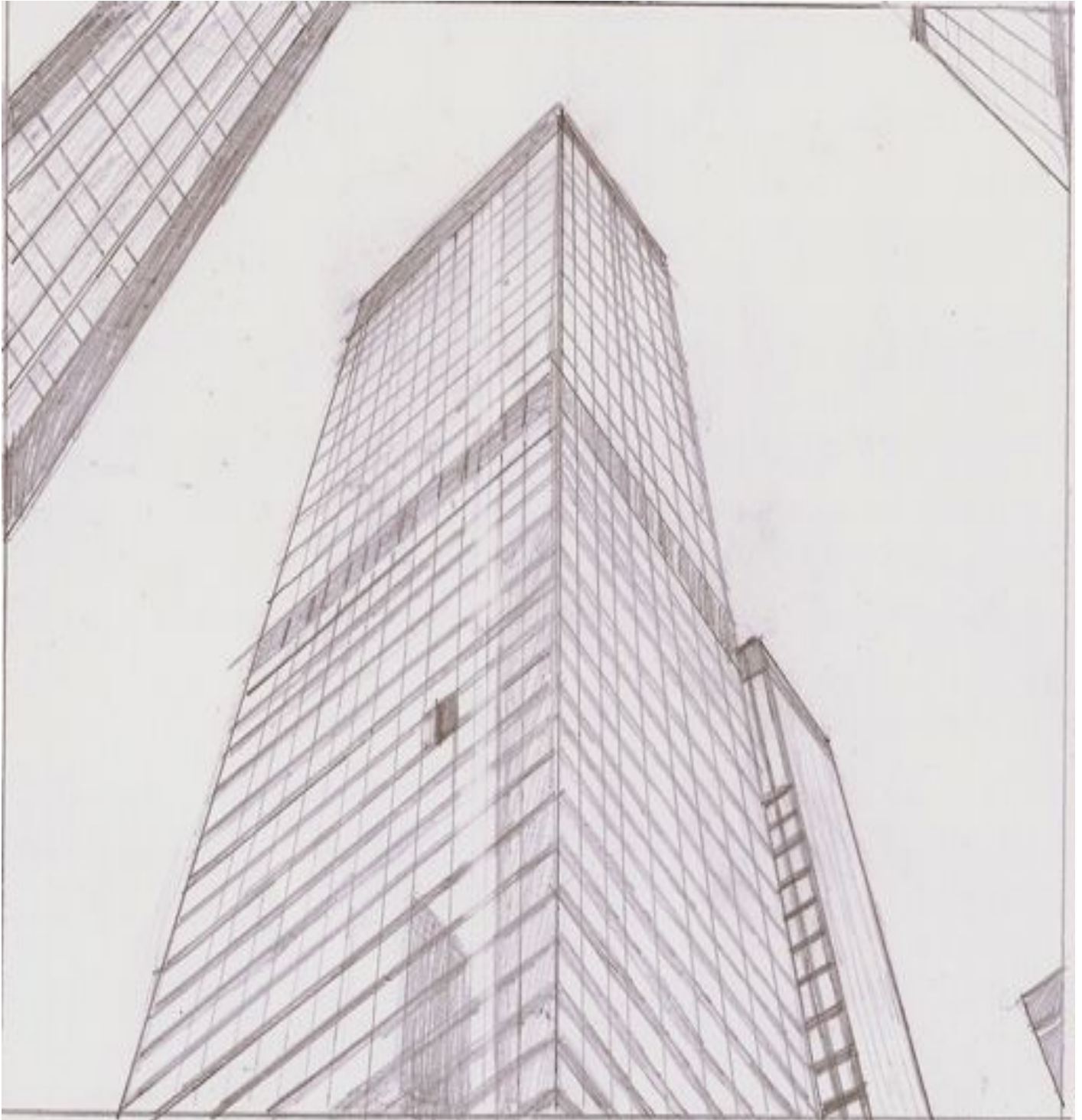


ALCATRAZ

by C. B. McWhorter



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Author's note: This story is a sequel to "The Mirror: Kindred Spirits", which introduced Victoire, a twin of sorts for Vincent, and someone who knows the secret to why she and Vincent are what they are. It can be found at the Beauty and the Beast Reading Chamber. I've tried to make this as much of a stand-alone story as possible, but I won't advise against reading The Mirror anyway (grin). I've brought not only Victoire from that story, but her acrobat partners Etienne and Yusef (and a glimpse of Lu-Lu, Victoire's "uncle", who raised her).

The story does assume a certain amount of knowledge of the first episode of Season 3, for which I apologize. I know some readers don't even want to venture there. This is my attempt to right the wrong. The main part of the story kicks in after 1. Joe Maxwell meets a frightened friend who gives him a code book right before a car bomb blows him to smithereens and nearly takes out our Joe; 2. Catherine realizes that she is *enceinte* when she goes to give blood for Joe; and 3. Catherine is kidnapped by Gabriel's creepy minions (to include in their number one John Moreno). Basically, this picks up after Episode 1. My thought at the time was "What would Victoire do about this?" and the fic sat in the shadows for years after that. I've dusted it off, and I hope it works.

I have put very little of Catherine's story post-abduction into this one. It was bad enough watching it the first time. I don't want to rewrite it. Sorry.

In case you can't tell, I've plundered the C.A.B.B. Photo Gallery with merry abandon. Many thanks to Lynn for making it all available.

Many, many heartfelt thanks to my excellent beta, canisdomina. She's truly awesome!

And many, many heartfelt thanks and awed kudos to Julia Passamonti-Colamartino (Ancient Soul) and Esther Wijnbeek (uastis) who shocked and awed me to the point of tears when they revealed pictures of Victoire! Their wonderful images are all through the story. They are also truly awesome!

And thank you for reading.
CB McWhorter, May 2011
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THE DAYS BEFORE

Central Park from this far above has a faint wash of pale green over it, the sort of color that is obvious from the corner of your eye, but when you look straight at the trees, their branches seem as winter-bare as they were last week. But they aren't. Leaf buds on those branches are beginning to swell. When he was down in the Park, Vincent could see that the buds on the Bradford pear trees were just about to burst open, and there were crocuses all over. Daffodil shoots were growing like mad. Spring is coming.

Vincent sits on a balcony 17 floors above all that spring activity and lets morning sunlight warm his face. Admittedly, it's not really very warm out here, but he is not one to waste an opportunity to sit in the sun. He snugs his cloak around his shoulders a little more. The mug in his hands is warm. He slept well last night. For the third night in a row, there were no nightmares. There's a pleasant ache in some muscles he's never really used a lot, a fact that brings with it an odd sort of masculine pride. He can't help but admit to himself that he is really, honestly happy.

How odd that is. His sister (his heart still skips at the notion that he has a sister) told him that it would get better. She insisted that the heaviness of his spirit that was left after the last (the final) encounter with Paracelsus was not just guilt and horrified reaction to events, but depression. Depression. Such a normal human word. Peter brought down books and articles about it, and it was almost a pleasure to realize that there was a name for what he was feeling. And a huge relief to find that there were medicines that he could take, now that they had a reasonable idea how to address his intermeshed mosaic metabolism.

It still galls him that he cannot sense Catherine's moods. The loss of that connection is like an amputation. Victoire was convinced that it would come back. She seemed very sure. Sometimes, he feels a flash of Catherine's sweetness in his mind. There was a moment last night, when they were so wound up in each other that he wondered if all of the passion was only his. When he thinks of things like that, he can almost believe...

A hand traces across his shoulders, and he looks up at the most beautiful face he's ever seen, smiling at him. "Aren't you cold?" she says.

He shrugs. "A little. Are you here to warm me up?"

He doesn't have to ask twice. She slips into his lap just as he flips the cloak around to cover them both. She gives a little gasp when she realizes he's wearing nothing under the cloak. Delighted, she snuggles into his chest and runs her fingers through the soft fur there. "Mmmm" she says, and he can't help but agree.

He caresses her through the warm satin of her robe as he kisses her brow. It isn't long before he discovers that she wears as little as he. His fingers tenderly caress a nipple that responds quite readily. "That's yours" she murmurs. Her fingers tease his nipple. "This is mine."

There's nothing else to do then but kiss her. Long. Several times. He's read about people getting bored with this. They must be crazy.



Two days after a car bomb landed Joe Maxwell in the hospital, Catherine's thoughts are racing as she pores over the little notebook Joe asked her to take. Her normal powers of concentration are nowhere to be found. She'd like to think that she could break the code in this book easily enough. She loves stuff like this. But she gets partway into a sequence and her brain flips over to how torn-up Joe looked, how frantic his mother was and how cautious the doctor was when she asked about him. It's going to be weeks before he can come back to work. She backtracks to the top of the page to try again, and she starts to worry about what's going to happen in the office while Joe is gone. Who's taking over? Then she thinks she has her discipline back in force, and she finds that she's wondering if the baby will have red hair.

And then Moreno hangs over her shoulder like a worried aunt, and she wants to scream. And there was the sausage McMuffin that Rita brought in this morning. The scent of it had Catherine terrified that she would upchuck right there in the office. How long does morning sickness last, anyway?

She nibbles another cracker. She made sure she didn't buy Saltines. Anyone in the office sees those, and the assumption is that there is a pregnancy involved. Even if it's a guy eating them. No, she bought oyster crackers. Let people think she had soup for lunch.

Hell with it. She tucks the notebook back into a drawer and picks up a file that she'd been working on for weeks. The only thing keeping her from sending the silly book down to forensics is pride. She's determined to get herself under control. Or something under control.

It occurs to her that control is actually the issue, isn't it? If anything, she feels as her life is definitely careening around a corner on two wheels. Now that she thinks of it that way, then she might as well send off the notebook anyway. It's a distraction from the normal things she needs to do. So much for that.

How in the world is she going to drop this on Vincent?

She has to tell Vincent. Ultimately, there's no way she'll be able to hide this, duh. Father is going to have a fit. Wait. Maybe he won't. Besides, he's not the problem, is he? Vincent is only just now finding his equilibrium. He's really responding to the medicines. He's sleeping. His temper isn't so short. Things have been good. How can she know if this news isn't going to send him back into a tailspin?

For that matter, what would he say if he thought she'd been keeping it from him?

She looks at the file she's opened. It's sat untouched for twenty minutes now. In fact she's just noticed that she's been staring at the top page without recognizing that it's upside down.

Enough's enough. She's going home.



The phone is ringing as Catherine prepares for work.

“Hello?”

“Catherine! *C’est moi!*”

Catherine flops onto her couch with a delighted squeal. “Vicki! What’s new?”

“Not much. Spring is coming, and everyone’s ... *étourdi*. I’m fortifying myself before I go in and brave a class of excitable five-year-olds.”

“Better you than me. How’s Lu-Lu?”

“He’s doing so great! Although I did catch him smoking a cigarette the other day.”

“Oops.”

They chuckle together. “Catherine, you’ve been on my mind today. Every time I think of you, I smile. That usually happens when something good is happening...”

Catherine sobers at once. Monday’s discovery has shaken her profoundly, and she’s been alternately ecstatic and terrified since.

“Catherine?” says Victoire. “Are you all right?”

“I.. I think so.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, nothing, really..”

“*Ah, mon Dieu!*”

“What?”

“You’re pregnant!”

“What?!”

“It’s the only thing that would send me the happiness and worry I’m getting from you. You know it comes over the phone, don’t you? You’re *enceinte*, yes?”

Catherine sighs. “Yes.”

Victoire crows with glee. “I’m going to be an aunt! I can’t wait! What did Vincent say?”

“I haven’t told him yet. Honestly, I’m afraid to.”

“Don’t be.”

“He’s so easily upset...”

“You might find he’ll be happy, *cherie*. It will give him something to think about besides himself.” Good grief, Catherine thinks. It hasn’t been three months, and she sounds just like a sister. “How long do you think you can keep it secret, eh? You’re tiny. You’ll be showing next week.”

“God forbid!” Catherine cries. “Oh, Vicki, there’s so much to think about all of a sudden. Beginning with: why, oh why, did the birth control fail?”

“Who knows? What kind was it?”

“It’s one of the new pills. I haven’t been on anything for two years, so maybe it hasn’t worked its way into the system or something.”

“Well, you’re off it now. Just think that some things were meant to be.”

“Obviously. I just can’t believe this…”

“How are you feeling? Any morning sickness?”

“Actually, yeah, a little.”

“How did you find out?”

Catherine settles in and tells Victoire the story of the past few days. “So there I am, leaving the hospital with my head full of work, and BAM! Second bomb in two days” she finishes. “Work-wise, this isn’t really good timing, you know? With Joe out, who knows who will fill in for him, and we’re short-handed as it is.”

“You are going to have to change your job. Can you switch to some other duty there?”

“I haven’t a clue. Nor do I know how I’m going to explain being knocked up to begin with.”

“One thing at a time. And that part is no one’s business. First you tell Papa.”

“We have a date day after tomorrow. I’ll tell him then.”

“You’d better.”



Two days later, an elevator door opens on a frantic Catherine. She greets her boss with relief, and then her life turns upside down.





DAY ZERO (Friday)

It's late on a fine spring evening in the south of France. The dinner crowd is thinning out in a cozy bistro in a small town. A woman sits at a table near the kitchen, one booted foot propped up on a chair, sipping wine. She laughs with her companion, another woman with a plump rosy face. They are teasing the teenager who is sweeping under vacant tables; he takes their ribbing philosophically.

"Alain, she just walked by" says the plump lady. "Shall I call her?"

The boy looks at her in horror, but the women only giggle. "Never mind him" says his tormenter to her friend. "You're going to be an aunt!"

Her friend grins giddily. "I may have to move to New York in order to be available for proper spoiling."

"Victoire, you wouldn't."

The lioness shakes her head. "No. I'll just have to keep spoiling yours."

"Oh, how I'd like to meet them" says Miriam. "Your new family, I mean, not my kids."

"I'd love to bring them here, but I just don't see it happening."

Miriam snatches up Victoire's empty glass. "Finish your tiramisu. I want to run one last load of dishes."

"*Oui, Maman*" Victoire grins as she obediently picks up her fork. She swallows the last bite with a happy sigh and then frowns. She takes a deep breath, and still frowns. A tremor of awful anxiety skirls deep in her chest, skittering up behind her heart into her throat. She rubs at her breastbone, then at her throat, but the feeling doesn't stop, and now gooseflesh ripples across her arms. She knows this feeling. She searches her thoughts, trying to find its origin. It's a small disturbance, but relentless all the same. Miriam stops as she walks by, catching sight of Victoire's face. "What is it?"

"Something's wrong."

"Lu-Lu?"

"I have to check on him. It's small, but real. I'm going home." She gathers her purse and hugs Miriam. "Oh, maybe I'm just neurotic. It's really small."

Miriam is too familiar with Victoire's premonitions. She pats Victoire's cheek. "You're not sweaty. Maybe you are neurotic. Call me if you're not."

Victoire huffs at her. "I will." And she hurries home.



"Lu-Lu?" Victoire calls as she enters the house. "*Ou est tu?*" He is not in the main room, so she hurries to his bedroom, where he is sitting in his bed, nodding off in front of his TV. "Wake up! Are you all right?"

He sits up with a start and glares at her. "I was. What's wrong with you?" He watches her rub at her chest. "What's the matter?"

"That's what I don't know. It's small, but it's been there for about ten minutes. Are you sure you're all right?"

“No chest pain. No trouble breathing. A little crick in my neck. And a little trouble sleeping.” He glares at her again for this last.

She stands with a far-away stare, playing with the charm she wears around her neck. Then she shrugs. “I suppose I’ll call the others.”

“Do it now before it gets too late.”

Victoire calls Miriam first. “Lu-Lu’s fine. How’s Yusef?”

“He’s right here. He’s fine. And he just saw Raoul, and he’s fine.”

“Thanks, *cherie*.” Next, Victoire dials Etienne’s number. “Are you awake?”

“Of course I’m awake. What am I? Five? What’s wrong?”

“I’m having a ... thing. Can’t figure out what it is. It’s small, but it won’t stop. Where’s Jimi?”

“I’ll check on him. How’s Lu-Lu?”

“It isn’t Lu-Lu.”

“Will you people stop fussing over me!” yells Lu-Lu from the other room.

“I’m coming over. You know, it’s afternoon in New York.”

Victoire’s goose bumps multiply madly. “*Ah, mon Dieu*” she whispers. “I’m hanging up.”

Now she’s sweating. After the sweating, her heart rate will go up, and then she’ll feel queasy. By the time Etienne gets to her door, she’s listening to Catherine’s work number voice mail. He makes her sit down while she dials Catherine’s apartment. The answering machine picks up. Unlike the automated office voicemail, this has Catherine’s voice, and as soon as she hears it, the nausea starts. “Catherine, it’s Victoire. Is everything all right? I have a bad feeling, and I’m worried. Call me as soon as you get this, please. I don’t care what time it is. Call me.”

Etienne mumbles “Chamomile” and heads for the kitchen. Victoire puts the phone down and stares into space. The premonition has worsened, and she starts to breathe slowly. Lu-Lu appears and frowns when his Vicki looks up at him like the little girl she used to be. He hugs her to him and kisses the top of her head.

“Something’s wrong” she whispers.

“Maybe it’s the baby” he says. She makes the sign of the cross, as does he, and they both start to pray.

Eventually, Etienne appears from the kitchen with a teapot and mugs. “Maybe it’s the baby” he says.

“We were praying for the baby” says Lu-Lu.

“She and Vincent have a date tonight, but not till later. How long since I called her?” says Victoire.

Lu-Lu smiles at her. “Eight minutes.”

Half an hour and a second pot of chamomile tea later, Victoire succumbs and dials Catherine’s number again. The answering machine picks up. She leaves another message that only sounds a little frantic (so the men reassured her). They wait some more.

By 2:00 a.m., tea has been replaced by wine. By 4:00, Lu-Lu breaks out a bottle of limoncello. Finally, they manage to doze on the couch, but at dawn, Victoire makes coffee, and leaves another frantic message (everyone admits it sounds frantic, now). Etienne goes out for brioche, and then leaves to go home and shower and change for work. Lu-Lu goes to bed, and Victoire wanders into her office to pick at correspondence. The feeling has barely faded, and she's ready to scream. Especially since she's now hopped up on limoncello and espresso.

She tries a shower of her own. She skips lunch. She snaps nastily at a vendor on the phone and feels like an idiot. At 4:00 p.m., she digs out the back-up phone number Catherine gave her.

“Dr. Alcott's office.”

“Hello, this is Victoire Dedeaux, I'm calling from France, and I need to talk to Dr. Alcott right away.” She winces that her French accent is nearly out of control, but what can she do?



DAY SEVEN (Friday)

Peter Alcott stares around him with a mix of anxiety and child-like wonder. Never in his life had he thought he'd see this part of an airport. Truth be told, he's never given this part of an airport much thought at all. He took more time than he expected to find this place. Victoire's instructions had been rather airy – "Oh, we'll be coming in at Air France freight Hangar B". Well, that isn't exactly designated on the sign for Arrivals when you drive in the main entrance to JFK. He'd gone past multiple people in booths, asking directions every two feet, or so it seemed, and in the end, he found he was directed to simply stop his car by the side of the hangar and wait.

Now he sits in his car – he'd gotten out and stood around, but the jet fuel smell bothered him – and watches people and little vehicles whir around him like bees in a hive. It's fascinating, and he wishes he'd been able to bring his little great-nephew. (Now wouldn't the results of that have sent Grandma into fits?) It takes his mind off the worrying he's been doing. Just after Victoire called him, he saw a news report that Assistant District Attorney Catherine Chandler had been abducted. And then he got a note from Below saying that Catherine hadn't met Vincent as arranged and that she didn't seem to be in her apartment, and could he check on her, please? Nothing got much better after that.

He was pleased to see that as understandably distressed as he was, Vincent seemed to maintain his equilibrium, even after he was unable to rescue her a few days ago. He and Jacob had worried that he might relapse, but he didn't. He can't think what material help Victoire's visit will provide, but at the very least, she's good for Vincent, and that's no small thing.

Finally he sees a plane approach the hangar. The bees swarm around it as it settles into place, and takes an inordinate amount of time to cut its engines and lower some sort of a gangway. He'd been worried that they would have trouble finding each other. "I'm tall with gray hair" he'd said, "and I'll be driving a..."

Her infectious laugh had cut him off. "No worries, Doctor! I'm sure you'll know me!"

She was right. A handsome young man in a leather jacket emerges and runs lightly down the gangway stairs. A tall woman appears at the top of the gangway, flaming curls tossed by the wind. Even without seeing her face, who else could it be? She turns to say something to someone behind her, shakes someone's hand, and floats down the stairs herself. The man fiddling with wheel blocks does a double take as she passes him, but by now, the young man in the leather jacket is glaring at him, and he turns back to his work. *Good God*, thinks Peter. *Is that really all it would be? What have Jake and I been so worried about all these years?*

He gets out of the car and heads across the pavement to the couple. They notice him at once, and the young woman hurries towards him. "Dr. Alcott!"

