

Communities

By C.L.

Another round of cramps hit her as she leaned against the grubby brick wall. The alley was dark, but it wasn't safe to stop yet. Everyone was still looking for her. She just had to stay safe, and alive until the right group found her. St. Vincent's loomed before her, but she couldn't risk the hospital. No there would be too many questions. Eschewing the comfort of a safe hospital delivery, she pushed away from the wall and pressed on. Central park was close...she could find someplace there. Hide in the trees, find a bench or someplace out of the way. The contractions were getting worse, there was no denying the facts. Her baby was coming, and there was going to be no stopping it. "Hold on," Ashley rubbed her stomach, "Just a little bit further."

He felt the disturbance before he heard the moan, his senses tuned to all the sounds and smells around him. There were the usual sounds of lovers stopping for private moments, people talking, traffic making its way, the ducks settling themselves on their nests and someone skipping a rock across the water. He heard the moan again, it sounded female and was coming from behind the bushes slightly before him. The presence of a stranger caused him to pause long enough to pull his hood over his head. The moaning increased, prompting him to step forward carefully. Brushing the branch aside, Vincent stepped into the grove.

The woman was kneeling next to a tree. Fingers gripped and her nails dug into the wood, as she panted. Golden brown, pain filled eyes met blue ones, as the woman tried to scoot closer to the tree.

"Don't be afraid," Vincent kneeled down, careful not to make any alarming moves "I won't hurt you." Vincent was relieved when he saw the woman relax just a bit before the next wave of pain overtook her. "Let me help you." Vincent moved quickly to her side, not even flinching when her hand gripped into his arm. "I can get you to a hospital."

"No!" the woman gasped desperately as she pushed him away. "No hospital. You must go, leave me, it isn't safe." Vincent watched as she struggled to get up and walk away, barely catching her before she collapsed again.

"You can't stay here alone, you need help." Vincent pressed again.

"No, it is too dangerous." Ashley wanted so badly to give into the soft voice of the imposing figure standing near her. It reminded her so much of home, but there was too much at risk. Her son took priority, she had to get away. "They want my baby, I can't stay." Stumbling, she tried to move away, knowing even as she tried that it would be a futile effort. She was too far into labor to be able to focus on anything but the continuing contractions.

"My father is a doctor, let me take you to him. You will be safe." The voice cajoled her to give in to the safety he promised, safety she no longer had the faith to trust in anymore. She gasped as a hand gently touched her arm. Turning to face him, she gasped as the wind caught at the cowl around his head, giving her just enough of a glimpse of his face, she gave into the strength of his arms and let him lift her and race her to safety.

The sentries sent the message ahead, asking Mary and Father to meet Vincent in the hospital chamber. "Another one Vincent?" Father huffed as Vincent arrived in the chamber with yet another strange woman in his arms. Vincent carefully set her down, yet Ashley kept hold of Vincent's arm as if it were her lifeline, while Mary fussed around her.

As Vincent set her down, Ashley turned; standing at the entrance of the chamber was an older man. He was quite dignified, despite the fact that he was dressed like he was ready for a renaissance fair, instead of the doctor that she was told to expect. Maintaining her grip on Vincent's arm as if it were her only lifeline in this crazy world, she should have expected that he would have lived out of the way, but this was beyond her dreams. She felt as if the man before her was staring through to her soul, and finding her lacking.

"She belongs in a hospital, Vincent". Ashley gasped and struggled, through another contraction. They were getting closer together and more painful with each passing.

"No, no hospitals!" Ashley pushed at Vincent, "just take me back, I will find something."

"You will do no such thing." Mary clucked around her like a mother hen. "My name is Mary, this is Father, and you have already met Vincent." Ashley found comfort in the glare the older woman shot at the older man. "What is your name hon?" Mary shooed the men out of the way as she helped Ashley clean up just a bit before settling her into bed.

"Ashley, my name is Ashley. You have to let me go, it is too dangerous for you to help me." Ashley tried to get the woman to see reason. "They want my baby, they will do anything to get their hands on my baby."

Vincent touched her hair, trying to calm her down as Father approached her, "It's alright, you will be safe here, you just focus on relaxing, let us take care of everything else."

Ashley nodded and gave into the comfort surrounding her. She accepted that for this moment, she may actually be safe, as her world shrunk to the pain of contractions that would force her helpless baby into the world.

"I can see the head," Father pronounced as Ashley dug her nails into the sleeve of the cloak that Vincent still wore. Giving into the need, she pulled herself up and pushed with everything she had. Blackness surrounded her as the sounds of her son's first cries hit her ears.

Father and Mary stood shock still as they stared at the face of the new infant he held in his hands. The facial features and fingers, while still covered in birthing fluid, looked exactly as his son had nearly 30 years earlier. The unconscious woman's panic and fear of a hospital suddenly made sense. The baby took a deep breath and started a new round of loud protests to his new cold environment, prompting Mary and Father to action. Quickly cleaning and wrapping up the baby, Mary tended to him while Father saw to extracting the last of the birthing material and cleaning up around the unconscious woman.

Motioning to Vincent, they left the room as Mary carefully tucked Ashley into bed.

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"Father?" Vincent's voice was quiet as they left. "She knew." The shock and wonder in his voice reached the older man's ears.

"I don't know, son." Father stepped into his chamber and sat down hard in his favorite chair. There were more questions than there were answers at this time. He had a strong feeling that the woman sleeping in the hospital chamber had a lot more answers than they had questions.

"No, I mean she knew." Vincent paced, his confusion evident in his voice. "I thought her lack of fear of me in the park was due to her fear of her situation and her pain...but she knew." Vincent sat down next to father, the pain of his origins a tide rising in him that threatened to engulf him.

Father took the hand of his son and held it tightly as he watched the emotions flow across those expressive blue eyes. "She fought for him, she was afraid for him, not of him." The unspoken comment flowed in the room. Why hadn't Vincent's mother done the same?

"I don't know, son. I really don't know." Father wanted answers...if only for Vincent's sake, he

wanted answers, and that woman may just have them.

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Ashley stretched, enjoying the luxury of a soft warm bed for a moment. Her stomach growled first, before a strong smell hit her nose. Sitting up, she grimaced before the reality of her situation hit her awareness. Before she had a chance to panic, she saw movement at the corner of the room. A woman sitting in a rocking chair started to rise. Ashley saw her check the cradle next to the chair and was relieved to see the sleeping bundle cozily tucked in right where she could see it.

“Good Morning,” Mary stated as she saw Ashley sit up. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you. Please tell me that smell isn’t me.” Ashley stated, slightly embarrassed as the woman flushed and looked away.

“There is a place for you to clean up. I can have someone show you, if you want, I will stay here and watch over your son.” Ashley looked at the cradle with longing, the need to hold her son for the first time conflicting with not wanting to be near him while she was as dirty as she was. The need to be clean won out, her son was safe and as soon as she was clean she could take him in her arms and never let him go.

Ashley heard her son crying before Mary walked in through the entrance of the bathing chamber. Ashley finished tying her shoe before standing up and taking her son.

“Your son’s hungry.” Mary’s statement was un-necessary as the baby started rooting around. Undoing her shirt, she cuddled her son to her chest. Sitting on the bench behind her, Ashley undid his blankets and looked him over from head to his toes, touching each one, rubbing her fingers against the soft tips of his nails.

“He is so small.” Ashley looked up, concerned. “Is he ok?” She couldn’t keep the tremor from her voice as the weight of everything she had been through for the past several weeks came crashing down around her.

Mary came and put a comforting arm around the younger woman as the tears came. “He is fine. He has demonstrated that his lungs are more than fully developed, you must have been beyond exhausted to sleep through his protests.”

A loud growling noise grew through the room and tears turned to laughter. “I think that was me,

not him," Ashley blushed as her stomach growled again, even louder this time.

"Come, we have breakfast waiting in Father's chamber. We thought you would be more comfortable with a smaller group." Ashley nodded her gratitude as she rose and followed the woman out of the chamber, while carefully arranging her son's blanket across her shoulder to cover him while he nursed himself back to sleep.

Ashley's mouth watered at the food she saw on the table, both Vincent and Father stood as she entered the room. Vincent held out a chair and made sure she was comfortable before taking the seat next to her. Mary and Father passed the food around, ensuring that she had plenty before settling down to their own meals.

For the first time since her capture, Ashley's hunger felt sated. She was still tired, but she could almost hear the unspoken questions in the room. That was ok, she had a few of her own. Shifting her son over her shoulder, she started rubbing his back, encouraging him to burp. Looking straight at Vincent, "How is it I don't know about you? I thought there wasn't a Taj in New York, how is it possible that the council doesn't know about you?"

Father and Vincent made eye contact. "Council? ... Taj?" broken questions echoed from each person around the table. Ashley's eyebrow shot up as she caught the confusion surrounding her. Something was off here, she wasn't sure what it was. If she didn't know better, she would have thought that they had never heard of the Taji, but that was impossible, after all Vincent sat right here with them.

"Perhaps you could elaborate." Ashley looked into Father's eyes and something set her guard up.

"You should know that it is forbidden to speak of the Taji outside of council." Ashley countered, yet she couldn't miss the slight sag from Vincent. She couldn't leave it at that, "Maybe we can start with how you got here, and go from there?" She countered.

Vincent looked at Father and through an unspoken agreement Father started. "It was the coldest night of the year..."

Ashley sat and listened, astonished as she learned the tale of this amazing man sitting next to her. To have gone through so much, being so alone for his whole life. Despite the obvious closeness of his family he was just that. Yet there was something of the story that left her cold. There were no documented Taji in New York, yet here she was, and not completely of her own

free will. "So you know nothing of your background, or your parents?"

Vincent just shook his head, yet there was such heartbreak there that it cut through her. The depths of her emotions reached out and her son started fidgeting. Cuddling him closer to her chest, she soothed him and focused on her emotional state just a few hours earlier. Reaching out with her free hand, she touched Vincent's arm. "Vincent, I can't tell you why you were left, but I can tell you this. It wasn't because you were not wanted." Her voice broke over the last, knowing that she was hitting the cusp of the matter.

Everyone sat for a moment lost in their own thoughts. Then Mary spoke up, "What do you mean by Taj?"

Ashley mentally shrugged, she would at least give them what information that was safe to give, she owed Vincent that much. "The Taji are an ancient race, they have existed from the beginning of time. There have always been guardians, and it is said that the community that can protect their Taj will be blessed with safety and prosperity, but they also must be protected. A community that fails its Taj will fall."

"What about your family? Do you have someone worried about you?" Mary asked.

"Yes," Amanda paused. "I don't know for sure who got me, I was kept isolated most of the time, but with the care I was given it was very clear that not only did they want my son, but that they had tried something like this before. I only know of a small handful of mates that have disappeared, and everyone of us, right after we became pregnant. "

"Do you know why?"

Ashley shook her head. "I have my suspicions, Vincent being here in New York only strengthens them. Someone wants control of a Taj, and has discovered their main weakness."

"And what weakness is that?" Father asked, looking at Vincent in concern.

Ashley looked at Vincent, studying him. Placing her fingers under his chin she raises his face to make eye contact. Vincent stares into her eyes as she studies him closely, lines of concentration creasing across her forehead. With a sudden smile she broke contact and leaned back in the chair, looking around the chamber for some mysterious missing person. "So where is she?"

"Who?" Vincent asked, confused.

"Your Mate, of course, who else? You're what, in your 30's now? You have to have already found her." Ashley registered the shocked looks on the faces around her.

"I am not married." Vincent's voice was quiet as he broke eye contact with her.

"Of course you're not married," Ashley picked up her cup and noticed it was empty. Setting it back down she continued, "well not at least in the legal sense. But then again, none of us are, since none of you officially exist. But at your age, you would have called her to you already."

"Called? What do you mean 'called'?" Mary reached over and grabbed the tea pot offering it to Ashley.

"Thank you." Ashley picked up the full cup and sipped as she thought out her words.

"A Taj has a connection to his surroundings. He has a mental bond to his family, and is aware of their emotional and physical health when they are near him. But there is a cost to him, emotionally, physically." Ashley paused to take another sip.

"The toll can be devastating and potentially deadly if he doesn't find someone to be his balance, his refuge and the other half of his soul. She is his mate, and the bond between mates is deep, even when they are physically apart."

"So how do you know he has one?" Father leaned back, intrigued by the information he was getting from this young woman.

"His eyes. There is pain, and confusion, understandable given what you have told me. But there is also peace. At his age, you would start to see the disconnect as the strain of the community tore at him if he did not have her to balance things out for him."

Vincent half listened to the conversation around him as he thought about Catherine, slowly he realized that was just what she was for him. An escape, and a balance. She accepted him as he was, all that he was openly and willingly. Despite how much of himself he tried to hide from her, she still saw it all, and loved him.

"And your son's father?" Father had to ask.

"Is like Vincent." Ashley paused before she dropped the bigger bomb. "Just as my father and brother are. They will be looking for me, and now that he is born, Ephram and his team will be

heading this way." Pushing the tea cup away, she stood. "Which is why I have to leave."

"What?" Mary, Father and Vincent all jumped to their feet. "What do you mean, now that your son is born?"

"The bond becomes blocked when the woman becomes pregnant." Ashley gave a small smile. "My Dad said it was self preservation, thanks to the emotional roller coaster that hormones and pregnancy put a woman through. It is the only time a Taj and his mate are truly vulnerable. If I hadn't been pregnant, the people who took me never would have succeeded, now they will be watching him to try to find me. They knew I was close to my time, and I will not be the cause of bringing danger to your community. I have to contact someone to let them know that we are ok, and make arrangements to get back home. Ephram can feel me now, he will be coming. I have to get in touch with him and let him know about the danger."

"No, it is too soon. You need time to rest and recover." Mary protested.

"We can get a message to him for you. It is too soon for you to be on the run, you must have time to heal, please stay." Vincent's wasn't sure if he was pleading with her for her safety or because of his need to know more.

Ashley looked at the people around her, their genuine desire to help her was in every posture and expression. Looking down at her son, she realized they were right. She was still tired and weak from her ordeal, and if she were to be able to produce milk for her son, she was going to need to have a reliable source of nutrition. "Yes, thank you."

~That night~

Catherine stumbled through her door, placing her briefcase and jacket on the couch as she allowed gravity to finally have its way. Falling back into the cushions, she took her shoes off and rubbed her tired feet. It was days like this that she questioned the wisdom of leaving the boredom of corporate law. Kicking off her shoes, she contemplated her plans for the evening. She dismissed the desire to go below, despite her longing to do so. It had been almost a week since she had last seen Vincent, and she was beginning to miss him. Tiredness fled from her body as the familiar clicking sound of nails hitting glass drew her attention. Racing to the French doors, she conveniently dismissed her stocking feet as she threw herself into Vincent's embrace.

"What is it?" Catherine immediately knew something was wrong, it wasn't in how he buried his

face in her hair during their embrace, or with how tightly he finally was becoming comfortable holding her. There was almost a distracted air about him that was very unusual during their time together.

"There is someone new below.... a woman." Vincent released Catherine and turned to stare at the lights.

Catherine nodded, waiting for Vincent to continue. It was so hard for him when new people came, he had to stay hidden in his own home. "Give her time, Vincent, she will come to accept and love you as we do."

"It's not like that. She is different." Catherine's heart paused a bit at that comment.

"How different?"

"She was in labor, when I found her in the park. She was alone, frightened and running for her life." Vincent paused, he could feel Catherine's trepidation but he had to continue with all of it.

"Is she ok?" Catherine asked.

"Yes." Vincent's answer was monotone, it was so hard for him to push on.

"And her child? Is her child ok?"

"Yes." Vincent paused before continuing "her child...a son ...he looks like me."

Catherine felt the world fall out from under her feet. Slowly she sank down into one of the chairs on the balcony as she digested the words.

"How?" The implications of this information for Vincent would be huge. If there was a baby like him, then there had to be others.

Vincent sat on the floor next to her, slowly he let her guide his head to rest on her legs as she stroked his hair. The emotions of the day finally taking its toll.

"Her name is Ashley, she talks about people called the Taj." Looking up into Catherine's eyes, he continued. "She knows what I am, she wasn't afraid of me, she was afraid for her son, not of him."

Catherine felt her heart breaking for her noble poet as he continued. "She keeps him cuddled close to her; so far Mary, Father and I are the only ones who know the truth of her son's

appearance.”

Vincent pulled a piece of paper out from his cloak. “She has asked us to contact her family and let them know that she is safe, but that there is still danger.”

“What kind of danger?” Catherine’s blood ran cold at the thought of Vincent and the tunnels at risk, especially from a stranger.

