know she loves me, then why do you...“

“Because all of her sorrow, all her pain... no matter how deep... it would ease, the day she held Elliot’s child in her arms,” Caroline interrupted, brushing aside the moisture on her cheek in a gesture he’d just seen Catherine use, not an hour ago.

“She could raise her child in the sun,” Caroline said. “Because she’d know if she stayed with you, that a child might never be born. Or if it is...” She shook her head at him.

Vincent remained silent, knowing she spoke no lie.

“You’re the thing that exists at the expense of all her other dreams, Vincent.”

It seemed she could do more than read his mind. She could read his past or at least parts of that. “Know that our dream exists at the cost of all your other dreams.” It was a thing Vincent knew he’d once told Catherine. He still felt it was true.

Caroline’s tone firmed, perhaps sensing his inner conflict. “Catherine is impetuous. That’s part of what keeps her with you. But it’s too high a price to pay, Vincent. You know it is. It’s why you’ve sent her away before; why you sent her to Europe, to be with her friends. You were right in that. Be right... with this.”

Vincent struggled inside, and looked to the ground, considering. Was this not a thing he’d often thought as well? Especially in his darkest times?
“So I could... leave our Bond with you. I could... let her go.” Vincent hated the very idea, hated the sound of the words, as they left his lips.

Caroline tucked away the light which had warmed her palm. She pressed it into her chest, where it vanished, as it made its way inward. “Yes. If you take it back, you’ll never be able to do that. She’d never let you. This way... you wouldn’t have to feel her hold another man’s child in her arms. Wouldn’t have to feel her become someone else’s bride. Think of it, Vincent. Your soul would be your own again, as would hers.”

Blue eyes met celestially hazel ones. “We’d be divided. Forever.”

“You’d be what you are now. Yes.” Her logic cut like a knife.

Vincent paced the narrow walkway, a sure sign he was thinking. He turned and held out an upturned, supplicating palm. “How do I know she will have a happy life if I step back?” he asked.

Caroline shook her head. “You don’t. I don’t. We just both know she wouldn’t have a good many things with you.”

The hand dropped. “And if I were to agree to become her... husband?” He dared to ask it. “What then?”

Caroline shook her head. “There is a ... a shadow clouding such a union. But is it certain?” Her expression told him she didn’t know. “Those... possibilities aren’t always clear.”

The sky was growing lighter, and Vincent could all but smell the approaching dawn. 

*How long have I been standing here? Where has the time gone?* he asked himself.

For some reason, the lightening sky meant something to the sad spirit before him. It meant she had to go. “She’s my daughter, Vincent. I promise I mean you no harm.”

“You mean me no kindness, either,” Vincent replied, stung by her.
Caroline looked down, admitting the charge. “Perhaps. But I do mean kindness for Catherine. Will you be that brave? Brave enough to let her g...“

But the wind picked up and the sky lightened some more. In the next second, Caroline Chandler was gone on the breeze, the word “go” sounding like a lost echo after her.

Vincent looked around, realizing he’d completely lost track of the time, while he’d been here. What should still be the middle of the night was a fast approaching morning. How long have I been standing here? He realized he didn’t know for certain.

He ran for the drainage culvert, barely reaching it before the edge of the sun began peeking in on New York City.

I have a day to decide all our fates, Vincent thought, opening up the metal gate.

Chapter Five
The Parted Veil

Vincent thought he would never sleep, that he wouldn’t be able to, in spite of the heavy fatigue that had dogged him prior to meeting Caroline. Then, surprisingly, not only did he sleep, but he dreamt of the night he’d saved Catherine from the Watcher.

In his mind’s eye, he could see Catherine as she worried, inside her apartment.

She was a taut-strung bow, frightened and pacing inside her home. The safe haven felt like a cage to her.

Though Vincent hadn’t been there, as he had been firmly sent Below by her, he knew it to be true. He remembered feeling her disquiet, inside a Bond he now did not have with her.

He watched Catherine leave the apartment and go down the elevator. Go down into the garage, and... disaster. The chloroform on the rag had dulled her senses, but her spike of fear had told him all it needed to. Desperate to reach her, Vincent had clutched the top of a moving train, willing it to go faster.

It was just not fast enough. The car she’d been in went into the water, with Catherine trapped inside the trunk. Night closed over them both, as death closed over her.

In his dream, Vincent felt her go again, felt the awful, soul-wrenching rip of her being sheared away from him. It hurt. Even in deep sleep, it hurt.

Then she was... drifting... somewhere else. Someplace he’d never been. Someplace he didn’t know the way to.
But the Bond was a thing that told him location. Over and above letting him know what she was feeling, it told him where she was. Always, where she was. He followed it down. Down past consciousness. Down past All.

Then...She was there, standing in a dark passageway, bathed in the light of a tunnel unlike any he’d ever seen before: It was brilliantly white, glowing, serene, and... and very populated.

Caroline Chandler was standing in the doorway, and Charles was at her elbow. Someone Vincent didn’t know was behind her, and so were others. Catherine was moving toward them.

“Mother,” she’d said.

Vincent had raced to her, knowing that but a few moments later would have meant her doom, and their permanent separation. He had snatched her back, just as Caroline’s outstretched fingertips had almost touched her.

And then they had touched him.

Turning, with Catherine in his arms, he’d felt the sheer relief of claiming her back as his own, even as he felt something else: the loss of the tiny piece of the Bond that Caroline Chandler had inadvertently come away with, in her welcoming, outward-seeking hand. Vincent believed her when she said it was an accident. Reliving the moment, he knew nothing had been planned.

He’d left with his prize, too flooded with emotions to realize what had truly been happening. Having Catherine in his arms again felt too incredible, too sudden, and too extreme to process even as he’d won back his love, he’d lost something else in the bargain. He hadn’t known. He hadn’t even suspected. Now, seeing it again as he slept, he did.

He’d taken Catherine back, and cradled her beside the sandy bank, next to the water that had just claimed her life.

“I love you.” It was the first thing Catherine had said to him, as he’d wrapped her in his cloak.

‘Was she speaking to me... or you, Caroline?’ Vincent now wondered, in his dream.

‘And did it even matter? Certainly she’d felt the emotion for both of us.’

The dream scene shifted but was still from that same night. He’d held Catherine on her balcony later. She’d begged him to hold her tighter, and all he could do was comply and say “I felt you go.”

He had felt her go. Distinctly. Her... and something else, as it had turned out.

He hadn’t noticed the difference, initially. He admitted that in his dreams. He could still sense what Catherine was feeling. The lessened Bond almost didn’t seem to understand something was wrong at first.
The Bond had helped him come to Catherine when she was in danger, at least once more: When two frat boys determined to kill for sport had had her cornered, he was there...

But... he knew something was wrong then. He just didn’t know it was something wrong with their Bond. He had thought it was something wrong with him.

This time, when he killed, the feelings were... overwhelming. He felt exhausted to the point of being drained. Drained of strength. Drained of will. Drained of everything. He’d even begged Catherine “When... when will it stop?” The question seemed of paramount importance to him. And it also seemed as if there was no sure answer. He’d tried to reach for the peace he so often felt in her presence, and had felt... static instead, as if she were a radio station with no clear signal. Something was interfering with it. With her. With them.

Then, disaster of all unholy disasters, his Darkness had been released, as the Bond broke down further between them. By the time he had found himself waking up in the park in broad daylight, the Bond was like a thing that had been slowly bleeding to death, inside him. A once beautiful thing, and a strong one, was reduced to its barest flicker of light, and a shadow of its former self.

By the time he’d awoken from his collapse in the cave, it was gone, that and more. He’d woken up with memories missing. One of them had been her name.

Of all the things he’d forgotten, and all he’d done when he’d been ill, that was the one that offended him the most. Her name. Her beloved name. “Catherine.” How could he ever not have known it?

But he hadn’t. He hadn’t known it. Vincent cringed inwardly, reliving that moment again. Now there was no static. Now there was no... anything.

And then the dream shifted to something else. Something more horrible than forgetting her name. Far more. Yet, it was a thing that hadn’t happened. Or at least, it was a thing that hadn’t happened yet.

Joe Maxwell came in possession of a book.

And Catherine became the possession of a monster.

It was ugly beyond all reckoning, and Vincent wept and moaned as he saw her. Saw her fighting. Saw her held prisoner and with him having no way to help her, no way to find her. The Bond was still gone. And now... this. It was his worst fear come true. Horribly true. She was suffering. Because she’d dared to love him, she was suffering.

Somehow, she was pregnant. Somehow, that became the point of holding her.

A madman with an Archangel’s name and a malevolent soul held her. Held her until she delivered a son. Vincent’s son. A beautiful human boy, with skin like hers and eyes like his.

And then she died.
There was no reaching down through the Bond to save her this time. The Bond was gone. The baby was gone. And she was gone.

For all the world, Vincent knew which loss he mourned more, and as the dream continued, his conscious mind kept shouting at the images: “No! It cannot be! It must not be!!”

But the horrible shadows played out, and even as he was reunited with his child, their child, Vincent knew a hole in his soul that would never find repair. She was gone. Gone forever. My Catherine. The name he’d once struggled to remember was now weighted down by grief.

Another image came before him, and this one reminded him very much of the angelic image of Catherine, who had told him to “remember love.”

But this was not Catherine. This was Caroline.

“You aren’t dreaming,” she whispered, sorrow in every line of her tear-streaked face. “You’re remembering. Remembering the past, and a future that hasn’t happened yet. And seeing what might be. What might be, if she stays with you.” The angel wiped her tears, but more were coming. “This is a parted veil. This is the shadow I fear. I think it’s forbidden for you to know it, but now you do.

“I don’t know what fate she’ll have if she goes to Elliot, or to someone else, Vincent. I don’t know if she’ll be happy, or sad. Fulfilled, or miserable. But I know the thing you just saw... the horrible thing... it’s not a dream. Or even a nightmare.”

Vincent felt the truth of her words and was horrified by them.

“What is it?” he asked.

She was slow to answer and seemed to be hunting for a word.

“It’s a... a possibility,” she replied. “A... message, if you will. We part the veil, and it shows us that. No future is set in stone. No outcome is ever assured. There is free will in the world and very little in the way of predestination. But this is a possibility. It’s her darkest one.” Caroline’s tears continued to fall. She let them.

“The child is mine?” Vincent asked the luminous spirit in front of him.

Caroline nodded slowly, as she used both hands to wipe her fair cheeks. “He is. Very much yours. You name him Jacob.” Her voice grew hesitant. “I... I can see no further than that. I... I had no leave to do this, to part this veil, to show all of this to you.”

She opened her hand, and the glimmering Bond shard was there, shining in it.
“If you keep our Bond... that future changes?” Vincent asked.

Her answer was a cryptic one. “Every choice causes other things to happen. Like ripples in a pond. It’s impossible to know what returning it might do. Just as it is impossible to know what keeping it might do. I only know that keeping it gives you the better option to leave and that your leaving might save her.”

“Oh damn her. Damn us both.”

Caroline could only stare at him. “The choice is yours. It has to be. I will see you where we met before. Please choose wisely, Vincent.”

“I saw a child. My child. Mine and Catherine’s. I saw your heir.” The boy was beautiful. Her tone held only sorrow. “As did I. I also saw the rest of it.”

She vanished into the misty air that seemed to surround her.

When Vincent woke up, his face was wet from the tears of his nightmare... which Caroline Chandler insisted wasn’t a nightmare at all.

Chapter Six

Verdicts and Values

Confusion reigned his day. Catherine was running errands, moving through the city, and unreachable by him. Chores for his hands were idle things, while the images of the night before, and all they might mean, weighed on him. He could have the Bond back. Or not. But either way, Catherine was in peril if he stayed near her.

And we might have a son. That too, was a possibility.

Vincent’s mind grappled with the notion that they might become lovers. And then parents. And that blessedly, their child might not look like him, might not be bound by his limitations.

That could happen even if she does not die at the hands of a madman, couldn’t it? Vincent wondered. Caroline said it was a possibility. A possible future. If Joe Maxwell gives her a book, I can tell her she must come Below. That there is great danger for her now, and she should stay where I can keep her safe. To trust no one. To never confide in John Moreno. She can stay here until the threat has passed.

He set his fingers to rubbing his forehead, then set an oil can to good use, barely thinking about the task before him. Is that when it happens? he asked himself. Is that when we become lovers? Or is it some other time? Some... birthday, or New Year’s
Eve? Some... anniversary?

Vincent’s head spun, knowing theirs had just passed. *Am I forbidden to tell her what I know? Will Caroline see to it that I... forget, somehow?* He had no idea.

Part of him wondered at the knowledge that he might father children with the woman he loved. If what he’d seen was a “possibility,” that meant his siring a child was also possible. His mind boggled at that realization.

The other part knew that Caroline was utterly correct: If he stepped out of Catherine’s life, he knew she would be safe from the events of the dream-vision Caroline had sent him. That she’d eventually be married to Elliot, or some other man from her world. That her life would go in a very different direction; a safe one. Perhaps.

Vincent couldn’t pierce a future he couldn’t see. He simply knew he never, ever wanted to be cradling Catherine’s dying form on a distant rooftop, while a maniac kidnapped their child. He could barely stand to remember the image, for the overwhelming despair it brought him.

*I should go to Catherine. As soon as the sun sets, I should go, I should speak to her.*

For some reason, he instinctively knew he could not reveal all he knew, nor say how he’d come by the knowledge. Caroline had said she’d had no permission to show him such a thing, yet she’d felt it too important not to. Vincent realized that a very particular veil had been parted just for him, and him alone.

Whatever all of this was, it was between himself and Caroline Chandler, and then separately, between him and Catherine.

But it was the decision about the latter that would cause what would happen with the former.

Vincent finished a menial chore he’d actually been paying no attention to. He tested the newly oiled hinge that moved a section of false wall. It swung noiselessly, as he knew it should.

Putting the tools back in the canvas bag he carried, he headed back for home.

*I need to see you, Catherine. I just... have no idea what I’m going to say.*

**

He was on Catherine’s balcony and through the unlocked doors before night could respectably be called that.

“Vincent!” she smiled her surprise as she put small boxes of French chocolates in a bag. “I was just going to come down. Remember? I said I would.”

“You did,” Vincent acknowledged, noting the size of the bag. She must have bought one for every child Below.
“I thought I’d deliver these. Then… perhaps later, we could celebrate our anniversary on the balcony?” she asked.

*Their anniversary.* A carved box he’d made to hold her crystal was a forgotten thing, in his chamber.

“I... Catherine, we need to talk. To speak honestly with each other,” he said, maintaining his position inside the room, but near the doors.

She crossed to him. “I’ve never known us to speak any other way,” she replied, pushing the doors open more fully, to invite the night air in.

She moved out on the balcony to where they usually stood, assuming he’d be more comfortable there. Last night’s drama had happened almost wholly inside her apartment. Catherine felt she needed the openness of her terrace as much as he did. Vincent followed her out. Down in the park, an April spring was exploding, beneath them. “Is this... is this still about last night?” she asked.

He nodded, watching the wind play with her hair. The breeze carried the scent of cherry blossoms. “It is,” he admitted forthrightly. *Though it’s not the part you’re thinking of,* he admitted to himself.

“You said that I must not... obsess over the lack of our Bond,” he began. “Does that mean... that you are content that it is gone?” It was a thin thing he’d wondered. A thing Caroline Chandler’s request had made him face.

Catherine hadn’t thought of losing their Bond in those terms. She said as much. “I... no, anything that makes you unhappy concerns me. I have to admit I never thought of it in terms of being ‘content’ or not.” She looked out toward the city lights. “I still think I feel it, sometimes. Faintly. It was always... less for me than it was for you.”

He knew that to be true. *We may be feeling it about the same, right now,* he thought.

She studied the lights a moment more before she turned her face to his. “If I admit I’m glad you can’t get hurt coming to help me, does that make sense?” she asked, grateful that on the work front, it had been a quiet few months. Not to mention she’d just come back from vacation.

Vincent considered her answer. It did make sense. And it didn’t. And to some degree, her conclusion upset him deeply. “You must know I will always be there for you. No matter what,” he said. *Even without our Bond. Even if... if we are no longer... together, as a couple. I love you, Catherine.*

“I do know that.” Her tone became tentative, and she stepped away, just a bit. “When you... became ill,” she said delicately, “I... I wondered one time if it wasn’t partly my fault. If I hadn’t grown... reckless, knowing you’d always be there for me.”

He denied her claim. “I don’t think I’d ever describe you as reckless, Catherine.”
“Impetuous, perhaps.

“I think I... made mistakes, sometimes. And sometimes when I did, you paid for them.” She knew she’d never said this to him before. As far as he knew, she’d never said it to anyone.

*What a terrible guilt you must have been feeling,* he thought.

“So, you think that if our Bond is gone, that will... no longer be true?” he asked. “Do you not think I have made mistakes as well?”

They both knew he had. Their misunderstanding of last night was a prime example of one.

Catherine could only lift her shoulders slightly in answer. Yes, she knew he’d made mistakes, just like anyone else would. But she was certainly in no mood to call him on any of those right now.

His voice was steady. “We are none of us perfect, Catherine. Nor did I ever think we would be.” His tone dropped lower. “But I would die if anything happened to you. There would be no... no recovering from it. No matter what,” he said, thinking of the tiny bundle of life he’d seen wrapped in a blanket, in his dream-vision.

She stepped closer to him once more, and slid her hand over to his, on the railing of the balcony. “You have to know I feel the same,” she said, squeezing his long, foreign fingers with hers.

“Catherine...” he began carefully, “if there was a way to have our Bond back... would you want it so?” he asked, fairly sure he knew the answer. *Of course she would. Why would she think otherwise...* She released his hand. “I’d want you to be happy.” Her answer was so immediate it interrupted his thought. *How do I say this, the right way?* she wondered. “I’d want... that. But... I don’t know. It’s been... so different, from the way we normally were,” she said, feeling her way along.

*Yes. Yes, it has been,* Vincent agreed. He thought of Caroline, standing on the path, holding the beating ball of light. *You have no idea how different. Or why. Neither did I, until last night.*

“Not... not having our Bond gave me a chance to feel what we were like without it too,” she ventured. “To know that... in a way... we’re more like others, even though we can’t possibly be. It was a way to know I love you even more.” Her reply surprised him. His raised eyebrow told her as much.

“You love me more without our...?” He was clearly confused.

She shook her head. “I don’t mean it like that. I was afraid I wasn’t going to be able to explain this well. I mean... I don’t love you *because* we shared a Bond, as beautiful and amazing as that was. I mean... I love you with all my heart. With our Bond, and without
it.” She was content with her understanding. Then she caught the intense look in his eyes.

“Vincent... are you trying to tell me that our Bond has been restored? That you can feel me as you once did?” She was clearly amazed at the possibility.

He shook his blonde head. “I... no. I am not saying that. The Bond is still... gone from me, Catherine.” For the moment. And perhaps forever.

Then, a flash of understanding: Was that the thing I was supposed to learn? To love you as you love me, both with our Bond and without it? To take this gift, hold it in my hand, and... understand it?

