

Beauty and the Beast

JULY 2025



New Orleans

Shelton



A Love Song That Whispers My Name

THE INVITATION MADE DURING WINTERFEST ONLINE

A LOVE SONG THAT WHISPERS MY NAME

New Orleans, Louisiana

July 9-16, 2025

Think back to the time when you first fell in love with this show. Remember feeling like you were the only one and each episode left you wanting more.

Remembering those times is the inspiration behind naming this convention "A Love Song That Whispers My Name." This show called to each one of us. We were first alone and now we have grown into a family of choice and as a family, we are continuing this dance of a lifetime!

You are invited to join us for our 38th annual in-person Beauty and the Beast convention, to be held in New Orleans LA. We are so happy to bring our tunnel family some Louisiana lagniappe. We will pass a good time and laissez les bons temps rouler. We will teach you how to tell if there's gators in dat watah and we may have a little Fais do-do down on the bayou. If you see the Rougarou, you better run, cos I ain't waitn' on you! I don't mess with no Rougarou!

Our convention hotel is the Hampton Inn French Market and breakfast is included in the hotel rate. Convention registration is \$250, which includes three days of con activities, three meals including our traditional banquet, and an ice cream party. We look forward to enjoying our traditional activities and some really fun panels. Please check out the 2025 convention page: <https://batbland.com/cons/25/> for more information including a roomie board, a bulletin board, registration, hotel information, add-ons, and so much more.

These conventions take a village to put together, so we invite you to contribute to another fandom tradition: the convention conzine. We welcome poetry, fanfic, essays, artwork, music videos, wallpapers, games, music, and more. So, check out the Conzine Guidelines on the con page. Please consider creating something to delight your fellow fans! If you're nervous about putting something in our

conzine, please don't be. This fandom is a wonderful place to share your talents. Remember you are with your chosen family now.

Our charities this year are The Cure Starts Now and Tough2Gether. These charities work to fight deadly childhood cancers like Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, DIPG. DIPG is 100% fatal upon diagnosis and is the most deadly childhood cancer. It is inoperable, it's aggressive, and it is cancer in your brainstem. It will kill you. It's not a matter of if; it is more a matter of when. Most children with DIPG do not live longer than 2 years after diagnosis. These charities advocate internationally, nationally and at the state level for additional funding for pediatric cancer research and family support, to reduce barriers to drug approval or travel out of state for care, and to make developing diagnostics and treatments reimbursable by health insurance. Less than 4% of Federal funding is dedicated to pediatric cancers. This year we will be donating to these two charities in the name of Marguerite McKenzie Chenier, the child of a family friend and my daughter's Godchild. She was diagnosed with DIPG when she was in kindergarten. On January 10, 2024, Marguerite passed away at home in the arms of her parents, surrounded by love. She is buried in the cemetery at the beautiful St. Joseph's Abbey near New Orleans.

Plans are still being developed for add-ons. Check the con page for updates, and we will be reaching out soon to those who have registered! We do have a public Facebook page for people looking for information and we have a special Facebook page for those registered for the convention.

Mais cher, come see, grab Yamamanem, your Parrain and your Marraine allons manger!! On va te voir là-bas! Cajun French slang translation: Well then, dear, come see, grab your mama and them, your Godfather, your Godmother and let's eat!! We will see you there!

Deb



WELCOME TO NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans is among the most unique cities in the New World. Known as the Crescent City due to the bend it traces along the Mississippi River, it sits like an island between the river and Lake Pontchartrain. Long before Europeans arrived, the region was home to several Indigenous tribes. The area that would become New Orleans remained largely isolated for nearly 250 years.

Founded in 1718 by French explorer Bienville and originally named La Nouvelle-Orléans, the city developed into a bustling port as trade flourished along its waterways. Despite this growth, a long-standing isolation from the mainland influenced the development of New Orleans' distinctive mix of religions, cuisine, and culture.

New Orleans flourished into a center of cultural innovation, giving rise to unique creations such as jazz, Creole cuisine, gospel music, jazz funerals, and a rich cultural blend that sets the city apart. In its early days, New Orleans featured more canals than Venice, and residents often traveled by boat. Later, they turned to the city's historic streetcars, which once covered over 200 miles of track—including the iconic streetcar named Desire, which traveled along Desire Street.

New Orleans has been shaped over time by the superstitions, traditions, and histories of Creoles, Spaniards, French, Irish, Italians, enslaved Africans, and free people of color. Its warm summer nights feel like a mix of ink and honey, glowing under silver moonlight. The city's distinct character has always been driven by independent thinkers, creative spirits, and those who resist conformity.

Rooted in a long history of superstitions and spiritual legends passed down through generations, New Orleans has earned a reputation for its ghosts, spirits, and hauntings. In his book New Orleans, Twenty Years of Writings from the City, Andrei Codrescu reflects on this mystique, writing, "The allure of our cemeteries is not just aesthetic... much of it is a constant whisper meant for the attentive ear... But marble without a story is just marble. A true monument leans in and whispers in your ear."

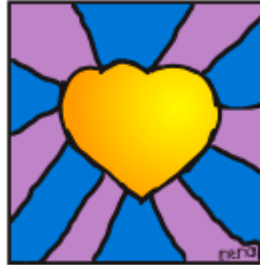
The city remains rich with supernatural lore, and among the most enduring are tales of vampires. One well-known legend centers on Ct. St. Germain, a wealthy Frenchman who mysteriously surfaced in New Orleans two centuries after his alleged death in France. St. Germain was famous for his peculiar behaviors, such as never eating in public and hosting lavish gatherings where he drank only wine. St. Germain disappeared just as suddenly as he appeared. Yet, the legend lives on, with many believing he was one of the newer vampires to haunt the city.

According to old New Orleans folklore, the coffins of America's first vampires are hidden in the attic of the Old Ursuline Convent—the oldest building in the Mississippi River Valley. To ensure the vampires remain trapped inside, the dormer windows were allegedly sealed shut with blessed nails, and they are said to remain sealed to this day.

So, with St. Germain still yet to return and the ancient vampires sealed away in the attic of the Ursuline Convent,

WELCOME TO NEW ORLEANS!

P.S. Be sure to listen for the whispering monuments!



Elana was 6 years old and had DIPG brain cancer. She left love notes and pictures for her family hidden all through her home.

This is one of those pictures and is inside our con logo.

These charities work to fight deadly childhood cancers like Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, DIPG. DIPG is 100% fatal upon diagnosis and is the most deadly childhood cancer. It is inoperable, it is aggressive, and it is cancer in your brainstem. It will kill you. It's not a matter of if; it is more a matter of when. Most children with DIPG do not live longer than two years after diagnosis. The median overall survival of children diagnosed with DIPG is approximately nine months.

After doing everything available in the US, even after every experimental treatment, there is nothing else to be done for these children. Parents are told to take their child home and try to keep them comfortable until they die.

But in other countries, there are more treatments available. These charities help families navigate care. They put all the important resources at the parents' fingertips spoken in parent-to-parent language. There they find the best ways to share the child's data and receive information on the child's specific tumor.

They advocate internationally, nationally, and at the state level for additional funding for pediatric cancer research and family support, to reduce barriers to drug approval, or travel out of state for care, and to make developing diagnostics and treatments reimbursable by health insurance. All grants fund specific research while holding the researchers accountable to results and innovation. Their mission is to fill gaps in the current pediatric brain tumor system.

While researching and fighting childhood cancers, many researchers believe that the lessons we learn from fighting pediatric cancer may in fact provide us the critical first step in winning the battle against all forms of cancer, both pediatric and adult.

The family never fights alone. Whether they're a newly diagnosed family or are struggling with the loss of a loved one, they are there to help.

Tough2gether Foundation paid for my daughter to travel to Germany and Canada to bring back medications for several families. These medications are in the US, but are not available to children in the US.

This year we will be donating to these two charities in the name of Marguerite McKenzie Chenier, the child of a family friend. She was diagnosed with DIPG when she was in kindergarten. She had every treatment available, 30 rounds of radiation, and CAR-T at Seattle Children's Hospital. Then there was nothing else that could be done in the US. In other countries, medications are available to all patients, even children.

On January 10, 2024, Marguerite passed away at home in the arms of her parents, surrounded by love. She is buried in the cemetery at the beautiful St. Joseph's Abbey near New Orleans.

MANY THANKS TO BATBLAND FOR HOSTING THIS CONZINE!

Have you explored Batbland.com recently? There are so many wonderful chambers, offering everything from fanfic to artwork to fandom links to a convention history section, and that is literally just scratching the surface!



Welcome to B&BLand

*a land south of Oz and north of Shangri-La,
where the blue bird sings
of beautiful and impossible things,
of things that are lovely and that never happen,
of things that are not and that should be.*

And its companion site, batbforever.com, contains scripts and transcripts of episodes plus lots of amazing extras, such as music cue sheets for a number of First Season episodes. Did you know there's a short music cue in *A Children's Story* called *Vinny's Fleas*?! Think we're kidding? Find out by checking under *Links and References*!

WINTERFEST ONLINE

2026

FEBRUARY 7 ~ 15



a potluck of fan-created treats and treasures
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chats, presentations,
workshops, discussions,
challenges, and more
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fill the banquet tables

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we will endure

*Classic Alliance
of
Beauty and the Beast*

CABB ~ NEW CHAMBERS

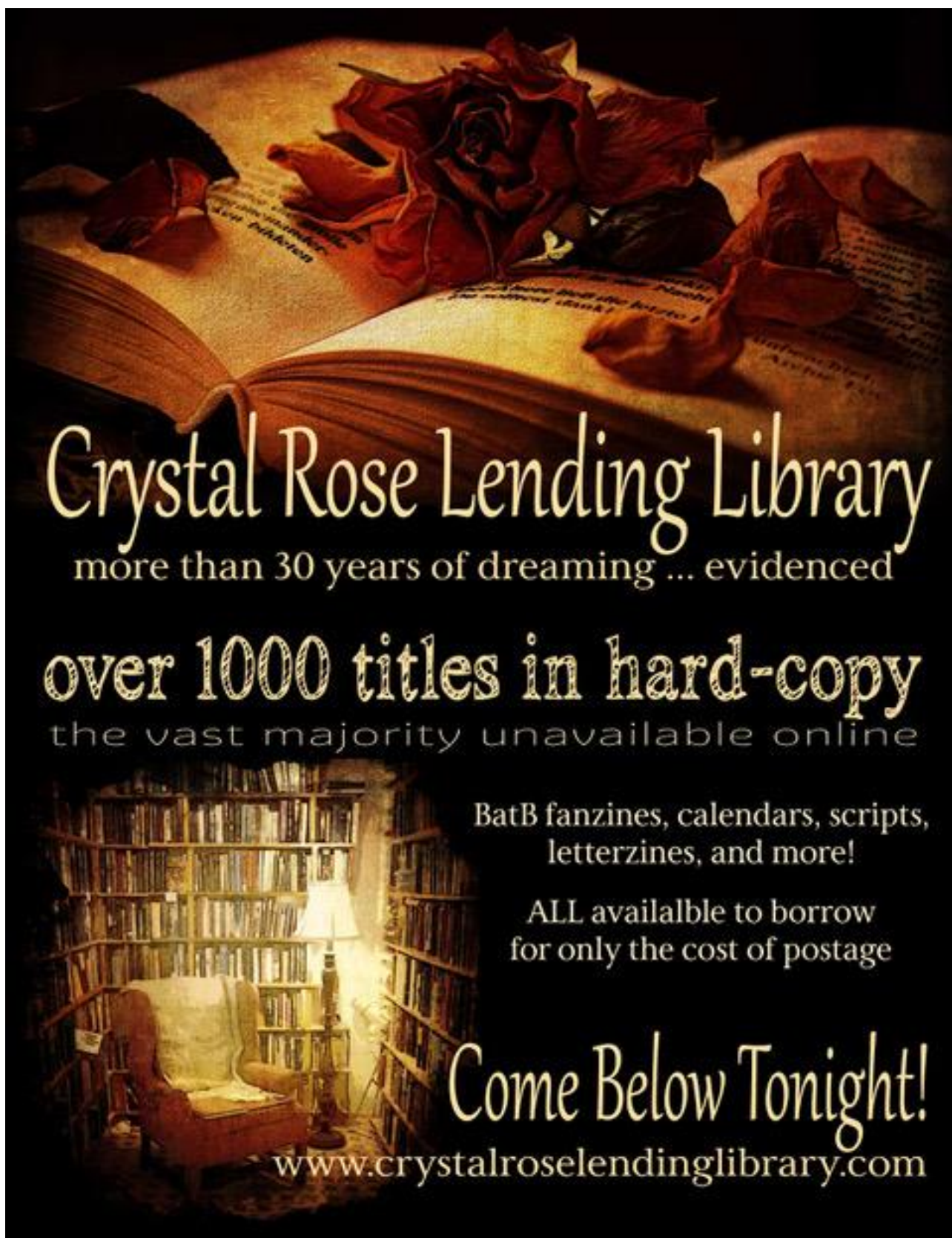
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By Paula

From *I Am Not Yours* by Sara Teasdale

Before we get to fun things, here's something serious we want to pass along.

SCAM FACEBOOK PAGES FOR BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

There are some legitimately fan-run B&B Facebook pages run by fans we know, with love. They have been on Facebook for years. Unfortunately, there also are several scam Facebook pages that have popped up in the last couple of years purporting to be by and for our fans which are scam pages. The owners of the scam sites pull posts from legitimate B&B pages and groups to populate their sites.

Numerous attempts to report these scam sites to Facebook have been unsuccessful, which is frustrating to the site owners and artists whose lovingly produced content is being hijacked.

We are aware of three such Facebook pages and we urge you to avoid them:

Beauty And The Beast 1987 T.S..(worldwide)

Beauty And The Beast 1987 T.S..(worldwide) > *(same name but with an arrow)*

Beauty and the Beast Resurrection (1987-90) *(the public page, not the private one)*

The scammers behind these fake fan sites are trying to sell tee shirts with fans' artwork on them, or mugs, or other items. They do this without the knowledge of or permission from the artists. They do this for numerous fandoms, and in recent years they have gained some traction in our own fandom. Even some longtime B&B fans have been taken in by them.

You can identify them easily by noticing that they occasionally will claim they're purging the group of inactive fans and insist you say "yes" to stay in the group. They get a long string of "YES!" comments. THEN they change out the post to insert one of their tee shirt ads with either stolen fan art or unlicensed publicity images on them, so it looks like there are dozens of "yes" comments on the merchandise, as if many fans want one or ordered one.

It would be awful if one of our fandom family was taken in by these scammers. They are trying to make money off art they do not have the rights to use. And beyond that, they are scraping legitimate posts from real fan sites to populate their scam sites. They do not "share" nor do they credit the original poster or artist, but post stolen content under their own name as the creator.

Here are some names of scam site owners/posters to be wary of, either from attempts to “friend” you or if you see their posts:

Rocky Sam
Rocky Samal
Mike Rock
Rock Miller
Dole Rocky
Rocky Dole
Dole Partoni
Roky Shamal
Rock Morgan
Den Morgan
Nil Shagor
Nil Shagur
Rosul Molla
Sheikh Misbha
Chy Anas
Gwen Gilbert
Johnson Butler
John Belin
Would John
Jennifer Lowes
Arif Ahmed
Basid Ahmed
Md Alomgir Ahmed
Sk Rahul Ahmed
Lar Man
Paula Riponn Dominquez
Jon Allen
Charles Bodnar
Maddalynn Davis (there are several spellings of this name)
Richard Oubourg

This is a sad situation, but knowledge and vigilance are a good protection from scammers.

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Please note that the writers and artists of the work in this conzine retain the rights to where and how their work is put online. If you see this conzine online anywhere but on Batbland, it has not been posted with permission.

Cover Art *a reworking of Sandy Chandler Shelton's 2009 NOLA Con logo**

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**Chan’s art used with permission.*

HOW DID BEAUTY AND THE BEAST WHISPER YOUR NAME?

Our theme for this year's convention is "A Love Song That Whispers My Name" and we invited fans to share their own stories about what that means to them. A number of fans, some fairly new to our fandom, some long-time participants, wrote an essay about how they experienced their own "whisper" and how it affected them. We thank them all for sharing their personal stories and feelings.

Throughout the conzine, you will find these essays. I know we readers will find commonality with their words in our deepest hearts. Perhaps they will spark your own memories! Here is the first one...

ONE BATB FAN'S JOURNEY

By Peg Ray

I was a silent fan of Beauty and the Beast when it premiered in September of 1987. This was at a terribly busy time in my life, and it offered a weekly fantasy escape from my mundane trials at the time. I was predisposed to being enamored by characters with fangs and capes since my high school crush on Barnabas Collins twenty years prior. So, Vincent was automatically on my radar for beloved fantasy characters. What more could a woman want? A beautiful hunk, hugs, that *voice*, and no demands other than "Tell me." Fantasy bullseye!

I remember being transported to the feeling of Below during the opening credits when the serpentine began to spiral at the point when Catherine started speaking. There were days when I was ready to pack up and move Below to where the characters had genuine care and concern for each other.

I watched each episode on a 15-inch color TV with a rabbit-ears antenna. I knew nothing of fandom, conventions, zines, or any other way to connect with others who loved the show. When the show went off the air, I was disappointed but moved on. I never saw reruns because I never had cable TV until around 2006.

It wasn't until late in 2023 that I discovered BatB again when it streamed on Paramount+. Since it had been so long, it was like watching it for the first time and falling in love all over again. When I'd completed watching all fifty-six episodes, I was crushed and wanted to know more about the characters. I found three novels on eBay. It wasn't enough. I started using Google to find out everything I could about the show and stumbled into Tunnel Tales. I had never heard of fan fiction, and I was hooked because the characters lived on in the imaginations of the writers.

Then I found a link to WFOL that promised fellowship with others who loved the show, so I signed on in 2024. I was timid in my interactions the first time as I was used to being panned by my friends for loving a decades-old show. One friend said, "That's the show with the creepy guy, right?" (Creepy guy? Uh NO, definitely NO!)

I came out of my shell more during WFOL 2025 because I saw that the people in the interactions were so accepting and supportive. I found others who genuinely appreciated the premise of the show as much as I did, and they accepted me as one of their own. I was not considered crazy for my love of the show. Due to the encouragement of the writers I have admired, I found the courage to write and read a short story during one of the sessions. Their praise was exceedingly kind and made me feel like I belonged.

Unfortunately, the WFOL 2025 auction has created a monster because I was able to procure some zines. This means that I must now find and read ALL zines that I can lay my hands on to see what others have envisioned for the characters. I totally blame JoAnn Baca for this because she was the one who shipped my auction items to me.

I was a scientist in my professional life prior to retirement. If I had a literary background, I would insert a relevant poem here to elucidate the feeling of belonging. Alas, I have no such insights, so I am limited by own thoughts and grammar. Suffice it to say, BatB and the wonderful fan fiction stories continue to whisper my name. I offer a sincere thank you to the wonderful fans I have met online.



O my Love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.
So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I....

CONFESSION – by Paula

From *A Red Rose* by Robert Burns

The Whispers of Lovers

By PearlAnn SnowStar

Two orbs of light danced around each other. Sounds of giggling coming from both. They moved through time and space together, never far from each other. Souls bound together, still individuals, but also one, as if they are two yolks in one egg.

After telepathically sharing thoughts and feelings, the two orbs paused in their dance. They noticed a portal that led to the city of New Orleans.

“You’ve never been outside of New York City, except to Connecticut.” One of the orbs moved toward the other one and nudged it.

“Catherine, it’s not Samhain.” He nudged back.

“Oh, Vincent, but it’s Mardi Gras. Look, the door is open.”

“But can we get back to the light, or will we be joining one of many this day on this plane, until another portal opens?”

“It’s a gift we should take. Please, Vincent.”

He sighed as he followed her through the portal into the noisy, bustling city.

As they moved through the people, some in costumes, they noticed their forms changing into what they were in a past life. A handsome lion man and a beautiful human woman.

Vincent looked at Catherine, who was dressed as Cleopatra.

“Catherine, you look so...sexy,” he whispered.

She giggled. “And you look so handsome in blue. Like the Beast in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast. So princely.”

She turned around and changed into a golden gown, with a beautiful tiara on her head.

“Hey, man, it’s Beauty and the Beast.” A woman dressed like a black cat twirled a tail she was holding. She walked up to them.

“Meooooow, so cool.” She strolled up to Vincent and stroked his arm. “Purrr, care to drop the Princess and come with me?”

Catherine started to reach over to remove the lady’s hand, but Vincent beat her to it.

“My lady cat, I’m deeply and for all eternity in love only with this beautiful Princess. I do not stray.”

The lady laughed. “Oooh, not an alley cat. I dig it. Call me Catwoman.” Catwoman reached for the beads around her neck and took a few off. She tried to put a strand around Vincent’s neck but, even standing on tiptoe, couldn’t do it.

He gently took the beads and placed them around his neck. “Thank you.”

Catwoman turned to face Catherine and found it much easier to place beads around her neck. She whispered into Catherine’s ear, saying softly, “He’s a keeper.”

Catherine nodded and smiled. “I know.”

“Enjoy the Carnival!” Catwoman said as she turned to walk into the crowd.

Catherine started to laugh.

Vincent looked at her. “She can see us.” He seemed a bit alarmed. He looked at the beads around his neck and lifted them up, studying them intently.

“Oh, Vincent, we’ve been given a gift.” She took his hand into hers. “We’re back in physical form, back in the physical world. And we’re on Bourbon Street!”

She took his hand and led him into the crowd. Amazingly, even with all the people, some bumping into them, they managed to keep together. Moving through the crowd, they went into a store.

“Marie Laveau’s House of Voodoo,” Vincent whispered into her ear.

They looked around at the people in the store and the items, piled to the ceiling with beads, clothes, and masks. They sensed a presence. There was a spirit behind them.

Turning, they saw a young beautiful black woman with understanding, kind eyes.

“Narcissa!” Vincent smiled.

Narcissa put a finger to her lips, “Shh, child. I’m here to tell you the Elementals wish to give you children of love a gift. Enjoy Mardi Gras up to midnight.”

“Midnight?” Catherine inquired.

Narcissa grinned.

Vincent smiled. “Like Cinderella, Catherine.”

“Beware, though, of dark spirits who want to keep you here or separate you. Your Guardian Spirit Guides and Guardian Angels will guide you.”

Narcissa pointed towards a display of ceramic figurines. “Avoid the dolls with pins in them but notice the beautiful Angel with the sword and wings of white. If you see him, he warns of danger. You must follow him to a safer spot when he comes before you. But eat, drink, and be human for this day.”

“We can eat?” Catherine sighed. “Oh, Vincent, let’s explore!”

Vincent chuckled as they walked down the street. They passed a parade with amazing floats and beads flying everywhere. The sound of jazz music echoed all around. They wound up at the French Market and looked around, amazed at the sights and sounds.

Catherine stirred Vincent toward Café du Monde. She looked at the coffee with longing.

“Need a drink?”

Catherine and Vincent turned to face someone who eerily reminded them of Winslow. He handed them a gift card and then disappeared.

Catherine looked at Vincent. He looked at her.

“Magic?” she asked.

“Of course.” Vincent gently took her hand, and they walked over to the counter.

Catherine got black coffee and beignets. Vincent ordered coffee au lait and beignets. Taking their treats to a nearby small table, they sat down.

The night was going so well. After the café, they decided to continue walking around.

They were back on Bourbon Street. There were smaller groups of people, still partying and out and about, even at this late hour. However, it was not so crowded.

Catherine started to shiver.

Vincent looked at her. “You feel it, too?”

“Something is not right.” She looked around.

Suddenly, Vincent growled and pulled her close. He looked to his left. She turned her head in that direction and looked at the dark alley. It was then she noticed the solid black shadow-person.

Vincent placed himself on her left side as they moved quickly down the street. She looked back. The shadow-person had no features, except you could tell that it was the figure of a man.

Vincent turned, placing her behind him.

A lady walked out of a store across the street and screamed. “Evil being!”

People around them turned to look at what was behind them, but the shadow-person had disappeared.

A man walked up to the spot where the shadow-person had been and bent down to pick something up. “Hey, look! A gold coin!”

People out on the street started to laugh and continued on their way. The lady who screamed was crossing herself, and mumbling something.

Catherine looked at Vincent. No words were said. They knew who that shadow-person was.

They noticed a restaurant named the Old Nola Cookery. He looked at her. She nodded. They walked into the restaurant.

Vincent looked at the menu. “Gator tail bites?”

“No! That does not sound appealing at all.” She grimaced.

He laughed. “Still, I’ll try it fried.”

“Hmm, fried eggplant sticks. That sounds much better.”

“Let’s order it to go, Catherine.” He was looking at a clock on the wall.

“Yes.” She seemed sad.

“We still have one more hour, Catherine.”

She nodded and ordered the two items, paying with the magical card. They walked out of the restaurant, eating their food as they continued onward down the street. When they saw a trash bin, they stopped, finished up, and tossed the garbage away.

She asked, “So, gator man, how was the gator?”

“Spicy, but very flavorful.” He grinned. “Tasted like chicken.”

She laughed and gently hit his shoulder. “The eggplant was good.”

They both noticed a portal had opened up in front of an alley. Holding hands, they sadly walked toward it.

Suddenly, the shadow-person appeared in front of them. “Going somewhere?” the shadow-person said with a menacing tone. He stood between them and the portal.

Backing up, with Catherine behind him, Vincent called out, “Saint Michael, help!”

“Paracelsus,” Catherine hissed.

A bright light appeared from the portal, becoming an Angel with white wings. He held a sword in his hand and immediately cleaved Paracelsus in two.

“Go,” Saint Michael said.

Catherine and Vincent jumped into the portal. They immediately returned back to being two glowing white orbs.

As the two orbs continued to float in the spiritual realm, they started to giggle. Then both of them started to sing.

“Way down yonder in New Orleans, in the land of dreamy scenes, there’s a Garden of Eden, ah, you know what I mean...” *

*Way Down Yonder in New Orleans, sung by Freddy Cannon (1960) lyrics by Henry Creamer, music by John Turner Layton Jr (1922)



THE SHOW THAT SAVED ME

By Lindariel

I am not engaging in hyperbole when I say that our beloved Beauty and the Beast series quite literally saved my spirit. When the series first aired in 1987, I was still struggling to put my life back together after finally managing to safely extricate myself from a mentally and emotionally abusive marriage. Thank goodness I had the sense to get out before he became physically abusive, because the signs were clearly there – throwing things, slamming doors, visibly struggling to keep from raising his hand against me.

Fortunately, I had a friend who had a room to spare in her home. I managed to keep my job, even though I “disappeared” for two weeks after leaving my boss a note about my difficult situation. Several months later, I landed a role in a regional musical theatre production that proved to be wildly successful, running for 18 months instead of just three months over that first summer. And even though my ex-husband contested the divorce, I had a great attorney who didn’t leave him any room to maneuver. It took almost two years, but finally I had signed divorce papers that consigned my abuser to the past and even returned my maiden name to me.

But hard-won legal freedom was one thing. Feeling free was quite another, especially since my ex stalked me for quite a while. He worked in the same building I did, fortunately on a different floor, and he’d show up at church, sitting in a front pew so he could easily glare at me up in the choir loft next to the altar. He even came to see my show and had the gall to come back to the green room afterward to ask if we could get together sometime for “closure.” I told him I had already achieved closure by leaving him and went to alert security. I did my best to ignore him as much as possible, but I also constantly altered my driving and walking paths to work, had colleagues escort me out of the building when possible, and spent far too much time constantly looking over my shoulder. I was making a life for myself, but I often felt hemmed in, trapped, and hopeless.

Then, on September 25, 1987, I happened to catch the pilot showing of Beauty and the Beast. I’d seen the promotional ads and thought it sounded interesting, if a bit

far-fetched. A modern-day fairytale. Ha! I didn't believe in fairytales anymore, and I certainly wasn't interested in letting ANY man back in my life.

But from the very first episode, from the very first time I heard Vincent's gentle, raspy voice, hope began to sneak its way back into my heart. By the end of the pilot, I was thoroughly enchanted, and Friday evenings became "appointment tv" for me, though often it was through viewing recorded tapes on the VCR. Most Friday nights, I was on stage myself! This show was a balm to my weakened spirit. Like Catherine, I found my courage and began to step out into my life in new ways.

By the close of the first season, my family noticed a new lightness in my aspect and step. By the time the series ended, I had quit my job and gone back to graduate school to get my master's degree in voice. And somehow while I was getting my degree, a new man – a much younger man! – came into my life; a singer, like me. We've been married for 32 and a half years now, and we have a house of our own, two beautiful, talented daughters ... and two cats. And in so many ways, I have this wonderful show to thank for the amazing life I've been able to build.

WHAT IS PAST...

By JoAnn Baca

Sometimes a story is written that affects me deeply. One such was written in the past year. Without going into the particulars, I want to say that I loved it and thank the writer for it, but felt a cry in my heart for a kind of sequel. This story is the result.

“...and that’s the story of my first Winterfest.” The old man took off his glasses to polish them as his rapt audience broke into applause, not in the least disturbed by the librarian trying to hush them as she passed. The smile on her face indicated she was only doing it for show. Mr. Eric’s story time was one of the best-attended of the week, and leeway was granted.

Winston, a tall, strapping teen who looked as if he would be happier shooting baskets on a nearby court, jumped up from the floor near Mr. Eric’s feet. He was a returning member of the ever-growing audience for Tales of the Tunnels, as Mr. Eric called them. “Let me help you, sir.” He held out a steady arm.

One shaky hand latched onto Winston’s forearm and Mr. Eric, frail and bent, slowly rose from the leather chair in which he had been sitting. “Thank you, young Winston. You are kind.”

Maria, Winston’s girlfriend, stood and took Mr. Eric’s other arm. “We love hearing your stories,” she said shyly, looking down into his wrinkled face. “They seem so real when you tell them.”

Mr. Eric smiled and nodded. “But they *are* real, my dear! To me, at least.”

The two teens waited patiently while others from the gathering spoke to Mr. Eric. He was quite the celebrity in the library, his story times bringing many in who otherwise might never cross its threshold, and his stories seemed to invite others’ remembrances of times past, which they shared with him. When the crowd finally melted away, Winston said, “We’ll help you home.”

This was his usual offer but, unusually, Mr. Eric shook his head. “Just down the stairs would be enough, but thank you. Today is a special day, and I’m not going straight home.”

“What’s special about this Saturday?” Maria asked as she and Winston helped Mr. Eric gingerly negotiate the stone stairs.

“Eh, what?”

She repeated her question.

“Why, didn’t you hear my story? Today is - or would have been -Winterfest!”

Winston and Maria exchanged a look over Mr. Eric’s head. “But it’s just a story, sir,” Winston reminded him gently.

“What? Oh...yes, yes, I know, I know.” Mr. Eric patted Winston’s shoulder after descending the last step to the sidewalk. “Help me get a cab, would you? Then you two go have fun on this lovely winter day!”

The cab procured, Winston helped Mr. Eric into it, and heard him ask for Central Park before the door closed. As the cab pulled away from the curb, he waved to the old man while saying to Maria, “Central Park is pretty big. Should we follow him, make sure he doesn’t get lost? He’s so unsteady on his feet, he can’t walk far, and who knows if anyone would help him?”

Maria held out a hand, and they soon were laughing over repeating the old movie line, “Follow that cab!”

Mr. Eric was slowly but resolutely making his way into the Park when their cab pulled up. They followed him at a little distance, not wanting to upset him, just watching to ensure he would be all right.

He stepped surely in a particular direction that, in Winston’s memory of the Park, didn’t lead anywhere specific. Puzzled, he and Maria exchanged looks. When Mr. Eric vanished from sight, they waited a moment, then stepped through the heavy foliage into which he had disappeared.

He was gone.

Before them was a drainage tunnel. There was nothing else around but trees and bushes. Since they heard no rustling, they both surmised that Mr. Eric had gone into the tunnel...which seemed so odd to them, they exchanged another look. But Maria's confusion cleared first as she recalled the name of his story time. "'Tales of the Tunnels.' Well, there's a tunnel, right?"

Winston stared at her in disbelief. "Those are just stories! And that's really just a drainage pipe!"

"Well, he had to go somewhere, and he didn't go left or right so..." Not knowing what else to do, she stepped forward and entered the tunnel into which the drainage ditch vanished. Winston reluctantly followed.

As soon as they entered, they heard the snick of a metal door closing. Winston turned on the flashlight feature of his cell phone and they saw footprints in the soil in front of a solid metal door. Mr. Eric was not in front of it, but his footprints indicated he had been there mere moments before.

Maria shoved at the door. It didn't budge. There was no handle or latch, so she began searching for a lever of some sort. She felt all around the door as Winston cast light on various sections of wall where it met the metal. "There!"

Maria looked up to see the smallest of indentations in the rock, something she normally wouldn't have looked at twice had she not felt around the entire door already. It was the only anomaly. She raised her hand and let her fingers cover the indentation, then pressed into it. That same snick of metal sounded as earlier, and the door unlatched. She looked at Winston. He shrugged.

Pulling out her own cell phone, she let her flashlight feature reveal the unlit interior.

It was difficult to see very far inside. The only illumination was the weak sunlight barely filtering in from outside, and their cell phone flashlights. Maria turned hers off. "Might as well save my battery if we're going in together. We *are* going, right?"

Winston nodded. "Do you smell that?"

She sniffed. "Smells like a match was lit recently."

“Mr. Eric doesn’t have a cell phone. But he came prepared with...maybe a candle?”

Nodding, she said, “Let’s follow his footprints. They look like the only ones, so it shouldn’t be hard.”

Soon they could see a weak light glimmering ahead of them. Whispering, Winston said, “Let’s fall back a bit. Don’t want him hearing us.”

She smirked. “He’s nearly deaf...but OK!”

They gazed around. They were in a tunnel, all right, one that was leading them downward. The rock walls were not oppressive, however, which surprised Winston. There was an aura of spaciousness and...peacefulness. He wondered if Mr. Eric had found this place and it had inspired the stories he made up.

As they continued downward, Maria noted, “I’ve never seen Mr. Eric walk this far. And he’s going at a pretty good pace, too.”

Winston frowned at the realization. How odd. The old man seemed to doddle at the library, but his pace was not leisurely here below the... Below! That’s what Mr. Eric sometimes called the place he referred to as his home in the tunnels. Well, this certainly did seem “below” – below the Park, below the city streets...below. Muttering, “If Below is real, I wonder what else is,” he picked up his own pace, closing on Mr. Eric.

Before they reached the old man, he disappeared into an opening in the rockface. They approached the gap with care and peeked around its edge. It led into a seemingly cavernous space. They entered and found that the passageway here was no longer within a tunnel; they were walking along a footpath that hugged the edge of a...cliffside? When Winston aimed his flashlight on their surroundings, they saw that there were several barely visible levels below and above them. “What the heck?”

“Where *are* we?” Maria wondered aloud.

“He’s turning into another gap in the rocks.” Winston picked up his pace. If they lost him amidst these passages, they might never find him again.

Hurrying, they veered into the tunnel without looking into it first.

Mr. Eric was standing there, arms crossed, waiting for them.

“You don’t sneak very sneakily,” he observed, a wry smile on his wrinkled countenance.

“Well, you’re hard of hearing, so we thought we were safe,” Winston said, smiling apologetically.

“I am, am I?” Mr. Eric chuckled. “People see what they want to see. What we make them see.” He shook his head. “Well, come on then. You’ve traveled this far, you might as well tag along the rest of the way.” He reached for an unlit torch lying against the rockface and, using his candle, lit it. Immediately they had enough light to see a long way down the corridor.

“Save your batteries. Follow me.” Mr. Eric turned and walked with a fairly sprightly step ahead of them. Another look passed between the youngsters, chagrin on both their faces. What had happened to the little old guy who could barely stand without help, who needed assistance getting down the library’s stairs...

The passage was straight, no further downward tilt, making their next few minutes’ walk quite easy, which allowed the young ones to look around, taking in the number of openings and the dark spaces beyond them.

“Those are individual chambers,” Mr. Eric said. “You’ll recall I spoke of the one I lived in while Below. It was quite a ways from here, nearer the Hub...where most of the community lived.” He looked back at them, smiling at their surprise. “Yes, it was all true, every word.” He faced forward again. “Where we’re going isn’t the Hub though. As I mentioned, it’s Winterfest today, so we’re heading for the Great Hall.”

“That’s where you held the big Winterfest gatherings...with...with your helpers?” Maria was recalling his story.

“Right! Back then that huge cavern held a couple hundred people, and there was music and food and magic and dancing and...” He stopped speaking, his voice having choked a bit on the last words. “So I like to visit it on these anniversaries, just to remember.”

“I’m glad we’re with you then,” Maria said. “So you aren’t alone with your memories.”

Mr. Eric looked over at her. “What a lovely thought.” He smiled, getting misty-eyed. “My sister Ellie would have liked you. She was always thinking of others, too.”

As they approached a large staircase, the elderly man warned, “Careful of the winds, they pack a wallop. You want to stay close to the wall since there’s no railing.”

Winston couldn’t believe how strong the breeze was that kicked up once they had started their descent. Again, he marveled that Mr. Eric seemed able to withstand the buffeting without assistance.

They got to a set of massive wooden doors, where they stopped. The doors were standing open, pushed back nearly to the inner walls. “Once I realized I was close to the time I couldn’t open these by myself, I made sure they stayed open. There are metal rings in the interior walls and I chained the doors to them. It makes the cavernous space quite chilly and windblown but I had little choice if I wanted to continue coming here.”

Inside, the wind wasn’t as strong but it still blew through. Maria was glad it was winter so she was wearing her warmest coat.

Mr. Eric walked through the vast space, his torch lighting tantalizing glimpses of the walls, the stacked tables, the cozy alcoves. Then he climbed...unassisted...up an interior staircase to illuminate incredible wall hangings on a surrounding balcony.

“Wow.” Winston was gobsmacked. The reality of the place made him begin to believe in the reality of the community that Mr. Eric said had once inhabited it. But...perhaps the old man had merely stumbled upon these passageways and caverns? He could still have manufactured the stories about inhabitants - some of them quite unbelievable, when you got right down to it. A genius boy named Mouse. A lion-faced man. A candlemaker supplying light to the entire community. It was a *lot* to buy into, even now that he was standing in this huge space...that had wall hangings and tables...

“You don’t quite believe me yet, do you, my boy?” Mr. Eric shook his head, smiling, and descended the stairs. “Come. I’ll show you someplace else that’s special. I don’t usually go that far on visits like this, but for you two, I will make an exception. First, however...”

He reached behind a stack of tables and extracted a bottle. Maria's eyes grew wide as she realized it was a very expensive one.

"That's hard to find...and pricey," she said. "Sure you want to share it?"

"You aren't quite old enough to drink yet, are you?" He watched them shake their heads. "Ah, well. Still, I'd rather not drink alone, so...just this once." He eyed the contents. "Not much left anyway. I'll have to bring a new bottle next time."

After opening the whiskey, he took a moment to breathe in its aroma. Then, nodding, he held it out. "Ladies first."

Maria quirked her head at such an old-fashioned sentiment.

"Humor me. I'm as much of an antique as those wall hangings."

She chuckled and nodded, reaching for the bottle. She took a tentative sip, then let the liquid sit on her tongue for a moment. Her eyes widened and she swallowed. "That's good!"

"Don't I know it," the old man said. "Winston?"

The younger man took a nip and swallowed it quickly, then nearly coughed at the burning feeling that ensued. "Whoa!" He handed the bottle back, satisfied with just one taste.

Mr. Eric stood for a moment with his eyes closed. Maria wondered if he was searching for the faint sounds of an orchestra, or the murmur of conversation, or the sound of many feet dancing on stone... Tears slipped from his eyes but his smile grew as he stood there. Finally, he took a healthy slug of the whiskey, draining the contents. When it was empty, he held the bottle high. "Happy Winterfest!" he crowed.

The youngsters looked at each other and said in tandem, "Happy Winterfest!"

Mr. Eric stood the empty bottle on the floor and straightened. "Come along. In for a penny..."

They exited the Great Hall the same way they had come in, but he turned them in the opposite direction once they reached the top of the stairs. They walked for what seemed like a mile, this time Winston carrying the torch. Mr. Eric told them that

what they were seeing had been viewed by only his eyes for nearly 25 years, since the community had disbanded, lives intersecting back Above, the need for this refuge diminished while the ability to keep it secret had also diminished.

“The man with the face of a lion, he was real.” Mr. Eric stopped to rest for a moment – the first time he’d seemed to need to. “This place protected him, as I said in my stories. But after he passed away...” His eyes blurred with tears, and they fell hot and fast, even as he kept speaking. “Anyway, the need for this place was no longer so great then, and once the oldest ones, those set in their ways, died, the younger ones had no compelling reason to stay. We all left. We had our memories, and we kept in touch with each other once we were Above, but this place stayed alive only in our hearts.”

He began walking again. “We sealed most of the entrance points, but left one or two for emergencies, for retreat in times of trouble that never came.” He stopped before turning a corner. “I’m the last one. The last of the last.” He slipped around the corner then, and they entered a chamber that was gained by descending a short set of steps. It was filled with books. A huge desk sat in one corner.

“Father’s Library,” he said. “We kept it as he’d had it. I don’t know why, really. We could have used the space, at least at first. But gradually, as our numbers thinned, it was just a nice place for our oldest to come and sit and reminisce.” He indicated the chess board. “The pieces are around someplace, probably in a drawer. Vincent did clean the desk out after Father passed. Catherine organized the papers they found there. We found some interesting things.” He smiled sadly, his mind a million miles in the past. Then he seemed to waken to the present. “A story for another day. Anyway, there was plenty of room in that desk after that.”

Winston walked among the stacks. Dust covered things, but it was dry and cool this far Below, and the books had held up remarkably well. “It’d be nice to get this place cleaned up and useful again,” he murmured.

Maria nodded. “Can we see more? Or are you too tired, Mr. Eric? You’ve been on your feet a long time.”

“I could rest right here while you two take a tour yourselves. Just keep going in a big circle and you’ll get right back to this place. There’s more to the Hub, of course, but that’d take you to lots of interesting places.”

“You sure you’ll be OK alone?”

Mr. Eric nodded. “After 25 years, I’m sure.” He lit a couple of candles so that Winston could take the torch.

The youngsters ran up the steps and turned as instructed. They were gone for an hour, rushing from chamber to chamber, wondering what they might have contained. They marveled at the big pond that Maria remembered was called the Mirror Pool, and were surprised to see a stout wooden door blocking one chamber that they peeked into, surmising it was the lion-faced man’s bedroom when they caught sight of a gorgeous painting of him with a woman in a long ruby-colored gown.

They wanted to take a longer look around but felt Mr. Eric’s energy might be flagging, so returned to the library. Finding him dozing in a chair, they crept through the chamber for a while, poking around and enjoying the serenity of the place.

“Seen enough?”

They turned to find Mr. Eric standing tall. He blew out the candles. “I’ll show you out.”

They returned to the Park entrance with him, peppering him with questions the whole way. He made an effort to keep up with their pace and their queries, but was obviously extremely tired once they got back to the street. Realizing he truly was exhausted, they felt awful for having worn him out so badly.

“We’ll get you home,” Maria said, insisting when he tried to refuse. “It’s the least we can do after such a magical afternoon.”

Winston took the old man’s arm – he really did need assistance by this time – and stayed with him through the cab ride and right to his door. Maria opened it for Mr. Eric, and he let out a deep sigh of relief as he entered his apartment.

He turned to gaze up at them. “I never thought I’d say this but...thank you for following me and learning my secret. I feel it’s safe with you two.”

“It is,” promised Winston.

The old man nodded and shut his door.

They walked in silence from Mr. Eric's apartment building to the subway, each lost in thought. Finally, Maria said, "We're going back, right?"

"Absolutely!" Winston's brown eyes looked beyond her. He was back in the Tunnels in his head. "Exploring that place will be amazing! And really, it's so nice down there..."

"I know what you're thinking," she said, her enthusiasm matching his. "We could move down there, maybe for the summer."

He nodded. "We can bring down whatever furniture we might want late at night...if we even have to. That lion-man's chamber looked pretty complete."

"And we'll check the kitchen area, see what we'd need to make it usable."

"Find a way to get more light down there..."

The subway came and soon they were on their way home, making plans.

Who knows, maybe more Tales of the Tunnels would one day be told? For what is past is prologue...*

Shakespeare really did know everything.

*From *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare.

MEETING LINDA HAMILTON

THE NICEST PERSON IN THE WORLD

By Deb Fowler

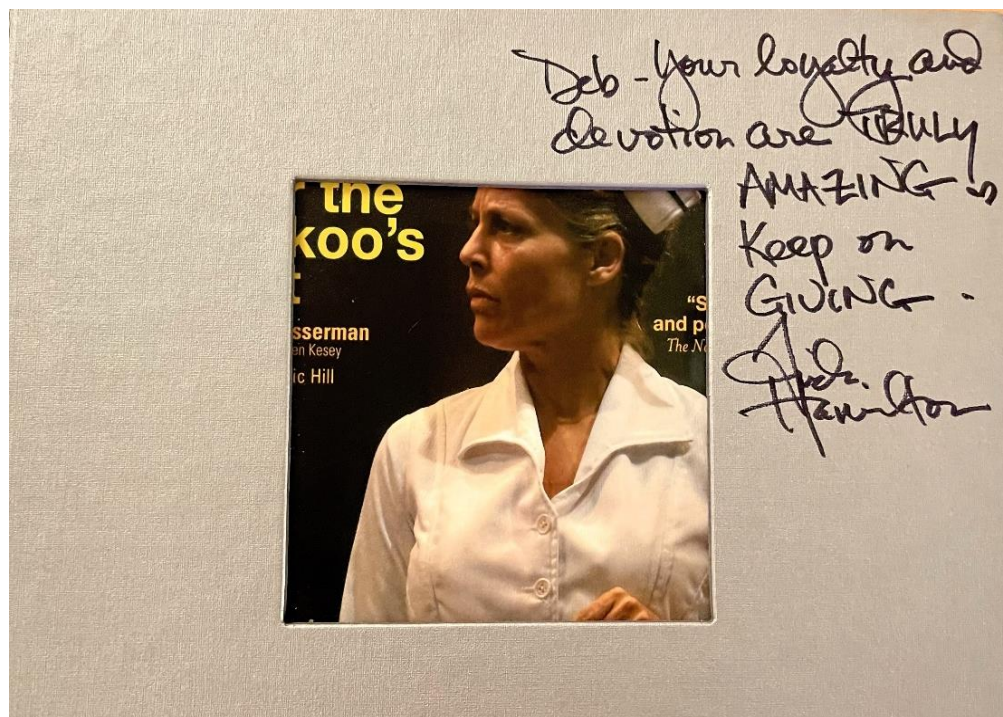
Pictures and notes from a photo book I made about our trip.

Moira Keeley contacted either myself or Rosemarie Salvatore about Linda Hamilton doing

a play at a local playhouse in Massachusetts.

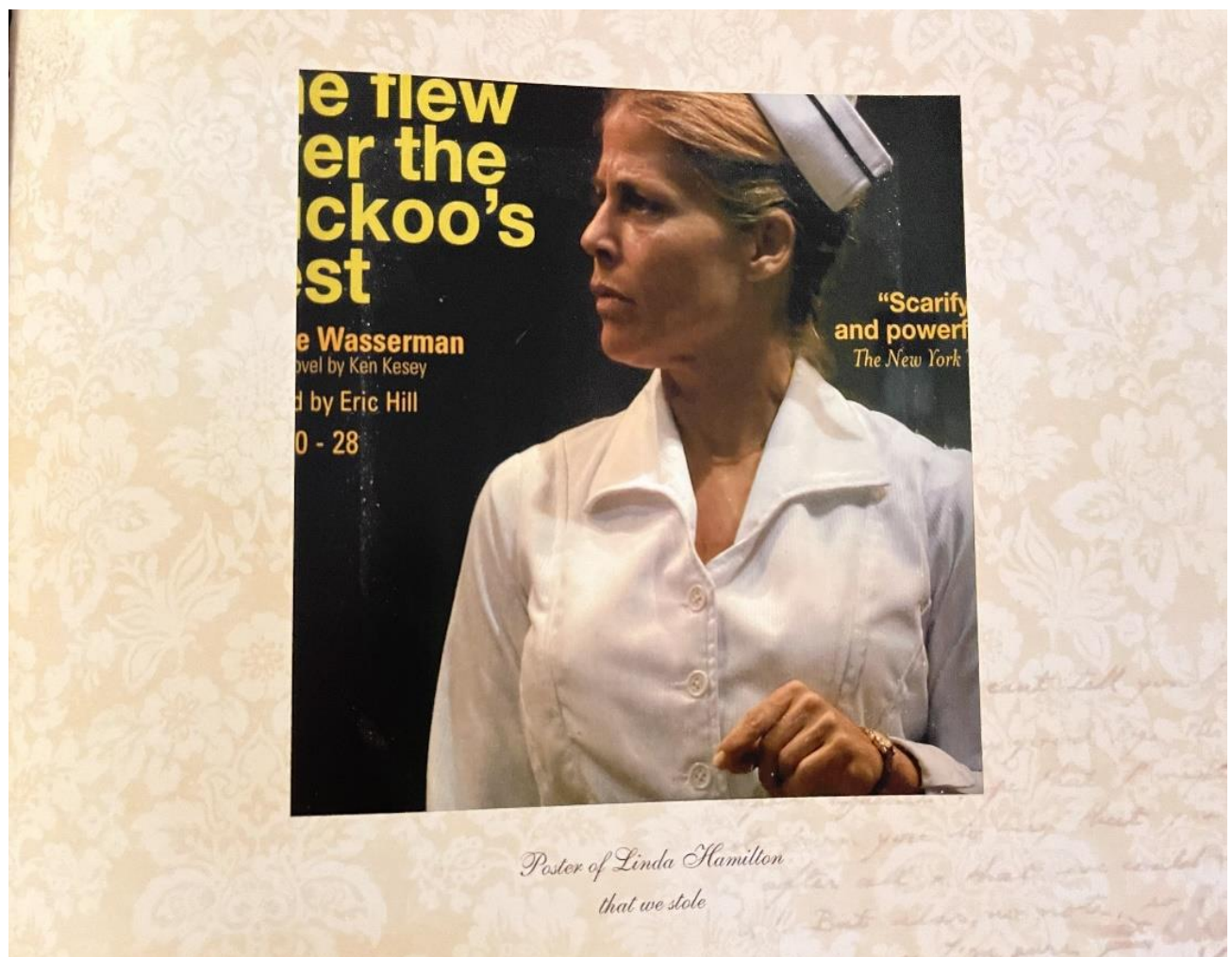
She said we could go and see her in the play and maybe get to meet her after the play.

So, of course we were in and very happily on our way.



Front of my book

Posters of Linda Hamilton were all over the little town where the play was, so we stole one or maybe several.



We had lunch in the “Dirty Dancing” style Red Lion Inn and Tavern and then we shopped in the gift shop.



We had lunch in the tavern and shopped in the gift shop.



Anatomically correct lion

Of course we found an anatomically correct lion.

Rosemarie, Moira, and me on the porch of the Red Lion Inn and Tavern.



Carousel carving at the Red Lion Inn and Tavern.



We visited the awesome local library and the doors and windows were open to the fresh air. Flowers were everywhere.



Hand-carved carousel and large carousel horse and chess set.



The Red Lion Inn, too expensive to stay there, but we enjoyed it anyway.



Devin (on the left) and Vincent (on the right) on the Carousel

Walking Bridge

Red Lion Inn

Our Hotel



Walking Trail

Almost Vermont

Us Again

Then we were lost



The Nature Trail

The Nature Trail



*Lilly and Moira (looking at her feet)
and Rosemarie on the nature trail.*

*Lake with a beaver dam and a tree covered
mountain.*

Lilly and Moira (looking at her foot) and Rosemarie on the Nature Trail.

Lake with a beaver dam and a tree-covered mountain.



<<<<<<<<< *Outside the theater*

Unforgettable >>>>>>>>>



<<<<<<<<< *It was like a dream...
only better*

On to the Theater

Like a Dream, Only Better

Like a Dream, Only Better

We were waiting by the stage door. In just a few minutes, a petite, blonde woman came out and got in a car. Rosemarie and I thought it was Linda, but weren't sure. I knocked on the passenger side window and the window rolled down and...

It Was Her!

She said, "Let me turn the light on."

Then she said, "Let me get out and come around. We can take pictures."

She was so tiny and so sweet.

We talked laughed, talked, hugged, kissed on the cheek and took pictures. She seemed to enjoy it too and I hope she knows how much it meant to us.

We were waiting by the stage door. In just a few minutes, a petite, blonde woman came out and got in a car. Rosemarie and I thought it was Linda, but weren't sure.

I knocked on the passenger side window and the window rolled down and...

IT WAS HER!!!!!!

We introduced ourselves and she mentioned the flowers we sent to her dressing room. She said, “Let me turn the interior car light on,” and signed a bunch of stuff for us to auction. Then she said, “Let me get out and come around and we can take pictures. Turn around to face the light” (which was a single little light).

When we turned around, there was no one there. I couldn’t believe they left her tiny little self alone with us, and it was black dark outside and we were in the middle of the country. They did not know us from Adam’s house cat and they left her alone! It didn’t seem to bother her at all though, and I think our time together was better since it was just us.

I was so nervous, I think I ran my mouth a lot (which I do when I am nervous). We talked, we laughed, we talked some more, hugged, kissed on the cheek and took pictures. She seemed to enjoy it too, and I hope she knows how much it meant to us.

When you meet someone that you have loved and followed for years, you never know what their reaction will be. It was really special that she was more kind, sweeter, and more welcoming than she really had to be, and more than I could ever imagine. It was a very, very special night.

I couldn’t stop saying, “We really met Linda Hamilton and they left her alone with us!”

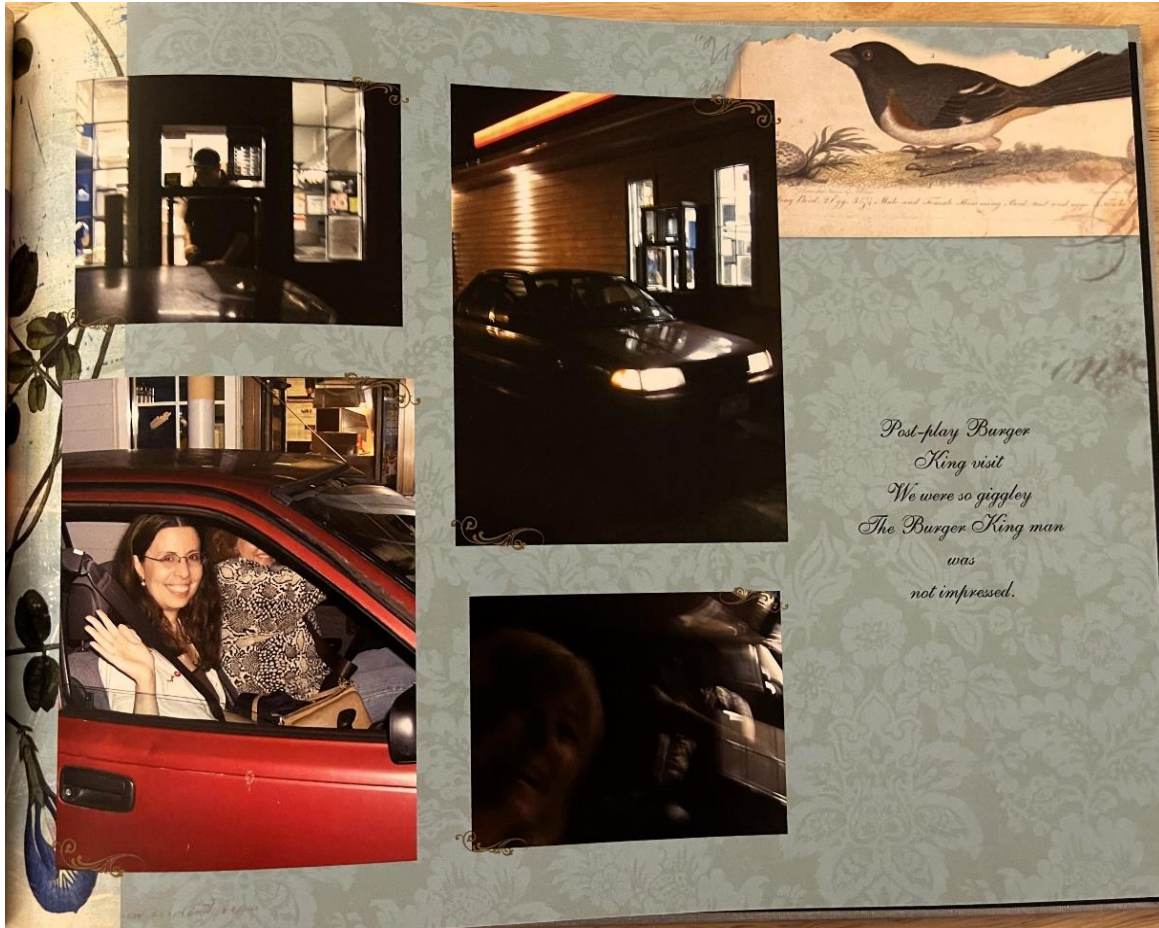
(Moir hated to have her picture taken, that is why she is in only one of the pictures).





She was just the best!

After the play we went to the Burger King drive-through. We were giggling like little girls. The Burger King man at the window was not impressed.



The weather was beautiful, especially since it was July and I was coming from Louisiana.

It felt like early spring. It was a beautiful little town and the countryside was even more beautiful.

Moirra has passed from this world now, but wherever you are, thank you so much!!!

July 24th - July 26th

2007

The Berkshires

An unforgettable trip

Great Friends,

Great Weather,

Great Fun,

Great Memories.

I'm pretty sure there are more pictures that are probably on one of the three external hard drives that I have, but I didn't look for them.

I HEARD THE WHISPER-YOU ARE LOVED AS YOU ARE

By PearlAnn SnowStar

Most people in BATB fandom know I have survived a domestic abuse situation in my childhood. My father sexually, physically, and verbally abused my mother, and physically and verbally abused my brother and me, in that order. Being an Air Force Captain, he had to make sure that for special occasions, like being out in public, we didn't show any signs of our abuse. Hence, he had his beating order, so to speak.

That was my background, and from the first moment our show came on the air, Friday, September 25th, 1987, on CBS, I could not pull away from it. I always wanted to show that pure, faithful, soul love mates had happy lives, not tragic ones, as mostly depicted in various stories and movies. And I always wanted to do so via an inter-species mating (my sci/fi-fantasy side coming out). I felt like someone had read my mind. It's not exactly how I wanted it to be (on Earth) but it was very close to my version of the Beauty and the Beast stories. I had pictured the Beast never changing back to a human but still being a Beast. His soul was so human that everyone saw him as a human. Of course, I had to watch this TV Show every Friday evening at 8pm CDT.

We all know about the third season. Catherine's death made me angry. I had to let others know, via a story, that Catherine wasn't dead. With the help of wonderful Karen Bates-Crouch, who worked with me and edited my story for the Mirrors Four zine, "Death Has No Dominion" was accepted under my name at the time, PearlAnn Snow.

With curiosity and a need to meet this fandom, I attended TunnelCon 1 in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the healing of my soul, myself, began. I was not alone, truly not alone. It was therapeutic, cathartic, and fun all at the same time.

I also went to TunnelCon 2 and 3, but then real life took over. I was working. I was living with Mom and both of us were trying to keep up with bills and other things. I made friends, and my brother came back with his second wife, Sharon, in 1995. I was now 41, and it had been 22 years since I last saw him. (My brother and I were separated when I was 19.) I know that if it wasn't for BATB, I may not have accepted him coming back into my life. But BATB showed me that it was OK to open your heart to love and forgiveness. Even though there were disagreements in

the BATB world, I never felt afraid that I would be beaten up because of my choices.

It took time and patience to go from being silent and accepting bullying to being fearless and expressing who I really was. I missed BATB a lot, and found the Yahoo BATB group (BBTV) in 2016. I also realized I had fallen back into old habits of self-criticism and doubt.

Real life continued, but after Mom died in 2020 due to COVID and her health, I decided to once again show my talents. To write. JoAnn Baca edited and guided this fledgling, and once again, this time under the name I forever want to go by, PearlAnn SnowStar, I did a WFOL 2021 story - Family Continues.

Once again, my heart felt so much relief. So much acceptance. I heard again the whisper of love. “You are worthy, it’s OK to be crazy and insane. It’s OK to be single, have no sex partner-ever and no children-ever. It’s OK to love steamy and express yourself.”

I know some people wonder why I can be loud and expressive at times. It’s because I’m making up for years of not coming out as me, so to speak.

While some of my family and friends still don’t get it, it doesn’t bother me anymore. I’m not afraid to love what I love, like what I like. I’m not going to be silent. I refuse to accept anyone threatening me or bullying me. I found myself being the hippy I wanted to be in the real world. I was willing to share my views and fight for freedom, not only for myself but for others, too.

I wanted to write this essay and end with hope for the future, even if our rights may be taken away. I’m not afraid to die, because right now, I’m living my best life despite it all.

The whispers coming to my heart and soul continue. I’m worthy of being loved for who I am. Not many may like me or my wild ways, but it’s wonderful agreeing to disagree and still come together for this show we love, the characters we love, and for the love I feel between the fans of this show whom I met. I have told my brother, Charles, and his third wife, my sister-in-law, Reyna, whom I just call my sister, that this is our extended family. This BATB is the family I accept, cherish, and am glad to be a part of. I know we’re not perfect, and that we may not get along at times, but we always are there for each other.

I attended the online Cleveland, OH, con, the Wichita, KS, con, the San Diego, CA, con, and the Washington, D. C., con. I cherish the hugs during those cons. Each con had special moments for me. From the slogan ‘What the Puck?’ (Cleveland) to the journey below in the salt mine (Wichita). From the beach with the seals to the safari and park in San Diego, to the Air and Space Museum in D.C. I loved the talent shows (participating in a few), the panels, and the banquets. Heck, I loved everything.

Until BATB, I wouldn’t even hug my Mom, it was my friends or family that insisted I do so. I couldn’t express love, only anger. Even at work, my co-workers never could get close to me. But after that first night of that special TV show, as well as attending TunnelCon 1, you couldn’t stop me from hugging Mom, my friends, and my co-workers. I was beginning to accept love and to be loving.

Even if real life came with many changes, from new jobs to things happening with Mom’s health, even with many changes in the places I lived, I no longer despaired. I was so glad that at ten I was stopped from committing suicide by my Guardian Angel. I’m not afraid to admit I’m very much like Narcissa in dealing with the Spirit World. I’m happy now to be alive.

I know I will die/transition to the light eventually, whether naturally or otherwise, because of the activities I’m in. Living life fully each day, continuing to work on loving myself and others, and my acceptance of those whispers of love, is a work in progress. I may get hurt and rejected at times, but I’m not scared to get up anymore and keep loving. I’m not going to blame myself for everything that goes wrong like I used to. If I make a mistake, I own it, forgive myself, and make it right if I can. I’m not afraid to show ME, flaws and all. All because love whispered my name and said come and be part of this wonderful BATB family. And I am so very, very glad I listened.

‘T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CONVENTION

By Tunnel Writer

'Twas the night before the convention
And all through the world
Not a con goer was sleeping
Their minds in a whirl.
Their suitcases were packed
By the doorway with care
In the hopes that their journey
Wouldn't be too hard to bear.
With Deb as the leader
And the con team to help
They each checked the list.
They exclaimed with a yelp:
Candles, and tote bags
And art. Oh, my!
Oh, and can't forget all the lovely things
That everyone can buy.
Greetings were shouted and hugs were given
And friends reunited with their excitement not hidden.
The closing ceremony arrives, and a circle forming.
Video plays with hearts warming.
One by one they say their goodbyes.
With plenty of tears they cry, "Give me a call," and "I'll see you soon."
Everyone heads home with memories they share.
It's nice to know there are people that care.
With smiles and chuckles
As seat belts they buckle
They head back to their life
Of work, bills and strife.
With Zoom, Marco Polos, Facebook, emails, and Winterfest Online
They are nice fillers while whittling the time.
Before you know it, they meet again.
They pick up where they left off as if their friendships only began.
From a distance you can hear, small and meek,
"Happy convention to all, and to all a good week!"



A LITTLE BIRD TOLD ME

By Ruby and JoAnn Baca

Rating: R (for violence, child endangerment, language, and sexual situations)

Origin stories for some original characters in, and background information pertinent to, this story can be found in an earlier collaboration: The Concrete Nest, Parts 1 & 2. The stories can be found in the Fanfic Submissions section of Winterfest Online 2022 here:

<https://batbwfol.com/winterfest2022/gh/subcatdisplay.asp?catid=125>

Also, the original character Calabria and her relationship with Joe first appear in The Bride Wore Smith and Wesson, which can be found in the Fanfic Submissions section of Winterfest Online 2025 here:

<https://batbwfol.com/Winterfest2025/sub/joannbthebride.pdf>

However, you need not have read those stories to understand the plot of this one.

Catherine and Vincent would think about that day in their own ways later. They both remembered how bright and sunny it was, but also how biting clear and cold. It was a fall sun. A sun that warned that if all winters end, then all winters must return.

It was just Catherine and Joe in their office that day. The space was small but functional. A lobby area, a hallway with two offices off it facing each other, and a breakroom in back. Each office had a door of wood and thick frosted glass. They wanted to assure their clients' privacy. And Catherine was grateful for the door for her own reasons. She'd known Joe for over ten years, and he still did not know about Vincent or the strange world that ran underneath the streets their building sat on.

Calabria bounded into the reception area carrying a rental tux in a bag. Lucy was at the desk and gave her a big smile as she waved her through. Calabria was carrying Joe's suit for the evening's activity, accompanying Catherine and Robin to a

museum benefit. Catherine was going because Robin wanted to. Calabria had planned to go, too, but work called. She placed the bagged outfit on Joe's desk.

He made a face. "I'm gonna look like a penguin. Feel like one, too."

"It's black-tie, Joey. Wouldn't want Miss Robin to see you in tatters." Calabria bit back a smile at that, thinking of what Robin wore Below, and she continued, "A case is keeping me late, else I'd be happy to drink champagne with you tonight. It's a nice thing you're doing."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Cally." And they kissed, both rolling their eyes as a phone rang on Joe's desk, breaking the mood.

Calabria saw Catherine go towards the breakroom and followed her. She knew that with Joe occupied on the phone they could speak more freely.

She thought again of how she had come to know the full Catherine Chandler, instead of just the carefully edited public version. It was shortly after Catherine had resurfaced after over a year - last seen being bundled into a car and presumed dead. She had been placed into protective custody until her story could be checked out. And it was quite a story of remembering no names, saying they were careful to never use them in front of her, and of a few rough interrogations about a ledger, and then of long months in a cell, guessing they had viewed her as a valuable target for ransom.

Calabria fought back a snort at that. There had been no ransom note, and Gabriel was scattered in ashes along with much of his New York outfit. The new DA was looking to make this all go away, and she was just to watch Chandler until the woman was in the clear and could be returned to civilian life, which seemed to consist of recuperating at the brownstone of a family doctor. It didn't add up, and Calabria didn't like things that didn't add up.

She had gone to inspect the basement of the safehouse again. The alcove that once had held coal had a back wall that was bricked. And yet... She knew so many houses this old had tunnels for booze smuggling during Prohibition. She was missing something. She paced the floor, seeing the footprints and cigarette butts of the other agents and officers who had come down here to smoke.

Footprints.

There were no footprints in the alcove. Which meant that someone was sweeping the floor in the alcove, but not touching the rest.

She looked again at that brick wall, thinking that when Chandler excused herself to go to bed, Calabria would usually take up watch in the living room.

You could get to the basement without being seen from the living room.

Calabria decided that Chandler's story had more holes than a piece of good Swiss. The detective knew that the woman had a reputation as a do-gooder, but she also knew that Chandler came from wealth and perhaps was trying to protect herself from being permanently cut off from it.

When evening came, she said good night to Chandler first, then walked into the living room and turned the TV sound up loud before doubling back into the basement and hiding behind a stack of boxes. The hours ticked by...one, then two...and then there was a creak.

Chandler was coming down the steps, carrying a broom.

Calabria held her breath as the woman walked to the alcove and rapped with the broom on the brick wall. Without a sound, the wall pivoted open and...*something* stepped out. An impossible thing. A man - a man with a lion's face and a man's body.

The being was holding something. A baby. At least six months old.

"Vincent." It was a desperate whisper from Chandler as she rushed to embrace him and the baby.

"You are well?"

"As best as can be expected. Will she take formula?"

"Yes, and Molly is pregnant and can begin wet nursing soon."

Chandler nodded, unbuttoning her blouse. The baby happily settled into her arms, placed there by the one called Vincent, and began to nurse.

Calabria couldn't believe it and took a step back, disturbing a stack of boxes behind her.