“She was taken, those that took her want her child.”

“So her assailants knew about the origins of her child when they took her?” The investigator in Catherine started clicking in, looking for pieces of this puzzle.

Vincent nodded. “Ashley is convinced that they did.”

“That is not all, Catherine,” Vincent stood up and went back to the half-wall, leaning against it as if he needed the weight of the bricks to hold him up.

“What is it?” Catherine stood up, going to him, she leaned into the heat of his body.

Vincent’s arm went around Catherine as he pulled her closer. “She speaks of a mate, a brother and a father...All look like me.”

Catherine gasped as the implications took hold into her mind. Taking the paper from his hand, she looked over the names and numbers. “I will see what I can do, Vincent. I will try to get the answers you seek.”

“Thank you.” The last was whispered into her hair. “Be careful,” echoed in the wind as Vincent disappeared into the shadows of the night.

~Later the next day~

Catherine walked into Father’s chambers. She always loved this place, the craftsmanship of the furniture, the piles of books, all of it fit the man who occupied the table in the corner as he poured over journals and medical books.

“Ahh Catherine, come in” Father gestured for her to come closer. “I take it Vincent has told you the latest?”

Catherine nodded as she sat in the chair opposite from Father. “Yes, I tried to get in touch with

Ashley's family, but most everyone had already left. They are headed this way."

Father nodded, "Ashley warned us that might happen."

"Father, are you sure about this woman?" Catherine hated to sound so cynical, but she couldn't bear for Vincent to be hurt.

"I saw the child, there is no doubt that her story is true." Father took off his glasses to polish the lenses.

"And the risk?" Father's eyes shot up at that comment. The irony of Catherine bringing this topic up did not escape either of them.

"We have increased the sentries, and are in the process of closing some of the passages. The helpers are being warned about the increased risk."

Catherine's head turned at the slight noise of someone entering the room. A woman was making her way carefully down the stairs, hugging a bundle close to her chest. Father stood and assisted the woman as she joined them at the table.

"Catherine, this is our new resident, Ashley."

"Temporary resident" Ashley stretched her hand out, "I have heard so much about you."

"Likewise," Catherine responded as she shook the woman's hand.

"Do you have any news? Were you able to talk to Ephram?" Ashley was almost beside herself. As soon as Mary had translated the pipe code about Catherine's arrival she rushed as fast as she could to Father's chambers.

"It seems I missed everyone. They left late two nights ago. I left a message for an Emily Carlington, the person I talked to was going to try to reach them, but she did not expect anyone to check in until they got here."

"That changes everything." Ashley sagged in her chair.

"That changes nothing," Father spoke firmly, you are not in any condition to risk travelling."

"Father, When Ephram gets here, he is not going to be in any condition to negotiate with. He will see anyone he comes across as a barrier between me and him."

“That is if he can find his way here. We still have options.”

Ashley sighed as she turned to Catherine. “Could Vincent find you?”

Catherine looked at Father. “Yes, I could,” Vincent’s voice echoed from behind them.

“Vincent...” Father started, but paused when he saw the determination in the three faces before him.

“You can take me to the top...They will be looking for me.” Ashley pressed on.

“And so will the people you escaped from.” Catherine added. “We can’t just discount them.”

“She’s right, Ashley, we will find a way to get you to your family without risking you, your son, or our people.” The look in Father’s eyes told her that the discussion was final.

“Ephram won’t be open to any discussion. I need to be the first person he sees.” Ashley resigned herself to the fact that these people were going to keep her safe no matter what. They may not be connected to the Taj Council, but apparently the same rules applied. Protect a Taj and Taja at all costs.

Father nodded as he watched Vincent look over the maps. “We have increased the sentries, someone is now positioned near every entrance. We have no way of knowing which entrance he will take.” Vincent looked up and glanced at Ashley.

“More than likely, he will follow our scent through the entrance that you brought me into.” Ashley added.

Vincent nodded. “Then we can anticipate him coming this way. We can move the false walls to guide him to this area.” Vincent pointed to a spot on the map. “From there it is a straight shot to the central hub.”

Father nodded as he looked over Vincent’s plan. “That looks doable, we should start the work immediately.”

Vincent stood up, “It already has. When the sentries report the breach, Ashley can meet Ephram in the Hub.”

Ashley sighed, as she adjusted the bundle she carried. Lovingly she stared into a smaller version of the face she loved so much. Catherine watched the play of emotions across the

younger woman's face.

"Would you like to see him?" Ashley offered. Catherine nodded and leaned forward as Ashley adjusted the blankets to reveal her son's face.

"He is amazing." Catherine gasped as she traced the slight dusting of that hair followed the infant's nose line. His bottom lip was tucked under the upper clefts while he made sucking motions in his sleep. Catherine felt her heart melt as she studied the small baby before her. This is what Vincent would have looked like, this is what his son might look like. For a moment Catherine felt the beginnings of a dream she had never allowed to take seed. Suddenly everything no longer seemed so impossible between the two of them.

Vincent paused in his planning as he felt the stirrings in Catherine. The look on her face broke his heart, there was so much he couldn't give her. Suddenly it was all too much for him to take in, carefully stowing away the maps, Vincent excused himself to go find some heavy rocks to move.

Catherine watched Vincent leave which a slight resigned sigh.

"Man, you've got it bad." Ashley tried to hide her smile.

"Excuse me?" Catherine looked confused.

"Let me guess; you're stuck in the 'you can do better' stage."

Catherine sighed, "There are times all this seems so impossible."

"Complicated? Yes...Impossible...No." Ashley touched Catherine's hand

Catherine sighed again and looked at the door Vincent just walked out of. "He just can only see the obstacles, and what I would be losing."

"I remember those days." Both women looked down as the baby started fussing. Ashley shifted him over her shoulder and began rubbing his back to sooth him. "Tell me, have you gotten the 'You can do better' speech?"

Catherine suppressed the urge to snort at that. "Worse, there is a man in my world that Vincent seems to think I would be better off with."

"Ouch! So he has his replacement already picked out?" Ashley shook her head. "That is worse

than I thought. But, I can honestly say, been there, done that.” Lifting her son, she rubbed her cheek against his. “And now I have the souvenir to prove it.”

Both women laughed at that comment before Ashley scrunched up her nose as the smell that was coming from the bundle she was carrying.

“Catherine, don’t fret. You are not alone in this anymore, I promise to do my part to open your Vincent’s eyes to exactly what his possibilities are with you.” Ashley excused herself to go to her chamber and tend to the needs of her son.

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Catherine walked in through her door just in time to hear the answering machine click on. “Ms. Chandler, this is Dr. Carlington, you left a message about my daughter-in-law Ashley...”

Catherine rushed and grabbed the phone, “Hello, Dr Carlington?” rubbing her leg from the brush against the edge of the table.

“Thank God you answered! How is Ashley?”

“She and the baby are fine, and safe.” Catherine replied.

“So she had her baby?” Emily sounded concerned.

“Yes, a boy, both mom and son are healthy and in a place where they are safe.” Catherine tried to assure.

“How many people have seen the child?”

“Not many, Vincent is the one who found her, the Doctor and midwife who helped in the delivery, and myself.”

“There is a Doctor involved? Has he given either of them anything?”

“I don’t believe so...Dr. Carlington, please understand Father is well versed in the needs your grandson has. They are doing everything they can to ensure the health and safety of both of them.”

“He can’t possibly know.” Emily protested.

“Dr. Carlington, Vincent is like your grandson.” The other side of the line got so quiet Catherine

began to think that the connection had been broken.

“That isn’t possible.”

“I can assure you it is possible, Dr. Carlington.” Catherine assured.

“How?”

“I do not feel comfortable discussing this over a phone Dr. Carlington. Can you tell me how your son is expecting to get here?” Catherine decided a definite change of subject was needed.

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Even if the bond had not been restored, Ashley would have know of Ephram’s arrival by the change in atmosphere around her. Everyone stopped, frozen, listening to the tapping, then they would glance at her and turn away. His emotions were chaotic, almost desperate, the need to reach her, touch her, was his only driving force. With a sigh, she unbound her son from the sling across her chest, handed him to Mary, she turned, determined to beard the lion in his chamber.

Father, Vincent and several others were pouring over maps as they discussed strategy when she walked into the chamber. “Take me up.” Hands on her hips, she demanded.

“Absolutely not! The climb is too much for you at this time.” Father sternly replied.

Ashley sighed, she knew that would be his approach, fortunately she had plan B. “How much damage has he done?”

“He has already broken through two security levels, he is headed towards the labyrinth.” Ashley didn’t recognize the smaller man that spoke, but simply nodded.

“Then send a child.” Placing her hands on her hips she stared down the men at the table.

That comment got everyone’s attention. “You will want to send someone old enough to recognize the importance of this task, but not so old that he/she would have fully cleared puberty yet.” Ashley ignored the shaking heads as she faced Vincent. “Tell them, Vincent, explain to them. If it was Catherine you were trying to reach, would you harm a child?”

Vincent paused and thought before replying, “No, I would not harm a child.” but even then, his family already knew the answer.

"I'll do it." A small female voice spoke up from the upper level of the library, causing everyone to jump.

"Samantha, you don't know..." Father began

"Yes I do." Samantha interrupted. "If this intruder were truly dangerous Vincent would not be standing here with you trying to figure out how to get him here safely. If the intruder were dangerous... Vincent would already be gone."

Ashley hid her smile, the intelligence behind the child's bright eyes dared anyone to contradict her statement. The child was brave, but she had come to expect no less from the inhabitants in Vincent's community.

Kneeling down, Vincent signaled Samantha to him. "Do you know what you will need to do?"

The young girl looked at Vincent, then turned to Ashley. "I will need to lead him here, as quickly as I can, while avoiding contact with anyone else."

Ashley nodded. "Samantha, you will have to be brave, but allow Ephram to come to you. You cannot run from him."

Samantha nodded as Ashley continued with her instructions. "More than likely he will be wearing biker's leathers with a dark helmet over his head. All you have to do is go sit in his path and let him come to you."

"I can do that." Samantha leaned towards Vincent and gave him a quick hug. "I will be ok." she whispered in his ear before clutching a book to her chest and dashing out of the room.

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Ephram froze in his steps. The tiny voice was humming a simple tune as she sat innocently in the middle of the tunnel, flipping through a book as if it were the most natural place in the world to be doing such an activity. A brief flare of his senses told him that she was there alone. The others had escaped him, scurrying behind walls like frightened mice, but this precious child sat in the middle of his road. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the stone wall, admiring the girl's bravery as he studied the attention to her appearance. Long wavy hair, that refused to stay tucked behind her ear reminded him so much of his Ashley when she had been that age.

Samantha looked up at the man, and her heart stopped just for a moment. It was as Ashley had

said, Ephram was a tall man, maybe even bigger than Vincent. In black leather with his dark helmet, he made her a little uneasy. Samantha held her breath as the man moved forward and knelt before her. Taking a deep swallow she pushed up and held out her hand. "You must be Ephram, I am supposed to welcome you to our home and escort you to Father and Vincent."

"Oh you are, are you?" Ephram couldn't help but grin at this child's show of regal authority. Whomever she belonged to had their hands full. Bending down, he gently took her hand in his gloved one and bent over it in a gallant gesture that had the child blushing prettily. "Then lead on, my fair maiden, but I would prefer to be taken to Ashley."

Samantha picked up her book and stared at the strange man in front of her. "She is with them." Turning and skipping down a tunnel, Ephram watched as this child lead him in the opposite direction that he sensed Ashley was in. He could detect no deception in the child as she skipped further away, as if she expected him to follow.

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Ashley paced the chamber, it wouldn't be long now. She could feel him getting closer. If it wasn't for the people starting to gather into Father's library, more and more of them blocking her escape down the same path that Samantha had dashed down. Three months was a long time for mates to be separated, it seemed like it had been so much longer, that these last few moments seemed to have come to a complete stop. "There are too many people here!" She finally declared, her glare at Father warning him to shoo everyone off or she was going to do it for him.

Recognizing the building tension in the small woman pacing the chamber, Vincent encouraged everyone to go along on their tasks. That they would be kept informed of the situation as needed. "Perhaps it would be best if you meet him in the hub as we originally planned." Father suggested.

"I thought the hub was the opposite direction of the labyrinth." Ashley countered, she was not willing to do anything that would delay her reunion with her mate.

Just as she thought to warn Vincent that he would want to take a less aggressive posture, Ashley felt the push against her mind. "He's here!" rushing across the room, she launched herself into the arms of the large dark man as he entered above the steps.

Hands tangled together as they both struggled to get Ephram's Motorcycle helmet off him. "Why

do you have to wear this damn thing? Ashley cursed just moments before she felt his mouth find hers in joyous reunion. Vaguely she recognized the sound of the helmet hitting the ground as Ephram lifted her to crush her against his body. Tongues tangling as they strained to enjoy the taste and texture that both had feared they would never have again.

The murmurs hit Ephram's ears first as he became aware that he was not in the room alone with his mate. Raising his eyes, yet not quite willing to end the kiss yet, he saw several people standing in apparent shock as they took in the scene before them.

Ephram raised his head from Ashley's, allowing her to bring him back for one last brief connection. Raising her a bit higher, he held her close to him as he buried his face in her neck, the tension leaving him as he took her sweet scent in. The world was right again, this was all that mattered.

"We are not alone." It took every ounce of strength Ephram had to put Ashley away from him. Ashley sighed and threaded her fingers in through his. It was obvious to both of them that any contact was better than none.

Pulling him forward, Ashley brought him further into the room. "This is Vincent, the man who saved my life."

Ephram took off his glove and extended his hand, pulling the shocked man into a hug, "Thank you."

Ashley then turned and pulled forward an older man. "And this is the man they call Father." As she watched Ephram and Father shake hands before she added, "the man who delivered our son."

Everything in Ephram froze. "Son?" turning to Ashley he studied her face for the truth he had been afraid to touch. "We have a son?"

Ashley nodded, tears filling her eyes. This is not how it should have been. Ephram should have been by her side and been the one to hand her their child for the first time. Not these strangers, no matter how friendly and welcoming they had been.

"Where is he?" Ephram looked around the room, dismissing everyone around him.

"Mary has him." Turning at the sound behind him, he watched as an older woman walked into the room carrying a bundle.

Ashley rushed forward. "Thank you," she told Mary as she gently took the bundle and turned to put him in Ephram's arms. Ashley watched as Ephram sank into the nearest chair and performed the same inspection over the baby that she had merely a day earlier.

Both were so focused on their reunion that they completely missed Vincent, Mary and Father shoing everyone from the chamber. Introductions could be made later.

"Look Ashley, he has your ears." Ephram traced the slight point at the top of the right ear. "I can't tell yet, but I think he is going to have your eyes."

Vincent leaned against the entry way that lead to his chamber. Curiosity warred with pain; he could not drag himself away from the events in the room even if he wanted to. They were like any other parents, comparing features, counting toes, and celebrating a new life. Even though that new life looked like him. Ashley had told him that while she didn't know how he had gotten there, one thing was for sure. He had been wanted, at one point, his parents would have wanted, even celebrated, the possibility of what he was.

That concept warred with everything he knew about his life, or didn't know. Here was this woman, not as beautiful as Catherine, but beautiful in her own right. Obviously in love and devoted to a man who looked like him. They were living a life he had always thought impossible.

The possibilities, his dreams that he had dismissed, Catherine's dreams that he tried to ignore. All of it...So many things that he now had to think about and relearn.

"I want to thank you." The voice jolted Vincent out of his ponderings as he watched Ephram approach. "We owe you our lives."

"You owe me nothing." Vincent fought the urge to stare at the man before him. Ephram had no such qualms. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, Vincent continued. "You will want a chance to be with your family." Both men looked over and watched Ashley try to smother a yawn.

"Of course." Ephram patted Vincent on the shoulder. "I trust we will have time to talk later." Not waiting for a response, Ephram turned and walked back into the chamber. Barely pausing, he bent down and scooped Ashley up. Ashley squeaked and tightened her hold on their baby. "Ephram, put me down, NOW!"

Ephram kissed her cheek. "Once you are in bed, and resting." Nodding to Mary, he continued.

“Which way to where you are staying?” Mary pointed the direction she had come in from and led the way.

~~

Father watched Vincent from across the room. Despite the obvious similarities between Vincent and Ephram, there were definite differences as well. Where Vincent was golden, Ephram’s coloring was a darker. The research doctor inside him itched for answers about the genetics, the father in him burned for and yet dreaded answers about what truly happened to place Vincent in that alley so many years ago. Ashley’s reactions were also revealing. He watched her pace, in a manner he had always associated with Vincent. He watched her reactions as she became aware of Ephram’s presence in the tunnels. In fact, she had reacted before the first of the pipe messages had made it to them, pipe code she would not have understood.