He heaved a sigh and looked out into the New York night with her. He’d spent so much time mourning the loss of their Bond, he’d nearly forgotten how many other gifts life had held for him. Is that what I was supposed to realize? That what we are, special though that is, is as wondrous both... without our Bond, as it is with it?

“Perhaps that is a lesson I was supposed to understand as well. That our love exists as its own... entity.”

“I love you. You know that.” She gave a small smile. “Maybe this made us talk more. Since you couldn’t feel me.”

Perhaps. Perhaps it did. He wasn’t sure about that, considering the mood that losing the Bond had put him into.

I’m standing here trying to predict a future I barely understand. But... does anyone really know what the future holds? Why should I have an advantage denied to others? Isn’t it enough to know that she loves me, and I love her? Others go forward with just that. Some go forward with less.

He’d wrestled half the day with Caroline’s uncertainties about Catherine’s future. And realized that, that too was a thing he was going to have to learn to be sanguine with. There are no guarantees. Nothing can ensure her happiness. Our Bond, when I have it, tells me what she feels. But it doesn’t create that feeling, and never did. She fell in love with me, and I with her. We do all we can to ensure each other’s happiness. That’s a thing we do, ourselves. The Bond doesn’t make that happen. We make it, ourselves.

He looked wonderingly at the face of his stubborn Madonna. They should paint you and put you in the Louvre. With the wind in your hair and a lift to your chin. My headstrong love. Do you know how... precious you are to me?

“Something... happened with me.” He tried to explain the events of last night, without explaining them. “I thought I was supposed to make a choice. But I think I was supposed to learn a lesson; the one you already knew. That we loved each other, no matter what. That the Bond... as special as it is... it is not the only thing that defines us, Catherine.”
He looked in the direction where Elliot Burch was supposed to build his tower, knowing
that for Elliot, tall buildings and burning ambitions did indeed define the man he
thought himself to be. She might be content with him, might be happy, with his child.
But she’d never be happy with just him. He doesn’t love her as I do. She doesn’t love
him as she loves me. I’m the better choice. Even if he can build her a castle, while all I
can build her is a trinket box. I’m sure of it. It was an odd truth to feel very certain of
just now.

Large hands gripped her concrete rail. He felt the cold cement beneath his palms. “I
think I believed the newspaper story Kipper brought because... without our Bond, I
couldn’t feel you, to refute it.” He grimaced at his own foolishness, his own lack of faith.
I should have trusted her. It’s as simple as that. Where else am I safer? Where else,
more loved? “I should have just trusted in you, without even needing our Bond. Then I
would have seen the error for what it was.”

He held one arm out to her, asking her to come into his embrace. “If I promise to never
be such a fool again... will you truly forgive me?”

Catherine came willingly into his arms, more content to be there than any other place in
the world.

“Of course. I already did.” She squeezed him tightly, letting him know that all was well
between them, as far as she was concerned. “I know you’ve hated not having our Bond,”
she said, understanding. “I do wish we had it back again. But for your sake, not for
mine.”

Blue eyes flickered. So do I. I want it back, for the joy of feeling you again. Does that
make me selfish, Catherine?

“I believe I had to learn the lesson that our Bond cannot be substituted for ‘trust.’
Indeed, that it cannot be substituted for anything.” Is that what you wanted me to
learn, Caroline? Was that another message, hidden inside your choice?

“I have no excuse for believing the wild tale Kipper brought me. Only... that part of me
felt... empty, without our Bond.” He let her go and turned from the scene before him
then leaned back against the railing and folded his arms across his broad chest.
“Without our Bond... in my mind... there is only me.” He tried to convey the terror of
that, without frightening her. “It was like how it had been, before. Before you, before...
when I felt... how heavy a thing ‘separation’ can be. Before, when I was... struggling.” He
whispered the last word.

She put a palm over his heart. “Before... like when you were all alone,” Catherine
acknowledged, understanding completely.

He nodded and turned to face the outward view again, tugging her hand down and
letting it slide around his back. He took in the panorama before him, knowing that
behind each light, there was a story. He also knew that all those stories weren’t all
necessarily happy ones. That there too, behind the lights, there was loneliness, or sadness, or even fear.

“I fear that aloneness, Catherine,” he admitted softly, as if to speak of it too loudly would be to conjure it. “I know the darkness that waits for me there, and I confess... I do fear it. For it is a truly terrible thing.”

She slid her other arm around his front and just left it there, holding him. “I’ll be with you. No matter what, Vincent.”

Yes. Yes, you will be. Whether I take the Bond back for us, or not. He knew it was true. The Bond didn’t cause her to fall in love with him. If not having it hadn’t caused her to fall out of that, perhaps nothing could. Her next words confirmed as much.

“I... I don’t want to be apart, on our next anniversary. No matter what opportunity comes up. I love you too much. If you want to give me a gift... give me that one,” she said.

Something in him wanted to protest at the potential loss of an opportunity, but he also knew it was time to listen.

“We’re going to be together, Catherine. And I’m going to love you. Every day. And

“I don’t want to be on the wrong side of the globe, come next April 12th. I don’t even want to be on the wrong side of the balcony from you,” she said, explaining some of her own disquiet. “Part of having the world... two worlds at my feet... has to mean that I can choose between them, Vincent. Not that I always have to choose the one over the other one. On April 12th... I choose to be where you are. No matter where that is.”

And I choose you. Always.

He knew he had an appointment to keep. And I can keep you safer with the Bond, than without it.

He gave a gentle pressure to her shoulder, and brushed the crown of her head, with a kiss. We’re going to be together, Catherine. And I’m going to love you. Every day. And
maybe, someday... a child. A child for us. And all that that implies.

“It will be difficult to balance the two worlds we live in. My world and yours,” he said, aware of that as well.

He felt her shoulder lift, in a soft shrug. “I don’t suppose anyone ever said it was going to be easy.” She laid her head on his chest, just for the pleasure of having it there. “I just know that... this feels like ‘home,’ Vincent. Not the apartment. You.”

They embraced, softly. Caroline says if I accept the Bond, we will never part. Good. For I never want to. If you feel the same...

Vincent knew he needed to make a certain rendezvous, near a certain tree in the park. And he knew that Catherine had promises to keep as well. It was time to nudge her out the door so he could meet with her mother, beside a linden tree Catherine had once climbed, as a child.

“Will you go Below with your gifts? Spoil the children a little?” Vincent prompted.

Catherine nodded. “And then come back here. I know we’re a few days late. But... It’s our anniversary, Vincent. Or at least it’s still the month for that. I want... candlelight on our balcony. I want to watch the moon with you, and just... be together, celebrating us. Perhaps it’s time to mark a new beginning.”

Yes. Yes, it is. A new beginning, with our Bond restored, between us. I trust you with my life. I trust you with my heart. I know I didn’t forget that when I couldn’t feel our Bond. I just... listened to my fears, when I shouldn’t have. He brushed another soft kiss on the crown of her head.

Forgive me for doubting us. I treasure you.

“I would... love that. To stand here with you. To... just be with you,” he said, positive that that truth was the one that guided all others. It had been. Since their beginning, it had been. When I lost everything else, I knew that, he thought.

I’m going to go and get our Bond back. I will tell your mother you love her. And that I will keep you safe. Whatever happens. Whatever comes.

“I’d best get going, then,” she said, reluctant to disentangle them.

“Samantha will want to hear stories of the recitals you’ve seen. Elizabeth will insist that you tell her about the art.”

Her smile was a loving one. “I’ll stay only for a bit. Will you meet me, Below?”

He brushed her forehead with another loving kiss. “There is something that needs my attention first.” And a gift I need to get, from my chambers. So... two of those, actually.
She hugged him, hard and quickly, then stepped back. “Good, actually. That will give me time to set up the balcony. I brought back some old books for us, from the most marvelous shop. Some other things. Do you mind?”

Mind? I’d adore you for it. I’ll adore you for... everything. Eternally.

Chapter Seven
The Impetuous Tree

The path to the tree barely wound, and Vincent felt as if his feet fairly flew. He was unsurprised to see Caroline Chandler standing there, close to the linden, on almost on the very spot she’d vanished yesterday. He’d never doubted that she’d be there; never doubted that she was a woman of her... a ghost of her word.

“You wanted me to think before I accepted this. To realize something,” he said, eyeing the glowing ball of light that hovered just above her palm. A hard breeze lifted his hair, fanning it. Caroline barely looked ruffled.

Catherine’s mother looked ethereally lovely. And like she had just a bit of a smile on her face. “I wanted you to acknowledge who you are in love with. That is all. My daughter is special, Vincent. Whether you have a Bond with her, or not.”

“I know she is. If... if Leonardo had seen her first... he’d never have painted the Mona Lisa.” He’d have painted her. And the world would have a different smile, to wonder
“She has your smile. When she’s pleased with something... She has it.”

Caroline’s Mona Lisa-esque smile didn’t change. She extended her palm. “She’s to be trusted. Completely. The two of you are more than this... this little bit of magic.”

_They were. They were their own magic._ He saw Caroline’s slight smile grow, fractionally, as he thought it and had the feeling she’d just sensed his thoughts. Again.

“You didn’t tell her we met.”

“I wasn’t sure if I could.”

The smile grew a little more. “Neither am I,” she replied.

Vincent eyed the tree. Catherine’s Impetuous Tree. In his mind, it now had a name. _I may convince her to do one or two more impetuous things before we’re through, _he thought. _Perhaps one of them, standing right here._

He thought of marrying her, beneath her tree’s outstretched boughs. Freshly minted springtime leaves covered it. They looked new, bright green, and... venturesome.

Vincent felt a kinship with Catherine’s tree. _The hourglass isn’t running out on us. It’s... it’s barely begun to flow._ It was a light-hearted realization.

Words from when he’d helped Catherine return to her world, after Charles’ passing, came back to him. “_Catherine, we are something that has never been, and our journey is one that none have ever taken. We are just now setting out._”

_We are just now setting out._ They were. For all that had happened, Vincent felt sure of it. They were just now setting out. There was so much more, ahead of them.

He began removing his glove, slowly, telegraphing his intention. “She is visiting with the people of my world, sharing herself with them,” he said. “Later, we will be on her balcony.”

He hesitated only a moment, before he confirmed his decision, as he removed the glove entirely. “We both know what taking back our Bond means. It means there will be no undoing us, no matter what. I’m going to ask her to be my wife. I believe I would have your husband’s blessing in this. I would also like yours.”

The smile grew mysterious. “Would you propose if you had no Bond between you?” she asked.

The blue eyes were more certain than she’d ever seen them look. “I would do that if I had to make my way across the entire world to find her. The known universe. Hunting with no Bond, with nothing more than knowing the last city she was in, and on what day she left it. I love her. With all my heart.”

Caroline stepped away from the tree and closer to him. “You’ll need this, then. You know how... impetuous Catherine can be.” She raised one eyebrow, slightly.

Vincent extended his hand, palm up. “I’ll keep her safe. When I knew nothing else, I
knew that was my charge.”

Caroline gently transferred the Bond shard from her hand to his. “Losing faith in your ability to do that caused you to doubt. To doubt the two of you.” She reminded him of what he already knew.

The light shimmered, then sank into his skin. Vincent felt his palm tingle, then warm; then his arm, then his entire body, as the lost bit of magic made itself at home again, centering itself both inside his heart, and head. *God, this feels so good. It’s been so long.* He closed his eyes, over the sensation. The next time he spoke, it was in an awestruck whisper.

“We’re stronger with it, than without it. But I understand.” He felt the blood flow, in his veins. Felt it warm. “Our Bond doesn’t define us. Our love does that. But it still... Thank you,” he said, feeling the Bond flow through him, and then link him to his love.

*Catherine was in his home. She was giving his loved ones their gifts. And she was happy.* He told Caroline as much, in the same, awestruck whisper.

“Catherine is... right now... happy,” he said, eyes still closed. “She is standing, surrounded by loving people, my people, sharing the gifts she brought them from the other side of the world. She’s being embraced and telling stories. They are like... family to her,” he said, hoping the choice of words gave comfort and no offense. He opened his eyes. Then he flexed the fingers that had held the small piece of the Bond. They were still warm, still tingling.

“Thank you,” Caroline whispered, seeing it as he did.

“Thank you for keeping your word,” he replied. “For keeping our Bond safe. And then... returning it.” He slowly tugged on his glove His palm still tingled.

“It was never mine to keep. Thank you for not demanding it back yesterday,” she replied.

“If you know my heart, you know what it meant to me,” he answered, feeling a touch of Caroline’s love for her daughter, as he readjusted himself, within the Bond.

Caroline Chandler had held part of their Bond for a year. Vincent wondered if perhaps just a touch of her kind essence was now a part of the unique tie that connected him to Catherine. He searched for the answer, inside his newly Bond-filled mind.

Blue eyes focused on the beautiful spirit’s lovely face. “I can feel you,” he said. Her love was deep. And very fierce. Vincent now knew that when Catherine loved their child, she would do so with an Amazon’s heart. “It is... very beautiful.”

“You’re welcome,” Caroline replied, earnestly. “Take care of her, Vincent. Love her with no limits. I will not tell you that there are no struggles before you.”

They both knew she was speaking of the terrible vision of the night before.

“But I will tell you that whatever our struggles are, we will overcome them,” he said surely. “Your blessing?” he asked again.

Her smile became a cryptic one. “My daughter hasn’t said ‘yes,’ yet. You’ve yet to
persuade her.”

Vincent enjoyed the flow of the Bond as it deepened, and bloomed inside his chest and mind. Below, Catherine had just laughed at something. He felt her delight, and closed his eyes again over the sensation, for a moment.

There you are. Right there. God, how I love you. Her soft, feminine joy was transcendent.

“She’s laughing.” He shared the realization with Catherine’s mother. “There are... children near her. And she’s laughing.” He felt his beloved’s pleasure. And then... he felt her awareness... of him.

“She knows,” he said, eyes still closed. Tears were gathering, beneath his closed lids. “She... feels it. She knows our Bond is restored to me. She’s... touching her temple. It’s where she always felt it most keenly. And she’s laughing. Still. Laughing, and looking up, to where we are.”

He made a fist and held it over his heart. Eyes still closed, he told Caroline, “I feel it. Here. I feel everything.” And the aloneness is a million miles away. He staggered just a bit, like a drunken man finding his balance. A tear slipped free and trailed down his cheek, no longer able to stay held back.

I remember you. I remember this, he thought to Catherine.

“Good. That is a good thing, Vincent,” Caroline replied.

Moonlight touched the path. When he opened his eyes again, Caroline Chandler was gone.

Chapter Eight
Guardian Angels

“You did something very good, Caroline.” Charles Chandler said softly, to his wife.

Caroline watched an April kiss deepen. There were candles on the balcony and a stack of old books to one side. French poetry, mostly, but also a copy of The Odyssey, written in Greek. Most were gifts for Vincent. A carved box sat to one side, painted with red and white roses.

“Perhaps,” she said, with a rather coy smile. It was one Charles eminently recognized. Perhaps Leonardo should have painted you, he mused. Still, he had to admit he was confused.

“Yet, you told him they shouldn’t be together. That she should find someone else to...”
“I told him there was a choice to be made.” She gave her husband a kiss on the cheek. “That he had to... confront his fears and move through them.”

Charles appreciated his wife’s skill, when it came to guiding large, sometimes reluctant males. “I’m starting to understand why we were married in Paris, rather than New York,” Charles chuckled, knowing she’d gotten her way on that one as well.

He took in the scene before him. Vincent was whispering in his daughter’s ear. Love words. Forever words. Catherine was listening to him, and loving him. Her smile was radiantly glorious.

“They won’t have that choice... to be married in Paris.” He lamented, for a moment, what could never be.

“No, but they’ll have other choices,” Caroline said contentedly, as her daughter whispered something back. Vincent tugged his cape up so it covered her shoulders, keeping her warm against the springtime chill. Then he kissed her again.

“Besides... I’m not the only one who’s been busy,” Caroline chided her husband. Even in a three-piece suit, his boyish charm was still there.

“I have no idea what you—“

“Patrick Hanlon is never going to give Joe Maxwell a book. He’s going to give it to Judge Martin. You sent Mr. Hanlon a dream.”

Charles shrugged his shoulders, knowing his wife wasn’t the only one who had run a bit of interference.

“I thought it might be easier on everybody if it worked out that way,” Charles replied offhandedly. “Dan Martin used to be a code breaker, in the Navy. Things will play out differently with him involved.”

Caroline raised an approving eyebrow. “John Moreno will be revealed. Gabriel will be destroyed.”

“Joe Maxwell will stay out of the hospital. And will probably be running that office by this time next year. Hmm. Wonder what changes that will bring?” Charles folded celestial arms, as he pondered his own question.

Neither of them knew the answer. But they both knew that Judge Martin’s involvement would cause certain things to happen. And that such interference in mortal affairs was strictly frowned upon — without certain conditions having been met, and certain permissions having been acquired.

“You know... I understand we can become Guardians... if we want to,” Charles nudged her. He too had a way of getting what he wanted. “We could... be around more often. Sometimes.” He began making his case for it.

Her smile was in her ephemeral voice. “I understand that’s true. I admit I don’t quite
All We Take Away and All We Leave Behind by Cindy Rae

know what the rules are.”

“You never asked?” he queried. Such a thing didn’t quite sound like her.

She looked back to the scene on the balcony. Vincent was leaning his head down low, touching his forehead to Catherine’s. Whatever he was saying, they both knew he was earnest.

“I… I don’t think I even knew I could move between the two worlds...” she said, referring to their home of light and this mortal plane, “Until Vincent showed me you could. That was the day he saved Catherine from drowning.”

Charles nodded toward the couple. “I think Vincent has a habit of showing people... and others,” he said, including them, “... that they can do things they didn’t originally think they could do.” There was a soft chuckle in his voice.

“And I imagine that moving in between the worlds is something of his specialty. Hers, too,” he said, indicating their daughter. She was speaking earnestly, as she looked up at her future bridegroom. Charles felt no need to eavesdrop. He had a feeling he knew what she was saying. Besides, this was a private moment, between two lovers. Well, somewhat private, he amended mentally.

“I imagine that’s right,” Caroline replied. “Vincent said he felt your blessing. Before...”

“Before I left this place for you. He did. I did give it to him, Caroline. She needs him.”

“They need each other,” Caroline corrected gently, defending her daughter’s value in Vincent’s life. “I know it’s not what either of us originally imagined for her, but... he loves her, Charles. I held a piece of his essence for a year. He loves her... so much.”

“Yet you told him you’d keep it for him. To let her go,” Charles prompted.

Caroline didn’t deny it. “I just wanted him to understand that it was her he needed in his life. Not their Bond. That their Bond... important as it is... isn’t the most important thing. Their love is. Their love... and everything that comes from it.”

Charles nodded his understanding, as he watched his only child smile. It was almost a mirror of the one his wife now sported. “We can just ... go back now, if you want. Or... come here now and then. Peek in,” he nudged.

“Before another year passes? You mean break the rules?” She knew they would be, if they moved back and forth, so freely.

“You sent him the dreams,” he accused lovingly.

