

Beauty and the **B**east 39th Anniversary 2026



Together Forever
Volume X
TreasureChambers.com
September 25, 2026

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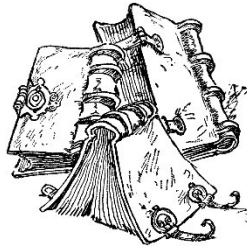
eauty and the east
39th Anniversary 2026

Together Forever
Volume X
I Had Thee as a Dream

TreasureChambers.com
September 25, 2026

Featuring stories, art, and poetry, inspired by the characters
created by **Ron Koslow** and so beautifully brought to life

by **Linda Hamilton** and **Ron Perlman**
from 1987-1990



A Treasure Chambers Publication

Acknowledgements

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Angie



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PearlAnn SnowStar

Katrina Relf

Judith Nolan

Ma Grizzy

Mel



Letter from the Chief Editor

Dear Fans,

Welcome to 10th annual Treasure Chambers Fan Zine celebrating the wonderful show, **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**. I'm honored and humbled by the creativity that this show continues to inspire each year. I wish to thank all those who contributed this year and helped to make this zine a reality this year.

To Barbara Anderson: You deserve a special round of applause from all of us, as your work starting the zine (and your past years of work) was a huge help. As everyone knows, the first step is always the hardest, I merely followed your lead and kept the same, if simpler at times, zine.

And to those who just enjoy the gifts offered here, each one of you helps to keep the dream alive and makes it worth the effort it takes to create this zine and the Celebration Page - praising ALL seasons of this show in whatever way we wish.

So, we know that when we create something, it isn't just being thrown into an empty and dark void, but is instead read and cherished by those who also love all these great characters, brought to life by the fabulous cast and crew, who helped breath life into the fairy tale.

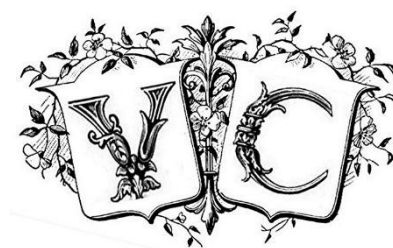
May we continue to keep finding the light in the darkness and come together as one family in these tunnels, which are kept warm by friends.



Your Editor,

Mel

Table of Contents



Acknowledgements.....	iv
Letter from the Chief Editor.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii

Classic

The Ways Change by Anon E Mouse.....	10
Digital Art by Ma Grizzly.....	12
Digital Art by Mel.....	13
God Created Father by Erma Bombeck.....	14
Drawing by Katrina Relf.....	15
A Sonnet for Solace by Angie.....	16
Digital Art by Judith Nolan	19
Arthur the Hero by Judith Nolan.....	20
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	23
Nobody's Child by Christine Cunningham.....	24
Digital Art by Judith Nolan	27
Stars by Angie.....	28
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	31
O Little One So Small by Inez Paskal.....	32
Digital Art contributed by Judith Nolan	33
Loose Ends by Anonymous.....	34
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	59
Happy Father's Day, My Love (Poem) by Jackie Kapke.....	60

Digital Art by Michaela	61
The Unintended Lesson by Judith Nolan.....	62
Digital Art by Michaela....	66
One of Mouse's Adventures by PearlAnn SnowStar.....	67
Digital Art by Mel.....	76
The Queen Of May by Judith Nolan.....	76
Digital Art by Michaela	86
Heart Laid Bare by Gwen Lord.....	87
Digital Art by Mel.....	91
Tunnel Gifts by Judith Nolan.....	92
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	100
The Code by Anonymous.....	101
Digital Art by Michaela.....	163
The Christmas List (According to Mouse) by Judith Nolan.....	164
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	171
To Explain The Impossible by Inez Paskal.....	172
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	177
Mouse Needs Help by Judith Nolan.....	178
Digital Art by Mel.....	185
The Winter Light by Judith Nolan.....	186
Digital Art by Mel.....	198
The Music Box by Judith Nolan.....	199
Digital Art by Mel.....	204
When The Bough Breaks by Anonymous.....	205
Digital Art by Mel.....	212
Vincent by Margret Mansfield.....	213
Digital Art by Ma Grizzy.....	215

She's Not Dead (SND)

Digital Art by Mel.....	215
Still Here by Janet Rivenbark.....	216
Digital Art by Mel.....	268

Alternate Universe

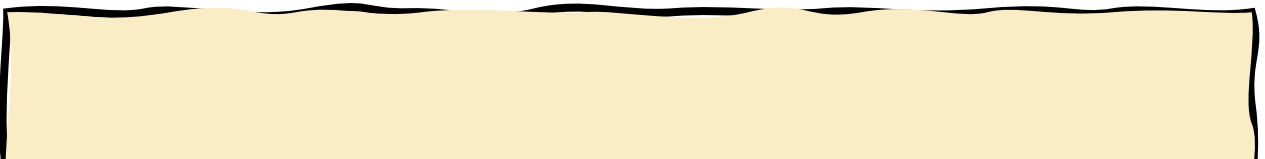
Digital Art by Michaela	269
A New Beginning by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova (C/V , Diana appears as a friend)	270
Digital Art by Michaela	314

Season 3 and Beyond

Digital Art by Mel.....	315
Stepmothers by Mel.....	316
Digital Art by Judith Nolan.....	319
The Green Dress; A Second Chance by Jackie Kapke.....	320
Digital Art by Mel	337
A Match (Dabble)	338
Digital Art by Judith Nolan	339
Classics vs Diana by Mel.....	340
Digital Art by Judith Nola m.....	343
A Picture in the Dark (S3 Round Robin) by multiple authors.....	344
Digital Art by Mel.....	390

Plot Bunnies Story Garden

Plot Bunnies by multiple authors	391
The Ways Change, Farewell by Anon E. Mouse.....	392
The End by Barbara Anderson.....	394
Digital Art by Mel.....	395
Literary References	396



The way changes



Or toss a coin
In the Great Falls
Or in a wishing well.
You can climb down
A spiral stair,
Or up a city steeple,
Come in by ones,
Or twos, or threes...
You're our kind of people!
It doesn't matter
How you come,
Not where, not when, not how.
Just know
Can change, my dears...
Shall we explore them now?



DIGITAL ART

by Ma Grizzly



Classic

by Mel



GOD CREATED FATHER

by Erma Bombeck

(from CHAMBER CAMEOS - Vol 2 Issue 6)

When the good lord was creating fathers, he started with a tall frame.

And a female angel nearly said, 'What kind of a father is that? If you're going to make children so close to the ground, why have you put fathers up so high? He won't be able to shoot marbles without kneeling, tuck a child in bed without bending, or ever kiss a child without a lot of stooping.'

And God smiled and said, 'Yes, but if I make him child-size, who would children have to look up to?'

And when God made a father's hands, they were large and sinewy.

And the angel shook her head sadly and said, 'Do you know what you're doing? Large hands are clumsy. They can't manage diaper pins, small buttons, rubber bands on ponytails or even remove splinters caused by baseball bats.'

And God smiled and said, 'I know, but they're large enough to hold everything a small boy empties from his pockets at the end of a day... yet small enough to cup a child's face in his hands.'

And then God molded long, slim legs and broad shoulders.

And the angel nearly had a heart attack. 'Boy, this is the end of the week, all right,' she clucked. 'Do you realize you just made a father without a lap? How is he going to pull a child close to him without the kid falling between his legs?'

And God smiled and said, "A mother needs a lap. A father needs strong shoulders to pull a sled, balance a boy on a bicycle, or hold a sleepy head on the way home from the circus.'

God was in the middle of creating two of the largest feet anyone had ever seen when the angel could contain herself no longer. 'That's not fair. Do you honestly think those large boats are going to dig out of bed early in the morning when the baby cries? Or walk through a small birthday party without crushing at least three of the guests?'

And God smiled and said, 'They'll work. You'll see. They'll support a small child who wants

to ride a horse to Banbury Cross or scare off mice at the summer cabin or display shoes that will be a challenge to fill.'

God worked on, giving the father few words but a firm, authoritative voice and eyes that saw everything but remained calm and tolerant. Finally, almost as an afterthought, He added tears. Then He turned to the angel and said, 'Now, are you satisfied that he can love as much as a mother?'

The angel shutteth up



DRAWING

by Katrina Relf



A Sonnet for Solace

by Angie

How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow,

- Sonnet 93, William Shakespeare

Lisa was above and would not be returning below after the trial. She had told Catherine that she had decided to retire to New York, where in time she would start teaching children to dance.

Vincent was happy for her and, having seen her address the tunnel children when she first returned, he was sure she would be a good teacher. She could use her own experiences, both the good and the bad, to make sure prospective dancers knew not just the work and the joys, but also the dangers of patronage and being a rich man's 'trophy'.

His own feelings towards her were... complicated. He had loved her once, and suffered for it, but he was much older and wiser now, and yet he could not completely discard what he once felt, even as he loved Catherine far more than he could ever have loved Lisa.

He was sitting in front of his journal, as he often did after day's end, wondering how to put this into words. He idly picked up his copy of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and tried to get his thoughts in order. Yes, there was a sonnet which spoke to him now. He tried to remember the number – ninety something – and leafed through those until he found it. Yes, it was Sonnet XCIII – 93.

*"So shall I live, supposing thou art true,
Like a deceived husband; so love's face
May still seem love to me, though alter'd new;
Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place:"*

Vincent sighed. So many years had passed between her leaving the tunnels as a teenager and her return as a mature woman with a worldwide reputation and career as a dancer. He was not really surprised that she had changed, but her attempts to remind him of those earlier days, before she left, had been painful – and he realized later, not what they had seemed. Sadly, she had been trying to hide from what she had done Above, what she had made of her life with a rich criminal and his henchman.

And yet ...

*“For there can live no hatred in thine eye,
Therefore in that I cannot know thy change.
In many’s looks, the false heart’s history
Is writ in moods, and frowns, and wrinkles strange.”*

There was no question, she was not just a very talented dancer. The years had not worn her. She had talked as if their relationship was current, although she knew it was not, and knew that he knew it too. She had berated him for being too serious ... until he had felt Catherine in danger and had left abruptly, her accusation unanswered.

He could not deny, or even try to diminish her beauty, her effect on him, despite her having put his Catherine at risk by her actions. How could he blame her for being what she was, a beautiful woman who knew her worth and used it? From his small experience and what he read in newspapers, she was not alone in doing this. It was likely what many aging female artists did as they felt their talents and years of work diminishing. Survival took many forms. Nevertheless ...

*“But heaven in thy creation did decree
That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
Whate’er thy thoughts, or thy heart’s workings be,
Thy looks should nothing thence, but sweetness tell.”*

Lisa would always be beautiful to him, he realized at last. She would visit the tunnels when she wished - Father had welcomed her and insisted - but would she? She might take some tunnel children as students, returning to the community what they had done for her. That was the kind of gesture he knew she could do easily, and would.

For the rest, he could not be fooled again, and she knew it. She had apologized to him for trying to use him, and he had accepted that apology. Beautiful women could not be disliked because they used what they had.

*“How like Eve’s apple doth thy beauty grow,
If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show!”*

Again, Shakespeare had revealed the answer he had been seeking, the truth of what he really wanted. He did not want the old Lisa back, or the new one to replace her. He valued her as a friend, one who perhaps understood him better than he gave her credit for.

Catherine understood. He could put the fears and sorrow behind him now. Lisa was gone, again, beyond him. Their friendship had taken on a new life, a different life, now that he need not dwell on that past.

He could move forward again, with Catherine.

END



DIGITAL ART

A.I Art by Judith Nolan



Arthur the Hero

Judith Nolan

Nobody agreed precisely when it happened. The story changed depending on who told it.

By the time it reached the farthest chambers, Arthur had reportedly fought six attackers, rescued three children, prevented a cave-in, and personally carried Mouse to Father for treatment. The truth was somewhat different.

It began when Mouse returned from Above with a torn sleeve, a bruised shoulder, and a dramatic tale involving a broken bicycle, two policemen, and a duck.

The duck had apparently won. Mouse sat upon a stool in the Mousehole while Father cleaned a shallow cut on his arm.

Arthur watched closely. Very closely. The raccoon sat on his haunches with both black paws folded neatly across his furry stomach.

Father smiled. "See? Arthur is worried."

Arthur leaned forward. Mouse winced as Father applied disinfectant. "Ouch."

Arthur sniffed again.

Father nodded approvingly. "He's checking on you."

Arthur suddenly lunged. Straight at the bandage. "Arthur! Give that back!"

The raccoon seized the end of the dressing and attempted to run away with it. Father caught him midway across the chamber.

"Never mind," Father sighed. "Perhaps not."

※※※※※

A week later, the story grew. Children began telling everyone that Arthur protected Mouse.

That he guarded him constantly. That he could sense danger. That he was practically a four-legged guardian angel.

Arthur was not four-legged at the moment. He was upside down inside a rubbish bin. His hind feet protruded from the top while the rest of him searched determinedly for food.

Mouse walked past. "Okay, good, okay, fine."

Arthur ignored him.

Mouse stopped. “You know, people think you’re a hero.”

Arthur’s tail twitched.

“Vincent said you always know where I am.”

Arthur located half a doughnut. This was considerably more interesting.

Mouse nodded. “Probably true.”

The raccoon emerged triumphantly, covered in newspaper but holding his prize.

Mouse smiled. “Because you know where snacks are.”

Arthur chittered proudly. At last. Someone understood. He ate his treat with extra relish.



The legend reached absurd proportions after an unfortunate rehearsal in the community chamber. Mary was directing a small play. A very serious play, but also a dramatic play. She adored the Bard and was always keen to promote Shakespeare’s works to the tunnel folk.

This play was the sort involving danger and sacrifice. Mouse had been roped in to help when he did not leave the dining room quickly enough. This proved unwise.

“Lie still,” Mary instructed. “You’re supposed to be badly injured.”

Mouse nodded. “Okay, good...”

He lay down and closed his eyes. Someone nearby applied theatrical blood under Mary’s instructions. It ended up being a great deal of theatrical blood. Far more than seemed necessary.

Arthur arrived halfway through, still on the hunt for neglected treats. He stopped and stared. His black nose twitched. The chamber fell silent.

Everyone waited and watched. Surely, now they would witness Arthur’s devotion to his master. His deep, animal concern and love for Mouse.

The raccoon hurried forward to his fallen master. Mary dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Arthur climbed directly onto Mouse’s chest and stared deeply into his face.

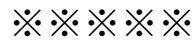
Mouse grinned and whispered, “There. See?”

Arthur ignored him completely. The raccoon lowered his head and began enthusiastically licking the fake blood from Mouse’s soft leather shirt.

The chamber exploded with laughter. Mouse laughed so hard he ruined the entire scene.

Mary sat down heavily. Father covered his face. Even Vincent could not stop smiling.

Arthur looked up in confusion. He had solved the problem. The red stuff was gone. Everyone ought to be pleased.



That evening, Mouse sat beside Arthur in the Mousehole. The raccoon slept curled against his leg.

Mouse stroked the soft fur thoughtfully. "You know..."

Arthur snored.

"Everyone keeps getting you wrong."

The raccoon twitched one ear.

"They think you're brave."

Another twitch.

"They think you're noble."

Arthur farted quietly in his sleep.

Mouse nodded. "Exactly."

He smiled. Then carefully draped a blanket over his friend. "But I love you anyway."

Arthur continued sleeping.

Dreaming, no doubt, of biscuits, stolen cake, and red cornflour paste. The things heroes are truly made of.



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



Nobody's Child

by Christine Cunningham

SEASON ONE

Father looked with compassion at the child Vincent held in his arms. "Where did you find him? Lay him down so I can take a look." Vincent relinquished his burden and stood back. The child, a boy, lay rigidly on the table, his eyes wide open, unblinking. "He's almost catatonic, Vincent. Something very bad must have occurred to cause such trauma. Have you any idea what happened?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, I was on my way to Catherine when I found him wandering aimlessly in the park. There was no one around, and he looked right through me when I picked him up. How old do you think he is?"

Father looked the boy over and shrugged. "I'm not sure. He appears well fed and healthy enough. About eight or nine, I would say." He tried to get a response from the child, but there was nothing, no reaction. "We'll keep him here for now. See if Catherine can find out anything. There may have been an accident of some sort, and people could already be looking for him."

Vincent was late. Catherine expected him over an hour ago. She was about to go back inside when he appeared, obviously upset about something.

"What's wrong, Vincent?" She asked in concern.

He leaned against the balcony, looking out over the vastness that was New York. "On my way to you tonight, I found a child in the park. He is Below now, with Father. He is in deep shock, Catherine. He cannot or will not speak, so we have no way of knowing what may have happened." He sighed so heavily. "He is only a baby. Too small to suffer such trauma, and there seems to be nothing we can do."

She knew how much Vincent suffered when children were in need. "What can I do to help?"

He thanked her with his eyes. "Can you try to find out if there has been an accident, or if there has been a report of a missing child? Someone must know something."

She stroked his arm. "Don't worry so, Vincent. I'll do all I can, but it will have to wait until the morning. I'll keep the radio on, just in case."

She could sense that although he was standing right beside her, his thoughts were back home.

It was where he really wanted to be. "Go on, Vincent, go back. Do what you can for the child. He is more important than us right now."

He hated to leave her. Their times together were so few, but he was grateful for her understanding. "I am sorry, Catherine. I will be back tomorrow, I promise."

The next day Catherine scoured the newspapers looking for any clue as to the identity of the child, but there was nothing. The radio had offered little hope either. Even at the precinct there had been no reports of any incident involving a missing child. No one had reported him missing. It was as though he had come from nowhere. '*Nobody's child*,' she thought sadly.

After she had finished work for the day, she went Below.

Her heart went out to the small boy looking so lost in the big bed. "Is there any improvement, Father?"

He shook his head despondently. "None. Have you any news, Catherine?"

She sat beside the bed and held the small hand in her own. There was no response. "I've checked the radio, read the papers from cover to cover, and even checked with the police and hospitals. There is nothing, Father. No one has reported any child of his age missing, kidnapped or anything. He's from nowhere it would seem."

Vincent paced the chamber. He was angry. "This child must belong somewhere; someone must know him." He stopped his pacing abruptly. "He could have been abandoned. That could be why there is no report on him. It's possible, even if it does sound inhuman."

Catherine and Father looked at each other. "He could be right, Catherine. We have children here that were left on the streets by their parents. Either they were drug addicts or prostitutes, unable or unwilling to look after them. It does happen. Even when he comes out of this shock, he will probably block out everything that went before." The three of them fell silent, each thinking that children should never have to suffer so.

Vincent stayed with him almost continuously, talking to him, asking questions, hoping for some spark of reaction, but it was useless. The other children came to visit and brought all kinds of gifts for the boy, but they lay untouched on the bed.

Up Above, Catherine had tried everything she could think of to help, and as the days passed, she came to realize that no one would claim the child. She was also concerned that Vincent was becoming obsessed with the boy and decided to speak with Father about it.

Entering the tunnel that night, Catherine heard a small cry. She looked around and there, in the shadows, found a kitten, bedraggled and hungry. "Oh, you sweet thing. Are you lost too?"

She bent down and picked up the mewling bundle. The kitten, finding somewhere safe and warm, burrowed into Catherine's arms. She smiled and gently stroked the matted fur. *Strange how stroking the coat of an animal make you feel better*, she thought. And with that thought came another. She hurried through the tunnels to find Father.

"Father, look what I've found. Do you think if I gave it to the boy...?"

He slapped the table with his hands. "Catherine, this may be the answer. I've read that people in shock or even those in comas, respond more to animals than people. Come, let's try."

They made their way to Vincent's chamber, their hopes high. Vincent was there, and he rose to greet them. "I'm glad to see you, Catherine. What have you got there?"

She lifted the kitten from the crook of her arm and said, "I found it in the tunnel entrance. Father and I thought it might help. It's worth a try."

He gently took the kitten from her and prayed it would work. "Look what we've brought you. He has no one either. Would you be his friend?" With those words, he placed the kitten in the boy's hands and waited.

The silence in the chamber was deafening as they each hoped and prayed it would work. Suddenly it came. A flicker of an eye. The movement of a hand over the kitten's back. Receiving so much attention, the kitten began to purr loudly, and the child came out of his shock, falling into a peaceful sleep.

Vincent, Catherine and Father let out the breath that they had been holding and hugged each other with relief.

"Bless you, Catherine," said Father. "I really believe he's going to get better." Then he left them to find his medical books. He could need to know what to do next.

"You are wonderful, Catherine. I am grateful." Vincent listened as she explained that no one was likely to claim the boy now. "He should stay here, Vincent, with people who want him. He will be happy here." Vincent nodded. He had already decided that the child would remain Below. It turned out just as Father had predicted. The child soon became a boisterous little boy, fitting in with the others as though he had been born to it. Except that he had no memory of anything that had gone before.

The kitten went everywhere the boy went. They were inseparable. Father gave the boy a name, Richard. "He looks like a Richard, don't you think?"

Catherine asked Vincent what would happen now. "He will live his life, Catherine. Maybe one day it will all come back to him, but until that day comes, we shall see to it that his life is

full of love and laughter and that there are people who really care about him. He will be secure in the knowledge that he has family."

They stood together, hand in hand, watching as Richard and his kitten ran off to play a game with the others. Vincent and Catherine looked at each other and smiled.

NOBODY'S CHILD WAS HOME



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan





Stars

by Angie

".... joy in that I honour most"

- Sonnet 25 , William Shakespeare

"Elliot is king in your world."

Vincent stared at his bandaged hand, now that Catherine had left, and recalled with some shame what he had told her. She had almost lost her life, as had Elliot, on the docks. Yet when she had come to him after leading Elliot to a culvert entry, he had abandoned all his good intentions and spoken not of his love, but of his envy.

He knew better, and that Elliot's fame didn't matter to Catherine, for she loved *him*, not Elliot. How could he apologize? What could he say?

The answer was to hand, he realized, and it wasn't a chess piece. When Catherine visited him the following night, he was ready.

After hugging her close and feeling her love for him, so close that he bathed in it, he was again shamed. How could he doubt her, or give in to jealousy? He knew exactly what she felt for him. Her love warmed him daily.

"Catherine," he said softly, as they separated.

She looked up at him and signed inwardly. No one spoke her name as he did.

She smiled. "Yes, Vincent?"

"I have been thinking. I have been unfair. Come, sit down on my bed, where it's comfortable. I have something I'd like you to read."

"I'd love to, Vincent," she answered, her smile widening. She was pretty sure she knew what troubled him, if that was the word, and was very curious to know what he wanted her to read. When he picked up a well-worn volume she recognized, she nodded.

Of course.

Vincent opened the book to the page he wanted and handed it to her, pointing to the relevant piece.

Catherine made herself comfortable against the headboard, turned slightly so she could see Vincent's face as she read. He turned a little towards her and put one knee up on the bed. *Even better*, she thought. She loved to watch him as she read.

Looking down at the page, she began to read.

"Sonnet 25

*Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of public honour and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
Unlooked for joy in that I honour most.
Great princes' favourites their fair leaves spread
But as the marigold at the sun's eye,
And in themselves their pride lies buried,
For at a frown they in their glory die.
The painful warrior famoused for worth,
After a thousand victories once foiled,
Is from the book of honour razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toiled.
Then happy I, that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove nor be removed."*

"You're amazing, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "How do you always find the perfect sonnet?"

He replied, his mouth twitching upwards a little. "I can only do so because..."

"Shakespeare knew everything," they both intoned gravely, and their laughter filled the chamber for several moments.

"It's true," Catherine remarked at last, having got herself under control. "Elliot may be a 'prince' of sorts, but his reputation rests upon very shaky ground, as he found out with his tower. One wrong move and all his other accomplishments will be forgotten. People Above are very fickle."

"Elliot almost lost his life... and yours two nights ago," Vincent said softly. "Your world is as dangerous as it is unforgiving."

“We survived thanks to you, and you were the one injured,” Catherine reminded him. “Elliot underestimated the opposition – and not for the first time.”

“Whereas, I, who will never face either his victories or his opposition, have what is best of all... your love.”

“Elliot, I’m afraid, does not understand that. I don’t know if he ever will, Vincent.”

“It is not important, Catherine.

“It is, only because I know he hasn’t given up. You cannot be removed from my heart, Vincent. Nothing Elliot can do will change that.”

Vincent hung his head. “I know. Your love lives in me always. It is more than I ever hoped, being what I am. Every day I thank the Fates for that night I found you.”

“What you are, my love, is a man who can see both sides, yet you often demean yourself – and you shouldn’t. Your honesty is one reason I love you. I could never have this conversation with Elliot. He doesn’t believe that there is anything he can’t have or buy if he wants it.”

Vincent sighed. “I almost feel sorry for him, failing to win what he wants.”

“He makes his choices and takes both triumphs and lumps, Vincent. He is charming and rich, but single-minded and self-absorbed. I’ve known too many men like that. You have shown me what a true man should be. There’s no going back for me now.”

“I too cannot go back to what I was before I met you, Catherine.”

“Then, it’s a very good thing that neither of us has to,” Catherine said. “Can you accept that, Vincent?”

“Yes. I must. The alternative is one I don’t wish to contemplate. It’s very difficult, but I am getting better at it.”

Catherine swung around to sit beside him and handed him the book. Turning his head towards her, she whispered, “Perhaps this will help...” and gave him a full, but brief kiss.

He gathered her to him and gave her one in return. Elliot was forgotten.

“Practice will make perfect,” he whispered. “*’Happy I that love and am beloved.’*”

Catherine sighed and put her head on his chest, hugging him tightly. “Yes, me too.”

There was no more to say.

END



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan

*In all the world,
there is no heart for me
like yours..."*



O Little One So Small

Inez Paskal

(from CHAMBER CAMEOS – Volume 2 Issue 5)

*O little one so small
Where are the words to tell
What pain there is inside
Or how you almost died
Is it your turn to win
When does your life begin
Who cares, who loves, who feeds
Those hidden aching needs
And how do I concede
You are the child in me*



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



Loose Ends

by Anonymous

A CONSCIENTIOUS POLICE OFFICER DECIDES VINCENT IS A LOOSE END IN AN UNSOLVED HOMICIDE INVOLVING MARTIN BELMONT AND HIS ASSOCIATES

"Hey!" Edie howled in outrage as a dirty little boy collided with her on the sidewalk. The black woman's eyes flashed, and she reached out to grab the child. He eluded her deftly, and instead shoved into her companion, nearly knocking her to the ground. *"Damn brat!"*

Catherine Chandler only laughed, righted herself, and with a free hand pushed her hair out of her eyes. "No harm done. At least we still have our purses." She smiled wryly, and held up her Gucci bag as evidence.

The black woman nodded. "Good thing, too. I'd have strangled the little..."

Catherine laughed again, interrupting the tirade. "Come on. We only have half an hour for lunch today. Let's not waste it." Purposefully, she stepped off the curb and skirted the midtown Manhattan traffic, heading for their favorite noontime hangout--a street vendor whose chili dogs were works of art. She clutched a note in her hand, pressed there by the street urchin during their encounter; they had exchanged a brief look and a smile before the boy scurried away.

Without opening it, Catherine knew the note was from Vincent.

"Those kids today," Edie raged. *"They're just like wild animals. Let me tell you, my mama would've tanned my hide if I ran around like that, knocking into folks!"* Emphatically, she bit into her chili dog.

Her companion grinned. Edie was a true friend. And she was also Catherine's guide to the buried knowledge of the District Attorney's computer, and an absolute authority on the comings and goings of the office and staff.

Normally, a discussion of Edie's upbringing would have delighted her, but today, she had other things on her mind. Balancing her lunch, she carefully slid onto the bench beside her friend and propped the sloppy sandwich against her purse. While Edie rambled, she unfolded her note and scanned it, then read it more thoroughly.

'Catherine,

Once again , I must ask for your help. Two of the children have been burned, and infection has set in . Father has done what he can , but our stores are nearly depleted, and our sources Above pushed to their limits. Can you help? I have attached Father's list of what we need. I will be waiting at the park tomorrow night at ten o'clock. If you cannot come, send word through Tommy. HE will be in front of your building again tomorrow.

What shall I do with all these days and hours

That must be counted o're I see thy face?

Until tomorrow,

Vincent'

She closed her eyes. 'Oh Vincent, what are we doing to each other...?'

Hurriedly, she glanced at the list. Most of the items were simple enough--bandages, antiseptic, and the like; but some of the names were unfamiliar--Tetra-bid(older brand Tetracycline), Keflex, and Pedlamycin(older brand erythromycin). 'Getting them might be a little tricky, but she would find a way.'

"Hey, girl, aren't you gonna eat?" Edie's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Uh-huh."

"What's that?" Her friend leaned over, glancing at the crumpled paper.

"Shopping list."

"Oh. Well, I hope you're not planning to do any shopping now. We're late as it is." She pointed to her watch.

"Oh, great! I've got a deposition at two o'clock." Catherine began to devour her chili dog, dribbling sauce down her hands and dangerously close to her expensive skirt. "I

vote we find a closer place to eat next time," she said, dabbing at a spot with her napkin.

"Yeah, and less fattening." Edie patted her slender stomach.

Both women laughed as they cleaned up the mess. Deftly, Catherine tossed a wadded-up napkin into the trash barrel from ten feet away, while Edie smiled in admiration.

"You know what, Cath? For a white chick, you're pretty hip." With a low chuckle, she headed for the street.

Lieutenant Robert Herman closed the heavy metal file drawer, paused, then tugged it open again. A name had caught his eye. Impulsively, he pulled out a file and tossed it onto his desk.

"What's this?" Sargeant Greg Powell asked, craning his neck to read the name "Chandler, Catherine." He shrugged. "Doesn't mean anything to me."

The older man chuckled, combing his fingers through his thick grey hair. "You're getting senile if you don't remember this one, buddy. Park Avenue socialite, junior partner in Daddy's law firm, attractive, well-connected. Your basic rich-bitch type with everything going for her. Unfortunately, she had the bad luck to connect with some street scum who mistook her for a call girl. They left her to die with her face carved up. She turned up ten days later with amnesia. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. The plastic surgeons put her back together again, didn't they?"

"Good as new. Only now, she's got religion and joined up with the DA. I dunno, maybe she thinks she's going to get back at the scum by prosecuting them. Anyway, she's making quite a name for herself over there."

Powell nodded. "I'll bet she's still got that Park Avenue address, though."

"You can believe it! She's committed, but she's not stupid. Actually, she's doing a pretty fair job for us. She even got that hooker, Carol..." He glanced at the file. "... Carol Stabler, to agree to testify against her pimp."

The young Sargeant whistled. "Not bad for a rich *'bitch'*. She must've showed her this picture." He reached over the desk and picked up a photograph from the file. It

showed Catherine Chandler as she had looked when the police found her, with her face brutally scarred. "Ugh! Did they get a conviction?"

Herman shook his head. "No, and that's the funny thing. Carol turned up dead in a Village brownstone owned by a friend of Chandler's. But that's not all. In the basement, we found the pimp and two of his buddies--equally dead and looking as if they'd been ripped up by some big animal. We never found out what killed 'em."

Powell scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Screwy. That why you're still interested?"

The older man shrugged. "I guess so. I *'hate'* loose ends." He grinned. "You know, there's one other weird thing that bothers me. When we looked the place over, we found some kind of tunnel in the basement. We checked it out, but it just led into the sewers. Now, what kind of place would have a tunnel into a sewer?"

"Bolt hole?"

"Could be. I don't know. There's just something about this whole case that bothers me."

"And you think Chandler's mixed up in it somewhere?"

"She's the only lead I have."

"And another loose end?"

"I guess so."

"Well, we just finished up the paperwork on the Crawford case, and the captain's pretty happy with you, so why not give it a try?"

Lieutenant Herman nodded. "Maybe I will. Maybe I'll just find out what our Cathy Chandler does in her spare time." With a smile, he picked up the file and dropped it into his briefcase.

The walk through Central Park seemed longer than usual. A New Yorker all her life, Catherine knew the dangers of the park at night, but except for a few ambitious joggers and some street people, the path she followed was deserted. Awkwardly, she clutched a cumbersome box close to her body as she hurried along, half in apprehension and half in anticipation of her meeting with Vincent.

'At last!' Despite her extensive training in self-defense, she was relieved to finally find herself before the concrete culvert leading to the entrance to Below. To Vincent's world.

With a smile, she ducked inside. She took only a few steps before a familiar cloaked figure appeared from the shadows.

"Vincent!" she called, hurrying the last few feet.

"It's good to see you, Catherine." The soft, raspy voice echoed through the tunnel as he took the package from her. "Come inside."

Eagerly, she waited while he unlatched the iron gate and led her through, oblivious to the moving shadow that crept across the floor behind her.

Robert Herman cautiously peered into the tunnel as the two figures disappeared. He tried the gate, only to find it locked. *'Not unexpected, though. So, Cathy Chandler, you have a friend and I just might have a case...'*

Patiently, he settled himself against the wall to wait. After twenty years of police work, the cold and dampness of a stake-out were nothing new to him. He'd known worse. When the woman came back, he'd have some answers.

In spite of himself, he shivered. *'I'm getting too old for this sort of thing...'*

"How did it happen?" Catherine asked.

"How do things ever happen?" Vincent countered. "Mrs. McKelvey's cat wandered into the furnace; the landlord picked *'that'* particular time to fire it up; and the boys, wanting to help, decided to go in after the cat. Their burns are fairly serious, but Father thinks they will heal." He smiled. "They did manage, by the way, to save the cat. Her whiskers are a little singed, but she is fine."

Catherine smiled back. *'His account of the rescue of the cat is so typical. He cares about everyone and everything in this sheltered world of his...'* She felt at home here, warm and loved, more than anywhere else she'd ever been, including the luxurious household where she'd grown up. The secret to her comfort, she knew, was Vincent himself. She would be at home wherever *'he'* was.

She looked around the room, still marveling at this place, carved from the steam tunnels beneath the Manhattan streets. Her relationship with Vincent had begun and

grown here, where she had awakened to the trauma of her slashed face, where he had helped her to heal, both physically and emotionally.

The room was ageless. Nothing had changed for years. It was as though she had stepped into another world, safe from the wildness of New York life. Everywhere she looked, she saw a clutter of books on every conceivable subject--art, literature, biology, history, architecture--books that were read, that were loved and absorbed, that were carefully put aside for the next reader. The walls were covered with fine reproductions, their irregular shapes emphasizing the beauty of the art, and the flickering light from the fireplace added just the right touch of romance. It was a happy place, a noble place.

Contentedly, she curled herself farther into her threadbare armchair as her eyes finally came to rest upon her host.

As usual, Vincent seemed to know her thoughts. "It is not such a bad life we live here, Catherine. Not even for the children."

The glow from the fire reflected in his eyes as she tilted her head to study his face. Anywhere else, it might have been a face out of a nightmare, or a freak-show; here, it seemed right. He belonged to this room, as much as Shakespeare or Degas did. His appearance was distinctly feline, a cross between man and lion. Reddish hair grew across his broad nose and up his forehead. A catlike mouth drew up at the corners, revealing sharp, carnivorous teeth when he smiled. His eyes were deep-set and slightly slanted, mirroring the intelligence of the man. And around his face framed a magnificent mane of auburn hair, shaggy but soft and well-groomed.

As he moved in his chair, gesturing to make a point, Catherine's attention shifted to his hands. Like his face, they were covered with reddish hair that did little to conceal their grace and power. The same could be said for his body. He used it well, coupling the speed and agility of a cat with the strength of a human. The result might have been a powerful, dangerous creature--but she knew Vincent was dangerous only to those who would harm others. *'One needs only to look into his eyes...'*

Firelight glinted off the boots Vincent wore. The antiquated clothing, the standard Below, suited him. Old-fashioned homespun shirts, velvety trousers, and nearly knee-high boots were covered by a calf-length cloak. The effect, like his eyes, charmed her. *"Yes, he belongs here..."*

He looked up suddenly, noticing her scrutiny. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she answered, shaking her head. "I was just looking at you." He turned away, his expression sad. "No!" she repeated. "Please. In the firelight, you're so beautiful..."

With a jerk, he raised his head to meet her eyes again, a smile baring his pointed teeth. "In the eye of the beholder, perhaps?"

"The beholder, yes. And very glad to be here."

He studied her in turn, then changed the subject. "Father was pleased with the medicine. I hope it did not cause you any problems."

She shook her head. "No, none at all. I have '*some*' connections, and a few people who owe me favours. I don't think a couple of bottles of antibiotics are going to get anyone into trouble. Besides, I'm just glad I could help." Gently, she reached across the space between them to lay her hand on his arm.

"We will, of course, be happy to repay you for them..."

"Vincent, no. There's so little I can do to help. Let me do what I can. I owe you so much."

He returned her smile and nodded. "All right." He raised his head as a series of rapid bangings from overhead filtered into the room. "They are busy tonight."

"It's such an ingenious idea. A complete communications network all over the city, just by banging on pipes."

"Well, it's not quite perfect," he laughed. "Occasionally, some irate tenant breaks into the conversation and totally destroys our code. But we do the best we can. We have to use everything here, especially our imaginations." He tapped his forehead. "We survive."

"You more than survive, Vincent. You care for the homeless and the frightened. It's noble work."

"But it '*can*' be dangerous." A grey-haired man dressed in comfortable homespun entered the room, his hands full of notebooks. A slight limp hampered his walk. "The drugs are very welcome, Catherine. Thank you." He smiled fondly. Over the past year, he had come to accept his foster son's unlikely friend; since they had taken her in, horribly injured and close to death, then returned her to her own world, he had come to realize what a valuable asset her friendship was.

Yet, even now, Catherine could sense Father did not entirely approve of her--or of her relationship with Vincent.

"Will the boys be all right?" she asked.

"Yes, I think their burns will heal completely." He smiled wryly. "Maybe next time, they will think twice about venturing into a furnace to rescue a pussycat."

Somewhere, a clock struck the hour, followed by another burst of noise from the pipes above.

Reflectively, Catherine glanced at her watch. "It's getting late. I should go."

With a sigh, Vincent rose and, taking her hand, led her toward the stairs. "Goodnight, Father," she called back over her shoulder.

"Goodnight, Catherine. Take care you are not seen. If anyone should find us..."

His final words were lost as they climbed back to Catherine's world. In the tunnel, Vincent paused for a moment to throw his long cloak around his shoulders and drew the hood around his face.

"Will I see you again soon?" Catherine asked at the gate.

"Soon," he promised. The heavy cloak swung around them as he slipped his arms around her.

"Vincent, this isn't fair," she murmured into his chest. His reply was simply to tighten his embrace and bury his face in her hair. Then, slowly, he released her until, inches apart, their eyes met.

"Catherine, I never..."

"Miss. Chandler!" Lieutenant Herman's voice split the air like thunder.

The couple jumped apart. Vincent instinctively pushed the startled Catherine behind him. His lips parted in a fierce growl.

Herman's eyes widened in alarm, but he stood his ground. "Lieutenant Robert Herman," he announced shakily. "N-Y-P-D. I'd like to ask you some questions." The faint light in the tunnel glinted off the badge he held out before him.

Catherine fought to keep calm. She stepped around her companion, her hand on his arm. Beneath the layers of cloth, his muscles were tense; he was ready to spring.

She gave him a warning look. "Lieutenant," she began, her mind racing. "We haven't broken any laws here."

"I'm 'sure' I can find something," he snapped. "How about trespassing on private property for starters? But we'll ignore that for now, if you'll cooperate."

Squinting in the dim light, Catherine finally remembered where she'd seen him before. *'He was in charge of the investigation of Carol Stabler's death!'* Inwardly, she groaned. *'He was an experienced cop who would not be put off easily.'*

"Who's your *'friend'*, Miss. Chandler?" The policeman's voice was under careful control.

With catlike grace, Vincent moved to her side, his face still partially shielded by the shadow of his hood.

Herman watched him, peering around the hood as best he could. *"What 'are' you?"*

Vincent remained silent, and Catherine knew he had no answer. She shifted nervously beside him, hoping the words to stall the policeman would come to her. But Vincent spoke first.

"You're a brave man, Lieutenant," he said quietly. Then, with lightning speed, he moved to the man's side and flung his arm around his neck, pulling him back against the wall. *"Go, Catherine,"* he commanded.

"Vincent, no, please! Let him go!" she begged.

"Catherine, *'go'!* I will not hurt him, I promise." His words were a whispered message the struggling officer failed to hear.

With a frantic look, Catherine ran for the culvert. When she reached the opening to the park, she stopped and leaned against the curved wall to catch her breath. Running away was not her style, and the thought of Vincent alone with the other man chilled her. She knew she could trust Vincent--but Herman was an unknown quantity.

Defiantly, she turned and ran back into the tunnel. At the gate, she found a dazed Lieutenant Herman sitting on the ground gingerly rubbing his neck. Vincent was nowhere to be seen, and the gate was securely locked.

Cautiously, she stooped down next to the man. "Lieutenant, are you all right?" she asked, offering him her hand.

He glared at her silently for a moment, then rose shakily to his feet. "I guess so." He stretched experimentally. "No thanks to your *'friend'*." They stared at each other in the faint light. "You're going to answer some questions, or I'm going to place you under arrest."

"Lieutenant, I..."

"I know, you're a *'fancy'* lawyer, but I *'can'* find a reason to hold you--and wouldn't your boss like to find *'that'* report on his desk in the morning? Now, what'll it be? Questions over coffee, or down at the station?" He rubbed his neck again. "Your friend has quite a grip."

She smiled at him. " *'Yes'*. he does, doesn't he? There's a coffee shop across from the park. Let's go." She turned and led the way out of the tunnel.

"Wake up, girl! It's almost time to go home!" Edie called merrily as she passed Catherine's desk. Abruptly, she changed her mind, turned, and leaned over her friend. "A little friendly advice?" At the other woman's nod, she continued. "You look terrible. Why don't you take a few days off?"

She looked up into the black woman's sympathetic face and sighed. "Maybe I will. I haven't been sleeping very well lately."

"That guy again, huh? Well, I'm not gonna tell you your business, but it looks to me like you're headed for some bad times. Why don't you just tell him to get lost?" At the expression on her friend's face, she stopped. "Okay, back off. I gotcha. I just don't want to see you hurt, that's all."

Catherine smiled and said softly, "I know. Thanks." She squeezed the other woman's hand. "This is really complicated, Edie."

"Sorry. Just let me know if I can help. And get some rest, huh? You look like *'death warmed over'*."

'Oh Edie, if it were only that simple...' Each time she closed her eyes, she saw Vincent's face and heard Lieutenant Herman's questions over and over again.

'Who is he?'

'What is he?'

'What were you doing down in that culvert?'

'What's behind the locked gate?'

'And what did he have to do with the deaths of Marty Belmont and his men?'

Most of the questions were easy to evade. To others, she gave half answers. Her training helped, of course. That, and the fact that the Lieutenant had nothing substantial to go on--no facts, no evidence, just his own fear and prejudice. But she knew he wouldn't give up.

The day after she talked to Herman, she'd returned to the park, only to find the tunnel sealed by tons of rock and debris. Vincent had worked quickly. Since then, there had been no word from him--not that she expected any. *'How can he be sure I didn't betray him?'*

She hoped he could feel her loyalty, read it in her thoughts as he could read her other emotions, so she concentrated, and prayed he was safe.

'It seems Father was right all along. I'm 'dangerous' to Vincent, and to the whole city Below...' She closed her eyes. The time had come to make a decision, and she couldn't allow her own selfish love for Vincent to destroy his world. Silently, she vowed to let him go--and the only way to do that was to go away herself.

Slowly, she reached for the telephone. "Operator," she said into the receiver. "I'd like a number in Los Angeles..."

The days passed, and Lieutenant Herman was no closer to an answer than before. He was sitting at his desk with a scowl on his face, studying the case folder before him without really seeing it, when Greg Powell poked his head in the door.

"Anything new?" the Sargeant asked, slumping into a chair, silently praying for some relief from his partner's black mood.

"Nothing. None of the leads panned out. Even talking to Chandler the other night didn't give me much. Okay, her lover's a freak, so what? It isn't illegal. *'Kinky'*, maybe, but not illegal. That tunnel they went into is now one big pile of rock. Another dead end." He slammed the folder shut and rubbed his eyes. "I really don't think Chandler is responsible for Belmont's death, but her boyfriend is another story. It all fits. You should've seen those teeth!"

"Bad, huh?" Powell asked.

The look on his face told Herman the young Sargeant didn't really buy his story of the lion man, and he had no proof. "Linus the Lion-Hearted, he was not!" he said emphatically, but with a grin.

Powell chuckled. "So, what happens now?"

"Beats me. I guess I can keep following Chandler, but if I know her, she'll avoid him like the plague, and you know what it's like to try to find somebody in this city when he doesn't want to be found. The leads are drying up, Greg, and the captain's not going to give me forever."

"You'd better be careful pushing Chandler. She's got pretty good connections."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm not too worried. This one's got scruples. She's not giving anything away, but she's not making waves, either." He got up from his chair and paced around the small office. "God, I *'hate'* loose ends!

"I know," the Sargeant replied sympathetically. "But worry about it tomorrow, will you? It's time to go home."

"Yeah, maybe I'll go home and worry about it there, instead. Let's go."

The chill October air whipped across the terrace as Catherine stood gazing out over the city. She was torn between her longing to see Vincent and her dread of the confrontation she knew would have to take place sooner or later. For the last three nights, she had stood and waited for him, alternately hoping and fearing he would come, rehearsing what she would say to him when he did. *'It's only a matter of time...'*

She leaned against the railing and watched the distant traffic below. Below that was his world, a world she had vowed never to see again.

A gust of wind blew her hair back from her face, stinging her eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest, hugging her hands to warm them. The cold cut through her. *'He's not coming...'* She turned to go in.

Suddenly, he was there, stepping out of the shadows and into the light that streamed from the apartment.

"Vincent," she said softly, seeing the pain on his face. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be."

"But I am."

"There are always risks. This time, we were unlucky."

"I didn't betray you."

"I know. I knew you would not."

They lapsed into silence, uncomfortable with each other for the first time since their meeting.

Vincent broke the silence. "Is the Lieutenant still looking for me?" He gazed down at the street.

"I don't know. He may be. I haven't seen him since he talked to me that night. I told him we were lovers. I'm sorry, but it's what he wanted to believe. I told him we met there to be alone. It was easier to lie."

"There is no need to be sorry, Catherine." His voice held a bitter edge she had never heard before. "Let him think whatever he wants about us. It does not matter."

Hesitantly, she reached for his hand, feeling the power there. When he turned to face her, his eyes held such pain that she could feel the tears spring to hers.

"I love you, Catherine."

"And I love you, Vincent. But I can't hurt you by letting others destroy your world. It's time for me to leave New York." Her stomach lurched as she said the words.

For a few moments, they were silent again. Finally, Vincent sighed and turned away from her. "Perhaps you are right. Where will you go?" he asked flatly.

"I've been offered a job in California, doing what I do here." She forced the words to cover her tears.

He nodded, but remained silent for a time, studying the rows of tiny vehicles far below them. "You should go, then."

"Vincent, I..."

"Catherine, do not make it more difficult." Slowly, he pulled his hand from hers and turned to go.

"Vincent." The two syllables were filled with all her unhappiness, and he paused for a moment, then climbed over the railing to begin his descent.

" *'In every party, there is an image of death'.* Goodbye, Catherine." The words floated back to her from the darkness.

She slowly walked back into her apartment and locked the door behind her.

Glare from the airplane window made Catherine squint as the jet circled Los Angeles International Airport. The strength of the California sun was one of the things she would have to get used to in her new life--one of many things.

"And what will you be doing in your job, dear?" her elderly seat mate asked. Throughout the flight, the woman had babbled incessantly about various children and grandchildren. Only now, as they neared the runway, did she turn the conversation to the younger woman.

"I'll be working for the District Attorney's office in Los Angeles."

"Oh, you're a secretary?" She brightened. "Now, my niece Mary is a legal secretary, and she..."

"Actually, I'm a lawyer," Catherine corrected her. Once, she might have been offended, but Vincent had taught her tolerance for the prejudices of others. Now, the chauvinistic assumption only amused her.

"Oh!" The woman patted a strand of bluish hair back into place. "Well, it looks like we're finally going to land."

Relieved not to have to defend her right to the job, Catherine turned back to the window, her eyes once again assaulted by the bright glare from the concrete. She wasn't convinced that trading New York's chill for the Los Angeles smog was a fair deal, and she would miss the damp, sooty New York days--and nights.

The thought of the night brought visions of shadows, all of which turned into Vincent when she closed her eyes. The pain in his face haunted her, and she couldn't make the image go away.

'It's been a month...'

A jolt brought her back to reality.

"Here we are!" her seat mate announced needlessly. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" The woman bustled about, gathering her things, giving Catherine time to collect her thoughts.

She took a deep breath. *'When I walk out of this airport, I walk into a new life. New York is behind me. Vincent is behind me.'* She smiled bravely, but after a moment, the smile slipped, and she shook her head. *'Everything seems so easy in the daylight...'*

Lieutenant Herman swayed with the motion of the subway car. He seldom rode the trains, but his car was in the shop again, and nobody he knew seemed to be going his way at this late hour. *'Oh, well, serves me right, staying at my desk until three in the morning. Anyway, it won't hurt me to do what thousands of New Yorkers do every day.'*

He watched the faces of the people around him as the train's doors slid open and closed. Most were solemn, dull, almost dead. A few smiled, and some made his skin crawl. He wondered what they were thinking, then decided he didn't want to know. Finally, he recognized his stop and worked his way to the exit. Outside, on the platform, a few people loitered. Even at three in the morning, New York was alive.

Stuffing his unread newspaper under his arm, Herman headed for the stairs leading to the street, but a slight noise stopped him in his tracks. It was nothing more than a whisper--but it was enough to trigger the curiosity of a career cop. Voices followed, then laughter, and that peculiar noise again. *'It's like the sound a kitten makes when its tail is pulled...'*

Cautiously, he rounded the corner of a news-stand and saw three youths and a young girl. One of the boys held their victim tightly, his hand clamped over her mouth, while the other two slowly and sadistically peeled off her clothing, piece by piece.

Herman hated situations like this, not liking to act with no back-up, but he had his principles. Quickly, he dropped the newspaper and reached for his gun and badge. *"Police Officer! Freeze! Let the girl go and keep your hands in sight!"*

The youths froze. One shoved the hysterical girl to the ground; she lay there, her eyes wide with horror. Time stopped for a moment, as each of the actors in the little human drama sized up the situation.

Finally, one of the boys began to laugh. "Hey man, you're *'way'* outta your league. This is *'our'* turf. Why don't you make like a good boy, and get the hell outta here?"

The others jeered their support and advanced on Herman, who levelled his gun. He knew self-preservation would eventually outweigh his distaste for shooting a kid.

Suddenly, his gun hand was jerked up and back--grabbed from behind by another youth who had apparently acted--none too successfully--as the lookout. Two more followed and spun him around to face them. A lit cigarette dangled inches from his eyes. He coughed reflexively from the smoke while the boys laughed.

"You're a *'fool'*, man," the first youth pointed out as he strolled over to the policeman. "You should've split when you had the chance." Herman winced as his arm was drawn tighter behind him. "Now, we *'still'* have her, and we have you, too. Hey, maybe you'd like to *'watch'*? Everybody gets a turn."

Another boy giggled. "Maybe he wants to *'help'*?" That brought general laughter from the gang, and a gasp from the girl. One of the youths pulled her to her feet and shoved her hard against the Lieutenant. He swallowed. She looked about fifteen, the same age as most of the boys. He closed his eyes.

"C'mon, man, have a feel!" the spokesman urged.

Suddenly, Herman heard a low, menacing growl. *'God, now they've got a dog!'* The growl grew louder, and a shape emerged from the shadows.

Cloak swinging and mane flying, Vincent launched himself into the circle of youths. The boys who held Herman let go in panic and retreated, stumbling over the girl, who had fallen back to the ground with a whimper.

Almost involuntarily, the policeman's training took over. With all his might, Herman rammed an elbow into the stomach of the youth nearest him, the gang's spokesman. The boy hit the ground hard and sprawled there for a moment.

Vincent, in turn, rounded on the others, sending one youth flying into a wall and the other fleeing up the stairs.

Forgotten, the young leader rose bravely to his feet, drew a knife, and advanced on Herman. The Lieutenant recognized the danger too late, and as he turned, the knife grazed his arm from elbow to wrist. With a wince, he held his ground and deftly kicked the boy's feet out from under him.

Vincent added the final touch when, fangs bared, he descended on the fallen youth and lifted him to his feet. The boy struggled, managing to slip from Vincent's grasp,

and followed his friends up the stairs to the street. The girl, as much frightened by her benefactor as by her assailants, was nowhere to be seen.

Exhausted, the policeman sagged to the ground, cradling his injured arm. Without a word, Vincent stooped to examine the slash, gently turning the arm to the dim light.

Herman looked into his eyes, tension drawing his face taut. "Thank you," he said grudgingly, easing out of his coat to allow the other man to stop the bleeding with his handkerchief. "I don't know why you're here, but I guess I'm glad you are."

"I thought it best to keep an eye on you. And I do not like to see people hurt."

The Lieutenant snorted. "Looks like you do your share of hurting. First Belmont and his boys last winter, and now this bunch. I don't know whether to consider you *'The Caped Crusader'* or a one-man crime wave."

Vincent turned away. "I help those I can, those who want my help. That girl needed my help tonight. Apparently, you thought she needed yours. If you had not thought so, you would not have come to her aid. Your world is a dangerous and unhappy place. I spend as little time here as I must."

"*'My'* world? This isn't my world. I didn't make it this way. I suppose it's better living down in the sewers, under the streets?"

"The measure of civilization is not always how tall the buildings grow, Lieutenant."

"*'Civilization'?*" Herman scoffed. "And how about your *'girlfriend'*. Cathy Chandler? Is that the life you're planning for her?"

"That is *'her'* business and mine."

"Is that why she left you?" Herman smiled at his reaction. "Sore subject, huh? Well, you couldn't really expect *'little Miss. Park Avenue'* to tramp around in the sewers with you for the rest of her life, could you? After the novelty wore off, she was bound to go right back to her good life."

Vincent finished the make-shift bandage and helped the other man to his feet. "You are a smart man, Lieutenant Herman, but you understand very little about people. Why do you hate me?"

Herman blinked; the question had caught him off guard. "I don't like vigilantes," he answered at last. "They get in my way."

"Ah, I see. Or people who threaten the concept of what the world should be." The policeman shrugged. "You had better have that arm looked at. If you go back to the platform, I am certain someone will help you find a policeman to make your report to and to see you home. Forgive me if I do not escort you."

"I'm going to keep an eye on you," the Lieutenant promised. "If something strange happens again, I'll know right away where to look." He pointed to the ground. "We don't care much for people who take the law into their own hands. Just ask Bernard Goetz."*(shot four black teenagers on a New York City Subway train in Manhattan. All four victims survived, though one, Darrell Cabey, was paralyzed and suffered brain damage as a result of his injuries)* The last remark was an after-thought and went unheard; Vincent was gone.

'*Why 'do' I hate him?*' Herman wondered. With a shrug that hurt his arm, he headed for the platform and home.

Catherine leaned back against the loveseat in her Glendale apartment. Another Sunday afternoon half gone, and her briefcase full of paperwork still lay unopened. Around her, boxed cluttered the sparsely furnished room; some were open, but many were still sealed with the moving company's tape. In disgust, she stood up and kicked a pillow lying on the floor. '*Why can't I get moving? Why can't I make myself open up these boxes and put things into their proper places?*'

Deep down, though, she knew why, and the thought left her empty. '*The boxes held too many memories, and she couldn't bring them into her new life.*'

"My God, Cathy," she said aloud. "It's been '*five months!*' Get with it!"

Giving herself a mental kick in the pants, she resolutely marched over to a carton by the terrace door, ripped the tape from it, and unfolded the flaps, then knelt beside it and peered inside. It was filled with knick-knacks from her New York apartment--a porcelain snow goose given to her by her father one year after they vacationed in Canada; a silly statue reading '*#1 Lawyer*' that Joe had presented to her after she'd won her first case; other old, familiar mementos.

Fondly, she took each article from its wrappings and placed it on the floor. Each had a special place in her old apartment, but... '*How can I make them fit in here...?*'

Visions of the cozy elegance of her New York flat came back to her--'*a flat now occupied by a sociology professor on sabbatical to study Manhattan's street*

people'. The thought almost made her smile, and she reached deeper into the box, drawing out a photograph in a cheap gold frame, one Edie had given her. It showed the DA's staff. *'So as not to forget us...'*

Catherine looked at it closely and laughed. Dyed-in-the-wool New Yorkers, every one, they grinned back at her. *'What a motley crew!'* Gently, she placed the picture on the floor. *'How different they are from the staff of the Los Angeles office!'*

She realized Californians perceived things differently, but hadn't realized how differently until her secretary Joyce called in sick on Thursday because it was raining; she said dampness made her sneeze. Catherine wondered wickedly how long the poor dear would last in New York, and shook her head.

She looked out the window, past the terrace railing. The sun beat down on a city that seemed composed entirely of asphalt. She shielded her eyes for a moment, then rose and pulled the drapes closed. *'California...!'*

With a sigh, she forced herself back to work. Carefully, she unwrapped a tiny silver bell that had belonged to her mother and again reached into the box. This time, she withdrew a flimsy cardboard container provided by the movers. Curiously, she opened it and peeked inside.

The smell of roses assaulted her as she lifted out four dried rosebuds, carefully preserved and packed. Vincent had given them to her, one by one, or left them on her terrace. Sometimes, there was a note or a small gift with them. But always, they were given with love.

'This is too much...!'

She set the box down and scooted away from it, clutching her hands in her lap. Memories washed over her--*'Vincent's face, his smile, his touch; the incredible beauty and peace of Below, and its terrors, the happy, ragged children who lived there; and Vincent again, cape swinging, rushing to her rescue.'* As she sat there on the floor, a voice seemed to explode in her mind.

'Catherine!' It howled in anguish.

Tears streaming down her face, she looked around the room *'This 'isn't' my 'home', my life, this world of highway vigilantes, roller-skating gurus, and publicity-seeking debutantes...'* No, her life was back in New York with her father, Edie, and Joe. And most importantly, with Vincent.

She smiled, wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand, and crawled back to the box. With renewed resolution, she began to pack.

"*Shhhhhh. It's Cathy!*" Edie cried, frantically waving her hand to hush the commotion around her desk. "Yeah," she continued into the telephone. A smile spread across her face. "Yeah? When? Are you sure? He did? *'All right!'*" She bounced in her seat, excitement shining in her eyes. "*She's coming back!*" she exulted to the assembled staff. "For good! Yeah! Yeah, I can do that. Sure. Wait a minute." She scrambled for paper and pen. "Okay. I have it--call the phone company, and water and gas. You sure that guy's gonna be out of your apartment? Okay, if you're sure. Yeah, I will. See you soon!"

She hung up the telephone with a shout of joy. "*She'll be back on Monday! In her old job, in her old apartment, and ready to take on anything we can dish out!*"

Those around her desk smiled, a few rolled their eyes. Cathy Chandler's zeal had not made her everyone's favourite, but most respected her abilities and would be glad to have her back.

"Oh," Edie continued. "She said to say *'hi'* to everyone--until she can tell you for herself, that is." She giggled. "Now, go away, and let me get to work. I got a lot of calls to make!"

Vincent sat in his usual spot on the roof of Catherine's old apartment building, looking down at the city. Not for the first time in his lonely life, he was tempted to fling himself over the railing. *'It would be 'so' easy to do, just one simple act...'* But the thought of the effect on those he loved, on those who loved and relied on him, stopped him once again.

With a sigh, he dropped his chin to his chest, the hood he wore folding around his face. It was six months since she'd gone--six months of pain, of forcing himself through the daily routine, of throwing himself even more into the lives of the people Below. And he never stopped missing her.

"Catherine," he said softly. Just to hear her name. The psychic bond between them had loosened somewhat with distance and time, giving him hope that some day he would be free; but now and then, he still felt a twinge of her pain or pleasure. He

hoped that, somehow, she was happy, and felt she would try to make herself so, yet longed to have her share his torment.

'How selfish,' he thought, and smiled wanly. *'Careful, Vincent. Beware of displaying human emotions or weaknesses. But then, I'm not completely human, am I?'* He laughed bitterly. *'Self-pity now, too? What would Father say? Be glad of what you are. Rejoice in your strengths'...*

He got to his feet, and leaned against the railing. *'The city is beautiful from here. No wonder she loved this terrace so much. How can anyone be bitter or lonely with this before him?'*

Suddenly, as he relaxed, he could feel her presence, stronger than he had felt it in months. *'She's here, in the city!'* He roared his joy. *'Find me!'* he willed, and ran for the stairway.

Catherine dropped her suitcase on the living room floor and checked over the apartment. The lights were on, the telephone was working, and the place was warm. *'Edie did her job well...'* Now, her first priority was to see Vincent, and there was no time to send a message. She would have to find him on her own.

Stealthily, she made her way through the crowded streets to an abandoned building; as far as she knew, it was the entrance nearest to the Pipe Chamber, and she and Vincent had used it on several occasions. *'Dangerous',* she thought, surveying the neighbourhood, but she had to risk it. The trick would be finding her way through the maze of tunnels, most of which were unfamiliar. But she knew if she could just reach the Pipe Chamber, someone would find Vincent for her.

Trash filled the alley alongside the old building. With a deep breath, she heaved herself over the sill of a broken window and dropped to the floor inside. Everywhere, the shadows came alive.

'Rats...' she shuddered. Blocking them from her mind, she hurried to the basement door and pushed her way through, descending the rickety stairs as fast as she could.

Suddenly, a noise stopped her in her tracks. Holding her breath, she backed against a wall, inched her way around a corner, and waited.

Soft sounds surrounded her, but she couldn't be sure whether they were footsteps or just rats. A furry rodent brushed against her leg, and she bit her lip to stifle a scream.

In the darkness, the few minutes she waited seemed like hours, but at last she felt it was safe to continue. Cautiously, she edged her way to a crack in the masonry that led to the sewer, then climbed through the hole and out into the faint light of the tunnel.

She hesitated. The basement was bad enough, but the sewer frightened her even more. Water dripped around her, streaming down the walls and running through an open concrete trench. Without Vincent's comforting presence, that ditch seemed a mile wide. She swallowed, and glanced up and down the tunnel for a narrower crossing.

"Not easy without him, is it?"

The voice startled her. "Lieutenant Herman?" she gasped. "How did you know I was here?"

"I followed you. I thought you'd never come out of that basement." At the look on her face, he couldn't help laughing. "Come on, Miss. Chandler, certainly you know I have my spies in the DA's office. Not everyone is as enamoured of their fastest-rising young star as little Edie is. They told me you were coming in tonight, and I followed you from the airport. Not so hard, really."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I don't like loose ends."

"And Vincent's a *'loose end'?*"

"Yeah, you might say that. I've had some time to think about him over the last few months." He strolled up and down along the ditch across from her. "Maybe he has a point, after all. He takes care of his world down here..." He waved a hand, indicating the sewer. "And I take care of mine up there." He pointed to the ceiling. "Looks to me like we're both just doing our jobs. Case closed." He dropped his hands to his sides. "I just wanted to tell you that."

"You could have *'called'* me."

"And give up the opportunity for a great scene? No way. Your friend Vincent isn't the only one with a flair for the dramatic." He struck an exaggerated pose.

She shook her head, smiling. "I'm not sure I understand, but I *'do'* thank you."

He shrugged, back in the role of the weary police officer. "Can I give you a hand?" he asked, stretching his arm across to her.

With a nervous laugh, she took hold of his wrist and jumped the gap, skidding a little on the slippery floor. He steadied her. "Thank you again."

"We serve and protect." He bowed, then jumped back over the trench. "Goodbye. And good luck." He turned and disappeared through the gap in the wall she had used only moments earlier.

Catherine watched him go, then peered into the semi-darkness before her. Somewhere along this stretch of tunnel, there was an entrance. At last, she spotted it, but her relief was short-lived. In the passageway, blocking her entrance, stood a large black man with an extremely aggressive stance.

She smiled uncertainly. "I need to see Vincent."

"*Who?*" he asked sternly, shining a flashlight into her eyes.

"Vincent. I'm a friend. My name's Catherine Chandler." Her smile faded as she squinted into the light. She wasn't sure if he was one of Vincent's people or not, and even her hard-earned street-fighting skills would be of little use against someone his size. She shifted nervously. "Please. I need to get a message to him. Will you help me?"

He studied her for a moment, then moved the light out of her eyes. "I remember you now. You're Vincent's Catherine. He'll be glad to see you."

She stared at him, her eyes finally adjusting to the poor light. "Winslow!" she laughed, relieved. "I didn't recognize you."

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"The Pipe Chamber. I should be able to get a message to him from there."

The black man nodded, and led her down a ruined staircase. They crawled through the broken walls of foundations and hurried down what seemed like miles of tunnels before the distant bangings on the pipes grew almost painfully loud. At last, they emerged into a huge cavern where hundreds of pipes converged. At its centre, moving almost frantically about his duties, was a wiry little man.

"Oh, hello. Haven't seen you for awhile."

"Hello, Pascal. I've been away. Can you help me find Vincent?"

"Of course, of course. What would you like to say to him? Oh, just a minute, message coming through..." He listened intently, scribbled a few words on a pad of paper, then banged his response in rapid code on the set of pipes before him. He waited, then repeated the message. Satisfied, he turned back to her. "Sorry. Now, what was it? Oh, yes, a message to Vincent."

"I need to find him. Just tell him I'm here and want to see him. I'll wait here, if it's all right?" She looked to Winslow for approval, and he nodded. "That's all." She waited expectantly as Pascal sent the message. "Will he answer?"

"Don't know. Maybe. Just a minute." He listened, scribbled, and banged a reply. "Not for you," he explained. "Sorry."

Disappointed, Catherine leaned against the wall. She knew she might have to wait all night if Vincent were out in the city--but if it took that long, so be it. She had waited six months; what was another few hours?

The messages continued to come and go, and soon her presence was forgotten. Winslow returned to his duties in the tunnels, and Pascal continued to work tirelessly. Alone, Catherine stood by the wall, clearing her mind, concentrating; *'If he can still read me, maybe this is the way ... I'm here, Vincent. I'm in New York, and I'm in the Pipe Chamber...'*

"I know." He hurried to her from the tunnel. "I was far away, and it took me this long to reach you. I'm sorry."

She launched herself at him, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, Vincent, I'm the one who's sorry. I should never have left."

He remained silent, but held her tighter. Finally, he released her and looked into her eyes. "There has been no life without you."

"I know," she whispered. "I couldn't wait to get back." Tears started in her eyes, and he held her close again. She sighed. "Vincent, what's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know, Catherine." He closed his eyes and held her even tighter.

Finally, they stepped apart, laughing, the banging in the cavern had become deafening. "Let's go somewhere quieter," she suggested.

He shook his head and tapped one ear. The pipes rang around them.

"Quieter!" she shouted, pointing upward.

He nodded and laughed aloud. "Welcome home, Catherine."

The spring breeze off the river tangled Catherine's raincoat around her legs as she leaned against the rail. Below her, moonlight reflected off the water between the shifting shadows of the bridge towers. Except for a pair of lovers, the walkway was deserted.

That afternoon, she'd gotten a message from Vincent, asking her to meet him, and she'd cancelled an appointment in order to see him. It was no sacrifice, but she was worried. *'What's wrong? Is he ill, or in trouble? Is someone hurt? Or does he just want to see me...?'*

She started as he appeared from the shadow of one of the towers, then laughed at herself. *'How long will it take me to get used to his silent comings and goings?'* "Vincent," she called softly.

"Hello, Catherine."

He held her for several long moments, resting his chin against her hair. These times alone together were always the best. "Thank you for coming."

"Did you think I wouldn't? Is anything wrong?"

He smiled at her worry, dispelling it. "No, we just need some legal advice. But that can wait. Let's walk awhile."

Content, she nodded, and slipped her arm around his waist. "All right. I have so much to tell you..."

Together, they crossed the bridge.



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



Happy Father's Day, My Love

by Jackie Kapke

(from CHAMBER CAMEOS – Volume 2 Issue 6)

You're a wonderful father

As we already know

Your doubts were unfounded

All our dreams have come true

Your huge hands are so gentle

With our little son

Tears of joy fill my eyes

Seeing how far love has come

The love you give to me means more

Than with any other man

We'll live new dreams together now

Come, dear, take my hand

You never dreamed a woman would love you

Let alone bear you a son

You thought this a life you'd never know

But, oh, you were so very wrong

Next Father's day there'll be a change

I've got a small surprise for you

Celebrating the day's events

There'll be somebody new

Yes, we're blessed with one more child

*A special gift from up above
The look upon your face says all the rest
So, Happy Father's Day, my love*



DIGITAL ART

by Michaela



The Unintended Lesson

by Judith Nolan

The class held in Vincent's chamber beneath the city was slowly filling with excited children. Their friend and mentor always gave the best lessons and stories, and not a single child would willingly stay away.

Books appeared from old leather satchels. A few chairs scraped against the stone floor while the younger ones found their places on the old Persian rug. A pair of small boys argued over the owner of a dropped pencil. The girls gathered to one side and admired the boy of their current choice.

An unusual addition to the class was Mouse. His was a most important task. Vincent had asked him to repair an ancient desk lamp. The tinker had brought his toolkit and was working with three different-sized screwdrivers. His concentration on the task was deep and frowning.

He paid no attention to the assembled children. He did not need to be a part of the class lesson.

Vincent smiled as he settled himself on the edge of his massive bed and waited for the noise to quieten down. He always enjoyed the youngsters and their inquiring minds that could take the day's lesson in any direction.

The older children saw that he was waiting for them to stop talking. Elbows were quickly employed, and there was a lot of noise made to quieten the smaller kids.

"Go on, Vincent," Kipper encouraged. "We're all listening now."

Vincent nodded. "Thank you, Kipper. Today, we will be continuing our discussion on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

A soft groan rose from somewhere near the back. "I don't see why everybody thinks Shakespeare is so great. He writes funny."

A few heads nodded. The older children, who knew better, used their elbows again to regain quiet.

Vincent chuckled softly. "Perhaps by the end of today's lesson, you may have an answer."

The children settled. *Almost...*

Near the doorway, two of the older girls were speaking quietly. "I wish I could meet that famous author who used to live down here. His picture on the back of his book is so divine."

“Then why don’t you?” her friend asked. “You’re going up to live with Lady May soon. She’s sure to know him.”

The first girl shrugged. “Oh, I don’t want to bother him. He’s too famous now to worry about us down here.” She fiddled with her long plait of blond hair.

“You wouldn’t be bothering him,” her friend replied. “I’m sure he’d love to hear some news from home. After all, he was born down here.”

The other girl shook her head as she stared at the floor. “Maybe. But I’m just a nobody.”

The words were barely spoken. Yet Vincent heard them above the soft conversations of the other children. His keen hearing had always been attuned to any hurt or suffering in others.

He slowly set down the book he was holding. Then he turned to the pair of girls at the back of the class. “Nobody?” he questioned softly.

The room fell silent. The girl flushed crimson. “Sorry, Vincent. But I didn’t mean—”

“No,” Vincent replied. His voice was gentle, but firm. “You meant exactly what you said.”

The girl looked miserable and hung her head. She studied the neat stitching of her leather boots with close attention.

Vincent rose from his bed. For a moment, he studied the young faces before him.

Then he smiled. “It seems today’s lesson has taken a new course.”

A few children exchanged puzzled looks.

Vincent set his balled hands onto his hips. “Now, tell me, honestly. Who among you believes yourself to be a nobody?”

To his surprise, several hands rose. Some immediately. Others more reluctantly. A few then joined, emboldened by the silent support of their peers.

Vincent looked at them one by one. Then he shook his head. “You are all very much mistaken.”

The room remained quiet. One of the boys frowned. “But we’re just kids.”

“Yes, you are. But that does not make you into nobodies.”

“And we live in the tunnels,” Malcolm added.

“Yes. A place where we are all equal, and no one is more important than anyone else.”

Kipper raised his hand. “And nobody knows *who* we are.”

Vincent nodded. “That may be true. But that still does not make you nobodies. Everyone is somebody’s important person. No one is truly alone, down here.”

He picked up the book of Shakespeare and held it up. “When Shakespeare wrote his plays, kings and queens often stood at the centre of the story.”

The children nodded. They had heard the stories before.

Vincent looked at each face in turn. “But tell me this. What is a king without the people around him? Does he then think he may command the weather, the land, or the animals?”

Silence greeted him as he knew it would. Young minds grappled with the concept of one man to rule them all.

He smiled. “What is a queen without friends? Without family? Without servants? Without soldiers? Without the people she loves?”

The children considered the question. They began to talk among themselves.

Vincent returned to sit on the side of his bed. “Every life touches other lives. Every person changes the world around them, whether they realise it or not. You matter because you are alive, and every action provokes a reaction in someone.”

The young girl near the door was listening intently now. She was no longer studying her boots.

Vincent looked directly at her. “If you wish to speak to someone, then speak to them.”

She blinked and frowned. “But what if they don’t want to talk to me?”

Vincent’s eyes softened. “That is up to them.”

The room went utterly silent. The children sensed there was something bigger happening now.

Vincent leaned forward. “But do not ever decide that you are unworthy before they have the chance.”

His words hung in the air. The gathered children looked at each other.

“If you wish to know someone, speak to them,” their mentor continued. “If you admire someone, tell them. If you have a question, ask it.”

He smiled. “The rest is up to them.”

Several of the children nodded slowly.

One of the younger boys raised a hand. “What if they’re real famous?”

A ripple of laughter moved through the room.

Vincent’s smile widened. “Then they are simply famous people.”

The children nodded. The young girl joined in and lost her worried look.

Vincent shrugged. “They still wake up in the morning. They still eat breakfast. They still worry, dream and hope, exactly as you do.”

Mouse looked up from the lamp. “They still lose things, too. Happens all the time.”

The room erupted into laughter. Mouse grinned and ducked his tousled head.

Even Vincent laughed. “Yes, Mouse. They still lose things no matter how famous or important they are.”

The tension vanished. The children crowded closer, now held entirely in their mentor’s palm.

Vincent looked around the classroom. “Literature teaches us many things.”

He rested a hand upon the worn Shakespeare volume. “But one lesson appears again and again.”

The children waited and watched. Vincent was their best teacher.

He looked them over. “Every human life has value.” His voice grew quieter. “Every single one.”

The girl near the doorway lowered her eyes. A small smile appeared on her face.

Vincent saw it. And knew the lesson had already been learned. At last, he opened the book. “Now, then...”

His eyes twinkled. “Let us see what Mr Shakespeare has to say about the vagaries of human nature.”

The children opened their books. And somewhere deep beneath the city, among stone tunnels and candlelight, nobody saw themselves as a nobody anymore.

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DIGITAL ART

by Michaela



One of Mouse's Adventures

by PearlAnn SnowStar

Mouse was excited. Maria, the gypsy helper Above, was so glad to get the crystals. Now, what was he going to do next?

"I know!"

He ran out of his chamber and bumped into Vincent.

"Sorry. Got to run."

"I need to ask you about perhaps a machine that you talked about yesterday." Vincent saw the quizzical look on Mouse's face. "The one to pump water out of a chamber."

"Yes. In there. Need now?"

Mouse had something to do. He couldn't be bothered now. But Vincent nodded his head yes.

"Must see someone first. Above. Can't wait?"

"It is urgent, but if you promised to meet someone..."

"Did. Go. Be back."

Mouse paused.

"Show how to use?"

Vincent smiled. "That might work."

"OK, good. Show now."

Mouse ran back into the chamber, with Vincent following him.

Mouse was back Above. Scurrying around the busy afternoon crowd, he made it to a bus stop. He pulled things out of his pocket. There it was: the bus pass. Pleased, he held it, checking the sign to be sure that he was in the right spot. Yes, he was.

Seeing the bus coming, he waved. The bus stopped, and he showed the pass to the driver, who motioned to the machine beside him.

"Scan the pass, buddy," the driver said.

Mouse looked at the pass, figured out what side to use, then scanned it.

"Wow." He was amazed at the machine and started to examine it.

The driver shook his head. "Why me? Buddy, go sit down."

"OK, Good. OK, sit."

Mouse sat in the nearest empty seat.

The driver turned to look at him. “Not used to going on the bus, I take it. Look, what street do you want?”

Mouse paused, then pulled out a note. He got up and showed the driver.

“OK, go sit back down, and I’ll call out the street.”

Mouse smiled, then sat back down in the same seat.

It wasn’t too long before the driver called out the street’s name. Mouse got up.

“Thanks.”

“Sure, buddy. Now be alert and cautious. This neighborhood is shady.”

“Seeing friend.”

The driver opened the door, and Mouse jumped out just as Tony Ramos came into view.

“Mouse!” Tony ran up to him. “You made it.”

The driver closed the door, and the bus took off.

Mouse looked at the bus, then at Tony. “Driver helped.”

“I’ve got to show you my place. Maria told me you got her crystals.”

“Maria happy.”

“Were you busy?”

“Not much.”

“Okay, I’ll make this short. But since it’s late afternoon, I’ll take you back to Catherine’s brownstone.”

“Know where.”

“I know, but it’ll make me happy.”

“OK, good, like happy.”

“Come on, let me tell you what is happening.”

Tony and Mouse walked quickly down the street. Tony was doing most of the talking.

That night, Mouse was back in his chamber, fixing the water pump machine. It had worked, but after doing what was needed, it stopped.

“Good thing that broke down after we got the water pumped out.”