Vincent walked over to Father and sat at the table next to him. Both men sat silently, lost in their own thoughts. Vincent finally rose. Placing a kiss on Father’s head, he gathered his cloak and left.

~~

Ephram sat in the rocking chair next to the bed as Ashley fussed around the chamber. “How?” Ephram made a sweeping gesture to the room that surrounded them.

Ashley paused and turned to face her mate, and waited for him to finish.

“What happened to you? How did they get you? How did you get here? How did he get here?”

Questions spun through his head, each one picking up before the other left off. “Three months, Ashley, for three months I didn’t know if you were alive, dead, hurt. For three months, I feared the worst and prayed that my passing would be quick.”

Ashley put down the blanket she had been folding and rushed across the room. Ephram let out a burst of air as she crashed into him. Bending down, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tighter to his body.

“I’m alright, I’m alright.” Ashley kept whispering as Ephram buried his face in her neck. Lifting her, he stumbled the few steps towards the bed where they crashed together. Hands collided as clothes fell away.

She was smaller than he remembered, she seemed more frail. Tongues collided as a small voice in the back of Ephram's head screamed, "*It's too soon!*"

"Shhh, it's alright, I am alright." Ashley repeated over and over. "You won't hurt me, you can't hurt me."

Ephram allowed his emotions to sweep through the bond, celebrating in its renewal. Celebrating the feel of her, yet this was different than before. What their mind completed, their bodies withheld. Breast to chest, legs entangled, Ephram and Ashley sunk into the currents of their bond and allowed it to carry them to peaceful darkness.

~Early next morning~

Vincent paced by Catherine's threshold. Confusion ran through him. His first reaction was to run deeper into the tunnels and to the river, where he could think, focus, put all this new information into perspective. Yet his feet had other plans, instead of finding the path that would have lead him deeper into the earth, to peace and solitude, they had brought him here. To Catherine.

Vincent felt the moment that Catherine reached the entrance, her joy reaching him as she crossed through the light, and approached him.

"Ephram is in the tunnels." His words said so little, and so much at the same time. Catherine stepped closer and leaned against Vincent, looking closely into his face. "You don't look like you have slept at all."

Vincent merely shook his head at that. Words failed everything.

"I spoke with Ashley's Mother-in-law, she is flying in later today. She insists upon meeting Father." Vincent nodded somewhat absentmindedly, his hand stroking the soft fabric of Catherine's jacket.

"I am sure under the circumstances arrangements can be made." Vincent pulled away from Catherine a bit. Slipping his hand in hers, he lead her down the tunnel.

Father looked up as Vincent lead Catherine down the steps. Piles of medical journals spread haphazardly across the table.

"Catherine, we were not expecting you this morning." Father leaned back, removing his

glasses, he wiped the lenses, before wiping his eyes.

"I understand Ephram made it." Catherine sat in the chair next to Father, barely catching several journals before they slid off onto her lap.

"Yes, earlier last night."

"And neither of you have slept since." Catherine observed.

Father cleared his throat, a bit flustered at that observation. "With all the excitement, I am getting the impression that our two guests were the only ones who did get any rest last night."

"Yes and with the fuss the baby started up early this morning, it is sounding like even they didn't get much." Mary added as she carried in a tray. "Good Morning, Catherine."

Father, Vincent and Catherine quickly cleared away the journals to make space for the tray just in time for Eric to rush in with a second tray behind Mary. Eric had barely released the tray before rushing over to Catherine to give her a hug. Catherine returned the hug then tousled Eric's hair as she watched his eyes dart behind her. She didn't think his eyes could get any bigger before she turned to see what caught his attention.

"Eric, William promised to save you a muffin, but you should probably get back quickly before someone else finds it." Mary pointed him in the direction of the dining hall and gave him a gentle shove.

"That smells great!" Ashley stated as she lead Ephram down the steps.

"You think anything smells great, as long as you didn't cook it." Ephram teased as he followed her in.

"Don't start!" Ashley chided as she turned around. Ephram, not phased, looked over her head and continued. "Did she tell you how she managed to finally hook me?"

"Ephram," Ashley growled.

Everyone looked at each other as they watched the two interact. Despite his teasing, there was a light in his eyes every time he looked Ashley's direction that was impossible to miss.

"I can't say we have had the pleasure of that story." Father, always up for a good tale, ignored Ashley's glare as she sat down in the chair across from him.

“Well it is simple...She fed me her mother’s cooking. I assumed that Ashley had been similarly trained.”

“I distinctly remember telling you that I didn’t cook.” Ashley warned.

“Yes, well at the time I thought that meant you didn’t have time to cook.” Ephram paused for effect. My first clue should have been your mother’s present to us when we announced our binding plans.”

Not able to resist, Catherine leaned forward and asked. “What was the gift?”

Ashley blushed as everyone looked at her. “A wall plaque.”

Ephram snorted, “Yes, Ashley, and what does this plaque say?”

Ashley blushed harder as she fidgeted with the baby blanket. “Dinner will be ready when the smoke alarm goes off.” There was just a moment of silence before everyone at the table burst out laughing.

“I have accused her of pulling a bait and switch, but she won’t have any of it.” Ephram continued.

Taking pity on Ashley, Catherine responded. “But did she ever tell you she could cook, or present her Mother’s cooking as her own?”

Ephram scratched his head, and thought for a moment. “No, I can’t say that she did.”

“Well then you do not have grounds for Bait and Switch, or false representation.” Catherine smiled at Ephram.

Ashley’s mouthed “*Thank you.*”

Completely unaware of the exchange between the two women, Ephram looked at Catherine. “And why would you say that?”

Catherine caught a glimpse of Vincent’s expression and struggled to keep a straight face. “Bait and Switch is if the product advertised is not the product that is sold. False representation would be if she presented her mother’s cooking as her own. By your own admission, you knew it was her mother’s cooking, and came to your own unsupported conclusion that she had the same skills. Therefore, the real issue is that your expectations exceeded the situation as it was

offered.”

Ashley burst out laughing, “She has you there.”

Ephram looked a little shocked as he looked between the two women. Not quite willing to give up the banter, he pressed on. “What do you base this on?”

Ashley interrupted, “Give it up Ephram. You know better than to argue with a woman.” Leaning forward, she gave him a little peck. “Don’t feel too bad, dear. If you want to feel pity for someone...Then you should feel sorry for Vincent.”

Everyone at the table stopped and looked at Ashley.

“And why do you say that?” Father sounded a bit defensive.

“Simple, Ephram can occasionally, all-be-it rarely, win an argument. Between his Mother, Sisters and I, he has learned when to not even try.” Ashley paused to spread honey butter on her muffin. “Vincent, on the other hand, has a snowball’s chance in Hades. Not only does he have to deal with his life mate...but she is a lawyer on top of that.” Covering her smirk with a small bite, Ashley continued before counting on her fingers. “1. Female, 2. Attorney, Yup I would say poor Vincent.”

Everyone stared at Ashley for a moment before Ephram burst out laughing. Slapping Vincent on the arm in a gesture of camaraderie. “We must suffer together, my friend, that is one of the costs of having a beautiful life mate.”

Both Catherine and Ashley blushed at that comment as the conversation turned to planning for the arrival of Ephram’s family.

~~

Ephram watched as Vincent interacted with his community. While he had never been formally trained in the ways of the Taj, he had adapted to them instinctively. Father may be the defacto leader of this Community, but Vincent was the person that everyone went to for answers.

“What is it?” Ashley leaned against Ephram’s chair, sighing as he pulled her down onto his lap.

“Watch Vincent,” Ephram paused as he waited.

Ashley puzzled why Ephram wanted her to watch Vincent, but he always had a good reason

when he asked seemingly odd questions.

“Do you see it?” Ephram queried.

“See wha...” Ashley paused before the light dawned. “Oh!” Sitting up, she turned to Ephram.

“So it does look familiar.” Ephram leaned back, pulling Ashley closer to his chest. “I wasn’t sure if I was imagining it.”

“Your mom is coming. Do you think she is going to want DNA to confirm?” Ashley whispered.

“Possibly, but look, the coloring is about right.”

“I thought he was more like you?” Ashley commented.

“Yes, but his mate’s family had escaped Hitler’s breeding program, so she had blond hair, blue eyes.”

“Hmmm,” Ashley thought, “well that would explain the coloring. I barely remember his brother, wasn’t he at our wedding?”

“Yes, Kevin was there for a short while, that was also about when the drama about his community clashing with his life mate happened.” Ephram’s voice got cold with that comment.

Ashley stroked Ephram’s arm, wanting to avoid that heated topic. “Well that group’s foolish political maneuverings cost them everything. That community fell shortly after their Taj left.”

“As it should have.” Ephram lifted his hand to caress Ashley’s cheek. He let her calm him through their bond. “But still, to have lost a pair like that...”

“Humph,” Ashley turned around, and went back to watching Vincent work with the children.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ephram demanded.

“We haven’t exactly lost that pair.” Ashley commented.

Ephram sat up, “WHAT?” His voice raised to an almost roar, causing all activity in the chamber to stop. Ignoring the audience they suddenly acquired, Ephram continued angrily, “What exactly do you mean, we haven’t lost them?”

Ashley took exception to Ephram’s tone and jumped off his lap. “Don’t you roar at me, Ephram Carlington! I know for a fact you have excellent hearing, and know exactly what I said.” With

that, she stomped out of the room, leaving Ephram facing a group staring at him in shock. "WOMEN!" Ephram cursed, as he followed Ashley out of the chamber.

~~

Catherine shuffled the papers on her desk again. Joe needed this deposition, yet she couldn't seem to focus on the page. The implications of the new visitors in the tunnels weighed heavily on her. To say that she and Vincent had been taking their relationship slowly would have been an understatement. Glaciers moved faster than they had been moving. Ashley talked about the complications of taking extended maternity leave without any of her co-workers knowing that she was pregnant.

"Must be a great read." Cathy jumped as she looked up at the smirking face of her boss. Her stomach turned as he popped a chocolate cheese doodle in his mouth.

"I don't see how you can eat those things." Cathy grimaced. "Especially in the morning."

"This must be why I am such a sweet guy." Joe grinned. "You should try it sometime."

Cathy snorted "You, sweet? Since when?"

Joe placed his hand over his heart. "You wound me."

"I doubt that." Catherine leaned back in her chair. "Is there a reason you have decided to torment me with your food choices?"

"Yes, just a quick question." Joe paused long enough for Catherine to feel like rolling her eyes.

"And that question would be?"

"What does a Dr. Carlington have to do with any of your cases?"

Catherine sat up in her chair quickly. "Emily is here?"

"Yes she is, who is she?" Joe popped another cheese doodle into his mouth.

"Possible expert witness for a case."

"Really? Which case?"

"I am not sure, Joe, she contacted me."

Catherine rose from her desk and walked away, not looking over her shoulder. These close calls with Joe were getting worse. She didn't know how much he really knew, but it was obvious that he was suspicious of something. Walking into the door, she saw an elegant older woman. Her gray streaked hair still held enough color to show where Ephram got his coloring.

"Dr. Carlington, I am Catherine Chandler." Closing the door behind her, Catherine watched as the woman turned around and held her breath. Her eyes were a bright color blue that Catherine had only seen on one other person in her entire life.

"Call me Emily, please." She sized up the younger woman. Catherine Chandler was not exactly what she expected. Her professional dress did not hide the elegant debutant Emily knew her to be. "Your pictures don't do you justice."

"Here we go again." Catherine figured that she would never completely live down the debutant label, no matter how hard she tried. "Thank you, I know a safe place we can have lunch and talk." Catherine opened the door. "Do you have a place you are staying?"

"Yes, I have already checked in at the Waldorf East." Emily followed Catherine out the door and down the hall.

~~

Ephram followed Ashley into their chamber. "Ashley..."

"Don't start with me, Ephram." Ashley cut him off

"I don't understand, why would you keep this from me?" Ephram felt a bit hurt and confused. The bond did not allow lies between life mates, it had never dawned on him that she would be capable of keeping a secret this big from him.

"Of course we kept it from you." Ashley snapped back, not realizing how much she gave away with that comment.

"We?" Ephram echoed the word with a low growl. "Who else knows of this?"

"Who? Ephram. You want to know who knows?" Ashley put her hands on her hips as she turned and faced her mate.

Ephram ignored the signs before him as he pressed on. "I do believe that is what I just asked you, Ashley, stop stalling. You have no idea of what this means for the council."

“The answer to your question is who doesn’t know.” Ashley replied as she slowly approached Ephram. “What your precious council has failed to realize is how tightly the wives stick together. Ephram, what you don’t get is that it is because of the council’s actions... Or should I say lack of actions, that Serena and her mate disappeared.”

“Ashley, you of all people should understand the risk for a Taj alone, with no support.” Ephram tried to get Ashley to understand.

“Ephram, they have support. In fact they have more support now than they got when they were supposed to be under the protection of the Council.”

Ephram sat down on the bed, hard. The emotions and determination coming from Ashley was like nothing he had seen from her before. Sure they had disagreed on things in the past, but she had never been this passionate against something that he had always considered essential to his life. His whole life he had dreamed of the day that he would be asked to join the council. He never realized how strongly Ashley felt against the council. “How is it I never knew you felt this way?”

“Ephram, I do know what the council means to you.” Ashley stepped forward to him. “But the council has refused to move forward. The existing members are more interested in keeping status quo than they are in the welfare of the people they are supposed to be supporting.” Ashley pushed Ephram back just a bit as she crawled on his lap. Straddling over him, she placed her arms on his shoulders and allowed her chest to rub against his as she settled down.

“Ephram, I have never regretted what I gave up to become your life mate, but this life is not easy. I am one of the lucky ones, I got to keep my family. But people like your mom, my mom, Serena, and even Catherine. As far of the world is concerned, they live alone. Do you know that my mom’s parents think I am an only child and that I am a sperm bank kid?” Ashley shifted on Ephram’s lap as he brought his arms around him. “Did you know that my grandfather is convinced that I am a lesbian because I have had no interested in every guy they have tossed my way when I have visited?”

Ephram shook his head, his heart starting to break as he began to realize how stressful their relationship had truly been for her. “Ephram, don’t go down that road.” Ashley chided as she lifted his face to hers.

“You are my life, I chose this willingly. I have no regrets.” Pressing her lips to his for a quick kiss.

“The council focuses on what was good for the Taja, those needs are changing in our world. They have never looked to what is best for the Taja, we have had to look after ourselves. What you men refer to jokingly as the ‘Wives club’ is our support system. None of us would have made it without the support of those that came before us.”

Ephram ran his hands up and down her back as he absorbed what she had been telling him. He had never thought about what toll their lives had on the women. All of them seemed to transition so easily into the lifestyle of a Taja, that he never realized how difficult it was on them. But he wasn’t completely ready to give up, the council was a very important part of their society. “Ashley, the council is what protects us...” Her finger on his lips stopped him mid sentence.

“I have never disputed that, Ephram, only in how they do it.”

“Yet now, Kevin lives outside the protection of the council.” Ephram pressed.

“No, now Kevin and Serina live together without harassment. They no longer need to worry about a traitor in their own community. Kevin and Serina now live under the protection and support of the Taja.”

Ephram’s hands slid under Ashley’s shirt as he began to stroke the smooth skin of her back. With a quick twist, Ashley tugged the shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor behind her.

Ephram groaned as Ashley’s tongue slipped between his cleft. His mouth opened as she slipped her tongue in further. Ephram swallowed Ashley’s moan as he pulled her tighter to him, his hand slipping down to the hem of her skirt. Lifting it slowly as he caressed her leg. Lifting her thigh higher he slipped between her legs to stroke her softness.

~~

Father met Vincent in the passageway, Pascal, Jamie and Mouse not far behind him. “Father?”

“Mouse told me there was a disturbance in the Library.” Father stated, obviously a bit concerned.

“I am not sure what happened, but Ashley and Ephram appear to have had a bit of a disagreement.” Vincent nodded to the crowd forming behind Father. “I thought I would go check to see if everything was ok, I see I am not the only one with that thought.”

“No,” Father stated. “I had several visitors coming to express their concern. I thought I would

come get to the bottom of the issue.”

Vincent paused in thought. “Perhaps it would be better if it only be you and I, Father, we wouldn’t want to put our guests on the defensive.”

Father saw the wisdom of that thought and motioned for everyone else to go about their duties.

Mary stood her ground, “Ashley left their son with me for a bit, he is starting to get hungry. I think I should take him to her.” Father and Vincent nodded as they followed her down the tunnel.