“Sending dreams is perfectly allowed,” she replied.

“Not prophetic ones. Those need special permission.”

“You did the same thing.”
“I didn’t, actually. I simply sent Patrick Hanlon a dream that will prompt him to speak to Judge Martin. You parted a veil.”

Her hazel eyes cut him a loving glance. “Oh, dear. I may need an attorney to plead my case. Do you know of a good one?” she asked, smiling, and clearly unworried.

“The very best,” he said, brushing a heavenly kiss upon her temple. Vincent was doing much the same, to Catherine. “I think I can get them to commute your sentence... as long as we agree to come here. Sometimes.”

“There are some who’d say that was a punishment.”

“There are some who say a lot of things. Game?” The youthful charm was being turned on her, full force. She knew she could deny those smiling blue eyes nothing.

“Our grandchild is going to have blue eyes. Vincent will think they’re like his. I’ll think they’re like yours,” she replied.

“Caroline Winston Chandler, you’re dodging the question.” It was something he’d also known her to do when they were married as well. It was her way to stall for time, while she was thinking something over.

She was, but she wasn’t trying to avoid answering. She was simply enjoying the view. On the balcony, Catherine was throwing her arms around Vincent’s neck and giving a joyful squeal. Vincent was lifting her against him, for a hard, fast hug. He then set her back down, right near where he’d put Great Expectations, over three years ago. He was speaking. The words “linden tree” drifted down to Caroline.

*Clever boy,* Caroline thought.

“Guardian Angels, then?” she asked her husband. “One for him and one for her? It might be a thing worth discussing.” They both knew she’d just agreed to it.

“Knowing those two, they just might need it,” Charles still had a smile in his voice, as he embraced his wife from behind, and let her watch their daughter accept Vincent as her bridegroom.

Catherine reached up to wrap her arms around Vincent’s huge neck. Rather than have her need to reach, he simply bent his knees and scooped her up, cradling her against his broad chest. The kiss he bestowed on her lips was fearless.

Caroline answered her husband’s grin.

“If they keep on like this... we’re going to need more than just the two of us,” she mused. Charles’ smile was an echo of hers. “We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it,” he replied.

And before the next April 12th happened, they did.
"What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you." - Ralph Waldo Emerson.

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~

Cindy

Pacem Muros
Luminescent
by Deidre Lockyear

You come to me in velvet mysteries
Draped in crimson like watercolour music
You arrive unannounced with the softest rain
And hold me, spellbound.
Your voice is molasses and gravel
Wrapped round the heart of a lily
You dive beneath my surface so elegantly
And leave me dreaming.
This
Our version of love
So strange
Our forever after
I bring you peace wrapped in a storm
Your masks fall to my kisses and tears
Should black thorns of sorrow pull me into Winter
Your hope is relentless.
Now I know the indigo ways of midnight
And the fall of sadness to grace
I will be the Belle hidden in your tower
Your silent siren.
This
Immersion is love
Unchained
But held tightly

You are Ultraviolet
I am the Moon
Together we are
Luminescent.
Tolerance implies a respect for another person, not because he is wrong or even because he is right, but because he is human.  
~John Cogley

~~~

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s life.  
~ Richard Bach