He grasps her hand. "Peter, please." He smiles at her. "Oh, my dear, you are lovely."

"You're sweet" she says, and pulls him in to kiss him on both cheeks. Then she turns to her companion. "This is my partner, Etienne Martin. He's come to help."

Peter shakes Martin's hand with a smile, but he casts a doubtful glance at Victoire.

"I didn't warn you I'd be accompanied" she says contritely.

"That is because I did not warn her" says the Frenchman, glancing a little sternly at Victoire himself. "I couldn't let her run about New York alone."

OK, Peter thinks. *Maybe it isn't completely carefree.* "Help is always welcome" he says.

Conversation halts when a man brings luggage, and there's a flurry of activity with a customs agent. Once they are alone again, Victoire says, "I told Etienne everything when I went back with Lu-Lu, er Jean-Luc, my uncle. I can assure you he's very good at keeping secrets."

They pile into the car and head out. "Well, I have to confess that I haven't had a chance to warn anyone below about your arrival" Peter confesses. "I dropped a note on my way to the airport, but we may arrive before it does."



Peter's prediction that the note would arrive after Victoire was proved untrue – barely. Father folds Peter's note with an expression of sardonic resignation. The word on the pipes that a group of visitors was making its way to the hub could only mean that Victoire was here. *Perhaps it's a good thing that they aren't saying who is visiting,* he thinks. *Vincent – oh, who knows how he'd react?*

He rises to make his way to the kitchen for a pot of tea when he meets William just outside his chamber. "I heard the pipes and I'd already started some water for myself, so I thought I'd be ahead of the curve" says William. "Any idea who's here?" He puts a tray on the table in front of Father's desk.

"I suspect it's Victoire. Peter just sent a message that he was headed to the airport to fetch her."

"Victoire? She's come to help?"

Father nods. "At the very least, she can help with Vincent's state of mind." And everyone else's, for that matter. There's no hiding the fact that this situation has unsettled everyone. Catherine's absence rings through the passageways, never mind that she didn't really live Below. Not ones to waste a fresh pot of tea, the men settle in and start to prepare their cups.

It isn't long before Peter comes in, followed by two people instead of just one, but while Victoire smothers Father and William with hugs and kisses, Etienne is all but unnoticed. Not for long, though.

"Who is this?" asks Father.

Etienne comes forward. "Forgive me" he says. "I am Etienne. I invited myself when Victoire told me what is going on." His protective hand on her shoulder tells the rest of the story.

"We are glad to see any friend" says Father. "I assume Victoire has told you about our policy of secrecy?"

“*Bien sur*. We are good at secrets.”

“Where is Vincent?” asks Victoire.

“I believe he’s in his chamber” says Father. “No need to tell you that he’s very distressed. The morning after her kidnapping, Catherine managed to tap on a pipe somehow. We found her, and Vincent tried to get her out of there, but was foiled. Nearly killed, I fear, but he won’t give me details. We’ve been able to get into the building where she was, but it’s vacant now. No telling where she is, or if she’s alive.”

“I need to go to him” she says. Father merely nods, and she heads up the steps.



Vincent is sitting at the table in the center of his chamber, staring at a blank page of his journal. The look on his face is heartbreaking. He doesn’t hear Victoire enter the chamber, and barely registers when she sits at the table, until her hand moves over to cover his own. His eyes widen when he sees her claws, and then snap to her face in disbelief.

“Victoire” he whispers.

“*Me voici*” she says.

“Why are you here?”

“You need me.” She moves the journal away and takes both his hands in hers. “So I came.” He slides out of his chair to kneel before her and is drawn into her arms. She gathers him in tight. They hold each other for a long while.

“How did you know?” he asks.

“I felt it, love. I felt that horrible *frisson* of evil that comes when a loved one is in danger. You know it. At first I thought that Lu-Lu was having another heart attack. And then I started trying to reach Catherine. When she never called me back, I used the number you gave me for Peter Alcott. And here we are. One of my partners, Etienne, came with me. Now, sit up and tell me everything that’s happened.”

It’s a sadly short recitation. Vincent hangs his head, ashamed at his failure to rescue his love. Victoire listens intently, and then sits back, all business. The transition startles him out of his reverie. “There had to be security cameras. Did you notice where they were?”

He shakes his head, and then casts back into his memory. “They might have been in the stairwell, but I admit, I didn’t think to look.”

“How did you access the building?”

“Through a basement window.”

“Father said people went back to the building and found it empty. How did they access the building?”

“I don’t know.”

She pulls a handful of newspapers from her bag. “Peter has gathered all the press he could find about her kidnapping. Oddly enough, for all the inches of print here, little of it is useful. Either the police are keeping things very close or there really isn’t much

for them to go on. Something about her having worked on a case around a car bomb that blew up her boss and an apparently dirty businessman. It's been a week now. That doesn't bode well. I think they have no way to find her."

Vincent catapults himself out of his chair to pace the room. "I have no way to find her! I reach out my thoughts, my feelings, and I can NOT sense her! She's gone, Victoire. I can't sense where she is, if she's hurt, nothing! My God, Victoire, I don't even know if she's alive!"

"She is."

He stares at her until he remembers to breathe. "How?..."

"I can feel her. She's alive, and unharmed, but pretty unhappy. It's faint, but I can get that much."

"Could you... feel her, before?"

"Only through you. And at that time, it was clearer. I feel her through you now, love, but it's much fainter. Farther away."

"I can't feel her."

She wants to weep over the look on his face. "Well, it's still there. And once you get over whatever that *salaud* did to you, you'll be able to access it again."

He settles back in his chair, with shuttered gaze as he looks into himself at this. He can't ignore his joy at the knowledge that she's still in his soul, but why can't he feel her? What will it take for him to be able to reach that part of himself?

Victoire lets him meditate for a while. Ultimately, he turns to her, looking, of all things, bashful. "I can't believe that I'm actually jealous that you can feel her and I cannot."

Her laugh surprises him. "See? I told you that you are human!" She returns to seriousness. "I swear to you, *mon frère*, we will find her." She seals that promise with a resounding kiss on his cheek.

"You sound as if you know how."

"I wish. But if we put our heads together, we will do more than we can alone. And I don't plan to sit by and wait for clueless police, who couldn't feel her to begin with, to bumble their way through. There's much too much at stake."

He lets her gaze into his eyes until he's uncomfortable. "What is it?"

"I have something to tell you. Something Catherine told me a couple days before she was taken. But I'm not sure..."

"Yes?"

"It's her secret to tell you." She shrugs. "She was afraid to tell you, afraid it would frighten you, but I told her that you needed to know as soon as possible. Oh, don't look so worried, Vincent, it's a good thing. But..."

"I could use a good thing right about now."

"It's a reason we should hurry."

"Vicki, if you don't stop teasing me..."

She doesn't even look penitent, but then she sobers and takes his hand. "She's pregnant, love."

He goes still as stone.

She counts to one hundred, and then squeezes the lifeless hand she holds. “I think that might actually be why you can’t feel her. The energy hasn’t decided which sentence to follow. It may be that your mind will detach from her and be with the baby.”

He finally focuses on her face. “I’m going to be a father.”

She smiles. “Not if we don’t get her back.”

He sits up abruptly, crazed determination in his eyes, and then subsides, just a little. In three deep breaths, he’s regained control, but he seems tremulous. “Now I’m more frantic than ever.”

“Should I have not told you?” He glares at her. She nods in satisfaction. “Good.”

Vincent gets to his feet to pace the chamber. Victoire settles back in her chair and sighs. “I suggest that in the morning, we tour the city. I actually took the liberty of setting it up. I asked Peter where we could rent a car with darkened windows, and he said he could borrow his brother-in-law’s. He offered to drive for us. We meet him at his apartment garage early in the morning and get started. That will give Etienne and me a chance to sleep.”

“You do have a plan. Get started how?” he asks.

“I don’t know anything better than you and me holding hands while driving around until I catch a whisper of her. Just take a methodical approach. That’s not much of a plan. They had her in a building here in the city before. I think that means we need to start in the city.”

He grimaces at the thought of all the streets in Manhattan until a worse thought intrudes. “What if they’ve moved her out of the city?”

She shudders. “God, I hope not. At any rate, it’s a place to start. If you can come up with a better plan of attack, tell me.”

“*Allo?*” Etienne hovers at the doorway, obviously unsure how to manage without a door to knock on. “I’ve been given the most remarkable tour.”

“*Allo!*” Victoire replies. “What did you see?”

Etienne enters the chamber, followed by Cullen. “This place is amazing!” he says. “And I saw your waterfall.” His expression conveys more than words.

“Told you” she murmurs.

“Anyone interested in dinner?” asks Cullen.

“More than interested” says Etienne.

The two men lead the way down the passage towards the Dining Hall, talking like old friends. Vincent raises an eyebrow. “They’ve connected quite well.”

“That’s Etienne. Lu-Lu called him “Little Friend of All the World” when we were children.”

“Kipling” Vincent muses. For some reason, it’s always Kipling. Maybe there will be another Man-Cub in the near future. No, that wouldn’t be possible. He would be a Mowgli. And what of that? A thought occurs. “Vicki.”

“Mmm?”

“Perhaps Catherine’s news should be kept between us?”

“As you like.”

“I’m not sure about Father.” They exchange a glance and a nod.



“Catherine!” Vincent sits bolt upright, awakened by his own cry. Shaking and breathless, he drops his head on his knees. He hasn’t been able to sleep since she was taken.

A movement at his doorway and then “*Mon frère!*” Victoire crawls onto the bed and pulls him into her arms. She croons and rocks as he wraps his arms around her. “I’m here, love. We’ll find her. We’ll find her. We’ll bring her home.”



DAY EIGHT (Saturday)

After an early breakfast, Vincent leads Victoire and Etienne through the tunnels to an exit beneath Peter’s apartment building. They emerge into the parking garage to find Peter waiting for them. “How did you like the trek?” he asks Etienne.

“It’s amazing. Is there anywhere you can’t go?” he asks Vincent.

“Many places. But we long ago made it easy for Peter to visit us. We have below-ground entrances for several of our helpers.”

Peter lets them into a car that has very dark windows. Vincent and Victoire climb into the back while Etienne takes the front. Vincent gazes out the windows with some interest. “I was sure that there was no way anyone could see out of this car.”

Peter pulls out a map. “All right, people. Which end of this tiny island should we start?” The four stare at the map in consternation.

“It really isn’t so tiny, is it?” Victoire murmurs.

Vincent gives his sister a speculative stare. “Which direction is she, Victoire?”

Without hesitation, she points. “That way.”

“South, then” says Peter.

“What if we start *tout près* the south of the Park and go back and forth?” Etienne drags his fingers east-west across the map. “We work our way street by street until we reach the, er, bottom.”

“And let’s pray we don’t have to go all that way” Peter says.

“Wouldn’t that take an awfully long time?” asks Victoire.

“It certainly could, but it’s Saturday, so traffic won’t be so much, maybe” says Peter. “We really don’t know what sort of place she’s in. The last was a warehouse, right? Was it otherwise abandoned?”

“It didn’t seem to be” say Vincent.

“So, another warehouse?” says Etienne. “Another place out of the way?”

“Where are there warehouses that way?” says Victoire.

“I’ll have to admit that I wouldn’t know every street in this city” says Peter. “So I don’t know. By the piers, probably.”

“Who would know?” asks Vincent rhetorically.

“A cab driver?” suggests Etienne.

“We should have asked Stew” says Peter, wanting to whap his forehead like a V-8 commercial.

“Is Stew a cab driver?” asks Victoire.

Vincent nods. “We can certainly bring him in if we need.”

They head off to the Park, Etienne watching the map and Victoire watching her brother stare out the window in fascination. She can feel his anxiety, more so as they sit with their hands joined, but she smiles a little at his interest in the world Above. A man crossing a street stares directly at Vincent’s window, and Vincent shrinks back against Victoire, but the man moves on. “He really can’t see me, can he?” he marvels. Otherwise, there’s little conversation at first as they proceed towards the Park. After a while, Vincent points out an apartment building where a helper lives. A little while after they turn onto 5th Avenue, he becomes very focused as they pass the Guggenheim Museum.

“What is it?” asks Victoire.

“On Halloween night” he says quietly. “Catherine and I walked down this way. Out in the open. Because no one would think I was unusual.” She squeezes his hand.

Once they reach the end of the Park, Peter turns right, heading for the Hudson River. “You know” says Victoire, “I think that we could go farther south a bit and see how it feels. If we don’t sense her more, we can backtrack. If we do, it would save time.”

Unfortunately, they’ve reached Columbus circle, and Peter can be heard softly swearing to himself as he navigates the traffic around, finally turning down Broadway, singing a George Cohan song under his breath.

They work their way through Midtown, but as they get closer to Times Square, traffic and pedestrians pile up. “It’s awfully crowded” says Victoire fretfully. “I’m losing her. No, not really losing her, but the sense was changing as we came down this way, and for the past two or three blocks, it’s the same.”

“Maybe she’s nearby?” says Etienne. Victoire can only shrug.

“Well, let’s try this” says Peter, and turns the car.

Vincent looks at the theatres around Broadway with interest. “I’ve never actually seen these places from the front.”

“You’ve been inside?” asks Etienne.

“I’ve been in all of them.”

“Did you see us?”

“Twice.”

They reach the Hudson River piers, and Peter tries to head back east, although he has a bit of trouble with traffic to get onto 42nd St. They head east again, and cross Times Square again, and then pass Bryant Park and Grand Central Station. Peter is about to sigh with relief when they wind up face-to-face with the U.N. Heading west on 41st St ends up in a dead end at the Main New York City Public Library, and Peter works his way south again to get around it. “I should have seen that coming” he mutters. He finds his way west again and they wander through Hell’s Kitchen, and Peter nearly gets caught up in the traffic into the Lincoln Tunnel.

“Why is it called Hell’s Kitchen?” asks Etienne, looking at the name on the map.

“I’m not sure anyone knows for certain” says Vincent, “but it has a violent past.”

At the Convention Center, Victoire suggests that they press south for a while. They stop so that Etienne can get out and get everyone coffee at a Starbucks. Then they keep going until they reach more piers. “It’s more that way” Victoire says, pointing east, and Peter turns again.

They press on, through Chelsea and into the Flatiron and on to the East River. “There’s Bellevue” says Peter. And back west they go, covering Gramercy Park and working back through residential streets towards Chelsea again. They weave back and forth across the island for another hour until the angled streets of the West Village interrupt the grid they’ve been following. Peter plunges in, and Victoire becomes enchanted with the neighborhood until her brother nudges her.

“You can come back, you know.”

Once they work their way back towards Greenwich Village, Peter says “Anyone hungry?” They wind up with lunch from McDonald’s, which is a treat for Vincent as much as for Victoire and Etienne. “I thought they had McDonald’s in France?” says Peter.

“Not in our town. You have to go somewhere bigger. So no American-style fast food for us in the winter.”

“Unless we’re on tour” adds Etienne.

Peter gets out to stretch his legs for a bit. Vincent leans his head back and closes his eyes. “Is this going to work?” he frets.

Etienne says “Hey, we’ve only gone this far.” He holds up the map. “Do not surrender now.”

Back on the prowl, they head east again. As they pass the Tompkins Square Park, Victoire says “She was getting closer, but now she’s farther away.” Peter nearly slams on the brakes.

“Should I turn around?”

“No, I think we should stick with the plan. She may really be getting closer, or I may just be getting tired.” Victoire reaches for Vincent’s other hand, so that she can hold both his hands. They press on to the East River and then back west into the East Village. “I’m dying to go shopping” mutters Victoire. And then as they near Washington Square, she says “I know we’re getting closer. Even though the crowds are distracting, we’re closer.”

Peter pulls over. “What do you think we should do?”

She points to the left. “What if we go that way for a while? If she gets closer as we go south, we’ll see what happens. If not, we can come back and resume from here.”

“OK” Peter turns on Mercer St and off they go, straight through Soho till they hit Canal St. The energy level in the car had been flagging – how many hours can you drive back and forth anyway? But now they were getting hopeful. “Which way?” says Peter at Canal St.

Victoire doesn’t know. “Try left” she says. They skirt by Little Italy. “Go right again when you can.” Traffic is thinning out as they get closer to the Financial District. Victoire moves closer to her brother, and closes her eyes. “We’re closer. Really.”

Vincent blinks back tears.

“Let’s try this. When it fades, we turn. Eventually, we’ll spiral into it.”

“OK”

“So turn right.” A few blocks later: “Turn right.” Three more times they turn, until they are circling around one block. The second time they circle that block, she says “Try going one block more this way.” Peter drives on. “Go back” she says. And they wind up circling the same block. “Pull over” she says. “She’s here.” She wipes tears from her cheeks and then flings her arms around Vincent’s neck. “We’re here” she chokes. “She’s here.” Vincent clings to Victoire, staring out the window at the red granite wall of the building in front of them. He lets the tears spill down his cheeks.

“My God” whispers Peter. “Do you have any idea how close we are to her office? It’s only 4-5 blocks that way. So’s the Court House.”

“You’re joking. Someone has ... *les couilles*” says Etienne.

Vincent tries to look out the rear windshield up at the building. “My God, I want to get out so badly.”

“Me, too” says Victoire.

Etienne pulls out a camera and starts snapping pictures in every direction. “Can you drive around slowly?” he says. Peter rolls down each side of the building as Etienne snaps away. “We’re going to have to leave” he says.

“Leave!” cries Vincent. “No!”

Victoire puts her fingers over his mouth. “There are cameras” she says gently. “Look back. See, at the corners? If we keep orbiting, someone will notice. Not good.”

Peter drives off and wends around another block, then parks a block away so that they can see the building in front of them. “About 15 floors” Etienne says. “The building to the north is much taller. This one, here to the west, is a little shorter. The other two... well, there on the east is about the same height. I can’t see the other.”

“An office building seems like a weird place to imprison someone” Peter muses.

“Yes” says Etienne. “But it has some *avantage* over a warehouse, perhaps. Who would look for her here?”

“Are there tunnels this far south?” says Victoire.

“Oh, yes. The Chamber of the Falls is probably a little bit that way.” He points south.

“Where’s the nearest entrance?”

“I’m not sure. There’s an entrance I use closer to the courthouse, but I need to consult our maps.”

They sit in silence for a long time, just watching a quiet building as the Saturday afternoon draws to a close. Occasionally, Victoire wipes away a tear. Vincent tries to feel Catherine, stretching his feelings as much as he can. His heart is pounding, he wants to shout, to run, to tear into that building until he’s pulled it down to get her out. It merely sits before him, blocky and silent. It gives up no secrets. They are facing the front door, but no one goes in or out. There are no side doors, and two rear doors, and a small loading dock. On the back, there are a couple of basement windows, covered with bars. But the strong walls cannot keep her spirit prisoner. Victoire can feel her, through him. Whether he knows it or not, he can feel her. She is not alone. “Is she all right?” he finally asks.

“She’s frustrated and furious. It feels like she’s pacing.” Victoire chuckles.

“She’s too angry to be afraid.”

“All right” says Peter. “What do we do now?”



Father leaps up from the table when he sees the barely suppressed glee on Victoire’s face. Conversation in the dining hall dies away. “You found her?” Father asks, so tentatively.

Vincent nods. “We found her.” A cheer goes up around him.

“Oh, thank God. Where?”

“Victoire thinks she’s in an office building in Tribeca, not far, would you believe, from the courthouse” says Peter.

“How odd.”

“We all think so” says Vincent.

“How do we get her out?”

“That’s the \$64,000 question, isn’t it?” says Peter.

“The what?” says Victoire. Vincent just shakes his head to her behind Peter’s back.

William bustles over with a tray laden with plates of stew, and one of the girls follows with mugs of water. “I didn’t realize how hungry I am” says Peter.

“First” says Etienne around a mouthful of stew, “we make sure we know as much as we can about the area. We don’t have much time. I think we should go back tonight to research the other buildings. The neighborhood is very quiet today. I doubt it is always so.”

“No, during the week, it’s bustling” says Peter.

“Bustling?”

“*Très actif*” says Father.

“We need to know what businesses are in there, what the entrances lead to” Etienne continues. “Who goes in and out, and at what times of day.”

“I had a glimpse inside the front door” says Vincent. “There is a desk inside.”

“Did you see someone seated there?” asks Victoire.

“Yes.”

“I wonder if the picture I took of the front door will get that much detail” says Etienne. “We’ll need to take lots more pictures. How do we get them developed?”

“That, my friend, is easier than you’d think” says William. “We have Helpers who live above who have all sorts of little businesses.”

“Including a 1-hour photo place” says Mary.