Turning the corner, Mary suddenly froze. Her stance set warning bells off in Vincent. Opening his senses he heard nothing but heavy breathing in the chamber beyond. Father was the next person to freeze, something was obviously wrong. Steadying himself for the worst case scenario, he reached to block Mary and Father from whatever danger they faced. Turning around, shock froze him in place. The scene before him was unmistakable. A nearly naked Ashley’s head was thrown back in obvious ecstasy as Ephram stroked his tongue across her chest, then nipped at her neck.

Vincent felt his body respond as he watched Ephram do to Ashley the very things that he desired to do to Catherine, only this time without any negative impact. Stumbling back against the wall, Vincent felt something rise in him that was powerful, intense and very seductive. Fearing the safety of those around him, Vincent stumbled away and ran for all he was worth.

Father turned to reach for Vincent just as the baby in Mary’s arms decided to make his presence known. The inhabitants of the chamber before them jumped. Ephram reacted first, before he fully assessed the situation. Snatching Ashley up, he turned and placed her behind him, sheltering her from all eyes as he turned to confront whomever dared to threaten his mate. Only Ashley’s hand on his arm kept him from springing forward. Taking deep breaths, he calmed down enough to recognize the shocked faces of the two elder representatives of the tunnels, both standing frozen before him in obvious shock and embarrassment. Mary rushed in and put the screaming baby in the cradle. “He was hungry.” She stated before she left almost as quickly as Vincent did, without making eye contact even with Father as she scooted out.

“I need to speak with both of you as soon as you are decent.” Father used his best authoritarian voice before turning and making his way back down the tunnel with as much dignity as he could muster.

Ashley was still behind him with her nails digging into his arms. Ephram could feel Ashley

shaking behind him, the emotional firestorm still fogging his brain as he tried to assess what had just happened.

Grabbing Ashley's clothes from the floor, Ephram turned and pulled the shirt over her head. While she fidgeted and fussed with her appearance, Ephram realized that he, too was missing some clothing.

Ashley's well being came first, taking her into his arms he tried to comfort her and sooth her shaking. Yet no matter what he did, it only seemed to get worse. Worried, he pulled back to look at Ashley in the face. The tears he expected were falling down her face, but she wasn't crying. Well at least not in the manner he had thought. Ashley was beside herself with almost hysterical laughter.

"Oh my gosh!" Ashley gasped as she wiped the tears from her face. "I feel like the time we were caught in the farm pickup truck bed by the priest."

Ephram laughed at that memory as he stepped back a bit and turned to pick up their rather loud son. Reaching up, Ashley opened her shirt to expose her bare breasts to him. Still shaking with laughter, she leaned forward, allowing their son to latch onto her while he still fussed in his father's arms. A sigh escaped as he began nursing. She had associated the heaviness in her breasts to the arousal she always felt in Ephram's arms. Now it seemed that it was a combination of her milk and her reaction to her mate.

"We should go see Father." Ephram let Ashley take their son before he picked up a small afghan from the cradle and carefully draped it over her. These people had seen more of his mate than he ever intended them to see again.

~~

Catherine held open the door to the small Chinese restaurant to let Emily walk in. "Ms. Chandler! It is good to see you again." Catherine smiled at the hostess and with a brief signal to Henry, they were escorted to a booth, away from the rest of the diners. Lin smiled as she saw their new guest, and hurried to make arrangements. Catherine had done so much for them to help rebuild their business after their run in with the Tong that they were always happy, as were most of the other helpers, to assist her any time she needed. It was not unusual for Catherine to bring a colleague or key witness to the restaurant for a private place to speak with them. Henry and Lin directed the wait staff away from the back table and proceeded to serve the

women themselves.

Emily looked around her at the small family restaurant. It was tastefully decorated, and the staff apparently knew Catherine well. “Do you have jasmine tea?” she asked the young lady who seemed so eager to serve them.

Lin nodded and looked to Catherine. “Would you care for your usual? Or would you like us to surprise you today?”

Catherine looked at Emily and raised her eyebrow in silent question to the older woman. “Do you trust me?”

Emily looked around her and nodded. “I love Chinese food, so anything would be great.”

Catherine smiled and nodded to Lin. “Why don’t you surprise us.”

The food was delicious, and Emily made a point of keeping the conversation to light banter and polite conversation. Too many years of being cautious were engrained in her to even consider bringing up such a delicate subject in a public place.

“Lin, we will need to use your Grandfather’s access when we are done here.” Both Emily and Lin froze and looked each other over. Lin was the first to recover; if Catherine was bringing this up in front of this woman, then she was ok.

“Certainly. I will let him know to expect you.” Lin replied as she replaced the tea pots on the table.

Emily looked at Lin then back at Catherine, a bit shocked at how freely she spoke in this public place.

“I know you must have several questions about Ashley and Ephram.” Catherine began.

“While I am, perhaps we should go someplace more private to have this discussion.” Emily chided the younger woman.

“Emily, I can assure you that our topic is safe here. But before we go any further I must tell you about the place where your daughter-in-law has found refuge.” Catherine lifted the tea pot and poured herself another cup.

“The community that Ashley is with is a safe and protected place.” Emily settled back, as

Catherine began to explain. "The people who live there are good people who live by a different code. They have their own rules, laws, and authority. There are two highly important rules they live by: to accept help where it is offered and give it when they can." Catherine paused to take a sip. "And the second is to never reveal the existence of this community to outsiders."

Emily's eyebrows popped up at that comment. "Yet you are discussing this with me?"

"This conversation has been approved, they know you are coming."

Lin stepped in and began to clear some of the plates from the table as she leaned forward.

"Grandfather asks if you will take something with you when you go."

Catherine nodded. "Of course, I would be glad to."

Emily looked over the young woman with a closer eye. "She knows?"

"Of course I know. We owe everything to those below, we are proud to be helpers." Lin stood up with pride, as she looked across the room at Henry with a soft smile.

"Helpers? Below?" Emily queried.

Catherine merely nodded. "Those of us that live and work in the city are called helpers. We give what we can, when we can."

Emily nodded, this was a concept that she understood. "It is the same with all the Taj communities."

"You said Vincent was like Ephram." The air around the table suddenly got cold. Emily had obviously underestimated how protective this woman was of this strange unknown community. There was more to this than she knew.

"Perhaps it is best that I show you, instead."

Rising from the table, Emily noticed that almost all the wait staff had either disappeared or was suddenly busy. She could not make eye contact with anyone to signal for the check.

Catherine laughed as she realized what Emily was looking for. "Don't bother, they won't bring it."

Taking money out of her purse, Catherine looked around then went to an empty table and placed the bills under one of the place settings.

Emily merely raised an eyebrow as she followed out of the restaurant. Once clear from the door, she turned. "How can they stay in business if they keep giving away their meals?"

Catherine grinned. "Normally they don't, but I have helped them with some things after they had a bad turn with some shady characters a while ago. They figure they owe me, and refuse to charge me for a meal. Here we need to get moving." Catherine directed Emily down the street. "This has become a bit of a game, if I don't get away before they find the cash, they will chase me down and try to give it back."

Emily shook her head. Catherine Chandler was not turning out to be anything like she expected, this woman had all the makings of a potential Taja. Going over the list in her head of what eligible bachelors were still available, Emily started contemplated how she would have them cross Catherine's path.

~~

Father paced through his chamber, a combination of embarrassment and concern flowing through him. Vincent's reaction to the scene in the guest chamber was understandable, based upon everything he himself had drilled into his son. Never in his wildest imaginations did he imagine that such a relationship was possible, yet he had held the proof of just that in his hands, not once but twice in his lifetime.

A sound at the chamber entrance alerted Father to his visitors. Taking a deep breath he tried to focus on the task ahead of him. No matter how embarrassing this may be for all of them, he was a Doctor, he would be able to handle this rather awkward conversation.

"We are here at your request." Father tried to hold his flinch, he had heard that same tone in Vincent's voice during the times that he had been less than accepting of Catherine's presence in his son's life.

Although Ephram's stance was nothing like Vincent's. Standing slightly behind a chair, Father watched as Ephram assisted Ashley in sitting. Everything in his posture warned Father from saying or doing anything that might upset the small woman sitting so calmly between them.

"Thank you." Father motioned to one of the other chairs at the table as he himself sat down. "Ashley, I did not have this conversation with you after your delivery. At the time you were in no condition for a post partum discussion." Father paused a moment as he composed his thoughts. "But given what we inadvertently interrupted, I feel it is necessary to correct that omission."

Ephram bristled at the proprietary tone in the older man's voice, surely this man was not going to lecture him on the necessity to protect his mate.

Father focused solely on Ashley as he continued. "First, due to the circumstances, I feel I should let you know that there is a tapestry hanging by your chamber entrance. We do not have the ability or resources to place doors on chamber entrances, but in this community a closed tapestry has the same meaning of a closed door. Given that we have a large number of young children who live here, it would be best that you utilize the tapestry when you are in your chambers.

Ephram and Ashley blushed just a bit at that comment. "Of course." They commented in unison.

"Ashley, you had some minor tearing during your delivery. It was not anything that required stitches, but it will require some time to heal." Father cleared his throat before he continued. "Due to those minor injuries, it is not advised that you have any activity in that region until further notice."

Ashley's eyes got wide. Was this man telling her what she thought he was saying? Looking across at Ephram, she realized that was exactly what was happening. Covering her mouth, she tried desperately to hold the laughter she felt bubbling out of her. The irony of this was more than she could bear.

Making eye contact with Ephram did not help her control any. The laughter burst out before she could stop it, Ephram merely shook his head at the situation.

"I'm sorry," Ashley apologized to the very cross looking man across the table from them as she tried to get her laughter under control. Looking at Ephram, she hoped he would take over the conversation from here, but it didn't look like he was going to be any help. Her mate looked like he was ready to eat bear.

Taking a few deep breaths, Ashley managed to get her laughter under control, looking down at her nursing son, she realized that if she was going to finish this conversation, she was not going to be able to make eye contact with either of the men at the table.

"Father, Ephram could never harm me. The bond between us forbids it." Ashley tried to explain, but the blank look on Father's face told her she was going to have to get a little more explicit.

"I understand that he would never intentionally hurt you Ashley, but until you..."

Feeling her face heat up, she held up her hand, halting Father's statement. "No, Father, it appears that you don't completely understand." Placing her hand in Ephram's, she squeezed it slightly. Sending an apology across the bond she continued. "You see, until my body is healed and ready to accept Ephram... Well.. um... Ephram's body will not respond in a manner that makes it possible to do what you are requesting that we refrain from."

Father sat stunned, surely he wasn't hearing properly. "You mean to tell me that..."

Both Ashley and Ephram sat next to each other, holding hands. "That is exactly what she is saying, Father." Ephram emphasized. "What you don't seem to understand is that we cannot live long without our mate. So every aspect of the bond is designed to protect and guide her. First through the pregnancy, the bond is temporarily disabled. During the delivery, the bond is first re-established, first through the mother, then again through the baby after he/she is delivered."

Father nodded his head as Ashley picked up the topic. "You see Father, Ephram's body will not respond to me in that manner until I am healed."

For several more minutes they continued to answer Father's questions, most of them centered around the bond, how it worked. As they stood to leave, Ephram glanced towards the upper level before assisting Ashley up the stairs and out the chamber.

~~

Vincent leaned against the wall, blending into the shadows. He did not intend to eavesdrop, but he had been so focused on his thoughts that he had not realized that he was not alone until it was too late. Ashley's words burned through his mind... "*The bond forbids it.*" She said it so matter-of-factly, no doubt, no question crossed her mind, or carried in her voice.

Looking down at his hands, Catherine had held these hands, kissed them and called them hers. Catherine had faced him in his worst rages and come out completely untouched. Not even Father could say that. Time and time again, Catherine had stood before him and spoken and demonstrated her complete trust and lack of fear in regards of him. Yet there was still fear there, both his and hers. Their fear of losing the other, Catherine's that he would send her away again. His that he would harm her in a way that would destroy everything they had. Ashley's words, her actions, demonstrated that Catherine's fear was based on more reality than his was.

Flashes of Lisa's back, Devin's cheek, Father's arm. The countless people his hands had destroyed while protecting Catherine and his family. Some deliberate, some not, all struck down by his hand. Catherine and Ashley called him a man. Father and Peter were more scientific about the differences. Stepping forward, Vincent clung to the shadows, as he watched Ephram glance in his direction before he lead Ashley out of the chamber. Perhaps it was time to get answers, from someone who may actually have them.

~~

Catherine paused at the intersection as she waited for Emily to rest for a bit. "When you said wear comfortable shoes, I didn't think you meant hiking boots."

"We don't have much further to go, we should be there in another few minutes." Catherine assured her.

Emily groaned as she pushed away from the wall. "I am going to have to go back up those stairs again. Now I can see why you are in such good shape."

Catherine grinned, "Well, this amongst other things."

"Well lead on, McDuff." Emily looked at the intersection and wondered how this woman could tell which direction they were going. She had lost her bearings before they had even reached the huge spiral stairs. The indirect path did not surprise her. If her suspicions were correct, she was an unknown entering into a Taj's domain... Emily would have taken similar cautions to protect her family as well. Although she was not sure how a Taj could be in Manhattan. As a rule, they avoided crowded areas, and well, New York City pretty much defined crowded.

The last turn caught Emily by surprise. The chamber looked like something a mad English doctor would work in. It reminded her vaguely of a Research Doctor she knew way back when she was just a wet behind the ears med student. She had admired that man's dedication, he hadn't known she existed. She had been one amongst hundreds of interns that crossed his path every day.

Catherine smiled as she watched Emily's reaction to Father's chamber. She had to admit, next to Vincent's chamber, this was one of her favorite places in the tunnels. It reminded her a little bit of her Grandfather's old attic, full of little treasures here and there, all haphazardly piled together.

“Ahhh Catherine, you made it.” Father’s voice came from the desk, behind the spiral staircase. She turned and saw him finish writing something in his journal.

“Father, I would like you to meet Dr. Emily Carlington.” Catherine began, as she paused just a moment as she watched the woman’s face go slightly pale. Emily seemed to shake herself out of whatever had shocked her quickly as she extended her hand to the older gentleman.

“Dr. Wells, I must say it has defiantly been a long time.”

Father stumbled at the use of his name and former title. A quick glance at Catherine’s face showed that she was as shocked by the turn of events as he was.

“Forgive me, but have we met?” Father feared that he already knew the answer.

“Yes, although you would probably not remember. You were a research doctor when I was an intern.”

Ahhh, Father nodded. “Actually, it is now just Jacob, or as most of the people here call me, Father.”

Emily nodded, and let the subject drop. This was not the time for that conversation. “I understand...”

“Mom!” Emily jumped up at the sound of Ephram’s voice. Crossing the room, she rushed to her son’s side. Quickly hugging him, she pulled back and began a quick inspection. “You are ok? Please tell me you did not ride all the way here on that monstrous beast you call a motorcycle!”

“Of course not,” Ephram denied as he lead her back to the table. Winking at Catherine and Father, he continued. “I would never tell you that I rode all the way here on the Hog.”

“Ok, then you found safer transportation?” Emily pressed, refusing to sit down as she turned to face her errant oldest son.

“Mother, I am not going to discuss my means of transportation. The only thing that matters is that I got here, and that Ashley and our son are safe and sound.” Ephram pointedly pulled out a chair for Emily and offered it to her. The subject, as far as he was concerned, was closed.

“Fine, I will drop the subject for now, but I can’t fathom why you insist upon riding that horrible death trap!” Emily concluded.

"Well, because it would look suspicious if I rode in a car with a darkened Motorcycle helmet on, and biker's gloves." Ephram laughed as he joined everyone at the table.

"You have to admit, he does have a point." Ashley added from the entry way. "Look who I found."

Vincent followed Ashley into the chamber. Fighting the urge to pull his hood up, he faced a complete stranger the best way he knew.

Emily hugged Ashley and turned to look at the man who followed behind. "Amazing." Stepping past, she walked up to Vincent and let the Doctor take over. "Dark blond hair, blue eyes..." Emily looked Vincent over carefully, observing his features and comparing them to every Taj she had met.

"Mother, you are making him uncomfortable." Ephram commented.

Emily turned, and saw the look in her son's eyes. "*Ahhh, so he sees it too.*" Turning to Vincent, she extended her hand. "Forgive me, there are times the geneticist in me takes over. You must be Vincent. I understand that you saved our Ashley's life."

Vincent dropped his head, letting his hair fall forward, "Welcome to our home." Brushing off the praise, he hoped they could find a new subject and quickly.

"Speaking of which, where is my Grandson?" Emily looked around.