~~~

We will not agree on every issue. But let us respect those differences and respect one another.  
~ John Lynch

~~~

“A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip and worried to death by a frown on the right man’s brow.”  
~ Charles Brower

Let’s always remember to...

...Respect Everyone, Deny None
Catherine held a pink beribboned gift box.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Catherine.” Lena felt awkward. “You’ve already done so much.”

“It’s a celebration,” Catherine replied. “A day for new beginnings.”

Lena shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re even speaking to me. Let alone giving me gifts.”

“Technically, it’s for little Cathy… or is it Katy?” Catherine smiled. “I’m very flattered that you named her Catherine.”

“I thought she wouldn’t be doin’ too bad if she grew up to be like you.”

“If she is anything like her mother… she’ll be just fine.”

Lena smiled. “You wanna hold her?”
Sam, making a hissing sound, escaped from pipes in the warehouse where Mitch and his men were hiding. Ned checked his revolver as he stood watch. Mitch paced nervously next to him, smoking a cigarette.

"Mitch," Ned said, "relax, you're gonna have a heart attack."

Mitch moved along to the catwalk high above the floor, where other men were stationed. He approached one of the men standing guard.

"George, if anything moves, shoot it!"

Mitch walked to the other end of the catwalk where another man was stationed, armed with a rifle.

"Anything?" Mitch asked.

The man shook his head no and Mitch walked back down to where Ned was waiting.

"What? You scared of this guy or something?" Ned noticed the jumpy way Mitch was acting. He'd never seen his boss this scared of anything before.

"You idiot! You don't know what we've unleashed!" Mitch yelled as he grabbed Ned by the shirt.

"How do you know he's gonna come after you? Because you shot that woman?"

"He'll come."

"I still don't get it, who is he?"

"When he comes, you'll know who he is."

As Mitch walked away, he remembered what happened in the tunnels a long time ago.
Mitch’s Decision, by Allison Duggins

Mitch and a few of the other older boys were making comments about the attention Lisa was giving Vincent during the Winterfest celebration.

"Lisa's been Above for over a year. You'd think she'd have gotten over her fascination with that freak," Sonny commented.

"I've heard tell she's had plenty of boyfriends Above. I've even heard she 'put out' for a few of them." Roger gave a sneer as he glanced over at Lisa.

"After that incident in the Great Hall, when Vincent went after Lisa, you'd think she'd avoid him like a leper. She's acting like nothing happened between them. We all saw Lisa's shoulder, what he did to her." Mitch commented.

"I've always wondered myself what she sees in Vincent. Sure, he's bigger now than the rest of us but... size isn't everything." Joseph chimed in.

"Do you know something we don't, Joe?" Mitch joked.

"Screw you, Denton," Joseph shot back.

"Maybe we should teach her a lesson," Sammy whispered.

"What did you have in mind?" Roger gave a dirty look in Lisa's direction.

"What are you two planning?" Mitch stepped closer, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Since she 'puts out' for a freak like that, maybe we should try our hand." Sammy implied.

"What makes you think she and Vincent did the horizontal mambo?" Joe questioned.

"Why else would she be fawning all over him? Look!" Roger pointed across the room.

They all glanced over and saw Lisa give Vincent a kiss on his cheek as she put her hand on his chest. They also saw the disapproving look Father gave both of them.

"Father doesn't look like he likes the idea of them together again either. I heard tell he read the riot act to both of them after Vincent scratched Lisa. He didn't want them seeing each other. Guess that fell on deaf ears." Joe poked Mitch in the stomach.

"Yeah, she sure looks 'chummy' with him. Maybe she'll do the same with us." Sammy grabbed his groin as he thought about the idea.

The others kept glancing over as they watched Vincent put his hand on Lisa's cheek and softly caress it.

"Hey, Lisa," Sammy called out, "why don't you spend some time with a real man?"

Vincent and Lisa looked up at the comment. Vincent then bowed his head and turned away. Lisa just gave a disgusted look at Sammy. She tried to turn Vincent back toward her but he resisted. She excused herself as Vincent looked at her dejectedly.

Pascal and Winslow stepped up to speak to Vincent after Lisa walked away from him. While they were talking, they failed to notice that Lisa had left the chamber and that the group led by Sammy had followed her out of the entrance.
As the group followed Lisa, they could see that she was heading for the Chamber of the Falls. They noticed she didn't bother to look back to see if anyone was following. Sammy glanced behind them, as did Roger, to make sure Vincent hadn't decided to come after Lisa.

"No sign of that freak. The coast is clear. Now's our chance," Roger cooed.

"What are we gonna do if we get caught?" Joe asked.

"We won't get caught. Besides, she won't tell." Roger promised.

"How can you be so sure?" Joe persisted.

"Cause we threaten the freak's life. Tell Lisa we'll tell the cops all about that claw-bearing, joke of a man if she squeals on us," Sammy rubbed his groin again.

Lisa wandered down the tunnel toward the Chamber of the Falls, not noticing the danger that followed behind. Her mind was too jumbled by the feelings she was experiencing.

She knew she was attracted to Vincent but also knew the comments she'd probably get if she were to involve herself with him. Most of the Tunnel residents accepted and loved Vincent as a brother and confidante, but there were some like Sammy and others who only thought of him as a freak. She had her whole future to consider. She knew dance would be a big part of it and, in order to fulfill that dream, she knew she would have to leave Vincent behind.

While Lisa was trying to compose herself, Vincent made his way to the bridge over the Whispering Gallery, listening to his own jumbled mind. He knew that Lisa's future was Above in the world of dance. He knew he had no right to try to confine her to a world of darkness with him.

"It hurts," he said to himself.

Vincent knew Lisa's heart was as troubled as his own. He concentrated on his sense of Lisa. As it was with Father, Vincent had an empathic connection to those he cared about. His sense of them was stronger than with other people, not quite a bond but the ability to ease their troubles with words they needed. Vincent was able to ease Lisa's feelings regarding the future by easing his own fears. He could feel a sense of calm come over her and he knew she was nearby in the Chamber of the Falls. Suddenly, an uneasiness came over him.

Lisa finally noticed Mitch, Sammy, Joe and Roger as they entered the chamber shortly after she did.

"Why are you following me?" Lisa demanded.

"We just wanna talk," Mitch told her.

"Yeah, talk," Sammy and Joe said together.

"Why don't you go away and leave me alone?" Lisa asked.

The boys walked to the chamber entrance and huddled together. Lisa thought they were
leaving and settled herself on the big ledge overlooking the falls.

"Fellas, I don't think this is a good idea," Mitch began. "Lisa's always been a tease and you all know it."

"What, are you chicken, Denton? You've made some pretty lewd comments about that bitch," Joe commented.

"Yeah, it's strange hearing you having second thoughts about this," Roger stated.

"Well, if you don't want any part of that sweet dish, you can wait outside." Sammy shoved Mitch toward the chamber entrance. Mitch started to protest.

"Look, we've all seen Vincent and this strange connection he has with certain people. If you do this, it might draw him and I wouldn't want him after us. We all saw him get weird after the time David hit him with that rock, snarling and growling till Father was able to get him out of the chamber. We've all seen how sweet he is on Lisa."

Sammy grabbed Mitch and pulled out his pocket knife. Mitch made a grab for it but Sammy opened it and pointed it at Mitch. "Say another word and it'll be your last. Go stand watch and steer anyone away." The others waved him off and Mitch reluctantly went to the entrance.

"Hey Lisa, you wanna party with us?" Sammy called as he came closer with the others following.

"No, just leave me alone." Lisa said without turning around.

"Awww, come on, babe. It'll be fun." Joe crooned as he stroked her arm.

"I said, leave me alone." Lisa stood up and found her way blocked.

"No, sweetheart, I don't think we will." Sammy and Joe grabbed her arms as Roger grabbed her around the waist with one arm, while pulling her face close to his with the other. Roger kissed her hard. Lisa tried to pull away but both boys maintained their grip.

"Don't do this."

"Don't do what? We're only getting our share of what the guys Above get from you," Roger whispered in her ear.

"I don't............"

"Don't what? 'Put out?' I heard different, Lisa. Why should that freak get your goodies and not us normal men?"

"Vincent and I never............"

"Oh, come on. We've seen how you make doe eyes at each other. Seen how you snuggle right next to him, like he's God's gift." Roger tried to kiss her again.

"Hey Roger, let me have a taste," Joe licked his lips.

Joe and Roger changed places. Lisa tried to scream but Joe's kiss drowned her voice. Sammy boldly put his hand on Lisa's breast then put his hand between her legs.

"Hey, whadda ya know. Me thinks the lady doth protest too much," Sammy crooned. His
hand pressed deeper.

Vincent could hear her cry of terror so vividly, it was as if she were right beside him, screaming his name. Vincent let out a loud roar and raced off the bridge and into the tunnel beyond. Mitch heard the sound of pounding footsteps and shrank into the crawlspace just outside the chamber entrance. Mitch suddenly felt ashamed of what his friends were doing to Lisa and absolute terror at what Vincent might do when he arrived. Mitch ran to the nearest pipe and banged out an alarm, praying the others would arrive before Vincent, but he knew Vincent was only seconds away. He went back to the crawlspace and waited for Hell to arrive.

Mitch heard Lisa scream, then he heard the terrified screams coming from the chamber after Vincent burst through the entrance. He heard the voices of his friends begging for mercy amidst Vincent's roars and snarls. He also heard Lisa attempting to get Vincent to stop. Mitch peeked into the chamber. The vision was too horrible to comprehend, but he knew he had to go in there, at least to pull Lisa out of harm's way.

Winslow, Kanin, Pascal, Matthew and Robert arrived at the chamber entrance. They could still hear Vincent's loud roars and snarls coming from inside. They entered and found Mitch standing next to Lisa. Vincent threw Sammy's lifeless body against the tunnel wall and then turned toward Mitch.

"Vincent, let us handle him," Winslow said as they stepped in front of Mitch.

"He's gonna kill me," Mitch squeaked.

"Mitch, don't you move a muscle or we'll let Vincent finish what he started." Winslow threatened, pointing a finger at him.

They watched as Vincent wandered around the chamber, looking at the destruction he caused. Roger and Joe's broken bodies were not far from where Vincent was standing and Sammy's lay in the opposite corner.

"I never wanted any of this to happen." Mitch mumbled.

"You didn't do anything to stop it either." Pascal spat at him.

"I told them this was a bad idea and I wanted no part of it." Mitch tried to explain.

"So, what now?" Pascal questioned.

Vincent's rage was finally spent and as he started to sink toward the ground, Matthew and Robert each grabbed an arm.

"What have I done?"

"What was necessary, Vincent, nothing else." Matthew stated.

"Lisa?" Vincent managed to ask.

"Kanin is with her now and will escort her back to the home chambers." Pascal tried to reassure his friend.

"What about............." Mitch shuddered at the thought of what happened to his three friends.
"You're gonna help us dispose of them." Pascal stated flatly. He threatened to hurt Mitch himself if he ever told anyone what happened to them. Winslow looked at Pascal with a startled look at his outburst.

"We'll have to dump the bodies into the Abyss. Those three were always going off on their own anyway so if they suddenly disappeared, no one will be concerned," Winslow told the others.

One by one, the bodies were dumped into the Abyss. A silent prayer was offered as they disappeared into the dark. Vincent stood silently watching as the others did this for him.

"No one must know this happened. If the community ever found out, they'd banish Vincent for sure, even though he was sorta justified in what he did. They'd never trust him around anyone." Pascal warned the others. They all nodded in agreement with Pascal's comment.

Matthew and Robert grabbed Mitch and pulled him into the tunnel for the walk back, as Vincent, Winslow and Pascal followed silently behind............

Mitch’s thoughts returned to the present as he realized that Hell was finally coming for him and there was not a damn thing he could do about it.
Case files, medicine chest, drawers... Diana ran a mental list of things that needed to be packed up, as she did just that. She was less than halfway through the chore when a very long, very familiar shadow cast itself into her living room.

Toothbrush, toothpaste... I'll need to buy some aspirin at the airport. How did I let myself run out of aspirin? She knew she was ignoring him at the moment... survival instinct.

“Diana?” Vincent’s deep voice inquired. He took in the scene. “You are... packing?”

“I got a call. I have a case,” she answered off-handedly, tossing toiletries into a bag. She seemed matter-of-fact in her preparations.

Vincent eyed her lone suitcase. Perhaps she won’t be gone for very long.

“I see,” he replied, wondering if she would tell him more if he maintained his silence. He did. It worked.

“A friend I’ve worked with before asked for my help. In Seattle. It’s time.” She began sorting through a small stack of file folders.
“Seattle is... a long way away.” Vincent watched her rifle through papers. Her beautiful hands had a slight tremor to them, one anyone else probably would have missed. She shoved the paperwork into a valise.

“Yeah, well, that’s where the work is.” She was opening drawers, going through the contents of her desk, digging for something. After a moment, she tugged out an address book and added it to the pile.

“You will... search for someone?” Vincent asked. “Bring them home?” He knew she’d done that for Jacob, and for that matter, him.

She shook her head in quick denial. “The victim turned up last week. I’ll be looking for the killer.”

Ah... like you did for Catherine. I understand. So you will... immerse yourself in something unspeakably ugly, again. Because it’s time.

But that had taken weeks... months, even.

Did I think you would just... stay here? Just... keep coming down to see Jacob, because that’s what I needed you to do while I... what? He wondered.

Nodding toward the open doorway to her roof, she confirmed his worst fear. “I’ll send for the rest of my stuff. The rent is paid up until the end of the month. You can use the roof until then, if you want.”

She was going. Not just going... leaving.

It was a visceral kick to his midsection, one that shouldn’t have hurt as badly as it did. No. Don’t. Don’t go, he thought, not willing to examine the instinct any further than that. His heart felt sore.

He looked toward where she nodded, at the vast expanse of open space that was so much wider than Catherine’s balcony, and much... different than that precious place had been to him.

But those days were gone. And in no way did the fault for that lie with her. Why would I return here, if you are not? He thought, but didn’t say aloud.

She scooped up a sweater and tossed it into the open suitcase.

“Were you... going to tell me?” He tried to keep any accusation out of his voice. This beautiful, brilliant Amazon of a woman owed him nothing, and he was still trying to process the pain he felt at the thought of her imminent departure. I need time. Time I no longer have.

“The call just came an hour ago. I was going to leave you a note,” she said, indicating the writing tablet on top of her desk.
Oh? And what would it say? ‘Dear Vincent, I helped you through the most agonizing, most devastating months of your life. I risked my life for yours, and for those you hold dear. I was in danger because of you. I kept your secret, even though it meant I violated an oath I gave. I saved your son. I saved you. I avenged Catherine’s death, and I did all of it simply because it was the right thing to do. I have to go now. Farewell, Diana.’ Is that what you would have written?

“I... have to catch an early morning flight.” She defended her decision.

Vincent walked over to the desk and looked down at the paper. It had but two words on it. “Dear Vincent”

Well, I guessed that part right at least, he mused sadly. He realized she must have written it, then decided upon this flurry of packing instead.

Did you not want to finish it, Diana? He wondered. Does it... pain you to say goodbye, just as it pains me to hear it?

He had no bond with Diana, had no way to “know” what she was feeling. And right now, he wished he did.

He processed that thought, startled by its implications, even as understanding dawned. No, it’s not the same. But it is... real, he thought.

“You should have come down and said goodbye to Jacob, at least.” He tried to keep his tone light.

Diana shook her red-maned head. The soft waves in her hair caught the light from the lamp, as she continued to move. “No, I don’t think so.” She looked down and tossed in a hairbrush. “If I did that, I’d never be able to leave. I’m half in love with him already.”

He reached a decision as she ran the zipper around the case and set it near the door. When she stood, two massive arms were on either side of her, effectively “trapping” her in the space.

What’s this? She thought, still facing the wall.

“You must... confess something to me, then,” the low voice intoned, very near her ear.

What? That I’m falling in love with you? That this is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but probably the most necessary? That I know I can’t compete with a dead woman, with what you used to have?

“What?” Diana hoped the monosyllable came out steadier than she felt. She turned her head in profile.

“What must be done so that your heart will love with its other half,” he replied.
I’LL FIND YOU BY MOONLIGHT

By Anne Alden-France

Did I come too late, my love?
Or did you leave too soon?
Thirty-one and all but done,
Slow dancing with the moon.

Did we run out of time?
Our hourglass forsworn?
Or did you, brave, go to your grave,
Just after I was born?

And so, was time the villain?
Some ever-falling sand?
Seconds to hours, weak in my powers,
I’m searching for your hand.

Or does distance keeps us thusly?
Is it mountains, and not guiles?
The space between, a face unseen,
I cannot fight the miles.

Faith bids me “Keep on looking.”
And “Don’t give up this fight.”
I think you’re near, you’re just not “here,”
Beneath this silver light.

If I could sense your presence,
I’d never let you go.
A life alone is all I’ve known,
Awash in moonlight’s glow.

I’m waiting for my Beauty
While featured like a Beast.
I’m in the park, it’s after dark.
I don’t mind in the least.

But if you fear this darkness,
(The inner and outer kind)
I’ll make a vow: “You are safe now,”
When it’s you I find.

If springtime is for lovers,
Then love, I’ll find you soon.
In damp and wet, I’ll find you yet,
Come April, ’neath the moon.
Solo Concerto

Season 3

By Cindy Rae

Inspired by Mel
Diana knew she had meant to spend the evening by Vincent’s side. Some of the Tunnel children were giving a concert performance for the adults. Apparently, that was a thing children did here.

They were doing it now.

And there she was, sitting the entire length of a rather large concert chamber away from him.

She’d had to.

From what was a recessed wall niche, almost a perch, Diana Bennett sat and drew up one ripped-jeaned-knee, rested an arm across it, and then rested her rather stubborn chin. She tucked the other leg up also, keeping herself back, keeping herself cloistered, in shadow and stone.

The music was fine. But she wasn’t thinking about that.

She had entered the room with him, with him, Vincent, as his guest, his “special guest.” And she’d been on his arm. They couldn’t have looked more like a “couple” if they tried. Diana wasn’t sure if he understood the picture they’d presented. But she had.

And then, he’d done something. Something normal, something habitual. He had done it without even thinking, really. She could tell, just by his body language.

He had moved to a place on a high “balcony.” It was little more than a wide footpath, meant to hold the standing concertgoers. There was a railing to hold onto, and a wall to lean against. Some of the children were there now, sitting down, letting their legs dangle, as they took in the performance. The adults stood behind them.

He was standing. And his eyes were scanning the room, looking for her.

Diana tucked herself back in the shadows, almost reflexively, the instinct of the hunted animal seeking a hiding place, when the hunter was near. His eyes scanned past her position. She was well hidden here.

A spiritedly melody drew his eyes back to the performance, even as it drew his ears.

Music hath charms… She let the thought hang, before she completed it mentally. To soothe the savage beast? Is that what he is? A savage beast? Maybe. Maybe sometimes he is. Sometimes. But other times…

Diana relaxed the tension in her willowy frame and leaned back, an outcropping of rock making contact with her left shoulder blade. She was as far against the wall as she could go.
There’s a metaphor for you, Diana mused, as she watched Father lean over to whisper something in Mary’s ear. She nodded politely, and glanced in the direction of a young boy; one with a mop of curls and a frowning expression. *Nipper. No, not Nipper. Kipper. Yes, that was his name.*

Kipper was frowning at his music, and Diana made a quick read of him. He wasn’t quite comfortable, up there on the stage. Not “happy” about being there, yet there he was. His fingernails were bitten and uneven, and his mended slacks sported extra-large patches at the knees.

*He’s an athlete, not a musician. Or at least, he’s not a musician by nature,* she realized, pegging him correctly, as she checked him for other signs she was right. Band-Aids covered two fingers, and a healing bruise was discernible on his arm. *He falls down a lot. Skateboard. Or Roller skates. Maybe.* She let the thought go.

The room was warm, and full of people. Torches sat in wall sconces, candles burned brightly, and the hushed audience leaned forward, just a bit, listening both appreciatively, and attentively. Handmade instruments and thrift store castoffs were being used to saw their way through... something. Something classical.

She bet Cathy Chandler could have named the tune.

*“Name That Tune.” An old game show, where they only gave you a few notes, and asked you to guess the name of the whole. Is that what I’m doing? Trying to figure out the whole, while being shown only a part?*

She wasn’t sure. And since the idle thought would do her little good, she let that go as well.

Diana’s mind was like that. It shifted from thing to thing, even as it remained deadly focused on one main point.

Like why she wasn’t standing next to Vincent, up on the walkway right now.

*That was where you used to stand. Where you used to stand, with Catherine. Right there. You put me in her spot. Everyone looked around, and some of them whispered. You were less than a minute away from realizing it, less than a minute away from realizing we should have stood somewhere else. But I knew. So I excused myself, and I moved.*

She knew that Vincent wouldn’t follow her. There were advantages to being slender and lithe. She had moved through the gathering crowd easily, only needing them to move aside, not needing them to back off the ramp entirely. Older children had begun to fill the stairs, as they sat. She’d stepped past them, nimbly. Her feet were small.
Vincent had no such advantages.

She hadn’t explained why she’d had to slip away. She hadn’t wanted to. She’d simply said “Excuse me,” and gone past everyone. It had been a polite leave-taking. There was no need for drama.

Vincent had nodded at her request, and simply let her go. *Maybe he thought I was going back to get my wrap, or a cushion to sit on. Maybe he thought I had to use the bathroom. He knows I’m not afraid of heights. We spend too much time on my roof for that. My roof. Someplace he never was with Catherine.*

Diana picked at the frayed denim on her knees, knowing both by instinct and by observation that Cathy Chandler had never worn ripped jeans to a concert, either Below, or anywhere else.

*She wore a beautiful dress,* Diana realized, and knew it to be true with unerring certainty.

Diana had spent several days in Cathy Chandler’s apartment. Her collection of clothing was both tastefully expensive and stunningly lovely. Diana counted over forty business suits, a plethora of nightgowns, twelve evening gowns, (one with the tags still on) a selection of coats and winter wear, and a large number of ‘dressy’ tea length frocks. Catherine had only owned five pairs of jeans, all with designer labels. And none of them had ripped knees.

People bought what they wore most. The suits were for work, as were the long coats, the leather jackets, and the sturdy gloves. Diana knew at least some of the latter had been a nod to the time the attorney spent in the cool air, Below. She highly doubted the beautiful young woman had worn her nightgowns down to the tunnels, and the jeans were tucked into her bottom drawer, the drawer a person used least often. Evening gowns seemed a bit too fussy for a climb down a ladder or a stroll across the park, so that meant... the dresses. The sometimes frilly, sometimes chicly tailored, always expensive dresses. The kind you wore to a fancy restaurant, or a good play. The kind you wore to indicate you had “dressed up,” to show you honored where you were going.