“We’ll need all the help we can get” says Victoire. “I am afraid that finding our girl will be the easiest part of this whole thing.”

One by one, as they’ve finished their suppers, people have drifted to their table, until most of the Council is present and a goodly number of kids.

Kipper speaks up: “We can check out a lot of stuff. No one pays attention to kids.” The other youngsters murmur and nod.

“That would have to be after school hours” says Mary.

“A lot of us can, er, case the place” says Cullen. “Inside and out, maybe.”

“Vicki and Vincent and I are going to look at the neighborhood after dark tonight” says Etienne. “See if we can find a way to a roof of another building. It doesn’t help that the building is on a block of its own. It’s so isolated. But every building has its weakness.”

“I think we’ll get to at least one roof” says Vincent.

“Take the car” says Peter. “And let me give you keys into my office. You can park the car outside there, and just leave the keys on my desk.”

Olivia sits forward. “When do we take what we know to the police? And how?”

There’s a long pause. “Do we take what we know to the police?” says Peter, finally. “Something about this whole scene is very odd to me. There should be a media frenzy about this. There certainly was when Cathy disappeared. But not now. Why not?”

“Not that we actually want one” murmurs Mary. She holds a pacifying hand up to Peter. “But I do get your point.”

“It would be easy enough to call in an anonymous tip” says Cullen. “See what they do with it.”

“If nothing comes of it, we know we’re on our own” says William. “But would we know why?” There is another worried pause.

Vincent turns to Father. “Another thing I want to do is look over our maps of that area.”

“Once we know more about that block and the others around it, we can split volunteers up into groups to walk around on Monday, get more information.”

“So should we expect to have a meeting tomorrow?” says William.

“I think we should” says Father.



Etienne settles onto the roof, props an elbow on the low parapet wall that runs its perimeter. Eventually, he shrugs the pack off his shoulder & roots in it to pull out a notepad. Then he sits, still as stone, staring at the monolith across the street as if he can see through it.

Victoire plops herself some distance behind him, sits cross-legged & arches her back. Vincent watches her, and her companion, with confusion. They’ve been exploring the area for hours. He’d just been thinking that they would be ready to move on, even to go Below, but here they are looking as if that’s the last thing they’ll do. Not that he’s eager to go. Now that he can be this close. How can he leave? But what are they thinking?

“What are you doing?” he asks Etienne.

“Studying,” is the unhelpful reply. Etienne’s gaze doesn’t waver from the building.

Victoire reaches for her brother’s hand, and smiling, pulls him to the deck beside her. She leans against his shoulder. “I need you,” she says.

He turns to her questioningly. She says: “I can sense her pretty well from here, but you know I can sense even more if I’m holding on to you.” She snuggles under his arm, and she leans her head on his shoulder, draping her arm across his knee. He leans his cheek against her curls.

Almost against his will, Etienne looks over at them. Victoire has a far-off gaze that he knows well. She's meditating, focusing on her target a few hundred yards away. As Etienne watches them, Vincent reaches down for her hand, twines her fingers with his own. They look like such fairy tale creatures, brother & sister, fabulous creatures, sharing hope and fear, but sharing more than that. A twinge of envy surprises him - or is it jealousy? He tries to shake it off, but not in time. Victoire's brilliant eyes flash up towards him. She heard that. Embarrassed, he turns back to Catherine's prison.

Victoire closes her eyes. Etienne. Jealous. What else could be new? But there isn't time for this now. No time for memories, soul-searching. No time for herself right now. She slips back to the building in front of her, letting it grow larger in front of her.

Catherine is in there. Asleep. Dreaming - nightmares. She can hear Vincent's heartbeat, and feel his tension. How in God's name did they get into this surreal mess?

Vincent sighs. Right here. She's been here for days, waiting for him to find her. And he's failed her, until his sister comes to interpret his own feelings for him. The first flood of gratitude and relief is fading now. He watches as Victoire repeatedly glances up towards the top floors of the building. He watches Etienne scribble notes in the dark. And the enormity of this task overwhelms him. She's right there. And he can imagine no way to get her out. A skyscraper in the middle of the city, taller than most of its neighbors, sure to have a security system to match the one that defeated him before. As good a prison as Alcatraz. Fear & frustration mount in him until Victoire sits up abruptly. She scowls at him. "Whatever you're doing, stop it!"

"What's wrong?"

She caresses his cheek. "When you dwell on anger, all I feel is you," she says softly. "And I share it. But I need to feel Catherine. Can you think of something else?"

Abashed, he pulls her back into his shoulder. Think of something else. Shubert's Unfinished Symphony. Rain. Catherine laughing, soaked, giddy. Warm in his arms.

He's startled from this reverie when Etienne scuttles across the asphalt to them. He hands the notepad to Victoire.

"Do you want me to check the count?" she asks.

"Both ways."

"What count?" says Vincent.

She points to Catherine's Building – they are now thinking of it as Catherine's Building – and gestures horizontally. "Windows," she says. "And floors." She holds a hand up before her face, moves it very slowly across her visual field to count the divisions between the windows. Then she repeats the exercise from the opposite direction. "*C'est ça*," she says, consulting the drawing. On all fours, she crawls to the parapet & begins to count floors, first downwards, then up. She looks again at the notepad & nods at Etienne. And then, she counts windows & floors again. At last she turns back to the men. "What next?"

"The usual," says Etienne with a shrug.

"Oh, right," she snaps. "You do this everyday, now."

He ignores her. He's writing on the pad, muttering to himself in French. "All right. How many businesses are in there, and where? How many floors are served by the

main elevators? Where are the rest of the stairwells? And most of all, what sort of roof does it have?"

Victoire jumps to her feet, and runs to the nearest exhaust fan. She hops up, and cranes her neck to look at Catherine's Building. Making a disgusted cluck, she jumps back down & runs to the little house that protects the stairs. She leaps to snatch its eaves, and hauls herself up on top. For a moment, she crouches there, and then she stretches to her full height. "Aha!" she says. "A windsock."

"So there's a helicopter pad up there," says Etienne. "That's good and bad. Don't jump down. It'll make a thump."

She eases herself down, smiles at him conspiratorially. He flashes a knowing grin at her, and mumbles something about what he always knew.

Vincent can hardly contain his curiosity. "Is there something going on here I should understand?"

"No," his sister replies. "Etienne and I have known each other so long, it might look like we talk in code."

"And then there are the times when we do talk in code," says Etienne.

"Decode it for me."

"Well," says Victoire slowly. "There are plenty of uses for an acrobat's talents other than delighting the masses."

"And some of them are more lucrative," adds Etienne.

"All we need, really is a place to start in that building."

"Are you mad? When I tried to get her from the other place, it was a fortress!"

"Every fortress has its weakness," Etienne says, with an edge that makes Victoire shoot him a warning glance. "Some fortresses need different equipment than others."

For a moment, Victoire's shoulders sag. "I never thought I'd regret dispensing of some of our old equipment."

"Who said we did?"

Victoire stares at Etienne in a way that would make any one of her subordinates cringe. Etienne is unperturbed. "I assured Tante Emilie & Lu-Lu that we did," she says, tightly.

Etienne shrugs. "I didn't."

"Then where is it?"

"In Yusef's basement."

She stares at him again, but now she is clearly torn. "Is that where it's always been?"

He meets her gaze now, and says, quite gently: "Yes".

"You're sure."

"I promise."

Now she smiles. She looks at her watch, and gathers up her purse. "Now we go back to Peter's office" she says. "And we call him."

"Who? Yusef? Now? Do you know what time it is there?"

“It’s time he got up.”

Vincent makes another (increasingly feeble) attempt to add himself to the discussion. “Who’s Yusef?”

“Yusef is one of our partners. In the winter, he helps his wife run a restaurant. And we are going to call him. Now.”

“What for?” It’s as if she hasn’t heard him. She’s struck out for the staircase, and there’s nothing to do but follow. They reach the car and head to Peter’s office, and still Victoire won’t answer Vincent’s questions other than to say “There may be more help than we thought.”

They let themselves into the office, and head to the back office. Etienne dials. “Yus? Wake up. It’s me. Of course I know. What do you mean, how is America? It’s dark over here, it’s cold and at least you got to bed. It was Victoire’s grand idea that I call. You can thank her later. Listen. You know that old stuff we used years ago? That we have stored in your basement? Is it still there?”

“He’d better say yes,” grumbles Victoire. Etienne looks at her & nods.

“I think we’ve found a use for it... No, don’t you wish. Believe me, you wouldn’t like it if I could tell you. But I think we’ll need most of it... Yes, that... Yes, those.” He straightens up abruptly. “Jesus, Yusef, you kept those?”

“What?” demands Victoire. Etienne makes a shooting motion with his fingers. She gasps.

“I guess we could use them, too.”

Victoire snatches the phone from Etienne. “No! You will not smuggle those into America! Or out of France!” she hisses into it. “Very funny. You have no idea how serious this is. I can’t even dare to hint.”

Etienne casually retrieves the phone. “I’m back. The infrared stuff is probably pretty out-dated, but I don’t think it will matter. The question is: will it work?” He listens for a while, and then nods. “Look it over, and call us back.” He gives Peter’s number. “Make sure you only talk to the doctor, and leave a message.” He chuckles. “Smartass.” And he hangs up. “He’ll see how much of it is useful“ he says to Victoire.

She’s pacing in front of the windows. She nods. “She’s on one of these upper floors, on the west side,” she says. “And I’m willing to bet the public elevators don’t go that far.”

“Agreed.”

Vincent puts his hand firmly on Victoire’s shoulder, turns her to face him. Unsure which question he wants to ask first, all he can do is glare at her. She relents. “Etienne learned some useful skills when he was in the Army. They found they’d conscripted an acrobat, and they had some special assignments for him.”

Etienne chimes in. “Surveillance. Security.”

“Espionage?” Vincent asks.

Etienne shrugs. “Could be. Or breaking and entering.”

“For the Army?”

“Well, not that for them. But the tools are... adaptable.”

Vincent turns to his sister to find her looking, of all things, ashamed. “We haven’t always been quite respectable,” she mutters. “One of the reasons I went to college in England was that Lu-Lu wanted to split up his gang of hoodlums.”

“So she went to school to learn business and banking, and I went to learn electrical & mechanical engineering,” Etienne says. “And don’t think I don’t know that Lu-Lu worries about what we could do with those degrees.”

Vincent is resisting the knowledge here. His sister? A felon? “What had you done?”

“At least half a million dollars worth of mischief,” she says, and she truly can’t hide a smile. “They still don’t know who did it. Them. It was a short but busy career. And it was fun, but I’m not really proud of it.”

Vincent ponders. Under different circumstances, this would be a blow to his sensibilities. But at this point, his foremost thoughts are a combination of gratitude for providence from strange places, and a certainty that Catherine would think this was funny. “So you think you can break her out of that place like ... like ... I don’t know what like.”

“She’s a bit larger than most of the stuff we, er, trafficked in. But infinitely more precious.”



DAY NINE (Sunday)

The meeting the next afternoon seems to involve most if not all of those who live Below. A few Helpers have come as well.

A map lies in the middle of a table in the Dining Hall, drawn by Vincent with the blocks surrounding their target enlarged. Buildings are sketched in, and labeled where possible. Tunnel entrances are off the scope of the map, but their directions are indicated by arrows. A couple of sewers are marked, along with traffic lights. Victoire explains: “What we need to do first is fill in all the missing information. Where are the sewer entrances? How many doors open onto other alleys? What businesses are in these buildings and what businesses are in this one?”

Etienne picks up: “We need to know how many people are in and out of this place all day. If we can, how many people work in each office and what the business hours are for each one. What kind of guards do they have? How many elevators and stairwells are there?”

“Maybe we can see if there are any employment openings in there” says Rebecca.

“I wonder if any of our helpers do business in there?” says Father.

“I can go talk to Terry at the Domino’s near there” says Stephen. “They might deliver there. And old Mrs. Burns still has that sandwich shop near the courthouse. I think she delivers.”

“I already asked Stewart if he could drive by there. He said he’d make sure his route is around there as long as we need him to” says Vincent.

“I’m going back to street performing” says Jules. He moved into the tunnels a year ago, introduced by one Catherine Chandler.

“Sebastian might take up a corner as well” says Father.

“Our partner is sending over some old equipment of ours” says Victoire. “We have little pen cameras that are very useful for secretly photographing a target.”

Father looks a little uncomfortable at this.

“What do you have those for?” demands William. Etienne and Victoire exchange uncomfortable glances.

“It seems” intones Father, “that we are hosting two of France’s Most Wanted.”

“I wouldn’t go that far” Victoire objects.

“Most Wanted for what?” says Jamie.

“We’ve... been known to do, em, a jewel heist or two in our mis-spent youth” mumbles Etienne. “This is embarrassing” he grumbles to Victoire, in French.

“Only really high-end jobs, mind you” says Victoire, a little too brightly. “And we were never caught, and we haven’t done a job in a long time. Like ten years.”

“So you could be rusty?” challenges Cullen.

“Not for researching a target” says Etienne. “I can’t vouch for what shape the equipment is in.”

“What sort of equipment is that?” asks William.

“Erm... Climbing equipment. Cameras. Infra-red stuff. Erm...” Victoire points at her ear and seems at a loss.

“Communication things” Etienne provides. “We’ll see what else comes.” He moves towards the map, pulling out a pad of paper and assuming the air of a general. “What I’d like to set up is a schedule of *sorties* so that we know who will be up there when. I’ll set out sheets for each block of each street so that when you have information, you put it on that list when you come back down. We want to know what each building does, how many stories it has, and where the alleys are. Once we get to the inside of the Building, we’ll have sheets for each floor. We need floor plans. We need to know where all the surveillance cameras are. This includes the basement, which is more important than you’d think. That’s usually where all the centers for controlling the lights, the elevators and the electrical systems are.”

“Do we have time to do all this?” asks Mary.

“If you don’t study your target thoroughly, you get caught” says Victoire. “We were never caught. If we get caught here, I’m not afraid of jail, I’m afraid people will die. Yes, we have to do all this.”

The anxious hush that follows this is finally broken when Vincent says “I can’t thank all of you enough for wanting to help us. But Victoire is right, it’s dangerous. If you want to stay clear, or keep your children clear, that is understandable. Don’t hesitate to do what you think is right.”

“Your equipment” says Jules. “How will you get it down here? It sounds like a good load.”

“Peter has offered the use of his garage” says Vincent, “and we’ll likely have to borrow a van. We can make space in the smaller storage chamber near Olivia’s chambers. However, I don’t know if we’ll have the power you need for it.”

“A lot of the electronics are battery-run” says Victoire. “The viewing monitors are not, though.”

“We need to remind Yusef to get the batteries before he ships” says Etienne.

“Viewing monitors?” says Mary.

“We set up our own hidden surveillance cameras and watch on a TV screen” says Etienne.

“This is so neat!” Mouse blurts out. He’s practically vibrating.

“You won’t lack for help” says Father drily.



DAY TEN (Monday)

In the morning, Vincent walks the first batch of reconnaissance runners to the tunnel exit closest to Catherine's Building. He paces at the gateway for a while after they leave, until he realizes that he's being a little silly, and he wanders back to the Hub.

Etienne and Victoire have gone Above to Peter's office to call Yusef about shipping plans.

The children are in classes, and Vincent doesn't have a class to teach today.

He is at loose ends and aching at the inertia. He wanders into the Dining Hall, where William is cleaning up after breakfast. "You looking for something to do?" says William.

"Sure" says Vincent, and follows William into the kitchen.

They are putting away clean dishes when Father comes in, looking for hot water. He sits at a table while the water heats up, and contemplates his son as he moves around the kitchen. "I never in a million years imagined that those two had such a checkered past" he finally says.

"It certainly surprised me" Vincent says.

"Me, too" says William. "I thought they were these big stars."

"How do you think they funded the show to start with?" says Vincent.

"Otherwise they'd still be doing the tent circus act."

"Huh. Well I'm awfully glad they're here." William starts uncovering loaves of rising bread. "You hang around much longer, you'll wind up helping with lunch" he says as he slashes the tops of the loaves.

"What is for lunch?" asks Father.

"Sandwiches and applesauce." William slides trays of bread into two ovens.

"I'm keeping it easy."

Stephen trots into the Dining Hall, and heads straight for the map at the table. He picks up a pencil and starts filling in on a block next to Catherine's Building. He then pulls over the sheet assigned to details for that block and starts to write down details. He grins when Vincent leans over his shoulder and thanks him for the mug of tea he places by his elbow. "This was cool" he says. "I feel sorta like a spy."

"At least you aren't saying you feel like a second story man" says Father.

"Or a fifteenth story man" jokes Stephen. "I'll go back up with the kids after school. I talked to Terry. They do deliver to that Building sometimes. He's willing to hire a temporary delivery person, and he's also willing to hire a kid or two to distribute flyers. Mrs. Burns wasn't in her shop."

More people straggle in and log their findings. The map fills up with details. By the time lunch is over, the only person still Above is Jules, who is also going to be contacting some helpers.

Etienne and Victoire appear after lunch, with Peter in tow. Their partner Yusef is bringing the equipment on a freight flight tomorrow, and Etienne will ride out to the airport with a helper who has a van. "Do you have room for another?" asks Victoire. "I'm sorry that we just seem to add people at will."

“Of course there’s room” says Mary.

“Is he prepared for the tunnels?” asks Father.

“Oh, yes” says Victoire. “Jimi threatened to come, too, but he’s awfully claustrophobic.”

If Father is worried that she’s shared their secret with such apparent ease, he keeps it to himself. After all, they have reason to be good with secrets.

Etienne goes with the children after school. Victoire works with Vincent to arrange the storeroom for their equipment.

The air of depression in the community seems to have dissipated, replaced by excitement and action. They are not powerless, they can make some effort to right this situation, and they dive into the plans eagerly.

Jules arrives for dinner, and announces that “Maurice is going to write in the coffee shop”.

“What does that mean?” asks Victoire.

“Maurice is a long-time helper, and he’s retired” Mary explains. “He’s been writing a book for a couple of years now, and he likes to work in coffee shops and diners.”

“The problem with that plan, however, is that he spends more time socializing than writing” adds Peter.

“The coffee shop is right across the street from the front door, *non?*”

“Right” says Jules. “If he gets a table in the window, he can watch and make notes all day and no one will care. So long as he keeps ordering stuff.”

“You know” muses Peter, “it’s really not a bad retirement.”

“Really?” says Father. “What happened to the villa in Tuscany?”

“I just moved out of that brownstone into a condo. I shudder at the thought of moving again.”

“*Pierre*”, says Victoire, “you may come to stay with us in our villa in the Midi any time you like.”

“I may take you up on that.”

The kids come down for dinner, chattering away and very excited. “It’s like one of those memory games” says Eric. “You know, where you look at the picture and then you have to answer questions about it from memory.”

“It’s like ‘Where’s Waldo’” says Kipper. “Backwards.”



Victoire sinks farther down the wall of the hot spring, sighing luxuriously. For the moment, she lets go of the whirl of thoughts that has consumed her. Under the water, she spreads her fingers, paddles her feet, and stretches. Allowing the rhythm of her breathing to take over her mind, and she slips away into a semi-trance.

She's barely aware of someone behind her, but she rolls her head against the wall to watch a man's legs & torso, quite naked, descend into the water beside her. "This bath is for the women, you know."

"So if another one comes, I'll go." He captures her hand under the water. "Perhaps."

She chuckles. She'd return to her contemplation of nothing, but Etienne's steady gaze prevents her. She turns to stare back at him, blue eyes into brown.

"What you're thinking of," he says quietly. "It's a long time since we've done it." She shakes her head. "We never did anything like this. We never had stakes this high."

"We've done harder jobs, though."

"Are you kidding? Vincent is right. They are set up like a fortress!"

He nods. "But do they man it like a fortress? I'm sure whoever designed the system knew his job. It's excellent, I'm sure. But the little I've seen of their people..."

"Amateurs."

"Right. Not military, or if they were, they weren't the best the military ever conscripted."

"I saw two. Well-dressed street thugs."

"Meaning that they may not be as well-trained in handling the system as they ought. I hope they'll be complacent about it. Think the security system does their work for them."

She nods, and they fall silent, following their own trains of thought. Eventually, he raises her fingers to his lips. "Another thing."

"What?"

"Years ago, you promised Emilie you'd never do this again. How do you feel about breaking that promise?"

"This is for an entirely different cause. She couldn't object to it."

He smiles sadly. "Vickie, her main objection wasn't really about what we were doing." She raises an eyebrow at this. "Her greatest fear was for your safety. As it would be now."

She sighs. "I know that, Eti, but some things are worth personal risk, and Tante Emilie would agree with that. To me, this is worth ..." she spreads her hands, still holding his, and shakes her head. "So much."