Vincent's head snapped forward. "Is someone there?"

She unholstered her gun and walked forward with it raised. "Everybody be cool. We're going to all go upstairs and answer some questions."

"Please!" Chandler held her child closer. "I know I can't ask you to pretend you saw nothing, but," she was crying now, "just let me finish feeding her."

Calabria felt her guts slice open. Thoughts of *You can't cover for this, it has to be reported* warred with *If you break up this family, the harm won't just be on them, it will visit you, too, in ways you can't begin to understand*. She felt a roaring in her ears. And almost as if it was some unseen force guiding her movements, she slid her gun back into her holster. "I'll be waiting upstairs, Miss Chandler. I expect to see you soon." In disbelief at her own actions, she walked back upstairs into the dark kitchen.

As she sat at the table, she was both surprised and not surprised to see Chandler emerge from the basement sometime later. "I thought you'd take your chance to run."

"I wanted to, but you took a leap of faith tonight. I think it's only fair I take one in turn."

Over two mugs of terrible instant coffee, Calabria learned that the world she thought she understood was only one of many, and that something very secret and wonderful was happening right under her feet. And during that conversation, "Chandler" became "Catherine" to her.

It was over two mugs of much better coffee that Calabria and Catherine caught up.

"I'm glad you're doing this. I'm even more glad Robin wants to."

Catherine smiled, with a wariness behind her smile that hadn't been there before her ordeal. "Honestly, so am I. There's a part of me that would be happy if she was content to just be a tunnel child. But she's my child, so I can't ask where she got her adventurous streak. If it wasn't for taking risks, I never would have met...him."

Calabria smiled at how cautious Catherine still was about mentioning Vincent while Above, even to a Helper. She had been one since that night in the safehouse. “How’s he taking this?”

“As well as can be expected. It’s funny, it took so long for us to tie our lives together because he thought he would keep me trapped with him. But now, I see his struggle to believe that we’ll be safe Above when he’s not there. And I can’t promise him nothing will happen, because he’s a father now. You know how fathers are.”

“No kidding. Well, have a nice time, and take good care of my husband, too, you hear?”

Catherine laughed. “It’s a deal.”

That evening at the brownstone, Vincent watched his wife and child get ready for the benefit.

“Catherine...” They had wrangled over this for days. Vincent had reluctantly agreed. But that reluctance was giving way to the old fear that licked cold ash in his belly.

She turned from the mirror, one hand in the “stop” position. “I know your concerns. And I do share them. But we can’t keep her Below except for school forever, Vincent. She needs to have the experience of being out and about. And we promised her she could go.”

Robin ran into their bedroom, smiling and twirling in her new dress. “It’s beautiful, Mommy! Do you like it, Daddy?”

Unable to resist her open, happy face, he nodded. “It’s your color, as Grandmother Mary says.”

She ran to him, hugging him. He bent to hug her back, but his gaze remained locked on Catherine’s. “Both of you look lovely tonight.”

Catherine took that as capitulation. Begrudging, perhaps...but he would trust in her decision.

Smiling, she took her daughter by the hand. “We’re being picked up by Uncle Joe. Aunt Cally is working late tonight.”

Robin nodded. “Uncle Joe hates wearing a tuxedo, but he said he’d do it just for me!” She frowned then. “Wish you could come, Daddy.”

“I’ll wait to hear all about it from you. It will be much more fun that way,” he insisted, tugging at one of the strawberry blonde curls framing her face.

Catherine looked out the window from their second-floor bedroom. The brownstone had larger bedrooms, but Vincent liked this corner room the best, as it looked out over the Park on one side. “Joe’s here. Let’s go before he honks and bothers the neighbors.” She gave Vincent a warm hug as she whispered in his ear, “I’ll watch over her, I promise.”

Vincent observed Robin at her mother's dressing table as she pulled at the curls Catherine's curling iron had made on either side of her face, mimicking what he had done. They bounced back with a spring and she laughed. *She will never flinch from a mirror*, Vincent thought, glad it was so, but with a pang at the gulf that would develop by necessity as Robin grew and understood more of why her father hid himself away.

He looked at Catherine, striving to be a woman of both worlds, and raising their daughter to be. He chided himself for trying to talk her out of bringing Robin to the benefit. He couldn't let their lives be marked by fears of what might happen...even as he tasted anew the bitterness of almost losing Catherine again. *She was found. She was found great with child. Your child. And not only did Rolley and Chance find her, they brought her home.*

He had to have faith again, faith that Above's cruelties could not extinguish its goodness, and that Robin deserved to know the wider world her mother came from, a world that was hers, too.

Sylvia Rivers looked around the museum gallery with a studied indifference, not even drawing her usual pleasure from being the best-looking woman in the room. She had never liked parties until Gabriel had taught her how to enjoy them. She recalled his rasping voice, like the wind when a fire is about to sweep through,

whispering in her ear. *Just watch them like a cat watches mice, and decide which would be the most fun to play with.* It had been good advice, and had made her a wealthy woman. Officially a courier for the organization, she could be counted on for other odd jobs. She was here tonight to check in with Angelo.

She smirked, thinking of him. She was only a few years older than Angelo's twenty-eight years, but she remembered when they'd met - him a gawky teenager in a private school uniform, and her already formed as Gabriel's weapon, in a dress of apple green silk. Gabriel had Angelo wait a while in one of the too-large rooms of his too-large mansion outside the city before he came in with her and sat in a chair in the corner.

Gabriel had looked at Angelo like a cat at a mouse, then turned his gaze to her. In a voice drained of all feeling except for a hunger that would never be fed, he told her, "Make a man out of him." And she'd led Angelo to a small couch and began his lessons under Gabriel's approving eyes. She remembered Angelo's fear and uncertainty shorting out under an adolescent boy's desire. She had him truly then. And knew how to work him towards her ends after that.

Angelo Moreno had marked this evening as another dutiful responsibility to the firm: a junior almost-partner putting in an appearance at the reception to mark the restoration of the museum wing the firm had donated generously to. It was a short-straw assignment for whomever didn't have the pull yet to beg off, the firm's representative who would stand beneath the Renaissance paintings of angels frowning at saints being ripped to pieces while jig reels of underemployed actors with trays of seared scallops on endive leaves and flutes of champagne that might be good in another ten years roved through the well-heeled crowd. Angelo was here to glad-hand and hopefully network with the lawyers and bankers and power brokers in the crowd. His jaw tightened in frustration. He had another line of work, his desired one, but that had begun to feel stagnant, too.

He saw Sylvia watching him from across the room. Even the thought of having her in the bathroom after a line of coke didn't excite him. He had felt himself increasingly floating through life of late.

Until he recognized the child.

The girl looked no more than ten, with strawberry blonde hair and dressed in a simple but expensive dress of cranberry velvet. She was there with her mother, the infamous Catherine Chandler, who had survived multiple attempts on her life and an even more notorious kidnapping that had sent her into semi-seclusion and private practice.

Angelo sipped his champagne and smiled inwardly at the parts of her story that almost no one else in the room knew. Gabriel had called him into the tower one day, and on a bank of monitors played him a tape of something that shouldn't exist, roaring in a terrible rage and tearing through some of Gabriel's very unlucky men. On another monitor, Gabriel showed him a small, white room where an unhappy, and very pregnant, woman was standing at the window.

"The woman carries the creature's child... my child. I will have a child unlike any in the world."

Angelo had felt an unwelcome wave of fear at that. But he loved Gabriel, the father he wished he'd had instead of his weakling one, and he had merely nodded. Then Gabriel had died, and the tower burned, taking the tape with it.

The organization Gabriel had been part of rolled on, with Angelo marked as useful, but not for the great things Gabriel had groomed him for. And when the pregnant woman resurfaced, she had no baby. Angelo quietly thought it for the best that she'd gotten rid of it. The thing on the tape still haunted him - sometimes in the early morning hours, images of it pressed themselves against his eyelids.

He had not given it another thought when the woman had started being seen a few years later with a young girl. A girl was useless except for bearing a son. If Chandler had found a wealthy sperm donor or overstocked orphanage, that was her affair. But just now the child had looked up at her mother and Angelo's breath had caught at her eyes.

Cool, gray eyes, like the sea. Like the sea before it devours a ship. Like Gabriel's.

Angelo centered on those gray eyes. Not that...unholy terror's eyes, which had been a blue that haunted his dreams. And not Chandler's, which were mossy. Gray, like his mentor's, like the cold slate of his mentor's heart. So...had Gabriel indulged himself? Had he loved the cosmic joke of planting his seed in the scion of a

wealthy elitist from the upper crust of New York society? It made the most perverse kind of sense. But why had his mentor not divulged his secret? Perhaps he had planned to, but fate had intervened. Well, now he, Angelo Moreno, would be rapacious in turn: capture Gabriel's captive's child. Hold her until he, himself, could impregnate Gabriel's spawn with his own seed...a melding of fates, indeed.

It had never made sense to him that Gabriel had hinted about the monstrous being with those blue, blue eyes being the child's biological parent. It only took one look at the thing - that slaving, violent animal - to understand it was not in any way human enough to impregnate a woman. No...Gabriel's fantasy was just a cover story. It made for a good tale, disguising the uncomfortable truth of a rape and imprisonment. There had still been a few in the upper levels of the organization who would have been uncomfortable with such a reality.

Angelo threw his thoughts back to that day at the tower. Gabriel had always impressed upon him the importance of creating your own legend. And he would love to claim his child was not merely human, but something more.

The thing on the tape frightened him less now.

He could feel the air of the room heavy on his skin. Catherine Chandler had not gotten rid of the child, Gabriel's child. A daughter, yes, but she was what Gabriel had wanted. She was heir to Gabriel's empire. And Angelo would honor the last request of the man who had molded him into what he was.

He would have that child.

He would take her and form her as surely as Gabriel had formed him. He would create his own legend in siring a child with Gabriel's only offspring. She would bear him a son to be proud of.

Angelo walked over to introduce himself. He saw Chandler's unease at his last name as she placed him - the now-nearing-thirty adult who she had last seen as the somber-looking young man being photographed walking out of the church where his father's funeral service had been held. He also saw her struggle to not judge him for his father.

How he delighted in her compassion, her not wanting the son to bear the sins of the father. Gabriel had taught him compassion was weakness. And it was Chandler's

greatest weakness. He would play on that fatal weakness to get the quarry he sought.

He smiled down at Robin. “Do you like the paintings?”

Robin smiled. “Yes! I like how in the really old paintings, the angels’ wings are all different colors, like parrots. It’s so beautiful.”

“It is beautiful. It was nice to meet you, Miss...?”

“Robin.” And she held out her hand to shake.

Angelo shook her hand for only an instant, smiling up at her mother and missing the current of disquiet that passed over Robin’s face.

“Have a nice evening, Miss Robin. It was nice to meet you, too, Ms. Chandler.”

Catherine nodded and watched as Angelo wandered over to another clutch of guests.

He made his way to Sylvia. She didn’t miss the change in him. He looked as if he’d been reborn, like a pilgrim who had finally reached the end of an arduous journey to find his faith richly rewarded.

“Gabriel’s child lives.”

“What?” The carefully assembled cool of Sylvia’s bearing almost betrayed a tremor.

“I know Gabriel showed you the tape, too.”

She saw no gain in lying. “And so what? It was a trick, a very talented makeup artist. All so Gabriel could spin one hell of a story instead of being another crime lord who knocked up his mistress.”

She had always been impressed by how Chandler had slipped out of trouble for that one. Sylvia knew that Gabriel would have killed her instantly if they hadn’t been lovers. She had figured Chandler’s imprisonment was Gabriel’s punishment for some infraction she didn’t know of and didn’t care about. And she had assumed that Chandler had gotten rid of the pregnancy before resurfacing, sometime after her escape from the tower during the attack that had killed Gabriel. But if she hadn’t? This presented possibilities...

Angelo saw the wheels turning and smiled. “I know you’re here to ask if I need the contents of the deposit box Gabriel left for me. Well, Sylvia, I think I finally do.”

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully for Catherine and Robin. The young girl happily looked at paintings while Catherine caught up with acquaintances from her past life, telling carefully edited bits of her recent life story.

Robin noticed Angelo leaving early, with a woman, and she tried to ignore how it felt like suddenly a weight had been lifted from her. She looked up at a painting of an angel, its wings resplendent in all the colors of the rainbow. She didn’t realize she’d said it aloud until she heard her own voice begging, “Please watch over me.”

Catherine observed Robin’s quietness on the ride back. She chalked it up to her daughter being up later than usual.

Robin gave Joe a peck on the cheek as they stood outside his car about to go into the brownstone. “Thanks for the ride, Uncle Joe.”

“Anytime, kiddo. I’ll tell Aunt Cally you missed her.”

“Thanks!”

And Joe smiled as he watched the two walk up the steps and into their home.

Inside their brownstone, Robin got ready for bed. When her father came to tuck her in, she happily told him about the reception, the paintings, the food, the soda they had for kids to drink.

“That sounds wonderful. Did you meet any interesting people?”

Robin got quiet for a moment before finally saying, “Yeah, a lot of nice folks that Mom knew and I didn’t. They talked about adult stuff. And...” She thought about not saying anything more.

Her father gently coaxed her, asking, “Was there someone who wasn’t nice?”

“No.” Robin thought about saying she was too tired to talk, but a voice inside urged *Tell him*.

“There was this guy, Angelo Moreno.” She didn’t notice her father becoming statue still at the mention of the name. “He was nice, and didn’t do anything weird. It’s just that when we shook hands before he went to talk to other people... I...I don’t know. I’m being silly.”

“Perhaps, but tell me.”

Robin took a deep breath, then said, “I got a funny feeling, like something bad was going to happen. Not at the party, but...later.”

Vincent chose his next words very carefully. “Perhaps it was nothing, or perhaps you sensed danger to come. You are my child, and you are the inheritor of my...gifts, including some I may have not wished for you to have.” He could tell she didn’t completely understand, and that sleep was beginning to overtake her. He smiled. “Rest now, all will be well.”

Robin smiled drowsily. “Goodnight, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, Robin.”

Vincent turned over the conversation he had planned to have on his walk to Ivy’s. He had been looking forward to his chess match with Calabria. But now he wondered at the wisdom of bringing up to her what Robin had said. Catherine had told him about Angelo, and the little she knew was that he was a young, up-and-coming lawyer with a powerful firm who maybe wasn’t as much of a mover and shaker as he otherwise would have been, thanks to his father being swept up in Gabriel’s activities.

Vincent was uneasy, assuming the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, but it worried him more that Robin might be manifesting his abilities of second sight, and this early, too. *It’s nothing. Please let it be nothing. Let my family have the peace it’s sought for so long. Please.*

He was still considering bringing up the conversation with Robin to Calabria as he reached the basement of Ivy’s internet cafe. The brownstone had a computer, but a lifetime of caution made him wary enough to want to use a terminal from Ivy’s should it ever be traced.

He smiled as Ivy opened the secret door for him. Even in the dimness of the basement, her green eyes shone. She'd been named for them, Hiedra. Her parents, realizing Franco's Spain was no place for two aging hippies, had taken her to America when she was two years old. And she grew like the vine she was named for, using the English translation in school, Ivy.

Her parents worked hard, and built a little corner store into a thriving business. They had become Helpers when she was six, and she had learned of Below when she was ten. When her parents retired, she'd sold their store to open the internet cafe. It was a rousing success, and a place for after-hours computer lessons for the children Below, as well as a general hub to leave non-pressing messages and packages for the Tunnel community.

It was also a place where Vincent finally had his mettle tested over a chess game.

That had come about because Ivy had told him about Calabria not coming in as frequently anymore for online chess games now that she'd set up a computer in the apartment she shared with Joe. Vincent had expressed surprise that he didn't know she played. "She's great, same killer instinct she brings to her job, she brings to the board."

Vincent felt a pull to finally take Ivy up on her offer to help him set up an account with a phony address and phone number. "Perhaps she would be interested in playing me. I'm looking for a...challenge."

Ivy grinned. "Modest to a fault. There's nobody Below who can beat you, and you're getting bored."

Vincent ducked his head with a chuckle. They'd set up an account for him that evening. And the next time Ivy saw Calabria, she told her that if a user calling himself "The Uncommon Reader" wanted to play chess with her, she should take him up on it. Calabria laughed at the screen name Vincent had chosen and said she'd be delighted to.

Calabria had missed touching base with Vincent and Below as much as she had before her marriage. It weighed on her that she knew about them and Joe didn't. But she also knew that Joe still saw things too much in the easy good/bad divide of the institutions he'd built his career on. She missed Winterfest, and she missed not

even being able to accept a candle from Robin, but she didn't want to collect any more lies to tell Joe than basic necessity required. So she was happy to find this conduit in which to stay in touch.

A game late Friday night into early Saturday had become a way for her to deal with insomnia and to shed some of her work week so she didn't carry all of it into the weekend. Vincent knew this, which made him feel a touch guilty as he mulled bringing up what Robin had told him to her.

It turned out that he was not the one to bring it up. After beating him in their first game easily, Calabria typed into the instant messenger at the bottom of the screen, "What's up? I can beat you, but you usually make me work for it."

Vincent responded, "I'm sorry, my thoughts were elsewhere." And he told her what Robin had said.

Now Calabria had something to turn over in her mind. But before she could respond, she heard Joe's voice behind her. A car alarm had woken him up.

After typing "Joe" she quickly closed the window.

Joe tried to play it casual. "Exchanging messages with your secret lover?"

"Very funny. Just playing chess with another night owl."

"He got a name?"

"Don't even know if they're a 'he,' just goes by 'The Uncommon Reader' - good player."

Calabria felt safe saying that much, as Joe was mostly teasing. But he loved deeply and fiercely. He had loved Catherine, unrequitedly, which was part of the reason he still hadn't been told about Vincent and Below. She realized something else in that moment: that was why he was able to work in private practice with Catherine and not ask questions about Robin's father. A terrible thought came to her. *Oh, Joe. Do you think Gabriel raped her when she was his prisoner and she chose to have the baby? And you don't want to press on wounds by asking?*

She had picked up from Ivy that Robin was starting to be old enough to understand the less-kind tunnel gossip about Vincent – that he couldn't be her father, as it was

impossible for him to have fathered a child with a human woman. Calabria bristled at that.

But right now she saw Joe's curls hanging over his eyes and his chest hair matted from sleep and a hunger awoke in her. She stood up from the computer and grinned wickedly. "Well, if you're worried about me straying, better prove you're the best I could get."

Joe laughed and they chased each other into the bedroom. They made love in eagerness, in hunger, and with need.

Afterwards, as Joe drifted back to sleep, Calabria decided she would just check up on Angelo to be sure. *I hope it was nothing, Robin. I want you to stay a kid for a little while more yet.*

Sylvia Rivers ended the phone call. It had been expected...and full of possibilities.

She leaned back in her leather desk chair and stared out the 10th-floor window of her *pied-a -terre*. It was nice living here. Gabriel had ensured she was set up well - long before tragedy had struck him. The perks of having been a fixer for him and his associates with tentacles worldwide had been generous and numerous. Even now, picking up work as an independent contractor, she made more than enough to satisfy her needs. But she'd been getting bored. More than bored, if she was honest with herself.

Gazing at the phone, she thought about her recent call. Angelo Moreno, DA's son and flavor of the month for Gabriel years ago. But Angelo's timing had been off. Unlike Sylvia, he hadn't achieved full usefulness to Gabriel before the shit hit the fan. Still, Gabriel had made certain provisions for him, for a future Gabriel hadn't lived to take advantage of. And now Angelo was calling in his chips.

Angelo's fixation on the young girl at the gala was growing. That was fine with Sylvia, because she had to admit that her own fixation was blossoming, too. She didn't care about the girl at all, a pawn useful only as a means to an end. But she would help Angelo, stay close to him in his obsession to grab the child and...what...raise her secretly for years, until he could impregnate her? How short-sighted!

He was missing the true picture. They need not waste five or six years, holding her against her will. All they needed to do was lure the creature to try to rescue her. The payoff there could be immediate.

She smiled languidly. That magnificent beast had featured in her dreams since Gabriel had shown her the video. He was man enough to speak, man enough to challenge Gabriel for love of a child. How could Angleo not believe the beast itself was man enough – human enough – to be the girl’s biological father? But Angelo wanted so badly to believe in the myth he had constructed of Gabriel being the child’s true father, of creating some sort of closed loop by mating with Gabriel’s “daughter,” that he couldn’t see the more realistic option.

But she could. Yes, she very much wanted a mating...just not between Angelo and the child-grown-up. She wanted those heavily muscled arms wrapped around her body, those clawed hands stroking her bare skin, the power between his legs thrusting his seed into her own womb. A child, yes! Now, THAT was the kind of child Gabriel’s remaining associates could utilize.

So, yes, she would assist poor delusional Angelo. For her own ends. To draw the creature to her, to capture him, to bargain a baby in trade for the weak little girl Angelo wanted to kidnap.

Smiling, Sylvia stood and went to her safe to get out the key to the bank box holding what Angelo wanted. It was going to be glorious to watch his face when she turned the tables on him. But until then...she would play along.

Over the next week, Angelo and Sylvia set to work. Sylvia had a lead on a house in Connecticut. The previous owner recently had died of violent dementia; the upper floor windows were barred and the glass replaced with unbreakable plastic during his mental decline. It would be good enough to hold Robin while they made further arrangements. Angelo hired a “security expert” from his underworld contacts to grab Robin and take her to the house. The man was the kind who, when told what Angelo wanted, only said, “I get paid half up front.”

Angelo was ready to be done with the law firm. The money Gabriel had left him in the bank box would finance a play for the London branch of the organization.

Sylvia viewed it as the weakest arm, and thus the one to establish themselves in. They had no idea how public Chandler would go when Robin was taken, but they were counting on the full force of the law not being brought down on them, lest the authorities discover a few things she clearly still wanted hidden.

After the week of preparations, the plan had hardened into shape. Angelo would go to work as normal on Monday. Sylvia would have their security man grab Robin after school. Angelo would leave work as normal and switch cars in a garage, driving the wrong direction out of the city until he could swap cars again, then drive to the house. They would risk no more than a week in the house before bundling Robin onto a private plane out of the country.

Their treachery excited them; they were the naughty children that Gabriel watched play with each other again. They had an ace now: an heir, a breeder. Sylvia didn't tell Angelo she hoped Gabriel hadn't been lying. Because she was excited that the thing on the tape might have been real. Maybe Gabriel had been punishing Chandler for screwing it.

She, ever careful, confirmed with her contact that the Connecticut place was theirs for the next month, even though they would be gone long before the month expired. She celebrated by snorting a line of coke. She felt good, better than she had in a while.

Angelo had been watching her as she placed the call, and stood now that she walked towards him. But she pushed him back onto the couch, unzipping her thousand-dollar pencil skirt as she did so. Angelo smirked and his hands went to his belt. Sylvia closed her eyes and pretended he was the thing on the tape. She was running through the woods, the beast close on her heels. The beast grabbed her, knocking her to the ground, then ripped open her dress, gazing hungrily at her naked body in the moonlight. And then the beast was on her, the heat pouring off his body as he took her, throwing his head back in pleasure as each savage thrust made her cry out. Sylvia screamed as the fire in her belly consumed her.

She wanted that beast.

That night at Ivy's, Vincent noticed Calabria seemed preoccupied. Their play was the opposite of the previous week's – this time it was she who stumbled early. She lost their game in so few moves that he was concerned. "What's wrong? Something at work?" he typed.

She typed back, "Sorry, my concentration is off. It's Moreno. I checked him out. Things are a bit hinky in his life story."

"Is he dangerous?" Vincent's hackles rose. A threat, after all these years? He steeled himself for having his fears confirmed.

"Robin has good instincts." Calabria took a moment to collect her thoughts, then typed, "He followed his father's footsteps but in a bigger way. John went to Fordham for undergrad and law school, a great resume, and one any whip-smart Catholic kid in New York City would be thrilled with. You'd think Angelo would be a shoe-in as a legacy at Fordham, and you'd be right. But instead, Angelo got early entrance into Harvard for college, graduated early, then went to Yale for law school – both very expensive schools, but he had no loans or scholarships. Pretty unusual for a kid with a dad who works for the city, even one with a prestigious job. And he was set to be hired at the most exclusive law firm in the city. But when John Moreno fell from grace, Angelo's status fell, too. Now he's working in a nice but definitely second-tier law firm, competing for partner. Word is he's hungry and angry."

Vincent stared at the words on the computer screen. John Moreno's son, being groomed by...someone...for great things. Things which fell apart just when Moreno was exposed in the scandal surrounding Gabriel. It didn't take much analysis to connect the dots.

John Moreno's son. *Hungry and angry*. The last words mocked him from the computer screen.

On the walk back to the brownstone, Vincent saw Chance pacing outside her and Rolley's chamber, rocking one of their twins, Estella, to get her back to sleep.

Chance smiled. "Hey, V! What's up?"

Vincent thought about giving a noncommittal answer, but he remembered that he was no longer alone with his struggles. And Chance saw instantly something was wrong.

“What’s going on? And don’t say ‘nothing’ because we both know that’s not true.”

Vincent did smile some then. “When you take a scavenging patrol out on Monday, could you perhaps establish a...lookout around a certain person?”

Chance looked surprised but she nodded. “You got it, who’s the person?”

And Vincent told her about Angelo, where his office building was, and how he wanted to be wrong, that nothing was amiss...but he knew better.

Chance nodded. “Nobody is gonna mess with Robin while I’m around. I’ll spread the word.”

Vincent clasped her shoulder in thanks and continued back to Catherine and Robin.

He checked on Robin when he reached the house. She was sound asleep, and Vincent’s heart nearly ached with love for the tiny being that still half held onto a book and flashlight, as she clearly had been reading after bedtime. He smiled, recalling that he’d done the same at her age. Then he walked to the bedroom he shared with Catherine, undressed, and slid under the covers.

She was looking over a file from work. She put it away and turned the nightstand lamp off.

“You look troubled.”

Vincent did not want to burden her yet with what could still be nothing. “It has been a long week.”

She sensed she’d get no more conversation out of him tonight, but she knew she could still help him. She began to kiss and stroke him.

He sighed and wrapped his arms around her, and gently traced the sides of her face, her neck, her shoulders with his claws. They made love with a gentle, practiced rhythm, Catherine muffing her cry into the wall of his shoulder, and Vincent’s low

groan of completion making her feel like more than a woman - like a primordial figure of love and desire.

She remembered the early days, after she had been returned to him, with Robin still an infant. How his joy had been tempered by fear that he would lose them both again. How he hadn't been willing to leave her to even eat. How, when he had nearly fainted from hunger, without thinking, she had brought his great face to her breast and, also without thinking, he had begun to drink. How they truly had found and forgiven each other in that moment. How they would meet in the hollow behind the stained glass in his chamber after that so she could nurse him. Him needing this, her, the stitching together of a childhood marked by abandonment. That he would love her as a man with his body after, her blouse open and her skirts pushed up to her thighs. How she forgave him for not letting her give him this for so long.

She held him tighter in their bed. "I will always be here."

Robin watched for her mother from the gates of her school. A woman with grey hair and bowed head slowly walked by, leaning on a cane. The shopping bag she was carrying slipped from her fingers and its contents spilled. As the woman bent down with effort and tried to gather her purchases, Robin's heart plucked. She was supposed to stay in the schoolyard until her mother came, but the old woman was clearly struggling. How could she just stand there?

Robin darted out, only meaning to assist her and go right back. She ran up to the woman and bent down. "Let me help you." The woman looked up, and Robin had only a moment to see that her face wasn't old at all before the woman pressed a cloth on her face.

Not missing a beat, Sylvia put Robin in the backseat of a waiting car and nodded at the driver, Angelo's man. They drove several blocks to a private health club, where they switched cars and Sylvia ditched her wig and cane. They went from there out of the city, towards the house in Connecticut.

Chance and her party had been watching Angelo's building all day. Outside of a lunch meeting, he had not left the building. The late afternoon stretched on. Chance passed a note to a young woman reading tarot cards, a Helper who had set up her table near their lookout.

The Helper, Tanis, took the note to a waiting Vincent, who had tried and failed to quell the building sense of anxiety he'd been feeling all day. He was in the brownstone's library, in a futile effort to give himself something to do until they could be sure Angelo was or was not dangerous. He read the latest update from Chance: still nothing suspicious.

It was getting close to when Catherine would pick Robin up from school. Vincent returned to his chore, trying to focus on culling their collection of books and arranging the rest into some semblance of order. He felt the first flicker a short time after that.

Something was wrong. His breath felt metallic. Adrenaline like copper running into his mouth. *Catherine*. The Bond felt static at first...then blue flame hot with fear galvanized him. He was already standing by the phone, and picked it up before the first ring ended.

"Is she home with you?" Catherine asked without preamble.

Robin?! Was it her that he had felt earlier? Had the sense of unease making him uncomfortable been a harbinger of his daughter's fear?

"No. What's happened?" Robin understood how important it was to stay inside the gates of her grade school until someone she knew came to get her. It was safe there. Wasn't it?

"Mrs. McClaren told me that the last time she saw Robin, she was waiting by the gate for me. When she realized Robin was gone, she thought I'd picked her up. None of the other parents or children I've spoken to noticed anything, but it's chaotic once school is out."

Vincent could feel the depth of Catherine's panic, his own rising, twining with hers. "She wouldn't walk by herself. She knows to wait."

Catherine replied, “I’ll check the streets between the school and home but... Oh, Vincent...”

“If you don’t find her...we’ll talk of next steps.”

He couldn’t believe how calm he’d sounded when speaking to her, considering his hands were shaking and he had fallen against the wall, his legs barely able to hold him up.

Robin is gone.

Catherine’s brain recycled those same three words like a mantra, her panic spiking. She had checked; no one had seen Robin.

She went directly to the office from the school, telling Lucy to hold all their calls save from the brownstone, and to start the phone tree to notify all possible Helpers.

Calm. Calm. I have to be calm. Oh god my baby is gone and I...

The panic hit harder than at any time Vincent had ever experienced it through their Bond. It speared his heart, and he felt a corresponding echo, faint but sure, pulsing beneath it – Robin’s own panic, fuzzy and indistinct but definitely there.

He dropped the stack of books he’d been carrying. He would go to Catherine, for that was the strongest connection, and the only one he had a direction for. It didn’t matter that it was daylight Above. It didn’t matter that she was in her office with Joe – unsuspecting Joe, who had no clue what he was about to discover.

He ran hell-for-leather down corridors and around outcroppings and over barriers that other men might have to clamber over. He ran to out-pace his fear, to see Catherine’s face, to bear whatever lay before them.

The basement of the building where Catherine worked was accessible from the tunnels through a seldom used entry point, one Catherine refused to utilize even though it saved her time from home to office, or from Below. She never wanted to take the chance of anyone accidentally seeing her emerging or disappearing into a space they might otherwise never notice. Especially Joe.

Now Vincent crashed through the entry point, intent only on finding Catherine.

She awaited him, pacing, tears running down her cheeks, sobbing, nearly hysterical. When she saw him, she fell into his arms.

“Robin was taken!” She managed to choke out the words. But saying it aloud was worse than having the phrase running through her head on a continuous loop. It was in the world now. And it was terrifying.

“You know this?” It seemed impossible, given the care they had taken all these years. And who would do it? Some random stranger? No. It was the man they had feared since the night of the museum event. It had to be. But it was incredibly risky, even for someone like Angelo Moreno, to sully his reputation by grabbing a child in broad daylight. And Chance had last reported him still in his office. But if he had accomplices...

“She...she...called out to me! The connection we have... Didn’t you feel it, too?”

“I felt the spike of your fear,” he replied. “But...yes...faintly, below that, there’s the thrum of Robin’s terror. It’s...not localized though. Is your connection?” He was desperate for some hint of how to reach their daughter, and he was amazed that Catherine could feel her better than he could. As an empath, he was used to being the one who had the deepest connection to others’ emotions.

Catherine shook her head.

From upstairs, there was the sound of the door opening. Footsteps. Joe, coming back from picking up a late lunch.

“Hey, Radcliffe, you here? Got your tuna on rye!”

Lucy must have stepped away, as she hadn’t intercepted him. Frantic, Catherine stared at Vincent. “I’ll be right up!” she called, her gaze never leaving his face.

“What do you mean, right up? Where the heck...?” He opened the door to the basement they never used and flipped on the overhead light.

“Holy SHIT!”

To Joe’s credit, he immediately hurtled down the stairs to confront whatever phantasm was holding Catherine. “Get away from her!”

Catherine broke away from Vincent and held up her hands. Joe paused at the bottom of the steps.

Finding a weak smile from the last of her reserves, she sighed. “Joe, I’m afraid I’m about to throw you in the deep end. This is Vincent, my husband. And we don’t have time for more than that, because someone just took Robin.”

Joe blinked. Grasping the banister, he sat down on the steps. “Oh, Jesus Christ, please tell me this is a stroke about to happen.”

Catherine had thought about the ways that Joe might finally be told about Vincent and Below. Now she tried not to imagine what might lie on the other side of him finding out this way.

She told Joe the short version: being found after her attack by Vincent and that he nursed her back to health, being careful to scale back where he kept her to merely a hidden living space under an old building. She finished by saying that she loved Vincent, and that Joe was well within his rights to be furious with her for keeping him a secret...but that Robin had been kidnapped and they had to focus on finding her right now.

Joe didn’t seem to be able to grasp the immediacy of the problem. He appeared dazed. He kept looking from Vincent to Catherine, shaking his head. “I really need a drink,” he mumbled, “now that I know everything.”

Vincent glanced at Catherine. When he turned back to Joe, he said, “Unfortunately, you’re a long way from knowing...everything. But now you know enough to make at least one decision. About me.” He waved one clawed hand in Catherine’s direction then back at himself. “About us.”

“So many things are clicking into place now,” Joe murmured, thinking out loud, his mind a million miles away. “How I missed it all this time...” He shook himself, realizing he needed to respond to the big man’s implied question. “Yeah. You and Radcliffe.” His eyes widened as another piece of the puzzle became clear. “Robin! She’s...?” He looked at Catherine, pointing at Vincent.

“She’s our daughter, yes.” Her eyes misted as she added, “You understand now why Gabriel held me for so long. He knew of Vincent and wanted our child.”

“We realize this is a lot to take in. Too much. And not the way we hoped this situation would one day be explained to you.” Vincent leaned forward. “If you need time, we understand. And...” His gaze swept up to Catherine then reclaimed Joe’s. “If you can’t accept this and...what came before, when Catherine worked in the DA’s Office...we will understand that, as well, and...arrangements will be made.”

“Arrangements?” Joe had gone from confusion to confusion. His mind was spinning.

“To protect Vincent,” Catherine said.

Joe’s eyes widened. “To protect him...from me?”

“If you can’t keep his secret...our secret, then...yes.” Catherine’s face grew stony, determined.

He snorted. “I’m not your biggest problem here,” he replied. “When Calabria finds out about...all this...well...”

Catherine closed her eyes and sighed. This would be the biggest shock of Joe’s day, she knew. But she was prevented from speaking by a voice coming from the top of the stairs.

“I already know.”

Calabria came down the stairs and put her fingers lightly under Joe’s hanging-open jaw, closing his mouth. She met his eyes and tried not to flinch at the anger and hurt she saw in them.

“When Catherine resurfaced, I was one of the officers they had babysitting her in the safehouse. I surprised her one night in the basement when Vincent brought Robin to see her and...here I am.” She met a glance from Catherine and understood to mention no more of Below than could be helped.

Joe was both furious and heartbroken that two of the women he loved most hadn’t thought he was trustworthy enough to know. Worst yet, he couldn’t help the lick of resentment he felt that they were probably right about that. But now he finally focused on the words that were of most concern, the ones he hadn’t been able to

concentrate on in the shock of finding out about Vincent: there was a bigger problem.

Robin.

Joe thought of that sunny face saying “Hi, Uncle Joe!” when Catherine would bring her to the office. He took a deep breath. “Right now, we’ve got a little girl to find.” He speared Calabria with a look. “There will be plenty of time later for me to yell at you until my voice breaks.” And without another word he bounded up the steps.

Calabria sighed. *Please let me still have a marriage when this is all over.* She and Catherine followed Joe.

Vincent returned to the brownstone, where a party from Below was organizing their search routes. *Please let us find her.*

The house was echoing, empty. Robin sat in the only room that was furnished: a bedroom, decked out for a child much younger than she was, as if the person who put it together had no idea of what a girl her age might like. Baby dolls and simple coloring books filled a low shelf. She gazed in disdain at the stack of Little Golden Books on the bedside table, recognizing titles she had read when she was five. The pajamas on the pillow were two sizes too small. And the sheets had cheery cartoon characters from a show she had told her mother was “for babies” when asked if she wanted to watch it.

All of it was brand new. The sheets still had that inky smell; they hadn’t even been washed. Everything was likely purchased by a person going into Macy’s and just grabbing the first thing they saw, not caring about the price or the person they were for.

Nothing in this room had a story.

It was then that Robin felt her first wave of fear that maybe her parents weren’t going to find her. How could they, when she was in this room of new things? There wasn’t the “Ladyhawke” novelization that Chance had read to her over and over when she was little, to the point that it was only held together now by black thread. There wasn’t Eric’s old stuffed iguana her mother had got him on a trip to the

Museum of Natural History. He'd lovingly cleaned and patched it and given it to her for her fifth birthday. There wasn't the little jar of coins from foreign countries she and her father had collected from the fountains on their night walks in the park.

She went over to the window. It overlooked a small backyard and a fence, had bars on the outside, and the glass had been replaced by some kind of plastic that she couldn't break. She knew this because she'd tried, almost immediately after the door to the room was closed and locked.

There was a small TV in one corner, but she couldn't get it to work. She had tried that, too, to see if word of her kidnapping had become public, but the knobs were missing.

She saw that the small bathroom had pipes, which meant the car trip to this place had taken hours, if they were willing to risk that. There would be no help coming from them. Robin tried to be brave, but she was worried about her dad trying to find her, and how her mom would be able to keep him from coming Above to search for her. She tried hard to think of some way to get a message or a signal out, but she was coming up empty. So far.

Not that she wouldn't keep trying. She walked over to the bookcase, where the coloring books were held up by two bookends in the shape of horses. They were heavy, creamy marble. She picked one up. It might do.

The hours stretched by, the day fading into evening. And finally there was a sound at the door.

A key turned in the lock. Robin tensed, one of the bookends in her hand. She stood so that the door would block the sight of her when opened.

A man called out, "Robin? It's time for dinner."

She felt his hesitation as he gazed around the small room.

"This isn't the time for hide-and-seek. Come on, I have a burger and fries from McDonald's for you."

She frowned. She much preferred the big, juicy burgers Adan prepared to what passed for food from a fast-food restaurant. He was a Helper, and she loved going

to his Palestinian cafe for a juicy lamb burger with fried jalapeno slices. And his fries were crispy on the outside and so tender on the inside, and sprinkled with za'atar. She always wanted more than she took.

Still, she needed to eat.

But only if her plan didn't work.

The man took two steps into the room. With one more, his knee would be even with the marble bookend in her hands. She held her breath.

He took that step.

With all her strength, she swung the bookend and slammed it into his knee, just like Jamie had taught her in self-defense class. You use what you have, you hit to injure, and you run when you can.

The crunch was scary, but she sucked up her fear and jumped over him once he'd collapsed to the floor. She was through the open door and down the stairs, running as fast as she could toward where she remembered the front door was. Suddenly, a strange man tackled her. She fell hard, the breath knocked out of her.

"Hold on there, wildcat," the man grunted, as with effort he wrestled her flailing limbs.

The man whose knee she had hurt, Angelo, hobbled down to them. "Get her back to her room." He winced. "And get me a doctor." He glared down at Robin. "You, young lady, need to learn manners. No supper for you." His gaze shifted to the other man. "Lock her in."

Obediently, the other man pulled her up by one arm and dragged her, but he didn't escape bruised shins where she kicked him as hard as she could several times as he hauled her upstairs again. He threw her roughly to the floor of the bedroom and pulled the door closed.

She heard the snick of the lock. She hadn't paid much attention to the lock when she had been brought into the room the first time, but listening to the lock turn now, she did. And she smiled. Jamie wasn't the only one whose lessons Robin had absorbed. Mouse had shown her many ways to get into places she was meant to stay out of...she just needed something to act as a lock pick.

Sylvia had watched Robin's escape attempt from the kitchen, and how she struggled as she was dragged up the stairs, kicking all the way. *Definitely has spirit. Could be rather useful when she's older.* She opened the freezer and filled a dish towel with ice, taking it over to Angelo, who had collapsed into an easy chair. Silently, she handed the bundle to him.

She smirked as Angelo nurse his hurt leg. The girl had moxie, which Sylvia could respect. She made a mental note to enter Robin's room with care.

"Listen, Angelo...she's scared and vulnerable right now. Rather than bully her, why not let me smother her in honey?"

Angelo's eyes narrow. "What?"

"I'll be the carrot, since you're obviously the stick. To cajole her into cooperating, or at least into calming down." She walked to the sideboard after draining the contents of her glass and refilled it – strictly with iced tea, considering she needed to be at the top of her game. The fact that she'd poured it from a whiskey bottle was just for effect. Men could be so easily duped.

"I can't believe you drink that rotgut," Angelo growled, eschewing her bottle of cheap whiskey for the top shelf brand he preferred.

"There's no accounting for taste," she murmured.

Robin was slumped over, sitting on the floor with her back to the locked door. Angry tears fell from her eyes, which she dashed away with quick slaps. This was no time to feel sorry for herself. Momma always said to keep your wits about you when bad things happened. The time for falling apart was after everything was over. But...it was hard. She felt so alone.

A tentative knock sounded behind her. She sat up straight, alert for signs the door would be pushed open again.

"Robin? Sweetheart?"

It was a woman's voice. Robin relaxed the slightest bit.

“Angelo can be so bossy, I know. I’m so sorry.”

Robin didn’t respond.

“Are you OK? Did he hurt you? I’m Sylvia, by the way.”

She wanted to keep quiet, but something in the woman’s – Sylvia’s – voice sounded so kind. “I’m OK. I just wanna go home.” It made her lower lip tremble to admit that last part. She was scared.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Sylvia said. “I’ll try to find out. Meanwhile, I’ve got dinner heating up. Shall I bring you some when it’s ready?”

Her stomach growled. She’d missed lunch, and the man she’d hit had withheld the burger and fries he’d promised. William always told her to take every opportunity presented to eat. “Y-y-yes.” Remembering her manners, she added, “Yes, please.”

“OK. And...” Sylvia’s voice dropped to a whisper, “we won’t tell Angelo, the big meanie.”

Robin smiled. “OK.”

She heard the tell-tale click and stood back from the opening door, tense. But it was just the woman, Sylvia, with a tray with soup and crackers. She frowned. Something about the lady seemed familiar, but Robin couldn’t place her.

It was nothing special, but it was food. Robin ate while Sylvia looked on.

She took a chance.

“I want to go home.”

“I know, baby, but Angelo told me your dad really wants to see you.”

Robin got very still. Her dad didn’t know Angelo. In fact, nobody knew she *had* a father.

Sylvia baited the hook. “Gabriel misses his baby very much.”

Robin nearly hurled the tray across the room, but caught herself in time. “Gabriel is not my daddy, and anyway, he’s dead.”

“That’s what the papers say, but he escaped, and he’s been waiting to see you again.”

Robin pushed the tray away. "I'm not hungry anymore."

Sylvia shrugged. "Okay, sweetie, but you want something else, just knock on the door, okay?"

Robin said nothing as Sylvia picked up the tray and left, locking the door behind her.

Robin really wanted to cry and scream. Gabriel was not her father. Gabriel had died when the tower had burned. But a building fear that he might have escaped gave her a renewed sense of urgency to escape.

She searched her room again. One of the dolls was dressed in frills and held a parasol. She carefully tore the fragile fabric for the wires holding the parasol open. When she guessed two hours had gone by, she tried the lock the way Mouse had shown her. There was a soft click. She risked opening the door a sliver.

No one seemed to be on this floor, but there were sounds coming from downstairs. She tiptoed out of the room. With little ability to outrun the guard, she knew her best chance was to somehow get out of the house without being seen. She checked the windows in the other rooms on the floor. They also had bars. Finding a flight of stairs to the attic, she crept up them, and there found a small window without bars. She slipped out of it and carefully climbed onto the roof.

Now what?

She saw the gutters and followed them to the long drainage pipe that ran down the side of house. She remembered the courage that had let her dive from some of the ledges around the falls that even the older kids shied away from, and the talking-to she'd gotten from her parents about that. Her parents. Her love for them sparked that same courage, and she used it to ever so carefully shimmy down the pipe.

The moment her feet touched the ground, she ran. It was an easy leap over the picket fence around the property. Instinctively, she headed for the woods that surrounded the property.

Initially, she had thought of following the road that led to the house, but she wasn't sure how many people Angelo had working for him. And she was truly scared of letting anyone else know about her father and Below. So she ran into the woods, stopping only when the trees got too thick to see the fields and the road easily.

From the kitchen window, Sylvia watched Robin flee into the woods. Good. She knew the girl would lead her to her father. She had told Robin that story and made sure she'd had something to eat so that she would have the incentive and the fuel to run. Sylvia had counted on Robin's fear that the story might be true. She figured the girl would keep to the woods until she found and followed the train tracks back to the city.

It was time to make a phone call, but first she needed to tidy up.

Sylvia headed to the kitchen table where she'd left her purse, took a small gun out of it, then walked into the living room, where Angelo and the security man - Ned? Ted? well, it didn't matter anymore - were listlessly watching some game on television. She raised the gun. The pop-pop of the shots was barely louder than the sound of the TV set.

Robin dove into a thicket of blueberry bushes, which seemed like the best hiding place while she caught her breath. Finally, she risked a look back to where she had run from. There wasn't anyone searching for her...yet. While allowing herself a minute to calm her rapid breathing and racing heart, she made a plan. *Don't panic. You're free now. Find a road or train tracks, something to follow.* Even when she did, she knew to parallel it while at least twenty paces inside the tree line. That would provide quick hiding should she hear a car or people searching.

She looked around with trepidation. The woods were more like parkland than forest. She could see easily through the trees. There wasn't a lot of cover. Still...getting farther away from the house where she'd been held captive was her best - her only - option. Find safety first, then figure out where she was, THEN notify a Helper. That list had been drummed into her since she could remember.

Shivering in the cool air, she moved carefully from beneath the bushes, then scrambled towards what looked like a path farther inside the tree line. Perhaps she could make better time if she used it now, when no one was yet following her. A path meant a parking lot or road nearby. Maybe there would be an emergency phone in the parking area.

Sylvia took one more look around the house, mentally crossing off a checklist. Once sure she was leaving only bodies, not fingerprints, she walked out, abandoning the house with the front door wide open. The house rental had been made under Catherine Chandler's name, ensuring a dead end once the authorities got involved.

The tracker she'd placed inside the hem of Robin's clothing ensured she needn't panic. The child was far from any help yet. She got into her vehicle and turned on the ignition, humming as she drove to the closest business with a telephone booth.

The receiver was picked up, and a tense voice answered, "Yes?"

It was the woman. Sylvia wanted the man. "Tell him I want to speak to him."

Catherine, confused, asked, "Who?"

Chuckling, Sylvia responded, "You know who. Your man. That big, strong one with the face of a big cat. Now, Chandler."

Catherine felt her breath still. But they had searched all evening and night and found no trace of Robin. Or of Angelo, who had finally left his office but had been clever enough to switch cars and lose his tail of Chance and Tanis.

She had a choice to make. She found her iron. "Let me speak to my daughter first."

"You don't make the rules here, honey. Let me speak to him or you can forget ever seeing your kid again."

Catherine couldn't bear it, and Vincent was watching her struggle to hold herself together. She handed him the phone with a shaking hand. "A woman wants to talk to you."

He had heard the other side of the conversation. Without preamble, he spoke. "I am here," Vincent said into the receiver.

Sylvia felt her toes curl in her shoes. "Damn, what a voice. I can see why Chandler spread her legs for you."

Vincent reached into his mind to pull together a calm he absolutely did not feel. “Did you call merely to be vulgar, or do you wish to discuss Robin’s immediate return?”

Sylvia grinned in the phone booth. This thing had to be absolutely fantastic in bed. “All business, huh? Well...what is your name?”

“My name has nothing to do with the return of Robin.”

“Your daughter?” Sylvia baited him. “She is yours, right? I’m going to feel really dumb if I just have the bastard Chandler popped out after Gabriel banged her one time, maybe at one of his parties.”

There was a growl, and Sylvia felt elemental fear and power all the way at the other end of the line. She had to have him.

“Easy, kitty. I don’t want money. I want something more valuable.”

“And what is that?”

“To find that out, you can meet me at Gabriel’s old mansion. Chandler knows the address.”

“And Robin will be there?”

“I make the rules, honey. Remember that. At the mansion, 11:30. Tomorrow night, of course. I know how nocturnal cats are.” She laughed and hung up.

Robin risked a few hours of sleep and woke when she could feel sun on her eyelids. The small meal of soup and crackers felt a very long time ago and she walked on heavy legs to the tree line. It was still meadows and falling down farmhouses. She continued on, her stomach beginning to cramp and her head aching, finally spotting a faded-looking strip of stores next to a fast-food restaurant. She decided to risk a little dumpster diving.

As she walked up to the dumpster, a voice stopped her.

"Hello, Robin."

The woman was waiting by a car. She had a small gun pointed at Robin. Robin's heart sank.

"I gave you a little present before you ran, in case I needed to find you again."

Robin would not cry, but she knew her strength to duck and run had gone.

The woman walked toward her. "Now, I know you're hungry, so we're going to go inside and have breakfast. There is a nice woman working the counter. If you make any trouble, I will shoot her in the head. And then shoot you. Do we understand each other?"

Robin nodded and began walking in front of Sylvia, who tucked the gun into a pocket of her long overcoat.

Sylvia ordered for both of them. Robin knew the woman would make good on her threat to kill the cashier, so she sat quietly and ate her biscuit and drank her juice, although the food felt like glue in her mouth. But she refused to completely give up just yet.

When Sylvia finished, she got up and ushered Robin out of the restaurant. By the car, she spoke again. "Now we're going back to the city to meet your big, strong daddy. And you're going to be a good girl and put these on."

Sylvia handed over a pair of handcuffs, and Robin mutely put them on. She lay on the floor of the backseat as the woman told her to, and only started to cry when Sylvia taped her mouth shut and covered her with a blanket. She let herself have some tears, but she practiced breathing through her nose the way Lena had taught her to when she had been demonstrating breathing exercises to her class Below, showing the children how to conserve air in case of a cave-in.

She made herself think. She could tell by the way the woman had turned out of the parking lot that they were on their way back to the city. Robin opened her mind to the bond she was beginning to understand she shared with her parents. *I am alive, I am coming back to the city, please find me, please...*

A shadow entered the room first, hesitant but looming.

She could feel her insides begin to melt in anticipation.

The shadow resolved into a tall cloaked figure. A cowl was pulled up over his head; he held it closed near his mouth, so that only glittering eyes met the sweep of her flashlight.

"I was beginning to wonder if you didn't love your daughter as much as I thought," she murmured.

"Where is she?" The voice was gravel and grit, harsh, indicative of wrath, not resignation.

"I will keep my end of the bargain, don't worry. She's safe...and far from here. So come closer, and show me how much you want her back." Sylvia set down the flashlight and opened her coat to reveal herself to him. She knew she was stunning - the best breasts money could buy, a flat stomach no woman who had had a child could hope to regain, curves at the hips leading to a backside other men had salivated over. "Come here."

She shrugged off her coat and lay on the couch she had salvaged. Her memory of the fumbling young Mr. Moreno she had coupled with on it to entertain Gabriel would soon be supplanted by the glorious fuck she had dreamed of with this...beast of a man.

Vincent stood where he was. "You are as sick as your mentor," he growled. "I could crush your windpipe with little effort."

"And then your little Robin would sing no more. So cut the crap and get over here. I've done a lot to earn this, and I intend to enjoy every minute of it. And it had better be enjoyable, if you want to see your daughter again. I want the full experience. Hours of your best service, please." She began to stroke her breasts, which she knew enticed men beyond their ability to resist her.

Still, he didn't come closer.

Impatient, she sat up. "I'll tie you down and mount you if you don't cooperate. One way or another, you are getting me pregnant. Why not do it in a way that's much more pleasurable for both of us? I'm sure Ms. Chandler told you to do whatever I asked. Anything to get your precious daughter back."

Sylvia rose and sauntered toward Vincent. With nimble fingers, she loosened his cape and tugged it off his shoulders. She ignored his glare, concentrating on

undoing the belt around his waist, then the suede ties of his tunic. She noted his harsh intake of breath whenever her fingers stroked him. This was going to be more fun than she had even imagined, slowly disrobing this magnificent specimen.

His tunic loosened, she slid it down his arms and off. How many layers did this outfit have? She realized his thick knitted sweater would have to be pulled over his head, and she needed his cooperation for that. But he was like a mannequin, unresisting and uncooperative at one time. Well, she was sure the candy inside was worth the unwrapping.

Tugging the sweater, she got it untucked. She began hauling it upwards, ready to instruct him to raise his arms, when a sound from beyond the room interrupted her.

"You bastard! I told you to come alone."

"I am as interested in keeping my word to someone like you as I am with giving you a child to destroy."

Sylvia moved to grab her coat and run but Vincent's arms were around her like steel bands.

"Where is my daughter?"

She smirked and said nothing.

He pressed harder.

A flicker of pain crossed Sylvia's face, but her wicked smile grew. "Why don't you rape it out of me, make me beg for more?"

Calabria came into the room. "There was a guard, second floor. I did a sweep - no one else. I don't think she's here, Vince." She crossed to where Sylvia had tossed her coat, made a production of folding it neatly, and handed it to her. Vincent released her so she could put it back on.

Sylvia made no move to do so, standing there, proudly naked, in front of them. "Of course she isn't. And either I get a baby from this magnificent creature or you never see her again." She stared defiance at Calabria. "You've got nothing to hold me on, because this is still an unofficial investigation, isn't it?"

Calabria didn't react, and Sylvia pressed her upper hand. "Besides, if you're thinking about bringing me in for trespassing, won't I have a story to tell your colleagues?"

Calabria knew Sylvia wasn't bluffing, and held her peace.

"I will not father a child with you." Vincent was firm. "Neither will I let you leave here without knowing where my daughter is."

Sylvia mocked him with a harsh laugh and began to put her coat on, but again found her arms locked tightly to her body. Calabria was behind her before she could squirm away, snapping handcuffs on her so tightly the bones of her wrists protested.

"Lady, I suspect that you killed two people in a house in Connecticut. We tracked you to it, I've got tire tracks at the scene matching a car registered to you, and I just found a gun in the pocket of your overcoat that very likely is the murder weapon."

She slipped the coat over Sylvia's shoulders and pushed her past Vincent, who turned to gather his clothing, aiming for the door.

"I'm feeling like taking a drive to the state line. Once I cross it, I will hand you over to some cops who are very interested in your whereabouts as a person of interest in those crimes. You tell them whatever crazy story you want to, but I'm thinking they won't care too much about yet another sighting of a New York urban legend."

At the door, she stopped and turned Sylvia to face her.

"Here is where you bargain for your life. You tell Vincent what he wants to know. We will drive to the state line and stop just shy of it. I'll call Ms. Chandler, and if she confirms that Robin has been found safe, I will let you out of the car, drive back to my loving husband, and forget you ever existed."

Sylvia scowled.

"Best deal you're gonna get." Calabria narrowed her eyes and glared at the captive woman. "Tick tock."

"You're bluffing."

Calabria barked a laugh. "You don't know me very well, or you'd know I never bluff. Off we go to Connecticut."

She nodded to Vincent, who took one of Sylvia's arms as she took the other.

"Okay, okay." Sylvia dug in her heels. She turned to Vincent and murmured directions. He nodded once to Calabria and disappeared.

Calabria wrestled Sylvia to her car and shoved her into the back seat, using a set of leg cuffs to further restrain her movement.

She wondered if she should be enjoying herself so much, in light of all that had happened.

Vincent ran like his feet had wings to the tunnel junction underneath the mansion, where Catherine waited.

"She said Robin is in the basement of a place called The Silver Star."

They moved quickly to the nearest exit point for that location, caution for once be damned. Catherine did emerge before him, giving the space a sweeping look. At first glance, the club's basement was empty of people, only crowded with boxes and dusty glassware. Later they would determine that the place had been closed for over a year, but at that moment they had no idea what...or who...lay above them.

She whispered, "Robin?"

"Who's there?" a small, very tired, very frightened voice asked.

Catherine almost fell to her knees with relief. "Oh baby, it's me."

"Mommy!"

Catherine and Vincent ran towards the sound of Robin's voice, not caring about the noise they made knocking over anything in their way.

Robin was tied to a paint-splattered mannequin which incongruously sported a pair of silver angel wings over its shoulders. Vincent slit Robin's bonds with his claws and she threw herself into his arms. Catherine covered her daughter's body with her own, and they all held each other, crying and laughing with relief.

"I knew you'd find me!"

"Always, baby," Catherine said, her voice a fierce whisper. "And now let's get you out of here."

As they exited the club's basement, they found that Rolley and Chance had arrived with Cullen and a small detail. They sported an array of tools and weapons, as if ready for anything.

Chance grinned. "You get your baby girl home. We'll close up the access panel as best we can, and put a false fall of rocks a few yards away when you're clear. Just in case you set off a silent alarm or something, they won't trace you to Below."

Already, Vincent was moving towards home, with Robin holding him tightly as he carried her.

Catherine smiled to see Rolley diligently sweeping up their footprints inside the dusty basement. But there would be time for thanks later. She turned and ran to keep pace with Vincent, adrenaline still coursing through her.

"We're not out of the woods yet, but at least we're together."

Vincent nodded at her words. Whatever happened, whatever came...they would be together for it.

It surprised Sylvia more than it should have that Calabria was true to her word. Once the policewoman had made the call to learn that Robin was safe, she had let her go...just short of the state line, as promised.

But once Calabria's car had faded into the distance, and before Sylvia could do more than make an emergency call to a contact within the organization, a police car rolled into view. Apparently, a woman standing in a rest area wearing only a coat and handcuffs had provoked some good citizen into calling 911.

She sat in the back seat while one of the cops called her situation in, already concocting her cover story for when the questions began back at the station. She wasn't worried. She hadn't broken any laws, after all – or none that these policemen would know about.

The cop put the receiver back on the cruiser's radio. "We're to take her to the small airport outside Fielding to hand her over to an agent. She's federal."

Sylvia's ears pricked up. That hadn't taken long. *The organization looks after its own.* She smirked. She was going to be extracted by whomever they were driving to meet. There'd be other games to play, other attempts to make. She would have the Beast, one way or another.

Her eyes grew dreamy, thinking of their son...and it would be a son...raised as a being of pure will and strength. She imagined, on his 18th birthday, presenting him with Robin to mate with. A sibling pair of demigods making another. She anticipated sitting in a chair like Gabriel's, watching her son take his half-sister by a great fireplace, Robin's body unable to resist the calling of her own kind - her son, with his mother's black hair and his father's face, roaring as his seed filled Robin while she screamed his name.

Yes, there would be time for that.

She was handed to the waiting agent with a cursory glance at badges and paperwork. The agent was a young woman with short hair, clipped almost to a buzzcut and bleached a pearly white. She thanked the officers and put Sylvia in the back of her car. Then the cops drove away. Sylvia watched the cruiser disappearing back into the horizon.

Sylvia turned to face the front again. "That was quick. I take it the organization needs me for something?"

The young woman didn't answer.

Sylvia shifted in the backseat. "We can stop worrying about appearances and get me out of these things." She gestured to her handcuffs.

The young woman didn't answer.

Sylvia frowned as the woman started her car and reversed field, heading out of the airport. She was heading to the marshy lands outside the fences.

Sylvia felt her first note of fear. "Look, I screwed up, but the higher ups will want to hear about this. I've got a plan."

The young woman still didn't answer. She turned down an old service road.

Sylvia fought back an instinctive need to beg and reached for cool anger instead. "You think you're pretty slick, huh? Well, one day you're going to fuck up, too, and you'll be needing a favor. Why not bank it now?"

The young woman stopped the car and turned to Sylvia with a gun in her hand. "We're going for a walk. Out."

Sylvia found the last of her bravado. "The hell we are. You'll have to drag me to wherever you're thinking of dumping me."

The woman nodded. "Fair enough."

She fired two shots into Sylvia's chest.

The woman made her flight 30 minutes later.

When Calabria got home, she found Joe sitting dejectedly, clicking the TV remote from one channel to another. He didn't acknowledge her until she took the remote from his hand and turned the TV off.

"Spit it out, Joey, and let's get past this." She sat beside him on the couch and attempted to throw an arm around his shoulders, but he shrugged it off.

Gazing down at his hands, he murmured, "I can't believe you'd keep something like this a secret from me." He looked at her for the first time, accusation in his eyes. "For years."

She wasn't having any of him trying to impose guilt on her. "Your work-wife kept the secret for even longer, so don't try to throw a pity party at home." Her voice softened as she added, "It's because we both admire your convictions so much."

Confusion lit his liquid brown eyes. "What the hell are you...?"

"You're an officer of the court. And yes, I know both Catherine and I swore to uphold the law, too...but we are entirely pragmatic. You're more...by the book. Which, frankly, makes you a better person than either of us." She smiled tiredly. "We didn't want to put you in the position you now find yourself in. I assume you have surmised the situations in which Vincent did what he had to do to protect those he loves."

"Oh, HELL, yeah." Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. "It all makes so much sense now."

She sat back against the couch. "So...now you have a decision to make. And so do Cathy and I."

He opened his eyes and stared at her with suspicion. "Is that an ultimatum?"

"No." She shrugged. "But it will change many things, depending on what your conscience requires of you."

Sighing, he nodded. "If I can't keep Vincent's secret...if I can't overlook the many legal issues, the likely crimes..."

She nodded in turn. "I'll have to resign. Which I'd do in a heartbeat, if you want me to." She held up one hand to forestall any argument. "I can get plenty of work in the private sector, so no harm, no foul...and no hard feelings between us, I promise."

"Okay..." He was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and when it came, it was more like a giant boot.

"As for Cathy, she will...disappear. She won't turn Vincent in to the authorities. Now, she has the means, as you know - she doesn't need to work, she's got her Daddy's big bucks to soften her landing. But...the partnership...that will be gone. I'm sure she'll stay in touch, but she will ensure you won't ever know where Vincent and she are."

"And Robin?"

He knew the answer before she added, "Her, too."

He stood and picked up his empty beer bottle, taking it into the kitchen. She rose to follow him. "She will understand. It's what she expects you to do, because she knows how honorable you are, how seriously you take your oath."

"She's already making plans?" His voice choked a bit over the last word.

"Actually, contingencies have been in place for years. It's just a matter of moving forward on them. And it'll happen fast." Calabria leaned against the kitchen counter and shrugged. "We may have already seen the last of them. But..."

"But if I promise that I'll keep her secrets..."

"She'll stay. And you'll be brought into the other secrets, as much or as little as you wish."

"Because there's more?"

"Oh, hellos, yeah. A ton."

Joe sighed and looked into Calabria's eyes. He could lose himself forever in them if he wasn't careful. He thought hard about what to do next... what to say, even. He suspected that if he told the authorities what he now knew, he would lose her. She said she'd merely retire from the force, but Joe understood what that would cost her, too. And he knew that it wouldn't, it couldn't, be the same between them ever again if Catherine disappeared with Robin.

Robin. He felt his heart clench at not getting to see her grow up, not getting to see her walk the stage at her graduation. What would become of her now? Would she try to re-enter the world as an adult as her mother had? More likely, she'd be a permanent exile. Due to him.

Joe sighed again. He took one of Calabria's hands.

"Before anything is decided, I'd like to meet with all of them. Maybe we can have dinner together."

Calabria smiled, gentle and tired. She had been through the wringer these past few days herself. She stroked Joe's face with her other hand. "That can be arranged. I know this great place, Adan's, where they have the best lamb burgers."

The table had been set in Adan's basement, and Adan himself had served them. Joe and Robin fought for the last of the fries, with Joe mock-grumpily letting the girl grab them. The look of triumph on her face made everyone smile.

Other than that, it had been an uncomfortable meal, filled with stilted conversation and long silences. Joe's resentment had been almost palpable to the others. Calabria was ignoring his attitude, but Catherine had tried too hard to smooth things over, with little success. Vincent, unable to find common ground with the man his wife had worked with for well over a decade, subsided into silence. Robin,

uncertain why her daddy and her uncle hadn't become immediate best friends, wondered if it had something to do with her breaking the rules and getting kidnapped.

Nobody was happy by the time dessert was served – cannolis that Calabria had bought at Joe's favorite Italian bakery. Joe snuck a look at his watch as he poked dispiritedly at his cannoli. She caught the motion.

"Sheesh, husband of mine. Surely you can miss *one* game."

He blushed.

Catherine asked, "What game?"

He gave his cannoli another poke. "Knicks at Celtics. Game started a few minutes ago."

Vincent shook his head. "I really thought they'd have a shot this year, but it's not looking good."

Joe looked up, surprised. "You a Knicks fan?"

Vincent nodded.

"Well, they got a weak spot at point guard," he said, reasoning with Vincent.

"True, but the team has a couple of all-stars."

"But with those bad trades..."

Catherine and Calabria looked at each other and smiled. Who would have thought?

And it turned out that by the end of dinner – even though they had missed the Knicks game – Joe and Vincent had bonded in the only way Joe *could* bond with Vincent, but it was an important way, and the key to Joe deciding that Vincent was an okay guy, and that some secrets were worth bending a few rules for, despite his wife thinking he was too stiff to bend at all.



A HAPPY LIFE – in verse
by Ben Bock

Scene I: The world above
It has now been a score of years.
Through her grief she still perseveres...

At times it seems a major anniversary
Is noted in a manner rather cursory.
But Catherine woke this day distraught and crying,
With painful memories of her mother dying.
She called in sick and feigned the trusty flu bug.
And summoned daddy for an “I love you” hug.

She called therefore upon her old friend Nancy
To meet for lunch at someplace fairly fancy.
Discussing life and dining on shrimp salad
Restored her some, her face now much less pallid.
Contentment, though, was hardly automatic
And Nancy deemed her oddly enigmatic.

Some therapy seemed called for, she decided.
But there she found her two goals now collided.
Confiding in the doctor risked exposure
Of Vincent, yet she still was seeking closure
Of wounds revealed by memories of her mother
And problems from her loving of another.

Psychiatry did little to bring solace.
There seemed no forward path that would be flawless.
To walk away from love she was not willing.
And yet her current state was unfulfilling.
She took a leave of absence from her duty.
And Joe approved, in deference to our Beauty.

Scene II: The world below
In the caverns beneath the street,
In the candlelight two men meet.

And Vincent as she suffered sensed her anguish.
Determined to do something more than languish.
Dismay about her pain gave Vincent shivers,
While Father spoke at length of raging rivers.
They both agreed that Catherine's situation
Was one of loneliness and deprivation.

Scene III: The concert hall
In a venue of elegance,
With a background of elephants...

The concert started, Catherine with her father.
The music soared but Catherine couldn't bother.
Her mind consumed with deep romantic notions,
Unable to contain her strong emotions,
She bolted out and scurried to her savior.
It seemed indeed some rather odd behavior.

Scene IV: The tunnel entrance
At the underworld's entranceway
Now the two lovers had their say.

In endless misery she could not just wallow.
The pair debated on what course to follow.
"Perhaps our dream must end," sighed Vincent sadly.
But that idea sure went over badly.
"Our special bond is worth it all," she stated,
"Let me live here, it's what I've long awaited."

“No, this must end,” said Vincent with some feeling.
“Our love has caused you pain and you’re not healing.
And I’m the source, which causes me much grieving.
Love someone else!” he said, his shoulders heaving.
With sadness Catherine left, her thoughts to ponder.
To quit this love, or should she grow still fonder?

Scene V: Nancy’s house
Now in Westport, Connecticut,
Showing good houseguest etiquette...

Confused and restless, feeling rather antsy
She grabbed the night train heading to see Nancy.
A reminiscing weekend seemed in order.
Alas, though, “Buddy” made advances toward her.
She dreamt of walks with Vincent in the sunshine
And picnics with him in the park with red wine.

Asleep beneath a blanket flecked with flowers,
Enlightenment struck Catherine in the wee hours.
A lamp went “Crash!” and Nancy rushed in, worried.
They talked it out at length, the mood unhurried.
As old friends do, they spoke in earnest voices
About the way we all must make hard choices.

Scene VI: A nocturnal dash home
This great love was a rarity
She now saw this with clarity.

Now time was of the essence, not much leeway.
Purloining Nancy’s car she hit the freeway.
“Goodbye fun weekend, goodbye Nancy Tucker.

I need to get my Vincent now to pucker.
To follow where our hearts decide to lead us,
And disregard the way the world might treat us.”