Diana hadn’t dressed up for the concert. And she knew she never would.

Vincent shifted on the walkway, still leaving a tiny bit of empty space, on his right. The space she would be standing in, if she was still there.

She knew she wouldn’t be... couldn’t be, really. Diana looked down from inside her secret sanctuary.

Pascal looked out of place, outside the Pipe Chamber, and she noted how he often touched the two long sticks he kept tucked inside a long pocket, in his vest. *He doesn’t quite want to be here either,* she mused.
Olivia kissed her sleeping son’s head. From his place on her lap, he dreamed the dreams of innocence, and she cradled him closely. Lena did much the same, with Baby Cathy. *Baby Cathy had been named for Catherine.* Diana had no idea who Luke had been named for.

Diana’s interested eyes continued to scan the crowd.

William refused to sit. The larger man was standing on the floor, near the doorway, next to a table piled with plates of cookies, baked by him. There was a punch bowl on one end of the table, and cups nearby. He was the guardian of the evening’s libations, after the concert ended. He was never far away from food, whether he was aware of it or not.

Jamie kicked her legs, impatient with having to sit still for so long. Mouse looked serene beside her. Cullen sat with his arms crossed. Rebecca was leaning forward, with a smile on her face, as Samantha began a solo.

Diana was willing to bet that none of them knew how much their body posture revealed to her, how much their expression, the way they held their hands, the way they leaned either toward or away from the person next them, told her. Olivia hadn’t relaxed her grip on Luke for so much as a second. *She’s lost something. Someone. She’s afraid she’ll lose more.* Diana pegged her skillfully, not even knowing her story.

Vincent… Vincent simply… stood.

His hands stayed on the rail, and she knew he was scanning the area beneath them.

*I couldn’t stay there. Not there. Not right there, where she used to stand. I don’t want to be compared. I’m sorry.*

Diana listened to the solo, trying to “hear” it the way Catherine Chandler might have. She focused on the notes, the timing, and the rhythm. For the first time this evening, she tried to “hear” a song.

She wasn’t sure if the handmade violin was exactly in tune, or if the notes were correct. But she knew the little girl playing it had a stubborn streak, and expected much of herself. Her brunette brows furrowed, as she concentrated.

*Little perfectionist.* At which point Diana was aware she’d stopped listening and started “doing that thing she automatically did,” again.

She’d gone back to the “default” position in her brain. The one that observed, and catalogued, and assessed. Music wasn’t a thing that relaxed her normally, and neither did crowds. Silence did that. True silence. The kind in which her brain could “shut off” for a while, and simply drift, weightlessly.

*Catherine probably knew every note of this song. She probably had it on cassette, and heard it at least once at the Met, or at Carnegie Hall. Somewhere. Somewhere one of the evening gowns got to go.*
Diana knew she’d never go to the Music Chamber beneath the Park with Vincent. He stiffened every time he walked by it, and still sometimes looked at the low hole of an entrance, with a look of remembered longing. So she never went there.

But she thought they’d be safe, in here. That the presence of Catherine Chandler, so very much a part of her balcony, or the now bricked-up entrance to her apartment building, and to some other certain places Above and Below, would be less pervasive here. Cathy, for all she’d meant to these people, had left her “mark” on only a few places in the tunnels. The Music Chamber was such a place.

And for all the time she’d spent Below, Diana knew that Vincent’s bedroom should be another place imbued by Catherine’s presence. Yet strangely, little Jacob was the “second person in the room” there, and he was too unique a thing to serve simply as Catherine’s proxy. Diana could enter Vincent’s chambers, play with the baby, (sleeping right now, with Sarah, and the other infants in the nursery) and not feel Catherine’s presence, like a somnolent force in the room.

She couldn’t do that, in the Music Chamber. So she didn’t go there.

She watched Vincent scan the room again, looking more deeply this time, sweeping his piercing blue gaze down the line of people to Diana’s right. She stayed where she was, neither shrinking back, nor coming forward into the light.

When his eyes reached the niche, they stayed. She doubted if he could “see” her. Not with his eyes. And Diana knew they had no bond between them. No odd, indefinable, magical link, like the one he’d had with Catherine, and now shared with his son. But she also knew she’d been spotted, just the same.

He inclined his head, thoughtfully, and simply stared. From deep inside the wall niche, Diana stared back.

He was the largest man (if “man” was a word that applied) in the room. His bearing spoke of a castaway prince, and his puzzled expression bespoke his concern. She knew he wouldn’t move toward her. Not yet. He’d have to ask the entire aisle to clear out, to back its way down the ramp and out the closest doorway, just so he could reach her. He wouldn’t be so rude. And there was no need to chase her. They both knew she wasn’t going anywhere. She hadn’t “fled” him. She’d simply moved away from him, thanks to his association with the space.

Diana dropped her gaze, and moved it back over the people. So many of them. So very, very... many. And so many of them children.

Safe children. Safe children were the best kind. And sometimes the rarest, in Diana’s line of work.

Do you know how loved you are? How lucky you are? she thought, to all of them.
These children are creative. These children are nurtured. These children are safe. How lucky they are. Her assessing gaze scanned the entire room, resting on each child. Then it tracked back to the evening’s soloist. How... fierce the little brunette looks, sawing away on her violin. I bet she has a temper. And hates to miss a note.

Samantha’s solo ended, but the piece continued, as the rest of the orchestra joined back in.

This is a long song. Not a song. Wrong word. Concerto. Concerto is a little concert.

The concerto continued, and Diana could tell by the music’s change in pitch and tempo, that it was drawing to a close.

Are we doing that, too? She wondered it almost idly. It was another question she had no answer for. Only a deep hope that the answer was “no.”

I don’t own twelve evening gowns. I don’t know the name of this concerto. But I think I’m falling in love with you, Vincent. And I don’t know what that means, for either of us. Do you?

Content that that question, like so many others, was unanswerable, this night Diana did something that surprised her. Rather than continue to concentrate on the crowd, she let her mind drift and flow. Her slender body relaxed, inside its hiding place, and she let her legs dangle, revealing her position, irrevocably.

He already knows where I am. It’s all right.

A sense of peace filled her, and the music rose to the vaulted ceiling, filling the air with a childish kind of glory.

They’re good. They’re really good, she realized. A smile ghosted her beautiful mouth, one that lingered in her blue-green eyes. Really good. The smile grew, just a touch.

The low strings, the cellos and basses, picked up tempo, and blended with their treble clef counterparts. It seemed like they were all playing something different, and then... the same.

Like when two people fall in love. At first, they sound so different. Too different. And then... the same. It was an idle, drifting thought.

One mini crescendo later, it was all over. The audience applauded politely, and those who were seated, stood. Standing ovation. One Vincent didn’t have to change position for.

She saw him check her location, as the people in front of him began to file out and the people closest to her filed past. She remained where she was. Either he would come to her or he wouldn’t. She wasn’t going to leave ahead of him, wasn’t going to try to sneak out, or make him chase her.

Even if he would.
Solo Concerto by Cindy Rae

A line queued up at the cookie table, the young musicians getting served first. Father was effusive with his praise. Rebecca gave Samantha a huge hug, her smile one of radiant beauty. It was gleefully returned.

*She coached her,* Diana knew it without asking. *How sweet.*

Vincent was making his way toward her.

*Vincent is making his way toward me. What an... amazing thought that is,* she realized.

The people standing near her had joined the refreshment line. Either that, or like Olivia, they’d simply left the room and headed wherever. The crowd was thinning out, even as most of the adults stayed, and celebrated the accomplishment of their younger charges. Zach gave Kipper a high five. Mary handed him a glass of punch.

And Vincent glided up to where she was sitting, almost noiselessly. That still amazed her. That such a large being could move almost without sound.

"You... came up here?" he asked.

"I thought I should. The acoustics are good." It was a simple enough statement. And it didn’t accuse.

"You... didn't want to be with me?" She could tell he was puzzled by the question, and already knew the answer, at least in part. But he couldn’t think of a different way to ask it. So he went with that one.

"I didn't want to stand with you where Cathy stood. I almost left, entirely."

Understanding crossed his expression. "But you didn't."

Blue-green eyes met sky blue ones. "No. I didn't."

Vincent glanced back to where he’d been standing, and held a distant memory close, for a moment, then let it go. He glanced down toward the stage where some of the children were putting away their instruments.

“What did you think of the concert?” he asked, veering the conversation to safer ground.

“I thought they were very good,” Diana replied politely, climbing down out of the niche.

“And Samantha? She’s our soloist.”

“I think she’s as stubborn as you are, and hates to get anything wrong. And that the blonde woman, Rebecca, coached her.”

Vincent moved his gaze to where Rebecca and Samantha were standing right next to each other, talking animatedly, and laughing. “I didn’t know,” he said, realizing it was likely true. Samantha waved her hands in an animated fashion while Rebecca listened, raptly.
“Which thing?” Diana asked.

“The last one. The others... yes. I’m at least somewhat aware,” he said with a wry almost-smile. “Though I don’t believe it’s correct that we’re equally stubborn.”

“Are you trying to tell me she’s... tractable? Or that you are?” Diana asked, raising one lovely eyebrow. “I’m not going to believe you either way. Just so you know.”

No. No, you aren’t. You have no reason to, and I’ve given you none.

He reached a decision. “In a week...I’m going to invite you to Winterfest. Just so you know. And I’m prepared to be... intractable about it.”

Diana eyed him curiously. “And how does one get invited to Winterfest?” Diana asked.

“Rebecca makes special candles. The children tend to deliver them. Samantha, for one. But I will bring you yours.”

“Is it red, yellow and white? I saw one, in Catherine’s things.” She wasn’t about to let him forget that she was very aware of the place the beautiful young attorney held in his life.

“Every year is different. This would be yours alone.”

Oh. Okay, then. “I’m not wearing a gown.”

“You may wear what you please.”

“And I’m not going to dance. I don’t dance.” And I don’t want to be compared to her.

Vincent was secretly relieved to hear it. “Dancing... is not required. But it is a time when we remember what we all mean to each other. How... precious the bond of our fellowship is. How much we... how much we owe to the people Above, and to each other.”

He faced her fully, and lifted her chin with one finger. “I owe you my son, Diana. And I owe you my life. I’m going to invite you to Winterfest, intractably, until you agree to come. There are wall niches you can sit in, if you like, and tapestries you can hide behind. But I will ask you. And I will hope you agree to join us.”

You’re inviting me because you feel gratitude. I understand. But it isn’t what I want from you.

“You’re inviting me because you feel indebted to me. I want you to stop that. Please. That is... I want you to ask me, yes. And I want you to feel something.” It was a deadly honest confession. “But not because you feel you owe me anything, Vincent. Not because of that.”

There. Now do with that what you will. Rescind the invitation. Just offer to walk me out. Something.
Vincent gave her a long, heavy look, and the air grew almost still between them. In the many months since Jacob had been returned to him, Vincent had struggled with many things. Fatherhood, a sense of widowhood... and a growing sense of... something else, something he truly couldn’t name, building between himself and Diana. He couldn’t call it “love.” But he honestly couldn’t call it anything else, either. Its flavor was very different from the love he’d once known. But he knew it for what it was; or at least, what it could become.

“Then I will bring you a candle, and ask you to Winterfest. You don’t have to wear a gown, and we don’t have to dance. And it surely won’t be because what I feel for you is simply “gratitude,” Diana. Are you content with that?” He inclined his head, at the question.

She smiled, truly smiled, for the first time that evening. “That will do,” she replied. And it did.

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Hope

Season 3
by Angie

Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone
(Rogers and Hammerstein – Carousel)
Vincent had parted from Catherine on her balcony, after they had discussed Margaret's death... an event that had been no less emotional for its inevitability. They envied Father and Margaret’s last few days together and questioned what their own future together could be.

Vincent returned to the tunnels deep in thought. What hope was there for him and Catherine? He couldn't grasp it. He usually didn't allow himself to think about it much, but tonight the question filled him and refused to be put aside.

Arriving at his chamber he stopped. There was a sound... music... coming from Father's chamber. Walking that way soft-footed, as only he could, Vincent approached the entrance to Father's chamber, stopping to listen.

Father had wound up the Victrola and was playing a record, something he rarely did. There was no mistaking the scratchy, ancient sound of the instrument. Vincent leaned against the wall beside the doorway out of sight and listened. A woman was singing, an older woman he guessed, her voice mature and poignant. He had never heard the song before.

“When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don’t be afraid of the dark.
At the end of a storm
There’s a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you’ll never walk alone,
You’ll never walk alone.”*

Vincent slid down to the floor and sat there, thoughtful, after the song had finished. There was no mistaking the message in the song, and it seemed to apply to him most appropriately.
Undoubtedly though, Father was playing it for himself.

But why was he playing this particular song? Then Vincent thought he could guess. Father had originally come to the tunnels in the depth of despair, having lost Margaret and everything from his former life. He’d had no hope... he had often said so. His life was gone and he had not cared overly much what happened to him.

Now this song told him to hope, although the love of his life had passed away. In effect, Father had lost Margaret twice. How could anyone have hope in his situation? The song played again, more quietly and Vincent listened raptly. It was so beautiful he felt tears rolling down his cheeks. A sob escaped him.

He realized he had been feeling sorry for himself on Catherine’s balcony, when instead, he should have been grateful for their love and the time they could spend together. They were both alive and able to enjoy each other’s company. They truly did not walk alone, ever. They were always thinking of each other, always together in spirit. Their bond ensured Vincent would never be unaware of Catherine, and although she did not have that same connection, she always knew he was near, and that sense of him seemed to be improving. He knew when she was thinking of him because there was a softness in his sense of her. It warmed him to the core.

The song ended and Vincent got up off the floor, feeling somewhat drained, yet somewhat more at peace.

“Vincent?”

Father had heard him!

“Yes, Father?”

“Why don’t you come in?”

He found Father sitting at his table, the old record player with its large horn in front of him.

“What was that song, Father?”

Father looked up and smiled ruefully.

“Ahh, you heard that, did you?”

Yes. It was very beautiful.”

“I haven’t thought of this in many, many years, Vincent. I was reminded of it tonight. I had to play it. It’s a song from the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, Carousel, from the 1940s. It was sung by an older woman to comfort a young woman whose husband had been killed. I’ve always loved it, but tonight... I can imagine Margaret singing it to me, telling me that I must not give up, that there is always hope, that I am not alone.”

“That is a message we all need sometimes,” Vincent murmured.
Father looked at him and nodded.
“Yes. No one walks alone, Vincent. Not even you.”
“I have Catherine, Father, so I am never alone. But you have lost Margaret... again.”
“Have I, Vincent? I feel her warmth in my arms, I hear her voice telling me of her life, I feel our kisses... and her love. Her love is still with me, Vincent.”

Father dropped his head to regard the cover of the record album and was silent. Vincent took the hint. He nodded then wished Father good night. Father merely nodded, obviously deep in his memories.

Vincent had cause to remember that night years later, as he stood by Catherine's grave, knowing that he had now lost his love, just as Father had. The pain he felt was intense, yet he knew he was not alone, for he had baby Jacob... a final gift from Catherine.

Then, as if he had somehow failed to notice it before... he felt a warmth around his heart and he looked up at the dark sky with its few stars. In his memory he heard the song Father had played after Margaret's death.

“Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone,
You'll never walk alone.”*

“I'll never walk alone,” he whispered to the night, bowing his head once more. “You gave me everything, Catherine. How could I ever think you would leave me alone, even in death.

“Thank you, my love.”

END

* Christine Johnson sang this song in the original production of Carousel in 1945. Apparently, it was written especially for her.
It can be heard on YouTube here: https://youtu.be/3dIcQKOUegs
The baby kicked and cooed, and looked up with an interested expression. He recognized the woman staring into his crib. Though he sometimes didn’t see her for days on end, he liked her shining red hair, and recognized it.

“Aaaahhh.” It was a baby sound, and his arms reached up. “Duh-Da-Da!” Jacob blubbered, drooling on his chin as Diana scooped him up.

“No, not Dada. He’s getting your bottle from the kitchen, from William,” Diana corrected gently, brushing her sensitive nose across the soft, blonde hairs that covered the baby’s head. He was nearly bald, save for a fine dusting of platinum silk that covered his crown. *If you take after your father at all, that will change*, Diana thought, placing a soft kiss on the delicate top of his precious head.

“Dada!” Jacob squealed, arching his tiny back and throwing his arms wide. He patted her nose with a soft, open palm. Diana tightened her grip, to avoid dropping him. He was hungry and excited, and being very wiggly. “It’s on the way, sport,” Diana replied, loving the feeling of holding him close.

“You’re getting stronger.” She smiled, “catching” his fingers with her open lips.

He kept patting her. The fair woman with the beautiful blue eyes had helped take him out of the Bad Place and away from the Bad Man. She’d helped his unique father to do it. Jacob had no words for those things, but certain impressions were clear enough. The slender woman whose cheek he was now patting was “good.”
“Dah!” Jacob insisted, planting a fist in his open mouth. He was starting to teethe early, and he was definitely hungry. Diana smiled, and he rewarded that by planting the wet fist on the side of her other cheek. Diana smiled at that, too. Any gesture of affection was a good one from Jacob, and this was definitely that.

_I love you_, Diana thought, and then, because she knew the words were too precious to be withheld from a child, she gave them to him, out loud. “I love you,” she whispered, not minding his slobber in the least.

“You are drooling everywhere! We better get you dry,” she said, using the edge of his blanket to wipe his mouth. If they didn’t keep him dry, he’d get a rash under his chin. He blew a spit bubble at her as he babbled, and followed the line of the blanket by turning his head. His still-toothless grin was enchanting.

“That’s a good boy. That’s a big boy. So big!” Diana sing-songed. Jacob giggled. “So big” was their game. It was good that he liked it, since it was the only one Diana knew.

“Ah bah. Ah bah. Da. Da. Da!” Jacob kicked the last monosyllable up half an octave, and wiggled again.

“Yes. You want a bottle and Daddy is coming. Hold on, big guy.” She laid him back down in the crib for safety’s sake, and leaned over him. A long lock of her bright hair fell over her shoulder, and brushed his cheek. She pulled it up as he reached for it, and he continued to smile up at her and kick his legs.

“Who’s a big guy?” she asked him.

“Gah!”

“Yes, you’re a big guy.” She applauded his attempt to repeat the word “guy.” Over the months, she had learned how to “play” with him. It was a thing that was utterly foreign to her usual, serious nature. But it was also a thing she welcomed. _You may save us all yet_, she thought, appreciating the incredibly powerful magic of a child... any child, but especially this one.

She picked up his stuffed rabbit, and held it where he could see. “You want this?” She waved it so that the chenille ears flopped back and forth.

“Da! Da-da-da!”

“Oh my, you want your Daddy today. Okay, big fella. So big!”

“He certainly is,” intoned a deeply familiar voice behind her.
Diana smiled and turned, setting the toy back down. She stepped away from the crib on instinct. Vincent always seemed to fill a space when he entered it, and it seemed instinctive to make room for him. He had a very clean, frayed hand towel over one arm and Jacob’s warm bottle in his hand.

“He’s definitely hungry,” Diana reported, watching Vincent tenderly pick up his son as Diana wiped her damp cheek.

“Fa!” Jacob squealed, stopping to bump his very normal, childlike nose against Vincent’s very feline one. The baby settled in Vincent’s embrace, and began to drink, immediately and thirstily. This was now old hat, between father and son.

“Thank you for waiting with him. I’m afraid I’m going to need to go just a bit faster,” Vincent said, finding comfort in embracing his greedily feeding son. You’re well. You’re hungry, and active and well. There, there, my son. I have you. Your father has you. It’s all right.

Whatever terrible things had happened in Gabriel’s clutches, and no matter how deeply that had marked Vincent, it seemed to him that Jacob, at least, behaved “normally,” after their shared trauma. He was a bright, happy, charming five-month-old. One who was going to start transitioning to more solid foods soon, if the nubbins on his gums were any indication.

“It was my pleasure,” Diana replied, watching contentedly, as Jacob attacked his lunch then slowed down, as the formula mixed with cereal began to hit his stomach. He fed a while longer, stopped to be burped, then finished off the last of it.

Vincent cradled Jacob over his shoulder and rubbed his back until another small burp passed. Jacob purposefully tangled his hands in Vincent’s thick mane, grasping the golden tresses and holding onto them, as his tiny body began to settle down from both the feeding and the joyful familiarity of being held by his father.

Vincent shifted his son and cradled him, a lock of long hair still firmly held in the boy’s tiny fist, as he now lay back in Vincent’s sheltering arms. “Time for dreams,” Vincent told the beloved boy, watching him start to drift.

As the baby began to relax, so did Vincent. As the blue infant eyes drifted closed, tension Vincent wasn’t even aware he was holding eased, and lessened. His shoulders dropped, and he took on the side-to-side rocking motion instinctive to all parents, when they were cradling calming infants. “There, there. We had a busy morning. Time for your nap. Sweet
“Hear the Magic” by Anne Alden-France

dreams, my son,” Vincent said to the half-sleeping child. The low voice, even while speaking, was having the effect of a sweet lullaby. The gentle, tinny sound of pipe noise completed the song.

“You should have heard him when you were getting his bottle. He was wiggling like a worm, calling for you,” Diana dropped her own voice to a stage whisper.

“Was he?” Vincent gently laid his drowsy son back down in his crib, adjusting the blanket so that he’d be warm enough. Jacob was a cover kicker. The tender father placed his son’s favorite stuffed rabbit close by.

“Yep. Da-da-da, over and over. Very excited. Very happy,” Diana replied, wanting to reach in to tuck Jacob in as well, just for the pleasure of touching the baby.

“Daah...” Jacob said dreamily, falling into slumber.

“There, you see? Like that. Calling for you,” she said. She knew Vincent would be pleased that Jacob had been calling for him. What parent didn’t want to hear their child say his “name?”

Vincent tucked a soft pillow near his son’s body, to prevent him from rolling over onto his stomach. He’d likely need to be changed after a while, Vincent knew, but for now, his son was warm, dry, fed, loved, and safe. All the things Vincent knew he could wish for him, for now.