"I know. I know," he says softly. He sighs. "Another thing..."

"Now what?"

He chuckles at that. And shrugs. "I want to tell you how much it means to me that you asked me to come with you. You had no idea what you'd find. I can't tell myself that you knew you'd need my skills."

She shoots him a wicked grin. "Just keep telling yourself that! As I recall, I didn't actually ask."

"Vickie, I'm serious. I'm proud that you want me here."

She turns her eyes on him. He's gazed into those eyes most of his life, can't remember a time when they didn't make his heart skip a beat. And now, he's convinced that he's wasted an awful lot of time over the past few years. He kisses her hand again.

"What you're thinking of," she murmurs. "That was long ago, too."

"Too long?"

She releases his hand to reach up to his cheek. How long has she loved this face? "Oh, yes," she breathes.

He leans into her, then. This was a long time coming.



DAY ELEVEN (Tuesday)

The next day is scheduled much like the last, with different people assigned to go Above. The table in the Dining Hall is beginning to look a war map with battle plans, and some of the kids start calling it the “Situation Room”.

“Different genre” mutters Michael who has come Below for a visit. He’s made a tour of the area himself, and adds what details he can.

Vincent carries him off to help him teach the older teens Act II of “Hamlet”.

Victoire and Etienne head to the airport to collect Yusef. The only good thing they have to say about the return traffic is that it gave them plenty of time to tell Yusef everything he needed to know. They also took the time to drive by Catherine’s Building.

Yusef is shorter than Etienne, and much more wiry. No less friendly than Etienne, he has none of his partner’s reserve. He blows into the tunnels like the Spring wind, bouncy and laughing. His voice can be heard three tunnels away (“which is a feat” says Father). He’s absolutely stoked about the project his friends have brought him into. “This is great!” he crows.

“It is?” says Vincent.

“This will be the best we’ll ever do! And we won’t have to forget our promise to Tante Emilie, because it’s not a break IN, it’s a break OUT! This, *mes amis*, is a challenge!”

“What promise? Who’s Tante Emilie?” asks Brooke.

Victoire shoots a quelling glance at Yusef, who ignores her. “When my aunt and uncle learned what we were doing, my aunt made us promise on *une Bible* that we would never do such a thing again. My uncle was not satisfied with that, and he convinced us to go away to university. Yusef was already married, so Lu-Lu had to content himself with merely intimidating Yusef, Raoul and Jimi.”

“Did they make you give back the jewels?” asks Brooke.

“It was a little late for that.”

“I think that’s enough” Father breaks in. “Brooke, why don’t you go help William?”

Brooke and Victoire exchange glances before Brooke heads for the kitchen. “Are you worried that I’ll contribute to the delinquency of your minors?” Victoire archly asks Father.

“Well...” he hesitates. “Some of them do seem to think it is a very romantic story.”

“I suppose that it is” she says. “It’s a little odd to talk about it so freely. Oddly enough, very few people in our own community know this story. Just the five of us, Lu-Lu and Yusef’s wife.”

“Did she, er, work with you?”

“No. Our paraphernalia is in her basement.”

“Ah.”

“That and Yusef talks in his sleep.”

Father throws his head back and laughs.

“I think I’d better go see what he’s brought us” says Victoire.



“This space isn’t big enough” Vincent tells her as she comes down the passageway, dodging people carrying boxes and duffel bags.

She peeks in the chamber. “Hmm. It might not be. I hope some of it can be *consolidé*.”

Mouse is in the midst of the boxes, itching to start opening them. “You may have a bit of trouble keeping him out of these things” says Vincent.

“I don’t worry about it. Yusef is very good at setting limits.”

Yusef takes that moment to appear, wading into the chamber as he rattles away instructions in French. “Those boxes just have the monitors in them, we’re not ready for them yet. We can stack them over there. What’s in here? Ah! The climbing gear! Save that for later. We need the little wee cameras first, where is that case? You, look for a metal attaché case...”

“Yus!” Victoire calls. “English! Even I don’t understand you!”

“Oh.” Momentarily flummoxed, Yusef mumbles and draws rectangles in the air. “I’m looking for a silver box, er, suitcase. Attaché case! Yes.”

“This?” Mouse holds up such a case.

“No, smaller.”

Victoire rescues the rejected case from Mouse and opens it. “Ah. The infrared camera. Good.” She looks over some of the boxes, and hauls out a duffel bag to inspect. “You brought the clothes? What makes you think they’ll fit us?”

Yusef stops and looks her over. “Are you implying that I’ve grown fat?”

“You were barely twenty! I’m implying that you’ve laid on more muscle.”

“Oh! Of course I have.”

Victoire watches her paw through the clothes. “All black, of course.”

“*À coup sûr!*”

Etienne saunters in. “Ah. *Il semble qu’il a tout sous contrôle. Peut-être.* Where are my computers?”

“Over there” Yusef points to a stack of old Microsoft boxes. “I don’t know why I brought them, they’re obsolete. If they can be made to interface with any system these people have, then they are not worthy opponents.”

Etienne winces at this, but inspects the boxes anyway. “We’ll just see how we do” he says.

“*Enfin!*” Yusef shouts. “Cameras!”



Yusef’s boisterousness vaporizes when he sits down to study the map. The photographs Etienne took on Saturday have been printed and are aligned with the map.

“It may as well be *le Chateau d’If*” he mutters. As I recall, we didn’t like city jobs for just this reason. Too crowded. Still, every building has its weakness.”

“That’s what Etienne said” says Vincent.

“It’s a mantra” says Victoire.

“That was half the fun” says Yusef. “Maybe more than half. The trill of sneaking in and getting out was great, but so short. It was solving the puzzle that was the best.”

“Was that the same for you?” Vincent asks Victoire.

“Sure, but not like for Yusef. I have the patience for some of the duller research, like going through telephone directories. I couldn’t go in to case the targets the way the boys could. I’m much too recognizable. Although I did get to do one store, posing as a customer and trading on fame. And I could go to museums. The big thing for me was getting past the security systems for the display cases. That was fun.”

“Well” says Cullen. “If you feel nostalgic, there is a jewelry store a block over.”

Victoire & Yusef both look scornful. “Small fish” says Victoire. “We didn’t bother with places like that.”

“Oh” says Cullen, impressed. “Excuse me!”

“You think she’s near the top?” Yusef asks Victoire.

Victoire nods. “I’d even guess that she’s more likely on this side, but I can’t promise you that.”

“Tomorrow” says Etienne, “we start on the inside.”



Yusef

DAY TWELVE (Wednesday)

James sits on a bench in the back of the Domino’s store. He’s a little fidgety; it’s been a while since he’s spent much time above, but by now he knows the geography of

these surroundings blocks as well as he knows the tunnels, and he's eager to get inside The Building. He fiddles with the little pen camera that Yusef gave him. It only has twelve exposures. "Choose wisely" Yusef said.

Soon enough, Terry hands him a warm case of boxes. "Good luck" he says.

There is a guard sitting at a desk placed squarely in front of the door. He stops James just as he makes his way for elevator. "Wait up! Whatcha got?"

"Three pies for Getaways Travel Agency."

"Yeah, OK. Third floor."

James manages to snap the little camera in what he hopes is the direction of the directory on the wall between the elevators. He tries to note where there are security cameras. He walks partway down each arm of the H-shaped floor plan, snapping pictures in each direction before he finds the travel agency. They don't tip very well.

Less than an hour later, he's back.

"You again" says the guard.

"Yeah. Pfister Title and Escrow." He butchers the first name of the business.

The guard chuckles. "Gotcha. Eighth floor."

The floor plan there is a little different. James does his same routine without much trouble.



Late in the afternoon, two rosy-cheeked youngsters barrel into the lobby of The Building after having raced each other from the Domino's store. "Whoa!" calls the guard. "What's up with you two?"

Kipper waves a handful of Domino's flyers. "We'll get paid to distribute these to the offices" he says.

"You can leave them here with me" says the guard, smiling.

"No!" objects Eric. "We're supposed to get at least one to each business!" He says this like he's quoting the boss.

The guard stops smiling. "Not the building policy, kids. Leave 'em here, take it or leave it."

"But he won't pay us for that! And I only have half of what I need!"

The guard scoffs. "Like what would you need?"

"Mother's Day is coming! And construction paper cards are for little kids!"

"Try it somewhere else, kids" the guard points to the door. The boys leave, looking forlorn.

At about that same time, James tries to use the rear door to take in a pizza. The doors are locked with a keypad on the wall. There is no one in the small lobby. He uses his last exposure to take a picture and walks around to the front door.



Vincent watches Victoire try to hide her concern over Kipper and Eric's news of their rebuff. "How bad is this?" he asks.

"This will slow us down" answers Etienne. "If we depend on deliveries, we have to explore the floors only as the orders come in. The flyer idea was good because the boys would have been able to get to each floor. We may have to send people in looking for sham business on some of the floors."

"Maybe we need to get an employee in there" suggests Olivia.

"I can try that" Jules volunteers.

"Do you think they've noticed you playing on the corner?"

"Who knows?"

"At least with Burns' sandwich place letting us make deliveries, we can get more than one person in there. Maybe" says Mary.

"I hate to suggest this, but would using pretty girls for deliveries soften up the guards, let 'em take longer on the floors? Maybe take the stairs?" Cullen presents this with more diffidence than he usually manages, but the women of the tunnels still scowl.

Victoire does not. "That depends. Does the guard's desk have video monitors?"

"Yes" says James.

"Then it works against you. He'll use the monitors to follow her around the building. He'd see every suspicious move she made."

"OK" says Jamie after some thought. "That's creepy."

Victoire waggles an eyebrow. "*Les hommes, cherie.*"

"Fine, but, ew" says Jamie.

"We have one camera's worth of pictures to see" says Etienne. "Tomorrow, we'll see what they look like and keep hoping that delivery service and employment attempts give us more. Once we have a list of businesses, we start looking through the telephone directory to see what else we can learn. Such as: what is the business on the top floors?"



DAY THIRTEEN (Thursday)

Victoire looks up from the newspaper. “You know, I can’t say why I thought of this, but it might be helpful to note which of those offices are, em, chains, is it called? Won’t the Yellow Pages tell that?”

Olivia nods. “They should. These books fascinate me. I’ve never used one.”

Victoire blinks. “Never?”

“No” Olivia smiles. “I was born down here. Lived here all my life. I’ve gone Above, but there are things I’ve never done. Like this. These pages are so fragile!”

“What else?” asks Victoire, intrigued.

“I’ve never ridden in a taxi. I’ve never left Manhattan. Oh, I’m sure there are lots of things.”

Vincent sits at the table next to his sister. “Is there anything in the paper?”

She huffs. “Not a word about Catherine. Nothing about the car bomb. I know it’s nearly two weeks, but it’s just odd.” She plucks a pistachio from a bowl on the table and pushes the bowl towards Vincent. “Have some. I keep wanting to go talk to her boss and demand to know what he’s doing.”

Cracking a nut, Vincent ponders that scene for a moment and he can’t repress a chuckle. “I’m sure you could pull it off, too. But Catherine’s boss is Joe Maxwell, and he was badly injured by the blast. Who knows if he’s even back to work?”

“I’m sure he would very much like to know who blew him up” says Olivia. “Maybe once we have our information, he’s the person we should take it to.” She reaches for Vincent’s hand across the table. “I worry, Vincent. I’m not sure that doing this ourselves is the way. What if it fails? What if it exposes us?”

“The risk of exposing you is why we’ve insisted that it is only us, the Frenchmen, who go in to get her. I beg you not to re-open the argument. Vincent would love to stride in there and scoop her up, but if he were caught, you’d all be in the pain.”

“Trouble” Vincent gently corrects.

“In the trouble? Just trouble. All right, you’d all be in trouble.” She ponders. “‘Trouble’ is not the same as *trouble*?”

Now Vincent ponders. “It is, but it’s also the other.”

Olivia giggles. “Funny word in either language. And the more you say it, the funnier it gets.”

James lopez into the Dining Hall with an air of weary victory. “I finally got into the basement” he grins, and at once sits down to draw a floor plan.

“Anywhere else?” asks Victoire.

James sighs. “The third floor again. The fifth floor. That’s it. The janitors and the law office on the eighth floor tip well though.” At that he grins.

“The travel agency does not?”

“No. Skinflints.”

“Skinflints?”

“Cheapskates” says James.

Victoire makes a wry face. “Cheapskates?”

“Someone who’s stingy with their money.”

“Ah! *Mesquin!*”

“Sure” James winks. “That.”



The group that meets after dinner is restless and frustrated. “At this rate, how long will it take to learn what we need to know?” worries Father.

Etienne shrugs unhappily. “Too long for our needs. Normally, I’d be thrilled. With only the four of us working a target, it would takes us weeks to get this far. Sometimes it took months to prepare.”

“But we don’t have months” Mary says.

“*C’est ça.*”

“I got a job application for the cleaning crew” says Jules. He shakes his head sadly at the hopeful faces turned his way. “It would be really good, I know, but not if time’s a thing.” He holds up the application. “This has to be mailed in, and the guy said it takes weeks to get an answer, and they’re really funny about who they hire. I can’t help but think it’s a dead end.”

“Every day that passes puts her at greater risk” Vincent frets. “What can they mean to do with her?”

“Are we sure she’s all right?” asks Father.

Victoire holds her hands up. “As far as I can tell, she’s well. It makes no sense, but there it is.”

“Thank God they make no sense” says Mary.

“Anyone have any ideas?” asks Cullen.

“It’s spring” says William. “Isn’t it time for a big place to have exterminators in?”

“We’d need to know what company they use before hand.”

“It’s window-washing time, too, but again, who?”

“With our luck, they hire from within” grumbles Yusef. “Does anyone besides me think that the *salauds* who took Catherine might actually own the building?”

“Yes” says Victoire. “Something had me wondering if all the businesses in there are legitimate.”

“Is that why you were asking about chains?” asks Olivia.

“Yes. A company with multiple locations is unlikely to be involved. I hope.”

“So far, we know which businesses are on which floors. And” he bows to Olivia, “we know which are chains. We know that there are two elevator shafts, and the two elevators towards the front of the Building only go to the twelfth floor. We can’t get to the rear elevator to tell if it opens on all floors, but I’m ready to wager that it serves the

top. We know that both sets open into the basement, *Dieu merci*. And we know where the electrical closet is. But how the devil do we get to it?"

"We need a different approach" says Yusef.

"Gypsies" says Vincent.

"What?" say several people at once.

"Gypsies. Catherine and I helped a Gypsy boy last year. Tony Ramos. Someone was trying to kill him... It's a long story. Anyway, my thought is that they might have a better idea how to do what we want. And, according to Tony, they owe us."

There's a long silence. "I don't know..." Etienne starts doubtfully, but is silenced by a glare from Yusef.

"How could we ask them?" says Father.

"Do you know where they are?" asks Victoire.

Vincent nods. "But I don't think I can approach them. Tony knows me, but the adults do not."

"The boy has seen you?" says Father grimly. Vincent nods. "Son. This is a story I have not heard."

Unexpectedly, a flash of mischief passes across Vincent's face. It's a delight to see after all this time. "Perhaps, if you're very good, I'll tell you for a bedtime story."

Father rolls his eyes.

Holding his hand up towards Yusef, Etienne says "You want to think twice before you engage Romani, if they are anything like those in Europe." He ignores a huff from Yusef. "They are a strong people who have survived by their wits for longer than anyone knows. They use anything and everything that can give them an advantage. Think long before you expose your secret to them."

"Let us see first if they'll talk to us" says Victoire.

"Do we really need to bring this kind of outsiders?" says William. "I admit I've never met a Gypsy, but their reputation isn't all that inspiring."

"William!" says Rebecca, "you can't condemn people just on the strength of folklore!"

After that, the discussion takes off into a multi-front debate. Vincent sits back and looks over at his sister. She can feel how his anxiety is building. This extraordinary family he has does much to keep him anchored, a blessing since the slowness of their progress is more than stressful at this point. Most police departments consider a case of a missing person that has gone on for more than two weeks to be an occult case of murder. For a sickening moment, she wonders if her sense of Catherine is false. Wishful thinking? What if she's wrong? She closes her eyes and focuses on her brother. Yes, the thread is there. It's real. She's real, and she's well, except that she's depressed and angry. *'Well, so are we, Catherine, dear'* Victoire thinks. *'So are we.'*

She rejoins the discussion to find that Jules is saying that he can go play his guitar near where Vincent recalls that Tony lived. "I'll set up along a route between there and the nearest school. See if that works."

“If they agree to talk to us, we can send people who are hard to connect to tunnels” says Yusef. “Eti and I will go.”



DAY FOURTEEN (Friday)

In the afternoon, a boy of about 12 is kicking his way down the sidewalk between his school and his apartment. He stops at a corner for longer than is actually necessary, looking to his right, where he can see the edge of a small playground that has a basketball court. His friends are there, and he'd so much rather go play than go home and face homework, but ever since he started school, his grandmother has for some reason become passionate about his not only going, and learning, but making good grades. His grandfather doesn't contradict her, either, even though he didn't go to school himself past the third grade. Mami insists that a Gypsy leader will have to know everything he can learn, and so Tony goes to school. Sighing, Tony crosses the street and heads home.

A man is sitting against the wall, playing a flamenco tune on his guitar. His guitar case lies open on the pavement in front of him, with a smattering of coins in it. The man's fingers fly, and Tony stops to watch, mesmerized. The man looks up and smiles. "Hey, Tony" he says.

The boy goggles at him. "How do you know my name?"

"You're a friend of Catherine Chandler's, aren't you?" The man's fingers don't even falter as millions of notes pour from the guitar. The boy nods, for once, speechless. "Well, I am, too" says the man.

"She's missing" says Tony. "I saw it in the newspaper at school."

The music stops, and the man stares at him intensely. "That's right" he says. "She needs your help."

"Mine! How can I help her?"

"We know where she is. We need help getting her out. Help you and your people might be able to give." He begins to play again, though his eyes don't leave the boy's face. "What do you think?"

"She helped me" says the boy. "A Gypsy never forgets."

"Can you talk to your elders? See if they'll meet with us?"

"Who are you?"

"We're her family. The police aren't much help."

"I'll talk to them" the boy declares. Nothing warms his heart like the thought of ineffective police.

The man grins broadly. "Thanks, Tony. Now, listen. Don't tell anyone but your grandfather about this. Got it?"

Tony nods. "How do I tell you what he says?"

"I'll be here in the morning."

The boy nods, and turns towards home. He tries to walk normally, but before long, he breaks into a run.

Mami = Grandma.

DAY FIFTEEN (Saturday)

The next morning, Tony finds the man in the same place. He's playing something jazzy this time, and smiles as Tony approaches. "Hey, Tony" he says.

The boy seems somber. "There were a lot of questions" he says.

"I bet there were."

"But if someone wants to talk to him, my grandfather will be at this place at lunchtime." He drops a folded slip of paper into the guitar case.

"Excellent!" says the man.

Tony hesitates, listening to the music for a bit. "I gotta go" he finally mumbles.

"Thanks a lot, Tony" the man says. "You're a champ." He watches the boy run down the street before he turns to nod to the dark-haired man at the end of the block who has been watching them. Surprised, the other man nods back, and he does not leave his post until the boy is out of sight and the guitar player packs up and leaves.



It's a diner much like any other, although sometimes the scents wafting from the kitchen aren't ordinary. There's more than the greasy richness of broiling beef or frying potatoes, but sometimes a whiff of cinnamon or cumin, or strong coffee. A group of men cluster at the end of the dining area farthest from the door, muttering to each other and occasionally laughing. An old man sits in the corner of a booth, playing with an empty coffee cup.

The group seems to ignore other patrons that come and go, but they turn their heads in unison when a group of men enter and look around. The rangy blond is recognized by one of the men in the back, the others are strangers. The boy who had been sitting next to the old man jumps up and runs to the blond man. "You came!"

The man ruffles his hair. "Well, yeah" he says. The boy leads the group towards the back of the restaurant, and ducks under the table to sit on the banquette next to the old man.

Tony's friend nods respectfully at the elderly man in the corner. "Mr. Ramos" he says. "I thank you for agreeing to see us, even though we've been less than, er, straightforward." Ramos scowls at him, and the men surrounding him stare blankly. "My name is Jules. I.. We" he pauses to gesture towards the men with him "are friends and partial family to a friend of your grandson's. She's in trouble and we wish to help her. However, we aren't very powerful, and the help we want to give must be quietly done. We need help to do this, from people who know how to fly beneath the radar, so to speak." He points to the man next to him. "This is Cullen." He points to a handsome young man next to Cullen. "This is Michael. And the two behind me are Etienne and Yusef."

Each of the men nods and greets the group at the table when he is named. However, when Yusef says "Sastimo" the old man in the corner sits up.

"You are Romani?" he demands of Yusef.