She dashed across the park to find her lover.
And there he stood already, thinking of her.
She threw herself into his arms, ecstatic.
The climax of this night felt so dramatic.
The two souls kissed a kiss that seemed mysterious
But none can doubt it left them both delirious.

A DISCOVERY IN ELIZABETH'S TUNNELS

Art by Amber N. Shelton (and story by JoAnn Baca)

"I'm curious about what she wants to show you."

Vincent had been in his chamber with Catherine, enjoying some rare one-on-one time, when Mouse had burst in, waving a folded note. He had proceeded to recite its entire contents, right down to the "Love, Elizabeth," before handing it over and dashing out as quickly as he'd come in.

Catherine was still laughing over the unexpected performance, but now she turned to her companion. "There's only one way to find out what 'Come visit me, I have something for you to see' means. Shall we go to the Painted Tunnels now?"

He shrugged, resigned to their day taking an unexpected turn...as so many of them did when Catherine was Below. Holding out a hand to her, he said, "I know a shortcut."

It had been a while since either of them had ventured to Elizabeth's gallery. They noted a few new pieces had been added: Eric and Ellie were there now, as was Lena and her little Cathy, and some newer items that were in the sketching stage. Was this what Elizabeth meant them to see?

"Ah, there you two are!"

The voice was unmistakable. They turned to find the community's painter in residence smiling at them, brushes in one hand, an open pot of black paint in the other.

"Hello, children!" She laid her small burdens down on the ground. "Didn't expect that odd boy to get you here so quickly."

"We can come at a better time if we're interrupting," Vincent said.

"No, no, I'm ready for a break. Visits are more important than my small chores anyway. Here..." She reached out, taking each of them by a hand. "Come this way."

She led them off down the familiar passageway, but continued well past the point where her paintings no longer graced the tunnel walls. Vincent cast Catherine a confused look. Then the old woman made an abrupt right turn and entered a cramped side tunnel that Vincent had to turn sideways to traverse. His confusion turned to bafflement, as he had no memory of this pathway.

“Almost there...” Suddenly, Elizabeth halted them. “Here.” She looked over her shoulder at Catherine. “Narcissa found this place for me. It’s not on the maps, she said.”

“It’s not,” Vincent confirmed. “I don’t recognize this area at all.”

“Ah, well, you know Narcissa. Best not to question her about things, just accept whatever she says.” Elizabeth let their hands go and stepped forward a few more paces. “Start here, Catherine. You can look, too, Vincent.”

She squeezed behind them so they could move forward into a cavern about half the size of Vincent’s chamber. It was lit from above by some kind of reflected light but they still needed the lanterns set by the entrance to view what was clearly a series of paintings along several of the smooth rock walls.

Astonishment lit Catherine’s features as she slowly traveled from the earliest images on the left, down one long wall and over to another. She smiled and even laughed at the pictures, done with obvious love and a bit of whimsy. “These are wonderful, Elizabeth,” she enthused. “Has Father seen them?”

“Oh, no...he might not like them all, so why get him into a tizzy when it’s unnecessary.” She smiled. “It’s my own personal gallery but I thought, with your upcoming wedding, it was time both of you knew about it.” She pointed to the unpainted walls. “There’s room for many more paintings, as you can see. So you two go ahead making memories and let this place be your special album for them.”

Vincent, astonished and a little embarrassed, turned to hug his old friend. “I’m touched...and honored. Thank you for this.”

Elizabeth stood in the entryway, watching the couple as they continued to gaze at her secret labor of love. She had a special place in her heart for this one child of the Tunnels. This was the best gift she could think of for him, for his very special love...and for the children she knew would help her fill the remaining walls.















MY FIRST CONVENTION EXPERIENCE

[Featuring A Comedy of Errors!]

By JoAnn Baca

Beauty and the Beast fandom was something I stumbled upon in the mid-1990s. It happened because the agency I worked for finally got the World Wide Web for the new computers given to the staff and nobody quite knew what to do with it. We got training in WordPerfect for document creation, and then were told to poke around and figure out how to use the computer's internet connection. Presented with this blank slate, I wondered what to look up. On a whim, I typed in "Beauty and the Beast" and eventually found BBTV and the online fandom community.

On BBTV at that time there was a lot of conversation about a fandom convention in Minneapolis (the 1997 Reflections con), which made me wonder a lot about what kind of weirdness I'd stumbled into. I mean, I was a fan of the TV series, sure, a BIG fan...but I wasn't the type of person who would go to a convention...was I?

I thought a lot about the in-person conventions as I got to know the online community better, and realized that since the 1998 convention was being held in Virginia Beach, just a few hours' drive from where I lived at the time, my travel costs would be minimal if I wanted to take a chance on going. If I found out it was too weird for comfort, well...I could just hop back in my car and drive home.

On BBTV I found some fans who needed another roomie so they could attend their second con, and I made plans to join these online pals who were "con veterans" but mostly strangers. So far, so good!

I drove down to Virginia Beach and apparently got there very early, because despite being told that fans would be milling around in the lobby, there was just one there. She (I came to find out) was a bit of an outlier in the fandom, and since I was waiting for my roomies who had booked the room, I had to stay in the lobby... while she tried to sell me a "4th season" novel she'd written, asked for funds so she could attend a multi-fandom convention later in the year where she planned to "advertise" B&B fandom... It was quite an odd situation for my first in-person

meeting of a B&B fan! But eventually other fans trickled in and I found a couple of my roomies, and lucked out – turns out I had some amazing, talented women to room with, for that con and for years to come!

Fast forward to dinnertime. Since I had a car, I offered to drive some of the large group of fans headed out to dinner. Unfortunately, my car battery was dead! Off everyone else went to find food, while I sat in the lobby for a couple of hours, until somebody from AAA showed up and towed my car to a gas station for a new battery! So I didn't have dinner that night, but did sneak a bit of peanut butter from a roomie's stash!

The next day, when the con started, I got to raise my hand when the emcee asked if it was anyone's first con. [That was the only acknowledgement for con virgins at that point! It wasn't until several years later that the concept of making a special deal out of our con virgins was developed.] I wandered into the dealers' room with my roomies and was in heaven for hours! But when it came time to get autographs from Jay Acovone and others from the show's staff, I just stared at them from the doorway. I watched other fans line up and chat with them, but had no courage to do the same. Still, just looking on from the doorway seemed magical enough to me!

One of the best moments of my first con was getting to meet fanfic writers. I was gobsmacked to meet Teri P. – who turned out to be just a normal human woman, not some fanfic goddess floating on clouds wearing a sparkly crown! Another highlight for me was seeing my fanfic in the conzine. It was such a thrill to know my name was “in print” along with so many writers whose work I admired so much.

That night, a bunch of fans went to dinner at a hotel near the con hotel and I went along with them. Near the end of the dinner, I excused myself to make a quick phone call from a pay phone in the hall (I had no cell phone back then). When I returned to the table, there was nobody left from the group I'd eaten with!

Someone had sat my purse on a chair, possibly the person clearing the table. Worst of all, I had paid no attention while walking to that hotel, so had no clue how to get back to the con hotel! [I finally figured it out...phew.]

The con hotel was beachside, and I saw someone dressed as Vincent having photos taken on the beach (the con's title was Beauty at the Beach). It was magical! How

remarkable to find out it was a woman – Lisa G. – who had crafted the makeup and dressed so convincingly as Vincent!

One memory which will never leave me was the hotel fire alarm going off. My roomies and I had bought a TON of zines – literally several xerox boxes full – and we stayed in the room as the alarm was going off, wondering how to save our zines! We considered carefully dropping them out the window, wondering if the boxes would survive the several-story fall. One of my con roomies coined the phrase “OP” (for Obsessive Pathetic) to describe us, and she really had us described perfectly!

Fast forward to leaving the con hotel. I had my suitcase plus my and another roomie’s boxes of zines to take home (to ship hers later). So when the gas station called to say my car battery had finally been replaced and they’d pick me up, I assumed they’d be picking me up with my car and I’d drop the driver off back at the station when I paid my bill. But...nope! The gas station guy arrived in a teeny sportscar! When he looked at all I had to transport, he gulped hard! I have no memory of HOW he managed to load that tiny car up with all that stuff, only that he DID manage! We actually had an audience, because nobody could believe how much had to be transported in such a small vehicle. I swear he bent time and space to do it, but I’ll just call it a convention miracle!

When I got home, I told my hubby that it was a sometimes weird, sometimes crazy, sometimes lonely, sometimes funny, but ultimately great weekend. It turned out to be the first of an unbroken string of annual B&B conventions that I’ve been able to attend, and most of my roomies are the same as the ones I shared my first convention with. They may be held in different places with different activities, but every convention is still a mix of crazy and funny and weird but mostly wonderful experiences. I wouldn’t trade them for the world!

IT WASN'T COURAGE, IT WAS LOVE

By Linda S Barth

The year 1992 might seem like the distant past to many BatB fans, but at that time I was still very much a fandom newbie. Right after the end of Season 2, I'd begun learning about a subculture that was entirely new to me, including its vocabulary with strange but alluring words like zines, fandom, and cons. By 1992, I had become fairly proficient with the world of zines, but cons and fandom? Not so much.

Back then, I knew of only one friend in "real life" who watched BatB, and had met just a few people in fandom via phone calls and traditional letters (email was just taking off). Someone told me about TunnelCon 2, to be held in Las Vegas in mid-June. It all sounded so intriguing – a weekend of non-stop BatB-ness, including talent shows and dealers' rooms and art auctions (oh, my!) all set in a fantasy world within a fantasy world, the convention space at the Stardust Hotel. Equally inviting was the idea of finally meeting lots of other people who loved the show like I did, along with the chance to see what this fan community was all about.

But the whole idea of wandering into an unfamiliar realm – not to mention the logistics involved in getting there – was very unsettling. I discussed it with another fan friend, half-hoping one of us would have the sense to talk ourselves out of it. Instead, we fired each other up. We had to do it!

There were just a few little snags. Okay, several big ones. It was the end of the school year and personal leave time was greatly frowned upon. I had two cats who would need a sitter. I'd be disappearing for three days, unable to tell anyone where I was going, what with being a closet fan and all.

Did any of that stop me? Ha! All it took was lying to my principal, finding a plausible explanation to offer my mother and sister (cat sitters), and preparing a believable explanation for all my friends who might be wondering where I was for three days. Plus getting a driver to JFK for a midnight flight to Las Vegas, a city I'd never visited; booking a rental car to drive through said never-visited city alone

late at night; rooming with a fan friend I'd never actually met in person who could have been a deranged serial killer in real life for all I knew; and spending three days with a few hundred strangers.

That good idea began to sound very dubious. What if something really bad happened? What if all the lies were revealed and I got fired, and no one ever trusted me again, and what if everyone found out I was spending a weekend in Las Vegas at a convention for a tv show, in effect outing myself as a mega-fan? (Back then, this was a serious issue for me – really serious.) How could I risk so much just for what sounded like a fun adventure that might well turn out to be a horror story? ARGHHHHHHH!!!

Well, it's not surprising to anyone who knows me that none of those concerns resulted in giving up and staying home. YOLO wasn't an official "thing" then, but it has always been part of my personal creed.

So, with principal skillfully lied to, cats happily vacationing at my mother's house, and phone answering machine turned on, I worked all day, got that ride to the airport, flew to Las Vegas, picked up the car, drove to the hotel, and turned the car over to the valet. Not a single snag or delay or problem whatsoever! I remember thinking how great everything was going and how well I'd handled it all. My plan had been perfectly executed, and I was rather pleased with myself for having made this decision.

Then, I strolled into the Stardust lobby. As Father might say, "Oh, dear God!"

It was very late, even for Las Vegas standards, and the lobby wasn't crowded. However, the people there made up for lack of quantity with an extreme amount of quirkiness. And if that isn't a word, it should be because these folks were the poster children for quirkiness, which, by the way, probably wasn't the relatively flattering adjective most others would have used at the moment, myself included.

Until then, I'd never ever associated my beloved BatB world – filled with classical music, lyrical poetry, delicate roses, longing sighs, bonded lovers, noble aspirations – with the scene playing out in front of me. Everywhere I looked, there were mounds of costumes and props spilling out of boxes and garment bags (A lion's head mask? Rubber rats? A big plastic rose bush?); people wearing t-shirts in vivid

colors and eye-catching designs that blatantly announced “I’m a BatB fan!” to anyone and everyone; large cardboard cartons labeled with titles of zines (yes, I knew what those were – but how could there be so many of them??); and a cadre of shrieking, cavorting, hugging middle-aged women who all seemed to be BFFs.

What the actual hell?! How did any of this align with what I’d thought was going to be a pleasant, calm, nurturing weekend? I’d imagined spending serene hours chatting about BatB in an atmosphere reminiscent of Father’s library, filled with amiable, easy-going, like-minded individuals. Some quiet laughs shared, some intriguing ideas thoughtfully presented, some discussions of art and music and literature.

In other words, the exact opposite of what I was seeing.

If all this was going on just in the lobby, what would the actual con be like?! None of it was the tiniest bit close to what I’d pictured, and I just couldn’t deal with such a clash between expectations and reality. I had to escape! I began to pivot toward the exit, planning to retrieve the car and head back to the airport to catch any flight immediately heading east.

But...it was after three a.m.; my roomie was expecting me; I was exhausted; and in my heart, I was not ready to give up.

So, demurely distancing myself as much as possible from this alternate universe and its exotic inhabitants, I got in line at the check-in desk. In front of me were three of the aforementioned very obviously experienced con-attendees, all highly enthusiastic, out and proud BatB fans. I stared at their denim jackets decorated with glittery, bedazzled, painted portraits of Vincent. I listened to their excited proclamations about the items they’d be selling in the dealers’ rooms (along with some equally fiery tea being spilled about some other folks well-known in the fan community). I tried to sneak a look into open boxes of framed fan art they’d balanced on suitcases along with other boxes containing who knew what.

Despite hoping to maintain my image as a cool, been there/done that/seen it all former New Yorker, I was probably doing a lot of gaping, staring, twitching, and wincing. Okay, I definitely was, and it didn’t stop right away. But by the time I attended my second con a year later in Austin, none of this seemed the least bit

strange. To be honest, it actually seemed normal (-ish) by the time TC 2 was over on Sunday.

But I'd be lying if I said it all didn't take a lot of getting used to in a very short period of time. It was an intense course in Culture Shock 101, but after the first day of what had to be deer in the headlights, jaws on the floor, heads on a swivel – and all the other appropriate cliches you can think of – my fortunately not at all serial killer inclined roomie and I found ourselves having the most amazing, incredible time.

We were stunned by original art created by some of the gifted early artists in our fandom. We were overwhelmed by the two huge dealers' rooms filled with piles of zines, racks of handmade tunnel clothes, prints and jewelry and other collectibles handcrafted by talented fan artisans. We listened in at workshops led by fans who loved to talk about the show just like we did. We laughed and sighed and got teary-eyed during the talent show and costume contest and at the banquet when we heard Father's iconic speech in a room full of others who felt just the same as we did.

We'd been welcomed into a world filled with fun and enthusiasm, creativity and talent, energy and laughter, and all of it made possible through a shared love of BatB. It was a group of people who were – and are – so diverse, yet we're alike in one very important, unforgettable way. We all love BatB. We all are BatB fans, and we understood then, as we do now, that for this world to survive, we must set aside the things that might separate us and instead embrace and nourish the shared dream together.

Of course, in-person cons are only one of the many ways we do this for each other and for ourselves. We all find ways to participate that best suit us. For me, it's writing fanfic, being a founder and admin of CABB, and my work as a Winterfest Candlemaker, the group that hosts Winterfest Online. All of it – and more – is part of a world that once existed beyond my realm of experience, a world that at first shocked and then delighted. It had been hiding in plain sight, waiting to be discovered and appreciated, much as the tunnel world is hidden until one is fortunate enough to find it.

I'll always be grateful I didn't allow surprise and trepidation make me turn away and retreat. I almost did, just because everything seemed so different from what I'd been accustomed to, from what I'd expected. But I'd always known that differences are not to be feared, that they are to be explored and celebrated, to be appreciated for how they enrich everyone's lives. We need to learn about, understand, and respect our differences instead of being judgmental by criticizing or ignoring them. I'm glad I remembered all those things on that pivotal night at the Stardust Hotel. And I'm glad I let those truths guide me during my first con weekend.

I have a very clear memory of looking down at Las Vegas from the plane on the way home, smiling and crying at the same time. Only days earlier, I'd entered a world that had admittedly intimidated me so much I'd almost abandoned it before taking a single step over its threshold. Yet when I had to leave it, I longed to return.

It is very painful to think of everything I would have missed if I'd decided to turn away from fandom. I never could have developed some amazing, life-changing friendships with people whose lives touched mine only because of BatB. I might never have been inspired to write and draw again. I would never have had the opportunity to learn and share and have fun with BatB people – the ones who get it, the ones who know. And I certainly never would have realized it was more than okay to be a fan. The list goes on and on. You all know, and you have your own cherished lists.

Back in the Stardust lobby, which now sadly no longer exists except in our memories, where everything seemed to be shouting a warning, I'm so glad and grateful I listened instead to the "love song that whispered my name". That courage, that love has made all the difference.

A MOMENT IN TIME

By Deb Fowler

“Vincent, do you dance?”

In that magical moment, two souls merged through dance. His clean, masculine scent and gentle touch spoke of both strength and tenderness. Though his calloused hands dwarfed her delicate ones, their bodies fit together as if designed by fate - her softness yielding to his firmness, creating an intimate connection that transcended mere physical touch.

Lost in their intimate dance, she breathed in his fresh, soapy scent. His silken hair tickled her shoulder while his work-worn hands traced tender patterns across her palms. As he drew her nearer, the press of her curves against his solid chest created a perfect harmony of soft and strong, each movement a whispered secret between them.

They danced to their private rhythm. He drew her closer, her softness meeting his strength, their bodies perfectly aligned.



NARCISSA
Cajun Woman of New Orleans
The Tunnel's Mystic Witch
By Tunnel Muse

My eyes are cloudy, yet I see,
The Tunnel World dark in front of me.
The caverns dark and deep,
Candles and spirits my only keep.
A Cajun woman of New Orleans, the tunnel's mystic witch.

The gems, stones, spices and shells my only means to communicate,
The dangers of this world to anticipate.
Crazy old woman, they call me,
Seeing things they cannot see.
A Cajun woman of New Orleans, the tunnel's mystic witch.

They are my family and I say, my friends,
Though they scoff, yet on me depend.
Helping with advice when they ask,
It's not at all an easy task.
There are some who trust me still,
And those in tunnels that never will.
I'm a Cajun woman of New Orleans, the tunnel's mystic witch.

I come from a world full of history,
But to people, I'm still a mystery.
I've filled some of them with fear and dread,
Because I deal with the spirits and the dead.
I live by my own ways and means,
I come not from fortune or fame,
I live my life in solitude, Narcissa is my name.
I'm a Cajun woman from New Orleans,
Their strange, loving and mystic tunnel witch.

DIFFERENT WORLDS
Part 4 of The Drawbridge
By JoAnn Baca

This story may be read on its own, but for full context it would be helpful if you were familiar with the previous three parts. They were originally posted on various fandom sites and conzines, and are included in the Appendix at the back of this conzine if you have not read them yet.

*There are so many different worlds, so many different suns.
And we have just one world, but we live in different ones.
Mark Knopfler*

Catherine was wiping down her kitchen counter after storing her leftover Chinese take-out when she heard a knock on her apartment door. She frowned, checking the clock on the wall: 9:30. It was late, and she wasn't expecting anyone.

As she approached her front door, the knocking resumed. "Looking for Miss Catherine Chandler, please," a polite male voice announced. It sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"Who is it?" She wasn't going to open any of the locks on her door until she knew who was disturbing her evening uninvited.

"Ye know me as the Chandler. We met...when the Weaver was hurt."

Surprise lit her features. A member of the highly secretive community Below...here? She looked through her peephole and was reassured by his familiar face.

"Just a moment." She threw back the bolts and unlocked her door, opening it wide. "Come in, please."

The thin, breeches-clad man stood at her threshold, wool hat in hand. The highlights of his full beard and longish hair glinted where the flickering flames from her fireplace caught the gold. "Ma'am." He nodded to her.

“Come in,” she urged him again, not wishing for her neighbors to take note of his odd attire. He entered, obviously uncomfortable, but seemingly determined to carry out whatever mission he was on.

She closed but didn’t lock her front door as she said, “Please, sit. I can get you water or another refreshment, if you’d like.” Catherine was uncertain what they might be used to drinking in their mysterious and hidden corners of the tunnels, but it was safe to assume water was acceptable.

“I would appreciate that, thank ye, Miss Catherine.” He nodded as he sat gingerly on the edge of one of the cushions of a couch in her living room.

She returned with glasses for both of them, and a plate of Girl Scout cookies, the only sweets she had in the apartment. He stared at the cookies as if they were oddities, and well they might be, to him. He didn’t take one.

“May I ask how you got past the doorman?” She smiled uncertainly, but sat to show him she wasn’t overly concerned about his presence.

He winked. “Do ye think your man is the only one who has...alternate ways of entering places?” He took a sip of water. “Delivery men appreciate a hand at times. And...I have other means.” It was as much of a confession as he seemed willing to give. With it over, he got to the point. “Ye will recall the penny we exchanged in return for your lawyerly skills.”

Smiling, she recalled how she had calmed his fears that she might tell others of finding her way into his society’s home tunnels. She had offered her silence, which he had not believed she would keep, until she asked for payment of a penny so that she would become his lawyer, forbidden from telling his secrets to others.

“Ye are still bound by that secrecy, correct? Ye called it ‘paid in full’ for your services.” He seemed proud to have recalled nearly word for word what she had said.

“Yes, basically.” She smiled. “Lawyer-client confidentiality is a requirement of my profession.” She thought of how he had framed his comment, and asked, “Are you in need of a lawyer Uptop?”

“Aye. So I came to ye.” His eyes narrowed. “It’s what ye promised.”

She nodded, bemused. “It’s true. I made the promise to assure you of my silence, which I have kept.”

“Considering how your man keeps searching, I’m certain ye never told him where he might have good results. I appreciate ye keeping your word. And now...I need ye to keep your promise to be my lawyer. Paid in full.”

She sat back and considered what he seemed to be asking her. “While I am willing to help you in any way I can, I can’t be a private party’s attorney right now, as I am employed by the city in the District Attorney’s Office. Legally, I am bound only to represent the city in cases before the court. But I know many fine lawyers, and...”

He shook his head. “Nay. Ye promised ye would help me, and help me ye must.”

“I will, as much as I am able to,” she assured him. “Tell me why you need a lawyer and I will do my best to advise you - informally.”

He tilted his head, seemingly assuaged...for the moment, at least. “One of our number...a youngster, wet behind the ears and full of himself...has gotten entangled in something that put him in your city’s jail.”

“Does he need representation?”

“He needs help getting out. I’ll see to it he disappears back to the tunnels once he’s freed.” The Chandler shook his head. “But I fear it’s serious.”

Lifting a notebook and pen from her coffee table, she said, “Tell me his name and where he’s being held. I’ll find out what I can.”

“The Miner. Well...he uses another name when he comes to the city, though he has no identification from your world. He chose Robert Miner.”

“All right.” She noted his name. “And which precinct is holding him?”

He shrugged. “He didn’t say. Here is his note.” He reached into the pocket of his homespun vest and pulled out a piece of paper that looked like it had once been rolled, maybe to place in a bottle.

She spread it flat and read it aloud.

Cannot return. Incarcerated in the city. Forget me.

Miner

“Well, that doesn’t tell us much.” She looked up at him. “When I go into the office in the morning, I’ll have someone check for his name in our computer system.” At his frown, she added, “It’s a citywide listing. If he gave this name when arrested,

we will be able to find out not only where he's being held, but for what charges. Once we know that, I can advise you on how to proceed. It may be as simple as providing bail for him, if it's not a serious charge."

"We have no presence in this world of yours." He held his hands out, palms up. "No funds. We know no one...except ye."

She took her responsibility to this man seriously, even though he barely understood what he was asking of her. Seeking to ease his concern, she said, "Don't worry too much until we know more, all right? As I said, it may be easily resolved. If it's not, we'll deal with that once we know what he's up against."

The Chandler rose. "I thank ye." Suddenly his eyes brimmed with tears. "I have worried on this mightily since I received his note."

She stood up and guided him to her door. "I can imagine how upsetting this is. But summon patience, if you can. I'll know more tomorrow. Where should I send word to you?"

"If it's all right, I will return on the morrow. Late, like tonight."

"That's fine. I'll see you then."

With only the slightest of hesitations, he held out his hand to shake hers, then put on his hat and left.

After he'd gone, Catherine had two immediate thoughts. First, she wondered how the young man had sent the note if he was supposedly in jail. Second, she had to ensure that Vincent and the Chandler did not cross paths at her apartment.

It was a minor miracle that Vincent hadn't visited tonight. It was mid-week, so she wasn't expecting him, but it wasn't unheard of for him to surprise her, especially if something noteworthy had happened Below or there was an invitation to deliver.

Vincent opened Catherine's message with anticipation, which turned into disappointment as he read it.

Dearest Vincent,

I ask that you not come Above to visit me until I send word. For the next few days, I will be working on a project I cannot discuss, and will be holding meetings at home in the evenings.

I'm sorry I can't tell you more.

All my love,

Your Catherine

Catherine's suspicions about the young man were confirmed the next day, when Edie informed her that no one named Robert, or Bob, or Bobby Miner, or anybody with the last name of Miner or even Minor, was in the system. There had been no arrest, no incarceration...nothing at all was in the police database. Edie had extended her search back two months, and then reached out to neighboring jurisdictions.

"Who is this guy, Cath?" Edie was intrigued by Catherine's odd request, and the lack of information that had resulted. She was unused to failure.

"I'm not quite sure, but an...old friend got a note telling him the young man was in jail. He's not very savvy about our justice system, so he asked me to check on it."

"He from another country?"

Catherine smiled. "Something like that. Anyway, I appreciate you doing the search for me."

"Sure thing! Of course, lunch is on you today!"

The Chandler was not happy with Catherine's news. "Why would he lie? Mayhap your filing system is incomplete?"

She shook her head. “Everyone arrested is included, no exceptions. And my researcher is the best. She found nothing, even going back several months, and extending to all the boroughs. She spelled the name in different ways, used diminutives of ‘Robert’, and still found nothing. So take this as good news. He’s not in any serious legal trouble in the city, as his note suggests.” Seeing the confusion on the Chandler’s face, she softened her voice as she patted his arm. “He may have wanted you to think he couldn’t come home, but that’s a different issue.”

“Why would he do such?” He ran his wax-scarred hands through his long hair in frustration.

“Is there...perhaps...another person involved?” She was careful about broaching the topic, but it seemed likely that Robert Miner had been looking for the easiest way to break from his community. “He might not have believed you would accept an outsider as his...companion. It’s hard to argue for him to return home alone if you are made to believe he’s caught up in the legal system.”

A cloud seemed to pass over his face. “Months ago now...yes. He mentioned something about having met a girl. We told him there was no bringing a stranger into our midst, the risk was too great. He agreed...reluctantly, but he said he understood.”

Catherine nodded, then switched from an attorney’s mindset to an investigator’s. “Tell me what you recall about her. Did he mention her name? Where they met? Anything you can tell me would be helpful.”

The Chandler’s face condensed into a frown. “It was a great shock when he told me of her. The Miners who know him best may remember his speaking of her, but to me he said little other than this girl was handsome and kind to him.”

“It might be helpful if I returned with you so I could interview the people he worked with...the Miners. And perhaps his parents and friends? The more information I can gather, the better.” She knew this was likely a suggestion he would refuse, so was astonished when, after considering her offer for a minute, he nodded, albeit reluctantly.

“I will receive The Punishment, but it is necessary, I can see that.” His face was grim, as if anticipating much trouble.

“Can I spare you that? What of something less drastic? Perhaps...” She handed him her notebook and pen. “If you conducted the questioning on your own behalf,

would that invoke The Punishment? And perhaps the man I assisted...Weaver...might be willing to help you, since he knows me?"

Relief spread across his face. "Aye, that would do!" He refused the notebook and pen but said, "I'll take your questions and ask them."

"All right. I'll just sit here and compose them. You can take one sheet of paper with my questions on them with you?"

"Yes, that I can do. I will memorize the questions on my way back home, and commit the responses to memory, as well."

A half an hour later, he left with Catherine's list of questions about the mysterious woman who had caused Robert Miner to leave his own world behind.

"Might I come in, Miss Catherine?" A knock had been followed immediately by the Chandler's query. Catherine rose from her dining table and its scattered papers and opened the door.

"Please, come in." She held her hand out for his hat, and after a slight hesitation, he gave it to her. She then waved him to the seat he had taken before, where a glass of water and a bowl of soup were waiting, the soup covered by a dish.

"I just made corn chowder for dinner" – a slight exaggeration, as she had only heated up the restaurant-made soup she'd purchased a few hours before – "and thought you might like something warm on this cool evening."

"Chowder?" he asked with interest. "I am partial to chowder."

"Please, enjoy it. I'll just get some tea and return soon."

By the time she brought in a tray with a steeping pot of tea and two mugs, the corn chowder was only a memory, only a few bits of potato lurking at the bottom of the otherwise empty bowl.

"I am much beholden." He nodded as he accepted a mug of tea.

“Have you information for me?” She was ready with her notepad, and within a few minutes had jotted down the little the Chandler had collected from those in his community who had anything to impart.

She frowned. “There’s not much to go on,” she admitted, “but...I may know someone who can help.”

“Is this someone bound to your confidentiality agreement?” Suspicion clouded his eyes.

“He is very discreet. And I will be careful to reveal only what is necessary,” she assured the man.

The Chandler rose and took his hat from the arm of the couch. At her door, he paused and turned to her. “I know my demand about what ye owe to me was beyond what ye meant to offer. I appreciate your help. Ye are a kind woman.”

She smiled. “I’m happy to assist a tunnel dweller, no matter his community. You all inhabit the same world Below, after all.”

Elliot Burch was surprised but pleased to see Catherine Chandler on his visitors’ log.

“Cathy!” he beamed as he greeted her. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“It’s good to see you, Elliot.” She didn’t take the seat he offered her. “I’ll only stay a minute. I’ve come for a referral.”

He leaned against the front of his desk, a confused look on his face. “Looking for a new job?”

“No.” She chuckled. “Just looking for a good investigator.”

“Ah, then you want mine. He’s the best.” He turned to his Rolodex and pulled out a business card, then turned back to her. “Here. I have his number memorized.”

She looked down at the card. “Cleon Manning.”

“Tell him I sent you to him, and he’s to put everything else on hold to work on what you need.” Elliot waved a hand when she began to object. “Look, you wouldn’t have come asking if it was something insignificant.”

Acknowledging the importance of her mission, she nodded. “I appreciate this.”

“I expect an expensive Christmas gift from you this year,” he said, smiling, as he ushered her out of his office.

“There’s not much here to go on,” Cleon said to Catherine when they met that evening.

She mused on her apartment becoming Grand Central Station this week. She had agreed to meeting on her own turf since Mr. Manning indicated it was close to his office. She doubted that but...she had to admit, it was convenient.

“It’s all I have. His family is...extremely traditional, and not at all sophisticated. They came to me with the only information they had. If I were to guess, this young man seems to want to break contact with a minimum of pain, but it isn’t working.”

“Are they Amish?” He was only half-serious, but that half was more than curious.

“Something like that. They really don’t deal well with modern city life. So I’m their interface. I hope that’s OK?”

“Oh, sure, sure. Mr. Burch said to put my best guys on this, so...”

She blanched. “I’m sorry, I thought... I’m paying for this investigation out of my own pocket, so how many men...”

He laughed. “No, you’re not. On that, Mr. Burch was quite clear. So you just let me do what I’m best at, OK? We’ll find this Robert Miner and his young lady soon enough.” He rose. “I’ll let myself out. I’ve got your number and will keep you updated.”

Once he left, she locked her door and sighed. She missed Vincent. But there was no way she could go Below or ask him to visit with all the activity centered within her apartment in the evenings.

As if he had been monitoring her front door, the Chandler knocked and announced himself soon after the investigator's exit.

She filled him in on the little she had to tell him, and then, without any ceremony, he thanked her and left.

The next morning, Catherine got a phone call at work. "It's Manning. Can you get away for lunch?"

She looked at the office clock. "I can, yes." She wrote herself a note as she listened, then nodded and said, "I'll meet you there."

Catherine emerged from her office building to find Cleon waiting by Elliot's limo. He motioned her over. "We might as well both use the boss's car instead of taking a couple of cabs."

She didn't argue. It was obvious Elliot was accommodating her in every way he could. She assuaged her guilt by admitting to herself that he wouldn't miss the money involved, and he got a lot of pleasure out of helping her.

"You're sure you've found him?" She was frankly shocked it had taken Cleon so little time, considering the scant information she had given him.

He nodded. "We got lucky. Robert Miner and Sissy...well, Susan Kovalcheck, got a marriage certificate this morning. He must have used a fake ID, but then the marriage bureau doesn't scan those too closely."

"They're married?" Her heart sank.

"Not quite yet. They apparently talked about getting married in a little church in Brooklyn this afternoon. The clerk overheard their discussion. We can probably catch them before the ceremony."

She wished she had time to alert the Chandler to this news, but there was no help for it. She alone would have to represent the world Robert Miner was leaving behind.

In less time than she would have believed, the limo came to a stop in a parking space in front of the church. There was activity near the doorway as people filed in, so she easily slipped inside.

Near the altar in the little church stood a young bearded man who looked quite out of place in a new, ill-fitting suit and work boots, while the men milling around him were more stylishly dressed. Through the doorway at the side of the altar, Catherine could see a lovely young woman in a knee-length white dress standing with a matronly type who wasn't smiling, although the young woman didn't seem to notice.

Taking a chance, she sidled up to the bearded man and whispered, "Are you the Miner?"

Hearing himself addressed in that way caused him to turn panic-stricken eyes toward her, but they quickly turned quizzical. "Who be ye?" he muttered.

"A friend of the Chandler and the Weaver," she murmured in turn. "Might I speak with you?"

He threw a frightened look toward the back of the church but when he saw no one from his erstwhile home there, he relaxed a bit and nodded.

Alone at the far edge of the front row of pews, she said, "Your family in...you know...asked me to find you. They were so worried that you were in jail."

He blushed. "I had to think of something to prevent them from expecting me back. I didn't mean to cause such worry that they would seek out..."

"Someone like me?" She smiled after finishing his thought. "Well, it's a long story, but I met the Weaver and the Chandler a while back under very unusual circumstances, and they trusted me to look for you." When she could see him begin to protest, she hurriedly added, "I don't mean to try to convince you to return home. I just wanted to find you, so I could assure them you are safe...and happy."

His eyes softened, and he looked toward the girl in white. "I am. Sissy is wonderful. I knew from the first moment I saw her that she was my other half." He shook his head, looking at the ground. "I tried to tell them. But they wouldn't

listen.” He turned pleading eyes to hers. “Will you explain it to them? I cannot go back without her, and they cannot accept her. There was no other choice for me.”

“Bobby?” The young woman, Sissy, had called out to him, obviously worried that he was speaking to a stranger. Catherine could see the concern on her face.

“Everything is fine,” Catherine replied to her. She turned back to the young man. “I will explain to them that you are staying in the city. But please, don’t abandon them completely? They miss you. And if it’s all right, could I have contact information for you? I could be a conduit of news until you feel comfortable seeing them again, if you’d like.”

He nodded, relief on his face. He gave her a telephone number. “That’s Sissy’s parents’ number.”

“Thank you.” She wrote it down, then took a card from her purse. “Here’s my office number, and my home number is on the back.” When she saw his eyebrows rise while reading her information, she added, “This is a completely private matter. My office isn’t involved, I promise.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Really. And...congratulations.”

Cleon got her back to her office quite a bit after her lunch hour was over, but Joe was occupied and didn’t notice, so she quietly got back to work, trying to make up for the time away from her cases. At 6:00, she grabbed her coat and slipped out, knowing the Chandler would be coming by, and hoping to give him her report with time enough left to go Below to see Vincent.

The Chandler was awaiting her, sitting patiently in the hallway chair by her front door. She wondered if any neighbors had seen the strangely dressed man who looked like a Mayflower reenactor, but then...it was fairly close to Halloween, so perhaps that could be her explanation.

“I had a strong feeling ye would find the Miner today. Am I wrong?” he asked as she unlocked her door.

She ushered him in, saying, “I did see him, yes.”

As soon as she had closed the door behind them, he turned to her, his face reflecting his anxiety. “Is he well?”

“He is well...and happy. He also...is married.”

The Chandler dropped the hat he had been holding. “He has...married?” he said in a harsh whisper.

“Come. Sit,” she urged him, picking up his hat and tossing it on the couch. When he had complied, she sat on the coffee table in front of him, holding one of his hands. It was forward of her, she knew, but she felt he needed physical contact for her report.

“My investigator found that he had applied for a marriage license. I got to the church just before the ceremony. He is obviously deeply in love, and felt he had no choice but to remain in the city with the girl he cares so much for. But he asked me to tell you that he will keep in touch with you through me until a time when he feels he can visit with his family in the tunnels.”

The man looked stunned, and Catherine wasn’t sure how much of the information he had absorbed.

“Married...to a city woman.”

“Yes, a lovely girl named Sissy.” She reached into her pocket and handed him a Polaroid given to her at her request by one of Sissy’s aunts. The look in Robert Miner’s eyes as he gazed at his Sissy left no doubt of his deep affection for her, and that look was reflected on Sissy’s face.

Catherine watched the Chandler’s face go from shocked to resigned to...eventually...sadly smiling.

“May I borrow this? It is not strictly allowed, but...”

“Of course. I brought it for you. For your family.”

He nodded, still staring at the image of the happy couple. Finally, he said, “He had...no choice. I see that now.”

“He had to follow his heart,” she murmured, thinking not only of the Miner, but of one special man waiting patiently for her Below.

The Chandler looked up at her. “Thank ye. I am much relieved, even as I am saddened to have lost him.”

“I suspect you haven’t lost him,” she said. “He...and you...just need some time.”

He looked down at the photo again. “He is my son.”

“I assumed he was. Your love for him was obvious from the start.”

“Does...does your man’s father make things difficult for him, as I have done with mine?”

She nearly laughed out loud. But his people knew so much about Vincent’s community, it shouldn’t have surprised her. “Let me put it this way: I wish he would become as understanding as you.”

That drew a smile from the man before her. “Perhaps this is reason enough to break our silence and meet with the Father’s commune.”

They both chuckled at the thought, knowing it was highly unlikely.

“I shall not bother ye further,” he said, rising.

“If you ever want to send word to him, I have his contact number. I believe he wants to maintain a line of communication. Anytime, just let me know. I’ll pass along a message, or a letter, or try to arrange a meeting.”

“Thank ye.” He picked up his hat. “Ye are a wise and caring woman, Miss Catherine. I am glad we have the same name.”

“I am always happy to help another chandler,” she replied, smiling.

“Catherine!”

He met her as she descended the ladder into the world Below...his world, the one apart from hers.

She turned and melted into his waiting arms.

“I’ve missed you.”

“I love you,” she responded, cutting to the heart of things. “Always and forever, Vincent.”

There was the briefest of hesitations, and then... “Always and forever...I love you, Catherine.” His husky voice was filled with emotion, and his arms enfolded her, pressing her to his heart.

“The man you saw...”

As she had suspected, Vincent had been keeping a close eye on her since he’d received her mysterious note.

“I can’t speak of it. I made a promise.” She hated to put him off, but she had to.

“He is one of...the others. From the place we stumbled upon and then lost.” It was a statement, not a question.

She had suspected that Vincent’s curiosity and need to protect her would lead to that conclusion. But she wouldn’t confirm his discernment. She wouldn’t break her promise...not even for him.

“I couldn’t say.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” She didn’t know if she could be so incurious, if the shoe was on the other foot.

“Someday...perhaps...”

“Someday, I hope that we might move beyond speaking of ‘someday,’ Vincent,” she said, changing the subject to one of far more concern to her.

He nodded as he held her close.

“Someday is getting very close now. Soon, my love. Soon.”

“Promise me?”

He leaned away from her, gazing into her eyes as he swore words she hoped very much to hear in another context very soon.

“I do.”



DATE IN THE PARK by Paula

From *I Love You* by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

MY FIRST IN-PERSON BEAUTY AND THE BEAST CONVENTION

(Dallas, Texas 2012)

By Tweetie Lynn

Today is April 26, 2025, a few days before the May 1, 2025, deadline to submit something to the 2025 “A Love Song That Whispers My Name” conzine. At first, I wasn’t thinking that I would have time to write or offer a submission, as my life has been a bit upside-down dealing with financial and health issues. However, I am an optimist with great faith that things will get better eventually.

As I started to reflect, I realized I could at least offer an essay of my first time attending an in-person Beauty and the Beast convention. I always wanted to go to a BATB convention, but I couldn’t afford it. However, I always kept the dream alive in my heart. As the years passed by, I would enjoy people’s reflections of their con attendance, either in the BATB Yahoo Groups (back in the day) or in the current BATB Google Groups. I also enjoyed going to Batbland.com to read con reports or see con photos. It was always such a joy!

After many, many years, the magical year of 2012 arrived. At first glance, my circumstances dictated that there was no way I could go, as my husband had just gotten out of the nursing home/rehab center after staying in there for a full year and a half, leaving me alone to take care of my two kids, bills, life, etc. Financially it would have been hard to attend the con. But things fell into place, as well as strategies. I remember JoAnn Baca saying that people would save their pennies and do whatever they could to go attend a BATB convention. Whenever someone would say in the BATB email groups, “I wish I could” or “I can’t afford it,” JoAnn would always give optimistic hope by saying people did this or did that in order to attend...showing us there was always hope if we really wanted to go...whether it was driving to a con instead of flying, saving up pennies, even if it took years, etc.

Well, 2012 was the blessed year it all came together for me to attend my first Beauty and the Beast convention, “Chamber Music and Memories, The Power of Vincent’s Love“ in Dallas, Texas. Some of the pieces that made it all come together were that my husband, after me being concerned about leaving him alone (he was just a few months back home) after being in a nursing home/rehab center

for 1 ½ years, said that he would be ok with himself and my younger son (who was still in middle school). My husband, who was now considered disabled, felt strong enough to watch over my son (and my son, vice versa, watching over his dad), saying that he would be ok with just the two of them for the days I would be away. I had mentioned to him that I believe attending the BATB convention would be doable because 1) I found an affordable Amtrak train two-way ticket (it would be a 24-hour train ride in coach seats, which is long, but I was willing to “bear” it to attend my first convention), 2) I had a friend in the area of Dallas, Texas who had a brother who worked at a hotel where he could give me a free room “on the house” for two days before the convention (I’m still amazed that he could offer that), 3) I had saved enough for the con registration fee and for three days at the con hotel, and 4) I could not afford any con “add-ons” - however, my friend in Texas said I could stay at her home a few days after the convention, and she could show me around.

Things were definitely falling into place! I decided to take a leap of faith and experience many of my firsts...my first Amtrak train ride, my first time visiting Dallas, Texas, my first and only time leaving my husband and son by themselves (my high-school-age daughter was only home at night to sleep as she was a very busy Senior in high school who worked many hours, and competitively danced), so it was pretty much the boys looking out for each other and, of course, it was my first time attending an in-person BATB convention.

It was also my first time sitting in an Amtrak train seat, where literally strangers would hop on and off the train and somehow the strangest ones would sit in the empty seat next to me. (This is where I was wishing I had a friend or a family member accompanying me, but I kept remembering Vincent saying to Catherine, “You have the strength, you do...” so I kept soldiering on, knowing that after 24 hours I would arrive at my destination in Texas, greeted by friends and Tunnel Family, who I would soon be meeting in person for the first time.)

Finally, in the morning, 24 hours after I had boarded the Amtrak train, I arrived in Dallas, Texas! My friend’s brother picked me up, took me to the hotel that he worked at, and I happily fell asleep for a long nap on the comfy bed (I didn’t get much sleep on the train ride). After feeling refreshed and ready, my friend’s brother took me out for a meal, and I got to experience for the first time how “big”

everything is in Texas, from the huge meal portions to the very big glasses of sweet tea. I then got to roam around some shops in the area. For pretty much that night and the next day, I took it easy and just chilled. I made sure I got up in time to enjoy the free breakfast at the hotel. ☺ Of course, I checked at home. The boys and family were doing all right and were happy I arrived safely in Texas.

Then the time arrived to go to the Dallas Marriott Suites Market Center Hotel for the 2012 Beauty and the Beast convention, “Chamber Music and Memories, The Power of Vincent’s Love”. I was nervous and excited at the same time. I can be pretty shy at first, so I definitely was nervous. I remember arriving at the hotel and saw a bunch of people with Beauty and the Beast t-shirts sitting in a group in chairs, either in the foyer of the hotel or in front of the convention rooms. (I’m trying to unfuzz my sometimes fuzzy memory. LOL!) I remember there was an empty chair a few feet away from the group, so I sat down, wondering what I should do. I can’t remember exactly, either I approached or someone from the BATB con approached me, and the next thing you know I was with family, my Tunnel family. I received warm hugs and enjoyed meeting many people that I only had met online, or that I had read about online (for I was what they would call a “lurker” at first, on the BATB email group...someone who had quietly observed from afar, but would just happily read other people’s discussions. LOL!). I will always be grateful to JoAnn Baca, because it was she who always encouraged us “lurkers,” and many years ago, I decided to dip my toe in the email group. Now, here I was at my first in-person BATB convention, meeting these people in real life. ☺

The BATB convention itself is, as one Tunnel Family member Theresa calls it, “A Haze of Happiness”! I loved every second of it. I loved... receiving my welcome tote filled with Beauty and the Beast-themed goodies, my BATB con badge with Con Virgin on it, meeting other Con Virgins such as Skippy from Australia (we were like two peas in a pod, staying by each other, enjoying the festivities), playing the BATB-themed games, attending marvelous panels, seeing Laura G. dressed up as a Winterfest candle standing on stage next to a Wanted poster of Vincent in a black cowboy hat (Reward \$1000), shopping the BATB tables full of art and goodies, taking pictures with “Bubba Vincent” and “Lisa Vincent” in my Texas cowboy hat, enjoying the BATB auctions, taking photos with the original costumes

from the show, clapping during the wonderful Tunnel Talent Show, enjoying the Con Virgin Welcome activity, delighting in the special surprise that only in-person convention goers get to partake in, attending the beautiful and wonderful Banquet evening, lighting our gorgeous Tunnel candles together, and being welcomed into the Tunnel Family Circle, where we were now no longer considered Con Virgins... Whew!! “A Haze of Happiness” indeed!

I had gone to the Batbland.com website to visit the Con History page to refresh my memory on the name of the 2012 convention hotel. I had almost forgotten that I had submitted my con photos to the 2012 Con History page, so if anyone is interested in seeing the wonderful time had at the BATB convention, you can share in the “Haze of Happiness” there. (I think y’all will enjoy seeing Vincent in his Texas cowboy hat!) ☺



THE MOMENT I KNEW I FOUND HOME

By Angela McQuiston

If I could only keep one memory from my first con in 2019, it would be the closing ceremony. For me, that is what changed my life.

As I stood in that circle looking around at my tunnel family, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I couldn't stop the tears even if I'd tried. The acceptance, the love, and the support - the feeling was something I could never describe. My tears flowed like a waterfall as I received hug after hug. I remember thinking, "FINALLY, I belong. After ALL these years, I FINALLY have friends."

It was at that moment that I KNEW that I was "home."

I didn't know it then, but some of my most treasured people were standing in that circle that day. These friends have lifted me up, have become my loudest cheerleaders, and they have inspired me to step out my comfort zone. If you told me 10, 8, or even 5 years ago that I would WILLINGLY get up and make a room full of people laugh, I would've called you crazy. They have encouraged me to do things I've never dreamt possible.

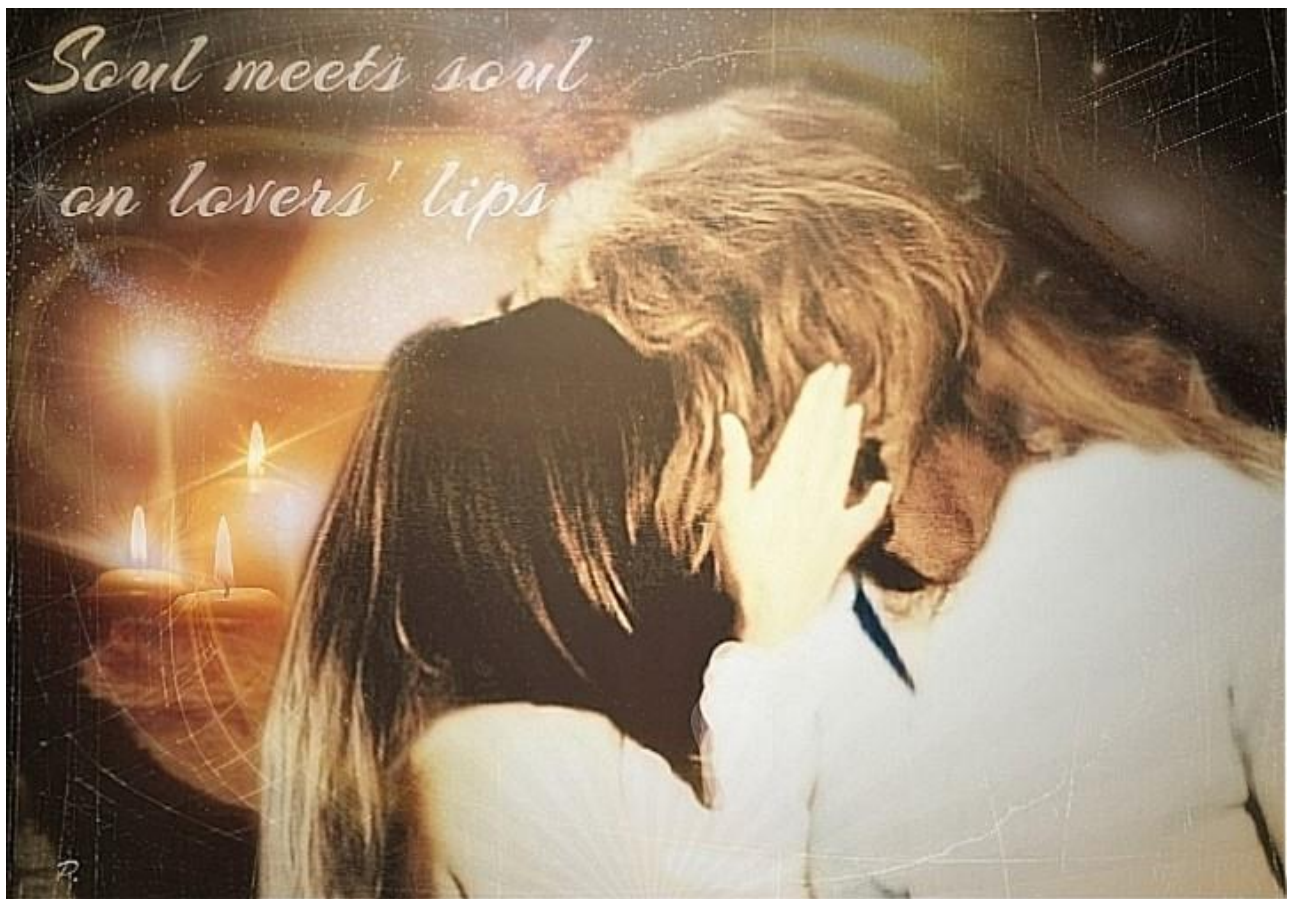
My mother put it best, when she was berating my brother for making fun of me and the cons. "Do you know your sister drove to Kansas with a friend? Did you know your sister flew to San Diego BY HERSELF for the first time? Do you know your sister drove home from Mackinac City by herself? Do you realize she drove to the east side of Ohio ALONE? This 'stupid convention,' as you call it, has changed her. It has given your sister confidence that I've NEVER seen in her before. I for one think it's wonderful, and I support her."

There's just something that happens to me when I get to the cons. I change. I can put away that shy, quiet, low self-esteem, unsure, don't-talk-to-anyone person that I am. At the con, I'm free to be open, talkative, funny, and, most importantly, I can be myself. It's the only week of the year I don't have to suppress the real me, because I know I'm loved and accepted. That makes all the difference in the world.

As Vincent would say, it has changed my life forever.

IN THE EVENING By Paula

From *In the Evening* by Percy Bysshe Shelley



A SECRET SHARED

By Peg Ray

Author's note: This story takes place at the end of Everything is Everything.

Catherine watched as Tony and his grandparents hugged. She was always emotionally moved by happy endings. She left the building and proceeded to the tunnel entrance where she and Tony had left Vincent.

He was patiently waiting for her at the bottom as she descended the ladder. He could read the contentment on her face as well as through the bond. So he had a small smile on his face as he watched her, and softly declared as a fact, "It went well."

Catherine had a bittersweet expression as she confirmed, "Tony has a family again."

"Good." Vincent was still smiling.

Catherine was contemplative as she responded, "I think he stole a piece of my heart." Her fondness for the young gypsy was showing.

Vincent appreciated the generosity of her spirit. "And you will always keep a part of his. You helped him find his way home again, Catherine. No one could ever give a child a better gift."

She wanted to ensure he understood the valuable role he had played in procuring a happy conclusion for Tony. She pointed out, "It came from both of us."

In response, he reached around with his left hand to rest it gently on the back of her neck and tenderly pulled her close to him for a hug. They settled together for a few moments, just soaking up the good they had accomplished together, before breaking apart to head home.

The couple walked quietly through the yellow highlights of the tunnel, holding hands and enjoying the gift of being together. The hem of his cloak swayed with

each step he took, sometimes feathering itself against the outside of her left calf. To Catherine, each contact felt like a whispered caress enhancing the closeness.

She was thinking about all that had transpired that evening and suddenly wanted to know about the dogs, but was unsure if asking Vincent about the incident would make him uncomfortable so she should leave it alone. Her attorney's mind was sometimes prone to over-analyzing, and she was unconsciously chewing at her bottom lip as they walked.

Vincent suddenly stopped walking and turned to face her. His voice was low and his expression quizzical as he asked, "What has you so pensive, Catherine? Does something about the resolution bother you?"

"No." She hesitated, then spoke softly. "It's nothing like that. I have a question I want to ask you, but I don't want you to take it the wrong way. I don't want to make you uncomfortable." She looked at the ground, not wanting to make eye contact with him.

"Catherine, you know you may ask me anything. I will answer you truthfully if I know the answer. Please look at me." He was uneasy about her hesitance and could think of nothing that had happened that should concern her so.

Catherine looked up and drew a deep breath then let it out slowly as she complied with his request. "Okay. It's about the dogs. What did you do to make them so submissive? I've never seen anything like that. It was incredible." She dropped his hand and took a step back to look up at him from a more comfortable angle.

The corners of Vincent's mouth twitched slightly as he looked off into the distance, gathering his thoughts to explain this phenomenon. He turned around slowly and stepped to the tunnel wall, then turned to face her, folding his arms over his chest and crossing his legs as he relaxed his back against the curved surface. He looked down for a minute before he again looked into her eyes and began to explain.

"I just got their attention and then visualized what I wanted them to do. And then they did it. They stopped their frenzied attack and laid down in front of me. It was as simple as that," he said. He cocked an eyebrow as if to ask if that answer was sufficient.

Catherine slowly shook her head in disbelief. “It can’t be as simple as that. There must be more to what you did to stop their attack.”

Vincent gave her his small smile again and shrugged. “I don’t know how else to explain it. It *is* what happened.”

Catherine’s continued skepticism over this brief explanation was apparent when she asked, “How did you know that it would work? Have you done this before? And *why* would that work? Obviously, those dogs were trained to be vicious, and they were doing an excellent job demonstrating that training.”

Vincent knew her logical mind couldn’t resist asking for more information. It was inherent in her makeup. So he patiently answered her questions. “I knew it would work because, *yes*, I have done it before. I assume it works because even apex predators have a hierarchy, and they instinctively know who will be stronger in a battle. Much of that assessment comes down to size, strength, and inherent weapons for killing. I am bigger and stronger than the dogs, and my empathic transmission of that must resonate with them. Every predator will walk away from a battle they cannot win if given the opportunity. Survival is a strong internal directive. I simply gave them the opportunity by asking them to submit.”

“When did you first discover this talent?” Catherine was fascinated by this new discovery of who Vincent was.

He shifted his weight to uncross his legs and recross them the other way. “I was around ten years old when a family with a German Shepherd named Max came to live in the tunnels for a brief period while the father needed time to get a new job to provide for his family. Father made an exception for the dog because the children were attached to it and the dog was their protector. One of the boys was about my age and wanted to be my friend, but the dog wouldn’t let me near him. The dog growled and showed his teeth whenever I came within his sight. He was fine with all the other children, so I was unhappy with the situation.

“I started trying to reach out and see if I could feel the dog’s emotions, and I got a faint read on why he saw me as a threat. At the age of ten, I barely outweighed the dog by a few pounds, so size was not the issue. He didn’t like my scent because he recognized it as the scent of a predator. So, he went into protection mode for his pack.”

Catherine stepped closer, leaning her shoulder against the tunnel wall to face him. She waited for him to continue.

“As a kid I tried to do what all the other kids did to get the dog to accept them. Treats, a soft voice, not making eye contact, and staying close to the other kids did nothing to alleviate the dog’s distrust of me.” Vincent gave a wry smile.

“Then how *did* you manage him?” Catherine was certain that he had prevailed.

“The teasing of the other children was starting to make me angry. It took Devin’s interference on my behalf to get them to let it go. I took some downtime to go to the Mirror Pool and brood about the problem.” He paused for a moment, as he could almost hear what she was thinking about his ongoing tendency to brood. Then he continued in a self-deprecating tone. “*Yes*, Catherine, even then I had a need to be alone to work out what I perceived to be a problem.”

They both gave a knowing smile as he paused again before continuing.

“I wanted so badly to be like everyone else and not be excluded for being so different. I started to imagine how it would feel and look if the dog would just back down and let me play with his children. I ran the scenario over and over in my head until I could readily call it up, throwing in the suggestion that I was stronger than the dog.” Vincent had a faraway look in his eyes, as though he was reliving the vision.

He continued. “So, it was with a sense of purpose that I sought to confront the dog. Devin tried to talk me out of it, but I tended to be stubborn when I was young.”

Catherine couldn’t resist the urge to tease him when she asked, “When you were *young*?”

He looked at her in mock admonishment and put his hand to his chest for a moment. “Yes, Catherine, when I was *young*. Anyway, when Devin and I rounded the corner where the family was housed, Max was guarding the tunnel entrance to the chambers. As usual, he greeted me with growling, showing every tooth in his head. I immediately made eye contact, asserting my dominance while visualizing him settling into a down position with his head resting on his paws. To my amazement and most certainly Devin’s, Max stopped growling and laid down quietly. I never had any further issues with the dog. I was accepted to play with the

children. Over the years, I have found this skill useful to deal with less than friendly dogs I have encountered when roving above at night.”

“You never cease to amaze me. And I mean that in a good way.” Catherine smiled and gazed at him with all the love in her heart apparent in her expression as well as flooding the bond.

Vincent pushed away from the wall and reached out for her hand to continue the walk home.

Catherine removed the gloves from her hands and put them in her trouser pockets before placing her hand in his. She craved skin-to-skin contact to enhance the present closeness with the love of her life.

Vincent smiled as they resumed walking.

Catherine couldn’t resist asking, “Does this talent work with other species?”

“That’s the same thing that Devin wanted to know. He had me try it with cats, racoons, squirrels, birds, rabbits and any other animals we encountered when we sneaked out at night into the park without Father’s knowledge. The answer is a resounding no. Devin was *extremely* disappointed.” Vincent softly chuckled with this pronouncement.

“Did you ever try it with people?” Catherine was curious.

He looked sheepish before he answered. “I tried it on Devin for fun and on Mitch Denton to stop his bullying when I first discovered my success with the dog. Those attempts were unsuccessful. In my child’s mind, I really wished that I had a superpower to be able to control my world and those in it. Alas, I had no such luck.”

“Vincent, all children and even some adults secretly wish to have a superpower to control the people and circumstances around them that cause them pain. In my childhood, I wished for such a gift when my mother died. But wishing did not make it come true.”

Catherine looked into his eyes with such compassion and love that it took his breath away. He sighed. “Only you and Devin know about the dogs. Even Father

has no idea about this additional *difference* about me. There was no reason to share it.”

They had reached the threshold where their goodbye was imminent. Vincent gently enfolded her in a hug with his arms encircling her waist. Catherine had her arms around his waist under the cloak and put her cheek on the soft fabric of his vest. He rested his face on the top of her head where the scent of her shampoo lingered. The love and contentment flowing through the bond between them was serene.

Vincent realized that he had let himself be totally vulnerable to her by sharing this secret and for once, he didn't care. He was floating in the calming tempo of the bond, secure in the knowledge of her unconditional acceptance. So he was caught off guard by her next actions.

Without premeditation, due to the intimacy they were sharing, Catherine lightly pulled her arms from around his waist, slid them up his chest to his neck, and then gently framed both sides of his face with her hands. She tenderly urged his face downward towards hers and placed a soft kiss on his lips, lingering there for a timeless measure.

She demanded nothing from him but gave him the sweet sensations he had only imagined in his dreams. The feel of her full lips on his was only possible because he had forgotten to shore up his willful defenses for her safety before they had reached the threshold. Yet, nothing bad was happening. The kiss was chaste, guileless, and full of promises.

She slowly released the kiss and looked deeply into his eyes when they finally opened. Surprise did not begin to describe the look she found there. The sky-blue topaz eyes blinked slowly as he tumbled into her gaze.

Catherine spoke the words she had said to him at their first parting. “Vincent, your secret is safe with me. I would never betray your trust.”

He responded as he did the first time, with tenderness in both his voice and his expression. “I know. I knew that from the beginning, when you trusted me.”

She lingered for a moment more in his arms, until the bond coalesced their feelings into what would be preserved as a special memory, and then she stepped away.

She gave him one last look with what he had cataloged as her self-satisfied smile before she stepped through the light that would take her back into her world.

Vincent sighed and started pulling himself together, packing his emotions back into their tightly confined corners that allowed him to function in his world. He touched his fingers to his mouth where the feel of her lips had been permanently tattooed into his senses, then shook his head to clear his mind as he started the trek back to his chamber.

He knew that his dreams tonight would be full of possibilities.

NEW ORLEANS CEMETERIES

New Orleans cemeteries and the rituals associated with them are a significant part of the city's culture and history, reflecting the city's unique climate, traditions, and architecture. Death and life are closely connected in New Orleans and their dead are revered and celebrated—forever from ashes to ashes and dust to dust.



THE BEGINNING OF NEW ORLEANS AND ITS CEMETERIES

Along the Mississippi River the annual flooding deposited sediment collected from farther up the river. These silt deposits accumulated on the riverbanks and formed natural levees or raised land embankments. New Orleans was settled in 1718 on a raised river bank beside the Mississippi River (near the general area where the French Quarter is now). That area still has some of the highest ground in New Orleans.

The first residents buried their dead outside the city limits in the raised riverbanks near the Mississippi River. When flood season came, the water table would rise beneath the coffins, pushing them out of the ground. They would break apart, and human remains would wash away—sometimes through the city streets, creating a bog full of the dead, and the land became more of a cesspool than a cemetery.

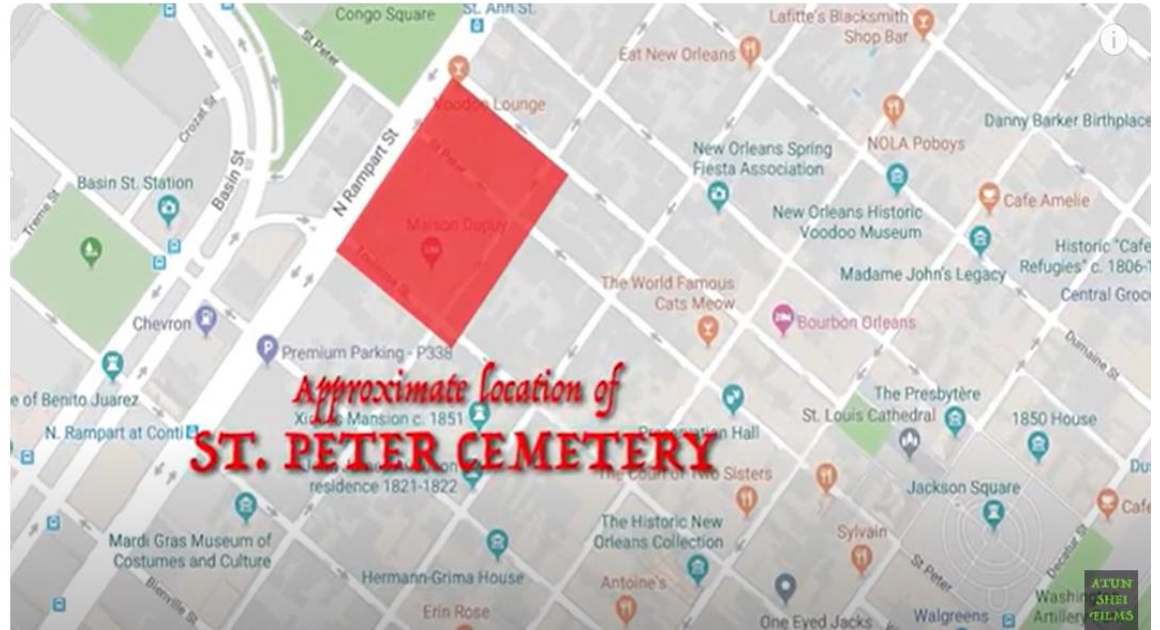
In 1724, St. Peter Street Cemetery was opened outside the main part of the city. St. Peter Cemetery was the first official cemetery of New Orleans. The St. Peter Street Cemetery served as the City of New Orleans' primary burial ground through most of the Colonial era, from 1724 (and possibly earlier) until 1789, when it was officially replaced by St. Louis Cemetery Number One. It appears to have occasionally been used into the 1790s, particularly when flooding made it difficult to access the new cemetery. The St. Peter Street burial ground was utilized by all segments of New Orleans society in the Colonial era.

The yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans was one of the deadliest outbreaks of the disease in American history. The epidemic caused widespread devastation in New Orleans. This epidemic, in addition to the proximity of the St. Peter Street Cemetery and the high-water table for in-ground burials, made a sanitation problem for disposing of the dead.

At that time, New Orleans was heavily influenced by France, Spain, and the Caribbean, where above-ground burials were more common and stylish. In 1789, city officials created the St. Louis Cemetery (later known as St. Louis Cemetery Number One), which had a suburban location at the time, being outside of the city's fortifications. In 1803, the city legally declared that all burials had to occur above ground. This was to stop bodies from floating away and spreading more disease.

St. Peter Cemetery, the original Catholic cemetery, was closed and quickly forgotten. In time, St. Peter Cemetery was paved over and part of what is now the French Quarter was built on top of it. It is believed between 8,000 and 12,000 people now lie underneath the section of the French Quarter between N. Rampart, St. Peter, St. Ann, and Dauphine Streets. Caskets are often discovered to this day. In 2011, fifteen coffins were discovered while building a pool for an apartment complex. In 2015, after the area was excavated by a forensic anthropologist and a bio-archaeologist at LSU, the remains were reinterred in St. Louis #1. In 2021, The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority discovered the unmarked historic cemetery while making revisions to the Canal Street/City Park terminal. The remains were again studied by the forensic anthropologists at LSU. The Katrina Memorial Mausoleum Foundation offered a vault in their mausoleum, where these remains were re-interred. The

re-interments were commemorated with a memorial mass at St. Augustine Catholic Church, followed by a procession and a “Celebration of Remembering and Healing.”



LOCATION OF ST. PETER CEMETERY

St. Louis Cemetery Number One now holds the distinction of being the oldest extant cemetery in the City of New Orleans. The cemetery was initially constructed as a temporary burial site but was soon after approved as permanent by Spanish Royal Decree on August 14, 1789. In 1975, St. Louis Cemetery Number One was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as having a national level of significance in the areas of art and architecture. It was later listed as part of the African American Heritage Trail by the State of Louisiana in 2008.

TYPES OF TOMBS

WALL VAULTS



Each cemetery is surrounded by very thick stone walls. Wall vaults are built into the surrounding walls of a cemetery. These walls house the bodies of the deceased who do not have a place to be properly laid to rest. This includes people who are waiting for their turn to be buried in their family's tomb.