Mouse didn’t look up. He knew it was Teresa. She was a woman with black hair, olive skin, and dark eyes.

“You might need new parts or even a new machine.”

He sighed. “Maybe.”

She walked up to him. When she placed her hand on his shoulder, he jumped.

“Mouse?”

Blushing, Mouse looked up at her. “Concentrating.”

She’s so beautiful.

“Didn’t mean to startle you. I heard you were busy Above.”

“Maria, then Tony.”

“How are they?”

He tried to go back to what he was doing, but couldn’t.

“They fine.”

She found a small stool and pulled it up next to him. She sat down.

“Let me see the machine.”

He looked at her.

“Mouse?”

“Oh... machine... yes.”

He handed the machine to her.

“You know, I can try to look around for a better pump. It’s a shame to try to keep repairing this thing.”

Teresa was smart.

She looked at him. “Mouse, you haven’t been the same since...”

“You kissed me.”

“Welllll, I like you, Mouse. A lot.”

He looked down. “Like you, too.”

“You know, I came Below when I was a teenager. You were the first person to come up to me and welcome me. Then you ran away.”

“Always running.” He quickly changed the subject. “You scared. Then got used to Below.”

“Yes, I did, with your help. So let me help you with this, OK?”

“Catherine?”

“No, there are other Helpers. I think we keep asking Catherine too much. She’s so eager to help us. But now, with two toddlers, even with Vincent, they’re a handful.

So, I got a few Helpers in mind. One works at a hardware store. I’ll check with her. See if she can help us. If she can’t, I’ll find someone else.”

“Go to Catherine.”

“Maybe, maybe, not.”

She stood up. She placed a hand on his shoulder. He looked at her. That’s when she kissed him on the cheek and ran out.

He forgot all about the machine. She was just a good friend. Younger than him as well. Yet, just like yesterday, she kissed him. Second kiss.

Kinda nice.

He jumped up and went to refill Arthur’s bowl of water. Arthur was sleeping.

So much older. Sleeps. A lot.

Maybe there was something else he could do. Something to take his mind off of Teresa. Mouse ran out of the chamber.

A few days later, Mouse and Teresa went Above to the hardware store where a Helper named Jodie Hamer worked.

Mouse let Teresa do all the talking. He looked around. His eyes glistened at the beautiful sight of so many different items. Lots of neat stuff. He wanted to take EVERYTHING home. Luckily, Teresa held his hand as they walked down the aisle.

“Mouse?” Jodie inquired. “You’re with us?”

Mouse murmured, “Sorry. Distracted.”

Teresa spoke up, “That’s OK. Jodie was asking if maybe you need a new machine. The new water pumps are easier to use. Plus, she can get us a discount.”

“Maybe, maybe not. How much parts?” Mouse looked at the two ladies

“Come with me,” Jodie said as she led them to the back of the store.

“We can see how much parts would be compared to a new...” Teresa started to say when the bell by the door jingled.

“I’ll see who it is...” Jodie paused.

A tall, bulky man wearing a black ski mask and hoodie ran up to them. He held a gun in his hand.

Mouse instinctively put himself in front of Teresa.

“You three, in front.” The man pulled out a gun. “NOW!”

Tony Ramos headed toward the hardware store that Maria told him about. So many changes had happened since he met Catherine. The years passed by. Catherine moved to a brownstone, although she kept her old place for ‘friends.’ Eventually, after meeting up with Vincent at the brownstone, he then met Mouse. He also became a Helper after meeting

Mouse. Grandma and Grandpa had passed away. He was confirmed as King of the Gypsies. He learned to read.

This past year, his neighborhood started changing. People came in and demolished the building they moved into. They built a new apartment building in its place. Then, other buildings were changed. Rents went up. Taxes as well. He and others, like his gypsies, had to move. He was glad he found a reasonable new place. The apartment building was not in the best condition. The neighborhood was sketchy. But it'll do. And some of the gypsies moved into the same place he was at. He also got a good job. It was at a pawn shop owned by Arturo Romanany, a fellow gypsy. They were making sure everything looked legal. Keeping good ledgers. However, any gypsy that came in, well, they got the family discount.

He turned the corner, deciding not to wait for the light. As he walked down the sidewalk, he looked across the street. The hardware store wasn't busy. It was then that he noticed a big man, dressed all in black. He was moving toward the store. Before he went in, he pulled on a black ski mask and covered his face.

Tony looked around. Of course, nobody paid any attention. He reached into the inside left pocket of his brown jacket. It was where he kept his flip phone. He took the phone out. He quickly made calls to a few of his gypsy friends.

"Better call the cops, too. Just in case Jodie can't reach the button under the counter," he mumbled to himself.

Mouse, Teresa, and Jodie, with their hands up, walked past the robber. The robber stepped behind Jodie.

"Don't try any funny business; I know how to use this." The robber's tone was serious. Too serious.

Mouse's eyes were moving, then he saw something. Mouse was holding his breath as he put something into his pants pocket. He also glanced behind and saw Teresa had moved from behind his back to his right side.

OK. Good.

"You," the robber loudly said, "woman behind the man. Quit wobbling."

"OK, OK." Teresa sighed.

She hid me.

The four of them made it to the front of the store. No one else was around.

"Now, someone open the damn register." The robber's voice ominously boomed. "No pressing any button under the counter. If you do, I shoot."

"I'm the clerk," Jodie said. She went behind the counter. The robber kept his eyes on her but pointed the gun at Mouse and Teresa.

“You two, stop now and stay still,” the robber said.

Mouse and Teresa didn’t move.

Mouse debated. He wasn’t looking at them, but the gun was pointed at them. He was watching Jodie as she opened the register.

“I said no pushing buttons. Keep one hand up, or I shoot them.”

Jodie must have lowered one hand. Mouse realized she probably didn’t push the alarm button.

The robber moved closer to Jodie, but still had the gun pointed at Mouse and Teresa.

“Get a bag, that brown bag on that shelf under the counter.”

Jodie’s voice trembled as she spoke, “OK, OK, just keep cool.”

The bell by the door jingled, and Tony Ramos stepped in carefully.

“WHO ARE YOU?” The robber yelled out as he looked toward Tony. He was waving the gun all around.

Tony quickly lifted his hands as he cried out, “Please don’t shoot. I needed to get a new screwdriver.”

The robber moved and leaned against the window.

“Give me your wallet,” the robber demanded.

“OK, OK, please don’t shoot me,” Tony said as he kept his right hand up. Using his left hand, he reached into the inside pocket on the right. He carefully pulled out the wallet. He glanced at Mouse.

Mouse reached into his pants pocket slowly.

As Tony slowly handed the robber his wallet, Jodie leaned to the left side. After what seemed like eternity, she moved back into place.

Meanwhile, the robber took Tony’s wallet.

Mouse was nervous, so he moved quickly in front of Teresa. He looked up at a surveillance mirror in the left corner by the window. That was when he was sure he saw something moving through the left aisle.

“Fuck, this is zippered!” the robber called out angrily. He shoved the wallet forward. “Open it.”

Mouse noticed that the hand that held the gun had lowered. Someone had come up from the aisles behind the robber.

It felt as if time itself slowed. Everything seemed to move slowly.

Mouse pushed Teresa to the floor and fell on top of her. The gun went off. Mouse braced himself. He didn’t feel any pain.

There was screaming and cussing and sounds of a struggle. Mouse looked at Teresa, but her eyes were fixed on what was behind him. He turned slowly around, as Teresa moved to sit up.

Who was that man? How did he get in here?

The other man gripped the robber's arm. The arm that held the gun. It looked like he was trying to get the robber to drop the gun. Tony had grabbed the same arm.

Mouse looked at Jodie. She was behind the counter, on the phone, screaming at somebody.

Mouse removed the small wrench from his pocket. He straightened himself and waited. The robber was concentrating on Tony and the other man, hitting them with his free hand. It was now or never. Mouse ran up and hit the robber on the head with the wrench. The gun fell from the robber's hand.

That's when the door to the shop burst open, and three police officers came in, guns drawn.

Mouse closed his eyes.

"Police officers. Drop the weapon."

Police sounded angry.

"Mouse, Mouse, are you hurt?" Teresa's voice called out.

Mouse opened his eyes and looked at who was patting him all over. That made him feel... warm... weird.

Jodie had stopped screaming. Teresa was safe.

He noticed a policewoman was handcuffing the guy as two cops held him down. Tony was smiling. Jodie just glared at the robber. The other person who came from behind was next to Tony.

Teresa looked at Mouse. Mouse looked at her.

The three officers got the robber to his feet. One of the policemen took off the ski mask and asked, "What is your name?"

The robber, who had tan skin, black hair, and a beard, just snarled.

As one policeman held the robber, the other picked up the gun with a white handkerchief as the policewoman held a plastic bag open. The policeman put the gun into the bag.

The policewoman took the bag outside to one of two squad cars blocking the street.

The policeman then went to the other side of the robber and held him. He then said, "We're going to have to take statements. Is anyone hurt?"

"Hope I shot someone," the robber mumbled.

"We're OK," Tony quickly said.

The two policemen holding the robber dragged him out of the store.

The strange man who helped them smiled. He pointed at one of the shelves by him. "He shot a shelf."

The policewoman came in. "I heard that. Don't touch that shelf."

Another policeman came in with a clipboard. "Okay, one at a time. What happened?"

A few days later. Mouse was in his chamber, resting on his bed. The past couple of days were much too exciting, even for him.

“Mouse?” Vincent called out.

Mouse got up. “Enter.”

Vincent was holding Arthur, who was chewing on something.

“Arthur was making his way to the kitchen.” Vincent smiled. “I asked William to give him something.”

Mouse walked over and took Arthur from Vincent’s hands.

“Arthur must remember. Not as fast anymore.” Mouse looked at him. “What?”

“I managed to get a part of the ham that William was going to use for supper tonight.”

Mouse gently placed Arthur into his crate. Turning around, he found Arthur’s water bowl. He put that down next to the crate. He stood up to get a pitcher nearby. He poured water into the bowl.

He placed the pitcher on a side table.

“Shouldn’t you close the crate?” Vincent inquired.

“No. Arthur sleep after.”

“He’s...”

“No say. Mouse knows. Could be any time soon. Maybe not.”

“I wanted to let you know the new water pump is working splendidly. Teresa told me that after the attempted robbery, the manager wanted to reward everyone.”

“Everyone agreed. Water pump parts.” Mouse smiled. “But Jodie said no. New pump better.”

Mouse looked at the items on his workbench. He picked up the small wrench. He smiled.

“Said I keep.”

Vincent just shook his head. “I’m just glad everyone is all right. Teresa told me that one of Tony’s gypsy friends went toward the back of the building. He picked the lock on the shop’s back door and got in.” Vincent touched Mouse’s shoulder. “You and the others were very brave.”

Mouse looked down at his feet. “Robber arrested.”

“Yes. Teresa said she’ll stop by to see you. She is with Catherine, asking if the police will still need you all as witnesses.”

Mouse looked at Vincent. “What? Why?”

“Just in case the evidence and Jodie’s testimony are not enough. Catherine thinks that it will be, given that the robber violated parole.”

Mouse had a puzzled look on his face.

“Catherine says he was on parole at the time. He shouldn’t have had a gun. Nor should he have attempted to rob a hardware store.”

Mouse grinned. “OK if not testify. Better.”

Vincent nodded his head in agreement. “Only time will tell.” Vincent gave him a concerned look.

“Mouse OK. Only one bad dream. Gone now.”

“If you do need to talk, I’m here.”

Mouse smiled. “Know.”

Vincent turned and left the chamber.

Mouse looked at Arthur. “No want to. Testify. Answer questions. Had enough.”

“So did I.”

Mouse looked up to see Teresa standing there.

“Arthur?”

“Drinking water. Soon sleep.”

She walked up to him and gently took his hand.

“Are you sure you’re OK?”

Mouse nodded. “No want to go Above. Scary.”

She smiled. “Oh, you’ll be back Above. But not for a long time. Catherine assured me that when John Tacoma gets his trial, there may not even be a need to testify.”

“Who?”

“That’s the robber’s name. John Tacoma. Tony’s friend’s name is Marius Farkus. It’s an interesting name. The first name means warrior, while the last name could mean wolf. Either way, he was so brave. It gave Tony a chance to grab him. I was just scared because you pushed me to the ground and the gun went off.”

Teresa hugged him. Mouse blushed. “Twice you tried to keep me safe. You’re so brave.”

“Supper soon?”

She chuckled. “We can walk to the kitchen and see if it is.”

Mouse nodded, and together, they walked out of his chamber.



DIGITAL ART

by Mel



The Queen Of May

by Judith Nolan

“Absolutely not.” Father did not even look up from the ledger spread open across his desk.
“The answer is no.”

Lady May Heathcote-Smythe removed one immaculate glove finger by finger as she regarded him with glittering displeasure across the candlelit chamber. “You have not even heard my proposal.”

Father looked up at her over the rims of his spectacles. “I heard enough when Geoffrey informed me you had arrived Below with three hampers, six flower crates, a bolt of ribbon, and what William described as *‘foreign interference in his kitchen.’* We cannot allow that level of upset among those who care for us.”

“It is not foreign interference,” May snapped. “It is civilisation. And I care just as much as anyone.”

Vincent, seated nearby as he looked through Father’s collections of old books, wisely lowered his head to hide a smile.

Father sighed as he put aside his pen. “Now, please understand me, May. I am not saying anything like that.”

“No.” She lifted one imperious finger. “Do not compound the error and ‘May’ me in that long-suffering tone, Jacob Wells. It has never worked before, and it will not work now. We have known each other for far too long to start lying now.”

The old man’s eyes twinkled despite himself. “Then perhaps you would care to explain why my entire tunnel system currently smells of lilac.”

May seated herself in the chair on the other side of Father’s table. “Because spring has finally arrived after a hard winter. It’s time to celebrate.”

“Spring,” Father repeated patiently. “Exists perfectly well Above. Down here, we have neither sunlight nor suitable ventilation for whatever madness you are proposing.”

May leaned forward and closed the ledger firmly on his desk. “That,” she declared. “Is exactly the problem. Where is the fun in that?”

The chamber fell quiet. Even Vincent stopped pretending not to listen.

“Fun?” Father raised his greying brows. “That is a luxury we do not possess.”

May drew herself up to her full diminutive height. Candlelight glimmered softly against the pearls at her throat, the silver in her hair. She looked every inch the grand society hostess she had once been Above, though there was nothing cold in her expression now. Only determination.

“You have children growing up Below who have never danced around a maypole. Young women who have never worn flower crowns. Boys who think spring is merely a word in a storybook.” Her voice softened unexpectedly. “And that is intolerable to me.”

Father leaned back slowly. “You can see all that?” he marvelled.

“May Day,” Vincent said quietly. “May wishes to have May Day.”

“Precisely.” Lady May pointed her thumb at him approvingly. “At least, one person in this chamber possesses the wit to see what I wish to do.”

Vincent bowed gravely. “I have always tried to cultivate one.”

Father rubbed his forehead. “May...”

“Oh, do stop looking as though I’ve announced a public execution.” She waved one dismissive hand. “I merely intend to hold a proper feast. Music. Dancing. Decorations. Cakes. Tea. A little joy. Heaven forbid, you may enjoy any of it.”

“A little joy from you usually requires structural repairs afterwards,” Father muttered.

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

May ignored him magnificently. “I have already arranged everything. The Great Hall will be transformed by tomorrow evening. Mary is helping the children make garlands. Pascal and Mouse are gathering greenery from the park entrances. And William...”

At once, her expression sharpened. “... will come around when I show him all the things I have brought down for him from my own supplies.”

Vincent nodded. “William is all bluster and protective of what he sees as his territory. He hates to think he’s being imposed upon.”

May nodded sharply. “The man acts as though I insulted his ancestors merely by producing a proper seed cake among the other treats.”

“You told him American sponge tasted like packing material,” Father observed.

“Because it does.”

Vincent coughed suspiciously into one hand.

May turned on him instantly. “You may laugh, young man, but your beloved Catherine agrees with me entirely.”

“I am suddenly overcome with loyalty to her opinions.”

May smiled at him. “Wise boy.”

Father watched them both for a moment, the familiar warmth of old companionship easing his resistance despite himself.

May saw the exact instant his resolve weakened. She pounced immediately. “Jacob,” she said more gently. “Let me do this. It will cost you nothing but time. And you do have plenty of that.”

Something shifted in the room. Vincent glanced quietly away.

Only a handful of people still called Father by his given name.

The old man studied her lined face for a long moment. Beneath her formidable composure, he could see the same fierce loneliness he had first recognised decades ago in a young

Englishwoman who had stumbled into the tunnels through a hidden doorway in her wine cellar. A woman trapped in a loveless marriage and starving for somewhere to belong.

May had found her belonging Below. And ever since, she had spent her life giving that gift to others.

Father sighed. "I suppose," he said carefully. "It is already far too late to stop you. The word is out in the tunnels."

"Completely."

"And if I refuse permission?"

"I shall simply ignore you."

"I suspected as much."

She smiled triumphantly.

Vincent closed his book. "Then we are having a May Day celebration."

"We are having," Lady May corrected. "A proper English May festival. It's well beyond time."

"God help us all," Father murmured.

"Indeed, He shall," said May serenely. "Because none of you barbarians knows what you are doing."



The tunnels had never looked quite like this before. Greenery wound around iron pipes and stone archways. Candles flickered everywhere, reflecting gold against damp walls. Long tables filled the Great Hall, covered in white cloths. May had apparently bullied half of Manhattan into laundering and pressing to perfection.

Flower garlands hung from every beam. Children raced breathlessly between the tables under Mary's increasingly hopeless attempts at maintaining order.

At the centre of the hall stood the maypole. Vincent stopped beside it and stared upward.

Long ribbons of blue, white, green, and gold spiralled down from the polished wooden pole May had somehow arranged to have transported Below without anyone entirely understanding how she had managed it.

"It's beautiful," Catherine whispered beside him.

Vincent slipped an arm around her waist automatically. "It is," he agreed softly.

Further across the hall, Lady May was directing preparations with terrifying efficiency. “No, no, no! The flowers go there. Honestly, Geoffrey, must I explain everything personally?”

“I was only trying to help.”

“And failing magnificently.”

Geoffrey muttered something under his breath and retreated, carrying candles.

May immediately rounded upon another victim. “Pascal! Stop eating the strawberries!”

“I’m testing them.”

“You have tested six already.”

“One cannot be too careful.”

“Apparently, one can.”

Catherine laughed softly against Vincent’s shoulder. “She’s impossible.”

“Yes,” Vincent said affectionately. “And we adore her. May is unique and very special to us all.”

Across the hall, William emerged from the kitchen looking grimly offended.

May narrowed her eyes at once. “Well?”

William folded his arms. “The syllabub is acceptable.”

“Acceptable?” May drew herself up in outrage. “It is exquisite.”

“It remains excessively sweet.”

“It is meant to be sweet.”

“It could still be less so.”

“You are impossible.”

“So, I have often been informed.”

For one dangerous second, Vincent thought May might actually strike him with her cane. Instead, she gave a sudden bark of laughter.

William’s face twitched reluctantly as he tried to suppress his acceptance of the inevitable. The battle was over before it had truly begun.

Nearby, several of the younger girls from Below stood uncertainly beside one of the long tables, clutching half-finished flower crowns.

May noticed instantly. She noticed everything. Her expression softened as she crossed toward them.

“Well?” she demanded briskly. “Why do those garlands look as though they survived a small war?”

The girls exchanged nervous glances. One of them — Anna, barely seventeen and newly arrived in the tunnel world after years of abuse Above — lowered her eyes immediately. “I’m sorry, Lady May.”

May’s expression changed at once. Sharpness vanished beneath something infinitely gentler. “Oh no,” she said quietly. “We do not apologise for flowers.”

The girl blinked uncertainly.

May sat beside her with unexpected grace despite her cane and carefully adjusted the crooked crown in Anna’s trembling hands. “There.” She tilted her head critically. “Much better. Flowers are meant to look alive, child. Not disciplined.”

A hesitant smile touched Anna’s mouth. The other girls relaxed fractionally.

May continued working as she spoke. “When I was your age,” she informed them, “I once attended a May celebration in Sussex where the vicar’s wife became entangled in the ribbons and pulled half the maypole down on top of the church committee.”

Several girls giggled.

“It caused quite a scandal,” May continued. “Three elderly ladies resigned from public life.”

“Really?” Anna whispered.

“Possibly not. But they should have.”

The laughter came easier now.

May nodded in satisfaction. “That’s better. A feast without laughter is merely eating in company.”

Anna watched her quietly for a moment. “Were you frightened?” she asked suddenly.

May paused. “Of what?”

“Of going Above again. After you found the tunnels.”

Something flickered briefly across May’s face. Old memory mixed with old pain. “Oh yes,” she said simply.

The hall around them seemed to dim for a moment beneath the weight of honesty.

“I had spent so long becoming what everyone expected that I scarcely remembered who I was.” Her fingers moved lightly over the flowers. “Then one day I found a doorway in my cellar and discovered an entire world where no one cared whether my gloves matched the silverware.”

Several girls smiled.

May's own smile grew faintly wistful. "Your Father gave me tea in a cracked cup. Mary scolded me for climbing through unsafe tunnels. William informed me my boots were impractical." Her eyes softened. "And for the first time in years, I laughed."

Anna looked at her carefully. "And that changed everything?"

"Yes." May settled the flower crown gently onto the girl's dark hair.

"Because sometimes," she said quietly. "Being loved properly teaches you how to live."

Across the hall, Vincent heard the words and looked away abruptly. Catherine squeezed his hand.



By evening, the Great Hall glowed like something enchanted. Music drifted through the tunnels. Candles burned everywhere.

Children darted laughing beneath arches of greenery while the older residents gathered around the feast tables in visible astonishment at the sheer scale of Lady May's ambitions.

There were cakes dusted in sugar. Strawberries floating in cream. Seed cake and freshly baked bread filled the air with aromas that smelled good enough to eat.

Cold meats were laid out on huge platters beside plates of steaming hot vegetables. Tiny, iced buns decorated with flowers. Tea steamed from polished silver pots.

And, because May insisted civilisation depended upon it, enough pastries to feed a minor monarchy.

Father stood near the entrance surveying the chaos with resigned disbelief. "I leave the tunnels unsupervised for one afternoon," he murmured. "And England invades."

Beside him, Mary smiled fondly. "Oh, hush. Look at them."

Father did. Children were dancing around the maypole now under Catherine's laughing instruction while Pascal attempted to cheat by wrapping three ribbons simultaneously around his arm.

Mouse was already hopelessly tangled. William pretended not to notice as he and his helpers moved in and out of the kitchen chamber with yet more plates of food.

At the centre of it all sat Lady May like a benevolent queen holding court. She wore deep blue velvet tonight with pearls at her throat and fresh lilies-of-the-valley pinned beside one ear. Candlelight softened the fine lines of age. Laughter lit her face with startling youth.

She looked alive. Father felt something tighten unexpectedly in his chest. “She’s overdone it,” he said quietly.

Mary glanced at him knowingly. “She missed this.”

“Yes.”

“She missed being needed.”

Father’s gaze lingered on May. “Perhaps,” he admitted softly. “We missed needing her.”

Across the hall, Vincent approached Lady May, carrying two cups of tea. “One sugar,” he said.

She accepted the cup with regal approval. “You continue to justify my early faith in your upbringing.”

“I live only for your approval.”

“As well you should.”

Vincent settled beside her while the music swelled nearby. “You’re tired,” he observed gently.

“Nonsense.”

“You’ve threatened six people with your cane in the last hour.”

“Only because they deserved it.”

“And you sat down voluntarily.”

May sniffed. “I am old, Vincent. Not dead.”

“Father worries.”

“Jacob worries if someone sneezes twice.”

“He worries more about you.”

Something softened briefly in her eyes. “Oh, I know.”

She watched the dancers silently for a moment.

Anna was laughing now, genuine laughter bright on her face as she struggled through the ribbons beside the tunnel children.

May smiled faintly. “There,” she murmured. “That’s better.”

Vincent followed her gaze. “You did this.”

“No.” She shook her head. “They did. I merely reminded them they were allowed joy.”

The music changed, and the children squealed. Someone collided with Pascal and sent ribbons flying everywhere.

William shouted above the din from the food tables. He wanted everyone to start the feast before it all got cold.

May laughed suddenly — rich and helpless and entirely genuine.

Vincent looked at her quietly. “You love them very much.”

The laughter faded slowly from her face. “Yes,” she said simply.

Her gloved fingers tightened around the teacup. “When I first came Below I thought I had discovered adventure.” Her voice softened. “What I truly found was the family I was never blessed with.”

Vincent’s eyes burned unexpectedly.

May noticed immediately, of course. “Oh, don’t start looking emotional,” she scolded. “You’ll distress me.”

“You are distressed by nothing.”

“Incorrect. Bad manners distress me profoundly.”

Vincent laughed under his breath.

She reached over suddenly and touched his cheek with one gloved hand. “So serious,” she murmured. “Even now.”

“I learned from Father.”

“Yes, and look what became of him.”

Across the hall, Father approached slowly through the candlelight.

May straightened instantly. “Jacob,” she announced. “If you have come to complain about the flower petals again, I shall have you removed.”

“I merely wished to observe that you appear to have conquered the entire tunnel community.”

“Naturally.”

Father smiled. The music drifted softly around them. Children laughed. Candles flickered against ancient stone. And for one strange, lovely moment, the underground world felt impossibly warm and alive with spring.

Father looked at May for a long time. At the flowers in her silver hair. At the stubborn pride in her lifted chin. At the joy she had carried down into darkness and scattered there like seeds.

Then he bowed slightly. “My Queen of May,” he said gently.

May stared up at him.

Vincent wisely looked down into his teacup.

Mary covered her mouth to hide a smile.

For one perilous second, Father appeared genuinely uncertain whether May might strike him with the cane after all.

Instead, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “Oh,” she said crossly. “You dreadful old man. I promised myself I would not cry tonight.”

Father smiled softly.

May blinked rapidly and lifted her chin with fierce dignity.

“Well,” she announced. “Someone had to bring a measure of civilisation to this place.”

And nearby, beneath ribbons and candlelight and drifting flowers, the tunnels laughed with her as they all began to gather and sample the fresh delights of her May Day feast.



DIGITAL ART

By Michaela



HEART LAID BARE

by Gwen Lord

"Why do I feel I do, why...when I have achieved all this, all the dreams I cared about. Why is it I feel so empty inside, as if it was now all for nothing?" Elliot tossed his expensive pen across the magnificent piece of furniture that was his desk. A deep sigh left his weary and exhausted body.

Glancing up at the large old antique clock on the facing wall, he saw the time reflected back at him: 3:20am, it was inconceivable how the hours passed with such lightning speed, as if on wings of the wind. He stretched and rubbed the sleep away from his eyes, unable to allow it to finally take command of his body.

Sitting back in the ample black leather chair, he ran his hand through the mass of his hair, then allowed it to move over the new growth of beard that, shortly, would need his attention.

Elliot opened the drawer at the right hand of the desk and, without looking, felt for his bottle of whiskey---it was his second this week. Taking off the top with determined hands, he lifted it to his mouth, savouring, allowing the liquor to swirl and intoxicate before it went on its way to help fill a need, of which he knew not the source, then he continued his soul-searching.

As a child, he had made promises to himself; he wouldn't be a carbon copy of all that made up his daily life, he was determined to carve a better destiny, than the one as Stosh Kasmarek. *One day...he vowed, I will alter all this*, and in his teens, set about bringing it to pass.

The first thing he did was to change his name; one he had decided on years ago was now his: Elliot Burch. The wrath that this brought about, from his ailing Mother and his drunken Father, resulted in him leaving home---as much as it was; putting his past behind him---which was not easy to do, he found, but necessary---in order to re-carve his future.

Looking back, the road had not been easy and, more than once, his life had been in danger because of shady deals he had to make in order to go forward. And if he intended to get to the top, forward he had to go, to make his mark on his beloved New York.

Time and tide wait for no man, and Elliot Burch was no exception. He wined and dined and even slept with the enemy, but at least his dreams were starting to take shape.

The first building to bear the E.B. insignia was the City Planners' new 'toilet scheme'. Not the best place to begin the ladder to the top, but everyone had to start somewhere, and he had put his foot on the first rung of that ladder.

Once this first step had been taken, more and more work came his way. He was keen to be way out in front and, if a building was not quite on schedule, then he would join the men on site and work alongside them, anything to get himself a good name and become trusted.

The emotion he felt on the completion of his first skyscraper was indescribable. He felt like he had given birth. At last, he had arrived and, of course, more and more buildings followed, all bearing the E.B. name. Now, not only was he sought after for his buildings, but also for his bank balance, as mothers pushed their daughters forward to be in his company. The prominent men in the city looked on him as a possibility for their precious daughters. There had been a lot of talent about, and Elliot had to agree; he did enjoy this side of it all, a side that Stosh Kasmarek would never have seen. One didn't look a gift horse in the mouth, and out of all these sweet moments and associations had come some pleasant memories. He smiled. How close he had come on more than one occasion to marrying one of them.

Elliot felt he was truly accepted when the Mayor offered him the freedom of New York City for all he had given them and, in return, Elliot had offered to put a large slice of his art collection on display in the museum and then to donate it to the city.

It was while he was attending this glittering occasion he recalled, that he looked up to see a vision of beauty before him, beyond his imagination, and lost no time in going over to speak to her. His charm and good looks held her captive, as he continued to hold her interest. For the first time in his life, Elliot Burch was falling in love.

He felt comfortable and at ease in her company, and the need to see her all the time was the driving force to so many dates. Looking back, he sensed she held back and never really gave all of herself to him, even on the one night that they shared in his penthouse suite. But Catherine Chandler had come into his life, and from the first moment that he saw her, he was a lost cause. He decided early on in their relationship that one day he would make her his bride, as only she held the key to his heart.

Never having asked the woman of his dreams to marry him, the thought of this task filled him with fear. He rehearsed his lines over and over again, until he felt he had it right; he set off for Catherine's apartment at breakneck speed. Only when he got there and discovered her not in, did he look at the time and, to his shock see that it was nearly five in the morning. He was worried and decided to wait, and moments later she arrived, all flushed with love, which he mistook was for him.

As soon as Cathy had brought them coffee to the balcony, he could wait no longer. He proposed and spilled out his heart. He pleaded with her to share all he was, all he had, and he tenderly told her. "And I do love you." This was the most important decision he had ever contemplated, as he offered her his heart. A lifetime was never going to be enough time to prove to her how much she meant to him.

Her refusal was like a blow from some unexplained force. At first, he couldn't take it in. He told her to sleep on it and not to decide right away.

The following morning, she had entered the office very early to tell him she would marry him, but only on her terms, but the terms she offered staggered him. How could he do what she asked, to stop building his pride and joy, his lifetime's ambition? He couldn't let go of his dream after all he had done to get this far. With her terms in tatters, she hugged him and left him alone in his office, in shock.

There had been other times he thought on looking back, where he should have sensed his love was not returned, but he was in love, and a man like Elliot, only loves this way once, and so believes in dreams and in possibilities.

She returned the meal he had specially prepared for her, and even when they had nearly died together on the docks, and he had kissed her, he felt sure she leaned into the kiss; then it was gone. Later that same evening she told him there was no hope for them and a part of him died then.

She never knew his heart was broken and that even Elliot Burch could cry.

Over the weeks and months that followed, they still met and had a meal together. She sometimes even appeared to flirt with him, and his heart sang, but he knew her heart was bound to another. If only he could see his rival, but this was denied him. All his power and money couldn't bring him the happiness he craved, and the only person to bring him this peace of mind was in love with another.

Word got to Elliot that Catherine had left the DA's office and had gone to live with **HIM**. It cut like a knife. There was no one in this city that could give her more than Elliot, and yet she had turned him down flat. She had even told him once that Vincent didn't have a job and could not even offer her a home, but she said that did not matter, as she had enough for both of them. Yet, whenever she needed help, it was Elliot she turned to and he gave her that help, knowing that she would never give him reasons, and only said, "Trust me!" which, with his heart on his sleeve, he did.

"Oh, Catherine, why did you have to say...NO!"

Elliot replaced the cap on the bottle of whiskey, then returned the bottle to the drawer. Slowly he stood to his full height, then put on his coat and straightened his tie. Glancing yet again at the clock on the wall, saw that it was 5:17am; hardly worth going home to an empty house--- the home he had built for Catherine, but had never got the chance to give it to her. She would never now see each room furnished to perfection, a dream home. He had built it with such promise, with such love and attention to the smallest detail. Even the nursery lay in wait for its owner, a child's paradise with every soft toy money could buy.

Now he knew what it was that was wrong with him, he was lonely. This empty feeling he carried around with him was the emptiness he felt without her. Didn't she know, he wasn't a bad guy...and to prove it, he would always be here for her, waiting to pick up the pieces of her life, if she even needed him, and until then...he would work deep into every night, to make his body so tired, that it fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, instead of into her arms.

He knew that one day, his dreams could come true, it did for Stosh, so why not for Elliot...



DIGITAL ART

by Mel



Tunnel Gifts

by Judith Nolan

The first hint of winter had settled over New York with a quiet insistence.

Not snow, not yet. But a cold that lingered in the bones. A wind that slipped between buildings and found every weakness in coats, gloves, and resolve.

Catherine stood at her window, one hand curled loosely around a cup of coffee gone lukewarm. Below, the city moved as it always did—urgent, bright, unaware.

But her thoughts were elsewhere. Below... was colder than usual.

She could feel it. Not sharply, not painfully. Just... a quiet awareness threading through the bond. A subtle heaviness. A collective endurance.

Vincent was not uncomfortable. Not truly. But others, such as the children and the elderly. Those who did not complain and made the best of what they had.

Catherine set the cup aside. “No,” she murmured softly. “That won’t do.”

Her gaze drifted to her wardrobe. To the shelves and the many things she owned. Too many things. Too many things she did not need.

A slow, thoughtful idea began to form. Not gifts. This was not like Christmas. They would not be wrapped and presented.

But... *what was needed?* She reached for her coat.

“Vincent,” she whispered silently, her heart reaching through the bond. “I think... I have something to bring you.”

A warm pulse answered her. Curiosity and affection, mixed with trust.

She smiled faintly. “Yes,” she said softly. “Let me see what I can do.”

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It took her two days. Not because it was difficult. Because she wanted to do it properly, as she had done the very first time she had taken excess items below and handed them out.

Catherine moved through her world with new eyes. Her wardrobe yielded coats she had not worn in years—fine wool, lined, warm. Scarves still wrapped in tissue, along with gloves and hats.

Practical things. She paused over each one.

“Too formal... no. Too delicate... This one—yes.”

Then she left her apartment early on Saturday morning and went further. To small shops tucked away and places she rarely noticed before.

She bought thick socks. Simple sweaters and durable boots.

Children’s clothing—sturdy, warm, forgiving of wear. Toys, but not fragile ones. Wooden things. Things that could survive being loved. And books, always books. She carried everything back in stages, her apartment slowly filling with quiet purpose.

By the second evening, she stood in the centre of her living room and looked at the gathered piles.

It was... a great deal. She folded her arms, considering.

“This isn’t enough,” she said quietly.

Because it wasn’t only about warmth. It was about dignity. Her gaze drifted again.

Then she smiled. “Yes,” she said softly. “That will do.”



Vincent was waiting for her at the threshold with a two-wheeled cart. Catherine had tapped out a message for him to help her bring her things Below. He stood at the junction where the tunnels widened, lantern light catching in his hair, his presence a steady warmth in the cool air.

But today—today his expression shifted into something very close to astonishment.

Behind Catherine was a pile of cardboard boxes. She had carried them all by stages down to the sub-basement.

“Catherine...” he said softly.

She smiled, a little uncertain now that she stood before him. “I may have... overdone it. Just a little.”

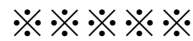
Vincent stepped closer, his eyes moving over the gathered things. “You have brought...” He paused, searching. “...so much.” His lips curved. “We may need a bigger cart and more helpers.”

“It’s what I had,” she said simply. “And some things I didn’t. It’s all for them,” she added gently. “Not as gifts. Just... what’s needed.”

Vincent inclined his head, understanding settling into him. “Yes,” he said softly. “They will understand that.”

He looked back at her. “You have brought them care and consideration for the end user.”

She met his gaze. “I learned that from you.”



Word spread quickly Below. It always did. Catherine’s simple message had been heard by other ears, and people were drawn out from their work and play by deep curiosity.

By the time their cart reached the central chambers, the tunnel folk had begun to gather. Children came first, hovering at the edges.

Then the adults appeared. The latecomers found places among those already assembled. The smallest finding their niches between bodies or under arms.

Father’s chamber was again the gathering place. Vincent and some of the men took the boxes down the short set of steps and placed them in the middle of the floor. Whispers were many and deeply curious. Hands, arms and elbows were quietly worked for better vantage points.

Mary approached quietly, her eyes already soft with understanding. “Catherine...” she said warmly.

“These are for everyone,” Catherine replied. “Things that might help. Warmth, mostly.”

Mary nodded slowly. “Then we will see they are given... properly.”

Father arrived next. He stopped short.

His gaze moved across the gathered items, thoughtful, measured. “A considerable undertaking,” he observed as the crowd of onlookers parted for him to find his usual seat.

Catherine felt suddenly uncertain. “I hope it’s all right—”

“It is more than all right,” Father said gently. “It is... generous in a way that requires care. You are more than generous to us, and we appreciate the gesture.”

He looked at the others. “No one is to rush. No one is to take more than they need.”

A murmur of agreement followed. “Let us proceed,” he said.

The distribution was... not what Catherine expected.

There was no grabbing or taking more than two or three items. People stepped forward slowly and chose carefully.

Held items up, considering not only themselves, but also for others.

“I have one like this,” someone murmured, setting aside a coat.

“This would suit Thomas better.”

A pair of boots was passed between three people before settling with the one whose old pair had nearly given out entirely.

The gathered children were quieter. But their eyes shone.

A small wooden toy changed hands twice before reaching a child who had none.

Catherine watched, something tightening gently in her chest. “They think of each other first,” she whispered.

Vincent stood beside her. “Yes,” he said softly. “That is how we have always lived.”

He took her hand. “Nothing is to be thought so precious that it cannot be given away to someone in deeper need. It is how everyone should be.”

“Yes...” Catherine nodded with a sigh.

It was nearly over when someone laughed. Not loudly, just enough to ripple through the chamber.

“Father...” Mary asked. “What have you chosen?”

“I... ah...” The tunnel patriarch seemed lost for words.

He had gotten out of his chair at the insistence of the tunnel folk and chose something from what was left. He obviously had not meant to keep what he lifted from the box.

Catherine turned and smiled. Father stood holding another sweater. Last time he had accepted an old skiing sweater of her father’s.

The thick woollen garment Father held up now was clearly well-made. But its pattern was unexpected. On the front, a portrait of Mickey Mouse had been cleverly woven into a design of many colours. It was something far removed from the old man’s usual layered, scholarly attire.

“I believe,” William said with open amusement. “That one’s got your name on it.”

Father looked at the sweater as though it had personally offended him. “I hardly think—”

He remembered the last sweater Catherine had given him. He had quietly traded it for a full-length coat. He felt caught, trapped once more by the expectations of others.

“Try it,” Mary urged. “It looks just your size.”

A pause. Then, slowly, Father removed his outer shawl and coat. There was a collective stillness as he pulled the sweater over his head and shoulders.

It fit perfectly. The colour brought warmth to his face, and Mickey grinned out from his chest, looking very pleased with the new arrangement.

The weight settled naturally. For a moment, he said nothing. Then, “Well,” he admitted. “It is... adequate.”

“Inadequate, you mean,” William muttered. “You look like you’re ready for a day out at Disneyland.”

“William,” Father said, with dignity. “I am not in the mood for such jokes.”

More laughter now. Even Father’s mouth twitched.

Catherine covered her smile.

Vincent leaned slightly closer. “It suits him,” he murmured.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “It really does. I never thought of him as a Mickey man.”

Father adjusted the sleeves. “...It is warm,” he conceded.

And that, from Father, was high praise indeed. He did not dismiss the garment, but nor did he look down at the grinning face on his chest. He resumed his thick shawl and covered over the offence.

The sorting of the last items went on. A child discovered a pair of mittens that actually fit. She held them up as though they were treasure. Another boy found a book and began turning pages with reverence.

Mary gathered a bundle of scarves, already planning. “These will go to the hospital ward,” she said quietly.

William examined a set of heavy cooking utensils. “Well now,” he said, pleased despite himself. “These might survive my kitchen.” He peered at the maker’s label and whistled. “I might have to start charging a covering fee.”

He picked up a sheathed knife and turned it over in his hand, testing the balance with a practised eye. “Wüsthof,” he muttered. “Well... she didn’t waste her money, I’ll give her that.”

He glanced at the enamelled pot beside it and snorted. “And what’s this then—Le Creuset? Fancy name for something that’ll be black with soot in a week.”

A pause. “...Good weight, though.” He took them and left the chamber at a trot.

Mouse had found something else entirely. A small mechanical wind-up toy. He turned it over in his hands, eyes alight. “It moves,” he said. “Okay, good, okay fine. There’s a spring... and a tension... and—”

“Mouse,” Catherine said quickly. “Do not take it apart.”

Mouse frowned. “...Not even a little?”

“Not even a little.”

He considered. “...All right,” he said reluctantly. “Maybe later.”

Vincent smiled faintly.

As the chamber slowly settled, the sense of activity softened into something quieter. People lingered to talk and share. They were already putting things to use.

Catherine stood slightly apart now, watching and taking it in. Everything had gone far better than she expected. Much better than last time, when she had only brought down two large boxes.

Vincent approached her. “You have given much,” he said.

She shook her head. “I had much.”

“That is not the same thing.”

She glanced at him. “No,” she admitted softly. “It isn’t.”

“I wasn’t sure how it would feel,” she added. “Bringing things down. I didn’t want it to feel like... charity.”

“It does not,” Vincent said firmly. “It feels like...” He searched for the right word. “... belonging.”

Catherine’s throat tightened slightly. “I hoped it might.”

Later, as the chamber emptied and only the last quiet voices remained, Catherine and Vincent walked together, away from the warmth and into the quieter tunnels.

“Did I do it right?” she asked after a time.

Vincent looked at her. “There is no ‘right’ in what you did,” he said gently. “There is only intention. And yours...” He paused. “...was clear.”

She let out a small breath. “I kept thinking about last winter,” she said. “What you didn’t say.”

“What did I not say?” he echoed.

“You never complain,” she said. “But I could feel it. The strain. By the way, you... carried it for everyone.”

Vincent’s gaze softened. “That is simply what I am,” he said.

“And this,” she gestured back toward the chamber. “Is what I can be.”

He was quiet for a moment. “You are more than that,” he said softly.

She met his eyes. “And you are not alone in carrying things anymore.”

The bond warmed between them.

People began to move past them, calling greetings or touching shyly as they walked beyond. Soon, the dribbles became streams of people, all heading toward the dining hall. Delicious smells began to permeate the air.

“Come on...” Vincent encouraged. “Let’s go and see how William put your Wüsthof knife to good use.”

“It smells delicious,” Catherine replied as they joined the others in the vast dining hall and found a seat at the long tables.

She remained longer than she intended. Long enough to see the sweaters worn. The scarves were wrapped around necks. The boots were tried on and walked in. Long enough to hear laughter echo through the tunnels in that particular way it did when something had shifted for the better.

When she finally turned to leave, Vincent walked with her.

At the threshold between worlds, she paused. “I’ll bring more next time,” she said.

Vincent shook his head gently. “You have brought enough.”

“There’s always more to do.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But not all of it must be done at once.”

She smiled faintly. “That sounds like something Father would say.”

“I have been listening,” Vincent replied.

She laughed softly. Then, more quietly— “Did you like anything?”

He considered. “Yes,” he said.

“What?”

He met her gaze. “You.”

Catherine’s breath caught.

“Being there,” he clarified gently. “Seeing you among them. Not apart.”

She held his eyes. “That matters to me.”

“I know,” he said softly.

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Later that night, Catherine stood on her balcony. The cold had deepened.

The city shimmered below. But her thoughts were still Below.

She could feel it. Life continuing.

She closed her eyes. “Vincent?”

“I am here.”

She turned and smiled. “Did Father keep the sweater on?”

A soft, amused warmth answered her. “Yes. This time, he did not trade it away.”

Her smile widened. “Good.”

She wrapped her large shawl a little tighter. Not against the cold. But to hold onto the feeling of the day.

Of doing something that mattered. Of giving not from excess—but from understanding.

“It’s cold out here,” she whispered. “I have something for you. Something I saved and held back.”

“What is it?” he asked as he stepped closer.

Their bond shimmered with warmth and curiosity. Catherine smiled as she turned to him and took his hand between hers. The softness of the fur on the back and the long nails held no fears for her.

She tugged at him gently, urging him toward the open door behind her and the shadowed room beyond. Inside, her electric fire cast dancing light across the walls and floor.

“Come on...” she whispered as she stepped backwards over the threshold, still holding his hand. “It’s inside. Where it’s warm. We can order the pizza you like.”

“Catherine...” Vincent warned even as he followed her inside.

Yes...?” She smiled as she closed the door against the cold outside world.

“What is your gift?” he asked with frowning curiosity.

“Me...” Catherine replied simply. She led him safely into her world.

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DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



The Code

by Anonymous

He shouldn't have gone to Catherine that night. Late November in New York was seldom pleasant, cold rain habitually dousing the city and resulting in the type of dampness that soaks through to one's bones. Sharp winds had also plummeted the chill factor, causing shattered patches of thin ice and making walking *and* climbing somewhat hazardous.

It was just such an evening, not fit for man or beast, nor any combination of the two, but there existed in Vincent's determination almost bordering on stubbornness when he knew that what he was doing was right. He had promised Catherine he would come that night, and Hell or high waters, particularly not wind and rain, would keep him away.

His only other choice would have been to send one of the children to Catherine with a message, and although Kipper or any of the other young ones would've been quite willing to do his bidding, Vincent shuddered at the thought of asking a child to leave the safety of the tunnels on such a night. And so, he set out on his journey, Father's pleadings ringing in his ears as he stepped from the hidden exit, a blast of wind hitting his face and the freezing rains soaking through his cloak as if it were no more than the sheerest muslin.

The ascent was made safely, but by the time he reached Catherine's balcony, he was shivering from the cold, his hands and fingers feeling as if they were no longer his. He had hardly reached the French doors when she swung them open and, with a face as determined as his own, pulled him inside.

"Catherine, your carpet," he objected immediately. "I will ruin it."

"Do you think I care about my carpet when you're standing there trembling with the cold and looking like a drowned puppy?" Catherine scolded softly, and slipped off his cloak, almost dropping the heavy, rain-soaked garment.

"You'll get wet," he protested, and tried to relieve her of her burden, but she moved away from his grasp.

"I'll dry out, but I don't think this cloak is ever going to," Catherine frowned. "I'll hang it in the bathroom and maybe it won't be quite so damp by the time you leave."

Disappearing into the other room, she returned in minutes with a large, thick towel and began

drying the damp, tawny ringlets framing his face.

"Vincent, you shouldn't have come tonight," she spoke quietly, her face tender with concern. "At the very least, you could catch pneumonia being out in weather like this. And---and you could've fallen."

Vincent felt a shudder pass through her body, and, reaching up, enclosed a wrist in his gentle grasp. "I *had* to come, Catherine. I gave you my word."

She shook her head. "I would've understood."

"I know," he whispered. "But I would not like you to think I am merely a *fair-weather* friend."

His teasing brought a smile to her lips, but he knew he wasn't free of her gentle scolding yet, nor did he wish to be. Taking his arm, Catherine pulled him across the room to the fireplace and instructed, "Sit down here on the hearth and try to get warm; your hands are like ice. I'll go get a comforter."

His hands were, indeed, cold, and the moisture from his hair sizzled as it fell in tiny droplets on the warm stones. Vincent realized wryly that he had underestimated the forces of the night, but the uncomfortable climb had been worth it considering the tender care he was receiving at Catherine's hands. She pressed a glass of burgundy wine into his hand, and he took a hesitant sip, frowning as the sweetly alcoholic taste slipped across his tongue. Swallowing quickly, he felt a pleasant warmth starting to spread through his chest and proceeded to drain the glass in one gulp.

With Catherine beside him on the hearth, so close he could smell the fragrance of her body, and her voice soft, almost hypnotic, as she read from Shakespeare, he was lulled to sleep by the security of his surroundings, his head gradually coming to rest on Catherine's shoulder.

It seemed as if he had been asleep only minutes when he felt a soft touch on his face, and a gentle voice urging, "Vincent, you---you have to go. The sun will be up in about an hour."

He awoke immediately, realizing with shock that his clothing and hair were only slightly damp.

"Catherine, I am sorry," he apologized contritely. "Please forgive me. I did not mean to---"

"It's all right," Catherine interrupted in a tender voice, and bowed her head, her cheeks tinged a soft shade of pink. "I enjoyed watching you sleep," she whispered, and before he could make a response, she headed for the other room. "I'll get your cloak."

The garment was still quite damp, but glancing out the window, Vincent saw that it made no difference. The rain was still coming down in torrents, the harsh winds blowing it almost horizontally across the balcony.

Catherine saw it, too, and with her hands on his chest, frightened eyes rose to meet his.

"Vincent, be careful," she begged, and with his arms wrapped around her, he held her close, silently offering his reassurance. They stood as one, cherishing those precious moments when their hearts and souls are joined.

Reluctantly lowering his arms, Vincent stepped away from the embrace at last, his fingers entwined with Catherine's. Their eyes locked, and slowly turning away, he slipped through the French doors into the violent night, the tempest raging around him stirring a primordial yearning in his soul.

He began to make the descent with even more caution than before, but perhaps it was the lingering effects of the wine, the drowsiness which still lurked around the edges of his consciousness, or just sheer misfortune that caused his foot to slip on an icy patch clinging to the crack of a stone.

The fall could well have been fatal, but less than four stories above the ground, he managed to twist his body in such a way that he landed amidst a row of garbage cans which had already been overturned by a pack of marauding dogs. The pile of trash cushioned his fall, but he lay there for a moment, breathing heavily, and tried to calm the wild pounding of his heart. His body hurt in several places, but none of the aches compared to the sharp pain shooting up his left leg. Grasping an iron pipe, he pulled himself slowly to a standing position, but attempting to put weight on the injured leg caused it to give way beneath him, collapsing to the cold asphalt; a gasp of pain and frustration escaped his lips.

Already soaked to the bone by the wind and cold rain, Vincent slumped against the wall of the building, feeling helpless and utterly miserable. He was trapped there in the alley as effectively as if he had been chained to the spot and realized with a sinking feeling that he had only one chance of being rescued before the night was chased away by the chilling light of what would be a dismal day.

Catherine had come to him when he and Father were trapped in the tunnels, and perhaps now she would sense that something was wrong if he called out to her. Closing his eyes, he *'saw'* her face, smelled the fragrance of her body, and his heart silently cried out her name--

'Catherine!'

Eighteen stories above him, Catherine had already gone to bed, attempting to snatch a few

hours' sleep and hopefully to dream of a tawny head resting lightly on her shoulder. She had rolled over, her arms slipping around the pillow in a hug, when suddenly both she and the pillow shot up to a sitting position, her green eyes wide with fear. "Vincent! Oh my God!"

Below in the alley, he felt her fear in his heart and cursed himself for having caused it. It would be several minutes before she could reach him, and even then, he knew Catherine would have to seek aid, for she would be unable to help him into the tunnels alone.

Trying to find a more comfortable position, he groaned at the agony of bone scraping against bone, and knew his leg was broken in at least one place. In the darkness, he couldn't tell if it was a compound fracture, but knew any further movement could very well make it so.

There was a sound to his right, and realizing Catherine could not possibly have made it to him so quickly, he pulled his hood over his face and tried to straighten, his heart suddenly pounding against his ribs with such intensity he could feel his chest throbbing.

The pre-dawn shadows parted to reveal a man; wet, black curls playing riotously across his forehead and the face beneath marred by a concerned frown. "Hey, buddy. What the hell you doin' sittin' out here on a night like this? I thought I was the only dumb one around here."

With his back against the wall, Vincent made it to a standing position, careful not to put any weight on his leg. There was no answer he could give the stranger, plausible or otherwise, so he remained silent.

The dark-haired man stepped closer, a smile now curling his lips. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue, or you just too frozen to talk? Hey, look, I know where there's some shelter about a block or so from here. Why don't you let me take you there? You look like you could do with a cup of coffee and a dry blanket."

Vincent drew back slightly, his emotions in turmoil. He dared not reveal himself, yet could not take a chance on Catherine innocently walking into what could possibly be great danger for her. The vision of her lying face down in the park flashed painfully through his mind, and pulling his hood closer around his face, he spoke in a quiet but firm voice. "I know where there's closer shelter, but I cannot make it alone. My... leg is broken."

The stranger reacted immediately, stepping to his side and hooking an arm under his shoulder. "Well, we oughta be able to make it together. That way we can both get outta this God-awful rain. Man, this stuff's enough to freeze your liver."

They started walking slowly, Vincent glancing over his shoulder to see if any further shadows separated from the darkness. Spotting none, he sighed in relief.

Once Catherine reached ground level, it would take her several minutes to search the alley, and by that time, he hoped they would be far enough away that she would be unable to find him. The minute they stepped into the tunnels, however, he knew the danger to himself would then be great.

The thought troubled him little, for his heart and mind were intent upon protecting Catherine. She would not be there if he hadn't *called* to her, and the mere thought of her being in danger because of him caused a hand of fear to painfully grip his heart.

They neared the entrance to the tunnels, and Vincent suddenly realized the stranger beside him was asking a question. "Man, are you with me, or are you driftin' somewhere a thousand miles away?"

"I'm sorry," Vincent forced a smile. "What were you saying?"

"I said, the name's Clinton Andrews. You got a handle you're willin' to share?"

"Vincent."

In the darkness, he saw the flash of white teeth as Andrews grinned. "Anything like that impressionist artist guy?"

"One might argue the similarities," Vincent admitted wryly. "Here is the shelter," he indicated. "These crates will have to be moved aside. Perhaps I can lend a hand."

Slipping his arm from beneath Vincent's shoulder, Andrews shook his head. "You just lean there against the wall, and I'll get 'em outta the way. I'm bigger'n I look."

Since the slender man didn't appear to weigh more than a hundred and thirty pounds even soaking wet, Vincent had to smile at the remark. There was something about Andrews that made him trust the curly-headed, cheerful stranger. Why he was in the alley before dawn and in such inclement weather did not bode well for his character, but Vincent was quite willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Andrews made good on his mild boast, and with the crates moved to one side, again hooked his arm under Vincent's shoulder. They stepped through the dark entrance, Vincent hesitating when his eyes fell upon the naked light bulb ahead.

"What's wrong?" Andrews asked in a worried voice. "That leg givin' you fits?"

"Some," Vincent admitted, and pulling away from Andrews, he leaned heavily against the wall, his head bowed. "I... appreciate your help, Clinton, but---but now you must go."

"And leave you here with a busted leg?" Andrews returned in a tone of shock. "You gotta be

kiddin', man."

"But you owe me nothing," Vincent protested.

"Hey, you're a fellow human being, right?" Andrews replied with a grin.

Vincent sighed. "Not precisely."

"Huh?"

Still keeping his head turned away, Vincent whispered. "I am not what you think I am, Clinton. My---my features are... different from yours or any other person you have ever known."

Andrews chuckled softly. "Yeah? What are you? Some kind of Neanderthal man or maybe a hunchbacked monk like I saw in a movie one time? You do dress weird, but hey, who am I to pass judgment?"

"Then you refuse to leave?" Vincent asked quietly.

"You got it."

Turning his head toward the light, Vincent reached up, slowly drawing the hood from his head. "And now?" he whispered.

Andrews's eyes widened with shock. "Gawd Almighty! You're---you're a lion! But you---you can't be. I mean, you can *talk* and all. But that face! It's... I mean..."

Vincent bowed his head, a familiar ache spreading through his chest.

"Hey---uh---look, I didn't---I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Andrews spoke in an apologetic tone, and raising his head slightly, Vincent could see a slender hand reaching out to him. It hesitated a moment, then grasped his arm in a firm grip. "Look, Vincent, you gotta---you gotta give a guy a chance. I mean, it's not every day I run into a soakin' wet half-man, half-lion with a broken leg in an alley at 4 am in the morning." A smile teased Andrews's lips. "You gotta admit there's some humor in that somewhere."

"If so, you will forgive me if I don't see it," Vincent sighed.

"No, I guess you wouldn't," Andrews nodded. "You probably lost your sense of humor when you broke that leg. Listen, you'd better sit down and try to rest while I figure out what to do. I mean, it's not like I can take you to a hospital or something to get that leg fixed. I've been in New York for a couple of years or so now, and I've never heard of anyone like you, so obviously you've been keeping your identity a secret." As he talked, he hooked an arm under

Vincent's shoulder, helping him to a wooden crate, then stepping back, ran a hand through his hair. "You know, the way you look and all, I guess I oughta be afraid of you, but somehow I just don't feel that way."

"I won't hurt you," Vincent promised in a whisper.

"Yeah, I think I know that." Andrews nodded, and a look of amazement crossed the lean features again. "Damn!" he laughed hoarsely. "I got so many questions I suddenly wanna ask."

"I'm afraid that would do little good," Vincent replied quietly. "How I came to be thus is a mystery even to myself, and any other questions you may put to me, I cannot answer for reasons that I am not at liberty to explain. You must simply try to accept what is."

"Yeah, well, I'm gettin' really good at that," Andrews returned in a voice that had suddenly lost its cheerfulness. "Most things in my life I've had to accept or take the coward's way out."

There was something in his tone and demeanor that caused Vincent to lay a gentle hand on his arm. "You mean suicide?" he asked softly.

Andrews dropped onto the crate beside him and nodded. "I've thought about it, but somehow it's not me, least not yet."

There was silence between them for a moment, then Vincent asked, "Why were you in the alley tonight, Clinton?"

The dark-haired man turned a wry look upon him. "I might ask *you* the same thing, but is that one of those questions you can't answer?"

"I had been visiting a friend," Vincent replied truthfully.

"On a night like *this*?" Andrews returned in a note of surprise. "It must be one *hell* of a friend."

"*She* is," Vincent smiled.

The brown eyes turned to him, sparkling with understanding. "I get the picture," Andrews grinned and rose to his feet. "Well, as far as why *I* was in the alley---" he spread his arms wide, "---Vincent, you are looking at Clinton Andrews, pickpocket extraordinaire."

"You are a *thief*?" Vincent questioned in shock.

Andrews looked as if the wind had just been taken from his sails. "Well, I guess that's one way of putting it," he admitted in a sheepish tone.

Vincent eyed the man warily. "And you are *proud* of this---this *ability*?"

"Hey, I was proud five years ago," Andrews yelled back, "but I found out the hard way pride doesn't put food in your stomach!"

Surprised at the sudden anger, Vincent asked softly, "What happened?"

Andrews leaned against the wall, the dark eyes staring at the naked light bulb ahead.

"I grew up in Pittsburgh," he began to explain in a bitter tone. "Got a job there at the steel mill and for four years had everything a man could want, or at least everything I wanted. Then came the big lay-off. Being low man on the totem pole is all the rot it's cut out to be. Within months I lost everything, so with my last two hundred dollars in my pocket, I came to New York, hopin' I could make it big in the Big Apple. To make a borin' story short, I've been on the streets ever since, doing odd jobs here and there and pickpocketing to put food in my mouth and support my habit."

"What---habit?" Vincent asked reluctantly.

Andrews rolled up his left sleeve, revealing a needle-marked arm. "I'm a junkie, or at least on my way to bein' one," he answered in a quiet voice. "I sniff it, shoot it, or pop pills. I've been usin' for about a month now, not the hard stuff, so I'm not addicted *yet*, but give me time---I'll get it down pat." He paused a moment, then asked, "You understand what I'm talking about?"

"Death," Vincent returned in a whisper.

Andrews shrugged. "Yeah, well, all of us have gotta go sometime. What difference does it make when?"

"It makes a difference to those who care about you," Vincent replied softly.

"Don't have anyone," Andrews sighed and picked at a small pebble lodged in the black wall. "Got an old man out there somewhere, but he was a drunk and took off before I hit my fourteenth birthday. There isn't anyone else."

Vincent reached up to lay a gentle hand on the lean shoulder. "There is me, Clinton. You have given me help and respected the fact that I could not answer your questions. I, at least, owe you for that."

Andrews shook his head, a smile spreading across his lips. "You don't owe me a *damned* thing, Vincent," he corrected in a soft voice. "You may not look it, but you're more human than anybody else I've met in this city. Most of 'em are as cold as that rain out there."

"There are many who care," Vincent promised. "Please, Clinton, let me---" A sudden warmth

filled his soul, and his heart began to beat rapidly. "Catherine! She is near!"

"Catherine? Who's that?" Andrews grabbed his arm; the slender face lined with concern. "Vincent, you okay?"

Ignoring Andrews, he turned his head towards the entrance to the tunnel, calling out softly, "Catherine!"

Emerging from the dark shadows surrounding the entrance, Catherine ran across the passageway, throwing her arms around him. "Thank God, Vincent! I finally found you!" she sobbed against his chest. "I was so worried!"

Clinton Andrews ceased to exist for Vincent as he held her close, trying to soothe the tremors of fear running through her body.

"I am sorry, Catherine," he whispered tenderly, his heart aching with the pain he had caused. "Forgive me," he murmured against her hair. "I did not mean to frighten you."

She drew back, swiping at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Vincent, what happened?" she asked in a voice still choked with emotion. "I---I felt you were in danger." Her eyes searched his face, and she gasped, "You're in *pain*! What is it?"

"My leg is broken," he answered quietly.

Catherine's hands flew to her mouth, obviously understanding immediately what had happened. "Oh no! Vincent, you could've been *killed*!"

Taking her hands tenderly in his, he reassured her, "I am all right, Catherine. The fall was a short one, and a broken leg will mend."

"You *fell*!" she gasped. Vincent nodded. "I need to get you help," she replied in a worried voice and turned, noticing Andrews for the first time.

"Is this her?" the dark-haired man flashed a grin.

Vincent nodded. "It is her. Catherine, this is Clinton Andrews. He... found me in the alley and helped me here."

Catherine offered her hand. "Thank you," she said softly. "We owe you a great deal, but---but I think it would be best if you leave now."

"Catherine, I would like him to stay," Vincent whispered.

She threw him a look of doubt, understanding the words he had not spoken. "Oh, would you excuse us a few minutes?" she asked Andrews. "Vincent and I need to... discuss something."

"Sure, lady," Andrews nodded, the dark eyes growing cold, "but I wouldn't wait too long to get that leg set. He's in a lot more pain than you know, and it's only gonna get worse."

He moved away some distance down the passageway, and turning back to Vincent, Catherine protested in a low voice. "You can't reveal your world to him; you know *nothing* about this man."

"I know he needs us," Vincent returned softly. "Is that not all that is important?"

"No, it's not," Catherine argued. "You've got to think about Father and the others in the tunnels. Vincent, why did you let him bring you here in the first place? I---I felt you were in danger. You must've known I was coming to you."

"I knew," Vincent agreed in a low voice. "That is why it was imperative that we not be there when you arrived. I could not know at the time that Clinton wouldn't hurt you, and in my present condition, I could offer you no protection."

"How can you be so sure he won't hurt me *now*?" Catherine objected in an anxious voice. "Or---or someone else down here, maybe even you."

"If he had wished to harm me, he would already have done so," Vincent pointed out.

"Catherine, he is alone. Surely you and I, above all others should be able to understand that feeling. I have never regretted giving myself to you when you needed me; can you truly ask me to do less for him?"

Catherine drew back; her face lined with anguish. "That's not fair, Vincent," she protested hoarsely. "I would've died if you hadn't come to me that night. You know how deeply I love you, and I also carry gratitude in my heart for what you did for me during that black time in my life, but there's no comparison between myself and Andrews."

"There *is*, Catherine." Knowing he had hurt her, Vincent reached out to take her hands in his. "Please, try to understand. Clinton is also dying. He told me he started using drugs about a month ago. He is not yet an addict, however, and I must try to stop that from happening. The drugs are a solace, a means of temporarily escaping his harsh world. We must give him something to take the place of his need for such false hopes---our love and caring. He has none of that in his own world."

"Vincent, all I'm saying is wait," Catherine pleaded. "You told me the Council was a bit upset when you talked Father into allowing Lin and Henry to come down here. When the Tong followed with their threats of revenge, some of the Council members felt the two of you had overstepped your authority. Don't give them any reason to think that again, Vincent. Present Clinton's problem to them and let a majority decide whether or not he should be welcomed

here."

"No, there is no time," Vincent shook his head stubbornly. "If I allow Clinton to leave now, he will disappear into the night, becoming another lost soul in your world. He must go with us tonight, and I will take full responsibility for his actions."

Slipping her hands from him, Catherine cupped his face with a gentle touch. "Vincent, I love you for what you are, but sometimes you frighten me," she said softly.

He understood her words, and a hand rose to tenderly encircle her wrist. "You would not love me if I didn't," he whispered.

He saw her eyes fill with tears as she nodded silently, and, pushing himself to his feet, he barely stifled a groan as he called out quietly, "Clinton, if you would again be willing to lend me your support, we will be on our way."

Moving quickly to his side, Andrews slipped an arm under his shoulder while Catherine did the same on the other side. "Where're we goin'?" the slender man asked.

"Remember our agreement about the questions?" Vincent smiled.

"You're right," Andrews flashed a toothy grin. "Lead on, my noble friend. My life is in your hands."

The journey took more than an hour; Vincent was forced to guide them along a longer route because he could not negotiate the Spiral Staircase. By the time they reached the living quarters, his forehead was beaded with sweat, his leg throbbing painfully as he had time and again put weight on it in an effort to relieve Catherine and Clinton somewhat of their burden.

They found Father pacing the floor, his elderly face creased with lines of worry, and at the sound of their approach, he whirled around, the pale blue eyes widening. " Vincent! Good God, what happened? I was about to gather a search party!"

"I'm all right, Father," Vincent reassured, sucking in his breath sharply as a stabbing pain shot up into his hip. "However, it does seem that I am in need of your medical assistance."

Taking in the situation at a glance, Father began issuing orders, and in minutes, Vincent found himself settled comfortably on the bed, Catherine sitting beside him and Father limping about the room, gathering various items he would need for his ministrations. "You." He pointed to Andrews, then gestured with his hand, "You'd better wait in the study."

Seeing the younger man drop his head, Vincent added quickly. "Do not wander off, Clinton. The tunnels are a maze for those who are not familiar with their wanderings."

"Yeah, I kinda got that idea on here," Andrews agreed in a wry tone. "Don't worry, Vincent. I'll be here when you get fixed up."

Waiting until he disappeared into the other chamber, Father turned back to Vincent, his elderly features marred with a frown. "We will discuss *him* later," he promised grimly. "But right now, I have to see what I can do about this leg. Are you injured anywhere else?"

Vincent shook his head. "Only bruises."

"How far did you fall?"

"From the fourth floor."

He felt Father stiffen, but the older man's voice was sarcastic, hiding his fear. "Well, it's unfortunate you didn't fall on your head; then you wouldn't have been hurt. I told you not to go tonight, but would you listen?"

"Father!" Catherine chastised softly.

The blue eyes rose to meet hers, and Father sighed. "Forgive me, Catherine. I don't mean to censor at a time like this, nor do I imply that you are the cause of his injury. It's just that I dread the thought of having to cause my son pain. And that's what I will have to do in setting this bone. I just wish I had some medication to relieve the distress, but I used all we had on hand last week for those injured in that tunnel collapse."

Vincent reached up to squeeze his shoulder gently. "It will be all right, Father. Do what you must."

Father nodded silently and, exchanging a worried look with Catherine, began to remove the leather boot.

Vincent inhaled sharply; Catherine's pain added to his own, making him suffer even more. He would not have wished her absent, however, for her cool hand on his forehead soothed him as no medication could have done.

The true agony ripped through his body when Father straightened the leg, but he bore it stoically, his eyes locked with Catherine's and feeling not only her pain, but her strength as well. One hand gripped his, applying pressure that he could not return for fear he would injure her, but it was enough.

One last excruciating stab of pain cut through him as the bones slipped into place, leaving him breathless, and closing his eyes, he felt Catherine's cheek next to his, her hand tenderly smoothing the stray hair back from his forehead. He remained thus as Father now worked

quickly, splitting his pant leg and wrapping strips of white sheet tightly around the broken limb.

"You have beautiful legs," Catherine murmured so softly that only he could hear, and his eyes flew open in surprise, meeting hers, which were so close he felt as if he could see her heart through the dark pupils.

She smiled and straightened, her fingers entwined with his as Father finished bandaging the leg, then applied the sticky substance he had invented for just such emergencies to form a cast. Reaching for his black bag, he removed a small bottle and shook two pills into his hand. "These will help you sleep, Vincent. I can at least do that much for you," he added in a tone of regret.

"You've worked wonders, Father, considering the circumstances," Vincent replied softly. "What would I do without you?"

"Probably break both your legs and your arms as well," Father returned gruffly, then his hand gently touched the tawny hair. "Rest now," he whispered.

"In a few minutes, Father," Vincent promised, "but first you must know about the man in the other chamber. His name is Clinton Andrews, and he came to my aid in the alley."

"I suspected as much," Father nodded. "Don't worry. He will receive all the respect that is due him until you and I have had a chance to talk." He began gathering up the medical paraphernalia scattered about the bed and table. "See that he takes the pills," he murmured to Catherine, and left the two of them alone in the chamber.

Taking Catherine's hand in his, Vincent whispered with reluctance.

"You must go now. The morning has already arrived in your world, and you need to prepare for your appearance in court this afternoon. I will have one of the children guide you back."

Catherine shook her head. "I'll stay until you've fallen asleep," and pouring him a cup of tea, she ordered softly, "There, now take your pills."

Doing as he was told; Vincent's eyes rose to meet the green orbs looking down upon him with such tenderness. "It is fortunate you are not a nurse, Catherine," he whispered. "Upon seeing your face, any man would wish his illness to linger so he could continue to receive your gentle ministrations."

"Is that a prediction on your part?" Catherine teased.

"Perhaps," he smiled. "One cannot help but dream."

"Then do so," Catherine urged softly, "but go to sleep first."

Picking up a book of Shakespearean sonnets, she sat with one hand in Vincent's and began to read;

*"Let not my love be call'd idolatry,
Not my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be,
To one, of one, still such, and ever so..."*

The judge ruled for a continuance on the afternoon trial, and, finding herself free for the remainder of the day, Catherine's heart and footsteps turned back to the tunnels. Kipper guided her to the chambers, and as her eyes fell upon the empty bed, she felt her heart skip a beat. Whirling around, she came face to face with Father, and demanded fearfully, "Where's Vincent?"

"You're early," Father smiled and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. Vincent awoke a few minutes ago and insisted upon changing clothes. Winslow and Cullen are helping him."

"How is he?" Catherine asked softly.

"Oh, fine, fine," Father nodded and, settling in one of the oversized chairs, waved his hand to another close by. "Although, with that cast on his leg, I daresay he's going to get cranky pretty soon," he added.

"Vincent... cranky?" Catherine laughed at the thought.

"Ah, you think that's absurd?" Father returned drily. "You weren't here the time he had the flu for two weeks. Such growling." He shook his head solemnly, but there was an unmistakable twinkle in the blue eyes.

Catherine laughed again, but it was obvious to anyone who knew her that her heart was not in the happy emotion. Covering her hand on the chair arm, Father asked quietly, "You seem upset about something. Do you want to talk about it?"

Catherine met his gaze briefly, then turned her head away. "I---I don't like to say anything behind Vincent's back."

"And I wouldn't ask you to," Father promised, "but if you're worried about something that has to do with Vincent..."

Rising quickly, Catherine gazed at the empty bed for a moment, then wheeled around to Father. "What has Vincent told you about Clinton Andrews?" she asked suddenly.

"Nothing very good, I'm afraid," Father frowned. "It seems Clinton is a pickpocket and drug user, but Vincent assures me he trusts the young man implicitly."

"That's what worries me," Catherine sighed. "I'm not as trusting as Vincent, though, so I ran a check on Andrews. He was arrested for alleged armed robbery of a bank in Pittsburgh about two years ago, then proceeded to jump bail and came here."

Father's frown deepened. "That presents a definite problem. It's not the policy of our world to knowingly harbor a criminal."

"In all fairness to Andrews, the evidence against him was circumstantial," Catherine admitted. "It could simply have been a case of him being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Father turned a suspicious look upon her. "But you don't believe that, do you?"

Dropping in the chair again, Catherine sighed. "To be honest, I don't know what to believe. There's nothing I value more highly than Vincent's opinion, and he does have a wonderful way of bringing out the best in people."

"Yes," Father agreed in a dry tone. "I believe he would even try to find good in Satan himself."

Catherine threw him a quick look. "Meaning Vincent may be seeing something in Andrews that doesn't really exist?"

"Possibly," Father replied.

"But Vincent---" Catherine started to protest.

"Should my ears be burning?" a voice behind her asked quietly, and whirling around, Catherine blushed a deep red.

"Vincent!"

Alone, he maneuvered slowly down the four steps leading from the study, relying heavily on a pair of sturdy, yet handsomely-carved crutches. Father pulled a chair close and, thanking him with a silent nod, Vincent sank into it, raising one of his wooden supports slightly.

"Cullen," he explained with a smile. "His talent never fails to amaze me." His head rose, the blue eyes meeting Catherine's, suddenly clouded with concern. "You are disturbed about something. What is it, Catherine?"

Instead of answering his question, Catherine posed one of her own. "Where's Andrews?"

Vincent's forehead, between the V of fur, creased in a frown. "Clinton is with Winslow. Why do you ask?"

Catherine reached out to lay a hand on his arm. "Vincent, I ran a check on Clinton Andrews," she said quietly. "About two years ago, he was arrested in Pittsburgh for armed robbery, then jumped bail. There's an outstanding warrant against him."

"Clinton did not commit the robbery." Vincent shook his head firmly.

"But he told you himself that he's a pickpocket and drug addict," Catherine pointed out.

"Stealing someone's wallet is far different from committing a robbery at gunpoint," Vincent objected.

"But he was arrested for the crime," Father argued in a quiet voice.

"All those who are incarcerated are not guilty," Vincent returned softly. "Surely, Father, you of all people, should know that."

The reference to his brief stay in jail for a murder he did not commit caused the older man to look away, his face lined with pain.

Vincent squeezed his shoulder, immediately apologizing. "I'm sorry, Father. I am merely saying it is not the custom of our world to pass judgment upon one without first allowing that person to offer an explanation."

"That's true," Father agreed. "But this is not our decision alone; we have the rest of our world to consider. I think the wisest thing to do right now would be to have Winslow or one of the others show Andrews back to the surface, then seal the entrance."

Vincent's features furrowed in a deep frown. "Catherine?"

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Father," she said in a remorseful tone. "Andrews could present a danger to all of us, but most of all, to you. It's wonderful to be so compassionate, Vincent---I wouldn't want you any other way---but sometimes you need to temper your compassion with reason."

Vincent rose slowly, a look of pain on his face which Catherine and Father instinctively knew had nothing to do with his injured leg. "I cannot turn Clinton away," he whispered, "not until I have talked to him and heard his side of these charges. Then I will decide." With that vague promise, he limped from the room, leaving behind two very worried loved ones.

He found Andrews in Mouse's chambers, nodding solemnly over one of the young man's latest inventions. Looking up at his approach, Mouse broke into a grin. "Vincent! Heard about your fall. Made you something. No more broken legs." Reaching down beside his table, he picked up a large vinyl pillow. "Filled with air," he proudly explained. "Tie it to backside, fall, pillow cushions. Neat, huh?"

The thought of himself climbing Catherine's apartment building with a pillow tied around him caused Vincent to smile. "Neat, Mouse," he agreed, "but what if I fall headfirst?"

Mouse stared at him a moment. "Headfirst?" he mumbled and snatched the pillow from Vincent's hands. "Needs more work," he decided and scurried away.

Behind him, he heard Andrews chuckle softly. "Strange kid, but he's likable and sure has the smarts. If he was upstairs, he'd probably be an eccentric physicist or something."

"Yes, Mouse is quite a remarkable person." Vincent nodded and facing Andrews, his features grew grim. "Clinton, we need to talk."

"Sure," Andrews agreed readily. "But let's do it sitting down. You oughtn't to be on that leg too much."

The easy solicitude made Vincent's task more difficult, but settling in a chair opposite Andrews, he forced himself to come directly to the point. "Catherine works in the District Attorney's office," he began to explain. "She checked your record and discovered there is an outstanding warrant on you for armed robbery in Pittsburgh."

"I didn't do it, Vincent," Andrews returned in an earnest voice. "I swear to you I never robbed that bank."

"What evidence did they have against you?" Vincent asked quietly.

"A videotape. They got me on tape before the robbery when I went into the bank to close out my checking account," Andrews replied with a harsh, mirthless laugh. "Five minutes later the place was robbed by a guy who kept his face turned away from the camera, but he had on a denim jacket and jeans just like me and was my size with dark curly hair. The cops compared the tapes and decided that was all the evidence they needed."

"Why did you run?" Vincent questioned softly. "Surely if you had stayed, you could have cleared your name at the trial."