Yusef makes a little bow, and seems almost apologetic. "My grandparents."

“But not you.”

Yusef shrugs self-deprecatingly. “I live with a different tribe.”

“Did your grandfather teach you manners?”

Yusef lets loose his roguish smile. “Sir, everyone tried.”

The old man chuckles. “I am Milos Ramos, *Rom baro* of the *kumpania* here in New York. My friends here are the *phuros* who advise me. You are right when you say you have not been straightforward. What kind of people approach me through a *chava*? And how can you think that you can do what the police can’t? There’s a story here, and I mean to hear it. Sit down.”

The visitors find seats; the area is crowded now. Ramos waves to the girl behind the counter, who nods and starts to collect mugs. He looks at Yusef. “Tell me.”

Yusef nods towards Cullen, who flushes but sits up straighter to address the chieftain. “Catherine Chandler went missing a week ago. And it seems that nothing the authorities have done has come close to finding her. She is sort of a member of our family...”

“Since her father died, Catherine Chandler has no family” interrupts the Gypsy.

Etienne speaks up. “Not all family is given by blood.”

The old man stares hard at him. “Where are you from, *Gadjo*?”

“Marseille.”

“And yet you care what happens to this woman.”

“Very much.”

“Are you her lover?”

“No.”

“Then what is she to you?”

“Family. We need her home. She needs to be home. And we cannot do it alone.”

“Tony says you know where she is. Why not go to the police with this information?”

“We cannot” says Yusef.

“Why not?”

Yusef only makes a tiny shrug and smiles apologetically.

A man next to Ramos speaks up. “This woman works in the District Attorney’s office. You speak as if you are not quite right with the law. How is that?”

“Etienne and I, we aren’t Americans. Why would the police listen to us?”

“And keep in mind that Ms Chandler works as an investigator for the DA” puts in Cullen. “She’s helped more people than she’s brought to justice. And investigators don’t exactly work alone.”

“Or deal only with the, er, perfect citizens to learn information” adds Jules.

The old man leans back and makes a sound more like a rumble than a sigh. He examines each of his visitors as if they are teenagers caught in a prank. Finally he says “Tell us what you know.” The girl comes out from behind the counter with a tray of small coffee mugs that she sets on the table. Ramos gestures towards them. “Please” he

says. They help themselves, and Yusef lets out a blissful sigh after his first sip. It's Turkish coffee.

Cullen pulls a map of Manhattan from his jacket pocket. He lays it out on the table, and points to a block circled in red. "We've located her in this building."

"How have you done that?" demands one of the *phuros*.

Jules smiles slyly. "We have our ways. We are the people no one notices, but we notice a lot. We know that there are 23 businesses in that building that are evident to the public. But there are parts of the tower that are not open to the public. At least the top three floors. That's where we think she is. We don't know who actually owns the building, but it's pretty tight. There are security cameras everywhere, and guards at each door, that we know of. The guards aren't easy-going. But as far as we can tell, they don't guard the elevator shafts. We need a way to get into the basement. We need a better idea of the layout of the upper floors, and a better idea of what is actually up there. Besides Catherine."

"So far, we have a little information on all of the visible businesses" says Etienne, laying a list in front of Ramos. "We know roughly how many people work in the building. We have maps of some of the business' entry and exit doors and relationship to stairwells. We are still gathering information about their timetables. We have a rough idea of the layout of service areas, and a few of them do interconnect. We still don't know much about the air ducts. And we simply have no information about those upper floors. We need more eyes on the job. We're on a tight schedule."

Ramos stares at Etienne while one of his men murmurs something. "You know what you're doing" he says, with a hint of respect.

Etienne sighs as if he doesn't understand Ramos' meaning. "I just wish we knew more."

Yusef pulls out a sheaf of papers and lays one on the table. It's a hand-drawn floor plan. "This is what we know of the basement. There's an electrical closet that we may be able to use to tap into the security camera system. If we can link into that, we can surely get a better idea of the top floors, but we still haven't planned that angle of attack."

"How did you get to survey the basement?" demands one of the elders.

Cullen grins. "Janitors order pizza." There's a general chuckle at that.

"The top floors do not" says the elder.

"No, dammit. At least not directly."

"If you knew exactly where she was, how would you get her out?"

Etienne and Yusef glance at each other. "That's where we come in" says Etienne.

"You don't look like second story men" says a younger Gypsy. The Frenchmen blink in incomprehension. "Cat burglars" the young man says.

"We aren't" says Etienne. "We're circus acrobats, actually."

"Cirque de Joie" provides Yusef with a grin. "We were here a couple of months ago. Did you see our show?"

"Just what do you think you can do?" scoffs the young Gypsy.

"It is better you never know, isn't it?" says Yusef, and his voice is soft now.

Ramos shoots a sharp glance at his younger *kumpania* member, who subsides. “There are questions we do not need to know the answers to. A job like this needs very careful planning, especially when it is a life you mean to save. If Ms. Chandler is being kept prisoner, it isn’t for her health. And they won’t keep her long, whoever has her. It’s amazing they’ve kept her this long. Careful planning must be completed quickly.”

“There is more,” says Etienne. He leans forward. “The lady is expecting. There are two lives to save.”

Ramos’ eyebrows rise wildly and scans the faces in front of him skeptically. “Who is the lucky father?”

“We are his representatives.”

“And why is he not here himself?”

“We kinda forced him to stay out of sight” says Cullen. “The fewer people who know, and know him, the better.”

Ramos indulges in another long inspection of his visitors before he nods. “I see.”

“I still don’t get it” says the elder sitting next to Ramos. “Chandler is an uptown socialite. A New York City lawyer. She’s a high class kinda gal. You guys – aren’t. How the hell did she wind up with you looking out for her?”

Michael speaks up. “We each have our own connections to her. There are too many stories to tell. And some of the story is for her to tell. For me, I had nothing, and she helped me get into college, with a scholarship and everything. She made a future for me. I owe her big time.”

“We’re all like that” says Cullen. “And we’re not happy with how things are going. She always says that if it’s important enough, you get in there and make it happen. So we are.”

“It could cost you” says Ramos.

“Losing her is too big a price to pay for waiting for the authorities to blow it” says Michael. “Please” he says quietly, looking straight at the *Rom baro*.

Tony, who has been unusually quiet through all this, tugs on his grandfather’s sleeve. He whispers something to him. Milos softens. He looks over at his friends, who either shrug or nod in turn. “All right” he says. The visitors relax in their seats and grin. “You’ve collected a lot of information in a few days’ time. How did you do that?”

“Like I said” says Jules. “We’re the people no one sees. We deliver pizza, distribute flyers, panhandle on the corner. We looked into getting one of us onto the cleaning detail, but the hiring process they have is too long. So far, we’ve had 20 people in and around there, and we know the alleys around the building like we live there. But we need a way to get more inside information. We’re hoping you have connections with service people that will help. Trash collectors, cleaning crew, maintenance, distributors, someone like that. You know the city in ways we don’t.”

“Although we know a lot,” injects Cullen defensively.

“Chill, buddy” mutters Jules.

“We don’t” says Yusef, pointing to Etienne and himself.

“So” says Cullen. “Any thoughts?”

“Some questions you don’t need to know the answers to” says Ramos sternly. “How do we reach you? I’m not sending my grandson to drop coins in your guitar case.”

Michael scribbles a number on a piece of paper. “This is my phone number” he says. “I can get a message to any one of the others.”

“When we meet again, don’t bring a crowd” says Ramos. “Just two of you. You two.” He points to Etienne and Yusef. “You are Romani. You can be here, if anyone asks.”

Yusef bows his head. “As you say” he says, respectfully.

And the meeting is over.



DAY EIGHTEEN (Tuesday)

Frank monitors the rear view mirror on his side of the van while the driver backs it up to the dock. “Almost there” he says. Then: “Got it.”

Al, the driver, looks over at him and grins. They get out of the van and Al hops up on the dock to knock on a door. Frank takes the opportunity to light a cigarette. It had taken a minimal amount of talking to get Al to accept company for the day, even though it was technically against the rules (Frank chuckles to himself that Al has no idea how many rules are about to be broken). It seemed that Al was hoping that Frank might actually want the job that he’d said he was thinking about, a concept that Frank initially had thought was funny. Now, he’s thinking that it had potential. Too bad, since it could all be pointless after this caper.

He hears Al calling through the door “Document Management of Manhattan”. The door opens, a clipboard is passed back and forth, the large garage door starts to rise. Frank smokes his cigarette. He looks up at the Building. It isn’t the biggest one in Manhattan, but it’s big enough. These dreamers think they’re going to find a woman in there. And they’re just nuts enough that they might. The whole story is just too weird to be real, as far as Frank is concerned. The lawyer is dead, he’s sure of it. The Frenchmen may hang on to their fantasies, but why in the world should anyone be holding her, pregnant or not? What kind of a crook does that? Not that it matters much to Frank. This ‘fact-finding mission’ will yield something for the Romani even if they find no clue about Catherine Chandler. They’ll be able to pull enough very useful financial information from the bags of papers to be shredded. He drops his cigarette and climbs up onto the dock to help Al.

A large trolley heaped with duffel bags is brought to the dock. Al is raising the door on the van, and he starts heaving duffel bags into the back of the van. Frank pitches in as well. He yelps and shakes his hand out, inspecting the closures on the bag. “Damn thing bit me” he growls to Al. The bag’s opening is cinched shut with a drawstring that is secured with a plastic locking tag.

Al chuckles. “Little plastic thingies’ll getcha.”

Frank moves into the truck to arrange the bags along the sides of the van. He drops one heavily up against a stack, and a subtle grunt is heard.

“Wadyou say?” asks Al.

“Huh? Me? Nothin’” Frank glares at the back corner of the van. “These things actually have their business names on ‘em” he notes. “Why do they need that?”

Al shrugs. “Some of ‘em want it that way. Not all of ‘em. See, this one’s plain.” He tosses the bag to Frank.

“Guess you might say it makes things easier” Frank mutters, but he’s not talking to Al.

They finish up and climb into the cab of the van. As the vehicle moves on, in the back of the van, two flashlights are lit, and two men climb out from piles of bags where they’d hidden. One has Etienne’s list and he begins comparing names on the bags to the list. He pulls out a nameless bag and pushes it towards his young companion. “Thank God the locks are plastic. When you get one off, pocket it. Do NOT leave one lying around.”

“Yeah” says the other. He has the bag open in no time, and sits down on the floor to go through it.

The older man pounces on a bag. “Gardner-Deacon, Accountants” he says with satisfaction. He cuts off the lock and starts to paw through it.

“Why you messing with that one?” says the young man. “We know who it is.”

“Indeed we do, Grasshopper” says the older man. “It’s an accounting firm. The kinda business that has important stuff to shred.” He starts laying papers aside with a big smile on his face.

“OK, but I’m not gonna go through everything else alone here.”

“Yeah, yeah”

The van sways as it moves through the streets. Al and Frank chat in the cab, and two men rifle through protected papers as quickly as they can.

“Hey, Manny” says the young man. “There’s no doctor offices in there, are there?”

“No, why?”

“This is kinda like medical, in’t it?” He waves a square piece of paper.

“Could be” says Manny. “Put it aside.”

“I got some letterhead here, and it’s got a street address but no suite number.” The young man passes over a page.

Manny inspects it with his flashlight, and then swears.

“What?”

“Holy Mother of God” says Manny. “We gotta get outta here. What else is in there?” They spread papers around them. “Look for financial stuff. And international.” A few more letters disappear into the flat file box he’s carrying. “Put that other stuff in here.” He sits back and rubs the back of his neck hard. “It ain’t gonna be enough that we close these back up” he says. “How we gonna reseal ‘em?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Manny holds up a page with letterhead. “*Johai*” he whispers.

“Shit” breathes the boy. “Here? In New York?”

“Of course they’d be here in New York. And we just got into their personal business. We gotta get outta here.”

The boy scans his flashlight around the van. Against the back wall, there’s a metal box. He crawls over to it and lifts the lid. “I don’t believe this” he says as he pulls out a plastic bag. “These companies are supposed to be all about information security, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, they don’t lock the door. They don’t have methods to make sure creeps like us don’t get in to root through their bags. They use these flimsy plastic locky thingies, and they keep extras right here.” He tosses the bag on the floor in front of the older man. “We can close these things back up and no one will know. Some security.”

Manny fishes a locking tab out of the back. “How’s this work?”

“You wrap this around here and push the end through this. It goes in but won’t come out. See?”

They seal the bags that they’ve opened and move toward the door. Frank had brought the door down, but he’d made sure that it wasn’t properly closed. The young man lets the door ride up an inch or two so he can look out onto the street. They stop at several stop lights. Finally, the young man nods to Manny, they quickly slip through the door, and flip the lock into place. It’s a long light. By the time the van passes the intersection, Frank sees his cousins standing at the corner, waiting for the signal to Walk. They don’t look happy.



DAY NINETEEN (Wednesday)

Milo Ramos looks up as the Frenchmen enter the diner. They nod as they approach, and wait for his invitation to sit.

“*Sastimo*” says Yusef.

“*Sastimo.*” He sighs heavily, and plunges in. “We have learned a great deal for you. My friends, you are in way over your heads.”

“What have you discovered?”

The old Rom baro pulls out some papers, laying them one by one on the table. He points at the letterhead of the first paper. “It appears from the elevators that this accounting firm is the occupant of the top floor. But as we know, there are three floors above it.”

Yusef and Etienne glance at each other and nod.

The old man puts an odd square of paper on the table. “We found this. It’s an ultrasound image. My niece is a nurse and she says it is an obstetric ultrasound. You said your friend is expecting?” They nod, staring in fascination at the ultrasound, which really doesn’t look like anything recognizable. The old man points at initials in the top left hand corner. “This is where the patient’s name is meant to go. ‘CC’ It could be her.” He pauses for effect. “You know there are no doctors’ offices in the Building.”

Etienne pulls the image towards himself, feeling oddly reverent. “Why would someone do ultrasounds on her?”

The old man puts another sheet of paper on top the ultrasound image just as a pretty girl places hamburgers with piles of fries in front of the Frenchmen. They look up in surprise. “Please. Be my guests” the old man says. He glowers when they demure, and with the niceties observed, they start to eat. After a bit, their attention is drawn back to the paper on the table. “This is your list of the businesses in the Building. We’ve only found one other; this one.” His pudgy finger taps at the name written at the bottom.

“So” says Etienne. “Is that the top floor?”

“I’m afraid it is, *Gadjo*” says Milo, and he looks grave enough that his guests look alarmed. “We know this name” he says. “There are things we Roma know that local law enforcement does not. This name... This name means only trouble. If they have an office in the building, that means they own the building, and maybe buildings around it. There’s no telling how many of the other businesses listed on the directory in the lobby are legitimate tenants or just dummy names. If they are there, then security will be intense, more than it even looks like. These people are dangerous.” He sits back and stares at the Frenchmen.

“Who are they?” asks Yusef.

“They use many names. This is one of their international business fronts. Some say that there is one man at the top; some say that there is a brotherhood – rings, blood oaths, the whole deal. Doesn’t matter. They are an international power that the American Mafia, or the Russians, for that matter, can only dream of being. Their wealth is exceeded only by their ruthlessness. If they have Ms. Chandler, she is probably dead by now.”

“We know that she is alive” Yusef says.

“How do you know?”

They merely shrug at him.

“Then they are keeping her for a reason, and I’d guess that it has to do with her pregnancy. Once that is complete, they’ll dispose of her.”

“Why would they do that?”

He shrugs. “It may be a way that they recruit their acolytes. There may yet be something they expect to get from her. Who knows?”

“How do you know of them?”

“Our brothers in Eastern Europe have had trouble with them. Whole enclaves have been wiped out: men, women and children, hundreds at a time. The last attack was two years ago. We try to keep an eye out for them so that we can keep far away. In the last 20 years, they have been even more vicious.” He leans forward. “My friends, we know what it is that we owe to Ms. Chandler. We will give what help we can. But I cannot send my people into their line of sight. I won’t let them go within three blocks of that Building. It is my responsibility to protect my *kumpania*, and I must do that first. I am sorry.”

Etienne and Yusef stare at him, dumbfounded. “Who are these people?” whispers Yusef again. “What are we to do?”

“We call them *Johai*, ghost’s vomit. Who knows what they actually call themselves? If you are determined to rescue her...” He stops and shrugs. “They’ll kill you.”

The pretty waitress reappears with a large, heavy pastry box. She lays it in front of Etienne. “We all feel bad,” she says. “Catherine Chandler brought us back our Tony, and we don’t forget that. But they will kill him, and the rest of our children. What else can we do? It’s hardly anything, but take this with you. It’s baklava.”

Etienne manages a smile at her, but he has no appetite at the moment.

“Just what is your connection to Ms. Chandler?” the old gypsy asks.

Etienne sighs. He’d managed to avoid this answer before, but what’s the difference now? “She is our boss’ sister-in-law.”

“Ah, the enigmatic Leonie! Yes, we’ve researched you, Flying Tigers. Does her brother look like her?”

Etienne scowls. “No one looks like Leonie!” It is his automatic answer.

The old man harrumphs. “Of course he does; otherwise he’d be here. Keep in mind that my Tony tells his old Grandpa everything. Any chance they saw him?” Etienne and Yusef make no answer but the worried glances they exchange are clear enough. “That might explain why someone would want his baby.” He shakes the whole odd line of reasoning away. “All right, look. Whatever you do, keep your boss out of sight. Send her back home, bury her underground, anything you can do. If they connect her to trouble, she is too easy to recognize, and trace, and kill - her and everyone connected to her - and I do mean everyone. Keep her brother out of sight, too. If you insist on being crazy, work like you are *mulani* - ghosts. Never send anyone into or around that Building more than twice. Avoid security cameras as much as possible, and they’ll have a lot of them. Don’t make eye contact with anyone. And for God’s sake,

leave the Roma out of it!” One of the *phuro* sitting behind the old man mutters something. He nods. “Manny is right. Whatever you do, do NOT trust law enforcement. These people probably own someone pretty high up, like Ms Chandler’s boss, or the Chief of Police. Someone who has the power to weaken the investigation into her disappearance.”

Frank leans forward. “Their security in the Building is probably pretty tight, but I can tell you from experience that outside the Building, not so much. They don’t really inspect their service providers.”

“You mean like deliveries and trash removal?”

“Yeah, that.”

The waitress touches Etienne’s shoulder. “Tony’s really mad at us about this. If he comes to you, send him home. Please. Or at least get him away from that Building. Please.”

“*Ka*” Yusef pats her hand and then shares a long look with Etienne. Then Yusef turns to the Gypsy leader. “We are grateful to you for everything you have done. And we do not want to put anyone in more danger. Thank you, for everything.”

“Anything we can do in the background, we offer freely” said the old man. “But don’t come back here. And phone lines are not safe. If you want to reach me, leave a message for me at this pizza parlor.” He hands a slip of paper to Etienne. “Make it look like an invoice or a bill in an envelope. Go now. We have a cab waiting for you at the back door.”

Etienne pockets the slip of paper, and rises from the booth, feeling a little shaky on his legs. Yusef follows him. They solemnly shake hands with the old man and his deputies, and gallantly kiss the hand of the waitress. Then they go out the back in search of their cab.

(Sastimo: a greeting. Phuro: elder. Kumpania: Gypsy group. Ka: I will. Rom baro: leader. Gadjo: non-Gypsy man. Johai: ghost’s vomit.)



A very dispirited group sits around a table in the Dining Chamber. They pass around the bits of paper they got from the Gypsies. Father is fascinated with the ultrasound. Peter is looking over his shoulder.

“It’s a calibration page” he says. He points. “Patient name goes here. Date of study. LMP.”

“What’s LMP?” asks William.

“Last menstrual period” answers Mary. Several of the men blush and shuffle. “It’s what you use to calculate how far along the pregnancy is.” She lays a gentle hand on Vincent’s arm. “My dear, I know it’s embarrassing, but is this date – rather two weeks from that date – a reasonable match to..”

She stops when Vincent ducks his head to hide his face in his hair. “It is” he whispers.

“This calibration page was done last week. By these dates, she’s nine weeks along. Do you think that they really mean to keep her for the child?” Admitting to Father that Catherine is pregnant made Vincent and Victoire a little nervous, but he took the news better than they thought he would. Certainly much, much better than he would have before Victoire came along and told them about Patrick Meecham. Father’s actually a little “chuffed”, he says. He’d be thrilled if he weren’t so worried.

“If they are, then we have more time to work out a rescue” says Peter.

“Not that much” says Victoire. “We want her home now.”

“Of course we do” says Father. “But it’s nice to know time isn’t completely against us.”

“Isn’t a little disturbing to think that these people might want the baby?” says Mary.

“A little?” says Vincent.

“It does seem far-fetched” allows Father. “The whole situation is far-fetched, however.”