Historically, these single-vault tombs could be purchased or rented. As space became more limited, it became a cheaper and more space-efficient way to prevent corpses from floating away. Often these types of tombs were used during the heaviest years of the various yellow fever epidemics. They were also used as rental tombs. If two family members died within the same traditional year-and-a-day period, the second to die would be placed inside a wall vault. The year-and-a-day period would occur, and the body would then be reinterred into the lower vault of the family tomb. Many of these wall vaults are reused by families and can sometimes hold up to ten people each inside of them.

Wall vaults were loosely based on Roman burial sites known as columbaria. While these were generally used to hold the actual cremated remains of Romans, rather than acting as full-on burial vaults as they do in New Orleans, they have a similar structure. Columbaria were built belowground in chambers carved out of tufa rock. Beautifully designed, they were meant to hold thousands of human remains, and lifted to the ceilings of these Roman burial chambers. The wall vaults of New Orleans lie aboveground and are not as ornate as their Roman counterparts but are nevertheless a unique feat of human ingenuity.

OVEN CRYPTS



Aboveground tombs are seen as New Orleanian inventions by many Americans. However, they were quite popular and stylish in many French, Spanish and

Caribbean cities prior to their use in the States and were introduced by the Spanish during their colonial rule. Most of the tombs seen around New Orleans are owned by individual families and can hold a vast amount of people. This is possible because they operate as slow-burning furnaces with inside temperatures in the summer staying around 350 degrees Fahrenheit. The tombs are not airtight, allowing for gas exchange and decomposition. The bodies are slowly cremated over the course of “a year and a day” to properly execute the cycle of “from ashes to ashes and dust to dust” of Judeo-Christian doctrine. After that time period, the crypt is opened and the remains of a body pushed off the “shelf” and into the "caveau" or "receiving vault" below with a long pole. The expression “I wouldn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole” originated in New Orleans. Through this process, many family members can be buried inside one family’s tomb. Multiple generations can be held in each individual tomb, sometimes totaling up to 60 people or more.

It is possible that someone else in the family would die before that year and a day was up. That’s where the wall vaults came into use. Those spaces were used as temporary placeholders for the bodies until at least a year and a day had passed since the previous burial in the family. After a year and a day had passed since the death, the next family member was removed from the wall vault and moved to the caveau of the family crypt.

SOCIETY TOMBS

Taking Care of People in Life & Death



The Italian Benevolent Society, located in St. Louis Cemetery Number One

Society tombs are large structures that can hold hundreds of members and their families. These tombs were an affordable option for people who did not have a private family tomb.

Some minority groups within a larger society did not have the means to afford their own tombs. Eventually, organizations would form benevolent societies. These groups provided medical services, community events, and a final resting place. The first was formed by groups of newly freed African peoples in 1783, and named The Perseverance and Mutual Aid Association. They were later commonly organized by groups of immigrants, religious orders, and the less affluent French and Spanish of the city. Once common around the western world, they are still active and alive in New Orleans. The Italian

Benevolent Society, located in St. Louis Cemetery Number One, is one of the most stunning and well known.

ALL SAINTS DAY IN NEW ORLEANS

In the early days of the Catholic Church of New Orleans, saints were traditionally honored on their own day, but with the growing number of saints, this soon became a problem. In the seventh century, Pope Boniface IV officially established All Saints' Day in order to honor all the saints at one time. History records an earlier sacred day before Boniface's time, but it wasn't widely observed. Originally, Christians observed All Saints' Day on May 13. But in the eighth century, Pope Gregory III moved it to November 1. The first All Saints' Day in New Orleans occurred in 1742 as the old St. Peter Cemetery was celebrating a rededication. Today, family members come to their tombs to clean them and leave gifts for their deceased ancestors. These gifts include flowers, photographs, food stuffs, and even alcohol. The holiday is practiced in most Catholic countries but is not seen in such brilliance anywhere around the United States as it is in New Orleans. Today, many local cemeteries hold blessings of the graves, as families gather to pay their respects. Many families light the graves with candles, the idea being that the candles light the way for priests who walk through the cemeteries blessing the tombs. This is a tradition that goes back over 150 years and has its roots in the Creole and Choctaw culture.



COPINGS

Copings accommodate in-ground burials and are bordered by one- to three-foot stone walls. The coping wall surrounds the gravesite and marks the boundaries of the plot. The body is interred within the confines of the plot and the top of the tomb is usually covered with gravel or grass.



MAUSOLEUMS

A mausoleum is a freestanding structure that generally holds vault of unrelated individuals not joined by a common cause in life. Vaults are purchased individually from the cemetery operator. Most of the mausoleums in New Orleans date to the twentieth century.



COLUMBARIUM NICHES

The columbarium niche, also known as a cremation niche, holds an urn or small container with the remains of an individual. Niches can be simple or elaborate and are found in indoor and outdoor settings. This image shows columbarium niches in St. Michael the Archangel Mausoleum at St. Louis Cemetery Number Three.



THE SECOND LINE

The second line has its origins in traditional West African circle or ring dances. This is a carry-over from African traditions that believed in celebrating the member's spirit leaving the body to return to the ancestors and God. This led to what became known as a "jazz funeral".

Second Lines, sometimes referred to as Jazz Funerals, are a cultural phenomenon found nowhere else in the United States. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs) played a crucial role in the Second Line's development. One of the many services provided to members of benevolent

societies was a funeral procession with a somber musical procession following behind. The name “Second Line” evolved from the bereaved family and band forming the "first line," and the rest of the mourners, dancing and celebrating, formed the "second line."

In 1875, the “Société d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle,” a black benevolent society, held a meeting and deemed the official music to be “brass band” music. After the initial dirge, it became common for bands to play happy, fun, upbeat music, and by 1883, these processions were being used for the society’s annual parade. Today, these parades are a common occurrence in everyday life in the Crescent City. They are used for both funeral processions and general celebrations across the city. Much of New Orleans’ music, dress, and parade culture originated from these early processions. Everyone is welcome to join in. This is the “joie de vivre” everyone talks about in New Orleans. This feeling of pure happiness that swells up in your chest.

***“I break tradition
Sometimes my tries are outside the lines -
We’ve been conditioned to not make mistakes
But I can’t live that way.”
~ Unwritten, Natasha Beddingfield***

**BREAKING TRADITION
By Rosemarie Salvatore**

Author’s Note: To truly understand where I started from, you need to know something about my family. My family is 100% Italian-American on both sides. I’ve always suspected that at least part of the reason my parents were attracted to each other was because their families were so similar in traditions and experiences. The tried and true is what they believed in. If they had their way, nothing would change. Ever. When I was little, this gave me a great sense of security – always knowing what to expect. But as I got older, and wanted to explore my creative side, it became more and more of a problem. I was not going to college and I was certainly not going to study art. I was going to get a sensible secretarial job after high school and live at home until I got married. There was no discussion about it. That was the life they had lived, and that was what was expected of me. I didn’t want that life, but I saw no way to break free. The two years after high school graduation, when most people are excitedly starting new adventures, were for me two of the worst years of my life. Finding a good job was difficult due to my mediocre typing skills and introverted nature. I felt very alone, tremendously confused, and miserable, not knowing what kind of future I was facing. But then...there was a whisper...

Beauty and the Beast has always whispered to me.

In the summer of 1987, I remember seeing network TV commercials for the shows that would premiere in the fall. I remember it because there had never before (or since) been such intriguing and mysterious advertising for a new TV show as there was for *Beauty & the Beast*. I remember wondering, why all the mystery? Everyone knows this story. I also tried to figure out how they could take a one-time fairytale and make it fit into a weekly series format. And even if they could do that, why would they want to??? I had to find out.

Seeing the first episode was easy enough. We already watched CBS on Friday nights. My mom was a fan of the prime-time soap operas *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*. On September 25, 1987, *Dallas* had its season premiere. It was a 2-hour episode, and *Beauty and the Beast* was given the hour after *Dallas* – the 10 PM timeslot – for its premiere on the East Coast. They must have had high hopes for the show, because that timeslot ensured that a lot more people would see it. *Beauty and the Beast* would benefit from *Dallas*’ huge audience.

There was a telephone call at 10 PM. My aunt often called us to discuss the things that happened on *Dallas*. I loved talking to her, but this time my mind was on the new show that was just beginning. I got back to the TV at about 10:10 or so. Catherine was just waking up in the Tunnels, with her face bandaged, and asking Vincent where she was.

I have never been a fan of horror movies and was not even a sci-fi fan at that time, so I remember being tense until they showed us Vincent’s face. My reaction was that it was not as bad as they were building it up to be. He looked different, sure, but not really scary. When the episode was over, my reaction was short and sweet. I remember turning to my mom and saying simply, “I liked it.”

By the next week, the CBS Friday night lineup had returned to normal. *Beauty and the Beast* was at 8 PM, *Dallas* at 9 PM, and *Falcon Crest* at 10 pm. I was looking forward to seeing the new show again. There was just one small problem.

My sister had just been caught doing something crazy. As if that wasn’t bad enough, this thing involved her new boyfriend. So, two sets of parents, and the couple in question, were talking/yelling about it in our living room. As it crept closer to 8 PM, I knew the chaos was not going to end anytime soon. We only had one full-sized TV in the living room. What was I going to do? I had to see this new show.

It’s surprising that I even remembered a show that I had only seen once before amidst all the family drama going on. But I did. And I did something I had never done before. I went into my parents’ bedroom and watched the show on the small TV they had in there. It was the only other TV in the house. Normally this was off limits. But in the months to come, it would be the place where I watched many a first run episode of the series. The quiet of the upstairs was not only welcome, but necessary for not missing anything that was being said.

I've often thought, in recent years, that I am SO glad that *Beauty and the Beast* was not created today. The way a whole season is released at once and then often binged over a short period of time - I couldn't have done that back then. Each episode of *Beauty & the Beast* seemed so stunning and original. Like nothing I had ever seen before – and yet also familiar somehow. I would think about each episode for days after it was over. It took a lot of time to process each one. If I'd had to watch several episodes for the first time, back to back, I think my head would have exploded!

It was an amazing feeling. I felt that I knew exactly what Catherine was feeling, having this “secret” relationship – with a TV show. Even though my mom watched a lot of episodes with me, she never seemed moved by the show like I was. I just didn't understand it. How could we be seeing the same thing? I knew that I was being changed in some fundamental way – I just didn't know what that was yet. This feeling went on for the whole run of the show. I had no idea there were fans, or conventions or anything.

Beauty & the Beast coincided with a time when I was becoming more spiritual. I had a job that I took the bus to. The bus let me off in the center of town on a corner where there was a church. I often got there too early to go in to work. However, taking a later bus would have gotten me there too late. So, I started going into the church to wait out the 10-15 minutes or so before I knew the office would be open.

The church was cool in the hot summer and warm in the winter. It was also dimly lit and quiet. I guess it was like a morning meditation ritual that developed - and I loved it. *Beauty and the Beast* would turn over in my mind, along with other things going on in my life, family issues, a homily that I had just heard that Sunday at mass, etc. I often reflected on the spiritual symbolism that I was seeing in the show, and how that symbolism related to my life and my faith. I truly believe that God was involved in this change that was happening in me. My family probably saw nothing different about me externally, but what was going on inside was huge. It was a wonderful, exciting time in my life.

Until it wasn't.

When the third season hit, I was completely devastated. It was so incredibly painful. Was I going mad? I had been sad before when favorite shows were cancelled, but never like this. I felt like there was an empty place where my heart had been, and a horrible dead weight in my stomach. I had no appetite and could think of little else. But I couldn't talk to anyone about it. No one else that I knew

even watched the show. My mom didn't like Season 3, but basically just shrugged it off. As if to say, "That's Hollywood for you." So, I was back to being miserable.

Then one day, *Beauty and the Beast* whispered my name again.

My dad usually brought the newspaper in when he left for work and put it on the kitchen table. Some days, I would look through it as I was eating breakfast and getting ready for work. It depended on how much time I had. That morning something told me to turn to the TV page.

And there it was.

A photo of Vincent and Catherine and an article about how the grassroots group Viewers for Quality Television was organizing to try and save *Beauty and the Beast* from cancellation. Oh, my God! I felt like a drowning woman who had just been thrown a life preserver. If this article had appeared on one of the days when I didn't look at the paper – what would have happened? Maybe a family member would have seen it and told me about it? Maybe not, I don't know.

There was hope! I went to work that day feeling lighter, and rushed home to write to the address provided in the article. I joined VQT and began following their instructions to write letters to the show's sponsors and network executives. In one newsletter, VQT printed the address of the International Beauty & the Beast Fan Club just as a courtesy to all the BatB fans that must have been asking for more information. The editor of that newsletter was Deb Hense, and she was my first contact in BatB fandom.

Soon, I had a subscription to the International Fan Club newsletter and several other newsletters that had advertised in it. That's when I realized that this wasn't like other fan clubs that I had belonged to as a kid. Usually, you got a newsletter in the mail but never actually met other fans in person.

TunnelCon I in Las Vegas had just happened and I read my first con report on it. It all seemed very surreal to me. These fans are actually meeting? *IN PERSON*? I didn't know television could be taken that seriously.

That was when *Beauty & the Beast* whispered to me a third time.

I had to go to a convention. But how? I had no travel experience except with my family. Our family vacations always involved staying fairly close to home. We

went to the Jersey shore most of the time, but on a few occasions ventured up to the New England states, or as far south as Virginia Beach. We always drove to these destinations, so I had never been on a plane. How could I possibly get to a convention? I tentatively started making plans, not really knowing what I was doing or how it would all turn out.

There was a failed attempt to attend *Celebration of Life*, the BatB cruise that was to leave from Florida. The next fan gathering was *South of Oz*, also in Florida. By this time, I had met some local NJ fans and one of them wanted to meet Ron Perlman very badly. We agreed to go to *South of Oz* together.

We left New Jersey early on Friday morning, and returned very late Sunday night. I was away from home only one full day, but it felt like much longer. I would need a lot more pages to recount the whole dizzying experience. Let's just say *South of Oz* was magical, overwhelming, and full of so many "firsts" for me.

I had thought that once I attended a convention, I would get it out of my system and not need to attend any more of them. But shortly after getting home from Florida, I received information in the mail on the next con, *TunnelCon II* in Las Vegas. The art on the flyer was *so beautiful*...and I knew I was hooked. At least I had a whole year to plan and work things out this time.

After attending many wonderful conventions, *Beauty & the Beast* would whisper to me yet again. I had an ever-increasing desire to give back. I so admired the con organizers who created such wonderful experiences for the attending fans. I wanted to do that. As usual, people around me told me I was crazy. They reminded me again and again that I had no experience doing anything even remotely resembling a convention. But really, by now, I was used to the drill. Hadn't I already done so many things that I had no experience doing? Wasn't I always living on a wing and a prayer? Besides, even if I agreed with them, to a point, *the whisper would not go away*. The only way to silence The Beauty and the Beast Whisper is to do the thing. And so, I gave it my best shot.

Beauty and the Beast has always whispered to me of finding your strength and challenging the status quo. Of living your best life and not being controlled by parental expectations...or anyone else's expectations.

My family was very limited in their thinking. I wanted a life without limits. I've tried to create the best life possible, often starting from scratch, knowing nothing about what I wanted, only knowing I had an overwhelming feeling. A feeling that

told me I must try, or have no life at all. Even so, most people have not understood my efforts.

In addition to the challenges I've mentioned, I recently discovered that I have a neurodivergent brain! I've had undiagnosed ADHD all this time. Well, *that* explains a lot. That's why I have always felt slightly out of step with everyone else. But it also makes me even more in awe of all that *Beauty and the Beast* has inspired me to accomplish so far.

Will *Beauty and the Beast* continue to whisper my name? I don't know...but I will keep listening.



WHAT CUDDLY BEAST

By Lindariel

Fleshing out one of my ideas from the 2025 April 12th CABB Altered Episodes Challenge: Take an episode title, change just one word, and write a short synopsis of the resulting episode.

What Cuddly Beast: Catherine finds a poor, bedraggled, sopping wet kitten abandoned in a box in an alley. She brings the kitty home for some TLC while trying to figure out the best way to find a good home for the little creature. However, when Vincent arrives on the balcony that night, the kitten immediately “adopts” Vincent as her new favorite person.

Just a quick reminder, in my BATB universe, Elliott Burch is NOT dead, and he has taken back his birth name – Stanislaw “Stan” Kaczmarek. He knows about the Tunnels and has become a Helper and friend. Oh, and he’s adopting Kipper.

It was absolutely POURING down rain, and Catherine was having no luck flagging down a cab in Friday rush hour traffic outside the DA’s office while juggling an umbrella, her briefcase, her purse, and a gym bag. Although it was well into May, clearly the April showers weren’t finished with New York City just yet, and it was unseasonably chilly out.

Huffing back her irritation, Catherine trudged further up the street to see if she might have better luck a few intersections away from the busy building. She warily hustled into an alleyway just in time to avoid being soaked by a city bus splashing through a large water-filled pothole and paused for a moment to catch her breath.

“Mew, mew”

Catherine turned to see if she could spot the source of the odd squeaking sound, but she couldn’t see anything moving. *No rats, please!*

“Mew, mew”

There it was again, sounding much less like a rat, and this time she thought she saw a tall, soaking wet cardboard box wiggle a bit beside the overflowing trash

dumpsters outside the back entrance of the local diner favored by many of her DA office colleagues. Gulping back a lungful of “fresh” air, Catherine carefully approached the box and peered over the top.

“MEW, MEW, MEW, MEW, MEW!”

“Oh, my stars, you poor thing!” Catherine cooed, as she reached inside the tall sippy box and gently lifted out an equally sopping wet, shivering, scrawny calico kitten. She quickly pulled a sweatshirt out of her gym bag and wrapped up the tiny mewling kitten in some much-needed warmth.

“Mew, mew ... mew ...”

“There, there, sweetheart,” Catherine crooned, rocking her charge softly from side to side. “It’s OK. You’re safe now.”

The kitten burrowed further into the soft lining of the sweatshirt, and Catherine could have sworn she heard a little sigh.

“What kind of monster abandons such a sweet little thing in the middle of a rainstorm?! Well, it looks like I’m not going to the gym today. Let’s get you home and warmed up and figure out what to do.”

The kitten had settled deeply into the sweatshirt with only a little pink nose sticking out, so Catherine carefully placed her precious wrapped-up cargo into the gym bag, leaving the top partially unzipped, and crossed her fingers that she’d luck into a cab soon. AND that her little passenger would stay silent for the long ride to the Upper West Side.

As it turned out, luck arrived in an unexpected form. Catherine had just made a third unsuccessful attempt to flag down a cab when one with the service light turned off pulled over anyway. The back door opened and a familiar voice called out, “Could I offer you a lift, Cathy?”

Catherine climbed eagerly inside the cab, carefully settling her gym bag, purse, and briefcase at her feet and declared, “Stan, you’re a lifesaver! I’ve been trying forever to get a taxi!”

Stan Kaczmarek's dimpled grin brightened his face as he stowed her wet umbrella with his own at his feet. "Always happy to be the knight in shining armor," he replied with a quick wink. "Are you heading to the gym or to your apartment?"

"Well, I WAS going to the gym, but my plans have unexpectedly changed, so I'm heading to my apartment instead," Catherine responded, placing a finger over her lips and pointing surreptitiously to the sleeping kitten in her gym bag.

Stan's eyebrows rose precipitously as he murmured, "Ah! Well ... life has a way of throwing us curveballs, doesn't it?" Then he called out to the cabbie, "Change of plans, my good sir. We're heading to the Upper West Side instead." And he rattled off Catherine's address.

As the cab pulled back into rush hour traffic, Stan fished out a small notebook and pen from his breast pocket and scribbled off a quick note. *I happen to know a good veterinarian who actually makes after-hours house calls.*

"I did say you were a lifesaver, didn't I?" Catherine whispered with a smile.

"I'll give him a call when I get home," Stan replied and jotted quickly. *Dr. Rudolph Kowalski, Rudy to his friends. I'll send a kitty supply delivery as well.*

Stan peeked a little closer at the gym bag and jotted a bit more. *A calico. That means it's probably a little girl.*

"How do you know?" Catherine asked.

"My Mom was a bit of an enthusiast," Stan replied, while scribbling, *Mom fed all the neighborhood strays. Genetically, calicos are almost always female, but Rudy can tell you more.*

He peeked at the kitten again. *You should name her Lucky. She certainly is lucky you found her.*

Catherine replied, "I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but whatever happens, I'll make sure she's safe."

Once they arrived at the apartment building, Freddie the doorman rushed up with a large golf umbrella and took charge of Catherine's briefcase and umbrella while she managed the gym bag and her purse.

“Thanks so much for the ride, Stan. Give my regards to Luz, and to Kipper, too, if you’ll be seeing him today,” Catherine called through the open door.

“Yep, Kipper’s coming over for dinner tonight, so we can go over next steps in the adoption process,” Stan answered. “Have a good evening!”

“It’s going to be interesting, to say the least,” Catherine replied and then turned to accompany Freddie into the building.

“Thanks so much for your help, Freddie,” Catherine said with a smile. “By the way, I’m expecting a consultant sometime later this evening, Dr. Rudolph Kowalski, as well as a delivery from Mr. Kaczmarek.”

“Good to know, Ms. Chandler,” Freddie replied, as he summoned the elevator for her and placed her briefcase and umbrella inside. “I’ll buzz you when your guest and the delivery arrive.”

Glad for a moment alone in the elevator, Catherine quickly checked on the tiny kitten. She was sound asleep and wiggled just a bit when her cozy nest was disturbed. Catherine smiled and closed up the sweatshirt. “Just checking on you, little Lucky,” she crooned. “I hope you’re gonna be OK after such a difficult, wet, cold day. I’d hate for you to get sick.”

She pulled out her keys and gathered up her various bags just in time for the elevator doors to open at her floor. Once inside the apartment, Catherine dropped everything on the chair just inside the front door, shrugged off her raincoat, and carried her precious cargo over by the fireplace, kindling a starter log for some extra warmth in the chilly apartment. She opened the bag completely and pondered her latest responsibility.

“Well, Lucky, I’m sure you’re exhausted, and I hate to wake you up, but I also don’t relish the idea of fleas in my apartment,” Catherine mused. “So, I think the first step is to fix up a little bed for you and give you a nice, warm bath.”

While the kitten snoozed, Catherine slipped into some comfortable clothes for her unexpected evening of kitten chores. Assembling a kitty bed was no problem – a dry cardboard box and some soft fluffy towels would be sufficient. After rummaging a bit through her bathroom closet, Catherine triumphantly unearthed a small bottle of baby shampoo left over from her last babysitting experience with

Lena's daughter and a small fine-toothed comb, and set up a wash basin of warm water inside her bathtub.

Little Lucky mewled and hissed her displeasure at being awakened and removed from her cozy, somewhat damp nest, which was immediately dumped into some soapy water in the bathroom sink for a good long soak. The kitten struggled weakly as Catherine lowered her slowly into the wash basin. But after a bit, the kitten gradually stopped hissing, relaxed, and allowed Catherine to give her a bath with the baby shampoo and to gently comb through her fur to remove any fleas. There were some, but thankfully not terribly many, which had Catherine declaring, "You certainly are a lucky girl, little Miss. This could have been a LOT worse."

After a thorough rinsing with warm water from the bathtub spigot, Catherine gathered Lucky into a large bath towel and took her out to the living room by the fireplace to begin the process of gently drying her fur, combing throughout to make sure all of the fleas were gone. Once Lucky was completely dry, Catherine briefly petted and admired the kitten's lovely mottled black, gray, orange, and white calico coat.

"You're a little beauty under all that dirt, aren't you?" Catherine cooed, then wrapped Lucky in another dry towel, and settled her into the makeshift kitty bed. Lucky mewled a bit, turned two tiny circles, then kneaded the soft towel before settling back into an exhausted sleep.

Catherine sighed. *I'm sure she's hungry, but I don't really have anything suitable for a kitten, and I don't want to make her sick.* She watched Lucky for a bit, but once she was certain the kitten was soundly asleep, she took a few moments to tidy up her bathroom and washed and inspected the sweatshirt in the bathroom sink before deciding a trip through the washing machine and dryer would be an even better idea. Then she unpacked the rest of her gym bag, turned it inside-out, and carefully searched it for fleas. Fortunately, the bag and its contents were clear of the little pests.

Around 8:30 pm, Freddie rang the intercom to announce that Dr. Rudy Kowalski had arrived, along with Catherine's expected delivery from Stan. Soon, she opened the door to a smiling, bespectacled gentleman with a short, neat, graying beard and moustache, balancing a doctor's bag on top of a rather large, sealed delivery box.

“Welcome, Dr. Kowalski, and thank you for the house call,” said Catherine, as she hurried to help him with the large box. “Goodness! Stan said he was sending a delivery, but I wasn’t expecting anything this large. Or this HEAVY!”

Dr. Kowalski laughed pleasantly, “Well, Ms. Chandler, a box of kitty litter isn’t exactly light! I expect that accounts for the weight. Stan explained your situation, so knowing him, he probably bought up everything he thought you might need, plus a few extras. Now, where is my little patient?”

Together they deposited the heavy box on Catherine’s coffee table, and she guided Dr. Kowalski over to the makeshift kitty bed by the fireplace. “Little Miss Lucky is right here, and sound asleep,” Catherine replied. “She’s had a rough day, and I’ve given her a bath to get rid of some pesky fleas, so she’s quite exhausted. She seems very thin to me, and I’m sure she’s going to wake up hungry. I hope you can advise me on what would be best to feed her. She’s just a tiny thing. Does she need kitten formula?”

Dr. Kowalski smiled as he gently lifted the wrapped-up kitten from her bed, eliciting a grumpy little *Mew!*

“Well, hello there, Miss Lucky,” he whispered. “I’m Rudy.”

“Mew! MEW! Hissssssss!”

“My goodness, such indignance!” Rudy laughed. “How rude of me to disturb your nap!” He settled on one of Catherine’s dinky couches with the kitten in his lap and opened his bag, removing a stethoscope and an otoscope. “Let’s take a good look and listen, and see if we can’t determine your age, young lady.”

The gentle veterinarian listened to Lucky’s heart, lungs, and belly, examined her eyes, ears, and teeth, checked her legs and body for injuries, and tested her reflexes. “Well, Miss Lucky, your heart, lungs, and tummy sound healthy, and your teeth tell me that you’re about 8 weeks old. Let’s see how much you weigh.”

He pulled a small sling scale out of his bag, and then clucked with concern after weighing the kitten. “You’ve had a rough time, haven’t you, Miss Lucky? But that’s all going to change right now.” He turned to Catherine, “She’s about a half pound underweight for her age, which is a bit of a worry, but nothing we can’t

overcome. She's old enough for wet kitten food, but I think we should start with a bottle of kitten formula so we don't upset her stomach. I expect she hasn't had much to eat for a few days."

He handed Catherine a small bottle with some dry formula inside. "Would you please fill this up to the line with some filtered water and then place it in a bowl of hot water for three minutes?"

When Catherine returned with the bottle of warm formula, Dr. Kowalski placed a wrapped-up Lucky in her arms and helped her entice the kitten into nursing from the bottle. Lucky caught on quickly and began greedily consuming the warm formula, her little ears pulsing with each pull.

While Catherine fed Lucky, Dr. Kowalski opened up the delivery box and began unpacking Stan's haul: a kitten-size litter box and scoop, a box of litter, a soft fleece cat bed and blanket, small ceramic food and water bowls, a cat grooming kit including a brush, flea comb, and nail scissors, an assortment of canned kitten food in various brands and flavors, powdered kitten formula and several bottles, a soft-sided cat carrier, and a tiny pink collar with a gold tag engraved with the name Lucky on one side and Catherine's phone number on the other side.

"Goodness," Catherine exclaimed, especially after examining the collar tag. "He's thought of everything, hasn't he?"

Rudy laughed. "What else would you expect from Stan? He never does anything half way. And for an abandoned kitten? He wouldn't be his mother's son if he didn't go above and beyond to help."

"How long have you known Stan, Dr. Kowalski?" Catherine asked.

"Rudy, please," he replied, and took a moment to pull a few more items out of his doctor's bag. "I've known Stan since he was a boy. We were neighbors in the Polish tenements down by the docks. Even though I'm a few years older than Stan, I was always small for my age, so we quickly became friends. I watched him help his Mom feed all the neighborhood stray cats and started doing what I could as well. Mrs. Kaczmarek was a wonderful lady. In a way, she inspired me to do well in school so I could get a scholarship for college and become a veterinarian. I know how hard things were with his Dad, especially after his Mom died, and I

know why he changed his name years ago. I'm glad he's found his way back to the old neighborhood and to see him putting all of his talent into doing good things for other people. It suits him. He's always had a big heart."

"I'm glad as well," Catherine said. "Thank you so much for your help today."

"Oh, it's my pleasure," Rudy replied. "And we're not quite done. Now that Miss Lucky has some good nourishment in her, it's time for the less pleasant part of my visit – her first distemper shot."

Lucky wasn't pleased at all about the shot, but after a few hisses, she settled back into nursing from the bottle of kitten formula pretty quickly.

"What about a rabies shot?" Catherine asked. "I found Lucky in a wet cardboard box in an alley, and I have no idea how she got there or what she's been exposed to."

"She's still too young for the rabies vaccine," Rudy replied. "But I didn't find any bite marks or other injuries on her, so I don't think we need to be worried about rabies right now. I'll leave you my business card and a schedule of appointments for her next shots and her deworming medicine."

They looked down at the little kitten, who had polished off her bottle of formula and was fast asleep in Catherine's lap.

"She'll probably wake up hungry again in another few hours," Rudy said with a smile and pointed to a small can of kitten food. "You can try some of this kitten food. It's chicken, which will be easiest on her stomach. If she's not interested, just prepare another bottle of the kitten formula Stan purchased. I suspect after a good nap, she'll tear into the wet food, though. She needs to put on some weight."

Catherine gently placed Lucky in her new soft fleece kitty bed by the fireplace, and retrieved her checkbook from her purse. "What do I owe you, Rudy, for this wonderful house call?"

"Not a thing right now," Rudy replied. "You have enough to worry about as a new Cat Mom. I'll add the house call to your first office visit in two weeks." He handed her his business card. "I'll look forward to seeing you and Miss Lucky again soon enough. You've done a wonderful thing here. I doubt Lucky would

have survived if you hadn't found her today." He reached out his hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Chandler."

"Cathy," she replied, shaking his hand and accompanying him to the door. "Have a wonderful evening, Rudy. Lucky and I will see you in two weeks."

After putting away all of the kitten supplies from Stan and setting up the litter pan over by her trash bin, Catherine fixed a quick sandwich for her rather late dinner and ate while flipping through her address book, looking for friends who might possibly be able to offer Lucky a good, permanent home. *Maybe Nancy Tucker? Her kids are old enough to handle a kitten gently, and I bet they'd love a sweet little kitten for a pet.* She looked over at the sleeping kitten, now stretched out comfortably on the blanket in her fleece kitty bed, no longer hungry and shivering, but warm and relaxed. *I wish I could keep you, Miss Lucky, but you need someone who can be with you during the day, and I'm away from home so much...*

A light thump out on the balcony heralded the arrival of a much hoped-for Friday evening guest. Catherine dropped her half-eaten sandwich on the plate and rushed over to open the French doors to the balcony and throw herself into Vincent's waiting arms.

"Oh, I hoped the rain wouldn't keep you away!" Catherine exulted. "I've missed you so much this week! It's been too long."

"I couldn't agree more, **my Catherine**," Vincent rasped, his voice descending into the darker tones of his second nature, and he captured her mouth in a kiss that was equal parts tender, and longing, and demanding.

How long that kiss might have continued, they would never know, because they were unceremoniously interrupted by a tiny thump and a very insistent, "*Mew! Mew! MEW!*"

"What on earth?" Vincent asked, and Catherine took his hand with a giggle, drawing him further into the apartment and closing the balcony doors.

"Let me introduce you to my unexpected guest," Catherine said as they rounded the dinky couches only to be confronted by a most indignant kitten. Lucky's fur was rumpled from her nap, and she crouched defensively in front of her kitty bed after having fallen out of it less than gracefully. She was absolutely adorable!

“This is Lucky. I found her in a soaking wet cardboard box in an alley on my way home today,” Catherine stated. “Stan gave me a ride home and arranged for a veterinarian friend to drop by this evening and make sure she was OK. She must be hungry again. I’ll go fix her some food.”

“*MEW! MEW! MEW!*” declared the little kitten, as she toddled unsteadily, but determinedly, over to Vincent and immediately began trying to climb up his trouser leg! “*MEW! MEW! MEW! MEW! MEW!*”

Vincent lifted the struggling kitten in his large, gentle hands and brought her up, up, up to look into his smiling face. “Well, hello, little one,” he murmured.

A tiny paw reached out to pat Vincent’s cheek, and Lucky stretched out her neck to nuzzle at his chin with her teeny, pink nose. And then, she began to purr.

“Oh my,” Catherine mused. “That’s more affection than she’s shown me or Dr. Rudy this entire evening, and it’s the first time I’ve heard her purr.”

“She’s hungry,” Vincent replied. “I can sense it. Ravenous, in fact.”

“I’ll be right back with some kitten food,” Catherine responded, as she hurried to the kitchen to pull out the new ceramic food bowl and add the contents of one of the small cans of kitten food. “Here, let’s see what she thinks of this. Dr. Rudy said the flaked chicken would be easiest on her tummy. Otherwise, I can give her more kitten formula. She’s very underweight for her age.”

Vincent settled cross-legged on the floor by the fireplace and held the small bowl of food up under Lucky’s nose. She sniffed for just the briefest moment, and then immediately began devouring the food.

“Well, I think we have her answer,” Vincent noted wryly, then whispered to the kitten, “Easy, easy, little one. No one’s going to take your food away.”

Catherine giggled and settled on the floor beside him. Vincent studied her for a moment. “Unless I miss my guess, YOU are hungry as well, Catherine,” he murmured and nodded over at the dining room table. “Is that your abandoned dinner I smell? A sandwich? JUST a sandwich?”

“Well, excuse me, mother hen, but I’ve been a bit busy with this little lady here,” Catherine groused gently. “Are you hungry, too? Did you get some dinner before coming here?”

“Of course I did, Catherine,” Vincent replied. “It’s after eleven o’clock, for heaven’s sake. The dining hall closed hours ago so William could go prepare the late dinner shift at the St. Francis Cathedral soup kitchen. Go finish your dinner. Miss Lucky and I are just fine right here.”

Catherine grabbed her plate and wine glass from the table and settled right back on the floor beside Vincent. “I’ll just have a picnic, then,” she asserted a trifle smugly, while watching the little kitten consume her dinner at a slightly more sedate pace. “She’s a sweet little thing, isn’t she?”

“Oh, yes!” Vincent replied readily. “What are your plans for her?”

Catherine munched on her sandwich, somewhat solemnly. “I was thinking of calling Nancy Tucker to see if she and her family would like to have a little kitten for a pet.”

“You would give her up?” Vincent asked, subconsciously holding the kitten just a bit closer in his lap.

“Oh, I really don’t want to, Vincent,” Catherine replied. “But I’m seldom at home, and a little kitten requires someone who can look after them pretty much all day. I just can’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair to Lucky. She deserves a good home.”

“You’re right, of course,” Vincent responded, sadly, cuddling the kitten even closer.

Lucky finished as much of her food as her tummy would allow at about the same time Catherine polished off her sandwich.

“Let’s introduce Lucky to her litter pan,” Catherine suggested and motioned for Vincent to follow her to the kitchen.

Vincent handed Catherine the nearly empty food bowl and gently placed Lucky in the litter pan, scratching just a bit at the litter to entice her interest in exploring. Lucky wandered about the pan a bit, sniffing and scratching here and there at the litter, then suddenly squatted in the back corner.

“Oh, aren’t you a smart girl!” Catherine whispered as the kitten proceeded to take care of business. “Oh, I was hoping she’d catch on quickly. Litter pan education is the most important part of her curriculum right now.”

Vincent chuckled, as Lucky followed up her exertions by digging away at the litter and covering up the evidence before wandering to the sloped entrance to the litter pan and tumbling out gracelessly onto the floor with an indignant “*Mew!*”

“Here, here,” he crooned, scooping up the kitten and nuzzling her with his nose. “Well done! You’re all right. Everything will be easier to manage once you put on some weight and regain your strength.”

“And grow longer legs,” Catherine added, circling Vincent’s waist with her arms and leaning against his shoulder. “It makes me sad to think I won’t be able to watch her grow up. She’s undernourished and underweight, but she still has such a strong spirit. Dr. Rudy said she likely would have died if I hadn’t found her today. I can’t even bear to think about it.”

Vincent settled Lucky against his chest, where she immediately cuddled closer and began purring again. With an arm around Catherine’s waist, he guided the three of them over to one of the couches to relax. Catherine leaned against his side and softly stroked the now drowsy kitten. Vincent quietly watched her.

At last he broke the somewhat melancholy silence that had descended over the apartment. “You know, Catherine, you do have friends Below who could happily be persuaded to help look after Lucky,” he murmured. “The chief volunteer being me.”

“Really!” Catherine breathed. “You don’t think Father would object?”

Vincent leaned his head to the side. “He might,” Vincent replied. “But he’d be drowned out by a chorus of Yeas from adults and children alike. I happen to know Mary is particularly fond of cats. And we do have Arthur as a precedent.”

“Oh, Vincent, if that could be possible, I promise I will handle all of her veterinary needs, provide food, litter, and any other supplies to take care of her!” Catherine responded eagerly. “I really DON’T want to give her up. She’s completely captured my heart.”

“And mine as well, it would seem,” Vincent added, snuggling the kitten just a bit closer. “I find myself not wanting to let her go.”

Lucky cuddled even closer to the big man. The lady was nice. But Lucky had definitely found her new favorite person in Vincent.

Feelings By Paula

Author's Note: In my BatB world, Ike first appears in my story Friendly Terms, which is part of the Decades Challenge for WFOL 2025. You can find my stories on CABB -- New Chambers in Tunnel Tales and Challenges.

Love grows where friendship already exists.
Unknown

The murmur of the water had a soothing effect. He leaned against a rock wall and gazed at the flowing streams.

An enchanted place, good to relax, perfect to think... Tears gathered in the corners of his gray eyes, ready to flow. Gratitude for the chance at a new life filled his heart, but also longing for his mother, who was not so lucky, and for his father, whom he did not even know. Here he was not alone; surrounded by people who care about him, he regained joy and faith that his life could be better. It's unbelievable that it's already been a year that I lived Below and had a family.

A gentle smile adorned his face as the tender thoughts went in another direction. *I am in love. I think that after such a long time I have become trustworthy, that I have proven to her that I can be relied on.* Ike closed his eyes tightly, recalling the last time when they were swimming in the Bathing Chamber. Thanks to Vincent, he felt confident in the water and greatly enjoyed this activity. Often, under the pretext of exercise, he could get a little closer to the object of his incessant thoughts. He was a keen observer, wondering if there was a shadow of hope that Amy would look at him differently, if he could become more than just a good buddy.

He sighed heavily. *So much time has passed and we are still friends. It's time for me to take the first step. Should I invite her for a date? Or just kiss her?*

Steam was rising around the waterfall. He ran his hand over the sandy ground, and after a moment his eyes opened wider when he saw her name written on the sand.

I didn't expect this feeling would affect me so much. He shook his head and shredded the letters, still not knowing what to do.

The sound of footsteps snapped him out of his reverie. His face lit up with a smile when he saw his best buddy.

Vincent tilted his head to one side. “I see you are without a book today. That means you want to think.”

Ike laughed briefly. “You know me well.” His gaze went to the book held in his companion’s hand. “I can see that you want to escape into some adventure.” He recognized the cover. “‘Tales of the Fish Patrol’. We talked about this book a while ago.”

“Yes, I thought we would read, but if you need a moment of silence, I’ll find another place.” Uncertainty took over and he took a step back.

“Where are you going? I needed to think, and now I need a conversation.” He patted the spot next to him, making his friend smile broadly.

He took up the invitation, willing to both talk and help.

Minutes passed in silence as they both stared at the streams of water. Vincent could almost hear the gears turning in his closest friend’s head. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“I don’t know where to start.” He spread his hands helplessly.

“Best from the beginning and slowly,” replied his curious comrade.

Ike pulled his legs up, rested his hands on his knees, and took a deep breath.

“There are issues that involve my thoughts, concerns, and feelings.” He finished the enumeration in a hushed voice.

His listener nodded and focused on his companion. “Go ahead.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ve been living in this wonderful place for a while now, but in my mind I still remember the time when my life was limited to an abandoned building, scattered syringes, when I didn’t have any food, and had to steal when I couldn’t ask anymore.”

His gaze escaped toward the water. “Images come back to me of when my mother was lying on the bed unconscious, and I didn’t know what to do. I did not

understand this addiction. I ran away then and rummaged through the garbage.” He rubbed his moist eyes. “And there I found damaged books. Looking at the photos was an escape from this hopeless environment.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through this, but luckily you found us. Here, you don’t have to fear another day. You live in peaceful surroundings.”

“Yes, and I am grateful for that every day.” His eyes were still full of tears.

For a while, silence returned. Vincent waited for Ike to continue, sensing that this was not the whole cause of the commotion.

“I told you that my mother’s friend, an older guy, taught me how to read. I think he wanted to protect me from certain situations.” He paused and looked at him, knowing that he didn’t have to tell him the details. “Believe me, there were times when I needed to concentrate on something else.” His laugh was short and full of bitterness.

“I can guess how hard it was for you.” Vincent touched his arm.

“Thanks, I know you understand. I mention this because I’m afraid I could have the weakness in me that my mother had. I’ve never tried drugs, but I am afraid. Will I be strong enough in the future? If something doesn’t work out in my life, will I succumb and fall into the same swamp?” He rested his forehead against his hands, dreading the past and its impact on the future.

His comrade felt that such a childhood leaves a mark for life, but today Ike for the first time honestly told him about his fears. Previously, he cut off any questions and appreciated when someone didn’t pry into what he was dealing with on a daily basis. *I want to help you, but I only have words.*

“I feel the strength in you. You lived on the street for so long, hoping for a miracle, and you did not give up on it. You wanted something else. You survived.”

Soothing and calm; sincere words, but with tremendous power, Ike could almost feel the strength. He directed his gaze to his friend, who always had to protect himself from the world Above. He admired his strength and wisdom. The corners of his mouth curved into a slight smile. “You know how to comfort.”

He returned the smile. “I never thought of myself that way. I just told you the truth.”

“And that truth is what I needed.” After a while, his face clouded over; he bowed his head and again his thoughts returned to his mother. The longing became more intense. “I regret that my mother did not get such a chance.”

Vincent also missed his parents, about whom he knew nothing; *abandoned, unwanted, unloved*. His eyes clouded with mist, but he shook his head, immediately remembering that he was supposed to be offering comfort. He cleared his throat. “She is certainly happy that you lived and did not end up like her.”

This time Ike tightened his hand on his shoulder. “Dude, you are like a brother to me. Remember that.”

These words were a balm to his heart, yearning for his parents and still for Devin. “And you are like a brother to me.”

They looked at each other for a while, recalling the time when they both came close to death. This was the moment when their brotherly bonds grew closer and they knew they would always protect and count on each other.

Something else was troubling his companion. Vincent could still sense some tension, nervousness in him. “This is not the end, right?”

Ike combed through his short hair nervously. “I decided to tell Amy that I really like her, and I would like to go out on a date Above or here. Do you think she will agree? That she won't be afraid, that she doesn't mind that I grew up in a bad environment?” He furrowed his brow, waiting for an answer.

“Then you haven't told her yet? I thought she already knew how you feel about her. After all, she had agreed to go swimming with you. Wasn't it a date?” He looked at his buddy with wide-open eyes and noticed that he hid his face in his hands.

“I'm hopeless, but whenever I wanted to tell her what I felt, before I started I could see the fear in her eyes as if she sensed what I wanted to confess and was afraid.”

“I do not know. In this area it is difficult for me to suggest something.” His facial features became more serious, but he did not want to bring up his one and only sad experience with a girl. He took a deep breath. “I think she likes you, so you shouldn't worry. Just talk to her.”

“I'm a little nervous. Look!” He held out his hands and showed him how they were shaking.

Vincent raised his eyebrows. “Do not worry and tell her quickly! Because being too nervous is not good for your health!” His smile revealed fangs and a row of white teeth.

Ike snorted. “Don't mock me. I am seriously stressed.”

His friend patted him on the shoulder. “I know. I'm trying to cheer you up a bit.”

Finally, his face brightened a little. “Thanks. I appreciate your support, brother.”

“I will keep my fingers crossed.” He looked at the book he still held in his hand and was about to suggest that they read for a while, but suddenly Mitch appeared in the entrance. They both looked in his direction, waiting...the atmosphere thickened immediately.

“I was looking for you, Ike.” He put his hands in the pockets of his torn pants.

“What's up?” Ike tried to be nice out of consideration, still grateful for Mitch holding the grate while they ran from the thugs.

“Rennie found a guitar Above. It's a little damaged, but once you said you wanted to learn to play, so he put it on your bed.”

Ike's face brightened. “Wow! Awesome! I'll look at it in a while. Maybe I can fix it.”

“Cool.” He coughed briefly “Want to go get some air with me, here near the entrance to the park?” His face was expressionless.

“No, thanks. I have other plans for today. Take Rennie.” He turned his head toward the water. A song was already playing in his heart, one just for her.

Mitch sneered as if he had seen something disgusting. “Don't tell me you're going to read this junk?”

He tore his gaze away from the skimming water. “We'll be reading something interesting.”

Mitch waved his hand at them. “You guys are boring!” Then, he was gone. The surrounding area became more pleasant and without tension.

Ike squinted and looked at his companion. “Do you think he heard our conversation?”

“Perhaps. But somehow he didn't insist, and he always pushes you to go with him and pretends that you're best buddies.”

“We'll never be best buddies. I don't trust him, although he didn't fail when it seemed like the first thing he would do was run away and leave us all.”

His friend's watchful gaze focused on the entrance, but he sensed no one nearby. “Yes, but if he ran away he wouldn't have a life here.”

They nodded their heads simultaneously;

Vincent focused again on the book he was holding. “So, what do we do now?” he asked in a conspiratorial tone.

Ike took the book from his hand. “As befits a bored man, we'll read for a while.”

His companion snorted. “Father will be happy to know you’re quoting him.” He leaned against a rock, happy – really happy – to have someone like him by his side.

Dinner was going on and there was a buzz of conversation around. Ike leaned towards the girl who had stolen his heart and whispered an invitation in her ear. “Meet me at the Waterfall Chamber an hour after dinner is over.”

When the warm question filled her ear, her beautifully carved lips smiled shyly. “Ok.”

This one word from her was short but gave him immense joy. He tried to eat, but did not taste. He already wanted to leave to get ready, then sit close to each other. In his imagination they held hands, he hugged her close, and maybe she would let him have one kiss. He pretended to scratch behind his ear to glance at her. His beautiful companion was turned toward Rebecca. It cooled his senses just a bit, but taking a deep breath didn’t change anything. Ike still had an overwhelming urge to kiss her without looking at the crowd around them; his face drew closer, his misty eyes looked at her profile; captivated, hypnotized...

A kick under the table at his ankle brought him back to order, and he looked gratefully at his friend. Again, it was enough for them instead of needing words as a thank you, an explanation. Immediately, he returned to the meal and finally finished it. Ignoring the curious glances of the adults, the boy simply ran. Today hormones nearly triumphed over reason.

“Why is he in a hurry?” Father expressed amazement.

Vincent, who was sitting nearby, didn't want to reveal his buddy's evening plans, so he came up with a quick explanation. “Rennie found a guitar Above. Ike wants to fix it.”

“Oh, I see. I didn't know he could play.”

“Because he doesn't know how to, but he dreams of learning.” That was a partial truth, one that an adult would be happy with.

The leader of the community was reassured. “Good that the boy wants to develop and try something new.” The saved teenager was still a source of pride for him.

With a slice of bread, his son scraped the leftover stew from the bowl and laughed inside; it was the only way he could do it to avoid further questions.

A quick bath did not bring solace. Feverish, Ike rummaged through his shirts and sweatshirts to find something as little damaged as possible. *A gray hoodie and worn-out jeans would be appropriate for this date-not-a-date.* He quickly scrubbed his teeth and combed his hair with his fingers, not very happy with the result. With two hands, he leaned against the closet door and took a few deep breaths, but unfortunately it did not help. *One more try.* With his eyes closed, he breathed slowly. *Better.*

The worn carpet had a new path trodden by him in anticipation... and it was still too early...

Amy noticed his hasty exit from the dining chamber. *Maybe he wants to talk with me right now.* In her mind there were various reasons for their evening conversation, and curiosity did not let up. Inside she was afraid of what he would say to her. *I like him, his helpfulness, sincerity, respect for others, but I have a sad past that complicates everything.*

Her premonition that this would not be a mere chummy chat did not leave her. More than once she had seen Ike gather himself to say something important, but she had always skillfully found a way to divert him. This time she should just let him talk. Calmly, without nervous movements, so as not to arouse suspicious glances, she got up from the table and went to the agreed place.

The girl sat on the sandy surface and waited, calming her galloping heartbeat. When she heard footsteps, she almost held her breath. *You appeared earlier...* Her gaze traveled toward the entrance, and her eyes opened wider when she saw Mitch standing there. She immediately rose from her seated position, not wanting a confrontation with him.

“What are you doing sitting here all alone?” His lips twisted into a suspicious smile.

Amy quickly came up with a lie. “I wanted to think for a while.”

He nodded. She didn't know he had overheard part of Ike's conversation with Vincent earlier. During dinner, he was a watchful observer. His gaze never left the conspiring couple. He did not miss the moment when his buddy whispered something to the girl and when he hurriedly left the dining room. He assumed they

had arranged a date. The desire to show that he was faster and better than his fellow was immense, and jealousy of the affection he observed in others dulled his rational thinking.

“Maybe you need some company?” He slowly approached her.

She felt uncertain inside, but she knew the last thing she needed was his presence. “No thanks, I have to go back now.”

“Oh,” he sneered a little, “so soon?” He was next to her now, his hand brushing her hair behind her ear. “You’re a pretty girl.”

She pulled away from him and frowned. “What are you doing?”

“I thought maybe we could go out together Above. I have some money put aside.”

The glint in his eyes frightened her; she felt a chill around her heart. From the beginning she did not trust him and had never shown interest in him. “Thanks for the invitation, but I won’t take it.” She turned towards the entrance, wanting to get as far away from him as quickly as possible.

He grabbed her hand. “You think Ike’s better than me!” He had a clenched jaw and furrowed brow.

Now fear gripped her completely. It seemed to her that her feet were glued to the ground. She was afraid of his anger, afraid of what he might do to her. “Ike is my friend. What are you talking about?” She tried to regain her composure.

He laughed out loud. “Who are you trying to fool? After all, you’re arranging to go swimming together. Do you think I’ll believe that this is how you’ll end your date?” Now he locked her in a tight embrace.

“Leave me alone!” She broke out of his grip. “I told you, we’re just friends!” She was breathing heavily.

Mitch sneered. “You think I believe that? I know you’re waiting for him!” His expression darkened.

She glared at him angrily. “To talk, nothing more!”

“Sure.” He snorted with laughter. “Don’t pretend to be such a saint. I know what you’ve been doing with him. I just didn’t think my buddy was so good at it.” He whistled with feigned admiration.

He grabbed her hand again. “But I'm better.” The words whispered in her ear, making her feel disgusted.

“I don't want anything from you! Don't touch me!” She tugged hard and he finally let go. *Maybe he doesn't care that much about me after all.*

Amy ran as far away from the bully as possible. He looked after her and was surprised that she did not take up his offer and succumb to his charms.

Tough luck, her loss. His confidence had not diminished, and he did not at all think he had behaved badly. He was convinced that Above there were better girls than she and more willing.

Ike approached the place where he was to confess what had been sitting in his heart for a long time, nervous, excited, shy. Around the bend, instead of hearing the sound of water, he collided with Amy, who was hastily moving away from the place where they were to meet.

He grinned as she landed in his arms, but the joy did not last long, as she slipped out and did not look in his eyes.

Her face was barely visible in the nearly fading torchlight. “I thought we were supposed to meet in the Waterfall Chamber.” He raised his brows.

“And can't we talk somewhere else?” She asked the question to his boots.

All confidence after a little bit flew out of him. He'd dreamed that they'd be sitting close, listening to the sound of the water. The boy scratched his head, looking in his mind for another quiet place. “Then maybe in Vincent's chamber? I heard he's playing chess with Father.”

She nodded, but her behavior worried him deeply. “Has something happened?” He extended his hand toward her, wanting to touch her chin and finally see her eyes, but she moved away, stripping him of his confidence completely.

“Nothing happened. Let's go.” Unfortunately, she did not offer him a glance.

They were silent on the way, and this quietness weighed heavily on their minds.

Inwardly, he was fighting a battle over whether to even tell her how he felt. Watching their behavior, he had some concerns; on the other hand, he was tired of stewing everything inside and wondering what she was thinking.

After crossing the threshold of their friend's chamber, Amy sat down in a chair and Ike set up a second seat opposite. For a while the tapping from the pipes was the only sound they heard.

A shadow of reluctance surrounded her. She folded her hands and placed them on the table and finally honored him with a sad look.

At this point he should stop, perhaps change his plans and make another meeting; he longed for her smile and the sparkle in her eyes. His hands went to the table, hoping that he might be able to touch her when the conversation went in the direction he dreamed of. Nerves were eating at him mercilessly.

Finally, he began. "I don't know how to start."

Her smile was shy and for a moment he noticed the weak response in his lovely companion. It was a bit of encouragement he was waiting for.

"We have been friends for some time. I really enjoy spending time with you. I treasure these moments. I don't know if you've noticed that I've been trying to tell you something, but I was not able to do it." He sighed and could feel the sweat running down his back. "I've liked you for a long time, but I've kept it inside, afraid to admit that you've become more than a friend for me."

Amy closed her eyes, and he didn't know whether to continue or collapse to the ground. However, he trudged on. "I would like us to go out together on something like a date, try it out, and maybe something will change from your side, too, and we'll become a couple. What do you think about it?" He waited, and her eyes were still closed. The teenager felt a blush begin to flow onto his cheeks and ears. His hands went under the table; the hope of a touch had disappeared.

Suddenly his beautiful companion stood up and walked over to a nearby cabinet. Her sigh echoed off the rock walls.

Failure was suffocating him. She didn't need to say anything; all good thoughts were just moving away from him.

After too long a silence, she began to speak. "Ike, I like you and we have nice conversations and times together, but I'm not ready for dating. Friendship is enough for me now." She turned toward him, but his gaze was fixed on the table. Now, his complexion looked pale even in the candlelight. He'd accepted her refusal with dignity, and although she didn't think he would be pushy like Mitch, she feared a similar reaction.

He started to get up from the table. "Sorry, I..."

Amy didn't let him finish. "You don't have to apologize to me." And then she was gone.

For a moment he stared at the exit with his mouth open. "I'm sorry." The boy fell heavily onto the chair and his hands were resting on the table. He hid his face there; disappointed, ashamed, wounded.

Vincent was returning from a victorious chess game, inwardly exultant. Curiosity gnawed at him as to how his best friend had fared during the date; he was sincerely rooting for him, or rather them. He sensed that Amy would share Ike's feelings. He had almost returned to his chamber when he saw the aforementioned girl running out of it. She quickly flashed past him, rubbing her eyes. His heart was immediately gripped by anxiety. *Something had gone wrong.*

Amidst the rock walls, he stood, struggling with his thoughts. To go to Ike, or to give him some time alone, or perhaps to sit with him in silence to make him feel better. With a slow step he moved to his place, and as he crossed the threshold, the answer appeared on its own. Before his eyes he saw an image of disappointment. His companion, who had somewhat filled the void left by Devin, had his head tucked in his hands, clenching his fists and relaxing them, breathing deeply.

Vincent clasped his hand on his friend's shoulder. Ike shuddered and raised his head. "Oh, you're back already. How did the game go?" He tried to maintain a semblance of calm.

"All right, another win, Father snorted and muttered something under his breath." His listener smiled sadly.

He risked the question. "And how did it go with Amy?"

His friend spread his hands. "As you can see, hopelessly. For Amy, friendship is enough. She is not ready for dating." He hung his head.

"I'm sorry." He sat down opposite his buddy.

"Thanks, I can handle it." He rubbed his eyes and began to massage his temples. "Too many of these emotions, I feel like my head is about to explode."

Vincent combed his own stormy hair. "I don't know if I should tell you this, but I saw Amy as I walked down the corridor. She was in a hurry and she was wiping her tears."

At these words, Ike's heart stopped for a second. "Strange. We didn't argue. I accepted her words. But tears...why? What's the point?" He got up from his chair, walked to a nearby wall, and leaned against it with his forehead. It brought him relief from at least this one pain.

Vincent furrowed his brow. His buddy was falling apart from love. He remembered what that feeling was, how it had destroyed him from the inside, what a mark it had left forever. Although his friend was in a different situation, he couldn't bear to look at his sadness. In his mind he was searching for solutions... "I don't understand why she would react like this. Maybe it's something deeper. Perhaps I will try to talk to Father about her past."

Ike turned away from the wall and leaned against it, his eyes misty and half-closed. "Just don't tell him about what I feel for her. I don't want a lecture on responsibility and risks. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Calm down. After all, you know I will not say anything. I will never betray your trust."

He sighed heavily. "I know, I just had to make sure. I'm nervous about her reaction. She's probably afraid of me. Like I told you, she doesn't want a boy like me. Why would she risk it?" His gaze was full of regret.

His listener could not stand it. He rose from his chair and almost groaned. "You are a normal guy with a difficult childhood! You survived, you are not like those drug addicts, I told you!" He looked at him gently although he was boiling with anger.

Ike realized at once what foolishness he had shot at a person who daily reflected on his humanity. "Sorry, man. I've had enough." The throbbing headache was becoming unbearable. "I need to lie down." He put his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt and pulled the hood over his head.

"Ok, but I'm not angry. I'm just trying to help you." He watched with compassion as his buddy dragged himself to the exit.

Suddenly he stopped. "Thanks. I'm just a jerk." His lips curved in a slight smile.

Vincent shook his head. "Go! You really need some sleep."

"Bye. Let me know if you learn anything."

"For sure. Until tomorrow."

A classical guitar, scratched, with two strings broken off, lay on his bed. His hand stroked the surfaces of the instrument. *Beautiful. I'll try to get to it tomorrow.* Tonight was a disappointment; inside he felt the pain of rejection. However, he remembered what Vincent had said about her tears. *Maybe something happened and that's why she reacted the way she did when I told her how I felt. I naively let myself hope.*

He fell heavily on the bed and put his hand on his forehead, wanting to feel relief. *Too many sensations, too many expectations.* He closed his eyes, dreaming of sleeping long enough so that when he woke up he wouldn't feel this inner pain. *Amy, you swept me off my feet...* After a while tiredness took over and he was consumed by sleep.

The morning had come and Vincent put his plan into action. There was still some time before breakfast, so he ran to the library to talk quietly with Father. He cautiously crossed the threshold and was pleased to see his parent sitting down with tea and reviewing maps. "Father, can I talk to you?"

"Yes, yes, please sit with me. Has something happened?" He looked investigatively at his son, who quickly jumped down the stairs.

The teenager sat in a chair. "I'm just curious about a certain matter." He pretended nonchalance.

"I'm all ears. What's going on?" Anxiety and a hint of impatience echoed in the words.

The boy leaned against a chair with his arms crossed. "I wonder about Amy. She is such a secretive and sensitive girl. Could you tell me what made her find herself Below?"

Father squinted as a warning light went off in his head. "And why do you want to know that?"

"Just curious about her past, nothing more." His face remained emotionless.

For a moment they pushed each other with their eyes.

Finally, Father sighed heavily and put the maps aside. "All right, I'll tell you, but Amy did not want to go back to those moments."

His son nodded with increasing curiosity. "Tell me. I won't talk to her about it."

"Amy grew up without a father. Her mother found a partner and they lived together. He sometimes raised his hand to the girl when she did something not as he felt it should be or if she was a few minutes late getting home. Her mother was sickly and frail, and when she died, it got much worse. I only know that her stepfather beat her almost every day. She escaped from that hell and wandered in the streets. It's good that one of the helpers spotted her, because she could have ended very badly."

He was a horrified listener, shaking his head and not comprehending how someone could treat her like this. *How much evil is there in this world Above? Now her fears became understandable. She was afraid, she had a right to be. You have to give her time, my friend. I'll have to tell you about it as soon as possible.* “It's sad and terrible what she went through. Thank you for your confidence, Father. Now I understand her caution.” He began to rise from his chair.

His parent felt uneasy that his son had drawn the attention of another girl. He cleared his throat. “Does this girl interest you in any special way?”

The teenager looked with shocked eyes. “She is like a sister to me. You can rest assured I don't think of her or any other girl in that way.”

“It's all right. I'm sorry, but I have to make sure you know what the consequences could be.” He took a sip of tea to swallow his embarrassment.

“How could I ever forget that?” From inside, he was torn by grief because nothing deeper would ever connect him with any girl. Loneliness was still present on the horizon and mocked his dreams. He shook his head. He had to help his friend, and maybe with these words he would give him hope. “I'll be going. I got a little hungry.” He sent him a gentle smile, “See you later.”

“All right, go! Breakfast is an important meal.” The reassured man returned to studying maps.

“Yes, Father.” His son rolled his eyes as he ran up the stairs.

During breakfast, Vincent noticed that he wasn't the only person combing the dining room with his gaze. Amy, more silent today than usual, noticed the absence of a certain person. In her hand she held a piece of toast, and instead of starting to eat, she glanced at the entrance every now and then. Rebecca and Olivia chatted merrily, but their friend looked sadly at her breakfast, losing all appetite.

He had to postpone his conversation with his friend. Today it was his turn to help in the kitchen. Bravely he and his colleagues struggled with the mountain of pots. Rennie quickly wiped down the dishes, Pascal put them back in their places, and he struggled to hold them in his hands, sometimes rushing mercilessly. The pace was murderous. His colleagues watched his figure in silence. He had to cut off those suspicious glances. “I just want to finish this quickly. You guys probably do, too!” They laughed together and the work went even faster.

Along the way through softly lit corridors, Vincent stretched after his workout in the kitchen, giving his muscles relief. Slowly approaching his destination, he paused in the entrance, watching his buddy lying on his back. His eyes were closed

and his breathing seemed calm. He squinted and hesitated to come closer. "Are you sleeping or resting?"

After a while, Ike sensed his presence and opened sad eyes. "I don't sleep, but I feel powerless today," he almost whispered.

"Maybe breakfast would help," Vincent suggested gently.

His buddy shook his head. "I have no appetite. I think I'll be sick."

"Sick with love." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Brother, can I help you a little in your suffering?"

"Do you have some miracle cure?" Hope was not heard in his voice.

"I asked Father about Amy." Those words made his companion sit up straight.

"She had a tough past. Her stepfather beat her severely. She ran away. I think she is afraid." He immediately noticed how his friend's eyes took on a sadder expression, and his hands were clenched into fists.

"How can someone do something like that?" Ike was sick to his stomach at the thought. He understood her perfectly; she had her hell, just as he had broken out of his.

His comrade spread his hands helplessly. "I don't know. I will never find the answer. What will you do now?" He watched as his friend lay back on the bed and covered himself with a quilt.

"I'll give her as much time as she needs, but for now it's hard for me to pretend that it doesn't hurt that she didn't trust me. I have to endure this and go back to what it was before. I'm afraid she's not interested in anything more than friendship. I'm the one who's crazy about her, and I have to learn how to treat her as just a friend."

Vincent sighed heavily. "Don't lose hope. Maybe time will work in your favor."

"I want to believe that. Thanks to you I learned more, and it will be a little easier for me to deal with it. Father didn't ask why you needed to know?"

"Of course, he asked."

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

"No, but he suspected that I was the one interested in her."

"I knew I could count on you." He sat up again and patted him on the back.

"Always. You'll see, it'll be okay."

"Now that I have some hope, I think I'm getting a little hungry." He smiled sadly.

“That's a good sign. Let's go, otherwise Father will come here and want to examine you. He certainly noticed your absence at breakfast.”

He shuddered at these words. “OK, I don't want any examination – just being around needles makes me feel worse.”

Vincent rose from the bed. “So you should hurry. I'll wait in the corridor until you change.”

He leaned against the wall in the hallway, his arms crossed over his chest. *I did what I could. At least you have hope.* He furrowed his eyebrows and pressed his lips together; the memory of some events were still as fresh as if they had happened yesterday. *May you have more luck in matters of the heart than I've had...*

Time passed, but nothing changed. Ike and Amy had not spoken to each other since that evening. There were moments when he regretted admitting what he felt at all. He doubted whether it was worth it to be honest; he missed swimming together, walking Above...

Another picnic passed without his presence, and an evening of games without laughing together with friends. It was his deliberate choice because when Amy would be near, he could not pretend to reconcile himself to her refusal.

Only in the company of his closest buddy did he not have to pretend. They willingly immersed themselves in the world of adventure, forgetting about everyday life.

Somewhere inside still smoldered the hope that maybe someday Amy would agree to go out with him, so he helped out at the grocery store for a small salary. Date – a word dreamed of, desired and forbidden at the same time.

The boy still wanted to keep busy, not to think, not to miss. With Winslow's help, he repaired the abandoned guitar. There were afternoons and evenings when he stayed alone in the chamber, trying to play. The sounds did not have a beautiful timbre, but it was an engaging and healing occupation.

One evening, when Father walked down the hall, the sad melody reached his ears. For a moment, he stood in the entrance, moved and surprised. His gaze took in the seated figure trying to play. Pride filled his heart. The boy – or perhaps a young man – studied, worked, wanted to finish night school in the future... and now he had discovered a musical talent within himself.

The leader watched him, his closed eyes, concentration on his face as he absorbed the sounds being played. It was certainly a moment not needing company, so he slowly retreated into the shadows, still overflowing with amazement.

It's been going on for so long...Is it longing or remorse? Amy tried to find herself in her own feelings. The girl began to regret that she had not told him about her unpleasant past, and that she'd hidden the unwanted experience with Mitch. Now her close friend had become a distant acquaintance, withdrawn and thoughtful. Something had changed in her, and she could no longer accept with calmness when he once again refused to spend time with friends...

Ike looked at the stars reflected in the Mirror Pool. *It's magic.* Here in this place, in addition to the view of the sky, which he could almost touch, he also appreciated the silence.

Since he knew what a difficult past Amy had, he understood her fear. *I can't push her. I can only wait until she sees that I won't hurt her.* He looked at himself. He was tall and regular swimming made him have an athletic body. *She is afraid of my strength, yet I would never in my life raise my hand to her. How do I convince her of myself and my feelings?*

He sat on the sandy ground, completely resigned. *The only violence I could use is against the monster who treated her that way.* A heavy sigh failed to quell his raging emotions. *But in the end, I would probably restrain myself, not wanting to stoop to his level.* He clenched his fists. *What a mess.*

His eyes were closed and his thoughts revolved around the girl who charmed him so. *Her blue eyes, her light brown hair wrapping her petite face, her shapely figure he surreptitiously observed as they swam.* The memories had a comforting effect, although they deepened the longing, yet at the same time they gave strength to continue waiting for her to see him as more than just a friend. A gentle smile wandered on his lips. *How lovely you are...*

"Ike?" A soft voice snapped him out of the land of memories. He slowly opened his eyes and turned his head toward the sound, not believing she was standing there now, so close.

"Hi..." He combed his hand through his hair. "Have you been here long?"

"No, I've just come." She smiled shyly, which made an enticing impression on him, and he had to look away, melting from tenderness.

The atmosphere around them was tense. He heard her take a few steps forward.

“I'm sorry...”

These words he did not expect to hear. He bestowed on her a surprised look.

“I don't want you to be so depressed. I'm worried about you,” she added after a moment.

Ike closed his eyes tightly. The last thing he wanted from her was pity.

His gaze became sad. “Amy, don't apologize to me. I don't need sympathy.” He knew he was probably exaggerating, exulting in his pride, but he couldn't do otherwise.

The girl furrowed her brows. “I understand that you're angry with me right now, but I feel bad about all this. I can see how you've changed since we talked last time.”

He got up and started walking. “I'm just trying to come to terms with what you told me.” He took a deep breath. “I understand what you went through. I had a destructive childhood myself, but I thought that since we understood each other, liked each other and were friends, you would give me a chance, that we would try to be more for each other. Now, I...”

He put his hands in his pockets. He lacked words -- this conversation cost him a lot. “In a short time I will be the former Ike. I promise.” A slight smile brightened his clouded face.

However, she drew closer and looked at him with those beautiful eyes. Mesmerized, captured by the feeling, he waited...

Amy was grateful that her sad past was not a secret for him. “You know about my past?”

“I know.” He endured looking straight into her eyes. He had avoided being around her for so long, and now she was standing too close. He thought he was going crazy.

She bit her lip. “I haven't been completely honest with you lately.”

Ike tried not to look at her mouth. “What do you mean?” His gaze focused on her tightly clasped hands.