Andrews turned a look of bitterness upon him. "I don't mean any disrespect, Vincent, but if

you think that's true, then you don't know much about the people of my world. I'd been out of a job for over a year and didn't have an alibi when the robbery went down, so as far as the court system was concerned, I was the type who was better off in prison." The dark eyes suddenly filled with unshed tears. "I've been honest with you, Vincent," he continued in a voice that grew increasingly hoarse. "I told ya I'm a pickpocket and on my way to bein' a user. But I've never mugged any old ladies or swiped a wallet from anyone who didn't look like he could well afford it, and I have never robbed a bank."

He jumped to his feet with a jerky motion, and Vincent rose slowly beside him, a crutch under one arm and the other reaching out to grasp a lean shoulder.

Making an angry swipe at a tear, Andrews complained in a choked voice, "Damn it, I hate this! I haven't---I haven't cried since I was a kid."

"Then perhaps it is long overdue," Vincent whispered, and drew the young man into his arms, his own heart aching as Andrews broke down, sobbing bitterly against his chest.

It was a somber trio who gathered in the study--Father behind the desk, elbows on the wooden surface and his chin resting on his clasped hands, while Vincent and Catherine sat opposite, one with the posture of calmness and the other playing nervously with the strings on her jacket.

"So that's your last word on the matter," Father spoke in a grim voice. "You refuse to turn Andrews over to the police."

"A prison cell would only accentuate the problem," Vincent argued quietly.

"But he is a criminal," Catherine reminded him. "In the world Above, people are punished for their crimes. Remember Kanin..."

"Clinton did not rob that bank in Pittsburgh," Vincent protested patiently. "And Kanin is paying for his at the moment."

"Perhaps not," Father agreed with obvious reluctance, "but by his own words, he has confessed to being a pickpocket, and that, Vincent, is a crime whether one has been convicted of it or not."

"He has given me his word that if he is allowed to stay, he will not steal again, nor will he use drugs," Vincent returned in a voice suddenly edged with coldness. "Clinton is alone and needs nothing more than someone to care. It is such a small thing so easily given, and if we do not do so, then the philosophy of the world we have built here becomes a mockery of the

truth. It is but walls without a foundation."

Leaning back in his chair, Father sighed. "Very well, my son. Andrews's continued presence here is against my wishes, so the responsibility for his actions rests entirely upon your shoulders. Word has already spread through the tunnels that you are harboring a criminal. If he steps out of line just once, it is you the Council will blame. Are you willing to accept that responsibility?"

"I am," Vincent answered quietly.

Father rose to his feet. "Then there is nothing more to be said," he spoke gruffly, effectively bringing the conversation to an end by leaving the chamber, the pronounced limp only enhancing his dignified exit.

Behind him, silence hung heavy in the air, Vincent staring straight ahead and Catherine sitting with her head bowed, her hands still toying with the strings on her jacket.

Stealing a glance at her, Vincent felt an ache spreading through his chest, and reaching out, covered the nervous hands with one of his own.

"Don't hate me, Catherine," he pleaded in a whisper.

Her head rose quickly, green eyes meeting his, and a sad smile played across her lips. "You know me so well, and yet you believe that's what I'm feeling right now?" she asked softly.

Vincent hesitated. "I feel... a turmoil within you, so many emotions I cannot distinguish between them."

Catherine grasped his hand tenderly between her own. "None are hatred, Vincent. I could never feel that way towards you. A little anger maybe, but not hatred." She turned in her chair to face him, a look of desperation clouding her features. "I'm angry, Vincent, because just once I wish you would think of yourself. I know you want to help people---that's the noblest thing about you---but you must stop to consider what the consequences might be for you. Clinton may be everything you believe him to be---I pray to God he is---but if he isn't..." Releasing his hand, she jumped to her feet, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she turned back to Vincent. "I know I should be concerned about Father and the others here in the tunnels, but all I can think of right now is you," she admitted in a voice lacking its usual composure. "You've become the center of my world, Vincent, and if anything should--- should happen to you..."

Rising, Vincent leaned heavily on one crutch and pulled her to him in an embrace. Resting his cheek against the silkiness of her hair, he whispered, "Nothing will happen, Catherine, I

promise you."

The next day passed without any further protest from Catherine, and Father Vincent spent most of it with Andrews, quietly encouraging him to talk about his past and his renewed hopes for his future. Discovering that the young man was more intelligent than he had first appeared, Vincent directed their conversation towards politics, religion, and literature, thoroughly enjoying Andrews's interesting and sometimes radical ideas on the subjects they discussed.

With the conversation still fresh in his mind the following morning, Vincent was totally unprepared for the grim news delivered by Cullen over breakfast. Looking up from his tea when the carpenter entered the chamber, Vincent sensed immediately that something tragic had occurred. "What is it, Cullen?" he asked in a calm voice, contradictory to the sudden pounding of his heart. "What has happened?"

"It---uh---it's Master," Cullen replied hoarsely, referring to the elderly Chinese man who had married and buried the people in the tunnels for as long as anyone could remember. "He---he's been murdered."

"Murdered!" Father echoed in horror and rose quickly to his feet. "Are you certain, Cullen?"

"Unfortunately," the younger man nodded. "A little over an hour ago, Maxim was going through the tunnel bisecting Master's chambers. He said he heard a sound like a cry for help, and when he ran into the chambers to investigate, he found Master on the floor, and someone bent over him. When Maxim yelled, the guy took off, so he grabbed one of Master's antique swords and gave chase."

"Is the man in custody?" Father demanded.

Cullen hesitated. "Not... exactly. He almost lost him a couple of times, but said the guy didn't know the tunnels, so Maxim cut through an intersecting passageway and came out in front of the murderer just short of the 123rd Street entrance. He took him by surprise; there was a brief scuffle, and the guy fell on the sword."

"He's dead?" Vincent asked quietly.

Cullen nodded.

"And does anyone know who this murderer was?" Father questioned.

Cullen met the steady gaze, then his eyes went to Vincent with obvious reluctance. "It was...

Clinton Andrews."

"Impossible!" Vincent jumped to his feet, ignoring his broken leg. "You must be wrong!"

Cullen shook his head sadly. "I wish I were. Maxim didn't know him, but I recognized Andrews immediately. I'm... sorry, Vincent."

Snatching up his cloak, Vincent threw it about his shoulders and grabbed the crutches.

"Where're you going?" Father demanded.

"There has been a grave error committed here," Vincent flung back. "I intend to discover the truth."

"Vincent!"

Ignoring Father's protest, Vincent limped through the tunnels, his mind and heart in turmoil. It had to be some horrible mistake. Clinton could not have killed Master or anyone else; he was as certain of that as he was of his own innocence. It was no doubt some strange practical joke initiated by Clinton himself. In the past three days he had come to learn that the young man had a sometimes wild sense of humor and had probably engineered the bizarre scheme just for the sheer fun of it.

Vincent had almost convinced himself his theory was correct and was fully prepared to meet Andrews's grinning face with a vicious growl, play-acting mingled with a little realism. From his own point of view, the joke was NOT humorous.

Rounding the corner of the tunnel leading to the 123rd Street entrance, however, Vincent drew up short, his heart thudding painfully as he suddenly realized his theorizing had only been a way of avoiding the truth. Clinton Andrews lay on the ground before him, the pitifully slender body now motionless, and the dark eyes turned in a sightless stare toward the black ceiling.

The small cluster of people gathered in the passageway moved back silently as Vincent approached, only Winslow remaining close, a large, beefy hand reaching to grip his shoulder.

Vincent felt nothing, his heart and soul engulfed in a frozen numbness that seemed to chill his very bones. "Master?" he asked in a whisper.

"They took him to the Cathedral," Winslow answered quietly, referring to a chamber deep in the tunnels, the natural round formation and high domed ceiling of which was reminiscent of an old church.

"Would you see that Clinton is also taken there?" Vincent requested softly.

Before Winslow could answer, a tall, commanding figure separated from the group, his gait and peppered hair tousled, and his pale skin now tinged with the heat of anger. "You're not layin' this murderer out in repose next to Master! That's sacrilege!" he yelled angrily.

Maxim, you are confused," Vincent whispered. "Clinton was not a murderer."

"He did it!" the older man shouted back. "You just don't wanna admit it because you brought that animal down here! It's your fault Master's dead! If you hadn't been Above the other night playing with that slut, none of this would've happened!"

A rush of fury swept through Vincent's veins and grabbing Maxim by the front of his shirt, he snarled, "You will not speak of Catherine in that manner!"

"What're you gonna do about it?" Maxim retorted. "Turn killer like your friend there?"

Vincent released him and jerked back, feeling as if a hot iron had touched his heart. Stepping between them, Winslow snapped, "That's enough, Maxim!"

"No, it's not!" the older man fired back and whirled around to the small group gathered behind them. "Vincent's wrong about this murderer! I was there, I saw him standing over Master's lifeless body, and when I chased him, he tried to kill me! Vincent's the one who brought him down here, knowing he was a thief and drug user, and now he stands there and defends this killer against the rest of the decent people here!"

A murmur of anger swept through the cluster of stern-faced men and women, and Maxim continued. "I thought our rules dictate that the Council decides who would be accepted. Did any of you vote for Andrews to be here? How come Vincent got to make the decision alone? He brought that woman here without our permission, then let those two Chinese kids come, and you all know what happened then---our world was almost destroyed. Now Vincent brings this junkie down here, and he ends up killin' an innocent old man, probably to rob him and get more money to buy drugs. How long are we going to let Vincent get away with breaking our rules? How many more of us have gotta die?"

The mumblings of anger were growing in volume, and gripping Vincent's arm, Winslow whispered, "I think we'd better get outta here. The natives are getting dangerously restless."

Vincent shook his head firmly. "These people are my friends."

"Not right now," Winslow argued. "They're no different from the ones on the surface. When someone incites 'em to riot, they become mob animals. Believe me, retreat's the better part of valor right now."

Vincent stared in disbelief at the faces of those he knew so well, their anger mingling with the

deep sorrow in his heart. "Perhaps you're right," he agreed sadly and, turning with difficulty, began limping through the passageway, his head bowed.

Behind him, Maxim shouted angrily. "You'll pay for this, Vincent! Master was a good man and you're as guilty of his death as if you murdered him yourself!"

Vincent froze, but touching his arm lightly, Winslow urged him on. "Ignore him. The guy's just upset; he doesn't really mean that."

"And what about you?" Vincent asked softly, his eyes meeting the dark brown ones of his friend. "Do you also feel Clinton is a murderer?"

Winslow looked away quickly, his chest swelling as he inhaled deeply. "Yeah, I guess I do, Vincent. Maxim found him bent over Master's body, and he said Andrews had several of Master's possessions in his arms--a vase, candlestick holder, stuff like that."

"Then where are those possessions?" Vincent demanded. "I saw none of them around Clinton's body."

"He must've stashed 'em somewhere," Winslow guessed. "Maxim said he lost Andrews a couple times in the tunnels." Vincent remained silent, and Winslow continued. "Look, damn it. I don't agree with Maxim about you bein' to blame for this. It was a mistake bringing Andrews down here, but it was an honest one. You just got taken in by the guy."

Vincent shook his head firmly. "Maxim misinterpreted what he saw. I was with Clinton most of the day yesterday, and he told me many things. What he didn't tell, I felt in his heart. He has had a difficult time the past few years, but he was not a killer. Clinton was incapable of taking a life."

"Vincent, I know you feel things the rest of us can't, but I've been up Above more'n you have, and I think I know a little more about how people act," Winslow pointed out. "They fall into three categories---the good guys, the bad guys, and those who want you to think they're good. That's the worst ones because they're often politicians, cops, preachers, people like that. They make you believe they're as pure as the driven snow when the truth is they're the devil's own sons."

"And you believe Clinton fell into that last category?"

Winslow nodded.

"No." Vincent paused and, turning to face the black man, his voice was sad. "You didn't know Clinton. His death, like that of Master, was a tragic mistake."

A frown spread across Winslow's features, and he released a sigh. "Well, you go on believin' that if you wanna, Vincent, but you've got something more important to worry about right now---yourself. I don't like the mood of that crowd back there."

"He's right." Father and Cullen stepped beside them, the older man continuing in a grim tone. "We've just come from the Cathedral, and mingled with the sadness of those who are there is a considerable amount of anger. Nothing like this has ever happened in our world, and it has left the people in shock."

"The tapping on the pipes is almost hysterical," Cullen added in a solemn voice. "If Andrews wasn't already dead, I've got a bad feeling that he would be lynched."

"Enough!" Vincent suddenly roared and backed away from the small group, his forehead furrowed with lines of grief. "You don't understand. None of you do."

He started to turn, and Father asked quickly, "Vincent, where are you going?"

Pausing only a moment, he bowed his head. "I need... to be alone, Father."

"Do you think that's wise right now?" Father returned in a hesitant voice. "The people---"

"Feel I am to blame for Master's death," Vincent finished coldly. "If they want to wreak their vengeance on me, let them do so."

Limping slowly through the passageway, he disappeared into the darkness, leaving behind three very worried men.

"What the hell're we gonna do?" Winslow demanded in an anxious tone. "I don't think anyone'll try to hurt Vincent, but Maxim's got 'em pretty stirred up, and I've never seen the people so angry."

"Yeah, but it won't do any good to go after him," Cullen shook his head. "Vincent'll just very politely, but firmly, chase us away."

"There is one person who might be able to go to him," Father decided. "We must get a message to Catherine."

His secret place was failing to give him the comfort it normally provided. Standing at the edge of the bridge spanning the vast nothingness below, Vincent listened to the whispers, the sounds of gaiety, and the sadness of tears drifting down from the world Above, and his heart ached with a sense of sheer aloneness. For the first time in his life, he was at odds with the people of his world, both angry and sad that they refused to listen to his pleas of innocence on

Clinton's behalf. They could not understand, nor could he explain the pain he had felt when Clinton had talked of his childhood, the mother he had never known and the drunken father who had beaten him time and again, at last nearly killing him, then disappearing from his life forever. Alone, Clinton had managed to pull himself from the gutter into which his parents had thrown him and had apparently been building a good life for himself when his world had suddenly been ripped out from under him.

Clinton had told the tragically short story in a quiet, unemotional voice, only a note of bitterness creeping through now and then in his narrative, but Vincent had felt the fear and the longing to be needed and loved. Now, however, the young man would need no one, for his all too brief life had been brought to an end by the gleaming steel of a two-hundred-year-old sword.

Standing at the edge of the bridge, Vincent gazed into the Abyss, trying to push reason above his overwhelming sadness.

What had really happened in Master's chamber that had led Maxim to such a terrible conclusion? Perhaps the elderly Chinaman was already dead when Clinton found him, and he was merely bent over the body attempting to find out what had occurred.

Vincent felt that was a plausible and quite possible scenario, but it did not explain Maxim's accusation that he had also caught him stealing some of Master's possessions. No matter how Vincent approached the problem, he could not arrive at a logical explanation for the latter, yet he was as certain of Clinton's innocence as he was of Catherine's love.

Suddenly his heart was filled with the presence of her, and turning, his eyes widened in surprise. "How did you find me?"

"Father told me you wanted to be alone," Catherine replied softly. "I thought this would probably be the place you'd choose." Stepping closer, she laid her hands gently against his chest. "He told me what happened, and... I'm sorry, Vincent."

Gazing into her face for a moment, he stepped back, his own leonine features marred by a frown.

"You are sorry for the wrong reason, Catherine," he whispered. "I need not your pity, but your faith. Believe me and believe in me when I say Clinton was not a murderer."

"Vincent, I want to believe," she returned in an anxious voice. "I respect your opinion more than that of anyone I've ever met, and I love you so much it hurts to see you like this. I would do anything to take away your pain."

"Then tell me you believe Clinton is innocent," Vincent pleaded.

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. "I can't. If I did, you'd feel my true feelings and know it was a lie."

He turned away, the ends of his crutches making crunching sounds in the coarse, gravelly soil. "Why do both our worlds see only the bad in people?" he flung passionately over his shoulder. "Why is there so little room for compassion and doubt?"

Catherine drew in her breath sharply. "I think you judge us--me--unfairly," she protested in a voice edged with anguish. "I've been taught to look at the facts--that's my job, to collect evidence for prosecution. Sometimes I operate on my gut instinct because there're those times when that's all I have to go on, but we've got facts here, Vincent, and I can't ignore them."

"And what of the law of both our worlds that a man is innocent until proven guilty?" Vincent demanded. "My friend is lying dead in that tunnel. Does that fact preclude him from having a fair trial even though all have decided he's guilty?"

"I never said he was guilty," Catherine objected immediately. "I believe he is, just as you believe he's innocent. Neither of us, however, have any real proof to substantiate our beliefs, and we may never have. But right now we've got a more serious problem, one that has Father very concerned. The people are upset over what's happened, and Maxim's fanning their anger. On my way here, a couple of men I came upon in the tunnels made remarks, and--"

Vincent turned to stare at her in horror. "You were threatened because of me?"

"Not exactly," she replied hurriedly. "It was more of a--a demand for me to go back to where I supposedly belong."

Grabbing Catherine's shoulders, Vincent snarled. "Who were these men?"

"It doesn't matter, Vincent." She shook her head. "I'm not the one who's important, you are."

"No, Catherine," he whispered hoarsely... You are more important to me than life itself. If anything should happen to you because of me..." A shudder ran through his body, and pulling her close, he pressed her head against his chest. "I'm sorry, Catherine. My heart aches at the thought that the people of my world could be so cruel."

"They are good people," she breathed softly. "But whatever the truth may be, they feel a great injustice has been done, and like the people Above, they want some kind of revenge.

Clinton's dead, so you're the only one from whom they can try to get payment. I've seen mobs like this before; until their anger cools, they're not responsible for their actions. You must be careful, Vincent. Please, come back to the chambers with me."

He hesitated for a moment, but unable to deny Catherine even her smallest wish, he nodded at last. With her hand resting lightly on his arm, they started through the tunnels, Vincent's leg hurting him much less than the pain in his heart.

It was to grow even worse when they passed by one of the elderly women who lived in the tunnels, and upon seeing them, her aged face suddenly contorted with rage. "I hope you're happy, Vincent!" she yelled. "You brought a murderer among us! Master was a good man, and now he's dead! It's all your fault!"

"Maddie, no!" He started to reach out, but the white-haired lady jerked back.

"Don't touch me!" she cried out. "You'll pay for this, Vincent! Mark my words, you'll pay!"

She was gone, leaving behind pain and sadness. Gripping Vincent's arm tightly, Catherine tried to soothe his ache.

"Don't pay any attention to her, Vincent. She was so angry, she didn't know what she was saying."

"Maddie has been here for more than forty years," he said in anguish. "She used to bake cookies and always made sure I received the first ones from the oven."

Catherine leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Oh God, Vincent, I'm sorry."

Feeling her pain mingling with his own, he straightened, filling his lungs with air.

"Come, Catherine. We must return to Father immediately."

They had almost reached the tunnel leading to the chambers when a man Vincent knew only casually stepped from an intersecting passageway, drawing up short when he saw them.

"So, it's you," the dark-haired man growled. "I thought they'd have you locked up by now. First, you bring that slut on your arm down here and bed her. Then you bring a murderer in our midst. They oughta put you away!"

Hearing Catherine gasp, something snapped inside Vincent, and throwing his crutches aside, he lunged for the man, slamming him against the wall, as a roar of fury echoed through the tunnels.

"Vincent, no!" Grabbing his arm, Catherine tried to pull him back. "For God's sake, let him go!"

Taking a grim satisfaction from the look of fear he saw in the dark eyes, Vincent released his

hold and staggered back, Catherine's arm under his shoulder. "You may say what you like about me, Redmon, but I will not allow you to insult Catherine," he warned in barely-controlled wrath. "Leave us."

Redmon turned and ran, leaving Vincent to slump against the wall, his head falling back against the rough surface and his breathing ragged.

"There is too much anger in the tunnels," he whispered hoarsely. "It hangs heavy in the air, like a disease ready to strike out at even the most innocent. You had nothing to do with what has happened in our world today, and yet they condemn you because of our love. In their fury, they try to turn something beautiful into a thing to be despised."

Picking up his crutches, Catherine leaned them against the wall beside Vincent, then slipped her arms around him. "They are only words, Vincent," she spoke softly, "and words can't hurt us if we refuse to let them."

His arms going around her, he buried his face in her hair. "It does hurt, Catherine."

"I know."

Catherine steadfastly refused to leave the tunnels, but remembering she had not slept the night before, Vincent at last talked her into going with Mary to get at least a few hours' rest.

Alone in the study, he had sunk so deeply into morose thought that he was not aware of Father's presence until he felt a hand gently stroking his hair. Looking up, he felt his heart begin to thud painfully against his ribs and demanded. "What is it, Father? What's wrong?"

Dropping into the chair beside him, Father closed his eyes for a few moments, then, staring at some unknown spot across the room, he answered at last. "They are preparing the funeral for Master. As you know, it was his wish that he be cremated and his ashes scattered in the Chamber of the Winds. The funeral pyre is almost built."

"Is that what is disturbing you?" Vincent questioned softly.

Shaking his head once, Father rose and began pacing the floor. "I am to begin the services in one hour," he replied in a hoarse tone, "and they have--they have requested me to ask you... not to attend."

Vincent stared at Father's back feeling the withering taste of bitterness in his soul. "Requested or demanded?" he asked harshly.

Father turned, his face creased with lines of anguish.

"Vincent, you must listen to me. I want you to stay away from the service because if you go, you'll only be hurt, emotionally and perhaps even physically. I've seen anger like this before. When I still lived Above, I saw a mob lynch a young black man for no other reason than he stole a white man's pocket watch. That was almost fifty years ago, and the memory of it still chills my heart. I pray to God our people are not like that, but one can never be certain about human nature. I can't order you to stay away, but you are my son, Vincent, and I'm pleading with you not to go."

Vincent rose slowly, his features cold. "I will not attend the service, Father. Simply because you request it of me and because Master deserves a quiet, dignified ceremony. But I will not hide in these chambers like a coward. Clinton did nothing wrong, nor did I."

"Vincent, you simply must accept the fact that Clinton was a murderer," Father argued quietly. "You should never have brought him down here. I have told you time and again, my son, that you simply cannot continue to defy our laws like this. The Council waived punishment the one time with regard to Catherine because her life was in danger, and since then she has proven to be an invaluable Helper to the community."

"An invaluable Helper!" Vincent echoed grimly. "Is that how you and the others think of her?"

"Of course not," Father retorted, "but Catherine is not the issue here--Clinton Andrews is. You voluntarily brought the man into the tunnels, revealing our society to him. In that situation, you did have a choice, Vincent. After you reached the tunnel entrance, you could've told him to go for a doctor, then sent a tapped message for help. That entrance would have been sealed, and he would never have known of our existence. But no, you brought him here, and even after Catherine warned you he was a criminal and could not be trusted, you still refused to turn him away. One would've thought you would've at least listened to her, if not to me."

"Criminal records do not tell the whole story," Vincent shot back. "Yes, Clinton was a thief, but he was not a murderer."

"But the evidence--" Father protested.

"Means nothing!" Vincent interrupted. "Don't you think it was strange that none of the items stolen from Master were found on him?"

"He had already hidden them somewhere in the tunnels," Father reasoned. "We may never find them. The point is, you deliberately broke our rules by bringing a stranger down here, and after learning the facts about him, still defended the man. Andrews has paid the ultimate price for his crime, but now a majority of the Council members have ruled to meet in two

hours to pass judgment upon you for bringing him into our midst. I have no choice in the matter and only pray that they don't vote for banishment."

Vincent whirled around, the leonine face etched with lines of fury.

"Our world is no different from the one Above!" He threw back, his voice dangerously soft. "It thinks with the mind instead of feeling with the heart! The precious Council would no doubt have been happier if I had died in that alley!"

Father's eyes widened in shock. "Vincent!"

"It is true, Father," he returned angrily. "I know that every society must have rules in order to survive, but in each instance, there must exist extenuating circumstances. You and the other members of the Council forget that each of us came or were driven into these tunnels because we needed something that the world Above could not give us," he continued with contempt. "But now I am told I must commit hypocrisy by turning my back on those who ask nothing more than I myself have always desired--to be accepted and loved. You, Father, of all people, would command me to withhold my heart from those who need it?"

"Damn it, Vincent! You're not listening to me!" Father exploded. "You brought a murderer down here!"

Vincent's fist came down hard on the desk, causing the piece of heavy furniture to tremble with his wrath. "He did not kill!" he proclaimed in fury. "I will attend the Council meeting and will accept whatever judgment is passed upon me--it makes no difference--but I will not rest until I've cleared Clinton Andrews' name, and you, Father, nor anyone else will stop me."

With that promise, he whirled around and limped angrily from the chamber, Father's voice ringing in his ears.

"Vincent! Don't do this--please! You'll only make things worse!"

It mattered not where his faltering footsteps carried him, for Vincent could find no peace in the tunnels. Sadness hung about him like a heavy cloak, weighing down his heart and causing his vision to blur with unshed tears. To be barred from attending Master's funeral had been an unconscionable blow to his soul, an act of cruelty he had not thought possible from those he loved as family. Master had played an important role in his youthful education, sharing his inscrutable wisdom with him and taking him on journeys to ancient China. Like Marco Polo, Vincent had visited the Forbidden City, rode with Genghis Khan, and walked along the Great Wall of China, all through the eyes and words of Master. His grief over the loss of so great a man would've been heavy under any circumstances, but now it was enhanced by the tragic death of his new friend and the harsh treatment of those in the tunnels.

Sorrow bore down upon him like a physical weight, and slumping against the wall, one hand went to his chest, the tears escaping his closed eyelids and flowing down the velvety cheeks as a glistening monument to the anguish in his soul. He felt a gentle touch on his arm but had no need to open his eyes to know that Catherine stood before him. Bowing his head, he drew in a deep breath and whispered, "They will not let me attend Master's funeral."

"I know," Catherine returned softly. "Mouse just told me. Vincent, you can't give up," she pleaded. "This will all pass with time; the anger will fade, and the grief soften."

Resting his head against the rough wall, Vincent released a sigh. "Yes, but it will never be the same, Catherine. They have prevented me from bidding farewell to a man I loved." His eyes lowered to meet hers as he asked hoarsely, "And what of a service for Clinton? They refused to let him lie in repose in the Cathedral, and there is no talk of a service for him. Clinton had no one, Catherine."

"He has you, Vincent, and he has me," she promised in a whisper. "No matter what I believe Clinton may have done, he's dead now and does not deserve this. He will have his funeral, and I'm almost certain Father and some of the others will attend. If not, then you and I will hold the service alone."

Vincent nodded slowly, tears again filling his eyes, overflowing to form sparkling rivulets down his cheeks. "The tragedy of today has caused such anger and hatred in others as I have never felt, and bitterness in myself such as I have never known. I stand alone, separated from my world, and the pain..." his voice dropped to the faintest of whispers, "... is almost more than I can bear."

Reaching upward, Catherine's arms slipped around his neck, gently pulling the tawny head to her shoulder.

"Let it go, Vincent," she pleaded softly in his ear. "If you try to keep the bitterness inside, it'll only turn you hard and cold. Oh please, for my sake, don't let that happen. Release the pain."

In the loving comfort of Catherine's arms, Vincent felt the anguish swell, bursting forth in a flood of hot tears, the massive shoulders trembling with the passionate depth of his grief.

The pale gold light of the tunnel cradled them in an aura of sorrow as they stood as one and wept, the tears not his or hers, but theirs, joined as were their hearts and souls in a union of sadness.

The Council meeting had been called to order, but only those standing closest to Father had

been able to hear the pronouncement. The study was churning with emotions; the people obviously divided in their opinions behind the call for assemblage.

Having refused the offer of a chair, Vincent stood alone in the center of the chamber, surrounded by raging, conflicting emotions, and felt very much like a lamb being led to slaughter. He both saw and felt Father's pain as the patriarch demanded order, a futile gesture that caused Father to lock eyes with him, silently begging his help.

Throwing his head back, Vincent released a roar that reverberated through the tunnels, and as its echo died away, so did the sounds of controversy around him. Silence suddenly hung heavy in the room as Vincent turned to face his accusers, his voice quiet, but edged with bitterness.

"You have gathered here to pass judgment upon me. Do not even I deserve a measure of dignity as you do so?"

Several faces around him turned scarlet while others dropped their heads in obvious shame. Waiting for Vincent's condemnation of his peers to sink in fully, Father spoke at last. "I have repeatedly called this Council meeting to order. If there is any of you present who feel you cannot abide by that word, then you will please excuse yourself and leave the chamber immediately."

No one moved, the silence in the study so complete that the collective breathing of those in attendance sounded like a rush of wind.

Nodding in grim satisfaction, Father announced, "Then this Council meeting will proceed to the business for which we are here."

Maxim's hand shot into the air. "I have an objection!"

"Already?" Father sighed and acknowledged the grey-haired man. "What is it, Maxim?"

"I object to your presiding over this meeting," Maxim returned in a hard voice. "Vincent's your son, which means you're prejudiced."

A murmur swept through the crowd, and Father held up a hand. "Maxim is right," he admitted. "I am prejudiced where my son is concerned, but I'm also prejudiced when it comes to anyone upon whom this Council is going to pass judgment. No matter who the person may be, the hurt is still there, but I think most of you will agree that I have always been fair, never allowing my personal affection and pain to cloud my judgment. However, if there is any among you who believes he or she should sit in my place, then please step forward."

It was as if all present were suddenly turned to stone, not a step taken nor a voice raised as

Father waited. Only Vincent moved, his head turning slightly and his eyes meeting Maxim's. Shocked at the gleam of hatred he saw there, he looked away quickly, his forehead creasing in a frown of concern.

There were others in the tunnels who deserved to feel more anger--ones like himself who had known Master since childhood instead of just the three short years that Maxim has resided in the tunnels.

His troubled thoughts were interrupted as Father called the meeting to order once again, the normally quiet voice now tinged with a coldness which caused Vincent's heart to ache. He could see in Father's eyes, hear in his voice, and feel in his soul the effort it took to announce--"This meeting has been called to decide upon punishment, if any, which should be imposed upon Vincent for his act in bringing Clinton Andrews into our world without vote or permission from the Council. I'm certain all of you are aware of what has happened today--" He threw Maxim a sharp glance. "--so unless there is an objection, I move that we dispense with a recounting of the events that have led up to this meeting." Father paused, but when there was no voice heard in protest, he turned to Vincent, his eyes softening. "Vincent, do you wish to say anything in your defense?"

Vincent turned slowly, glancing at Catherine who, against his wishes, had insisted upon being present. His eyes then swept the faces of the others gathered around him, and he spoke in a voice that was soft, yet reached the very edges of the chamber.

"Clinton was, as all of us have been at one time or another--alone and in need of love. His world could not give him that which he so desperately needed, and so I brought him here."

"Where he ended up committing murder!" Maxim yelled.

Father brought his hand down hard on the desk. "Maxim, you will control your outbursts! Vincent has the floor, not you!"

"Yeah, and he's trying to wriggle his way out of this!" the pale-skinned man shot back.

Father straightened, his voice suddenly cold as steel. "One more remark such as that and I'll have you forcibly ejected from this meeting."

Maxim fell into a sullen silence, and turning back to Vincent, Father promised, "There will be no further interruptions. Please continue."

"There is nothing more to be said," Vincent returned coldly. "Even in the silence, my words will not be heard."

"Please, my son," Father pleaded in a soft voice.

Vincent met the blue eyes with a gaze hard as granite. "Call for a judgment," he demanded quietly.

With a sigh, Father dropped his head. "Vincent has admitted to breaking one of our laws, and judgment must be imposed. The floor is open for discussion."

To no one's surprise, Maxim stepped forward immediately. "Vincent didn't just break a law, he broke the most important one of all, and I say only one judgment can be rendered--banishment!"

The reaction to that announcement from the other Council members was one of both anger and shock. The meeting turned into immediate chaos, shouting matches developing across the chamber while Father banged on the desk angrily, demanding order.

In the middle of it, yet surrounded by a circle of emptiness, Vincent closed his eyes, almost seeing the emotions thundering around him, colliding with one another like rocks in an avalanche. The very chamber seemed to tremble with their force, and leaning heavily on his crutches, he grasped his chest with one hand, his heart feeling as if it would drown in the flood. Opening his eyes slowly, his gaze fell upon Catherine, and with all the emotions raging around him, he could suddenly feel only hers--an overwhelming sense of love, so powerful it was like a sword slashing through the hatred and anger threatening to engulf him.

His eyes remained on Catherine, his heart using her as support just as his arms used the wooden crutches, only his ears hearing Winslow's deep voice raised above the chaos--

"Cullen wants to say something here, and I want the rest of you to keep your damned mouths shut while he says it!"

A hush fell around the chamber; obviously, no one felt the desire to incur Winslow's wrath.

Murmuring something to him softly, Cullen stepped in front of the desk to address the Council.

"If we vote for banishment, then we're not the fair, decent people we claim to be," he declared in a calm, even voice. "Vincent brought Andrews here because he was trying to help the man. All right, so Vincent made a mistake, but who among us hasn't? I think we need to remember there's not one of us here whom he hasn't helped at one time or another, Maxim included. When I had that gold fever, Vincent never turned his back on me, even after I hurt Mouse, and I, for one, am not turning my back on him now."

His speech calmed the gathering considerably, many hanging their heads in obvious shame, but a voice rose from the back of the group reminded quietly, "Vincent still broke one of our

most important rules."

"True," Cullen agreed with reluctance, "but does he deserve our most severe punishment simply because he did something he thought was right?"

"I agree with Cullen," Winslow put in gruffly. "If you people vote to expel Vincent, then I'm leaving, too, because I don't wanna live in a world that has so little compassion for one of its own. Hell, I can get that kinda crap upstairs."

"What about compassion for us?" some unseen individual in the back of the chamber objected. "When Vincent brought Catherine down here, it was different. Even with Henry and Lin, although we never voted on it, we accepted them because Henry's life was in danger. But none of this was true with that Andrews guy. The man was a total stranger."

Vincent did not turn, but his ears recognized the protester's voice. "I remember eleven years ago when it was you, Jessup, who was the total stranger," he returned softly.

"Yeah, and I remember how Vincent helped you get settled in, and was always there when you needed to talk," Pascal threw in.

Maxim took a step forward, his fist clenched in the air. "All of you are forgetting the point. Vincent wasn't in the dark about this—he knew Andrews was a pickpocket and junkie when he brought him down here. Then he found out the murderin' bastard committed armed robbery in Pittsburgh, and he still let him stay."

"And when I confronted Vincent about him in the tunnels a little while ago, he attacked me!" Redmon shouted. "Damned near broke my neck!"

"Tell the Council what you said to provoke him!" Catherine suddenly demanded. "Tell them Vincent was only defending my honor!"

"She has no say in this meeting!" Maxim yelled.

Father eyed him stonily. "If reference is made to Catherine or aspersions cast upon her, then she has the right to speak."

"Let's get on with the vote!" Redmon called out in an angry tone. "I call for banishment! According to our laws, you gotta present it before the Council!"

The look Father turned upon Vincent was one of fear and sorrow, but trying to force a smile of reassurance to lips which felt as if they would never express happiness again, Vincent nodded slightly.

Drawing a deep breath, Father announced in a monotone, "Those who are in favor of

imposing the punishment of banishment, please so indicate."

Unable to face the assemblage, Vincent's eyes went to Catherine, knowing from her he would feel the outcome of the vote. Silent seconds ticked away, precious moments of his life Vincent knew could never be recalled, lost forever in the nightmare thrust upon him. His eyes still locked with Catherine's; however, he saw her face begin to glow, felt the joy swell within her heart, and knew the tunnels were still his home. With a relief seared by bitterness, he turned back to Father, knowing not who turned their backs or how many, but one glance at Maxim's angry features told him it had not been nearly enough.

"The vote for banishment is no," Father announced, not quite able to keep a note of happiness from his voice.

"So, we just let Vincent walk away?" Redmon questioned roughly. "What about The Code? If no one talks to him for a month, maybe he'll think twice before he brings someone else down here before asking permission."

Quite a number of heads nodded in solemn agreement to the suggestion, and Father sighed. "All right, those who are in favor of imposing the punishment, please so indicate."

This time, Vincent faced the gathering, watching as, one by one, they turned their backs on him, each movement like a silent betrayal, sending a sharp pain through his heart. Pascal, Cullen, and Winslow were the last, and exchanging glances, one by one they turned, Winslow growling, "I'm only doin' this because technically Vincent did break the law. It don't mean I gotta agree with it, though."

Only Mouse and the younger children continued to face him, and Vincent felt the pain ease. "God bless the children," he whispered and turned slowly to face Father, his eyes widening in surprise.

Meeting the look with a smile, Father murmured, "I guess I am more prejudiced than I thought. I could never turn my back on my own son." The blue eyes swept the room, and he inhaled deeply. "Punishment has been voted upon. For one month no man, woman, or child may speak to you, Vincent. The sentence--" Father cleared his throat, but his voice was hardly more than a whisper, "--will begin now."

"And what about Catherine?" Maxim demanded. "Is she included in this, too? The laws apply to our other Helpers. If she's gonna come down here to our world, then she has to abide by 'em, too."

"Surely you can't be serious!" Catherine threw back in fury. "If you want to impose this unfair punishment on Vincent, that's your business, but don't try to shove it down my throat!"

"Weren't you the one who brought the news to Vincent that Andrews had committed armed robbery?" Mary pointed out softly. "Surely you can see, Catherine, that Vincent made a terrible mistake in judgment."

"I'm... forced to agree," Cullen added in a reluctant tone, and glancing at Vincent, his voice rose slightly. "If I could talk to Vincent, I'd tell him we're still his friends and love him very much, but when one of our rules is broken... I'm sorry, Catherine, but we've got to stick by the rules."

Catherine whirled around to Father, her face etched with lines of anguish.

"They're right, Catherine," he spoke quietly. "Since you have come among us, you've readily accepted our laws. No matter how much it hurts, I'm afraid you must do so now."

"To not talk to Vincent..." she whispered in a choked voice and turned slowly, her hands going to her mouth as if to muffle a sob.

Vincent had not moved, his head tilted back and his eyes fixed on a point on the wall far above the chamber floor. He had known as soon as The Code had been passed that Catherine would be forced into this position. It was inevitable, and yet the sorrow threatened to overwhelm him. To not be able to hear Catherine's voice grow soft and tender as it did when she talked to him, or to drink in her soothing words at a time when he needed them most, was an agony almost beyond bearing. With his head bowed low, he limped from the chamber, leaving behind a silence so tangible one could almost touch it.

It was broken at last by a ragged sob from Catherine's throat.

"Oh God! What have we done to him?"

He had wandered tunnel after tunnel for more than an hour, the numbness enveloping his heart and easing its pain to a dull, constant ache. The day's events had tired him physically, however, and with a weary tread, he turned back to the chambers, his arms bruised by the crutches and his leg throbbing with a pain that could no longer be ignored.

Gone was the crowd that had seemed to infest the rooms before, and Vincent felt an overwhelming relief when his eyes fell upon Father and Catherine sitting side by side, both lowering the books in their hands and looking up at his approach. They could not speak in words, but their eyes conveyed their love and concern, and a sense of peace like a glowing fire spread through his soul as Vincent limped to the remaining chair, lowering himself with a soft sigh.

The Code did not prohibit him from talking to them, but a one-sided conversation held no appeal, and so he remained silent, feeling a barrier beginning to rise between himself and his loved ones.

It was torn down immediately, though, when Catherine offered softly, "Father, I imagine your eyes are still hurting. Would you like me to read another poem aloud?"

Vincent caught the look of fleeting surprise, then understanding on Father's face. "Oh--yes, child, if you don't mind, that would be very... thoughtful," he answered with a smile. "Choose any one you like."

Catherine leafed through the book in her lap and pausing, her eyes scanned a page. Resting his head against the back of the chair, Vincent closed his eyes, drinking in the sweetness of her voice as she began to read;

*"The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in his flight.
I see the lights of the village
Gleaming through the rain and the mist;
And a feeling of sadness comes o'er me,
That my soul cannot resist;
A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembled the rain.
Come, read to me some poem.
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of today.*

*Not from the grand old masters,
Not from the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Through the corridors of Time.
For, like strains of martial music,
Their mighty thoughts suggest
Life's endless toil and endeavor,
And to-night I long for rest.
Read from some humble poet,
Whose songs gush'd from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from the eyelids start;
Who, though long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies.
Such songs have power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.
Then read from the treasured volume
The poems of thy choice;
and lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.
And the night shall be fill'd with music,*

*And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently... steal away "*

The Day Is Done--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

It was a poem to touch Vincent's heart, a quiet and simple thing which Catherine had found a way to share with him at a time when he needed it most. A companion against the aloneness he had felt during that day, it had driven the weariness from his body, and rising slowly, he silently held out a hand.

He felt Catherine's tremble as she slipped it into his and stood, laying the book aside. Bending slightly, she kissed Father's cheek, murmuring a "goodnight", and with her hand now tucked under his arm, Vincent led her into the passageway.

All was quiet in the tunnels, even the incessant tapping seemingly acquiescing to The Code's demands. In the silence, Vincent could easily sense Catherine's emotions, feeling her heart torn apart by what she was being forced to do. She could easily have broken The Code there in the corridors, and no one but the two of them would have been the wiser, but Vincent knew she had too much loyalty and respect for the laws of his people to do so. He would not have asked her to, yet the enforced silence added his own pain to what he felt in Catherine.

They stopped at last at the basement entrance to the apartment building, and turning, Catherine laid her hands on Vincent's chest with a gentle touch, her eyes rising to meet his, suddenly brimming with tears. There was no need for them to voice 'goodbyes,' for since that day many months before when he had said the word and truly felt it was so, 'goodbye' had never been exchanged between them.

There were other ways of parting, ways in which words, even if allowed to be spoken, did not seem adequate. Reaching out, Vincent pulled Catherine into a silent embrace, feeling her heart pounding furiously against his chest. Resting his cheek against the silkiness of her hair, he felt her arms slip around him, trembling against his ribs, yet clinging to him with a strength that all the forces of nature could not have weakened.

They stood as one for long moments in the pale golden light, time suspended like a motionless pendulum, as their hearts entwined with a love that went beyond any physical unity those Above or Below could ever hope to share.

Lowering his arms at last, Vincent stepped back, his hand cupping Catherine's face and a

thumb tenderly caressing a stray tear.

"I will be all right," he promised in a whisper, and answering him with a silent smile, Catherine turned.

Leaning his shoulder heavily against the wall, his cheek now pressed to the cold stone, Vincent watched her leave, his eyes never closing until she disappeared from view. With a heavy sigh, he then turned and began the slow journey back to the chambers.

The morning brought with it a calm determination born in the late hours of the night when sleep had eluded Vincent. His body had found rest, gradually relaxing beneath the heavy patchwork comforter, yet his mind had remained active, the brooding self-pity fading into reason and compassion. He found he could not in good conscience continue to blame the people of his world for doing what they had thought was right when he himself felt so strongly about his own beliefs. He had always counseled his loved ones to follow their heart and now found himself condemning them for doing just that.

Release of the bitterness gave room for thought, and he indulged in it as a thirsty man might drink deeply from a cool well. Grief still lingered like a storm cloud around the edges of his consciousness, but the mourning and gradual acceptance of death would come later. In the early hours of the morning, however, when the silence was so complete he could almost hear his heartbeat, Vincent came to a decision, one that caused his forehead to furrow in troubled thought but was as unarguable as the rising sun.

As he sat down to breakfast, the frown was still with him, but his features softened when he saw the culinary fare spread on the table before him, Father's way of offering an apology. Realizing with surprise that he had not eaten in almost twenty-four hours, Vincent put his plans aside in favor of appeasing his suddenly ravenous appetite.

Father sat beside him, eating only sparingly, and his head bowed low during the entire meal. Covering the hand on the table with his, Vincent rose at last, bending to tenderly place a kiss in the grey hair. "Don't worry, Father," he whispered. "The time of silence will be short."

Father looked up quickly, a question in his eyes, but refusing to explain further, Vincent squeezed his shoulder and promised, "I'll return soon."

He had taken only a few steps into the passageway when he stopped, his eyes widening in surprise. Catherine was in the tunnels; he felt her presence long minutes before she came around a corner of the passageway, Cullen at her side.

The carpenter's face was a picture of sorrow, and gripping his shoulder, Vincent smiled softly. "Thank you, my friend."

The lines of pain eased, and grasping Vincent's hand briefly, Cullen nodded, then, pulling away, disappeared into the tunnels.

Feeling a hand slip under his arm, Vincent locked gazes with the green eyes turned up to his, his heart beating rapidly as he felt Catherine's love flow over him like the warming touch of a fine wine. He could not ask her what excuse she had given her office for her absence, but was grateful she had come, not only because he needed her silent love beside him, but also for her expertise in carrying out his plan. First, however, he had to convince her that the tragic events of the previous day had not occurred as all had been led to believe.

Guiding Catherine to his secret place, Vincent stopped at the edge of the bridge, tilting his head back slightly. That early in the morning, only an occasional word or phrase drifted down from above, mere snatches of lives like intermittent pages of a novel. Turning his eyes back to Catherine, Vincent took her hands in his, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

"I need your help, Catherine, but I know you cannot in good conscience give it to me unless I can convince you of Clinton's innocence. The only proof I have at the moment is here--" He put his hand over his heart. "--and it is that which I must try to reveal to you. There's a question I would like to ask, but you need not answer in words, for I will feel it in your heart." Pausing a moment, his eyes rose to meet hers, and his voice grew solemn. "I have killed--you know that for you have seen me do so--but do you believe me capable of murdering someone in the manner in which Master was killed?"

Catherine stared at him, obviously shocked at the unexpected query, then from her mouth came a single, almost defiant word--"Never!"

Vincent rejoiced at the sound of her voice, but controlling the rush of emotion, asked softly, "How can you be certain?"

"Because I know you, Vincent," Catherine returned in an earnest tone. "A part of you is in my heart. I've grown to know how you think, how you feel, how you give totally of yourself to others. It--it's a feeling I can't put into words, but I know you're incapable of murder, and I'm as certain of that as--as..." Her eyes widened suddenly, "... as you are of Clinton's innocence," she finished in a whisper. "Oh, Vincent!"

She threw her arms around him, and Vincent held her close, the rush of emotions leaving him lightheaded.

Pulling back at last, Catherine reached up, her hand tenderly brushing the hair back from his

cheeks. "Vincent, I'm so sorry," she apologized softly. "Not being able to talk to you caused a pain in me as I've never known before. It was--it was as if a part of me were dying."

"I felt your pain, Catherine," he returned quietly, "and I knew you would not have followed The Code without being forced to do so, even though you believed me wrong in my judgment."

"If you felt all those things, then words between us aren't truly needed," she whispered.

"Perhaps not." Vincent smiled. "But your voice is so lovely, I cannot help but rejoice at the sound of it."

Catherine's answering smile faded as her eyes suddenly flashed with anger. "I guess some of the people would think I'm committing a terrible sin by breaking The Code, but I don't care anymore. If you feel as strongly as Clinton's innocence as I would about your own, then there must be another answer."

Vincent nodded. "I'm certain of it, and that's why I need your help, Catherine. I want to examine Master's quarters, and I thought with your trained eye for detail, you might see something I would overlook."

"It sounds like a good idea to me," Catherine agreed immediately and slipped her arm under his. "Come on, Vincent, let's play Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson."

Master's chambers turned out to be both a revelation and an added mystery. Vincent felt a soft sadness as he stepped into the brightly decorated room, its interior seeming to vibrate with the reds, yellows, and midnight blacks of Master's heritage. He wondered briefly what would become of the treasures so painstakingly gathered by the elderly Chinaman over the years, and felt the need to keep the chambers intact as a memorial to the man who had taught him so much about life.

Feeling Catherine squeeze his arm in understanding, he forced a smile of reassurance to his lips. "I'll take this side of the room," he indicated and turned his attention towards anything which looked unusual or out of place.

Minutes later, Catherine asked from across the room. "How did Master die?"

Vincent looked up quickly. "He received a blow to the head with a sharp instrument. Father believes it resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage."

"Did they find the murder weapon?"

He shook his head. "I don't believe anyone was interested in looking for it."

"Except us," Catherine returned grimly, and motioned for him to join her. "I think I just found it, Vincent." When he reached her side, Catherine pointed to an ebony black table, its mirrored surface reflecting their solemn features. "Dried blood," she explained quietly. "It's on the corner of the table and here on the floor. See the edge of that tapestry rug?"

Vincent studied both, his forehead creasing in a frown. "I don't understand. Maxim found Master's body in the center of the chamber."

"Then why is the blood here instead of there?" Catherine pointed out.

"Perhaps someone shoved Master; he hit his head on the table, then crawled across the room," Vincent theorized.

"I don't think so," Catherine disagreed. "If the blow was severe enough to kill Master, he would've bled quite a bit. It would've soaked into the earth, but left stains like these. There aren't any stains between here and the center of the room."

Vincent's eyes rose to meet the green ones before him. "What are you saying, Catherine?"

"Clinton didn't kill Master," she replied in a firm voice. "No one did. I think he fell, probably sometime during the night, struck his head on the table, and died. It was a tragic accident, Vincent."

His frown deepened as he pondered her words. "If that's true, then why was his body not at this spot when Maxim found it?"

Reaching up, Catherine laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Vincent, I think it's time you put aside everything Maxim has told you," she advised softly. "This entire case rests on his testimony alone. If he's lying, then the whole thing falls apart."

"I know," Vincent whispered and bowed his head. "My thoughts turned to that last night, Catherine, and I realized that for Clinton to be innocent, Maxim, in turn, must be guilty. But that, too, is extremely difficult for me to accept. Maxim has been among us for more than three years, a man given to brooding and moods of despondency, but he has always done his duty by the others in the tunnels. He has often been the first to offer a hand, an ear, or his heart when someone was in need."

"What do you know about his past?" Catherine asked quietly.

"Very little, I'm afraid," Vincent sighed. "He is the brother of one of our Helpers who asked that he be allowed to come here. Maxim was on the road to becoming an alcoholic and

continued to drink excessively the first year he was here. We offered him love and hope, however, which he could not find in the fleeting happiness of a bottle. After he had been with us for almost seven months, he came to me one night, the smell of spirits on his breath, but obviously not intoxicated enough to forget his pain. He began to talk, telling me he had been a judge in Florida, but discovered the court system was corrupt, *pandering to the criminals instead of the victims*, as he phrased it. Then came the day when a man was brought before him on charges of molesting seven young children, but Maxim was forced to throw the case out due to an illegal search and seizure. He resigned the next day and returned here to New York. Maxim cried when he told me the story, Catherine, and I find it very difficult to believe that he himself would now become a criminal after having fought them for so many years."

"But he has to be guilty of something, Vincent," Catherine argued. "It's conceivable Clinton may have found Master already dead, then stole a few of his things, but what reason would he have for moving Master's body to the center of the room?"

"None that I can see," Vincent replied, "and although I do not feel as strongly about Clinton's innocence when it comes to theft, I doubt very much that he stole anything here." Moving to a table next to a cauldron of spent ashes, Vincent picked up a delicately sculpted Chinese figurine. "This is solid gold, Catherine; one need only lift it to know it is so. The figurine would bring a small fortune on the black market, and yet it remains here, while next to it is an empty space once occupied by a candlestick holder, pretty in that it displayed light, but of very little value to anyone but Master." Turning, he made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Look around you. That vase on the mantle is from the Ming Dynasty, that jewel-encrusted saber in the corner belonged to Genghis Khan. One need not know their past to recognize their monetary value, and yet they are still here. I know the items that are missing, and none would bring any significant price. If Clinton were going to steal, he would've at least taken something worth his while."

Sinking into an ornate chair from a past era, Catherine rested her head against the thick cushioned back and frowned. "Vincent, none of this is making any sense. Instead of solving a mystery, we're only creating another one."

"Yes, this does appear to be a case Sherlock Holmes would relish," Vincent sighed. "Clinton did not kill Master, and now it looks as if he wasn't in these chambers at all, which leaves Maxim to account for his own actions. He could have moved Master's body for only one reason--to make his death appear to be murder. But why would he attempt to frame Clinton for a murder that did not even occur?"

"Maybe Clinton was a part of his past, and for some reason he wanted revenge against him," Catherine suggested.

"That's possible," Vincent nodded slowly, then his eyes rose to lock with Catherine's. "There is one thing we have not considered. If Maxim lied about what happened here, then it follows that he also lied about his altercation with Clinton."

Catherine inhaled sharply. "You think it was cold-blooded murder?"

"Yes, but the question is why?" Vincent asked grimly. "If Maxim did, indeed, want revenge, he could have killed Clinton then dragged his body outside the tunnel entrance, and we would've naturally assumed that someone from Above had committed the crime. So why the elaborate frame?"

Rising, Catherine laid a hand on his shoulder. "As I said, we've created another mystery, Vincent, and the worst of it is, we can prove none of this. It wouldn't do any good to confront Maxim with what we've found because he doesn't strike me as the type who would willingly confess. Father's hands would be tied, too, because despite what we've found here, it's only circumstantial evidence."

"Then Clinton must continue to bear the cross of a murderer," Vincent returned sadly.

"Don't give up hope," Catherine pleaded. "No matter how long it takes, one way or another we'll clear Clinton's name."

Taking her hands in his, Vincent gazed down at her, his features softening. "You are truly wonderful, Catherine. The deaths of Master and Clinton would have been unbearable if you had not been here beside me."

Catherine shook her head, the green eyes suddenly brimming with tears. "I only added to your pain, Vincent. All you asked was that I believe in you, and--and I couldn't do it. I've trusted people before and they've let me down, so I was--I was afraid to believe Clinton was innocent, and I allowed that fear to hurt you. I love you, Vincent, and I trust you implicitly. Now, I have to learn to trust other people through you."

"Do not be so hard on yourself, Catherine," Vincent whispered. "I felt your hesitation and knew that you were afraid. I was selfishly asking more than you could give. Love is something that comes to one quickly and cannot be controlled, but trust is like a flower--it must be nourished by acts of friendship and kindness before it can blossom. In my pain, I tried to make you feel that which you could not possibly feel so soon, and for that I am truly sorry."

Slipping her arms under his, Catherine laid her head against his chest. "You're the only person I know who can take someone else's wrong and make it your own," she spoke softly. "I think that's the third reason why I love you so much."

"And what are the first two reasons?" Vincent could not stop himself from asking curiously.

Looking up, Catherine answered his inquisitive gaze with a secretive smile, and again nestled her head against his massive chest.

He made Catherine promise not to speak to him in front of the others, for fear that if she openly broke The Code, she would be banished from the tunnels. He did not like the lie, and Catherine protested the unfair treatment he was receiving, but the possible consequences far outweighed either of their objections.

The forced silence between them was made easier, however, when Catherine reluctantly departed to make an appearance at her office, and, breathing a sigh of relief, Vincent returned to the chambers, feeling a pair of blue eyes watching his every move. He knew Father was worried, and no words of reassurance he could deliver seemed to alleviate the concern. At last, knowing there was nothing more he could do to try to ease Father's heart, Vincent chose a random book from one of the shelves, the words of some long-dead author lying unseen in his lap as his mind once again contemplated what he and Catherine had discovered that morning. His musings and the lack of sleep the night before caused his head to nod, the words on the yellowed pages before him gradually beginning to fade into nothingness.

Sleep came to him like a cloak of peaceful blackness, a deep slumber that if it had been allowed to continue, would have given renewed strength to his body and heart. It was rudely interrupted, however, by Mouse, who came tearing into the chamber with the demand, "Father, must break code! Must talk to Vincent!"

Looking up quickly, Father's expression was grim, but his eyes soft. "Why must you talk to my son, Mouse?" he asked in a quiet voice. "Do you have something in particular you need to tell him or do you simply miss his conversation?"

"Both," Mouse replied with a sheepish smile. "Wrong to punish Vincent because he cared. Also know something maybe important. Can't tell him if can't talk to him. Could tell you and let him listen," he added in a hopeful tone.

Vincent leaned forward, his forehead creased in a frown, and glancing at him, Father shook his head. "That won't be necessary, Mouse. You have my permission to talk to Vincent directly. I'll take full responsibility for your breaking The Code."

"Okay, good--Okay, fine," Mouse agreed and turned to Vincent, his face glowing with a grin. "Missed you, Vincent. Missed you lots."

"I have missed you, too, Mouse," Vincent returned solemnly, not mentioning the fact that it had been less than twenty-four hours since The Code of Silence had been imposed.

"Been thinking and thinking," Mouse continued in a voice that suddenly lost its cheerfulness. "Should have told you yesterday, but afraid. He doesn't like me; told me before I am retarded and belong in institution."

Father's eyes widened in horror. "Who on earth told you that?"

Mouse looked at both Father and Vincent before dropping his head and mumbling...

"Maxim."

"Maxim!" Vincent echoed, and his voice hardened. "Mouse, if you have something important to tell me concerning Maxim, then you must do so. I swear to you I will not let him or anyone harm you."

"Know that now," Mouse flashed a grin. "Afraid, though, Maxim had gotten sick like Cullen did when he hurt me. Don't wanna be hurt again."

"You mean the gold fever?" Father asked in surprise. "Mouse, what would make you think Maxim has gotten that?"

"Was in one of the lower tunnels yesterday afternoon looking for some mineral rocks for newest project," Mouse began to explain breathlessly. "Saw Maxim, but he didn't see Mouse. Wondered why he was there, got curious, followed. Saw him move pile of rocks at end of tunnel, hold up something shiny, then return it and leave. Waited till he was gone, then looked to see what he had hidden. Found small dagger, porcelain vase, and gold candlestick holder."

"The items which were stolen from Master's chambers," Vincent breathed softly.

Father turned a look of shock on him. "Then what means Maxim has been lying all along. He's the one who killed Master, stole his valuables, then murdered Clinton in an effort to frame him."

"Only partially true," Vincent amended. "I don't believe Maxim killed Master."

Father drew back in surprise. "Then who did?"

"No one," Vincent replied sadly. "It was a tragic accident." He related what he and Catherine had found in the elderly Chinaman's quarters, Father's face growing more grim with every word.

"Vincent, why didn't you tell me this before now?" he demanded.

"Because you could do nothing about it, Father. You could not even have answered me due to The Code," Vincent reminded wryly, "which you have just broken."

"To Hell with The Code!" Father slammed his hand on the desk in anger. "I didn't feel it was right in the first place and now it's obvious that it's been unfairly imposed upon you. But Maxim of all people..." He shook his head in shock. "If Master's death was an accident, then why would he want it to appear to be murder?"

"That is what we need to find out," Vincent returned quietly. "But first we need to obtain the evidence to support our accusation." Rising slowly, he turned to Mouse. "Can you show us where Maxim hid those items?"

The young man nodded, then dropped his head. "Mouse doesn't belong in an institution?" he asked hopefully.

"No, you do not," Vincent reassured him softly. "On the contrary, you are one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. Maxim obviously does not understand your genius, however, and so he is afraid of that which he does not comprehend."

Mouse looked up quickly, a note of relief in his voice. "Think so, really?"

"Really," Vincent smiled and pulled the young man into his arms in a gentle hug. "As frightened as you were of being hurt again, it took true courage to come here and tell us what you saw," he whispered. "I am proud of you, Mouse."

"And I am proud of you, my son," Father spoke softly, and as Mouse stepped back, he pulled Vincent's head down, kissing his hair. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Your belief that Clinton was guilty was as strong as my conviction that he was not," Vincent replied quietly. "I cannot fault you for that, Father."

"Then come." Father smiled. "Let us get proof of Clinton's innocence and evidence against the one who is truly guilty." His smile faded as a cloud of anger passed across his face.

"When I think that Maxim stood in this very room and demanded banishment for you... I could very well wreak vengeance on him myself!"

"That is not the answer, Father," Vincent cautioned. "Whatever Maxim did, he had a reason about which we know nothing. One man has already been tragically condemned; let us learn from our mistakes."

Father nodded sadly, and the three of them left the chambers together, Mouse leading the way through the tunnels. In one of the intersecting passageways, they came upon a group of people, all pausing in awkward silence when they saw Vincent and Father. Separating from

the group, Winslow stepped forward, his dark face creased with lines of anger. "Father, we're breaking The Code," he stated flatly. "All of us--Cullen, Mary, and everybody else here--we talked with Catherine a little while ago, and... well, hell, it's just not fair to punish Vincent like this."

"That's right," Cullen put in. "We want another Council meeting so we can vote for rescission of The Code. Catherine told us she and Vincent found some evidence in Master's chambers which led them to believe he wasn't murdered at all. She said even if Clinton was guilty, we shouldn't punish Vincent for his crime."

Mary stepped forward, her voice soft. "Catherine asked us the reason we impose The Code, and when we said it was to hopefully prevent someone from doing something wrong again, she asked if that was what we really wanted to do with Vincent. Did we truly want him to never again reach out to someone who needed his help? I think that--that's when we realized what a terrible thing we had done."

Winslow nodded in agreement. "So, with your permission, Father... well, hell, even without it, we're breakin' The Code. That goes for a lot of other people in the tunnels, too."

"I understand how you feel," Father replied in a solemn tone, "and I suppose it would be quite unfair of me to judge you when I, too, have broken The Code--more than ten minutes ago."

Grins suddenly flashed across the faces of those present, and Vincent felt a warmth of love spread through him as he found himself embraced by first Mary, then Cullen and Winslow.

Stepping back, Winslow gripped Vincent's shoulder and offered his own unique brand of gruff apology.

"We thought we were doin' the right thing, Vincent, but we just want you to know that from now on you can bring down every damned stray human you find and we don't say a single word about it."

"Thank you," Vincent smiled softly, "and I, in turn, promise that I will try to control my desire to do so."

"Well, now that everything has been settled about The Code," Father spoke in a tone of relief, "I think it might be wise if a few of you accompany us as witnesses." He briefly related what Mouse had seen, and both Cullen and Winslow immediately nodded, Jessup also stepping forward to join them.

"I'm going, too," the tall, willowy man announced. "You were right, Vincent, when you said that eleven years ago, I was a total stranger here. I would never've made it through those first

few months of hell if you hadn't helped me. I owe you at least this much, and I owe Clinton, who wasn't given the time to go from a total stranger to a friend."

Vincent grasped the slender shoulder and whispered, "Thank you, Jessup. Any debt that you feel may be due is now more than paid." Turning back to the young man beside him, he inclined his head slightly. "Mouse, if you will..."

The journey through the tunnels was not long, but the path was slow and twisting, causing Father to remark in concern. "Vincent, sooner or later, you're going to have to give that leg a chance to heal. Broken bones require rest, and you certainly haven't gotten that the past few days."

"It will not be much longer," Vincent returned optimistically. "As soon as the truth has been revealed, then I promise to do as you say. You can not only be Father, but Mother Hen as well."

Father threw him an exasperated look but knew nothing short of a tunnel catastrophe would slow Vincent down now.

They rounded the corner of a passageway that was seldom used by the tunnels' residents, and, going to an inconspicuous pile of earth, Mouse pointed. "Master's things there. Saw Maxim take 'em out of ground, put 'em back again. Mouse did it, too."

Winslow and Jessup immediately dropped to their knees, shoving their hands into the loose soil. In seconds, they straightened, each holding up an object that all present recognized as belonging to Master.

"A Council meeting is in order," Father announced grimly. "We'll confront Maxim with this evidence and see what he has to say."

"I disagree, Father," Vincent said quietly. "I think such a confrontation should take place only with those who are present here and perhaps Catherine, since she works for the District Attorney."

"Why such a small group?" Cullen asked in a curious tone. "Maxim demanded a full Council meeting against you."

"Two wrongs do not make a right," Vincent chastised softly. "We don't know why Maxim did what he did, and I believe he should be given the opportunity to explain his actions in front of as private an audience as possible."

"Vincent, the man killed Clinton in cold blood!" Winslow protested. "Doesn't that make you madder'n hell?"

"One cannot afford to allow anger to cloud the judgment when a person's life is at stake," Vincent cautioned quietly. "Clinton was not able to speak up in his own defense, but Maxim can, and no matter what our personal feelings may be, we must allow him that chance."

"I agree," Father nodded. "Is there anyone here who has an opposing opinion?"

Winslow, Cullen, and Jessup slowly shook their heads, but noticing that Mouse stood with his own bowed, Vincent whispered, "What is it, Mouse? What's bothering you?"

"Meeting," the boy mumbled. "Don't wanna go."

Glancing quickly at Father, Vincent reached out to squeeze Mouse's shoulder. "Then you don't have to. Even if Maxim denies having buried these items, it would be his word against yours, and all of us here know you do not lie."

"Never," Mouse shook his head vigorously. "Take things sometimes, but no lies. Maxim dug up, Maxim buried. Fact."

"Then it's settled," Father sighed. "Vincent, have one of the children carry a message to Catherine. As soon as she gets here, I'll send a message through the pipes that I wish to see Maxim. We'll meet back in the chambers in an hour."

Vincent was leaning heavily against the wall next to the basement entrance when Catherine arrived, and tenderly caressing the hair on his shoulder, she whispered, "You look so tired."

Sighing, he rested his head against the rough black surface, closing his eyes and feeling Catherine move into his arms. "Sometimes it seems that I live in a dream world," he spoke softly. "I have such hopes of a life for both our worlds free of conflict or heartache, but suddenly I am confronted with reality, and like a fragile eggshell, the hopes and dreams lie shattered at my feet."

Drawing back, Catherine's eyes rose to meet his, her hand gently touching a velvety cheek. "Albert Schweitzer had those same hopes, and so does Mother Theresa. I know it hurts, but you must never give up your dreams. Your world and mine need the Schweitzers and the Mother Therasas, and especially you, Vincent, for without your dreams, all we have is the harsh, cold reality."

Gazing into the green eyes, Vincent felt the pain ease in his heart. "It is ones such as you, Catherine, who make us dare to dream," he whispered, and with her hand under his arm, he led through the tunnels to the chambers, feeling at peace despite the confrontation that lay ahead.

Upon their arrival, Winslow immediately tapped out a message on the pipes, and in minutes Maxim stepped into the study, his eyes widening slightly as Vincent and the others waited silently for Father to speak.

His features grim, Father stood behind the desk with his hands resting lightly on the surface. In a voice edged with coldness, he spoke.

"Maxim, we have uncovered some evidence which leads us to believe the tragedies of yesterday did not occur in the manner that you related them to us." Opening a desk drawer, he removed one by one a candlestick holder, vase, and small dagger, and, laying them on the desk in front of him, continue. "These items were found buried in one of the tunnels, and all here recognize them as having belonged to Master. Mouse was watching you last night as you went to the exact spot, uncovered the objects, then re-buried them." Setting the items aside, he leaned forward, his face growing dark. "Vincent and Catherine have also discovered that Master's death was not murder as you would have had us believe, but rather a tragic accident. With these two facts now before us, I think it's time you told us the truth about your activities yesterday morning."

Maxim's face had remained passive during Father's speech, and now he spoke in a voice as casual as that of one discussing the weather. "All right, things didn't happen I related them, but Andrews is dead, and that's all that really matters."

"Why?" Vincent asked quietly, and remembering Catherine's theory, questioned, "Had you met Clinton before when you lived in the world Above?"

The gray-haired man shook his head. "I didn't need to know him because I know his kind. Andrews deserved to die."

Father stiffened, his eyes narrowing. "Are you telling us you killed Clinton in cold blood simply because he was a pickpocket and drug user?"

"*Killed* isn't the right word," Maxim corrected. "I *executed* him. We all know what Andrews did in the world Above, it was only a matter of time before he committed a worse crime, such as murder. It was my duty to stop him before he did."

"Your duty?" Cullen echoed. "It sounds more like vigilante action to me."

"I'm just doing what the court system refuses to do," Maxim returned in a cold voice. "Miss Chandler can tell you--we're inundated with rules and regulations that protect the guilty. Someone has to take control and form order out of this chaos."

"I agree that our courts are imperfect," Catherine retorted. "But you don't take the law into

your own hands. Do that, and you're no better than the ones you're trying to put in prison."

"You don't understand, do you? None of you do!" Maxim shouted, his voice suddenly harsh with anger. "Somebody has to change things, get rid of the crooks, the blacks and illegal aliens, the gays, and the idiots like Mouse! We've either got to kill them or put 'em away somewhere before they contaminate the rest of us!"

Father drew in his breath sharply. "Dear God, you're a Nazi!"

"That's a damned lie!" Maxim yelled, the pale skin turning red with fury. "I'm an American, more American than any of you because I care what happens to my country! The crime, corruption, social disease--all of that's caused by foreigners and the freaks that are running loose! We need to lock the freaks away and ship the foreigners back to where they came from!"

"To what country would you send the Apache or the Navaho?" Vincent asked quietly.

"They'd stay on the reservations where they belong!" Maxim shot back. "They couldn't hold onto this country, so they don't deserve to be a part of it!"

"My God, I don't believe what I'm hearing!" Father exclaimed, and pointing a trembling finger at Maxim, demanded, "You have lived among us for over three years, you know our most important rule is to help others, and yet you can talk like this, kill Clinton in cold blood, and not feel any remorse? What kind of man are you?"

"The kind who loves his country!" Maxim flung back. "We've got to do something about the criminals and those who don't fit in! Get rid of the trash that's coming up on our shores! It's true I didn't kill Master, but I say good riddance to the Chink!"

"Vincent, grab Winslow!" Father yelled.

A fur-covered hand shot out, closing around the black man's arm in a steel grip. It stopped Winslow in his tracks, but his voice boomed with fury.

"You lousy bastard! What right have you got to go around passing judgment on people? Who died and made you God?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Maxim retorted. "You're just a *nigger*!"

"Stop it!" Father demanded. "I will not stand for that kind of talk in our world!"

"You just don't want to hear the truth!" Maxim shouted. "This society would be a helluva lot better if we'd quit letting in all the riff-raff the world Above doesn't want!"

"Does that include me?" Vincent asked softly. "Is that why you voted for banishment in the Council meeting?"

Maxim hesitated, apparently momentarily at a loss for words. When he did speak, his voice was not quite so hard, but still condemnatory. "You did a lot for me when I first came down here. Even though you're a freak of nature, for a while I even thought of you as a friend, that is, until you developed this unnatural relationship with Miss Chandler. I couldn't stand by and let that continue, so I tried to get you thrown out of here."

Vincent bowed his head, Maxim's words stabbing his heart like a knife. Catherine, however, slipped her arm defiantly under his, her eyes blazing with wrath.

"What Vincent and I have together is the most beautiful thing in my life, and you have no right trying to turn it into something ugly!"

"I'm just trying to show you you're making a sick mistake," Maxim returned in a voice dripping with disgust. "You can't love him--he's not even human!"

"Vincent is ten times more human than you'll ever be!" Catherine hissed.

"Yeah, you'd be a lot better off if you were just half as good as he is!" Jessup threw in, the slur on Vincent obviously the last straw for everyone present.

"Look, you're white and American," Maxim replied in a patient voice. "I don't have anything against you."

"Well, I sure as hell do against 'you!'" Jessup yelled.

"Jessup's right," Cullen put in. "Any decent man would be against your kind of ideology. There is no such person as an American, unless it's the Indians, as Vincent pointed out. It's bad enough you comin' down on Winslow and Mouse just because they don't fit into your little self-made world, but when you condemn Vincent, you go too far. He's the one who presented your case before the Council to get you accepted here because your brother begged him for help, and Vincent's the one who was always there to defend you, take care of you, and put you to bed when you got to drinking too much. And you repay him by calling him a freak of nature? You're the one who's the freak!"

"You're all crazy!" Maxim shouted. "You don't see what's going on right beneath your noses! Four months ago you voted to let a guy come down here who has AIDS, last year it was a Commie immigrant; the year before, a family of Mexican dirt! I thought it would be different here, but you're corrupting this world just like they've done Above! If I was still on the bench..."

"The bench?" Catherine echoed in a whisper, her eyes widening in horror. "My God, I know who you are!" she suddenly exclaimed. "You're Maximillian Hayes--the death judge! Vincent said you resigned, but that's not true, is it? You were forced off the bench in Florida because of your unreasonably harsh sentencing. If a drug user or petty thief came before you, you wanted to give him twenty years in prison or even the electric chair. After you were forced to resign, you and two other men went on a raid in the Cuban section of Miami. Witnesses said you broke into a house with shotguns and killed four men in cold blood."

"They were criminals forced upon our country by Castro!" Maxim yelled, the dignity he had once commanded now gone completely.

"They were decent, hard-working men with jobs and families!" Catherine corrected angrily. "They were together that Saturday afternoon doing the great American pastime--they were watching a football game! You murdered four innocent men, then obviously came here to hide out. But there's no statute of limitations on homicide, and New York has extradition laws."

"Then there's no need for a Council meeting," Father decided. "The only punishment we can offer for the crime of murder is banishment, but if you're wanted Above for a similar crime, then you will be returned there to stand trial for your misdeeds. Winslow, Cullen--take him into custody."

"No! You're not taking me back!" Maxim yelled, and before any could move, he whirled around, toppling the heavy table in the center of the room. Winslow and Cullen jumped back, both falling over a chair as flickering candles rained down upon them. Moving as quickly as his injured leg would allow, Vincent snatched off his cloak and threw it over the two men, extinguishing the tiny flames that had already ignited their clothing. Throwing the cloak aside, with Catherine's help, he managed to get Winslow to his feet, but Cullen remained where he was, conscious but trying to staunch the trickle of blood coming from a wound on his forehead.

"Catherine, stay with Father," Vincent threw over his shoulder. "Winslow, send a message to Pascal. Tell him to organize a search party, then head east through the tunnels."

"Vincent, for God's sake, be careful!" Father called after him. "There's no telling what Maxim will do!"

"He will not kill again," Vincent promised darkly, and left the chamber, pausing outside the entrance to listen. He heard Winslow's footsteps just a few feet away heading for one of the main pipes, and in the distance, his sensitive hearing caught the faint sound of another set of footsteps traveling quickly in the opposite direction. Maxim was heading deeper into the

tunnels, no doubt hoping to lose himself in the maze of corridors and intersecting chambers.

Vincent headed in that direction, angry at his inability to travel faster. With two good legs, he would've caught up with Maxim in minutes; as it was, he could only hope that luck would guide his path. His crutches tapped on the hard rock leading into the Chamber of the Winds, and hearing a growing confusion of sounds far behind him, he halted long enough to send a quick message along the pipes to the search parties.

Stepping into the chamber, he paused, the tawny hair whipped about his shoulders and his eyes momentarily blurred by the sudden rush of wind. The roaring in his ears blocked out all other sounds, even his own breathing as he moved slowly to the foot of the great stone stairs which seemed to cling precariously to one edge of the deep Abyss. Vincent backed away, his eyes going to the head of the steps where he saw Father, Catherine, and several others emerge from the shadows.

"Vincent! Behind you!" Catherine suddenly screamed.

There was no time to turn. Feeling a hand on his shoulder, jerking him backward, Vincent fought to maintain his balance as the glint of steel flashed before his face.

"Oh God! Vincent, don't move!" Father cried out in horror.

"That's good advice," Maxim shouted back. "If anyone tries anything, I'll cut his throat open!"

Vincent could barely see the jewel-encrusted dagger in Maxim's hand, but could feel its cold steel, like a hand of death, pressed against his Adam's apple. Uninjured, he would not have hesitated to whirl around and break free of his captor's clutches. In his present condition, however, he would only fumble and with the knife slitting his throat, Maxim would be free to kill again and again those who did not fit into his pseudo-perfect world.

Above them, Father moved down one step, holding out a hand in a pleading gesture. "Maxim, release my son. He's done nothing to harm you."

"He's my passage out of here!" Maxim yelled back. "If any of you try to stop me, he dies!"

It was obvious the older man was hanging onto sanity by a mere thread, and Vincent coaxed softly. "You need help, Maxim, and our people Above can provide it to you. You have become lost in the wilderness of your own mind. Let us help you find your way home."

"Shut up!" Maxim screamed hysterically, and Vincent gasped as he felt the point of the dagger bite into his throat and felt the flow of hot blood down his neck.

The others saw it, too, and Winslow shouted in fury, "You lousy bastard! You kill him, and I

swear I'll tear you apart with my bare hands!"

"Back off!" Maxim ordered. "I'm leaving here, and Vincent's going with me!"

Without moving his head, Vincent's eyes fell to the edge of the Abyss less than three feet away from his left boot, and a drastic, no doubt suicidal idea entered his head. Seeing no other alternative, he informed the ex-judge in a monotone. "I cannot allow you to reach the surface, Maxim. If you refuse to turn yourself over to Father, you will die here in the Chamber of the Winds."

"Shut up or I'll kill you now!" Maxim yelled.

Feeling the pain of the dagger again, this time at the base of his throat, Vincent drew in his breath sharply. He was going to die, that was certain, and his gaze rising to meet the horrified eyes of Catherine, he whispered, "I will not go with you, Maxim. We die here together."

"Vincent! 'No!'" Catherine's voice ringing in his ears, Vincent threw his body sideways, carrying Maxim's with him. Both disappeared over the edge of the Abyss, Catherine's cry of horror mingling with another that faded away into nothingness.

A deadly silence descended upon the group on the stairs, even the ever-roaring wind seeming to drop to a hushed whisper. In the tunnel far beneath the earth, time stood still, an almost tangible cloud of stunned horror enveloping the cluster of motionless figures.

Father was the first to break free of the paralyzing spell, a ragged sob escaping his lips. "My son!"

"He's not dead!" Catherine suddenly hissed. "I won't let him be!" She flew down the steps, the determination in her face more poignant than a flood of tears. Dropping to her knees, she stretched out, staring over the edge of the precipice into the infinity beyond. "Vincent! Vincent, answer me!"