“I keep wondering if the Gypsies just came up with that *johai* story to back out” says William.

“No” say Yusef. “It’s real. Ramos is frightened. When he says an entire enclave was wiped out, he does not mean a couple of dozen people camping. It’s hundreds in a town. That’s... *C’est horrible.*”

“He said we are in over our heads” says Etienne. “That is a new term to me, but it is *descriptif.*”

Victoire tucks her hand under his on the table. “I am very distressed about what they said about the police.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t act on your wish to go talk to Catherine’s boss” Vincent says. “It’s just that, knowing everything she’s said about Joe, I can’t see him as being in league with criminals.”

“Who’s above him?” asks Father.

“John Moreno. I don’t know as much about him.”

“He’s well respected” says Peter. “But I’ve heard of crazier things.”

“One thing one of the Romani pointed out” says Yusef “is their security is fancy and tight, but they make mistakes. We saw how many cameras they have, and how many guards. But there are things they miss. We can use that.”

“If we can figure out what they’ve missed” says William.

“Well, the elevator shafts are open. But they’ve definitely fortified their basement windows, and recently, it seems” says Cullen.

“Sorry” Vincent mutters before he raises his head to glare at Cullen. “Wait. Why am I apologizing about that?” Cullen chuckles.

“I can’t stop thinking about that electrical closet” says Etienne.

“I can remember when all you thought about was girls” jokes Victoire. “You’re getting old, Eti.”

Etienne flashes her a cheeky grin. "I'm still thinking about a girl, you know. Just not my girl." He becomes serious. "Unfortunately, we can't play Romeo and get Juliet out by the balcony. Disabling their surveillance system is *crucial*, of course. But after we do that, what do we do?"

"Won't we know more if we can hack into the security cameras?" asks Vincent.

"We'll know a lot, as long as we can maintain the link. If they find that, we're done for. They might even move her again."

Vincent shudders.

"They have a lot of cameras" says Mary. "How many people do they have to watch them?"

"People usually aren't helpful enough to put a camera in the observation room" says Victoire.

Mouse pipes up. "Electrical closet in the basement." Everyone turns to look at him. "Piece of cake to get into. Run wire out. Watch from tunnels." The others stare at him.

"Piece of what?" says Yusef.

"He means easy" says Cullen.

"What do you mean, Mouse?" asks Etienne.

Mouse rifles through the drawings and papers on the table, oblivious to the impatience of those around him. He produces the drawing of the basement floor plan and some photographs. "Electrical door on the back wall" he says. "But look." He points to the apparent indentation that the electrical room door occupies. And he points to the space next to it marked "Janitor's Room". "This door. Outside wall." He pulls out photographs of the back alley, and points to a section of sidewalk. "See these? Trap doors."

They follow his finger. There is a pair of metal doors set into the sidewalk. The sort city dwellers walk across every day and never think about. Father and Peter gasp. "What are those?" asks Olivia.

"An elevator" says Peter. "Buildings would use them to take deliveries, back in the day. They've become obsolete since so many places put in loading docks."

"And this Building has a loading dock" says Vincent.

"I walked over those things" says Cullen. "They're soldered shut."

"We couldn't use them anyway, with the cameras on the alley" says Victoire.

Etienne has been staring at Mouse, who is fidgeting mightily. "They turned that space into the electrical room" he says.

"Right!" cries Mouse.

"At some point, they must have rewired the Building, and they used the extra space for a more sophisticated system."

Vincent gasps himself now. "The old steam tunnels." He turns to Father. "The maps."

“Samantha” says Father. “The maps on my desk. Would you run and get them, please?” The girl takes off at a dead run. Father sighs. “For once I don’t care if she runs in the passageways.”

“So how do you propose we get into an underground room?” says Yusef.

“If there’s a steam tunnel near there, it’s easy to dig over to under the sidewalk” says Cullen. “They probably think it’s completely secure.” The Tunnelers chuckle.

Samantha dashes in with the rolled-up maps. It takes a while for Father and Vincent to find the proper steam tunnel section for that block. Then it takes a while to match that to the tunnel network that is usually used. “We can enter the steam network from here” says Vincent, pointing. “It’s about a three-block walk.”

“Loosen bricks” says Mouse, “start digging to room.”

“How are you going to know exactly where to dig?” asks Victoire worriedly.

“Won’t digging over take a long time?” says Yusef.

“Piece of cake” says Mouse, beaming.

Cullen and Vincent nod. “We actually do this sort of thing all the time” says Vincent. “With a big enough crew, it can go pretty quickly.”

“For this?” says Mouse. “Big crew!”

“Aren’t steam tunnels, er, hot?” says Etienne.

“The tunnels weren’t filled with steam. They were maintenance tunnels for the pipes that ran underground. They were what carried the steam. The tunnels have been walled off now” says Father. “People stopped using steam heat, so the passageways aren’t needed.”

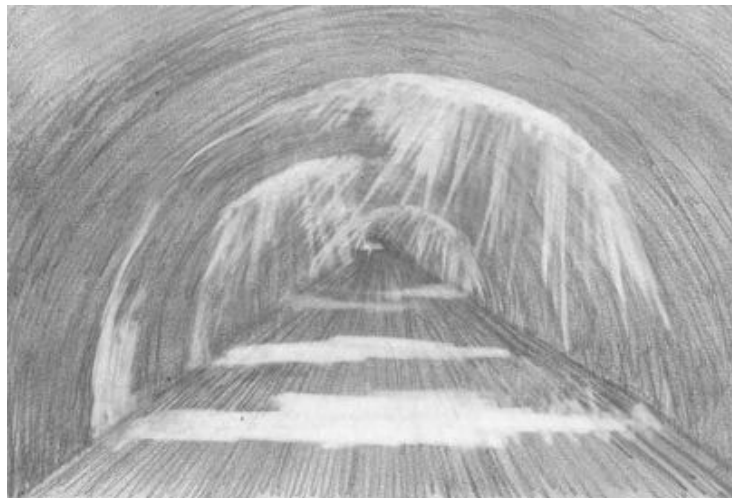
“They didn’t fill them in” says William, “they just bricked over the ends.”

“So we break into the electrical room from underneath, wire into the camera system and run the wire out to a tunnel to watch from there” marvels Victoire.

“A wire can be traced to a tunnel” says Father.

“It would be pretty easy to hide an extra wire” says Yusef. “Hiding the hole we made to get in there...”

“You let us worry about that, too” says William. “You work on getting Catherine out. We work on getting in. When do we start?”



DAY TWENTY ONE (Friday)

Rather than fret in his chamber, Father has taken up residence in the Dining Hall, where he has insisted the crew members return for meals. He launched this fiat when William complained that he couldn't send much besides sandwiches all the way to Tribeca, but Vincent grumbled that he did it to make up for the fact that Mary (drat her correct and over-educated hide) convinced Father that his hip wasn't really going to allow him to traipse that distance himself. At least this way he can see the diggers for himself and get news first hand even though they've been able to transmit a lot via the pipes.

He contents himself with receiving the notifications from the Topside observers who are around the streets of Catherine's Building most of the day. They try to stay out of the range of the video cameras, but they can still keep track of people entering and leaving the place. On one occasion, a long limousine pulls up to the back door. The watcher couldn't see who got out, but that is the first time anyone has used that door at all.

A ragged cheer goes up when the pipes convey that the crew has actually found a door to the room. It may have given access of old to a steam tunnel, or space for maintenance, who knows? And who cares? This may have just made this project a lot easier. Father and William clap each other on the back, and William hands Father a beer.

"We may be celebrating prematurely," he says, "but I'm taking the good news as I can get it."

Father gives this no argument.



In a quiet room under the sidewalk by a building in Tribeca, there is a small grinding noise, but no one hears it. If someone had been in the room, he might have noticed that the noise came from the old metal door on the back wall of the room, but he might also have discounted it, because anyone who worked there knew that the old door was sealed. Filings began to fall from a spot just below the door's handle as the tip and then finally the end of a hand-drill protruded from its surface. Then there was a long pause before another odd-looking object protruded through the hole. The object was pulled back until its end was flush with the door, and then the room remained undisturbed.

A few scant feet away, Etienne manipulated the end of the flexible rod that he'd introduced through the door, as he and Yusef raptly watched a TV monitor on the floor at their knees. The image is odd, since it's an infrared camera.

"I don't see a surveillance camera" says Etienne. He moves the little camera lens around to scan the room. "The cables are labeled well."

"Good" breathes Yusef.

"Ah!" says Etienne. "Look!"

"Are those fiber-optic cables?"

"*Mon Dieu!* They are!"

Victoire creeps up to join them. “So?”

“Fiber-optics” the men say together.

Victoire makes a scornful little sound. “How fancy.”

“Yes. Terribly up-to-date. We aren’t. This wasn’t available when we were cavorting about.”

“*Merdre*” says Victoire.

Etienne sets about taping the little camera lens in place. “We didn’t bring any recording equipment in here. I want to monitor the room for 24 hours or so, just to see if someone checks on it at all, but we’ll have to take turns watching. At any rate, that gives us time to get the right equipment.”

“I’ll take the first couple of hours” say Yusef.

Victoire and Etienne pat him on the shoulder and make their way towards the tunnels. Vincent meets them and he frowns in response to their frowns. “What is it?”

“Their technology is newer than ours” Victoire snarls.

“We need fiber-optic cables and hardware” says Etienne.

“And how do we get that?”

“Well I suppose it’s easy enough to buy, if you know where to go” says Etienne. “It’s expensive.”

“Which we can handle. But where to go?” says Victoire.

The trio trudges towards the hub, deep in thought.

“Would it be noticeable to go buy these things? Would we attract attention?” asks Vincent.

“I doubt it. But I’d like to know where we can go and not pay too much.”

“Perhaps this is something our Gypsy friends can tell us” says Vincent.



DAY TWENTY TWO (Saturday)

The next day, a letter arrives at a pizzeria and is sent on to its proper recipient. That evening a phone rings in a college dorm room.

“Hello?”

“Is this Michael?”

“Yeah.”

“Catherine’s friend?”

Michael nearly jumps to his feet. “Yeah!”

“This is Manny. We met at lunch.”

“Hi.”

“I got a notice that some friends of yours are looking to buy some equipment. We can get it for them. Just tell us what you need and where to take it.”

“I’ll find out. Do I call you back?”

“Nah. Just drop us a note.”

“Manny” says Michael “Thank you so much.”

“Glad to help.”

The line goes dead, and Michael punches the air. “Yes!!!” He has no idea what equipment they need down Below, but just to think that something is working is enough to make him want to yell. He snatches up a jacket and heads for the elevator.



DAY TWENTY FOUR (Monday)

Three men and a boy stroll into a busy restaurant in Chinatown. When a pretty pregnant lady greets them, they say that they have a reservation for Ramos.

“Of course!” says the pretty hostess. “Right this way. My name is Lin. I hope you came hungry. We have a very special meal for you tonight.” She leads them into a back dining room, where Etienne and Yusef are waiting. Tony and Manny hand over two large packages to Yusef, and they get settled.

“There is more” says Manny, “can we unload it in the alley?”

“Of course,” says Lin. “Now, no menus! Our chef will take care of you tonight. And please, this is our pleasure. Any friend of Catherine’s is a friend of ours, if not our heroes.”

Milos Ramos bows and smiles, taking her hand to kiss it. “It is our honor” he says. When she leaves, he smiles at the Frenchmen. “More ‘family’?”

“So they say” says Yusef. “Apparently, if it weren’t for Catherine, Lin’s husband would be dead and she’d have been forced to marry a man she hated.”

“It seems that our friend has a way of making families, I think” says the *rom baro*.

It is a wonderful meal, with dishes that inspire that contented silence during which the diners close their eyes and savor, and the chef becomes more than happy. There’s a bit of teasing as Tony has his first lesson with chopsticks. Interspersed, the men find common ground, talking about adventures in France and all over Europe.

Finally, Tony summons the courage to ask “How’s the hairy guy?”

Yusef puts down his chopsticks. “Vincent would be here if he could” he says. “I think he’s doing well, though. It’s good that he knows she’s OK, but we are racing against time.”

“Tell me,” Milos leans forward, “how is it you know she’s all right?”

The Frenchmen shrug in unison. “He knows these things” says Etienne.

“His sister does the same thing” adds Yusef. “We grew up with her. We’re used to it.”

“Ah” nods Milos, accepting this without question. “That’s good.”

There is nothing they’d all like better than to really discuss their common problem. Yet they refrain, even here. As the waiter brings in sweets, Yusef says “What do we owe you for the goods you’ve found for us?”

Milos raises his hands. “As much as this dinner” he says.

“Oh, no” says Yusef. “It’s too much.”

Milos waves this off. “All we ask is that Tony can see our friend when this is over.”

“I think she’d love that” says Etienne.

DAY TWENTY FIVE (Tuesday)

Jamie sits in the lawn chair someone brought over, watching the monitor for the electrical room. Thank God this is only for two hours. More would drive her nuts with boredom. She nearly jumps out of her skin when the front door to the room opens, and a man in work clothes walks in and flips on the light. The infrared camera shows his heat signature brightly. Heart in her throat, Jamie watches as he plucks a clipboard off a hook near the door and starts to walk around the columns of cables. He never even glances at the sealed old door. He makes checks on the page on the clipboard, hangs it back on the hook, douses the lights and leaves. Jamie focuses on the clipboard, but she can't see the details on the page. She lets out a growl of frustration just as Stephen comes up to her.

“What’s wrong?” he says.

“A man came in to inspect the cables. He used that clipboard there, but I can't see the divisions on the page. Do they do this monthly? Weekly? What?”

“Doesn't matter” says Stephen. “If we go in tonight, it won't matter. You go tell Victoire, I'll take over here.”

He plops down in the lawn chair as Jamie hurries away.



Things move quickly after that. Once they got the door unsealed (which was a little noisier than they'd liked, but was apparently not noticed), it took Etienne a matter of minutes to find an extra open cable that some forward-thinking installer had left for future additions, and to make his own connections. Their own line was easily hidden under a pile of equipment against the wall, and simply slipped under the door at the corner. A simple metal disk was taped over the hole under the doorknob, and they left the room, running their cable out to the steam tunnel where Mouse had set up a table and chairs.

In a moment of sheer mischief, Yusef snatches up the longest orange utility power cord and races down the passageway to the electrical room. Slipping through the door, he plugs into socket there, and moves a heap of sheets of bubble wrap to hide it.

Snickering, he runs back to the table. “They owe us” he says. “No reason we should use up all our batteries.”

“Now comes the hard part” mutters Etienne. Mouse has pressed up close to watch what he does until Etienne laughs and says “Do you want to sit on my lap?” It takes a while for him to manipulate things, and he starts to swear.

“*Merdisque?*” asks Samantha.

As Etienne blushes, Jamie whispers to Samantha “You aren't supposed to let them know you heard them. If you do, they decide they need to send you to bed.”

“It is getting close to that time” says Rebecca.

Before Samantha can start that argument, everything changes. Suddenly, the snow on the monitor gives way to a picture of a hallway. The crowd behind him cheers. “That's one” says Etienne.

“How do we know which one?” asks Victoire.

“I’m a long way from worrying about that” he answers. After some more fumbling and swearing (Samantha keeps very quiet), another hallway shows up. “I think I’m figuring this out, now” he says.

Hallway after hallway flips by, sometimes interrupted by images of the insides of elevators. An image of elevators gives rise to debate about whether they are for the front or back. As it happens, no one in the crowd has been inside the Building, so they table the discussion. As Etienne starts to mutter about how long it’s going to take to figure out which hallways are which, a totally different image appears. It’s a room, and camera shows both the doorway and an expanse of window. There’s minimal furniture in the room, just a bed and a small table with a chair. The room is dark, but the bed is clearly occupied.

It seems they’ve all stopped breathing at once. “Who’s in that bed?” someone whispers finally.

“Look out the window” whispers Victoire. “That’s the building to the west.” She has had her hand on Vincent’s shoulder, since he sits in the chair next to Etienne. Now she reaches around to pull him back against her hip, and he grasps at her hand.

The person in the bed raises up on an elbow to thump the pillow, and flops back down, only to sit up on the side of the bed shortly after that. She has her back to the camera, but there’s no question who it is. She pushes her hair behind her ears and stands up to pace to the window. She wears a hospital-type nightgown, and every movement she makes is agitated. They watch her lean her forehead against the glass, scanning as well as she can to the street below. When she turns her head to look up the street, she turns her face to the camera, and everyone lets out a breath.

“Catherine” Vincent whispers.

Victoire drops to her knees to hug him from behind. She doesn’t realize that she’s sobbing until she can’t see the TV screen before her, but she makes no effort to stop. She notices that Etienne is wiping his eyes. The people behind them hug each other.

“Thank you” Vincent chokes. He can’t take his eyes off the screen. He’s aching to hold her, but all he can do is hold on to his sister’s arms for dear life. Angry though she seems, Catherine looks well. She paces in front of the window.

“Her feet are bare” murmurs Rebecca. “Don’t they let her have shoes?”

Samantha pushes Mouse out of the way to stand next to Etienne. She reaches out to caress the screen. “We’re here, Catherine” she says. “We’ve found you, and we won’t leave you alone, not for a minute, promise. You’re not alone.” Etienne wraps his arm around the girl, and she buries her face in his shoulder to cry.

“Etienne, you’re sure they can’t know we’re eavesdropping?” asks Jamie.

“I’m sure.” He sighs and turns to Vincent. “*Mon ami*, next we categorize each camera and map out a way to get to her. We watch and log each surveillance routine and what her daily routine is. But now, I need sleep. I promise, I’ll start that in the morning.”

Vincent grasps Etienne’s shoulder. “Go, my friend. I’ll see you later.”

“I’m going to set up the other monitor” says Yusef. “I can guess where you’ll be tonight, Vincent.”

Vincent nods. On the screen, he can see that his Catherine is weeping against the window. His heart breaking, he weeps with her. As he watches, she seems to calm down. She gets back into the bed, and turns the pillow so that she can hug it to herself, laying her cheek against the top. It's a poor substitute for the way she lies with her head on Vincent's shoulder, but gradually, she seems to fall asleep. Her lover does not sleep, but watches over her as the night passes, and her room lightens.



Victoire comforting Vincent

DAY TWENTY SEVEN (Thursday)

Screen by agonizing screen, comparing images with hand-drawn maps of what floors they'd been able to see, and with their list of businesses, they determine which camera is which. Each camera projects its identifying number so that they are able to figure out where each one is.

They find that they are rarely without company, since anyone who can makes the trip to join them. A large thermos for coffee and a basket of muffins appears, and they are taken back for refilling as needed. The children are especially interested, waiting impatiently for pictures from the cameras on the floors they visited.

Mouse is there almost as much as Vincent. He proves to have a great ability to manipulate the system. "Is this Mouse heaven?" teases Victoire.

Mouse shrugs. "Sure. But doesn't blow anything up."

"No! Thank God!"

The new devices that Ramos gave them is priceless. It is, in effect, a complete command center for a system, so that they can flip through the cameras the same way the people in the Building do. Etienne and Yusef shared a moment as they were unloading it and setting things up.

"There are no price tags" said Yusef.

"No."

They chuckled.

Most fascinating are the cameras on the upper floors. As they piece things together, they are able to see that Catherine's room is on the 14th floor. They can watch the after-hours patrols of guards. There isn't a great deal of activity on these floors. However, there is a stable cast of characters that wander the halls. After a few hours of watching this, Etienne breaks out a VCR recorder and tapes, and records several hours of activity on those floors, including the few people in and out of Catherine's room. Many of the rooms on the 13th and 14th floor have video cameras, but most of the 15th floor does not. The back elevator opens onto a lobby there that has one ornate door. Guards do not go through that door. One gaunt man has caught Etienne's attention. He's left the Building twice, taking the elevator up to the roof, not down to the ground.

Over the course of the first day, Etienne has added three more monitors and two VCR's. The table gets quite crowded. A pile of carefully labeled tapes is growing on the ground.

"Do I want to ask where all these electronic gizmos came from?" asks Mary.

"I brought some of it" says Yusef. "The Gypsies gave us some of it. But we had to borrow the extra VCR's. And we'll need more."

The most frustrating part is finding the cameras on the roof. When they finally get those, Etienne and Yusef dance around the tunnel, singing a song that they should probably be glad that none of the children can hear. Their glee is only partly dissipated by the realization that, unlike the inside, where there are an amusing number of blind spots, the entire roof has video coverage.

“Why do they think the roof is so important?” asks Vincent at dinner. It took Victoire to get him to leave his watch over Catherine.

“I don’t think it is” says Yusef. “I think it’s just easier to cover the whole roof than to cover the interior. On the inside, they got lazy.”

“You don’t think much of these people, do you? Professionally?”

Yusef and Victoire both chuckle. “No” she says.