“It is true that I am afraid, but I know that I should try to trust that not everyone is the same.”

Surprise and hope spread in his heart immediately. He nodded, understanding and feeling that this was not the end of what she wanted to tell him.

“Mitch also offered me something more than friendship.”

He pressed his lips into a narrow line. *He overheard my conversation with Vincent and brazenly approached her.*

“When I turned him down, he wasn't very nice.” She averted her eyes

Ike clenched his jaw tightly. “Did he do something to you?” He strained the words through his teeth.

“No!” she immediately assured him, “He only used words.” She did not want to provoke violence; if she had told him exactly how their mutual colleague had behaved, he would have talked to him with his fists.

The boy felt his circulation return. “Words also hurt.”

In her mind, she fled to memories when actions did her the most harm. However, she nodded, returning to the here and now.

“Not long after Mitch, you showed up with your question. You spoke to me completely differently, but the fear remained. However, when I turned down your invitation for a date, you reacted in such a way that inside I felt sorry for the words I said. You're not like Mitch. You had a tough childhood, but you're a nice guy.”

As he listened to her, he was dizzy with joy. *Is it possible that...?* It seemed as if his heart would leap out of his chest.

Amy moved closer, and after a moment he felt the gentle touch of her hand. “I like you very much, and I'm sorry, too, that you were so upset because of me.” A shade of pink tinged her cheeks.

You are amazing. He stared at her, stunned. “I can't believe it...it's like a dream.”

The whispered words were followed by a wide smile, making her yearn for a kiss. Still holding his hand, she stood on tiptoe to reach his tempting lips. Ike tilted his head, quickening the long-awaited moment. It was gentle, in her rhythm; she wrapped her arms around his neck. He could hear their rapid breaths, her deep sighs...

I am kissing the girl of my dreams. Life is beautiful...

KISS By Paula



THE ACHE FOR HOME

By Lindariel

Rating: R (for brief sexual situation)

Some introductory notes: This story is the 16th in my Beauty and the Beast AU series, which picks up after the Season 2 episode “A Kingdom by the Sea” and then goes in a different direction. No “Hollow Men,” no Paracelsus abducting and then masquerading as Father, no mental breakdown for Vincent, and most importantly, Catherine is never abducted by Gabriel (I deal with him in other ways) and therefore DOESN’T DIE! And Elliott Burch doesn’t die EITHER!!

My previous stories in chronological order (the first 15 are posted under the name Lindariel across both versions of CABB Tunnel Tales and on Archive of Our Own) are Arthur’s Gift, The View from Here, Do You Happen to Have the Time?, A Fine and Private Place, His Own Kind of Nobility, Walking Unfamiliar Ground, Songbirds of North America, A Second Harvest, A Late Harvest, Blame It on the Mets, The Last Straw ... ?, A Special Surprise, Pay It Forward, Sunflowers for Thankfulness, and What Cuddly Beast (which appears in this conzine).

For readers who are jumping in with this story: Stan Kaczmarek is Elliott Burch’s birth name. After his father was murdered in “A Kingdom by the Sea,” Elliott basically hit rock bottom, did a lot of soul searching, and decided to “go back to the beginning” to figure out where he went wrong. He put his business in escrow, took back his birth name, moved into his Dad’s ratty apartment close to the docks, took a job as a longshoreman, and started over. Finding new meaning in some volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, Stan then runs into a desperate Kipper on the street who is being chased by some gun-toting goons because Kipper saw them transporting women being trafficked into the commercial sex business. They escape, go to the police, and Catherine is called in to help talk to the eye-witnesses. In the process of getting Stan and Kipper to a safe house, the three are attacked and escape into the Tunnels, where Stan/Elliott finally meets Vincent, the man who won his Cathy’s heart. Stan’s experiences in the Tunnels and his growing fondness for Kipper, who reminds him of a young Stosh Kaczmarek, help provide him with a new direction for his talents, wealth, and ambition – a complete reimaging of low-income housing. In concert with his former adversary Luz Corrales, the activist who helped bring down his Burch Tower project, Stan establishes the Mathilde Kaczmarek Innovations in Housing Foundation, named after his late mother. Oh, and Stan is in the process of applying to become Kipper’s legal guardian.

By the way, the “prior intimate experience” Vincent refers to in this story can be found in my earlier story Walking Unfamiliar Ground. Enjoy!

***“The ache for home lives in all of us,
the safe place where we can go as we are
and not be questioned.” – Maya Angelou***

“Well, it’s a real shame,” Luz Corrales declared, as she and Stan Kaczmarek exited the boarded-up three-story commercial building on Hobart Street in the East Village. “It’s a terrific building for our purposes, but the neighborhood just isn’t right. There really isn’t much demand here for low-income housing.”

Stan sighed, squinting back up into the late May sun to admire the handsome Art Deco architecture with the stylized roses over each window. Walking by this building every day as a young Cooper Union architecture student, he’d often dreamed of buying it and turning the top floor into a home for his folks -- the graceful, spacious home in a beautiful neighborhood his dear, hard-working mother deserved, rather than their depressing, cramped, rundown tenement by the docks.

He sighed again, then startled out of his reverie at the sound of someone clearing their throat. Luz was looking at him, a bit concerned, her brow raised inquiringly.

Say something to her, you idiot, before she thinks you’ve gone barmy!

“Uh ... yeah ... you’re right about the neighborhood,” he belatedly replied after clearing his own throat. “I was pretty sure that would be the case. Sorry for checking out on you for a moment there. I used to walk by this building every day on my way to class. I was just remembering how proud I was to put my lecture notes to use by identifying it as Art Deco. It brings back good memories, and I just couldn’t pass up an opportunity to take a tour inside when I heard it was becoming available. I’ve always liked it.”

He relaxed a bit as Luz’s perturbed brow melted away, replaced by an easy smile.

Dodged another bullet there. Never forget, you are still on probation with the lady, and she doesn’t miss a thing!

The two colleagues walked to the corner to hail a cab back to the Mathilde Kaczmarek Foundation’s temporary headquarters at the Fairness in Housing

Coalition, where Luz served as executive director. As a taxi pulled up, Stan pointed down the block.

“Two blocks further down and one block over is the lecture hall for the architecture program at The Cooper Union,” Stan commented, holding the door open for Luz. “That’s where I got my degrees. I really love this neighborhood.”

Luz smiled at him again as she double-checked their list of potential properties to inspect. “Oh, I agree, and I hope whoever buys that building does something truly worthwhile with it. There’s already plenty of retail in the area,” she noted. “A good medical clinic or legal aid office wouldn’t go amiss, though.”

Stan considered her comment for a moment, his eyes lighting up with a new idea, and then stepped back up onto the curb. “Why don’t you go ahead and take this cab back to the office, and I’ll get another,” he suggested. “I’ve just had an idea, and I’m going to see if I can’t follow through on it right now.”

“OK,” she laughed. “I know better than to get in your way when you have that light bulb look going on. Let me guess, you know someone who might do the right thing with that building.”

She handed him the spec sheet for the Hobart Street building and climbed into the cab.

“Got it in one!” he replied, taking the paper with a flourish, shutting the cab door behind her, and leaning into the open window. “I should be back in plenty of time for our four o’clock meeting with the Bronx Neighborhood Association.”

“Keep your fingers crossed,” she responded. “If they give us the go-ahead on a neighborhood partnership, we’ll be able to take possession of that condemned high-rise apartment building and launch our second project.”

Stan laughed, “Sure! I’ll just add a kitchen sink to the three oranges, the anvil, the live chicken, and the chainsaw I’m already juggling. No problem!”

“You know you love it!” she called out as the cab left the curb.

“You can say that again,” Stan murmured with a smile as he hailed another cab.

“Take me to the DA’s office, please.”

Catherine knocked gently on Joe's door before gingerly opening it and ducking down just in case there was a dart already in mid-air.

THWACK!

A poorly aimed dart smacked sideways into the dart board just to the right of the doorway and fell harmlessly to the floor.

"You really need to move that thing before you have an OSHA lawsuit on your hands," Catherine remarked drily, as she deposited a small stack of files into Joe's inbox.

"Aw, Radcliffe, now where would be the fun in that?" Joe replied with a rakish smile, rising to gather up his errant dart. "It pretty quickly teaches folks to always knock before entering, and keeps the interns on their toes. As far as I'm concerned, that's a win-win." He pointed at the inbox. "Please tell me that's the last of the Klein paperwork."

"Ugh! I *wish*," Catherine sighed. "That's just the latest salvo from Interpol. We're still waiting on two more amended statements from the FBI, but I think we might at last be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. The files they recovered from Klein's Long Island estate and from Jonathan Pope's office are pretty scary. What Gabriel Klein was intending to accomplish just boggles the mind. That maniac had dirt on politicians, law enforcement officials, contractors, not to mention all the ties to drug smuggling and human trafficking. Turns out, he was pulling Max Avery's strings, as well as his mob enforcers'. Given another year, he would have owned half of the city either literally or figuratively. I'm just glad we were able to warn Moreno off that real estate deal he was considering. I'd hate to think what might have happened if Gabriel Klein had been able to blackmail or buy off the DA's office."

"You and me too, kiddo," Joe agreed. "Listen, you've had a long slog getting through all this Interpol paperwork. The FBI statements still aren't here. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? Make it an early weekend."

“Consider me gone!” She smiled, giving Joe a quick hug. “And find something healthier to eat than those disgusting chocolate-covered cheese nuggets. I can’t believe you keep buying those things!”

“Hey, gimme a break!” Joe complained. “I’m having dinner at Ma’s tonight, so I’ll be sure to eat my vegetables then like a good boy.”

“Well, thank goodness,” Catherine replied. “Someone has to make sure you live on something besides junk.”

“Get out of here before I change my mind!” Joe joshed, waving her out of the office.

Just as the door closed behind her, Catherine heard the *THWACK* of another dart hitting the dart board sideways and then the floor. She giggled as she crossed back to her office. *Some things never change.* Her giggles turned into a gasp of pleasant surprise as she spotted Stan Kaczmarek occupying one of the chairs in front of her desk.

“Stan!” she called in greeting, pausing to give him a quick hug before taking a seat behind her desk. “How are things going with the social worker for your guardianship petition?”

“Just fine, so far,” Stan replied. “I’ve taken Ms. Wallace on a tour of the Juniper Street renovation and talked through my plans for the building, especially my new loft apartment on the top floor, and I put her in touch with Jacob’s Board of Education contact regarding Kipper’s home-schooling situation. She wants another tour once the renovation has been completed. In the meantime, she’s reviewing my financials and contacting my list of character witnesses. You should be hearing from her soon.”

“I’m glad you were assigned to Nichole Wallace,” Catherine responded. “She won’t have any bias against you as a single man, and she’ll be thorough, but fair.”

“Good, that takes care of the live chicken portion of my juggling act for today,” Stan laughed. “In other news, I’m probably going to be adding a kitchen sink to the act later this afternoon. Luz and I have a meeting with the Bronx Neighborhood Association. If they sign off on our plans, we’ll be able to start demolition on a

second project for the Kaczmarek Foundation – a condemned high-rise apartment complex.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Catherine exclaimed. “You’re still mid-construction on the Juniper Street building renovation. Are you sure you’re ready to take on another project before that one’s complete?”

“You bet I am!” Stan replied. “My life is completely up in the air, and I’ve never felt more alive. I will admit, I’ll be so glad to move out of Dad’s old apartment and start enjoying the tall ceilings in that loft on Juniper. It’s going to be amazing!”

Catherine laughed. “Kipper has done nothing but talk about plans for his bedroom. Be forewarned! He’s already scheduling sleepovers with his buddies for practically every night of the week. Are you prepared to be invaded by a small army of pre-teen boys?”

“I did say it was a *live* chicken, didn’t I?” he responded with a grin. “They’re great kids, and they’re welcome to visit anytime, especially once I have the dining hall set up on the fifth floor. I’m not much of a cook, and I’ve seen the way they eat! I’ve already lined up one of Bill’s Army buddies to take charge of the kitchen. By the way, Green Thumb sent over their plan for the rooftop community garden. They should be able to get started next week, just as soon as all of the roof repairs and water and utility supply work have been completed. We should have some late summer vegetables to enjoy.”

“You’re really moving fast with this renovation,” Catherine replied. “Father can’t stop talking about how many Helpers you’ve been able to pull into the project.”

“Well, it helps that the building was in really good repair structurally, so we’ve been mostly occupied with the interior renovations, upgrading utilities, widening the loading dock for the grocery store, installing my private elevator, sistering-in extra support for the roof to accommodate the patio and garden, those sorts of things,” he responded. “The Bronx project will be a very different situation. That’s a condemned building, so we’ll be completely demolishing it and putting up a brand-new building. The permitting process for that alone will take quite a bit of time. But once it’s complete, it will be the official model demonstration project for the Kaczmarek Foundation’s low-income housing concept. Luz is already working with me to create a design model for us to present at a plenary session for the next

National Housing Conference. Plus, it will be an excellent feature for the open house fundraiser we're planning for the Foundation launch-week in June."

"Wow, Stan, that's terrific!" Catherine said. "Are you still on track to complete the Juniper Street Building renovation by June?"

"We are," he replied. "Robinson's Grocery probably won't open until July when they'll finally have inventory in place, but the free medical clinic and legal aid offices should open mid-June, and the management office should be ready to work with social services on housing contracts for the low-income apartment tenants at the same time. I plan to move into my apartment in two weeks, so I'll already be on site, and the Foundation office should officially open in early June."

"Well, the next Board meeting should certainly be an exciting one," she said, as she started packing up her briefcase. "I'll look forward to it."

"Are you on your way to a meeting?" Stan asked.

"Actually, I've been given the rest of the day off." She beamed. "Joe's taking pity on me for all of the late nights I've put in recently handling the third round of Interpol paperwork from the Gabriel Klein case."

"Good for him! You still work too hard for someone who's supposed to be keeping more reasonable hours," Stan stated.

"Pot, kettle, Mr. I-Live-And-Breathe-Construction," she retorted. "At least now I know Vincent, Lucky, and I will be able to enjoy tonight's Central Park concert."

"Point taken." He grinned. "How is little Miss Lucky, by the way? Rudy says her two-week check-up went well."

Catherine grinned as she thought about her little calico rescue kitten. "She's doing great! On work days, she spends time Below with Vincent, Mary, and the children. Father grumbles a bit, but I've caught him several times holding her in his lap while reading a book, the old softy! And Vincent is absolutely her favorite person. I kinda hate bringing her back to the apartment with me in the evenings, but I need *my* kitty time, too!"

Stan laughed heartily. "Now you know why my Mom fed all the neighborhood strays. She *adored* cats. Even the most cantankerous, feral ones very quickly

learned to love her. She was a natural with them.” He paused and cleared his throat. “I often think that if she’d just had the opportunity, she would have made a wonderful veterinarian, like Rudy.”

“I’m sure she would have,” Catherine replied, patting his hand softly.

Stan shrugged his shoulders with a big sigh. “Well, let me get to the purpose of my visit. Since you have the rest of the day off, I’m actually hoping I can persuade you to come look at a building with me and then maybe have a quick bite for lunch. You’ll still have plenty of time to meet Vincent and Lucky for the concert.”

“*Another* building?” she asked. “Are you seriously planning to take on a *third* project? You barely even had your 501c3 papers in hand before you and Luz were off and running with the Juniper Street project.”

“Actually, this building isn’t for the Foundation,” Stan replied. “I think it’s for *you*.”

Catherine stared at Stan in consternation for a moment. “What on earth would I do with a building?” she asked.

Stan just smiled. “Come take a look at it, and you’ll see.”

Father fidgeted anxiously at the access tunnel to the infirmary chamber, waiting for the work crew to arrive, bringing Vincent on a stretcher. Jamie’s alert on the pipes had assured him there were no broken bones – *I’ll be the judge of that!* – just a bad fall from a broken ladder, leaving Vincent with some nasty bruises and a sore hip that made it too painful for him to walk.

If Vincent actually admitted to that much pain, then the bruising must be severe indeed.

Soon the work crew arrived and carried a stoic Vincent directly into the hospital chamber, where Mary was expertly preparing ice compresses and organizing bandaging materials. Father immediately set about palpating Vincent’s abdomen, checking for signs of internal hemorrhaging, while Jamie described the nature of the fall.

“We were getting ready to descend the ladder that takes us from level C31 to D15,” Jamie reported. “Mouse had gone down first to set up the torches, and Vincent was going second so we could lower the tool boxes and supplies to him. He was about halfway down when one of the ladder welds broke free and swung him out away from the overhead cross bar. He held on for about 30 seconds and then just let go to jump the rest of the way down. He was able to land in a tuck-and-roll beyond the pile of boulders at the base of the ladder, otherwise, he would definitely have broken bones. But it was quite a long fall. I lowered the first aid kit to Mouse, and then we had to detour back to C25 and take the long way around and down to reach Vincent with the stretcher. Mouse had already made Vincent as comfortable as he could by the time we got there. Vincent didn’t hit his head, so there’s no concussion, and he’s been awake and lucid the entire time, but I can tell he’s in a lot of pain. He didn’t even try to stand, just held himself as still as possible while we transferred him to the stretcher. Then we hoofed it back as quick as we could without jostling him too much.”

“You’ve given him no water?” Father asked.

“None at all,” Jamie replied. “I remembered from your first aid class that we shouldn’t give anything to eat or drink if there was even the possibility of an internal injury.”

“Good girl,” Father responded, patting her shoulder. “I take it Mouse didn’t notice a problem with the ladder on his way down?”

“No, he didn’t, but he’s a good bit smaller than Vincent, and he didn’t have much light to go by,” Jamie reported. “By the time Vincent spotted the problem, it was already too late. He’d just called out to keep people off the ladder, and the weld broke the very next second. I’m glad Mouse had been able to set up several torches, otherwise Vincent never would have seen the boulders. It looks like there had been a rock slide in that section since we were last there for repairs. That’s probably what weakened the weld.”

“Why don’t you get your crew to the dining hall for some lunch, and ask Pascal to put out a call for emergency work crew volunteers to assess the rock slide and repair the ladder,” Father suggested. “You’ve already had quite a day.”

“I hope you feel better soon, Vincent,” Jamie said as she was leaving.

“Thank you, Jamie,” Vincent replied softly. “Would you have someone take a message to Catherine for me? I was planning to meet her on the balcony this evening, and then we were going to take Lucky to the music chamber for tonight’s concert in Central Park. Obviously, I won’t be able to manage that with this bruised hip. Perhaps she could come Below instead, and we could spend the evening together with Lucky.”

“I’ll go myself,” Jamie offered. “I have paperwork I need to take to her for college anyway.”

“Please, try not to alarm her,” Vincent replied, gasping as Father palpated his sore hip.

“What makes you think she doesn’t already know something’s wrong?” Jamie retorted. “I’ll be very surprised if I don’t run into her on my way Up Top.”

“Wow!” said Catherine as she admired the edifice of the Hobart Street location.

“This is such a lovely building! It’s Art Deco, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, built in 1933,” Stan agreed. “It’s been well-maintained and is owned by my colleague Herb Stanfield. He’s planning an early retirement to Arizona and doesn’t want to be bothered with managing the building long distance, so he’s selling it instead. He contacted me directly because he thought I might like it for a Kaczmarek Foundation project, but Luz and I both agree the neighborhood doesn’t really need low-income housing.”

“OK, that makes sense,” she responded. “But what makes you think *I* need a building like this?”

“Well, let’s take a little tour, and I think you’ll see for yourself,” he replied, unlocking the building’s beautiful double doors. “The hallmark of Art Deco architecture is symmetry reflected in bold geometric patterns. So, the first two floors feature a central marble hallway separating identical size office or commercial spaces on either side. However, we’re going start our tour by taking the private elevator directly to the third floor, which is set up a bit differently.”

As soon as the elevator doors opened at the top floor, Catherine looked around and gasped. The entire top floor was a private residence, and it was gorgeous! The left

side of the central marble foyer and hallway quickly revealed a cozy living room sharing a magnificent double-sided fireplace with a library/study featuring floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookshelves, followed by a formal dining room with an elegant bar-style pass-through to a well-appointed kitchen. On the other side of the hallway were two good-size guest bedrooms sharing a Jack-and-Jill bathroom, a powder room for guests, a laundry room, and a spectacular corner master bedroom suite with dramatic floor-to-ceiling windows, a large walk-in closet, and a marble master bathroom fit for a king.

“Now, if this was my building, the only changes I’d make to the residence would be to install all new appliances in the kitchen and laundry room and a more secure access code panel for the private elevator,” Stan commented. “The marble hallway is in perfect condition, and the hardwood floors in the rooms can easily be refinished, as well as the cabinetry in the study, kitchen, laundry, and bathrooms. The whole space has been freshly repainted, so there’d only be touch-up work, unless you want to change the color scheme. I could get Kanin, Cullen, and a Tunnel crew in here and have the residence completed in two to three weeks. You could move in by early to mid-June.”

“But ...” she began.

“Now, now,” he interrupted. “We’re not finished with the tour. Let’s take the private elevator down to the basement, and then we’ll walk through the other two floors.”

Once they were in the basement, Stan suggested a few changes that should be made to upgrade the utilities, including a more modern heating and cooling system, and provide better security for the ten-space underground garage and small loading dock.

“Let me point out one other thing, and this is the clincher,” Stan continued. “I consulted Jacob’s maps before touring the building this morning, and I’m absolutely certain this building is located directly above an access corridor leading to the Tunnels. It’s probably about a 20-minute walk to the Hub, although that would depend on how many twists and turns would be involved. I haven’t had a chance to consult with Mouse yet. You could easily retrofit the private elevator to go all the way down into the access corridor.”

Catherine stared at Stan for a moment in shock. “You’re telling me it would be possible for Vincent and Lucky to get on the private elevator down in the access corridor and ride it all the way up to the residence without being seen.”

“Exactly,” Stan smiled. *Bingo!* “I still can’t believe what Vincent goes through to come visit your balcony! He told me that he rides on top of your elevator car all the way to the top floor, crawls out onto the roof, and then drops from the roof onto your balcony. Now, the man is a physical phenomenon, but how much longer will he be able to do that safely and unobserved? Ever since hearing that, I’ve been keeping my eyes peeled for a building that would provide a safe, comfortable home for you with completely private and much safer access to the Tunnels. This building is ideal. You’d even have a much shorter commute to the DA’s office.”

“But what would I do with all the rest of it?” Catherine goggled, completely overwhelmed by the tantalizing possibilities as well as the challenges inherent in taking possession of such an extensive property.

“Whatever you like,” Stan replied, as they stepped back onto the elevator to go to the second floor. “I was thinking you could put in a medical clinic on one side of the first floor, and a legal aid office on the other side. Luz said the neighborhood could use both of those services.”

“OK, I can see that,” Catherine agreed, warming up to the idea and coming up with her own. “Peter Alcott has successfully introduced one of his residents to the community Below. I bet Dr. Caldwell would love a chance to run her own small community medical clinic, and it would provide Tunnel folks with additional access to medical care. Ooh! I could do *pro bono* work for our Helpers through the legal aid office.”

“See, I knew you’d see the possibilities!” Stan enthused, as they stepped off the elevator into the large second floor lobby and slowly walked through the space. “Now, the second floor has four office suites, each with their own restrooms, two on each side of the central hallway. You could easily renovate this floor into a dormitory for young people from Below who are attending college or technical school or getting their first jobs or for adults who have taken jobs Above and would like a convenient place to stay during the work week. Each office would convert into two spacious bedrooms with a connecting bathroom, so you could

house as many as eight people on this floor, sixteen or more if you put in bunk beds, and you'd still have plenty of space to convert the lobby area into a communal living and study space on one side and a large shared kitchen and dining area on the other. There's space to add laundry facilities for them in the basement. Since the public spaces on the first floor only need garage access, I would add a security code panel to the public elevators limiting access to the second floor only to dormitory residents."

"Could I have Green Thumb put in a covered rooftop patio and a garden? It would be wonderful to have a safe outdoor space for Lucky to run around and play, and for Vincent to enjoy as well," Catherine asked eagerly.

"I don't see why not," Stan replied. "It's perfectly flat, just like the Juniper Street roof. Look, here's the spec sheet on the building. Why don't you think it over, and let me know if you're interested. Herb is waiting to hear from me before he puts the building on the market, so you have some time to consider your options and talk with Vincent."

"Thanks, Stan," Catherine responded gratefully as they walked back to the elevator. "With everything that's going on in your life, it's so kind of you to think of Vincent and me this way."

"Well, I'll admit my motives are just a bit selfish," he replied. "I love this building and this neighborhood because of its proximity to The Cooper Union. I walked by it every day when I went to school there. If I couldn't find a way to make it work within the Kaczmarek Foundation's mission, I was determined to make sure it went to someone who would put it to good use."

As they stepped off the elevator on the ground floor, Catherine suddenly staggered back against the wall with a sharp cry, clutching her right hip in pain.

"Cathy!" Stan called out, helping her limp a few steps over to a lobby bench to catch her breath. "What's wrong? Did you turn your ankle in those heels?"

"No, I didn't," she replied, suddenly realizing that the pain she'd felt wasn't real, or more accurately, it wasn't *hers*, and now it was gone, leaving behind only a lingering sense of dread. "Oh no! I have to leave, *right now!*"

"Wait, let's make sure you aren't hurt," Stan objected.

“No, you don’t understand!” she cried. “I’m not the one who’s hurt. *Vincent* is!”

“What do you mean ... Oh! This is that Bond communication you told me about,” Stan exclaimed. “Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she replied, impatiently. “I felt a sudden pain in my right hip, but now it’s completely gone. What I do feel is shaky and worried, and like those feelings are coming from outside myself.”

“How can I help?” Stan asked.

“I need to get back to my apartment and go Below,” Catherine responded. “It’s the only way to find out what’s happened, if they even know anything. Vincent could have been by himself when he was injured, and they might not realize it. Could you please get us a cab?”

“Sure, just wait here and catch your breath,” Stan replied. “I’ll be right back.”

Less than five minutes later, the door opened, and Stan waved her out so he could lock up the building. He walked her to the cab and ushered her inside, leaning against the door.

“I wish I could come with you, but I have that meeting at four,” he explained. “Are you sure you’ll be fine on your own?”

“Yes, I promise I’m OK,” she answered. “I’ll have Kipper bring you a message once I know what’s going on.”

“All right,” he responded, reluctantly. “Tell him I’ll be at the office. Just know that I won’t stop worrying until I hear from you.”

Catherine sat on the edge of her seat the entire way uptown to her apartment. She handed the driver more than enough to cover her fare and a generous tip and jumped out of the car. She did her best to wave nonchalantly to Freddie at the door and hurried through the lobby toward the elevators, but quickly slipped into the stairwell as soon as Freddie’s attention was diverted by a package delivery. One hurried flight down the stairs into the basement, and she passed into the storage area, assessed that she was alone, unlocked the door to her private storage space, and headed down the ladder and off into the Tunnels.

At the first pipe junction, she stopped briefly to rap out her ID code, location, and the message: *On my way. Worried Vincent is hurt.*

Almost immediately a return message sounded out: *Jamie coming to you. Vincent hurt, but OK. Don't worry.*

Catherine stumbled to a stop and leaned against the tunnel wall, suddenly weak and clutching her crystal necklace in relief.

He's OK. He's injured, but he's going to be OK.

A few minutes later, Jamie rounded the bend and gave her a brief and much needed hug. "Are you all right? Do you need me to call for help?" Jamie asked. "I know sometimes you can sense Vincent if he's in pain."

"No, I'm fine. There was a sudden sharp pain, probably when he was first hurt, and then he masked it," Catherine said. "I'm just so relieved to know he wasn't alone somewhere, needing help, and unable to ask for it."

"He was with my work crew," Jamie replied, as they started on their way to the Hub and the hospital chamber. "He had a bad fall off a broken ladder, and he's pretty bruised up, especially his right hip. But no head injury, and he says no internal injuries or broken bones, although Father hadn't examined him yet when I left to get you."

"That's where I felt the pain, in my right hip," Catherine said, shaking her head. "We've lived with this Bond for four years now, and I'm still astonished by it, and so grateful for it."

The two women hurried on to the infirmary, where Father and Mary were having a bit of a problem with their recalcitrant patient.

"Vincent, please, it will be much simpler and far more comfortable for you if you'd just let us cut your clothing away," Father urged. "Mary has a nightshirt all ready for you. It will only take us a moment."

"And I'm telling you, Father, there are no broken bones for you to set or internal injuries to concern you," Vincent responded through gritted teeth. "I'm simply bruised and in pain and need to rest. There's no need to jostle me around and ruin a perfectly good set of work clothes. Please, don't fuss so."

“Is there a problem here?” Catherine asked from the chamber entrance, as Jamie quietly left to finally get some lunch for herself.

“*YES!*” both men responded simultaneously, producing a chuckle from both Catherine and Mary.

Mary plucked gently at Father’s sleeve and murmured, “Vincent isn’t in any imminent danger. Why don’t we let Catherine have some time with him? I’m sure she’s worried. And you and I can spend some time with Lucky.”

Father sighed in exasperation, but allowed Mary to herd him out the door, the older woman slyly pointing out her compress preparations to Catherine behind his back. Once they were alone, Catherine set down her briefcase and suit jacket and washed her hands before bringing a basin of warm water and a cloth to the table at Vincent’s bedside. Wordlessly, she began gently washing the dust off his face and neck. His eyes followed her every move.

“You knew,” he murmured. “I could feel your anxiety and knew you were coming here.”

She nodded. “I felt a sharp pain in my hip when you fell, then nothing but a quiet sense of dread.”

He sighed. “I abhor all the fuss whenever I’m injured. Aside from setting broken bones and suturing cuts, there’s actually very little Father can do for me. We’ve learned over time that I don’t react well to opiate pain killers, and the others do very little to counteract pain for me. Fortunately, I’ve never needed surgery. It’s best if I can just rest and let my body heal itself.”

“Are you absolutely certain you have no broken bones or internal injuries?” she asked, as she began gently loosening the ties to his vest and shirt to wash away the dust from his upper chest.

He reached up to capture one of her hands and press a lingering kiss to her fingers.

“Yes, I’m certain. I would know,” Vincent replied in the darker tones of his second nature. **“Please, don’t worry, My Love.”**

“Worry comes with the territory, I’m afraid.” She smiled at him, tremulously. “I’ll make a deal with you, My Own. Let me help you get changed into a nightshirt so

Father can check your bruises and satisfy *his* worries, otherwise neither of us will have any peace. Then, Mary can apply these ice compresses she's so kindly prepared. You do that, and I promise to worry less and help run interference with Father." She extended her right hand to him. "Do we have a verbal agreement?"

"Yes, counsellor," he replied, shaking her hand. **"Will you stay Below for the weekend?"**

"Hmmm ... I believe there's an old saying involving wild horses?" she quipped, as she finished opening his vest and folding it aside to tackle the rest of the shirt ties. "Now, I don't want to pull your shirttail out over that sore hip, so why don't you get rid of that contraption you call a belt and loosen your trousers for me."

Working together, they were able to ease Vincent's vest and shirt off so Catherine could finish bathing his chest, back, and arms, and apply a cold compress to the large bruise on his right shoulder. Once she'd helped him pull on the nightshirt, she removed his work boots and socks. Just that bit of effort, however, had left him pale and trembling a bit in pain.

"Vincent, saving a pair of work trousers isn't worth the price of your pain," Catherine urged. "Let's just cut them off and spare you the ordeal, please. Trousers can be easily replaced."

He gave her an exhausted smile. **"You know I can deny you nothing, now."**

She covered him with a light sheet and folded it back on each side just enough to safely cut down both sides of the trousers from waist to hem before folding the sheet back down to preserve his modesty. Then, with just a slight lift of his hips, she was able to draw the ruined trousers off from beneath the sheet and drop them in a discarded heap by the door. She handed him another cold compress to place against his bruised hip as she placed another on his knee, and then brushed his hair gently to remove the worst of the dust.

"I'm going to go call for Father and Mary," she whispered, kissing his brow. "I'll be close by, getting things set up in our chamber so you'll be more comfortable."

Catherine found Father and Mary conferring quietly in the library, with a contented Lucky purring softly in Father's lap, and updated them on the status of their patient. After urging Father to keep the "fussing" to a minimum, she took

possession of her little rescue kitty and continued on to Vincent's ... *their...* chamber, opening one side of the beautiful carved doors, and stowing away her briefcase and jacket. She left Lucky to do her usual prowling around the chamber before jumping up to take pride of place in Vincent's big chair, while Catherine changed into some Tunnel clothes and her comfy moccasins and took a quick inventory of what might be helpful in caring for an injured Vincent. They needed a fresh pitcher of drinking water, extra glasses and tea cups, fresh linens for the bed, some extra pillows, and, her gurgling stomach reminded her, a late lunch tray for both of them, plus Lucky's mid-day meal.

A quick stop by William's kitchen produced the promise of a lunch tray delivered to their chamber along with the other requested kitchen supplies. After another stop by the laundry room for fresh linens and a few pillows, Catherine was soon busy stripping and making up the bed with Lucky's "help" in anticipation of Vincent's eventual arrival. Inspiration struck, and Catherine pulled the bed away from the wall to give her more maneuvering space to care for Vincent. *He's gonna need a shampoo and bed bath at some point.* A quick tap on the pipes sent a message summoning Kipper to their chamber, and then she spent a few minutes at Vincent's desk with Lucky tucked up on her lap, as she composed a note for Kipper to take to Stan. Kipper soon arrived, helping William to bring in a large lunch tray and a smaller tray with the requested water pitcher, glasses, and tea cups.

"I checked in with Father at the infirmary," William reported. "All's well, but Vincent wants to rest there a bit longer and let the ice compresses do their work before trying to walk back here. We've got Kevin and James on stand-by to help him when he's ready to move. There's a thermos of chicken noodle soup for him and a wrapped-up sandwich when he feels up to eating something. In the meantime, I have chicken and dumplings for you, a nice fruit salad, and some deep-dish apple pie for dessert. And, of course, a serving of Lucky's kitten food; Little Miss is having salmon today! I've been informed by a certain cranky patient that you're not to budge until you've eaten every bite, you hear me?"

"Hoo-yah, Corporal William," Catherine saluted with a grin.

"It's Oo-rah, Catherine, and that's the Marines." William sighed in mock despair, shaking his head. "You've been watching too many bad movies."

She laughed. “Seriously, William, thanks so much. Oh, by the way, Stan mentioned that he’s hired one of your Army buddies to manage the kitchen and dining hall at his Juniper Street project. That’s terrific news!”

“Yeah, Charlie Klutz and I served together over in ‘Nam,” William replied, as he set Lucky’s food bowl on a small mat on the floor and gave the cute little calico a quick scratch and a pat. “He’s a wonderful volunteer at Sister John’s soup kitchen and a great cook, but his current diner job is pretty lousy. Low pay, terrible menu, and the boss won’t let him make any changes. He deserves a chance to work for someone who’ll really appreciate his skills. Now, I’m serious about you eating *all* your lunch, young lady. Vincent’s gonna need you to be in tip-top shape. He can be a difficult patient.”

“Well, Vincent and I have a deal. He cooperates with me, and I do my best to minimize Father’s fuss and my worries,” Catherine responded, digging into her chicken and dumplings. “Oh my, William, you are a *genius*!”

“Pshaw! You keep that up, and I just might send down a basket of muffins later this afternoon,” William quipped, then turned to Kipper. “You did good work today, young man. Now, I don’t want to hear that you’ve given this lady a bit of trouble. She’s got enough on her hands with an injured, stubborn Vincent.”

“Aye-aye, Corporal William,” Kipper saucily saluted.

“And that’s the *Navy*!” William mock-pouted, sweeping dramatically out of the chamber. “Honestly, you people are hopeless!”

Kipper and Catherine giggled helplessly, as she motioned for him to take a seat at the table and slid the basket of dinner rolls over to the constantly hungry boy.

“We really shouldn’t tease him like that,” she chortled.

“Yes, we should!” Kipper insisted with another giggle.

They munched in contented silence for a while. After Kipper had a chance to inhale two dinner rolls, Catherine handed him the folded note.

“I was touring a potential building site with Stan earlier today when Vincent fell, so he saw my reaction and knows something’s wrong,” she explained. “I promised him I’d send you with a message this afternoon once I knew what was going on.

He and Luz have a four o'clock meeting at the Coalition office, so you'll find him there. You be careful now."

"I will," he promised. "And don't you worry one bit. There's a Tunnel entrance just two blocks away from the office. I'll be fine. Father already knows I'm having dinner with Uncle Stan this evening and staying at his Dad's apartment. We're getting ready for our next meeting with Ms. Wallace."

"That's good," she replied. "Here, why don't you help me with this dessert before you go. William sent enough apple pie for four people."

"I think that's because he knew I'd be here," Kipper responded, helping himself to a large slice of pie and a glass of water to wash it down.

"I think you're probably right." She grinned.

The meeting with the Bronx Neighborhood Association went even better than Luz and Stan had expected. Their plans had been enthusiastically endorsed, plus the Association's president had offered the organization's help in canvassing the neighborhood to determine the kinds of community services that would be most helpful to provide as part of the project. In addition, they'd volunteered to assist with identifying other properties in the borough that might prove to be excellent sites for future Kaczmarek Foundation low-income housing projects. They also offered to make introductions for the Kaczmarek Foundation with top executives at Habitat for Humanity to share ideas and potentially form a future partnership. Luz and Stan were reviewing their notes from the meeting and determining their next steps to secure the building site when the receptionist tapped on the conference room door.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but there's a young man at the desk who says he's Mr. Kaczmarek's nephew," he stated. "A Kipper Moskowitz?"

"Oh, yes! Thanks, Jerry. Please send him right back," Stan replied eagerly. "I've been expecting him."

"Your nephew?" Luz asked. "I didn't think you had any siblings."

“I don’t,” Stan replied. “Kipper’s actually a ward of the state right now, until I can establish legal guardianship. I met him through the St. Francis soup kitchen program, and we got along really well right from the start. If you’ve ever wondered what a young Stan Kaczmarek might have been like, he’s about to walk through that door. You’ll see.”

Soon Kipper poked his head in and then gave Stan a blinding grin.

“Uncle Stan!” he called, hurrying across the room to give Stan a big hug.

“Hey there, Buddy!” Stan smiled, ruffling Kipper’s hair.

“Hey yourself!” Kipper scowled dramatically. “What is it with the hair already?”

“Oh, my apologies, Sir Kipper,” Stan retorted, then sobered just a bit, remembering. “Now that I think about it, it’s something my Dad used to do with me when I was a kid.” Then he brightened. “Let me introduce you to Ms. Luz Corrales, the executive director of the Fairness in Housing Coalition. This is the generous lady who made it possible for me to set up a temporary office for the Kaczmarek Foundation here until I can open the official office suite in the Juniper Street Building. Luz, this is my nephew, Christopher Moskowitz.”

Luz had been greatly enjoying the easy banter between Stan and the perky pre-teen. “It’s nice to meet you, Christopher,” she nodded, reaching out to shake the boy’s hand. “How did you come by the nickname Kipper? Isn’t that a British term for herring?”

“I didn’t know that! Wait ‘til I tell the guys I named myself after a *fish*!” Kipper laughed. “Nah, when I was little, I had a hard time saying Christopher. It kept coming out Kipper, and pretty soon that’s what everyone called me.”

“Now, *I* didn’t know *that*,” Stan declared, looking over to Luz. “Thanks for asking the question!”

She shrugged in response. “Nicknames interest me. It’s fun to know how people come by them. Luz isn’t a nickname, but it is the Spanish word for Light.”

“Well, mine wasn’t nearly as interesting,” Stan replied. “I was Shorty for the longest time until I was around Kipper’s age and suddenly shot up six inches

overnight and just kept growing. Then I was Stosh for a while, which is just the Polish nickname for Stanislaw. Not exactly original, either of them.”

“Shorty!” Kipper spluttered. “I can’t even imagine you short!”

“Well, I was.” Stan laughed, poking Kipper in the ribs. “So that means there’s still hope for you!”

“Hey!” Kipper replied, poking him right back. “I resemble that remark!” And they both laughed, while Kipper pulled Catherine’s note out of his pocket. “Here, before I forget. Cath ... umm ... Ms. Chandler sent you a message. Vincent’s bruised up, but OK. I saw him myself.”

“Cathy Chandler?” Luz asked. “You know Cathy Chandler?”

Stan looked up from reading the message. “Yeah, Cathy volunteers with a youth program that Kipper’s involved in. She’s helping me out with the guardianship petition.”

“Who’s Vincent?” Luz inquired, sensing something else was going on.

“He’s one of the teachers for the youth program and a mutual friend, a really great guy,” Stan replied. “I was showing Cathy the Hobart Street building earlier today. When she checked in with her office at lunch, she had a message about Vincent being injured in some sort of accident and promised to send me an update. Apparently, he fell off a ladder and injured his hip, but he’ll be fine. By the way, according to this note, she’s planning to buy the building.”

“Catherine Chandler’s buying that gorgeous building?!” Luz exclaimed.

“She sure is.” Stan grinned, happy to have deflected Luz’s attention away from Vincent. “And she likes your idea about putting in a medical clinic and a legal aid office. It’ll be the perfect set-up for her to do *pro bono* work.”

“Well, if we can’t have it for the Foundation, the next best thing is definitely to have one of our Board members buy it, especially someone with a real commitment to improving the lives of poor people,” Luz commented. “Whatever made you think Cathy would be interested in buying a building?”

“Just a hunch, really, based on an off-hand comment she made back when we first toured the Juniper Street building,” Stan replied. “She said she often wished she could live closer to her office. Well, now she can.”

“So, she’s going to live there, too?” Luz asked.

“Yep, she loved the residence, and it doesn’t even require much refurbishment,” Stan replied. “Two weeks of work, and she could move in. Plus, she wants to convert the second floor into free dormitory housing for kids from the youth program who are aging out of foster care and want to go to college or technical school or get jobs in the city. I knew it would be perfect for her. In fact, I’m gonna call Herb Stanfield right now, and let him know he has a buyer.”

After enjoying her lunch and seeing Kipper on his way, Catherine spent a few minutes tidying up and slightly rearranging the furniture a bit more to make it easier to care for Vincent. Leaving Lucky to her usual afternoon food coma nap on Vincent’s big chair, Catherine dropped off her lunch tray at the kitchen with a quick word of thanks to William and headed back to the infirmary with Vincent’s lunch to see how he was faring.

As soon as Father spotted her from his perch at the medical records desk, he lifted a finger to his lips and pointed over to the hospital bed where Vincent lay, softly snoring, with Mary sitting at his bedside. Father motioned for Catherine to leave the lunch with Mary and come with him to the library for an update.

“Thank you, my dear,” Father said, as Catherine helped him settle into his comfortable desk chair. “I took your advice to heart and kept my ‘fussing,’ as Vincent calls it, to a minimum. He was absolutely right about his condition, of course. There’s no sign of any internal injuries, and no discernable broken bones.”

“Well, thank heaven for small mercies,” Catherine mused. “It could have been so much worse.”

“His hip is my main concern; in fact, an X-ray might reveal a hairline fracture to the iliac crest, but there’s little to be done about that except to monitor him for fever and for him to rest and let it heal,” Father continued. “In sports medicine parlance, Vincent has a hip pointer, which is a deep bruising injury often seen in

football and rugby players, as well as some slightly less severe bruising up and down his right side, mostly at the shoulder and knee. If I didn't know better, I would've assumed he'd had an especially hard landing after parachuting out of an airplane. Thank goodness, he somehow managed to execute the tuck-and-roll landing taught to military paratroopers when he fell, otherwise he surely would have broken bones."

"What kind of recovery period are we looking at?" Catherine asked as she poured them both glasses of water from the pitcher on Father's desk. "I want to be here as much as I can to help alleviate Vincent's boredom while he's stuck on bedrest."

"You certainly have a way with him." Father smiled. "He told me about your *deal*. Good for you! It's hard to predict recovery times for hip pointers, and even harder to predict recovery times for Vincent. His body heals a good deal faster than most. Our main problem will be keeping him in bed to let the swelling and bruising subside and managing his restless energy. He'll be wearing a compression bandage for some time, and we'll keep cold compresses on the worst of the bruising for 15 minutes every hour for the rest of the day. Once he's ambulatory, he'll need crutches and then a cane until he can walk without pain, but the best thing he can do for the next several days is just rest. That will be our biggest challenge – getting Vincent to resist the temptation of getting up and moving about too soon."

"Well, I'll be here for the entire weekend, and I already have our chamber all set up for him," Catherine responded. "Since Vincent's sleeping, let me run over to the phone in the Peis' basement and make a quick call to Joe to request half-days for next week. He owes me for all the extra hours I've been putting in on the Klein paperwork."

"You might ask Lin to have Dr. Wong give you an extra supply of his special chamomile tea blend," Father suggested. "It's the one thing we've discovered that genuinely helps Vincent sleep. As soon as we ruled out internal injuries, Mary coaxed him into having a cup. It worked like a charm, as you just saw."

"Good to know." Catherine grinned. "I'll be back soon."

After stowing a generous supply of Dr. Wong's special tea in their chamber and giving the rest to William for his tea supply, Catherine headed back to the infirmary. She discovered Vincent groggy, but awake, and enjoying the soup and sandwich lunch she'd left with Mary.

"Well, hello there, Sleeping Beauty," Catherine teased him gently. "I hope your pain has eased up some."

"Some, but not enough to contemplate walking yet," Vincent admitted. "I may just stay here for the night," he added apologetically.

"That's not a problem," Catherine replied. "I'm sure Mary and I can fix up one of these other beds for me. Lucky and I don't mind sleeping here."

"Yes indeed," Mary agreed. "Let me go fetch some fresh bedding and extra pillows for Vincent. We'll need more to support his back and help keep any weight off that hip." And she bustled out of the chamber on her latest mission.

"You'd be much more comfortable in our chamber," Vincent objected weakly.

"No, I'll be much more comfortable if I can be wherever *you* are," Catherine countered. "I'm actually happy to hear you're not going to insist upon trying to walk back to our chamber right away. You need to rest your hip as much as possible. Dr. Wong says you could easily reinjure it or even tear a muscle and dislocate it if you move about too much, too soon."

"Yes, that's what Father says, **and what my body is saying as well,**" Vincent admitted, the darker growl of his second nature bleeding through. "**Could I have some more of Mary's tea, please? It helps me sleep better when I'm in pain.**"

"You bet," Catherine responded, as she removed the tea cozy, poured another cup, and added a dollop of honey. "I brought down an extra supply from Dr. Wong. I'm owed some time off at work, so I used the Peis' basement phone to call Joe and ask for half-days next week. I figure you'll appreciate having some company so you don't get too bored while on bed rest."

"You know I always want you with me," Vincent stated. "I just wish it could be under better circumstances. **Being nursed back to health isn't exactly what I have in mind when we spend time together.**"

“But it *is* part of having a committed relationship,” Catherine rejoined. “I know you’d take care of me if I was sick or injured, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d insist upon it, My Catherine,” he replied, finishing his cup of tea and leaning back into his pillows. “I suspect it’s about time for more ice compresses.”

“OK, I can do that,” she responded, opening the ice chest Mary had set up on a side table, removing three compresses, and helping Vincent place them on his shoulder, hip, and knee.

Mary bustled back in just as they’d settled the last of the compresses, and she and Catherine spent a few minutes making up one of the other hospital beds for Catherine’s use. Mary double-checked the placement of the compresses and then left the couple to their visit.

“Once you’re sleeping again, I’ll go fetch some books for us to enjoy this evening. I noticed you’ve been revisiting *Great Expectations*,” Catherine told him. “I also have some good news to share once you’re rested and feeling a bit better.”

“Hmmm ...” was the only reply she received, as Vincent drifted off into a healing sleep.

“Sooooooo, Ms. Corrales seems really nice,” Kipper ventured, as he and Stan enjoyed their take-out dinner from Lin and Henry Pei’s restaurant, sitting at the tiny kitchen table in Stan’s Dad’s apartment.

Luz had actually spent a good bit of time visiting with Stan and Kipper before her Coalition work called her away. She’d proven to be an ardent baseball fan, and wonder of wonders, a die-hard Mets enthusiast. Kipper had quickly charmed her with his thoughts on various players and exaggerated tales about his newly acquired skateboarding skills, all while demolishing two doughnuts, a banana, and a glass of water for a late afternoon snack.

“Yes, Ms. Corrales is *very* nice,” Stan agreed, eyeing the boy. “She’s also extremely bright and frighteningly observant, just like you. You should keep that in mind whenever you talk with her. You saw how she honed right in on you mentioning Cathy and Vincent. She makes connections quickly, and she doesn’t miss a thing.”

“Oh. Well, never mind then,” Kipper replied, disappointed. “I was going to suggest offering her Vincent’s spot at the next Mets home game, since she’s such a big fan. He won’t be able to come to the games until his hip heals up.”

Stan sighed. “I thought about that too, but then she’d have questions about all the other people attending the game in my Skybox. ‘Where did you meet them? Why are they so oddly dressed? Why do they all call the old man Father?’ Like I said, she doesn’t miss anything.”

Kipper nodded and continued inhaling his sweet and sour chicken.

“Slow down, Buddy,” Stan gently instructed. “Your stomach will appreciate it if you actually chew your food a bit longer.”

“You sound just like William.” Another gigantic bite of food. “And Mary.” More food. “And Father,” Kipper groused.

Stan laughed a bit longer at the addition of each successive name and mouthful.

“Let me guess. And Vincent,” he retorted.

“And Catherine.” Kipper giggled, then slurped down the rest of his milk. A pause. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Cathy?” Stan asked. “You know I’m in love with Cathy. I’m working on getting over her, but I’ll probably always love her to some extent.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kipper replied. “But I was talking about Luz, um, Ms. Corrales.”

Stan paused, puzzled, and gave Kipper a long look. “Well, yeah, I do like Luz,” he responded, carefully. “I’ve certainly given her plenty of reasons to thoroughly dislike me. But she’s been kind enough to hear me out, just like you did, and we’ve been able to find a way to work together pretty amicably. So, yeah, I like her. More importantly, I *respect* her.”

“OK, but do you *like* her, like her?” Kipper asked.

“Whoa, where is this coming from?” Stan wondered. “Are you actually asking me *girl stuff*? You’ve just met the lady, Kipper. And I’m barely back in her good graces. Plus, we work together, and dating a colleague is generally not a good idea.”

“All right already!” Kipper replied. “I get it! I get it! ... But she sure is smart ... and *pretty*.”

“Kipper!”

“I’m just sayin’ ... you should *think* about it ...”

“You’re planning to buy ... a *building*?” Vincent asked, stunned, as he snuggled a purring Lucky against his uninjured side.

He’d managed to nap for most of the afternoon, and the three of them had enjoyed a hearty dinner together before Catherine shared her news about touring the Hobart Street building with Stan.

“I was just as shocked as you are when Stan made the suggestion,” Catherine replied. “But this building is amazing, and it actually solves several problems for me. Plus, it’ll make our life together so much easier.”

Vincent stared at her for a moment and then drew in a deep breath. “All right, I’m listening,” he said. “What would be the purpose of the building? What problems would it solve for you?”

“The biggest problem I have right now is safe and *private* access to the Tunnels for both of us from my apartment Above,” Catherine responded. “This building will solve that problem beautifully. The entire top floor is a gorgeous residence with its own secure private elevator all the way to the basement. Stan says the building is located directly above an access corridor to the Tunnels, and the elevator could be extended down into the corridor. Think of it, Vincent! You could simply step into the elevator and ride it directly up to the residence without anyone seeing you. No more dropping down onto my balcony from the roof. I was already strongly tempted to buy the building after the tour, but this injury sealed the deal. I don’t want you endangering yourself anymore just to come visit me Above.”

“So, you would plan to live there?” Vincent asked. “Is the neighborhood safe?”

“Yes, it’s a beautiful neighborhood with a community park close to the Cooper Union campus where Jamie plans to go to college,” Catherine replied. “Also, it’s much closer to the DA’s office than my uptown apartment and 10 minutes closer to

the Hub. I've been thinking about finding an apartment closer to the office for some time now, except Tunnel access would always be an issue. Plus, this building gives me the opportunity to do some wonderful things for the neighborhood and for the Tunnel community."

She showed Vincent the spec sheet for the building and described Stan's suggestions about the medical clinic, the legal aid office, and the second-floor dormitory, as well as her plans for a covered rooftop patio and a garden.

Vincent sighed. "This sounds incredible. Lucky would love the patio and garden, and it would be so much easier for you to drop her off Below before you go to work. Someone could just meet you at the elevator for the exchange. I just wish I could go see the building myself."

"I wish you could too," Catherine replied. "I want to take Mouse, Kanin, and Cullen to see it right away, and we'll be sure to take lots of photos for you. I've asked Stan to bring me a copy of the current blueprints so we can start talking with Kanin, Cullen, and our Helpers about renovations."

"Are you certain this is what you want, My Love?" Vincent asked. "Your father helped you acquire your current apartment, and you've lived there for years. You must have so many memories attached to it. Are you sure you're ready to give up your home?"

Catherine laughed. "My apartment has increasingly become just a place to keep my clothes and sleep and maybe occasionally eat. It's nice, but it's more like a hotel suite than a home. You've never been comfortable there, other than on the balcony, and it certainly isn't safe. Besides, my home isn't a *place*. It's *you*. What we have is worth everything, remember? This building would give me a chance to create a real home for *us* to share Above, just as we share a chamber Below. A place where you could safely come and go as often as you like no matter the time of day or night. And instead of a tiny balcony, we'd have a covered patio and an entire rooftop garden to enjoy. So yes, I'm *very* certain this is what I want. I think we could build a happy life for ourselves there Above and here Below."

Vincent mulled her response over for a moment and then made several aborted attempts to ask a question.

“Vincent, please just say whatever you’re thinking,” Catherine eventually urged. “You can ask me anything. This is an important decision, and I want you to be part of it.”

“I ... I’m well aware you are a wealthy woman, My Love, and I applaud your exceptionally generous plans for how this building could benefit people both Above and Below,” he replied after a few moments. “But surely this building will be an exorbitantly expensive acquisition, including all the renovations you have planned. I just need to be assured this project is within your means. I don’t want you to sacrifice your opportunities to travel the world or purchase art or do other things you might have planned to do with your inheritance and investments, or to jeopardize your retirement.”

Catherine smiled and shook her head. “My Own, you’re so sweet to be concerned, but I’m in a very comfortable position to buy this building and several others if I wished,” she replied. “Even after folding over the trust I received from my mother into the Margaret Chase Charitable Trust, I still have my father’s estate and investments, his apartment, our family home on the Upper West Side and our vacation cottage in Connecticut, Dad’s partnership equity in the Chandler & Coolidge law firm, my apartment, my own investments, and my salary from the DA’s office. Plus, my aunt has left me yet another sizeable and completely unexpected inheritance, which alone will be more than enough to purchase and renovate the building. Apparently, she was impressed with my ‘civic-minded decision to leave corporate law and work for the District Attorney of New York City.’ I was so surprised to hear that when they read her will. She’d never said a word to me about it.”

Vincent just goggled at her, stupefied by this revelation.

“Vincent ... Vincent? ... Vincent, are you all right?”

Finally, he swallowed, cleared his throat, and hoarsely replied, “**My stars, I had no idea!**”

“Yeah, when they coined the phrase ‘an embarrassment of riches,’ I believe they were thinking about me,” she replied. “But you really don’t need to be worried about the cost. I’m actually quite excited to put my aunt’s bequest to good use. I

think she'd love what I'm planning to do with the building, especially since I'll be calling upon the services of Green Thumb for the rooftop garden."

"Well, as I've always counselled the people I love, you should follow your heart, Catherine. If this is truly what you want, of course you have my full support. Your next step will be to talk with Father about your plans and have him get the Council's approval for your private threshold, but that shouldn't be a problem," Vincent responded, his brain finally re-engaging after processing the shocking news about the extent of Catherine's wealth. "I'm sure he'll have recommendations regarding Helpers you could contract for portions of the renovations that would be beyond the skill of our Tunnel workers, such as extending the elevator into the access corridor. You're also going to need a good building manager, maintenance staff, and security services as well, and they'll need to be people who know about the Tunnels. You should probably talk with Albert Johnson about that."

Catherine immediately began making notes. "Once I have young people from the Tunnels living in the dormitory, I'll also need at least one chaperone, plus someone to manage the communal kitchen, and I'll set up an account with Robinson's Grocery to keep the kitchen and cleaning supplies stocked," she commented. "Dorm residents will be expected to clean their own rooms and bathrooms and clean up after themselves in the kitchen, but they'll need supervision."

"This is going to be quite an undertaking, Catherine," Vincent replied. "You'll have staff to manage."

"Well, managing building staff will be part of the building manager's job. But still, isn't it exciting?!" she responded. "I think I understand how Stan feels when he talks about juggling three oranges, an anvil, a live chicken, a chainsaw, and a kitchen sink, and never feeling more alive in his life. By the way, apparently Kipper is the live chicken."

Vincent laughed. "I'd guess closing out his extensive corporate holdings is the anvil and the new foundation is the chainsaw. I wonder what the three oranges represent."

"Who knows?" Catherine giggled. "Probably things in his personal life, like his Dad's apartment and the Manhattan penthouse and his manor house in Scarsdale. I

know the kitchen sink is this new project he and Luz are planning to start in the Bronx. He's also offered to consult with me on the architectural layout for my building."

"He certainly did an amazing job redesigning and directing the renovation of Father's library after Kipper's accident, even in the midst of all his planning for the Juniper Street building. The man does seem to thrive on being busy." Vincent sighed. "I know how he feels. I get restless when I don't have a physical outlet for my energy, and I despise being injured!"

"We'll just have to come up with interesting ways to keep you occupied while you heal," Catherine assured him. "You could take on some extra classes from Father starting on Monday and just have the children report to our chamber for their lessons. That will fill up your mornings while I'm at work."

Vincent attempted a reply, but suddenly yawned instead.

"Looks like your latest cup of tea is doing its job." Catherine smiled, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "Plus, it's time to remove those compresses and make you comfortable for the night."

She cleared away the dinner tray, removed the compresses to the basin Mary had left for them, and replaced the pillows at Vincent's back to help keep his hip elevated.

"I'm going to go change for bed, let Miss Lucky use her litter pan, and I'll be right back," she whispered, gathering up the kitten. "I wouldn't be too surprised if Father comes in to check on you soon."

"Hmmm ... I can't promise I'll be awake," Vincent murmured.

The next morning, after sharing a hearty breakfast with Vincent and Lucky and cajoling him into cooperating with Father's need to check on the progress of his injuries, Catherine asked the older man to stay for a visit and shared with him her plans to buy the Hobart Street building.

Father examined the building's spec sheet for a few minutes and then reached over to place a palm across Catherine's brow.

“It’s just as I feared,” he proclaimed, dramatically. “You’ve caught Building Acquisition Fever from Stan Kaczmarek. I’m afraid there’s no cure.”

Catherine chuckled. “So you’ll help me? I want all of the renovations to be implemented by Tunnel workers and Helpers and to hire Helpers or former Tunnel dwellers as staff and service providers. I thought maybe Sharon Caldwell would like to take on running the medical clinic. She’s young, but I think she’s up for the challenge, and she’d have wonderful advice from Peter and you.”

“Catherine, your plans are marvelous and exceptionally generous,” Father stated. “Are you certain you can manage this financially?”

“Asked and answered, Father,” Vincent replied. “I don’t think you want to know the true extent of Catherine’s wealth. I’m still recovering from the shock. Let’s just say, you don’t need to worry.”

“There will be significant tax advantages to utilizing the first two floors for community service projects, and I plan to do *pro bono* work for Helpers through the legal aid office,” Catherine stated, “But my primary motive for purchasing the building is to establish a home Above – for *us* – that Vincent and other Tunnel members could visit in complete safety. I’ve wanted to do this for a long time, but I just didn’t think it would be possible, and I’m so grateful to Stan for thinking of me when he heard about this building.”

“I’ll present your request for a private threshold for the building to the Council, but I’m certain they’ll have no problems granting permission,” Father said. “I’d like to see it for myself. Would it be possible for me to accompany you and Stan when you take Kanin, Mouse, and Cullen for an inspection tour later this morning?”

“I don’t see why not,” Catherine replied. “The utilities are all turned on, and the elevators are in perfect working condition. You’d have no problems getting around, and Stan’s already planning to send a car to pick us up.”

Vincent sighed, a bit petulantly. “I wish I could go too.”

“Stan’s bringing his best camera, and we’ll get the photos developed at a one-hour shop before we come back,” Catherine promised. “I’ll be able to share them with you this afternoon.”

“Well then, before you leave, I’d like to get settled back in our chamber,” Vincent replied. “I think I should be able to walk that far with some help.”

Father fussed a bit, of course, but Catherine soon had Kevin and James come to help support Vincent. Walking proved to be out of the question for him, but Kevin suggested a chair-assisted fireman’s carry, and soon they had Vincent transported back to his chamber without his feet ever touching the ground.

Vincent was infinitely grateful to be returned to the comfort and privacy of his familiar chamber, but by the time Catherine had him settled in bed with proper support for his back and hip, a purring Lucky at his side, and a fresh cup of Dr. Wong’s tea, he was completely exhausted. She sat with him, gently stroking his hair, until he fell asleep. Then she quietly dressed for her errands Above, leaving a copy of Shakespeare’s Sonnets on his bedside table and summoning Brooke to sit with Vincent and provide any care he might need in her absence.

When Catherine, Stan, and the Tunnel party returned, they learned Vincent had already eaten some lunch and was once again sound asleep. Brooke reported that Vincent and Lucky had enjoyed a pleasant visit with some of the older children during the morning, but he’d tired quickly and spent most of the morning napping.

At Catherine’s suggestion, the group congregated around the Council table for a late lunch, so Father could sit in a more comfortable chair after a long morning on his feet. They eagerly discussed the results of their inspection tour during lunch, and then rolled out the blueprints Stan had brought with him after the dishes had been cleared. They compared the drawings with their on-site measurements and began creating a renovation plan, including the roof, elevator, and utilities upgrades, refurbishment of the third-floor residence, and renovation of the first-floor office suites and the second-floor dormitory.

“Tunnel access is easy,” piped Mouse after a big slurp of milk. “Stan is right. Just dig out and elevator can go straight down, down, down to the Tunnel. Mouse will go find best walk to the Hub after lunch. Much shorter than from Catherine’s apartment.”

“Cathy, you’re going to need some new furniture for the residence,” Stan noted. “Your apartment furnishings are lovely, but they just don’t match the atmosphere and style of this building.”

“Oh, I already have a plan for that,” Catherine responded. “I strongly suspect I’ll be able to set up a rent-to-buy agreement for my apartment and all of its furnishings with my friend Jenny Aronson. She lives in Brooklyn Heights and has always wanted a place in Manhattan but could never afford it. The only piece of furniture I want to bring from the apartment is my mother’s dressing table. Oh, and the red and white hybrid rose bush from my patio! I want that for the rooftop garden.”

“You’re gonna have a lot of shopping to do,” Cullen stated. “You’ve got three bedrooms to furnish, not to mention all the other rooms.”

“You’ve never seen my parents’ home on the Upper West Side.” Catherine smiled, a little sadly. “I had originally hoped to live there, if a way could be found to establish a threshold in the basement, but sadly it’s just not feasible. After Dad passed away, I received a generous offer from one of my cousins to buy the brownstone, but I just haven’t been able to face clearing out the house or his downtown apartment yet.”

“Are there family pieces you’d like to bring into the residence once it’s ready?” Stan asked gently.

“Practically the entire house!” Catherine laughed. “What I don’t need for the residence can be used to help furnish the dormitory or brought Below. Dad bought all new furniture for his apartment, so I think I’ll just pack up his personal belongings and either sell or rent it completely furnished to some Wall Street executive. It’s time.”

“We can help you move,” Cullen offered. “We have Helpers who own a moving company, so getting a truck won’t be a problem. Or we could borrow one of Dominic’s trucks.”

“Cathy, you and I should talk to Albert Johnson later today or tomorrow, if possible,” Stan chimed in. “The building needs to be secured as soon as you take possession of it, and Herb Stanfield is willing to close on the building as early as

this Tuesday. Unfortunately, unsecured renovation properties are hot spots for thieves, and I certainly don't want you living there alone without an established security system and a team on the premises to monitor the doors, lobby, and stairwells."

"I'll get a message off to Albert and invite him to bring his family Below for lunch tomorrow after their church services," Father suggested. "He'll have excellent advice about proper security and staffing for your building. His eldest son, Marlon, is probably more than ready to branch out on his own as a security specialist."

"How quickly do you think we could have the second floor dormitory ready for occupancy?" Kanin asked.

"The first and second floors will probably require another two to three weeks work after we've finished the residence," said Stan. "That's mostly because of all the new plumbing and electrical work we'll need to do on those floors. Once that's complete, it's just sheet rock, paint, cabinetry, appliances, and the three Fs – flooring, fixtures, and finishing work. If we concentrate on the second floor first, it could be ready one week after Cathy moves in."

"Catherine, I know you were thinking about using the dorm mostly for our young people heading off to college or to their first jobs, but we don't have many of them yet," Kanin continued. "Just Michael, who's already settled in a dorm on campus; Brooke, who doesn't want to live Above; and I believe Mouse and Jamie would probably prefer the extra privacy of the Peis' apartment, even though Catherine's building is much closer to The Cooper Union campus. But what about Dwayne and Mildred Pearson? Dwayne recently got a job driving a city bus and would probably appreciate living Above again and having an easier route to work. And Mildred would be a great choice to help supervise the dormitory and manage the kitchen for you. If they say yes, they could move in as soon as the second floor is ready and furnished. Then you wouldn't be living there alone at night except for building security. And you know they both love Lucky, so they could look after her on days you can't bring her Below."

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Kanin, and I definitely had planned to make the dormitory an option for Tunnel residents who have jobs Above, in addition to our young people," Catherine replied. "Perhaps even some of my building staff would

want to live on premises. Father, perhaps we could announce my building plans at dinner tonight and see who might be interested in utilizing the dormitory space on a full- or part-time basis. Depending upon the response, we might want to make different choices about how to renovate the second floor to create more private spaces for adults.”

Father readily agreed, and the group spent some time discussing potential floor layout options for the dormitory, medical clinic, and legal aid office.

“Let me see if Peter and Sharon could come to dinner this evening,” Father suggested. “They’ll have a much better idea about the equipment and storage space needed for a modern medical clinic. It’s been long enough that my knowledge is theoretical at best.”

At that point, Brooke came into the library with word that Vincent was awake and asking for Catherine.

“Well, I should probably check on my patient,” Father stated, as Catherine helped him to his feet. “Then, I believe I require a nice long soak in the bathing pool and a nap after all the walking I’ve done today. Stan, please feel free to continue your discussions with Kanin, Cullen, and Mouse here, and of course, you’re most welcome to stay for dinner. Brooke, would you call for runners to take messages from me to Albert, Peter, and Sharon, please?”

Father’s check-up examination was mercifully short, mostly consisting of head-shaking and marveling over how quickly Vincent’s bruises were healing. He stayed for another half-hour to pet Lucky a bit and share in Vincent’s delight over the photographs Catherine and Stan had taken during the building tour that morning and to help her summarize the plans that had been made so far and answer Vincent’s many questions. Soon, however, Father’s weariness and stiffness began to catch up with him, and he left to call for Kevin to come help him get in and out of the bathing pool safely.

Once Father was out of earshot, Vincent sighed. “Normally, that would be my task,” he commented.

“Perhaps, but Father has needed to ask others to help him before when you were away visiting with Narcissa or working on extended projects in the deeper tunnels or going to the Crystal Cavern,” Catherine replied, as she put out Lucky’s afternoon snack. “Besides, I’ve been away all morning, and now it’s *my* turn to help Lucky monopolize your time.”

“Oh, and how do you propose to occupy me this afternoon, My Catherine?” he insinuated with a cheeky smirk.

“Well, I don’t know,” she replied, innocently, kissing his cheek and carding her fingers through his still dusty hair. “I suspect you’ll need a shampoo and conditioning treatment, followed by a thorough sponge bath at the very least.”

“...”

“Vincent ... Vincent? ... Vincent, are you all right?”

He blinked and cleared his throat. “Umm ... **yes, I’m fine,**” he rasped. **“Perhaps some water, please?”**

Catherine did her best not to giggle as she complied with his request. “Don’t worry, I was just teasing you a bit.”

He downed the water in one long continuous gulp and then blew out a slightly shaky breath. “Well, I suppose a sponge bath would be somewhat the reverse of our previous intimate experience together, wouldn’t it? I won’t be able to manage getting in and out of the bathing pool for at least another day or two, plus I doubt Father would want me to put these bruises in hot water today.”

“...”

“Catherine?”

“Ummm ... I wasn’t sure when you might be ready to talk about that beautiful afternoon,” she murmured. “I think about it all the time. Relive it.”