Ashley walked forward and placed a kiss on Emily's cheek. "Sleeping soundly, so that he will be in the best of moods when he meets his Grandmother for the first time."

Ducking quickly, Ashley avoided Emily's playful swat in her direction. "Mind your tongue, child, I am too young to be a Grandmother."

Vincent relaxed a bit as he watched the banter between Emily and her family. He felt Catherine's hand slide into his and squeeze, before he even realized that his hand was resting on her shoulder.

Emily watched as Vincent sat next to Catherine and tried to contain her breaking heart. This man should have had so much more than a hole in the ground. "Tell me, how did you come to be here?" Emily asked Vincent. Father started the tale of a resident finding a small babe in an alley behind St. Vincent's hospital, each person adding their own bits, until they finished with

Ephram's arrival.

"I must meet this Samantha." Emily laughed as Ephram finished his tale of a brave young girl sitting in the middle of a tunnel reading a book. Turning serious, she looked at Ashley, then at Vincent.

"You say that you passed near St. Vincent's during your escape?" Emily questioned.

Ashley nodded; intrigued, Catherine leaned forward. "Do you remember which direction you came from?"

"Sorry, no. I was so desperate, I only really remember the hospital, because I was so tempted to go in." Ashley apologized, she was not going to be much help in this investigation.

Emily patted her hand. "No worries, honey. I am sure we will find answers eventually." Looking across the table, she saw a determined look cross Catherine's face.

"What is it, Catherine?" Father also noticed Catherine's expression and recognized it for what it was. He has seen that expression cross her face enough times over the past few years that he knew her inner investigator was coming out.

"I find it a bit coincidental that St. Vincent's is connected to not one but two births." Catherine leaned back as she continued. "First Vincent, then nearly 30 years later, Ashley." Catherine squeezed Vincent's hand, not wanting to hurt him but the question had to be asked.

"You recognized Vincent." It was a statement, not a question. Father sat up, alert. "That is impossible, he has been here his whole life."

Emily stared at Catherine from across the table. "*looks can be deceiving*". She had let down her guard around this woman, forgetting that she was first and foremost an attorney, from a long line of attorneys, and from everything she could see, a rising star in the District Attorney's office. With a quick glance to Ephram, she stood her ground. "Merely speculation, counselor. Without the proper tests, I have no way of knowing if my theory is correct."

"What tests?" Father demanded, he was not going to let Vincent become a lab rat, not even for this woman.

"Nothing invasive, a little blood, some hair and a swab of skin from the inside of his mouth." Catherine nodded. "If Vincent agrees, I can get you the necessary swab kit from a friend of

mine in the police department. You will need a higher tech lab that Father has here.”

“Not a problem, I have a colleague I am scheduled to meet here in town, I will merely request to utilize his lab and ask for discretion.”

“Exactly what do you hope to gain from these tests?” Father insisted on pressing. This was his son they were talking about, and Vincent was being abnormally quiet about the whole topic.

“Well first, it can help confirm who his parents may have been.”

Neither Catherine nor Vincent missed the past tense of Emily’s comment. “Ashley stated that she suspected that Vincent’s parents are dead.”

Emily nodded. “It is the only way he would have been allowed to be raised here, so far away from the council and family.” Pausing for a moment, she turned to Father.

“What I don’t understand, is how he survived infancy. The mortality rate amongst orphaned Taj infants is nearly 100%, the chances of Vincent surviving without a parental bond falls in the range of impossible.”

Father rubbed his eyes as he remembered those days. “I can tell you, it wasn’t easy.”

Emily nodded. “I would like to compare notes, and see what you did differently that was successful.”

“I will see if I can find them for you.”

“Vincent, you better make a run for it...I sense an examination in your near future.” Ephram jumped up between his mother and Vincent, “Here, I’ll hold her back, you make your escape!”

Ashley saw the look on Vincent’s face and burst out laughing as Emily glared at them all.

“Seriously Ephram, you make me sound almost predatory... of course I wouldn’t invade Vincent’s privacy in that manner.” Placing her hands on her hips she continued. “I would offer you up first and hope that Vincent’s natural curiosity would prompt the courtesy to be returned.”

Father, getting caught up in the game, “That would be up to Vincent, of course.”

Enjoying the banter, Catherine looked at her watch. “I have to be getting back.” Turning to Emily, “It was good meeting you, I am sure our paths will cross again.”

“Actually, I should probably go back with you, I am scheduled to meet with a colleague of mine later this afternoon.” Gathering her jacket. She kissed Ashley then Ephram both on the cheek.

“I trust I will get to see you later.” Emily looked up at Father.

“Of course, you are welcome here.” Father replied.

“Thank you, I brought some books and journals with me that you might find of value.”

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Catherine and Emily left the tunnels through an access panel underneath the Waldorf Hotel.

“Emily!...Cathy!” Catherine jumped at the sound of her name.

“Peter! What are you doing here?” Cathy leaned forward to kiss her old friend and mentor on the cheek.

“I am meeting with Dr. Carlington.” Peter responded as he shook Emily’s hand. “I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“Actually we only met today, the woman Vincent found is her daughter-in-law.” Cathy added.

Emily’s eyes got wide. “Wait, You know about...” she paused

Peter smiled and nodded, “Since the beginning. Jacob and I went to medical school together.”

“It is a small world.” Emily smiled.

“Smaller than you think.” Cathy replied, “Peter, her son is like Vincent, I have a feeling you two have a lot to discuss. I get the feeling that Father would like to be part of that conversation as well.” Kissing Peter on the cheek again. “I have to get back to the office, I will let you two work out the details.”

Peter and Emily watched Catherine dash through the lobby and out the front doors. Emily looked over and saw him shaking his head.

“Peter?”

“I have no idea where she gets all her energy. I am sure I only know half of what she is involved in, but between her job, social responsibilities, those below, her duties as a helper and Vincent... I can’t see where she has time to sleep.” Peter sighed... “Makes me feel old and

tired just thinking about it.”

“I can understand that.” Emily headed to the elevators. “I got the impression she had set a slower pace when going through the maze of tunnels, so I could keep up.” Stepping into the elevator, she pushed the button for her floor. “I have some journals that I think you will find helpful, I promised to take them to Dr. Wells later, but we might as well do it now. I will need to make some calls and get some things sent over, along with a couple of documents faxed, Father will need them.” Emily finished

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“The dark biker is in New York.” The raspy voice on the phone would send chills up the spine of any normal person. There was never a face, just a voice on the phone. “It is a matter of time before he finds her.”

“We are keeping a close eye on him. We know he didn’t scout long, he went straight to the park.”

“Find him, when you do, I don’t care what you do with them, I want that baby! I have been as patient and forgiving as I can. I will not tolerate any further mistakes.”

Three scruffy men stood around the table fidgeting with different knives. This should have been an easy job. Grab a pregnant woman, and keep her locked up until she gave birth. Something they had done time and time again. They had done their research, she was unwed, and appeared to have very little family. But their research had been wrong.

“We are not gettin paid enough for this shit!” A younger man paced back and forth as he cursed and muttered to himself.

“Shut up and stop griping, JR If you hadn’t fallen asleep while you were supposed to be guarding the broad, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“Don’t blame this on me!” he snapped back. “How was I to know she could even reach that window, much less fit through it? Besides, that woman had to go piss more than anyone I have ever met before.”

The loud crack of a hand hitting flesh echoed through the small room. “Dumb Ass...she was going to the bathroom so much to get you to let down your guard.” Flash flipped open a dirty looking cooler; pulling out beer, he flipped the cap off and chugged half the bottle.

Jumping to his feet, JR pulled his knife and waved it in front of him threateningly. "Just try hitting me again, old man, and I will show the world who the true dumb ass is, by carving it into your face!"

"ENOUGH!! JR, put up your little sticker, Flash, stop antagonizing the kid, we have enough trouble on our hands."

"Sure thing, Boss, what do you want to do?" Flash tossed another bottle the direction of the man sitting at the table.

"We don't get the rest of the money until we deliver the baby." Flash and JR both sat at the table, as they watched 'Boss' think over their options.

"Ok, the way I see it...we have two options." Boss counted off his fingers.

"One, we know he went to central park and disappeared in one of the storm ditches. I say we stake that out to see what we can find out." Boss took a swig of his beer before he continued.

"Should that fail, then I say we grab us some other pregnant broad, and turn that baby over. Our customer will never know the difference.

"That works for me. The sooner we get paid, the sooner we can blow this joint!" Flash slammed down his beer. "JR, you take first shift, Don't screw it up this time!"

~Next Day, Afternoon~

Three heads bent over the table as they passed books and journals between them. "There is a complete genetic break down in here." Father exclaimed.

"Look at this," Peter passed another journal over. "They have breakdowns of the variations of blood types."

"Dr. Wells, what possessed you to switch to goat milk formula instead of the more common dairy base?"

Vincent and Ephram stood on the upper level looking down over the three Doctors as they lost themselves in their research.

"I guess it is better that they are pouring over the books than us." Ephram commented.

Vincent looked over his shoulder, "How long do you think that will last?"

“Not long.” Ephram shrugged. “If Father is anything like my mom, then in about an hour they will start wanting to view live specimens instead of text books.”

“She will last an hour?”

Ephram chuckled softly. “Maybe you and I should make ourselves scarce for a bit. I get the impression that you have a lot of questions, yourself.”

Vincent pushed away from the rail and lead Ephram around the upper balcony, showing him how to sneak out without disturbing the three Doctors as they compared and compiled lifetimes worth of notes.

“What about your son?” Vincent looked towards the exit that would take them to Ashley, but also right across the path and into the notice of the very people they were hoping to avoid.

Ephram laughed. “Yeah, they will have to go through Ashley to get to the baby. I am thinking their chances are next to nil.” Slipping into the tunnel, Ephram waited for Vincent to take the lead.

They walked together in silence for some time as Vincent gathered his thoughts.

“Something’s bothering you.” Ephram ?? “Are you normally this quiet, or is this because of what you walked in on yesterday?”

Vincent gripped his fists as he lead Ephram towards the falls. “All my life, I have been cautioned and cautious about my differences. The times I forget, or forget myself, someone has gotten hurt.” Leaning against the wall, he looked down in shame. “To be the cause of that pain in Catherine...”

Ephram stopped and leaned against the opposite wall, watching the younger man before him. “Tell me about these people you hurt.”

Vincent shook his head, “Sometimes I lose myself.”

Ephram began to feel alarmed. He could sense no evil or unbalance within Vincent, but could he be driving himself to the fever? “Tell me about these times, Vincent. When is the first time you ‘Lost’ yourself?”

Vincent pushed away from the wall and walked away slowly, quietly. Ephram followed, letting the younger man have the chance to get his thoughts together. Yet at the last turn, he paused

and gasped. Here the walls were different, smooth, not rock. And every surface available had murals. Some of the people in the pictures he recognized, a much younger looking Father holding what had to be a baby Vincent. Portraits and scenes decorated the walls for as far as he could see. Walking through, he touched each painting with reverence. There was one of Vincent and several other boys obviously involved in some mischief. Stopping, he paused at a portrait of a young woman captured mid pirouette, A teen-age Vincent standing slightly behind her.

“Her name was Lisa.” Vincent whispered.

“I know.” Ephram’s statement surprised him. “My sister is our community’s yoga and dance instructor. She has several videos of Lisa’s performances. She got the chance to dance with a company that Lisa did a solo performance for. I hope you get the chance to ask her about it sometime.”

Studying the picture closely, “You fell for her, didn’t you?” Ephram opened his senses and felt Vincent’s trepidation.

Vincent made no comment, just nodded.

“How old were you?”

“Young, 15, 17?” I don’t remember anymore, I just remember hurting her.”

“What happened?” This was important. Ashley had told him that she got the impression from Catherine, that their relationship was not moving forward as it should.

“I hurt her.” Vincent whispered, before he walked on.

Stopping in front of another portrait, this one was of a teenage boy, with deep scratches across his cheek, there was no mistaking the mark.

“How old were you when this happened?” Ephram asked.

“7, maybe 8,” Vincent moved again. Portrait after portrait showed Vincent at his fiercest, attacking, protecting. Mixed in were pictures of Vincent teaching, leading, loving and being loved. These walls showed both sides of the Taj, at the end of the tunnel, Vincent stood, quietly waiting as Ephram realized exactly what was happening. Vincent was offering his sins up for judgment, possibly to the only man capable of truly judging him.

"We should talk." Ephram walked to Vincent, "but not here."

~~

Samantha skipped through the park with her basket, she had made her deliveries with enough time left over to play in the park for a while. She was getting good at getting her errands done faster than the boys. By her estimates, she had a good hour or two before someone would expect her back in the tunnels. Setting her things down on a bench, she dashed over and jumped on a swing. She knew she should be too old to do this, but it felt so good to feel the air on her face as she pumped her swing higher and higher. She almost felt like she was flying when she was on the swings. As much as she loved her home in the tunnels, there was just times when you needed to be outside. Even Vincent came up to the park, she figured that she wasn't supposed to know that, but everyone knew that Vincent would sometimes spend most of the night walking in the park, or through the streets.

Samantha continued swinging as she watched the crowds move through the park. The joggers were starting to make way for people in business suits as they cut across the park on their way home from work. One face looked very familiar in the crowd. Dragging her feet she slowed her swing down "CATHERINE!!! WATCH!!!" Samantha yelled before she took a flying leap in the air. She would have landed on her feet if the gravel had not slid away. The moving gravel in combination with her forward movement, Samantha found herself on her knees before she landed face first into the ground.

Catherine heard her name and turned in time to see Samantha launch herself into the air from the swing. Her heart stopped as she watched this young girl who had earned such a special place in her heart come crashing down to earth. Rushing forward, she helped Samantha up from the ground and dust off the dirt. "Where are you hurt?" Catherine demanded as she did a cursory inspection.

"Did you see me, Catherine? I almost flew!" Samantha crowed. "Look, I had to have made at least 6 maybe 7 feet!" Catherine sat back as she watched Samantha danced around. She couldn't hold in her laughter when the younger girl continued. "I have you as a witness...so when I tell the boys that I beat their jumps you can tell them you saw it. And that will teach them!"

"Yes, well, I can defiantly testify to that, you almost gave me a stroke when I saw you fly like that." Catherine ruffled her fingers through the dark curly hair as she helped dislodge gravel

and leaves.

“Are you going below?” Sam inquired, neither of the women paid any attention to the sleeping biker on the bench behind them.

“That was my intentions.” Catherine smiled as she stood up.

“Hold on, let me get my stuff.” Samantha ran over to the swing set and grabbed her basket. “I’ll go with you.”

JR watched with great interest as they walked off together towards the very drain tunnel he had been watching.

Sitting up, he watched the tunnel for over an hour as he waited for them to come out. Looking around him, he made sure no one was watching him. Casually strolling to the drainage ditch, he walked as far back as he could, There were no signs of the two people he watched come in, the tunnel ended into a cavern type room, with bars surrounding a closed up drainage tunnel.

Going to the bars, he grabbed the door and rattled it, it was defiantly locked. Walking around, he found a crevice he could stuff himself into and hide. He knew the Dark Biker had come in here, but nobody had seen him leave. If people were coming into this place and not going, then there had to be another way out.

~~

Ephram followed Vincent towards the water falls. The magnitude of this place amazed him, that such a place would exist in New York was mind boggling, for it to exist under Manhattan defied all credibility. Turning around, he took in everything he could see, Ashley would love this place. Ephram stopped as he saw Vincent sitting on the edge of the path, his feet dangling over the cliff side. He stepped back and leaned against the wall as he studied the man closer. From what he could tell, he was maybe 5 or 6 years older than Vincent, yet right now he felt so much older than this troubled man.

“Tell me about the first time.” Ephram broke the silence. If he was going to be any help to Vincent, then he was going to have to find how close to the edge the man was truly dancing.

“His name is Devin, he is Father’s son.” Vincent started quietly.

“So you were raised together, as brothers?” Ephram was starting to put the pieces together.

Vincent simply nodded. Devin had gotten the money together to buy a knife, against Father's wishes. One of the kids told Father, Devin thought it was me. He got angry and confronted me with it, when I denied it, he struck at me."

"And you struck back." Ephram continued.

"Devin found out later that it was another kid named Mitch that had told Father."

"Vincent, you were young, and defending yourself, have you looked at Devin's face? I mean really looked at Devin's face?"

"Yes, he is scarred now, because of me."

"No, he is scarred because of something he started. Vincent, you were cornered, by an older boy who was intent on causing you harm. You have attacked others...what happened with them? Did they survive?"

Vincent shook his head.