“I don’t really understand it. They’re supposed to be so terrifying. They have all the good expensive stuff, but we’ve seen much better surveillance systems, even without the fiber-optics. It’s because of how they use it” says Etienne. “And once I get to that point, wait till you see how easy it is to hijack the system.”

“It isn’t easy” objects Victoire. “It’s just easy for you.”

Father looks at them with bewildered admiration. “I never thought I’d be pleased to have such expertise at my disposal.” Etienne smirks.

“We have a lot of planning to do yet” says Yusef.

“Your planning has sounded a lot like arguing” William teases. Victoire, Yusef and Etienne laugh.

“We’re just getting started” says Victoire. “Wait till later. And just be glad Jimi isn’t here. He’s never been wrong in his entire life.”

“Even when he is” adds Yusef.

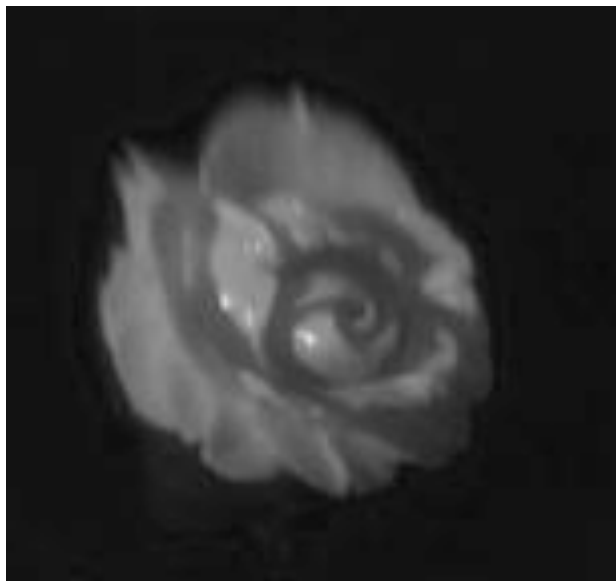
Mary pats Vicki’s hand. “You three will figure this out, won’t you?”

“We always have” says Etienne.

“Just tell me you’ve pulled trickier heists than this” grumbles Cullen.

They look at him gravely. “We’ve never done anything this important” says Victoire. “The value of the goal increases the complexity of the planning.”

“I don’t know if that’s reassuring or not” says William wryly.



DAY TWENTY EIGHT (Friday)

“I tell you, a *tyrolienne* will work just fine!” Yusef insists.

“It’s just too risky” says Victoire. She drums her fingers on the table next to the monitor. “Catherine’s normally physically fit, but she’s been shut up in that room for three weeks, now.”

“*Tyrolienne?*” asks Vincent. He’s taken a brief break from the monitors and returns to find the Pink Panthers, as Peter has dubbed them, in the midst of an argument, complete with shouting, fists on the table and wild gesticulations. For the most part, he’s been able to keep up with them when they are speaking French, but some things escape him.

They stop abruptly and stare first at Vincent, then at each other. “What is that in English?” says Yusef.

After a bit Victoire says “Ah! Zipline!”

“You mean...” starts Vincent, but Yusef leaps at a chance to sell his idea to him.

“It’s simple! The building to the west is two stories shorter than Catherine’s Building. We set up a strong line between the two roofs and ride the line across the street to get her away from there.”

Vincent blinks at Yusef with a certain degree of horror.

“Look, I’ll show you” says Yusef, pushing drawings towards him. “We can even use a harness for her so she doesn’t have to hold the handle that goes down the line. The harness attaches to the line so that is just rolls downhill between the buildings and someone on the other roof catches her.”

Speechless, Vincent tries to clear his mind of visions of Catherine falling 14 floors to the street. Then he breathes a silent prayer that Mouse never hears of a device like this. He studies Yusef’s drawing in an effort to be polite, but it’s obvious that Yusef has not won him over. Admittedly, the idea of plucking her from the air and never letting her go is momentarily attractive, until his imagination shows him the two of them tumbling to the roof in a rib-cracking heap. “What other ideas do you have?” he finally manages to ask.

They try to regroup from their argument, and Victoire pulls out another diagram. “Assuming we can get to the roof and neutralize the cameras for long enough, we could rappel to her window and get in through there. We can put her in a harness and lower her to the ground. That’s not as crazy as it sounds, but it would be very easy for anyone to see her go by their windows. It’s a pretty exposed method.”

Vincent uses the time it takes to retrieve his coffee cup to think about this one. “It does have the advantage of simplicity. Have you done it before?”

“Yes. Down ten stories. However that building had a blind side that backed up to a river. No one there to really watch us rappel down.”

“Ten stories?”

“*Oui.*”

“Wow. How did you retrieve the rope?”

“Jimi rigged the top bit with a little remote-control charge that blew it loose, and it fell down.”

Another thing to never tell Mouse about.

“Under normal conditions, you just leave it there” says Etienne, “but we didn’t want to leave anything vaguely traceable.”

“What if the charge had gone off prematurely?”

“Don’t think I didn’t worry about that all the way down” says Victoire.

“Another way would be to use the ventilation ducts” says Etienne. “The problem there is that while you are invisible, you are not silent.”

“And we can’t figure out how to get down umpteen floors using the ductwork” says Victoire.

Vincent stares at the monitor screen with Catherine on it, watching her pace. “Shame we can’t use that electrical room” he says. “It’s such an easy way out.”

“Agreed” says Victoire. “But how to get her there?”

They all stare into space, or, rather, stare at Catherine. As they watch, the door to her room is opened and a tiny Oriental woman enters carrying a tray. A large man hovers in the doorway. She barely glances at Catherine as she places the tray on the little table, and walks right back out the door. Catherine merely stands by the window as this happens, even turning her back to the woman herself. They can see her jaw clench as she takes a deep breath and then turns to the table. She picks up a glass of milk, and lifts the dome over the plate as she drinks. With obvious resignation, she sits down and begins to open a packet of plastic utensils.

Vincent works to control his rage. They are doing her no obvious harm, but to leave her so alone, with nothing to occupy her vibrant mind is a form of torture all its own. He’s watched her pace, and talk to herself, and possibly sing to herself. He’s watched her nightmares as she sleeps. Over and over he’s promised her that he’ll never leave her alone. He also promises himself that he’ll never let her out of his sight. A small part of him recognizes that both these promises could be a bit overblown, but he’s managing to ignore it.

“You know” says Yusef, “we haven’t monitored the night-time activity in the basement.”

Etienne switches over to the camera in the basement, which is aimed at the front elevator from the south side of the Building. Just on the edge of the field, they watch a janitor come out of that back room, lock the door, and head towards the elevator. As he goes, he flips a switch and all the lights go out except those at the elevator.

“Timing” says Vincent, “we really had lucky timing.”

“Does this mean they shut down the basement at night?” wonders Victoire.

“Oh, that would be just too easy” says Yusef. “There is no way it is that easy.”

“It still doesn’t help us get her down there” Victoire grumbles.

“How do we unlock the electrical room from the inside?” says Vincent.

“It would be easy enough to go see if there’s access to the lock on the inside” says Yusef.

“None of you would happen to be lock pickers, would you?”

Victoire pats his shoulder. “All of us are.”

“Of course” mutters Vincent.

Cullen arrives just then with a fresh thermos of coffee. “I can pick locks.”

Vincent closes his eyes and obviously refrains from comment, which makes Victoire chuckle. “A little larceny is good for the soul” she says.

Cullen scowls at Vincent. “Are you channeling Father, here? I’ll have you know I haven’t picked a lock since I came here!”

“I think he’s wondering why you haven’t shown him how” teases Victoire.

“Anytime, Vincent, any time” says Cullen.

“Thank you” Vincent growls.

“All right, to change the subject” says Etienne. “I think it’s safe to say that any rescue we attempt will be at night, yes?”

“Yes.” It’s a chorus.

“We need to start recording from the cameras. There are some we can guess we’ll want, but we want the time-stamps to match, so what time shall we plan this rescue so we know when to start the recordings?”



Catherine is dreaming. At least it seems she’s dreaming.

“Hi, Cathy” says a voice. Someone is patting her hand.

She opens her eyes to find Kristopher Gentian crouched beside her. “Kristopher? How..? What?..”

“Shh” he says. “Listen. You need to wake up. Wake up and look at that camera, and when I say so, smile.”

“What? Why on earth would I do that?”

“Would I ask you to do something bad?”

She ponders him for a moment. “No.”

“So, just look up at the camera, and smile like you’re thinking of Vincent, can you do that?” She’s still frowning at him, perplexed. “For me?”

“Oh, OK.”

“Great! Just wake up, Doll, and look at the camera.”

She opens her eyes – wait weren’t they open before? She looks around this room she hates, looking foolishly for Kristopher. She can almost hear the echo of his voice. In spite of herself, she looks towards the camera that she has pointedly ignored for days.

“Now, smile!” she hears, out of nowhere. “Smile at Vincent!”

She smiles at the thought of Vincent, and fights the prickle of tears. After a moment, she collects herself, and burrows back into her pillow. This place is making her nuts.

Far below her, Vincent shouts and leaps towards the monitor. She smiled up at the camera, almost like she knew he was there!

“I made her think of you. She smiled at you, Vincent.”

He knows that voice. “Kristopher?” No one is there. He settles back into his chair. Catherine is apparently again asleep. “Thank you” he whispers.



DAY TWENTY NINE (Saturday)

No one enters the basement until morning, right after Victoire comes down to find Vincent draped across the table, with his head on his arm by Catherine's monitor. "You finally slept."

"I did not mean to."

"That's silly, love. She doesn't want to come back to a zombie." She hands him a mug of coffee from the fresh thermos she's brought.

"So" he says. "You and Etienne?"

She smiles. "We were an item years ago. It didn't work. I've always regretted it."

"Perhaps it will work now."

"I hope so. We were much younger then."

They record the halls of the 14th floor, the inside of the rear elevator, the roof, the basement, and anything else they can think of. They dream up and discard ideas for getting Catherine out of that locked room.

"A fire alarm?"

"No idea how they respond to those. We'd have to do a test run, and a second alarm might not work the same."

Some of the ideas get a little fantastic.

"A hot air balloon? No, Mouse."

"We have to do something before Vincent goes postal" says Jamie.

"Postal?"

"Way too hard to explain. Let's just say his patience is wearing out."

"Ah. Yes. So is mine."

Etienne watches the tall man on the 15th floor. "That's the boss" he says. "I bet there are a lot of people who would love to know what he looks like."

"I'm sure you're right" says Vincent, "but whom?"

"Well, one thing I'm going to do is give a copy of this tape to the Romani."



It's eventually decided that the only way to get her out is through the window.

"Won't the crash attract attention?" asks Father.

"Crash?" says Victoire. "What crash? Are we amateurs?"

"You can break the window without a crash?"

"*Absolument.*"

"So" says Etienne. "We rappel to her window, pull her out, and then what?"

"Take her to the roof?"

"Just grab her and pull her up?"

"We'll need to get a harness on her."

“That can be noisy.”

“What can you do?”

“When you get to the roof, what?”

“Elevator to the basement. Out the electrical room. Reseal the door, refill the passage, vanish.”

“You’re going to just get on the elevator?”

“I’d still rather you rode down on top of the car” says Vincent.

“Once I have that camera neutralized, it won’t matter” Etienne reassures him.

“Unless someone else calls the elevator.”

“It will take time to get the harness off her” Yusef says, still worried about the roof.

“Look, as little as she is, I can carry her to the elevator” says Etienne. “Harness and all.”

“I don’t like the harness” worries Victoire. “It’s too risky.”

“And the rest isn’t?”



Around lunchtime, Kipper brings a note from one of the people watching the street outside the Building. Vincent reads it, twice, and looks at the others. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“At this point you never know what I’d believe” says Victoire.

“Window washers” says Vincent.

“What?”

“Window washers. The kind who take a platform down from the roof.”

“I don’t believe it” says Victoire.

“You gotta be f—ing sh—in’ me” says Cullen. Kipper’s eyes go wide, but wisely, he says nothing.

Vincent passes the note around.

“What side of the Building?” asks Etienne.

“The Church Street side.”

“Her side”, whispers Victoire. “Those people usually leave their equipment on the roof until the job is done. At least they do in France.”

“It’s easy enough to see if they do that here” says Etienne as he switches a monitor to a roof camera.

There is a long silence during which they look at each other in awe and watch figures scramble around the roof.

“The sooner the better” says Yusef at last. Nods all around.

“Kipper” says Vincent. “Take this note to Father and tell him...”

“Tonight we storm the castle” says Etienne.



Yusef is pacing and shaking his arms and legs like a cat. He fiddles with his turtleneck, and with his earpiece, and jogs in place. Then he runs at the great pile of dirt at the end of the tunnel so that he runs up the pile and executes a back flip. “We’ve never done a job unrehearsed” he fusses, for the fourth time in fifteen minutes.

“It will be fine” coos Victoire. “You’re going to crack your skull. We’re pros. Retired pros, but pros. And we’ve made this simple enough that a beginner can do it.”

“That would be me” says Jamie, pulling on black gloves.

“You’re not a total beginner” says Etienne. “You know how to access the elevator.”

“That I do.”

Etienne checks his watch. “In about half an hour, our distraction should arrive, and we switch the monitors to run the bits we’ve recorded. After that, we have three hours to get her out of there.”

“I wish I were going with you” says Victoire.

“We said no one remotely recognizable in the Building” says Etienne.

“I know. I know. I’ll handle the command center. Too bad those comm. links won’t work from there to here.”

“You’ll have the cameras.”

“Tell me again” says Jamie, “how she’ll be able to see new stuff while the tapes are running?”

“The tapes don’t go to the camera. They go to the video system. Our video system has been separated out from theirs by...”

“I’ll shorten it for you,” Victoire interrupts. “He’s a genius.”

“OK.”



Just before 1:00 AM, a very drunk man reels into the front door of an office building in Tribeca. He pokes at the keypad by the door and then tugs on the handle. The door doesn’t open. He blinks at the handle for a bit, and then turns back to the keypad, punching buttons again. The handle won’t budge. He scowls and punches the buttons harder. By the time he’s futilely tugged on the door handle a third time, a guard appears on the other side of the glass.

“Whaddaya doin?” shouts the guard.

Upstairs, in the observation room, another guard switches his screens to the front lobby and the front of the building, taking them off the random rotation they usually show.

“I’m tryin’ to get in” says the drunk.

“Why?”

The drunk blinks blearily at the guard, and looks into the lobby. “What street is this?”

“Church St.”

“You don’t say?” Benny turns around to look at the street with a look of surprise. He waves at the guard and stumbles off, singing off key.

The guard saunters back to his desk and picks up a phone. “It was nothing” he says. “Drunk got lost.”

The guard upstairs snorts and hangs up. The surveillance screens go back to their random rotation, and neither man realizes that sometimes, the images that he sees are from a different night.



“As I said” says Etienne. “Highjacking the system is easy.”

“For you” says Victoire.

“So cool” breathes Mouse, staring raptly at the screens.

Etienne stands up so that Victoire can take his chair. “This won’t take long” he says, and he bends to give Victoire a passionate good-bye kiss.

“It better not” she says, when she comes up for air.

Etienne turns to Yusef and Jamie, inspecting their black clothes and the equipment on their belts. He points at Jamie. “Is your earpiece right?”

“I think so.”

“Remember, don’t turn it on unless we are separated.”

“Right.”

He turns to Vincent. “Walk us to the door?”



Vincent watches from the tunnel door as Yusef fiddles with the lock on the electrical room door with Jamie and Etienne shining their flashlights on the door for him. There is a click, and Yusef turns to Vincent, and nods. Vincent closes the back door to the electrical room and leans against it for a moment. He takes several slow breaths, and then trudges back to the table.

Victoire smiles at him. “Can you see where you are going?” she says into her headset. “Ick. Too much static. Probably lost them when they got into the elevator shaft.”

Vincent sits next to her and looks over the bank of VCR’s playing bogus feeds. “It will be a miracle if this works.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence” she says drily. She never takes her eyes off the screens in front of her.

Vincent glances down the tunnel. It had been something of an argument to keep all but essential personnel out of this area tonight. And having won that argument, he finds he wishes the others were here. He pictures everyone waiting in the Dining Hall, and imagines the noise. Yes, it's better they are not here. He glances the other way down the tunnel, at the pile of dirt they had excavated to get to the electrical room. He worries about how fast they can replace the cinder block on the wall, and the dirt in the tunnel. 'One thing at a time' he tells himself.

"Ah" says Victoire. "They are on the roof."



"Cathy. Cathy, you need to wake up."

She opens her eyes to find Kristopher crouched in front of her. "Kristopher?"

He grins. "Hi, Doll. You hafta wake up, and don't be scared. Don't make a sound, OK?"

"Um. OK. Kristopher, what's going on?"

"Would you like to get out of here?"

"Of course."

"Then, whatever happens, hold tight to your backbone and keep quiet. And you might want to be thinking about what you can stuff under the covers to make it look like you're still in bed."

Her eyes pop open. Again. Of course no one is there. Again. She looks around and thinks about what could be stuffed into the bed, and then stops herself. It's not like she's in summer camp. And then she hears a bump above her window.



Etienne swears under his breath as the front of the platform bumps the wall. He scowls up at the others who are manning the cables. The platform could be controlled by the person on it, but they had decided that it would be quieter if two above controlled the descent. If this is quieter, the idea was a bad one to start. Once more, he peers through the dark window before him as he drops past it. The room there seems empty, but he crouches flat anyway. This part of the descent (and for that matter, the ascent) is what has him most nervous. It is an unknown entity, that possibly vacant room. It's covered by no surveillance camera. They just have to hope to hell that if someone is in that room, they're asleep. And heavy sleepers.



Victoire hisses at the screen. Vincent's head snaps around to see that someone has gotten off the basement elevator, flipped on the lights and gone into the janitor's room. His mouth goes dry.



Catherine lays unmoving, waiting for another bump. Nothing. She curses her nerves for giving her funky dreams. And she's awake now. Not much chance of going back to sleep.

"Would you like to get out of here?" Kristopher had asked. What part of her subconscious could possibly doubt that? What kind of a dream is that, anyway?

As she frowns into the dark, a shadow appears at the top of the window. Barely daring to breathe, she watches as inch by inch, a window-washer's platform appears. What the..? She blinks hard a few times, and under the covers, scratches hard at her thigh. OK, she's awake. So what is this? Is it the rescue she wishes for? Or something bad? Recent experience has taught her that apparently good things can turn out to be nauseatingly bad. So she remains motionless and waits for what might happen next.

The platform has a solid panel on its street side, which makes it very hard to see what, if anything it contains. But it seems that there's something there. Succumbing to her alarm, Catherine slips out of the bed and runs to the corner of the room under the camera. From there, she starts to slide along the wall towards the bathroom.

She nearly screams when a black hand appears on the glass, but she remembers just in time: "Don't make a sound, OK?"

In the dark, a pale square appears at the window. A flashlight leaps to life, making Catherine wince. Its beam is directed at that square: paper, with writing on it. She dares to creep closer, and then leaps at the window when she recognizes that handwriting. It says "We've come to take you home" in Vincent's beloved script. She seeks a face through the glass. The light moves away from the window to illuminate a man's smiling face. She doesn't recognize him. He points behind her to the bed, and she moves back to sit on its end.

Her eyes are brimming, and she presses her hands to her mouth to keep from laughing. She's going home! On a window-washer's platform! They can't be serious.

Two circles are pressed to the glass. They look like suction cups with a handle between them. The man reaches to the side, and starts to press a window-cutter into the glass. Slowly, he draws it downwards almost to the sill, then turns it and runs it across. Now holding firmly to that suction-attached handle, he draws the rest of a rather large square.



Etienne at the Window

Electrified, Catherine races into the bathroom to collect towels that she arranges in the bed under the covers. Could be summer camp after all.

A quiver, a tiny tap, and a lean, and the glass separates itself with a strange little sigh. He grasps the top of the severed plate with a gloved hand, detaches the suction device, and leans into the room to gently lean it on the floor against the wall. He looks up at her with a grin as she braces herself against the chill wind that whips into the room.

The man then reaches behind himself to retrieve a plastic bag, which he wordlessly hands to her. Catherine reaches in to pull out a pair of shoes – her own shoes!

“Shoes!” she breathes. He makes a motion for silence. She can barely help herself when she finds a pair of socks tucked in the shoes. She wastes no time putting on the socks, reveling in their warmth. Peeking back into the bag, she finds her sweat suit. That, too, she quickly dons, nearly forgetting to turn her back to her benefactor before she pulls off the hated gown and pulls on the shirt. She slips on the shoes and tucks the bag into her pocket.

“Come” the man whispers, holding out his hands. She nearly squeaks when he simply lifts her bodily off the floor, whisks her through the window and onto the platform. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he directs a flashlight beam upwards, and the platform slowly starts to rise. “We must lay low” he whispers, and guides her to lie on the floor as he had on the way down.