"I am here, Catherine," he called back softly, the sweet sound of his voice causing her to inhale sharply.

Now the tears came, like a spring shower wetting Catherine's cheeks as she faced the others still on the stairs. "He's alive!" she exclaimed in a choked voice. "Oh God, he's alive!"

The joyous announcement sent a surge of blood pumping through the veins of the listeners, and there was a mad rush down the steps, Cullen, a white bandage wrapped around his head, taking Father's arm and helping him down the steep incline.

Stretching out on the rocks beside Catherine, Jessup yelled, 'Vincent, we can't see you

because of the heavy mist. Do you know how far down you are?"

"From the sound of your voice, I would judge approximately twenty feet," Vincent returned calmly. "Normally, I would be able to climb up, but my leg makes it impossible to do so."

"Do you have a good hold? Can you hang on?" Cullen asked in a worried tone.

"For eternity, if need be," Vincent promised. "But I would appreciate not being forced to do so."

"Listen to me," Winslow said gruffly. "He's the only person I know to fall into the Abyss and live to tell about it, and he makes light of the incident." Jessup, Mouse, and Pascal, having already disappeared from the chamber, Winslow leaned over the edge and called down, "They've gone to get some rope, so don't go takin' any walks till they get back. What the hell were you doin', anyway, playin' the damned hero like that! When we get you outta there, I'm gonna--I'm gonna hug you to death!"

"Easy, Winslow," Father laughed hoarsely, the tears on his face matching those on the black man before him.

Catherine remained precariously close to the edge, her eyes seemingly trying to pierce the murky fog below. "Vincent, don't let go," she pleaded, and her voice dropped to a whisper.

He heard the three words, so simply yet tenderly spoken, and his arms ached with the desire to hold Catherine close and chase away her fears like the vestiges of a nightmare. The time for that would come later, he prayed, but at the moment, he was in a more dangerous position than he wanted those above to know.

The tiny ledge on which he stood was hardly wide enough for the feet of a child, and finding a handhold above him, he put his weight on the broken leg, gasping in pain as he reached out with the other in an effort to find a better ledge to stand on. He gingerly tested a small outcropping, but it gave way, causing his hands to dig desperately into the stone crevasses above him.

The rain of rocks caught the attention of those above, and Catherine cried out. "Vincent!"

"I am all right, Catherine," he reassured, forcing his voice to remain calm. His leg had taken more than its share of abuse, and flattening against the wall, he pressed his forehead against the rough surface, breathing heavily and praying for strength.

The wait seemed endless, but actually only a few minutes had passed before he heard Father's voice. "Vincent, we're dropping down a rope. If you can't tie it around you, then just hold on. There are enough people here to pull you up, so let us do all the work."

He saw the rope dangling inches above his reach and called up quietly. "Drop it another foot." The strong piece of hemp was now in his grasp, and not daring to loosen his hold long enough to wrap it around his waist, he looped it several times tightly around one wrist, then, gripping the rope with both hands, inhaled deeply. "I am ready."

Catherine was first on the rope, Cullen, Pascal, and Winslow behind her, all pulling together like a team in a tug-of-war. In less than a minute Vincent was at the edge of the precipice, and grasping some sturdy rocks, he pulled himself over. Father and Mouse helping him to his feet. Father hugged him briefly, kissing his hair, then stepping away, making room for Catherine.

She moved into his arms, and Vincent could feel her body trembling as the control she had fought so hard to maintain was slowly slipping from its emotional bonds. He held her close, nestling his head against the silky hair and feeling his own pounding heart slowly return to its normal rhythmic beat.

Drawing back at last, Catherine's eyes rose to meet his, tears streaming down her face and her voice hoarse with relief. "Vincent, that was the craziest thing I've ever known you to do, and... the noblest."

"I am sorry, Catherine. I had no other choice," he apologized softly, and his eyes went to his friends gathered around him. "Thank you. I owe all of you my life."

"Well, it's the least we could do considerin' the hell we've put you through the past few days," Winslow returned roughly. "But if you ever try something like that again, the Council's gonna vote to kick your butt all over these tunnels."

That remark was followed by laughter, and squeezing Vincent's shoulder, Father asked with a smile. "Are you ready to follow my orders now and get some rest?"

"Definitely," Vincent sighed, but he felt his heart constrict as his eyes flicked to the Abyss.

Seeing where his gaze was directed, Father whispered, "As you said, you had no choice. Death is always tragic, but in this case, you no doubt saved several lives, nearly at the risk of your own. Mourn for Maxim if you must, Vincent, but don't blame yourself for his death."

Nodding silently. Vincent turned and, with the help of Winslow and Jessup, followed the others from the chamber, leaving behind the ever-roaring wind.

Despite what Maxim had done, Vincent insisted on a memorial service for the ex-judge, followed by a longer, more touching service for Clinton. It seemed as if all in the tunnels

were trying to correct the terrible wrong they had done the young man, The Cathedral full of silent mourners as first Father spoke a few words, then Vincent delivered a quiet eulogy to the friend he had known so briefly, yet so fully. There was no way to know Clinton's desires for the disposition of his earthly remains, but remembering he had spoken fondly of the park, Vincent requested cremation.

The service over, he moved to the far side of the enormous chamber, one of Master's intricately designed urns sitting on a table next to him. Joining him, Catherine slipped her hand under his arm, resting her head lightly against his shoulder. "It was a beautiful service," she whispered. "I doubt that poor Clinton had ever had such touching words said about him."

"He deserved those and much more," Vincent replied softly. "Unlike Maxim, Clinton was not a lost soul. Despite his bleak past, I could feel his love of life flowing from him like a rushing river."

"Which makes our own judgment of him all the more harsh," Father spoke beside them.

Vincent met the troubled eyes with a gentle smile. "No one has anything to be ashamed of, Father, particularly yourself. You didn't turn your back on me."

"If you had not been my son, I'm afraid I would have," Father admitted. "For that, I owe you an apology."

Leaning forward, Vincent placed a kiss in the grey hair. "It is not needed, Father. Duty would've made you turn, but your heart would have still been with me."

"Yes, but would it have cost any of us that much to believe?" Father asked sadly.

"I believed, not only in Clinton, but Maxim as well," Vincent reminded him softly. "How can I judge you when I, too, made the wrong decision?"

The lines of pain cutting across Father's forehead eased somewhat. "That may be true, but it is better to believe in all than to believe in none. And no matter how you may feel, there are still many in the tunnels who will not be at peace with themselves until they offer an apology. If I am not mistaken, one is coming now."

Turning, Vincent immediately reached out to the approaching elderly, white-haired lady. "Maddie." It was she who had hurt him the most with her harsh accusations, but seeing her pain now, his heart melted in forgiveness.

Ignoring his outstretched hands, Maddie reached up to cup his face, tears streaming down the wrinkled cheeks. "Oh, baby, I am so sorry," she croaked.

Wrapping his arms around her, Vincent gently massaged the frail back. "It is all right, Maddie," he whispered. "All is forgotten."

Drawing back, Maddie swiped at the tears, and digging her hands into a canvas shoulder bag, withdrew what appeared to be a pile of crumpled napkins. "I--I have something for you," she offered in a choked voice, and unfolded the snow-white material so he could see... "Cookies. I took them out of the oven just before the service. They're still warm."

Feeling his heart fill with love, Vincent grasped the aged hands tenderly. "Sugar cookies--my favorite," he smiled. "But then you already knew that didn't you?"

"Yes, and I'll bake you a dozen every day," Maddie replied in a pitifully hopeful tone. "Just don't hate me, baby--please?"

Vincent leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "Never, Maddie," he promised.

They stood on a small rise in the center of the park, the stars twinkling silently above them, and a quiet breeze stirring Vincent's hair. Taking the urn from Catherine's hand, he felt an ache begin to close around his heart as he spoke hoarsely. "I wish we had been given the time to know him better. He would have made a valuable friend to all of us." Removing the stopper from the urn, he poured its contents slowly into the wind. "Go, Clinton. May you find peace."

The ashes disappeared like wisps of shadows, and turning his gaze towards the black, moonless sky, Vincent felt the emotions building within him, demanding a release. The time for mourning had finally come.

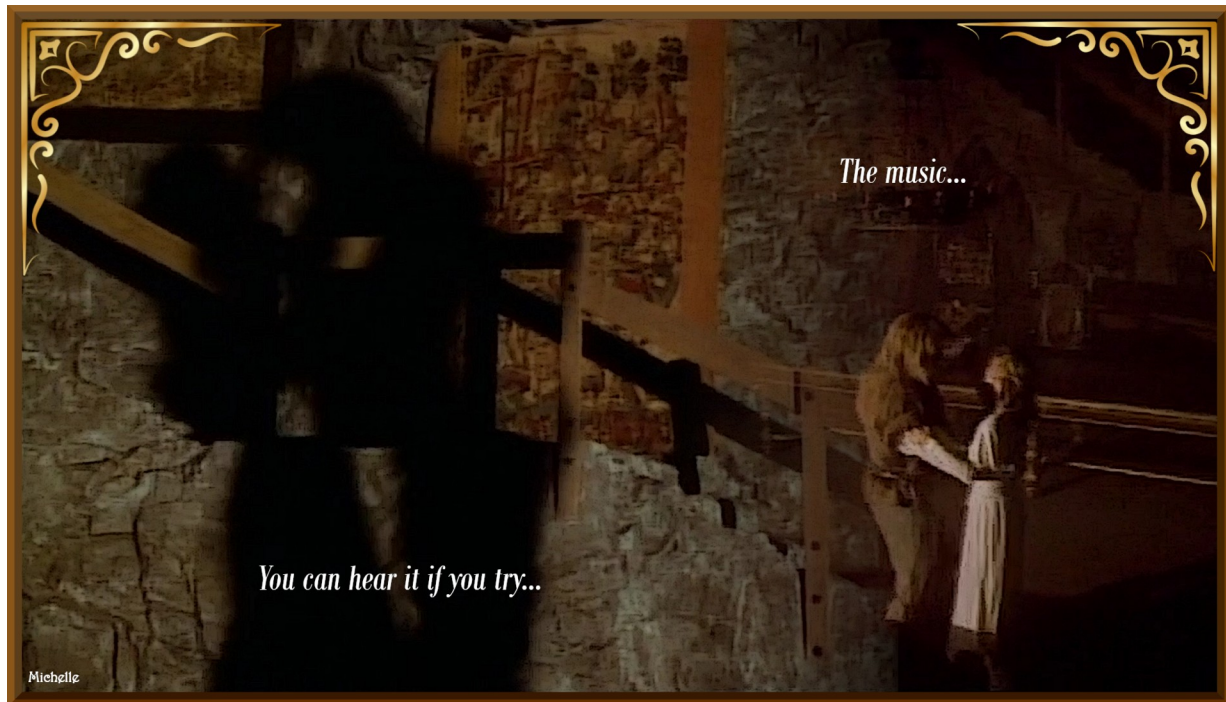
Stepping into his arms, Catherine held him close, their tears becoming one as they stood with cheeks and hearts together in the whispering midnight wind.

Sonnet 105, William Shakespeare



DIGITAL ART

by Michaela



The Christmas List (According to Mouse)

by Judith Nolan

The trouble began, as many things did Below, with Mouse having an idea.

This, in itself, was not unusual. Mouse had ideas constantly. Most of them arrived without warning, made perfect sense to him, and required immediate attention regardless of time, place, or whether anyone else was ready for them.

This particular idea, however, arrived with a piece of paper. A very important piece of paper.

Mouse stood in the middle of the main tunnel, holding it at arm's length, squinting at it as though it might reveal its secrets if stared at long enough.

"It's a list," he announced to no one in particular. "A proper list. Christmas list. Needs items. Needs thinking. Needs... organisation." He paused. "Okay, good. Okay, fine."

Unfortunately, Mouse had never been particularly acquainted with organisation.

He turned the paper upside down. Then sideways. Then right way up again.

"Hmmm..." He needed help. Naturally, he went to Vincent.

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Vincent was in Father's study, carefully returning a book to its proper place, when Mouse burst in without knocking.

"*Vincent!*" Mouse declared. "Got problem. A big one."

Vincent turned, already smiling. "Good morning, Mouse. What sort of problem?"

Mouse thrust the paper toward him. "List problem. Christmas list. Needs doing. Not done. Must be done. Urgently."

Vincent accepted the paper with the same calm reverence he might have given to a rare manuscript. "I see..."

He did not, in fact, see. The paper contained several words, all written in different directions, some crossed out, some circled, and one that appeared to have been written twice for emphasis.

Vincent studied it carefully. "Is this... a list of things you would like for Christmas?"

Mouse blinked. "No."

Vincent paused. “A list of things you intend to give?”

Mouse considered this. “Maybe. Possibly. Could be both. Flexible list.”

Vincent hid a smile. “Flexible?”

“Yes. If I want it, I put it on. If I find it, I give it. If I give it, maybe I want it. Circular system.” He nodded, satisfied. “Efficient.”

Vincent lowered the paper slightly. “Mouse... that may cause some confusion.”

Mouse leaned closer. “Confusion is fine. Confusion leads to discovery. Discovery leads to improvement.” He tapped the paper. “Needs help.”

Vincent considered for a moment. “Perhaps... we could make two lists.”

Mouse recoiled slightly. “Two?”

“One for things you wish to give,” Vincent said gently. “And one for things you might like to receive.”

Mouse’s eyes widened. “Double lists.”

“Yes.”

Mouse beamed. “Brilliant.”

Vincent inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Mouse leaned in conspiratorially. “You’re very good at lists.”

“I have had some practice.”

Mouse nodded seriously. “Good. You’re in charge.”

Vincent opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. There were some battles it was better not to fight. It only made you tired.

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Within half an hour, the situation had escalated. What had begun as one list had become several.

There was now:

- Mouse’s Giving List
- Mouse’s Receiving List
- A Possible Trade List
- A Things That Might Be Useful List

- And, inexplicably, a List of Lists

Catherine arrived just in time to witness the expansion. “What on earth is going on?” she asked, pausing in the doorway.

Mouse looked up, delighted. “Catherine! Lists!”

“I can see that.”

Vincent glanced at her with quiet amusement. “We are... organising Christmas.”

Catherine stepped closer, scanning the papers spread across the table. “Are you, now? That’s some months away yet.”

“I know.” Mouse nodded vigorously. “Essential work. Critical. Must not forget things. Need time to think on them.”

“Such as?”

Mouse pointed proudly. “Number three.”

Catherine leaned in. ““Thing that might be useful at some point”?”

Mouse nodded. “Very important.”

Catherine bit back a laugh. “I see.”

Vincent gestured to another page. “We have also begun a list of people Mouse wishes to give gifts to.”

Catherine’s expression softened. “That’s a lovely idea.”

Mouse puffed up slightly. “Many people. Lots of giving. Efficient giving.”

Catherine glanced down the list.

It included:

- Vincent
- Catherine
- William
- Father
- Mary
- Arthur
- “Everyone else”
- “Maybe dog if find one”

Catherine blinked. “Mouse... there are no dogs down here.”

Mouse frowned. “Should be. Add to list. Arthur needs a pet.”

Vincent made a small adjustment to the paper. “Perhaps we will revisit that item later.”

Mouse accepted this compromise. “For now,” he said grandly, “we proceed.”

※※※※※

The trouble with Mouse proceeding was that it rarely remained contained.

By midday, several of the tunnel dwellers had been recruited—willingly or otherwise—into what Mouse had now termed “The Great Christmas List Project.”

Jamie was tasked with “writing neatly.”

Kipper was assigned “running errands for list-related purposes.”

Rebecca had been placed in charge of “useful suggestions.”

William had refused outright.

“I’m not joining anything that involves writing things down on paper,” William declared from his kitchen. “Paper burns, and I’ve got enough to worry about without someone setting fire to a list of ‘maybe useful things’. I’ll stick to my cooking.”

Mouse considered this. “Add ‘do not burn list’ to the list.”

Vincent intervened gently. “Mouse... perhaps we should keep the lists away from the kitchen.”

“Good idea,” Mouse agreed immediately. “Fire risk. Noted.”

Catherine leaned against the doorway, watching the entire operation with growing amusement.

“This was your doing,” she murmured to Vincent.

He looked faintly guilty. “I merely suggested two lists.”

“You’ve created a system.”

“I fear it may have grown beyond its original intent.”

Mouse, overhearing, turned proudly. “Expansion is natural. Like tunnels. Like ideas.”

Catherine laughed softly. “Of course, it is.”

※※※※※

By late afternoon, the lists had achieved a kind of chaotic harmony. Mouse stood at the centre of it all, directing traffic, making notes, and occasionally contradicting himself.

Vincent remained beside him, a calm anchor in the storm of enthusiasm.

And Catherine... Catherine found herself drawn into it more than she expected.

She crouched beside Jamie, helping her decipher one of Mouse's more ambitious entries. "What does this say?" Catherine asked.

Jamie squinted. "I think it's 'something shiny but not too shiny.'"

"That seems... specific."

"Mouse says too shiny is suspicious."

Catherine nodded solemnly. "Of course it is."

Across the room, Mouse was explaining something to Vincent with great urgency. "...and if I give William something useful, he might use it. But if I give him something interesting, he might not use it, but still like it. So, which is better?"

Vincent considered this carefully. "What would make William happiest?"

Mouse paused.

This was a new line of thought.

"Happiest..."

He looked toward the kitchen, where William was stirring something vigorously and muttering under his breath. Mouse tilted his head. "Food."

Vincent smiled. "That seems likely."

Mouse nodded decisively. "Add food."

He scribbled something onto the list with great determination.

※※※※※

As evening settled and the lanterns were lit, the lists were finally... if not finished, at least temporarily complete.

Mouse gathered them up carefully, stacking them with surprising precision.

"Good work," he declared. "Very productive. Many lists. Much progress."

Vincent inclined his head. "It has been... enlightening."

Catherine smiled warmly. "I think you've started something rather wonderful, Mouse."

Mouse beamed. "Yes. System works."

He paused, then looked at Vincent. "Did you make a list?"

Vincent hesitated. "No."

Mouse frowned. "Should have list."

"I am not certain I require one."

Mouse considered this deeply. "Everyone needs list."

Catherine stepped in gently. "Perhaps Vincent already knows what matters most."

Mouse looked between them, then nodded slowly. "Advanced level."

Vincent's eyes softened as he met Catherine's gaze.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Perhaps."

※※※※※

Later that night, as the tunnels grew quieter and the lists were tucked safely away, Catherine walked beside Vincent toward the outer passages.

"You realise," she said lightly, "that you've created a tradition."

Vincent shook his head. "Mouse has created it."

"You helped."

"I... organised."

She smiled. "You always do."

They walked a little further in companionable silence.

"Do you think," she added softly. "That his lists help people understand what they want?"

Vincent considered this.

"Perhaps," he said slowly. "But I think... they help us understand what we wish to give."

Catherine glanced at him. "That sounds more like you."

He smiled faintly. "It sounds like us."

She slipped her hand into his.

Behind them, somewhere in the tunnels, Mouse's voice echoed faintly, "Where is List of Lists? Missing list! Important list!"

Catherine laughed under her breath. "Yes," she said. "Definitely a tradition."

Vincent's laughter followed hers, warm and quiet, as they disappeared into the lantern-lit dark.

※※※※※

And in his chamber, surrounded by carefully stacked and very important papers, Mouse finally found what he was looking for.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “List of Lists.” He studied it with satisfaction. “Everything accounted for. Okay, good. Okay, fine.”

Then he added one more item. At the very bottom.

In slightly crooked writing. “Friends.”

He nodded, folded the paper carefully, and tucked it safely away.

“Best item on the list. Best by far...”

※※※※



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



To Explain The Impossible

by Inez Paskal

SUGGESTED BY KAREN MORGIA

SEASON TWO

Mud seemed to be everywhere as the small band carefully made its way toward the fork in the tunnel.

"I knew it had been raining heavily for days," started Mary, "but this does seem a bit abnormal, doesn't it?"

Olivia herded the children behind her as she turned into the next tunnel, testing the footing before calling for them to follow. Neither she nor Mary would have allowed the children to come with them if they had known the seeping water was proving to be potentially dangerous. Puddles of water were everywhere, and telltale sinkholes were evidence that the tunnel floor was already beginning to be undermined.

They might have decided to go back if it weren't for the fact that Olivia could see Kim Chou waiting just ahead. He had come out to meet them with his contribution of fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Please be careful," he warned. "It is not good footing. I do not think you can take the cart."

Very carefully, Olivia went to the cart, filled two bags, and brought them back to where the children and Mary were waiting. She continued this until most of the food had been evenly distributed amongst the children and Mary.

"I will leave the rest here, and you can send some of the men for it," Kim Chou offered.

"Thank you for everything," said Olivia as she grabbed her sacks.

Turning to leave, she realized that Mary and the children had already started back, and she smiled, knowing that William would be very happy to have the food supply replenished. Suddenly, panic struck. Luke, where was Luke!

Olivia's son had just turned four and had spent the better part of the morning convincing his mother that he was now old enough to help out along with the other children. She had told him to stay put and wait for her, but when she got to the tunnel junction, he was not there.

"Luke! Luke, are you here?"

No answer. In fact, it suddenly seemed that there was an unbearable silence; Olivia could not

even hear the chatter of the children who were up ahead. Her whole body seemed to be pounding, for she knew that something horrible had happened.

Running into the tunnel, she was brought up short by Mary and the children standing in a circle, perfectly still, not making a sound. She looked in desperation at each face, but she knew before she had completed the circle that Luke was not among them.

They carefully moved aside and silently pointed to a small sinkhole. It was barely big enough for a small child, just big enough for Luke to fall through.

What happened in that next moment was amazing to witness, but even more amazing to experience. Olivia seemed to be transported to another dimension; everything around her seemed to be distorted. Her vision became blurred and dim except for that one little opening in the earth; she was aware that a distress message was going out on the pipes, but this was no longer part of her realm.

Without a moment's hesitation, Olivia dived into that devouring orifice. Some of the older boys grabbed her legs, but they didn't need to, for she was thoroughly wedged.

There were gasps and little cries; however, no one dared make a loud noise for fear of collapsing the whole system. Mary did her best to keep a calm composure, but as time wore on, she began to crumble just a bit. Why did time seem to stop when there was a crisis?

Finally, the reassuring sight of a black cape flying about could be seen in the distance, and it was only a matter of minutes before Vincent was standing before them.

He ever so carefully dug his outstretched hands through the crumbling ground and grasped Olivia around the waist. Slowly, she began to merge, and the older boys helped pull at Vincent's arms. It soon became evident that they were raising a limp body, dead weight; Olivia was unconscious.

Inch by inch they pulled, first her waist, then her arm and shoulder, her head, and the other outstretched arm.

“Mommy, Mommy,” shattered the silence, as Luke's head became visible.

Quickly, Vincent reached down and grabbed Luke, pulling him to safety as the earth started once again falling in on itself. It was then that they all noticed that even in her unconscious state, Olivia held onto her son; her grip had turned his little hand purple, but he was alive.

Rushing Olivia to the Hospital chamber, Vincent carefully placed her in Father's charge. An examination showed she had a severe head wound, a dislocated shoulder, and multiple cuts, scrapes, and bruises.

Luke, on the other hand, was fine, scared, and worried about his mother, but fine. Members of the community took turns sitting by Olivia's bedside until she showed signs of regaining consciousness.

"Luke, Luke," were the first words out of her mouth.

"He's fine," reassured Father. "You will be fine also, my dear. You must be in pain, I'll give you something."

"No, not until I see Luke!" insisted Olivia.

"Yes, of course," conceded the older man.

Olivia seemed oblivious of any pain as she sat up and fondled her son. She checked him over; every little scratch, bruise, and bump was given a mother's loving touch. Holding him close, she rocked and started to cry.

Just then Mouse came into the dispensary, mumbling and scratching his head.

"We fixed it some; needs better shoring. Don't understand it though."

"What don't you understand, Mouse?" asked Mary.

"How she could've done it. Opening was too small, and the ledge was too far away," answered Mouse.

"What ledge?" asked Vincent.

"The one that Luke must have fallen on. Even stretching her fingers out, she never could've reached him."

Father grinned.

"You never know about mothers," he said. "There is something mysterious and miraculous about them. I read something the other day, something about them being like God. Wait a minute..."

Returning a few minutes later, Father sat next to Olivia with a paper, and all gathered around.

"This is from last Sunday's paper, Mother's Day, a columnist named Erma Bombeck."

And he read;

" 'The Model Mom

When the Good Lord was creating Mothers, he was into his sixth day of overtime when the angel appeared and said, 'You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one.'

And the Lord said, 'Have you seen the spec on this order? She had to be completely washable, but not plastic.'

Have 180 movable parts... all replaceable.

Run on black coffee and leftovers.

Have a lap that disappears when she stands up.

A kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair.

And six pairs of hands.

The angel shook her head slowly and said, 'Six pairs of hands... no way.'

'It's not the hands that are causing me problems,' said the Lord.

'It's the three pairs of eyes that Mothers have to have.'

'That's the standard model?' asked the angel.

The Lord nodded. 'One pair that sees through closed doors when she asks, 'What are you kids doing in there?' when she already knows. Another here in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn't but what she has to know, and of course the ones here in front so that she can look at a child when he goofs and say, 'I understand, and I love you' without so much as uttering a word.'

'Lord,' said the angel, touching his sleeve gently, 'come to bed. Tomorrow...'

'I can't,' said the Lord. 'I'm so close to creating something so close to myself. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick... can feed a family of six on one pound of hamburger... and can get a nine-year-old to stand under a shower.'

The angel circled the model of a Mother very slowly. 'It's too soft,' she sighed.

'But tough!' said the Lord excitedly. 'You cannot imagine what this Mother can do or endure.'

'Can it think?'

'Not only think, but it can reason and compromise,' said the Creator.

Finally, the angel bent over and ran her finger across the cheek. 'There's a leak,' she

pronounced. 'I told you, you were trying to put too much into this model.'

'It's not a leak,' said the Lord. 'It's a tear.'

'What's it for?'

'It's for joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, loneliness, and pride.'

'You're a genius,' said the angel.

The Lord looked sober. 'I didn't put it there'."

"Yeah?" questioned Mouse. "Well, I don't care! She still couldn't have done it."

"Yes, she could, Mouse. She's a mother."



DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Judith Nolan



Mouse Needs Help

by Judith Nolan

The tunnels were quieter in summer. But they were never silent.

There were always footsteps somewhere beneath the city. Pipes breathing through old walls, carrying the tapping of messages. Water moving through ancient stone. The distant thunder of trains. Voices travelled oddly through forgotten passageways like scraps of dreams.

But summer softened things. Even the deepest part of the Mousehole felt warmer. But still a small brazier flickered in one corner to drive back the chill of the bare stone walls.

Mouse sat cross-legged in the middle of absolute catastrophe. At least, Arthur considered it a catastrophe. The raccoon chittered his way back and forth, seeking something to eat with his small black hands and their sharp claws.

Bits of wire hung from chair backs. Small gears covered the floor beside opened cigar boxes full of screws and washers. Three cracked alarm clocks lay in pieces upon the table beneath a naked bulb. Someone — probably Mouse — had balanced a used teacup upon a stack of engineering magazines in direct violation of all known safety principles.

Cullen stood in the doorway holding a stained paper bag carefully away from his body. “I brought us some bagels,” he said as he surveyed the chaos.

Mouse did not look up. “Okay, good. Okay, fine... no sesame seeds because birds don’t like sesame seeds, and Catherine likes birds but not pigeons because pigeons are dirty, except the grey one near the park with only one foot because he’s dignified, not dirty, there’s a difference...”

Cullen blinked. “Yeah...” He shook his head in honest bewilderment.

Mouse tightened something with furious concentration. Tiny metal springs shot suddenly across the room. “Oops...” His guileless blue eyes followed their arching path to note where they landed.

Cullen watched one bounce off a wall as he bit into a bagel. Waiting for Mouse to get around to eating was a waste of good time. “What exactly are you building?”

Mouse froze and frowned. His eyes widened behind the work glasses he was wearing. Then he leaned protectively over his work in progress. “Nothing...”

Arthur chittered up at the woodworker and held out his black paws pleadingly. Cullen dropped a bagel into the raccoon's eager grasp as he stared at the obvious machine parts.

"Mouse..." he said slowly as he chewed.

"Not finished." Mouse hunched his shoulders defensively.

Cullen shrugged. "That much is apparent."

"Can't tell before finished because then people think things, and if they think things before finished, then finished becomes wrong because it gets looked at too early."

Arthur jumped up onto the table to nose at the bag of food with infinite care. Cullen removed it but handed the animal his part-finished one before he took a fresh one.

The woodworker leaned back. "What is it for?"

Mouse finally glanced up. "For Catherine."

That explained nothing. And everything. Cullen sighed softly as he pondered staying or leaving. The Mousehole smelled faintly of solder, dust, tea leaves, and old paper. The strange, comforting smell of Mouse himself.

Mouse resumed muttering while tightening another screw. "Need three more copper contacts and the little blue switch from Cullen because Cullen keeps good switches hidden in the third drawer because nobody respects organisation and Vincent said maybe not electricity near water, but there isn't water except steam and steam isn't exactly water because otherwise clouds would drown birds..."

Cullen sat slowly upon a nearby crate. "Should I ask?"

Mouse shrugged. "No."

"Will I anyway?"

Mouse nodded rapidly. "Probably."

Cullen folded his arms. "What is it?"

Mouse hesitated. Then very quietly, he said, "A music box."

"Whoa..." Cullen looked genuinely startled.

Mouse shrugged awkwardly. "For Catherine."

The words emerged as though that alone explained the necessity of dismantling half the century's discarded appliances.

“Music boxes already exist,” Cullen pointed out gently. “She’s probably already got one or two.” He munched contentedly on his bagel.

Mouse looked offended. “Yes, but not *this* one. Not store-bought. Not factory-made. Mouse-made. It’s better than better.”

He scrambled, suddenly beneath the table, emerging moments later holding a dented cylinder with tiny punched holes. “See?”

“What do I see?”

Mouse sighed tragically. “Songs are memories. People forget because brains are leaky. Music remembers better.”

Cullen’s expression softened slightly. “And this one remembers something important?”

Mouse nodded. “Her song.”

Cullen stood up slowly. “Ah... Not merely a machine then. A gift.”

One of Mouse’s impossible heartfelt offerings assembled from scraps and devotion.

“What song?”

Mouse frowned in concentration. “The one Vincent hums when Catherine’s hurt or sad or sleeping.”

Cullen smiled faintly. “You know, most people simply buy presents.”

“Bought things that don’t know you. They could be anyone’s. Like I said, not Mouse-made, and special.”

Mouse bent again over the machine. “Needed the cast iron hinges I got from Winslow because Winslow hoards things and says he doesn’t, but he does.”

He looked up at his companion. “Now Cullen has the soldering iron because he borrowed it in April and forgot he borrowed it, but I remember because everyone forgets things except maybe Vincent and me, but Vincent remembers feelings more than objects...”

Cullen listened with growing amusement. Mouse never truly stopped speaking. His thoughts simply escaped continuously into the world without filters or gates.

Like a radio tuned to six stations simultaneously.

Mouse sighed. “Okay, good. Okay, fine... need stronger winding key because Catherine turns things gently, but gently still breaks delicate gears eventually because delicate things break; that’s what delicate means...”

Cullen picked up one of the clock parts. “Does Vincent know about this?”

Mouse gasped in horror. “*No!*”

“Why not?”

“Because then he’ll get the face.”

“The face?”

“The sad face.”

Cullen laughed outright. “I wasn’t aware Vincent had multiple faces.”

“He does.”

Mouse pointed vaguely with a screwdriver. “Thinking face. Worried face. Catherine face. Protecting face. Tunnel council face. Too many feelings face.”

Cullen rubbed his forehead in honest confusion. “And this gift would produce which face?”

Mouse stopped moving for a moment. A rare stillness settled over him. “Happy face.”

The simplicity of it pierced straight through Cullen, unexpectedly.

Mouse looked back down quickly, as though embarrassed by sincerity. “Maybe.”

Cullen watched him quietly. The machine upon the table looked absurdly complicated for a mere music box. Tiny copper wires curled through salvaged clockwork beside delicate brass arms and some mysterious arrangement involving polished glass.

“What does the glass do?”

Mouse brightened instantly. “Lights.”

“Of course, it does.”

“When music plays.”

“Why?”

Mouse looked astonished that his friend would even ask. “Because music is light. Light is life.”

Cullen surrendered immediately. “Well, naturally.”

Mouse beamed. Then immediately returned to muttering.

“Need Cullen now. Cullen has the contacts and says no touching electrical things without supervision, which is ridiculous because supervision is just watching somebody do something interesting...” He stood abruptly.

Cullen blinked. “You need me now?”

“Before Cullen sleeps because Cullen naps secretly after lunch.”

“He does not.” Cullen found talking about himself in the third person made his head spin.

“He does.” Mouse was already pulling on three different jackets simultaneously.

Cullen rose with resignation. “I’m coming with you.” He frowned. “No, that should be, ‘You’re coming to see me...’” He rubbed a hand over his untidy hair in honest confusion.

Mouse squinted suspiciously. “You’ll talk to people on the way.”

Cullen laughed as he pushed one bagel into Mouse’s hand. “That is generally considered useful. You’d better eat something before that raccoon of yours gets them all.” He took the bag away from the reach of the chittering critter.

“Talking slows things down.” Mouse filled his mouth with the bagel, chewed, and swallowed almost in the same movement. “Waste of good time.”

Cullen laughed. “And exploding the tunnels speeds them up?”

Mouse considered this carefully. “Sometimes.”

The journey through the tunnels became an odyssey of interruptions.

Mouse greeted everyone. Not calmly but rapidly. Like verbal confetti.

“Okay, good, okay, fine... yes, fixing the radio tomorrow... now that rat belongs there now... yes, your soup tasted strange because the onions were old...”

People smiled as they passed him. Even when they could barely follow his words as they spilt out of him.

Children especially trailed after Mouse like fascinated ducklings. By the time they reached Cullen’s chambers, the woodworker was exhausted merely from listening.

Cullen pushed the door open. “Come on in...”

Mouse blinked. “You still don’t know what I’m asking you for.”

Cullen pulled on his leather apron and tied it up. “I know it probably involves danger, missing equipment, or both. They usually do.”

Mouse minimised his thumb and forefinger together. “Only tiny danger. Need copper contacts and a fine oak wood box.” Mouse inhaled dramatically. “For Catherine.”

Cullen passed one hand over his eyes. “Go on...”

Mouse grinned triumphantly. “Okay, good! Okay, fine!”

Twenty minutes later, they had sorted out copper contacts, solder, two batteries, a string, and inexplicably half a lemon cake.

“Why the cake?” Cullen asked.

“Arthur said he’s still hungry. He’s always hungry.”

“That explains a great many things.” Cullen turned away and fossicked among his many wooden items until his hand settled on a fine oak box that just needed some sanding, then a good wax and final polish. He held it out and hoped that was the end of his involvement in the latest of the Mouse’s crazy schemes.



By evening, the Mousehole glowed warmly beneath scattered lamps. Mouse worked furiously.

Arthur lay stretched out nearby, asleep after consuming bagels and the cake.

Occasionally, Mouse would mutter, “Okay, good. Okay, fine...”

At last, near midnight, the music box stood complete. It was oddly beautiful.

Its old wood had been waxed and polished lovingly to a gleaming shine. It was not elegant with its solid cast-iron hinges. But somehow it looked alive.

Copper curled through brass like vines. Tiny, coloured lights hid beneath etched glass. The winding key resembled something salvaged from a submarine.

“Saw your lights were still on.” Cullen appeared in the open doorway. He approached cautiously. “Well? How’s the patient?”

Mouse looked suddenly nervous. “What if it’s all wrong? What if you were right?”

Cullen smiled gently. “I can already see it isn’t. It’s beautiful, my friend.” His large hand settled comfortably on the tinker’s shoulder.

Mouse wound the key. For one terrible moment, nothing happened.

Mouse froze in horror. Then softly — very softly — music drifted into the room.

A fragile melody. Tender and haunting.

Cullen recognised it almost immediately. Vincent's soft humming of the tune.

The little unconscious song he carried through the tunnels whenever Catherine occupied his thoughts. As the melody played, tiny lights glowed beneath the coloured glass. Blue. Gold. Amber. Like stars flickering underground.

Mouse stood motionless, watching them. "Okay..." he whispered.

Then more quietly, "Good..."

Cullen looked at the small shining machine and suddenly understood something essential about Mouse. Everything he built was really an attempt to keep love from disappearing.

Above them, the city roared unknowingly onward through the summer night. But deep beneath it, in a hidden chamber filled with scraps and muttering and impossible tenderness, a little music box sang its song softly in the dark to light home.



One year, Ron was the headliner at a comic con, and some of the staff were chilling in the green room to get away from the constant din and torrent of people. Ron was napping in an office chair with his feet up on the conference table. One of the staff was talking about how she would love to chat with one of the other guests. She said something to the effect of, "Oh, I don't want to bug them. I'm just a nobody."

Very quickly, we heard a deep, booming voice exclaim, "HEY!" Ron had perked up, still reclined. He pointed at her and said, "*Hey!* Don't you *ever* feel like you are not good enough to talk to anyone! You want to talk to someone; you talk to them. The rest is up to them. But don't ever feel like anyone is above you!"

He preached it, and she felt it. The conversation continued for a while.

Mr. Perlman is a class act.



DIGITAL ART

By Mel



The Winter Light

by Judith Nolan

Snow had begun before dusk and was still falling when Catherine finally left the district attorney's office.

The city had taken on that strange, suspended hush that only a true winter storm could bring to Manhattan. Taxis moved more slowly through the streets. Headlights blurred in the drifting white. The hard lines of buildings and pavements softened under a growing veil of snow.

She stood for a moment beneath the awning, one gloved hand curled around the strap of her bag, and looked out at the changed world.

Joe had barked his final instructions at everyone an hour earlier, making it plain that the office might be closing early for the weather, but no one was to assume sentiment had softened him in any permanent way. Catherine had smiled, accepted the reprieve, and gathered her things without protest.

Now, at last, she was free. But instead of hailing a cab, she stepped out into the snow.

It settled at once on the shoulders of her dark coat and caught in the loose strands of hair that had worked free of her hat. She drew in a breath of cold air, and with it came that immediate sense of release she had been yearning for all day.

The city was beautiful like this. Not glittering. Not performing. Just... quiet.

She turned south without quite deciding to do so. Her boots made soft sounds on the whitening pavement. Around her, people hurried homeward with parcels tucked beneath their arms and scarves drawn up against the cold. Shop windows glowed gold and red. Somewhere, faintly, she could hear Christmas music drifting out over the street.

But it all seemed farther away than usual. Less urgent. Less real than the warmth that stirred suddenly and unmistakably along the bond.

Vincent.

She smiled without meaning to.

'It's snowing,' she sent silently, though not in words exactly. More in feeling. In wonder. In the kind of quiet delight, she no longer needed to translate for him.

At once came the answering awareness. Not surprise—he had already felt the weather through her—but a soft gladness. An image of candlelight. Of warmth held against the cold. Of waiting.

He was below. Somewhere in the maze of tunnels and chambers she now knew as surely as she knew the streets above. Somewhere under the city, while the snow gathered over everything, he was thinking of her.

And waiting.

Catherine lowered her head slightly as she walked, sheltering her smile from no one.

At the corner, she stopped beside a small flower stand still bravely open despite the weather. Buckets of winter greenery stood in neat rows beside sprays of holly and white roses kept under canvas.

The old woman tending the stall peered out at her from behind layers of wool and said, "You'd better take something home with you, miss. Storm like this calls for flowers."

Catherine laughed softly. "Does it?"

"Calls for kindness," the woman corrected. "Flowers are one way of managing that."

Catherine looked down at the white roses. Their petals were edged with the cold but still perfect, still luminous against the dark green leaves.

Not extravagant. Not formal.

Simple. Winter-white and quietly beautiful.

She thought at once of the tunnels. Of candlelight against stone. Of beauty below was always something chosen, protected, preserved by many hands. She thought of Father's chambers lined with books, of Mary's shawls, of William's careful grumbling, of Mouse's improbable treasures.

And, inevitably, of Vincent.

She bought three roses and let the woman wrap them in brown paper and twine.

"For someone special?" the flower seller asked as she handed them over.

Catherine glanced down at the parcel in her gloved hands.

"Yes," she said softly. "Very."

She took the roses and continued on her way.

By the time she reached her building, the snow was falling more thickly. The doorman greeted her with concern and took one look at the weather before urging her to stay in for the evening.

"I'll be fine, Harold," she assured him. But even as she crossed the lobby, she knew she would not be staying in. Not for long.

Her apartment felt too still when she entered it, though she had left lights on against the winter dark. She set her bag down, removed her gloves and hat, and crossed to the windows.

Below, the city moved under snow and shadow. Beyond, the park was becoming a white dream.

She stood there for only a moment before turning with sudden purpose.

She changed quickly into warmer, simpler clothes—a thick cream sweater, dark slacks, soft boots fit for colder paths. She brushed the snow from her hair, but did not bother to do more. Then she picked up the wrapped roses and slipped out again, more quietly this time.

The way below was one she had long since ceased to think of as strange.

It was hidden, yes. Secret. Impossible to anyone who did not know it existed. But to Catherine, it had become as real and necessary as her own front door.

The descent into the sub-basement brought with it the familiar shift in air and sound. The city did not disappear so much as fade. Its sharpness gave way to something older. The faint echo of pipes. The distant murmur of voices carried through stone. The breath of warmth rising up from the world beneath.

She drew her coat tighter about her and made her way into the tunnels.

At once, she felt him more strongly. Not merely aware of her now.

The first of the main chambers she passed was bright with activity. Children were carrying folded lengths of cloth from one place to another while Mary supervised the sorting of what looked like blankets and scarves into careful piles. A kettle steamed near the fire, and William's voice could be heard from somewhere nearby, arguing with someone about the proper treatment of cinnamon.

Mary looked up, and her face lit with immediate pleasure.

"Catherine!" she exclaimed. "Out in this weather? You must be frozen."

"I'm all right," Catherine replied, smiling as Mary came to embrace her. "It's worse above than below, as usual."

"That is because below, sensible people keep warm," William called from the next chamber. "And if sensible people had any sense at all, they'd come in here and eat something while it's hot."

Mary shook her head fondly. "He's impossible."

"I heard that," William barked.

Catherine laughed, the warmth of the place already working its way through her. She held up the parcel in her hands. "I brought these down. I hope that was all right."

Mary took one look at the white roses showing through the paper, and her expression softened.

"Oh," she said quietly. "How lovely."

"They seemed right for tonight," Catherine said. "For everyone. For winter."

Mary nodded as though she understood far more than the simple words.

"They are perfect," she said. "We'll put them on the long table."

A small blur of movement shot past Catherine's knees and stopped abruptly at the sight of her.

Mouse.

He blinked up at her from beneath untidy hair, a spool of silver ribbon wrapped around one wrist and trailing after him like a captured comet.

"Catherine!" he announced. "Snow above. Snow below, too, maybe, if the tunnel roof falls in. Okay, bad. Not good. But pretty. Very pretty."

"Yes," Catherine said gravely. "Very pretty."

Mouse's eyes dropped to the roses.

"Flowers," he said. "Not edible. But good. Good for looking at. Good for feelings."

"That's exactly what I thought."

Mouse nodded in approval and hurried off again before he could be detained, the ribbon continuing faithfully behind him.

Mary smiled after him. "He's been like that all day."

"I gathered as much."

"And Vincent has been looking for you without admitting he was looking for you."

Catherine felt warmth rise to her face even in the tunnel's dim light. "Has he?"

Mary only smiled and did not answer. She did not need to.

The bond had already shifted, brightened, deepened. He knew she was here now. Knew she had come not by accident or impulse alone, but because something in her heart had led her to him as surely as always.

"I should go on," Catherine said softly.

Mary squeezed her hand. "Yes," she said. "You should."

The path to Father's chambers was quieter now, less crowded, though the tunnels still held the soft pulse of preparation. Candles had been placed at intervals along the walls, their flames reflected in old glass and polished bits of metal in ways that made the underground world feel almost festive, almost enchanted.

Catherine walked more slowly as she neared the chamber she sought. Not because she was uncertain.

Because she wanted to hold the moment just a little longer. Then she saw him.

He stood at the far end of the corridor where it widened near Father's bookshelves, half in shadow, half in candlelight. His cloak fell in dark folds around him, and in the soft gold of the lanterns, his hair looked almost burnished. He had been still a moment before, but at her approach, something in him changed—something subtle, immediate, wholly unmistakable.

His whole face warmed. "Catherine," he said.

The way he said her name made everything in the long day above fall away.

She came toward him, smiling. "Vincent."

He took a step forward, then another, until they stood only inches apart. For a moment, neither reached for the other. Neither spoke. The quiet between them held too much.

Then his gaze dropped to the roses still in her hand. "You brought winter down to us," he said softly.

"I thought perhaps Below might like a little of it," she replied.

His eyes lifted to hers again, deep and luminous and full of that tenderness which always undid her.

"You have been among us only a short time this evening," he said, "and already you have made the tunnels more beautiful."

Catherine laughed softly and shook her head. "That sounds like something Father should have said."

"No," Vincent replied. "It is something I wished to say."

His voice was low, almost reverent. Not theatrical. Simply true.

She looked at him for a long moment, then lowered her gaze to the roses.

"I bought them from a flower seller on the street," she said. "She told me a snowstorm called for kindness."

Vincent smiled. "A wise woman."

"Yes." Catherine hesitated. "I thought perhaps... one of them could stay with Father. One with Mary. And—"

She stopped.

"And one?" Vincent prompted gently.

Her fingers tightened slightly on the brown paper wrapping.

"One for you," she said.

A silence followed. He did not move. Did not speak. Yet the bond opened like warmth in winter stone. Slowly, she drew one rose free and held it out to him.

Vincent looked at it with such care that it seemed suddenly not a flower but something rarer. Then, with equal care, he took it from her.

The white bloom looked almost luminous against the roughness of his larger hand.

"For me," he said quietly.

"Yes."

He raised his eyes to hers. "It is the most beautiful gift I have ever received."

"Oh, Vincent," she whispered. "It's only a flower."

"No," he said. "It is kindness. Thought. Beauty carried through the storm."

His voice softened further. "It is from you."

That was the thing that mattered. Catherine felt the truth of it settle through her.

They stood in silence another moment. Around them, the tunnels breathed and glowed and carried on with their life. Somewhere in the distance, a child laughed. Somewhere nearer, William shouted for someone to keep watch on the biscuits. The world moved around them, but their stillness remained untouched.

At last, Catherine said, "I nearly stayed above tonight."

Vincent's expression changed. "Nearly?"

She nodded. "I was tired. The office dragged on, and then the city was... the city." She looked away briefly. "But everything felt empty. Even beautiful things felt empty."

"And so, you came here."

"And so, I came here."

His hand closed a little more firmly around the stem of the white rose.

"I am glad," he said.

She looked back at him.

"So am I."

A small silence passed, less fragile now.

Then Vincent turned slightly and gestured down the corridor.

"Will you walk with me?" he asked.

"You know I will."

They began to move together through the tunnels, slowly, their steps falling into quiet accord. Catherine carried the remaining roses, and Vincent kept his single white bloom as though he scarcely trusted himself to do otherwise.

"Father has been reading to the children all evening," he said. "Though I suspect he has been doing more explaining than reading."

"About snow?"

"About snow. About winter festivals. About why some customs above involve evergreens and candles and gift-giving and why none of these things, in truth, have as much meaning as the people who share them."

Catherine smiled. "That sounds exactly like him."

"He also spent twenty minutes attempting to explain mistletoe to Mouse."

She stopped short and stared at him.

"He did not."

Vincent's eyes shone with quiet amusement.

"He did."

"And?"

"Mouse has decided it is a highly suspect plant and should not be trusted."

Catherine laughed outright then, the sound echoing through the stone passage and drawing a smile from Vincent deeper than the one before.

"That," she said, "is probably the safest possible conclusion."

"Yes," he agreed solemnly. "Though Father seemed personally affronted by the botanical implications."

They went on, side by side, laughing softly together now.

By the time they reached the outer edge of the great chamber, the mood within had shifted. The busiest work was done. People were settling. Some sat near the fires. Others were arranging simple decorations along the walls or carrying in dishes for the evening meal. Candlelight reflected off polished tin and glass. The whole space glowed with warmth gathered against the storm.

Catherine paused beside Vincent and simply looked.

This was what she had wanted all day and not known how to name.

Not escape. Not romance alone. Belonging.

The feeling of a world made gentle by the care people took of one another.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

Vincent looked not at the chamber, but at her. "Yes," he said.

She turned and caught the look in his eyes, and for a moment, the rest of the world disappeared again.

Not because it wasn't there.

But because everything he felt was there too—unhidden, unguarded, held with all the humility and strength that made him who he was.

Her voice softened.

"Vincent..."

He waited.

She reached very lightly and touched the fold of his cloak near his wrist.

"I'm glad I came down tonight."

A faint breath escaped him, almost a sigh. "So am I, Catherine."

Then, because the moment had already become too full, too fragile to endure without easing it, he said more lightly, "Though I suspect William will soon insist we sit down and do justice to his efforts in the kitchen."

"As long as Mouse has not already done justice to them first."

Vincent glanced toward the far side of the chamber, where Mouse appeared to be attempting to conceal something round and sugar-coated beneath his vest.

"I believe," Vincent said gravely, "that that possibility can never be wholly discounted."

Catherine followed his gaze and smiled. And there, in the warm light of the tunnels, with snow falling somewhere far above and winter held gently at bay below, she felt something inside her settle.

Not the end. Not resolve. Simply settle.

As though this, too, was a kind of homecoming. Vincent did not lead her far.

They moved only to the quieter edge of the great chamber, where the light softened, and the sounds of the gathering fell into a gentle background murmur. Here, the walls curved inward slightly, and the candles had been set higher, their glow diffused across the stone in a way that felt almost like twilight.

Catherine slowed, turning once more to take it all in. The long tables had been set with simple care. Bowls, loaves, small arrangements of greenery placed here and there, and now, as Mary arranged them, the white roses she had brought down from the world above. Their pale blooms caught the candlelight and seemed almost to hold it.

"It feels different tonight," she said quietly.

Vincent's gaze rested on her rather than the room.

"Yes," he said. "It does."

She glanced back at him. "Is that because of the snow?"

"In part," he replied. "But also because of what you have brought with you."

She smiled faintly. "Three roses do not account for all of this."

"No," he agreed. "But the thought behind them does."

Catherine lowered her gaze, not quite trusting the warmth that rose within her.

"I think," she said slowly, "I needed to be reminded of something."

Vincent did not interrupt. He waited, as he always did, allowing her the space to find her own words.

"Up there," she went on, "everything moves so quickly. Even the things that matter are... rushed. Decisions, responsibilities, people. It's all immediate. Urgent. Necessary."

"Yes."

"And here," she said, looking around again, "nothing feels rushed. Nothing feels... lost in the noise."

Vincent's expression softened. "That is because we choose not to let it be so."

She met his gaze. "You make it sound simple."

"It is not simple," he said. "But it is deliberate."

Catherine considered that. "A choice," she said.

"Yes."

She nodded slowly. "I think I forget that sometimes."

Vincent's eyes held hers with quiet understanding. "You remember when you came here."

"Yes."

"And when you leave?"

Catherine hesitated. "It's harder," she admitted. A silence passed between them, not uncomfortable, but thoughtful.

"You carry this place with you," Vincent said at last.

She looked at him, uncertain. "Do I?"

"Yes," he said. "The way you see things. In the way you choose. Even when you believe you have forgotten, it remains."

Catherine absorbed that quietly. "I hope that's true."

"It is." There was no doubt in his voice.

She drew in a breath and let it out slowly, as though something within her had eased just a little.

Around them, the chamber had begun to settle further. People were gathering at the tables now, conversations softening into a shared quiet. Mary moved between them with her usual gentle authority, ensuring everyone had what they needed. Father's voice could be heard nearby, low and measured, speaking to a small group of children who listened as though each word mattered.

Catherine watched it all for a moment, then looked back at Vincent.

"I almost stayed away tonight," she said again, more softly this time.

"I know."

She blinked. "You do?"

"I felt your hesitation," he said. "Your weariness."

"And yet you didn't... call me down."

Vincent's gaze deepened. "I would not ask that of you."

"Even if you wanted to?"

He held her eyes. "Yes."

The simplicity of it struck her more deeply than any insistence could have done.

"You always leave the choice to me," she said.

"It is yours to make."

She smiled, though there was something in it that trembled just slightly. "That can be difficult."

"I know."

"And yet," she went on, "it's also why I come."

Vincent's expression changed, something quieter and more vulnerable moving beneath the surface.

"Catherine..."

She shook her head gently, stopping him before he could say more. "I'm glad you don't ask," she said. "Because if you did... it wouldn't be the same."

He inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the truth of it.

"No," he said. "It would not."

A moment passed between them, deeper than the last.

Then, because the moment had grown too full again, Catherine turned slightly toward the chamber.

"We should join them," she said. "Before William decides we're ungrateful."

Vincent allowed the faintest hint of amusement to touch his expression.

"That is a risk I would prefer to avoid."

They moved together toward the long table.

As they did, Mouse darted past once more, this time clutching something unmistakably edible and attempting to look as though he was not.

"Mouse," Catherine said.

He froze, then turned slowly.

"Yes, Catherine?"

"That looks suspiciously like one of William's biscuits."

Mouse considered this, then nodded solemnly. "Yes. Suspicious. Very suspicious. Must investigate further."

Vincent's eyes shone faintly.

"I see."

Mouse brightened. "Will report findings." He disappeared before further questions could be asked.

Catherine laughed softly. "I think William's conclusions are going to be very limited."

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "I suspect the evidence will not survive the investigation."

They reached the table then, and Mary greeted them with a smile that needed no words. One of the white roses had already been placed in a simple jar at the centre, its pale bloom glowing softly among the candlelight.

Catherine felt a quiet satisfaction at the sight of it. It belonged here.

She took her place beside Vincent, aware of him without looking, aware of the steady calm that came simply from being near him.

As the meal began, conversation rose and fell around them, gentle and unforced. Laughter came easily. Stories were shared. Even Father allowed himself a moment or two of something like contentment, though he would no doubt deny it if pressed.

Catherine listened, spoke when drawn in, and let the rest wash over her.

For once, she did not feel the need to measure time. Did not feel the pull of what awaited her above.

There was only this moment. This place. These people. And Vincent, beside her.

At some point, she turned slightly, just enough that their shoulders almost brushed.

He stilled, just briefly, then allowed it.

No movement beyond that. No acknowledgement. And yet—everything was there.

She let her gaze drift to the rose in his hand, still held with that same careful attention.

"You've kept it," she said softly.

He looked down at it, as though reminding himself it was real. "Yes."

"I didn't think you would carry it with you."

"I did not think so either," he said. "And yet..."

He did not finish. He did not need to.

Catherine smiled. "It suits you."

Vincent glanced at her, a question in his eyes. "How so?"

She considered her answer. "It reminds me," she said. "That even in winter... there's something that refuses to fade."

He held her gaze.

"Yes," he said quietly. "There is."

The moment lingered, soft and unbroken. Then the conversation around them drew them back once more, and the evening continued as it always did—gently, steadily, without urgency.

Later, when the meal had ended and the chamber began to quiet, Catherine rose at last.

"I should go," she said, though there was no real desire in it.

Vincent stood as well. "I will walk with you."

"You always do."

"Yes."

They moved back through the tunnels together, the candlelight dimming as they left the main chamber behind. The sounds faded, replaced once more by the deeper, quieter rhythm of the underground world.

At the place where the path would lead her upward again, they stopped.

Neither spoke immediately.

The moment required nothing of them.

"I don't feel the same as I did when I came down," Catherine said at last.

"No."

She looked at him. "I don't feel empty."

Vincent's expression softened with a quiet, profound relief. "I am glad."

She hesitated, then reached once more, her fingers brushing lightly against his hand this time, not quite touching, but close enough that the connection was unmistakable.

"So am I," she said.

They stood like that for a moment longer.

Then she drew her hand back.

"Good night, Vincent."

"Good night, Catherine."

She turned and began the ascent. After a few steps, she paused and looked back.

He was still there, watching her, the white rose pale against the darkness.

She smiled. Then she went on.

Above, the snow continued to fall.

Below, the candles burned on. And between the two—something endured.



DIGITAL ART

by Mel



The Music Box

by Judith Nolan

The music box sat among the clutter of Mouse's worktable for three entire days. This was unusual.

Normally, once Mouse finished building something, it immediately departed for its intended destination. Radios were given to elderly tunnel residents. Shelves appeared in chambers before anyone realised he was making them. Broken toys vanished and returned mysteriously repaired.

But the music box remained among the detritus. Mouse frowned at it repeatedly as he tried to decide its ultimate fate. He worked, and he stared, as he tried to gather his courage. Giving the gift to its intended recipient took more than he felt he possessed. That thought only deepened as the days dragged by.

Arthur watched from atop a crate while eating something he had stolen, sight unseen, from William's kitchen when the cook's back was turned. He'd stopped to wash it in a small puddle on the way back to the Mousehole. Now he made contented noises as he ate the stolen treat while wondering what his master was doing.

Mouse leaned over and wound the key in the music box. The little lights glowed. The melody played. Mouse frowned. Arthur chittered as he licked the last crumbs from his black paws.

"I know," Mouse told him. "You're always right."

Arthur chittered again as he checked his furry body for anything edible he may have missed.

"No, not broken." Mouse sighed.

More chittering as the raccoon tried to decide if he should risk a return to the scene of his latest crime.

"Exactly." Mouse nodded.

The raccoon washed his paws thoughtfully as he vacillated between staying and going.

Mouse sat down hard on a stool. The music continued softly. The tiny coloured stars moved beneath the coloured glass.

"What if she doesn't like it?"

Arthur nearly fell over backwards.

Mouse pointed at him. "She might not."

Arthur stared.

“People are complicated.”

The raccoon looked deeply sceptical.

Mouse sighed dramatically. “Fine. I know Vincent will like it.”

Arthur made a sound suspiciously resembling agreement as he scuttled down off his perch and went to do battle with the tunnel’s portly cook once more.

“That isn’t helping,” Mouse called after him.

※※※※※

The following afternoon, Father came through the tunnels carrying several books beneath one arm. He paused at the mouth of the Mousehole, trying to decide whether to stay or go. It was the plaintive sound of music that drew him within.

He found Mouse sitting beside the music box, looking miserable.

The old man lowered himself carefully onto a nearby chair. “Good afternoon, Mouse.”

The tinker smiled absently. “Okay, good, okay, fine.”

Father smiled as he put aside his books. This was going to take longer than he thought. He eased back in the old rump-sprung chair. Mouse was not fooling anyone.

“What troubles you, son?” he asked with a soft smile.

Mouse gestured helplessly toward the table. “This...”

Father leaned closer to examine the box. “It appears to work fine by my reckoning. I heard it playing from the tunnel outside.”

Mouse frowned. “It is fine as fine.”

Father leaned to put his hand on the tinker’s forearm. “Then, what is wrong?”

Mouse hesitated. Then whispered, “What if giving things changes things? Changes everything?”

Father’s eyes softened immediately. “Ah...”

Mouse picked nervously at a loose thread on the hem of his tunic. “It wasn’t supposed to be difficult. It was just an idea.”

Father nodded. “Giving gifts rarely is.”

“This one is.” Mouse stared at the floor. “Catherine really likes it when people do nice things. But what if she thinks it’s too much of a nice thing?”

Father considered this carefully. “You made it because you love her company, and she loves Vincent. You love him, too.”

Mouse blinked. “Not like Vincent loves Catherine.”

Father tried not to smile. “No, not at all. As you would love a brother.”

Mouse nodded. “Different love. But still makes you feel all finny inside.” He pointed to his abdomen with a worried look.

“Yes, just like that.” Father smiled. “The love a man would have for his family.”

Mouse thought about that. Then nodded. “Yeah...”

Father patted his shoulder. “Then she will understand that you are giving the music box to her with a whole heart.”

Arthur returned with another treat he’d stolen from right under William’s nose. He chittered with pleasure as he saw they had a visitor. He didn’t hesitate to climb into Father’s lap without invitation.

Father accepted this invasion of his person as one accepts rainstorms and taxes. Some things simply happened. The raccoon settled in for a feast and a long-overdue catch-up.



Three hours later, Mouse finally gathered sufficient courage. The journey to Vincent’s chamber should have taken five minutes. It took forty.

Mouse stopped repeatedly. He checked the winding key. Adjusted the ribbon again and polished the glass. Then he adjusted the ribbon once more.

When he finally reached the stone entrance to Vincent’s chamber, he stood outside staring at the door. The music box felt unexpectedly heavy. Inside, he could hear voices.

“Catherine...” he breathed.

She was laughing. Vincent said something in reply, too soft to hear.

Mouse smiled despite himself. That laugh always made the tunnels brighter.

He knocked on the stone work and cleared his throat, asking to be allowed to enter. He shifted from foot to foot as he waited to be noticed.

Vincent appeared in the opening and smiled. “Good afternoon, Mouse.”

Mouse immediately forgot every prepared sentence. “Okay, good, okay, fine...”

Vincent smiled and waited patiently.

Behind him, Catherine looked up from the table. Her face lit instantly. “Hi, Mouse. How are you? Come on in.”

That helped the tinker’s flagging confidence a little. He held out the box as he barely advanced into the chamber. “For you.”

Catherine blinked at the box. “For me?”

Mouse nodded rapidly. “I made it.” He took two steps closer and held the box out at arm’s length.

She accepted it carefully. “Oh, Mouse. It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

Vincent moved closer. The three of them gathered around the table.

Catherine examined every detail. The polished oak and the brass fittings. She admired the coloured glass and then the tiny winding key.

Her fingers traced the careful craftsmanship. “I don’t think I have seen anything as beautiful in a very long time.”

Mouse swallowed. “Not done yet.” He pointed to the key. “Wind it up.”

Catherine looked at him, then she slowly turned the key. For one dreadful second, nothing happened. Mouse stopped breathing.

Then the melody began to play. At first, it was soft and gentle, then it moved into a more familiar sound.

Vincent froze. Catherine’s eyes widened. The little lights bloomed beneath the glass. The music drifted through the chamber.

Nobody spoke. The tune wound itself gently through memory and feeling and all the things words never quite managed to say.

Catherine looked slowly toward Vincent. He recognised it immediately.

Of course, he did. It was his song. The one he often hummed without noticing. The one that followed Catherine through the tunnels like a shadow made of music.

Mouse suddenly wished he could disappear. Perhaps into a wall or another dimension.

Then Catherine looked back at Mouse, and her eyes shone. “Oh, Mouse...”

He braced for impact. He wondered if he could escape now.

Instead, she wrapped both arms around him. A full Catherine hug. The dangerous and emotional sort. The sort nobody escaped.

Mouse made a startled squeak. “You remembered.”

Mouse blinked. “Music remembers.”

Catherine laughed through suspiciously bright eyes. “Yes, it does...”

She squeezed him again. “It does.”

Across the room, Vincent stood very still. Watching the lights and listening to the melody. Watching Catherine’s misty smile.

Exactly the one Mouse had hoped for. Vincent caught his eye. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Vincent inclined his head. A simple gesture. A thank you. A recognition and full of understanding.

Mouse felt warmth spread through his chest. The pleasant sort. The sort that meant something had gone exactly right and didn’t hurt his tummy.

The music played on. And deep beneath the city, in a chamber filled with love and light and impossible friendships, a little handmade music box sang softly into the evening.

Remembering for everyone who happened to be listening and smiling a little as they remembered the familiar tune.

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DIGITAL ART

by Mel



When The Bough Breaks

by Anonymous

SEQUEL TO THE SOUND OF ALONE

<https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/RowenaWarner/RowenaWarnerTheSoundOfAlone.pdf>

He had sent a note to Catherine asking her to meet him in the park that night. Although it was now more than a month since her rape and Matheson's subsequent death, Vincent could still feel in Catherine a lingering sadness that would suddenly cause her to reach out to him for support. He wanted to offer her a gift, something that would clear her mind of the dark shadows for a while and bring peace to her still-troubled heart. Vincent hoped the concert scheduled to be held that night under the twinkling stars would be just what Catherine needed.

Keeping to the darkness surrounding the towering trees, he wished, not for the first time, that he and Catherine could walk hand in hand in the open like the other lovers they had watched in secret. That could never be, however, and determined not to greet Catherine with a mood of sadness, he forced a smile to his lips. He had her love, which was far more than he had ever dared to dream, and tucking that beautiful thought away in the corner of his heart, Vincent quickened his pace.

At a mountainous oak, father to all others in its vicinity, he paused a moment to listen, the faintest of sounds touching his ears. It was like the soft cry of a wounded animal, perhaps that of a tiny deer or small fox. Since there were no such creatures in the park, however, he cocked his head to listen intently, moving slowly towards the place from whence the sound came.

Staring into an open litter barrel, Vincent drew in his breath sharply, his eyes widening in horror. Reaching into the metal container, he straightened carefully, his arms tenderly holding what appeared to be a crumpled blanket. Pulling one corner back, he felt his pulse quicken as he gazed into the angelic face of a baby.

From its size and the appearance of the pink, wrinkled skin, Vincent knew it could not be more than a few hours old, and cradling the infant in his arms, he turned back the soiled covering, a low gasp escaping his lips.

The baby was so small and without clothing, but it was his legs that caused Vincent's heart to

ache, cruelly twisted stumps that were almost too painful to bear looking upon. Replacing the cover sadly, Vincent touched the child's hand, watching in amazement as the fingers, hardly larger than a bird's claw, closed around his, trying to pull his finger to its mouth for the natural instinct of suckling.

Vincent looked down in wonder at the newborn life nestled in his arms, and with his finger still clutched by the tiny hand, he started walking again, heading for the tree which marked his rendezvous with Catherine.

She was already there waiting and, at his approach, stepped toward him, her features puzzled. "Vincent, what the..." Her eyes fell to the infant in his arms, and she inhaled sharply. "Where in the world did you get a baby?"

"He was abandoned," he explained in a voice edged with anger. "Someone had left him in a trash container as if he were a piece of litter to be disposed of."

"Dear God!" Catherine breathed softly. "The poor darling! How could someone do something like that?" Vincent pulled the blanket back slowly, and seeing the child's deformity, Catherine gasped. "Oh no!" If possible, Vincent's love grew even stronger as he felt her compassion pour through their bond and saw her arms outstretched as she begged, "Can I hold him?"

He carefully relinquished the small bundle, his heart melting as he listened to Catherine's soft cooing sounds. "Look how blue his eyes are," she said, smiling. "They look just like yours."

In the distance, Vincent could hear the first strains of music and reached out to take Catherine's arm. "I was planning to take you to the concert tonight," he whispered low, "but now it seems we have a more pressing matter to attend to."

Catherine's features grew serious. "Vincent, you know what has to be done. I have to take this baby to the juvenile authorities. They'll institute a search for his mother, and--"

"No!" he interrupted sharply. "He was not wanted, abandoned in this world, but he can have a life in ours."

"Vincent, you can't keep this child," Catherine protested in shock. "He has a mother out there somewhere--"

"Who obviously does not care," he retorted with a snarl, then relenting, his voice grew softer. "Catherine, I am certain your facilities do their best for such children, but can you truly tell me they will have the time to give this infant the love he will so desperately need?"

Catherine hesitated a moment, then shook her head. "No, I can't promise that. Perhaps your world *would* be better for him, at least if and until we can locate his mother." The baby

emitted a tiny, gurgling cry, and she smiled. "I think he's trying to tell us he's hungry. Do you think Father would be able to lend a hand with this?"

"Father always seems to be able to lend a hand, no matter what the situation," Vincent replied low.

"Good. Then I think you'd better carry him," Catherine suggested. "I might stumble in the dark."

Vincent took the baby gently in his arms, its hand reaching up almost immediately to grasp the smallest fold of his vest. Gazing down at Catherine, who now had her arm hooked under his elbow, he murmured softly, "The dream has become a reality."

"I beg your pardon?" Catherine asked.

He shook his head and smiled. "It's not important." The baby released another cry that went straight to the heart, and Vincent urged, "I believe we should hurry. He no doubt has had no milk since his birth."

Father had long ago convinced himself that nothing his son could do would ever surprise him again. Since he was old enough to walk, Vincent had brought home everything from a sick bird to a young woman beaten and left for dead in the park. But the one thing he had never dreamed his son would place in his arms was a baby.

Staring in shock at the infant making a sound hardly louder than that of a kitten, Father shook his head. "Vincent, I fear the answer to this question, but where could you *possibly* have found a newborn baby?"

"He was abandoned in a trash container in the park," Vincent whispered.

"I think it's time you stayed *away* from that place," Father suggested dryly, and his tone softened. "I daresay the child is starving. Go quickly to Mary and tell her you need two bottles, some milk, and several diapers. She keeps those things for just such emergencies."

Both Vincent and Catherine disappeared from the chamber, and gazing down at the baby, lines of concern creased Father's forehead. "I don't like the sound of your cry," he murmured in a worried tone, and laying the child on the bed, he drew back the small cover, his eyes widening in horror. "Now I understand the look on Vincent's face," he sighed. "You were obviously abandoned because of your deformity. No wonder you've already found a place in my son's heart." Crossing the room to retrieve his medical bag, Father performed several quick tests, including listening to the infant's heart and lungs. Straightening slowly, he drew

in a deep breath, too knowledgeable in the wonders of life and death to hope that his diagnosis might be wrong. His gaze touching the child, he whispered softly, "I suppose it is God's will that directed Vincent's steps in the park tonight, but being his father, I cannot help but wish he wouldn't cause my son so much heartache."

In minutes Vincent and Catherine returned with the paraphernalia necessary to feed and clothe a small child, Mary having added to their list a clean blanket and several pairs of warm sleeper outfits. Taking the baby in his arms, Vincent touched the tiny lips with the nipple of the bottle, and it began to suckle, the blue eyes closing as the pale cheeks worked furiously.

Standing back, Father gazed sadly upon the touching scene, his eyes going from his son to the young woman he now loved as a daughter. Catherine stood with her hand resting lightly on Vincent's arm, a smile curling her lips, and watching the faces of his children, Father felt the tears welling up inside. The infant, abandoned and unwanted, could have found so much love in this world, becoming the son that Vincent and Catherine could never have. He could see it in their eyes, in the looks that were exchanged between them, and knowing the truth would only grow more difficult with delay, he reached out to take Catherine's hand in his, directing his words to Vincent, who he knew they would hurt the most. "I... examined the baby while you were gone and made some very distressing discoveries. In addition to his physical abnormalities, I detected a severe irregularity in his heartbeat and found congestion in the tiny lungs, indicating the onset of pneumonia."

Vincent's eyes met his, suddenly wide with horror. "What are you trying to say, Father?"

"The child is dying," he answered softly. "He has a day, perhaps two, at the most."

"No!" Vincent whispered in anguish. "He can't die; we must not let him!"

"I'm sorry, Vincent, but that is out of our hands."

Catherine grasped Father's arm, her tone hoarse with desperation. "What if I take the baby to a hospital? Surely they have facilities..."

Father shook his head. "I have kept up to date with developments in the field of obstetrics. I'm afraid there is nothing the doctors Above could do, either. I've seen children in this condition before. His mother may have been a frequent drug user, or perhaps she or the father or possibly both were themselves physically handicapped. We can only guess at the cause, but the result remains tragically unchangeable."

"You could not be wrong, Father?" Vincent asked in a voice edged with futile hope.

"I only wish I were," Father returned low. "This infant made such a heart-breaking entrance

into this world; it seems unfair he will never live to see its beauty."

Vincent gazed down upon the infant still suckling contentedly on the empty bottle. "Life *is* unjust," he spoke bitterly. "It gives us wonderful treasures beyond our wildest dreams, then rips them from us like a fiend in the night." His finger tenderly caressed the baby's cheek. "How can such a tiny innocent be asked to bear such hurt?"

"It is not the child who must bear the hurt, but those who will grieve his passing," Father replied sadly. "Life *is* a series of arrivals and departures--we must learn to accept that."

"And make the most of the time we are given in between," Vincent added in a choked voice.

Catherine laid her head against his shoulder, a single tear streaming down her cheek, and together they formed a picture of sorrow so deep no words could ever tell nor artist could ever paint.

Time seemed to pass slowly when one is anticipating a wonderful event, but moves with heart-breaking swiftness while standing vigil over a dying child.

Catherine took time off from work, preparing to stay by Vincent's side during the painful ordeal, and each began taking turns changing and feeding the tiny infant, and showering him with love.

The morning following the baby's discovery, Father entered the chamber with his arms lovingly wrapped around a small wooden cradle. "This was yours, my son," he explained in a suspiciously rough voice. "I have lent it to others over the years, but--but somehow I could never bring myself to part with it entirely."

Taking the cradle from his, Vincent kissed the weathered cheek. "Thank you, Father," he whispered, and placing the small bed on the floor next to his own, he lined it with the blankets he had gotten from Mary. Despite the smallness of the cradle, the baby seemed lost within, only his bright blue eyes visible above the matching cover.

"He should have a name," Catherine decided softly. "If--if he has to leave us, he should have something to take with him."

Vincent raised his head, his eyes meeting Father's then going to Catherine. "Jacob Charles," he offered in a quiet tone, and both smiled in response.

"I am *honored*," Father bowed slightly, "and I'm sure Catherine's father would also be."

"It's a beautiful name," Catherine sighed, and with her arm hooked under Vincent's, they

gazed down upon the child who had already become so much a part of their lives.

Jacob seemed strong enough to the inexperienced eye, but late that night, standing vigil over the cradle while Catherine and Father dozed, Vincent instinctively knew the time was drawing near. The baby was making soft whimpering sounds, and he could hear its breathing like a death rattle in the tiny chest.

Gently slipping his arms under the pitifully small body, Vincent lifted Jacob to his chest, an almost unbearable ache consuming him. So strong was the pain within him, he was not aware of Catherine's presence until she reached up to brush back a lock of hair that had fallen across his face.

"Vincent, are you all right?" she asked softly.

Instead of answering, he inhaled deeply, his voice hardly more than a whisper of sound. "He is so much like me, Catherine. Our mothers discarded us at our birth, preventing us from ever knowing or feeling one of the strongest and most beautiful forms of love that exists. Perhaps it is best Jacob leaves us soon, for then he will never feel the heartache that comes with knowing your mother could not bear to look upon you."

"You don't know that's true," Catherine protested in a tender voice. "Just as you and Jacob have a lot in common, perhaps your mothers did as well. Maybe both of them were alone in the world, frightened, and unable to support even themselves, let alone a child who is... different and who would require more than they could give. I'm not trying to defend them, Vincent, but as a woman, I can understand how they must have felt. And you *are* different from Jacob in one important way--your mother *wanted* you to live; otherwise, she wouldn't have left you on the steps of St. Vincent's. It must have broken her heart to have to walk away from her baby."

Some of the pain drifted from Vincent's heart, and with a sad smile, he reached out to tenderly cup Catherine's chin, his thumb lightly caressing her cheek. "I know this is painful for you, Catherine, but I cannot help but be glad that you are with me."

"There is no other place I could be," she answered simply.

The child in his arms took a ragged breath, and Vincent felt a cold hand clutch his heart. "*Jacob!*" he whispered in anguish.

As if answering the low cry, Father appeared at his side, laying a gentle hand on Vincent's shoulder. "How is he?"

Vincent gazed down upon the pale complexion, the tiny chest now silent, and the blue eyes

closed as in sleep. "He is gone," he whispered hoarsely, hot tears beginning to flow down the velvety cheeks. Holding the lifeless child to his chest, Vincent buried his face in the soft blanket, a heart-breaking sob escaping its folds.

They buried Jacob by The Beckoning Falls, the gentle roar of the waters offering a reassurance of nature's immortality. The service was simple, and when Father and the others had drifted away, Vincent and Catherine stood alone at the tiny grave, their hands and hearts joined in mutual grief.

Kneeling, Catherine placed on the fresh soil a bouquet of wildflowers she had gathered in the park, and her hand reached out to tenderly caress the wooden cross. "*Jacob Charles.*" she read the inscription softly. "We'll miss you, my darling. Wherever you are, I know you've found peace, but it's... so hard losing you."

Dropping to his knees beside her, Vincent drew Catherine into his arms, gently brushing away the tears on her cheeks. "Jacob was ours, Catherine, but for a brief time; he enriched our lives beyond measure, and strengthened our love for one another. Let us remember those wonders he left behind."

Catherine rested her head against his chest, and together they shared their grief in the shadows of The Beckoning Falls.



DIGITAL ART

By Mel



Vincent

by Margaret Mansfield

(from CHAMBER CAMEOS 11)

I sit and think upon your countenance

So rugged and unique,

And can't but help to wonder why

God has blessed me so.

You are the words and the music

You are the song my heart sings.

There is not a thought I think

That you aren't hidden safely

Somewhere within it's depths

I try to remember life before you,

And find only shallow emptiness.

There isn't a thing I do

That doesn't reflect my inner joy

In celebration of your existence.

I give thanks.

*For your love warms me
Your strength protects me
Your wisdom humbles me
Your gentleness comforts me
Your scent excites me
Your spirit uplifts me*

*You are the harmony
You are the melody
You are the song my heart sings*



DIGITAL ART

By Ma Grizzly



She'd Not Dead (SND)

by Mel



Still Here

by Janet Rivenbark

Catherine was huddled in a seat in the back of a military aircraft. It had been a strange week... had it been that long? It could have been more or less; she'd lost track.