"Devin has a souvenir of being foolish enough to put a Taj on the defensive. You would not have been given the training or the guidance on what to expect, much less how to control those urges, your reaction was natural. You will need to talk to him about this Vincent, if you are ever to put it behind you..."

"What about Father?"

"Tell me what happened there." Ephram moved forward and sat on the edge next to Vincent

Vincent talked about Paracelsus, and his drug lab. He talked about the safety of the tunnels, and Paracelsus attacking him, first with the drug, then later with his knife.

"So, let me get this straight." Ephram stopped Vincent's story. "You broke Father's wrist, while under the influence of a deadly hallucinogenic drug? There is more to this story than I am getting, Vincent." Standing up, he urged Vincent to do the same. "Let's see Father and get to the bottom of this."

~~

Catherine stopped by the guest chambers, looking for Ashley. The curtain was open, and the

room obviously empty, so she followed the tunnel to Father's chamber.

It didn't take long before she could hear the sounds of Ashley's son crying. Stepping into Father's office, she saw the three doctors standing around the table with open books scattered all around them. Ashley was standing to the side and her son was on the table kicking his legs and protesting every bit of his examination.

"What's going on?" Catherine whispered in Ashley's ear.

"The mad scientists, have gotten a hold of my son." Ashley growled. "That is what is going on."

Catherine laughed. "I take it they gave up on the chance to compare dissections of Vincent or Ephram.

Ashley glared at the chamber entrance. "No, it seems that the men have conveniently made themselves scarce. And our good Doctors, here, felt it would be safer to examine a helpless baby than an embarrassed grown man."

Catherine nodded. "I have some questions for you, about your abduction. Do you think you can trust your son in the hands of these mad scientists and his Grandmother?" Both women looked at Emily just as she rubbed her hands together over the baby. "On the other hand, maybe we should wait, I have to admit, I have never seen Father or Peter like this."

"Good idea." Ashley rolled her eyes. "Unfortunately, I have seen Emily like this before, she can get rather enthusiastic about her research."

"What's going on here?" Ephram demanded as he and Vincent walked into the room. "Ashley, why are you letting that nutcase examine our son."

"Before you growl at me, Ephram, look...There are three of them and one of me!" Ashley placed her hands on her hips.

"Good point." Ephram conceded.

"Ephram, I take great exception to you calling my colleagues nutcases." Emily raised her voice to be heard over the noise.

"Mother, I was talking about you." Ephram walked over and kissed her on the forehead. "You are the biggest nutcase in this room. OUCH!"

Ephram jumped back as he felt Emily yank a strand of hair from his head. "You should respect your elders boy, and remember the nut doesn't fall too far from the tree, son."

Rubbing his head, he glared at his mother. "What did you do that for?"

"I needed DNA. This is the easiest way to get it." Showing the other doctors around the table, she cut off the end of the hair that still had the skin tab.

"What do you need my DNA for, Mother, you already know about my history."

"Yes, but we don't know Vincent's. I am going to use yours as a baseline, since all my research is back at my lab, and I can't get it here." Crooking her finger she signaled for Vincent to come closer. Opening up a tube with an overly large q-tip inside, she moved towards Vincent. "Open wide." Sticking the tube into his mouth, she rubbed it across his inner cheek.

"Now wait, why does he get the swab and you get to pull out my hair?" Ephram continued to protest. "Besides, why is my son howling like a Banshee on the table while everyone watches?"

"Ephram, leave him." Turning in surprise, he looked at the person who spoke. He had expected Ashley to back him on this.

"Ashley?" There was definitely more to this than he was picking up on.

"I need to know that he is ok." She hugged herself. Ephram probed their bond as he began to realize something.

"You're blocking something." Ephram moved Ashley into his arms to provide the warmth she seemed to be missing. "What are you hiding from me?"

"They had me for three months, Ephram." Moving closer to his embrace, she spoke for the first time about her ordeal. "For three months, I didn't know if I was going to live, or die. For three months I lived in fear. And for three months of my pregnancy, I had no medical treatment. I just need to know that he is ok."

Ephram nodded as he looked across at his mother and the other two doctors. "Make it quick, I won't have them traumatized any more than they already have been."

Emily nodded and turned to her bag. "Ashley, I need you to go pump, we will need a sample of your milk."

Ashley took the pump and bottle then disappeared down the tunnel to the privacy of her chamber. Fortunately, she had seen this used enough times that she understood the general concept.

As Ashley returned, she exchanged the bottle for her son.

"From what I can tell, he is perfectly fine. A little underweight, but if his hollering is any indication, his lungs are fully developed." Emily wrapped her grandson up in his blanket before handing him over to his mother. "Father said his APGAR ratings were high, and take a close look at his feet. He has the creases at the bottom, so he was obviously full term."

"Thanks, Mom." Ashley kissed Emily on the cheek as she cuddled her son close to her chest, before sitting down at the table. "I was so worried that everything I went through would have a negative impact on him."

Catherine joined the group at the table. "I know you said that you really don't know who took you, but can you tell me a bit about what you do know?"

"I don't know where to start." Ashley apologized.

"Start at the beginning." Emily suggested. "Why did you leave the safety of the compound?"

"I didn't." Ashley's response surprised them all. "I got a call from John, he was concerned about the readings on some of the tests, and wanted me to come in and give a few more samples to make sure that everything was ok."

Emily sunk down in the chair, "John?" her face going white.

"Who is John?" Catherine pulled out her notebook from her pocket and started to write.

"John is a brilliant scientist who has worked with our community for years. He came shortly after you were born, Ephram. He was helping us work on a formula for the babies."

"Do you have a last name for John?" Catherine pressed, pulling out her notebook, she started writing

"Yes, of course. His name is John Pater."

Father, Vincent and Catherine froze at that answer. "I am sorry, did you just say John Pater?" Catherine looked at Vincent, the link was too strong for it to be merely coincidence.

"Yes, he is a chemist." Emily continued.

"Yes, we know." Catherine's voice was harder than Vincent had ever heard before. The bond went ice cold before it went silent.

"I take it you know John Pater." Ephram commented.

"Yes" Vincent said. "That drug I told you about...The one that I was under the influence when I struck Father."

"The one that a man you called Paracelsus created." Ephram nodded.

"Yes, well, Paracelsus' given name is John Pater. He has been connected with these tunnels since the beginning."

"There is more to it than that." Father continued. "The woman that found you, the one that brought you to me, was Anna, John's wife."

"Impossible." Emily declared, "I took him to the airport myself, he left two weeks before..." She suddenly stopped.

"Before what, Mother." Ephram pressed.

"We don't know for sure, Ephram, I don't want to say until we know for sure." Emily tried to stop him.

"The test is only a formality at this point." Ashley pressed. "Look at him, Emily. Really look at Vincent. Can you tell me that there is any doubt as to his relationship? Heck, take away the Taji features and everything else is almost exactly what Jennifer looks like."

Ephram nodded. "And his movements are so much like Kevin's that it is scary. Don't you think they should all know that there is a survivor?"

"Besides, doesn't Dena have a right to know for sure what happened to her sister, even if she can't be told about the Taji?" Ashley picked up where Ephram left off. Emily was always amazed at how well a bonded pair worked together when the goal was mutual. To see that her son had found that made her smile, even as her heart broke with the news she knew deep inside that she had.

"We think your mother's name was Debbie." Emily stated as she watched Vincent. "She

disappeared two weeks after finding out she was two months pregnant. Two weeks after John Pater had left our community to return home.”

“And my father?” Vincent had to know.

“Her mate, Marcus, was found in their bed, from what we could tell, he had been poisoned.”

“Who are Kevin, Dena and Jennifer?” Catherine asked.

“Kevin is Marcus’s younger brother. Dena was Debbie’s sister, and Jennifer is Dena’s daughter.” Ashley stated.

“I have family? Blood relatives?” Vincent changed his phrasing upon seeing Father wince at the first comment. All his life he had felt separate from everyone, despite the closeness of the family that had loved and raised him.

“We believe so.” Emily stated. I will run these samples. I will check with Jennifer; genetically, she is closest to you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Father asked.

“While through familial connections Jennifer may be Vincent’s cousin, genetically she would read as his half sister.” Emily paused. “You see Dena and Debbie were identical twins.”

“How many of these people are still alive?” Father had to ask.

“Dena is in an Alzheimer’s unit. But Vincent would never be allowed to meet her anyway, she was never cleared to meet the Taji.”

“Not cleared?” Catherine asked.

“The Taji are very protected.” Ashley commented. “Only those who have been approved by the council, and have undergone rigorous personality testing, get to come into the inner circle.”

“How did Paracelsus pass those tests?” Catherine asked

“I don’t know,” Emily stated. “Exceptions may have been made in his case. A natural disaster resulted in several orphaned Taj children, we were desperate to come up with a formula they could accept in order for them to survive.”

“And John was involved in this?” Peter pressed.

"Yes, we worked together. Much to Tom's frustration."

"Dad?" Ephram asked. "Dad had a problem with John."

"No, your dad had a problem with me working in a lab alone with another man." Emily responded. "Especially after you were born. At that time, it was expected that after giving birth, a life mate would drop her career and focus her entire life around the kids."

"Well that was the normal expectations in the 50's," Father replied. "Men had careers, women worked at home, with the kids."

"Yeah that is what Tom's parents said... A lot!" Emily groused.

"I was breaking the mold, even back then. But I had worked too hard, through too much adversity to just drop being a doctor." Emily looked at Ephram. "Your dad understood, he stayed with you and allowed me to keep working."

"You were a great Mom." Ephram confirmed. "Even if you were a little abnormal."

"Besides, look at what you have accomplished." Ashley pressed. "The Taji now have documented medical history, plus, all of the life mates that have been able to continue with their careers."

"I have done almost everything but the one thing I set out to do." Emily looked around the table. "But it looks like someone else accomplished that for me."

"What is that?" Catherine asked.

"There has never been a documented case of a Taj orphan surviving the first month of infancy. Until now." Emily turned to Vincent, "I don't think you fully understand what a miracle you truly are. Because of you, and your Father, we may be able to save others."

Vincent bowed his head, it was hard for him to accept compliments of this sort, if these people truly knew what he was.

"She's right." Ephram added. Vincent looked up and made eye contact, "you may have some ghosts we need to excise, but you are truly a miracle, and worthy of the Taj name." This is what Vincent came to him for. Judgment. Well he was going to give it, but not the judgment Vincent expected.

“What ghosts?” Father asked.

Ephram moved around the table to stand behind his wife. Kissing her on the head he faced Father.

“Vincent told me about a drug that John created, he also told me about striking you.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Vincent stiffen up, and Catherine closing her notebook and going to him to offer comfort. Good, that was as it should be. “I need to know your side of the story.”

Father noticed the marked change in the atmosphere around the room. “Ok,” nodding his head. “We had discovered that Paracelsus was creating his drug in the tunnels. I had confronted him about it, with no luck. He made it clear that should anything happen to him, then he would expose the tunnels, and Vincent to the authorities.” Father’s eyes glazed over as he focused on the events as they had happened. Vincent had obviously gone to Ephram for judgment, he was going to ensure that Ephram had all the facts as they were.

“Vincent volunteered to keep Paracelsus from leaving the tunnels, until we came up with a better solution. It was during this time that Paracelsus drugged him.” Rubbing his eyes, “I remember hearing Vincent cry out, his torment echoed through all these tunnels. I went to Vincent to discover that he had trapped himself in a dead end. I approached him, calling his name. I had never seen him like that before, he warned me off, but I still approached him. He bared his teeth at me and tried to warn me off a second time, but I insisted. I approached him, slowly continuing to talk when he lashed out and knocked me away. I broke my wrist when my hand hit the wall.”

“So you are saying that Vincent warned you off not once but several times?” Ephram pressed.

Father simply nodded. “He was like that for hours, nobody could get near him. Finally out of desperation, I called for Catherine.”

Ephram turned to Catherine, “What happened then?”

Catherine picked up the story from there. “Father explained to me what had happened. I was already working this drug case from the other side of this. Father explained to me that I was not to approach Vincent, but that he was hoping my voice, in combination with our bond, would calm him enough for them to provide Vincent with aid and care.”

“What did you do?” This story was turning out as he had expected.

“They took me to where Vincent had holed himself up, and had me call out to him. I had never heard him so tormented like that before. I remember moving forward, continuing to call Vincent’s name, and hands holding me back. Father reiterated the importance that I could not, should not approach Vincent. We argued and I went ahead anyway.”

“What was Vincent’s reaction when you came closer?”

“I could tell he was reacting to the light I carried, so I put it down and kept approaching. I kept calling his name as I walked closer and each time he got quieter and quieter. When I was finally standing directly in front of him, I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye, a bit of light with it. Vincent protested, and lunged forward. I wasn’t sure who was behind me, but I knew that Vincent would never forgive himself if he hurt anyone while he was in that state, so I launched myself into his path. I just kept saying his name, over and over, the next thing I know Vincent’s arms came around me and he was saying my name. It took him a little bit longer before we could leave that area.”

“Were you frightened?” Ephram pressed.

“Of course, I was terrified!” Catherine exclaimed, but before anyone could add anything, she continued. “I knew exactly what this drug was capable of, and how deadly it could be. The effects of it should never have lasted as long as they did in Vincent. Before he even touched me, I could feel how hot he had gotten. Fever was not supposed to be one of the effects of this drug, when I was holding him, his heart was racing so fast I was afraid that it would suddenly stop, and take mine with it.” Catherine blinked back the tears she refused to let fall.

“Vincent said there were others.” Ephram decided that this was going to end here.

“Others?” Father and Catherine spoke at the same time.

“The others I have killed.” Vincent spoke quietly from behind Catherine.

“While saving our lives.” Catherine turned to Vincent, she realized what Ephram was doing. Well if Vincent was going to be on trial, he picked the wrong person to confront with it.

“Catherine.” Vincent started

“Don’t Catherine me, Vincent.” Catherine had never been so mad at him before, she was not going to let him continue to flay himself with this. “Not a single one of us would be in this room if you had not protected us the only way you could.”

Counting off on her fingers. “Those men in the brownstone had already attacked me once, and killed Carol. If you had not interfered, they would have continued coming after me and finished the job they had started months earlier. Do you think they were going to let me survive a second time?”

Raising a second finger, “The professor was insane, he had already killed two people and was in the process of sacrificing me to you of all things, when you broke in. It was the fire that killed him, not you.”

On her third finger, she continued. “You gave the Tong leader a chance to leave here unharmed if he promised to go away, it was the weapon of one of his own people that killed him, not you.”

Forth finger was Paracelsus’ minion that took her from her balcony so he could watch her die while Paracelsus had him fight to the death, with Erlik. Fifth was the martial arts instructor who killed himself when the rope he was swinging on broke. On and on, she named each situation where Vincent had been forced to protect her, or his world, from outside deadly forces.

Ephram sat down in the chair that Catherine had vacated. Letting Ashley lean against him, he watched as Vincent’s life mate read him the list of every heroic deed he had committed. This man had faced a lot, but he was surrounded by strong, supportive, loving people. Vincent was in good hands.

As Catherine wound down her list, ending it with the list of people that she had killed to protect herself or him, Ephram decided it was time to finish this whole farce. “There is no judgment, here, Vincent, you are not the demon you think you are. You have defended your family, your home and your life mate in the honorable way of the Taj.

Not willing to completely give up, Vincent threw up the one thing that he was still convinced would turn Catherine away. “And what about what happened with Lisa?”

“Who’s Lisa?” Ashley whispered in Ephram’s ear.

“Remember the dancer that Jess was complaining about?” Ephram whispered back.

“The one that went after Tara’s husband when she was 7 months pregnant?”

Ephram nodded. “That’s the one.”

Ashley paused. “What does she have to do with Vincent?”

"It seems she grew up here in the tunnels. Vincent had a thing for her, then."

"So this was the private education she was so secretive about." Ashley thought for a bit. "Her career started when she was about what, 16? 17?"

"So Jen says."

"You don't have to tell me about Lisa, I can guess. Jess complained when Lisa was dancing with the company, that she went after anyone and anything in pants. Lisa was a flirt and a tease, and from what I was able to learn, a very accomplished one at that. I also remember Jess complaining about how Lisa would wear very little in the dance rehearsals. I went with Jess to one of the rehearsals, and I can tell you that she has no scars, so I know that whatever you think you did, there were no lasting marks on her."

"Give it up, Vincent." Ephram put his arms around his wife and son. Then leaning back, he smiled at Ashley's little squeak as he pulled her into his lap. "Everyone has their bad first kiss/encounter stories. So the only thing that your dramatic Lisa encounter does is make you normal."