He brushed a long, furred finger along his sweet son’s brow, and smiled a little, both at the baby and at Diana’s error.

“He wasn’t calling for me, Diana. He calls me ‘Father.’ Or ‘Fa,’ at least. I admit it might cause some confusion when he’s older, considering that is what all the rest of us call his grandfather.”

Vincent’s blue eyes lingered on his sleeping son. Dream of great things. I swear I’ll do everything I can to see you to them, he thought, knowing that without the exceptional woman beside him, no dream for Jacob would be possible.

“I think you’re wrong,” Diana whispered respectfully, sidling close. She too touched the beautiful boy, placing her fingertips over the soft rise and fall of his little chest. So precious. So perfect. “I heard him say Dada. Plain as day. Several times. Or just ‘Da,’”

They both lifted their hands away from Jacob. Vincent stepped away from the crib the same time Diana did, and they both continued to behold his amazing son.

“I’ve never taught him to say ‘Dada.’ As a name, ‘Daddy’ didn’t seem right, for me.” He turned to face Diana. Vincent’s warm blue eyes met her quizzical ones.

“I swear I heard it,” she insisted.

Ah, Diana. You hear the sound, but you don’t hear the magic. He gave her a knowing look, then glanced back toward his miracle child.

“For a detective, you may need to hone your skills,” he demurred, with a soft smile.

“Oh?”

“I don’t think he was trying to say my name, Diana... I think he was trying to say yours.”
As the studio lights went out for the last time, the actors removed their makeup and carefully put away their costumes. It was bittersweet, but ‘them’s the breaks’ when you’re an actor. Sooner or later the play closes, or the show gets cancelled. It’s time to hit the pavement to find another gig before your next car payment or rent is due. Would they cross paths again one day with the cast members who had become more than coworkers and, in some cases, lifelong friends? Perhaps... who knows? They walked out of the studio, not knowing what their next job would be, or even if there would be another job. Acting is a fickle business, after all.

They climbed into their cars and went on with their lives, leaving thousands of heartbroken fans around the world to pick up the pieces of the shattered dream and return to a world they knew all too well, a world where happy endings are not guaranteed. Apparently, not even in a Hollywood fantasy. It’s a world in which the kids need to be fed, the dog needs to go to the vet, supper must be cooked, and sooner or later someone has to clean the toilet.
“I don’t think so!” came their collective cry. “Not this time!” It was time for the fans to take control.

Beauty and the Beast fans had been drawn into the Tunnel world, and captured by the magic of it all! They had unwittingly become an inextricable part of Ron Koslow’s dream. You may be able to cancel a show, but it’s much harder to cancel a dream... and even if you could, this one was just too beautiful to walk away from. Before the first season had even ended, the fans had already begun to let their imaginations take them to places the writers, the directors and the ‘POWERS THAT BE’ had never dared to go. These fans weren’t going to let a little thing like the show’s cancellation get in the way of their happy ending. NOT THIS TIME!

They wanted their happy ending and **gall darn it**, they were going to get it... one way or another! Because before the final curtain fell on our show, for that is what it is now, these lovestruck fans discovered a wonderful secret. They discovered that this is our dream now, and we will...

...Always Encourage the Dreamers

“Each moment of our life, we either invoke or destroy our dreams.” -Stuart Wilde
“Find someone, Catherine. Someone to be a part of.”
I meant those words. We both know I did. You were too beautiful to be alone.

Too beautiful inside. And outside.
And being alone can be so terrible a thing. Such a dark, empty, soul-destroying, terrible thing. No one knows that more than I. So I gave you those words, and I meant them.

I thought it would be someone else.

But really... deep inside... I so very much wanted it to be me.

Thank you for making it be me, Catherine.

“Catherine... find someone. Someone to love forever...”
Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses, who are only waiting to see us, once beautiful and brave. - R.M. Rilke, as quoted by Vincent.
I’ll dream us two dragons -  
   I’ll wrap you in blue  
And surround you with purple,  
   No “Me” without “You.”

They’ll raise us to heaven,  
   We’ll soar, in my mind,  
Our dragon companions  
   Won’t leave us behind.

Iridescent ascension!  
   No matter how tall  
Our Great Kingdom’s spires,  
   Dragons won’t let us fall.

Swooping and soaring  
   And not as we seem,  
Which one of us dreamers  
   Is dreaming this dream?

In love on our dragons,  
   The wind not discounting -  
Perhaps our true challenge comes  
   After dismounting?

I’ll dream us two dragons.  
   Wild and free,  
All our Beasts and our Beauties -  
   No “You” without “Me.”

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love—Cindy

Pacem Muros

**Angie’s graphic creation originally appeared on Treasure Chambers, for the April 12th 2018 Celebration. All credit for the inspiration behind this little poem goes to her.**
"Drop your bag, Catherine. I'll catch it."

"Gladly! Here it comes." And so saying, she released the handle of her overnight bag.

Vincent caught it neatly and set it down. He reached up and took her waist in his hands and lifted her off the ladder. Once her feet found ground, she turned and wrapped her arms around his waist... he held her close and tight.

After a moment, she pulled back and looked deeply into his eyes, determined to see through to his heart. "Vincent," she said in her most serious tone, "are you sure it will be alright for me to spend the weekend?"

It was Thursday, and she'd only worked half a day. She was going to stay Below until she returned to work Monday morning.

"I am sure," he answered.

She continued to stare. He took her hands in his.

"Catherine," he said softly, taking her hands into his own, "set your mind at ease. I will be alright."

"You'll tell me if you become......overwhelmed?"

"Yes."

She tucked in her chin. "Do you promise?"

He smiled at her. He raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them softly. *She's so concerned......it's so endearing...... "I give you my most solemn promise," he said.*
She sighed and gave him another squeeze. They set off down the passageway.

Later, as she entered his chamber, she was filled with a sense of wellbeing. She felt it every time she was in his chamber. He was sitting at his desk, writing in his journal.

"Finished unpacking?" he asked without looking up.

"Yes. I can come back if you're not done."

"No, no," he said quickly, and closed the book. "I'm finished." He stood. "Father wanted us to have tea in his library, if you'd like."

"That sounds wonderful."

He tucked her arm in the crook of his elbow, and they set off for the library, strolling casually.

"I believe Mary and Rebecca will be joining us as well."

"It will be nice to have a chance to talk with them." She paused. "What were you writing about?" she asked.

"About you coming to visit. The things we're planning to do. How glad I am you're here."

She squeezed his arm. "Me too." She let a beat go by, then added, "I admire your dedication to journaling. I've tried several times to keep a diary. But I get busy and forget to write, or I'm too tired to write, and before I know it, weeks have gone by and I haven't written a word. Then I feel so discouraged, I give up. In a few years, I try again."

"I think the pace of life here lends itself to reflection, conversation and writing. Perhaps not just the pace of our lives, but our lifestyle as well. We read great writing and poetry, and talk about not only its meaning, but our feelings and opinions about the themes and ideas."

"I think that only happens at colleges and universities Above. I'm not sure it's entirely a function of time either. As we grow older, we become less and less disposed to share our true feelings with each other."

"But if you don't share your honest feelings, you can't feel close to anyone."

She nodded. "Sharing one's honest feelings reveals one's genuine self. That exposes one to being judged on their true self. I can't think of anything more frightening."

He was silent for a moment. Finally, he said, "How strange and how sad to think that, while I conceal myself here Below, there are many who are actually hiding in plain sight Above."

"At least once a day I wonder that you know the deepest, truest part of me, and yet you still count me as a friend."

He stopped and took her by the shoulders. "How can you say such a thing, Catherine?"
"Oh, Vincent, I don't have any illusions. I know myself. I lose my temper too quickly, I'm impulsive, I judge people, sometimes I'm overly emotional, and so many times I use very poor judgment."

She could have continued, but he placed a finger on her lips.

"The core of your self, Catherine," he whispered, "is a lovely, vibrant blossom, the freshest bud just starting to bloom, sweet in its perfume, delicate in its artistry, captivating..." he leaned closer to her face, "enchanting..." he leaned closer, "...sublime."

He looked so deeply into her eyes, and his face was so close to hers that she stopped breathing. Her stomach dropped down to her thighs... she thought he was going to kiss her.

Slowly, he straightened up. She started breathing again. "Thank you, Vincent," she whispered, and they resumed their walk.

They entered the library and greeted Father, Mary, and Rebecca.

After dinner, Olivia invited them to watch a rehearsal of *The Crucible*. Father was playing the part of Reverend Hale, the fiery 'expert on witchcraft.' Lena was playing Abigail Williams, the principle accuser of Salem. Kanin was John Proctor, the man Abigail had an affair with, and the three of them had such powerful chemistry, their performance sent chills down Catherine's spine.

Catherine and Vincent sat in his chamber, he in his chair, she on the edge of his bed, drinking tea and talking, until she yawned hugely. He walked her to the Guest Chamber.

"I had a wonderful day," she said softly. She felt the flames of her yearning for him start to kindle. She didn't want to douse the flame, but she wanted to keep it... just very, very small. She concentrated mightily, and took deep breaths. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him. She pulled back and admonished him, "Promise you won't let me sleep through breakfast?"

He chuckled. "I promise."

"Thank you. Good night, Vincent."

"Sleep well, Catherine."

And so, they parted, both well pleased that neither cost the other any emotional discomfort.

However, neither of them could get the other off their mind. Catherine waltzed with the Vincent of her imagination across the guest chamber as she changed into the soft, flowing nightgown he had put in the wardrobe for her. Vincent ambled back to his chamber, a man lost in a lovely dream. He readied himself for bed with her scent surrounding him, his arms filled with her essence. Sleep came easily, as they each imagined the other in their arms and wondered, *would it be so awful, if.......?
Then, in a dream, she could see Vincent so clearly, standing on a small schooner, a tiny speck crossing a huge ocean. He closed his eyes and raised his face, and inhaled deeply the clean ocean air. The bright sun warmed him, the wind blew his mane back over his shoulders, and the cool ocean spray flew up, spattering droplets across his cheeks.

After watching many golden sunsets and many rosy dawns, he reached the shore. He journeyed over land under an ultramarine sky, following chains of brilliant white cumulus clouds for many long days until at the twilight of one evening, he reached a magnificent castle. He entered, and she saw herself in a great hall, lighting candles; as she did, the room was transformed from inky blackness to misty gray, to shining brilliance. She turned and saw him, and smiled. They came together in the middle of a dance floor and waltzed to Chopin; while they were still ruddy-cheeked and breathless, he gave her white roses.

When she woke the next morning, she remembered it as a beautiful dream, but it made her feel sad somehow. She couldn't get it off her mind at breakfast in the Dining Hall. Suddenly, she was aware of Vincent's hand on her arm.

"Catherine? I asked you why you sighed?"

Coming to herself, she smiled ruefully. "I was really lost in my thoughts, wasn't I? Sorry," she apologized to the table. "I had the most wonderful dream last night, but it has left me with a feeling of sadness, and I don't understand why." Then she told them about her dream.
"I wonder why you would feel sad, Catherine? That was a very beautiful dream," said Mary.

Father shook his head slightly. "I agree with Mary, I don't understand why you should be saddened. Vincent," he asked, turning to him, "what do you think?"

"I don't know what to think... except that when you've finished your breakfast," he said to Catherine, "I'd like to take you on a walk to The Ruins."

"Hmm, yes......well, do take along a first aid kit and some water," said Father.

They walked happily together, neither Catherine nor Vincent minding at all when he had to put his arms around her to boost her up or help her down over the rugged terrain. They walked through caverns where the walls and ceilings were covered with flowering vines, and they were showered with soft, fragrant petals.

In the distance, a dozen distinct waterfalls cascaded down a jagged fifty-foot drop. Dozens of things that looked and moved like pink jellyfish floated slowly up then sank slowly down in front of the falls. Catherine asked Vincent about them, but he said no one knew what they were. Other caverns had hollow, tubular formations running up their walls that moaned lovely, doleful harmonies as the Tunnel winds circulated through them.

They walked under arches of crystal filigree, supported by pillars of black granite. After an hour, the tunnel opened into a vast open expanse. They had reached the outer border of The Ruins and stopped, mesmerized by the lifeless cityscape, a silent testimonial to a thriving civilization long ago passed away.

He offered her the canteen; she sat on a bolder and took a drink. "I'm still thinking about your dream," he said.

She smiled and nodded. "Me too." She handed the canteen back to him.

He leaned his back against the tunnel wall and raised the canteen to his lips. As he drank, he believed he could taste the sweetness of her lips on its mouth. He closed his eyes and savored the flavor before he swallowed.

She watched him close his eyes, and envied the canteen. She looked away quickly. "That looks like a pyramid," she said.

He blinked, clearing his mind. He had been picking up flashes of emotion from Catherine, striking like lightning, not lasting long enough for him to be able to identify the feeling. He knew she did this when she was trying to hide her feelings from him. He followed her line of sight.

"Yes, it does. We think it might have been used as a temple. Would you like to see it first?"
"I would love to." She started to rise, then stopped. "Oh, wait... I remember something else from my dream. I think I must have been teasing you. I remember I had taken something from you, one of your things, and I was running away with it."

"Do you remember what it was?"

"No... but I remember that I had tucked it under my arm, like this." She demonstrated a football hold. "I had a head start... I looked back over my shoulder at you, and I was laughing while I ran."

"What was I doing?"

She thought for a moment. "You were chasing me, but you were laughing, too."

He shook his head slightly. "I wonder what it all means?"

"Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Maybe it's just a lot of nonsense."

"Maybe, but there are those who believe that dreams are the way our unconscious mind communicates with our consciousness."

"Really?"

"Jung believed that our unconscious mind uses symbols to communicate."

"Why symbols? Why not just speak plainly?"

"The unconscious mind has no language. It must use symbols, metaphors."

"Ah, I see. Then you might say there's meaning in everything, whether or not we intend there to be. Like that temple. It's the tallest building I see. People make the most important buildings the tallest. In medieval times, the churches were the tallest. Today it's the banks."

"That's true," he agreed.

She smiled at him.

He loved that smile. "Are you rested?"

"I'm ready if you are." She stood up.

They strolled wide paths past rock-walled garden plots and wondered if the inhabitants could have grown any plants at all; or rather, if they used the spaces outside their small homes to sit, hold hands, and watch their children play.

Catherine and Vincent studied frescos, friezes and mosaics on walls that indicated the nature of the buildings; bakeries, laundries, baths, barbershops.

At noon, they sat down in what might have been a marketplace, resting their backs against a dilapidated building. Vincent spread a cloth and Catherine laid out their picnic of fruit, cheese and bread. She surprised Vincent with a demi-bottle of red wine.
When they finished, stomachs full of good food, and muscles relaxed with good wine, Vincent pulled a volume out of his pack and handed it to Catherine.

"You choose," he said.

She opened the book and turned the pages slowly. Her choice made, she handed it to him as she nestled against him. He pulled her close with his right arm and held the book in his left.

"Poe," he observed.

"Yes," she murmured, rubbing her cheek on his vest.

Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you no  
Thus much let me avow-  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.  
I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf-tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand  
Grains of the golden sand-  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep,  
While I weep- while I weep!  
O God! can I not grasp  
Them with a tighter clasp?  
O God! can I not save  
One from the pitiless wave?

She was asleep; he stumbled through the final lines.

Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?

And he was asleep as well.

7 A Dream Within a Dream, By Edgar Allan Poe
As she dreamt, she saw herself in an airport, waiting to board. The arrival/departure screen flashed "Cancelled" next to her flight. She looked around at the other passengers. She saw a woman holding a baby. The baby was bursting with good health, happy, cooing and laughing. Suddenly, she was seated on the plane, and soaring into the blue. A flight attendant walked down the aisle toward her. Her name tag said, 'Miss Trust.' She looked around at the other passengers, and she knew them all; people she worked with currently, and those at her father's firm, people she'd gone to law school with, people she'd gone to high school with. She was seated in an aisle seat. She remembered to look for the exits. The plane hit turbulence. She ran to the cockpit and pulled the plane out of the turbulence, and soared once more.

Then she saw herself as she had before, in a long, lacy gown, laughing and running from Vincent, with a book tucked under her arm. He was laughing and chasing her.

Still holding each other, they woke together, smiling. He wanted to kiss her warm, soft lips so badly that his breath caught.

"Nothing like too much good food and wine to make you sleepy," she said. "Should we head back?"

"Yes, I think we should," he answered. They packed up the remains of their picnic. They hiked for some time in silence, holding hands, still smiling. "I liked your choice of poem," he murmured.

"If this is a dream, I hope I never wake up," she answered. "I dreamt about you," she added.

"And I about you."

"Oh, my. What did you dream?"

"I dreamt you were in an airport. The flights were listed on a board, and it showed that your flight had been cancelled. You turned and saw a woman holding a beautiful baby. Then you were flying..."

"...soaring high in a blue sky. The stewardess walks down the aisle toward me, and I see her name tag; it says..."

"...Miss Trust," they said together. They stared.

Finally, Vincent shook his head a little. "This bond we share...."

"Now we're even sharing our dreams."

His mouth twisted into a wry smile. "We share a dream, and we're sharing our dreams." He thought for a moment. "Let's pay a visit to Narcissa."
They found her in her chamber, several levels beneath those of the other Tunnel Dwellers. She was stirring the contents of a small caldron suspended over the fire in her hearth. She invited them to sit at her table, and they told her what was happening.

"A dream within a dream, indeed," she chuckled. "Tell me about this dream."

"It was actually two dreams," admitted Vincent. "I also shared your dream in which you were lighting candles in a castle, Catherine." They told Narcissa about the dreams.

She listened, letting her head fall back a bit, resting her hands on the table, palms turned up. "I see Vincent, crossing an ocean, wind filling the sails of his boat......" as she spoke, images appeared in her crystal ball, illustrating the scene.

"Days he spends, crossing the water...... The water is the unconscious mind, where our true feelings and desires dwell.

He journeys then, for days, over land, then sees Catherine in a great castle, in a vast hall, lighting candles. The light illuminates the understanding.

You dance together. You work in partnership, in a ritual. There is a ritual you both want to share.

He gives you white roses, Catherine. White roses are purity... chastity. This is why you felt sad. You long for a physical expression of your love, but Vincent offers you purity." Before they could get embarrassed, she pressed her questions to them. "As you ran from him, Catherine, what book did you hold under your arm?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

Narcissa nodded. "Have you ever seen this book before? Did it feel like a familiar object?"

Catherine considered. "Yes, it did......it was a book I knew very well......Vincent?"

"I......almost......" He shook his head. "I reach out, but the answer is just beyond my grasp."

Narcissa nodded. "And what of the second dream?" They described it for her.

"Sometimes in our dreams the unconscious mind tries to speak to us by showing us the literal meaning of our figurative language. In this dream, at first your flight is cancelled, it does not take off. In English you have an expression for hopes that you never make any attempt to realize, you say your plans 'never got off the ground.' So, the unconscious part of your mind is thinking about plans you had, or a relationship you had, that you never worked to bring into being.

The baby you see represents some newly born part of yourself. The airplane itself, or any vehicle we see ourselves in, represents our life. So, you are in your seat, soaring through the air, and another figurative saying you have is that you are 'reaching new heights.'"
You see the stewardess walking down the aisle, coming toward you. You see her name tag, 'Miss Trust.' She could be Miss Trust, the embodiment of trust itself. Or she could be mistrust, a personification of wariness. And you see all the other passengers on the plane are people you know, old friends, new friends, former coworkers, newer coworkers. You must ask yourself, what is your feeling? What is your most honest feeling about these people? Do you have the utmost trust in them, or are you actually unsure of their motives?

You see yourself looking for the exits; you are looking for a way out... a way out of your life. The plane hits turbulence; this is your life, running into difficulties. You're afraid you've set your goals too high. You run to the cockpit and take over piloting, and pull the plane out of turbulence, and you soar smoothly above the clouds. This is you taking control of your life and reaching new heights."

She paused, and cocked her head to one side. "But......are these Catherine's dreams that Vincent is seeing? Or are these Vincent's dreams that Catherine is seeing?" She pondered for a moment, then nodded. She spoke, more to herself than to the couple, "Yes......yes......what if the plane is Vincent's life? At first it seems as if none of his plans will ever get off the ground. Then something new and wonderful is born in him... Catherine. But can he trust her? His life up to now has been defined by his father. Can he trust this woman? Had he been looking for a way out of the life his father had prescribed for him?"

She addressed him, "Vincent, you have had more difficulties since you met Catherine than you had in your entire life up to that point." He looked kindly at Catherine; she smiled ruefully back at him. Narcissa continued, "You have been afraid that loving her was too great a risk for you both. But if you did dare to take control of your desires... your life... is there a part of you that believes you would soar to new heights of happiness?" Vincent and Catherine raised their eyes to meet one another's gaze.

Walking home, they were lost in their own thoughts for a time. Vincent broke the silence.

"Narcissa spoke of taking risks... daring to take action... daring to trust......I wish I had your courage, Catherine."

She was a surprised. "My courage?"
He smiled. "You don't think of yourself as courageous, but you are. You turned your entire life completely around. You decided you wanted to do it, and you did it. You faced all the challenges that came with that decision. You're still making sacrifices..."

"I sacrifice nothing."

"Tell the truth. Don't you miss the dinners, the parties, the celebrities?"

"No."

"Tell the truth."

"Oooo, you......fine. There are times I remember all the excitement... the dresses, the jewelry... staying up all night, dancing, gossiping."

"Stop! Stop thinking about it! You'll realize how much you miss and go running back."

She laughed. "Never!" She stopped. They faced each other. "I would never trade what I have now for what I had then." She looked down, then back into his eyes. "You know......I thought you were going to kiss me yesterday."

"I wasn't brave enough. I didn't dare," he whispered.