A young woman in an olive colored flight suit, with a nametag reading SSGT Roberta G. Butler, walked over and offered her a can of soda.

"Sorry," she said with a smile as Catherine accepted the can. "We didn't anticipate passengers on this run. But the embassy packs some pretty good box lunches. Would you like one?"

"Thank you," Catherine said as she sat up straighter and tried to smile at the woman. "That would be nice. I am starting to get a little hungry. How much longer?"

"We've been in the air a little over four hours and should land at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina in another four or five. The flight should remain pretty smooth; there's no weather to speak of. I'll bring that boxed lunch back to you in a few minutes."

Catherine was surprised at the amount of food she found when she opened the boxed lunch. There was a ham and cheese sandwich, a hard-boiled egg, an apple, a bag of chips, two large chocolate chip cookies, and a small bottle of orange juice. It was more food than she'd seen in an entire week for the last six months. She ate half the sandwich, some of the chips, and sipped from the can of soda that the young woman had brought her earlier. It would take some time to get used to eating full meals again. She packed up what she had left and set it aside for later.

When the young woman came to tell her that they were approaching Charleston, she pointed to Catherine's head and offered a dark blue stocking cap.

"It's kind of chilly," she explained. "December in Charleston is usually pretty mild, but it's always cold and windy on the flight line."

"Thank you... ah... what is the SSGT?"



"Staff Sergeant," SSGT Butler supplied, "but you can call me Robbie."

Catherine gratefully accepted the hat and put it on. Having no hair would take some getting used to, especially in New York City in the middle of the winter. She wondered how long it took hair to grow back. She used to have her hair trimmed every few months, but never had more than an inch cut off.

Robbie settled into the seat next to Catherine and buckled her seatbelt in preparation for landing.

“Um, do you know what the plan is once I land? No one told me much of anything,” Catherine asked.

“I just know that I’m supposed to take you to the terminal, and the people at the desk there are expecting you and will take care of you.”

“Thanks.” Catherine settled back in her seat and waited.

The plane landed, and once the engines were shut down, Robbie stood and told Catherine she’d take her to the terminal. Catherine gathered her half-eaten box lunch and followed her down the ramp at the back of the plane.

Robbie had been right. The wind was blowing, and it was cold. Catherine had no idea what time it was. They got into a box van that drove a short distance along the tarmac.

“You want us to wait for you, Robbie?” the driver asked when it stopped and they got out.

“No, I’m just going back to Base Ops when I’m done here. It’s not far.”

Robbie took Catherine into the building and over to the desk near the front door. She told the young man behind the desk who Catherine was, and he nodded.

Catherine reached for the hat, and Robbie waved her off.

“Keep it. You’ll probably need it.”

She turned back to the desk and smiled at the young man.

“Miss Chandler,” he began. “I’m Airman Hernandez. We were expecting you. We have you scheduled on a flight to McGuire that leaves at 0400. So, if you’d like to have a seat, I’ll call you.”

Catherine looked around and found a clock. It was after 2 a.m., so she wouldn’t have to wait very long.

“Where is McGuire?” she asked.

“It’s an Air Force base in New Jersey,” he told her. The nearest towns are Wrightstown, North Hanover, New Hanover, and Browns Mills. It’s about 75 miles south of New York City and 60 miles east of Philadelphia.”

“Do you know if someone is going to meet me there?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a shrug. “The embassy just told us to make sure you got there.”

She thanked him and went to sit down in the empty room.

She considered asking for a phone to make a call, but it was 2 a.m. She wished someone had told her more of what had been planned, or maybe she should have asked more questions. She'd gotten too used to doing as she was told and not asking questions.

She ate some more of the boxed lunch, then dozed off and was startled awake by a voice.

"Miss Chandler. You can board now," Airman Hernandez told her. "I'll take you out."

It was even colder outside than earlier, and Catherine shivered in her light T-shirt and jacket, glad she had the hat.

"You can get a blanket once you've found a seat," Airman Hernandez advised her when he noticed her shiver. "These aircraft can be pretty cold once they reach altitude."

Catherine walked up the ramp at the back of the plane. This plane was much larger than the one she'd arrived on a few hours earlier. She was met by a man in a flight suit. His nametag read: TSGT Dawson T. Arthur. He led her to a ladder.

"The passenger area is on the upper deck," he informed her. The seats are rear-facing, but they are better than the jump seats down here. There is a comfort pallet up there, and you'll find blankets and pillows. There are no other passengers, so you can stretch out if you want to."

Catherine climbed the ladder and looked around. It was a lot like the inside of any passenger plane, except it was all olive green.

TSGT Arthur followed her up.

"How long is the flight?" she asked.

"It should take about two hours. Is someone meeting you?"

"I'm not sure. If there isn't, is there a place I can make a phone call?"

"Sure, I'll show you to the phones in the terminal if no one is there for you."

She thanked him and settled back once more.

The last few days, and the fatigue... more like exhaustion, were catching up with her. She was asleep almost as soon as the plane left the runway.

She was jolted awake, what seemed like only minutes later, when the plane touched down a little roughly before settling.

In a repeat of the previous landing, TSGT Arthur led her off the plane and to a box van. She swore the place looked exactly like the place they'd just left. She wondered if something had gone wrong and they'd had to turn back.

But those thoughts were put to rest when she entered the building and saw two familiar faces: Joe and Peter.

That put a small hole in the dam, and she allowed a few tears to escape her eyes as she hugged both of them.

“It’s real?” she questioned.”

“It is, honey,” Peter said, hugging her again.

Peter was driving, and Joe offered her the front seat.

“No, I might like to lie down in the back. I’m just so tired.”

But she didn’t get a chance to sleep during the almost two-hour drive back to New York. Joe kept asking questions that Catherine tried to answer, but she wasn’t sure how coherent she was.

She had one question of her own: “John Moreno?”

“In jail... no bond. I had just gotten out of the hospital when Burch brought the book to me. His people had broken the code, and it was jam-packed with information. After I read it and figured out who I could trust, I started making calls. We moved on as many as possible simultaneously. John was arrested in his office and marched out in handcuffs.”

“What was he charged with?” she asked.

“Conspiracy, among other things.”

“You can add one more charge,” she told him evenly. “Kidnapping.”

“What?” Joe asked, stunned.

“I was on my way back up to our offices after I abandoned my car in the parking garage. He met the elevator on a floor below ours. He had two men with him, and he told them to take me. I was so surprised I didn’t even struggle.”



As they drove across town, Catherine listened to Joe and Peter argue about where to take her. Joe wanted to take her back to his office to answer more questions, but Peter wanted to take her to his house so she could rest.

“And I need to check her to make sure she’s okay,” Peter added. “She’s been living in horrendous conditions for the last six months.”

Catherine finally broke in and settled it.

“Joe, I want to go to Peter’s. I’m exhausted. I think I’ve had maybe eight hours of sleep in the last... I don’t know how many days it’s been. I need that checkup and food, and rest. I honestly don’t know how I’m still on my feet.”

Joe conceded, and Peter headed toward his house.

The two men had left from there the night before, and Joe had left his car parked in front of Peter’s.

He hugged Catherine after he helped her out of the car.

“Welcome home, and call me when you feel like talking, Kiddo,” he told her, then got in his car and left.

Catherine made it up the steps to Peter’s door. It was almost 9:00am, and the sun was shining.

“Vincent is waiting inside,” Peter told her as he unlocked and opened the door.

“Thank God!” she said as she stumbled through the open door and into Vincent’s arms.



That was when the dam truly broke. Catherine hadn’t allowed herself more than a few tears since she’d been kidnapped the previous June. Once started, she couldn’t seem to stop. Vincent picked her up and settled with her on his lap on the couch in the living room.

Peter left them alone, took off his coat and hung it, then went to the kitchen to start breakfast. When he heard voices from the living room, he poured tea he’d just made into mugs and took them out to them.

“I’d almost given up hope,” Catherine finally managed to get out.

“I never gave up hope,” Vincent told her as he wiped the tears off her cheeks with his handkerchief. “I knew you were alive, but I also knew you were a long distance away. It felt like it did when you were in California.”

“The Bond returned?” she questioned.

“Yes, Father was insistent that it was just wishful thinking on my part, but I knew you were alive. But that was all I could discern, and it was after you’d been moved far away.”

“I was in South America,” she supplied.

“I know. Peter told me. I’m so sorry I didn’t get to you that time in the warehouse down by the river.”

“That *was* you? I was drugged, and I thought it was a dream. I heard gunfire. Were you hurt?”

“Not really. What hurt the worst was that I wasn’t able to get to you.”

Peter came into the living room and handed the mugs of tea to Vincent and Catherine.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” he told them. “Nothing fancy, just scrambled eggs and toast.”

“It sounds wonderful, Peter,” Catherine said. “Thank you.”

A few minutes later, they joined Peter in the kitchen.



“That was great, Peter,” Catherine said, sitting back after she finished her breakfast.

“It was just scrambled eggs and toast,” he repeated as he cleared the table.

“But it was a breakfast I’ve been quite literally dreaming of, and it was hot. We only got hot food once a week.”

“You are welcome, honey. Now you need rest, but first I want to give you a quick checkup and get some blood.”

He’d left his old-fashioned doctor’s bag, which doubled as the house’s first aid kit, on the counter. Now he pulled out his stethoscope and a couple of syringes.

He was done in a few minutes.

“Is there anything that is bothering you?” he asked.

Catherine pushed her sleeve up a few inches above where he’d put the bandage after he’d taken the blood. She pointed to a rash in the crease at her elbow.

“Almost all the women had this,” she said. “Everyone said it came from the chemical that they sprayed on us every week. It itches, and hurts, then oozes if it’s scratched. It’s gotten a little better since I’ve been able to shower, but it hasn’t gone away.”

Peter inspected it closely.

“Do you have this anywhere else?” he asked.

“Both arms, behind my knees, in my groin, under my arms, and around my waist.”

“It does look like an irritation, or maybe an allergic reaction or even a chemical burn.” He went to his bag, came back with a small bottle, and handed it to her. “Benadryl. If it’s an allergic reaction, it should help, and even if it’s not, it should still help with the itching. I’ll prescribe something and have it brought to the house. I’ll send the blood sample to the lab and put a rush on it. We should know something about that tomorrow.

“Now, I suggest that you get some rest. If you shower, don’t use any perfumed soap; there’s a bar of Basic under the sink in the upstairs bathroom. Don’t use any deodorant. I need to call a

messenger to pick up this blood, then I'm going to take my own advice and get some sleep too."

Catherine stood and hugged Peter.



Peter only slept a few hours, and when he came down to the kitchen that afternoon, he found Vincent sitting at the table drinking tea and reading the newspaper.

"Cathy still asleep?" he asked as he poured himself a cup of tea from Vincent's pot.

"Yes, and I have a feeling she's going to be asleep for quite a while. She was exhausted. She showered, and when she got done, she was almost sleepwalking. She's sleeping very soundly."

"Are you going Below to talk to Jacob?" Peter asked after he sat down and picked up one of the newspaper sections Vincent had finished.

"I told Catherine that I'd stay, but I do need to go talk to Father and pick up a few things from my chamber."

"She won't know," Peter assured him. "And if she did, she'd understand. But one thing, make sure Jacob knows not to broadcast her return to everyone. Maxwell suggested that we wait until we know the whole story and how Cathy wants to handle it."

Vincent nodded. "I understand. She did say she didn't want to let even her friends know she is back until she knows what's been going on here. She said she knows Mr. Maxwell will want her statement, and she also wants to talk to him about where the whole case stands."

"She'll be safe here until some decisions are made," Peter said.

Vincent closed the paper he'd been reading and added it to the pile on the table.

"The sooner I get Below and talk to Father, the sooner I'll be back."



When Vincent got below, he first went to his chamber where he packed a small bag with a couple of changes of clothes, his journal, a pen, and the book he had been reading. Then he went to talk to Father.

Father noted the bag that Vincent dropped at the top of the stairs near the entrance and looked up at Vincent with raised eyebrows.

"You'll be staying a few days?" he asked.

“Yes. Catherine needs me near right now, and truthfully, I don’t want to be that far from her either.”

Father nodded. “How is she?” he asked.

“Exhausted, underfed, but Peter doesn’t seem to think that there is anything serious.”

“Do you have any idea when you will be back? Cullen said that he’s going to need your assistance; it seems that the hinges on the doors to the Great Hall need attention.”

“I know. When we went down to see what needed to be done to prepare for Winterfest, the hinges were positively shrieking. He said that they would need a thorough inspection, possibly repair, then a wire brush to clean off the rust, and a lot of lubrication. Don’t worry, I will be back in plenty of time to help him with it. It’s only the 7th. Winterfest is still two weeks away. There’s something I wanted to mention before I leave, though.”

“What is it?”

“Both Mr. Maxwell and Catherine think it would be prudent to keep her return a secret for the time being. She’s not even going to tell her friends that she’s returned until she’s had time to learn what she can about everything.”

“I understand,” Father said, then turned and reached up to the shelf behind his chair. He took down an old shoebox and held it out to Vincent.

“What’s this?” Vincent asked.

“Clippings from all the city papers. All of them are about Catherine’s disappearance and the corruption she and Mr. Maxwell uncovered. I know she will probably have access to all the official files, but these might help to give another point of view.”

“Thank you, Father. I didn’t know you were doing this.”

“I thought that sometime in the future you might want it. I’m just happy that the outcome was better than I expected.”

Vincent tucked the box under his arm and then went to hug his father.

“I’ll keep you informed on what’s going on,” he promised, then turned and left.



When he got back to Peter’s, the house was silent. He checked on Catherine on his way to the room that Peter had told him he could use. She was sleeping soundly.



The sky was just starting to get gray when something woke him. It was Catherine. The Bond was strengthening quickly. He hurried down the hall to her room and found her sitting in bed.

“Catherine, are you all right?” he asked as he sat on the side of the bed.

She reached out and grabbed his hands, and he could feel her start to relax.

“I woke up, and I didn’t know where I was. I kind of panicked, I guess.”

“We should have put a night light in here,” Vincent said, squeezing her hands. “I didn’t think of that.”

“What time is it?” she asked.

“About 6:30 Friday morning. The sun should be up soon.”

“Wow. I slept... what, about 18 hours?”

“Close to 20,” he said with a smile. “How do you feel?”

She released his hands and stretched.

“Much better, and I’m hungry.”

“Then I guess it’s breakfast time,” he said, standing. “I’ll go down and get it started. You come down when you are ready. “Any special requests?”

“I’m craving protein, and a steak sounds good, but I’ll settle for eggs. Maybe with some cheese.”

Vincent went down to the kitchen and started gathering things from the refrigerator. He started the coffee, and by the time Catherine came down, it was done, and he was setting a three-egg omelet with ham and cheese, along with two slices of buttered toast, on the table. He joined her a few minutes later with his own breakfast.

“How is it?” he asked, noting that she’d already eaten half of it.

“Delicious!” she said between bites.

Vincent couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. “William will be happy to learn that the cooking lessons weren’t a waste of time.”

He pushed the shoebox Father had given to him across the table to her.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Newspaper clippings that Father saved. It’s everything he could find in the papers about your kidnapping and later about all the discoveries stemming from that coded book you had.”

Catherine’s eyes went wide.

“I’ll have to make sure to thank Father. This might fill in some holes.”

A few minutes later, they heard Peter coming down the stairs. They heard the front door open and close, then Peter appeared in the kitchen wearing a suit and carrying the newspaper.

“You’re up early,” Catherine commented as Peter poured himself some coffee.

“I could say the same to you. I have a patient in the hospital, and I want to see her before I go to the office. How are you?”

“I feel so much better,” Catherine said with a grin. “Vincent said I slept 20 hours.”

“You obviously needed it.”

Peter picked up a white pharmacy bag from the counter before joining them at the table.

“What’s this?” Catherine asked when Peter set it beside her plate.

“It’s for the rash. I want you to use it twice a day. There are a bar of soap and a box of powder packets. Shower with the soap first, then fill the bathtub with warm water and add the powder according to the instructions. Soak for at least 20 minutes, making sure all rash spots are covered. Don’t rinse when you are done; just pat dry. You’ll smell slightly medicinal for a while, but the rash should heal pretty quickly. If it does, don’t stop the soaks. Keep doing it until all of the powder is gone. There should be enough for seven days. And keep using the soap until it’s gone. And don’t use any lotions or soap with fragrance until the soap is gone.

“I don’t care what I smell like,” Catherine commented. “Anything is better than what I’ve had to smell and what I smelled like for the last six months.”

Peter patted her hand where it rested on the table.

“Did Jacob tell you about the phone that was installed yesterday?” Peter asked Vincent.

“A phone?” she asked.

“The council decided that it would be prudent to have a phone below in case of emergency.”

“Father has a phone? How did you ever get him to agree to that?” asked Catherine.

“You know Jacob... anything for the community, or for Vincent, for that matter. The icing on the top was when I told him that he could give the number to Devin so he could call anytime.”

“I didn’t see it, but I did hear about it. Mouse did the technical part,” said Vincent.

“He did. I had another telephone line installed in the basement here, and Mouse moved it to Father’s study. It took a lot of wire, but he got it done. He even managed to camouflage the wires, so they blend right in with the tunnel walls between here and Jacob’s study.”

Catherine laughed, and both men looked at her.

“You are determined to drag Father, kicking and screaming, into the 20th century,” she said. “Next thing you know, Mouse will want to install a computer network below, with a modem, and Father will be on AOL.”

Peter laughed, and Vincent just looked confused. “AOL?” he asked.

“America Online,” Peter supplied. “Dial-up internet access and email. I have it here. My son-in-law set it up for me the last time he and Susan were here. Susan and I exchange emails almost every day.”

Vincent shook his head and held up a hand.

“Forgive me, I’m sadly behind the times. I’m still trying to grasp where Mouse got all the wire for the phone.”

“You know Mouse. He *found* it somewhere,” Peter said with a smile.

When Peter finished his coffee and rose to go a few minutes later, Catherine looked concerned.

“Aren’t you going to have breakfast before you leave?” she asked.

“I’ll grab something in the hospital staff cafeteria after I see my patient,” he told her. “They have a very good breakfast menu.”

“What do you plan to do today?” Vincent asked as they cleared the table together.

“First, I’m going to follow the doctor’s orders, then I’m going to see if I can find something to wear. After that, I’m going to start writing that statement that I know Joe is going to be asking for. And since Peter has AOL, he’s got a computer, and it must have some kind of a word-processing program. It will be easier to write it that way. I can even format it as I know Joe wants and save his secretary some work.”



It was early afternoon when Vincent opened the door to Peter’s home office to see Catherine reading a stack of papers in her hand.

“Are you ready for lunch?” he asked.

“I sure am. And this is done.”

She picked up a pen from the desk and signed the bottom of the last page, then slid the papers into a large Manila envelope.

She followed Vincent to the kitchen, tugging at the T-shirt she had on.

“Dratted thing is too small,” she said when Vincent looked at her questioningly. “It’s rubbing on the rash.”

Vincent had to smile just a little. She’d found clothes in the room that she’d slept in. Most of them looked like they would fit her, but they had obviously been the choice of a much younger version of herself. The t-shirt was black with the word Heart at the top, with pictures of two women below it. And the pants were a very bright shade of pink and were too short.



They spent the rest of the day quietly. Catherine read a book, and Vincent read the statement that she’d prepared for Joe. He was shocked at what she had endured. He knew that it had to haunt her, and all he wanted to do was gather her into his arms and try to chase those ghosts away.

They prepared dinner together and had it ready when Peter got home from work.

At dinner, Catherine told them that she was going to call Joe and ask him to come to Peter’s the next day to pick up the statement.



When Joe knocked on the door the next afternoon, Vincent went to the kitchen, and Peter answered.

Catherine was surprised to see a woman with Joe. She was tall and slender, with the most gorgeous red hair. It made Catherine feel a little self-conscious about the bit of fuzz on her head. She’d taken to wearing the stocking cap in the house, because her head was cold.

“Hi, Cath,” Joe said when they walked into the living room. “This is Detective Diana Bennett. She investigated your case.”

Catherine stood, and she and Detective Bennett shook hands.

“It’s good to meet you in person,” Detective Bennett said. “It’s nice to have a happy ending for a change. Too many of my cases end badly.”

“Are you still on the case, Detective Bennett?” Catherine asked.

“Unofficially, and please call me Diana.”

“Diana had some questions, and I wanted her here today, so she could ask them, if that is all right with you.”

“Fine with me. I’ve got some questions too.”

Catherine sat back down on the couch and asked Peter to stay for *moral support*.

Joe and Diana settled into chairs on the other side of the coffee table.

Catherine handed Joe the Manila envelope while Diana set up a tape recorder.

“Where do you want to start, Cath?” Joe asked, after the tape recorder was running.

“Well, since Peter hasn’t heard the whole story, and you haven’t read my statement yet, I might as well start at the beginning.” She looked back and forth between Joe and Diana.

“How much do you know?”

“Only what the detectives were able to surmise, but it is pretty sketchy,” Joe answered.

“I went through your apartment,” Diana added. “But there wasn’t really anything there.”

Catherine took a deep breath and began. Therapists said that talking about trauma helped one cope. She hoped that was true.

“Well, I left the office. I’d driven to work that day, so I went down to the parking garage. I got in and started the car, and I’d shifted into reverse when a man walked up to the driver’s side window. He had a gun, and I floored it, backed up, and tried to get away.

“Another car chased me, shots were fired, and I decided that I would be safer up in our offices, so I stopped the car and made a run for the elevator. I was relieved when I made it and punched the button for our floor. I watched the numbers ascend and was shocked when it stopped a couple of floors below ours. I pulled my gun out. But I was relieved when the doors opened, and I saw John standing there with two men. When he signaled them to grab me, I was shocked.”

“Do you remember anything about those two men? What they looked like, their voices? Can you describe them?” Joe asked.

“Their faces are etched into my brain,” she told him. “But John was clearly in charge. Maybe he can tell you more.”

“He hasn’t been very cooperative so far. I thought for sure he’d tell everything in hopes of a good deal. I talked to him yesterday and told him that we know he was involved with your kidnapping, but he didn’t bat an eye; he’s been very tight-lipped. What happened next?”

“The elevator took us back to the parking garage, where I was put into a van. Another man injected me with something, and I was out in seconds. I don’t know how long I was in the van, or how far it drove.

“When I woke up, I was in a small room, on a cot in the corner. Almost as soon as I woke up, they started asking questions. It was all about the book. They wanted the original, then asked how many copies I’d made and whether I’d broken the code. I answered all the questions, just

not totally truthfully. I told them that the only copy I'd made was the one I gave to John. I'd made two. The second one is under my mattress."

She saw Joe roll his eyes at that.

"I didn't think to look there," Diana commented.

"Yeah, not very original, but it was the best I had at the time. At least I didn't hide the original there. I'd already given it to Elliott, but I told them that it was in my safe deposit box at the bank. I thought that it might be a little incentive to keep me alive. If they wanted access to the safe deposit box, they would have to take me to the bank, and that might give me a chance to escape.

"But they just weren't satisfied with those answers and attempted to beat the information out of me, but my answers didn't change. When that didn't get them what they wanted, they tried drugging me. I honestly don't know what I told them then, or how long it was before I was moved again.

"That time I woke up in what was probably a basement, but it looked an awful lot like a dungeon. I was in a small cell in a corner at the bottom of a stairway. There was a small walled section in the back with a shower, sink, and toilet.

"There was a man there who identified himself only as *the doctor*. He didn't open the cell, but he had me stand close to the bars where he took my temperature, checked my pulse, listened to my heart and lungs, and asked me a few questions about my health.

"Then he passed a stack of clothing through the bars and told me that someone he called *The Boss*, wanted me to join him for dinner, but I needed to shower and change clothes first.

"I didn't argue. I hadn't eaten since lunch on the day I was kidnapped, and I didn't have the slightest idea how long that had been. And the idea of a shower... well, let's say it sounded good.

"I showered, but when I came out, I found that all my old clothes had disappeared. I figured they were probably destined to be burned.

"The dinner that followed was bizarre, to say the least. The table was at least eight feet long. Three places were set at one end, and a fourth was set at the other end. The doctor escorted me in, and when I entered the room, the other two men stood. The doctor seated me at the end of the table, then introduced the dark-haired man on my right as Jonathan Pope. The man at the far end of the table was just introduced as *the Boss*. The doctor sat on my left. During the meal, the doctor spoke only when asked a question. Pope spoke a few times, and he called *the Boss*, Gabriel, once. It was Gabriel who did most of the talking. He asked a few questions, but never directly addressed me, although he did stare at me a lot.

"What did he talk about?" Joe asked when Catherine hesitated.

“After the first few initial questions, I wouldn’t really call it a conversation. He kept talking about Schopenhauer...”

“Who’s this Schopenhauer?” Joe demanded. “Was he involved?”

Diana elbowed him, and Peter covered a smile with his hand.

Catherine almost laughed. “No, Joe. It’s Arthur Schopenhauer. He was a German philosopher who wrote a lot of books. He died in the mid-1800s.”

“So, I guess we can safely say that he’s not on the New York Times Best Seller list, huh?”

“When was the last time you even read a book, Maxwell?” Diana asked. “And comic books don’t count.”

Joe rolled his eyes again and looked back at Catherine, who picked the story back up.

“I was there for maybe a week. I was never summoned to dinner again, although the meals I was served were excellent. The doctor brought me some books and magazines, so I passed the time reading. I tried to figure out where I was, and if there was a way I could get out, but there was nothing. The only person I saw was the doctor. I asked a lot of questions, but his only answer was that he didn’t know. He was only supposed to make sure I stayed healthy.

“Then one night after dinner, I was suddenly extremely sleepy. I fell asleep, and when I woke up the next time, I was in another cell. Only this one was larger, darker, damp, smelly, and there were five other women in it with me.”

“That was the South American prison?” Diana asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you know how you got there?” she asked.

“I have no idea, but I felt awful, they must have kept me sedated for a long time.”

“Do you know when you got there?” Joe asked.

“I was there almost six months, as near as I can tell. I know I was kidnapped on June 2nd. And when I got around to asking one of my cellmates if she knew the date, she said she was pretty sure it was June 26th. She had scratched a calendar on the cell wall and was marking off each day. I guess I had arrived around the 24th.”

Catherine watched as Diana wrote something in her notebook before resuming.

“I learned the names of all my cellmates: Maria, Juana, Ramona, Sofia, and Angelica. Angelica was the only one who spoke English. She told me that most of the women there, except for 15 or 20 who were in the other end of the building, were political prisoners. The two groups were kept separate because the others were considered to be dangerous. All the guards on our end were women, but Angelica said the guards on the other end were men.

“Not long after I arrived, all the prisoners... it looked like there were maybe fewer than 100, were all taken out of our cells and taken outside to a small, paved area. It wasn't very big, but it was fresh air and sunshine. I was singled out and taken to a room where they shaved my head. After I was back outside, we were taken back inside, ten at a time, and told to strip. Then we were herded into a room that looked like it had once been a shower room. But we didn't get showers; we were told to cover our eyes, hold our breath, and keep our mouths shut, and then we were sprayed down with a chemical. I had been warned ahead of time, so I wasn't too surprised. Angelica had told me that the head shaving and the spray were to combat lice. After we were sprayed, we were given clean clothes and sent back outside.

“While we were out of the cells, they were cleaned, then also sprayed with what smelled like the same thing we were sprayed with. The cells all had a toilet and a sink, but that was it. After that, I found that this happened once a week, and once a month, all the women's heads were shaved. No one ever got a shower.”

“When did you find out where you were?” Joe asked.

“Angelica told me we were in Paraguay. That puzzled me because I'd read several months before that the dictatorship had fallen. When I told Angelica that, she was surprised. That news had not reached them. She told the others, and the word spread, causing quite a stir.

“They wanted to know who had taken over, but all I could remember was Rodriguez. Angelica said she hoped someone would eventually remember the women in our prison.

“After that, things followed a routine. We were awakened early and given the same breakfast. It was some kind of bread. Angelica said it was made with cassava and eggs. We had that with a drink she called yerba mate. There was no lunch, and dinner was late in the afternoon. It was usually the same as breakfast, only the bread sometimes tasted like it had cheese in it. On Sundays, we had soup with chicken, dumplings, and vegetables for dinner. It was actually pretty good.”

“Not a lot of protein,” Joe observed.

“That's pretty typical in places where they want to keep people compliant,” Diana observed.

“An extremely low-protein diet can lead to muscle wasting, weakened immunity, hair loss, and fatigue. It also causes brain fog.”

“So how did you finally get out of there?” Joe asked.

“Around the middle of November, we started hearing a rumor that the prison would be closing. There was all kinds of speculation, from they were going to take us all out, shoot us, and bury us in an unmarked grave, to we would be released, compensated, and sent home in style. What happened was somewhere in the middle. On the night of the 30th of November, we were all called into the courtyard and informed that the next morning, after breakfast, we

would be given some money, loaded onto a bus, and taken to the nearest town. Supposedly, the money would be enough to get us to wherever we wanted inside the country.

“All I knew was that I needed to get to Asunción, to the embassy there. Once we got to the town the next day, we found out where the bus to the capital picked up in that town, but then found that since we had just been released from prison, the shaved heads were a dead giveaway; they wouldn’t let us on the bus. I don’t blame them; we did smell pretty bad. Some of the women were able to make calls. Angelica was going to a town not far from Asunción, and Juana called a relative from a town not far from it. We managed to get a ride with her as far as she was going. Angelica and I walked about 5 miles to her hometown. She wanted me to stop for the night, but her cousin, who had agreed to let her stay until she figured something out, didn’t want me to stay. She gave me some food and a map and told me that Asunción wasn’t far.

“I don’t know how far I walked, but I was about to give out. I had eaten the food and was getting hungry again. I was sitting on the side of the road resting when an elderly man in an ancient pickup truck stopped and asked if I was all right. I told him I was just resting and that I didn’t speak much Spanish. He actually spoke a smattering of English, German, along with Spanish. He asked me where I was going, and I told him I was going to the American Embassy in Asunción. He said he’d take me there.

“I was so grateful that when he dropped me off in front of the embassy, I gave him all the money they’d given me at the prison. He even waited until he saw that the guard let me in.”

“How were you able to verify your identity?” Diana asked.

“That turned out to be surprisingly easy. The guard at the gate was a local security guard, but a US Marine was on duty inside. He heard me tell the guard my name, that I was an American, and that I was looking for help. He came out, took responsibility, and then took me inside. He asked me my name again, and I told him; then he asked how I’d gotten to Paraguay. I gave him the short version, and he picked up the phone and called someone.

“It turned out that he was from New York and had been home on leave the previous June, at the time I disappeared. The person he called was an aide, also from New York. Even without hair and the sorry state I was in, they both recognized me from pictures they’d seen in the papers.

“Within an hour, I was talking to the Chargé d’Affaires. I think that was when someone called the DA’s office here in New York.”

“Yeah, I was just getting ready to leave the office when my secretary told me that I had a long-distance call from Paraguay,” Joe told them. “I had to pick my jaw up off the floor when the caller told me that they were a Consular Officer at the Embassy there, and that there was a woman in their office claiming to be Catherine Chandler. They wanted to know if there was

some way that they could verify her claims. I gave them some information, and they hung up. They wouldn't even give me a chance to talk to you."

"They asked me all kinds of questions," Catherine told them. "What was my father's name? When did he die, and what did he die of? What was my apartment number? Finally, when they asked what my boss called me and I answered "Radcliffe," they seemed to be convinced. That was when I knew that they'd probably talked to you."

"A couple of days later," Joe told her, "I got a phone call. Someone at McGuire told me that you'd be flown back to the States on the embassy shuttle. They faxed me all the information I needed. It gave the date, time, and place of arrival, authorization to enter the base, and stated that I would be allowed to have one other person with me. I knew that person would have to be Dr. Alcott."

"Can I ask some questions?" Catherine asked. "I was really too tired the other day to think straight."

"Shoot," said Joe. "We'll give you everything we have."

When he said that, Diana reached into her bag and took out a stack of file folders. "I made copies of everything I had." She handed the files to Catherine.

"Thank you." Catherine glanced at the files, then put them on the end table. "Was Elliott able to break the code in the book?" she asked.

"He had a very good cryptologist on his staff. He said that after you disappeared, he wasn't sure who to give it to, but after he read it, he figured out that since I'd given it to you, and my name wasn't in it, I should have it. He brought it to my apartment before I was cleared to go back to work."

"What names were in the book?" she asked.

"John, for one, but he was the only one in our office. There were several judges, a couple of police precinct captains, and staff members in many city offices who had access to a lot of information, even one of the mayor's staff. Guards from several different prison facilities. A lot of business execs. There were even some Feds in the book. That was tricky when we started to move to arrest as many as we could."

"How did you figure out who you could trust?" Catherine asked.

"Process of elimination," he told her. "I called Greg, and we started working on it. By the time I was cleared to go back to work, we'd talked to the Mayor and the Police Commissioner, and we'd put together a team. We even got some Feds in on it, and they took care of their end while we moved on everyone else that we could find."

"How about that Gabriel guy?" Catherine asked. "Do you think he was the person your friend Hanlon worked for? He seemed to be in charge."

Joe looked at Diana. “No one with that name, either first or last, was arrested,” Diana said. “What did he look like?”

“He was very lean, with sharp facial features, a high forehead, and he was very serious and intense. He is maybe 6 feet tall and has short, medium-brown hair. He seemed very stern, world-weary, and authoritative. And I think his eyes are blue.

“I did see *Gabriel* one other time. I was reading one night, and the door at the top of the stairs opened. The cell was directly across from the bottom of the stairs. I heard the door and looked up. *Gabriel* and another man were standing at the top of the stairs. The other man looked enough like *Gabriel* to be his brother. He had the same look and was about the same height, but his hair was white. I don’t know if it was bleached or if he was just prematurely gray, but he didn’t look old enough to have naturally white hair. Their conversation was chilling.”

“What did they say?” Joe asked.

“Gabriel pointed me out, and the other man said that I was lucky he didn’t kill women or children, not even for him. And then he went on to say that he knew that Gabriel wouldn’t dirty his hands to do it himself.”

Diana wrote all that down, then looked up at Catherine. “There are pictures in those files I gave you. Look them over, and if you see either of them, or anyone else you recognize, let me know.” She handed Catherine a business card.

“I’ll do that. You said you had questions?” She directed that to Diana.

“A few. At first, we weren’t sure whether your disappearance had anything to do with the book, though we thought there was a good chance it did, since it was missing too. Joe got me on the case, and I went over to your apartment. Detective Hughs had already been over it. But I was looking for other stuff. I kept finding references to someone named Vincent. I kinda figured he was a boyfriend, and that automatically made him a suspect. I asked Joe, and he said that this Vincent was probably a guy you’d taken time off to be with when he’d been sick.” At Catherine’s nod, Diana continued. “Joe said that he doubted that he had anything to do with it. He trusts your judgment of people. But I wondered who this guy was, and why he didn’t turn up asking about you after you disappeared.”

Catherine looked over at Peter.

“Peter knows him very well and was keeping him informed. Everything that Peter learned from Joe was passed on to Vincent.”

“Does he live around here?” Diana asked.

“Not in the city, but it’s not far. He and his family are very private. Our relationship could pose a problem to them, so we’ve kept it quiet,” Catherine said, then looked at Joe. “And don’t worry, Joe, he’s not organized crime. His father is a doctor.”

Joe laughed and held up his hands. “I wasn’t even going there. I did tell Diana that you were a good judge of people.”

Not long after that, Joe and Diana left, and Vincent came out of his hiding place in the kitchen.

“That was hard for you,” he commented as he joined her on the couch.

“Yeah, but it had to be done,” she said with a tired sigh, “and I’ll probably wind up testifying in court, so I need to get used to it.”

She picked up the file and started going through it.

She quickly picked out two photos: the doctor and Pope. Both had been arrested. In a separate file, there were several photos of known but as-yet-not-arrested associates, and it was there that she found photos of both Gabriel and the man with the white hair. The passport-like photographs made them look even more like brothers. Vincent felt the shiver go through her body.

“What is it?” he asked.

She handed him the photos. “Gabriel and the white-haired man,” she said.

Vincent read the name at the bottom of one of the photos.

“*Snow*,” he said, reading the name at the bottom of the photo of the white-haired man. “I agree, they do look a lot like brothers.”

“I need to call Detective Bennett and let her know,” she said, rising and heading toward the kitchen.

Vincent reached out and caught her hand.

“It can wait. They just left, and she may not be at that number yet. Call tomorrow or call Mr. Maxwell at home tonight.

Later, Catherine made a decision, and she announced it at dinner.

“I want to go home,” she told them.

“Home? You mean your apartment?” Peter asked.

“Yes. I’ve imposed on your hospitality, and I’m grateful, but I want to sleep in my own bed.”

“I’m a little concerned about you being by yourself,” Peter told her.

“Peter, I’m a big girl. I know how to follow the doctor’s orders. I’ll keep showering and soaking and eating, don’t worry.”

Vincent watched the exchange, then added his own comment.

“I’ll stay with her,” he said, looking first at Peter, then at Catherine. “If that is all right with you.”

“I’d love it!” Catherine looked at Peter. “What do you say?”

“Well, it’s clean. I sent my housekeeper over to take care of things when we found out you were on your way home. But we will have to do some shopping to restock your pantry and refrigerator. Jenny went over a couple of weeks after you disappeared and cleaned out everything that might spoil.”

Catherine nodded. “Then we can leave right after I call Detective Bennett tomorrow.



Catherine and Peter walked into the lobby of Catherine’s apartment building late the next afternoon. Peter was pulling a cart that he used for his own grocery shopping. He also carried a bag; Catherine had one too.

When they entered the lobby, the man behind the security desk looked up. He frowned at first, then recognized Peter. When he took a closer look at Catherine, his face lit up in a huge smile.

“Miss Chandler! You’re back. Welcome home!”

“Hi, Roger, and thank you. How’s your family?”

“All good. It’s great to have you back.”

They had worked out a plan to get Vincent to her apartment before nightfall, and they put it to work when Catherine and Peter reached the elevator.

“Oh, Peter. I just remembered. You go on up. I need to speak to Roger.”

Peter got on the elevator, but instead of pushing the button for Catherine’s floor, he pushed the one for the basement.

Catherine went back to the desk and spoke to Roger.

“Can I ask a favor, Roger?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“If anyone shows up asking for me, tell them that I’m out. If I’m expecting someone, I’ll let you know, but don’t let anyone up without my say-so. And don’t tell anyone I’m home.”

“You got it. I’ll make a note and make sure everyone else knows too,” he assured her.

When the elevator reached the basement, Vincent was waiting. He got on the elevator with his leather duffle, and Peter held the door until the panel lit up when Catherine pushed the button back in the lobby. He let the door close, and they were back in the lobby, where Catherine got on and pushed the button for her floor.

Once they were inside her apartment, Catherine smiled. “That worked better than I expected. It’s a good time of day, and the building isn’t that busy.”

Catherine rummaged around in a desk drawer and found a checkbook. She wrote a check to reimburse Peter for the groceries.

“You should probably hold on to that for a while,” she told him. “I need to call my accountant to see how he’s been handling things.”

“Actually, I talked to him a few weeks ago. He’s been keeping me informed, just in case, since you named me executor of your estate. He said that the DA’s office has continued to pay you, and he’s been paying all your bills and keeping all your accounts active.” He tried to hand the check back to her. “But this isn’t necessary.”

She waved it off. “No, it is. Take it.”

Peter didn’t argue, just took his wallet out and put the check inside. She had a feeling that it would likely never be cashed.

Peter left a little while later, and Catherine and Vincent started putting away the groceries.



They tried to cook dinner together later, but soon realized that Catherine’s kitchen wasn’t big enough for both of them. In fact, it was barely big enough for Vincent by himself. So, Catherine cooked while Vincent watched from the doorway.

After dinner, Catherine finally felt relaxed. Muscles that she hadn’t even realized were tense started to relax.

“I think I’m going to bed early,” she announced around 9PM.

“You’ve had a busy day,” Vincent agreed.

“But we didn’t think this out,” she said with a laugh. “Both these love seats fold out into beds, but they aren’t very long. I’m afraid that your feet will hang off the end. You take my bed, and I’ll sleep on the one out here.”

“No! You said you wanted to sleep in your own bed. I’m used to sleeping in a small space. I’ve been sleeping in the same full-size bed for years. It’s about the same size as this. I’ll be fine.”

The argument didn’t last long.

“Besides, you said you wanted to go to bed early,” he finally said. “I don’t sleep that much, and will probably sit up reading for a while. The light is better out here.”

Vincent woke just before dawn. The sky was just starting to turn gray.

He tiptoed through Catherine’s bedroom, moving carefully, so he wouldn’t wake her.

In the kitchen, he filled the kettle and put it on the stove. Then he prepared the coffee pot. He’d turn it on when he felt Catherine starting to wake. Then he prepared the teapot, and when the water boiled, he made his tea and took it and a mug to the living room. He sat at the table in front of the door to the balcony and watched the sun rise. He remembered watching the sunrise from here another time, months ago.

The sun had been up about an hour before he felt Catherine beginning to wake. He went to the kitchen to turn on the coffee pot, and when Catherine came out of her bedroom, he met her with a cup of hot coffee.

“Umm, thank you,” she said after a sip. “I could get used to this.”

Vincent had moved to stand in front of the French door. Catherine stood beside him, and he surprised her by putting his arm around her and pulling her closer.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“The light. I have seldom seen the city in this light, or any light for that matter... I remember watching the sunrise from here before.”

“When you were sick?”

“Yes, and I remember breaking something?”

“Several somethings,” she agreed.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing important,” she assured him. “A mirror by the door to the balcony, a glass curio cabinet, the coffee table.”

“I’m sorry,” he hastened to apologize.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him. “This apartment was a surprise from my father when I graduated from law school. After Steven and I broke up, I moved back in with Daddy. I was too busy with school to hunt for a place. The only problem with it being a surprise was that he picked it and hired an interior designer to decorate it. I’ve changed a few things over the years, but it’s never really been my taste. You just gave me the excuse to replace a few things.”

“But the cabinet held keepsakes,” he protested.

“It did, but as you can see...” She pointed at the new cabinet. “Everything that was in it escaped damage. It’s all pretty heavy and unbreakable. And I never liked the mirror by the door; it reflected the light weirdly. And the coffee table was too big. I banged my shins on it every time I stood up from the couch.”

“So, you are saying that I did you a favor?” he asked skeptically.

“Pretty much,” she agreed, smiling up at him.



The next few days passed quietly.

Catherine was in the kitchen building lunch sandwiches when the phone rang. No one but Peter had called in the last few days, so Catherine asked Vincent to answer it.

“Hello?” he said when he picked up.

“Ah... do I have the right number?” asked a slightly familiar voice.

Vincent smiled. “Who were you calling?”

“Um... Catherine Chandler,” came the answer.

“Then you have the right number,” Vincent affirmed with a slight smile as Catherine came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“Oh... you must be Vincent,” Joe said. “Glad to kinda finally meet you.”

“As I, you,” Vincent said. “Here’s Catherine.” He handed the handset to Catherine as he whispered the word “Joe.”

“Hi, Joe. What can I do for you?”

“I called Dr. Alcott, and he said you’d gone home. Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Yes, Joe. Vincent is here, and I’ve sworn the security staff to secrecy.”

“Can they be trusted?” Joe asked skeptically.

“Absolutely! Now, what did you need?”

Joe went on to tell her that he didn’t really need anything and was just checking in. She thanked him before hanging up.

“I wonder how long it’s going to be before he wants me to come back to work,” she said as she hung up. “That might be a while if I have to wait for this to grow out.” She rubbed her hand over her head.

“Have you considered a wig?” he asked. “That way, you could go back to work sooner. I know it’s driving you crazy; you want to get back to work.”

“I don’t know about a wig. I’d have to go out to a shop where they sell them, then I’d be advertising that I’ve returned.”

“We have a Helper who owns a wig shop in Brooklyn. I’m sure she would come here.”

“Of course, there’s a Helper,” Catherine said with a laugh. “You have helpers who are doctors, lawyers, city employees; why not a wig maker?”

“She doesn’t make them. She takes measurements and orders them, then fits them to the individual,” Vincent told her with a chuckle. “I’ll call her.”

Twenty minutes later, Catherine was looking for a soft fabric measuring tape, so Vincent could measure her head.

“She said that she saw photos and knows how you wear your hair, and with the measurements, she might be able to fit you and leave you with a final product in one visit,” he told her. “She said she’d be here this evening after the shop closes.”



The Helper, Natalie, arrived carrying several boxes and bags. And she swept into the apartment like a force to be reckoned with.

She explained the process to Catherine before seating her in the middle of the living room on the chair Catherine used at her desk. And over the next hour and a half, she measured, tried wigs, frowned, tweaked, and finally stood back and nodded.

“I think that’s it,” she announced. She looked at Vincent, who had watched the whole process with great interest. “What do you think?”

Vincent smiled and nodded. “I agree.”

She held a mirror out to Catherine. “How about you?”

Catherine took the mirror and inspected the result. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled.

“It’s perfect. I look like me again. You even got the color perfect.”

“I did some *homework* before I left the shop,” Natalie told her. “You would be surprised at how many of my customers come into my shop with photos of you as their inspiration. So many that I have several pinned to the corkboard in my office.”

“Me?” asked Catherine, in surprise.

“Yes. Many young Orthodox Jewish women now have jobs and careers. They use you as a role model of how a professional woman should look.”

“I never thought I’d be a role model,” Catherine mused.

“Many of the young girls Below have wanted to emulate you,” Vincent said. “Samantha has even expressed a wish to be a lawyer.”

They could tell that Catherine was surprised.

In the previous days, Catherine had contacted her accountant and confirmed that all her accounts were still open, so when Natalie quoted a price, Catherine wrote a check.

Natalie took the check and handed Catherine two pieces of cloth. One was dark green, and the other was gray.

“What are these?” Catherine asked.

“In Yiddish, they are called a tichel. They are head coverings worn by Orthodox Jewish women at home or when they don’t want to wear their wigs. These are pre-tied and use elastic to keep them secure. If you want to go out and don’t want to put on the wig, these will keep your head warm. She showed Catherine a picture. I have an older woman who makes them to earn a little extra, and I always give two to every wig customer.”

“Thank you,” Catherine said. “I’ve heard my friend Jenny use that word. And these will look a lot better than that stocking cap I’ve been wearing... By the way, how long does it take hair to grow? Do you know?”

“I was a stylist before I started selling wigs, and I learned in school that, on average, hair grows about half an inch a month. That also depends on age and your health, and it tends to grow a little faster in the summer. I would say that next year this time, you might have at least a chin-length bob.”

After Natalie left, Catherine couldn’t get over how much she felt more like herself.

“I didn’t realize that hair could make that much of a difference,” she told Vincent.

Later that evening, when Catherine came out of the bathroom after her final medicated soak, she looked around the living room but didn't see Vincent. Then she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. He was on the balcony, looking out over the park.

She joined him, and he put his arm around her, encircling her with his cloak and pulling her against his chest.

"It's cold," he said.

"You'll keep me warm," she said as she put her arms around his waist.

"Always," he agreed.

"This is the first time I've been out here since I got home. I'm surprised we haven't been out here sooner. We used to spend a lot of time out here."

"Only because I wouldn't go inside," he said.

"I never understood why."

"It never felt right. I wasn't comfortable. Your apartment is so soft and feminine, and I always felt like the proverbial bull in a china shop."

That made Catherine smile. "And now?"

"Since I was here when I was sick, I just feel more at ease; more familiar."

The next couple of days were quiet. They read, cuddled on the couch while they listened to music or watched TV. They enjoyed being together, and not having to separate any farther than the next room at the end of the day.



"It just dawned on me that I haven't checked in with Joe, lately," Catherine said one morning after breakfast.

After they cleared the breakfast dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, Catherine picked up the phone and dialed Joe's private number.

"Maxwell," he said, picking up after one ring.

"You must not be very busy if you are answering that quickly," she said with a smile.

"Radcliffe! I was just going to call you. The tape from our question-and-answer session has been transcribed. I'm going to send it to you so you can read it and sign off on it. You still at your place?"

"I am," she told him.

“Do you really think that’s safe?” She could hear the concern in his voice.

“Safe as houses, as our British friends would say,” Catherine assured him. “The building has security, and I have locks on my door.”

“But that didn’t always work,” Joe reminded her.

“And Vincent is here?” she added. “Besides, after the last *incident*, the building management company installed surveillance cameras. They are in the lobby, parking garage, and stairwells.”

“OK, but at least let me worry a little,” he said.

“No need. But that was why I called.”

They chatted for a little while longer, then Catherine hung up.

“He’s worried,” Vincent stated, looking up from his book.

“Like the big brother I never had... or really wanted, for that matter,” she said with a chuckle.

It was afternoon when the phone rang with the distinctive ring that meant the call was coming from the lobby. She answered.

“This is Roger in the lobby. There are a couple of packages down here for you, Miss Chandler. I’d bring them up, but I’m the only one here right now.”

“That’s OK, Roger. I’ve been expecting a package. I’ll come down and get it.”

She told Vincent where she was going, and when she got back, he could tell she was puzzled.

She held up a large Manila envelope.

“I was expecting this from Joe, but I don’t know what the package is.”

The box was plain brown cardboard, a lot like those used by moving companies, about 12" x 12" x 12".

“Did Peter send something over?” Vincent asked, moving to stand next to her as she set the box on the table in front of the French door.

“I don’t know. There is no return address on it, just the messenger company’s item number.

She got a letter opener from her desk and cut the tape on the top.

When she opened the box, she gasped and stepped back.

“What is it?” Vincent asked. He looked in the box, then looked back up at Catherine.

“It’s my clothes; the ones I was wearing when I was kidnapped.” She leaned forward to look in the box again, then held her hand out. “Give me a pencil.”

Vincent got a pencil from the pencil cup on the desk and handed it to her. She used it to shift some of the items in the box before she reached in and took something out; he didn't see what.

"It's all here," she said. "Shoes, purse, clothes, right down to my underwear and pantyhose." She poked at the purse with the pencil. "It even feels like my gun is still in my purse."

She looked up at Vincent, and he could see the fear in her eyes.

"They know where I am," she whispered.

"Perhaps you should call Mr. Maxwell and let him know. Then we can go Below."

She nodded and reached for the phone.

Joe, Detective Hughs, and two uniformed officers arrived in less time than it should have taken for them to get there.

While Hughs was looking in the box, using the same pencil Catherine had used, Joe looked around the apartment.

"I thought you said that Vincent guy was here," he said.

"He was," she told him. "But he's arranging for a safe place for me to go after you leave."

"So, I take it you are not going to let me put you into protective custody? At least let me post police here in the building."

"No way. That would just broadcast to the entire building that I'm back. No, Vincent has a place where no one would know to look. We will leave as soon as he gets back and I pack a few things."

"You're sure? How will I get in touch with you if I need to?" Joe asked.

"Positive. And I'll call you and give you a number when I get there." She remembered what Peter had said about Father's phone. "And don't try to trace the number," she warned. "You'll find that it's in Peter's name, but it's installed at a different location."

Catherine was surprised when Joe didn't argue more.

She walked to the door with him and Detective Hughs.

"Oh, and my watch is in that box. When it's no longer needed as evidence, I'd like to have it back. It was a gift from my father when I graduated from college."

"I'll make a note to have it all returned if and when it's no longer needed," Joe told her.

After the two men left, Catherine locked the door as Vincent came out of his hiding place in the bathroom.

"When do you want to leave?" she asked.

“If we can come up with a way to cover my face, we can leave as soon as we can get packed,” he told her.

“That is the easy one,” she told him. “I have a ski mask. With that and a scarf, we can disguise you well. Did you bring your gloves?” He nodded, and she continued. “We also need to pack up all the food from the refrigerator and anything else that might go bad. We don’t know how long we’ll be gone.”

They both set about their tasks, and not long afterward there was a stack in the middle of the living room.

“OK, we are not going to be able to get all that down to the basement in one trip,” she said.

Vincent sized it up and shrugged. “I think we can do it in two,” he said as he started to divide it into four piles: two small and two large.

When she protested about him taking all the heavy things, he pointed out that not only was he stronger, but if he was carrying a large stack that covered his face, he’d be doubly disguised. She agreed, and they both started putting on coats and picking up their stacks.

It took the two of them two trips, and when they finally got it all to the basement, then down the ladder to the sub-basement, Vincent had to ask:

“What is in all that?”

“The cooler is all the stuff from the fridge and freezer; that big box is all the other food I didn’t want to leave. The suitcase is my clothes; my toiletries and wig are in the backpack; my briefcase has the stuff Joe wanted me to read and sign, and the files Diana gave me. The dress bag has my dress for Winterfest, and you have your duffel and a backpack.”

Once they were safely Below, they both relaxed. Vincent went and tapped out a message on the pipes.

“Mouse should be here with a flatbed cart in a few minutes.

When Mouse did arrive, he lit up like a Christmas tree, and she was treated to one of his rare hugs.

They loaded the cart, dropped the food off in the kitchen, then took everything to Vincent’s Chamber.

When Mouse was gone, Vincent picked up some of Catherine’s bags and disappeared behind an armoire on the left side of the chamber. Catherine followed and was surprised to find the guest chamber she’d used in the past at the other end of a short tunnel.

“Was that always there?” she asked.

“Not really,” he told her. “When Devin and I first moved out of the children’s dormitory, Devin was in the other chamber, and I was in this one, but after some figuring, we found that there was only about 4 or 5 feet of stone between the two chambers, so we started working on connecting them. We hadn’t finished by the time Devin left, and I never went back to work on it. Father decided I should move into the other chamber because it was a little larger, and that we could make the smaller one into a guest chamber. I kept the armoire in front of the hole we’d made, and not many even knew it was there.

“While you were gone, I needed something to occupy my time and take my frustrations out on, so I started work on it again. I plan to ask permission to convert this guest chamber into my bedchamber and then use the other, slightly larger chamber as a sitting room/classroom/study. Mouse said he can brick up the entrance from the tunnel in here.”

“That is a good idea,” she said. “Your chamber is always so busy; no one ever *knocks* before they barge in. Maybe doing something like that will put a stop to that. Especially if you can put in a door.”

After he left Catherine to unpack, Vincent went to tell Father that they were Below, and why they were there.

“Are you sure that there is no way that they could know where to look for her?” Father asked.

“While I’m sure that the man who kidnapped Catherine knows of my existence...” Vincent began.

“What? How is that possible?” Father interrupted.

“When I tried to rescue her, there were surveillance cameras all over the building. I can’t be sure they were operational, but if they were, I’m sure that there are probably tapes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Father demanded.

“To be honest, I didn’t think of it before, and that was probably because it was something that neither of us had any control over,” Vincent told him. “But aside from that. I doubt very much that there would be any way that we could be tracked to here. We left through the basement threshold; no one saw us leave. As far as even her building security is concerned, she is still in her apartment. The only people who know she’s gone anywhere are her boss and the detective he brought with him. And they don’t know where she went. She told Mr. Maxwell that she would call him later to let him know she had arrived safely and would give him a number where she could be reached. So, she might be getting phone calls on your phone.”



Winterfest was only a few days away, and once everyone knew that Vincent was back Below, there were demands on his time from every direction.

At breakfast the next morning, several of the children and teenagers asked Vincent if he would help them with the reading they were going to do after dinner on Christmas Eve. He agreed and told them to meet in his chamber at 10:00.

Catherine spent the morning reading the transcript that Joe had sent over. She'd put it back in the envelope and planned to ask Father if there was someone who could take it Above to Joe.

She'd forgotten that Vincent had the children in his chamber when she entered to tell him where she was going. She sat down to listen to them, rather than disturb them. They were doing "Then Night Before Christmas" and their timing was perfect, bouncing from one child to the next around the room.

"Very good," Vincent praised when they were done. "If you do it just like that on Christmas Eve, everyone will love it."

"But I get nervous," Lana said, as she carefully folded her paper and tucked it in her pocket. "All those people looking at me!" She glanced at Catherine. "You talk in front of people, don't you, Miss Catherine? Do you get nervous?"

Catherine laughed. "I sure do. There is one judge who has been on the bench for what must be 100 years; he scares the daylights out of me. Pantsuits and tailored trousers for women are broadly accepted in most courtrooms, but he's one of the few judges left who has been known to threaten to slap a woman lawyer or even a female witness with a contempt of court ruling if they show up in pants. I wear pantsuits to work sometimes, but never to court. Speaking in front of some of those judges is enough to make me forget my name, much less my closing argument."

That made the children laugh.

"Then how do you do it?" Samantha asked.

"First of all, I know my case inside and out. I make eye contact with everyone, the jury, the defendant, his legal team, and even the judge. It makes you look confident, even when you aren't."

The children all applauded the advice, then Geoffrey held up his hand.

"What is it, Geoffrey?" Vincent asked.

"Well, I was just wondering... the only thing I remember about my parents is that my dad was in jail... a lot... Ah, what was it like being in that prison, Catherine?"

"I don't think we need to talk about that right now," Vincent said, looking over at Catherine, who was sitting on the side of his bed.

“No, it’s OK. They want to know...” She looked around the room; all the children had turned to look at her. “The prison where I was wasn’t a pleasant place at all, not that any prison is pleasant. But that one would make even Rikers Island look like a summer camp.” She took a deep breath before she continued. “It was old. The other women I talked to said that it had been built in the 1920s, but it felt more like a medieval dungeon. The walls were stone, and all the metal was rusting. Everything was damp...”

“Were there bugs and rats?” one of the girls asked.

“No, that was the only saving grace. They sprayed a chemical that kept all those away. But it wasn’t clean, and we were never allowed to bathe.”

“Ew,” one of the older girls said. “That’s gross!”

“It certainly was,” Catherine agreed. “They wouldn’t even let us on the public bus when they let us out of the prison. I figured it was because we all smelled bad.”

That caused a few nervous giggles.

“I shared a cell with 5 other women,” Catherine continued. “We had a sink and toilet and absolutely no privacy.”

“Did you have friends?” asked one of the younger girls.

“As much as I could, with the language barrier. They spoke Spanish, and I only had one year of Spanish in high school. I learned their names: Maria, Juana, Ramona, Sofia, and Angelica. Angelica spoke English quite well, and we passed the time teaching the others English and me Spanish.”

“What else did you do?” asked another child.

“Nothing really,” Catherine admitted. “We were only allowed out of the cells for an hour or two once a week. There was a paved courtyard, and we would go out there once a week, rain or shine. But when the sun was shining, it was too hot, and there was very little shade.”

“And they shaved your head,” stated Brooke, who had heard the rumors.

Catherine pulled off the tichel.

“They did,” she affirmed. “They said it was because of lice, but I held the opinion that it was just as much to take away our sense of self, our individuality. Although, if it hadn’t been for that and the chemical they sprayed everywhere, including on us, there probably would have been more of a pest issue.”

“But if you’d been allowed to bathe...” one of the girls said.

“That would have helped,” Catherine agreed. “But that prison was over 60 years old, and as far away from the capital as we were, I think we were likely lucky we had toilets and sinks.

There were rooms that looked like they'd once been showers, but all the fixtures were rusted." She looked around the room and smiled. "I'm just glad to be out of there. My first night in the American Embassy, before they sent me home, I think I spent an hour in the shower and at least another half an hour brushing my teeth."

The children all left a few minutes later, several of the girls hugged Catherine before they left. Vincent sat beside her on the bed when the chamber was quiet again.

"That was difficult... again," he observed.

"It was, but as I said before, I'm probably going to have to testify in court, so I need to get used to it." She looked over at him and smiled. "So, what are you going to do today?"

"Cullen and I are going to go and repair the doors to the Great Hall... You?"

"Well, since it's Tuesday and Winterfest is on Thursday I thought I'd go see if someone can use some unskilled labor somewhere."

"This close to Winterfest, I'm sure everyone will need help. Pick your poison carefully," he warned with a smile, "and don't let them work you beyond what you can do."

"I'm feeling a lot better than I did a couple of weeks ago," she assured him.

The first place Catherine went after lunch was to the nursery. Mary put her to work almost before the words were out of her mouth.

"With everyone taking on extra work to get ready, I have a lot more children to look after. Brooke and Lena are usually here, but they have both been called down to the Great Hall to help decorate."

Catherine spent a blissful afternoon rocking babies, and playing on the floor with toddlers.

As she and Mary walked to dinner, Mary told her that Brooke and Lena would be back the next day, so Catherine went to ask William if he could use some kitchen help the next day.

"How early can you be here?" he asked.

"How early will you need me?"

"The earlier we start, the earlier we will be done," he countered.

"OK, then how about 5:00?" she asked, knowing that he started serving breakfast at that time.

"I'll see you then," he said with a grin.

Catherine had been using Vincent's private bathing chamber since they'd come Below, and the next morning just after 4:30, Vincent, who was already up, dressed, and drinking tea at his desk, was surprised to see her crossing his chamber, yawning and stretching.

"You're up early," he observed.

“I could say the same to you.”

“But I’m normally up early,” he pointed out. “Why are you up this early?”

“I’m going to help William in the kitchen today. He said the earlier we start, the earlier we get done.”

“Then I hope your help will allow him to finish before midnight this year,” Vincent said with a laugh.

Catherine arrived in the kitchen promptly at 5:00, and William told her to get something to eat, and she joined his other assistants at a table.

After that, the work was pretty much non-stop. She spent the morning peeling apples for pies. Then once the pies were in the oven, and they’d had lunch, she started on the potatoes.

William said he was making two kinds of potato salad: mashed potatoes and cut-up roasted potatoes. Catherine swore that she’d never seen so many potatoes in her life; her fingers had started to prune up well before she was even halfway done. After dinner, the clean-up started, and she was finally back in her chamber around 7:00.

She flopped down on her bed with a groan. She decided that she’d be thinking twice before ever volunteering to help William again. She’d heard rumors that he’d been a cook in the Army, and she was pretty sure those rumors were correct.

Vincent, who had just come out of the bathing chamber, heard the groan. He quickly finished putting on his night clothes and went to check on Catherine.

She was stretched out on her bed on top of the covers, one arm over her eyes, fully clothed.

“Are you all right?” he asked, sitting on the end of the bed next to her feet.

“I’ll survive,” she said, without looking at him.

“What did you do today?” he asked, picking up one of her feet and pulling the shoe off before he started rubbing it.

“Oh, God, that feels good,” she groaned before answering. “I peeled enough apples for enough pies to feed an army, and then I peeled enough potatoes to feed that same army. I made the mistake of telling William I could peel things with a paring knife; I didn’t need a peeler. He said his peeler broke last week. I’m going to give him a gross of peelers for Christmas.”

Vincent chuckled as he moved to the other foot.

He could feel the tension oozing out of Catherine as he rubbed, and he kept moving up her legs.

When he got to her lower back, he took her hands and pulled her up into a sitting position. She melted against his chest as he rubbed her lower back, then worked his way up to her shoulders.

When he reached her neck, she leaned her forehead on his shoulder.

“This is better than soaking in the hot spring,” she said.

“You should still go and soak,” he told her. “It will help you sleep.”

She tilted her head back and looked up at him.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Catherine saw the question in his eyes, the hesitation that had always been there, made stronger now by everything they had survived. She lifted one hand and laid it against his cheek.

“Vincent,” she whispered.

His breath caught. The sound of his name, spoken that softly, seemed to reach something inside him. He lowered his head slowly, giving her every chance to turn away. Catherine did not. She rose to meet him, and when his mouth touched hers, it was with such care that tears stung her eyes.

The kiss was tender and unhurried. It held no demands, only quiet wonder. Catherine’s fingers slid into the heavy fall of his hair, and Vincent’s arms came around her as if he were afraid she might vanish if he held her too loosely.

He felt the Bond between them, warm and certain, carrying all the words neither of them could manage. Fear, relief, longing, gratitude—all of it moved through him in a single breath.

She leaned closer, and he answered her with another kiss, deeper in feeling but still gentle, as though they were both learning something new about the other.

When they finally parted, Catherine rested her forehead against him and smiled through the tears that had escaped.

“I’m here,” she said.

Vincent closed his eyes and drew her carefully against him. “And I will not let myself forget it,” he murmured.

He hadn’t been holding her for long, or at least not long enough for either of them, when they heard a voice calling from the other chamber.

“Hey Fuzzbutt? You home?”

“Devin,” Vincent said. “Father said he’d be here sometime tonight.”

“Go,” she urged him, reluctantly.

He stood and looked down at her for a moment before turning and leaving.

“Hey, did you finally finish the connection between the two chambers?” She heard Devin’s voice drifting back to her from the main chamber.

Before she got up, she lay on the bed for a while. He’d kissed her. *He’d* actually kissed *her*. He’d made the first move. She smiled as she wondered what might have happened next if Devin hadn’t interrupted.

“Yes, I plan to ask for permission to use the other chamber as my bedchamber and set this one up as a classroom and sitting room,” Vincent said as he hugged his brother.

“Sounds like a plan,” Devin agreed.

“When did you get in?” Vincent asked.

“Not long ago. I talked to the old man, then I got Charles settled in the guest chamber. He’s exhausted. Traveling really takes it out of him.”

“How is he?” Vincent went to sit at his desk, and Devin sprawled on his bed.

“Better. He’s getting more exercise and has lost some weight; that has helped a lot with his breathing. But Peter has set up appointments for him with some specialists after the first of the year. He might need surgery; some of the tumors are growing and obstructing his airways.”

“Won’t that be expensive?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, but Catherine set up a trust to cover all his medical expenses, so we are good. And Dad told me that Catherine is home. How is she?”

“She is good and getting better every day,” Vincent said with a smile. “She’s Below for the foreseeable future; there is still a threat to her Above.”

Devin yawned, and Vincent laughed.

“Looks like Charles isn’t the only one who’s tired,” he commented. “Go on and get some rest. We can talk tomorrow.”

Before Devin could leave, Catherine stepped out from behind the armoire next to Vincent’s desk. She was wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and was barefoot.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” she said, waving her hand. “I’m just heading to the bathing chamber.

But Devin stopped her, hugged her, and told her he was glad she made it back in one piece. He rubbed his hand over her nearly bald head and looked at her questioningly.

“You looking to start a new fashion trend?” he asked.

“Long story,” she said, stepping away from him. “Ask Vincent.”

She left them and continued on to the bathing chamber.

Devin left a few minutes later, and Vincent leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Now that the chamber was quiet, he relived every second of the kiss from earlier. He had amazed himself that he'd found the courage to do what he'd wanted to do so many times before.

He was still sitting like that when he heard Catherine enter the chamber. She was starting to move past him and slip behind the armoire when his hand shot out, captured her wrist, and he pulled her toward him.

They were both surprised when he lifted her off her feet to set her on his lap. She was even more astonished when he shifted her so that she was sitting astride his thighs with her knees on either side of him in the oversized chair bringing her face level with his.

Catherine's breath caught, and for one heartbeat she simply looked at him. The boldness of the move left her speechless. Vincent's hands rested lightly at her waist, steadying her but not holding her there, and she understood that even now, even after he had reached for her with such unexpected certainty, he was still giving her the choice.

She answered by laying both hands against his face and leaning forward until her forehead touched his. "You don't have to be afraid of wanting this," she whispered.

Something in him was giving in. She felt it in the careful tightening of his arms. She wasn't sure what it was... not fear exactly, maybe wonder... too big, too fragile, too long denied. When he lifted his gaze to hers, there was no hiding from what she saw there.

This time, when he kissed her, there was no hesitation. It was still gentle, still Vincent, but the restraint that had always kept him at a careful distance had softened into something warmer. Catherine closed her eyes and let herself sink into it, into the solid strength of him beneath her, into the certainty that she was safe, wanted, and cherished.

His mouth moved over hers with an aching tenderness that made her chest tighten. He kissed her as though every day she'd been gone had been pent up inside him with nowhere to go, and now it poured out, not in words, but in the press of his lips, the shelter of his arms, the low breath he released when she kissed him back.

Catherine threaded her fingers into his hair and held him there, not to keep him from leaving, but to tell him without words that he no longer had to. The Bond shimmered between them, bright and sure, carrying her answer before she could speak it.

Yes.

Vincent drew back first, though only enough to look at her. His breathing was uneven, his eyes dark with emotion.

“Catherine...” Her name was a question, a prayer, and an apology all at once.

She smiled and brushed her thumb along his cheek. “Don’t apologize.”

“I was not certain I could stop,” he admitted, the confession barely above a whisper.

“Then we stop *together*,” she said. “Or we go on *together*. But we decide *together*.”

The words settled over him, quiet and deep. He had spent so many years believing that love meant holding himself apart, protecting her from every part of him that frightened him. But Catherine was not afraid. She’d told him that more than once. She had never been afraid.

He kissed her again then, slower this time, with reverence that stole the last of her fatigue. Catherine leaned into him, and the chair creaked softly beneath them, the only sound in the chamber besides their breathing and the distant, comforting murmur of the pipes.

For once, no one called from the tunnel. No footsteps approached. No urgent message came tapping on the pipes. There was only this small circle of lamplight, his arms around her, her hands in his hair, and the impossible, blessed reality that they had both survived long enough to reach this moment.

Catherine realized that her robe had loosened when he lifted her; she didn’t think he’d noticed. His hands had stayed steadfastly at her waist, so as the kiss ended, she took his hand and placed it over her breast.

His breath caught and he barely moved.

“It’s okay, Vincent,” she whispered. “You can touch.”

Given permission, his thumb brushed over the nipple, which was instantly hard. He took Catherine’s sigh as encouragement, and he squeezed lightly.

Catherine snuggled close.

“Take me to bed, Vincent,” she whispered. “Make love to me.”

He hesitated a moment before standing. She thought for sure that she’d gone too far and expected him to set her on her feet and say, “Good night.” But his next actions truly amazed her. He shifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he deposited her in the middle.

She removed her robe and pushed the bedcovers down as she watched him go around the chamber blowing out candles. He stopped, put another piece of wood on the brazier, then went to the entrance, where he rolled down the rug that hung over it.

On his way back to bed, he pulled his shirt off over his head and dropped it on the floor. His footwear wasn’t so easy to dispose of, so he had to sit down on the side of the bed to remove them.

Catherine scooted over behind him and put her arms around him from the back. She kissed his neck.

“I love you, Vincent,” she whispered before releasing him.

His feet bare, he stood and turned to face her while he slowly removed his pants.

God, he's glorious, she thought as she held her arms out to him.

Vincent moved into her arms, slowly, as if each step carried the weight of every fear he had ever overcome. Catherine kept her arms open, her heart open, and when he rested beside her, she drew him close with a tenderness that asked nothing except that he stay.

For a long moment, they simply looked at each other. The firelight moved along the stone walls and softened the edges of the chamber until the whole world seemed to have drawn back, leaving only the warmth of his hand in hers and the steady, unmistakable answer flowing between them through the Bond.

“We have waited so long,” he said.

Catherine touched his mouth with her fingertips. “Then don’t let waiting be the only thing we remember.”

He bowed his head over her hand and kissed her palm. Catherine felt the last of his hesitation ease, not vanish, but surrender to trust. She pulled him closer, and he followed, careful even in his longing, as though love itself made his hands gentle.

There were words at first... soft assurances, promises half-whispered, her name and his spoken with wonder. Then even those stopped. Catherine gave herself to him, to the quiet strength that had always made her feel safe, and Vincent held her as if she were both miracle and home.

Beyond the chamber, life in the tunnels continued: the distant murmur of water, the occasional message on a pipe, the settling of old stone. But it was as if nothing existed beyond the walls of the chamber. Inside, wrapped in firelight and warmth, they moved past fear together, slowly, tenderly, with all the love two wounded hearts could offer one another.

The fire burned low and Catherine rested against him, listening to the deep, unsteady rhythm of his breathing and feeling the astonishment that still trembled there. She smiled against his skin and pressed a kiss over his heart.

“Still here,” she assured him.

Vincent’s arms tightened around her carefully. “And I am never alone again.”

She lifted her face to him once more, and the kiss they shared then was quieter than the others, softer, full of all that had been said and all that no longer needed saying. Afterward, he

drew the covers over them both, and Catherine let herself drift, held by his warmth, his heartbeat, and the certain knowledge that she was finally home.



It was still early, although a little later than he usually woke. He'd just heard the 7 a.m. sentry check-in on the pipes.

The room was almost dark; the only light came from the stained-glass window over the bed. But his enhanced vision allowed him to see the room and Catherine, who was sleeping peacefully next to him.

He smiled.

Catherine was astonishing, amazing; there just weren't enough adjectives to describe her.

As incredible as the loving had been, lying next to her as she slept so peacefully, feeling her relaxed and trusting in his arms... That was the stuff of his deepest, most secret dreams and fantasies.

Lying with her sleeping in his arms, holding her close, sliding his hand down her arm, touching her... he sighed. *Dreams do come true.*

But it was the knowledge that he wouldn't be alone for the rest of his life... the fact that he had Catherine by his side, finally sunk in, and had he been standing, it would have brought him to his knees.

She was his, and he was hers, for life.

He lay quietly for a little longer, then he heard the tapping of Father's cane on the other side of the rug. Resigned, he raised up a little on one elbow just as Father pushed the rug aside and limped into the chamber.

"Vincent, we missed you at breakfast. I was wondering..." Father looked across the chamber, and it didn't take a medical degree to ascertain the circumstances.

Vincent raised a finger to his lips to shush his father, who, surprisingly, just nodded, turned around, and left.

Catherine stirred.

"Was that Father?" she asked without even opening her eyes.

"Yes," he answered as he settled comfortably next to her again.

"Is he upset?" This time she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

He hesitated for a moment, in thought.

“You know... I don’t think so. He looked surprised, but I’ve never known him to hesitate to rail against someone if he thought it was deserved. He just turned around and left.”

“Maybe we should get up and go face the music?” she suggested.

“No,” he said, then he kissed her. “I’ll go get us some breakfast and bring it back here. I’ll stop and talk to Father on the way back. There is no need to put you through that.”

Vincent got up and quickly dressed in brown cords and a sweater. After pulling on his boots, he left.

Several scenarios played out in his mind as he walked to Father’s study; none of which actually happened.

Vincent entered the study, and Father, who was at his desk, looked up and smiled... actually smiled.

“Everything went well, I assume?” he questioned.

Vincent was stunned. “Um... yes, it did.”

“Good, good. That is all that matters.”

“Father?” Vincent didn’t even know what question he was going to ask.

“I’m just glad you were here Below, my boy,” Father told him. “I was always apprehensive that it would go badly, and there might have been a minor injury, and that you would take it badly.”

“Well, I do have a scratch,” Vincent said, turning, lifting his shirt and showing Father a long, shallow mark across his lower back.

Father laughed at that, and Vincent managed to join him.

“I prescribe cleaning it with alcohol or peroxide, then having Catherine *kiss it better*,” Father said.

When Vincent got back to his chamber with the tray of food a little later, Catherine was sitting up in bed, wearing a nightgown. She’d obviously gone back to the guest chamber to get it.

“I could get used to being spoiled like this,” she said as Vincent joined her and set the tray between them. “How did it go with Father? You weren’t gone very long.”

“Father surprised me,” he said as he handed Catherine her cup of coffee.

“How?”

“No lecture... only a suggestion for the treatment of the scratch on my back.”

“I’m so sorry about that, and a little embarrassed. What did he say?”

He said I should clean it and have you *kiss it better*.”

They finished breakfast, and Vincent moved the tray off the bed.

“As much as I’d like to spend the rest of the day here with you,” he told her, “I promised to help the men lower the chandeliers in the Great Hall so we can put fresh candles in them.”

“Maybe tomorrow?” she suggested as she got up. She knew that the day after Winterfest was always a quiet one Below. “Besides, I have a lot to do today to make myself presentable for tonight.”

“You are more than presentable right now,” he declared, pulling her into his arms and kissing her soundly.

She giggled and pointed to the thin silk nightgown she had on. “This would really cause the gossip to fly.”

“Father doesn’t allow gossip,” Vincent pointed out.

“As if that ever stopped anyone,” she said with a wink as she started across the chamber to the tunnel to the guest chamber.

“Will you have any extra time today?” he asked.

“For what?” She turned back to him.

“To move your things from the guest chamber to this chamber.”

“For that, I’ll make time,” she assured him with a grin.

Catherine spent the whole day doing a lot of the things she’d dreamed of during her time in the prison. She bathed with her scented soap, gave herself a manicure and a pedicure, then applied the scented lotion she knew Vincent liked.

She met Vincent for lunch, then they both went back to his chamber, and he helped her move her things from the guest chamber. He even carried the full-length cheval mirror from the guest chamber to his chamber before he went back to work.

When he returned later that afternoon, Catherine was in her robe, applying a little makeup. When he came out of the bathing chamber, still a little damp, she was dressed and ready.

She took his breath away. Her dress was a floor-length dark green velvet, fitted to the waist then flaring out from there. It had long sleeves and a high, rolled collar. And he was surprised to see that she was wearing the crystal he had given her.

“You are beautiful,” he said as he crossed the chamber to take her in his arms. He touched the crystal. “I thought it was lost.”

“I did too, but it was in the box of things that was sent to my apartment. It was the only thing I took out before I called Joe. I wasn’t letting it out of my sight again.”

“Will you be going down to the Great Hall with me?” he asked as he dressed.

Catherine was adjusting the wig a little in front of the mirror.

“No, I told Peter that I’d wait for him and then go down with him and Father.”

When Vincent left a little while later, she realized she didn’t have a coat and that it was cold and windy on the stairs. They’d left her apartment in such a rush that she hadn’t even thought of it.