Vincent looked around at everyone in the room, flabbergasted. "Catherine?" Someone had to be made to understand.

Catherine shook her head. "I don't share your vision, Vincent." Rubbing her hand up his arm. "You are a man that I respect, admire, and yes, even love. How many times do I have to tell you that you deserve this?"

Holding out his hands to Catherine. "These hands..."

Catherine covered both of his and leaned into him. "Are mine."

Ephram looked around, it was time to lighten the mood up. From what he could tell, Vincent was really good at brooding.

"You know, you are not the only person who had a bad first romantic encounter." Ephram tightened his grip on Ashley as he heard her hiss at him. She relaxed slightly as he continued. "Father? Peter?" He looked across the table at the two older men.

Clearing his throat, Father answered "Yes, well, of course." Not really wanting to get involved in that subject.

Peter started laughing as Father turned and glared at him. "Vincent, did Father ever tell you about when we were interns?"

Vincent shook his head and let Catherine lead him closer to the table.

"Hmmm. Well, we were further upstate, working in a small town hospital." Peter dramatically paused as if he was trying to remember. "There was this one volunteer, she was a cute little thing, not much younger than we were. The last day of our internship, we were all going to go celebrate and Jacob convinced her to come join us. What none of us realized was that she was the youngest daughter of one of the local dairy farmers. This farmer had six kids, the first five were all boys."

Noticing that he had the complete attention of his audience, he grinned and continued. "Well, after dinner, Jacob was determined to be the gentleman and escort the lady home. The next thing I know he is tearing into our dorm, throwing our stuff into suitcases and pushing me to get into the car, we were going back to the city that night. It wasn't until later that I learned that your father had been caught making a move on the farmer's daughter, by her five older brothers... and their shotguns."

Vincent's eyes got wide as he stared at his dignified, and now somewhat flustered, father.

"That is not accurate, it was not her five brothers." Father protested.

"I am sure you would love to set the story straight, Father." Catherine leaned forward, with a spark in her eyes, this was fun, she tried to hide her smile. You could always count on Peter to tell some completely embarrassing tale, at least this time it was not about her.

"It was her father and uncle with shotguns. I decided discretion was the better part of valor and it was best to get out of town before her brothers joined into the fray."

Catherine turned to Vincent and saw that he was enjoying Peter's story.

Emily watched the interactions around her. She tried to imagine what Ephram would have been like if he had not had the privilege of being raised within a Taj community. It was just beginning to hit her how close a call it had truly been.

"What are you thinking about, Mother?" Ephram had felt the ripple in her emotions. While their bond was not as close as his and Ashley's, it was still there.

“Just thinking,” Emily smiled. “I seem to recall a certain someone who managed to get bitten when trying to get that first kiss.”

Ashley groaned “No we are not going there!”

Ephram buried his face in Ashley’s hair as he tried to suppress his laughter. All eyes at the table turned to them.

“Ephram, don’t you....” Ephram kissed Ashley’s lips just hard enough to stop her from talking.

Vincent looked back and forth between Ephram, Ashley and Emily.

Finally settling his gaze on Ephram he had to ask. “Why did you bite her?”

Ephram’s laughter resulted in Ashley punching him in the shoulder before she pushed out of his lap and contemplated leaving the chamber. “That’s where you are wrong Vincent. Ashley bit me.”

Emily laughed, before Ashley could leave, she called out to the younger woman. “Ashley, you are going to have to tell them the rest of the story if you are going to save face.”

Ashley stopped and sighed. “Fine.” She turned around and looked at Vincent. “Ephram and my brother Cole are about the same age. “Not all the Taji live in the same area,” Ashley started, “In this case my brother Cole and Ephram lived in communities close enough that they grew up together, and were basically huge pains in my...Well you get the idea.” Vincent nodded.

“One night, Cole and Ephram were at a classmate’s house for a small party. It wasn’t common knowledge at the time that the girl’s parents were not home. Being a small town, that really didn’t make much of a difference.” Walking back to the table, Ashley continued. “Mom had sent me over to find Cole and ask him to come home. When I got to the house, I asked around for where Cole was, someone pointed me to a door and told me that he was in there, but be careful because the light wasn’t working in the hallway.”

Ephram picked up the story. “We were playing some typical games that teens play, I was given a dare from some of the guys that I had to kiss the next girl who walked into the hallway. So we disabled the lights, and I waited in the dark.”

When Ephram paused, Ashley continued. “I didn’t know what was happening. I opened the door and walked in, suddenly the door shut behind me and I was being picked up and kissed, I

had been expecting to find Cole, and not to be accosted. So I bit first then kicked second. I laid Ephram out before he knew what happened. The next thing I knew the lights turned on, Cole and his friends were standing at the end of the hall, Ephram was writhing in pain on the floor behind me, and I was fit to be tied.”

Ephram laughed, “Yeah it took me a week to be able to stand up straight after that. But that was when I knew that Ashley was going to be my mate. Everyone laughed at me, those days she couldn’t look at me without giving into the urge to throw something in the general direction of my head.”

“I assure you, Ephram, the urge still comes on a regular basis.” Ashley growled.

Vincent watched everyone around the table laugh good naturedly at the stories. It was hard to imagine a smaller version of Ashley laying out someone like Ephram, and no matter how embarrassed the story made her feel, there was still a connection between them.

“Cathy, I seem to remember you have your own story.” Peter’s comment interrupted Vincent’s thoughts as he felt a flash of embarrassment through their bond.

“Nobody wants to hear about that, Peter, it wasn’t a big deal.” Catherine tried to dissuade Peter from going any further.

“I don’t know, Catherine, after all, we told our stories...so turnabout is fair play.” Ashley smiled.

The other woman’s unspoken comment was clear, “Ok, fine.” Cathy sighed, she needed to do this for Vincent.

“I was in the seventh grade. I had been in school with Ricky and Tommy since second grade, and they were the bane of my existence. They liked frogs, ate worms and anything else they could do to gross me out. On this particular day, they had made a bet with each other to see how many girls they could kiss in school that day. I had learned early on that anytime they got together to do something, it usually spelled trouble for me. So when I saw them messing around under the big oak tree by the school, I knew something was up. It didn’t take them long to flank me near my locker. When Tommy moved towards me, I swung the locker open and hit him in the face with the door. I was reaching for my bag in the locker when Ricky reached in and beat me to it, so I slammed the locker shut on his hand. Ricky was now behind me howling like a banshee, holding his hand to his chest when Tommy decided to make another try, so I grabbed the bag out of my locker and swung. I was aiming to hit him in the head when he

ducked; unfortunately, he was standing too close to a couple of steps and fell down them. At that point Ricky had a broken hand, Tommy had a black eye and a broken leg, and I had detention for a week.

“Wow” Ashley replied. “that hardly seems fair.”

“That is what I thought. But Dad put it into a different perspective. First, yes, I broke a school rule, but so did they. They were slammed with In School Suspension for a month. Tommy had to walk around on crutches and had the added insult of sporting a black eye that had been given to him by a girl. Ricky had to miss out on the sports season, because his broken wrist prevented them from playing again that year. Me, I could go back to school, and not only that, but I had showed those two little boys that I could stand up for myself.”

“Wait that doesn’t count...you never got kissed.” Ashley??

“True, but I ended up dating Tommy a couple years later, he kissed me then.” Catherine looked at Peter.

“Ok, but the initial story doesn’t count as a first kiss.”

“It does when she tells you what happened when Tommy did get around to getting to kiss her.” Peter commented.

Eyebrows went up around the table as everyone looked at Catherine, who was blushing.

“Well?” Ashley prodded.

“I threw up on him.” Catherine finished while everyone started laughing. “We had our High School reunion a few years ago, both Tommy and Ricky made a point of avoiding me.”

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JR heard the scraping noise first. Squeezing himself tighter into the crevice, he watched as the metal wall slid back to allow two boys to walk out. They pressed on one side of the iron gate and the whole wall opened up to let them out. Paying close attention, he watched where they touched to reclose the metal door before closing the gate behind them. This was all he needed. Falling back against the wall, he waited for the boys to leave before walking out himself.

The Boss would be happy about this. They could go get the little Bitch’s baby, kill her and be done with all this before the day was over. Tomorrow he would be a rich man.

“What do you mean, she went into the ditch?” Forget convincing Boss, he had to get past Flash.

“I mean I stayed there for most of this afternoon, and all evening and they didn’t come back out.” JR turned to Boss. “The kid was dressed funny like, but the broad, she was classy, dressed like she has money.”

“So you fell asleep.” Flash sneered. “And missed them when they came out, or you screwed up again and now you’re trying to cover it up.”

“I swear Boss, I didn’t fall asleep.” JR decided Flash wasn’t worth his time, he would never believe him anyway. “After the two chicks disappeared in the tunnel I followed them, nobody Boss, and I mean nobody was there. I hid behind a rock and waited, then two kids opened up this fake wall and walked out as calmly as you please, like they do this shit every day.”

Boss looked up at Flash. As the man rolled his eyes and gestured as if he was puffing a joint.

“Boss, just let me show you, if the secret door isn’t there, then you can do whatever.”

“Deal,” Boss stated, “that door isn’t there, then you go to the meeting point and explain to our client why we don’t have the baby. Then we will let him deal with you.”

JR ignored Flash’s cussing as the man stomped through the muck. Walking up to the bars, he grabbed the end he saw open before, planting his feet, he yanked hard and almost fell over when it opened easily.

It took him a bit longer to find the hidden latch that opened the door. JR stepped back and let Boss walk through first. Feeling in his pocket, he pulled out his knife, and fingered the gun he had tucked in for safe measure. Heck, if things went well tonight, maybe they would leave the tunnels without Flash. That would be more money for him and Boss; who knew, maybe he would find that classy broad he saw earlier and teach her a few lessons about what it was like to play in the gutter.

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Vincent jumped up as Father froze.

“What is it?” Ephram going on the alert, ??

“Intruders.” Vincent stated, “three men, all carrying knives and weapons.”

Ashley tightened her hold on their son as she looked at Ephram. She hadn’t had the need to

see that look in a long time, but she knew a Taj on alert when she saw one. Heaven have mercy on the men that threatened anyone under their protection, because the Taji would not.

“Not again.” Father sank back. The last thing he wanted to do was send Vincent back out, these events were beginning to take a toll on his son’s psyche. “If this continues we are going to have to close the entrance to the park.”

“They are armed, dressed in biker leathers.” Everyone looked at Ephram.

“I can guarantee they are not my crew, we were being followed. My team travels with an RV, I have a dummy rider who takes my bike when I need to make an appearance to outsiders. They were going to pick up a few more riders and should be well on their way to Sturgis by now.”

Ashley turned shocked, “You let someone else ride your hog?”

Vincent ignored the conversation around him. He paid attention to the pipes, the intruders were following Ephram’s path to the maze, that was fine with him, it was a good place to mount a defense.

“Try putting up the false walls, let’s see if we can lure them back out one of the other exits.” Father stated.

Walking up, Vincent placed his hand on Father’s shoulder. “There isn’t time.”

Ephram stood up and placed Ashley down in the chair he vacated. His mate was at risk as well; once the order was given, Ephram would take his stand as well.

Father sunk into himself. Vincent was right, there was not enough time for alternative measures.

“Vincent,” Catherine approached him as he put on his cloak. Lifting the hood over his head, she whispered for him alone. “Come back to me.”

With those simple words she gave her understanding, her blessing and her love. He knew that he had something to come back to.

Ephram turned to Ashley and kissed her and laid his hand on their son’s head. “We haven’t had a chance to discuss names.”

“That’s ok, we can do it when you come back.” Ashley kissed him again then stepped back. Emily took her place as she hugged her son.

"Vincent, wait." Ephram called out as he quickly crossed the room.

"This is my family and home, I will defend them." Vincent declared.

"As is your right, but my mate, my son, and my mother are here as well, you don't have to stand alone in this. Not this time." Ephram offered his arm to Vincent, in an age old gesture of comradeship between warriors.

Vincent stared at the arm, recognizing it for what it was. Ephram was right, he wasn't alone in the world anymore, he was a Taji, and tonight he would guard his home in the way of the Taji.

"Lord have mercy on their souls." Emily prayed out loud as the two men left the chamber.

"For tonight, the Taji will not." Ashley completed the prayer.

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JR, Boss and Flash walked through the tunnels trying to find their way, there were no definite land marks, just rock walls interspersed with wide concrete drain pipes. Steam pipes travelling along the walls rattled, with a constant tapping sound that pierced the dark silence. The place was deserted, with the only signs of habitation being the footprints in the dirt beneath their feet. Prints that went every which way, but appeared to be going no place in general.

Flash cursed as his light flickered. A low growling noise reached their ears just as the light went out.

"What the hell did you get us into this time, dumb ass?" Flash pointed his knife at JR.

"Enough!" Boss stepped between the two men. "We don't have time for this, let's just find the bitch, get the baby and get out. If you want to poke something, then you can poke her once we get her back."

More growling accompanied Boss's words. The men felt the hair stand up on the back of their necks.

"Who's there?" JR called out, swinging his flashlight around trying to catch any movement in the shadows.

"What do you want?" A rough voice echoed through the tunnel, stopping the men in their tracks.

"We don't want any trouble, we are trying to find a pregnant woman that was in our care." Boss

figured a little diplomacy might do them some good at this time.

"Why do you seek her?" The voice replied.

"We just need to get her back, she is not well." Boss replied.

"If you are so concerned, then why did she feel the need to leave your care?" A second voice spoke out.

"Like I said, she is not well. Not playing on all cylinders, if you know what I mean." Another growl met that comment. Boss stepped back towards his crew as he continued. "Her baby's father hired us to keep an eye on her and keep her safe until after she gave birth, then she would be free to go."

"And who is this baby's father?" the voice demanded. "Why isn't he here with you?" Vincent's voice insisted.

"Well, he is a busy man, that is why he hired us, to like keep the bitch...I mean, lady safe."

"Go back and tell your employer that the woman is safe and does not wish to partake of his hospitality any further." Ephram's voice spoke out, they would give these men a chance to leave.

"Well, you see, it's like this. We can't do that." Boss stated, "Our employer is the type of man who doesn't take no as an answer, and he dislikes failure even more. So just turn her over and we can go our separate ways. No harm, no foul."

"That is not going to happen. Your employer has no claim on the woman or her baby." Ephram's voice stated.

"Well, that is not how our employer sees it." Boss shot back, "Now either bring her to us, or we fight our way through. Either way we get the bitch."

"I will say it again, leave now, your employer has no claim here, and neither do you. Leave now, or face the consequences."

Boss looked back at Flash and JR, this was not going well. People rarely told him no, yet this man hid himself in the dark, with what sounded like a large dog, threatening him. "Why do you think my boss has no claim?" It was time to change tactics. Motioning behind his back he signaled for Flash and JR to spread out. The voice was coming from somewhere in front of him

now, they could flank the guy and take him down.

“Because her child is my son.” Ephram waited until the first assailant stepped in front of him before he reached out and grabbed the kid by the neck. Death was quick and merciful. Vincent lashed out at the same time, taking out the second man, leaving only the man in the center. Stepping forward out of the shadows, Boss saw for the first time what he was truly facing.

Dropping his knife, Boss stepped back. Tripping over his feet, he went down into the dirt and landed next to Flash. Cold dead eyes stared back at him, showing him his future. His boss would not take failure lightly, at least with this creature his end would be quick. Reaching out, he grabbed Flash’s knife and rolled, as he got to his back he aimed the knife towards the monster that stood before him, only to find that the monster was not alone. A second creature stepped out of the dark, grabbing his wrist. Boss heard the crack of his bones before he felt the last rush of pain. Death came quickly.

Ephram looked at the carnage around them. Vincent was an efficient killer, yet the price took a heavy toll on the man. Stepping forward, he placed his hand on Vincent’s shoulder. “Let’s clean this up. There is no need for those we protect to know the extent of the damage.”

Vincent nodded. Picking up two of the bodies, he threw them over his shoulder and lead the way to the abyss. He would be feeding that darkness once again, with the evidence of his sins.

Ephram tossed his body into the darkness as well and stepped back to observe Vincent. “Thank you.”

Vincent turned, shocked at the simple gratitude.

“I know it isn’t enough, it never will be, but thank you.” Ephram continued. “I owe you the life of not only my mate, but my son as well.”

“What are we Ephram?” Vincent asked the one question that had plagued him his whole life. “What are we really?”

“Come, let’s go wash the stench of death from us and I will explain all that I can.” Ephram lead Vincent away from the Abyss. This was one soul that darkness was not going to get.