"Taking a risk is like jumping into cold water," she whispered back. "You have to be ready."

"You have to be brave enough to risk everything."

"When what you have is important to you, it's hard to risk it."

"You have to be ready."

They smiled, and continued walking.

She was happy at work on Monday. She only brought a few files home, and finished her work on them within a few hours after eating dinner. She changed into a negligee and sat on the balcony with a glass of wine, watching the moon rise. He wasn't there, but she felt him, and it made her feel warm and happy.

She went to bed early, and dreamed. She was barefoot, and she wore a light, lacy, long white gown. She was walking through an art gallery, filled with portraits, landscapes, abstract art and sculptures. It was a showcase of all her feelings, thoughts, and creativity. She saw Vincent walking through a hall filled with a show of all his emotions, hopes and fears. Together they explored the rooms and found an antique secretaire. Vincent pulled open a drawer, and there lay his journal, but with one difference... there was a red rose embossed on the cover.

Vincent picked up the journal. "It's my life," he murmured. "My life, my wildness, my gentleness."

"Is has a red rose," said Catherine.
"Red roses signify passion."
"Will you give it to me?"

He allowed her to slip it out of his hands. She looked at the cover, and realized that all she ever wanted was this perfect red rose of Vincent's. Suddenly, she felt mischievous. She turned and ran from him, tucking his journal under her arm in a football hold. He watched her run, and though he didn't mind the theft at all, he thought how wonderful it would be to catch her, and so he set out after her.

She opened her eyes to bright blue moonlight, streaming into her bedroom. She rose, and pushed open the French doors. The night air was cool, and the lights of the city sparkled from across the park. She turned, and there he stood, holding a bouquet of red roses. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

"You caught me," she whispered.

"I will never let you go," he whispered into her lips.
Love alters not with her brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved...

William Shakespeare

by Judith Nolan
Cold Feet!
by Judith Nolan

"Though nobody can go back and make a new beginning...
Anyone can start over and make a new ending..."

Chico Xavier

Catherine eased off her high-heeled shoes. The sheer relief was immediate. She dropped back onto her naked heels and sighed, rubbing one set of chilled and abused toes over the other. The arches of her feet ached cruelly.

“What I wouldn’t give for the chance to take a long, hot bath right now,” she whispered into the shadowed silence of the brownstone she shared with Vincent, and their extended family of children and grandchildren.
Unfortunately that pleasure had to be denied, given the hour was already late and she needed to be up early in the morning to renew the battle. She had been on her feet all day without respite. Once she would have paced the courtroom and not counted the cost. But those days were long gone.

The complex fraud case she had agreed to prosecute as a favour for her old friend, the Manhattan D.A. Joe Maxwell, had dragged on interminably now for weeks. Annoyingly, continuances were stacking up upon continuances.

“We’re going nowhere, fast!” Catherine opined grimly, as she gathered her shoes and tiptoed up the staircase.

The main bedroom was in darkness. Her husband’s deep and even breathing said he was fast asleep. The subtle colours of their mutual bond had told her that, even as she entered the room on quiet feet.

Catherine moved into the adjoining bathroom to remove her makeup and brush her teeth. Back beside the bed she shed her clothes quickly, tossing them over a nearby chair. Shimmying a sheer silk nightgown down over her hips, she folded back the covers and carefully entered the warm cocoon of the vast bed.

In the darkness she heard Vincent stir, but he didn’t awaken. Snuggling down, Catherine shifted as close as she dared without disturbing him. It was warmer on his side of the bed, and the subtle scents of his maleness drew her closer.

It was sheer heaven to lie here in the night and listen to him sleep. It was a treat she often allowed herself when she came in late from work, which was happening far too often these days.

Vincent was sleeping on his side, facing away from her. Cautiously she took his hand, where it lay relaxed and half-curled against his broad back on the mattress space between them. It was as if he was reaching for her in his sleep. She threaded her fingers through his.

“I love you so much...” she whispered on a long, exhaled breath.

Almost of their own volition her cold feet sought and found comfort. She had not intended it to be so. But once they found their way beneath Vincent’s roomy heavy cotton nightshirt to the firm, warm curve of his muscled calf, they were tempted into a new boldness. Her icy toes danced lightly over his taut skin, skimming down to the fine bones of his ankles and back again.

Once such an exploration began, Catherine found she could not stop it. Her feet rose higher, then lower, stroking out the full firmness of his flesh. She knew she should pull back, but it felt like heaven, so warm and inviting, and she simply couldn’t bring herself to move away.

A low rumble and a sudden alertness in their bond made her aware she had awakened her husband.

“Your feet are cold...” he murmured, stretching lazily, like a huge cat.
“Sorry…” Catherine apologised, pulling her feet away.

“Don’t be sorry.” Vincent rolled over to face her. “Welcome home. I missed you at dinner tonight.”

“Sorry,” Catherine said again. She felt him smile in the darkness. “I love watching you sleep. It comforts me,” she confided. “Especially when things are not going at all well in court.”

“Don’t apologise. Come here…” Vincent’s strong arm slid beneath her, encouraging her closer. Moving his upper leg, he scooped her against him with his heel, imprisoning her legs between his.

Her now not-so-cold feet came to rest against the long length of his lower legs. They smoothed their own path of pure joy, delighting in the different nuances of his skin.

Nose to nose they stared at each other, sharing the same breath and the same intimate space. Somewhere in the darkness a distant clock chimed the hour of midnight.

“I love you, wife,” Vincent said softly, kissing the tip of her nose. “Cold feet and all. You know you can always warm them on me.”

“I’ll keep you to that,” Catherine whispered against his lips, as she kissed her way slowly from one corner of his mouth to the other, then back again.

“Let’s see what we can do to warm you up…” Vincent caught the back of her head with his free hand and deepened the kiss. “I believe you had dreams of a hot bath just now…”

“That can wait,” Catherine breathed, her awakening body responding urgently to her husband’s knowing caress, as he moved back enough to sweep her nightgown up the curve of her hips to her waist.

Tomorrow would come soon enough. Now there was nothing between them but a shared passion that could never be diminished. The warmth of that love spread throughout her whole body, reigniting the intimate fire she had come to know so well...

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle…”

*Albert Einstein*
"You hypocrite! " Olivia yelled, as she burst into Father's chamber. Vincent, Catherine, and Father looked up in shock.

"I'm sorry, Olivia, but Kanin knew the rules when he became one of us."

"What about Vincent?"

"What do you mean?" Father questioned.

"Vincent's killed numerous times to save us, to save Catherine and he gets no punishment for his crime."

"That's different."

"Why, because he's your son?" Olivia spat in disgust.

"Well... ah..." Father struggled to justify his position.

Catherine and Vincent looked on in silence at the display.

"Enjoy your happiness while you can. I don't want to be a part of this world while he goes unpunished."

"Olivia..." Catherine spoke out

The young woman turned and left before anyone could stop her.
Our fandom is a community. Our love of B&B transcends distance, time, and 'real' lives, bringing us together, often virtually, but always with love. We are truly part of one another, and although our minds often think alike, they never think the same. Fan fiction is one expression of this – binding us with joy and inspiration, because...

Though we may not be together, we are never apart...
Vincent stood at the culvert entrance briefly then moved swiftly beside the rocky stream bed, now dry from a summer of drought. He kept to the shadows of the concrete wall then flung himself over it before it reached the end, the better to arrive at the safety of the trees quickly. It was dark, but people were still abroad, seeking the relative coolness away from the streets of the city.

It was overcast, the night sky starless, trapping the heat generated during the day. Vincent felt the sultry heat in his tunnel clothing, but knew it would not be for long. His nose told him his timing was propitious. He moved through a stand of evergreens and stood under a fir near one of the Park's extensive flower beds. He stood still, expectant. Yes, he could smell it now. It was very close.

The grass and soil were very dry, flowers drooped, even the tree leaves were dusty. There had been no rain for weeks, or so little that it had served only to increase the already unbearable humidity that accompanied New York's high summer temperatures.

Tonight, Vincent had a mission. Catherine was expecting him, and he would be there... soon... very soon. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting.

It began slowly, just a few large plops into the dirt near him, unnaturally loud in the silence, as if the world was holding its breath. The moisture disappeared in a small cloud of dust. Then the rain quickened, casting smaller but more numerous drops, until even the dust began to moisten at last.

Suddenly there was a terrific bang from the heavens. Vincent started, then watched as a jagged streak illuminated the city's towers beyond the Park. He smiled.

Rain now poured in a relentless deluge and he moved further under the tree and breathed deeply, relishing the released scent of soil, pavement, grass and flowers. It was time.
He quickly laid a dark handkerchief on the grass near the flower bed, which was immediately soaked. He gathered up the head of a spent rose from the ground and plucked some grass, wrapped it all in the handkerchief, then carefully put everything into a plastic specimen bag, closing it carefully. Then he moved swiftly back to the culvert and along the tunnels to Catherine's threshold, his prize carefully stored in an inside pocket of his cloak.

On the way he passed a sentry post and the scent of the rain was so pervasive that a sigh followed his passage and a tapped message immediately rang over the pipes. “Rain Above”. There would be a dash to collect rainwater from strategically placed rain collectors, carefully meted out to anyone who wanted a soft rinse after washing their hair in the hard mineral waters of the tunnels.

Vincent was on her balcony in minutes and stood there, protected from the rain now, although dripping from his exposure to it. He eyed the waterfall beyond her balcony overhang with amazement. Another flash of lightning blazed over the Park, barely visible through the heavy curtain of rain. He moved towards Catherine's patio door, which was open.

He had hardly put his foot down at his destination when she burst through it and into his waiting arms. He surrounded her with his cloak, which was relatively dry on the inside, and tried not to drip on her clothing.

Catherine took a deep breath and sighed. This was Vincent! The scent of the tunnel candles, stone, dampness.... and now something more. Rain of course!

She looked up at him at last, and smiled. He smiled back at her and they moved apart a little.

“You smell like the first rainfall on earth,” she told him.

He smiled back at her, remembering the word he had discovered recently in an obscure geological textbook.

“Petrichor,” he stated, and was gratified by her puzzled expression.

“What?” she asked.

It's a word that describes the scent of the first rain after a long drought,” he elaborated. He brought out the plastic bag, opened it and handed it to her. She took it, puzzled. The scent wafted from inside the bag, and she breathed it in, eyes closed. She sighed happily then looked up at him again.

“I'm pretty sure I know the roots of that word, but I think it does a disservice to this,” she commented.

“But who knew there was a word for it, Catherine?” he responded, leaning down to plant a kiss on her upturned face.

“So I presume 'petr' refers to stone....” she replied.
“And 'ichor' is the ethereal fluid supposedly flowing in a god's veins,” he explained. “Technically, we are smelling the oils released by plants, rocks and soil,” he elaborated. “And you brought this to me, knowing I couldn't possibly experience it as you did.”

“Yes. I had to. I am always with you in spirit, Catherine. Everything I do is enhanced by our love, reflected and made more beautiful by it. I wanted to bring you a little of that magic. I wanted to share this special gift with you... if I could.”

“And so you did, Vincent. But you also brought yourself, a greater gift than you can ever know... a treasure beyond price.”

Vincent dipped his head, embarrassed as always by such praise.

“I think New Yorkers would say the rain is a better one, Catherine, but I thank you.”

Catherine put her hand behind his head and pulled him down to her. She kissed him long and softly on his mouth and didn't let him go until her feet, necessarily on tiptoe to reach him, began to protest.

“They're wrong, Vincent. You are much better than that,” she commented softly. “And thank you for sharing a new word.”

Vincent, speechless with joy and love, merely gathered her to him again. The smell of the rain, which had permeated his clothing, enclosed them, binding them together in the ichor of the gods.

END
Time Tunnels
Welcome to the Time Tunnels…

Last year we created an entire zine dedicated to honoring authors of the past. Our intention was to bring attention to the thousands of BATB stories that are not currently available online. We wanted to highlight the hundreds of BATB FanFiction authors and artists who have come and gone over the years, leaving behind a treasure trove of stories to enjoy.

In the early days of fandom, zines were plentiful. It seemed that many fans were eager to write stories giving Vincent and Catherine their happily ever after and much more. And BATB fans everywhere were eager to blissfully consume them. The stories and zines were as varied as the imaginations of those bold enough to write them. But over the years things changed. Printed zines slowly gave way to BATB websites, blogs, and the online database.

Thankfully most of the zines, that were so loved over the years have been carefully preserved and are still available to fans to borrow from the Crystal Rose Lending Library (www.crystalroselendinglibrary.com). Over 1000 titles are available within the United States for merely the price of postage and a promise to return them in a timely manner.

Perhaps one day all of those lovely zines will be made accessible to everyone online or by email... but until then we would like to use these Time Tunnels to remind the fans, old and new, that there are thousands of wonderful stories still available, just waiting to be rediscovered, in hardcopy zines for all to enjoy.

Who knows? Perhaps one of those stories will spark your sleeping muse and give you the inspiration to write a story of your own.

The Homecoming is one of many stories written by Lynette Combs. It first appeared in the zine “What Light Through Yonder Window,” a collection of stories and art by Lynette Combs. Lynette is a multi-talented person, who has given freely and abundantly to this fandom for many years. She is not only a prolific author, but a poet and artist. She has even created several zines of her own. Lynette has shown the rest of us how “it” should be done. Anyone who sets out to read her work will not be disappointed.

Thank you Lynette for allowing us to use your story for our zine.
“I know you think he isn’t coming back.” The young woman faced him resolutely from the chamber door. “He is.”

Jacob Wells stepped toward her. “Child, it isn’t that I believe he won’t come back. But … you haven’t heard from him, have you, in nearly a year—”

“It’s been ten months.”

“Ten months,” he amended. “But in light of that, I simply want you to be prepared for the… possibility.”

“It isn’t a possibility, Father.” She lifted her chin; her dark hair settled over squared shoulders.

It was a sight that made the old man sigh. Olivia had always, he thought, been ... resolute. As a child, growing up in the tunnels, this had been masked by shyness or mistaken for stubbornness. As an adult, it was the bedrock underlying her more apparent qualities of quietude and natural sweetness.

“You know why he hasn’t written,” she went on. “Why he asked me not to write to him, too, or – or visit him there …” She had abided by those wishes, and the pain of that decision was still plain upon her face. “You know that he couldn’t bear to be reminded of what he’d left behind here … and he couldn’t stand the thought of my seeing him there – behind bars – or seeing Luke and not being able to touch him, or hold him …”

“I know,” he said gently, “that it has caused you to feel more alone than you perhaps needed to, throughout this ordeal.”

“Don’t condemn him.” She didn’t add, Again, but the word seemed to hang in the air between them anyway. “And after all, I had all of you.” She said it without bitterness. “you’ve all been a great help … much more than I expected.”
Father limped to the bottom of the short metal stair and leaned upon his stick looking up at her. “We’re your family.”

“Yes, you are. I doubted that once, when all of this started, and I shouldn’t have. But he’s my family too, Father – he is my life – and you mustn’t ask me to doubt him, either. Not now ... and never again.

“All right,” he nodded, and watched her turn and leave the chamber. He wondered, sadly, whether he would see her disappointed before this day was through ... or whether she would find her love vindicated and fulfilled. With all his heart, he hoped it was the latter.

She asked me if I’d take care of Luke for the day ... while she waits.” Catherine sat cross-legged on the end of the big bed, watching the toddler stacking blocks on the threadbare carpet. When she looked up, her face was alight. “I mean, when I was Below the other day she deliberately came and sought me out. She could have asked anyone, Vincent. Marry, Lena, Rebecca ...”

“Any of them would have been glad to help,” he agreed, leaning forward in his reading chair. As they talked he couldn’t help but notice how the soft golden light from the stained-glass window, behind her, haloed her face and hair.

I haven’t seen much of Olivia this year,” she said, raising her eyes to his. “I’m hoping this, today, means she’s begun to forgive me.”

His blue eyes widened. “You did nothing wrong.”

“That doesn’t matter. I was part of something – no, let me finish – something that tore her family apart. And I don’t mean only her and Kanin; it caused a lot of dissent among the rest of you too.”

Vincent nodded. Too well he remembered the arguments aimed at trying to persuade Father to make an exception to one of their most basic rules. And in his mind’s eye he could still see Mouse, turning imploringly to Catherine with the plea no one else would voice, but all were thinking: “Let him go.”

“It was only natural for Olivia to feel hurt, and angry—”

“At all of us,” he murmured. His eyes fell again to the child playing at his feet, oblivious to the day’s importance.

“Olivia never mentioned it again, but ... I know she felt, at least in the beginning, that by not shielding Kanin we had all somehow betrayed them.”

“She could not allow herself to be angry with him, after all,” Vincent said of the man who had lived a lie among them for sixteen years. “And it was good that we could be here for her ... even for that. She was very reserved with us for some time after Kanin left to begin his sentence.” His voice betrayed none of the pain Catherine knew he’d felt, at being treated that way by his lifelong friend and childhood playmate. “We could accept her coldness – even her anger – so long as she did nothing foolish.”
“Like taking the baby and trying to live outside the perimeter,” Catherine suggested.
“Yes, but that would have been impossible without Kanin, and she realized that.”
“I’m glad she got over being angry,” she sighed.
“When Luke fell ill with fever,” he remembered, “Father stayed with them day and night. That was the turning point.”

With every appearance of robustness, Luke noisily demolished a block-tower, then grabbed hold of Vincent lifted the child up onto his knee.

Catherine watched him with the baby. His great, furred hands were so gentle with this tiny being; his face was alight and unguarded as he returned the youngster’s smile. Someday, Catherine thought, making no effort to shield her feelings; for the poignancy of her hopes here were no secret to either of them, and she could not have concealed them if she’d tried.

Vincent looked up, blue eyes meeting green enigmatically for a long moment; then both of them returned their attention to the child. “He’s grown so much since Kanin’s been away,” Catherine observed.

He nodded, not looking up. “Olivia says that since he started walking, he’s gotten into everything.”

Luke was looking up at Vincent with an adoration all the tunnel-children seemed to share. Impulsively he reached up and caught a fistful of gold-red strands of his hair, yanking enthusiastically. “Wellyow!”

“What?” asked Catherine.

“Yellow, I think.” Wincing, Vincent caught the baby’s hand in his much larger one.

Catherine grinned to see him trying to loosen Luke’s grip. “He has his father’s hands, apparently.”

“Are you going to be a stonemason, Luke?”

The child giggled and yanked again, enjoying the attention and ready to agree to anything. Catherine’s smile saddened. “This must have been the hardest part of all for Kanin.”

“Yes.” Freeing himself finally, Vincent set the boy gently on his feet again, and watched him toddle toward the bed. “W can only imagine what this year must have been like for him.”

“The one time I went to see him, he asked me not to come again. Said he didn’t want to see anyone he knew. Not even ... any of you.”

He nodded; it was a story he’d heard before. “Especially us. His shame was ... overwhelming for him.”

“I haven’t seen Mrs. Davis either,” Catherine said, “not since the sentencing.”

They watched Luke reach up over the side of the bed, first with one dimpled hand and then the other, now intent on seizing the trailing end of one of Catherine’s shoelaces. Vincent said, “I don’t suppose one ever really recovers from the loss of a child.”

“No,” she agreed, thinking inevitably of losses they too had suffered. “But at least, once Kanin came forward, there was a kind of – of closure.”
“For both of them, I hope. I sometimes suspect, when I think of Kanin chipping our chambers out of solid rock, that in working at the stone year after year, he was chipping at the mass of his own guilt.”

“I can’t imagine what it would be like to be responsible for the death of a child,” she said. “Even accidentally.”

“The boy that Kanin was, fled from it. The man that he became, paid the price.”

“As if he hadn’t been paying it anyway, in secret, during all his years Below.”

Vincent nodded. He could still hear the man’s voice, pleading, desperate. “A day doesn’t go by that I don’t think of it. There isn’t one thing I’ve done that isn’t in some way trying to make up for it ...” All the while knowing, as they did, that he couldn’t make up for it. But – “That’s my sentence. I’m already serving life.” And Vincent had thought, Then has our world been nothing more than a prison for you? He had looked to Olivia, seeing her stricken and torn, and wondered if she wondered it too. And perhaps, sixteen years before, Kanin’s life among them had begun that way. But now the man had a wife, a son, a life ... Until the District Attorney had reopened the case, and his file had ended up on Catherine’s desk. Driving Under the Influence. Vehicular Manslaughter. And the mother of the dead child pressing for resolution ... serving her own kind of sentence.

Kanin had told Vincent, “I’d walk into hell if it meant I wouldn’t have to face that woman!” But in the end, he had faced her ... then walked into hell anyway. Walked away from his life; from his wife, and from the ten-month-old son who meant everything to both of them. That had taken a special kind of bravery.

Coming back would require a courage equally rare.

Luke had caught one of the elusive shoelaces now; and crowing with triumph, was yanking at the bow. Catherine, laughing, leaned over to pull him up onto the bed, where she tickled the chortling child into submission.

From his chair Vincent watched them, smiling, his fingers laced across his middle. He thought, How natural she looks there ... and once again he was astonished and humbled that she would deny herself joys like this in her own life, simply because of her love for him.

“I know what your thinking,” Catherine warned him in a soft singsong voice, not raising her eyes.

Caught by surprise, he chuckled out loud; then got up and came to sit at the head of the bed. When Luke sat up again, Vincent caught him up in a great warm hug.

“Vincent?”

They looked up to see a young, fair-haired girl standing in the chamber doorway. “Lena,” Vincent greeted her with pleasure. “How are you?”

“Fine. Hi, Catherine.”

“Lena,” Catherine smiled. “Where’s little Cathy?
“With Mary.” The young woman stepped forward. “We’re taking some of the little kids down to the wading pools.”

Vincent cocked his head. “Is Naomi going?”

“Well ... She offered to ‘help’ with the babies.” Lena smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on her.” Like everyone else, she’d come to recognize that little orphan’s penchant for misadventure.