She went to find Mary, who, as usual, had an answer. She pulled out a smaller version of Vincent’s cloak.

“This was the first cloak I made for him,” she explained as she settled it on Catherine’s shoulders. “he was about 16 at the time, before the growth spurt that shot him up to over six feet. It was right after I came Below.”

“Are you sure you want to loan this to me?” Catherine asked.

“It’s not a loan. You keep it. Maybe the two of you will have a son someday who would like to have it.”

So Father doesn’t allow gossip, she mused to herself as she hugged Mary.

Winterfest was everything Catherine remembered and more. She’d been nervous about Helpers possibly letting slip that she was home, but then the bad guys already knew. She might as well start letting friends know.

After *Christmas*, she promised herself.

This time, she and Vincent danced to music that everyone could hear, and by the end of the evening, she tired but happy.

She and Vincent left shortly after the closing ceremony.

“Won’t they need you to help clean up?” she asked as he helped her with the cloak.

“Father told me that you looked tired; I should put you to bed,” he said.

“He said that?” She giggled. “I won’t argue.”

“Where did you find this?” he asked touching the cloak.

“I needed something, and Mary gave it to me. She told me to keep it, that we might have a son someday who would like to have it.”

They had just reached the bottom of the stairs. He turned to her with a shocked expression.

“Is that possible?” he asked. “Should we be taking precautions?”

“Don’t worry. One of the first things I talked to Peter about was birth control. I’ve taken it for years, mostly because it made my periods easier. He was a little hesitant because I haven’t had a period in months. But I talked him into it. I’ll continue to take it until we make that decision together.”

He looked relieved, but Catherine was quiet until they reached the top of the stairs and were out of the wind.

“Would you like to have a child, Vincent?” she asked quietly as they walked hand in hand.

“That is a huge decision, Catherine,” he answered after a moment.

He stopped and pulled her around to face him.

“If I knew for certain that a child fathered by me would not be like me, I’d want one right away, but there is no guarantee, and I don’t think I’d want my child, my flesh and blood, to go through what I’ve gone through.”

“But that child wouldn’t be doing it alone,” she pointed out. “You would be here to guide, so would I, and everyone else here Below. He or she would be loved, just as you were.”

He nodded. “I know all of that... in my head, but my heart is still hesitant.”

“Well, just know that, when you make your decision, I’m with you every step, but also that I would love to have your babies.” She stretched up on her toes and kissed him.



The next morning was a late one. They didn’t leave the chamber until lunchtime. Vincent had brought muffins back from the Great Hall the night before, and they were able to make tea and coffee in the chamber.

“Where did you find the French press?” she asked as she sipped her coffee.

“William had it in a cabinet in the kitchen. He gave it and some coffee to me yesterday.”

Lunch was simple, mostly leftovers from the feast the night before.

The tunnels were extra quiet that day. Even the pipes weren’t busy.

Vincent and Catherine were just getting ready for bed when Vincent heard his name tapped out on the pipes. Catherine heard it too and looked up at him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“No one is sure. Stephen didn’t check in on the hour.”

“Do you have to go?” she asked.

“It’s probably nothing. He’s probably just fallen asleep. It wouldn’t be the first time a sentry fell asleep.”

He left and went to Father’s study. He was still up.

“What is it?” he asked as Vincent entered the study with his cloak over his arm.

“I don’t know yet. What sentry post is Stephen on tonight?”

Father consulted a list.

“The one closest to the park threshold.”

Vincent put his cloak on and turned to leave.

“Be careful,” Father called after him.

“Always,” he called back. “It’s probably nothing.”

Father rose, went to a pipe, and tapped out a message requesting an ALL-QUIET on the pipes.

In the Pipe Chamber, Zach listened intently to the pipes.

Pascal came over. “What’s wrong?”

“Father asked for an ALL-QUIET,” Zach replied.

Pascal frowned. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Father said Vincent is going to check.”

“An intruder?” Pascal asked.

“No one’s seen anything.”

“Have you heard from all the outposts?”

Zach said. “Except Stephen. He’s down near the park threshold. That is what started it. He didn’t check in.”

“He’s probably asleep,” Pascal said. “Send it again. Use the emergency reply code.”

Zach tapped the message onto the pipes, and Pascal returned to his place as the sound traveled through the tunnels.

There was an intruder, and after he'd broken through the door at the park threshold, he donned night vision goggles and headphones attached to a sound amplifier. He stepped through the ruined door and examined the tunnel walls. Through his amplified hearing, he heard the faint sound of giggling. He raised his shotgun and moved toward it.

Farther down the tunnel, Brooke and Stephen were cuddled together at the bottom of the ladder in the sentry post. Stephen began to speak, but Brooke interrupted softly.

"Oh, Stephen..."

The intruder paused and turned back toward the sound.

Brooke smiled at Stephen. "The look in your eyes... it's so silly. I love your eyes."

Stephen laughed. "You love my eyes?"

The intruder followed the sound while Brooke and Stephen kissed.

Brooke drew back. "What's the matter?"

"The pipes," Stephen said. "Listen."

"I don't hear..."

"They're too quiet." Stephen looked up. "I'd better go check. Stay here." He kissed Brooke, then climbed the ladder. The intruder's amplified hearing caught every movement as Stephen reached the perch and opened the grate directly in front of him. The intruder fired the shotgun at the grate. Stephen fell backward off the ladder, landing in front of Brooke.

Brooke heard the explosion and ducked as rocks rained down around her.

"No!" she screamed, pulling away from Stephen, climbing the ladder, and taking off down the tunnel at a dead run.

The scream echoed through the tunnels, reaching Vincent as he made his way in that direction.

Brooke ran blindly through the passages, with the intruder close behind. Guided by his amplified hearing, he finally caught up as she stumbled, fell and crawled toward a gate. He stepped in front of her and aimed the shotgun at her head.

"What was his name?" he demanded. "The boy's name."

Brooke crawled backward. "Stephen."

"Stephen," Snow repeated. He pressed the gun against Brooke's back. "And yours?"

Brooke's sobs didn't deter him.

“Look at me. Your name...”

“Br... Brooke,” she sobbed. “Brooke.”

He stepped away. “Close your eyes, Brooke. You won’t feel any pain.”

He heard a movement from behind and whirled to see what it was. He turned and fired.

Brooke took the opportunity to get away. She scrambled to her feet and fled.

Vincent heard the gunshot and roared. The intruder heard the roar magnified through his equipment.

“I’m coming,” he said. He followed the sound and found himself in a steep, winding stairwell.

He descended the stairs, pressing his headphones tight as he searched for any sound. Somewhere ahead, Vincent moved through the tunnels.

Vincent ran, leading the intruder away from the inhabited tunnels. It was standard procedure. The intruder tracked the sound of his footsteps with amplified hearing, and the two moved through the tunnels in a deadly game of hide-and-seek.

At last, they both stopped, listening. Vincent turned back down the passage toward the intruder. The intruder caught the sound of Vincent’s breathing and dripping water.

Vincent struck, breaking a steam pipe and sending a blast of steam into the intruder’s face. He hit the intruder, slashing his arm and knocking the gun aside, then turned and fled. The intruder tore off his goggles and fired the shotgun after him.

In Father’s chamber, Father, Catherine, William, and Pascal gathered around Brooke, who wept in Mary’s arms.

Jamie ran into the chamber.

“Mouse just heard gunfire,” Jamie said. “Down in the serpentine, under the north well. They were headed down.”

“Vincent’s leading him away from us,” William said.

Jamie turned to leave. “I’m gonna go get my crossbow.”

“Come back,” Father said. Jamie kept moving. “Jamie, come back here,” he called more sharply. She stopped and turned.

“For God’s sake,” Father said as Jamie reluctantly came back into the chamber. “Do you think you’re going to stop him with a child’s toy? Don’t you understand? Vincent is leading him away. We just have to hope that he’s successful. Father lowered his gaze. “Now please, let us not throw away this gift.”

Catherine had remained silent to that point, but she couldn't do it any longer.

"Is that all he is? A watchdog? The Tong invades, and you send Vincent. Mitch Denton is Below and you send Vincent. You have a gang of butchers in the tunnels, and you send Vincent. It's always Vincent. Now this? You should all be ashamed of yourselves." She looked straight at Father. "You say you love him, but you put his life in jeopardy every time there is a threat."

She turned and stormed out of the chamber, leaving the stunned group behind her. Jamie was the only one who followed.

Vincent ran through the tunnel. Behind him, the intruder followed, using his amplified hearing to track him while wrapping a rag around the slash on his arm. He entered a fog-filled cavern. Roars echoed through his headset, and the intruder fired toward the sound.

"Okay," the intruder said, his words echoing back at him. "That's one for you. I know you're out there." His hand trembled as he reloaded the shotgun.

"Time for the endgame," he said, scanning the cavern. "You can run. Hide. It doesn't matter. When you look behind you, I'll be there." The words bounced off the stone. He turned, spotted Vincent, and fired. He ran forward, slid down a slope, and scrambled for a weapon. Finding his handgun, he looked around at the stalagmites rising from the cavern floor.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Here," Vincent answered calmly.

The intruder turned in place. "I can't see you."

"I know."

"Do you have a name?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I always learn their names," he said. "All the names. Do you?"

"I know their faces," Vincent replied.

He leaned against a stalagmite. "I don't suppose you want to call this a draw."

Vincent's growl answered him.

"I guess that's a 'No.'"

"He sent you," Vincent stated.

"Who? Gabriel?" he asked.

"Yes, that's his name."

“One of them,” he said. “The woman is with you, isn’t she. He’s never lost before, and he sent me to make sure he doesn’t lose this one.”

“What’s *your* name?” Vincent asked quietly.

“Which one?” he asked.

“Whichever one you want on your headstone.”

“Snow... that one is as good as any of them.

“I’ll make sure it’s spelled right,” Vincent said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“I’m tired of playing games,” Snow muttered. Then he spotted a cloaked figure. “The game ends... Now.”

Snow fired at the figure, shattering the stalagmite hidden beneath the cloak. He emptied the gun, then approached. A rumble began overhead. He pulled the cloak away, revealing only stone, and stumbled back as the cavern shook harder. He screamed as the ceiling collapsed on him.

When the dust settled, Vincent edged out from behind the stalagmite where he’d been hiding. He retrieved his cloak; it was full of holes, but maybe Mary could mend it. Then he bent down and checked the pulse on the hand that stuck out from between two rocks. Snow was dead.”



By Christmas Eve, things Below had returned to normal.

Stephen was recovering from a mild concussion, with Brooke as his willing nurse. Vincent had tasked some of the men with the disposal of Snow’s body. Their first thought was to throw him into the Abyss, but Vincent had decreed that he should be left in the park where he would be discovered, in hopes that Gabriel would get the message.

Catherine was in Father’s study with Vincent, Mary and Devin, where she had just apologized for her outburst.

“No, my dear, you were right. We depend too heavily on Vincent,” Father surprised her by agreeing. “But we don’t have anyone else who can do what he does.”

Catherine thought for a moment.

“What if I bought a bunch of those little voice recorders? We could record Vincent, then each Sentry post could keep one. If they hear an intruder, they could just play the recording. Things echo off the stone down here, it would sound just the same as if he was there. And the

response would be immediate, instead of waiting while Vincent got to the location and allowing the intruder to get farther in.”

Vincent chuckled. “With all the urban myths about things in the New York tunnels and sewers, it would probably work.”

Father looked thoughtful. “You’d be willing to do that?” he asked.

“Of course. They aren’t expensive. You could even have spares, and I’ll keep you supplied with batteries.”

As the decision was made, the phone rang. Everyone in the chamber just stared at it.

Catherine laughed outright and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Radcliffe, is that you?”

“Yeah, Joe. I just happened to be standing next to the phone. Did you call to wish me a Merry Christmas?”

“Yeah, and I even have a gift for you.”

“Ah, Joe. You shouldn’t have,” she said with a grin. Then she pushed a button on the phone and put it on speaker.

“It wasn’t me. It’s compliments of muggers, or someone; I don’t know who. But one of those guys you identified, the one we only knew as Snow, was found in the park. He was dead. Someone really worked him over good. He had burns, a big slash on his arm, and it looked like someone had beaten him with a pipe. He had a fractured skull.”

Catherine looked over at Vincent, who just nodded.

“But the other one is still at large,” she stated.

“Well, that makes the story even better. Diana had a hunch, and after the body was found, she told me to make sure that the story and the location where the body was found made the news. We staked the area out, and early this morning, guess who showed up?”

“Stop with the games, Joe. WHO?”

“Your friend Gabriel.”

“You got him?” Catherine was breathless.

“We did. In jail, no bail. And the list of charges is longer than my arm.”

“Hallelujah!” Catherine said as a cheer went up from the group gathered in Father’s chamber.

“What was that?” Joe asked.

“I’m with friends. It’s Christmas Eve, remember. I put you on speaker so Vincent could hear.”

“Oh yeah. Right... So anyway. When can you come back to work?”

That made everyone laugh.

“How about I come to your office on January 2nd, and we will talk about it,” she suggested.

“Deal!” he agreed. “See you then.”

END



DIGITAL ART

by Mel



Alternate Universe

DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Michaela



A New Beginning

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

For Dee

Chapter 1

Were it any other ordinary place, it would be asleep by now, but this was New York City, the place that never sleeps. The thousands of lights flickered all around as his cab made its way rather laboriously to its destination that evening. His eyes took in all the traffic, which didn't seem to be showing any signs of slowing as midnight approached, and the pedestrians, still rather leisurely strolling along the pathways. True, it was Friday, the end of the work week, but in reality, New York breathed with life twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year – a fact that both fascinated and terrified him. *Is there a single quiet place in this city?*

“Get on with it!” the cab driver yelled at the endless queue of cars ahead of him and slammed his hands on the steering wheel. It seemed that in the last half an hour they only moved two blocks.

The man sitting in the back on the passenger seat forced his mind back to reality and sighed. Seeing the madness ahead, he resigned himself and reached for his wallet, taking out a few banknotes. He passed them on to the cab driver.

“It's okay, I'll walk the rest,” he said calmly, surprising the cabbie, whose grumpy mood changed immediately – he was about to earn way more than he should have for the journey. Of course, he would not remind his passenger about this fact. He thanked him, grinning and suddenly not minding that he would probably still be stuck in traffic for some time.

The man grabbed his leather briefcase and got out of the cab. He straightened his designer suit jacket, took a deep breath, and started walking towards the place he called his home, a further ten blocks away.

The air was slightly chilly, a bit much for mid-April, but he didn't give it a thought. In his thirty-three years, the physical shape of a professional athlete and the health of a fitness trainer, this man was anything but sensitive to a bit of cold. As he took long and graceful strides down the familiar streets, he got completely lost in thought, so much so that even a couple of anything-but-inconspicuously dressed young women in their twenties, wearing heavy make-up and almost indecently high heels, begging for his attention, couldn't distract him. He may have been dressed like someone from the front page of a business magazine, screaming a wallet bursting with money, but his heart was miles away from the profession he chose – to be precise, the profession he was, in a way, forced to choose.

He loved his father very much, especially for the way he managed to raise his son after his beloved wife died when the boy was only ten years old. As the only child of a successful corporate law giant, he got everything he needed and wanted: from his favourite Batman toy figure to holidays in Europe, where his love of sightseeing and exploring was born. In contrast to the stereotype, despite all the wealth, there was never a lack of support and understanding from his father's side. They both missed the female touchstone of their little family long after the boy grew into a man, but her legacy carried the torch of love between them.

When the time came for him to decide what field of study to choose and follow in his career, the choice was rather obvious. His heart was never really with it, but he felt he owed it to the man who took over the role of both his parents at the same time, since untimely death broke their happy family apart. And yet, whenever his father said he was a fine corporate lawyer, he used to say he was *the son* of a fine corporate lawyer. As time and life went by, he couldn't help questioning whether he had taken the right path in life. Outwardly, he still represented his father's company as well as he could, and fulfilled his social duties by attending events, meeting important people, and playing the role of pleasant company everywhere he appeared. On the inside, though, he felt himself fading away, as if more and more colour fades from a cushion constantly exposed to the blazing sun...

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"I've been watching you for a while now, son," his father said with a worried frown as they shared a glass of whisky in his private office, full of cosy but expensive leather. "What's wrong?"

The younger man lowered his eyes and absently traced the edge of his glass with his index finger. "I don't know what you mean, Dad."

"I mean you doing business as usual, but being a shadow of what you used to be beyond the corporate walls," the senior lawyer stated, his blue eyes piercing his son's face, searching for answers.

"Everything's fine," came the quiet, unmistakably evasive reply on the other side of a heavy wooden desk. "I think I just need some time off."

"By all means!" said the father. "Vincent... You haven't had a break since we wrapped up that big Emerson case right after Christmas. It was a great success, so you more than deserve it. You should go to the lake house. You haven't been there for some time! You could take some of your friends if you want to."

A warm smile softened the older man's rather angular facial features. His son returned it with his own small smile.

“Thank you, Dad. I will.” He didn’t elaborate that the handful of true friends he had were mostly too busy with their own lives.

The prospect of spending some time at their family cottage in Connecticut, surrounded by the peace of nature, sounded very pleasant indeed. That place was always very dear to his heart, ever since his parents bought it when he was but four years old. The magic of golden sunrises and pink and purple sunsets, the smell of wildflowers, picnics by the water, the random sightings of deer in his beloved glen... And yet, despite his deep connection to the place, for the first time in his life, he felt something was missing – someone to share it all with, someone really close...

Vincent stood up and smiled, not wishing to put his father in a gloomy mood.

“I love you, Dad,” he said and hugged him.

“I love you too, son,” the older man replied wholeheartedly, returning the warm embrace...

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“Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

The honking horn and the shouting of a furious, middle-aged man from the car window interrupted Vincent’s brooding - and probably saved his life or an undesired injury, at least.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised and stepped back from the road he was just about to cross without looking out for cars on both sides.

“Damit,” he cursed silently, shaking his head. *I really need a break.*

Once he safely crossed the road, he found himself at one of the entrances to Central Park. He had spent many hours there in the past, especially at weekends, and especially since he had moved into his Manhattan apartment nearby. No sane individual would dare enter it so late at night, unless having indecent or other socially unacceptable thoughts, yet something was tugging at him, making him suddenly desire a quiet walk among the trees.

“Oh, whatever,” he remarked to himself after a moment of hesitation, weighing the possibilities of getting mugged there at this time of day.

“Needs must.” He took the first decisive step and walked into the beloved and by now seemingly deserted park.

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Finally, some place to breathe, Vincent thought for about five minutes of a pleasant walk along a row of trees that, at last, had dressed in leaves after the long winter. The crisp air started to have a calming effect on him. And then, out of nowhere, he heard a booming voice shout behind him.

“Stop right there!”

He did as ordered, not particularly alarmed, although he knew the quite regular reports about people being robbed or attacked in the city’s most beloved green space. Yet, he was apprehensive enough not to do anything that might provoke whoever was after him even more.

“Turn around, nice and slow!” came the next order, and Vincent did as required again, until he could match the face with the voice.

“You won’t get much out of me,” he said calmly, lifting his arms slightly. He was looking at two masked, gloved men, oozing with anger and threat.

They are well prepared for this.

“As if I’d believe you! Just look at your fresh gear!”

Vincent became aware of the image he must have presented, dressed for the working day in one of his impeccable designer suits. He didn’t wear a gold watch; for some reason, he found it too vulgar, and he much rather hung on to the old watch his grandfather had given him when he was still a boy. However, everything else about his appearance screamed wealth. Well, everything apart from the slightly wavy, shoulder-length blond hair. That was the only thing ill-fitting for a typical high-end lawyer image.

When his father jokingly once asked him why he didn’t like to cut it, Vincent thought, “*To remind me of my true self everywhere I go – the free spirit locked in a gilded cage most of his adult life.*” Of course, he didn’t say it out loud, not to upset his parent. He only mentioned something about making things more interesting in business meetings and court.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I really don’t have much on me at the moment,” he said, still calm.

Deep Voice slowly pulled out a long kitchen knife from the inside pocket of his black leather jacket. “We’ll see for ourselves, if you don’t mind.” He raised his eyebrows in a challenging manner. He indicated to his buddy – equally masked and dressed in black leather, only much shorter and definitely less vocal – to search Vincent.

“Ten bucks should be more than enough to get you and your friend some burger meal and a couple of drinks.” Vincent was still trying to solve this peacefully.

“For twenty bucks, you could buy my mother but not me,” the thug replied scornfully.

Vincent realised there was not much room for negotiation and decided not to steer the situation into hotter ground. He let Shorty search his pockets. After thoroughly inspecting them, Shorty’s eyes betrayed surprise and dismay as he was left with two five-dollar notes in his hand before he turned to his companion.

“He didn’t lie, man,” he said rather weakly, disappointed. “Ten bucks in cash, no wallet, no cards, no cheques. Not even car keys!”

How lucky I forgot my wallet this morning. These are the last remains of the “pocket money” I borrowed from Dad.

“I never lie.” The calm, confident aura surrounding Vincent started to irritate the tall man.

“How’s it possible you have nothing on you?! Do you jog to and from work every day?!”

Vincent couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “As a matter of fact, I often do. Not today, though.”

Deep Voice’s irritation turned into anger. “Enough sweet-talking! Nobody screws around Gerry Miller!”

He didn’t even realise the silly mistake he made by revealing his identity, but that alone gave his potential victim even more courage. He let the guy approach him as close as he could, then, with the speed of light, he blocked the thug’s armed hand and kicked him in the shin to incapacitate him. Seeing this, Shorty found his guts and attacked him with surprisingly apt moves. Before Vincent got rid of him, Deep Voice picked himself up from the ground; his arm swiftly went around the lawyer’s neck, gripping him like an iron clamp; the other pointed the tip of the knife at his chin.

“You wanna play?” the thug hissed. “All right, let’s play then...”

Before things could go any further, they all heard a rather deep growl from the dark area under the trees nearby.

“What was it?” Shorty squeaked, his courage gone at once.

“A cat, probably,” Deep Voice replied nervously and not very convincingly.

Another growl landed in their ears, this time more reverberating and appearing closer than before.

“That’s one hell of a cat,” Vincent managed to say with some effort, still surprised by Deep Voice’s strength.

Their eyes were still searching the darkness when they heard the third growl; its intensity unmistakably growing. Yet still, nothing and no one was in sight. It was almost as if a ghost decided to play a strange game with them.

“I’m done here!” Shorty exclaimed with a strained voice. “Let Braggy deal with this guy himself... Gettin’ done in by an invisible beast wasn’t part of the deal!”

He didn’t even wait for the reply from his mate and ran away as if his life depended on it.

“Wait, you bastard!” Deep Voice shouted after him, still holding Vincent at the knife point, though the grip of his arm around the young man’s neck was loosening. “Oh, to hell with it!” he spat after a moment of hesitation, released Vincent and ran after Shorty, disappearing out of sight within seconds.

“Braggy?” Vincent repeated, deep in thought, as he absently picked up the ten dollars the thugs dropped before their hasty departure. However, his focus immediately shifted to the dark space from which the growls had come just a minute ago. His emerald green eyes searched for any trace of the source of the sounds. Just as he wanted to give up, the clouds parted and revealed the full moon in the night sky, letting its light illuminate a figure standing a stone’s throw from Vincent; their long, dark, hooded cloak disguised their identity.

“Hello?” Vincent addressed the stranger, suddenly certain he probably owed his life to this mysterious person, no matter how incredulous it sounded.

This seemed to have unnerved the stranger, as they immediately turned around and disappeared into the black safety of the trees again.

Vincent, magically drawn to find out who he had to thank for helping him, ran in their direction, hiding in the dark spots. Hoping against hope, he spotted the shadow of the black cloak again, moving swiftly in the direction of the nearby drainage tunnel – the moon was his welcome accomplice again. He stifled the call of “Wait!” in his throat and watched the person vanish inside the tunnel. Only now did he dare to come out of the safety of the darkness and run towards it, intending to find out the identity of the mysterious figure. As he carefully and quietly stepped inside, he was welcomed by a loud mechanical sound. A second later, he saw a heavy, circular, metal door shutting behind whoever had just run away from him.

“Wait!” Vincent called out, no longer caring about being discovered.

However, the silence that filled the semi-dark tunnel told him he wouldn’t succeed in his mission. He stepped to the metal gate placed before the now-shut door. His hands absently reached for the bars as his brain feverishly raked over what he had just witnessed.

Why did they run off without a word? Who were they? What is behind that door?... What was that growl??

Questions kept buzzing in Vincent’s head, filling it with all possible and impossible theories. A shiver ran down his spine when he realised he had probably just escaped death. And the one person he had to thank for it didn’t want to meet him.

He sighed and shook his head. Picking up the briefcase he dropped as he entered the tunnel, he set off to finally walk home. There was one thing he knew for sure, though: He had to unravel this mystery, wherever it may lead him...

Chapter 2

She ran as fast as she could, taking the staircase leading toward her home two steps at a time, gliding behind each bend of long underground tunnels quickly, yet as quietly and elegantly as a cat. Her cloak was flailing behind her like a bat's wings, painting flying birds on the walls with its shadow. Her mind was racing, from both fear and excitement.

What did you think, letting him see you?! How could you be so careless, after all these years??

The dim, calming orange glow surrounding her on her journey finally led her to her destination. She slid down along the cold, rocky wall and buried her face, still obscured by the hood of her cloak. It felt like some heavy beast was sitting on her chest, squeezing her heart and lungs, making her breathing more difficult than it should be. She forced herself to take a few deep breaths to steady herself - to the desired effect, for she immediately felt her heartbeat slow, and the oxygen effortlessly flow in her blood at last. Her gloved hands pushed back the hood, letting the thick and long cascade of her honey-golden hair escape and fall over her shoulders.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!" ⁱⁱ she reprimanded herself in the silence and leaned her head back after closing her eyes, suddenly exhausted.

"Goodness! What happened?" A distressed male voice with a heavy British accent made her lift her head again.

"Nothing... of consequence," she replied and rose from the cold and dusty ground. She took a few steps toward the man. He was of middle height, somewhere over sixty, grey-haired, had a kind face, a pair of lively grey eyes, and was leaning on his fairly old-looking cane; he was dressed in clothes that could be described as "take-whatever-you-find-and-put-it-on"; nevertheless, the pieces matched somehow.

"I am fine, don't worry about me." She squeezed his arm and turned to leave before she had to explain more.

"How can I not?" the man asked again, knitting his brows and making her stop, although not turning back to him. "I've been watching you for some time... You've been going Above more than usual lately." He took a few steps to meet her. "You seem... restless."

Tell him... Don't be a coward!

At last, hushing her conscience, she turned to meet his eyes again, managing a small smile. "Everything is all right, Father."

He briefly studied her face, then took it in his hands and kissed her forehead. "I truly hope so."

Another small smile and a squeeze of his arm, then she walked away – leaving him unconvinced and herself feeling as if she had just failed to speak openly to the man she trusted with her life and who she had called father for as long as she remembered.



The phone rang for the fifth time, drilling into his brain with intensity that made him snap.

“For God’s sake!” he exclaimed, dropped his pen and picked up. “Leave me alone!”

The annoyance in his voice made the person on the other end of the line hesitate for a moment. “Vincent? It’s me, Diana... I’m sorry to disturb you; I just...”

“Oh,” he cursed himself inwardly. “I’m so sorry, Diana. I’ve not been in the best mood today.” He raised his eyebrows and sighed. “Which is not an excuse to jump at you like you were the bloody reporter who keeps ringing me about the silly article he wants to interview me for. “

The woman chuckled. “Another one?” she inquired, amused.

Vincent rolled his eyes and ran his hand over his face. “Yeah. I guess I should post in all the New York newspapers that they should find some other child of a famous businessperson to annoy the life out of them.”

“I just wanted to double-check if we’re still on for that catch-up coffee tomorrow, but if you need some distraction, I might just have something right now.”

The young man’s mood was improving; hearing the calm sound of his best friend’s voice already worked its magic on him. It always had, ever since they were children, playing in the backyard of Vincent’s family home, pretending to be Batman and Superman on another mission to save the world.

“Of course, we are, and go on,” he said, intrigued.

“I’ve had an interesting conversation with a woman whose daughter went missing almost four years ago. The girl was nine years old back then, a quiet but healthy child. One morning, she got on the school bus but never came back. The police investigated the case for eight months, but eventually, the trail ran cold, and after running out of other options, they gave up.” Diana paused.

“Go on,” Vincent urged her, sensing something unusual would follow.

“Yesterday, the woman was taking a walk in Central Park in the afternoon. The loss left a deep mark on her and her marriage. She’s been suffering from depression and divorced her husband a year ago. She also lost her job recently, anyway... Yesterday, just as she was passing the Carousel in the park, she thought she saw her daughter.”

Vincent knitted his brows. “Couldn’t she have just imagined it?” he mused.

“She said that’s what she thought at first, as well,” his friend continued. “The Carousel was always the child’s favourite place to go together. But then she clearly saw her interact with a couple of other kids of her age. Of course, she’s grown older a bit, but apparently, the mother recognised her immediately.”

“Did she approach the girl?”

“Just as she was about to, the girl left the Carousel with her friends and ran away. The mother followed them all to the place they disappeared.”

Her sudden silence intrigued Vincent even more. “Disappeared where?” he asked.

“That’s the fun part.” He could sense Diana smiling. “Inside one of the drainage tunnels.”

Vincent’s mouth fell slightly open, and he leaned forward in his chair. This was too much of a coincidence...

“She ran inside, but didn’t see or hear anyone. The kids just vanished into thin air... So, what do you say, Mr Corporate Lawyer?” Diana teased him.

The sudden thrill that filled his veins made him smile. “I say, now you’re talking...”



The kettle started loudly protesting on the stove, unattended for longer than necessary. Joe Maxwell rushed to take it off the heat - however, not without tripping over three boxes piled up against the robust, white, fabric sofa he was sitting on.

“Damn!” he cursed, as he just about managed not to fall and successfully turned off the stove.

“Honey, the kettle has boiled!” he called out into the large and empty living room. “I’ll make your coffee, but you’ll have to make his drink yourself. Brewing tea is something I can’t do even if my life depended on it!”

He put two black mugs on the kitchen counter and filled one with instant coffee, pouring hot water over it.

“We really need a coffee machine,” he muttered to himself, looking at the unappealing (both in look and scent) dark brown liquid while stirring it. “And I finally need to get those bloody boxes into my new office.”

“Agreed to the second one. And thanks,” a strong and cultured female voice spoke behind him, as a pair of long, slim arms snaked around his waist. “I’ll do the rest.”

Joe turned around with a wide smile, put his arms around her and greeted her with a kiss. Then he pulled back slightly, making a face. “You really don’t think it’s time we got a decent coffee machine?” he suggested before looking at the steaming mug on the counter. “This thing is vile.”

Diana chuckled and released him, turning her attention to making the tea.

“I need my coffee as quickly as possible when I work,” she said, with an amused smile, while taking out a tin of loose Assam tea leaves and a tea strainer. “I can crack half of a case while waiting for one from a machine.”

Joe knitted his brows, uncomprehending. “Boiling water in a kettle takes the same time...”

“True, but you waste time with cleaning afterward.” She turned around with a wide smile.

“Time I can spend already drinking and working.”

The Deputy District Attorney rolled his eyes, then grinned. “Yeah, right. I should have learned in those three years that I can never beat Diana Bennett in a dispute.” He kissed her again. “Speaking of vile... How on earth can Vincent stand that stuff?”

Diana chuckled again. “What can I tell you? Men are strange.” She teased him, raising eyebrows.

It was Joe’s time to laugh. “I bet you five to ten he’s stuck with it only because it was his mother’s favourite drink.”

A shadow of melancholy crossed his partner’s face. “It *was* her favourite drink,” she said quietly, deep in thought. “She was English.”

Suddenly, she saw it clearly in her mind’s eye as if it was yesterday: her ten-year-old self alongside her equally old best friend playing chess (and beating him) in the tree house of the large Chandlers’ family garden and seeing Vincent’s parents sit on the terrace, enjoying their afternoon drinks – a cup of coffee for the father and tea for the mother. Watching Mrs Chandler’s ritual of brewing and pouring tea into a fancy (probably Victorian-style) cup was like watching a magician at work for Diana. A few months later, everything changed...

“Right, well,” Joe interrupted her train of thought and turned away to gather his suit jacket and briefcase. No matter how much he preferred casual clothes over the business-style ones, he knew he had to appear professional in his position. “I’m already late,” he remarked and glanced at the boxes piled on the floor. “God knows what possessed me to bring them home in the first place.”

“You wanted to take a look at some of your older cases,” Diana said, suppressing a chuckle.

“I *will* get them out today, I promise.”

Seeing his puppy eyes, Diana smiled, amused, then took another sip of her coffee. “I know. You’ve been saying this for a week.”

The man moaned and shook his head. “Okay, I’ll send someone to pick it up. Saves me the heavy work.” He winked at her, making her chuckle.

“Get out,” she ordered, laughing.

Joe approached her hastily, grinning. “I know, so you can be alone with your best friend.” He kissed her and ran to the gate, separating the flat from the elevator leading to the ground floor.

“Call you later, and say hi to the big man,” he managed to say before disappearing behind the closing doors.

Diana’s smile lingered even after she turned around and walked over to her workspace. She put the coffee mug down on her large desk and tied the glorious cascade of her red hair into a ponytail. Before reaching for her drink again, she inadvertently pulled the long sleeve-ends of her cosy white jumper down, covering most of her hands, in an attempt to ward off the mild morning chill. Her mind briefly wandered almost three years back, when the Police asked her to help them with a case of a lost woman, as they were out of their wits. As the years passed, this kept happening to the private detective, probably the most reputable private investigator in New York. It took her several years to achieve it, but now, at thirty-three, Diana Bennett was a fully respected professional, not only among her clients but also in the New York Police Department.

It was the same department where, almost three years prior, she met the Deputy District Attorney Joe Maxwell, young, clever, handsome, dark-haired, dark-eyed, funny, honest, and grounded. Back then, she had no idea this man would charm his way into her heart. She was fully focused on her career and the case she was working on with him. However, the deeper she got to know him, the more she realised Joe was not very dissimilar from her, despite Diana being the calmer one and Joe the entertainer. She noticed there were two different sides to him – the one he presented outside, the other that he showed only in private life and only to those he grew close with, which were not many. Work partnership led to friendship, friendship to a love relationship, and barely a year later, they already lived together in Diana’s spacious loft apartment, which was modern and practical, just as the couple living in it. Both of them understood each other’s work and its demands, so unsociable hours when dealing with respective cases weren’t an issue. They spent most of their free evenings in comfortable harmony with Joe watching some sports game, and Diana reading non-fiction books, mostly related to her job. And surprisingly, it worked. It worked really well. After all, stimulation and inspiration don’t only come from fine dining or theatre visits.

The doorbell rang just as she was studying a large pin board, covered with photographs, newspaper clips and various notes. She rushed to the home phone and pushed a button.

“You’re late,” she said, smiling, certain about the caller’s identity.

“Only by six minutes,” came the reply. “I was waiting for Joe to leave.”

“Come up,” she chuckled and buzzed him in. Apart from their almost life-long history as friends, the same sense of humour was part of their common ground.

A minute later, the elevator door opened, and Vincent Chandler walked into his best friend’s living space with an air of calm but also expectation. Her words the day before kept his brain occupied, buzzing with possibilities. The idea of something mysterious going on in the New York underground tunnels intrigued him more than anything in all the years of his career as a lawyer. He felt all the more comfortable because it was his day off, and he could dress casually, leaving the strict business attire in the closet. The dark jeans, grey knitted jumper, brown soft-leather jacket and comfy sneakers were miles away from the world of his father’s law firm. Were it not for his blond hair and paler complexion, he could pass for Joe’s brother.

“Sorry, the traffic was horrible,” Vincent apologised, joining her at her work board. “So, what’s the real story with the girl?”

She passed him his mug of tea and looked back at the sea of photos and notes; some of them ended with question marks, others were joined by a pinned thread. He always found her logical thinking fascinating, ever since their early teenage years when they used to play *Clue* with their friends.

“The real story is the one *behind* the story,” Diana replied and took another sip of her coffee.

“There was an obvious tension between the girl and her father. At first, the mother didn’t understand why; she only started joining the dots after the girl vanished. With what I’ve seen throughout the years, I had a guess even before she told me the real reason, and it’s not pretty.”

Vincent knitted his brows and sighed, his eyes fixed on the black-and-white photo of a little girl. “I *hate* abuse,” he said.

“Any moral and sane person does. However, we can’t jump to conclusions until we have proof, which is a pretty difficult task without the girl,” Diana forced herself to think further. “Anyway, the real mystery, and that’s what you’re here for, is the tunnel one.”

Vincent felt a shiver run down his spine. The memory of a few nights ago awakened something powerful within him - again, for he couldn’t stop thinking of his mysterious saviour since the moment they disappeared from his sight – in the tunnel...

“What’s your theory?” he inquired. As he knew his friend, there was always psychology involved in her way of thinking when she was trying to solve a case, and no doubt she would use it now as well.

“I’m thinking the tunnels are a great hideaway if one can get food and other essentials from somewhere else. Many homeless people have been using them for years, but I never heard of children living down there.”

Vincent thought for a moment. “So the girl *and* the other children she was with disappeared in that tunnel, right?

“Yeah. The mother says they all looked pretty happy. If they really live underground, there must be something way more interesting down there than just an unlucky bunch of homeless people.”

Vincent leaned against the desk behind him and looked at his friend.

“What?” Diana asked, noticing the tension on his face.

“There is something you should know,” he replied seriously.

Her inquisitive, large, blue eyes willed him to go on.

“I have an interesting tunnel story, too...”

Chapter 3

She was noiselessly making her way through the late-night park again, staying far away from the lights of the lamps. The winter chill gave way to a warmer, much more pleasant air at last, welcoming spring in full force. Her sensitive nostrils and ears caught various scents and sounds: the sweetness of the finally fully blooming cherry trees, despite their buds sleeping through the night; the lush richness of the grass after the day’s gentle rain; the insistent rustling of the tree leaves in the breeze, singing their enchanting lullaby...

It was one of the many reasons why she loved her night walks in the park. Perhaps even more, however, she loved exploring New York at night, hiding in the shadows, watching the people and world go by. What others took for granted, she took as a blessing, even if she always made sure she would pass unnoticed by anyone.

How many would look at me and wonder...? Better not to dwell on that.

Instinctively, she pulled the hood covering her face lower, wishing to blend with the night. And then the moment of realisation came.

All this is not why you keep coming here these days... Nothing will ever be the same after that night...

That night was that of April 12, 1987, the night she saved a man’s life.

It’s not that she had never seen a man before. Of course, she had, but this one was different. Why? She pretended it was because of his good looks and air of non-aggressive confidence he had even in the face of danger. The truth, however, was that looks were not the main reason. Despite the absence of proper light, despite the distance between them, she could feel

the intensity of his eyes on her, the powerful tug at her heart, chaining her feet to the ground for a moment.

What is happening to me? Why him?

Yes, she helped him get rid of the men, but he was doing quite well before she stepped in when things started getting hot. Perhaps he could have saved himself, and she didn't need to risk so much. But perhaps not...

Her brain felt on fire, and she was trying to focus on the loveliness of the night. The threat of her body overreacting and falling into the trap of a collapse was very real. She took a deep breath, thinking this would *not* happen again. It did once, but that was many years before, when she was still a little girl. She was an adult, not a helpless child now, and had much stronger self-control. At least most of the time... However, she knew the sole reason she ventured into the park tonight was the chance to see *him* again.

No, Father was right. She needed to focus more on her world, less on Above. It didn't matter that it would probably mean losing the only time of relative freedom in her life. She would be safe and have no need to fear discovery by the eyes which would judge but not understand...

Confused and frustrated, she absently headed back to the drainage tunnel, resolved to return home. It wasn't safe to walk Above with her senses blinded by her emotions.

She finally saw the dim brownish glow spilling out from the tunnel entrance. A sigh of relief escaped her throat and added speed to her steps. She looked around, searching the area for a possible threat of being seen. Once sure the air was clear, she walked inside, feeling tired at once. However, she only took a few steps when she reached the gated door leading to her home and froze in her spot, shock seizing her whole body – two strangers were obviously looking for a way to open the steel door behind the gate. One was a woman in her early thirties, with tied-back, long, red hair, dressed casually in jeans, a white jumper and a sports jacket. The other was a man of about the same age, with shoulder-length, blond hair, wearing casual clothes as well. When he looked over his shoulder, suddenly hearing soft footsteps, her heart almost stopped: she recognised the eyes, intense and curious, and the same calm aura surrounding him; the same she saw on the night of April 12, 1987.

'What fates impose, that men must needs abide...' ⁱⁱⁱ



Vincent's hands froze on the cold, metal bars when he saw the figure that hadn't left his mind for days. The strange feeling of a deep, inexplicable connection almost overwhelmed his heart again. In fact, it felt somehow stronger. The long, dark cloak, the deeply pulled hood hiding the face of the mysterious figure, the air of some magical anticipation... All of this prevented Vincent from even moving an inch. And then, as if the spell was broken, the figure swiftly turned around in an attempt to flee.

“Wait, please!” Vincent called after the stranger and rushed out of the tunnel, desperate not to miss the opportunity to solve the puzzle now that he was so close to it.

“Where are you going?” Diana called after him, but he neither listened nor responded.

He felt like he had run for ages, but in truth, it was less than a couple of minutes when he finally caught up with the escapee in the nearest grouping of tall and dense trees. Despite the haste, he couldn’t bypass the stranger’s extraordinary way of running – fast yet smooth and quiet, with long and elegant strides. They were very fast, but Vincent’s irregular jogging mornings and his tall figure proved an advantage when he reached them and grabbed for their arm.

“Please, stop!” he exclaimed.

The cloaked figure tried to fight their way out of his arms, and he let them.

“I don’t want to hurt you! I just want to talk to you, please!!” Vincent pleaded again.

There was a moment of sudden silence when the desire to run away ceased, and the figure very slowly turned back to their follower. Their chest still heaved from heavy breathing.

“I only wanted to thank you,” Vincent started softly, his timber voice still slightly marked by the effort to catch his breath.

After a slight hesitation, the reply came, quiet and very soft, with a touch of gravel. “There is nothing to thank for.”

Vincent’s eyes widened, his curiosity really piqued now. *It’s a woman...*

“You saved my life,” he said, with genuine gratitude. “I’d say that is a lot.”

He heard a small sigh before the woman spoke again. “I’m glad you are all right.”

Vincent had no clue why, but his heart was beating heavily against his ribcage. He took a few slow steps closer to her, his tall figure illuminated by the moonlight.

“Can I... Can I see you?” he asked carefully.

She seemed to think, as her head went up to see his face, her own still a mystery to him.

“I... I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. She started to turn away, but somehow was still pinned to her spot.

Go, run away while you can!

“Why not?” Vincent inquired gently. Usually, he wouldn’t have pushed anyone to do anything they didn’t want to do, but he couldn’t help it in this case. He felt there would be no peace in his heart unless he saw the face of this woman.

“Because I don’t want to frighten you...” she whispered, her head bowed low, as if ashamed.

A small, compassionate smile appeared on Vincent's face, then he sighed.

"One of my closest friends, Charles, was a firefighter. He got caught in a huge fire once, saving a whole family from the flames before their house collapsed. Sadly, he got trapped under the falling, burning rubble... They managed to dig him out, but his face and his arm were badly damaged." He smiled. "He survived. He can't work as before anymore, but he teaches new firefighters now at the fire station."

The woman slowly lifted her head.

"There is a place for everyone in this world," Vincent added softly, while taking the last step to stand right in front of the mysterious woman.

A deep sigh resounded in the night air; Vincent could swear he noticed her body tremble, and his eyes willed her to answer his plea. He watched her gloved hands reluctantly reach for the hood and very carefully pull it down. As it fell back completely, the face was finally revealed, leaving him stunned and uncomprehending – it was an incredible, unimaginable face, lined with a beautiful mane of honey-gold, long hair, a face that could only be seen in fantasy books... The light of the moon left no room to hide a single detail of it, and Vincent stared at the deep-set, sapphire-blue eyes, twinkling like the stars above them, angular features, wide forehead, flat nose, and thin, extraordinary mouth with a cleft lip. The most striking, however, was that the whole face was covered with soft, golden fur, and he got a glimpse of long, sharp incisors in the slightly open mouth...

As bewilderment robbed Vincent of his words, his mind was filled with only one thought at that moment: he had never seen a more amazing face in his life – and more beautiful. Something about that majestic feline face made his heart skip a beat; he was mesmerised, especially by the warmth coming from those blue eyes and from somewhere much deeper. The face, the golden strands of hair gently swaying in the breeze, the willowy figure not completely hidden under the dark shelter of the cloak... All this, combined with the events surrounding their brief encounters, evoked a memory of *Jane Eyre* in Vincent: he knew there was absolutely no logical reason for it, but he felt like he suddenly understood the thing with the cord underneath Mr Rochester's rib connecting him with a corresponding one in Jane's ribcage...

How come he is not repulsed? the woman with the extraordinary face thought, her eyes relishing the features of his face properly at last. *I see his eyes... Despite the night around us, I can see clearly that they are as green as emerald, sparkling, burning... Oh, Moon, please, don't hide behind a cloud and stop granting me the joy of seeing myself in those eyes! Myself as I am, and yet not being despised because of it...*

"You have nothing to fear," Vincent spoke at last, his voice like a hush of the breeze that had just caressed his cheek. "Your secret is safe with me."

She heard the words and believed them; something within told her those eyes would never lie, not to her, not to anyone.

“I’m Vincent,” he said, smiling. “Can you tell me your name?”

As if by magic, the hesitation was suddenly gone. “Catherine,” she obliged him quietly, unable to look away from him.

The gravelly softness of her voice enchanted Vincent.

“Catherine...” he whispered, and she felt something inside shifting, like a wave breaking on the shore at tide – washing over her completely, wrapping her in a warm blanket of safety.

Time stood still as they were suspended in it. She startled when Vincent suddenly spoke again.

“Is that where you live?” He pointed at the drainage tunnel.

Catherine sighed and looked away. The return to reality was quick and painful.

“Yes,” she replied. “But I can’t tell you more. Please, don’t ask me.”

Vincent nodded, his face serious now. “I know... Your life depends on it.”

Of course, he understood; she knew he would, and felt deep gratitude for not judging his character wrongly. She met his eyes again. How would she be able to forget them?

Vincent didn’t need to hear the words to understand her affirmation. He smiled; there was a sudden deep longing in his eyes.

“Will I ever see you again?” he asked, his mind begging for a yes. The pull he felt toward the woman in front of him was getting stronger by the minute, and he still wasn’t sure why.

Catherine seemed to hesitate again. “I was happy to help you, and I can see you are a good man, but...” She shook her head, the moonlight reflecting in her hair. “I don’t know...”

“Vincent!” Diana’s strong voice broke their conversation.

They both jerked, and Vincent pulled Catherine into the shadow of the trees.

“Is there another way you can get home?” he whispered.

“Many...”

Vincent gasped and chuckled. “Of course...” He glanced in the direction from which they heard Diana’s voice again. “Go,” he encouraged Catherine. “Go, before she sees you.”

There was a question in Catherine’s eyes.

“Yes, she *is* my friend, but as I said, your secret is safe with me. Now go.”

Catherine’s eyes spoke of deep gratitude – and trust. “Thank you, Vincent,” she whispered.

He heard his own heartbeat in his ears; he was sure he would never forget the sound of that voice as long as he lived. Their hands touched briefly, and then Catherine disappeared deeper in the shadows, a long way from the drainage tunnel.

“There you are!” Diana finally found her friend. “Was it the same person you told me about?” she inquired, catching her breath and scanning the area.

“Yes,” Vincent replied quietly, his gaze distant.

“Did you find them?”

“No,” he replied after a short pause, and his face was an image of wonder.



The clock on the mantelpiece worked in its quiet but steady and assuring rhythm as usual. No flames danced in the fireplace below it, but the man leaning against its antique, slightly cracked marble frame focused only on the ticking of his favourite vintage piece. His worried, grey eyes, the colour of which matched most of his still dense hair, followed the hands of time as if expecting a miracle. His fingers lovingly caressed the cold metal.

“Punctual as ever...” He sighed, slightly knitting his brows. “Why can’t you be?”

The person he addressed his question to, unbeknownst to him, had just entered his living space. It was a large, cavern-like chamber, with a very high ceiling, full of second-hand (often antique) furniture, lots of candles and even more books. One could almost feel like entering a library. The chamber had another level; a black metal staircase led to the part with even more books, carefully stored in a neat row of old wooden bookcases.

“I’m here,” a soft, gravelly whisper reached his ears.

The man turned around, and a loud sigh of relief tore from his throat before the relief on his face changed into something bordering on anger.

“It is the fourth time this week you stayed out so late!”

“I’m sorry, Father, I lost track of time,” Catherine apologised while walking to meet him at his heavy, quite aged wooden desk.

The man leaned heavily on his cane; however, he remained as straight as possible, as if needing to emphasise his authority in the upcoming conversation.

“Now, you know we agreed on your night walks Above years ago,” he started. “I didn’t prevent you from it because you were already of age, and I understood your need to see beyond our world, to give you the sense of freedom I knew you longed for and didn’t have down here.”

“And I am grateful for that,” Catherine remarked genuinely.

“That said...” Father paused. “You have no idea how worried I have been every single night since then. On some nights more than on others, but the fear of something happening to you, of someone seeing you and... That fear has always been there. Nevertheless, I pushed it aside, or I’ve tried as much as I could, as long as I knew you would be back at the same time every night.” He knitted his brows. “Which is *not* what you have done lately.”

Catherine’s deep eyes reflected a sincere feeling of guilt – guilt for worrying the man who had been looking after her well-being all her life.

“I know you have my best interests on your mind, and I truly am sorry about causing you pain.” She sighed and absently looked away before meeting his eyes again. “Still... I *cannot* stay in my cage forever. I would go... mad.” Her last words were quiet but firm, and her eyes begged her father to understand.

The silence that followed was interrupted only by the sound of irregular tapping, somewhere in the distance.

The old man shuddered at her thought. It had been a long time since he was reminded of one of the most terrifying times of his life. Flashbacks of sleepless nights, cold sweats, hallucinations and desperate roars came back to him like a boomerang. He briefly squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. It took just a few innocent words to disarm him and understand that, however great his fear, the essential human need was greater, and there was nothing he could do about it. His shoulders fell slightly, and the strictness left his caring eyes as he reached for Catherine’s hand, still covered by a long, black leather glove, and squeezed it.

“All my life, I have trusted you,” she said gently. “You took me in, gave me a life no one like me could even dream of, and I always followed your advice, using everything you have ever taught me...” Her unusual lips curved into a small smile. “Now it is time for you to trust *me*.”

Father’s look lingered on her warm and loving gaze before he smiled. His hand reached for her cheek, covered with fine fur.

“Sometimes I forget how wise you have become,” he acknowledged, parental love lighting up his face. *And that your eyes are my undoing...*

Catherine chuckled. “I had a good teacher.”

It was the old man’s turn to chuckle. He finally turned around to walk around his desk, reaching for a well-loved book.

“I’ve just found this old copy of *Silas Marner*. I completely forgot I had it! It’s from 1922, would you believe it? Just as old as I am.” His excitement warmed Catherine’s heart. “Would you like to read me a chapter?” he suggested enthusiastically.

“It’s quite late. Some other time, perhaps,” Catherine replied, still smiling.

Father nodded, not too disappointed, and sat down to read in his own comfort. He suddenly remembered something as he put on his reading glasses, his eyes still pinned to the book's first page even as he spoke.

"By the way, what was the reason you returned late tonight?"

There was a slight moment of silence as Catherine lowered her eyes. When she looked up again, her face was as calm as before.

"Nothing to concern you," she replied, hoping she wouldn't need to elaborate.

The old man didn't even look at her, so engrossed in the story in front of him already. "All right then. Good night," he said and was about to be lost to any world for a few late-night hours.

Catherine's smile widened, but then faded, as the events of that night returned to her mind, veiling her mind with melancholy. *No, I cannot tell him... It's better that way...*

"Good night, Father," she said quietly and set out for her chamber.

She was not about to spend much of the night sleeping either.

Chapter 4

The day was going very slowly in the Chandler Corporate Lawyers firm. The whole twelfth floor of the office building was buzzing with employees, but for Vincent Chandler, the usual sounds were somehow distant that day. His mind was miles away from his fancy, luxuriously furnished office full of leather and noble wood, his fancy, polished cherry-wood desk, and the open document files strewn on it. The newest case of corporate fraud he was working on was of very little interest to him. He kept re-reading the same line of the paper ahead of him, unable to tear his mind from the events of the previous day.

When he realised he was reading the same words for the sixth time, he resolutely shut the file and got up from his oversized leather chair. Vincent had never felt very comfortable in an environment where every single object suggested a very good financial status of its owner, but that day it felt even more oppressive to him, and he couldn't wait to leave and get some fresh air.

"Are you going out?" his secretary inquired over the brim of her glasses when she saw him leaving his office, putting his coat on while walking.

"Yes," Vincent answered briefly.

"Are you coming back?" the woman wanted to know. In the six years she had been working for her boss, she had witnessed his sudden escapes quite often, and there was not a lot that

could surprise her in her fifty-five years. Her fingers didn't stop typing into her computer even while speaking to him.

Vincent halted, paused to take a deep breath, then turned to her with a smile and leaned against her desk (appropriately fancy for the company she was working for).

"Rita, can you do me a favour?"

The secretary finally stopped typing, took off her glasses and looked straight into the green eyes over which so many high-society ladies were losing their sleep.

"When have I not?" she teased, her mouth twitching with amusement.

Vincent chuckled. "I'll remind Dad to reflect your kindness in your next pay rise... Could you postpone my meeting with Greggson this afternoon to tomorrow at 3 pm, please?"

"You've postponed it twice already." Rita's look was slightly patronising.

"I know, I know..." Vincent sighed. "I *will* talk to him tomorrow, I promise. The deadline for the court hearing on his case is in two weeks; we've got plenty of time."

The secretary raised her eyebrows, weighing the truth of his words, both about the case and his meeting attendance. At last, she remembered that Vincent Chandler always kept his word and sighed.

"All right, but that's the last time," she said, putting her glasses back on.

Vincent beamed. "You're a gem, Rita," he whispered, took her hand, and kissed it. "And no, I won't be back today," he added before dashing off.

Rita sat in the same position for a long moment, a warm, motherly smile spread across her friendly face. *Like father, like son*, she thought, *however, not in everything...*

Her phone suddenly rang, and with the blink of an eye, she was back in her work mode. She reached for the receiver.

"Chandler Corporate Lawyers, Mr Vincent Chandler's office. How can I help you?"

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Diana looked up at the tall, concrete office building she was about to enter. She got a bit dizzy imagining working in such a place, crowded with people and full of noise. Yet again, she was happy she had the luxury of being able to work from the comfort of her home, having the peace and quiet she needed to think and connect the dots between the clues in her cases. Congratulating herself again, she walked through the revolving glass doors and went straight to the lift.

She got out on the sixth floor and made her way toward the back of the large, open office space, smiling at a few people along, acknowledging their greetings. She stopped at the see-

through glass door with “*Deputy District Attorney, Joseph Maxwell*” printed on it and knocked, although it wasn’t necessary, for the man himself noticed her already and waved to invite her in.

“Yes, I know you’ve called three times already... Yes, I totally understand what you mean, but I also want *you* to understand that after three months of investigation, we haven’t found a single shred of evidence that would support their claim, which means they can forget about any further investigation, let alone a trial. We have more important things to deal with here!”

Joe slammed the phone receiver down, threw himself back against his black office chair and ran his hands over his face.

“I’ve been here only for two hours, and I’ve already lost it with two assistants, a cleaner and a judge.” He sighed, feeling exhausted.

Diana sat down on the chair opposite him and folded her arms; she couldn’t suppress a smile. “Which one was this?”

“The judge,” Joe stated coldly. “And no, I don’t want to talk about it, and you don’t want to hear it. I swear, sometimes I wonder why the hell I keep doing this.”

“Because you are a decent guy and want to help bring justice to people?” Diana stated what she had known from the first day she knew him.

Joe snorted. “Yeah, right. Keep repeating that, and maybe I’ll believe ya.”

They looked at each other for a moment, then chuckled. Joe leaned forward, his elbows on his desk. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you,” he said, with a smile that made his dark brown eyes almost disappear.

She smiled. “You may rethink your statement after you hear why I’m here.”

“Oh, so not so cheer up your wonderful, handsome, and amazing boyfriend?”

That made her laugh. “Okay, that too, but there’s more.”

Joe sighed again, this time disappointed he had to return to business so soon.

“Okay, shoot. What do you need?”

“Could you get me some information on a guy named Gabriel Brannighan, please? Criminal record, fraud, anything out of the ordinary.”

Joe frowned. “You can get that info from the police. Why...?”

“I know,” Diana interrupted him, nodding. “But I want to leave the police out of it for now.”

“It *is* for a case, right?” The D.A.’s assistant was worried now.

His girlfriend smiled. “Yes, nothing personal, don’t worry. It’s just a bit... sensitive... with regard to the client,” she added quickly to make him less worried, although it wasn’t the whole truth.

Joe studied her face for a moment longer, then his facial features relaxed and he sighed. His typical cheerful smile returned to his face.

“Okay,” he said then. “You’ll have it tonight.”

Diana smiled too, stood up, and walked around the desk to kiss him.

“Thanks, Joe,” she said and started for the door.

“Yeah, yeah, what are boyfriends with police connections for?” came the cheeky reply.

Diana chuckled, starting for the door, when she suddenly looked over her shoulder, her expression a mock disbelief. She shook her head.

“A cleaner?”



Vincent was staring at the city lights behind the large windows, brightening the spring evening in New York. The light rain was insistently drumming on the glass, the drops running down, catching the man’s interest. The mug of tea in his hands went cold long ago, but he had barely noticed.

“Here,” Diana drew him out of his thoughts and passed him a bottle of beer. “I think you need something stronger tonight.”

They both smiled at each other, and Vincent didn’t refuse the exchange.

“Joe is trying to cut down on it, so at least you can help him use it up,” Diana remarked and leaned against the windowsill. His face was often an enigma to many people, but not to his best friend. However, that night, she would have given anything to know what was going on behind those emerald eyes.

“Do I know her?” she dared to guess at last.

Vincent looked at her, mildly surprised.

“Sometimes I forget how long you have known me, and how well.” He smiled.

Diana’s smile widened, and she turned to look out into the city as well.

“Remember the fifth grade? You, Jenny Aronson, the school trip to Hayden Planetarium...”

“Heavens!” Vincent rolled his eyes, then laughed. “Really? That far?”

“I could read you like a book even when we were children. It’s a shame Jenny couldn’t.”

“And I was a coward to confess to her,” Vincent chuckled, amused at the memory. “What can I say, I have always been a shy boy,” he teased, making her shake her head.

“Right... And still, she turned into one of the best friends you have ever had,” Diana stated.

“Very true,” he paused, grateful for the fact. “I should call her again. It’s been a few months since we last spoke at that book publishing party.”

They fell silent for a while, each sipping on their drink.

“So? Are you going to tell me her name?” Diana inquired again.

Just as their eyes met again, and Vincent thought about how much he could tell her, the sound of the lift broke the moment of anticipation.

“Home at last!” Joe exclaimed with relief, hastily taking off his coat; he was soaked to the skin. “Nothing more romantic than getting drenched at the end of a bad working day, I tell ya.” He chuckled and approached the two friends, shaking off excess water from his hair.

He outstretched his hand to Vincent. “Chandler,” he greeted his friend cheerfully.

“Maxwell,” Vincent replied, genuinely happy to see him.

Joe briefly turned his attention to Diana, kissing her. His face looked suddenly serious. She watched him for a moment. “You found something, didn’t you?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“I swear you have a knack for them.” Joe shook his head, then opened his briefcase and pulled out a file. “Is it for the case you’re working on now, the lost girl from four years ago?”

“Yes,” Diana replied, already looking at the first page in the file. Her inquisitive eyes skimmed over the lines, a clearer picture forming in her mind’s eye. She frowned.

“You didn’t tell me the family involved is that high up,” Joe wondered.

“I didn’t know. The mother didn’t mention it, and I literally just started collecting information two days ago. That’s why I asked for your help.”

“No wonder she didn’t go into details, then. I wouldn’t brag about such an ex-husband either.”

“Who are we talking about?” Vincent asked, with interest.

Diana took a deep breath, followed by a long exhale. She finally lifted her eyes from the file and looked at him, not speaking, though, as if deciding how much of what she had learned she should tell him. Vincent recognised that look – he was about to hear something really bad.

“The father of the girl is the CEO of one of the largest construction companies in New York. Gabriel Brannighan. It turns out he was sued for fraud and environmental violations. His

company account was flagged by his bank several times in the past two years. There were a few cases of violence by some of his employees reported to the police, but they couldn't prove anything. The witnesses either changed their minds or disappeared without a trace."

"Or he made them disappear," Joe interjected.

"Probably. It was the fraud that got him to court in January this year. That nailed him. The company folded in March." Diana paused, her look still lingering on Vincent's face.

Vincent knitted his brows while she was talking. "Brannighan... but that sounds..." he thought, trying to remember. A moment later, recognition flashed in his eyes. "Of course..."

"The big case you led in January..." Diana agreed.

"And won," Vincent added slowly in disbelief. It seemed a weird connection linking him with a girl who was just a few minutes ago a complete stranger to him. He couldn't believe how quickly he dropped the name and the case from his mind.

"Let Braggy deal with him!" Those words from the night he was attacked rang in his ears again. It would make perfect sense if...

"Let me guess, his nickname is Braggy..."

Diana nodded. "Yeah, some of his employees mentioned it. Apparently, he couldn't stop bragging about being the best construction business in the city. The loss of the trial made a big stain on his company's reputation, and it seems he can't forgive you for it." Only then did she look away, back at Joe, and notice he was frowning.

"Okay, okay, can someone bring me into the loop, please? What court case and what Braggy? What the hell are you talking about?" he inquired impatiently.

Vincent ran his hand over his face, then exhaled deeply and walked away from the window, needing some movement to focus.

"Vincent was attacked in Central Park a few nights ago," Diana started. Then she explained the events of that night to her boyfriend.

"And neither of you thought it important to report it or at least tell me about it?" Joe exclaimed, feeling somewhere between angry and distressed.

"I thought they were just trying their luck," Vincent said as if in a daze. He vaguely began to understand what the thug meant by "deal". He was probably closer to death that night than he had initially thought.

"Some hell of luck trying!" Joe exclaimed. "Do you have a gun?" he asked Vincent, more calmly.

His friend frowned. "Of course not," he replied.

“You’ll need some protection, buddy. This is not over yet.”

“What about your case, Diana?” Vincent wanted to know, suddenly realising they were straying from their real line of investigation.

The detective thought for a moment before answering, folding her arms.

“I have a strong feeling that by trying to solve your case, we will solve mine, as well... I just need to find out how.”

All three friends stood still for a while, each deep in their own thoughts and yet still very aware of the looming danger.

“You *will* need protection, buddy,” Joe said eventually, still frowning. “I am not waking up tomorrow to the news of a reputable corporate lawyer having been found somewhere in a ditch.”

“I’ll be fine, Joe,” Vincent tried to calm him down.

“Oh, yeah? And how can you be sure of that?”

“I just...” *Dark cloak, shadows of the night, two sapphires burning into his eyes...* “I can’t tell you how; I just *know* it.”

Joe raised his eyebrows but then decided that keeping a cool head was more important than arguing. “I really hope you’re right.” He turned his attention to Diana. “Are you sure you still want to work on this alone?”

Diana glanced at Vincent, then gave a firm answer. “More than ever.”



Catherine was reading *Jane Eyre*, one of her favourite novels and an annual re-read. The truth was, she was stuck on one line for about five minutes now, her mind miles away from Thornfield. Lifting her head, her eyes wandered around the private place she had lived in ever since she was a child. The eclectic mix of antique and second-hand furniture, a large bed with several old cushions and a quilt, a bookcase overflowing with literary classics, an ornamental cabinet filled with all kinds of knick-knacks and souvenirs, a desk with a high-backed wooden chair, the life-size statue of Justice by the entrance, a colourful glass chandelier and several candle holders with candles giving warmth to the space...

For almost thirty years, since she was two years old, this had been her safe place, her hideaway when she needed to escape the harshness of her everyday reality, or simply rest after her daily duties and wanderings. Her chamber had always felt comfortable and pleasant. And still, for the first time in many years, probably ever, it wasn’t enough to calm the chaotic flood of her thoughts.

Ever since that fateful night, she had been more restless than before, but tonight, she felt something else as well, and it puzzled her; the feelings of anxiety and uncertainty ran through her veins so palpably that she knew they weren't just her own. She was always more sensitive toward someone else's emotions, but this felt stronger than anything she had ever experienced. Moreover, the moment the sensation of deep longing, like a strong echo, reverberated in her heart, she knew the source of these emotions.

I wish we could meet again... I need you...

Shutting the book and replacing it on her nightstand, she reached for her cloak and briskly walked out of her underground chamber, heading Above. It didn't take her long; hurried by the calling and her own will, she reached the drainage tunnel exit within a few minutes. Catherine listened for any unwanted sounds outside, making sure it was safe to walk out into fresh air. It was quiet out there; the hour was late. However, the sensation of someone's nearness almost overpowered her. She wasn't afraid, though, for she knew this person. One more step, another one, and...

"Catherine!"

Vincent's astonished voice, despite the surprise, still hushed, made her stop right outside the tunnel. She took a deep breath, taking in his bewildered face in the moonlight.

"Vincent..."

He walked slowly to meet her, however, glancing around at first. He stopped at arm's length from her and looked into her eyes. She was barely hidden underneath the hood.

How did you know?

"I thought you needed me," Catherine replied quietly; her soft voice, touched by gravel, was like music to his ears.

Vincent's smile was veiled by sadness. "I wanted to see you," he said, "very much... However, there is also another reason."

He told her the story of the lost girl and the indirect connection to his attack; Catherine listened carefully, the tension on her face revealing worry about Vincent's life, but also recognition of a kind.

"So you and your friend believe the girl lives in the Tunnels," Catherine repeated, deep in thought.

"Yes, there is no other explanation. The police would have found her by now if she was living in the streets. Alive or..." His voice faded.

Catherine nodded. "I understand." She appeared to be thinking about something, at war with herself.

“How did you know I needed you?” Vincent suddenly returned to her earlier statement.

She sighed. “I know this will sound strange to you, but... ever since the night we last saw each other... I feel what you’re feeling... I know what you’re thinking...”

The pregnant pause after her statement stretched before Vincent was able to react.

“How is it possible?” he asked, amazed.

“I have always had the ability to sense people’s emotions, but never like this... never this strong.”

The touch... It must have happened when we touched the other night... A connection... A bond...

Despite his bewilderment, Vincent immediately followed another thought.

“People... You mean people here in New York, those who can never see you, or...?” He didn’t finish, but in his eyes, Catherine clearly saw what he truly asked her about. She briefly lowered her eyes.

“I know it’s difficult, but you can trust me,” Vincent tried to reassure her, genuinely meaning it. He didn’t want to pressure her, but if he and Diana were to find the missing girl, he sensed that Catherine was their only chance they had.

Catherine walked a few steps away from him and looked up at the crescent moon; it was bright and clear, casting its cool light at Central Park.

“I was only a baby when I was found,” Catherine started, still looking at the moon, and absently pulling the hood of her cloak down. “Someone left me wrapped in rags at the stairs of the Church of St. Catherine of Sienna in Manhattan. They obviously didn’t want a beast for a child... or perhaps they simply couldn’t look after me; I will never know...” She sighed. “I was brought deep down to the Tunnels, deeper than anyone even knows exist... to a man who used to be a doctor. He became my father. I was sick, feverish... and he saved my life. I could never stand here beside you if it wasn’t for him... and our world.”

She noticed Vincent stepping slowly into her peripheral vision. At last, she dropped her gaze from the sky and met his eyes. They were full of more questions but also of interest, compassion and kindness. Moreover, they were enchanted by the moonlit strands of gold and fire in her hair, gently dancing in the breeze.

“You must understand that the lives of more people than just me and my father are at stake here,” she said, anxious to make it clear before she stepped too far – even if deep down inside, she was convinced Vincent was a man of honour.

“I do understand,” he confirmed and nodded. “But I also know that the girl is the only witness who can help bring justice to Brannighan, not just for what he had done to her.”

Catherine took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Yes, she has been living with us for almost four years,” she gave in. “We wanted to contact her mother once we found out who she was, but she was so deeply distressed and scared of her father that she begged us not to. I have never seen such a fear in anyone’s eyes... Father thought we would give it a while and then try again, but she refused to return Above. So we let her stay.”

“Could I speak to her?” Vincent asked. “I would tell Diana that she had been living with the homeless people in the tunnel parts in which everyone knows people sleep rough. No one will ever find out about... your world, I promise. Or you could try to bring her here, at least, if you think it were safer.”

A sudden rustling in the trees alerted Catherine, and she quickly hid her head under the hood again. Luckily, they both realised it was just an owl taking off for its night adventure. Vincent breathed a sigh of relief.

“All right,” Catherine agreed. “I will bring her to you tomorrow. Hopefully, we can finally relieve her of her burden.”

“And help her bring justice to the man who had marked her for life.”

Catherine nodded.

There was so much Vincent still wanted to ask her, but it was all too overwhelming for him to think straight. Questions attacked him from all parts of his brain, and still, his heart warned him not to frighten her. He wished to get closer to this extraordinary woman, not chase her off again.

“What do you think happened to you?” he asked gently eventually, although guessing the answer. Unbeknownst to him, his companion already sensed what occupied his mind and was ready for this question.

“I don’t know,” Catherine replied, knowing he was asking about her appearance. “I was born... and I survived.”

Warmth shone in Vincent’s eyes like candlelight. “I’m glad you did,” he said, smiling.

Not planning it before, he suddenly gave in to his emotions and reached for her hand. It was gloved again. Vincent’s eyes watched it for a moment, then looked at Catherine – she knew he was asking for permission. Catherine’s reason commanded her to refuse it, and yet, she didn’t want to hide from him anymore. She barely moved her head to nod. Vincent slowly pulled down the leather glove, revealing a small hand, densely covered with soft, ginger fur, and ending with cat-like claws. Catherine flinched, looking away.

“Now you know everything,” she whispered, ashamed. “I never regretted what I am... until now.”

Vincent's studied her face, then his gaze dropped to her hand again. The thumb of his hand, still holding hers, slowly moved along the soft layer of fur.

"You have nothing to regret," he stated. "It is those who left you to die who should regret it."

Something glistened in her sapphire-blue irises before a small smile stretched on her cleft mouth. The stinging shame she had felt just moments ago disappeared.

"Can you tell me where you live?" she asked, changing the topic.

Vincent was caught by surprise, but he told her his address, intrigued.

"Good," Catherine said, satisfied. "Your apartment block has a basement, like every apartment block. Go down there, and look for a door, probably wooden. It's a threshold between the block and the subterranean New York City. Many decades ago, when the blocks were being built, many had secret ways leading to the tunnels, mainly for emergencies. Very few people Above know about and use them these days. It will be safe there."

Vincent knitted his brows, the obvious question in his eyes.

"For both of us to meet tomorrow evening," Catherine clarified, smiling. "That's where you can talk to Laura."

The air between them was filled with anticipation. Vincent knew there was a great chance he could help bring down the man who not only threatened him and committed fraud but also destroyed a family and did horrible things to a little girl. However, in truth, he was even more excited about a chance of seeing Catherine again, and finally in some safe place for her, on his own doorstep...

"I'll be there," he confirmed, smiling, his eyes shining. Subconsciously, he realised he was still holding her hand but didn't release it.

Catherine dared a smile again. With every passing minute spent with this man, her natural shyness with strangers seemed to be dissipating, not completely disappearing but turning into something less frightening and less upsetting - less restricting.

She looked at their joined hands, and Vincent finally freed her from his gentle but warm grip.

"Eight o'clock tomorrow then," she said and, after one last look at him, turned around and walked into the tunnel, swallowed by it.

Vincent stood there for a long time, the upcoming rain already filling his nostrils, which suddenly felt sharper than before. Everything seemed to have shifted since the night he had met this wonder of a woman. How much must she have suffered in her life? And yet, she obviously had people around who refused to look at her and see something most people in his world regard as a beast. Instead, they saw a human being, maybe unusual, maybe flawed, yet still, a human being. And Catherine spoke, walked, and behaved like a human being. She had an almost ethereal quality; she walked, softly and quietly, reminded Vincent of a being from

some beautiful, fantasy world. Her gentleness, kindness, honesty, and bravery spoke of a very special, real human being, though.

And he, Vincent Chandler, couldn't wait to learn more about her.

Chapter 5

"Are you out of your mind?!" Father exclaimed, frowning and on the verge of being furious.

"It's the only way that man can be brought to justice, you know that," Catherine said firmly.

"And the only way that Laura can find some conclusion to what she had suffered, and if she wants... to reunite with her real family. Whatever is left of it."

Her eyes followed the old man as he paced up and down his study space for a while, leaning angrily on his walking stick. Then he stopped, sighed heavily and shook his head.

"Can't you just take Laura up to his threshold? Do you really need to bring him down here? What if he reveals Above how we live here? Do you realise the danger? You barely know this man." Father wouldn't budge so easily.

For many years, he worried about his adoptive child once she started going Above. Now his worries were justified; moreover, she could break the fragile balance they had managed to achieve in their world Below many years ago. With a single act, the carefully built house of cards could fall and shatter into pieces.

"I know I shouldn't show him our world," Catherine admitted, "and I don't know how to explain it, but..." She paused, trying to find the right words to express herself. She looked deep into the man's eyes. "I *know* he will keep our secret safe. I can feel what he's feeling; I know what he's thinking, when he's worried or excited, happy or sad... I looked into his eyes, and they are good, honest, and kind. Those eyes would never lie to me." She let her words sink in with him.

There were people Father deeply loved and respected, but only Catherine could ever shift his whole perspective of things in an absolutely convincing way. His mind relied mainly on reason and mostly needed someone else to make him involve the emotional aspect in decisions about serious matters. His daughter's mind, on the other hand, had always been led by her reason and heart walking hand in hand, one balancing out the other. Today, just as many times before, Father had to admit there was an element of truth in her words.

"I may not always agree with you. However, I have always respected your opinions, and you have proved time and time again that you are worthy of my trust," he said after some

consideration. His aged hand cupped her cheek, covered with fine, barely visible fur. “All right, do what you must, and I will pray that things will turn out the right way for everyone.” Catherine’s excitement was palpable in the sparkle in her eyes. “Thank you, Father,” she said and kissed his cheek before leaving him.

“Godspeed, child,” he whispered. He was still worried, but his eyes were smiling.

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(Digital Art by Michaela)

Diana looked at her phone, then at her watch; it was almost nine in the evening. She knew she wouldn’t get a call before nine, but the nervous excitement gripping her every time she was on the verge of a case breakthrough threatened to overwhelm her again.

“Stop it, Bennett,” she reprimanded herself. “He will call as agreed. Give him time.”

The sound of the lift moving up didn’t disturb her; she knew who was coming anyway.

“Oh, oh,” Joe said the moment he saw her. “I know that look. You’re there again.”

Diana looked at him, and seeing his excited grin, she chuckled. “I may be, but it all depends on Vincent. I’m waiting for him to call.”

Joe walked over and joined her on the comfy sofa. “Right, of course, Chandler and his Superman skills,” he quipped, then blissfully stretched his legs.

“Whenever I am on the verge of a breakthrough, I feel like I’ve run five miles – my adrenaline is through the roof, but I’m dead exhausted.”

The detective’s smile widened as she studied his welcoming and cheerful face. There was something about the attorney that always brought her back to earth; however unbalanced she

felt at times, the fundamentally grounded nature of her boyfriend was the only anchor she needed to settle down again – and feel good.

“What?” Joe asked, perplexed, when he glanced at her.

“I love you,” Diana stated, straightforward as always.

The Deputy D.A. beamed, then let his head fall backwards, resting his head.

“You know, if you need something, you can say that without an introduction.” He chuckled.

“Can’t I say what I feel without needing anything?” Diana asked, amused.

Joe turned to her, his eyes softening. “Of course, you can. I’m just not used to you saying it often... I guess it caught me by surprise,” he explained, taking her hand.

The loud phone ring made them jerk, breaking the tender moment. Diana quickly reached for the receiver.

“Hello?”

“*Checkmate,*” came the reply from the other end of the line.

She exhaled, her eyes burning with thrill.

“Thank you,” she said, stressing each word, truly meaning it.

“*Tomorrow, as agreed.*”

“See you there,” she replied and hung up slowly.

Joe raised his eyebrows. “Am I assuming correctly you’ve had a breakthrough?”

Diana smiled, the cautious feeling of victory slowly creeping into her veins.

“Superman has saved the day,” she stated, and kissed him before getting up, deciding that another coffee was in order.

“By the way,” Joe called after her, making her turn to meet his eyes. “I love you too.”

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The morning was grey and gloomy, filled with another rain shower that had just passed. None of that mattered at the New York Police Department, though. Come rain or shine, crime knew no weather; it was the same in any conditions. The phone at the reception was ringing with very few breaks, the coming and going police officers seemed busy on duty.