“I do as well,” he admitted, blushing. “I’ve been thinking it might be time to share myself with you in a similar way, if you wish. A sponge bath would be a caring and loving way to do so. And since I’m injured, I’ll be less likely to ... **lose control.**”

“Oh, Vincent,” she whispered, kissing his hand and holding it against her cheek. “Sometimes losing control is a *good* thing. In an intimate setting, ultimately, letting go and losing control is pretty much the point.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he objected gently. “Right now, I need to understand and always be aware of what is happening inside me in order to trust my motivations regarding you. **I need to know, when all these feelings and desires come pouring out of me, that I will still have your wellbeing foremost in my mind. That thought can *never* come second to the pursuit of the mindlessness of pleasure.**”

“Well, then think about this,” she countered gently. “The last time we were together, *you* didn’t lose control. *I* did. It took me completely by surprise, and our Bond pulled you with me. But were you really mindless?”

“**Consumed by bliss,**” he responded after a moment of reflection. “**Wordless,** but words had flown long before that rapturous moment. Perhaps behaving more ... instinctively than deliberately. But you’re right. **I wasn’t completely unaware of my actions.**”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “You may have been too overwhelmed with emotion and desire for words, but you were in complete control of yourself until suddenly *I* wasn’t. And even in those unexpected, sublime moments, you never once even came close to harming me. I think here, in the privacy of our chamber, you can trust yourself enough to let me care for you and allow yourself to take pleasure in being touched by the woman you love.”

She grinned suddenly and whispered in his ear, “I’ll tell you a secret. Pleasure is a wonderful pain reliever, and you’ll sleep beautifully afterward. I promise.”

He chuffed out a surprised laugh. “Well, something to look forward to, then.”

“We’ll give Father some time for his soak in the bathing pool first,” Catherine said. “I’ll need bathing supplies, and I’m not about to barge in on Father to collect them! He’s had a workout today and deserves some time to relax.”

That earned her a rare genuine belly-laugh from Vincent, and she grinned, so happy to know they could talk more openly about their intimate life together. Lucky scrambled back up onto the bed after finishing her snack, and Vincent

scooped her onto his chest for her customary afternoon nap and gestured for Catherine to come snuggle against his uninjured side so they could pass the time together looking through the photos she'd taken of the third-floor residence in greater detail. She described for him the furniture she wanted to bring in from her parents' home, especially the beautiful desk and all the law books from her Dad's home office, and asked about pieces he might want to bring from Below to help furnish their home Above.

"There are some things I would like to contribute," Vincent murmured after a moment's thought. "You mentioned wanting to use your parents' bedroom furniture in one of the guest bedrooms and your childhood furniture in the other, but you've said nothing about the master bedroom, other than your mother's dressing table."

"I love Mom and Dad's bedroom furniture, but the bed is only queen-size, and I know you'd be more comfortable in a king-size bed," Catherine responded. "Dad did buy a king-size bed for his apartment, but it's very modern minimalist and won't suit the style of the residence at all. I'd planned to bring some furniture catalogs and photos so we could choose our bedroom furniture together."

"I believe we may have the perfect pieces for our bedroom here in our storage chambers," Vincent replied. "I know there's a beautiful king-size bedframe we received from a wealthy Helper's estate, plus a dresser and chest of drawers. Perhaps Cullen could take you 'shopping' in our storage chambers after dinner. He'll know which pieces I have in mind. They'll need to be refinished a bit, but all you'd need to do is purchase a new mattress set and linens for the bed."

"That sounds lovely," Catherine responded. "I want this home to be something we create together."

Just then, the beautiful mantel clock Catherine had given Vincent for their third anniversary chimed three times. Three o'clock in the afternoon.

"I believe I would also like to move our anniversary clock to the fireplace mantel in the living room," Vincent stated. "The other pieces in my so-called clock collection should remain Below because they may be missed by the givers. But that clock is a promise we made to each other – to set aside private time to be

together – one we’re still working to fulfill. I think it should definitely take its place in the home we’re creating for ourselves Above.”

Catherine kissed him gently and murmured, “Consider that an agreement sealed with a kiss. Please think about other items you’d like to bring into our home Above. Maybe Lady Justice? I’ve always liked her.”

“Hmmm,” he replied. “A nice addition to the study, especially one intended for you, Madam Assistant District Attorney. I’ll give the matter some more thought – later. I heard Kevin helping Father out of the bathing pool a while ago. All is quiet now.”

Kipper raced around the last of the tables in the dining hall, scrubbing the surface briskly with a wet cloth and depositing the crumbs in a saucer held just under the edge.

“OK, William,” Kipper announced. “That’s the last of the tables. Anything else, or am I done with lunchtime kitchen duty?”

William peeked up from resetting the clean hot beverage thermos in its stand. The tables were all cleared, and he could tell the boy was fairly vibrating to get out of the dining hall and go see his Uncle Stan.

“All right, young man,” William replied. “I officially declare you off duty until kitchen clean-up after dinner.”

“Aye-aye, Corporal William,” Kipper saluted with a smirk and turned to race out of the hall.

“HOLD IT!” shouted William.

Kipper skidded to a stop and glanced back at the portly cook, who was giving him what his late Mom would have called “the hairy eyeball.” William crooked a finger to summon the pert pre-teen back to his side.

“All right, I can see that you still require some education, young man,” William declared, as Kipper crept over to stand in front of him. “Listen carefully. HOO-ah!”

Kipper’s eyebrows shot up. “What?” he whispered, a bit taken aback.

“In the Army, the response is Hoo-ah, not Aye-aye, not Hoo-Hah, or Oo-Rah, or any other such nonsense you might have picked up from the movies,” William answered. “Think you can remember that, Private Moskowitz?”

Kipper cracked a big grin. “HOO-ah, Corporal William! I can do that.”

“All right, then. DIIIIIIIIIS-missed!” William barked, pointing out the chamber entry, and Kipper took off at a run. “And no running in the Tunnels!”

“Aye-aye, Corporal William,” came the saucy call down the Tunnel.

William laughed in spite of himself. *These kids! They make my hair gray and keep me young at the same time.*

Kipper giggled as he raced down the Tunnel toward the library where he knew Uncle Stan had been meeting with Father and the group of Tunnel folk who had been gone all morning with Catherine to look at some building.

*ANOTHER building! He still hasn't finished the Juniper Street building with the new loft apartment for the two of us. And then there's that high-rise project in the Bronx. How does he keep up with all of it? ... Will he still have time for me? ... Maybe he doesn't ... **want** ... to have time for me?*

Kipper slowed to a halt and slowly peeked into the library, where he could see that Uncle Stan's meeting was breaking up. Catherine and Father were already gone, and Uncle Stan was sharing handshakes with Kanin, Cullen, and Mouse, who mumbled, “OK good, OK fine. Mouse will check out the walk to the Hub from Catherine's building right now,” before scurrying out the door so quickly he didn't even notice Kipper.

But Stan saw him and immediately lit up with a broad grin. “Kipper! There you are! Come look at these building plans before I roll them back up.”

Kipper sauntered toward the council table, replying, “I heard Mouse saying something about this being Catherine's building. Are you doing something to her apartment?”

“Not at all,” Stan responded. “It turns out the building over by The Cooper Union that Luz and I looked at this morning would be a perfect new home for Cathy. Here, look at the plans. She'll live in the top floor residence after we've extended

the private elevator down into the access tunnel so Vincent can ride up unobserved. It'll be so much safer for Vincent and Cathy than her current apartment. Then we'll be renovating the second floor into a dormitory for Tunnel kids studying Above and adults with Topside jobs, and the first floor into a medical clinic and legal aid service."

"Sounds cool," Kipper replied offhandedly.

Stan looked Kipper over a bit. Something was off. "Hey, Buddy, is everything OK?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Kipper answered, still subdued. "I just ... I don't see how ... how you're gonna have time for all of this ... and for me. I mean, Juniper Street isn't finished yet, and you and Luz have that new Bronx project, and now this building for Catherine. It just sounds like a LOT ..."

Stan pulled the boy in for a big hug. "Thanks for telling me this, Kipper," he replied, kneeling down so he could look Kipper right in the eye. "I *always* want you to talk to me when something's bothering you, OK? Remember what Ms. Wallace keeps saying – Communication is vital to setting up the guardianship and building our relationship as nephew and uncle. But everything's going to be good, I *promise*. Three projects? That's nothing for me! I'm used to having a half dozen projects the size of the Bronx building going all at the same time. I have an excellent foreman in charge of Juniper Street, so I only need to check in every now and then. In fact, I'm moving into the loft in two weeks, so our next dinner Up Top will probably be the last one in my Dad's apartment. The Bronx project will be in the hands of a demolition crew for at least a month, if not longer, so I'll have plenty of time to handle Cathy's new building. You're going to see me every bit as much if not MORE than you do right now, OK? You could join my work crew, if you like! And even if I do get really busy, I will *always* make time for you. YOU are the most important person in my life. You do know that, don't you?"

Kipper nodded his head eagerly and then suddenly threw his arms around Stan's neck and burst into tears, and Stan hugged him right back. "Oh, Buddy," Stan murmured, "I thought you *knew*."

"I did, sort of," Kipper snuffled into Stan's neck. "But sometimes, I think I'm dreaming ... or just fooling myself. I mean ... you're a big shot, and I'm nobody."

Stan rocked Kipper slowly back and forth. “Oh, you are FAR from nobody, Christopher Moskowitz,” Stan whispered into Kipper’s ear. “You burst into my life and somehow patched up a great big hole in my heart. And before you say it, NO, it’s not the hole created when I lost Cathy. I’ve known about that one for quite a while. Yours is a place that was quietly waiting just for you, and I never even guessed it existed until you knocked me down and dragged me into an alley.”

“Aloneness,” whispered Kipper. “That’s Vincent’s word for it. He says Catherine ended his Aloneness.”

Aloneness. The word reverberated through Stan’s mind and something in his chest eased.

“Yeah,” he whispered back in a choked voice. “Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

“Me, too,” Kipper replied with a sigh.

Catherine returned from the bathing chamber, arms laden with towels and grooming supplies, to find Vincent softly petting a slumbering Lucky who was still firmly ensconced upon his chest – her favorite spot.

Mine, too, thought Catherine with a grin.

Vincent raised a brow and pointed to his little guest. “I appear to be occupied,” he whispered with a smile.

Catherine giggled as she deposited her supplies on the table and joined him in petting the little calico kitten. “Dr. Rudy says she’s put on a full pound in two weeks,” Catherine whispered. “Just what we were hoping for. Let me see if I can relocate her to your chair, her *second* favorite place.”

Lucky gurgled a sleepy “*Mew*” upon being lifted away from Vincent’s chest, but she settled happily in the chair, kneaded the cushion just a bit, and then continued snoozing. After observing the kitten for a few minutes, Catherine gave Vincent the double thumbs-up, added two more firesticks to the brazier to warm the chamber some more in preparation for Vincent’s bath, and quietly began organizing her supplies.

With Vincent's assistance, she removed most of the pillows from the bed, leaving only the two small pillows keeping his hip elevated, and helped him remove his nightshirt and shift up to the top of the bed, where she'd positioned a small table supporting a basin of warm water. Vincent pulled the pooled sheet from his lap up to mid-chest, while Catherine spread a folded plastic table cloth and then a thick towel under his head and upper back to protect the bed linens, and encouraged him to lean his head back into the basin. With a large plastic measuring cup, she carefully wet his hair and began treating him to a thorough shampoo and scalp massage.

Vincent's deep, appreciative purr soon filled the room. After a while, sultry dark eyes with just the barest rim of blue opened and observed Catherine intently, and when she caught his glance, he openly winked at her, the purr unbroken.

"I know you," she whispered.

"Yes, My Catherine," answered Vincent with the rasp of his second nature. **"This is who I've always been."** The purr resumed and deepened.

"Just restrained to be less, to be more ... acceptable," she sighed. "Caged by your upbringing."

"Don't blame Father," the deep voice sighed. **"He did his best."**

"I know, trial and error," she replied, then grinned. "I don't think his pediatric medical texts were written with you in mind, were they?"

"No." Vincent smiled. **"Not for something that has never been."**

"Someone, not something," Catherine insisted.

"Yes, someone," he agreed. **"Someone who loves you with every ounce, with every *sinew* of my being."** A large hand drew her slowly down for a deep, lingering kiss. The purr rumbled on as Catherine continued kneading his scalp throughout the kiss.

At last, Vincent reluctantly released Catherine so she could rinse the shampoo out of his hair.

“I’m gonna need a fresh basin of water,” Catherine said, giving him a pert kiss on the end of his nose while wrapping his wet hair in a towel. “Don’t go anywhere,” she teased. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m all yours,” Vincent replied, running a possessive hand down her back. **“All of me.”** And he stroked her back a final time, ending with a light, teasing pinch to her rounded derriere.

Catherine flinched a bit in surprise, gaped a smidge at Vincent’s rather smug grin, and then lit up with a broad smile and a hearty chuckle. “I think I like this somewhat naughty side of you, My Own.” She giggled.

Vincent blushed just a bit. **“To quote one of Cullen’s favorite sayings, ‘Fake it ‘til you make it,’”** Vincent responded, then purred. **“I have so many ... thoughts ... Catherine ... dreams...”**

“Oh, so do I,” she replied. “We’ll find our way together. But first, I’m going to get you bathed, and you’re going to let your hip heal. So right now, we’ll explore ... gently.”

“Of course, Nurse Catherine,” Vincent responded. **“I intend to be a most ... cooperative ... patient.”**

She giggled again, her heart all aflutter, and hurried to the bathing chamber to exchange the now soapy water in the wash basin for fresh warm water. She treated Vincent to another scalp massage, this time with a sandalwood scented conditioner, and once again carefully rinsed his hair with the plastic measuring cup. After squeezing as much water as possible out of Vincent’s hair, she spread it out to dry on a fluffy towel and carefully combed through it until it was snarl-free.

“Now, we move on to the bathing portion of the evening,” Catherine informed him, as she moved the small table to the side of the bed, acquired yet another clean basin of warm water, and fetched some sandalwood-scented soap and a wash cloth from her pile of bathing supplies.

Washing Vincent’s face, neck, arms, hands, chest, and back, with towels tucked about his body to help keep the bed linens dry, was somewhat reminiscent of the care Catherine had provided to him the day he was injured. But this time, every movement, every stroke of the washcloth followed by the gentle caress of her

hand, was charged with a slow-burning erotic intensity. Vincent's low rumbling purr gradually developed a churring rasp at the end of each exhale, and he often reached up to draw Catherine down to him for kiss after kiss, exchanging whispered endearments.

His upper body now freshly washed, Catherine patted his skin dry and drew the sheet up under his chin to keep him from becoming chilled. After collecting another fresh basin of water, Catherine murmured, "Feet and legs next."

She drew the bottom of the sheet up to uncover his feet, tenderly washing and massaging his feet and ankles just as she remembered the way her mother would care for her Dad after a long day at court. Vincent sighed and rumbled, **"This is heavenly, My Love. Be careful. You may find me politely requesting a foot massage nearly every day."**

"Oh dear," she responded with a giggle. "You've guessed my dastardly plan to hopelessly ensnare you forever."

"That you have already done with just a smile and a glance and the goodness of your heart, My Catherine," he replied, his eyes intently following her every gesture.

After emptying and rinsing the basin yet again, Catherine returned with more warm water. Uncovering first the injured leg and hip, Catherine marveled at how quickly Vincent's bruises were healing. The angry black and blue marks had already faded to a sickly yellow, and he barely flinched as she carefully washed and dried the injured leg and hip and reapplied the arnica cream from Dr. Wong's apothecary, which Father had been using to treat the bruises.

"You're looking much better," she breathed while covering up the injured leg and revealing Vincent's other leg.

"I still have a good bit of healing to do," Vincent replied with a sigh. **"But I hope to start walking with crutches in another few days."**

"Not for at least a week. No need to rush the healing process," Catherine responded, giving him a long, pointed look. "Do *not* risk reinjuring your hip just because you might be getting bored."

“Now, how could I possibly be bored when *you* are with me?” Vincent asked a bit saucily, then bit off a groan and a long sigh when Catherine began washing his leg with her bare soapy hands. **“Oh,”** he moaned. **“Oh, I take back my previous statement. THIS is heaven, My Love.”**

Inwardly, Catherine smiled, thinking, *Oh, you’ll be changing your mind again very soon, My Love.*

The raspy purr returned at full volume, and Catherine spent long languorous moments massaging and kneading Vincent’s marvelously muscled leg, first with her soapy hands, then rinsing with the wet washcloth and patting him dry. His purr continued to grow in intensity, and when she glanced up, she could see that his eyes had gone completely black. Words had deserted him.

He had expected her to cover up his leg, but his entire body tensed and a long, inarticulate moan escaped him when soft, warm, wet, soapy hands pushed aside the sheet and glided once again over his uninjured hip, across his belly, and down his groin to gently, lovingly caress and stroke his engorged, aching, and most private parts. His hands gripped the sides of the mattress, claws sinking into the protective toweling, his head tossed from side to side, and his body arched as Catherine drew him inexorably into a sudden, powerful climax that drove a roar from the base of his chest to rumble out of his panting, rasping throat. His senses whited out completely, and for long minutes he floated in a sea of clouds, dimly aware as gentle hands washed away the evidence of his bliss and covered him with a crisp, clean sheet and a warm blanket.

Once again, I stand corrected, he thought before lapsing completely into a deep, healing sleep. *THIS surely is heaven.*

Three weeks later on a Friday evening, Helper Harold Pleasants and his finest stretch limousine with blackout tinted windows pulled into the alley behind Dr. Wong’s apothecary just after nightfall. A grinning Stan Kaczmarek alighted to open the back doors and welcome Father, Mary, Catherine, and a confident Vincent, swinging along expertly on his crutches, into the interior of the luxury vehicle.

After a twenty-minute drive, the limousine pulled up to the small underground parking lot of the Hobart Street building. Harold entered a passcode on the access panel, and the security gate rose, admitting them to the parking deck. Wearing a sharp uniform, Marlon Johnson, Albert's eldest son and Catherine's new building manager, waited for them outside the locked basement entry door.

"Welcome home, Ms. Chandler," Marlon greeted her with a broad smile. "Ready to try out your new security system?"

"I certainly am," Catherine replied as she happily punched in her personal passcode to unlock the door and electronically register her arrival with the upstairs security team.

"There are only Helpers and Tunnel dwellers here in the building right now," Marlon told the group. "We won't be opening the ground floor medical clinic and legal aid office to the general public for another two or three weeks. So, Vincent, you should feel free to wander around on any of the floors this weekend, if you like, to check out the work in progress."

"Thanks, Marlon," Vincent replied. "But I think I'd like to start with the residence first."

Catherine led the group over to her private elevator and punched in her passcode, summoning the elevator to the basement level.

"I'm going to make one short detour before we go to the residence," she said, and pressed the button marked *Private Sub-Level*.

The doors opened into the access tunnel beneath the building, where Mouse and Jamie were happily waiting.

"Oh, Catherine," Jamie gushed, giving her a big hug. "The walk from the Hub to your building is so EASY! Vincent, there are just a few stairs and NO steep inclines. Once you get your stamina back, you'll be able to manage it easily, even on crutches."

"Told ya!" Mouse added. "Good location. Easy walk. Father could do it right now."

The group exited for a moment to examine the access keypad for the elevator, and Marlon provided Vincent with his private passcode and Father with a passcode for approved Tunnel dwellers to use.

“Father, once a Tunnel dweller uses this passcode and enters the elevator, the telephone inside the elevator will ring,” Marlon stated as he pointed out these features. “You’ll need to identify yourself either to Vincent or Catherine or to the security officer in charge if they’re not home, so they can press the button allowing you to travel up to the residence.”

“This is excellent, Marlon,” Father replied. “Practical, easy to use, but very secure.”

“Marlon and I took great care to select a system that would provide the ultimate in safety for Vincent and Cathy, but still be accessible for the Tunnel family,” Stan added. He turned to Catherine. “Are you ready to see your new home?”

“I’m more than ready,” Catherine gushed. “This is amazing, Stan! I can’t believe you pulled this off in just three weeks!”

“Cullen, Kanin, and the work crew have moved in all the furniture and placed it according to the design plans,” Stan replied. “We’ve done some of the general unpacking – kitchen, dining room, bathrooms, guest rooms, laundry – but we’ve left your personal boxes in the study and master bedroom for you and Vincent to unpack and organize as you wish.”

“A wise decision,” Vincent noted with a grin. “Madam Assistant District Attorney is very particular about the organization of her study. Not to mention her walk-in closet.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark!” Catherine replied to general good-natured laughter.

The group re-entered the elevator using Father’s passcode, and he clearly enjoyed answering the phone and speaking with Jeffrey Hicks, a former Tunnel dweller who had been working with Albert Johnson’s security firm for several years. Soon, the elevator came to a smooth stop at the top floor, and the group stepped into the beautiful marble foyer, accented with a handsome entryway rug from the former Chandler brownstone, a round console table bearing a lovely floral centerpiece, and coat closet.

“Uncle Stan!” called Kipper, who came bounding out of the living room. “Hey, Catherine! Come see your new place! All the furniture fit perfectly, just as you imagined it!”

Cullen, Kanin, and the rest of the moving crew soon came out to welcome Catherine to her new home and help lead the group on a guided tour of the beautiful residence with all of the magnificent furniture, antiques, and wonderful lighting Catherine had selected from her parents’ former home. Mary made note of the mantel clock in the living room, and Father’s eyebrows rose when he spotted Lady Liberty in the study. The master bedroom furniture Vincent had chosen for Cullen to refinish was also much admired, along with Caroline Chandler’s elegant dressing table.

Soon, the group gathered at the roof access stairs to go up and enjoy the covered patio and rooftop garden. “According to Green Thumb, we should have late summer vegetables to share, just like the rooftop garden at Stan’s building,” Catherine pointed out to Father.

Then, she pulled a large golf umbrella out of a storage bench on the patio and handed it to Vincent. Sweeping an arm around to note how the positioning of the neighboring buildings left very few windows with any sort of bird’s-eye view of her building’s rooftop, Catherine said, “There’s little chance we would be observed when enjoying the garden, but just in case, I have this umbrella for Vincent to use.”

“Lucky will love it up here,” Vincent noted, as he gently selected a flower from Catherine’s hybrid red-and-white rosebush and tucked it behind her ear. “So much space to run around and play.”

“As long as she doesn’t chew on the plants,” Stan added. “We’ll have to check your foliage against a list of plants that are poisonous to cats. When I was little, we lost one of Mom’s favorite strays to a discarded bouquet of lilies.”

“Have no fear,” Catherine chirped. “I already let Green Thumb know that I have a pet cat, and they made sure none of their plant selections or my rosebush would be harmful to Lucky.”

“William knows, too,” Mouse piped up. “When Tunnel workers come to weed and harvest and replant, we stick to the Green Thumb plan. Protect Lucky.”

“That’s great,” Catherine sighed.

“Well, I happen to know that there’s a feast waiting for us in the kitchen, courtesy of William, who is holding down the fort at the St. Francis soup kitchen,” Mary announced. “A welcome home party for Catherine.”

Soon the dining room was full of conversation and laughter, as the group enjoyed some favorite Tunnel finger foods, cups of tea, and even glasses of champagne delivered from Peter Alcott, who included a note for Catherine promising to visit later in the week. After a while, though, the leave-taking began, with Stan and Kipper heading off to Stan’s loft at the Juniper Street building, and Father, Mary, and the rest of the Tunnel guests preparing to walk back to the Hub.

Father gave Vincent an extra-tight hug. “You’re certain about spending this weekend Above?” Father asked.

“Very certain,” Vincent replied. “You know how to reach us in case of any emergency. I don’t want Catherine to be here alone on her first night in this new place. I fully intend to spend this entire weekend here with Catherine.”

“Well, Marlon and his security team will be here,” Father noted.

“Yes, but that’s not the kind of Aloneness that concerns me,” Vincent replied. “By the end of next week, the dormitory level will be ready for Dwayne and Mildred Pearson, Marlon, and Jeffrey Hicks to move in. Then, Catherine will have true Tunnel neighbors and staff living here Above. But until then, I want to be with her at night. Mouse and Jamie have offered to help me with the walk back, if necessary.”

“Be well, then, my son,” Father responded. “Mary and I will look after Lucky, so you can unpack in peace. Have a wonderful weekend in this truly lovely home. Your Catherine has done very well. Everything looks like it was *meant* to be here.”

Including me, thought Vincent with a quiet grin. *Including something that has never been*. And in his head, he could hear Catherine’s correction from a few weeks ago. *Someone, not something*.

After the last guest departed, Catherine and Vincent wandered the residence once again before settling in the master bedroom to unpack some clothing and necessities for their first night in this new home. When Catherine emerged from

hanging up a few work outfits in the walk-in closet in preparation for returning to work on Monday, she spied Vincent peering through the curtains of the bedroom's floor-to-ceiling windows.

She circled Vincent's waist with her arms and asked, "Are you up to some stargazing before we settle down for the night?"

"Of course," he replied. "Whatever you wish. I thought you might want to get your bedroom completely unpacked."

"Nah," she answered. "I just wanted to hang up a few things for work so the wrinkles can fall out by Monday. Let's take the last of the champagne and go up to the patio and enjoy the night sky from our new vantagepoint on the world."

Together, they snuggled on one of the large loungers under the covered patio, sipping champagne and taking in the view over Hobart Square Park.

"It isn't Central Park," Catherine murmured. "But it does have its own charm."

"Yes," Vincent replied. After a moment of silence, he continued, "Are you happy with your decision, My Love?"

"Oh, yes!" she immediately responded. "My new home is even more beautiful than I imagined. Everywhere I look, I'm surrounded by happy memories of my parents and my childhood in the brownstone, and lovely pieces from our chamber Below, representing the life and the future we're building together. I never realized just how much I wanted ... NEEDED ... this safe home Above for us."

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned," Vincent quoted, looking into Catherine's questioning eyes. **"Maya Angelou. I, too, am grateful to be able to come to you at last in safety."**



GAZES by Paula

From *Twas a Long Parting* by Emily Dickinson

MY FIRST CONVENTION
SAN FRANCISCO 2003
By Deb Fowler

I got my first computer around Christmas in 2000, purchased through QVC with six interest-free monthly payments. The first thing I searched for was Beauty and the Beast. I hopped between various websites until I discovered fandom around 2001. I learned about conventions too late to attend the 2002 event, so I set my sights on 2003 instead.

I had to overcome the guilt I felt about spending money and time on myself. I was always the one taking care of everyone else, and it made me feel really bad when I tried to do something for myself. It was tough to shake that mindset, and it still creeps back into my thoughts more often than I'd like.

I managed to complete my registration and began saving for the other expenses. Initially, I had hoped to stay for the entire week, but the hotel room was too pricey, so I planned to attend just the three days of the convention. While looking for more information, I discovered the roomie board and found three people who were open to sharing a room with me, which allowed me to stay the whole week after all.

I was the first of my new roommates to arrive and spent the whole day in my room, too nervous to go out. I had grown used to people dismissing my love for the show and not getting why I was so passionate about it, and I was afraid I'd hear more of the same. Back then, there wasn't much online content for BATB that I could find, so I had no idea what I was walking into. It was a big step to take, but I'm so glad I did.

After heading to the registration table, I stumbled on a place called the dealer room. It felt like BATB Heaven, with an endless array of treasures to discover. I made my way into the art room, and it completely blew my mind. The sheer amount of art in every form was overwhelming. As I explored further, I came across actual costumes from the show, ones worn by the actors themselves.

I was standing in front of Catherine's red cape, debating whether I could touch it, when a voice behind me asked if I wanted to try it on. It was Chan. I must have been so captivated by the cape that I didn't even notice her approaching. I'm sure she's seen plenty of new fans with the same awe-struck expression on their faces. I

tried on the cape, and then Chan gave me a tour of the art room. She shared details about nearly every piece—who the artist was, whether it was from an episode, and which episode it came from. She didn't have to welcome me into the Beauty and the Beast Convention world, but she did.

After that, I became a little bolder and started participating more. Everywhere I went, I was greeted with warmth and kindness. After feeling isolated for so long, like I was in a Beauty and the Beast desert, thinking no one understood the significance of this to me, I suddenly found myself surrounded by people who truly got it. They still believed in the Dream and remembered Love, just as I did. I felt like I had finally found my home.

Since then, I've been to places I would have never been and made life-long friends not only in the US, but all over the world. The Add-On adventures have been a wonderful way to view new places with friends. I look forward to spending more time my BATB family and going on more adventures with old and new friends.

RANDOM CHANCES

By Cedany

I first stumbled upon *Beauty and the Beast* around November of 2022 by random chance in the form of a synopsis video on YouTube. I decided—after having the whole thing spoiled for me—that I needed to actually find the show and watch it. There was just something so arrestingly cozy and comforting about the tunnels, not to mention the heavy overtones of optimism...a thing that I desperately needed after the previous two years. I wanted to explore those tunnels, and chat with their inhabitants.

Wouldn't you know, finding it in full took almost exactly a year...a year during which I discovered a considerable amount of fan fiction and started reading blind, having fun trying to piece together what seemed to be canon and who was who.

Cut to January 2024—while still mid-Season Two, I decided to add a fic of my own to the pile. I had written fan fiction before, but hadn't written anything at all in over three years...and (so I thought), it showed—especially in comparison to most of the fics I had been reading. In short, I felt a bit intimidated by the fandom. Pretty much immediately after posting my fic to AO3, I regretted it, and made another post on the fanfiction subreddit expressing said regret and intimidation, sort of wondering aloud to the masses whether or not I should take it down. In this post, I let slip a somewhat identifying detail about the show, or rather a major part of fanon (SND), while managing to keep it vague enough...or so I thought.

The next day, among a wealth of responses summed up with a resounding, “Leave it up!” I saw one that stood out, from another user, saying that this sounded a lot like a fandom they were in, and that they had just written a fic for a big event that was coming up.

I had come across something called “Winterfest Online” at some point in my search for any fan spaces dedicated to BATB, and replied that I thought we might be in the same fandom, asking if that was the event in question. Not long after, I had a response—

“Yep, same fandom! This is wild.”

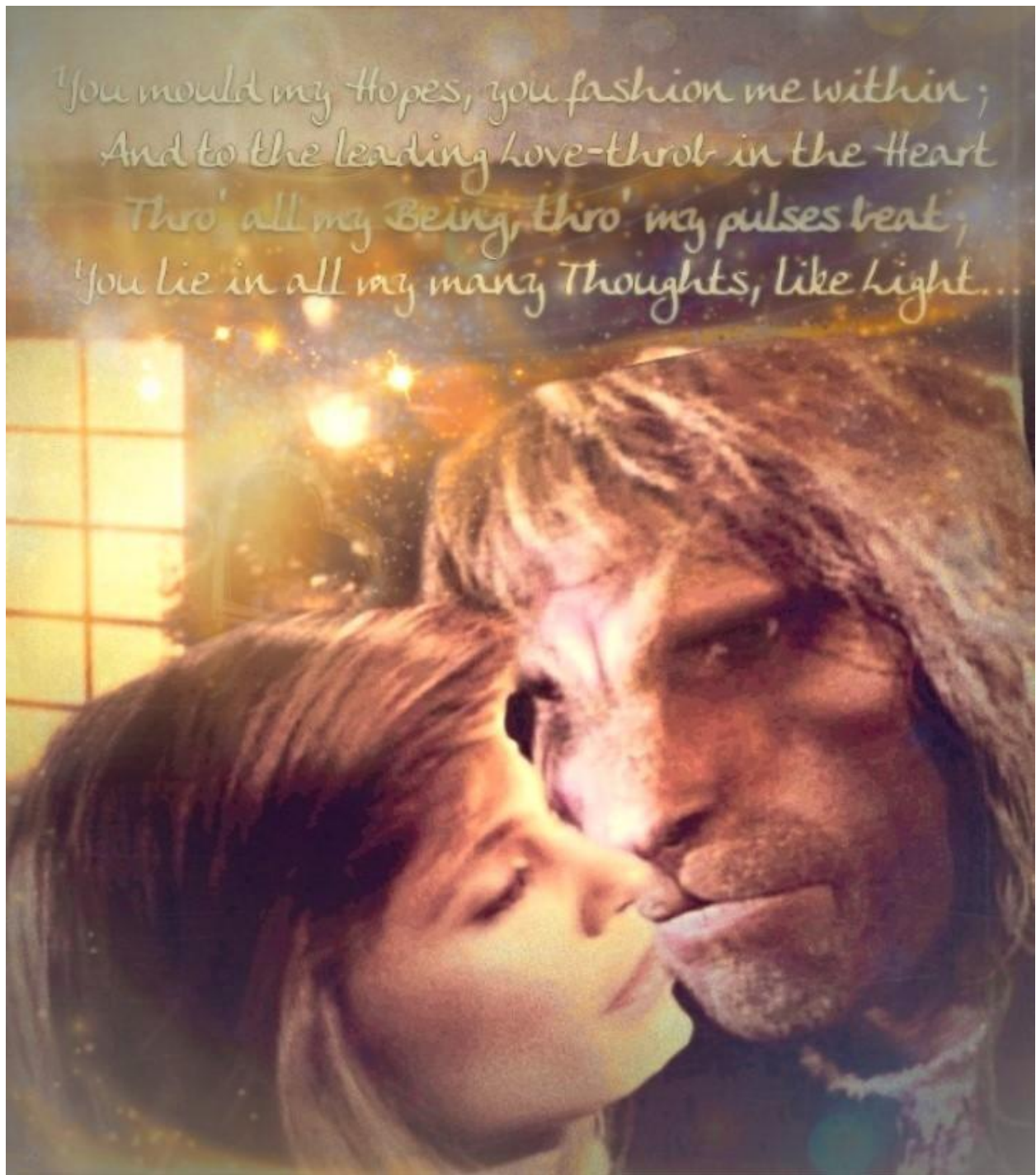
An excited exchange via private messages followed—what were the chances of us meeting? Since WFOL was only a few weeks away, they sent me some links to the website and chat room that the fandom used—which I hadn’t been able to actually find, for all my searching—and encouraged me to hop in the chat and introduce myself, as the group was always happy to have new members. I honestly didn’t expect to stick around—after all, I had never really been involved in any fandom before and had no intention of starting. Hanging out on the fringes of groups has kinda been my thing for as long as I can remember.

However, the conversation that followed an overwhelming flurry of “Hi!”s that first day solidified my decision to hang around for the rest of the week. I’d never really had the chance to talk to other people about a mutual interest...at least, not in any great detail. One week later, after multiple watch parties, speculative conversations, and an ever-growing list of plot bunnies, I knew that I’d found a safe haven in a crazy world.

It’s strange how a work of fiction can change your perspective. Like Catherine, I found something that I didn’t even know I was looking for, and it’s changed me for the better. I still don’t know how I feel about taking part of my moral philosophy from a TV show, but all in all...I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing. I find myself trying to be more patient and understanding, and—dare I say it?—helpful. BATB may be a fantasy, but its values are real and shared by its fans.

The world may be a cruel place sometimes, but good people are out there...if you look for them.

P.S.—Thank you all very much for not actually being intimidating :)



REFLECTIONS by Paula

From *The Presence of Love* by Samuel Coleridge

AN EVER-FIXED MARK

By Carolyn Kleinsorge

Rating: R (for violence, child endangerment, and sexual situations)

To my readers

“An Ever-Fixed Mark” is a continuation of a trilogy I wrote back in 1991 and 1992.. For those who have not read those books, I have tried to put in part of that storyline, that you are not completely lost. I hope that I accomplished this.

For those who want to read the trilogy, you can find them online in the Treasure Chambers. ‘Shall Have No Dominion, The Next Waltz and O Sweetest Song’

I would like to thank Allison Duggins, without whose help this book could not have been written. Her expertise and help with my computer problems, has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank my sister-by-choice, Gloria Dittmann, for reading each chapter, as the book was being written. She gave me ideas that I had thought about. She also provided the title.

Rosanna Sigue, another “Beauty and the Beast” fan, was also one of my readers, and I thank her for taking the time to go over it for me.

My son, Christopher, who watched every episode with me when the series originally aired, was also one of my readers. He knew the album “Of Love and Hope” so well, that at the age of ten, he would quote Shakespeare Sonnets to his teachers.

Lastly, I need to thank my oldest granddaughter, who until today, did not know that she contributed to this book. I used a book that she had written while in the fourth grade, for Vincent to read to Jacob. Thank you, Acacia.

And now, venture forth into the world of Vincent and Catherine and discover—An Ever- Fixed Mark...

Vincent felt Catherine leave their bed as his eyes slowly opened. For so many years he had been awake before dawn, walking through the tunnels, checking to be certain that all was well in his world Below. Now, and for the rest of his life, he would still be in bed, lying quietly beside his beautiful wife; holding her in his arms. Now and until the day he died, he would sleep longer than he had for the first thirty years of his life. The wonder of it still amazed him.

He watched as Catherine took their son from the large crib he shared with his sister. Slowly, he sat up and moved to the end of their bed. She would soon be wanting to lean back against him when she came back to feed their young son.

“How I love that you always know what it is that I need.”

Vincent heard her words and smiled. He stood up just long enough to pull on his drawstring pants, then returned to their bed to be ready when Catherine came back with their son. He watched as she walked slowly to their bed and, as she always did, leaned back against his chest. It was their morning ritual now. Each morning, she would get up, put on her nightshirt, and pick up one of their children. Then she would come back to lean against his body among the pillows as she fed each child their breakfast.

“I will never tire of watching you with one of the babies at your breast,” he told her. “I am still filled with awe every time.” Vincent put his arm around Catherine’s shoulder and kissed the top of her head. How he loved the scent that was only hers, and the softness of her hair beneath his chin.

“Momma,” Charles said softly as he touched his mother’s breast. Vincent would never become accustomed to seeing the small image of

himself, held against his wife's beautiful body. Her skin was so pale against the golden fur of their son.

Vincent looked on as Charles nursed greedily at his mother's breast. He had noticed that since the night he was born, his son was always careful to touch Catherine with the pads of his fingers. He never once scratched her accidentally.

"I have noticed that too," Catherine told him. "Your son is just as gentle with me as you are." Vincent continued to rest his head against Catherine's hair as he looked down at their son. He never thought to see such a sight. Here was a smaller version of himself, held against the breast of the woman he loved.

"I love our mornings," Catherine told him. "It feels so nice to have you behind me. It's just not the same when you're gone. Pillows are nice, but they aren't any compensation for your warm, strong back."

"I do not have to leave you very often, Catherine," he told her, kissing the softness of her hair again. "The visit to the chamber where Mouse and Elliot are working was planned at the last Council meeting. You know that."

"Yes," Catherine sighed, "I knew it was coming. I just miss you when you're away from us." She leaned back to be even closer, looking at the smaller image of her husband. Even now, it was hard for her to picture Vincent at this age.

“Ah, but I never had a mother feed me from her breast,” he answered, hearing her thoughts as if they were his own.

Catherine looked up at him. “Does it bother you that you have no idea who your mother was?” She asked. The question had come up before in the years she had known him, but it still worried her that he had missed out on so much.

“We have spoken of this, Catherine,” Vincent answered. “I had my surrogate mother, Anna, and of course, Father was always there. What brought this on?” He enclosed in his arms, until she felt even closer. He could feel the sorrow that had suddenly filled her heart.

“Just looking at Charles, I suppose,” she told him. “When I try to picture you at his age, I wonder how you ever survived.”

“Catherine,” he said softly, kissing her cheek, “What happened to me as a child is far behind the both of us. It no longer presses on my soul. I have you, and now I have our three children. What more could I possibly desire?” Vincent lifted Catherine’s chin and gave her a long, intimate kiss. Her mouth opened under his, and their love surrounded him. Then he broke off the kiss and told her, “I want nothing more in this world than what I have with me now, today.”

Catherine closed her eyes and grew silent. She didn’t really know what had brought her to question him again. Maybe it was just the thought of being without him for two nights. She always felt so lonely when he left her, even for one night. She had slept alone for years, and it had never mattered. Now, it seemed, she could hardly sleep without his warm body against hers.

“Love, faithful love, recall’d thee to my mind...”

She heard him and smiled. *“But how could I forget thee,”* Catherine answered. She warmed as Vincent leaned down again to deepen his kiss. How she loved how often he kissed her now. All of his hesitation was finally gone. Together they had discovered the very intimacy that they had so longed for.

“And now that intimacy is ours,” Vincent told her softly, lifting his lips from hers. “And we have years of intimacy ahead of us, Catherine. Years in which we will watch our children grow, as we grow old together.”

“Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be.”

“Precisely.” Vincent said, as he looked down again at the image of himself, resting against Catherine’s breast. The sight still filled him with an overwhelming sense of wonder and awe. After so many years of loneliness, he was now a husband, and the father of three children. While he watched, he saw the baby’s mouth fall away from Catherine’s nipple. Charles had finished his breakfast.

“I will take him, Catherine,” Vincent said, gently moving from behind his wife, and taking his son from her arms. Holding his son against his shoulder, Vincent walked slowly as he carried Charles back to where his sister waited. Caroline was standing up in their crib, holding onto the crib rail, and watching him as he drew closer.

“I do believe that Caroline has been waiting her turn with no little impatience, Catherine,” he said, laying Charles down onto his side of the crib and picking up his daughter. It still amazed him that he actually held one of their twins in his arms. No matter how long he lived, he would never forget what an absolute miracle his children were.

Vincent thought of Caroline as a smaller version of his lovely wife. She had green eyes, and when he held her, as he did now, her facial features seemed more and more to look like his wife. What a wonderful word, *Wife*. He had never thought to know the feeling of such a word. It was overwhelming at times like this; the knowledge that Catherine had become, after so many years of longing, his wife. It was still a marvel to him.

Vincent leaned down and handed their daughter to Catherine, then carefully got back into bed, so that she could lean against him. Putting his arm around her once more, he looked down as Caroline greedily grabbed at Catherine’s nipple.

“I think you were right about Caroline being impatient,” Catherine told him, as her daughter pulled greedily at her other breast.

“Yes,” he said, “I can feel the pull. It is much stronger than Charles’ was.” He looked down at the little image of Catherine and ran his fingers through the baby’s hair. She was born with so much of it.

Catherine chuckled. “I was born with a head full of hair just like Caroline,” she told him. “It’s not that unusual.”

Vincent smiled as he continued to watch their daughter. She was holding her hand against Catherine's breast, as if to make certain not to lose it. He bent down and kissed the baby-fine hair. To him, she, as well as her brother, were still miracles.

"Even after nine months?" Catherine asked him.

Vincent smiled. "Yes love. Even after nine months." he was unable to look away. Years with Catherine and their three children would always amaze him. No matter how long he lived, he would always think of their life together as the miracle it was.

"I still haven't gotten use to the fact that we don't have the same closeness that we do with Jacob," Catherine told him. "But then, it's obvious that these children have their own bond." Vincent watched as Caroline stopped feeding and looked up into her father's eyes. They were so much like Catherine's, although he thought that the baby's eyes were a more vivid shade of green.

"I sometimes wonder what she thinks of when she looks at me," Vincent said softly. "Does she look at you and then at me and wonder why we are so very different?"

Catherine looked up at her husband; seeing the tender smile that had been so often on his lips since the babies were born. "I really think that she just likes to look at her daddy," she answered. "I know that *I* like to look at you. Why shouldn't she?"

The baby was still looking at him, when her small hand reached up to touch her father's face. It was a gentle touch. And in her eyes, there was such intensity; as if the baby was looking into his soul. Vincent picked Caroline up from her mother's arms and held her closer, giving her back look for look. They might not have the same bond that he shared with Jacob and Catherine, but there was something Caroline was saying in that very intensive gaze. Vincent stilled his mind, trying very hard to understand what it was.

"Are the two of you having a staring contest?" Catherine asked. She too had seen their daughter's deliberate look. "Can you hear or feel anything Vincent?" She opened her mind, trying as hard as her husband, to discern something that she could not feel,

Vincent held the baby close to his chest, breaking away from that intensive gaze. "Not truly," he told Catherine. "But there was something there that I have not felt before. Did you feel it? I wish we could understand what she wants to tell us."

"No," Catherine answered, "I couldn't feel a thing except the intensity of your mind. I guess that we'll just have to wait until she learns more words, my love. Without our bond, she and her brother are not picking up words as quickly as Jacob did." Catherine thought about that for a moment. "Jacob could hear what we were saying to each other even when we weren't speaking. It seemed easier for him to pick up language sooner than most children." She paused, watching Vincent as he walked with their daughter. How she loved to watch him walk. No man had ever been as graceful as Vincent.

"I will never understand why you find me to be graceful, Catherine."

Catherine laughed. “That’s because you can’t see yourself walking,” she replied. “Watch yourself through our bond sometime, and you’ll see what I mean.” Catherine kept looking as Vincent shook his head. She knew that no matter how many times she repeated herself, he would never understand why she thought of his walk as sensual. Sometimes, early in the morning like this, she just wanted to have him come back to bed and make love to her.

“Another one of these mornings,” Vincent told her. “I just may take you up on that offer.” He turned back and looked at her resting against the pillows of their bed. “However,” he continued, “we would need to close the door. Jacob is very attuned to us. However, I do believe that he would be loath to have his breakfast postponed again because his mother and father had the door closed. Has he not mentioned that very thing to you, love?”

Cathine sighed. “Yes,” she said. “He told me that he doesn’t like having his breakfast alone with Father in the little kitchen. He said that Father always has a strange look on his face while they are eating.”

“That is because Father knows precisely *why* Jacob is having breakfast with him”

“Don’t you think that he would be used to the idea that his son is doing exactly what other husbands do?” Catherine complained. “It’s been over two years since Jacob was born, and the twins are nine months old. He certainly can’t believe that they came by osmosis,”

“Father knows precisely how children are made, Catherine,” Vincent told her. “He is after all a physician and a scientist.” Vincent put Caroline back into the crib beside her brother. As soon as she was next to him,

Caroline reached out and clasped her brother's hand in hers. The small gesture made Vincent smile.

"Well, I just wish he wouldn't be so obvious about it. He makes Jacob nervous." Catherine knew Father had finally accepted the fact that his son was now married, with three, small children. But she still didn't understand why the thought of Vincent making love to her, made him so anxious. She had explained that Vincent never hurt her. That he *would* never hurt her.

Catherine decided to change the subject while she watched Vincent come back to their bed. "Have you noticed," she began, "that they are the most well-behaved babies? Just like their brother was." When Vincent was back beside her, Catherine leaned over to give him a soft kiss. She loved the feel of his hair against her skin. She ran her hand across his chest, luxuriating in the marvelous feel of it beneath her fingers. Then she sat back and leaned against Vincent's chest. It was her favorite place to be.

"I wish you could have nursed Jacob." Vincent told her. Catherine saw his face move closer to hers; turning his head so that their lips could meet. He was no longer shy to kiss her; even in front of the entire community. She loved the changes in him. To know that he now saw himself as she had always seen him: as a man, filled her heart and soul.

"Speaking of Jacob," Catherine murmured against his lips. "I think he's on his way here to say good morning." She looked up to see their older son watching from the doorway to their chamber. He looked at his parents for a moment, then walked over to the crib to see Charles and Caroline.

"Day're holding hands, Momma," he said, turning back to look at his two favorite people. "Is that because of *dare* bond?"

“We believe so, Jacob,” his momma told him. “It seems to be very strong.” Jacob turned back to his brother and sister.

“Hello baby,” he said to his little brother. “Wen are you going to get up and play wit me?” He put his hand down into the crib and his brother grabbed at his fingers. “Do you want to play tickle?” He asked, letting his fingers play under the baby’s chin and neck. He watched as Charles smiled and gave his brother a little laugh. “I taut so.” Jacob continued to tickle his brother for a few minutes, then did the same to his sister. She laughed at him too, and held his fingers. Then Caroline put one of his fingers into her mouth.

“Daddy,” he said very softly. He didn’t want to scare the baby. “Caroline has one of my fingers in her mout” He turned and looked at his daddy. “Is it okay if she does dat?” The feel of her wet mouth against his finger was a new sensation. Neither of the babies had ever done that before.

“Are your fingers clean?” Daddy asked him. That made sense. He remembered how he always put his stuffed cow’s foot into his mouth when he was little. He loved his Moo Cow.

“Of course, daddy,” Jacob answered. “Fader would never let me leave if I didn’t wass my face and hands wen I got up.” He let Caroline suck on his finger for a little bit more, then took it out of her mouth. It was wet, so he rubbed against his pants. It wasn’t *that* wet.

Jacob turned and went over to his parent’s bed. He climbed up onto the mattress and sat down between his daddy and his momma’s legs. “Good

morning daddy and momma,” he said, “Are you going to be getting up soon? I’m hungry.”

Vincent leaned down and picked up his oldest son. It was hard to believe that he was already two years old. It seemed like only yesterday that he had been as small as Caroline and Charles.

“Do you not want your morning snuggle, Jacob?” his daddy asked as he put his arms around his daddy’s strong neck. He always thought that hugging his daddy was like hugging a big lion. Especially when he didn’t have a shirt on. His chest was warm and furry, and very nice for snuggling. He had seen pictures of lions in a book, and knew that was what made his daddy different.

“Of course I want my snuggle,” he replied. “I always want my snuggle. I just forgot because Caroline was teeing on my finger. It’s a good ting dat see only has tve teef.” Jacob could feel his father laughing because his chest was moving under his head. then momma started to laugh too, as she put her arms around both him and his daddy. It was a nice, big snuggle. It lasted a long time.

“We will all go down to breakfast, Jacob,” his daddy told him. “Momma and I will be getting up just as soon as we finish our snuggle.” Jacob liked snuggling. His daddy was so very big and strong, and his momma always smelled like roses. Snuggling was as nice as could be.

All of a sudden Jacob could hear his momma through their bond. She didn’t want the snuggle to end. “We can keep snuggling if you want to Momma,” he told her. “I’m hungry, but snuggling is very, very nice.” But, then he remembered that there was something he had wanted to ask.

“Daddy, “ Jacob began, “ why can’t I hear da babies? I can hear you and momma, but I can’t hear da babies at all; even wen we’re rite in the same room.” Jacob looked up into his daddy’s clear, blue eyes. He knew that daddy would answer him, just like Father always did whenever he asked a question. There didn’t seem to be anything that they wouldn’t tell him if he asked what Father called “an intelligent question.”

“You do not hear the babies Jacob, because they have their own bond,” his daddy told him. “Your bond is with momma and me. The babies have a bond that is only between the two of them.”

“Why don’t we have a bond wit dem too?” he asked his daddy. “It’s not fair. I want to know wat da babies are tinkin. It’s hard to know wen I can’t talk to dem like I do wit you and momma.” He saw his daddy look down at him and smile.

“It will not be long until they will be able to talk clearly to you Jacob,” daddy said. “They have to get just a little bit older so that they can learn some more words.”

“I knew words when I was as old as dem,” he told his daddy. “Why do dey have to wait?”

Vincent smiled as he moved away from their warm snuggle. “Why?” seemed to be Jacob’s favorite word of late. If he was not asking him a question, he was asking Father or Catherine. Now that he thought about it, Jacob seemed to ask questions of everyone; even Mouse.

He picked up his questioning little boy and got out of the bed. It was getting late, and he was aware that he and Nathaniel would have to start their journey directly after breakfast.

He heard Catherine's sigh, as she got out of the bed after him and Jacob. He felt that she would have rather stayed in bed with her two men, as she called them. Her thoughts made him smile, as he would have also liked to have stayed wrapped around her and their oldest son.

"Are you laughing at me again?" Catherine asked, as she went behind the screen Vincent had found, so that she could change into her clothes without being watched by their son. Their morning ritual with Jacob had made this a necessity.

"Of course I am not laughing at you, love," Vincent told her, as he put Jacob down and changed into his own clothes. "It is only that we had the same thought. Both of us were loath to leave our bed this morning." Since he bathed with Jacob on a regular basis, Vincent only turned away from him as he removed his drawstring pants and got into his warmer, traveling clothes. When he sat down on the bed to put on his boots, Jacob sat down next to him.

"I guess that's all right then," Catherine answered as she came from behind the screen. "I really do enjoy snuggling with my two men."

"Does dat mean dat I'm a man too, momma?" Jacob looked at his pretty momma. He knew that he wasn't supposed to watch her when she was behind the new screen, but he knew that she had already dressed. She had on a bright green blouse under her blue jumper. He thought that he had the very most pretty momma.

“It means,” momma answered, as she sat down next to him and his daddy, “that you are my oldest son, and someday you will be a grown man like your father. I just think of the two of you as my “two men,” That’s how I think of you in my head. You know that because you can hear me.” Jacob watched as his momma put on her shoes. She was wearing black tights. Momma said that they kept her legs warm. Jacob looked down at his own feet. He wore the heavy socks that Mary always made for him. Today, his were blue with white stripes.

“Are we ready to go to breakfast now?” he asked his momma. “I’m getting hungrier and hungrier.” Momma laughed and gave him a hug.

“Yes, Jacob,” she told him. “As soon as we get the babies packed up, we will be ready to go.” Jacob watched as she nudged his daddy. “Isn’t that right, daddy?”

“Absolutely,” daddy answered. “Just as soon as Caroline and Charles are ready, we will all go to breakfast.”

Jacob watched from the bed, as his momma got out the double stroller that Peter had brought down as a present for the babies not long after they were born. She wrapped his brother in a small blanket made for him by Mary, as she put him down into one side of the stroller. His daddy got up and put his sister next to her brother. Jacob got up and peered down into the stroller, He started talking softly to his brother and sister. then he looked around at his momma and daddy. It looked like they were ready to go to breakfast.

“What are you saying to your sister and brother Jacob?” his momma asked.

“Noting mush, momma,” he told her. “Just dat we were all ready to go have some oatmeal. Dey already had dare breakfast. Didn’t dey momma?”

“Yes, Jacob. The babies already had their breakfast. It’s just you, me, and daddy who haven’t eaten yet.”

As Catherine began to push the stroller, Vincent put Jacob up onto his shoulders. He knew that it was Jacob’s favorite way to go to breakfast.

“I sometimes feel guilty about the special presents Peter has gotten for the babies,” Catherine said softly, as they walked. “None of the other mothers have such a large crib or a double stroller.”

“None of the mothers Below have twins, Catherine,” Vincent said. “There is no reason for you to feel guilty. These things were necessary. The twins could not sleep in Jacob’s crib after a few months, and the stroller is the only way to carry our children around,”

“But I get to ride on your shoulders daddy,” Jacob said. “I like dis ride the best of all.” Jacob put his face down onto Vincent’s hair, as they went down the hall to breakfast. His son gave Vincent a little kiss before he sat straight up again, holding onto his neck very carefully. The gesture made him smile.

“Where is Father this morning?” Vincent asked Jacob, as they walked toward the dining hall. “Is he going to meet us for breakfast, or is he having it in our little kitchen?”

“Fader said dat he would meet us dare,” Jacob told him, “He had some papers to work on. He wants you to give em to Elliot when you see him later.”

“Did Father say anything else, Jacob?” Vincent asked. “Has Mouse been here in the Home Chambers?” He remembered how very secretive Mouse had been the last time they spoke. Of course, when speaking to Mouse, one needed to take on a whole other way of thinking.

“No daddy.” Jacob said, bouncing a little on Vincent’s shoulders as they walked slowly down the long tunnel. Although this particular corridor had seen many footsteps during the years, there were still some places where they needed to be careful. Catherine had a little trouble pushing the stroller. “Fader only told me about da papers.”

Vincent watched as Catherine carefully moved the stroller ahead of them. “If the stroller is too heavy, I can easily push it for you, love,” he told her.

Catherine looked back at her husband and smiled. “Then I would be the one carrying our son on *my* shoulders,” she laughed. “I think that I’ll push the babies for now,” She paused “Maybe when they’re a little older, and Jacob doesn’t mind walking by himself, I might change my mind. But they’re not that heavy yet.” She turned back around, and almost ran into Mary.

“Good morning ,” Mary said, kissing Catherine on the cheek and looking into the stroller at the babies. “My, but they are growing so quickly.” Jacob smiled as Mary bent to kiss each of the babies on their cheeks. When she stood again, she took one of Jacob’s feet in her hand and gave it a tug. “How is our big boy today?” She asked him.

“I’m hungry Mary,” Jacob told her. “Daddy and momma and me had a really big snuggle this morning, so we’re kinda late.” He looked down to where Mary’s fingers touched his striped socks under his moccasins. “I like my socks, Mary. Tank you for making dem for me.”

“You are quite welcome, Jacob, Mary said. She stood on her toes and reached up to give Jacob a kiss on one of his hands.

“I was coming to find you,” Mary said to Vincent, “Father has been wanting to talk to you this morning, and he sent me to see if you were on your way to the dining hall. Now that I’ve found you, I’ll get on with my errands” Mary patted both Catherine and his cheeks, and walked away.

“Is Elliot in any trouble, Vincent?” Catherine asked. “When he first came Below, Elliot thought that he was still wanted for Moreno’s death. He’s been doing so well since you explained the situation to Joe. I thought that everything was going well with the project. Is there some kind of problem you haven’t mentioned?

“I do not believe so, Catherine.” Vincent told her as they stopped walking. “ Elliot’s plan was approved by the council. He explained that he was using what little money he had left after the corporate bankruptcy was settled.” He took Jacob down from his shoulders and put his hand on his son’s arm. “Stay right here.” He said to Jacob. “Your momma and I need to discuss this, and I think she needs a hug.”

Vincent walked the short distance to his wife and drew her into his arms. “I know that you were not at that Council meeting, but Father had him explain exactly what he and Mouse were doing in that lower chamber.” He paused to give Catherine a long, lingering kiss. It still surprised him that he could kiss her without any concern for what others might say. “Elliot told him that he and Mouse were attempting to construct a power plant of some sort, far below the Home Chambers. Since they had found that underground river, they thought to construct a water wheel to bring electricity up here.”

“That’s an interesting idea. A little backward, I guess. But will it work?” Catherine asked him.

“It is not completely an old technique, Catherine.” Vincent told her. “Elliot mentioned that the chamber in which the power plant will be built, is well ventilated because he had also told the Council there would be generators as well as some sort of large batteries.” Vincent pulled her closer and leaned down to give her another long, deep, kiss. He often kissed her now, where others might see. She had, after endless discussions, explained to him that a husband kissing his wife was absolutely a normal thing to do.

“Father was concerned about the use of torches around the equipment, so Elliot explained how they would be using battery powered lanterns. He insisted that there would be no open flames around any of the components.”

“William was wary at first,” Vincent continued, putting a stop to their kiss. For a moment, he rested his chin on the top of Catherine’s hair. “However, Elliot told us it was this community who had given him a chance to regain his self-respect. He wanted to give back to those who had given him the opportunity to come Below after what had happened on the Compass Rose.

“He saved my life that night, love. I believed it was only right that he be allowed to stay here, with us,”

“Who decided to call the power plant ‘Mouse Ed?’” Catherine asked, smiling.

“Mouse, of course.” Vincent felt a pull on his belt, and turned to see that his son was attempting to get his attention.

“I’m hungry, daddy.” Jacob told him. “Can we go get breakfast now?”

Chapter II

Father was in the dining hall when they arrived. He was sitting near Lena and Nathaniel, who were still eating with their children, Catherine and little David. Vincent and Catherine found seats near them, and Vincent turned to greet father with a kiss on the forehead.

“Good morning children.” Father said, as they sat down beside him.

“Good morning, Father.” Vincent and Catherine answered in unison, laughing. It seemed that they did this with almost every morning’s greeting.

“Hi Catty” Jacob said, as Vincent put him into his high chair.” Hi David. It’s almost your birfday. Isn’t it?”

Lena’s son, David, looked across from his own highchair and smiled. “Amost,” he answered. “Nex week.” David looked over at his mother. “Rite Mommy?” he asked her.

Lena looked up from where she sat next to Nathaniel. “Yes, David,” she told him. “Next Friday you’ll a whole year old.”

“Dat’s rite,” Jacob said. “You’re older dan my babies. Dare’re only nine monts old.” He looked down at his sister and brother in their stroller. His daddy looked down too, and saw that they seemed to be following the

conversation. “Day don’t talk mush,” Jacob told David. “But day really like to listen.”

Jacob’s daddy gave his momma a little kiss, then he walked over to William’s counter to get them oatmeal. His daddy and momma liked oatmeal as much as he did. He also knew that Father didn’t like oatmeal at all.

When his daddy came back to their table with a tray, Jacob knew that there would be milk and honey on the tray. They liked milk and honey too. Daddy put his bowl of oatmeal on the little tray of his highchair and added a little bit of honey and some milk. Momma said that he couldn’t have more than just a little honey, but that was okay. He liked his oatmeal anyway, even if it wasn’t very sweet.

“Will you hab a party?” Jacob asked his friend, as he took the first bite of his breakfast. He saw that David and Cathy were having oatmeal, too. William and his helpers always made a lot of oatmeal in the morning for everybody. They made different muffins for the grownups, and always had warm bread and homemade jam.

“Willem make a cake.” David told him. “You hep eat it.” Jacob saw that David had oatmeal on his chin. It made him smile. His momma had told him that he was a big boy now, and was much neater than he had been when he was little. That made Jacob feel good inside. He knew that momma was proud of him when she called him a “big boy.” He liked that a lot.

“Cake is good,” Jacob said, spooning the little bit of his oatmeal left in his bowl. “Since I just had my birfday, I remember my cake. It was

cocolot.” Jacob remembered the cake that William made for him. Daddy had put two little candles on it. He got to blow the candles out, and momma told him that he should make a wish. He had wished that his brother and sister would grow up faster, so that they could play with him. “William knows I like cocolot.” he told him. “Is your cake going to be cocolot?”

“No, “ David answered. “Carrot cake,” he said. “Cake specil.”

“Willim said he just got lots of carrots from a Helper” David’s momma said. ” So, we decided that it would be a good choice.” David’s momma was cleaning the oatmeal off of David’s chin as she talked.

“Den your Momma will tell my momma wat time to be here, and I will come.” Jacob told his friend. “Will all the utter kids come to your party” He had finished his cereal and looked to see if his daddy had finished too.

“All of the children here have been invited. “David’s momma told Jacob. “I don’t know exactly how many will show up,” she said, “but William is making a sheet cake so that there will be some left over. Just in case.”

That sounded good to Jacob. “May I have some applesauce, daddy?” he asked, turning away from his friend. He knew that William always made lots of applesauce in the summer, cause the Helpers always brought down baskets of them.

“That will not be a problem.” Jacob’s daddy told him, getting up from the long table, “I know that William has made quite a lot this year.” His daddy walked to William’s counter and came back with a little bowl of

applesauce in his big hands. Jacob thought that he had the very best daddy in the whole world. Daddy put the bowl on his tray and moved the empty oatmeal bowl to the side.

“Tank you, daddy,” Jacob said. He didn’t start eating right away. He was waiting for David to answer his question. He liked all of the older kids. Geoffrey had made his special mobile for him, and Eric was good at playing tag. He thought it was nice that they let him play with them even though he was still not as big as they were. He couldn’t wait until he was old enough to play checkers.

“All come,” David finally answered. “I get presnits” David’s smile was wide.

“Most people like birthdays David,” Nathaniel said. “They are very special days.” Jacob watched as David’s daddy kissed his cheek.

“I member birday, Jake,” David said to him. “Big presnit.”

“Daddy gabe me his toy cest,” he told his friend. “It had lots of good tings in it. You soud come to my room and see it sometime.”

“Can I ?” David asked. Jacob could see that his friend had already finished his cereal. His momma had finished hers too. Both of them liked oatmeal and honey just as much as his momma and daddy did.

“Sure.” David’s momma said. “I’ll bring Cathy and David to see your room after Nathaniel and Vincent leave to check on Mouse and Elliot.” She looked at his momma. “Is that okay with you, Catherine?” She asked her.

“You know Lena,” his momma said, looking at her friend, “I’ll be busy in our chamber with the babies. Are you certain that you want to handle all three of them together? Jacob has been known to be a handful.”

“What’s one more?” David’s momma said. “If they’re all in Jacob’s room with me, I don’t think that it’ll be a problem.” She laughed, and looked at his daddy. “Didn’t I hear that Jacob has your energy, Vincent?” she asked. “Does that mean that he’s liable to be hard to handle?”

“No, Lena.” His daddy told her. “Jacob just has a habit of getting up very early and has sometimes been known to go into the nursery and wake up the other children so that they will play with him.”

“Oh, daddy,” Jacob said. “I haven’t done dat in a long time. You can ast momma.” Jacob looked at his momma. “Isn’t dat right momma?”

Jacob felt his momma looking down at him. “Well,” she said, “I haven’t heard any complaints lately. Have you finally found something else to do with your time? I *do* know that you need just as little sleep as your father.” Jacob looked down at his applesauce. He could feel her wondering what he had done. “Is there something that you want to tell me, Jacob?” She asked him.

“Well,” Jacob said softly, not looking up. “I *did* wake Fader up a couple of times. He didn’t get mad or anyting. He just told me to go back to my

room and try to read one of my books.” Jacob looked up at his momma. She didn’t seem mad at him, but he could feel her disappointment.

“I’m sorry momma,” he told her. “I promised Fader dat I wouldn’t do it again, And I’ve been very good lately.”

Catherine shook her head, and looked at her husband. He had been very quiet during this conversation. “Did you know about this, Vincent?” She asked him. Vincent glanced at her, and she could feel his sheepishness. It was obvious to her that her husband had been keeping Jacob’s secret.

“You know that I do not bother you with everything that goes on, Catherine,” Vincent told her. “You have so much to deal with now. Our younger children keep you so very busy, that I did not feel you should be burdened with such a small thing.”

Catherine smiled and took Vincent’s hand in hers. “How in the world you manage to keep secrets, I will never know.” Their bond connected them so deeply, that the idea of him bothering to keep Jacob’s little secret made her smile. Every day she could see him becoming more of the man she knew he could always be: A wonderful father.

Vincent brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers. *“Each day with you brings me so much joy, Catherine. You see me in ways that I still have trouble seeing in myself. I grow from your confidence and love”*

“I know that you seldom intrude into my thoughts, Catherine.” He said aloud. “It is only the deep emotions that set off your alarm bells.”

“My “*alarm bells*?” Is that really what you call them?” Catherine laughed. It was so different from what she felt when his emotions overwhelmed her.

Catherine watched as Vincent began to blush. It was hard to see, but she looked at him so often now, that she had learned to tell when he was embarrassed.

“It’s silly to be embarrassed,” she told him, as she held his fingers tighter. ”I guess “alarm bells” is a good way to describe my emotions when I feel strongly about something.” She leaned over, and gave her husband a quick kiss “Do my emotions *really* sound like alarm bells?”

Vincent kissed her back, still holding her hand. “That is how I think of them Catherine,” he told her. “Alarm bells is the best way to describe them.”

“Do you want me to tell you how *I* feel when your emotions become very strong?” She had been laughing, but now her voice became still and soft.

“Children,” Father broke in, “do you think that you could table this discussion for a more appropriate time?”

Now both of them blushed. “Yes Father,” they said softly, letting go of their shared hands. It wasn’t often that they spoke of such things when other people were around. Catherine didn’t feel ashamed, but she *did* suddenly feel awkward. She was thinking of a safer subject when Vincent began talking to Nathaniel.

“Elliot told you that he still had some kinks to work out. Didn’t he?” Vincent asked his friend. It was *normal* for him now, to think of the men he had known for so long as friends.

“That’s what was in the note Thomas brought me yesterday,’ Nataniel replied. “But it didn’t explain exactly what exactly the kinks were. That’s why Elliott’s note asked us to go down to talk with him. It’s probably why Father is asking you and me to check it out.”

“Father,” Vincent said. “Jacob told me that you have some papers for me to give to Elliot. Is the work progressing well? Or is there some sort of problem?”

‘That is what I would like to you to find out,’ Father answered. “I believe the water wheel is just about complete. However, I still have reservations regarding those batteries and generators. I am not concerned with the cables, as Elliot told us during the Council meeting, that they would be the last thing to be organized. Would you ask him about that Vincent?”

“Certainly Father. Elliot told you the chamber for Mouse Ed is far below the Home Chambers,” Vincent reminded him. “If the water wheel does not create enough energy to give the Home Chambers more heat and light,” he continued, “then Elliot will see about putting in the batteries. He assured us that they would not create enough hydrogen gas or sulfuric acid fumes even if the power doubled. The chamber is extremely large Father. And remember that Pascal and I checked on it before they even began to start building”

“I am just very happy to know that if he *does* put in the batteries, they will be direct current only. William and I are not the only people who worried about one of the children coming back from Above with a radio or phonograph.”

“I remember Father,” Vincent replied, smiling. “The Council was very specific about that, if I recall correctly.”

“You do.” Father replied. “The Council was very particular regarding the outside world intruding on our serenity.”

“Are you and Nathaniel going to be gone all day tomorrow *and* the next day?” Catherine asked her husband when they had returned to their chamber. He was putting Caroline back into the children’s crib, as she laid Charles next to his sister.