“The camera” she starts.

“We neutralized them” he interrupts. “Stay very quiet as we pass this window.”

She huddles next to this stranger as the wind and nearly freezes the tears on her cheeks. This can’t be happening. It can’t. Can it? She’s had some nutso dreams the last few days. Perhaps this is one. She closes her eyes and dares to pray.

The platform nears the roof, and eager hands reach down, helping her up and pulling her over the parapet onto the roof. “Catherine!” a choked voice says. She looks up into Jamie’s face, blond hair hidden by the hood of her black jacket, but smiling and crying as she hauls her into a hug. “Oh, Catherine!”

Hugging Jamie fiercely, she says “Where’s Vincent? And who are these men?”

“These are Victoire’s partners, Etienne and Yusef. And Vincent is waiting for us in the basement.”

Catherine glances around, taking in the helipad and the other buildings around them. “And how do we get there?”

“Easy” says her savior as he takes her hand. “We take the elevator.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Come.”

They run across the roof and down some stairs, pushing through a utility door onto a metal platform. Catherine looks at the top of an elevator. “You’re not kidding.”

They hop over to the roof of the car, and then help Catherine to join them. “Hold this” one of the men says. He looks at a control board with his flashlight, and pushes a button. “Hold tight.”

For a second time, Catherine nearly squeals as the car starts to drop. Jamie has her arm around her, grinning hugely.



Vincent and Victoire stare in agony at the basement image. It's been a good four minutes since whoever that man was has gone into the janitor's room. "Oh, please God and all the saints, don't tell me he's staying there!" agonizes Victoire. She flips the toggle on the headset. "Panther. Panther, there's someone at the landing site!"

No answer. She glances at Vincent. "Breathe, love" she says.

He stands. "I've got this" he says. He turns to the tunnel but stops when Victoire calls him.

"Take this" she says, holding out a headset. "This on your belt. This wire over your ear. And here's a flashlight."

He settles the earpiece in place, stuffs the flashlight in his belt, and hurries to the door. He slips across the dark electrical room and leans against its front door to listen. Nothing. He cracks it open silently. The lights are on, but there is no sound of movement. Then he smells it.

He closes the door and toggles the communicator on. "Marijuana" he whispers.

"You're joking" says Victoire. "Then he won't be leaving any time soon. *Merdre*. So now what?"

"I'll think of something."

"Wait. If there's one, there will be more."

"We don't have long..." Vincent says as he cracks the door open again.

Sure enough, the elevator dings and another guard comes out. He snarls as he flips out the lights and enters the janitor's room. "Hey, dumbass" Vincent hears him say. "You don't leave the lights on! That hotshot out front will notice and come check it out." The door slams.

"Now there are two in there" Vincent whispers.

"I saw."

Taking advantage of the dark, Vincent leaves the electrical room to examine his options. In the distance, he hears an elevator ding.



The elevator smoothly glides down one floor, then two, then it stops. The foursome on its roof glance wildly at each other, then they hear the car doors open. "I'll be back" someone says. The doors close, the elevator drops again, and they listen to someone hum to himself as they move downwards. They stop at the lobby and the man gets out. The elevator proceeds to the basement.

"There is no time to lose!" hisses Etienne. "Jump off!"

They leap to a platform with a small stairway near the cab, wincing since the platform and stairs are noisy metal. There's barely enough room for the four of them. "Now we wait" murmurs Etienne.



Vincent ducks back into the electrical room to pull free an end of cable from its spool on the floor. He draws it out of the closet and into the hallway, to stretch it across the bottom of the janitor's room door. Crouching low at the opposite side of the door, he gives a brief rumbling roar.

"What the hell was that?" he hears.

"Sounds like something's gonna blow up."

Vincent makes another brief chuff. "Shit" he hears.

The door flies open, and he jerks the cable taut just as someone trips over it, and hollering, falls heavily. Striking his chin on the concrete floor, he knocks himself out.

The second man nearly falls over him, grumbling "You clumsy jerk". He senses something rising up beside him, and turns just as a light snaps on to illuminate a terrible snarling face. He screams, and rears back, only to strike his head on the doorframe. He lands gracelessly on top of his unconscious companion.



An apparent eternity later, the elevator rises to stop at the lobby, then resumes its ascent. Everybody exhales.

"Now we go down these steps, through that door and across the basement" whispers Jamie. "We've broken into the electrical closet from the tunnels. They're waiting for us there."

Catherine leans against Jamie, shaking so hard she's afraid she can't walk. "I can't believe this is happening" she whispers. Jamie chuckles in her ear.

They creep down the stairs and out into the basement. They make a single file, holding hands in a line with the women in the middle and the men on the ends. Yusef leads them around the corridor mostly in the dark, only lighting his flashlight a few times.

As they round a corner, they hear a strangled yell and a thud. Then they hear another scream and another thud. Stopping, the plaster themselves against the wall and listen breathlessly. Catherine's knees are weak again, and she's sure that anyone can hear her heart pound.

Yusef peers around the corner, listening intensely. The janitor's room door is open, the light in the room illuminating two apparently unconscious men in a heap. Grinning, he leads the others on. They startle when they see the men, but then Yusef lights his flashlight to reveal Vincent just beyond the light from the door, standing over them, a length of cable in his hand.



Catherine gasps and jumps forward, but Etienne won't release her hand. "Steady" he warns. He motions for Vincent to back up.

They pass the set of elevators, and carefully skirt the inert forms and then stop before a door marked "Electrical Closet". Silently, it opens and they slip into the room. As Yusef re-locks that door under Etienne's flashlight, a scraping sound comes from the back of the room. Faint light appears as another door opens. Catherine feels Jamie push her towards that door, but she doesn't need to, Catherine knows exactly what to do. Three paces and she's in Vincent's arms, sobbing against his lips and hanging onto him for dear life. He scoops her up, holding her high against his heart.

Jamie pushes past them, sniffing. The Frenchmen appear, pulling the power cord and fiber-optic cable out of the room before they close the door.

"Go on" says Yusef. "I have this." He reaches into a box on the floor to pull out a blowtorch and spool of solder.

As they emerge into the steam tunnel, Victoire piles into them, throwing her arms around Catherine and Vincent and crying "Catherine!" over and over. Catherine unwinds one arm from Vincent's neck to hug Victoire.

Once everyone has calmed down, Catherine looks around, taking in the rift in the service tunnel wall, the pile of dirt, and the tables full of electronics. "I can't wait to find out what all this was all about."

Victoire waves at the now-blank monitors. "We've been watching you for almost a week."

"Somehow, I knew you were there" Catherine says dreamily. "I had a dream..."

"Of Kristopher?" asks Vincent.

She nods, smiling. "Two dreams. One tonight. God bless him. He told me to hold onto my backbone and keep quiet."

Etienne says "I hated pulling the plugs like that. I would so love to watch the comedy when they find you gone. *Elas!* It is not safe." He looks admiringly at Vincent. "What happened to those two on the floor?"

Vincent shrugs. "They heard a noise."

"Smelled like they were a little high."

"I think they will decide they were higher than they thought."

They stand and contemplate the command center. They can hear Yusef soldering the door. Jamie cries: "I get to do the pipes!" and dashes off. When Yusef eventually joins them, the group starts the journey to the Hub.

Catherine smiles up at Vincent. "I can walk, you know."

"Don't think I'm letting you go."

About halfway to the main tunnels, they meet an exuberant crowd carrying shovels and pushing wheelbarrows. They shout and dance round Catherine and Vincent, all talking at once and hugging Catherine. Vincent finally has to put her on her feet so she can hug people back.

"Where are you going with all these tools?" she asks.

“Fill the tunnel we made back up” says Mouse. “So they never figure out how you got out.”



The party in the Dining Hall is an all-night affair. William dispelled his own nerves with baking, and there are cookies, cake and pies to spare. Catherine falls on the cherry pie with gusto. “I’ve had the most boring food imaginable, and NO desserts!”

Peter catches her eying the bottle of Tanqueray. “Oh, no, little mother, not for you” he laughs as he puts the bottle out of sight.

She looks a little forlornly at Vincent. “I was going to tell you that night” she says apologetically.

“That’s OK, *cherie*. I promise to let you tell him about the next one” says Victoire. “What I want to know is when you are going to make an honest man of my brother.”

Catherine blushes as people chuckle. She turns to Vincent. “How about today? Is today good for you?”

He swallows hard. “You’d marry me?”

“In a heartbeat.” Heedless of the crowd, he gathers into her his arms for a passionate kiss. The unheeded crowd cheers.

Once they become aware of their surroundings again, Mary says “I regret to inform you that we can’t do a handfasting on that short notice. Give us a week, anyway.”

Vincent and Catherine exchange a glance. “I suppose” sighs Catherine.

This occasions more toasts all around, Catherine contenting herself with hot chocolate.

Father sobers. “How did they treat you, my dear?”

“Viciously at first” she says. She describes the abduction, and her voice breaks as she tells of John Moreno’s betrayal. She describes the interrogation. “And then all of a sudden, they drag me out of the building and into a van and I’m hauled off to somewhere else. I was certain I was being taken away to be shot. But they took me to that office building, and the next thing I know, the doctor is evaluating my pregnancy. It was too weird.

“There was this cadaverous man with the coldest eyes I’ve ever seen. He came in to watch the ultrasound. I tried to talk to him, and he ignored me completely. Just talked to the doctor like I was a, a... brood mare or something. He was so... proprietary. He said things like what a remarkable child this would be and that he expected the doctor to make sure everything went well. He had plans, he said.”

There is an uncomfortable silence at this. Vincent turns her to look at him. “They moved you because I found you and broke into the building to get you. I wasn’t in time. They saw me.”

“So he put two and two together and decided that the baby would be like you. I don’t know if he’d take the disappointment well. He just seemed the sort who’d want to

... own... someone like you.” She shudders. William hands her a slice of chocolate cake. “Anyway, after that I was fed and left alone. No one spoke to me unless they simply had to. God I’m glad to be out of there. How did you do it?”

It seems everyone wants to tell Catherine about his or her part in bringing her home. It takes nearly two hours, but she manages to understand the whole story.

Catherine turns to Jamie. “How did you get to be the third on the roof?”

Smiling, Jamie pulls a bit of paper with her name on it from her pocket. “I won the lottery” she says.

At about 4:00 AM, Vincent asks Catherine if she’s tired. “Are you kidding? I’ve had nothing to do but sleep for weeks!”

By breakfast time, people have drifted off to their chores and their beds, if they have the time. Catherine looks at her French burglars. For the tenth time she says “I can’t believe you all came. What wonderful friends you are!”

“What will you do now?” asks Peter.

“I have a suggestion” says Etienne. “We have hours of videotape that records their treatment of you, but also many of their movements. Someone should find them useful. Think about to whom we should send copies.”

“I’d like to see some of that” she says. “At the moment, I don’t think I dare risk being seen anywhere Above.” She shakes her head and ponders a while. “There is just so much... Does anyone know what happened to Joe Maxwell?”

“We heard from Benny that he’s still not at work” says Mary.

“Just how does Benny know that?” asks Victoire.

“He sells sandwiches in the office there” says Mary.

“Oh, that’s clever. You know, you lot are a force to be reckoned with. You can get your fingers into every aspect of the city if you want.”

“Don’t even develop that thought” says Father sternly.

“When we get the electronics moved back this way, I’ll show what we have” says Etienne.

“It seems to me that you wound up with more than you brought from France. How are you going to get it all back?” says Father.

“We’re not” says Victoire. “We’re leaving it here.”

“What?”

“Anything you can’t find a use for, sell. We do not need it, and I think you will make good use of a lot of it.”

“The climbing gear will be useful, thank you” says Vincent.

“But all that video paraphernalia...”

“Sesame Street tapes in the nursery” says Catherine. “Movie nights in here.”

“Movies!” exclaims Father.

“We’ll start with the tapes of the Lawrence Olivier Shakespeare movies.” Catherine continues. Father begins to look intrigued.

“Ahh” sighs Victoire. “And then “Wuthering Heights”.”

“Waterloo Bridge” says Catherine.

“You can get all that?” asks Mary in wonder.

“John Wayne” says William.

Catherine grins wickedly at Father. “I think you’ll find uses for it all.”



DAY THIRTY (Sunday)

Finally, finally, Vincent takes Catherine to his – their – chamber. She wraps her arms around his waist and snuggles into his chest. “Oh, God, I’m glad to be home!”

“What do you want to do now?” Vincent asks her.

She thinks a bit, then turns an impish face to his. “I’ve had nothing but showers for weeks. I want a bath.”

He kisses her long and slow. “And do you want company for that?”

“Depends on whom.”

“Hah!” he says, and scooping her up into his arms, carries her to a bathing chamber.

Her body is different. There is a lushness, a fullness of her breasts and belly that wasn’t there before. He takes his time exploring the changes, worshipping those breasts and pressing kisses across that belly, pressing his ear to her in the faint hope that he can hear his child, nearly inhaling warm water as he moves lower. A tickle of amusement enters his mind as she murmurs “What are you doing?” and caresses his head.

He nuzzles her belly button. “I’m trying to feel our baby.” He is overcome by a wave of tenderness as her hands pull his face up for a kiss.

“It will be a beautiful baby” she says. She clings to him in a spasm of panic.

“We’ll keep him safe” he reassures her.

Another tingle of amusement. “Him?”

“‘Him’ today” he says. “Tomorrow, we’ll call it ‘her’.”

Happiness overwhelms him, and his eyes widen. “Catherine?”

“Mmm?”

He seeks her mouth again, and runs his hands down her back and around her buttocks to pull her up against him. She moans. He kisses down her neck and over her collarbone so that she arches her back, impatient for him to reach her breasts. He happily obliges, suckling until she’s breathless. He feels her passion rise, and her pleasure from his mouth. He feels her eagerness as she rocks against the hardness trapped between them, making him groan. By now they are hotter than the water around them, or so it seems.

“Oh my love” she gasps, “I need you now!”

She wraps her legs around him so she can slide up his body to rub her cleft across the tip of him. A spike of sweetness greater than his own, and he rubs his length across her until they are both panting. One swift motion and he’s inside her, and it’s more than he’s ever experienced. It’s a swarm of colors after that, a maelstrom of thrusts and gasps and hands, and the wonder of touching the deepest parts of the woman he loves in so many ways. It’s real, it’s there, she’s in his heart, and he roars his completion replete with the knowledge that the Bond is back. He leans on the wall as she collapses against his chest, glowing and still rippling with her own release. He holds her tightly, savoring their joy.

Eventually, she sighs. “Did I mention I’ve missed you?”

He chuckles and kisses her hair. “I, for one, am determined to never let you out of my sight.”

“Sounds nice” she says. “Although eventually, it will have its inconveniences.”



“I thought we’d eat dinner in here tonight” he says later, watching her root through her drawer for a hair band.

“I’d like that” she says. “I think I’ve had enough of a crowd.”

“I thought so.”

She looks over her shoulder at him, and then straightens up to study him. “I know that look” she says. “You haven’t had that look in a long time.”

Shy, now, he drops his gaze. “I realized something in the bathing chamber.”

Hardly daring to hope, she whispers “It’s back?”

He nods. She flings herself into his lap to cover his face with kisses.

“It amazes me that this makes you so happy, you know” he says. She cocks a questioning eyebrow at him. “It does constitute an invasion of privacy. I know that.”

She scoffs. “You’ve never used it that way. I’ve had it both ways, now, and I like it better when we’re connected. And I want you whole. We have a baby coming. We both need all our strength.”

He smiles and cuddles her under his chin.



DAY THIRTY ONE (Monday)

Catherine squints at the time stamp on the monitor screen. “I don’t suppose there will be much more activity at that hour.”

“I believe that’s the last for that day. I really wonder who that guy is.”

“You and me both. *Johai*, huh? I like the term.”

Etienne puts another tape in the machine and reaches to recapture Victoire’s hand. The lobby of the fifteenth floor appears again, and Etienne fast forwards until there is activity. He rewinds a bit and then lets it run. They watch a man step off the elevator. The apartment door opens and a portly dark-haired man comes out to talk to the visitor.

“I saw him once” says Catherine. Someone called him ‘Pope’. He has an English accent.” The conversation ends, Pope closes the door and the visitor turns to the elevators. Catherine gasps. “That’s John Moreno!”

“What do you want to do with this?” asks Victoire.

“I’m beginning to have an idea” says Catherine.



DAY THIRTY FIVE (Friday)

Joe Maxwell lets himself back into his apartment and drops his mail on the coffee table with a sigh. He flexes his right hand restively. It's a habit now, stretching and flexing that right hand and arm. The burns scars are still so tight. The surgeon told him he could go back to work on Monday, but only half days. That restriction would bother him, but the other part of the day is for physical therapy, and he can tell that's helping. He's not about to give it up.

It's nice to be back home. For the first two weeks after he was discharged from the hospital, he went to his mother's house. Her care was priceless, both for his recovery and his spirit. She was convinced for him – first that he'd survive, and then that he'd recover well. And she was an enormous support after he learned about Cathy Chandler's disappearance.

That cuts deep. He long ago faced that he carried a torch for her, just as he faced that she clearly belonged to someone else. He wishes he knew who that was. Reportedly, no one has come forward looking for her. Does that mean the guy wasn't that into her? Or that there's a reason he can't come forward, and he's suffering alone? Like Joe. Whoever he was, he's facing the same fact Joe is: she's gone. Surely she's dead. Killed by the same faceless machine that nearly killed Joe. He flexes his right hand. He'd told himself that he would stop this circular thinking.

As he's digging through his freezer for one of the dinners his mother put up for him, there's a knock on his door.

He looks through the peephole. There's a kid in a video store shirt. He opens the door. "Can I help you?" The young man is carrying a biggish box.

"Mr. Maxwell?" says the guy, and waits for Joe to nod. "I have some videotapes for you."

"I didn't order..."

"Oh, yes, sir. These are especially for you. And I can tell you, I've seen most of this selection, and I know you'll be impressed." He hands the box over.

Automatically, Joe takes it, and he notices that there's an envelope taped to the top. It's addressed to him, and he gasps when he recognizes the handwriting.

He looks at the kid, wide-eyed. The boy nods. "Yes" he says. "I think you'll be happy to see these."

"Is she..."

The smile fades as the kid interrupts him with a shake of his head. "There's some good cloak-and-dagger stuff in there. Have a good evening!" And he walks away.

Joe nearly cuts his thumb in his eagerness to get the envelope off the box. He unfolds a thick letter and finds tears in his eyes. "Cathy."

Dear Joe,

First let me tell you: I'm fine. I've had a helluva month, but then so have you. I'm so grateful you're going to be OK. I have a lot to tell you, some of it pretty disturbing.

Secondly, I'll tell you everything about where I've been and everything I know about it, but I'm not going to tell you how I got out of there, where I am, or how I got you these tapes. If anyone can figure out a good use for them, it's you. I have the originals, and if you get to the point you need them, I'll get them to you.

Ready for a story? Here goes...

Joel reads Catherine's account, and then reads it again. Disturbing? When he gets his hands on John Moreno, he's going to wring his neck!

Lastly, let me tell you that I'm going to be well out of sight for a long time. No need to tell you why. I don't think it would be a very good idea for you to tell anyone that you know I'm OK. As far as my captors and Moreno know, I flew out the window like a bird. Great care was taken to make sure no one could trace my rescue. Best we keep it that way, don't you think?

I'll be all right. I'm going to take some time and focus on family. My husband and I intend to enjoy parenthood to the hilt, and we would like to keep this baby as safe as possible. Yes, I have a husband, Joe. I'm sorry I never confided in you my special circumstances, and now safety seems to dictate that I never will. Or at least, not for a very long time. But I'm well, and I want you to know that. And no, I don't really think we'll name the baby after you, but you never know.

Thank you for giving me the job, Joe. It's been the most exciting and productive time of my life – even if it did nearly get me killed. Maybe I'll be able to get back to something like it, someday.

You can get a message to me, if you really need to. Just give it to Benny the sandwich guy. It will reach me eventually. Please be careful, Joe. I think that these people wouldn't hesitate to take aim at you again. And I really hesitated to expose you to them this way. But I think you are the one person who stands between them and the rest of us. Forgive me for putting you in that position, but you are the most capable man I know.

I hate ending this letter. I hope we can meet again sooner than later. Please be careful.

Cathy

Joe finally folds the letter and wipes his eyes. Be careful. She said it more than once. He eyes the box of videotapes. He hasn't seen them yet and he's already got the beginnings of a plan. Perhaps he can't take down Cathy's *johai*, but he can see what part of the FBI is working on them. There has to be someone. And he can take down Moreno.

First, he's going to heat up some lasagna, and then he's getting to work.

FIN



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