“That one seems to really hate this place,” Vincent said quietly and slightly hinted with his head at a man in his late twenties, sitting handcuffed in a row of chairs opposite. He seemed angry, looking like a walking advertisement for Levi’s, just accidentally having been attacked

by a bunch of dogs. He had several piercings on various visible (and probably invisible) places and a few tattoos, mainly of skulls and snakes.

“I can’t imagine why,” Diana murmured back, suppressing a cheeky smile. Her eyes absently wandered around the space. *They are surely taking their time.*

Vincent looked at the teenager sitting between them. Laura Brannighan was thirteen, skinny, long-limbed; the fringe of her long, dark hair was falling into her frightened brown eyes. She was dressed in a strange mix of second-hand clothes, including a brown, patched-up jacket. The small hands in her lap were shaking.

“It will be all right,” Vincent tried to reassure her, placing his hand gently over her hands. “Diana will be there with you.”

Laura carefully lifted her large doe eyes to his face. From the moment she saw his eyes for the first time the night before, she realised Catherine was right.

“You can trust this man...”

Looking into those eyes, she realised one more thing: there was the same kindness and honesty in them as in her friend’s eyes.

“Laura Brannighan?” A serious man in his forties, dressed formally, with a name badge pinned to his grey shirt, approached the trio, making them lift their heads.

“Yes,” Diana spoke for the girl and stood up from her chair, pulling Laura gently with her.

“Lieutenant Herman. Come with me, please,” the police man requested.

Diana and the girl looked at Vincent.

“It will be all right,” he repeated to Laura once more, smiling. The girl nodded, but no smile reached her sad eyes before they both disappeared behind the door across the room.

Vincent sat down again, suddenly very tired. He hadn’t slept much over the last couple of weeks, mainly due to his overly active brain. Apart from Laura’s case, which he hoped would help bring a child safely to its mother again, he couldn’t shake off the thoughts of Catherine, the wonderfully mysterious enigma that occupied his mind and heart. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. It happened only the night before, but the memory of it was as vivid as if it happened just a few minutes ago...

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He walked into the basement, a dusty place crammed with all sorts of things, including several piles of boxes, the contents of which Vincent had no interest in. After carefully looking around and trying to identify a hidden door, he pushed aside one of the box piles. Behold, a small wooden door appeared before him, just waiting to be opened like a magical gate to a

world beyond his dreams. And that was exactly how he saw it when his hand reached for the handle and pushed the door open – he was entering a new world.

The short ladder behind the door replaced the staircase he would have expected. He stepped on it, pulling the door behind him and securing it with a latch. He walked down the ladder until, shortly after, his feet touched the cold and dusty stone floor. A ray of milky-white light appeared before him, originating somewhere above him and illuminating the otherwise darkened and empty space around him. He walked through it, and when he stepped out of it, appearing like a bunny from a magician's hat, his heart lurched, and his eyes lit up.

And there, at the spot where someone knocked a large opening into the wall, creating a entrance into the tunnel behind, two figure stood calmly, already waiting for him: one that he knew, veiled in a long cloak, the other new to him – a young and insecure teenager, seeking a shelter close by the side of her companion, whose hand rested on the girl's shoulder. She may have appeared happy with other children, but now, thrust into the cruel reality of her past, she was the same frightened child that ran away from home almost four years before.

"This is Laura," Catherine's soft, almost hushed voice filled the silence. The girl nodded shyly, acknowledging Vincent's smile.

"Laura, this is Vincent," Catherine went on, pausing briefly, "my friend."

Hearing those words, the only man present felt elated.

"Hello, Laura," he said, focusing on the child after the initial surprise. "I have a friend, a detective, who came across your case. I presume Catherine told you why we wanted to meet you."

Another silent nod from the teenager.

"We were hoping we could help you, if you are willing to help us."

He looked at Catherine, hoping he didn't push too much, but her face seemed relaxed and calm.

"Will I have to speak with the police?" Laura spoke for the first time, her voice a little shaky.

"Only if you feel up to it," Vincent replied. "No one is going to press you into doing what you yourself don't want to do."

The girl looked at Catherine, who smiled at her. "Maybe you could tell Vincent first?" she suggested, caressing her silky hair in a motherly way.

Laura averted her eyes from her back to Vincent and nodded, making him smile.

Catherine and Vincent's eyes met again. Understanding and compassion passed between them. And although he didn't say it out loud, Catherine heard his words in her mind as they floated through their recently created bond - he said 'Thank you'...



The buzz and constant motion in the reception room of the Police Department pulled Vincent out of his thoughts. He looked at his watch: Laura and Diana had been speaking to Lieutenant Herman for about fifteen minutes. He was sure it would take more than that to paint a clearer picture of Gabriel Brannighan and the abuse he committed against his own daughter.

Therefore, he was surprised that after only about another ten minutes, the office door behind which they disappeared suddenly opened, and the trio walked out. Laura was visibly shaken, but there was a change in her eyes and posture; it seemed as though the fear she had been feeling for years was slowly being overshadowed by something else – courage and determination to do what was right.

“I should know the time frame by the end of the week,” Lieutenant said to Diana. “We’ll get the warrant today, and it shouldn’t take long for the judge to go through the evidence and set the date.”

“Will he get arrested?” Laura suddenly interrupted them. The policeman couldn’t decide whether there was hope or sadness in her eyes.

“Definitely,” he answered firmly. “Your testimony at the trial and his previous records, including the unproven violent cases initiated by his company, will be more than enough to put him behind bars for a long time.” He looked back at Diana. “Where will she be staying? We should contact her...”

“No need,” Vincent interrupted him, glancing at his watch again.

His eyes wandered toward the main entrance, and ready to continue with his explanation, he noticed a tall woman in her early forties, with a worn face that once must have been called beautiful, and clutching a large handbag, nervously approaching the reception clerk.

“She will be in safe hands,” he said, smiling, pointing at the woman. They all looked in the same direction. “Laura, there is someone else who would like to see you.”

At that moment, the woman turned her eyes toward them, following the clerk’s pointing hand. Her red eyes, tired from a recent cry, filled with tears, and she walked slowly, almost in disbelief, to meet them. Vincent regarded Laura, and her reaction was one that he had expected: she released Diana’s hand and walked to meet the woman halfway.

“Mom...” she whispered and fell into her starved mother’s arms, tears running down her face as well.

Diana watched the two quietly, feeling both joy but also sadness. Vincent noticed her thoughtful expression, correctly guessing his best friend’s conflicting emotions.

“It won’t be easy. The trial will be a nightmare for Laura,” he remarked. “But they will heal together. They are not alone anymore.”

“Will there ever be a day when no one is truly alone?” Diana asked, her small smile touched by melancholy.

“To be honest, I don’t think so,” Vincent mused. “All we can do is hope that we all find the one who chases the clouds of loneliness away sooner or later, and despite all the bad and ugly, helps us find goodness and joy in our lives.”

The two friends smiled at each other, leaving the rest hanging in the air. Today was no time for gloom; hope was breaking away the clouds at least for a while.

“Considering the attack on you, we’ll put them in a witness protection programme right now,” Lieutenant said to Vincent, seemingly unaffected by the conversation; sentiment was not something that would define or influence a policeman, at least not while he was on duty. “They will be safe from him until and during the trial. We should put someone to look out for you, too.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Vincent rejected his idea immediately, with a friendly expression, though. “I’ll be fine.”

The policeman didn’t seem convinced, but looking at the young man beside him, something was telling him he would be all right indeed.

“It’s your call,” he said, then looked back at the mother and daughter. “We can explain the situation to them now.”

“Thanks,” Diana replied, back to her practical self. “Just give them one more minute. They haven’t seen each other for four years.”

“Sure,” the policeman agreed, not too fazed by a little wait.

Vincent was just about to shake the policeman’s hand to thank him when he was almost crushed by Laura, who suddenly ran and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you!” she exclaimed with a strained voice.

Vincent, taken aback, chuckled and hugged her in return. Just before, he noticed she was finally smiling. “You’re most welcome.”

Diana folded her arms, watching them, and the corners of her mouth turned upwards.



The following evening, Vincent was walking home, having just left his work. For a change, he didn’t run away in the middle of the day, but stayed throughout his whole office hours, meeting his clients as arranged, and finishing up paperwork on his recently closed cases. Rita, despite glad she didn’t have to re-schedule anything for him at least for a day, was slightly

uneasy about this. The way the man she grew to love like her own son calmly and methodically went on about his working day felt somehow amiss.

“Is everything all right?” Rita asked when she accepted a pile of documents to file from him.

“Of course, why?” Vincent inquired, his eyes focused on packing up his briefcase and tidying up his desk.

His assistant remained quiet, however, frowning.

Vincent lifted his eyes to her, noticing her expression. He smiled. “Nothing to worry about, I promise you,” he assured her. “Just file those documents and, please, tell my Dad I’ll see him at the restaurant at eight thirty. He’s in a late meeting, but he should be out soon.”

Rita stared at him above the rim of her glasses, her suspicion rising. “You and your father? A dinner? In the middle of the week?”

Vincent laughed, closed his briefcase and walked around his desk. She almost lost her composure as he hugged her.

“Everything will be all right,” he said, with a wide smile, as he pulled back.

Rita didn’t even manage to react, when she saw his back disappearing behind the office door.



The night was warm; the smells of various restaurants and fast food places, along with the dustbins, mingled, permeating the air. Vincent had a spring in his step on his way home. After a pleasant dinner with his father, he decided to skip a cab and take a walk instead. He felt an abundance of energy and enthusiasm, much more than in recent years. The events of the past weeks awakened something in him he couldn’t really define, but with each passing day, he was getting closer to it.

He was so deep in thought that he registered too late a quick shadow of a movement behind him as he entered a side alley, not dissimilar from one that changed the course of his life a few weeks ago. The arm tightening around his neck like pliers was quick, too quick for him to react in time, and the flash of a knife at his throat brought a flashback to his mind.

You have to be kidding me...

“Mister Brannighan sends his warm regards,” a creepy, quiet voice said into his ear. “He thanks you for your attention and sends his goodbye!”

The sudden rage that filled Vincent’s heart gave his well-built body more strength than even he had imagined. Despite the painful pressure on his neck, his elbow punched the man’s stomach with all the power he could muster, and with one mighty swing, he knocked him to the ground. Quickly, he picked up the knife the man dropped after the punch. He knelt at his

attacker's side and pointed the tip of the knife at his chest. The man stopped groaning and wriggling, the natural fear of death overpowering the pain from the hit.

"There are so many more and safer ways to make big money if that's what you're after," Vincent said, his voice strained with anger, his eyes ablaze, an almost black veil covering their emerald green. "If your boss thinks it's cool to give orders from behind bars, then tell him that if he wants to get rid of me, he will have to do it himself!" He paused, steadying his heavy breathing. "Which, under the circumstances, might be a bit difficult. So, tell him thank you and good luck with that!"

The man's eyes held nothing but fear. He surely thought he was dealing with a madman.

"Now get lost!" Vincent hissed and backed off, watching him.

The man rose slowly, his eyes still on his supposed victim, slightly hunched. Without much thinking, he began running away from Vincent, who was still holding the knife in his hand. Only once he lost sight of his attacker did Vincent bend over, exhaling deeply. His heart was calming, returning to its normal rate.

When he straightened himself up again and lifted his eyes, he spotted a dark figure standing on the other end of the alley, veiled in a long, dark cloak, watching him. The distance between them seemed insignificant; he felt her presence as strongly as if she were standing beside him. For a moment, he thought about moving closer, but something stopped him, some inexplicable calling within his heart.

Not here, not now...

Catherine's heart was slowing down too; she had run faster than ever before, and her still-heaving chest was the sign of it. She was only a few blocks away, watching the city lights from the roof of a high-rise building, when she felt the sudden sharp stab near her heart. She was ready to do anything... Luckily, she didn't need to, for Vincent proved pretty efficient in self-defence as well.

At least he didn't need to see it, not yet...

Vincent finally smiled and nodded. And then he watched her slowly turn around, walk into the shadows and disappear like a ghost.

Chapter 6

April had long given way to May and May to June, when Vincent turned off the light in the small kitchen of his otherwise spacious Manhattan apartment near Central Park and walked into the wide living room, carrying two steaming mugs.

"Your coffee, Miss Bennett," he said cheerfully, passing one mug to Diana.

“If you call me Elizabeth, I will send Joe to straighten you out,” she teased, enjoying the warmth in her hands.

Vincent chuckled and sat down next to her on one of the two smaller, but comfy sofas covered with warm, chestnut coloured fabric. For a while, they remained silent, just drinking and resting at the end of the workday. The prospect of a restful weekend lingered pleasantly on their minds. The hands of a vintage clock on the desk in the corner were slowly approaching ten, but the calming effect of Vincent’s forest- and wood-themed colour scheme in his apartment lulled both into a state of calm, seemingly slowing the passing of minutes.

After almost a month of adrenaline-filled events, it was pleasant to enjoy a simple act of being, and in Vincent’s case, not having to watch over his shoulder, watching out for any danger. After Gabriel Brannighan got arrested for child abuse, the date of his trial was set for June 3, and a record three days later, he was convicted to eleven years in prison, without probation. His previous offences, the proven and alleged ones added, caught up with him, doing him no favours. Laura, with her testimony, proved a much stronger and more determined witness than anyone could have thought, leaving no doubt about her father’s guilt. After she left the witness stand, Vincent saw her look her father right in the eyes, holding her head high as she passed him to rejoin her mother. He knew how much it cost her, but he couldn’t help but feel pride in her. The terrified child grew into a young, strong woman in just a few weeks. Although still only thirteen, what she had experienced matured her way quicker than it would be natural and ideal.

“Laura is leaving with her mother to Chicago next week,” Diana said, still cradling her mug.

“I know. Her uncle lives there. They will stay with him and his family for a while, until Laura’s mother finds a new job,” Vincent elaborated. “A fresh start in a new place will be good for them.”

“A chance to forget?”

Vincent shook his head, a sad smile settling on his face. “They will never forget, but they will have time to accept it and move on. The reconnection with family will do them both good. I heard her uncle is a good man.”

They went quiet again for a moment, chilling in the dimmed, warm lights of several lamps placed around the room. The question had been on Diana’s mind for a while now, but she never found the right moment to ask. However, she thought the time had finally come.

“All those years... Laura wasn’t staying with the homeless, was she?”

Vincent froze, suspended in time, and struggled between his loyalty to his best, life-long friend and his newly found friend. At last, he relaxed, giving in, but only a little.

“No,” he said quietly, “but she was... safe and loved.”

Diana studied his profile, lined with a long wave of blond hair; it reminded her of ancient Greek statues. Her lips curled into a small smile of recognition.

You don't want to, or maybe can't talk about it... You must have a good reason.

"And that is all I need to know, I guess," she added knowingly. "For now."

Vincent dared to look into her inquisitive but calm eyes; his own gaze was an enigma. He smiled and gave a little nod. "Yes."

Diana's smile widened. She averted her eyes from him, finished her coffee and stood up.

"It's getting late. I better go, or Joe will think you kidnapped me. Besides, I need to walk off the caffeine."

Vincent chuckled. "I told you herbal tea would be better this time of day."

"Yeah, keep on trying for another twenty years, and maybe you'll convert me," she teased.

He followed her to the front door, opening it for her.

"Catch up soon again?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied, smiling. "I hope it will be sooner than in three months, and it won't involve any crime."

He snorted, nodding. "Take care and..." His face grew sombre. "Thank you."

She gave him a peck on the cheek and left.

Vincent shut and locked the door, and a deep sigh tore from his throat. After a couple of comfortable hours with his friend, he was back to his aloneness, with only his thoughts and memories to keep him company. It wasn't what made him sad, though; it had been over a week since he had last seen Catherine...

After the trial finished, and Laura and her mother revealed their future plans, Catherine seemingly had no reason to meet him again. He knew she was safer Below, as she called it, beneath the New York streets. She had a home there, and apparently, people who loved and protected her, although she still kept a shroud of secrecy over the whole concept. And yet, he couldn't help but feel bereft of what was and what might have been. He missed the warmth in the sapphire blue of her deep-set eyes, her soft feline features, the way moonlight reflected in her long, golden hair, the kindness and care in her words and actions, the way she seemed to know what he was feeling and thinking. He had never felt such a connection and closeness to anyone before, despite having met her only a handful of times. Was he really meant to forget about her and live his life as he had done until they met? Impossible...

He walked into his cozy bedroom, but wasn't sleepy at all. Opening the French door, he entered his spacious balcony, overlooking Central Park and hundreds of lights from the high-

rise buildings all around, illuminating the New York night. His lungs rejoiced at the deep intake of the now cooler air, and Vincent briefly closed his eyes after he leaned against the brick half-wall. It brought him no relief, though, for all he saw in his mind's eye was the face he was supposed to forget about.

“Urgh!”

He shook his head, in a vain attempt to bring himself to his senses, when his eyes dropped to the wrought-iron bench next to him. He liked sitting and reading on it when he had a bit of time for himself after long and not very stimulating days of his corporate lawyer job. This time though, it wasn't a book he saw on it. This time, it was an envelope with one word written on it by somebody with neat handwriting: *Vincent*.

His heart skipped a beat, and although there was no logic to it – especially considering he lived on the eighteenth floor – he knew whose handwriting it was. His hands hastily opened the envelope to reveal a brief note.

10.30 tonight, where we met for the second time... C.

His melancholy forgotten, he rushed inside, grabbing his black denim jacket and keys on the way to the front door, and not even a minute later, the apartment was plunged into darkness and silence.

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It was 10.35 when Vincent hurriedly reached the drainage tunnel. All the way, he was cursing himself for not going to the balcony earlier; he wouldn't have to worry about missing Catherine. He breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the familiar hooded figure waiting for him. She was smiling, with that unusual but warming smile on her cleft mouth, more genuine and heartfelt than any he had seen before.

“I'm sorry,” he apologised when he reached her. “I found your note quite late.”

He knitted his brows, only now thinking about how Catherine could have delivered it eighteen floors up to his balcony. “How did you...?”

She lowered her eyes, amused. “I often climb buildings to watch over the city from the rooftops. There are safe ways to do that without being seen.”

Vincent's amazement at her was growing. He watched her incredulously, a smile growing on his face. “I've never met anyone like you in my life.”

Catherine's smile faded, and she looked away.

“I know what men do to someone like me,” she stated sadly. “There is no place for someone like me in your world.”

Vincent realised his mistake and was keen to elaborate.

“I’m not talking about your appearance,” he started before she turned away from him completely. “I mean the kind of person you are.”

She dared to look at him again, and he saw the sadness slowly lifting from her eyes. He could only imagine how much her extraordinary appearance must have undermined her self-confidence.

“Sometimes courage and kindness can be found in the most unimaginable places,” he added, willing her to understand. “They are even more precious then.”

Catherine felt herself sinking in his eyes. She couldn’t disregard the truth she felt she had lived all her life.

“All great and precious things are lonely,”^{iv} “ she quoted quietly.

Vincent reached for her hand, noticing the glove was missing.

“Not any more.”

They walked in Central Park for a while, hand in hand, always close to shadows and dark places, if the need to hide arose; however, being lucky that night – the park was truly deserted, as if it wanted to give this unlikely pair a chance they might otherwise never get. They stopped at the Lake, its liquid surface glistening in the moonlight.

“I had a long talk with my father today,” Vincent said after a while. “About where I am at this point of my life and where I want to be.”

Catherine listened calmly. “He sees you in a different place than you see yourself?”

“He did,” Vincent replied, smiling at her bright mind. “He thought I would follow his footsteps, become a corporate lawyer - which I did - work side by side him, and take over his company one day.” He paused. “After everything that happened recently... I know I can never be that person.”

Catherine looked at his serious face. “Perhaps you have a different purpose in life,” she pondered. He looked at her, listening with interest. “You are a man who cares about people and doesn’t hesitate to help them even in the face of danger... Perhaps that is your true path, being the voice of those who truly need help, a help that can decide about their life or death.”

Vincent was lost in the light in her deep-set eyes; his lips curled into a knowing smile.

“That’s exactly what I told my father.” Catherine smiled. “Corporate Law is mainly about money. I’m interested in people... That’s why I applied for a District Attorney’s Assistant job. I have an interview on Monday.”

She didn't say anything for a long beat, just kept looking into his eyes, smiling, but the light squeeze of her hand told Vincent his decision was the right one.

"Laura is coming Below tomorrow to say goodbye to everyone." Catherine changed the topic at last.

"You managed to contact her?" Vincent asked, amazed.

She smiled and turned to see his face. "There are things... so many things you don't know about us."

"Tell me," he demanded gently.

Catherine kept her gaze on him for a long while. "I spoke to Father, and he agreed." She chuckled softly. "It took a bit of convincing, but he did in the end."

"Agreed to what?" Vincent asked, smiling again.

She looked down at their joined hands: his smooth one, with long, elegant fingers; her clawed one, covered with fine fur. The surreal image made her hesitate, but only for a moment before wonder pushed the uneasy feeling away.

"Come," she said. "Let me show you our world."

Vincent released the breath he was holding and followed her, walking in a mildly dazed state.

Wherever you go, wherever you are, I'm with you... forever...

He only woke up from the enchantment when he saw the outline of the drainage tunnel ahead of them, the warm orange glow breaking free from inside. And as Catherine led him inside - after checking the area for possible watchers, as always - Vincent knew only one thing for sure: nothing was ever going to be the same as before.

It was going to be better.

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DIGITAL ART

AI Art by Michaela



Season 3 and Beyond

DIGITAL ART

by Mel





Stepmothers

(S4)

by Mel

The sound of repeated, but sporadic thuds drew Vincent's attention as he moved into the library to find his eight-year-old son sitting in a pile of books. His blond head was bent in concentration for a moment before he tossed the book aside and moved onto another one.

"Jacob, what are you doing?" Vincent asked, bending down to retrieve the discarded book. Gold lettering embossed on the cover read Grim Fairy Tales. His literary heart ached as her made to smooth the bent page back into place to reveal the story of Snow White.

"It's true," Jacob mumbled to himself as he turned a page of another book.

"Is something troubling, Jacob?" Vincent asked.

The boy remained quiet, but the mystic bond shared between father and son answered for him. Uneasiness and a twinge of guilt all warred within his son's heart as he discarded another tome with a shake of his head dismayed.

Another book of folk tales, Vincent noted quietly. Not his son's typical reading material, preferring the likes of Tom Swayer and Shakespearian comedies.

"What are you looking for, Jacob?" Vincent asked, trying a different approach.

"All these books say how evil stepmothers are," Jacob said.

"Jacob, these are just stories--"

"Oh they act all nice at first," Jacob continued as if his father hadn't said anything. "But after they marry the father, their real selves come out."

Vincent sighed, hearing the voices of the other children in his son's words. Some children whose lives had been much harder than Jacob's before they had found sanctuary in the tunnels while others parroted the misconception of stepmothers. In trying to seek answers, his son had only found confirmation in these fictional tales.

Vincent lowered himself to the floor and sat beside his son. "Jacob, these books you're looking to aren't real."

Jacob looked up at him. His large blue eyes (so much like his birth mother, Catherine) stared at him, pleading for answers. And despite his old soul, compared to other children, Vincent had to remember his son was just a child of eight.

“Jacob, if you’re worried about Diana-”

“She’s gonna be my stepmom.”

“Jacob, I asked you if you wanted that,” Vincent gently reminded his son. “I know you love Diana and you’ve known her basically since you born. How can you even think she’ll be a wicked stepmother?”

Jacob tapped one of the books around him. “They never start out wicked, Dad.”

Vincent took the book from his son. “You know, Diana, Jacob. She is a wonderful person.”

“I know, Dad, but-”

The tapping on the pipes overhead signaled Kipper was looking for Jacob.

Vincent opened his mouth to continue the conversation, but the boy hurried out of the room to join his friends. Away from the worries of the upcoming marriage.

Vincent waited until the footsteps had faded before he spoke. “Are you alright, Diana?”

A moment later Diana Bennett stepped into the chamber. Despite her vibrant red mane of hair, it still surprised him how quietly she could move and blend into the shadows if need be.

Dressed in a black shirt and beige pants with her green coat slung over her arm, she took in the scene of discarded books with a quick glance before settling on Vincent.

“I’m sorry,” Vincent said after a moment. “How much did you hear?”

Diana bent down to retrieve one of the books. Her fingers ran gingerly over its faded green spine. “Thought I would take a page out of these books and leave midway through.” She glanced over at him, offering a small smile. “I heard everything...no worries.”

Even as she said not to worry, the smile slipped from her face. Her blue eyes fell again on the book, but Vincent sensed her attention was at the same place as he was: the silver band on her ring that Vincent had given her only a month ago.

A quiet, contemplative silence settled over the chamber, both lost in their thoughts. Vincent studied the woman in front of him. Though they shared no mystical bond as he once shared with Catherine, and now Jacob, his strong empathic powers could still read beneath the lines of her stoic nature.

“You know,” Diana said flipping through one the books. “Jake, has a point. None of these stories show good stepparents.” Her lips lifted in a soft grin trying to lighten the mood. “I wonder what most people would say if they knew the ‘wicked stepmother’ troupe was originally the actual mother.” Again her smile faded, but into mild regret. “Not that Catherine would ever-”

“I know what you meant, Diana,” Vincent said. He crossed over to her and took the book of fairy tales from her. Setting it down, while keeping his focus on her. “And you would never be a wicked stepmother.”

“Are we rushing into this too quickly?” Diana asked softly. “I know Jake said he was onboard, but now...” She ran the back of sleeve across her face, stubborn and unwilling to let him see her tears.

Vincent drew her into an embrace. His clawed hands gently ran them through her crimson mane. Despite being welcomed by those in the tunnels, he sensed a quiet, subconscious place inside her still felt undeserving of the love given to her.

“Diana,” he stepped back to look into her eyes. “Listen to this now. I gave you this ring as symbol of my admiration and love for you. Catherine was my cherished love, who gave me Jacob and a beautiful dream of what could have been.”

Diana glanced down.

“But,” Vincent continued. “It was only a dream, one we never got the chance to make a reality. You brought me back from the depths of despair and gave me a reason to keep living and to fight. You avenged Catherine’s murder and brought my son back to me. And you have helped this community time and again over these last eight years.”

Diana nodded.

Vincent’s hand gently raised her head. His clawed hand cupped her cheek until they were staring at each other. “But as you said when we first met, you are not Catherine. She lives on in my memories and in Jacob, and I cherish both greatly.”

“And I would never want you to forget Catherine.”

Vincent’s blue eyes sparkled. “I know that, but there is no comparison between you. You, Diana Bennett, have found a place in my heart all on your own. I wouldn’t have asked for your hand in marriage if I didn’t love you with my whole heart.”

“And I love you, Vincent,” Diana said, her own hand rising to caress his face. “And I love Jacob.”

“I know despite his words just know that he loves you as well. You’ve been in his mother in all the ways that matter.”

“Then what do we do?”

Vincent took her hand from his face and gently kissed her knuckles like a prince from a fairy tale. “If you don’t mind waiting...”

“No, I don’t mind,” Diana said.

“Jacob will come around.”

Diana nodded once more and kissed him.



DIGITAL ART

by Judith Nolan



The Green Dress; A Second Chance

by Jackie Kapke

(SEASON THREE)

Once more, he sat with Diana in her warehouse loft apartment. Little Jacob, who was teething, and therefore miserable, had not come along. Dear Mary had offered Vincent a much-needed reprieve from his beloved, but quite irritable little boy.

Diana had made lasagna, crusty, savory garlic bread, and a salad. After dinner, they had enjoyed wine and quiet conversation.

Dinner and dishes done, they were both engrossed in the case Diana was currently working on. They sat huddled over the notes and newspaper articles scattered across her desk.

Her work had always been very personal, private, and even intimate to her. She had never allowed anyone to assist her until now.

Several weeks ago, Vincent had sensed her frustration and offered his assistance. She had been so desperate for a solution that she let him go over her notes on the case, and with one simple suggestion, he had given her a clue to its solution. Because he had assisted her in solving the crime more rapidly, two lives had been saved from a sadistic psychopath.

Since then, he was warmly welcomed into her once secretive investigations. With his insight and unusual perspective, things often fell easily into place. Again and again, she had to marvel at his intelligence, his wonderfully analytical mind, and, she had to admit, they worked well together. Vincent enjoyed helping Diana and was happy to be doing something worthwhile for people less fortunate than himself in the world Above.

Of course, Diana also had an alternative motive for accepting Vincent's help. It meant that he would stay longer, often well into the night, feeling him close, often legs, shoulders, heads pressed together as they worked. She enjoyed the intimate contact, his manly aroma, and sensed that, although he would never admit it, he enjoyed it as well.

She had fallen in love with him long ago. She knew that to him, she was just a friend; that she could never compare with or replace his Catherine. If friendship was all he could give, she would accept it gladly. She ached to be near him, hear his voice, sense his quiet strength. She was happy that he had allowed her to get even this close. One day, when his heart healed, she prayed that he would love her as well.

On several occasions, as he sensed or saw her weariness, he would massage her stiff shoulders. Diana felt as if she could melt into those powerful hands, and she often reciprocated the gesture. She would wonder if he could sense the pleasure she felt in touching him this way. In a way, she hoped that he could, that perhaps he might realize how deeply she

loved him. Then again, if his feelings were not the same, it was probably best if he couldn't sense her desire.

He was certainly more than just a friend. Who was she kidding anyway? She had fallen in love with the man and his mystique of romance and tenderness long before she rolled over his unconscious form the night he collapsed on Catherine's grave. He filled her life now. Seeing things through his eyes had changed her perspective on everything, forever.

He was sensing some of her feelings. He felt truly blessed that another beautiful, intelligent woman could desire and love him. Though he and Diana did not share a Bond as he and Catherine had, there *was* a connection, and he would often catch wisps of feelings from her. They were both empathic, and though they had not explored the possibilities of their shared powers, he truly believed that one day its occurrence would be awesome. However, he was not yet ready to take that step of discovery.

Diana had become his friend, her home a safe haven for him, a place to get away from the toil and responsibilities of the tunnels. She made no demands of him, accepted him and his friendship completely without question. She was a very dear friend, and though he couldn't admit it to her, at least not yet, she had become far more. He was growing to love her. He needed her voice, her gentle hands, and warmth. He needed a woman's love, no matter how hard he tried to deny it, and though Diana could never take Catherine's place, he was falling in love with her.

She did not try to take Catherine's place. She was only Diana, nothing more, nothing less. He could never have made it through his grief and loss without her kindness, her comfort. He had acknowledged his love for her the moment he stopped her descent into the Abyss along with the psychotic killer Gregory Coyle. It had been far more than the fear of a friend being killed, for she had become his lifeline, as he had become hers; but he was unable to admit it to her yet, or even himself.

Diana was sorting quickly through her notes. She had most of the information on her computer or in the filing cabinets beside the desk, but she realized she had forgotten the filing box with names of contacts and essential data that she kept on the top shelf of her bedroom closet. Some of the information kept there just could not be easily categorized or labeled, so she kept them separate.

She pushed back her chair to retrieve them, but Vincent put his hand on her shoulder.

"Continue what you're doing, Diana. I will get them. I can reach them more easily. Besides, I need a stretch break."

She couldn't argue with his logic. Diana pretended to continue, but watched him from the corner of her eye, her heart beating a little faster.

He arched his head back and let out a huge yawn that bared his fearsome teeth, reached his arms out and up, clenched his fists, and shifted his massive shoulders. Next, he placed his

hands on his hips and thrust his pelvis out as he arched his back again. A low, growling groan and then a sigh escaped his lips once his joints and muscles were satisfactorily stretched.

Diana smiled silently and laughed to herself; he had never been one able to sit still for very long; his limbs would soon cry out for movement. He had no idea how gorgeous he was! (*Or did he?*)

He used her bathroom facilities before entering her bedroom. She smiled again, happy that he was comfortable enough to use her home and all that it had to offer. She was glad that he felt relaxed and safe in it.

He flicked on the bedroom light and found her closet doors already wide open. He immediately saw the box she had described as he reached on tiptoe to bring it down carefully.

Just as he was turning to leave, a shimmering fabric caught his eye. It was the long sleeve of a silk, kelly-green dress with tiny metallic flecks of material shimmering and dancing in the light.

He set the box down on a small table next to him and, as if compelled, he reached out to stroke the glittering sleeve. His huge, work-calloused and roughened hands glided over the luxurious, smooth, cool fabric, and he sighed at its softness. Suddenly his world constricted, until there was nothing but the dress, the faint lingering scent of Diana's perfume and Catherine...

The dress was so like one Catherine had worn one night in Central Park, when they had remained secluded in the woods, listening to the sweet music as it wafted about. She had kissed him, that night... The memory and images were suddenly so clear, so intense... so real...

His fingers lingered on the cuff of the dress and as he dropped his hand, sighing, tears began to fill his eyes. She had been so beautiful that night, and suddenly that image became her face in death as she lay lifeless on her bed, and he had bent to kiss her before leaving her side... forever.

Diana, wondering what was keeping Vincent, came to investigate. She stopped in the doorway, watching him slowly caress the dress. She was just able to make out his profile, for his back was turned away from the light. She saw the look of wonder and pleasure on his face turn to sadness and pain, and she instantly knew where his heart had taken him.

Suddenly, sensing her presence, he dropped his hand, ashamed that he had been caught touching her clothing. He turned his head away, knowing she had seen the wet streaks on his face.

He shuddered, his voice almost cracking, "Forgive me, Diana. I..."

She stepped forward and reached out to touch him, then hesitated, thinking it best not to.

"Vincent, there is nothing to forgive. You are welcome to look at and touch anything I have. You know that."

He nodded, sighing, still unable to look at her.

"I'm sorry that it brought back such sad memories. Something, this dress? Does it remind you of Catherine?"

His chest heaved with the giant exhalation, and he began to sway, barely whispering, "Yes."

It had been almost a year since the night he had lost Catherine. She knew that tragic anniversary was tearing his heart apart.

She gently took his wrist and plopped down into her huge bean-bag chair, patting the spot next to her. "Come over here," she said softly.

He sighed again, shaking his head.

"Come on now," she encouraged.

He finally relented and sat stiffly beside her.

"Come here," she said, holding out her arms. A pained smile crossed his lips, but he leaned forward and rested his great head on her shoulder. Gently, she wrapped her slender arms around him, rocking slightly.

Safer in her arms, he cried quietly, no longer trying to stop the tears that streamed down his cheeks. He sank a little deeper into the chair, his head upon her breast.

She had held him before like this, as he worked through his grief. He was recovering slowly, and the tears came less frequently now. Diana knew that she and Father were the only people Vincent truly opened up to. Only they knew how deep and painful his sorrow was.

She knew that the love he felt for Catherine would never die; but gradually his grief was fading, the agony of her death lessening. He had made room in his heart for her, and Diana was eternally grateful for that. Vincent needed the tenderness of a woman's touch to heal and be whole once again. He had told her that he was blessed, and later that she had become more than just a Helper and a friend to him. But that for now, friendship was all that he could offer.

That was enough... for now. She would hold on, be there, for Vincent would never relinquish that special place in his heart for her, and Diana would never ask it of him. She merely hoped that one day he would find a small place for her. She loved him so, long before she had rolled him to his back on that cold grave, uncertain if he were alive or dead. She was suddenly struck once more by the pathos of his face that night, the sad, agonizing despair etched into his incredible features.

He had touched her heart, and as he healed, she learned of him. She knew that no other men could ever make her feel the way he did. It was like having some mythical being from a fairytale in her home. She smiled to herself as she remembered when she had had him all to

herself, able to touch his cheek, or toy with his marvelous full mane, to listen to his slow, steady heartbeat and respiration. She knew that she would love him... always.

She stroked his head and shoulders, taking a deep breath of his marvelous scent and tilted her face to look into his.

"How ya feeling?" she asked, kissing his forehead and stroking his bangs back to better see his face.

There was still pain in his eyes, but his sorrow had softened.

"Better, thank you, Diana. I... I'm sorry I lost control."

"Don't be sorry, Vincent. I'm not. I've told you before, there's no need to apologize."

"It's so hard to explain. It's just that some things stir such deep memories of her, and I never know when or how... There's no way I can prepare myself when they occur. I become so overwhelmed..."

"Vincent, whenever you need a good cry, a hug, anything, I'm here." She touched his cheek, turning his incredible face towards her. "I'm here," she repeated.

He blinked softly, exhaled, and whispered, "I know."

She pulled him forward once more to kiss his forehead and hug his huge bulk, meeting no resistance. Oh, how she wished she could kiss that mouth. *'Too soon, though, too soon'*, she told herself. *'He's not ready... yet! But maybe one day.'*

Sighing and wiping his face, he looked once more at her closet.

"So, you ever wear them?" Immediately, he felt like a fool for asking such a personal question and knew Diana could tell he was blushing.

"Them?" she asked, looking into the closet. "Oh, the dresses. Well, yes, but I haven't been anywhere lately that..." She stopped in mid-sentence, knowing she had unintentionally hurt him with her words.

The places she and Vincent went did not require clingy, silk gowns and high heels, but rather hiking boots, pants, and jackets.

Vincent was still silently cursing himself as they both felt the tension between them. First of all, he should never have asked such an intimate question and secondly, how foolish, how stupid he'd been.

Where would she have the opportunity to wear such lovely things? Certainly not with him, Below in the tunnels and sewers; not there, or any other place where he could show his face! Granted Catherine had worn dresses, but that was Catherine. Sometimes she would not be very sensible, not like Diana, but he had loved her for it and knew that many times she had dressed for him, for his pleasure alone. The impracticality had not bothered her. She knew

her love enjoyed and deeply appreciated beautiful things, and this had been her gift, one of the many gifts and sacrifices... for him.

He sighed, remembering all this, and wondered how he could ease out of the predicament he'd gotten into with Diana.

Diana was mulling over her own thoughts as she distractedly pulled and teased the thick, silky ends of Vincent's mane.

He looked shyly through his bangs, not knowing what to say. She was wondering if in his subtle way, he had been implying that she never wore dresses and that he might like to see her in one. Perhaps he was tired of seeing her in her frumpy sweats and the damned baseball cap. There had been a few occasions when she wore nice work slacks and sweaters, but as she thought back on it, she mostly wore grubbies. He had never required anything more of her than to just be herself; no frills, nothing fancy, just straightforward and to-the-point Diana.

Well, she thought, maybe it was time for a change, a little. Though tunnel dress was never fancy, he always looked well-groomed and neat for her. Well, except those first few months when he was so devastated by Catherine's loss, but even then, as rumpled and disheveled as he was, he was magnificent.

She sighed and turned to see him staring at her.

A little nervously, he said, "Well, perhaps we should get back to your case." He took a deep breath, and, grasping his massive thighs, stood and stretched.

Diana looked up at him, incredulously; she could see the trace of his tears still marking his features.

"Are you *sure* you're feeling up to it, Vincent? We could call it a night."

He retrieved the box from the table, holding it easily in one arm as he held out his hand to help her out of her low seat.

"I feel we're close to a solution. IF we can spare more innocent lives, it's worth our efforts. Don't you think?"

She couldn't help but smile at the sweet, innocent look on his face.

God, he's adorable.

She squeezed his hand firmly as she rose from her chair.

"I'm very grateful for all the help you've given me, Vincent."

By the way he squeezed her hand back, she knew his sentiments were the same.

Although glad that he was going to stay, Diana had been certain that his sadness over Catherine would terminate their evening on a depressed and tragic note.

She made some of his favorite spiced tea, and they forged ahead, trying to find some clue to the kidnapper's identity. He stayed till almost three am when fatigue finally claimed them both.

Earlier, he had pointed out something she had overlooked. As he leaned forward, pressing against her shoulder, she could do nothing but stare dumbly at him, her mouth open, not hearing a word he said like a love-sick teenager in a trance. He was so incredible, and so unconscious of his effect on her. He had to tilt his head and firmly say her name several times before he could get her attention to what he was saying.

As they straightened the papers up, preparing to call it a night, his hand accidentally brushed hers. They turned to face one another silently, nose to nose; he sighed and raised a hand to tentatively touch her cheek.

"Thank you, Diana," he whispered.

"For what?" she managed to blurt out.

"For being here for me. For all that you have done for me, Jacob, and all the others I love. I... I have no words..."

"You're welcome," she said quickly, before he could expound any further on all her *virtues*. He was embarrassing her and quickly sensed it. A little awkwardly, they embraced.

Watching him depart, she couldn't help but marvel at how easily he blended into the darkness and smiled. They had definitely made progress on the case, as well as their relationship, that night.



After pulling on his nightshirt, Vincent collapsed into his bed. He longed for sleep, the one haven he and Catherine still shared. It was here that she would return to fill him with her sweet presence. Often now, in his dreams, Catherine would become a very real spirit; her scent, her voice, her caresses touching him in deep places; places where he would never forget her.

He would cry in his dreams, weeping as he stroked her, touched her, held her close. He would tell her how deeply he loved her and would show her all that he had never been able to before. She would give her love in return. For here they were at last one, truly together with no secrets or words left unsaid, and she understood, her tears mixing with those of her gentle lover. It was all so very real, as always; all she ever wanted was for him to be happy, and this she repeated over and over.

Catherine knew that Diana could make him happy, and she begged him not to miss this second chance for love. Catherine asked him not to deny the stirrings in his heart. She knew he felt deeply for Diana, and deep down he knew it as well. There was no hiding it from her all-knowing ways.

He was still tortured, feeling betrayal to his first love, but Catherine implored him not to feel that way. She did not want him to isolate himself and mourn her for the rest of his life. She wanted him to live and love again. He had too much love inside to keep it forever locked away, and he needed a woman's touch just as much as their little son did.

Catherine kissed him one last time that night, his arms shaking as she pulled away from his naked warmth. As gently as she could, Catherine told him she would come less often now. It was the way it must be. He must go on in the living world, on with his life and make new dreams.

Vincent reached for her and called her name, but she faded into the shadows of his chamber. Before her image vanished completely, she closed her eyes and blew him a kiss, and he heard the sweet melody of her voice, repeating the same poignant encouragement he had once spoken to her.

You have the courage, my love. I know you do-do-do-o-o-o-...

The words faded as they echoed into silence. Soon, he fell into a dreamless sleep, tears drying upon his cheeks.



The next evening, Vincent sat on the ledge watching the triple falls. It was cool and peaceful; a good place to unwind and think. Legs crossed, one hanging over the edge, he tossed pebbles into the water below.

He knew that Catherine would not be in his dreams tonight, and it saddened him. He knew then what he experienced with her visits was more than dreams, and they had never been more vivid, more real than last night. He had told no one, certain that if he had, they would believe him hopelessly insane, even Father. So, he decided to keep Catherine's visits to himself, forever.

Vincent knew in his heart that Catherine had spoken the truth. Diana had become more than a friend... far more. He sat still letting the sound of the water fill his senses, listening to it and his heart.

Catherine was right; he needed Diana, he knew it with all that he was, and as strange as it seemed, she needed him as well... wanted *him*. He slowly shook his tousled head in wonder; Diana had become such a necessary part of his life, vital to his very existence, just as Catherine still was. He smiled.

Yes, he was falling in love. As much as he resisted, as much as he had tried to be only a friend and keep his distance, he *was* falling in love. Any fool could see that.

Is it really so terrible? After many hours of silent soul-searching, he had his answer. *No, not at all!*

He knew Diana had similar feelings for him; he was almost certain she had from the beginning. She had told him how his image haunted her dreams, how she couldn't forget him, even though they had both tried.

He could sense snatches of her desire and longing. There had been no way to hide it in her eyes.

He had felt the same stirrings in his breast. He longed for a woman's gentle touch, her softness and warmth. For so long now, all he had felt was the bleeding hole left by Catherine's death. His son had once again opened up to him the possibility of life and love, and now, with Catherine's spirit offering encouragement, he would go forward and discover where Diana's love would take them.

He knew she expected nothing, asked nothing, but he also knew her heart was yearning for love... *his* love. He was blessed with a second chance.



It had been several days since Diana had seen Vincent. He had come to her terrace after dark, tapping his nails on the window, momentarily causing her heart to skip a beat. He had come to invite her Below to a celebration the next night. Shyly, he asked if he could escort her and she accepted without hesitation. It was to be a grand party honoring Father's forty-five years as undisputed patriarch of their society and, being Father's Day as well, a wonderful coincidence.

"We could not be celebrating this event if it had not been for you, Diana. Everyone Below has asked me to invite you."

"Thank you, Vincent. You know I'd love to come; and, oh, I almost forgot to tell you, the police are on the trail of our kidnapper. They hope to have him in custody by nightfall."

He exhaled, nodding. "Good! That's wonderful, Diana... wonderful."

"Should I bring anything?"

Vincent blushed, bowing his head for a moment and shuffled his feet. "Just yourself; however, Mouse requested that you bring some of those delicious chocolate cookies you make."

"I'd be happy to," she replied, knowing that Father and Vincent had raved about them as well. "Thanks again for inviting me."

"Everyone loves you, Diana. You have become such a wonderful, loyal Helper and friend to us all, besides," he chuckled. "Little Jacob wouldn't know what to do without you there."

They both laughed and spent several minutes looking out over the city.

He turned toward her and said softly, "I won't keep you from your work any longer. I'm needed Below to help with the preparations. Shall I come for you tomorrow night at seven-thirty?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms snugly about herself.

"Until tomorrow," he whispered and was gone like some phantom in the night.



The next day, Diana had run errands and tied up loose ends at work. Returning home early, she took a leisurely bath and, looking through her wardrobe, chose a green sweater and a pair of black pants. As she worked, the sleeves of the green dress that had attracted Vincent kept catching her attention.

She wanted to look her best tonight; she wanted to look beautiful for Vincent. This was a very special occasion, and it was more a date than anything else they had done together.

Although he would never admit it to her, she felt that he did miss seeing a woman in feminine attire. No doubt Catherine had worn dresses much of the time. Below, the women's attire was so utilitarian and unglamorous.

Diana pulled the dress from the closet and, facing the mirror, held it in front of her.

It had made him sad; the tears had flowed, yet deep inside her, she knew he longed to see its beauty alive again.

Slowly, she pulled on a pair of dark pantyhose and a slip and slipped the dress over her head. It glimmered and shone in the light, and clung nicely to her slender figure, with a cowl neck cut fairly low in front and back. It had long, tight, pointed sleeves and a straight knee-length skirt. It was a very flattering dress, and she smiled at her reflection in the mirror. The dress brought out the fire in her hair. Her sister had encouraged her to buy it and, well, Mark had always loved it on her.

She slipped on a pair of matching low-heeled pumps and wondered what she should do with her hair. She had always pulled it back to get it out of the way, but not tonight.

She used a curling iron to create soft waves and curls, then braided the sides at her temples, letting them fall into the rest of her hair.

She used very little makeup, a little eyeshadow and lipstick, and was pleased by what she saw in the mirror. Suddenly she felt apprehensive, maybe she shouldn't wear this dress.

What if it brought back memories of Catherine, and hurt him?

She could never intentionally do that. She started to unzip the dress as she sensed him near.

She heard him land softly, coming through the skylight she always left open for him. Landing on padded feet like the large predator she resembled, Vincent moved in silence.

She heard him step toward her closed bedroom door and call softly, "Diana?"

She stood still, her hand on the zipper. What should she do?

His keen hearing had picked up the sound of her breathing within and he repeated her name, his voice more intense.

"Diana?"

Oh, what the heck, she thought. It's too late to change now.

"I'll be right out," she called.

He turned away, his eyes moving about her apartment to find something to occupy his time, a little embarrassed that he had interrupted her toilette. He strode over to her bookshelf and began rifling through her collection.

Diana pulled the zipper back up and nervously shook her shoulders.

Calm down, girl. You don't want to scare him off.

She took a deep breath, brushed a stray lock of hair aside, and opened her door.

He turned, book in hand, as she stepped into the room, but all movement halted as he stared.

She smiled at him, never having quite seen *that incredulous* expression on his face before.

His mouth was open, lips just slightly parted as he blinked, not speaking.

"Vincent?" she asked softly, tilting her head. "Vincent?"

He blinked and shook his head, finally realizing that the vision before him was speaking.

"I... I'm sorry, Diana, I... You are so very lovely tonight."

He was still holding the book in one hand and had not moved toward her. She could sense something, a sort of uneasiness.

"Vincent, if this dress bothers you, I'll..."

"No, no, Diana, please. You look... exquisite."

She stood a moment longer, one leg behind the other in a provocative pose, yet shy at the same time. He was still unable to tear his eyes away. The dress made her hair look like flame, made her skin flawlessly pale and soft-looking, and her hair was so different... loose and free.

She, in turn, was studying his reaction and admiring the flattering clothes he had chosen for the evening. He wore thigh-high butterscotch, cross-gaitered boots, black trousers, ruffled sleeves pale blue shirt she had never seen before, topped by a rich brown suede vest. His middle was cinched by a wide matching butterscotch leather waist piece and his favorite belt. All topped off with his ever-present cloak. Tonight it seemed to make his shoulders appear even broader; his long copper hair had been brushed to perfection, no easy task with his thick, unruly mane.

She knew they would probably stand there for hours, sighing and admiring each other, so she broke the spell, stepping forward to grab her black dress coat from the back of the couch.

"We'd better be going, Vincent, or we'll be more than fashionably late."

He nodded, still at a loss for words. Taking her hand, how warm it was in his, they walked to the celebration together.

It was a wonderful evening, just as elaborate as Winterfest, if not more so. Everyone's eyes seemed drawn to Diana and Vincent as they entered the hall by the staircase hung with tapestries. Even the music momentarily stopped. Many people had never realized how beautiful Diana truly was until now. She kept blushing from all the well-meant compliments on her dress and hair, and when she looked to Vincent, he would silently smile at her, and she would smile back.

They were separated as Vincent's friends demanded his opinion on this and that, and he helped the children with their gift for Father. She could crane her neck to locate him and would, more often than not, find him doing the very same thing, his head easily towering over everyone else's.

Finally, the crowd found their places at the banquet tables, and Diana was thrilled to be seated on Vincent's right; he in turn, next to Father.

Vincent stood, tapping his goblet for silence, and Diana's breath was stolen momentarily as he rose and all became hushed. She still found it hard to believe that all this was possible, that this would exist and... *Vincent, God, he is beautiful.*

"We are gathered here to celebrate a world and the man who created it." He paused for a moment, raising his incredible hand slightly, gazing upon everyone seated and standing alike. "For as long as I can remember, he has been *Father*." He bent his head and looked down lovingly at the older man. "He has another name, Jacob Wells, but Father is the only name he requires. Indeed, he has been a father to us all, but especially to me." He again looked at Father, whose eyes were moist with tears, but his gaze did not falter as it met his son's. "One bitter cold night, he gave love and acceptance to a disfigured, sickly orphan. And has continued to give nothing but his heart since then. He made me his son and showed us all how to live in a world free of violence, hatred, and fear. Yes, these things have visited us all on occasion. We, every one of us, have been tested, but we have passed the test. Our love and devotion to each other have triumphed. The important lessons Father has taught us have been learned well. I believe deep in my heart that any challenge we must face, we will; any foe we must defeat, we can. Because of the love of this man, there is nothing we cannot do. He saved my life, gave me a home and family, and above all--love; for that, I am eternally grateful. I have everything a man could ever ask for, and I am sure the same is true for all of you.

"Before I relinquish the rostrum to Father, and his speech, which I am certain will be *lengthy*..." There were many chuckles from the gathered crowd, Father included. "I want to thank a person who has become very dear to my heart. Without her, Father would not be here to celebrate this honor; he would not have a grandson at his side (*Jacob was contentedly gnawing a graham cracker in Mary's arms, seated at Father's left*) nor would I be alive to be making this introduction."

Diana was speechless. It had been embarrassing enough to be sitting at the head table near the legend in honor, but now, Vincent was actually drawing everyone's attention to her, even ahead of Father's speech.

She looked up, flushed, into his strangely feline face, and found the strength to take his hand as he encouraged her to rise. There was nothing but warmth, love and encouragement in his gaze, and she had never remembered them being more blue.

"Everyone, this is Diana Bennett. Many of you already know her and are aware of all she has done to save our lives and keep our world secure. She is far more than a Helper, having risked her life for all of us. Please, tonight, after we have had time to eat and enjoy this marvelous banquet of William's, come forward to greet her and introduce yourselves. Help her to know that our home is hers as well."

He looked down into her pink face as their friends began to clap and shout, and she smiled back nervously. He gave her a more reassuring look as he turned back to the crowd and the noise once more subsided.

"Now, without further ado," as broad a grin as was possible for his unusual mouth appeared. "I give you Father to us all, the undisputed ruler of our underground world, Jacob Wells."

He took Jacob's hand as he stood, and they both embraced warmly. Cheers and clapping once again ensued.

Jacob cleared his throat a bit self-consciously, as all eyes turned to him, and Vincent gracefully took his seat.

"Vincent's words are true. We owe Diana far more than we can *ever* repay. Please, do come forward tonight to greet her and make her welcome."

Father continued, and from that point on everything seemed a wonderful blur. She vaguely remembered Vincent's thigh or shoulder leaning into her as he made some comment or other as Father spoke. For the life of her, she couldn't remember what was said, only how warm he felt, how good and uniquely masculine he smelled, how soft and tender his voice had been.

At some point during Father's speech, Mary discreetly sneaked around behind their leader and deposited little Jacob into his father's arms. Vincent and his son rubbed noses; the smile they shared was something Diana would never forget. He then proceeded to bounce the boy on his knee and shoulder before handing him over to Diana. It seemed so long ago that she had asked to hold him, now he was here to hold as often and as long as she liked.

She pulled out a little rubber lion toy that she had brought for him. His eyes lit up wide, as he immediately proceeded to cram as much of it into his little mouth as possible.

Vincent felt his son's unstifled sense of pleasure and smiled warmly at the loving pair beside him. His heart constricted, but only for a moment, as he wished that it were Catherine there, holding her child.

Sighing and closing his eyes tightly for a moment, he felt her presence, as he often did, like an angel's wings caressing his heart, and she was happy and at peace. He swallowed back the sweet pain and once more looked down upon Diana. Her love for little Jacob and his son's for her was almost tangible.

Catherine was gone now. There was no one he would rather have at his side, holding his son... than Diana. She had sacrificed so much and asked nothing in return. With melancholy, he remembered the months when he had survived as only an empty shell, longing for death, longing for release from the crushing pain of Catherine's loss. Had it not been for the quest to find Jacob, he was certain that he would have finally embraced death,. He had almost given up hope, wanting to die on Catherine's bare grave.

Now he realized how thankful he was that Diana had found him, nursed him and given him another chance for life, happiness, and yes, love... He no longer resented being plucked from dark death's embrace.

She looked up into his face, Father's speech nearly over, and he was certain she knew how he felt. She knew--Vincent opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated and Diana took his hand, squeezed it gently, and leaned into his shoulder.

The rest of the night passed quickly. Diana had never remembered meeting so many people in one evening. It was all a bit overwhelming, and her brain was definitely screaming *overload*. But Vincent returned to her side to rescue her, bidding everyone goodnight and offering his arm. She added her farewells and breathed a deep sigh of relief as they entered the dark, quiet passageway.

Vincent tilted his head to look at her, sensing her relief and happiness. "You enjoyed the evening?" He already knew her answer.

"I had a wonderful time, Vincent!" She pressed against his shoulder. "But we had so little time together."

He nodded again, taking her hand. "Would you mind if we stop in to see how Jacob is doing? Brooke said she would keep watch over him."

The nursery was filled with its usual occupants and many more; children whose parents were enjoying the night's festivities. Brooke and Sarah had their hands full, but Vincent was relieved to see that Jacob was not one of the crying ones. He lay peacefully asleep on his tummy, his little behind pointed to the sky, the chew-toy lion still grasped in one fist.

With extreme gentleness, the huge, clawed hand reached into the crib to stroke the blond curls on his son's head. "His teething is almost over," Vincent said. "It will be very pleasant to *sleep* through the night again."

They left and walked on silently, Diana wondering where Vincent was taking her. He stopped, turning toward her under the glow of a nearby torch. Their eyes met, and once again he was speechless. His eyes broke from hers as they once again roved over her fragile beauty,

remembering how many of the male guests had complimented him on his exquisite taste in women.

He shook his head in awe, looking back at her face, not knowing where or how to begin.

"Diana, there are no words to..."

She smiled softly, stepping closer, touched by his shyness, his hesitation. "I'll have to wear a dress more often."

Slowly, she reached out to touch his cheek. "Thank you for tonight. I'm glad you like the dress. I wore it just for you. I wanted to be beautiful for you... to please you. Know that."

He sighed, blinking, and pressed his chest into her hand, unable to stop the tears that spilled from his eyes as he closed them. She leaned forward to kiss his moist cheek.

His eyes opened, his lips parted as Diana gazed steadily into his eyes. He had been surprised, but he had not stiffened or pulled away. This encouraged her to lean forward and gently kiss his mouth. It was a sweet, quick kiss. Diana intentionally held back all the desire and longing, just happy to experience that unique mouth for now, and it was certainly far from disappointing.

He dropped his head shyly, then slowly looked up to find her standing, waiting. He held out his arms, and she came into them as they held each other in a tender embrace. She placed her cheek to his breast and felt his lips and warm breath in her hair.

"I love you, Vincent." With her words came the overwhelming warmth of her love, the quiet, waiting acceptance. It flooded his soul, and he knew that he had been truly blessed. He was blessed with family, a father, a healthy, chubby little son, and two beautiful, gentle women who loved him.

She felt the last of his tears in her hair and knew the words were not yet there for him to say. But he held her tighter and nodded. She was not ashamed that she had told him. She would wait and pray that with time, he would tell her the same. His love was worth any sacrifice, any wait.

They took hands once more, and he led her to the single falls. A makeshift bench had been placed against the far wall, padded with an old piano bench cushion. He sat beside her, and she snuggled into his side. For a long time, they silently watched the falls, caught up in their own thoughts. It was an incredible sight, much more turbulent than the last time she'd seen it, swollen now by spring rains.

She nestled closer, her head tucking neatly under his chin. Again, he felt a sharp pang in his heart, for the action had been so like Catherine's. He held back tears, not wishing Diana to think all he did was cry, not wanting to spoil her happiness, but so many things, *so many things* still hurt so deeply... reopened old wounds.

She pressed her ear deep into his vest and moved her hand to the base of his throat, very still; listening.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly, truly puzzled.

"Listening to and feeling your heart." She looked up, a bit embarrassed.

"My heart?" he asked, still puzzled, pulling back his head to look at her.

"Yes. I've done it before, you know."

Now he was blushing. "Before? I..."

"When I first brought you to my loft. You were so still and quiet; it was the only way I could tell, well, you know. If you were alive. It was kind of nice having you all to myself, I mean." She dropped her eyes, her face suddenly a deeper red.

He raised an eyebrow at that, then laughed as he hugged her.

"The hour is late," he whispered in her hair. "I'd best escort you back home. I'm glad I could show you the falls."

"Me too."

They stopped in the shadows of the alley near her elevator.

"Goodnight, Vincent. Thank you again for everything."

He nodded. "Goodnight, Diana. Thank you for making the evening so special for everyone... especially... me."

She paused, hoping for maybe a goodbye kiss, just a little peck. But when he just stood there awkwardly, she turned to go, then his hand came up to take her wrist.

He studied her face, an unreadable look in his eyes, then ever so slowly he tilted his head down, brushing his velvet lips across hers, then kissed her, deeply, passionately, till her ears rang and lights exploded behind her eyes. Nothing had touched her but their lips, yet it had been incredible!

He pulled back, and they stood facing each other, panting short little puffs of air. He swallowed, then pressed his lips together, and took her wrist for the briefest second, whispering, "Until tomorrow then." And he was gone.

She collapsed back against the brick alley wall. "Sweet Jesus!" she sighed. She had never experienced anything like that! She was trembling, her heart racing. She knew he must have felt it too.

Finally, she managed to step into the elevator, and on the way up to her loft on the sixth floor, his words came back to her: *Tomorrow*.

Oh, she had almost forgotten. He was coming to help her organize her box files. Somehow, she was always too busy or involved in a current case to put her files in proper order and onto her computer. They had decided to spend the next night, and even the next, if that's what it took, to get it done.

She laughed as she unlocked the door to her apartment and slammed the deadbolt. At the moment, she couldn't care less if it never got done. She hoped their time would be spent doing...*other things*. She leaned against the closed door, laughing again. Offhand, she could think of a dozen or more things.

She kicked off her shoes and pulled off her coat, exhausted. Before she sank into her inviting-looking bed to dream of him, she'd check out her closet for a dress to wear... tomorrow night.

Pulling the alley manhole cover in place, then dropping to the passageway below, Vincent leaned heavily against the cool stone. He was still feeling vaguely disoriented as he tilted his head back and exhaled. Many overwhelming sensations had passed between Diana and him in that kiss, and he was a bit surprised by it all and shocked by his own boldness. Just as he was starting to have doubts about what he had done, a strange calmness passed over him. Immediately, he recognized it as Catherine's spirit, sensing her contentment and approval; his uncertainty fled. Suddenly, he was eager to retrieve his little son from the nursery in order to hold the living part of Catherine in his arms. As he hurried toward home, he sensed tendrils of Diana's happiness, and he was certain he could *feel* Catherine *smile*.



DIGITAL ART

By Mel





by Mel

A Match

(S3)

by Mel

Diana felt Vincent's gaze upon her, assessing his student after three months of coaching. But her focus remained on her opponent sitting opposite. He would've been a horrible poker player as he couldn't hide his joy at besting someone again.

"It's your move," Father said.

Diana's eyes lowered to the board; its white and black pieces were arranged in a strange pattern. She moved her bishop.

Father countered with his knight. "Check mate, Miss Bennett."

Diana shook his hand, a good sportsman, before she began setting up the pieces. Her blue eyes alight with determination.

"Best four out of five."



DIGITAL ART

by Judith Nolan





Classics vs Diana

(S3)

by Mel

(Inspired in part by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova)

“So you’re not a fan of the Classics?” Vincent asked.

“What makes you say that?” Diana asked, coming over to couch with two mugs. She was careful to keep them separate so neither coffee nor tea were contaminated by the other as she set them on the table. The chilly winter night outside lent to a cozy feeling inside the loft (even after the Christmas decorations had been put away) as she pulled up a blanket to cover her legs. It had been six years since Diana had found and rescued both Vincent and his son, Jacob, and since then a strong friendship had formed. The loft’s more isolated location gave Vincent more freedom to just relax and enjoy time away from the tunnels. It had become a comfortable habit now to have at least one weekend every month or so spent in Diana’s loft. After all the chaos and stress of Diana’s work, Vincent could see the tension leave her shoulders in their monthly weekend visits with them listening to music and reading books.

Vincent gestured to the bookshelf he had been perusing for the past five minutes. “They may be used, but barely.”

Diana grinned. “I thought as a book lover you would hate the damaged ones. That’s what my ex, Mark, always said as an English teacher.”

Vincent smiled gently. “I do agree with him, but Diana you don’t need to change your tastes to suit me if the classics displease you.”

“Would you hate me if I said a lot of them used to be Mark’s?” At Vincent’s look, she clarified. “We’re still broken up don’t worry. He just never got around to collecting them and I know you like them so why toss them now.”

Diana sipped her coffee for a moment. "And they don't 'displease' me, Vincent. I enjoy a couple, like the Picture of Dorain Gray. I just never got into the more popular ones, especially Austin."

Vincent soft smile returned. He knew the psychological and morality themes of Wilde's narrative would be far more engaging for Diana's mind than the world of Jane Austen where marriage proposals and social status were the main concerns.

"And yet I see you watch Christmas romance movies now and then," Vincent contoured. "And you must have read a few in school."

Diana nodded. "Yup I did, but I barely remember it. I still had braces in ninth grade."

"So then why the distain?"

Diana sighed, her fingers drumming lightly against warm cup of coffee. "If you're trying to make a name for yourself just out of college and then in specialized field, do you think it's easy to be taken seriously when your last name links you to most famous romance heroine?"

Vincent's blue gaze registered both sympathy and dismay. "Your colleagues were unkind?"

"Not unkind per se, but they thought it was that each thought they were the first to come up with the connection and had a good laugh at a joke I had heard ten times in one week asking where my Mr. Darcy is." Diana gestured to the TV. "And now with this new BBC version coming out next month, I'm expecting a lot more of that."

Vincent's gaze shifted toward the TV. While he preferred books and live performances to the modern experiences of television and records, he had come to find adaptations of classic works vastly interesting to examine and discuss.

Reading his thoughts, Diana sighed. "I can tape it if you would like."

"Only if want, Diana," Vincent quickly said. "I would never ask you to do anything that would make you feel uncomfortable."

Diana shrugged. "No, it will be good to know what the people are talking about."

"Do you not enjoy the Super Bowl or any sports? I believe that is something you could discuss with your coworkers outside of your cases."

"On occasion I'll watch a game or two, but no I enjoy quiet evenings." Diana pointed to the TV. "Would you like the episodes taped or not?"

Vincent bowed his head, laying hand over his heart. "It would please me greatly.....Miss Bennett."

Diana tossed a pillow at his head. "You're intolerable, Mr. Darcy."

Vincent set the pillow aside with a smile. "I apologize; I couldn't help it just once. I genuinely thank you, Diana. And see you do you know, Jane Austen."

"You're forgiven this once." Diana grinned, stood, and went over to her stereo player. Her fingers easily plucked a CD from her stack. "Now what about Billy Joel?"

“Ah that’s the Miss Bennet I know....” Vincent grinned and ducked as Diana teasingly tossed another cushion at the same time as the 80s music filled the loft.



DIGITAL ART

by Judith Nolan



(Author's Note: This year's Round Robin story is a sequel to the S3 Round Robin last year as published during WFOL.

Please follow the link to read the first one before continuing forward. Link:

<https://wfolcontributions.blogspot.com/>

(S3 Round Robin)

Chapter 1

A Picture in the Dark

by Mel

Diana Bennett cursed beneath her breath, pulling her red mane back into a messy ponytail, as she left the bathroom to answer the insistent buzzer. Nausea and a serial murder case that had taken three months (even with her husband's assistance) made her more irritable as she pressed the intercom. "Maxwell, I told you the case file is coming. It'll be on your bloody damn desk this afternoon. I-"

"Wow, I'd hate the D.A right now," a different, but still familiar voice answered with a chuckle on the other end

"Susan?" Diana asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Are you gonna let me up? I got something for you," her sister said.

"Of course."

Three minutes later, Diana pulled aside the grate as the elevator door opened, and the sisters embraced.

"This is a surprise," Diana said. "Did I forget something?"

Susan's blue eyes lit up with a light humor. "No, just wanted to surprise you."

Her warm smile slipped as she studied her sister's face. "Are you okay? You don't look so good. You're very pale." She placed her hand over Diana's forehead. "Hm...no fever. Stomach bug?"

"Gee, thanks. Great to see you too," Diana lightly batted Susan's arm away. "And great observation, Sis, but I think pale for me is impossible." Her hand gingerly touched her

porcelain face, a contrast to her sister's fair, but hearty complexion. "You know I barely see the sun."

Susan frowned. "Well, it's also what you're wearing. I got you that blue sweater years ago. Did you have a rough night?"

Diana shrugged and pointed instead to the package tucked under her sister's arm. "What's that?"

"You're working way too hard, you know that Di?"

Diana deftly sidestepped Susan's insistent gaze and moved over to the kitchen area. It was her job to get inside other people's heads to discover their secrets (she had spent the last two months in the head of a murderer), not the other way around.

"Do you want some tea?" Diana asked.

"Oh, so now I have two mysteries to solve," Susan said, feigning seriousness. "Since when do you drink tea over coffee?"

Diana shrugged, setting the kettle on the stove. "Since I realized coffee and upset stomachs don't mix. Vincent or any of his friends can't make good coffee to save their lives."

Susan grinned. "You should divorce on those grounds alone."

Diana smiled teasingly back. While she would never dream of divorcing, it felt nice to just joke around. She placed the tea bags in two mugs. "I've adjusted, and still drink a ton of coffee, don't worry, but keep the lawyer in mind just in case."

Susan gave a salute. "Aye, aye. Never thought you would fall for a tea drinker."

"I just don't see the point in fighting. And Vincent likes..."

"Vincent?"

Diana bit her bottom lip. In the playful nature of the conversation and exhaustion, the name had slipped out unbidden. She tried to reason with herself. *Relax, Bennett, there are a thousand Vincents in the city. You had two in your own elementary class, for God's sake. It's fine.*

"So, the mysterious tea-drinking husband has a name after all," Susan said, grinning. "You must not be feeling well if you let that slip."

"Good thing I'm not investigating my husband." Diana grinned to herself at the irony. She had only met Vincent through a tragedy and an investigation. But then it also seemed to fit with her crazy life.

"If he can make you smile like that, he must be a good man," Susa said. "Though honestly, Di, I think the police should worry about you at times. I'm sure you would know how to get away with any crime in the city."

"Lucky for them, I don't plan on doing anything except catch the bad guys." The kettle whistled, and Diana poured the water. "So, what's the other mystery?"

Susan held up the rectangular package. "Why on earth are you having packages sent to Aunt Helen's house when you have a decent place in the city? And all the way from Ireland. You're only lucky I was coming up anyway."

So, any Helpers who might have seen wouldn't ruin the surprise, Diana thought. Aloud, she said, "Brigit knows Aunt Helen better, and you know I like my privacy."

Still, she felt her nausea ease, replaced with childhood excitement. It was finally here!

In all the chaos, Susan's brother-in-law, Alan Johnson, had created at the family reunion back in October (and after); she had forgotten to mention her loose connection to her husband's favorite author. Her great Aunt Helen, on the maternal side, was somehow related. It had been a gamble to ask an O'Donnell to do anything, but she had recalled the story of Vincent meeting and speaking to Brigit in person on Halloween of 1987.

Between Father and Vincent, they have enough Shakespeare and classic lit to last a thousand lifetimes, Diana thought, smiling gently to herself as she unwrapped the package like some hidden treasure.

Brigit O'Donnell had emailed the manuscript earlier to see if the story would be something Vincent would approve of. And now two months later, here it was with a simple red hardback cover. Except for the title, printed in gold lettering, it looked very similar to the book of sonnets Diana had discovered when she was first investigating Vincent.

She gingerly laid her hand on the cover; Vincent's anniversary gift, catching the light: beneath her family's silver claddagh ring sat another Celtic ring with a sparkling red stone setting.

"Wow." Susan pointed at her hand. "Is that from your husband?"

Diana smiled down at the two rings, symbolizing her family Above and Below the city of New York. "Yes. He made it."

"You know the most Dan ever gets me is a new charm from Tiffany's for my bracelet," Susan moaned playfully. "And I see where Jake gets his artistic abilities."

"Yeah. And how is Dan doing?" Diana asked.

"He's good. He and Alex are hanging out at the Cloisters today. They have those old Unicorn tapestries on loan, I believe. It's a school project, but I wanted to come see you first."

Diana smiled softly. The Cloisters was a fun art museum modeled on a medieval European castle and celebrated its art and architecture. She hoped to take Jake one day, though she knew it was Vincent who would truly appreciate the place.

“Are you staying for the weekend?” Diana’s heart tore a little in those seconds waiting for an answer. On one hand, she would love some extra time with her sister’s family, but on the other, it had been months since she’d seen her family Below.

“I don’t think so. It’s just a day trip type of day... oh...” Susan dug into her bag and pulled out a flyer. “That reminds me, Alex was saying her school’s having this art show. And she wondered if Jake would ever show his pictures? Kid’s got a real knack for it.”

“Yeah, he does.” Diana smiled, proud of her stepson.

“Where is Jake anyway?” Susan asked.

“Staying with his father. I keep the loft for work.” Diana shrugged at the look her sister gave. “I work better alone, and you barely want to hear about my cases; I’m not subjecting my son or his classmates to this madness.”

“Where does he go to school again?”

“He’s home-schooled.” In the world of half or elusive answers, the truth of the sentence felt good. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just thought he might have a graduation coming up or something. That we could all come too.”

“That would be fun, but homeschool doesn’t work like that,” Diana said. She glanced down at the flyer. “And thank Alex for this, but I don’t think he’s ready for that yet.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “You can pick the pieces he shows, so no surprises.”

Diana knew she was referring to the ‘surprise’ the whole Bennett clan had faced when a wedding picture of Diana and her husband had turned up back in October, mixed in with some photos that Diana’s niece Alex had. Alex’s photos had been developed and printed for her by her father’s brother in the same darkroom where Jessica Webb had developed photos for Jacob.

The picture captured the bride and groom at a Renaissance-themed celebration, with the groom in an elaborate costume meant to mimic a mythical beast, partly for the theme and partly to cover up the burns he had sustained as a child.

At least that was the story as Diana’s side of the family understood it. She was forever grateful that they hadn’t pushed for more details, accepting that just as she kept her work private, she wished to do the same in her personal life.

Her gaze lowered briefly to the book in her hands, her heart aching. How strange it was that a woman across an ocean knew more of her exotic husband, had met him in person and conversed with him (even before she had), than those who lived just over the river.

“Hey, Di, you okay?” Susan asked.

Diana blinked, coming back to the present. “Ugh, yeah, fine. Just tired. The last case took a lot out of me. It was a guy who killed three... oh, never mind, we got him.”

Another piece of her life to keep to herself. Only her husband, Vincent, had any real notion of the toll her work took on her. It was one of the reasons she was glad they didn’t share the same mystic Bond he had once shared with his first love, Catherine Chandler (and now with Jacob). Vincent had already shouldered his own grief and nightmares from when Catherine had been stolen from him by the madman Gabriel.

There was no reason to burden him with the mental dangers of her job.

Maybe that’s why I’m tired, Diana mused. Though even as she thought it, something inside told her otherwise.

“I never doubt you will catch the villain. You always do.” Susan’s eyes flicked to the drape drawn across Diana’s workstation and then the rest of the loft. She sipped her tea. “I’m surprised you don’t have any of Jake’s pictures up. You know, for a nice contrast...”

To all the gore and horror of Diana’s job went unsaid. The job that forced her to dive into the minds of the most cruel and vile creatures on the planet. It wasn’t a job or even knowledge she would subject anyone else to. She had briefly debated, at one point, moving her operation to the tunnels beneath the city, where her husband and other family dwelled. It wouldn’t have been impossible to find a quiet chamber to herself, but the incessant tapping on the pipes and the possibility of any of the children finding her cases had quickly dashed that idea.

Besides, then I’d never get to see my family, Diana mused. *I see them so rarely, as it is with work.*

“Jake’s pretty particular about what pictures he wants to share,” Diana said. “Maybe someday.”

“That’s your catchphrase a lot, you know.” Susan eyed her for a moment longer. “You sure you’re okay?”

Diana nodded, forcing a smile. “Yup. You worry too much.”

“I’m a sister; it’s in the job description, you know,” Susan grinned, setting the teacup down.

“And you’re so good at it,” Diana teased.

“As fun as this has been, I did say I would meet Dan and Alex at the museum. I would ask if you want to come, but it sounds like that D.A. has been bugging you.”

Diana ran a hand through her hair. “No, it’s fine. Maxwell’s fine, just stressed, I think. But I do need to finish that report. Should only be a couple of hours.” She held up both the book and the flyer. “Thanks for these. I’ll have Jake give Alex a call when I see him. Give them my love,” Diana said.

“Will do,” Susan said, stepping into the elevator. “Just take care of yourself.”

“Will do,” Diana repeated with a salute.

As the elevator lowered, Diana rested her head against the gate before glancing over at her workstation. Her left hand, the rings of both worlds, caressed her stomach. She couldn’t be sure yet, but *if* it was, there would be just one more thing that she would have to keep private from her biological family Above.

XXX

Below the city of New York, a myriad of excited footsteps came around the bend, nearly slamming into Vincent.

Vincent stepped back, curiosity shone in his blue eyes as he called out to one of the kids. “Slow down. Kipper, what’s all the excitement for?”

The teenager turned, abashed. “Oh, sorry, Vincent. We have to hurry, or we’ll miss it.”

“Miss what?”

“There’s a race happening, and we want to see it,” Kipper explained.

Vincent’s eyes quickly scanned the crowd of anxious kids. “Where’s Jacob? Surely, he would like to go too.”

“He’s too busy,” a nine-year-old girl, Grace, said.

“Yeah, always with his pictures,” eleven-year-old Luke said, frowning.

Vincent sighed and nodded. It hadn’t been that long ago when his son Jacob, Grace, and Luke had been the Three Musketeers of their generation. Playing and laughing without a care in the world.

“Well, I hope everyone has fun,” Vincent said.

Kipper waved his hand. “Yeah, come on, everyone.”

Vincent watched the gaggle of kids scurry off to their entertainment with a soft smile. Kipper brought to mind Vincent’s older brother Devin, who was always restless within these tunnel walls, but it seemed Jacob was taking after him, retreating to the darkness of the tunnels. And he wanted to understand why.

Vincent turned and quickly made his way down to the darkroom that had become his son's second home. He knocked gently at the chamber's entrance. "Jacob, may I come in?"

"Just a second, Dad," a voice called back.

Vincent's lips hovered between a smile and a grimace; pride and concern warred inside him. Ever since the council had allowed a darkroom for photo development, it was hard to decide where his son spent more time: developing pictures or up in Central Park taking them, hiding behind a camera, rarely taking the time to live in the moment.

After the wedding picture of himself and Diana had been exposed in October to the brother-in-law of Diana's sister, Alan Johnson, Vincent would have thought Jacob would have lost some of his interest in photography. But the opposite happened.

"You can come in," Jacob called.

Vincent swept the curtain aside and entered, his piercing blue eyes adjusting to the dark in mere seconds. He had to duck slightly to avoid the new photos drying above him. Photographs of Central Park at various times of day, some from the family reunion he had attended with his mother, Diana, and some random shots from around the city.