~~

The pipes sang out the ‘All Clear’ as people sighed in relief. Catherine and Ashley shared a

look as they waited. As the time went by, Catherine became more and more dejected. There was no denying that Vincent had to kill again, which meant he would hide from her, again.

"I think it is safe for us to go home now." Emily stated, sorting through her journals, she pulled select ones out and handed them to Father.

"Catherine?" Ashley's heart broke for this woman. "I don't really have much but can you come with me to the guest chamber, and help me get ready to leave?"

Catherine nodded her head and followed Ashley.

"Here are copies of my research in regards to the Taji. I trust it will be in good hands if I leave it with you." Turning to Peter, Emily shook his hand "It was great meeting with you again. You know how to reach me, if you ever need anything." The three doctors exchanged information as Emily promised Father that the tunnels would now have access to the full resources of the Taji Council. "They will probably want to meet with you to discuss how you were able to save Vincent."

Father shook his head. "I only practice down here, the world above no longer recognizes my status as a Doctor." There was pain in those words, but not as much as there had been before.

"Oh, that reminds me." Emily reached into her bag and pulled out something. "I have something of yours. I had my family send this to me with the journals." Emily handed Father a folder, sealed tightly between two heavy sheets of plastic. Removing the rubber band, he carefully opened the protective case to the folder to reveal a document. Sinking down into his chair his heart stuttered at the title on the top of the page. "*Congressional reinstatement of Dr. Jacob Wells.*" It was an official apology for his ordeal, along with the reinstatement of his Doctorial credentials.

"How?" Father watched the page blurred before him.

"My Niece did her master's in political science before going on to law school. Her Master's thesis was in about the danger of private agenda's in politics. She focused on the Witch Hunts and was able to get Congress to reverse their decision on a number of the victims. You were one of them. While her work was published through the school, she had the official forms. Her goal has been to give them to everyone, but as you can imagine, most have become very hard to find. I had her send this to me." Emily paused. "It was at my request that your name be included in her project, I wanted to be the one to give this to you."

Father sat down at a chair, "I have no words." Peter took the document and touched the words before handing it back to his friend. Both men wiped tears from their eyes.

"Of course to be able to legally request prescriptions, you have to be associated with a clinic or hospital. I can assure you that the Taji council will accept your status in this community and afford you every accommodation that you need to ensure its continued success.

"How is that possible? We do not live in a Taj community." Father asked.

Emily looked at him puzzled for a moment before she completely understood. "The Taji community is not a single location. The Taji live all over the world, the council formed for their protection, it will be no problem at all to include this as another location." Emily hid a small smile. "In fact can think of a few people who will be very happy to learn of a Taj connection in New York."

~~

Catherine held Ashley's son in her arms as her heart broke just a bit more.

"Please don't give up hope." Ashley sat on the bed.

"He can't see beyond what he thinks he is. He can't see himself the way the rest of us do." Catherine sighed. "I love him, with everything I am, but he can't seem to understand that he is worth that love."

"They never do." Ashley's response surprised Catherine. "Do you think what I have with Ephram is easy?"

Catherine shook her head. "I know that I have it easier than most of the Taja. My mother and family are part of the Taj community, my father is on the Taj council." Ashley placed both hands on the bed and leaned forward.

"Every Taj male is aware of the sacrifices his mate will have to face once she ties her life to him. He will fight it every step of the way. It is our job to show them the truth, that they are our lives, and that we walk into this willingly."

Rising to her feet, Ashley went to the desk and tore a piece of paper off a pad in the drawer. Sitting down, she wrote out a series of numbers before handing it back to Catherine.

"The Taja have their own council. Emily and I will present your case before them, you are not

alone anymore, Cathy, there are women in this world who have walked your path and will joyfully welcome you into their fold.”

Catherine took the paper and gave Ashley a hug. “Thank you.”

“Now don’t thank me so quickly.” Ashley teased, “I fully plan for either Ephram or myself to teach Vincent the rules of necking and petting before we leave.”

Catherine blushed even as she smiled. “I am sure I still have a mini skirt somewhere that I can fit into.”

Ashley and Catherine laughed. Gathering up the last of Ephram’s biker gear, Ashley straightened the room a bit before she followed Catherine out. The women hugged again as they parted ways. Ashley to wait for her mate to take her back home, and Catherine to return to hers.

~~

Ephram dove into the waters, they were warmer than he expected. Stepping out of the pool, he grabbed a towel and rubbed as much of the water off as he could. “Vincent, remind me to have someone send you a good supply of chamois. I think you will find that you will get dryer faster.”

“That would be nice.” Vincent’s response was more polite than interested in any conversation. He had fought beside Ephram today, and saw something that surprised him.

The man that he had gotten to know as witty, and quick to crack a joke, had darkness inside him as well. The only difference in their cases was that Ephram embraced his. Vincent had reacted to Ephram’s first growl in the tunnels. It had called to something deep in him, but this time it was different. Vincent had let Ephram take the lead in their approach to the invaders, and Ephram had given them a chance to leave. Even knowing that they intended harm to Ashley, he had given them a chance to walk away. They had both heard the lead man’s offer to his companion to turn Ashley over after they were done. They both knew that those men had planned to use, and had already used a woman in the worst vile way possible.

“What are you thinking?” Ephram pressed.

“Does it ever get any easier?” Vincent sank into the pool, allowing the water to wash away the grime, knowing that it would never completely remove the blood.

“Killing?” Ephram tried to clarify.

When Vincent nodded, Ephram continued. “No, it never gets any easier. When it does is when it is time to truly worry, Vincent. But for now, cleanse your body, then go to your Catherine and let her cleanse your soul.”

“I cannot.” Vincent’s soul cried at that answer as he stared down at his blood-stained hands. “I cannot let this touch her.”

“It already touches her, Vincent.” Ephram sat near the edge of the pool. “Every time we connect with our darkness, we take a piece of our mate with us. We have to have her light to balance us.” Sensing that he finally had Vincent’s full attention.

Comment [LSS1]: Incomplete sentence

“Look at our mates, look at Catherine, at Ashley, heck even look at my mom.” Ephram started. “They are so fragile, so soft, we make one wrong move and they will pay the price.” Vincent nodded, that he did know, too well.

“But they are strong, too, Vincent, you have to have sensed it in your Catherine.” Vincent nodded.

“Do you trust her?” Ephram’s question got to the heart of the matter. “I mean do you really trust her?”

Vincent had to pause at that. He trusted Catherine with his life, the safety of the tunnels and even with his heart, but had he ever trusted her with all of him. The vision of her standing before him in Father’s chamber earlier today as she defended his every action and pointed out every time he had lost himself near or, for her, she had always come out unharmed, even when no-one else had. When it came down to it, the answer to that question was yes. He trusted Catherine with everything he was.

Ephram saw as Vincent finally made the connection. “You don’t have to trust yourself, Vincent, just trust her.”

“It isn’t that simple.” Vincent argued.

“Yes it is.”

“I don’t know how...” Vincent stopped, for once he didn’t have the words to finish, but it didn’t matter.

"You don't have to." Ephram did have the words. "All you have to do is let her know you are open to it, she will do the rest."

"How?"

"I take it you never really got into necking or petting as a teen?" Ephram leaned back against the wall, as he smiled at a memory.

Vincent shook his head. "No."

"It is simple, any part of the body that does not have clothes is safe to touch, the part of the body that is clothed, you may only touch the arms if she is wearing sleeves, her shoulders, or her back between the bra line and the waist line. She will let you know, by adjusting her manner of dress."

"So I am just supposed to walk up to her and start rubbing?" Vincent was appalled at the thought.

"Of course not, I know you two exchange hugs, you can't tell me you have been able to resist smelling or even kissing her hair." Vincent blushed at that comment.

"Well next time, when you greet her, give her a hug and aim that kiss a little lower. Go for her neck, behind her ear, or even her cheek. Trust me, your Catherine will get the hint."

"And the rest? I have no experience."

"Trust your bond, you can feel her emotions, you will know if you are doing it right." Ephram paused, "Oh and before I forget, how long have you known each other?"

"Almost three years now." Vincent was confused "Why?"

"Hmm," Ephram thought. "Well, the likelihood that she has taken a partner since the establishment of your bond is highly remote, be prepared for her to experience a little discomfort at first."

"Are you saying that I will hurt her?" Vincent was ready to find any excuse to put a stop to the direction this conversation had taken.

"No, it's just that when a woman doesn't use certain muscles for a while, they forget how to stretch, it will take a moment before her body remembers. Vincent, trust Catherine, trust your

bond, they will both keep you both safe.”

“It will be safe for us to leave now, I am sure my mother has already made the arrangements.” Ephram rose from the pool side and started getting dressed. “Oh and Vincent, if you are so worried about your hands, remember your mouth can touch anyplace your hands can.”

Vincent nodded as he rose from the pool. Ephram had given him a lot to think about.

~~

Ephram, Ashley and Emily emerged from the tunnels to an awaiting taxi in the middle of the Alley, the driver leaning against the back of the van as if this were the most normal place in the world to be waiting for a fare.

Ephram held back to the shadows as Emily and Ashley stepped forward.

“I understood there was going to be one more with you, besides the little tyke.” The driver opened the door for the women. “Normally I don’t drive the van, but considering the circumstances, we thought it would be safer,” looking up, he noticed one last figure lurking in the shadows. “Vincent, you about gave me a heart attack, hiding like that.” Stepping forward, the driver confronted the looming shadow, “You should know better than to skulk around your elders...You’re not Vincent.” Freezing in his tracks he looked the newcomer over in great detail.

“No, I am Ephram.” Holding out his hand, he waited for the response of the other man. He was not disappointed. The driver shook his hand without pausing, or flinching.

“Does Father know? Oh wait, does Vincent know? I mean this is huge!” the man was tripping over himself as the implications of another like Vincent existing.

“Yes, we are now returning home from the chance to enjoy their hospitality.”

“Well far be it for me to keep you from getting home on time.” Stepping back to the van, Ephram crawled in and moved to the back seat. Placing his helmet next to him, he watched the lights as the taxi drove through town, then passed through the gates to a private airplane sitting on the middle of the strip.

“It was great meeting you,” Ephram stated as he climbed out of the cab. “We look forward to meeting you again.”

The driver pulled out a card and handed it to Ephram. “If you ever make it back to the city, give

me a call, we all stick together and look after them. I can make sure you get there safely.”

Ephram looked over the business card before sticking it into his pocket. “Thank you, Terri, we will definitely do that.”

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Vincent stopped at the base of the ladder. *‘Let her cleanse your soul’*. That was Ephram’s advice. Vincent tuned his senses to the world above him. The coast was clear; slipping through the darkened hallway, he ducked behind some boxes as the passengers disembarked from the elevator. As usual, they were in a hurry to leave and did not notice the shadow slip onto the elevator just as the doors were closing.

He pushed the button then climbed through the top hatch, and settled himself for his ride up to her world.

Catherine stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself into a short terrycloth robe. These past few days had been very enlightening. Rubbing her hair with a spare towel she walked across her room to the table and picked up the piece of paper. Names and numbers, she was no longer alone. There were other women, like her, who protected a secret love from the harsh realities of the world. There were other women, who she could now talk to, and commiserate with.

The light tapping on the window brought her out of her thoughts as she rushed forward. Tearing the doors open, she stared longingly at Vincent.

“Are you well?” She asked as she stepped into his arms for a badly needed hug.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent decided to throw caution to the wind and take Ephram’s advice.

“I am well.” Bending his head, this time he kissed the edge of her hair, near her cheek instead of the top of her head.

For a moment, Catherine was frozen in shock. Leaning back in his arms, she studied his face, only for him to close the distance and give her a small peck near her lips. Ok, so she wasn’t imagining things. Shock gave way to action as she felt Vincent start to pull back. Tangling her fingers into his hair, she stopped his retreat. This time she brought his head back to hers and fused their lips together.

A sigh escaped her as she found herself right where she had wanted to be, in the arms of her lover. Little nips at his lips caused him to open up in surprise. Taking advantage of the opportunity, she tangled her tongue with his and coaxed it into her mouth where they tasted and tangled.

Her sigh turned to a moan as Vincent tightened his hold and pulled her closer to him. When the need for air became urgent, she tore her lips from him, both of them gasping.

Vincent buried his face in her neck, his deep breaths brought her scent deeper into him as he gave way to the urge to kiss and lick the soft skin right under her ear. Vincent felt Catherine shudder at that touch, as she arched into him. Leaning her head back, she gave him more access as his mouth travelled up and down the pulsing vein.

“Not here.” Catherine managed to gasp. Pulling slightly away, Vincent tightened his grip on her. “Not here.” Catherine stated again, this time she pulled him with her, in through the doors he had always resisted entering and straight to the couch.

Lips tangled again as they sank into the softness. Vincent remembered Ephram’s advice, as he allowed his hands to stroke her back, one hand travelled up, waiting for the feel of his first barrier, he found his hands tangled in her hair. The second hand travelled down her back, once again finding no barrier, he found his hand cupping the soft curve of her behind, his fingers meeting bare skin where the bottom hem of her robe had travelled up.

Catherine moaned and arched into Vincent’s touch as she felt his hands touch the back of her thigh. His lips kept leaving hers to taste and nip at her neck. Slipping her hand between them, she grabbed the front tie and tugged it. If Vincent wanted to pet, well she was all for it.

Amazed, Vincent felt the robe slip open as he continued to nibble down her neck. Meeting the edge of her collar, he followed the path of the robe’s opening. He couldn’t imagine ever having the nerve to remove her clothes, but was grateful for Ephram’s suggestion. Whatever was exposed he could touch, and if Catherine’s response was anything to judge by, he was being given her blessing to touch anywhere.

The texture of her skin against his tongue changed. Catherine gasped and arched in Vincent’s embrace as he tested this new feel. It fit perfectly against his tongue as it fit into his mouth.

“Yes!” Catherine’s hands tangled deeper into his hair as she pulled him closer. “Harder Vincent, Please, just harder.”

Vincent pulled her nipple further into his mouth, as he stumbled to the couch.

Catherine felt her couch as Vincent pressed her against it. Using the strength of his arms as leverage she eased herself up so that she was half sitting on the back, wrapping her legs around his waist, she held him to her. Arching further back, she panted and writhed against Vincent. She couldn't believe how hot she was getting.

Vincent used his weight to press harder against her body. Catherine was going up in flames in his arms and taking him with her. He felt her legs tighten around his hips as she rubbed herself against him. The press of his large belt buckle hit her sensitive core, then he felt Catherine tense in his arms. The tightness lasted for a breathless eternity, before she fell apart in his arms. The only thing he could do was hold onto her convulsing body, as she scraped her nails across his scalp and burst into flames.

He felt the first ripple of discomfort and released her nipple, its hardened tip already softening in the replete relaxation that he felt flow through Catherine. His body was still hard, and painfully so, but that fact no longer concerned him. Pulling back slightly, he looked at the woman in his arms. Her head was still tilted back, resting completely in the safety of his hands. Her eyes were closed as her mind floated in golden haze of her pleasure. Her robe was hanging open, held across her stomach by one tie, that was tangled into knots. The other tie dangled from the open edge of her robe as it hung from her side, hiding nothing of her body from his perusal. She was as perfect as he had always imagined she would be. He was pressed between her legs, the smell of her pleasure rose and teased his nose.

Groaning, he pulled Catherine back to him, cradling her close to his body, he lifted her and carried her across the room to her bed. Gently he laid her down and started to pull away. Catherine's arms and legs tightened, holding him onto him as if she were afraid he would fade away as he had so many other times.

"I am here," Vincent assured her as he settled her more comfortably across the bed. The one remaining tie on her robe was a hopeless tangled knot, so he applied his claw as close to the knot as he could and snapped it open.

Unable to leave her, Vincent tasted, touched and caressed every inch of Catherine's body. Time and time again he lost himself in the bond as he brought Catherine to the depths of her pleasure over and over again. She begged him, pleaded with him and eventually cursed at him. She tore at his clothes, pulled his hair and scratched his back, all to bring him closer to her. His

polite refined lady had passed the edge of her civility, as Vincent took great pleasure in finding the beast that existed in his mate. Ephram was right, Catherine was right, they had all been right. She was his light, his anchor and balance. As he felt Catherine's body sink into complete relaxation, he finally allowed the last of his clothing to be removed. Slowly giving his weight to her, he slipped deep inside. Catherine was so relaxed, so wet, and so anesthetized from her own pleasure that she felt no discomfort in his possession. For the first time in his life, Vincent found his inner beast, and put it in the one place it truly belonged.

Inside his Catherine.

Light slowly crept in through the window sheers. Night was done. And like Vincent, the darkness was finally gone. Together the lovers slept, peacefully, entwined, body, mind, heart, and soul.