“Please tell her I said to keep away from the springs and the falls,” he said.

“I will,” she nodded, for only a warning from this particular source might keep the wayward waif out of some mischief there. “Listen, the reason I came is, I went to Olivia to ask if Luke could come along, and she said he could, if it’s okay with you. I’ll bring him back when we’re done...”

Vincent handed the child over, and Lena shifted him expertly onto her hip. “Are you excited about seeing your daddy again? Huh? I bet you are.” She looked up. “Has anybody heard anything?”

“Not yet.” Vincent shook his head. “But...”

“We’re still hoping,” finished Catherine, reassuringly.

Lena hesitated. “I heard ... Some people think he might not come back.”

“We can only wait and see, like everyone else,” Vincent said softly. “The sentries will let us know if he’s seen arriving. But...”

“I think he’ll come back.” Lena lifted her head with some of the optimism she’d picked up during her short time among them. “After all ... I did.”

When she’d gone, Vincent looked up to find Catherine watching him, her green eyes sparkling. She scooted closer over the quilt. “You do think he’ll come back, don’t you?”

His mouth quirked; he reached to take her small, warm hand in his. “And you?”

“I ... One minute, I look around at you all and your world and I think, How could he not come back? And the next, I realize how hard it would be for me, if I were in the same situation. You know ... to come back to people you’d lied to, people who knew your secrets and had seen you at your worst” saw you shamed.”

“People who love you,” he offered. “People who accept you as you are, for good or ill, and welcome you.”

“Before, when he was a fugitive, he felt he had to stay here in hiding,” she pointed out. “But now, he could go anywhere. He doesn’t have to come back.”

“No.” He shook his head, his face softening. “And yet I rather think that’s why he will.”

“And if he does?” she asked. “If he does come back? Are you all going to have a welcome-home party for him, or anything? I haven’t noticed any special preparations going on.”

“No,” he smiled. “Not a party. But we have thought of something. Listen, and tell me what you think ...”
The man waited for the gate to rumble shut behind him and checked to make sure it was secure before setting off down the tunnel. He was a tall man, but he walked slowly, big hands thrust into his pockets and his coat-collar shrugged up as though against a chill wind.

The ways change, he thought, noticing that a familiar passage had been bricked up, and a little-used one opened. At his feet, a “casual” scattering of pebbles that would never have been noticed by a topsider, told him which tunnel-entryways were currently in use. He walked on.

Gradually, as he began to recognize familiar sights and sounds, his pace quickened. Although he knew every sentry-post along the way and heard the notice of his coming being rapped out along the pipes, he never glanced toward any of the spy-holes or acknowledged the presence of those unseen watchers. He only walked determinedly forward, looking neither right nor left, like a man who’d thought about it for a long time and had made up his mind.

Vincent started to his feet with a soft exclamation of surprise.

“What is it?” whispered Catherine, behind him on the bed, watching the tension of his listening stance. She could hear the faint but rapid message being rapped out across the pipes.

Vincent gave a heartfelt sigh, his broad shoulders sagging with relief. “He’s been seen,” he told her, turning. “It’s going to be all right. He’s coming home.”

Catherine came off the bed and into his arms in one fluid movement. “Oh, I am so glad,” she breathed, torn between laughter and tears. For an instant, she envied them their reunion, as she had occasionally envied them their child and their marriage. And then, feeling Vincent’s arms tighten around her, she forgot that it was possible to envy anyone, anywhere, anything.

Alone in the great library-chamber, Father heard the signal, recognized the excitement even in the hurried tapping of it; heard it picked up and repeated on a dozen different systems, by at least that many hands.

*He’s back – Kanin’s come back – Been seen in the east tunnel – He looks fine –*
The old man came forward into the center of his chamber and stood there listening, a smile upon his face. Well, well, he thought. So, it’s going to be all right, after all.

There was the sound of running feet, out in the corridor. Kipper skidded into view, and caught hold of the short metal bannister to stop his momentum. (And for once, Father didn’t scold him.) “Father – he’s here! I saw him, Father!” Behind the boy came a rather breathless Mary; and finally, William, whose bulk all but filled the doorway.

“Yes, I heard he’s returned.” The patriarch turned his kindly but stern gaze on them. “Now I know we would all like to run in and welcome him home, but I want you to please remember what we agreed. Remind everyone you see. We must give them time to become ... reacquainted. All right?”

Olivia sat very still on the edge of the wide bed, her dark eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance. She’d tried to read; to finish the mending; to re-clean a chamber already spic-and-span. She’d brushed her hair until it shone, and changed her dress three times. Dozens of candles stood in their holders, that he himself had set into the stone of all these walls; she’d lit them, blown them out, and lit them again. She wanted this place to be ablaze with welcoming light when he arrived – and she was afraid that they’d burn away to nothing, if he ... if he hesitated.

She never knew how long she’d been sitting there, blind to her surroundings and deaf to the clamor of the pipes, when she realized that someone was standing quietly in the doorway.
Her eyes found his face and she came to her feet, her heart throbbing painfully against her ribs. “Kanin,” she whispered.

“Livvy —” He stood there as if he were afraid to move; afraid to shatter some dream or vision that had appeared unexpectedly before his eyes. Olivia’s first thought was, He’s so pale; and her second, that there was more gray in his dark curly hair than there had been when he left, although he was only thirty-eight. He stood there looking at her with his heart in his eyes, his boyish mouth trembling; and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to soothe away that pain. She held out her arms and he came into them.

Much later they lay on the big bed together, still fully clothed, still content to talk and touch and warm each other with their rekindling love. Earlier in the afternoon Vincent had brought Luke back to them – a very damp and drowsy Luke – and after that reunion, his father had put him to bed in a crib that was larger than the cradle they’d been using when he’d left.

“Do you think he remembers me?” he whispered to Olivia now, his face just inches from hers on the pillow.

“Of course, he did,” she reassured him, although it had been impossible to tell. “You’re his father.”

“He’s so beautiful, Livvy,” Kanins said again, his eyes drifting past her shoulder toward that now twenty-month-old stranger sleeping in the crib-corner. “You’ve done a wonderful job with him.” He didn’t ask if it had been hard; he knew it must have been.

“Everyone helped.” She reached up to stroke his face.

“I’m glad you’re not still angry with them. It wasn’t their fault, what happened. It was mine.”

“I couldn’t stay mad,” she confessed. “They were all trying so hard to … to make it up to me somehow.”

“Some things,” he said, “you really can’t make up for.”

“I know,” she answered, knowing too that he spoke not of her, but of himself. She searched his face for some sign of the torment that had been there when he left. “But it’s all over now. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Was she asking for his reassurance, or reassuring him? He couldn’t quite tell. “If that’s true,” he said, “then where is everyone?” For, aside from Vincent, they had seen no one since his arrival. Kanin wasn’t sure whether he should feel good or bad about this. Although he had, in a way, dreaded seeing any of the tunnelfolk again, he hadn’t expected to be so soundly ignored by them either. “Even the pipes are quiet.”

“I don’t know.” She squeezed the large calloused hand she held in hers. “Does it matter?”

“Of course, it matters.” He leaned forward and kissed her gently. “Coming back here – to you, and to them – was all I ever thought about, the whole time I was … away.” He’d refused to speak to her of his life in prison, except in generalities. “I was afraid.”

“I know.” Her soft brown eyes held his.
“After the way I deceived everybody, all those years, what if they’ve decided they don’t –”
“No.” Olivia wouldn’t countenance the expression of such a thought. “Vincent welcomed you, didn’t he? He was so glad to see you.”

That was true, Kanin reflected. Livvy had taken the baby, and reintroduced him to his son; and after those first overwhelming moments, he’d realized that Vincent had withdrawn discreetly to the chamber doorway, but was still here. He’d come forward then and taking Kanins’ hands, had drawn him into a powerful embrace. After Livvy herself and Luke, Kanin thought now, he could have had no finer welcome. “But where are the others? They must know I’m here by now.”

“It’ll be all right,” she said again, but suddenly felt unsure, herself. He was right; if that were true, then where was everyone?

As if at some long-awaited signal, there was a sound in the corridor outside; feet noisily shuffled, a throat politely cleared. Kanin and Olivia, with startled looks at one another, got up hastily and straightened their clothing.

“May was come in?” came Catherine’s voice.

“Yes, please,” Olivia called out uncertainly.

When she and Vincent came in, Catherine went straight to Kanin with a shy smile. “Hello, Kanin,” she said softly, taking his hands and leaning upward to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

Plainly a little startled, he embraced her briefly and let her go. “Catherine …?”

“It’s nearly suppertime,” she told them. “Unless you’ve made other plans, we were hoping you’d join us.”

“Us?” Kanin looked from one of them to the other.

“But first,” Vincent said gravely, “I’m afraid there is some unfinished business that must be taken care of.”

“Unfinished business?” Olivia repeated faintly.

“Yes. A Council meeting.”

Kanin reached for his wit’s hand. “What about?”

“There’s a new arrival in our midst,” Vincent answered enigmatically. “You know that in such cases, a Council vote of confirmation is always required.”

Kanin’s honest eyes narrowed; he hung bac suspicously. “A ‘new arrival’? Look, I don’t know what you –”

“Come.” Vincent put his hand, warmly, on the other man’s shoulder. “You and Olivia are expected.”
When they entered the great library-chamber, silence fell at once over the gathering. Kanin, carrying a drowsy Luke down the short metal stair, turned uneasily to Vincent. “I thought you said it was a Council meeting.” For it was immediately clear to him that in addition to the Council members, nearly everyone he could ever remember seeing Below was also in attendance. The place was crowded with people; adults and children alike, they were sitting in chairs, on stacks of books, on the carpet, on the winding stair-case. At a glance he picked out William, Cullen, Mouse, Old Sam – dozens of his old friends, people he loved, and had missed, and to see that even old Elizabeth, whom he hadn’t seen since finishing her new “gallery” two years previously, had made a rare journey from her beloved Painted Tunnels.

He felt Olivia’s hand on his arm; and with his free hand he gave it what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Every face in the chamber was turned in their direction; every eye in the place was fixed on them. Some of the children could be heard, tittering with excitement. “What is this?” He demanded of the familiar figure standing in the center of it all.

“Patience, my boy, patience,” Father answered. “All in good time.” He straightened, assuming his most serious expression and an almost visible mantle of authority. “It has come to our attention,” he said portentously, “that there is a new arrival in our midst. And as you all know, a Council vote is required before he can be allowed to remain. Kanin and Olivia, step forward.”

Olivia was looking at him as though he’d lost his mind. “A ‘new arrival’? What on earth are you talking about? Kanin’s lived with us for sixteen years! You’re acting as though he’s a stranger!”

“In effect,” Father answered, both hands clasped atop his walking-stick, “he is a stranger.”

“But he only left us –”

“A fugitive,” he answered, though not unkindly. “One who gave up his place among us willingly. He comes among us now, a new man.” He studied the younger man, standing tensely before him with the toddler dozing in his arms. Unknown to Kanin, and despite his size and strength, to his friends it was a pose that made him seem terribly vulnerable.

“Now, Kanin. As a new arrival petitioning to come and live in our world, you must realize that our resources are limited. Just what do you feel you would be able to offer our community?”

Kanin looked at him blankly. “Offer?”

“I’ve been given to understand,” Father patiently intoned, to the man who’d carved half their living-chambers out of solid rock, “that you’re a stonemason.”

Kanin felt Olivia squeeze his hand, and finally registered the children’s muffled giggles of delight. Something here was not just as it seemed ... but it had been a long day and an even longer year, and he hardly dared to hope. He tightened his hold on Luke, as though the boy were a kind of anchor in these uncertain seas. “Uh ... yes, that’s right,” he said dazedly. “A stonemason.”

“And are you a good stonemason?”
"I ... I think I am." He lifted his head with a vestige of the pride he once had felt. "Yes."

"Is there anyone here," the patriarch went on, "who can verify this fellow's skill?"

Vincent stepped forward. "I can. I've worked with him often, and hope to again."

"Very well." Father gripped his cane afresh, the very picture of scowling solemnity. "I've also been told that he's a family man. Would anyone here care to speak to that? -- Not you, dear; I'm afraid you are partial," he said to Olivia, who gaped at him in disbelief. "Anyone else?"

"I would." Catherine stepped forward to take Vincent's hand, smiling reassuringly at the bewildered couple before them. "Kanin is a good husband and provider, and a wonderful father ... Father."

"I see. Then we have only one final matter to resolve." He paused, dramatically, as though to gather his thoughts. "As you know, Kanin, our rules require that someone among us speak for a new arrival; stand up for him, as it were, and sponsor his entry into this new life. This is more than a mere show of confidence. It is a grave responsibility, one which implies total faith in the newcomer; faith, and the belief that the new addition will prove to be in the best interests of us all ... individually, and as a community." He looked sternly around at the collected tunnelfolk. "Keeping all of this in mind, who among you wishes to stand up for this man?"

The sounds of muffled mirth and small stirrings faded. The large chamber was filled with an electric, breathless silence. Olivia moved to put her arm around her husband and child. Fearing the worst, Kanin bowed his head, his cheek brushing Luke's hair --
Someone cleared his throat, a little diffidently. The couple looked up, startled, and saw the pipemaster getting slowly to his feet. “Pascal,” Kanin exclaimed – but there was movement elsewhere in the chamber as well. He turned to discover Mary rising too.

Rebecca stood up next, followed by Cullen and Lena.
Not to be outdone, Mouse leapt to attention. Brooke and Jamie joined him.
Children began popping up all over the chamber like jack-in-the-boxes: Kipper and Eric, Samantha and Lana, Julio, Geoffrey and Naomi.
William lumbered to his feet.
And Old Sam.
Then Sarah, Zach and Elizabeth.
One after another, every single one of them stood up, until finally the whole community was on its feet and wreathed in smiles.
After a moment Father said, very softly, “Well, there you have it.”
A ragged cheer went up, dissolving into talk and laughter as they began to come forward, singly, in pairs and small groups. With hugs and handshakes, kisses and congratulations they welcomed Kanin home, surrounding him with a warmth he’d remembered and longed for, in spite of himself, during all his months Above in the topsider prison.
Someone gave Olivia a handkerchief; she blotted her eyes gratefully. Kanin held his head high, but Catherine could see that he was blinking back tears. She felt Vincent’s arms encircling her from behind. Leaning back into his warmth she whispered, “It’s going to be all right.”

“... Yes.”

She covered his hands, where they crossed her middle, with her own. Soft, short hair tickled her palms. “Look at them. So much in love ... so happy to be back together.”

And it was true that, throughout all the greetings and excitement of this reunion, Kanin and Olivia had been careful not to lose their hold on one another. Vincent chuckled to see that Luke, who’d become convinced that all this attention was somehow directed at him, was now flinging himself toward every friend who came forward, bestowing wet kisses with great freedom and enthusiasm. Kanin maintained a precarious hold on the toddler’s legs.

“Well, Kanin,” Father said, finally. “What do you think?”

“You planned this ... all of you.” He was shaking his head, his eyes full of more than tears. “I can hardly believe it.”

“Wanted to welcome you,” Mouse told him. “Welcome you home.”

“You did that, all right.” He took the handkerchief his wife offered, and unashamedly blew his nose. Then he looked to Vincent, who had been so instrumental, the year before, in persuading him to surrender himself to the authorities. “You knew, didn’t you? I mean, about how I felt about coming back.”

Vincent nodded. “We talked about it ... and we realized you might be feeling some uncertainty regarding your place here.”

“And we felt a need, ourselves,” Father added, “to welcome you back in a way that would leave no lingering doubt in your mind.” He cocked his head, his faded blue eyes twinkling. “Have we succeeded?”

“You had me going, there, for a minute after we got here.” Kanin smiled, a little ruefully. “But... coming home is all I thought about for months. Could I? Couldn’t I? What would it be like? Could we live anywhere else? Would we want to? ... And as I longed to see all of your faces again —” and his eyes swept the gathering “—I dreaded it too.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Vincent murmured. “Was it?”

“No ... but after what happened – the way I left – I was afraid that none of you would ...”

“We’re all very glad,” Mary said, beaming, “that you had the courage to come and find out.”

“I spent so much of my life being afraid,” Kanin said slowly, pulling Olivia closer. “I ran away from my life Above, because I was afraid. I almost ran away from my life here, once I was found out, because I was afraid ... and ashamed.”

But you didn’t run away,” Vincent pointed out. “You faced your troubles honestly ... one might even say, nobly.”
Kanin shook his head. “I … I didn’t feel very noble. And then, when I realized I was afraid to come back here …” He took a deep breath. “Well, I just didn’t want to keep making the same mistake over and over again.”

“Then,” Catherine asked, “you learned from the experience?”

“Oh, yes,” Kanin said softly. “Many things.”

“Well,” Father said briskly, after a moment. “Be that as it may … we were hoping the three of you would sup with us, this first night. From the way William’s begun to glower over there, I think we can assume our meal is getting cold. Why don’t you come and eat? You must be famished.”

“Thanks, I – I think I am, all of a sudden.”

“Excellent, excellent.” Limping forward, the old man clapped Kanin on the shoulder. “And afterwards, I promise we’ll leave you both quite alone for as long as you like.”

Watching them begin the exodus toward the door, Vincent stood quietly with his arms around Catherine. He let his friends and fellows break around them like a tide; and if any among them noticed, it was only with nods and covert smiles.

( -- Except for Naomi; who, looking back to discover her two favorite people lagging, would gladly have come back to keep them company. Mary and Rebecca, between them, were just able to shepherd the reluctant child safely up the stair and out the door.)

Catherine leaned back into Vincent’s warmth, her arms crossed over his.

“You’re smiling,” he murmured; for he could feel it just as clearly as though he could see her face.

“Do you think they’re really going to get any privacy, over the next few days?”

“You heard what Father said.”

“Yes,” she chuckled, “I heard what Father said.” She turned in his arms, smiling up into his face, her small hands braced warmly on his chest. “I asked you what you thought.”

“I think,” Vincent said solemnly, “that before they even clear the tables tonight, Father will have thought of at least three projects we’ve been forced to put off, solely for the lack of a skilled stonemason.”

“And he’ll mention these –”

“—In all innocence, certainly,” Vincent answered. “Nothing that needs to be taken care of immediately, you understand.”

“I understand,” she grinned. “And Kanin, who you said wasn’t ever idle a day after coming to live Below –” (but who, they both knew, had been a victim of enforced idleness during all his months away) “—will bring out his tools tomorrow morning, just to see what kind of shape they’re in …”

“And he’ll soon be back at work,” Vincent said, his own mouth curving with a rueful humor. “I’m certain even Olivia expects it. And … it will be good to hear the sounds of his chisel ringing through the tunnels once again.”
Catherine grew more serious. “I know that you’ve missed him.”

“We’ve been friends since he first came here.” Vincent gazed off over her shoulder, into the memory-distance. “We were ... almost of an age, he and I – and yet our friendship took me by surprise. We had nothing in common, or so I thought.”

Catherine reached up and smoothed a stray strand of hair away from his cheek. She thought of those two young men, seemingly so different, working side by side through the long silences of their respective, terrible secrets. Kanin’s past ... and Vincent’s very existence. “Kanin had the courage to face his truth,” she reminded him now, not unmindful of certain parallels.

“And then to come back here, where love waited,” he mused. “I sometimes think that took more courage than leaving did.”

“Vincent.” She was still looking up at him, and in her face he could see a hint of the smile he’d sensed through the bond; a smile that lit the depths of her smoky green eyes, and softened her full lips. She pressed closer, willing away melancholy, and his hands tightened at her waist. “Vincent, it was a happy ending – or a happy beginning. They deserve it, don’t you think?”

“I do,” he answered softly.

“And if they deserve it, then surely –”

“Hey,” came a piping interruption from the door. “Hey, are you guys finished yet?”

“Naomi,” Vincent sighed, bowing his head to Catherine’s for just an instant before they turned. The little girl was poised uncertainly at the top of the entry-stair, and he fixed her with a stern blue gaze. “Hey, you guys?”

“Are you finished yet?” she asked again, undaunted. “Because it’s suppertime, you know.”

“We know,” Catherine smiled.

Naomi looked as though she might be considering swinging a leg over the short bannister; Vincent cleared his throat, and she looked up at him a little mutinously before letting it go “We’ll, Father said you’re late, and I should come and get you.”

“Did he.” As he spoke, Vincent was fully aware of Catherine smothering mirth at his side. “He said you’re missing all the fun.”

“Not all of it,” Vincent said gravely. “Now, why don’t you go ahead, and we’ll be along –”

“But you’re late,” she insisted, shaking her bright flyaway curls. “You never let me be late.”

“That’s true, Vincent,” Catherine murmured at his shoulder. “What kind of example are you trying to set?”

He glanced down at her sharply; but she’d ducked her head, and a soft wing of light brown hair swung forward to hide her face. He returned his attention to the little girl. “Naomi –”

“Father said,” she reminded him plaintively. “And besides ... your chairs are empty, and I been missing you.”
“You heard her, Vincent –” He felt Catherine’s elbow in his ribs; her voice was full of laughter. “Father said.” And then she was taking his great hand in hers, pulling him toward the stair and the door above it.

“To supper?” he asked resignedly, allowing himself to be led.

Naomi sang out, “Last one there is a rotten egg!”

“Oh?” Vincent lunged up the several steps, and the child fled before him out into the corridor, giggling. Turning then, he reached down for Catherine and simply lifted her up the staisteps to his side.

“Vincent!” she said, a little breathlessly.

He was pleased at the way surprise widened her eyes. Impulsively he bent his head to brush her smooth, blushing cheek with his gold-bristled one. Straightening then, he took her hand and tucked it securely beneath his arm. “To supper?” he asked again, his voice low.

“To supper,” she smiled and leaning her head on his shoulder as they went out, she happily matched her pace to his.
Farewell
By Anony Mouse

We hope it took your breath away,
You wandered, and got 'lost'
Exploring “Peace Between The Walls,”
Not counting any cost.

We hope the writing made you smile.
We hope the art went well.
We hope the feelings still remain
Long after this farewell.

For all that starts must have a stop,
Even if the play's the thing.
A heart beats true; it's all for you.
"Shakespeare Knew Everything."

We hope the road bends back again
And sees you here next year.
We hope the time between is kind
And gives you no more tears.

But if you long for Tunnel Peace
And you can't wait 'til then,
Just turn back to "Invitation"
And you can start again.
Thank you to all of the authors, artists, beta readers, and editors who have so lovingly and selflessly shared their talents to make this anniversary Onzine so special.

by Rosemarie Hauer