One he noticed was of Luke and Grace playing in the sprinklers on a hot day in the park. The two children were clearly having fun, but Vincent remembered that day. Grace's blonde curls and Luke's dark hair were both two shades darker than when they had left, water dripping down their grinning faces. Jacob had been completely dry when they had come home. Taking in the scene from behind the safety of his camera.

"Jacob," Vincent began, pointing at the picture of his friends. "Luke, Grace, and the others wanted to invite you to some race up in the city."

"Yeah," Jacob mumbled distractedly as he continued to work.

"But they said you were too busy." Vincent took a breath, and his clawed hands gingerly touched the photos. "And I would be lying to you if I said I wasn't concerned about you spending all this time alone."

"I know how concerned you are, Dad," Jacob said, turning to him. Even in the dim light, Vincent saw his son's fierce eyes, so much like his beloved Catherine. She herself had struggled with the intrusive nature of the Bond they shared, and now it seemed their son did as well.

"What is this about, Jacob?" Vincent reached over, laying his furred hand over his son's pale, human hand. "Are you working on some project?"

Jacob paused and then shook his head. "Not at the moment."

"Then tell me why you are shutting people out? They..."

“I enjoy this, Dad. It’s fun. And look at Mom, she spends months alone, and you don’t get on her case,” Jacob said.

Vincent sighed. Father, the patriarch of the tunnels and Jacob’s grandfather, had warned him of the harsh teenage years; he just hadn’t expected them to come at the age of ten and a half.

“That is different, Jacob, and you know it,” Vincent said. “Your mother’s job is very difficult, and she doesn’t ignore her loved ones without a good reason.”

“Tell that to Alex,” Jacob said. “Mom forgot her birthday three times.”

Vincent took a deep breath. “Well then, come, and we’ll go see her. I believe she was wrapping up a case today. And you need different scenery.” He smiled. “Plus, it’s the weekend.”

Vincent could remember a time when a weekend at Diana’s loft was the most exciting thing for his son, and for him. Its near isolation meant he could walk the entire space even in daylight, like any other man. In that loft, he could imagine (and they were) like any other ‘normal’ family living in the city. Something he had only dreamed of with his beloved Catherine, but that his strong darling Diana had made real.

“Dad, I’m not five and...”

“That wasn’t a request, Jacob Chandler Wells,” Vincent said firmly. “We’ll leave around eight and no bringing your camera.”

XXX

Above in the city, another man was struggling despite the cheerleading therapist next to him. “Good, Mike, you’re getting there.” The physical therapist said.

Mike gave a gentle smile, closer to a grimace. The therapists and doctors were always trying to tell him he was improving, but months after his *friend*, Alan Johnson, stabbed him in the stomach over a freaking photograph of a strange wedding, and he was only now seeing some improvement. Dressed in khakis and a red T-shirt, he felt like a human, but his body wasn’t cooperating.

“Wait here, I’ll go see if your ride’s here,” the therapist said.

“Thanks,” Mike said. “But the guy said he would be late.”

“Ah. Will you be okay? I got another client.”

“No problem. See you Thursday.”

As the therapist left, Mike dug into his bag and pulled out a sketch pad. He mainly worked as a makeup artist at NBC (or had before the attack), but in his free time, he enjoyed sketching

potential designs for creatures in SYFI movies or fantasy shows. He was under no illusion that he would have a career, but it had been a hobby since he was a kid.

“Hm, what happened to you?” a male voice asked.

“Oh,” Mike startled. He looked up and saw a man dressed in a blue sweater, and beneath a blanket, Mike noticed black jeans. His dark curly hair was combed back, but it was his legs that caught Mike’s attention. The man was in a wheelchair.

Mike swallowed, recalling himself. He knew some patients were full-time residents for a multitude of reasons, and some had mental challenges, but he had been taught they deserved respect.

Mike met the man’s gaze. “I’m just in therapy.” He glanced over at the clock in the hall. How had an hour passed already? And where was his ride?

The man chuckled lightly and glanced down at his legs. “Yeah, me too. Not that it’s done any good.”

“How long? Oh sorry, never mind.” Mike held out his hand. “I’m Mike.”

The man grinned, taking the hand. “Oh, no worries. I’m Steven, and it happened thirteen years ago, but the doc says medicine’s getting better all the time. Just started outpatient therapy two months ago. A trial run, the doc says. And I’m just lucky to be alive.”

“Same here... well, not the same obviously, got myself stabbed, but...” Mike mumbled an apology and bent his head over his work again.

“What are you working on?”

Mike shrugged. “Just doodling really.”

“Can I see?”

“Ah... sure.” Mike flipped the sketch pad around, taking it in anew and almost laughed at himself. He had sketched out the stupid wedding picture. The bride and groom, dressed in Renaissance garb like two crazy idiots. That type of thing was for teenagers. Even sketched in pencil, the bride was beautiful, but it seemed the groom was where his imagination had latched onto. He had only seen the photo in a poor negative, then a minute or two later in higher resolution, after he got his friend Tony to look at it. Clearly a make-up job, but it was still fantastic.

The groom’s features were feline in nature, with piercing blue eyes, Mike remembered. His normal fingers were covered in furry gloves with claws at the end. His clawed fingers caressed the bride’s hand gently. If it wasn’t so tender a scene, Mike could imagine those claws tearing the hand clean off.

The man, Steven's, eyes grew distant as if recalling something before he shoved the sketch pad aside.

"Those claws... those claws..."

Mike blinked. "You've seen this outfit before?"

Steven shook his head. "No... not an outfit." His eyes shot up to Mike's, but they seemed unfocused. "He ruined my legs!"

Mike held up his hands placatingly for a moment and then pointed to the lion man. "He's real?"

"He's not human, do you hear me?" Steven pulled at his shirt and drew it up. Three deep scars ran across his stomach.

Those marks can't be made by anything else but some kind of animal, Mike thought, studying the man's chest in a strange, transfixed way, like how one would observe a car crash.

But Steven was refocused on the picture; his thin fingers tapping the bride. "Wrong... wrong... not Cathy." He looked up at Mike again, confused. "Who is she?"

Mike thought for a moment. The red-haired cop Alan had told him (the sister of his brother Dan's wife) about having come to the hospital only once to check in on how he recovered. Even then, he only saw her outside the window talking to a nurse. She had never come in to inquire about Mike as if she didn't want to attach herself to this case against Alan. Mike had warned Alan to leave the whole wedding photo thing alone, especially when a cop was involved. But Alan hadn't listened, too intent on getting to the secrets behind the wedding. It was his ticket back into a career, Alan had claimed.

"Who is she?" Steven asked again, a note of confused desperation in his voice.

Mike blinked, staring down at the picture. What was her name? He had asked the nurse. Diane, no Denise... no...

"Diana... Diana Bennett."

"He... he betrays her with this bitch." The words were barely above a murmur, and then Steven shouted. "HE BETRAYS HER!"

Mike gripped the arms of his chair and leaned back as far as he could.

"Oh, Cathy... I was... am faithful to you... only to you." Steven jabbed a finger at the sketch pad on the floor. "He... that... that Vincent BETRAYS you, Cathy... oh Cathy."

Mike opened his mouth, but just then a nurse came over to try to calm the upset man.

Focused on their patient, Mike scooped up the sketch pad and left, catching sight of his ride.

“Sorry, Mike, boss kept me a little late, and then traffic was a killer,” his friend said. “How did it go?”

“Fine,” Mike said as he slowly slid into the car, grateful to be away from that guy.

Yet, his mind kept flickering from the three long animal gashes on Steven’s stomach to the claws on the groom’s hand. He could easily see how those claws could do such damage.

That guy’s insane, Mike reasoned. There was no way anything Steven said was true. *But he named the groom...* Mike’s own fascination, though, began to speculate. *Where had that name come from if not some personal history? Those gashes had to come from somewhere, and no one names a dog, Vincent.*

Chapter 2

Finding Footing

By Cindy Rae

“So there. That’s it. That’s all of it,” Diana said, closing the cover on the file. She handed it to Joe Maxwell, who gave it a cursory once-over.

“It’s good work, Diana. The evidence will hold up if it goes to trial. Not that it looks like it’s going to.” His office phone buzzed. He ignored it.

“You think his lawyer will enter a guilty plea? Reason of insanity?” Diana asked.

Joe snapped the file shut.

“I think that’s in the wind, yeah. Perps don’t usually claim to see seven-foot-tall monsters in the room with them. Kind of gives the whole ‘of sound mind and body’ thing away.”

Vincent isn’t seven feet tall. More like six and change, Diana thought.

“Sane people don’t usually brick up their victims, either,” Diana replied drolly. She shouldered her purse, clearly indicating she meant to leave.

“I want you to take a look at...”

“No.” Diana’s white hand sliced the air as she interrupted the Manhattan DA. “That’s my last case for a while, Joe.”

The phone buzzed again. Joe continued to ignore it. Whatever it was, it could wait. Or at least it could get in line.

“I need somebody in investigations, Diana. Full-time. Or at least most of that. You can fix your own schedule.”

Diana shook her head. "You've needed that since the day Cathy Chandler went missing," Diana replied. "No thanks, Joe. I'm my own boss. I like it that way."

"There are people who need you."

Yes. Yes, there are. There are people who need me. There will always be people in this city who need me. But there are other people, too. People who need me. And there might be more... and maybe I'm just... tired of running this charade, of lying to my family, of telling... half the truth wherever I go, of...

"I need a break. I'm... I'm not feeling so good lately," she said, shading the truth. Again.

Joe took her in. Even for Diana Bennett, she looked pale. And her high, beautiful cheekbones looked hollower than usual. Her shirt was untucked, and her slacks were baggy, but for the first time since he'd met her years ago, Joe realized that Diana looked like she'd lost weight, not that she'd had much of that to spare to begin with.

"You seeing a doctor?" he asked, suddenly concerned. And if that desk phone buzzed again, he swore he'd rip it out and send it flying toward the wall.

Diana gave him a wry smile. "You're my boss. You're not allowed to ask that question in a professional setting. It violates my..."

"Then pretend we're at a bar and I just bought you nachos because I noticed you've lost what... eight, ten pounds? More?" he replied, trading one interruption for another. "I thought we were friends, Diana. And you just said you won't work for me."

Joe's office door fairly flew open. Rita Escobar was standing on the other side. Rita was harried and clearly annoyed with her boss at present. "Line four is the mayor, Joe, and he's not taking 'Can I take a message?' for an answer!" The usual bedlam of the District Attorney's Office swirled behind her.

Diana used the moment to escape. "Tell the mayor I said 'hi,' Joe. I'll be in touch." She eased by Rita and made for the exit.

"If you're not, I will be!" Joe shouted to her back as he reached for the phone.

XXX

"How long has he been like this?" Dr. Barnes asked the ward attendant.

White-clad shoulders gave a shrug. "Since they brought him back from therapy today, near as I can tell. The nurse made a note of it. Said one of the orderlies nearly had to restrain him."

Dr. Barnes tucked the newspaper he'd been reading under his arm and reached for Steven's chart.

“Such a shame. Bass has been making decent progress. Of course, I wasn’t here when he first came to us, but initial observations indicated he was quite... deluded.”

“Yeah, well... ‘decent progress’ don’t look like this,” the orderly said, turning the key on Steven’s room door.

In the center of the hospital bed sat Steven Bass, once a handsome man, now what was mostly left of one. The dark hair had turned almost completely grey in the years since his initial arrival. He’d put on weight since his lack of mobility, but time in the chair had also strengthened his upper torso. His once athletic legs were withered with atrophy, and the deep gouges to his abdomen had healed as much as they were ever going to, to dark pink lines of concentric torment. He looked older than he was.

And at the moment, he looked completely preoccupied.

“I was faithful. Always. Always faithful to you, Cathy. Only I understood... understood who you really were, what you really needed.”

His body rocked as he continued, “I’m the only one. The one you should have chosen. Not that... that... THING. I’m the one...”

“Steven?” Dr. Barnes asked, wondering if Steven would allow himself to be interrupted.

“I... I’m the one... Dr. Barnes. You have to tell them. I was always faithful to her. I... I bought her a stove. Do you like antiques? Cathy loved antiques. I bet he didn’t know that. It had to be red...”

Barnes took it as a good sign that Steven recognized him and was talking to him.

“Tell... who? Who do we need to tell, Steven?” Dr. Barnes asked. He set his newspaper down on the nightstand and took Steven gently by the wrist. His pulse was a jackhammer.

“Everyone. Everyone who will listen. Cathy... she needs to know.”

Barnes was as gentle as he could possibly be as he settled Steven’s arm back down. “Steven, we... this was discussed with you. Years ago. Cathy... Catherine Chandler isn’t with us anymore. I read your files. And I know that set you back a bit... but... you’ve known it for a long time. I’m so sorry. Did something... happen today? Something that brought it all back up?”

“I’m faithful!!” Steven shouted, pointing emphatically to his own chest. “He isn’t! She should have picked me! She’d still be alive if she did! And he’s with that... slut!”

Barnes looked over his shoulder to the still-waiting orderly. “Tell the nurse to prepare a sedative. Just to help you sleep, Steven.” The doctor looked back to his patient, who was sweating in the chill room.

His patient's eyes were pleading for understanding. "I'm better for her. She wouldn't want this," Steven said, as if he was still trying to make Barnes see reason.

"I'm sure you've had an... upsetting day, Steven. But we mustn't undo all the good work you've done. Remember when we talked about moving you to a... a less restrictive facility? That's still in the cards. One bad day doesn't undo that."

Steven's eyes lost their excited look. In an instant, he became canny.

"One... one bad day. Yes. Yes, of course, doctor," Steven said as the nurse entered the room. She handed the doctor two pills in a cup.

"Now, you'll take these? So, we don't have to give you an injection?" Barnes asked.

Steven knew to comply. Experience and his own sharp intelligence had taught him as much. "Of course. Of course, Doctor. It's for my own good. Isn't it?"

Barnes was pleased. "For your own good. Yes, Steven. There you go."

He poured Steven a cup of water from the nearby pitcher and watched as he swallowed the pills.

"Open."

Steven opened his mouth to show that he had swallowed the medicine.

"Good man. The pills will take effect in a few minutes. And then we'll talk tomorrow."

Steven moved himself around on the bed, making it look as if he intended to go to sleep.

"Yes. Yes, thank you, doctor. Thank you so much." *You idiot*, Steven tacked on mentally. Barnes left without another word. When the orderly closed the door, Steven heard the familiar click of the lock sliding into place.

This place wasn't as bad as the first place they'd sent him to, or the second one, but it was a locked cell, just the same.

Steven tried to slow his rapid breathing, knowing the barbiturates would take time to take effect. He was full of adrenaline, and he knew it.

He closed his eyes and saw Cathy Chandler. She was dressed in one of the gowns he'd bought for her.

It was a gown he could never picture on Diana.

"She's a slut. She's a whore, compared to you, Cathy. Just a whore. How could... how could he...?"

The trouble with drugs was that they gave you dry mouth. Steven reached for the water cup and nearly knocked it over. The newspaper Barnes had left behind was in the way, on his nightstand. Steven reached to move it.

And just above the fold, a black name shouted at him. A name so unlikely it left the insane Steven actually questioning how far into the realm of insanity he'd slipped.

Assistant to the DA cracks Homicide Case screamed the headline. And just beneath it, still in bold type:

Diana Bennett, freelance assistant to DA Joe Maxwell, was material in the apprehension of...

"She's... she's still in New York. That means *he's* still in New York," Steven reasoned, as he pored over the article. "Not in New Rochelle... in the city..."

His blue, almost glassy eyes became excited again.

XXX

"You guys sit in front. I'll be somewhere behind you," Kipper instructed. The crowd was thickening. It had been like that for the last twenty minutes.

"We're good," Luke said, making sure Grace had a good spot beside him.

There was a time when Jacob would have sat with them. Either beside him or next to Grace.

"I miss Jacob," Luke said, feeling it distinctly, and not for the first time.

"I know. How can we be "The Three Musketeers" when there's just two of us?" Grace replied. "I wish Eli had never given him a camera from his shop. I wish Diana didn't get him a better one. I wish he still liked to play with us. I wish..."

The expectant crowd began to murmur. Some of the first runners were coming their way.

"Yeah, I know. We can't be the Two Musketeers. It isn't the same," Luke said.

"Maybe we could ask Kipper to be the third?" Grace offered, as a runner in blue nylon shorts charged past. Another man in grey was hot on his heels. The crowd cheered.

Luke leaned over to speak directly into her ear. "Kipper's too old for us. He's a teenager!"

"Katie could join if she was still here!" Grace nearly had to shout it back.

"Katie and Lena left a long time ago! Probably not comin' back, at least that's what Father said."

Grace nodded.

For a time, the children stopped their conversation and simply enjoyed the race. It was a loud, colorful affair, and a woman neither of the children recognized seemed well known to the

crowd. She waved and smiled a bit as she went by, and several people in the audience cheered for her.

“Bet she’s training for the big race later on,” Luke said. It was the kind of thing Jacob would probably have known all about. The New York City Marathon was months away. But the tunnel kids often went up to see it as it wound through the park. Running was something Jacob loved to do, and he liked watching it almost as much as participating.

Or at least it was a thing he *used* to love to do, Luke thought wistfully.

“Bet Jacob knows her name,” Grace agreed. Then: “Marathon. Marathon is the name of a city in Greece. Jacob told me.”

“Yeah,” Luke answered, having nothing more to add.

But this was a smaller race, one of several half-marathons the park featured. Still, it was well-attended, and the afternoon sun was beating down on all of them.

A black man in a military camouflage shirt jogged by. He was dripping with sweat. The crowd roared its approval at his effort.

“Wait ‘til they get to Cat Hill. And Harlem Hill,” Kipper said from behind them, wanting to let his young charges know he was still close by. “They’ll really feel it, then.”

Luke nodded, knowing it was true.

The children continued to watch, enjoying the day, the spectacle of the runners, and the enthusiasm of the crowd.

“We could be Holmes and Watson,” Grace said, out of the blue.

“What?” Luke asked.

“Holmes and Watson. You know. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. That’s two people. In case Jacob never wants to... you know... come back to us.”

Luke frowned at the direction the little girl’s thoughts were taking.

“We don’t give up on our friends,” Luke stated.

Grace shrugged her shoulders. “Seems like he kind of gave up on us, Luke. I’m just saying.”

Luke knew it wasn’t an exaggeration that photography had all but seemed to swallow up their friend. His time was now spent either behind the camera or in a dark room. When asked to come and play, he’d consistently told everyone he was “busy.”

After several attempts to engage him, Luke and Grace had given up, figuring Jacob would return to their company at some point.

But so far, he hadn’t.

Luke reached over and squeezed Grace's hand. She was the youngest of the trio, and sometimes the difference between her nine-year-old self and his eleven-year-old one seemed like a chasm.

"Grace, I mean it. We don't give up on Jacob. He didn't give up on us. He just... he just found something else. Don't mean he don't like us."

Grace nodded and returned the gentle pressure of the squeeze. She was a tomboy, and the boys had included her in their games rather than insisting she play with dolls. She loved them both like brothers. And right now, she knew Luke was missing Jacob as much as she was, if not more. After all, the two boys were closer in age and had been friends for that much longer.

"We can try talking to Father about it. Or Vincent," Grace leaned in and all but whispered the last name, treating Vincent's name like it was his entire person; a secret that needed guarding.

Luke shrugged. His posture said it all. *Maybe we will and maybe we won't. Can't make somebody want to be with you.*

A large group of runners thundered past. This was the main body of the pack, the tight-knit formation of those who were neither the fastest nor the slowest of the bunch. Though loosely spread out, they were still clearly running "together." Many ran four or five abreast, while some ran in pairs or trios. Some were nearly on each other's heels, while others gave more space. Arms swung in rhythm. Feet pounded pavement.

They looked tired but determined.

Luke decided to use them for inspiration. He tugged Grace to her feet.

"Let's go back down. I got an idea," he told her.

Grace smiled. "What?" she asked.

He shot her a mischievous grin. "From here, we're not so far from Eli's. Sometimes, you just gotta push through," he replied, winding them back through the crowd.

Chapter 3

Feeding the Delusion

by Allison

Dr. Barnes unlocked Steven Bass's door and hoped the man was more lucid today than he was the day before. He spent half the night going over Steven's extensive file from the past thirteen years. He re-read the history of what brought him to Collier Forensic Psychiatric

Hospital in the first place. The old records described a chaotic, violent admission to Manhattan General Hospital. The files detail emergency surgery for massive chest lacerations, which the hospital chalked up to an *'unidentified animal attack'* or a *'mangled mugging'*. The intake notes described a man suffering from acute delirium after regaining consciousness in the ambulance. Catherine Chandler had said that Mr. Bass had told her that he had a rapidly degenerating brain lesion, but there was no medical evidence to back it up. And Mr. Bass had a violent, homicidal obsession with Catherine Chandler. Ms. Chandler was examined by the resident in charge to document her injuries since she reported Mr. Bass assaulting her and attempting to strangle her. After several days, the patient was subsequently transferred to Collier Forensic Psychiatric Hospital after numerous evaluations by the psychiatric department and recommendations to the judicial system that deemed him unable to stand trial for the attempted murder and kidnapping of Catherine Chandler.

For the past thirteen years, Steven Bass's long-term records had shown a completely different person. Steven became the model patient. The file noted thirteen years of flawless compliance, absolute emotional flatness, and severe physical decline—leaving him seemingly dependent on a wheelchair. Following his recent *'wind-up,'* which was triggered by a drawing he saw while at physical therapy, Steven's sudden emotional intensity regarding Catherine Chandler was a therapeutic breakthrough. Steven was aware of Ms. Chandler's passing and had come to terms with the events with the help of Dr. Barnes and other therapists. Dr. Barnes rationalized that Steven's sudden agitation toward the drawing and someone named Diana Bennett could only be resolved through exposure therapy. By physically taking him to Catherine Chandler's grave, Steven could finally process his long-suppressed grief, accept reality, and return to his stable baseline. That, and reminding him that whatever attacked him was an animal and not some human-like creature with claws. The possibility still existed to recommend him to a less restrictive facility. Steven was aware that his behavior had to remain stable to be considered.

Dr. Barnes knew there would be a lot of paperwork involved in taking Steven to Catherine's grave, but it was possible. The first thing Dr. Barnes would need was a comprehensive clinical summary and risk assessment report spanning his thirteen-year institutionalization to present to a judge or a forensic review committee. Then they might consider approving the request and setting up outside transport to take him to St. Cleo's cemetery. In his report, Dr. Barnes would explicitly note that because Steven's wheelchair and physical frailty, an escorted, low-profile transport to the cemetery posed an *'insufficient flight risk or danger to the public'*.

"Good morning, Dr. Barnes." Steven wheeled himself to the doorway where the doctor was standing.

"Good morning, Steven. How are you feeling after yesterday?"

“I must apologize for my behavior during my therapy session. I know whatever that *‘creature’* is, he’s a figment of my imagination. It took me a long time to come to terms with my delusions. Whenever my next PT session is, I promise not to go all *‘space wacky’* on them again. I remember you telling me about Cathy’s kidnapping and subsequent murder by that monster, Gabriel. I hope he rots in hell.”

“Yes, I do believe he’s rotting in hell. He was killed by Diana Bennett out on Staten Island.”

“Diana... killed him? Oh, Cathy, I’m glad she was able to avenge you since I was unable to do so.” He started to say something else but suddenly fell silent.

“Steven, I am going to put in a recommendation that you be allowed to visit Catherine Chandler’s grave at St. Cleo’s cemetery. I believe even with this one *‘bad day’*, visiting her grave might finally give you the closure you need. There is a lot of paperwork involved, and we may need a judge’s approval. I do believe it is possible, though.”

“Oh, Dr. Barnes, do you really think they might let me? They turned down all the other requests we put in for this.”

“That’s true. Your behavior when you first arrived here gave many people cause for concern.”

“Yes,” Steven commented. “I can see how my behavior back then was cause for great concern.”

“Other than this one day, you’ve been a model patient. You’ve put in the work with all your therapists, coordinators, and I honestly think it will be good for you.”

“When do you think we could do this, Doctor?”

“Well, I have a comprehensive report to fill out about you and submit it to a judge, as I said. Once, and if the judge approves the request, we then have to set up the logistics of transporting you there. It’s going to take a lot of time and effort on your part to prove to them that this will help you.”

“I promise, Dr. Barnes, I will do whatever you ask of me.”

“Good. Max will be here shortly to take you to the dining hall for breakfast, and then you’ll come see me, and we’ll talk some more.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

Dr. Barnes shook his head and laughed softly as he opened the door to Steven’s room and looked over his shoulder at the man in the wheelchair grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

Steven now knew he had a window of time—weeks, maybe a month—while the paperwork moved through the system. This timeline would give him the perfect opportunity to work on his ultimate goal—escaping Collier Forensic Psychiatric Hospital and finding Vincent and

Diana. Steven knew he must play the perfect patient: absolutely compliant, the perfect patient the hospital had ever seen, to ensure the doctor's report to the judge was flawless.

While Steven was trying to keep a low profile for the doctor and the judge, another inmate noticed his change in behavior and was curious about the cause.

Daniel Raden, the East Village madman who murdered his girlfriend, then made soup out of her body parts and served it to homeless people, was sent to Collier in 1991. He'd been charged with killing and dismembering 26-year-old Mandy Bowman. He'd stewed her chopped-up remains into a soup, tasted it, and then ladled the concoction out to the homeless in Tompkins Square Park. He had tried, like Steven, to be transferred to a less restrictive facility without success. Watching Steven interact with Dr. Barnes gave him hope that he, too, would be allowed to leave Collier.

What is Bass up to? Raden wondered as he watched Steven wheel himself across the courtyard. *He's as crazy as they think I am.*

Steven noticed Raden staring at him, but knew not to interact with him. Any deviation from his plan would force Dr. Barnes to stop the paperwork and refuse to take him to Cathy's grave. If he didn't go to her grave, he wouldn't have a way to get away from his captors and plan his revenge on the creature who had maimed him.

Chapter 4

by T'Mara

The next day was Saturday, and Vincent reminded his son that they were going to spend the weekend with Diana at her loft – without a camera. Jake was not pleased.

"It's not as if there was a fat chance of finding an interesting subject for my camera there," he complained. "But if I don't take the camera and there *is* something cool there, I will miss a chance to take a really unusual picture."

Vincent was not going to let Jake talk him into allowing him to take his favorite gadget to the loft.

"You'll survive a weekend without the camera, I am sure," he sternly told his son.

Jake decided not to answer. It was obvious that his father did not understand. Adults could be so annoying!

Putting on an air of great suffering, he followed Vincent, sulking all the way to Diana's loft.

When they arrived, Diana hugged them both and told them how utterly happy she was to be finally reunited with them after that demanding case that had kept her from Below for so long.

“And I am not going to take a new case right away,” she explained. “Joe Maxwell was hoping to get me interested in something, but I told him I need some rest.”

“You definitely do,” Vincent commented, noticing how pale she was. “You look exhausted. And you have lost weight. You have obviously worked too much for too long. You do not only need some rest, but you deserve it. After all, you got that criminal arrested.”

Diana smiled. She had, of course, anticipated that Vincent would notice how poorly she looked and that he would worry. She began to wonder if it might not be best to tell him of her suspicion that Jake might not be an only child much longer. But then, it was too early, was it not? And even if she was right, a lot of things could happen in the early months of pregnancy. Therefore, she decided to keep her secret for the time being – until she was absolutely sure and the critical first few months were over.

“And what have you two been up to, while I was chasing a criminal?” she asked cheerfully, while filling the kettle with water to make tea.

Vincent immediately told her about recent developments in the tunnels, that Father and Mary were sending their regards, and that William had just tried out a new recipe.

“And what about you, Jake?” Diana asked.

“I have been busy,” the boy explained.

“Busy?” Diana asked. “How so? Have you been helping your father?”

“Of course not,” Jake replied. “I have been taking pictures and developing them!”

“That must be really fascinating,” Diana agreed, smiling at her stepson. “By the way, Susan was here the other day, they were in New York for the day, since Alex needed to go to Cloisters for a school project. Apparently, they have some rare unicorn tapestries on loan there. What do you think, Jake, should we go there as well and have a look at these tapestries?”

Jake thought about it for a moment.

“There might be a chance to take some unusual pictures,” he finally agreed.

Diana hesitated.

“I am not sure,” she said. “Some museums have a no-picture policy. I don't know about the Cloisters, though; I will have to check.”

Jake's interest visibly waned.

"I need to find interesting subjects for my camera," he mumbled.

"I see," Diana said, trying to cheer him up. "But even if you can't take your camera there, it could be fun. Maybe we should invite Grace and Luke to join us!"

"I guess we could," Jake said listlessly.

Diana looked at Vincent. What was going on there? What was the problem with the boy? Only a few weeks ago, he would have been excited to go on an adventure, to explore something new with his friends. Apparently, while working on her case, she had missed some important development in her stepson's life. Guilt for having stayed away so long weighed heavily on her.

Vincent silently shook his head, signaling her, "Not now." They would discuss this problem once the boy was asleep.

XXX

When Mike returned for his therapy, he encountered that strange man in the wheelchair once again.

"Hi Mike," Steven called out. "It is Mike, right? I wanted to apologize for last week. I do not usually get that out of control. You must have thought me a weirdo, really. I hope I did not scare you."

He is mad, Mike reminded himself. Raving mad. But somebody once told me that, when dealing with mad people, it's best to pretend there is nothing wrong with them.

"Oh, okay, no harm done," he therefore said. "Something like that can happen to everybody when they are under stress or not feeling well..."

"You are right," Steven agreed. "I was under stress that day, and something in your picture reminded me of... the past."

He shook his head as if to fight off memories. Then he continued.

"By the way, I forgot to ask. I think you said the woman in the sketch was an acquaintance of yours, but I assume you drew the guy-that type who looks like a character out of a fairy tale book-out of your own imagination? You surely can't have had a model for him?"

Mike laughed. That question was harmless. Maybe that man was not *quite* as mad as he had thought.

"I drew him from memory," he explained. "I had seen a picture, or rather a negative, of him and his bride. Since I work in make-up and costumes, I thought a sketch of this elaborate costume might come in handy one day."

“A picture?” Steven wondered. Who would take a picture of that monster and – more importantly – how had a picture of this creature ended up with this man, Mike?

“Yeah, a picture,” Mike confirmed. “I think some kid took it at that specific event, wedding, or betrothal or whatever it was. Yeah, I remember now, the guy who showed me the negative said the bride's stepson had taken the picture.”

Steven grew agitated again but remembered just in time that he could not risk another scandal like the one he had caused last week. He needed to remain calm, the perfect model patient; otherwise he would not get a chance to be taken to Cathy's grave, to try to get away from Collier Forensic Psychiatric Hospital.

“A son,” he murmured. “If he is this woman's stepson, he must be the son of that fiend...” He looked straight ahead. “Cathy's son,” he whispered, “apparently living with the beast.”

His voice dropped even lower, the last words barely audible. “I must rescue the boy...”

Mike quickly excused himself, saying that his therapist was waiting. He felt uneasy. That man had seemed so perfectly normal a few moments ago, and now... the things he had been saying might have been the fantasies of a deranged mind, but what if they were not? Was it possible that this man, Steven, really knew the man in the picture Alan had shown him? Could it be that this man had been responsible for Steven's injuries, as he had claimed the previous week? But no man could have caused those deep scratches on Steven's chest. They must have been made by an animal, and whatever this bridegroom looked like under all that make-up and prosthetics, he certainly was a normal man. Or was he?

Why had Alan been so certain that this creature was real and not an elaborate costume? But Tony had said it was just that. No such creature existed, right? And Alan certainly had been out of his mind that day, getting very agitated and finally attacking him. But then, Tony had destroyed the negative and the print he had made of it. Why? Was there some truth to what this man, Steven, had said? And if so, how had Alan known, and probably Tony as well? For what reason could Tony have had to destroy the picture, if not to keep this creature's existence a secret?

XXX

“Tony, this is Mike. I need to speak to you - urgently,” Mike left a message. “It's about that picture that Alan showed us the day he... you know.”

He nervously stared ahead, hoping that Tony would get in touch soon. He had spent a sleepless night thinking about his conversation with Steven over and over again and getting more worried almost by the minute. What if Steven was right? What if such a creature truly existed? He had finally decided to tell Tony about his encounters with the strange man and to ask him once again whether he was absolutely sure that the bridegroom in that picture had been wearing an elaborate costume and excellent make-up.

Ten minutes later, Tony called him back. "Mike? What's the problem? I thought we had cleared up that story with the picture. Why do you want to discuss it again?"

"It's a rather long story," Mike informed him. "And I am a bit nervous. Can we meet and discuss this in private?"

Tony frowned. He had hoped that by destroying the negative and the print he had made, the danger to Vincent had been averted. What could have happened now to rekindle Mike's interest in that particular picture?

"Sure," he finally told Mike. "Can you come over at... let's say seven? We could order some Chinese and have a nice little talk."

XXX

At seven o'clock, Mike knocked at Tony's door, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

"I apologize, it's not the super-expensive one you like," he told Tony. "But since you didn't mention it on the phone, I thought I'd make a compromise and get you at least *something*."

Tony smiled. "After what happened to you here last time, I wouldn't have dreamed of asking you for payment this time. By the way, how are you? Are you completely recovered?"

"I still need therapy," Mike explained. "And that's how I met this strange man..."

They sat down, each with a glass of whiskey in front of them, and Mike began to talk about Steven, the man in a wheelchair, who may or may not be a raving lunatic.

"You see, he seems perfectly sane sometimes," Mike said, "and then he talks as if he has met this guy, who may or may not be responsible for his injuries. He once mentioned the name Vincent, and he seems obsessed with a woman called Cathy or Catherine, or possibly Cathleen or something, who may or may not be this man's paramour whom he may or may not have betrayed by marrying this other lady in the picture."

"Good God," Tony needed to think. He had no idea who this Steven was, but it was obvious that the man had met Vincent at some point. He thought it also possible that Vincent had caused this man's injuries. And that man, Steven, also had known Catherine Chandler and been aware of her connection to Vincent. It was also clear that Mike was beginning to wonder whether there might be some truth in Steven's words.

"And that's why I remembered how obsessed Alan was with that picture and how sure he was that this was no costume," Mike continued. "And I wondered why? Are you absolutely one hundred percent certain that this really *is* a costume?"

Tony laughed. He had to be careful now; he had to convince Mike that this was nothing but an expertly done costume. And he most definitely had to talk to Vincent again and relay to him what Mike had just told him. Vincent would know who this Steven was.

“Of course,” he said, trying to sound dead certain. “You know I am an expert in such things, and I demonstrated to you and Alan how this had to be a costume.”

“Yeah,” Mike conceded. “But you also accidentally – or not – destroyed the negative and most definitely destroyed the print on purpose. Why?”

Tony smiled. “You remember how agitated Alan was that night? How determined to go to the press and make a big story out of nothing? I could not let this happen. There were only two or three most likely outcomes: either whoever he tried to sell his story to was laughing at him, or if that person did accept the story, the readers would laugh at him, or, worst-case scenario, the story was accepted, readers believed such a creature truly existed, and Alan's article would have caused a mass hysteria. I didn't want any of that to happen.”

Mike nodded. He could understand this reasoning. “But what about this Steven guy?” he asked.

Tony shrugged. “I have no idea,” he said. “He is probably delusional. Maybe he reads or watches too much Sci-Fi or Fantasy. Maybe there is some personal trauma involved, where the people he named played a role, and it is all being mixed up in his mind, so that he cannot discern what reality is and what is fiction. I'd say it's best you leave him alone.”

“That's probably for the best,” Mike agreed. “But I guess I have already given him enough food for further fantasies. When I told him that, as far as I knew, the picture in question had been taken by the bride's stepson, he mumbled something. I cannot be absolutely sure I heard him correctly, but it sounded like he thought the boy must be rescued. This kind of worried me, though a madman in a wheelchair cannot possibly be a danger to anybody, right?”

Chapter 5

by Angie

Tony didn't waste any time calling Diana, hoping she was in the loft. To his surprise, she answered immediately.

“Diana? Yeah, it's Tony. My gypsy sixth sense is buzzing from some disturbing information, and I need to speak to you and Vincent soon.”

“Tony, Vincent's here now.” She was surprised, but knew better than to question. She looked over at Vincent and raised her eyebrows, and he nodded. “Can you come over now? It's still early.”

Tony thought quickly. Yes, this was too important to leave to schedules that rarely matched.

“I can be there in half an hour. That okay?”

“Sure. See you soon,” Diana said and hung up after he did.

Now what was that about? She was sure it was nothing good. She went to the kitchen to make them some more tea and wasn't surprised when Vincent joined her and put his arms around her from the back.

"What is it, Diana?"

"Got a bad feeling about this. Tony wouldn't want to talk to both of us, on such short notice, unless it was very important."

She poured them each a mug of tea and sighed inwardly. One of the first nights she hadn't had to work in months, and now there was a crisis brewing and their evening of relaxation would be blown... again.

They both returned to the couch, and it was Vincent who spoke first. "Any thought on what could be so important?" he asked.

"Tony knows a few people I know, related to my family – you remember Alan, but he was taken to meet Tony by Mike, a friend of his in the stage makeup industry. It has to be something about one of them, I think. Why else would he need to talk to you, too? And I bet it has something to do with our wedding photo... again."

Vincent stiffened, and his hands clenched his mug. "Why would you think that?"

"Because really, that's Tony's only connection to us both. He covered for us after the family reunion and explained away that photo and destroyed the evidence... but funny thing about secrets – they find a way into the light when least convenient... or expected."

Diana sighed and decided some music was needed. She went over to the CD player and inserted something called '*The Serenity Collection*' and hoped it lived up to its name. It was nothing much, just short classical pieces, but she had found it in a discount bin at the music store and now seemed like the time to put it to use.

She sat back down, and they both listened and indeed relaxed a little. It helped to pass the time, and it wasn't long before the buzzer on her elevator sounded, and she walked over to release the door and waited for Tony at the gate.

He looked worried as he stepped out but gave her a hug. Diana gestured at the easy chair and poured him a cup of tea. He took it, took a grateful sip, and shook hands with Vincent before sitting down.

He sighed. "Glad you are both here. I have bad news. You both know, I think, Steven Bass?"

Diana looked at Vincent and saw him go rigid. She wished she had not heard that name again.

"We know of him," she said bluntly. "He kidnapped Catherine Chandler and held her against her will. He was obsessed with her."

“Yes, I know,” Tony said. “My friend Mike is going to the same institution for some physio related to what Alan did to him and recently met Steven... by accident. He was doodling with a pencil, trying to recall his brief look at your wedding photo. Bass happened to see it and... went berserk. Wanted to know everything. Mike couldn’t tell him much, but it was enough.

“I told Mike that Bass was a nut case and I wasn’t going to let him upset my friends.

“Mike told me that Bass went on a long, insane rant about how he could have prevented Catherine’s death, that you weren’t a man, Vincent, a lot of other stuff that made Mike glad he got away quickly. He had some choice words about Diana, too, but apparently now wants revenge for Catherine’s death.

“Mike and Bass have different problems, so they seldom see each other, and hadn’t talked before this. He noticed afterward that Bass usually sat by himself. Now Mike knows Bass has a hair-trigger anger issue, about Catherine Chandler... and also you, Diana... and Vincent... and Jacob.

“Then another day, Bass went a little nuts again. He said enough for Mike to be very sure he was gathering more information all the time – likely from the newspapers, but he may have outside contacts. He swore revenge again – although Mike wondered how that would be possible in his condition.

“That’s bad enough, but it gets worse. Mike happened to overhear Bass and his doctor talking. Steven wants to visit Catherine’s grave and has requested that he be allowed to go there, a special outing. He has been refused in the past, but he might get it this time. He’s been behaving well, but this latest has Mike worried, because his doctor has not seen or heard all the rants. Bass’s doctor apparently thinks a look at the grave might help his mental state.”

Diana frowned. “He’s in a wheelchair still, isn’t he, paralyzed from the waist down?”

“Yes,” Tony agreed. “But Mike says he does physiotherapy, so his upper body is very strong.”

“But he can’t walk, so what can he do?”

Vincent spoke up, his voice raspy. “Don’t underestimate him, Diana. He’s very intelligent, criminally obsessed... and he has a lot of money. Catherine told me that. It’s how he got into the Collier hospital.”

“Yes, I read the file on him,” Diana said. “He can access his money through a lawyer acting as his trustee. So what?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know, but Mike is certain he’s planning something. Bass is insane, but he’s not stupid. He’ll find a way. Bass keeps informed. He knows about Alan, I think, because Mike may have mentioned him. Alan is in prison, but he may know someone or something that would help Bass get what he wants.”

Vincent grunted. "I do not know what Steven Bass is capable of now, but I do believe he wants revenge. Last time, from his wheelchair, he coerced a reporter and nearly exposed us. Catherine... and a man... a criminal we knew... ended that. It was a very bad time. Father almost died, and... this criminal... died. It could happen again."

Diana knew about the Spirko incident from the newspapers, but did not know the details, which had not been publicized, and she hadn't been involved. There were several deaths, she remembered, thugs as well as Spirko himself. The newspaper denied any knowledge of what Spirko had been investigating, and when he was found dead in the empty penthouse, the story died. Catherine had played a part in that; she was now sure the tunnel community was somehow involved. As to the other dead man – there was no mention of anyone but a couple of thugs who got slashed in Central Park. No one cared much about them, but Spirko had tried to make something out of it.

Diana sat straight up and made a pronouncement.

"I'll go to Collier Psychiatric tomorrow and talk to Bass's doctor," Diana said, in a voice that brooked no argument. "If his doctor is aware that Bass is planning something, he may cancel the outing request. I think that's most important for now – and he may not agree. It won't end there. I suspect Bass wants to escape somehow. I don't know how he could manage it, much less find us and kill us, but he wouldn't have to do it himself – and he would consider any risk worthwhile. He has nothing to lose and, from what I understand, has shown no remorse at all. I think his hate is all that keeps him from going completely insane. I've investigated psychopaths like that. They're dangerous because they're single-minded - and they have power beyond what we would think normal. He'll use anyone and anything he can."

"Then we must take precautions," Vincent stated bluntly. "Jacob and I will stay in the tunnels for the foreseeable future. Jessica will be warned. He could hire men who could search us out, so we must have extra sentries and alert our Helpers. Diana, you should stay Below for a while. Tony, be extra careful. If Mike mentions your name, you could be in danger, too."

Diana sighed. "I could stay below, but it's possible that I could be the bait that keeps whatever he's planning away from the rest of you. I can be found easily. He only needs one of us, after all. A clever man would know that. We can be prepared."

"We will have your loft entrance guarded, Diana," Vincent promised. "We will be ready if he is allowed this visit to the grave."

Diana noticed that Vincent had no doubt that it would, and she couldn't argue that. The tunnels were not the fortress they had once been. They had incursions, and not all were just luck.

Tony realized he was dealing with people to whom security was a normal part of their lives, and he reflected that, had it not been for Vincent and Catherine's help with his uncle and

grandfather, his life would be very different. He wanted to help, and there was something he could do.

“I can keep in touch with Mike and encourage him to keep his ears and eyes open, so that at least we may have some warning if Bass is allowed to visit the cemetery,” Tony offered.

“I will talk to Jessica and tell her to be extra vigilant,” Vincent promised.

Diana sighed. “Thanks for telling us this, Tony. We are going to have to work out a way to communicate quickly.”

Vincent made a suggestion. “Could you leave a message in Diana’s mailbox, Tony? Someone will be checking. I will teach you a tunnel code – a help code and your name - so that you can use the pipes if it’s urgent. There are outside ones in a couple of places, and access via a couple more. If you are in any danger, Tony, don’t hesitate to come to us.”

Vincent spent the next several minutes filling Tony in on a basic help code, and where he could find pipes near an entry that wouldn’t put him in danger. Tony repeated the information, and Vincent nodded, satisfied. Their gypsy friend would be an asset.

Then Tony had to ask. “How safe will you be if Bass tries to get someone to locate you?”

Vincent sighed. “We’ve been under siege before. I can distract and... discourage... them. We have a good sentry system and many warnings in place, which won’t be obvious to any intruder. If they have weapons, that won’t help them in my territory... and I can lead them away from us. I’ve done it before. I will talk to Father tonight. Thanks for warning us, Tony.”

“I owe you more than I can ever repay,” Tony exclaimed. “Not just for my life, but for my family. I will do all I can to protect yours. If you need a few gypsies to lurk in the shadows here and there, big ones with muscle, let me know.”

Vincent managed an almost-smile. “Thank you, Tony. That might be helpful. Diana will keep in touch with you. We have a great deal of planning to do.”

Tony rose and wished them both a good night, feeling much better for coming. No one would get past his people, he swore. He would ask for a beefy volunteer to do what gypsies did best – watch and wait. He knew a gypsy with a small photography shop just across the road, one he had used often in the early days. He would be more than willing to allow one of the family to play security guard, and at the same time keep his plate glass window from being broken so often. There had been some threats to local shops, Tony knew, likely from drug addicts, so this was a good time to discourage it, while making sure no one else got ideas about Diana or anything else in the neighborhood. He owed Roman for his support, so it was time to pay that back and do a good deed, too. He smiled as he exited the elevator at the street and looked across at the shop. Closed, of course, but he would visit Roman in the morning.

Diana and Vincent sat in silence for some time. At last, Vincent sighed and rose.

“I must tell my son. He now has a darkroom in the tunnels, but he will have to curtail his photo expeditions Above. Maybe Jessica can give him some classes in new techniques he can use in our darker world. She could stay with us while she does that. She does love to teach.”

“You’d better tell Jacob that we are off limits now and that any photos and negatives he has must not leave these tunnels,” Diana warned, with a wry smile.

“No, he must find other subjects,” Vincent agreed. “I don’t like to discourage art, but that photo was a slip we cannot allow to happen again. He and Jessica will both be warned, and I’ll get Father to do it. I’m too close to it.”

He left then, over the roof as he often did, and Diana sat for a long time in thought. She would have a busy day tomorrow. So much for time off.

Chapter 6

by Janet Rivenbark

Daniel Raden had been a model patient/prisoner since he’d been at Collier. He’d not argued with anyone; he’d taken his meds, made all the appointments with the shrink, made all the group sessions, and done everything he was told. And that had earned him privileges. The first had been a move out of the ward where he’d shared a room with 19 other men. He hadn’t had to do that since he’d been discharged from the Army. He moved to a semi-private room. He was still in the locked wing where they kept all the criminally insane, but he had some privacy.

The latest privilege he’d earned was the right to spend some time every afternoon in the main dayroom of the hospital. The big burly orderly, Stan, still watched him like a hawk, but now he had the freedom to walk around, talk to people, watch the TV, or read a newspaper or a book.

Hospital scuttlebutt had it that one of the other patients was going on a field trip. He scanned the dayroom and spotted the guy in a wheelchair over by the windows.

Steven knew he had to have a plan. In addition to his weekly visits with his doctor, since he’d graduated from dangerous psychopath to patient, he was in physical therapy three times a week. And he was making progress. He’d never lost feeling in his legs, just strength and control. And because he’d gone so long without physical therapy right after being sent to Collier, his legs had atrophied. The physical therapist had told him that if he’d started PT right after his wounds had healed, he’d be dancing a jig right now.

Thinking about that always made him angry, but that was all water under the bridge. Now he had to concentrate on coming up with a plan to get out of this place so he could rescue Cathy's baby from that creature.

I guess it's not a baby anymore, he thought. It must be at least ten years old... Well, at least I won't have to carry it or change diapers.

Daniel kept an eye on the man in the wheelchair as he moved around the room, seemingly looking for a comfortable place to sit. There was a chair across from the man that he was making his way to. He picked up a newspaper on his way.

He reached the chair and sat down. When he opened the paper, he was pleased to find that it was only a day old.

"So, what do you think of our new president?" Daniel asked, looking over the top of the paper at the man across from him.

"Huh?" The man was startled. "You talking to me?"

"Yep. I think you're the only one in earshot lucid enough to answer," he answered with a grin.

Steven knew who this man was, but didn't think it would hurt his chances much if he spoke to him casually.

"To tell the truth, I haven't been paying attention. I don't even know who it is."

"Yeah, I guess that doesn't affect us very much."

"I used to be very political," Steven said. "I even had thoughts of running for office or maybe being a judge someday."

"You're a lawyer?" Daniel asked, unsure if he wanted to continue the conversation.

"Almost. Never passed the bar."

Daniel nodded.

"How about you? What was your occupation?" Steven asked.

"Which one? The legal one or the illegal one?" Daniel asked with a grin.

Steven laughed. "Both?"

"Weed kept a roof over my head, but I was also a preacher. Formed my own religion. Before that, I was an amateur bodybuilder. Since you didn't pass the bar, how did you live?"

Steven nodded.

“Not a problem. My family had money. I lived in a house that my folks owned. Then I inherited everything when they died.”

“So, where’s the money now?” Daniel asked, suddenly curious.

“I had a financial advisor and an accountant. They are looking after everything.”

Something caught Daniel’s eye; Stan was on his way across the room.

“Time’s up, Raden,” Stan said, gesturing toward the door to the locked wing.

Daniel stood and dropped the paper onto the chair.

“Nice talking to you,” he said. “By the way, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Bass, Steven Bass,” Steven said with a nod.

“Dan Raden,” Daniel said, turning to follow the orderly. He had wanted to talk to Bass a little more, but now was not the time to defy the rules and lose privileges.

Daniel and Stan reached the locked door, and Stan took out keys to unlock it.

“How did the last competition go?” Daniel asked as he waited for Stan to lock the door behind them.

Since Daniel had lifted until a torn rotator cuff had knocked him out of competition, he’d given Stan a few pointers.

“Good,” Stan said as they resumed their walk down the hall so Daniel could check it at the desk. “Took second.”

“Good going!” Daniel said, injecting as much enthusiasm into his words as he could.

Steven watched Raden go. He’d known who he was talking to, but no one needed to know that. Steven made a point of not reading newspapers or magazines, but he’d become an expert at eavesdropping on any conversations going on near him. He’d kept up with the news, and he knew what was going on in the world.

Raden had been here for a long time. He might be a good resource, or maybe even an ally.

Steven was at breakfast the next morning when Dr. Barnes sat down across from him.

“I’ve requested permission for you to visit Miss Chandler’s grave,” he told Steven. “We meet with the committee at 10:00.” He looked at Steven’s dress shirt and dark pants. “What you have on is fine. I’ll meet you in the day room at 9:45.”

“What do they need from me?” Steven asked, suddenly a little anxious. Everything depended on this.

“They have your file and all the notes from your time here. I don’t think they will do much more than ask you some questions. Just answer truthfully and to the best of your ability.”

“Thanks, Dr. Barnes. I’ll be ready.”

Chapter 7

by J Webb

When Steven and Dr. Barnes entered the conference room later that morning, Steven was surprised that the setting wasn’t more formal.

He and Dr. Barnes were seated on one side of a table, and five people, three of whom he recognized as doctors at the facility, were seated on the other side.

Once everyone was settled, the man in the middle spoke.

“Good morning, Mr. Bass, Dr. Barnes.” He looked at Steven. “Dr. Barnes knows me, but we’ve never met. I’m Dr. Samuel Grafton, Facility Director.” He opened the file on the table in front of him. “We’ve all read your file, Mr. Bass, and there are just a few questions that we’d like to ask.”

At Steven’s nod, he continued.

“Why do you want to visit this particular grave?” he asked, getting right to the point. “I would think that you’d be just as inclined, if not more so, to visit the graves of your parents.”

“My parents were cremated,” Steven told him. “They owned a property in the northern part of the state that they loved. I took their ashes there and scattered them. Mom’s are in her rose garden, and Dad’s are in the lake where he loved to fish.”

Grafton was taking notes. “I see. And your reason for wanting to visit Miss Chandler’s grave?”

“I loved Cathy. I did her a grievous wrong, and I never had the chance to tell her how sorry I am.” Steven knew just what to say, and he hoped that it sounded sincere. “I requested permission to go to her funeral, but the court denied it.”

“Well, we don’t need the court’s permission this time around,” Grafton told him. “How did you and Miss Chandler meet?”

“Columbia Law, when we were there,” he said, smiling slightly. “I had a hard time getting her to go out with me initially. She spent most of her time studying. She was living at home with her father, who was a lawyer, and she wanted to work for him after she graduated and passed

the bar. It took several months, but I finally convinced her during the Christmas break to go to dinner with me.”

“And your relationship progressed after that?” Grafton asked.

“Yes. I was living in a house my parents owned, and she moved in with me the next summer.”

“And how was your relationship then?”

Steven was perplexed at the direction of the questions but didn’t question it. He just answered.

“At first, it went well. We had more time together and got to know each other. We were engaged, planning to get married after graduating and passing the bar, but after about a year, things started to get rough. She said I was too controlling. She was trying to plan a wedding, but she didn’t want my input... well, that’s not exactly true. She would listen to me on the subject, but she would totally ignore what I’d said.” He thought about what he’d just said, and decided that it didn’t convey the image he wanted.

“But in retrospect, she was right. And that was where it all went wrong when I tried to get her back. I was still trying to control her. I thought I was giving her everything she wanted, but I lied to her and wouldn’t listen. I made huge mistakes. If I had the opportunity to do it all again, with the knowledge I now have, I wouldn’t do it that way. I’m sure that if it had worked out that last time, she might be alive today.”

“You feel that you would have that kind of control in the relationship?” Dr. Grafton asked.

“No, Sir, not control, but Cathy and I had talked about children, and I think that once she’d had a child, she wouldn’t have continued the job with the DAs office, and she wouldn’t have wanted to put herself in that kind of danger. She knew what it was like to lose a parent at an early age.”

Dr. Grafton looked at the others who were on his side of the table. Each one nodded, then he looked back at Steven.

“We had pretty much made up our minds before his interview,” he told Steven, who tensed, anticipating bad news. “But we still wanted to talk to you. We are in agreement that a visit to Miss Chandler’s grave might be a good step for you. Give you a chance to close the door on that chapter.”

Steven couldn’t help the smile and the feeling of triumph, but he kept his reply humble.

“Thank you so much, Dr. Grafton.”

“You are welcome. I need to talk to Dr. Barnes, so you can go. Dr. Barnes will let you know the details.”

Steven wheeled himself out of the room, and Dr. Grafton turned to Dr. Barnes.

“He has come a long way,” he commented. “Miss Chandler was a patient of mine when I was still in private practice, and although she wasn’t in my office many times, I did have a good idea of her personality. And it appears that Mr. Bass has reached that point as well.

“Now, I think you should do the visit at your earliest convenience. Since Mr. Bass is in a wheelchair, you’ll need to take the van. And I suggest you take one of the orderlies from the high-security wing.”

“Do you think I’ll need that kind of security?” Dr. Barnes asked, surprised.

“No, but you might need the extra muscle to handle the wheelchair. The van doesn’t have a ramp, so Mr. Bass may have to be lifted, and it’s not easy to push a wheelchair on soft grass.”

Dr. Barnes nodded. “I didn’t think of that. I’m glad you did. I think I know just the orderly. He’s an amateur bodybuilder.”

Chapter 8

by CB Mcwhorter

Luke and Grace tumbled into the dining hall and sat on either side of Jacob for breakfast. “Hi, guys,” he said, barely glancing at them. “How was the race?”

“Well, we could have told you at dinner, but you weren’t here,” Grace said.

“It was cool,” Luke added almost dismissively. “But after was better.”

Intrigued in spite of himself, Jacob said, “Better how?”

“We went to see Eli,” Grace said. “And he gave us these.”

She and Luke plunked two ancient cameras on the table next to Jacob’s cereal bowl.

Jacob’s eyes widened. “Whoa. These are really old! Why’d he give ‘em to you?”

“So we can learn photography like you,” Grace said. “You can teach us, right?” Jacob’s grin proved to her that Luke had been right. If they couldn’t pull Jacob away from his new obsession and they wanted his company, they might as well see for themselves what he was into. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, he’d said. Looked like he’d been right.

“Sure, I can!” Jacob said.

“Eli says this one’s broken,” Luke said. “Maybe Jessica can fix it.”

Jacob picked it up and fiddled with it, pushing buttons and so forth. “Back won’t close,” he muttered.

“That’s not all!” said Grace, before Jacob became too distracted.

“He gave us these,” said Luke. He hoisted a paper bag onto the bench between him and Jacob. It was full of rectangular boxes. Jacob pulled one out and frowned at it.

“What are they? Toy cameras?”

“Nah,” said Luke. “They’re real ones. Eli said they used to be a lot more popular. They’re disposable. The film is already in them. People would buy them, take pictures, and return the whole thing to the camera shop. These are old, but Eli thought maybe the film could still work.”

“Weird,” Jacob said. The others nodded.

“You three!” William called. “More eating, less talking.”

Luke and Grace scurried to get their own breakfast.

XXX

Diana huffed at herself as she put down her phone. “I’ll just go talk to Bass’s doctor,” she taunted herself. “Sure.”

The doctor wasn’t available for an interview, imagine that. And tomorrow, he was out of the office most of the day. She could just guess where he would be.

She sat back and fumed a moment, her hand straying to her belly in a new habit. Well, his absence was probably a good thing. She knew she was being impulsive when she’d said it last evening. What sort of excuse could she give for going to see him? *I know Steven Bass is planning a breakout? We at the NYPD just know these things.* Yeah, that would go over well.

She looked over at her empty board. There were so many different parts to this issue; she should use it. Yeah. Why not? It’s still time off, right?

An hour later, she had a mess of file cards pinned up:

Steven Bass. Unraveling clearly enough that an occasional visitor to the physical therapy department could see it. Rich enough to get someone to pull strings outside of his institution. So, not just a miserable nut, but a dangerous miserable nut.

Bass’ doctor. Somehow, this guy seemed to have missed what Mike saw. Or ignored it. The correct response to a renewed obsession with the creature that attacked him was to take him to a cemetery? Are they counting on his remaining paraplegic when even Mike could see him exercising his legs? She had so many questions here.

Tony’s friend Mike. Sounded like a smart, observant guy. He drew from memory the people he saw in a photograph weeks ago. Was he as curious as he was observant? Was he a risk? A potential ally?

Tony. He offered help. They would probably need that. Maybe even tomorrow? Worth a discussion.

Jacob. Would he stay Below? Diana groaned. When he ran in lockstep with Luke and Grace, she could more or less count on the other two to keep him Below. Of those three, Jacob wasn't exactly the ringleader; Luke was. But he'd pretty much walked away from them. They could still be recruited to help.

Jessica. And all the adults Below. They would keep an eye on Jacob.

Alan Johnson, just for kicks. He wasn't part of this, anymore. But she put the card up so she could blow a raspberry at it.

A trip to a cemetery. Could they/should they round up a posse to stake out St Cleo's in case Bass staged a jailbreak? People from Below and Tony's friends? They could help if needed, get royally bored if not.

A picture. Jacob's damned picture. Did her childhood hobbies ever cause this much trouble? She broke a toe falling off a skateboard once. Not even close. She didn't make anyone nervous about her until she got a job.

Security Below. She's been thinking for some time that measures could be increased. Maybe some newer technology. But she also couldn't see how Bass would know to look for Vincent in the Tunnels. He encountered his roaring nemesis out in New Rochelle. Why would he think of Central Park?

No. Bass would be looking for her. The loft address was easy enough to get, especially with an assistant. Like a trustee for his estate. What would such a person think when his client started demanding a strange woman's address? What would such a person do if the strange woman called to discuss his stalking her? She didn't have proof that he was stalking her. Yet. Another card went up on the board. There's a trustee, she was sure of it. Who? She sighed. Probably the most successful way to find out would be to burrow into Bass's financials. Ugh. She hated that.

She surveyed the layout a little longer. OK. Step one. Call Tony, make a plan. Go recruiting Below. She didn't know for sure, but she trusted her instincts. The graveside field trip was tomorrow.

XXX

Samuel Grafton was in a very bad mood. Very bad.

Steven Bass' visit to the cemetery could have gone worse, but he didn't want to think about that. Barnes and Stan Jones, the aide, had loaded Bass into the van and left at 9:00 AM. In retrospect, Bass' attitude seemed off. A man still denying the death of a woman he loved should appropriately be somber, or even reluctant to go see her grave. Bass was eager. He

maintained a serious face, but he was practically vibrating. Grafton should have recognized it. Barnes should have. However, at this point, Grafton wasn't very impressed with Barnes at all.

The first hint that something was wrong was a visit from Bass' Physical Therapist and his Director. They were not happy. Seems they hadn't been told of the outing.

"Doctor, this isn't proper procedure," said Ella Raines, the Rehab Director. "For an outing such as this, Geordie should have gone with the patient."

"We sent Stan Jones. He's strong enough to get Bass in and out of the van."

Ella scoffed. "Any outing into the community is an opportunity to show the patient how to get around out in the community. It is so much more than a matter of herding the patient in and out of a vehicle. It's PT protocol." She dropped an operations manual onto Grafton's desk. "Furthermore, with someone with Bass' instability, there aren't enough people with him to satisfy an elopement protocol."

It was Grafton's turn to scoff. "Elopement? How far can a paraplegic get?"

They stared at him. "Dr Grafton," Geordie said. "Steven's not a paraplegic."

"What?"

"He never was."

"How do you know that?"

There was a careful pause. "I read the chart, sir."

Well, that was embarrassing. Grafton hadn't gone through Bass' entire file. He'd depended on Barnes to do that.

"The original exam showed three gashes across the abdomen down to the fascia, but not through it. No internal injury," Geordie went on. "There were bruises on his throat like someone had picked him up, but no damage to the C-spine. Or any part of the spine. And the gashes were described as looking like the work of a garden tool, like a hand rake. Law enforcement couldn't tell if the kidnapping victim had done it to defend herself. She was pretty stressed and had trouble providing much information. She did say she did whatever she could to get away from him."

"He came to us in a wheelchair," said Grafton.

"No one did any mobilization therapy for him till he came here."

"Which should be a crime," Ella added in.

Grafton could only agree. "So, he can move his legs."

"Yes. And he's been weight-bearing in Therapy for the past month."

Grafton stared. “Damn,” he said.

XXX

The New York expedition returned with a few more people than had left, and a patient who was absolutely raving. Grafton congratulated himself on having given in to premonition fueled by decades of experience. He’d quietly asked the charge nurse to have a sedative available. No harm, no foul if it was returned to the pharmacy.

Jones and a few other aides whisked Bass off to the high-security ward as the hospital director waited for an explanation, praying that Bass had just had a grief reaction. “He didn’t react well, I presume?”

Barnes gave a humorless laugh. “You could say that.”

“And who are these gentlemen?”

A dark-haired young man stepped forward. “I’m Tony Ramos. I was visiting the cemetery myself when, well, when things went down.”

Oh. No.

A middle-aged man nodded. “I’m Cullen. I’m a carpenter.”

“I’m assuming you have a story to tell,” Grafton sighed. “Let’s get some coffee, since we don’t have anything stronger.”

The trip to the cemetery was quiet. Bass seemed complacent, looking out the window.

“He perked up when we got to St Cleo’s,” Barnes said.

“Perked up?” Grafton repeated. “Most people are rather subdued when they approach an important grave.”

Barnes shook his head. “No. He was edgy. Maybe even trying not to smile. I should have taken warning.”

Grafton frowned.

Things got weird quickly. Bass gazed at the tombstone, called for Cathy, and acted as if he’d cry, but Barnes knew he was forcing it. Then he jumped up from the wheelchair and turned, not towards the grave, but towards the path to the entrance. He started to run, but he only made a few steps before his legs gave out and he landed on his face.

Jones was on him at once, practically landing on top of him, and Bass started to scream.

“Let me go! Let me go! I have to find him!”

Jones hauled him to his feet, ignoring the strangled noise Barnes made. "Him who?" Jones said. "You're here to see Catherine Chandler's grave. She's not a *him*."

"Her baby! I have to find her baby! I have to save him from that monster! She'd want me to raise him! I have to!"

Bass then kicked Jones in the crotch and tried to run again. No one had noticed that two men had seen the commotion and were running over to help. Bass then ran straight into a tall man with a toolbox. He dropped the box to support Bass under his arms when his legs gave out again. Another younger man ran up and helped Jones up from the ground. The two strangers helped get the distraught man back to the van, no easy task. At that point, it was such a struggle to get him into the vehicle that Barnes asked them if they would help them get him back to Collier. And they were nice enough to agree.

"I thank you, gentlemen, for your help," Grafton said. "I'll have a driver get you back to Manhattan."

"I have to ask," Ramos asked. "You were there to see Catherine Chandler's grave?"

"Yes," Barnes said. "They were involved, apparently."

Ramos nodded gravely. "I heard of him. What he did to her."

"You knew her?" Grafton said, surprised.

"I did. And if I'm near that graveyard at any point, I stop by. She saved my life. And stayed my friend."

"So, you know what happened that night?" Barnes said.

"She mentioned something, and I looked the rest up in the library newspapers. I asked her about it after that, and she said that at the end, all she remembered was running through the woods with some kind of tool in her hand that she'd grabbed to defend herself. And she cried, because it wasn't the first time someone had tried to kill her."

The doctors nodded. "Did you know she was pregnant?" Grafton asked.

"Before someone else kidnapped her and really did kill her? No."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Who?"

"Catherine Chandler's child."

"Oh. It was a girl. And cousins from Canada came and adopted her. Someone on her mom's side. That's all I know."

"Who was the father?"

“No idea. I was a kid. Grownups didn’t go into detail, you know?” Tony sat back and let the story he, Diana, and Vincent had crafted sink in. Maybe it would get Bass to calm down.

Grafton turned to Cullen. “Mr. Cullen, how did you get involved in this?”

The rangy man smiled. “I was taking a shortcut across the graveyard to take a bus.” He shrugged. “You looked like you needed help.”

“Thank you,” Dr Barnes humbly said.

From two floors away, they heard someone screaming. The doctors sighed.

Ramos and Cullen were sent on their way, with thanks. The two doctors sat in the director’s office, one of them fighting the urge to squirm.

“How could you think he was paraplegic?” Grafton asked.

“It said so in the admitting history and physical.” Barnes knew that this sounded hollow and incompetent.

“But we have medical history from other institutions, from the day he was injured. He goes on about a monster with claws, and what he really faced was a desperate woman with a rake.” Grafton slapped his hand on the desk. “Good God, not only did we miss his actual neurologic state, but the breadth and duration of his delusion.”

“I’m sorry...”

“You should be! And not just you! The doctor who took care of him before you came completely under-performed!”

“I obviously need to re-evaluate him from the ground up. There’s more to him than covert narcissism,” Barnes said. “And what was all that about his ‘being faithful’ to her? I’ve treated him for an STD twice, along with two different women!”

“Yes, in a space of weeks. At least we tightened security about that.” Grafton sat back and sighed. “You get the pleasure of calling his trustee.”

Barnes groaned.

Grafton went on. “But I think that we need to contact this detective he’s obsessed with. God forbid he gets out again, but he’s resourceful enough to get someone to bother her. I think this falls under our Duty to Warn.”

“Do you think a phone call will be enough? Should I try to see her in person?”

“Start with a call.”

XXX

The call to Patricia Martin, Esq of the august law firm of Franklin, McClosky and Cassiano came first. Barnes knew enough to face the sharpest music first in a case like this. He allowed himself a brief hope that Ms. Martin would not be in, but it was only brief. He explained the reappearance of Steven's fixation on his monster and on Catherine Chandler: seeing a drawing of a person dressed up like a character from "Cats" left him very distressed, only to calm down the next day.

"Well," said the attorney, "that explains the messages I've received from him."

"What messages?"

"He wanted me to investigate an NYPD detective and her stepson. Find out where she lives, where he goes to school. I haven't answered yet."

"Well, we're on to the next part, then," said Barnes. "Steven decided that the monster was the father of Chandler's child, and he'd married Ms. Bennet, who is helping him raise his son. He became convinced that Ms. Chandler would want *him* to raise her child, and he's determined to do that."

Martin made an inarticulate sound that could only be translated as '*Oh, crap*'.

"He's been emotionally labile, and we thought that this would be a good time to bring his mourning for Ms. Chandler to some closure. He agreed to visit her grave, something he was earlier unwilling to do."

"Oh, you didn't."

"I'm sorry to say that we did. Today. It went very badly."

"I'm sure," said Ms. Martin.

Barnes took a deep breath and repeated the whole story. "With our luck being what it is, I wouldn't be surprised if someone took a video."

"Oh, God."

"One thing we did learn from a friend of Catherine Chandler was that her baby was female. And was taken in by family that lives in Canada."

"He isn't going to accept that."

"Patients with this level of fixation rarely do show an interest in actual facts."

She gave a sarcastic laugh. "Our Steven wouldn't let little things like facts or practicality get in his way before all this."

"I also need to tell you that we feel a Duty to Warn for Detective Bennet."

She paused to think. “I agree. Although I cringe at the thought of broadening the possibility of publicity.”

“I think it helps that she’s law enforcement.”

“I have to say, Doctor, that I am not impressed with how his latest exacerbation has been handled.”

“I deserve that.”

“And you definitely shouldn’t admit liability when talking to the patient’s lawyer.”

“I will do all I can to make this right, ma’am.”

She laughed.

XXX

Barnes had hoped to leave a message for Diana Bennet. He was not so lucky. She answered right away.

“Detective Bennet, this is Dr Alan Barnes at Collier Psychiatric Hospital. I need to talk to you about one of our clients.”

“It’s Dr Bennet,” she said. “How can I help you, Doctor?”

“Doctor?”

“I’m a profiler with the NYPD 210. I have a PhD in Criminal Psychology.”

Where was she when they needed her? “It’s a pleasure to meet you. So, to speak. The client’s name is Steven Bass.”

“I’m familiar with that name.”

“Are you?”

“It came up when I was investigating the life of a murder victim in a different case. Years ago.”

“That murder victim wouldn’t have been Catherine Chandler, would it?”

She paused. “It would.”

“He came to us a mess, after hospitalization for repair of whatever it was that scarred his abdomen – I have my theories there. He’d had no physical therapy during his retention in a county facility during his trial. He was reported to be paraplegic. But he’d been getting PT now, and... But that’s not really what you need to know...”

Barnes went on to explain Bass’ recent behavior, starting with his being triggered by an encounter with another PT client who was doodling a man with a cat face.

“The guy said he was a makeup artist, and he liked to sketch ideas for aliens or creatures. He said he was inspired by a wedding photo he saw of a couple that had a fantasy-themed wedding. Bass saw that and lost it. He was sure that the groom was his “monster”. He was enraged that the monster was unfaithful to Cathy’s memory and had married another. Then he saw your photo in the paper and decided that the bride in the sketch was you. The makeup artist said that the photo was taken by the groom’s son, and now he’s convinced that he has to rescue the boy from the monster and raise him himself. That Cathy would want him to.” He stopped and waited for her to say anything.

“Go on,” she said, her voice clinical and calm.

“This was a serious backslide,” Barnes said. “But we worked on his perceptions, and he seemed to get back on track. He was rational and calm. He was able to verbalize that he was still mourning Cathy Chandler. It’s been close to 15 years since he last saw her, and that was in court. She was very clear that she never wanted to see him again.

“Then we thought that he might find some closure by visiting her grave.”

There was a faint puff of breath on the line, but she said nothing.

“He tried to escape. After weeks of rational behavior, he fought to leave, screaming that he had to save the boy. He had to kill the monster, and, er, you. We got him back to Collier, and he’s sedated now. It’s obvious that he hadn’t dropped any of the delusions but made a plan to escape and gave us whatever it would take to get us to let him leave the building. We feel it is our duty to warn you that he has expressed explicit aggressive action against you and your family. But he is secured at this time, and we expect to maintain that indefinitely.”

There was a moment of silence. “It sounds like you’ve had a bad day.”

He laughed with little humor. He was just glad he hadn’t mentioned that they’d thought the patent was paraplegic.

“Just to be clear,” he said. “Your stepson is not Cathrine Chandler’s child, right?”

“It is a little-known fact that Catherine Chandler had a girl. I think it would also be wise if you did not distribute that fact too far, although it might help Mr. Bass.”

Barnes made a doubtful noise.

“Yes, narcissists rarely allow facts to influence their world,” she said.

“Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

“Not at the moment. We will have to discuss as a family how to handle this. Thank you for the warning.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll keep in touch if anything new comes up.” Which would be likely.

XXX

Later that evening, in Father's library, Diana met with Vincent, Father and Cullen. She told them about Barnes' phone call. She'd also heard from Tony, who took a more amused view than Barnes or Stan did.

"So," Father said, "I'd love to say that the crisis is averted."

"It is," Diana said. "But this is the shape of his brain, now. Obsessions like his rarely go away. We can take comfort that he is contained. I think that Collier has been alarmed enough to never let him even breathe without monitoring. He's a serious risk to their reputation."

"They've been sloppy," Father said.

"Let's call it that," she said.

XXX

Two days later, after a special roast chicken supper in the dining hall, complete with strawberry cake, Vincent dropped the curtain across their chamber entrance and sat next to Diana on the bed.

He pulled her into his arms. "Happy Anniversary, my love."

"Always," she said, and kissed him.

"Forever," he said and kissed her back. "I have something for you." He pointed to a box on the table, wrapped in a soft green cloth with a tawny border.

Gleefully, she took up the box and unwrapped the cloth to find it was longer than she expected. There were two sturdy brass rings at one end. She set it aside to open the box. She found a leather bag with a crossbody strap and several pockets inside, and a narrow slot at the end to fit a water bottle. It could serve nicely as a computer bag or briefcase, but it was neither a computer bag or a briefcase. Suspicion stirred. She caressed the smooth leather.

"Where did you get this?"

"I made it. It originally had a flap closure, but I changed it at the end. I added a pocket or two."

She looked up at him. He looked both smug and shy, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out how he managed that.

"How long have you known?"

"Probably a month. I'd almost finished this when I first sensed it. Leather is the gift for third anniversaries, you know." He took in her flushed cheeks. "I knew you'd tell me soon."

"Are you happy?"

He crushed her to his chest and breathed in her ear, “There are no words.”

She hugged him tightly and let that worry dissolve.

“Jacob will be over the moon,” he said.

“Both Jacobs,” she grinned.

“Oh, and the shawl is a baby sling,” he said.

She reached under her pillow to pull out his gift, wrapped in paper with a Celtic knot pattern.

“Happy anniversary,” she said.

He unwrapped it with habitual care, and then his eyes went wide. “Brigit’s new book!” he said, smiling. “Also leather. ‘The Owl Woman and the Cailleach’.”

“It’s a children’s book,” she said.

“Was this your way of telling me?”

“It was. Didn’t think you’d spoil it.”

He kissed away her pout. “I love you so. I’m sorry to spoil your surprise.”

“You’re forgiven.” She raised her face to kiss him as she untied his vest and pushed it from his shoulders. It seemed that they were naked in the time it took to take a breath, even though they savored the disappearance of each item of clothing. She crooned as she slid her newly sensitized breasts up the velvet of his belly. He gave a growl as his hands sped down her back to grasp her buttocks and turn her underneath him. She wrapped her legs around his hips and smiled up at him. “Show me how we made this baby,” she purred.

And he did.

Afterward, he whispered. “Shall I spoil something else?”

She lifted her head from his chest to look at him with suspicion. “What?”

“I’d like your permission.”

“All right.”

“It’s a girl.”



DIGITAL ART

by Mel



Plot Bunnies Story Garden



Plot Bunny Ideas given by Fans. If any of these inspire your muse feel free to take them and see where the muse takes you.

Classic Ideas by Allison

- 1) What if Paracelsus was visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future in his own version of a Christmas Carol.
- 2) What if Tom Gunther was as possessive as Steven Bass and found out about the tunnels threatening to expose them?
- 3) What if Mitch went on trial for shooting Catherine and threatened to expose Vincent?

All Season Idea by Angie.

How are birthdays celebrated Below? Do they have one big party a month to celebrate all September birthdays? Or maybe they have a one-day Birthday Fest, where everyone gets a gift (names in a hat or whatever) and William does some special treats?

Season 3 by Mel

What if Elliott survived and fell in love with Diana?



The Ways Change, Farewell

By Anon E. Mouse



*And now you've wandered
All our ways.
You've tread (and read) our pages.
You found what's old
Is new again,
And how that still engages.
Our ways may change,
And yet, we're true
To "Once Upon a Time...",
We're steadfast, certain,
So are you!
And some of us can rhyme!*

So, ways may change,
But we're still here,
An ever-fixed mark.
And we're still us,
And you're still you,
In light, or shadow dark.
We hope we broke
your heart (a bit,)
Then mended it again.
We hope you wandered
Through these tales
And thought "Remember when...?"
And we hope
That you hate endings, dears,
As much as we all do.
If so,
Flip the front cover back,
And just begin anew!





The End

by Barbara Anderson



Alas... we now have reached the end.
The candles have burned low.
And though we'd love to linger here,
The time has come to go.

We thank you all for dropping by
to read a tale or two,
and hope that ere much time has passed,
again we'll welcome you.

May health and wellness be your fate.
May sunshine fill your days.
And if the clouds should ever form,
to these Tunnels make your way.

We'll share our stories once again,
and have a cup of tea.
For you are always welcome here,
whomever you may be.





DIGITAL ART

by Mel



ⁱ Sonnet 105, William Shakespeare

ⁱⁱ William Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ⁱⁱⁱ William Shakespeare: *Henry VI*

^{iv} John Steinbeck: *East of Eden*