“We may not return until sometime late at night, the day after tomorrow, Catherine,” Vincent answered, as he finished tucking the thin blanket around his daughter. Even in July, the air Below was always cooler than that of the city above them.

“If you remember,” he told her, turning and pulling her into his arms, “The chamber that Mouse and Elliot chose is far away from here. They chose it because of the distance. Nataniel and I will be gone for at least three days. It will depend upon what we find when we arrive.”

Catherine leaned into Vincent's arms, until she was wrapped tightly against his chest with her arms around his waist. How she loved the feel of being in his arms. No matter how many times they stood like this, it always felt like she had come home. Catherine rested her face against the warmth of his vest. She felt surrounded by the smell of leather and Vincent, The music of the pipes and the echoes of an intermittent subway, were now sounds that only added to her sense of finally being where she had always belonged: home Below with Vincent.

"Then I'll wait up for you that night," she told him, raising her face for a kiss. It didn't seem to matter how many times he kissed her, it always felt new. They had spent so long only touching to hug each other. Even after all this time, she reveled in the knowledge that she could kiss him whenever she liked. His lips were warm and the kiss; tender and much too short.

"I need to meet Nathaniel, Catherine," Vincent murmured against her lips. "The sooner we leave, the sooner I shall be home."

Catherine sighed, and looked up into his beautiful blue eyes. She sighed. "You're right, of course," she said. "But I can't sleep without you." She raised her face for another, longer kiss. Vincent did not disappoint her. His lips were warm and his mouth hungry. When the kiss finally ended, she laid her head again against his vest. "At least, I don't sleep *very* well," she murmured softly. She could feel his strong heartbeat beneath his vest. It was a sound that she had come to know so very well over the years. It had always brought with it a sense of rightness and peace.

"And you know it is the same for me, Catherine," Vincent told her. "Even though our bond connects us, I miss the feel of your body in my arms when we finally sleep." Catherine could feel the same need in him, that always filled her when they stood like this.

Catherine laughed softly. “When we finally sleep?” she repeated, looking up at his beautiful face. “Are you suggesting that I don’t let you sleep as much as you would like?”

“Perish the thought,” Vincent answered, giving her another, short kiss. “You know exactly what I mean, Catherine. I am not the only one who has a tendency to stay awake when we go to bed.”

“You mean before we go to *sleep*,” she teased. “You’re right, of course. We *do* have a little fun in our bed sometimes.”

“Only fun?”

“Beautiful, warm, and incredible fun,” she answered, tightening her arms around him to be even closer. “Imaginative, infectious, impassioned, sometimes impatient fun,” she said, looking back up at him. “Is that better?”

“Impeccable alliteration,” he answered, smiling broadly. How she loved to see him smile. She answered him with a chuckle, and stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

“My education has to have been good for something,” she teased. “I guess I better let you go then. So that you can get packed and meet Nathaniel. The sooner you leave, the sooner you’ll come back to me.”

Chapter III

Jacob held Cathy's hand as he walked with her into his very own room. Cathy's momma was holding David and was right behind them. This was the very first time that they had seen his room. Jacob was very proud of it. Father had told him that if he was going to be sharing a room so close to his, that he would have to keep it neat. Jacob always thought that Father was being silly, because all of Father's books were all over *his* room. But he kept it neat because his daddy had asked him to.

He had made his little bed. Well, he had made it as best he knew how. The blankets were straight, and the wooden pole that daddy had added to the head of the bed to hang the mobile that Geoffrey made for him. His little lamp on his chest of drawers beside his bed, made the moon and the stars look shiny. Jacob loved his mobile. Momma let him take it with him when he moved into his own room. Jacob had been afraid that he would have to leave it for the babies. But momma told him that since the mobile had been made specially for him, that he could take it and hang it in his very own room.

Daddy had helped him to put some of his drawings on the wall. Jacob made his pictures with his brightest crayons. He had tried to draw the rose

bush from the mud poem. It was kind of crooked, but momma told him that it was very pretty. He thought his momma was very smart.

“What do you tink, Catty?” he asked her, as he watched her looking around the room. She walked over to look closer at his mobile. She didn’t touch it, but she looked at it for a long time.

“I like your moon and stars, Jacob,” she told him. “They’re so shiny and pretty. And your room is neat. I share my room with my brother; he never puts anything away.”

“Now, it’s not always David,” Cathy’s momma said. “You leave your things out sometimes too.” Jacob saw Cathy’s momma looking all around his room. She was smiling.

“My momma and daddy ast me to go and stay wit da babies in da new samber dat daddy and his friends made. It took dem a long time. But I wanted to stay in my own room, and day let me. I promised my daddy and Fader dat I would keep my room neat,” he told them. “But don’t tell Fader dat I tink he soud keep his room neat too.” That made Cathy’s momma laugh. She had a nice laugh.

“Good room.” David said, coming to stand next to Jacob. He watched as David went over to his little push wheel. “Wat dis?” he asked. “Red.”

“Dats my puss wheel. It used to be my daddy’s when he was little.” Jacob replied. “Puss it.”

David grabbed the handle and pushed the little wheel around the room. “Moosic,” he said, still pushing it around the room.

“Birday presnit?” he asked, putting the push wheel back where it had been near the chest of drawers, and looking at the large chest at the end of his bed.

“Yes,” Jacob said. “It was my daddy’s cest when he was little. It’s got lots of stuff in it.” He turned to David’s momma. “It’s heavy to open,” he told her. “Could you help me? I usually keep it open, but I closed last nite.”

“Of course, Jacob,” David’s momma said. She sat down on the rug in front of the chest, and helped him to raise the heavy lid. Inside were books and a carousel that daddy told him not to play with. Jacob took out the big book with all the colorful pictures and poems, and gave it to David’s momma.

“Would you read my favrite poems, please?” he asked her, opening the book to the right page.

“Of course, “ she said. “Which ones are your favorites?” Cathy’s momma had moved the page, and was looking at all of the little poems that Jacob knew were in the front pages of his book.

“Day hab a red ex next to dem.” Jacob said softly. “I put dem dere wif my crayon. Daddy wasn’t happy. He said dat I soundn’t write in my books.”

“Well, since they are already there, I guess you just shouldn’t mark anymore.” David’s momma looked at Jacob. She didn’t look mad; she was smiling at him.

“Dats wat daddy said,” he told her. “I promised not to do it again.”

David and Cathy sat down next to their momma. He was already on the rug with her.

“Which poem do you want me to read first?” Their momma asked him, as she turned the pages.

“Start wif “Mud.” Dats a good one.” Jacob liked the poem about mud a lot. That was why he had drawn a picture of the rose bush.

David’s momma turned back to the marked page of the book and started reading the poem. ““Mud is very nice to feel all squishy-squash between the toes. I’d rather wade in wiggly mud, than smell a yellow rose.””

“That’s a silly poem, Jacob,” Cathy said, frowning. “Who would want to stick their toes in mud?”

“Da little girl in the pictur,” Jacob told her. “See? See has her toes in da mud. Daddy told me dat da yellow flower in the pictur is a rose on a buss.”

“I’ve never seen a buss.” Cathy said. “Mommy says that I’m not old enough to go Above yet. Isn’t that right mommy?”

Cathy's momma smiled. Jacob thought she had a nice smile. She was pretty. But not as pretty as *his* momma. "Yes, Cathy," she said. "Not until you're old enough to go with one of the older kids. And the place holding the rose, is called a bush; not a buss."

Jacob heard Cathy's momma say the word, but he always had a hard time with certain words. She told him that it would get better, when he got older. Jacob always believed his momma, so it didn't worry him.

Jacob looked to see what David was looking at. He was looking at the bowl daddy said was called a bathtub. "It's silly. Isn't it David?" he said to his friend. "Daddy says it's called a battub. People Above take bats in dem."

David looked at his momma. "Rite, mommy?" he asked. "Sit?"

"Yes, David." his momma told him. "I used to have one of those a very long time ago." Jacob thought she looked sad. "Would you read the poem about da battub?" he asked her.

"Sure," David's momma said. Her face was different. She didn't look sad anymore. "It's called "The Naughty Soap Song."

"How could soap be naughty?" Cathy asked, looking down at the picture.

“Well,” her momma said, “why don’t I read the poem. Then we can all find out what makes the soap naughty. Does that sound okay with you?”

“That sounds very good, mommy,” Cathy said. “It’s a pretty picture. I can read a little bit,” she said. “But why don’t you read it for us. I wouldn’t want to say it wrong.”

“Just when I’m ready to start on my ears,” Cathy’s momma told them, “that is the time that my soap disappears. It jumps from my fingers, and slithers and slides, down to the end of the tub, where it hides. And acts in a most disobedient way, and that’s why my soap’s growing thinner each day.”

Cathy clapped her hands and looked at Jacob. “Oh, I like that one,” she told him. “My soap does the same thing, But I didn’t know that it was being naughty” she looked up at her momma. “What’s that big word mean, mommy?”

Cathy was three now. Jacob thought that she knew everything. “I tink it means being nauty,” Jacob told her. “Fader read a book wit me once, dat had da big word. He said dat was what it meant.”

“As usual,” Cathy’s momma said.” Father was right. That’s exactly what it means. That’s why the poem is called “The Naughty Soap Song.”

“I told my daddy dat da tub was too little.” Jacob said. “My daddy and I take our bats todeter, and dat tub is too small for my daddy. He’s big.”

Cathy momma smiled, and closed the book. “Your daddy *is* very big, Jacob,” She agreed. “I can’t imagine that the both of you would ever fit in a bathtub together, unless they made one especially for your daddy.”

Jacob laughed, and so did David and Cathy. “I like the way we take bats,” Jacob told them. “It’s amost like simming. Before momma had da babies, my daddy took me simming in da Mirror Pool. Dat was fun.”

“My daddy took us to the Mirror Pool, too.” Cathy said. “Daddy held me up so he could show me how to swim. Mommy walked with David into the water just a little.”

Jacob turned around to look for David. He had gotten up and was standing by Jacob’s bed, looking at his mobile. “

“Petty” David told him, putting a finger on the little moon. “Star?” he asked, looking back at Jacob.

Jacob got up and walked over to his friend. “Momma says it’s called a cresnt moon. See says dat a cresnt moon is when you can only see a little part of the moon. Momma says dat it’s really sponse to be round, and dats its really far away”

“ Ittle moon,” David said. looking back at his momma. “ Far, Mommy?”

“If I remember right,” David’s momma told them, ”it’s over two hundred thousand miles away.”

“Dats far,” Jacob said. “Dats farder dan where my daddy and your daddy went today.”

“Speaking of which,” David’s momma said, getting up off the rug. “We should be getting back. I have a lot of things to do before they get back.”

“ Mommy?” David asked his momma. “ Puss weel?” Then he looked at Jacob.

Jacob thought about it for a while, then said, ”You can take it wit you, if you want to,” he told David. “I don’t play wit it mush anymore.” Jacob saw his friend smile really, really big.

David looked at his momma again, like Jacob did when he asked *his* momma a question. “Pees?” David asked her. His momma looked at Jacob and then at David.

“Are you sure, Jacob?” She asked him. Jacob looked at his friend. He could tell that David really wanted to push it around again.

“Yes,” He told her. “Momma says I’m a big boy now. Dats for wen I was little.” Jacob looked at David and smiled. “You can keep it. It’s a presnit.”

Chapter IV

Jacob was sitting on his bed, looking at the pictures in his big book when Vincent walked into his son's room to say goodbye.

“I am leaving now, Jacob.” Vincent said to his oldest son. “I wanted to speak with you before I left.” He sat down on the bed next to him. Jacob closed the book and laid it on the bed beside him.

“Wat did you want to tell me, daddy?” Jacob asked. Vincent put his arm around his son's shoulder, and pulled him close. He still found it hard to believe how much Jacob had grown.

“I will be gone for three nights.” He explained, kissing the top of Jacob's head. His scent was so much like Catherine's, that he languished in the touch of his son's hair, and the satisfaction that his heightened senses gave him the ability to know how much his child's scent was much like his mother's.

“I will need you to look after your mother for me.” Vincent continued. “She will be lonely, Jacob. Do you think that you might stay with her on the nights that I am gone?” Vincent felt his son ponder over the question. His answer was not long in coming.

“Sur, daddy,” Jacob said. “I know dat even wit da babies in da room, momma doesn’t like sleeping in your bed all alone.” Vincent felt Jacob’s arm go around his waist, as he leaned even closer. “I like to snuggle wit momma. I can even wear da new jamas dat Becca made for me.”

“Did Rebecca make you a new pair of pajamas?” Vincent asked. He hadn’t been aware of the new present. Rebecca must have given them to Jacob directly after breakfast.

“Yes, daddy,” Jacob told him, smiling. “See came to my room and gab dem to me rite after Catty and David went home. See? he told Vincent, looking into his eyes. “Day are green and hab elepants on dem.”

The description made Vincent smile. It was exactly the sort of cloth Rebecca would have chosen. She knew how very much Jacob loved anything with animals on it.

“I imagine that your mother will be very pleased to see them,” he told his son. “It is very wise of you to know so much about your mother’s moods.”

“But dat’s easy, daddy,” Jacob explained. “I can always feel wat momma is feeling. Dat’s part of our bond. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, Jacob. However, you must not intrude on your mother’s thoughts all of the time. Your mother should have some thoughts that are her very own.”

“Oh, I don’t do dat, daddy,” Jacob told him. “It’s just dat I can feel wen see is sad, or happy.” he said, somberly. “See always gets kind of sad wen you go away.” Vincent felt that Jacob knew his mother quite well,

“Good.” he replied. “Then I shall leave her in your hands.” Vincent knew that Jacob was reaching out to him at that very moment. “Is there something that you need me to know, Jacob?” he asked him.

“I just wanted you to know dat Fader and I were going to read todeter tonight.” Jacob explained. “I’m going to hav to tell Fader dat he can help me wit my reading anuder time.” Jacob paused, still looking closely at him.

“Momma is very busy now.” he told Vincent. “Sees always on da floor wit da babies.” Vincent watched his son thinking of how to put his question. He watched as his son decided, then he smiled at him. “Why is momma always on da floor wit da babies, daddy? Jacob asked. “ Lena and Anne-Marie aren’t always on da floor when I go to visit.”

Vincent returned his son’s smile. “Yes, momma is very busy. Charles and Caroline are working hard trying to stand up and walk. They see you running around and want to be just like their older brother.”

“Is dat why momma is on da floor so mush?” Vincent kissed his son’s upraised face. At times it was difficult for him to believe that he was the father of three young children: Extraordinary.

“Yes, Jacob,” he answered. “Momma said that she finds it easier to be down on the floor with them rather than constantly getting up and down.” He thought of the massage he had given Catherine last night, and felt her smile. She was currently changing Caroline’s diaper. Charles was watching her closely. He could see his son through Catherine’s eyes. There was such intensity behind them. Perhaps Charles was thinking of a way that he could do this for his sister, and allow his mother to do something else. That would be amazing.

“Is he really wanting to cagnes her diaper, daddy?” Jacob asked, seeing Catherine too. “I don’t tink dat I would like to cange a diaper.” Vincent laughed, feeling the awkwardness of his son’s disgust.

“That is because you trained yourself to change your own diapers. Your mother was astounded, and said that *she* did not have to potty train you, because you potty trained yourself,”

“It felt like sitting in the bating samber, but only on my bottom,” Jacob explained. “The uder stuff was worse.” He made the funny face that always made his daddy laugh.

Vincent hugged his son , then stood up. The day was passing, and he and Nathaniel had a long way to travel.

“Then I shall leave Catherine in your very capable hands.” He told Jacob. “Be certain that you do not forget to help your mother take the babies when you all go for lunch.”

“I won’t, daddy,” Jacob promised.

Chapter V

Vincent straightened the backpack he was carrying, thinking that he may have packed just a bit more than had been necessary. Then the thought came to him that Catherine had packed a small book for him to read.

“Thank you, Catherine. It was very thoughtful of you.”

“Just a little something that I wanted to you have, so you wouldn’t be without me,”

“I could never be without you, love. You are always in my heart and in my soul.” Vincent sensed Catherine’s smile and returned it to her.

“Talking to Catherine?” Nathaniel asked. Vincent had led them to the Stone Circle, and they were proceeding down with caution. The packs each carried were heavy, and it was prudent not to rush. Around them the clatter of the pipes followed them. It was a sound that Vincent had heard all of his life. Home sounds; like the passing of the subway above them.

“Yes, I was.” Vincent told him. “Catherine packed a book for me. That is why I needed to stop and adjust my pack.” Nathaniel was looking at him with a very quizzical look. “What is it, Nathaniel? Why the strange look?”

“Well,” Nathaniel began, “Lena told me that you and Catherine were connected by a bond through your minds. Wouldn’t you have known about

the book?” Vincent stopped, and leaned back against the stone wall. It was not often that he needed to explain the bond that had existed between him and Catherine since the moment she had looked into his eyes. Most of the family Below knew and understood what always connected them.

“We only intrude upon each other’s thoughts when there is a sense of something very important. Or as now, when I thanked her for the book,”

“Oh. I guess I was butting in. Sorry, Vincent.” Nathaniel started down the Stone Circle again and Vincent followed. They still had such a long way to go, and the Circle would be the easiest part of the journey.

“You did not intrude,” Vincent said. “Catherine and I were only exchanging our thoughts of the book. There was no intrusion.”

“Okay. That makes me feel better. Since I married Lena, “Nathaniel explained, “we have talked a little about you and Catherine, It’s remarkable how she managed to come back to you. ‘A miracle,’ Lena called it.”

“It *was* and still *is* a miracle. “ Vincent said, as they continued down the stairs. “Catherine explains it as a gift; something that has never before been given.” He shrugged and continued walking. “I truly believe her explanation. It *is* a gift. One that I will treasure as long as I live. Catherine is everything to me. Nathaniel. She has always been my light, and my love.”

“It’s good to know that after all these years, you finally have someone who could be here with you, “Nathaniel said. “All of us were worried about you when she was lost.”

“Yes.” Vincent replied. “And all of the community rejoiced with me when she returned.”

Nathaniel chuckled and Vincent knew why he laughed. “I remember someone who wasn’t very happy, “ Nathaniel told him. “Father was not at all rejoicing, if I recall.”

Vincent returned Nathaniel’s laugh with one of his own. “You are quite correct. Father was *not* rejoicing.” Vincent paused a moment, then said, “However, Mary and the rest of the community made him see the error of his ways.”

“A good way to put it,” Nathaniel answered. “Between Mary and William, Father didn’t have a chance.” he laughed again, remembering how Mary had ignored Father whenever they met. When he and Vincent reached the bottom of the Stone Circle, Nathaniel turned and asked, “Witch way now, Vincent?” He paused then continued. “I remember the last time you checked on the progress in that low chamber. Wasn’t Pascal with you?”

“Yes, he was,” Vincent replied, looking at the entrances to the different tunnel passages. One passage held difficult visions for him. The passage to the left was the one that he, Pascal, and Winslow had taken when Catherine was kidnapped by Paracelsus. Winslow had been killed on that journey. It was an unpleasant memory that Vincent would rather have not remembered. So many years ago, and so many changes,

“So, “ Nathaniel asked, “Which tunnel do we take now?”

Vincent returned his mind to the present, and pointed to the right. "That is the tunnel Pascal and I took. The chamber that Mouse and Elliot found is quite a distance down. We still have a long journey before us." Vincent turned and walked into the tunnel passage. He felt Nathaniel followed behind him.

"Didn't I hear a story about you and Pascal and Winslow taking a trip down a tunnel like this?" Nathaniel asked him, "If I remember it right, wasn't that was when Winslow died?"

Vincent's mind journeyed back again to the past, and that most difficult time. He stopped walking, and sighed heavily. He found it relatively easy to see, within his mind, the ledge upon which Winslow had been killed. The memory was as fresh as if it happened only yesterday, instead of years ago. Jamie had unknowingly followed them, and it was two of her arrows which stopped the behemoth of a man from killing Pascal. They had lain Winslow to rest beneath a grave made of stones. After that, he told his friends to go back. Only he would need to confront Paracelsus.

"Yes, Nathaniel." Vincent finally answered. "That time is still fresh in my memory. It was Jamie who saved Pascal's life with her arrows."

"What in the world was Jamie doing there?"

"She had followed us through the tunnels, through the Chamber of the Winds and down a ladder to and past the place where Narcissa lived at that time. She also had to catch a rope into a mist where she could not see where the rope ended. Even then, Jamie had courage. Too much courage, I felt at the time. I convinced both she and Pascal to go back. The rest of the

journey was mine alone to follow. It was me that Paracelsus truly wanted. Catherine but was the lure to bring me to him.”

“My love, it was years ago. That is behind us, and Paracelsus is dead. Please, don’t let the sadness of that time haunt you now.”

Vincent heard Catherine’s words and shook himself out of his reverie. She had felt his sadness and comforted him with her thoughts. Even *then* she had been his light; as she was now.

“I am well, Catherine. As always you bring to me the comfort of your love and warmth.”

“It was long ago, Nathaniel, he said to his companion. “The past is gone. We must be conscious of the present. We have a task before us. And the journey is long.” Vincent paused and looked back at Nathaniel. “Winslow lives in the hearts of the entire Community, Nathaniel. You know that.”

Vincent felt Nathaniel’s strong hand on his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to bring up old hurts, Vincent. I’m sorry.” Vincent laid his hand on Nathaniel’s and squeezed.

“There is nothing to forgive. It is but a painful remembrance from the past. We should be going on.”

Vincent led the way as they traveled onward down the right-hand tunnel. He and Pascal knew these tunnels well, having lived all of their lives Below. Of course, Vincent thought, Mouse knows of tunnels beyond those

of everyone else within the Community. He was an intrepid wanderer. Always went where none else dared to travel. Vincent smiled, remembering the time he and Catherine were returning from their honeymoon chamber and almost ran into a mud-covered Mouse. Behind him had been an equally mud-covered Elliot. Catherine had blushed so beautifully when Mouse mentioned his “rainbow,” being so close to their special chamber. When Mouse had declared that it was a “stupid place for a bed,” Catherine had blushed even more.

“As you know perfectly well, Vincent, I did think that Mouse needed to learn about tact.”

“Yes, love, I remember. You couldn’t imagine Elliot wearing one of headlamp caps that he and Mouse were carrying.”

“You’re awfully quiet, Vincent,” Nathaniel said softly. “Talking to Catherine again?”

Vincent turned to his friend, seeing the quizzical look on Nathaniel’s face. “We were just remembering our honeymoon. We almost ran into Mouse. He and Elliot had been searching out some tunnels and both were covered in mud. What surprised Catherine was that, although they were both covered in mud, Elliot had looked happy. “like a boy playing at making mud pies” was what she had been thinking.”

“I can’t imagine being that connected to somebody that it was so easy to hear their thoughts.” Nathaniel answered. “Doesn’t it get in the way sometimes? Don’t you hear things that you really wouldn’t want know?”

“There is nothing in Catherine’s mind that I would not dare to hear, Nathaniel. However, we seldom intrude upon each other’s thoughts unless there is a strong emotion behind them.” Vincent smiled. “We were just remembering that Mouse needed to learn the word tack.”

Now Nathaniel laughed. “Never happen, Vincent. That boy is in a world totally of his own. Lena told me that once, when she was pregnant with David, Mouse had asked why she was getting so fat.”

“What did Lena tell him?” Vincent asked. He had not known about that encounter. Mouse had never asked the question of Catherine.

“She was kind of taken aback at first, she said. Then Lena decided that Mouse needed to know about babies. She told him that there was a baby growing inside her.” Nathaniel explained. “She said that Mouse looked confused for a minute, then answered like he usually did. “Okay good,” and just walked off.”

“Yes,” Vincent replied. “Mouse would have been turning that answer over in his mind, and deciding that was an answer good enough for him. He often takes things with blind faith. It is one of the things that makes Mouse different than most of the people in the world; both Below and Above.”

“He could get in trouble thinking like that.” Nathaniel said, soberly.

“He has,” Vincent told him. “You were working with Christopher’s father when we held the meeting. Mouse had stolen some things from the world Above. We endeavored to explain that it was stealing, but Mouse insisted that it was only taking. He needed it, he saw it, and he took it. “Not

stealing,” I believe he said. Unfortunately, those in Father’s study disagreed. He was given a time of the silence. We all turned our backs to him.” Vincent paused. “It was very difficult for me, because I comprehended the way in which Mouse’s mind is so very different from ours. I believe him to be a savant of some kind,” he continued. “His mind is very childlike in many ways, but his inventions and the complicated devices he makes are at most times, incredibly intricate.”

They had walked into another choice of tunnels while they spoke, and Vincent took a moment to remember the way he and Pascal had traveled. He also remembered that it had been the first time he had truly thought of himself as a man: One man speaking to another. That too, had been Catherine’s doing.

“We will continue traveling to the right,” he told his friend. “However, perhaps we should rest and have something to eat. Getting to the chamber where the river flows is still quite a way down.” Vincent took off his pack and sat against the stone wall. It was cooler here, and he took out the thermos Catherine had packed. It contained his favorite tea, and would warm him.

Nathaniel joined him on the floor, taking a similarly dented thermos from *his* pack. Vincent remembered that it had been one of the Helpers who brought them down when his co-workers were going to throw them away, since having purchased new ones. The castoffs Above often found their way Below.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Nathaniel said, as they ate their lunch. “Who’s been taking care of Arthur? I’m pretty sure that Mouse wouldn’t leave Arthur to take care of himself.”

“Jamie has been staying in Mouse’s chamber with Arthur,” Vincent told him. “Mary was at first worried because Mouse’s chamber is so far away from the others. However, I convinced her that Jamie was quite sufficient in taking care of herself. She’s proven that many times.” The thought made Vincent smile. Mouse had been so worried about leaving Arthur, that he had almost taken his racoon along, It had only been when Jamie volunteered to move into his chamber to care for Arthur, that Mouse had been satisfied in leaving him.

“Cullen is down there too, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Vincent replied. “We explained to Elliot that Cullen was our best worker in wood, Since Cullen has no family for which to care, Elliot asked if he would help with the building of the water wheel. It was the first part of the Elliot’s design to be built.”

“Are there others? Nathaniel asked. “There are a few men that I haven’t seen in the Home Chambers for quite a while.”

“Those without families who did not have other essential duties, volunteered to help.” Vincent said, closing his thermos, ”Thomas told us that he would be would help.” Vincent had finished one of the sandwiches William had made for their journey, and was thinking of moving on. However, when he saw Nathaniel yawning, he realized perhaps a true rest was called for.

“ I believe we are ready to have a true rest,” Vincent told him “Why do we not stay here for a while and get some sleep?”

“I won’t argue with you on that,” Nathaniel answered. “You were right. Even going downhill, it’s pretty tiring.” Vincent watched as his Nathaniel put away his luncheon things, and took out a small sleeping bag from his pack. He then rolled it on the ground, and used his pack for a pillow. The tunnel here was not so rocky, that it only took Nathaniel a few minutes to make a softer place for himself, before he finally laid down on the sleeping bag..

Vincent followed suit, and cleared a larger space for himself. He took out the blanket Catherine had insisted he take, and also made a similar pillow of his pack. Then he laid down and let his mind drift. He was not truly tired, but as he began to think of the upcoming meeting with Eliot, Vincent wondered if everything may have finally begun to come together. There had been so many other necessities to be resolved. How to keep the workers fed? Would someone need to be there on watch when the project was finished? So many decisions yet to be made. He knew that the food situation had been accomplished by William and Christopher’s father, Thomas. As he thought of this, he realized that since he had become a father himself, he always thought of the men with children as fathers first. The thought made him smile, and he allowed his mind to drift into a light sleep.

Chapter VI

“Hello, mamma,” Catherine watched from her place on the rug as her oldest son walked into the chamber. Both Caroline and Charles were practicing their crawling, and they looked up at their brother in unison.

“Hello, Jacob,” she said. “Did you come to play with your brother and sister?”

Jacob sat on the rug next to Catherine and she noticed him staring at his younger siblings. He looked startled. “What is it, Jacob?” Catherine asked. “You’ve seen them do that before.” Both of her younger children were staring at their brother.

“I know that, mamma,” Jacob told her. “But wen day look at me like data, I just wonder wat day tink of me.” He leaned forward and gave both of them a kiss on their cheeks. “I can’t hear dem like I do you and daddy,” Jacob continued. “I really wis dat I knew wat day were tinkin’.”

Catherine sighed, and put her arm around her older son’s shoulders. “They are probably thinking that they would like to be able to walk like you do,” she told him. “They see you running around, and coming into the room, and I think that they are wondering where you came from.”

“You mean dat day don’t remember how we all went to breakfast dis morning?”

“Don’t *you* remember that they were both asleep in the stroller when we went to breakfast?” Catherine pulled Jacob closer, feeling his arm go around her waist. He really did love to hug and snuggle. He was just like his daddy.

The thought made Catherine smile. Vincent was so very different now. He touched and kissed her wherever and whenever he wanted.. And she loved every touch.

“Oh, dat’s rite, momma.” Jacob agreed as he thought again about their morning. He leaned his head against Catherine’s side. “But I was riding on daddy’s soulders. I couldn’t see dem. But day woke up wen we got dare. I remember how day wats Catty and me talking to each uder.” Jacob paused and looked up at Catherine. “Day even wats me wen I talked to David. I told Catty dat day didn’t talk mush, but day listen real good.”

“Yes,” Catherine said, remembering that Jacob had probably said exactly that. It seemed that his mind was as quick as his father’s. As Narcissa had once told her, Jacob was an old soul. He was going to grow up to be a very wise adult.

As she watched, both of her younger children crawled over to their brother. First Caroline, and then Charles stopped; each holding one of Jacob’s legs. He was sitting cross-legged on the rug, so each of them could get a good hold.

“Wat are day doing, momma?” Jacob asked, It was the first time that either of them had crawled over to her oldest son, and touched him, instead of just watching.

“I think,” Catherine answered, “that they want to see if they can hold on strong enough to pull themselves up.” She watched with concern as first Caroline, and then Charles pulled themselves up enough to sit back with their knees keeping them steady. Catherine worried that either might fall to their sides, and was relieved when neither did. It wasn’t standing, but it was a very good start.

“Look, mamma,” Jacob said softly. Catherine had noticed that Jacob was always very careful not to raise his voice, around his siblings.. “Day almost sitting like me.” The smile on his face was so wide that she couldn’t help laughing.

“You’re right, Jacob.” she agreed. “They really *do* want to be like you.” Both children stayed sitting back on their legs for a few minutes, then they looked at each other and sat up; kneeling.

“Do you tink dat day are going to try to stand?” Jacob asked her. Catherine could tell that both she and Jacob were anxious to see what her younger children would try next. As they watched, Caroline and Charles looked at each other, and let go of Jacob’s legs. It seemed that they had gone as far as they wanted this time. Both looked at Catherine with sleepy looks.

“I think that getting to their knees, has made them tired, Jacob,” she told her son. “Looks like they’re ready for their naps.”

“You mean dat day aren’t going to sit up anymore?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. See,” she pointed out.” Charles is already yawning.” Catherine picked up her youngest son, and carefully got up from her place on the rug. “Would you watch Caroline for me while I change Charles’ diaper and put him back to bed?”

“Of course, mamma.” Jacob took his little sister’s hand and held it in his. “I will wats her real good. We’ll play tickle, he told her. “See likes tickle.”

“You’re a very good brother, Jacob.” Catherine told him, as she retrieved a diaper from the pile on the dresser Vincent had found, and carried her son back to the bed. As she changed her son’s diaper, her thoughts wandered to her husband, and the thought that for two nights she would be without his strong arms around her. She sighed again, deeply, and carefully pinned the diaper around Charles. It had taken a few tries, but after nine months, she knew exactly how the pins went in. There were no disposable diapers in her world Below. Sometimes she wished there were. The diaper pile was getting low, and would soon need to be taken to the small laundry, and then the folding would begin again. *“Well,” she thought. “At least it will keep me mindlessly busy until Vincent returns.”*

“Momma,” Jacob said, as Catherine laid Charles back into the large crib. “Caroline is suwing on my finger again.”

Catherine looked back at her son and smiled. “She isn’t hurting you, is she?” she asked, walking back to where Caroline and Jacob were sitting.

“No, mamma. Her teef don’t hurt. Day aren’t big enuf,” Jacob told her, looking away from his sister. “It just feels funny. And her mouf is wet.”

“Isn’t *your* mouth wet?” Catherine replied. “I would be worried if her mouth was dry. Just as I would be worried if *your* mouth was dry.”

Jacob looked at her quizzically. “Why would you be worried, momma” He asked. “Wats wrong wif a dry mouf?”

Catherine leaned down and kissed Jacob on the top of his head, as she picked up her small daughter. “That could mean that you were dehydrated, Jacob,” she explained. “It means that your body needed water. A person can only last three days without water.” She walked over to get another diaper, as Jacob got up and followed her.

“Why is dat, momma?” he asked, as they both sat on the large bed. Jacob watched as she changed the baby’s diaper. “Why?” continued to be Jacob’s favorite word,

“That’s because a person can get very sick if they get dehydrated,” she explained. “When I was little, I stayed outside in the sun too long. And my mother told me that I could get dehydrated and get sick from too much hot sun.” Catherine finished changing Caroline’s diaper, and returned her to the crib she shared with her brother. As usual when they were together like that, they clasped hands.

“But we don’t have to worry about dat, momma.” Jacob said. “We don’t have sun down here.” Catherine joined her son on the bed and hugged him close, looking at his brown eyes. She thought his eyes were much like her father’s.

“You’re right,” she told him. “Sun is about the last thing we need to worry about here below the City.”

“You never told me about the City, momma.” Jacob said, leaning even closer. “Wats da City like?”

Catherine had to think about that for a while. How could she explain New York City to someone who had never experienced anything but the world *below* that city? She began slowly. “Well, the City is far away from us. It’s above the subway trains that we hear, and it’s very full of people. They don’t have all the space we have here. Their streets aren’t like our tunnels,” she continued. “Their streets are full of people all the time. People call it “the city that never sleeps.””

“Don’t day seep, momma?” Jacob asked, incredulously. “Daddy and I don’t seep mush, but *you* do. And so does Fader and de uder people. Dares always no people in da tunnels wen I get up early.”

“Oh, people sleep, Jacob,” she told him. “But some of the people work at night and some of the people go out and,” she paused, trying to ascertain just how to say what that thought brought to mind. “some of the people go to visit their friends.”

“Oh.” Jacob replied. “Day don’t visit during da day like we do?”

“Well, they do that too, but sometimes they go to a concert. Just like we have here, and under the park” Catherine hoped that her explanation would be enough. She didn’t really want to get into all of the intricacy of New York City; the noise, and the hustle. So, she decided to change the subject.

“Was there a particular reason that you came to visit so late, Jacob?” She asked, realizing the time. Day and night were more difficult to figure here Below, but she had gotten better at it in the past year. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Daddy told me dat I sould take care of you. Dat I sould seep wit you to keep you warm.” Jacob explained. “Daddy said dat you get lonely, and I sould take very good care of you. He said I had capble hands.”

Catherine smiled and bent down to kiss Jacob’s cheek. “I think your daddy meant capable hands.” she told him. She was grateful for Vincent’s forethought. She really didn’t like sleeping alone since she had come Below to be with him. The miracle of her being here, could still bring tears to her eyes. She would have missed all of her life with Vincent and the children. Narcissa had explained things to them, but a miracle was still a miracle.

“That was very thoughtful of daddy,” she told him. “You’ve got a very special daddy.” It was only then that she realized Jacob was wearing new pajamas. “Did Mary make those pajamas for you?” she asked him. Mary was always knitting new socks for the children, but she hadn’t thought that she also made regular clothing.

“Oh no, mamma,” Jacob replied. “Becca made dem for me. See knows dat I like animals. expesaly elepants.” He got off of the bed, and stood up, so that Catherine could see all of them. He even did a turn for her.

“Rebecca did a beautiful job.” she agreed. “The elephants are adorable. I didn’t know that Rebecca made clothes. I thought most of the children’s clothes came from Above.”

“Becca told me dat most of dem go from da big kids to da little kids,” Jacob said. “But see makes dem sometimes, see said, when see sees stuff see likes,” he paused, and looked down at his brand-new pajamas. “Like dees elepants.”

“Since you’ve come to sleep with me, “Catherine said, getting her nightshirt from under the pillows. “I guess that *I* better change into my night clothes.” She started to get up and go behind the screen, when Jacob stopped her with a question.

“Why don’t you were jamas, momma?” he asked, as he looked at the shirt in her hands. “You always wear does two sirts.”

“I wear these shirts,” she explained, “because they were your daddy’s. He gave one to me when I first came back. Now, I have two of them because when one is being washed, I can wear the other one.”

“Oh, “Jacob answered, “Den dats okay. Wen I get big, I’m gonna wear sirts just like my daddy.”

Chapter VII

Vincent led the way through the third tunnel to go slanting in a downward direction. The going was slower here, as not many people had traveled this way over the years, and the ground was rough.

“Damn, Vincent,” Nathaniel complained. “How far *is* this place. We must be miles below the Hudson!”

“Quite a bit below, I should think,” Vincent replied. “Neither Mouse nor Elliot have yet to find the source of the river. We are not even certain how far below it is,” he continued, as they walked. “No one has yet been able to decide precisely where the chamber is located.”

“Just how far down do *you* think we are?” His companion asked. Vincent saw that Nathaniel was having a little trouble navigating through the stone floor, so he slowed his steps even more.

“I would not hazard a guess,” Vincent told him. “All we have come to believe, is that it is lower than any other tunnel Mouse has yet found. Elliot believes the chamber is somewhere below Yonkers.”

“Yonkers!” Nathaniel exclaimed. “Damn. No wonder this is such a long walk. I didn’t know the tunnels went so far. Hasn’t Elliot been roaming around the tunnels with Mouse since he came Below?”

Vincent stopped walking and turned to look at Nathaniel. “Mouse came to us when he was very young, and although Mary insisted that he stay near the Home Chambers,” he explained. “When he believed himself old enough, he simply found a chamber of his own below most of the Home Chambers. It is almost as far as the one Narcissa occupies now.”

“So, it *is* lower than most of the other chambers.” Nathaniel said. “He must have been at least in his teens when he went looking.”

Vincent smiled and shook his head. “If I remember correctly,” he told Nathaniel. “Mouse was almost eleven when he set out. At least, that is what we believe. We never did come to find his precise age.”

“Never?” Nathaniel asked incredulously.” Vincent had never seen such a look on his friend’s face before. It made him smile; something he realized was only since Catherine’s return that he did quite often now.

“No, Nathaniel,” he answered. “We have no knowledge of Mouse’s age. As I have said, he is very childlike in many ways. It was difficult to discern his age when he came to us; as it is difficult to know his age now.”

“Wow!” Nathaniel said, whistling. “Only eleven,” he paused, shaking his head. “You must be right about him being a savant or something,” he continued. “To think that he was so young when he went looking for his own chamber. Wow.” Vincent heard Nathaniel give another, long whistle. It was one of the few things he had never been able to master.

“We should continue walking, Nathaniel.” Vincent said, turning around and moving slowly once more. “I promised Catherine that we would be back tomorrow night, and we have a way yet to travel.”

“Don’t you think that it’s night now, Vincent?” Nathaniel said. “Surely we’ve been walking the entire day.”

Vincent turned around again and saw Nathaniel looking at the watch he wore. Vincent had never found the need to wear one. “Have we traveled the entire day, Nathaniel?” Vincent asked, pointing to the watch. “For years I never found the need to wear such a thing. My constitution is such that I needed little sleep, and always had a sense of time.” He smiled inside, knowing it had only been since Catherine’s return that he had lost his sense of time. Her need to sleep, and his to be beside her, had made him lose his track of time altogether.’

“It’s almost eleven, Vincent,” Nathaniel told him. “You may not need much sleep, but I’ve had enough walking for today. I’m done in.” Nathaniel looked around and sighed. “Isn’t there some place better that we could set up camp?” he asked.

“Certainly,” Vincent replied. “There is a flatter surface to this tunnel only a few yards away. It will not take us long to reach it. Will that suit?”

“Absolutely,” Nathaniel agreed. “There’s no way that I could sleep on this deep and rocky a slope. I’d worry about rolling downhill during the night.” he laughed and Vincent laughed with him.

It was so new to him, this ability to find humor in everyday things; of being able to laugh with a man he considered a friend. For so long he had only thought of Nathaniel as small Catherine’s father. Now, as their closeness grew, he was simply Nathaniel; his friend.

Vincent led them further down the tunnel, and in a few minutes, until they reached the flatter part of ground. He stopped and removed his pack, as did Nathaniel. Vincent took out the heavy blanket he had used earlier, and his friend did the same. Both of them picked up any stones from the floor of the tunnel, and spread their beds on the now more level ground.

As they had gone lower through the tunnels, the air had become colder. Vincent was very glad he had worn his warmest clothing, since the blanket would be used to lie on. Catherine had even managed to help Mary in finding a coat that would actually fit him. His hooded cape was not made for traveling in the cooler places of the world Below. Catherine had explained that they found it among some of the things Devin had left behind when he brought the large man who had been caged in a carnival. Devin had rescued him, and brought him Below, where he thought Charles. The Dragon Man, would be safe. Unfortunately, when Father had tried to treat the wounds on the man's back, Charles had broken Father's wrist. Devin explained that Charles had no idea of his own strength. Due to that, and the other incidents which had occurred, neither had been able to stay. Devin refused to stay without Charles, and it had been impossible for him to remain in the community.

Charles could not only control his strength, but had not been able to become accustomed to the other people who lived Below. His fearfulness, and his lack of comprehension, made it impossible for him to remain. So, neither he nor Devin stayed. However, they had not taken everything with them. Vincent assumed that Devin had purchased the coat himself when he left Charles Below for a time. Since Charles there was very little clothing in his possession when they arrived, it had been a reasonable assumption. Catherine told him that she and Mary found it in the chamber where Charles and Devin had stayed. It had been washed, and taken in just a bit, because Charles had been even larger than Vincent. The coat had then been hung to dry before she brought it to him. Their bond always let Catherine know precisely what he needed; be it a kiss or a coat. So, smiling at the thought, Vincent let himself fall into sleep.

The next morning, they ate the muffins Willian had made for them, put their sleeping bag and blanket back into their packs, and set off again. The way was smoother now, and Vincent noticed how much happier it made Nathaniel. Much happier than he had been the day before.

“How much farther, Vincent?” Nathaniel asked, as they walked. “We must be getting pretty close by now, if we’re going to be home tomorrow night.”

“We are almost there,” Vincent answered. “It is only a little further. Do you not hear the hammering”

Nathaniel laughed. “I don’t have your kind of hearing, Vincent,” he told him. “You always hear things long before the rest of us. I’ve been noticing that for years.”

“Then you may believe that I hear hammering in the distance. Cullen and Thomas must be putting the final touches on the water wheel.”

They walked for almost a mile before the chamber for Mouse Ed was before them. Cullen and Thomas were both hammering on the water wheel that would help to bring electricity into the Home Chambers above. Vincent looked around the large room and finally spotted Elliot going over his blueprints. He walked over to him, with Nathaniel at his side.

“Vincent!” Elliot exclaimed. “You finally made it.” He turned away from his blueprints and held out his hand. “And Nathaniel. I haven’t seen you since David’s

naming ceremony.” Vincent and Nathaniel shook Elliot’s hand, and both looked back at the water wheel.

“How is the work progressing, Elliot?” Vincent asked. “It looks as though you are doing well.” Both Cullen and Thomas noticed the new arrivals and stopped hammering. They didn’t leave their places, but smiled and waved to them.

“It’s going pretty well,” Elliot told them. Vincent could see the pride on Elliot’s face. This was a different man than the one who had first come down, depressed and without hope. He was very glad to see the change.

“It looks as though you will be starting on the generators soon,” Vincent commented, looking around at the generators, gear boxes, and cables lying in neat order around them. He remembered what Catherine had told him about Elliot’s office always being very organized and tidy. It looked as though he kept his workspace in just the same order.

“Are you certain that you have enough cable?” Vincent asked, looking at the many coils of cable resting next to the generators. “It is truly quite a long way back to the Home Chambers. Pascal has discussed with me the idea of connecting this chamber to some of the lowest tunnels that still have pipes. Most of them have not been used for some time, however Pascal assures me that it can be done.” Vincent paused, hoping for a positive answer. “However, he also said that we would need more galvanized steel pipes, anchor bolts, for the pipe hangers, and J-shaped mountings.”

Elliot stared at Vincent for a moment, then said, “You’re talking as if you need money for those parts. *Are you asking me for money?*” he asked, incredulously.

“Mouse usually forages for the pipes,” Vincent answered, pausing to look closely at Elliot’s face. He was attempting to gauge how his words were being assessed. “You may have noticed in the time you spent in the pipe chamber with Pascal, that many different sized pipes are not unusual for us. We make the couplings ourselves. We also forage for the metal to make the mountings. There are many men in the community who assist in finding the parts.”

“Okay,” Elliot said slowly, gazing at what Vincent thought was a quizzical look. “So, it seems that all you and the others need, are the anchor bolts. Is that right?”

“That is all we lack, Elliot,” Vincent replied. “Everything else may be found discarded Above. However, it is much more difficult to discover anchor bolts that can still be of use. In order for the communication pipeline to reach to this chamber,” Vincent continued. “I am afraid that the supply of anchor bolts still stored, will not be enough. We used quite a few of them, when we put in the pipes for the eastern section of new chambers. The distance here, is even longer than those. It simply makes having enough anchor bolts, a priority. Father is concerned that there is no way for you and everyone else down here, to call to us if you have an emergency. He considers the pipe system to your worksite, to be a priority. You are fully aware, I am certain, that accidents on building sites are not out of the question.”

“You’re right, Vincent,” Elliot agreed. “All of my building sites have had at least one accident. Although, I can tell you that the accidents were usually due to someone in the crew not following orders.” He looked back at Mouse, Cullen, and Thomas. “On *this* site, I have an incredible crew. Mouse and I make sure that everyone knows what their job is, and how it’s to be done. There are no shirkers here. Nor are they clumsy. You gave me one of the best crews I have ever had the pleasure to work with.”

Vincent smiled. “I am glad to hear that. Catherine told me that you were known for your safe building sites, Elliot. Catherine has told me much about your work, and some of the people with whom you had to deal.”

“So, she told you about Avery, did she. I’m surprised by that. It was a difficult time for me. None of the other builders would discuss Avery with the DA’s office.”

“However, *you* did,” Vincent replied. “Catherine also told me that doing so made things difficult for you.”

“That’s an understatement,” Elliott told him. “Problems came up quite often until the DA was finally able to get Avery and his fellow problems into court, and put away,” Elliott chuckled. “His attorney turned out to be an idiot. It was great.”

Vincent stayed silent; only smiling with his friend. He knew that Nathaniel was standing just a bit behind him, listening quietly to things of which he had no knowledge. Nathaniel seldom went Above, so he had not known Elliot Burch, the wealthy developer.

“Now, to go back to my original question; how much money are you going to need? There isn’t a whole lot left in this piggy bank,” Elliot was smiling, so Vincent smiled back. He had not simply said no. Vincent took it as a good sign.

“To tell the truth, Elliot,” Vincent answered. “I have no idea about the cost of anchor bolts. Mouse usually scrounged for them also,” he watched as Elliot looked back to where Mouse was working.

“I hate to think of the places he must have gone to *find* those anchor bolts. Did you know that he got caught on the tower building site by three of my security guards?”

“Yes,” Vincent told him. “I hurried to follow him, and saw your guards take him into the trailer” He paused to remember the rest of the story. “I went to Catherine and told her what had happened. Catherine assured me that she would help him.”

Elliot laughed. “I have always wondered how Catherine knew to come to me so quickly,” he said. “I had barely hung up the phone when she barged into my office, demanding that I release him. She wouldn’t tell me why, or who he was. She wouldn’t tell me anything. Catherine asked me to trust her, and that she had made a promise. It was the only reason I got. I reminded her of the last time she had asked me to trust her.”

“That was when Father and I were trapped in the maze, Elliot,” Vincent explained. “Can I assume that the plastic explosive Mouse used to save us, was from that time?”

“You can,” Elliot answered. “My super on the site that night was questioning Mouse because he had been carrying a bag of sugar *and* the plastic explosive. Simons called me to ask if should call the police. I *can* say that I was a little stunned when he told me that the kid didn’t know the name of the President, but wanted his attorney. He even named her,”

“Catherine.” Vincent replied. He was fully aware of how close Mouse had come to being incarcerated. “We were very worried that Mouse would be arrested, Knowing him as you do now, can you imagine what the result would be?”

“I think it would have destroyed him,” Elliot answered. “Mouse in a jail cell? Absolutely not.”

“There was a time, years ago now, when we knew that he had stolen things from Above quite often. There was a meeting of the community. Father and Winslow tried to explain to Mouse that what we took from Above were only those things which the people in the City, had cast aside.. Mouse insisted that he was “not stealing; he was taking.” Vincent let his mind go back to the day of Mouse’s punishment, and how they had tried again and again, to make him understand, and why his stealing could not continue,” Vincent paused once again. “Mouse insisted that it was not stealing.” Vincent finally said. “Mouse told us, I believe: “ needed it, found it, took it.” He called it “stuff” and told us he left a lot of it behind, and that it wouldn’t be missed.

‘Unfortunately, the community thought differently. He was punished with what we call “the silence.” Father told him that for a month, no man, woman, or child would speak to him.”

“That sounds harsh.” Elliot remarked. “I have come to realize that most of the time, Mouse is a loner. We have wandered through many a tunnel since I’ve been with him. It must have made Mouse feel very lonely. He gets on so well with the men working here.” Elliot became quiet, and Vincent thought he was thinking back to the anchor bolts, and the expense. “Yeah, “ he said, after long moments of silence. “I have enough for the anchor bolts, *and* the batteries we keep needing to replace in the lanterns.”

“Then we will be able to connect this chamber with the disused part of the pipe system,” Vincent said. He truly had not wanted to ask Elliot to spend what little might have been left from the bankruptcy. However, he had asked enough of the men in the community. They would be looking hard and long for different pipes, and various metals for the hangings. Vincent turned, and saw Nathaniel

walking back to the other men. He had no need to listen to a discussion regarding the pipe system. He had lived with it for many years.

“It would be a great convenience to communicate with the people above us. It gets pretty dark and quiet down here at night,” Elliot told him.

“Pascal told me that you *preferred* the quiet.” Vincent said, smiling. He remembered vividly how very little time Elliot had spent staying with Pascal before finding a much quieter chamber with Mouse.

Elliot laughed. “You’re right,” he replied. “I could never figure out how that pipe man manages to stay in that chamber. The racket nearly drove me crazy.”

“Ah, but that is music to Pascal’s ears,” Vincent reminded him. “He would be lost without his pipes. Do you remember your first Winterfest with us? Pascal, as is his want, barely stayed for more than an hour.”

“I remember.” Elliot said. “That’s why I had to find some place that was quieter. Mouse’s chamber turned out to be the perfect place for me.”

“Even with Athur?” Vincent asked, still smiling. “Racoons are not known for their quiet demeanor.”

“Yes. Even with Arthur. That boy, Mouse, turned out to really be a wonder.” Elliot said. “His designs and the way he knows all of the tunnels, is amazing.” He paused, then continued. “As for the things you and I need, I will have to ask one of the men here, to go back to the City to order both the cable, and your anchor bolts.”

“You still will not go Above to order them yourself.” It was a statement; not a question. Vincent worried about why Elliot only went into the City when he enjoyed a concert in the park with Jenny. He had refused to order any of the parts for his designs himself. Instead insisting that Thomas or Cullen order them from his old suppliers.

Elliot shook his head. “No, Vincent.” he told him. “If I were to go to any suppliers, even the ones I never used, everyone would know that Elliot Burch was back. It wouldn’t be kept secret.” Elliott paused, Vincent saw a bit of sadness in his eyes. “I don’t want that. I’ve found peace here. And I’ve found that I have a purpose again. If they knew I was still alive, there would be a whole mess of questions I couldn’t answer. I really like it down here,” Elliot smiled. “Besides, there’s a whole lot of work to be done yet. We still have a very long way to go until the project is finished. And I really think that I would miss working with Mouse.”

Vincent returned Elliot’s smile. Although Elliot had been Below for little over a year, it still amazed him that Elliot and Mouse got along so well together. “We cannot have that.” Vincent told him. “Catherine and I would also miss you, Elliot.”

“How is Catherine?” Elliot asked quietly. “Is everything well with the twins?” Vincent could see that it was still difficult for Elliot to discuss Catherine with him, Although, he seemed more accustomed to Catherine being married, and having more children. Vincent doubted that he would be as calm, seeing another man married to the woman he had loved. Even the thought was distressing.

“Catherine is fine, Elliot; as are the children.” Vincent reached into his vest pocket. “Father had some papers for you, Elliot.” he said. “I believe they are questions Father has about the rehabilitation exercises Peter designed for you. Father is the physician here Below, and I expect Peter has sent him a reminder to

give to you.” Vincent paused. “I also think Father wants some idea of how the project is progressing.”

“You can tell Peter, that I’m doing the exercises, Vincent.” Elliot moved his left arm to show Vincent how far his rehabilitation had come. “As you can see, I haven’t stopped.” Elliot put his arm down and sighed. “I’m still unable to do as much as I would like. But I am supervising the work, and Mouse is making certain that everyone follows my blueprints to the letter. He’s even better than Jack in some ways.”

Elliot looked to where Nathaniel was having his discussion. “As for our project,” he began, “I’m afraid that it’s going to take longer than I thought. I was thinking that we would need only a couple of platforms, but in order to generate enough energy to reach the higher chambers, we’ll need at least five.”

“What kind of water wheel needs a platform, Elliot?” Vincent asked, following Elliot’s gaze. “If I remember correctly, your blueprints did not show any platforms.”

“Come on over to the first platform, and I’ll explain it to you.” Vincent followed Elliot to where Nathaniel, Thomas, and Cullen were standing. All three turned as they walked toward them. Vincent could tell that Nathaniel wanted to hear Elliot’s explanation. He had already seen the different wheels and platforms, and was no doubt as curious as he. Vincent had expected the sort of water wheel described in Elliot’s original plans. What he saw instead, was a completely different sort of wheel, resting on a platform of wood. There was an empty space under the wheel, more than likely where the wheel would turn in the water.

“The wheel is supported on the pontoon and its platform raft,” Elliot began, “The middle of the raft is empty because it is where the wheel goes down into the

river. The hub of the wheel is attached to a gear box that increases the speed when attached to the electrical generator. The electrical cord is lashed to the tension cable, which is then anchored to a point on each side of the land next to the water.” Elliot paused, pointing out each individual part. “Several floating wheel generators will be tied in series to multiply the extra power needed. It’s a good thing that the river isn’t too wide. Mouse is talking with Thomas on his design for the bridge we need. His design is brilliant.”

“And you are going to need *five* of these platforms?” Vincent asked. The project was becoming much more complicated than the blueprints seen by the Council.

“Yeah, I’m afraid we’ll need at least five. One for the first part of the river on the left, one farther down to the right, and the daisy-chain of three rafts in between them.”

“Then that explains all of the generators,” Vincent commented. “How many platforms have been completed so far?” Next to the generators and the rolls of cable, was a large box filled with what Vincent believed were the gear boxes and the other parts needed for the construction of the rest of the wheels. Beside the box, was a huge pile of lumber and a collection of various saws.

“We decided to make the daisy-chain platforms first,” Elliot told him, “so that makes three completed. We won’t put any of the rafts into the river until the other two are finished.” He paused and looked to where Mouse had walked away with Thomas. “Would you believe that Mouse is explaining his plans for the bridge? That kid surprises me more every day.”

“Mouse has always been incredibly good at making anything that is intricate. When he was eleven, by our estimate, he made Father a kaleidoscope. He

called it his “tube of colors.” It contained all of the colors we lack here Below the City. Father was very touched.” Vincent did not add that although Mouse had made it by himself, he *had* stolen the parts from Above. The memory made him smile.

Vincent and Nathaniel both looked at the various changes, Vincent was understandably curious, as it looked as though the project had become much more labor intensive. If they were to finish this year, Elliot would need more help. Vincent wondered who there was in the community that might be willing to come down to work.

“Now,” Vincent commented, “all you need is more cable, as we need the anchor bolts. Is there anything else that you need? Or are there any other parts needed to complete all of the changes?” He and Nathaniel walked with Elliot, to where Mouse and Thomas were standing.

“No.” Elliot replied. “I’ve already sent Cullen to get the extra gear boxes, and the generators. He and Thomas bought everything for what we need to finish.” Vincent looked again at all of the lumber, generators, and coils of cable that were all around them. Even with the changes he had made, Elliot seemed to have everything in hand.

“I will need to apprise the Council of the changes, Elliot,” Vincent told him. “Since so much is already completed, there will be no argument. However, it would be prudent if you could explain the changes in detail. I fear that my explanation would not suffice. You could explain all of this much better than I could.”

Elliot smiled. “I’m way ahead of you there, Vincent.” he told him. “I’ve drawn up a second blueprint for you to take back to the Council. It shows everything; the wheel, the pontoon, the platform, and the generator for one of the

rafts. I've even included a drawing of the river, showing where the rafts will be placed. That should tell them everything they need to know." Elliot paused, and looked around at the work they had already completed. Vincent saw the pride on his face, and was happy to know that at last Elliot had found a new purpose in his life.

"How many extra workers do you require?" Vincent asked. "If you intend to finish by the end of the year, it seems to me, that you will need more assistance."

Elliot shook his head. "There's no way that we will finish by the end of the year," Elliot explained. "Even if I had more men, it would still take at least until next summer before all of the rafts are finished; and then, the cables have to be brought up to the Home Chambers."

"There is absolutely no way?" Vincent inquired. "Even with five or six new men?" He hadn't thought that it would take so very long.

"No way, Vincent," Elliot repeated. "The crew I have now is really all I need. They are not only more than adequate, but they get along well," he continued. "And they work harder than any crew I've ever had. Yes, it's going to take a lot of time, but in the end it will be worth it."

Cullen, Thomas and Nathaniel, had all been listening to the conversation. It looked to Vincent, like Mouse was still near the river; looking over plans of his own.

"I didn't think it would take so long," Nathaniel said to Vincent. "Lena was looking forward to having better lighting in our chamber."

“Well,” Cullen explained to him. “Looks like your wife is just going to wait it out. Like Elliot said, we’ve been working as hard as we can. I’ve worked with wood most of my life, but I’ve never worked on this big of a construction site. And since I’ve lived Below, the most I do is make furniture, and chess sets; like the one I made for Father.”

“It is quite beautiful,” Vincent told him. “Father and I use it often. Remember? He even took it to Winterfest this year.” Vincent continued, “Sebastion was quite impressed by the workmanship.”

Vincent saw Cullen’s blush. “Yeah,” he said. “I remember. It made me feel really good to know that I had made something that everyone admired.” He looked back toward the river rafts. “That’s how working on this is making me feel.” The sense of pride, was written over his entire face. Vincent was glad that Cullen was back to being the man he was before Mouse found that ship. It had taken a little time, but it was nice to have his friend back again.

Chapter VIII

Vincent knew he should have gone straight to Father with the new blueprint. However, going to their chamber to greet Catherine needed to come first. When he entered the room, Catherine was, as usual, on the floor with their twins. Twins. Just the thought of them, made him smile.

“On the rug again, love?” Vincent said, going to her and sitting by her side. Catherine turned to him quickly, and he pulled her into his arms. “How I have missed you.” he told her, as his arms tightened around her. This was Home. The scent of her hair, and the warmth of her body against his; this was all he needed of the world.

Catherine was exactly where she would always want to be. Two lonely nights without him. Even with Jacob beside her, had not been enough. The feel of his strong arms, the warmth of his body; this was where she belonged. Catherine lifted her face and his lips opened under hers. How she had missed this. As long as she lived, she would never tire of the sense of rightness kissing Vincent brought. His hands moved into her hair, drawing her even closer. The kiss deepened, and Catherine lost herself in the taste of him.

“Mama.” An insistent voice called out. Both she and Vincent broke off the kiss, but his arms stayed around her.

“I think our daughter has missed you too,” Catherine said, as they both turned to Caroline. “I’m sorry sweetheart. Momma was only greeting daddy. He’s been gone for far too long.” Caroline had crawled to Vincent’s side, and was now

holding onto his leg as she stretched out her arms, one after the other; moving slowly up to his chest. Vincent gently released Catherine, and turned to pull his daughter into his arms.

Catherine watched as Caroline held on to Vincent's coat. It was only then that she realized he hadn't bothered to remove it, or the pack still on his back. "You're still carrying your backpack," Catherine said, with wonder in her voice.

"That is because I could not wait to hold you." Vincent replied. "You are not the only one who has been lonely." He rested his chin lightly on Caroline's hair. Catherine knew it still amazed him that she had been born with her head full of curls. She watched as he kissed Caroline on the cheek, still holding her close. She had always known that he would be a wonderful father. When she had come down to live in the Tunnels the first time, when her own father had died; she had dreamed of Vincent holding a child they had made together. That seemed so very long ago now. It had only been a dream then, but the reality surpassed the dream.

Catherine looked behind Vincent and their daughter, seeing Charles patiently waiting *his* turn to greet his daddy. Both of the twins were much quieter than their brother had been. Neither seemed to have the energy of Vincent and Jacob. They spent their time together. Always. *The bond between them must be very intense*, Catherine thought. In their crib and during the warmer summer days in their stroller, they were always holding hands.

"Charles is looking at you, Vincent." Catherine told him. "He's been waiting patiently to say "welcome back too."

Vincent handed Caroline to his wife, and picked up his small son. Catherine knew it was still a wonder to Vincent, that Charles was a smaller image of himself.

Vincent ran his fingers over the tiny fur hairs that covered Charles' face. He kissed him, as he had his sister; holding him close.

"He's beautiful, Vincent. And he will grow up knowing how much he is loved. Because of you and I, he will also know that someday he will find love. Just as you have."

Vincent turned around and Catherine saw the tears brimming in his eyes. "That I have found such happiness is only because of you, Catherine," Vincent told her. "You know my soul and my heart," he paused. "You must also know that I think of you as my "ever fixed mark." You are my love, my wife, and the dearest part of my existence."

"I expected you sooner," Father said, as Vincent walked into the book-strewn room. Father sat, as usual, in his favorite chair; sipping a cup of tea.

"I had to see Catherine and the children first, Father," Vincent explained. "I had expected to see Jacob there as well. Is he in his room?" Vincent looked over Father's shoulder to the small room that had been Jacob's since the twins were born. Jacob was not there. He could usually be found sitting on his bed, thumbing through the pages of his books. Although he still could not read, Vincent knew Jacob always enjoyed his books. Just looking at the pictures, and trying discern their meaning, made him happy. Vincent was proud that his oldest son had such a desire to read. He had always been surrounded by books himself, and read to by Father as he grew. It gave him pleasure knowing that he could raise Jacob as he

had been raised. And that Father too, often read to Jacob whenever he did not have other duties.

“Jacob is with Ellie, I believe, Father told him. “Little Catherine and David were taking their afternoon naps. You’ve come back earlier than we expected.”

“It still makes me smile when you speak of “little Catherine,” Vincent told him. “All of the community has acknowledged that you only began calling Lena’s daughter by that name since Catherine’s return to us.”

Father reached across the table and took Vincent’s hand. “Please know that I do it out of love for *your* Catherine.” Father paused, and Vincent felt his father’s grip tighten. “I suppose that in a way; I am still ashamed of how I treated Catherine when she first came back to us. Distinguishing her from her namesake, reminds me of how much she has become a much-loved part of our community. She was always so generous as a Helper. However, we are also very happy because it was she who brought Lena, Eric, and his sister, Ellie, to live with us.”

“Father,” Vincent began, “that was more than eighteen months ago. At our wedding, you apologized beautifully. Nothing else could have been more appropriate. Catherine and I have long forgotten that time.”

“Look not mournfully into the past.” Vincent quoted. “It comes not back again.”

“It has been quite a while since I have read Longfellow’s “Hyperion,” Vincent” Father replied. “That you quote it now, reminds me that I should read it again.” The room grew silent as Vincent watched his father’s changing face. His

expression went from sadness, to resignation. “You are correct, Vincent. The past does not come back to us. However, it does leave memories.”

“Memories that should be felt only at those times when it is necessary for us to remember them.” Vincent replied. “The present; our time now, is of greater importance.”

“Tell me,” Father began, changing the subject. ” how are things progressing with Elliot’s project?” Vincent sighed.

“When will you remember that Mouse is also part of “Elliot’s project”?” He asked. “I saw Mouse directing some of the construction while I was there. Elliot says that he is even better than the man who supervised most of Elliot’s buildings.”

Father took a sip of his tea, before he answered. Vincent knew a stalling tactic when he saw one. When Father finally spoke, he was shaking his head and trying not to smile.

“I am having trouble using that title, Vincent. “”Mouse Ed.”” He paused again. Vincent could tell that he was having some difficulty in keeping a stern face. “That the project should be called Mouse Ed, is somewhat difficult for me to imagine.”

“I cannot see why, Father. As Mouse said when the project was first discussed, we will not be needing Con Ed. anymore. We will be using Mouse Ed. Since it was both his and Elliot’s idea, it is totally appropriate.”

“Be that as it may, “Father began, “what can you tell me about,” he sighed, “Mouse Ed..”

Vincent let go of father’s hand, and pulled out the paper from inside his vest. “Would you please move your tea cup?” he asked. Father set the cup aside, and Vincent spread out the blueprint Elliot had made for them, on the small table. He was astonished to see how Elliot had remembered the exact proportions of the table. The blueprint covered it perfectly.

“This is the blueprint of the changes Elliot has to make to the original, Father.” Vincent explained. “His other plan would not generate enough energy. So, he changed the water wheels into what he termed river raft generators.” Father put on his reading glasses, and studied the new blueprint.

“You are quite correct, Vincent, ”Father told him. “This is much different than the original idea,” he said. “I see that he has drawn how the generators will look when in the water. It is quite an original idea.”

“Elliot told me that the idea itself was not his, but those of a friend who has a rather large estate. There is a small river on the property, and the man wanted to make something unusual. Elliot said that his friend often enjoyed showing unusual projects to his wealthy friends.”

“Yes.” Father said. “That is something Elliot Burch would understand. I am certain that he had many wealthy friends.” That Father’s tone was harsh, surprised Vincent.

“The Elliot who has lived Below with us for almost two years, is not the Elliot Burch who lived in wealth Above.” he reminded Father. “Our Elliot, is a man who took a bullet for me: A man who came to us so that he could heal and find solace with friends. They are not the same.”

“You are right, of course, “ Father said solemnly. “Perhaps it was only that you mentioned his wealthy friend, which took me to the past.”

“You should most assuredly read “Hyperion” once again,” Vincent told him, looking back down to the blueprint once more. “Elliot is sending either Cullen or Thomas up to the City for more cable, and the anchor bolts we need for the pipes. Because he has changed the way the wheels will work, he believes that more cable will be needed to bring electricity to a larger part of our community.”

“Has Elliot spoken to Pascal yet about putting in pipes to reach that chamber? It would be prudent for whomever is down there, to be able to communicate with us in case there is an emergency.” Vincent sighed, and decided to tell Father about the longer timeline later.

“No, Father,” Vincent told him. “We spoke quite a while about communication and the making of the extra pipes. I elected to speak to Pascal. It is much easier for me to do so, than to have Elliot make such a long journey. Pascal and I see each other often. It will not be difficult.”

Chapter IX

When Vincent walked into their chamber, Catherine was putting the twins into their stroller, and Jacob was sitting on the bed. He had heard her silent call, and explained to Father, why he had to get back to Catherine and their children. He had also heard from Jacob. It was time they went to eat, because he was very hungry.

“Daddy’s back, momma,” Jacob said, carefully getting off of the bed and going straight to Vincent to get a hug. “We missed you, daddy,” he told him, putting his arms around Vincent’s legs.

Vincent picked up his oldest son, and held him against his chest. Jacob deserved a good hug; just as his mother did. He looked toward Catherine as he held Jacob in his arms. She was also looking at *him*.

“Momma wants more than a hug, Vincent. Momma wants a long, warm kiss. I have been so very lonely without you.”

“As I have been lonely without you, love. “Rose of all my days, come near me.””

Vincent put Jacob down, as Catherine moved quickly into his arms. He held her close, giving her the kiss she asked for. He kissed her deeply, taking her breath, and the taste of her mouth. Vincent threaded his hands into Catherine’s hair, as they held each other close. This was what he had longed for; her warmth, and the feel of her in his arms.

“Daddy,” Vincent heard, as from far away. “I’m hungry.” Breaking off the kiss, he looked down and saw Jacob pulling on the leg of his pants. “We need to eat, daddy.” His son said, with a look that was filled with impatience.

Catherine moved, he thought, reluctantly from his arms and sighed. “It looks like momma will have to *wait* to welcome your daddy home properly.” she said softly, so that only Vincent could hear. He smiled and kissed her gently on both cheeks.

“Daddy will be thinking of nothing else all through dinner.” he whispered in her ear, as he ran his tongue over the indentation behind it. Catherine shivered, and Vincent smiled. Their minds were one, and each had the same thought.

Vincent picked Jacob up from where he was impatiently waiting, and put him on his shoulders. Catherine went to get the stroller, and together they walked to the Dining Hall.

The Dining Hall was full of late diners. It was usual for most of the community to have their dinners early, but it seemed they had been waiting for Vincent to return from the lowest tunnel with news of how Mouse Ed. was coming along.

He and Catherine found two empty places at the end of one of the long tables. Someone had already put Jacob's highchair at the outside end. It looked to Vincent, like the whole community had been waiting just for him. It seemed they wanted an explanation of how the construction of Mouse Ed. was progressing. They could have asked Nathaniel, as he was sitting with Lena and their children at another table. However, it was to him that they were looking; waiting for an update.

Vincent put Jacob into his highchair, as Catherine sat down, with the stroller beside her. Both of his youngest children were awake and watching him. It was as if they too, were waiting for him to speak. Vincent sat next to Catherine, and filled all of their bowls with the thick vegetable soup William and his helpers had prepared. Someone had placed a small bowl next to where Vincent was sitting, and he filled it also; putting it onto Jacob's tray. Knowing that everyone was still waiting, Vincent took the time to take three pieces of bread from the basket and passed one each to his wife and son. He took time to adjust Jacob's bib, as soup was wont to be messy when in Jacob's hands.

"Eat your dinner, Vincent," Father said from his place at the table. "All of our community can wait a while longer." Vincent saw Father's stern glance at the people around him. "You have had a long journey, and have only recently returned. Everyone here is anxious to hear what you have to say. However, it would be better for all of us if we ate while the soup was still warm."

It was as though Father's words had been a signal. Suddenly, everyone was concentrating on their food. Vincent smiled, handing Jacob the small spoon that had been left beside his bowl.

"Eat slowly and carefully, Jacob," he told him. "William's soup is meant to be savored. And remember to chew the vegetables well." Jacob rewarded Vincent with a smile and grasped his spoon tightly.

Dinner proceeded in silence, broken only by a parent admonishing one of their children. Those children without parents, were used to taking care of themselves. Even they remained quiet. Vincent was glad for the silence. It gave him time to decide how to explain the changes Elliot had made, and all of the work yet to be accomplished.

“Whatever you say will be sufficient, my love. I have always found your speech to be very eloquent.”

“I do not believe that eloquence is what is needed here ,Catherine. I need my explanation to be plain and to the point.”

“You will still say it eloquently.”

Vincent turned to Catherine and kissed her on the cheek. He no longer felt uncomfortable, kissing her in front of everyone. She had truly changed the way in which he saw himself. He was simply a man kissing his wife.”

After he had cleaned up Jacob’s messy face, Vincent looked around and saw that everyone had finished their meal. Most were sneaking shy glances at him, waiting for him to speak. He even saw William and his helpers: Christine, Amelia, Dennis and Nikolai, standing next to their wonderful cook. It was unusual for William to leave the kitchen. However, he too, it seemed, was curious about Mouse Ed.. Vincent remembered how William had told the Council that it was alright to let Elliot work on different undertakings with Mouse, as long as they stayed away from his kitchen. The memory made him smile.

Vincent got up from the table, and faced the expectant gathering. “The project called Mouse Ed,” he began, “has been altered to bring more electricity up to the Home Chambers,” he continued. “Instead of the original plans, Elliot has come up with a novel solution. There will be what he terms raft river platforms to float in tandem. There will be five in total, and will require more work than first expected.” Vincent paused, waiting for any questions. When there were none, he continued. “There are a few parts yet to be acquired. But, Elliot has said that he would purchase them. There will be no expense to our community. There is another part of the plan that *will* need to be accomplished by those of us here.” Vincent paused, looking around to find Pascal.

“You and I will have to discuss running communication pipes down to that lower chamber,” Vincent told him directly. “Nathaniel and I used the stairs of the Stone Circle to begin our journey. As you know, there are no pipes going down the Circle. There are, however, pipes below it; where we found Narcissa during that long ago Winterfest. We will need to go the way we went then, to hang the pipes. Communication must certainly be established..”

Vincent turned his gaze to the men in the room. “It will be our job to locate enough pipe, and metal for the couplings and J-shaped mountings. To make these, we will need every able-bodied man. The pipes we made for the Eastern sector were nothing, compared to what is needed now.”

“Just how long is this whole thing going to take, Vincent?” asked Phillip, from the table where Nathaniel was sitting. “It sounds like it’s going to be a couple more years.”

“That is very possible,” Vincent replied, looking at the young man sitting beside Jamie. “The river rafts and the bridge that crosses the river, need to be finished long before we complete hanging the pipes. Then there are the cables that need to be hung up from that lower chamber to the chambers here.”

“Where are we supposed to find these pipes?” Dennis asked. He was one of William’s helpers, and seldom spoke up.

“We find them where we have always found them, Dennis,” Vincent told him “We look for those which have been discarded from Above. This is nothing new for us, “ he continued.” Most of the pipes Pascal has in the Pipe Chamber, and the ones within our community, have all been found Above. It is a matter of how many we can find. Elliot has already spent quite a lot of what money he had left. He has told me that he will pay for the anchor bolts, as he has spent much on all the other things he and Mouse needed. We can only ask so much of him,” After a short pause, Vincent told everyone, “If any of you want to see the new plans, there is a new blueprint in Father’s study.”

There were murmurs around the large room. Vincent looked at the various low conversations, before sitting back down. There was little more he could add. The men in the community, as well as the older children, would have to decide whether or not they would help.

“I thought it went very well, Vincent.” Catherine whispered. “Now it’s up to them to figure out how to make it happen”

“It sounds so very simple when you say it,” Vincent whispered, taking one of her hands in his. He brought it to his lips, looking into her lovely, green eyes. He kissed her fingers, then put her hand back down. Father asked only for some decorum from them. Vincent and Catherine always tried to oblige him.

“If there are no questions,” Father said, “then I believe we should let William and his assistants get on with their work.” he paused and looked around the room. “Since so many of us are here at the same time,” he told the people who

filled the room, “I do think they will need extra help in clearing the tables. I would ask some of you to please stay and assist them.” Father stood up. “I believe that concludes our impromptu community council.”

The sound of benches being moved, told Vincent that Father’s words were having their desired effect. Many of the older children started to take their dishes and silverware back with them to the kitchen. Some of the people without families followed their example. Those with smaller children, hurried them from the Hall.

Chapter X

Vincent and Pascal sat on the two, hardback chairs in Pascal's bed chamber, having both come to the conclusion that the pipe chamber itself, would not be a place for quiet conversation. As it was, the sound of the pipes was still ever present.

"So," Vincent began, "where shall we begin?" he asked. "Is it possible to follow that chamber we used to locate Narcissa?" Somehow the memory of that time still haunted him. He had not told Narcissa how much he had worried about her recovery. She had always been very dear to him, even as a child.

The last time he had seen Narcissa, had been at the Winterfest following Catherine's return. Her burns had healed well, and no longer kept her from her work with herbs and teas. It had taken months before she had been able to use her arms, and she had stayed in the hospital for quite a long time, being cared for by Father, Mary, and Faye. After what Narcissa had termed enough, she had insisted on returning to her own chamber. It was with some reluctance, that Father agreed. However, he had insisted that Faye or Mary accompany her to make certain Narcissa would be comfortable. He also asked one of them to check on her for the first few months she was home.

"You're awfully quiet," Pascal said, in a soft voice. "Are you thinking of Narcissa?"

Vincent closed his mind to his memories, and looked at his friend. "Yes, Pascal. It is a difficult time to forget. To think we might have lost her, had it not been for you and your constant attunement to the pipes."

“It was only because the pipes were so quiet, that I was able to hear her soft tapping.

“Whatever it was that allowed you to hear it, Pascal, we owe you a great debt.” Vincent paused, thinking of Father’s description of Narcissa, and how he had tried for many years to convince him of Narcissa’s abilities. Father was a man of science. He would never understand how much she saw through her visions. Her world had always been incomprehensible to him.

“I am very fond of Narcissa, Vincent.” Pascal told him. “Our world would be awfully dull without her. I remember when we were kids. She always had vivid tales to tell us.” he paused and smiled widely. “I still have the cup I made when she showed us how make them. Do you still have yours?”

“I gave the cup with the moon and stars to Catherine.” Vincent replied. “The other one I have kept for Jacob when he gets a little older.”

“Well, enough reminiscing. I think we should go back to your original question,” Pascal told him. “We will need to measure exactly how far the pipes will have to go. How many days did it take you and Nathaniel to get there?”

“It took us two days.” Vincent replied. “However, we did not start in the lower tunnel where you heard Narcissa. Perhaps that way will be shorter.”

“Boy, “Pascal began, “I really hope so. We’re going to need a whole lot of pipes. Since it’s too late today, maybe we could start measuring the distance tomorrow. You check with Catherine, and I’ll gather my measuring tape. I suppose we should take some food and blankets with us; in case we need to stay a night or two.”

“Catherine is not going to be very happy with me.” Vincent told him. “I’ve only just returned. Could we perhaps postpone the trip until next week?”

Pascal smiled. “Sure, Vincent,” he said, still smiling. “I know how much you miss Catherine when you’re gone. And I know how much she misses you. She seems quieter when I see her in the Dining Hall with the children. It’s not that she mopes, or anything. She just looks sad, and doesn’t say much to anyone.” Pascal chuckled. “It’s usually Jacob that does the talking. I don’t think there’s one person here, he doesn’t know.”

“You are still awake, “Vincent to Jacob as he entered Jacob’s room. “It is very much past your bedtime.” He walked over to where his son was lying under the blankets of his bed. His head was on his pillow, and he was turning the pages of a small book.

“I was waiting for you, daddy,” Jacob told him. “When you’re home you always read me a story before I go to seep. So, I was waiting up for you.” Jacob paused and handed the book to Vincent. “I even picked a book,” he told him proudly.

Vincent took the book from his son, and sat down beside him. “I have not seen this particular book before, Jacob,” he told him. “Is it a new book Father has given to you?”

“Oh, no,” Jacob said, smiling. “The book belongs to Catty. See said dat I could borrow it. I really like da picturs. And Catty told me dat it’s about two girls who make a bully leave dem alone.. Catty said dat is her favrite book.”

Vincent looked at the cover of the small book. “”The Jelly Bean Defense,” he told Jacob. “I can see why Cathy likes it.” On the cover of the book was a well-drawn picture of two young girls holding a bag of jelly beans. Jacob got very little candy. It was only when Jenny came down to visit, bringing Jacob books and jelly beans. Jacob was very fond of jelly beans. “I can also see why *you* wanted to borrow it.”

Jacob laughed. “Dats because you know I love dat candy, daddy.” Jacob replied. “It’s da candy dat Jenny gives me.”

“Are you ready to have me read?” Vincent asked him. The hour was late, and he knew that Catherine was waiting for him.

“It’s fine, Vincent. I’m feeding Charles now. Then it will be Caroline’s turn. I know how much you enjoy watching me feed the babies.”

Vincent smiled, and closed his eyes. For he *did* love seeing one of their younger children feeding at Catherine’s breast. It was a sight that never grew old. He would always marvel at that vision no matter how long he lived. He had never imagined, for so very many lonely years, that he would ever look upon such a miracle.

Vincent opened his eyes, and looked back at the book in his hands. “Acacia Sorenson,” he said, looking at the author’s name. “I do not believe I have heard of this author before.” He opened the book and began to read. “This book is dedicated to my Grammy,” he said, reading the small lines.”

“Wats a Grammy?” Jacob asked, looking perplexed.

“I believe it is another name for grandmother,” Vincent told him. “It seems that the author has dedicated her book to her grandmother. She must love her very much. I have not seen such a dedication before.”

“Wats a dedicatin?” Jacob asked.

“A dedication,” Vincent explained, “is usually when the person writing the book, gives credit to someone who is important to them. Sometimes it is a relative, as in this book. However, a book may also be dedicated to someone who was an inspiration to the author, or helped them in some way with that particular book.”

Jacob scooted down in his bed, and pulled the blankets up to his chin. “I’m getting tired, daddy,” he told Vincent. “Would you read the book to me now?”

Vincent turned to the first page, and began to read. “There were once two girls who loved jelly beans...” Vincent continued to read until he saw Jacob’s eyes close, and the quiet of his thoughts in their bond told him Jacob was asleep. He got off the bed slowly, so he would not awaken him. Placed the book on top of Jacob’s small chest of drawers, and turned off the small lamp. Then he left Jacob’s room, and walked quickly to where Catherine was feeding Caroline. The sight was so vivid in his mind, that he felt as though he was already there.

Chapter XI

The picture Vincent had seen in his mind, awaited him. His wife was leaning back upon the pillows, and Caroline was nursing at her breast. Catherine looked up as he came into their chamber and closed the door behind him.

“Caroline and Charles decided to stay awake until their daddy got home.” Catherine told him. “They are usually fed by this time. It seems they were as anxious as me for you to get here.” Holding Caroline close, she sat up just enough for Vincent to climb into their bed and get behind her. He had undressed quickly; not wanting to wait to have his arms around Catherine.

Vincent heard her sigh, as she leaned back against his chest. Vincent parted her hair, and kissed the back of her neck. Then his arms were around her. The feel of her soft skin against his chest, let him know that this was where he wanted to be: Forever. His wife in his arms, and the feel of her body touching his. Vincent looked down at his daughter. She had her tiny hand against Catherine’s breast as she nursed.

“Caroline is just like Charles,” Catherine told him, smiling as she tilted her head to look into his eyes. “They both hold on as if to make sure that I don’t move.” Vincent rested his chin on her hair, as he continued to watch his daughter.

“Then our children have much in common with their father,” he said, breathing in the scent of Catherine’s hair. She always smelled of roses now. Mary continued to provide them with her rose-scented soap, so they smelled somewhat

the same. Vincent chuckled, thinking back to a time when she had awakened and softly asked, ‘furry roses?’

“And you recited your version of Burgess’ poem about a purple cow.” Catherine was laughing, as he felt her mind go back to their special chamber.

“I will never forget it,” she told him. “It was the first time I ever saw you being totally silly.”

I have never been silly, “Vincent insisted. “You woke me up with that phrase, and I answered you the best way I could. I answered with a poem.” He stopped speaking and kissed Catherine’s hair. “We have quoted poetry to each other many times before.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “but you had never before described yourself as a furry rose.” Caroline had stopped nursing, and was fast asleep. Catherine moved slowly from out of his arms, and carried their daughter to the large crib she shared with her brother.

“A thing that I never done since,” Vincent reminded her. “It was a special moment at a very special time.” Catherine walked back to the bed, as Vincent slid down from his seat on the pillows; welcoming her into his arms once more.

“It was our honeymoon. A very, very, special time.” Catherine told him, resting her head in her special place on his shoulder. “A time that I will never forget, no matter how old and gray I may become.”

Vincent tightened his arms around her, turning her face for a short kiss. “Neither shall I ever forget that time, Catherine,” he answered softly. “Even, as you say, when *I* am old and gray with you.” He felt Catherine smile.

“I am trying to picture you as old and gray,” she told him. “And it’s just impossible.” Catherine lifted her face for a much deeper and longer kiss. Vincent obliged, savoring the taste of her as his lips and tongue met hers. He held her closer, and the kiss deepened. How Vincent loved the sweet feel of her soft warmth against him. He felt her lips move from his mouth, down to his chin. Catherine planted warm kisses on her sojourn down to his neck and lower, to his naked chest. The sensation made him shiver.

Vincent could feel how Catherine luxuriated in the feel of his warm chest beneath her lips. She had been telling him for years that he was beautiful, and he had finally come to believe; through her words and thoughts.

“You are not playing fair, Catherine.” Vincent said softly. “While you have access to my body, I am caressing your nightgown.”

Catherine kiss his chest, one more time, before moving from Vincent’s arms. She rose from their bed; standing to face him. With slow deliberation. she loosened the ties at the top of her gown, and let it slip from her shoulders to the floor.

“Is this better?” she asked. Vincent watched the change in her expressive eyes. He also felt her thoughts. They matched his completely. Catherine smiled as he pulled back the blankets, silently inviting her back into their bed. No words were ever needed between them. They were two voices from one string.

“We need no words. Ours is a bond, not only of love, but of our hearts and our minds.”

Catherine answered his unspoken thoughts, by accepting his invitation to return to their bed. Vincent immediately pulled her into his arms. At the touch of their bodies meeting, he could not but indulge in the softness of her skin against the hair on his body. Then he felt Catherine move her entire body against his. The sensation made him shiver, and Vincent moaned.

Holding her gently by the shoulders, he brought her back up his body, so their lips could meet. Vincent let the kiss linger, probing with his tongue into the depths of her mouth. The taste was purely Catherine's; honey sweet, and warming. Her tongue dueled with his, as the kiss continued. Vincent could never get enough, though he lived forever. He took such delight in being able to make love to her like this; no more longing hugs, but her bare body, pressed to his.

Vincent reluctantly ended the kiss, and rolled onto his back. The move brought Catherine above him. She lingered in stillness for a time, before raising her head to look into his eyes. Her eyes looked dark in the candlelight. The passion in them was palpable.

"I am yours," Vincent said gently. "Do with me as you wish," he continued to look into her eyes, and their minds locked.

"As I wish?" She asked. "Truly anything I wish?"

"I am, and always will be; totally yours," He repeated.

Catherine raised her arms to run her hands through his hair. He let himself feel what Catherine was feeling. To her, his hair felt incredibly sensuous against her palms and fingers. Even as far back as Vincent could remember, she always

loved “petting him,” as he had called it. And now, she could “pet” him as much as she liked. The warmth within Vincent grew.

He felt Catherine hands move to his shoulders. Instinctively she knew where his muscles were sore. Carrying the heavy pack, always caused his shoulders to ache. As she massaged his tired muscles, Catherine bent down to rub her face against his. Vincent understood that she loved the differences between them. She often touched his face, and the hair that covered his chest.

Vincent closed his eyes, as her fingers slid lower; across his lips and neck. Then, they moved across his chest, and teased each of the nipples she found there.

When her tongue replaced her fingers, Vincent tightened his arms around her waist for a moment, then did some teasing of his own. This time it was *his* fingers that moved; down Catherine’s back to the even softer skin he found lower. Gently he touched the warmest part of her; finding the dampness his caresses had caused. Her moan was soft, but Vincent felt it shiver down his body.

He continued to caress her with gentle, yet insistent touches. He felt her move against those touches, bringing his fingers closer, deeper. Cathrine now had her fingers once again on his shoulders, as her body moved against his. Vincent felt her insistence, her need growing with each touch. When she moved against the hardness beneath her; it was his turn to moan.

Every part of him urged him to make them one. Vincent’s could hear his breath coming in harsh rasps, and he realized that he could only prolong his anticipation for a few moments longer. Catherine continued to move against him; her lips now seeking his. As he deepened their kiss, Vincent put his arms back around Catherine’s waist, and lifted her above him; ending the kiss.

“Bring me home, love,” he whispered in her ear. “Give to me the gift of your body, merging with mine.”

Catherine’s were glazed as she looked down into his, When Vincent felt her fingers around him, he gasped. Then, when she opened her legs to bring him into her, Vincent could no longer wait. He slowly sank into the heart of her. He was surrounded by her; and the incredible sense of right that always came to him. Catherine was the very dearest part of his heart, his soul. Their minds were one, and Vincent felt her need rising. He moved deeper within her; still keeping to his slow rhythm.

“Vincent!”

Catherine’s cried out, as her body tightened in spasms around him. Holding himself back no longer, Vincent moved faster, and his cries merged with hers.

Chapter XII

“This is the tunnel, Vincent,” Pascal told him, as they found the place where he had first heard Narcissa’s tapping, in the midst of that long ago Winterfest.

“The one we discovered that night,” Vincent agreed. “The one that led us down to Narcissa.” Vincent remembered that night all too clearly. “You did not remember where the tunnel led, but we followed it to where she had fallen.”

“That’s right, Vincent,” Pascal told him. “You led the way, and the two of us discovered that it led down to the bottom of the Stone Circle.”

“And you truly believe that this might be a shorter way to travel down.”

“I do,” Pascal replied. “But the only way to find out is to follow it, and see where it takes us.” Both of them dug into their packs from the floor of the tunnel, Pascal removed his long measuring tape from his pack, and Vincent took out a pencil and notebook.

Slowly, Pascal began measuring as they started to follow the four different pipes lining the walls. It was slow going. Each of them had packed blankets and enough food and water to last two days, in case the route was not quite as short as they thought, or as Vincent believed, the measuring of the distance would add to their time. He always thought it better to be prepared.

As Pascal told him the distance which each measurement, Vincent wrote it into his notebook. At the pace they were going, Vincent was certain that the walk would not only be extraordinarily slow, but take just as long as he had feared.

They walked in silence while they worked. Although Vincent's thoughts kept returning to his first sight of Narcissa; burned and broken at the bottom of the Stone Circle. He remembered how he had so carefully picked her up from the floor; trying hard not to add to her pain.

"That time is passed now, Vincent," Catherine reminded him. "Narcissa is safe and well again. Didn't you once tell me that certain things were 'Portions and parcels of the dreadful past'? This is one of those things, my love. It is part of that past.."

"You are quite right, Catherine. It was long ago, and although I shall never forget it; I shall begin to put it behind me with the other old sadness I hold within."

"You've been quieter than usual, Vincent," Pascal said, stopping as he came to the end of one completed measurement. "Is your mind completely on our work, or are you talking to Catherine?"

Vincent stopped, smiling at his friend. "You know me too well," he told him. "Catherine was just chiding me for dwelling on the past again."

"She shouldn't, Vincent," Pascal told him. "I'm remembering that awful time, too. I had never seen someone so burned like that. People have told me that burns cause more pain than almost anything else," he continued. "I don't want to

imagine how much pain Narcissa must have been in. I get the shivers, just thinking about it.”

“Then perhaps we should both take Catherine’s words to heart,” Vincent said, sighing. “She reminded me that I once quoted Tennyson; telling her that what we had suffered was ‘portions and parcels of the dreadful past.’”

Pascal patted Vincent’s shoulder. “Your Catherine is a very smart woman, Vincent,” he said. “I think you’re right, and that we should take her advice. Otherwise, we’ll never get this job done.” He let go of Vincent’s shoulder, and turned to restart his measuring. Vincent followed his example, and began writing down the numbers as Pascal called them out.

“Vincent tells me that the trip is going slowly,” Catherine said to Father, as they sat together in his study. Jacob was again visiting his friends, Cathy and David, and Rebecca had finished teaching her class; asking to spend time with the twins.

“Has he told you of the distance so far?” Father inquired. “I sincerely hope they have found a faster way to their destination. Running the pipes will still

remain time-consuming. However, I would feel more comfortable, if we could get the emergency pipe system finished as soon as we possibly can.”

“Are you really that worried, Father?” Catherine asked. She knew that Elliot had always been known for his safe building sites when she lived Above, so she had not been very concerned. It seemed that her father-in-law felt differently

“There are always things that can happen at a building site, Catherine,” Father told her. “I am particularly worried because *this* site happens to be near a river. And you and Vincent have both told me that Mouse is the one designing the bridge.” Father took off his glasses, and closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened his eyes again, Catherine recognized the deep concern. “Is it Mouse working on the bridge design that’s worrying you, Father? she asked. “Or is it concern for Mouse, himself?”

“It is both,” Father replied, sighing heavily. “Mouse working beside that moving water gives me chills, to tell the truth, Catherine. His designs have always been a matter of; will it, or will it not work. Many of his inventions have been incredible; such as the kaleidoscope he made for me when he was only eleven years of age,” Father paused. “Once,” he continued, “I remember that he designed a new ventilation system. The blueprint was very intricate, very detailed. However, Vincent and I both agreed that it was a totally unworkable plan.”

“So, your worry is that his design for the *bridge* might be unworkable?” Catherine asked, reaching out to take one of Father’s hands in hers. “Remember that Elliot is working with him. If the bridge design is off in some way; I’m certain that he will look the design over before they start to build it.” She squeezed Father’s hand. “Elliot always had very safe building sites, Father, “she told him.

“He’s been working on Mouse Ed. for quite a while now. He knows what Mouse is capable of. I doubt that he would let any sort of error slip past him.”

“I can only hope your confidence in Elliot is warranted,” he told her. “Nevertheless, I shall continue to worry; I have worried about Mouse ever since he first set out to find his own chamber.”

“Did you worry that he might get lost?”

Father shook his head, this time, it was his hand that squeezed hers. “No,” he told her, “that thought never came to mind. Mouse had begun roaming the tunnels just after he came to us. We believed him to be around seven then. Even Mary, was unable to keep track of him. He was forever disappearing.” Father’s smile was wide. “However, he always returned in time for dinner. It was as if he, like Vincent, had an internal clock. He never once missed that one meal.”

Catherine returned his smile, letting go of his hand. “Such a wonderful story,” she told him. “You must have been proud of him, in spite of yourself.”

“Yes, I was. My apprehension finally turned to amazement. I tried to question him about his forays through the tunnels. However, all he would say, was that he was okay, or he was fine. His vocabulary has grown through the years. Although you may have noticed, that his speech pattern has changed very little.”

Just as Father finished speaking, Jacob came into the room; and straight to his mother. “Need a hug, momma,” he told her. “I need a snuggle.”

Catherine picked up her oldest son and held him close. “What’s the matter, Jacob?” Catherine asked. She could feel that he wasn’t hurt in any way, but his emotions were another thing altogether. “What happened, Babyface?” Jacob had his arms around her neck, and Catherine could feel them tightened, as she held him closer.

“Catty’s daddy hit her, mamma,” he finally said. “I never heard anyone be hit before. It was awful. Catty cried.”

Catherine looked past her son, to Father. “Do children get hit often?” she asked. “In all the time I’ve been here, I have never once heard of any child being hit!” She was angry, and knew that it showed in her voice. *“Corporal punishment down here?” I have never heard of such a thing Below. Everyone takes very good care of the children’. The idea was abhorrent to her.*

“Catherine watched as Father sighed, and got up from his chair. ”I am equally surprised, Catherine. “he told her. “Such a thing rarely occurs. And when it does, it is up to me, as the head of the Council to look into the problem.” He patted Catherine’s shoulder, and Jacob’s, as he slowly began to leave the room. “ I will apprise you of the situation.” he told her. “You just concentrate on helping Jacob.”

When he was gone, Catherine stood up, and carried Jacob back to her chamber. He was still hanging onto her; his chin firmly tucked against her neck. ”It’s alright, Babyface,” she told him. “We’re going into our bedroom. You can stay with me tonight.”

After Rebecca saw Jacob, she told Catherine that the twins were asleep, and that she would close the door behind her. Still holding him close Catherine sat down on the bed, and kissed Jacob on the cheek. “The twins are asleep, so it’s just

you and me.” she said. “Can you look at me now, and tell me what happened? What did Cathy do, that her daddy would hit her?”

Jacob raised his head slowly, and sniffed. It seemed that he had been silently crying. He looked at Catherine and sniffed again. “I don’t know Xactly, momma,” he answered softly. “Catty and I were just playing wit some cards dat Catty found in a drawer. Day had picturs on dem. We taut day were pretty” Jacob sniffed once again, and continued. “I guess we soudn’t hab been playing wit dem, because Catty’s daddy got real mad at her, and took da cards away.”

Jacob looked straight into Catherine’s eyes. “I never saw wat happened den,” he told her. “Catty’s daddy told me dat I had to go home.” Jacob paused and laid back, putting his chin once again, against her neck. “I was walking away; wen I heard her daddy hit her.” Catherine felt his arms tighten around her neck. “I never saw dem, but I just heard Catty cry. It must have hurt real bad, cause I never heard anything like dat before. He mush hab hit her a lot. I could hear her even wen I was in da tunnel coming home. It was awful, momma.”

“I’m sure it was,” Catherine said softly. After a few moments, she continued. “Momma just did laundry today, and there is a pair of your pajamas, right on the top of the pile.” she lifted his head, so she could look at his eyes again.

“Why don’t I go get your pajamas, then you can put them on, and lie down on daddy and momma’s bed. Does that sound like a good idea?” Jacob nodded, then crawled out of her arms, and onto the bed.

Catherine got up, and went to the large pile of night clothes and diapers, that were on the shelf Vincent had made only for diapers; once upon a time. Now it held the laundry she needed to do, almost every other day. It wasn’t hard work, but

she always thought that she should be doing something else; teaching a class, or playing with Jacob.

Since the twins were born, Jacob had often either watched as his siblings tried to walk, or busied himself by going to see his friends. Catherine never worried about him getting lost. He had, it seemed to her, inherited his father's sense of direction. Besides, all of the children looked out for him. She remembered how the older children had been taught to look after the little ones.

As Catherine picked up Jacob's pajamas, she looked back and saw that her son had fallen asleep. It didn't surprise her, as she was always very sleepy after she cried. Catherine smiled to herself, realizing that she hadn't really cried since she returned to Vincent and their home. Any tears she had cried here, had been those of joy.

Chapter XIII

‘How far as it been so far, Pascal?’ Vincent asked, as he and his friend sat down on the tunnel floor for a rest. “I need to be certain that my notes are correct.”

Pascal smiled. “You’ve written everything down correctly, Vincent,” he told him. “I’ve never known you to be sloppy. When you set out to do something, you always do it well.” Pascal paused. “Even when we were kids, you were smarter than the rest of us. I remember how envious Winslow was. Father said that it was his dyslexia that made it hard for him to read. But you could, and did, read practically anything you could get your hands on.”

Vincent remembered his childhood a bit differently than did Pascal. Yes, he began to read earlier than most of the other children; however, it was because the other children could go Above. In order to travel, he had read books; many books. They took him to Sherwood Forest, to Twain’s Mississippi, and to anywhere else he could go in his imagination.

“I remember my childhood a little differently,” Vincent told Pascal, somberly. “I read because you and the other children were able to go Above and play. I had no such opportunity. My adventures were taken only in my imagination, Pascal: from the books I read.”

“I’m sorry, Vincent,” Pascal said, after a moment. “I had forgotten that. Of course, you’re right. All of us *could* go Above,” he paused. “I guess you were alone a lot. No wonder you were always reading. I’d forgotten how selfish we were to you sometimes.”

Vincent reached out and put his hand on Pascal's shoulder. "We were only children, Pascal," he replied. "It is only later, that most of us see beyond our own cares. You have no reason to apologize."

Vincent felt Pascal cover his hand with his own. "Well," he began, "I still feel sorry for our behavior. My father raised me decently, while he was alive. I should have known to be a better friend."

"Thank you." Vincent said. "You are a dear friend now. That is enough." Vincent picked up his notebook from where it sat on top of his backpack. "Will you check my calculations anyway?" he asked, handing the book to Pascal.

Pascal sighed, and took the book. "If you insist," he said. "But they aren't going to be wrong," he insisted.

"It is important that my calculations be exact," Vincent repeated. "We cannot afford any errors. The pipes *must* reach down to where the work is proceeding," he told him.

Pascal opened the book, and read for a few minutes before he answered. "Everything is right, Vincent," he began. "Seventeen hundred and sixty yards in a mile, and we've already traveled for two miles. You've written, three thousand, five hundred and fifty yards." He looked up and met Vincent's eyes. "It's right," he said. "Actually," he added, "It's perfect." He handed the book back to Vincent and opened his own backpack.

"I don't know about you," Pascal said, taking out a sandwich, and unwrapping the waxed paper, "but I'm hungry. Since we're taking a break, I'm going to eat, and take a drink from my canteen. Maybe I'll even get a little rest."

Catherine fed Charles, and then Caroline, as she sat against the pillows, watching her oldest child sleep. His story had upset her more than she had let him see. A father, especially Nathaniel, hitting his child, was totally implausible to her. And over a deck of *cards*? It made no sense.

While she was still trying to understand what had happened, Father knocked on the wood frame around the open door. “May I come in, Catherine?” he asked.

“Of course, Father,” Catherine answered. “Jacob finally fell asleep, so we need to stay quiet. I don’t want him to hear us.” She stayed on the bed, feeding Caroline. while Father started to sit across from her in Vincent’s chair.

Father sighed, heavily, looking up at her when he was settled. Catherine thought she had never seen him look so old. It was a few minutes before he began to speak.

“I have spoken to Nathaniel,” he began. “Lena was there, comforting little Catherines when I arrived. Nathaniel was nowhere to be seen.” He took out a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and wiped his brow. “Lena told me that Nathaniel had taken David to the Mirror Pool.” he paused. “I believe he did it, knowing that I would be coming for some sort of explanation of his behavior.”

“What did Lena say about the beating?” Catherine asked him. She was the one who had brought Lena to live Below, when Lena had been homeless and pregnant with Cathy. Catherine had never worried about her until now.

“Lena was visibly shaken,” Father told her. “She told me that Nathaniel had never shown such anger before. Of course, I questioned her regarding the catalyst for the beating,” he paused again, taking a deep breath. “She explained that she had been in their bedroom, feeding David,” Father continued, “When she heard little Catherine cry out, she put David into his crib, and hurried into the main room.”

Father stopped talking. Catherine saw that he was visibly shaken. She had only seen him like this once before: when she had first returned to Vincent. Only then, it had been anger. Now, it looked different; as though he had been through an ordeal of some kind. What could Nathaniel have said, to put Father in such a condition.

“What happened next?” Catherine asked, getting slowly off of the bed, and returned Caroline to her crib. Then she moved to sit on the floor in front of Father, She took one of his hands in both of hers.

“It’s obvious that something happened that greatly upset you,” she told him. “Did you confront Nathaniel at the Mirror Pool?”

After another few minutes of silence, Father finally spoke. “Yes,” he began, “walking on the sand is difficult for me, as you know. However, Nathaniel was there with David.” he stopped speaking, and Catherine thought he was trying to find the right words to express the encounter.

“I began to question Nathaniel, when he turned to me and very loudly told me that he had no interest in discussing anything in front of his son.” Father said, squeezing her hands. “I could understand his reasoning, Catherine, But to shout, was quite unnecessary. David had been playing quietly in the sand. However, when his father shouted, he began to cry.”

“Nathaniel turned from me, and picked up his son.” Father again paused. “When he turned back to me, Catherine,” he continued. “I have seldom seen such a look as the one Nathaniel gave to me,” he stopped and took a deep breath. “Such hatred, Catherine. Such extreme hatred. I admit that it quite overwhelmed me.”

“What could have been wrong with him, Father; that he would react with such hate?” In all the times she had been Below, even when she was living in the City, she had only seen anger once: when Winslow refused to believe that Mouse knew another way to get to Vincent and Father when they were trapped in the maze.

“I truly have no idea, Catherine,” Father answered quietly. “Nathaniel turned around, and practically stomped out of the room with his son.”

“Did you follow him?” Catherine asked, It astonished her that Father’s reaction had been so overwhelmingly strong. Something more must have happened.

“Unfortunately, I did.” he said sadly. “I realize now, that I should have let Nathaniel calm down. However, I was still perplexed at his action with Cathy, and wanted; no *needed* an explanation.” Father had been looking down as he spoke; now he raised his head and looked at her.

“When I went back to their chambers, I asked, very quietly, if I might go in to speak to Nathaniel. Lena came with David in her arms, and told me that Nathaniel was in the bedroom, talking to little Cathy, and did not want to see me.”

“So, you never got any kind of explanation?” Catherine asked. “How did Lena seem to you?”

“Lena was very quiet, Catherine,” he told her. “It looked to me, as if she was holding David very tightly. I believe he was still crying.”

After Father spoke, Catherine let the silence linger. She just looked at her father-in-law, and held tightly to his hand.

Chapter XIV

Vincent was happily surprised when they reached Elliot and Mouse in only three more hours. It had shortened their journey considerably. Putting in the pipes, would not take as long as they thought. Considering the time it had taken them to put the new pipes into the eastern chambers; five miles would not take that much more time.

“Vincent!” Elliot exclaimed, upon seeing Vincent and Pascal enter the river chamber. “And Pascal! Back so soon?” Elliot made his way over to them and shook their hands. “So, did you find a shorter route, like we had hoped?”

Vincent turned to Pascal, wanting him to answer for them. “We sure did,” Pascal said, with a wide grin. “We cut the time more than half. Only five miles one way!” Vincent could hear the pride in his voice, and was pleased. He knew that it was more than likely to be Pascal and him who would install the pipe. Twice as much, on the other hand, would have taken them months.

“I’m so glad,” Elliot told them. “Come take a look at what we’ve achieved while you were gone” Vincent and Pascal put down their packs, and followed Elliot to where Mouse, Cullen, and Thomas were working.

“Since we already made the daisy-chain rafts,” Elliot began, “Cullen, Thomas and I are finishing up the other two rafts, while Mouse continues his designs for the bridge. We’re going to need it in order to connect the tension and electrical cables to both sides of the river.”

“Is a bridge really necessary?” Pascal asked. “Couldn’t someone swim to the other side, carrying those cables?”

Elliot looked at Pascal and shook his head. “No way,” he told him. “That’s one cold river. Mouse has decided that it probably comes in from the Hudson. Of course, we don’t know that for a fact yet.”

“We’re under the Hudson River?” Pascal said, with wide eyes. “I don’t think I want to be under the Hudson, Elliot.” he said, shakily. “That’s a pretty big river. What if the river causes the tunnels above to collapse? None of our other chambers are located under water; subways yes. But a river?”

“You *do* remember that the City is on an island, right?” Elliot reminded him. “We were bound to find chambers that were under water. It was inevitable.”

“Inevitable doesn’t necessarily mean safe,” Pascal retorted. “I was born in these tunnels. Heck, I grew *up* in them. It never occurred to me that we’d ever be under water.”

“Our community has grown, Pascal,” Vincent told him. “Surely the new chambers in the eastern sector told us that. You and I worked hard, putting in the pipes to those chambers.” Vincent paused, remembering. “It was after Catherine came back to us.”

“No good! No good!”

All three of them turned to look at Mouse. He was stomping his feet, and repeating “No good!.”

Vincent walked over to him, with Elliot and Pascal following. Even Cullen and Thomas stopped their work to see why Mouse was so upset.

“What is troubling you, Mouse?” Vincent asked, standing near the table covered with blueprints. “Why are you angry?”

Mouse turned to look at Vincent. “Not angry!” he explained, continuing in a loud voice. “Don’t understand!”

“What is it that you do not understand?” Vincent asked him, in a much quieter voice. “Is there a problem with your designs? Surely you can find a solution.”

“Is it something I can help you with, Mouse?” Elliot offered. “We designed the rafts together. What is it about the bridge that you say is no good?”

Mouse looked at Elliot, frustration written all over his expressive face.” Show you,” Mouse answered, leading them all to a large pile of wood next to the river. It was obvious to Vincent, that it was the place designated for the bridge crossing.

“See!” Mouse said, pointing to the lumber. “No good!” Elliot went closer, looking across the twenty-five feet of river crossing, and down to the lumber. Then, he started looking under the pile.

“Mouse it right,” he told everyone. “We were going to use large rocks to hold down the initial girders to support the bridge’s decking. However, there aren’t

enough large, heavy rocks to support them. Now, it looks like we'll need a foundation of cement. Damn!"

"No cement!" Mouse groaned. Mouse walked over to the edge of the river. The ground looked solid enough to hold cement.

"So," Pascal stated, "you're going to need cement. Didn't you think to bring any?"

"No, I didn't," Elliot began, "and that isn't the only problem," Elliot continued. "Since we obviously can't get a cement truck down here, we're going to need a lot more than just cement." Elliot paused, and began counting out what he needed, on his fingers.

"We'll need another wheelbarrow, protective gloves, respiratory protection for those of us who will be mixing the cement, and probably two or three bags of dry cement mix." he paused, as if in thought, then continued again. "We'll also need a hoe, or something like it, to mix the cement. The ratio of water to dry cement has to be exact. That's something I can work on myself. I didn't start out by building large skyscrapers. I began working on small projects for other people, even after I got my degree in architecture."

"That is quite a bit more equipment, Elliot," Vincent remarked. "It will also mean spending more money. Will you be able to finance it, or are you going to need our help?"

Elliot looked at Vincent, and then at the men standing around him. Vincent could tell that he was hesitant to admit the need for their assistance.. "I'm not sure, Vincent," he finally said. "I took all of the money from the bankruptcy with me,

when I came to live Below. It's not as if I could just walk into my bank and withdraw it." He frowned, shaking his head. "You should have seen the look on my attorney's face when I asked him to give it to me in cash." Elliot let out a short laugh. "Would you believe that I stashed it in a locker at Grand Central?"

Just at that moment, something made Vincent look at Mouse. It seemed that Mouse was still very upset. He was mumbling to himself, and rummaging through the lumber; as though looking for something that should have been there. Vincent continued to watch, as he saw Mouse back up closer to the water, A sense of foreboding filled him.

It was at that moment, when Mouse backed up a bit too far, and slipped on the edge of the river bank. Vincent heard the splash, and began to run, throwing off his coat as he headed for the water. His mind was totally focused on only one thing; he knew that Mouse could not swim.

When he dove into the river, the cold was almost overwhelming. Mouse was flailing and trying to hold his head above the moving water. Vincent had never been so glad of his strength. It was enough to reach Mouse, just when his head suddenly disappeared. As he grabbed his shoulders, pulling his upper torso out of the water, Vincent heard splashing behind him."

Slowly, Vincent started bringing Mouse toward the shore, holding him up with one arm, while attempting to swim with the other. It was then that he felt other arms helping him to get Mouse out of the water. Vincent was relieved to have the help. His boots, and heavy clothes were making the rescue more difficult than he had imagined."

“Is he still breathing?” One of the men asked. Vincent did not answer, as his only thought was to bring Mouse onto land as soon as possible; not to answer questions to which he had no answer.

Cullen, he thought, was the one to get out of the water first: spreading some of the lumber out to make a place for them to lie Mouse down. Vincent, Elliot, and Thomas, stretched Mouse out onto the makeshift bed. He was not breathing.

Elliot tilted Mouse’s head back and began CPR. Vincent nodded, and compressed the boy’s chest in rhythm with Elliot’s breaths. They worked in tandem for what seemed like an eternity, before Mouse regained consciousness and began to cough up water. Vincent turned him to his side, helping Mouse to rid himself of the water left in his lungs. He heard the others breathing sighs of relief, although Vincent knew that the ordeal was far from over. Mouse was not the only one drenched in the cold water. He. Cullen, and Elliot were just as wet.

“Cullen,” Vincent said, looking at the man also dripping water from his clothes. “Do you have a change of clothing? One of us with hypothermia is quite enough.”

“Cullen looked down at the large puddle at his feet, then looked back up at Vincent. “Believe it or not, I hadn’t even realized I was wet,” he answered. “Yes, I have some extra clothes, too.” Vincent saw Cullen taking in his own wet clothing. “What about you?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure we don’t have anything here that would fit you.”

“You know that living Below,” Vincent reminded him, “one learns always to prepare for the unexpected. I have an extra shirt and pants in my pack.” he paused, looking down at his feet. “I have no other shoes. However, if you have any warm socks, I would at least be able to wear them on the way back.”

“Not a problem,” Cullen replied. “You’re not the only one who came prepared.”

“Let’s see to Mouse, first,” Vincent said. “Then, we can change. Mouse is our priority now.”

“Whatever needs to be done, Vincent.” Elliot told him. The other men nodded their assent. Vincent helped Mouse to sit up, and looked into his eyes.

He saw that Mouse’s eyes were somewhat focused, although he looked a bit lost. “We are taking you back home so that Father can care for you, Mouse. Do you understand me?”

“Okay,” was all that Mouse said, before his eyes closed again. Vincent looked at the men around him. It seemed that all of them were looking to him for instructions; even Elliot.

“I believe that it will take all of us to carry him back to the Home Chambers,” he told them. “Since it is five miles, merely to get where Pascal and I began our measurements; we will need to take shifts in carrying Mouse back to Father. Everyone nodded their heads, as they all looked down on the quiet boy at their feet.”

“It will only take me a minute to straighten things out here,” Elliot began, “Like Cullen, Mouse has more shirts and pants here. I told everyone that we wouldn’t be leaving the site for a while, so they all brought some extras with them.” Elliot paused, looking at Vincent. “I’ll get them while you take off his wet things. I don’t know what we’re going to do about shoes. He doesn’t have an extra pair either.” Elliot got up from the ground, and walked off.

Vincent began to remove Mouse's very wet clothing, and noticed that he was beginning to shiver. "Would please get the blanket from my pack, Pascal?"

"I'll bring mine, too," Pascal told him, as he hurried off to where they had left their backpacks.

Thomas began to take off his jacket. "We can put this on him, too, Vincent." He said, laying the jacket aside.

"What else can I do to help?" Thomas asked. "You shouldn't have to do everything."

"You can remove his shoes and socks while I am taking off all of the wet clothing he is wearing," Vincent told him. "He has a sweater over his shirt, and a tee-shirt under that." Vincent paused as he removed the final shirt. "I will take off his wet pants, just as soon as you have his shoes. We will also need to move him to another pallet of lumber."

"He doesn't have another pair of shoes," Elliot said, when he came back. "but I grabbed a couple pairs of socks he brought with him. They look like they're pretty warm. And I brought the extra clothes, and socks for you, too."

Vincent nodded, and took the clothing from Elliot's hands. "We will need to move him to a dry place after we get him undressed," he told him.

"Whatever you need," Elliot replied. "I'll spread out some more of the lumber." Vincent nodded, as he began removing Mouse's pants.

He looked up at Elliot. “Thank you,” Vincent said, watching Elliot for a moment, before he went back to undressing Mouse.

“As for the stockings,” Vincent said, as they both worked on their individual tasks. “they will be very warm. Mary has knitted stockings for all of the children throughout the years.” With Elliot and Thomas’s help, Vincent moved Mouse to the dry pallet Elliot had made. When Mouse was settled, Vincent handed the stockings to Thomas, as he began to redress him. Thomas put two pair of socks on Mouse’s feet. The other two pairs he put aside for himself.

“His toes are like ice, Vincent,” Thomas told him. “Should I rub his feet to try and warm them up?”

“That is a fine idea, Thomas,” Vincent replied. Just as he spoke, Pascal returned with two blankets. Mouse was now in dry clothing, although he was still shivering. Vincent lifted his eyelids as Father had taught him. Both pupils looked the same, and Vincent could feel that his heart beat was strong.

“Thomas,” Vincent told him, “pick up his legs while I pick up his torso. We need to lift him in order to cocoon him in the blankets.” Vincent looked at Pascal. “When we lift him,” he said, “would you and Elliot each take a side of the two blankets, and wrap them around Mouse?”

“Of course,” they answered in unison. When Mouse was securely wrapped, Vincent told them that it was time to get back to the Home Chambers,

“We must get Mouse to Father as soon as we can,” Vincent explained. “The journey here was five miles. If we each take turns carrying him, we should manage to get home before too much time has passed.

“I will let Catherine know that we are coming. She can tell Father to prepare the hospital chamber. All should be ready when we arrive.”

Vincent paused, sending a silent message to his wife. He explained the situation, and Catherine assured him that all would be ready when they returned.

“Good thing you two have that bond, “ Pascal murmured, as Vincent picked up Mouse, and carefully walked with others to the tunnels leading home.

Chapter XV

Thomas was carrying Mouse when they reached the Home Chambers. Catherine had informed Father of their expected arrival, and Mouse's condition. Vincent had been checking on Mouse, every few hours; making certain that he was staying warm in the tightly wrapped blankets. Each time they passed him to each other; the blankets had needed tightening. When Mouse woke up the first time, it had been Vincent's turn again. Vincent assured Mouse that they on their way home, and that Father would be waiting for them.

Each time Elliot, Thomas, or Cullen, had Mouse in their arms; each had done the same. Vincent had explained to them, that Mouse needed to be kept warm, and assured that they were on their way to Father. Over the years, Vincent had learned many safety precautions from Father. For sometimes, the world Below could be a dangerous place.

Vincent heard all of the others breathe a huge sigh of relief, when they saw Father, Mary, and Faye waiting for them outside the hospital chamber.

"Bring him, Vincent," Father said. "Lie him down on the bed Mary prepared." Father looked at Mary, and as soon as Mouse was on the bed, Mary put the oxygen mask over Mouse's nose and mouth. It was only a 35-liter tank, but Father had changed the breathing hose that usually went into a person's nostrils, to one of the masks used for emergencies in hospitals. Peter had been kind enough to bring them the oxygen tank, and to assist Father in changing the machine to accommodate the mask Father wanted to use.

“Will Mouse recover, Father?” Vincent asked. Pascal and the others were standing in the entrance to the chamber; watching and listening to everything Father did. They, too, were waiting for his answer.

Father took the stethoscope from Mouse’s chest, and turned to Vincent, and the others. “It will depend upon whether or not the water which might be still in his lungs, turns into pneumonia, or acute respiratory distress syndrome. Either one could be very serious.” he paused, as Mary and Faye removed the blankets, and Mouse’s clothing. Mary covered him with a sheet, the two blankets they had wrapped him in, and one Faye had taken from the cabinet Vincent knew contained extra blankets and quilts.

“What are the chances of those thing happening, Father?” Elliot asked from his place in the entrance. “Will Mouse be his old self again?”

Father looked at Elliot curiously, before he answered his question. “Then you are aware of the danger of brain damage?” Vincent and all of the other men turned to look at Elliot.

Elliot was silent for a moment, then said, “When I was very young, a friend and I were at the Y. Where we lived, there was little for boys to do, so we often went swimming at the YMCA.” He paused, and Vincent could see that the memory was distressing.

“Jack slipped into the deep end of the pool,” he continued. “We kids were supposed to stay in the shallow end, and we usually did. Jack, though, was always more defiant than the rest of us. He was walking toward that end of the pool, right on the edge, when he slipped in some water and fell in.” Elliot stopped talking and looked at Vincent. “He was a lot like your Jacob, Vincent,” he said. “Braver and not afraid of anything. Do you know what I mean?”

Vincent went to Elliot and put his arm around his shoulder. "I know exactly what you mean, Elliot," Vincent told him. "I often worry about my intrepid son."

Elliot nodded, covering Vincent's hand with his own, as he continued his story. "There was a sort of lifeguard watching the pool, and he got to Jack as soon as he could; even got him out and somehow revived him"

"They had just begun to make the people who worked at the Y, learn how to do CPR. Although I now know that they had been using CPR in large hospitals like Johns Hopkins, since the sixties. Even so, Jack wasn't there anymore. Maybe he had been in the water too long, or maybe the guy had not known how to do CPR as well as he should have, All we kids knew; was that Jack wasn't Jack anymore."

When he finished speaking, Vincent and the rest of them; looked at Father. "So, there *is* a possibility," Vincent said, quietly. It was not a question. It was a few moments before Father spoke.

"I believe in Mouse's case, because all of you acted quickly, the possibility of brain damage is quite small," he told them. He looked up and met Vincent's eyes. "You obviously knew what to do, and you did it quickly." Father told him. Then he turned his eyes to Elliot, Cullen, Pascal, and Thomas. "May I assume that all of you acted together?"

All three of them nodded. "I didn't help carry him, though," Pascal told Father sheepishly. "I only helped get him blankets."

"Pascal," Vincent said, "we all knew what a burden it would have been for you to carry Mouse. You are responsible for every communication in the entire

community,” he continued. “There was no reason for you to break your back attempting to carry Mouse. What would be the outcome if something happened to you? I see no one else here, who could possibly take your place.”

“You mean that I’m too small and skinny,” Pascal answered, very quietly. “I know that I’m not as strong as the rest of you. I don’t work with wood, and I have eyes; I can see how much bigger all of you are. Heck,” he insisted. “the heaviest thing I’ve ever carried is my backpack.”

“You are denigrating yourself for no reason, Pascal.” Vincent told him, gently. “There are people in our community of all sizes and shapes. You have been a part of us your entire life. Certainly, you have seen how much the people here differ from one another.” Vincent paused. “Taking care of Mouse was a group effort; and you were most assuredly part of that group.”

“You helped as much as the rest of us, Pascal,” Cullen told him.

“Yeah,” Thomas agreed. “There’s not any reason why you should feel bad for not carrying Mouse. That boy isn’t exactly a lightweight.”

“You might have noticed,” Elliot added, “that Vincent did most of the carrying. None of us is as strong as Vincent, And, to tell you the truth, I’m glad. If I were Vincent’s size, I would never have fit into some of the places I’ve been. Can you imagine Vincent walking on the scaffolding of a building site?” Elliot asked him. “I certainly can’t.”

“Gentlemen,” Father suddenly said in a very stern voice. “As interesting as your conversation may be; this is our hospital. Please take your discussion elsewhere.” He looked over their shoulders, at the other people standing behind

them. “You may have forgotten, but there are others just as concerned as all of you.”

All four of them turned around. Even with his exceptional hearing, Vincent had not heard the others arrive. He turned back to Father. “I apologize,” he told him. “I should have realized that all of those here would also be worried.”

With those words, all four of them moved away from the entrance, and through the crowd of people waiting, Vincent knew they were there to hear news about Mouse. Although he was often alone with his raccoon, and many times in trouble with someone; Mouse was much loved by entire community.

“Jacob and I have been paying attention to everything, since you first contacted me, Vincent.” Catherine said, as her husband walked into their chamber. She had been certain to have the babies fed, and Jacob tucked into his bed; knowing that he had waited up until Mouse was safely returned home.

“Why don’t you get those heavy clothes off, and climb into bed with your wife,” she suggested. “You look in need of a massage, and I can feel how much your back is hurting.”

“An excellent idea,” Vincent replied. He sat on his chair, and began to undress. Catherine also felt his utter exhaustion, so she went to him; helping by pulling off his heavy boots.

Their room was unusually quiet. She could tell that the crowd waiting for news of Mouse, had finally dispersed; and retired to their various chambers. After all the noise of the afternoon and evening, even the pipes were silent. Only the occasional subway passing above, made any noise at all.

“I really should bathe, Catherine,” Vincent told her, leaning against the back of his chair. “It’s been a very long day.”

“All of the children are asleep,” Catherine reminded him. “What if I give you a sponge bath? Would that be alright with you?” She knew he was too tired to make love to her, but the idea of giving him a bath, sounded like an excellent idea.

Catherine watched her husband’s change of expression, as she felt his acquiescence. The pictures that formed in his mind, were definitely those of assent. “Such interesting thoughts, Vincent,” she said, quietly. “You take off your clothes, and I’ll get a couple of the babies wash cloths.” She walked by his chair and kissed him softly on his lips. “I’m certain the twins won’t mind sharing.”

She could feel Vincent’s eyes following her, as she took two cloths, and dipped them in the basin of water they kept for washing the children. Catherine smiled, thinking that she had never known him to undress so quickly. The thought made her smile even more.

Catherine was very glad Vincent had closed their door when he came home. This was something to be shared only between the two of them. She turned around and walked slowly back to where Vincent was still sitting. She handed Vincent the wet cloths, then walked past him to take the folded quilt from the end of their bed; spreading the quilt onto the rug.

“Lie down on this, Vincent,” she told him. “I can’t give you a proper sponge bath while you’re sitting in the chair.”

She couldn’t help but look at her beautiful husband as he got up from the chair and relaxed on top of the quilt. The sight of him lying there, made her thoughts become just as interesting as his had been. Catherine knelt next to his chest, and took the cloths from his hand.

Catherine decided to begin with Vincent’s face. As she was wearing one of her nightshirts, she pulled up the hem, and rested one of the cloths on her knee.

Very slowly, Catherine brushed Vincent’s face with the wash cloth. His eyes closed, and she felt him relax even more. Gently, she bathed his face; beginning with his forehead, and working her way down around his nose to his lips. Although his eyes remained closed, she knew that he was watching every movement through the bond they shared.

She hesitated, then dropped a light kiss against those lips, before sliding the cloth across his chin and down to his neck. Vincent laid his head back against the quilt, giving her more access. She understood, and glided the cloth from one side of his neck, to the other; savoring the different textures of him.

Vincent groaned, as Catherine moved to his look at his beautiful shoulders and chest. She began with the spots where her head often rested; moving even slower down across the hair that covered him. Catherine loved being held against his chest: to her it symbolized the comfort and feeling of home that always came when he held her. Her hand stopped moving; as she just looked at the man she felt had loved her since the day their eyes first met.

“I *have* loved you since that moment, Catherine,” he said very quietly. “As you have told me; our souls recognized each other.”

“Yes,” she murmured. There was little else she needed to say. Their thoughts, hearts, and souls were one, No words were ever really necessary.

Catherine replaced the now warm cloth with the one on her knee. It was still wet, so she continued with her exploration and cleansing of Vincent’s naked body. “License my roving hands and let them go,” she said, as her hand moved down to Vincent’s stomach. “Behind, before, above, between, below...” When the cloth reached his legs, Catherine’s voice grew softer. She slowly washed down one leg and then the other. Her lips followed her hand, and she heard Vincent’s low moan. When her hand reached one thigh, she saw his body’s inevitable reaction, and smiled. Obviously, he wasn’t as tired as he thought. The cloth was gliding down his other thigh, when Catherine felt Vincent’s arms around her waist; lifting her to lie above his prone body.

“How blessed am I in this discovering thee...” Vincent said, continuing the quote and putting Catherine exactly where she had wanted to be. She almost purred when she felt him enter the warmth of her body. There were no words to describe how it felt to be filled with him. As he held her hips, Catherine slowly moved; taking him deeper.

She melted against him; needing to feel the difference of his hair against her breasts and stomach. “To enter in these bonds is to be free...” she heard, as he continued the poem. Suddenly Vincent grasped her hips more tightly; asking without words that she move at a faster pace.

Catherine shared his haste, and quickened her movements. After a few minutes, an overwhelming sense came over her, as she felt the world tilt into a thousand, shimmering pieces. Vincent followed, as her body spasmed against his. For long moments, there was no sound in their room, except that of their heavy breathing. Then Vincent whispered the final line of Donne's words into her ear; "Then where my hand is set my seal shall be."

Catherine couldn't help but smile. How *did* he have the energy, much less the clarity of mind to finish the poem? Her mind was still a blur; a jumble of feelings. She could barely keep two thoughts together. Vincent's chest rumbled beneath her, and she knew that he was softly laughing.

She opened her eyes, and found herself lost in the sparkling blue of his. "You're laughing at me," she whispered; her head resting against her favorite place. Vincent wrapped his arms around her; pressing her gently against his naked chest. "I could not help myself, love," he told her. "Believe me when I tell you that it was not 'clarity of mind' that allowed me to finish the poem," he paused, and Catherine felt his lips against hers in a soft, brief, kiss. "It was purely instinctive," he continued. "I remember once awakening you with Donne's words."

Chapter XVI

Vincent awoke early the next morning. Gently, trying not to wake her, he moved Catherine's head from his shoulder, and slowly got out of bed. The babies were still asleep, so he moved quietly as he put on his clothes.

Their door was well oiled, and made no sound as he left their chamber. Jacob had told him yesterday, through their bond, about Nathaniel and his treatment of Cathy. Vincent decided that this was a subject to be spoken of as quickly as possible.

Father's study was still empty, so Vincent was able to slip into Jacob's room. As he thought, Jacob was sitting up in bed, waiting for him. He sat next to his son, and wrapped Jacob in his arms.

"Please tell me what exactly happened, Jacob," Vincent quietly said. "I know you relayed the information to me yesterday, but I need to hear it in words."

Jacob stayed in his arms, as he began to speak. "It was awful, daddy," he began. "Catty and I were just looking at some cards see found. Day had pretty picturs on dem." Jacob paused, and drew back from his place against Vincent's chest.

"We weren't hurting dem or anyting. We were just looking at da picturs. Day had picturs of people on dem," he continued. "Day weren't like da picturs on da cards Catty and me play Old Maid wit. Day were difrent."

“How were they different, Jacob?” Vincent asked. “If they were pictures of people, what were the people doing?”

I don’t know Xactly, daddy,” Jacob explained. “Da people were men. Day had big sticks in dare hands. Day were holding dem up; like day were going to hit someting.”

Baseball cards, Vincent decided. They were baseball cards. Why would the children merely looking at baseball cards, cause such a reaction from Nathaniel? It makes no sense.

“And you and Cathy did not harm the cards in any way.” He was not asking his son a question; he simply wanted to be certain before he spoke to Nathaniel.

“Yes, daddy,” Jacob told him. “We were very careful.” Jacob sniffed, as he was trying not to cry. “You know dat I am careful wit toys and tings.”

“Yes, I know,” Vincent reassured him. “You have always been very careful with your toys and books,”

“cept for da red crayons,” Jacob whispered. “I won’t do dat again.”

Vincent drew him into his arms once more for a long hug. “I know, Jacob. You promised me you would no longer mark up your books, and I believe you.”

“Tank you, daddy.” Jacob said, lying back down. “ tink I’ll go back to seep now.” Vincent kissed his son’s head, and left the room.

When Vincent left Father's study,, he walked down the tunnel, to the hospital chamber. He wanted to check on Mouse's condition. Faye was there when he arrived. "How is Mouse today?" he asked her. Mouse looked to be sleeping soundly, having not awakened when Vincent walked past his bed.

"He's stable," Faye said. "Father checked on him last night before he went to bed. His chest was clear, and his temperature was normal. Father doesn't think that we have to worry about pneumonia."

Vincent took a deep breath, as it was the good news he had been hoping for. "May I tell everyone that Mouse is going to be alright?" he asked.

Faye laughed, quietly. "All you have to do is tell Pascal. He'll broadcast the news. You know how quickly people here learn what's going on; as soon as Pascal puts anything on the pipes"

"I will certainly do just that. Thank you, Faye."

Vincent left the hospital chamber in a very good mood, and wandered into the dining hall. The kitchen was noisily busy, as William and his four helpers were beginning getting breakfast ready. Vincent walked back to the counter that divided the main room from the kitchen, and looked for William.

He could see Dennis, Amelia, and Nik, however, William was nowhere to be seen. “I wanted to speak with William, but since it looks as though he is busy elsewhere; do you have a muffin I could take with me?” he asked. “I know it is very early. However, I got back very late last night with Mouse.” Vincent reminded them; knowing they had been in the crowd of people listening from outside the hospital chamber. “I would be very grateful if I could have something to take with me, as I do my rounds, and speak to Pascal.”

“Sure, Vincent,” Amelia replied. “Wait just a minute, and I’ll go grab you a muffin that just came out of the oven a few minutes ago.” Amelia walked off, and Vincent stayed quiet, while the other helpers were very busy. Feeding the entire community was a full-time endeavor, here. As Vincent waited, he looked around for William’s other helper, Christine.

Amelia returned with two oatmeal muffins, wrapped lightly in a small bit of toweling. “Thank you, Amelia,” Vincent said. “I do not see Christine. Is she ill?”

“No,” Amelia answered. “She’s sorting vegetables with William. Mister Wong and Henry brought in a whole box full last night.” She smiled. “It’s certainly handy having a Helper who owns a restaurant.”

“I imagine it is,” Vincent replied. “I remember well, when Lin and Henry were married here Below. It was a beautiful ceremony.”

“I remember that. Time passes quickly: even here in the tunnels’ Amelia said. “It’s been many years. Did you know that they have a little boy now?”

“No, I did not,” Vincent told her. “Since the twins were born, I do not see the Helpers as often as I would like. Please give them my best wishes the next time you see them.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Amelia said, as she walked off to help make breakfast. Vincent took the muffins with him, as he made his way to the pipe Chamber. Pascal needed to hear the good news about Mouse.

The pipes were relatively quiet when Vincent reached his destination. He knew Pascal would already be awake; he slept almost as little as he used to do before Catherine came Below. Just the thought of Catherine made him smile.

“You’re here very early,” he heard Pascal say to him. Vincent had been lost in thought, remembering Lin and Henry’s wedding, and how beautiful Catherine had been; and the looks they had given to each other. Their thoughts had been the same.

“Sorry, Pascal,” Vincent said. “I was day dreaming.” He held out the wrapped muffins. “Would you care for one?” he asked. “I stopped by William’s kitchen before I came. I seem to remember how neither of us was able to have dinner last night.”

“Thanks,” Pascal said, taking one of the muffins. “Oatmeal; one of my favorites.” As he held the muffin in his hand, Pascal said “Why don’t we go into my room. It’s much quieter there.” Vincent followed his friend into his small bed chamber, and sat down. The room was small, but Pascal kept it very neat, *“A place for everything, and everything in its place,” he thought.*

“So,” Pascal asked, “what brings you here so early?” He began eating his muffin while Vincent answered.

“I came to give you the news about Mouse,” Vincent replied. “Faye told me that there is no chance of pneumonia. His temperature is normal, and his chest, clear,” Vincent paused to take a bite of his muffin. “Since I had not yet heard it on the pipes,” he continued. “I thought to come and let you know. It is only right that you should be the one to tell the community.” Vincent took another bite. Pascal had been correct. The muffin *was* very good.

Pascal stood up, with a large smile on his face. “You bet I will,” he said. “That’s news everybody will want to know,” He finished his muffin and hurried off to the Pipe Chamber. Vincent took another bite of his muffin and smiled. Soon, the message would ring out across every pipe in the tunnels. He stepped through the pipe chamber, and waved goodbye to Pascal as he passed; sensing that Pascal had already forgotten about him.

It took some time to travel down to Mouse and Elliot’s chamber. Vincent had seen Jamie crying over Mouse at the hospital. So, he had not stopped to talk with her. Knowing that Elliot was back, Jamie would have returned to her own room last night. Elliot would be keeping company with Arthur. Just the thought made Vincent smile again. Arthur and Elliot; who could not smile at the thought of them together.

Then Vincent lost his smile. The first part of his day was proceeding so well, that he dreaded his encounter with Nathaniel in the afternoon; which made him put the thought into the back of his mind. The afternoon, was the afternoon. It would be dealt with later. Now, his day was going well, and to think only of Elliot and the project.

When he finally reached the chamber that Elliot shared with Mouse, Elliot was wide awake, and concentrating on some papers on the table before him. “Somehow,” Vincent said,, as he walked into the room, “I knew you would be awake. Catherine has told me that sleep to you, was wasted time.” Elliot looked up at Vincent and smiled.

“That’s right,” he said. “I told Catherine that sleep *was* a waste of my time. There was so much more I could do with my time, than simply sleep. ”Elliot paused, and got up from his chair. He shook Vincent’s hand, and pointed to the only other chair in the room. “Have a seat, Vincent,” he told him. “I’m pretty sure why you’re here. How is Mouse?”

Vincent leaned back in the chair. Even with the massage Catherine had given him, when they finally went to bed, his back still ached. He had carried Mouse most of the time, because the others simply did not have his strength; although they had tried. “Mouse is healing well. He has no fever, and Father believes he has little chance of getting pneumonia.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Elliot told him. “I was very worried about him. As strange as it still seems to me, we have become good friends; and his genius for innovation is amazing.”

Elliot sat back down, looking again at what Vincent could now see were blueprints for the bridge. “Have you figured out another way to make the footbridge?”

“Well,” Elliot began, “the soil is relatively stable. But I believe we should reinforce the banks with retaining walls. Then, we’ll need to level the ground where we intend to pour the concrete. That will ensure that the piers, or vertical posts, can be completely stable. Unfortunately, we will only be able to do this on

our side of the riverbank. The abutments can be made from wood, so that's not a problem,"

Elliot paused, showing Vincent the diagrams on the blueprint. "The abutments serve as the bridge end supports. I haven't made the decision yet, to make the piers, or the abutments. Both have their good and bad points. The main beams, or horizontal supports; they've been called both, will have to be made of treated wood. I've already had Thomas working on that. The wood has to be treated, because of the weight we'll need to carry the cement and other equipment to the other side." Elliot stopped talking, and looked up at Vincent. "That's our main problem," he explained. "How do we get the horizontal beams across the river, without the bridge having been built first?"

Vincent thought the question over in his mind, and remembered where there had been a small boat. He used it years ago, when he had taken Catherine across that foggy lake. It had been a longtime, now; and the boat had more than likely rotted. Besides, Vincent had no desire to return to where the followers of Paracelsus might still be living.

"You seem to be lost in thought," Elliot said. "Have you come up with an idea? I could certainly use one."

An idea *did* come to Vincent. "Why do we not put the problem aside, until Mouse is better. I believe he would be the one who could solve this problem better than either of us," he advised Elliott.

Chapter XVII

Vincent decided to return to his family before speaking to Nathaniel. He believed Catherine could advise him on how to approach his distressful interview. She had dealt with domestic violence, as well as violence against children; when working at the District Attorney's Office in the City. Surely she would have insight he would need.

When Vincent entered their chamber, Catherine was putting Caroline into the stroller, next to her brother. Jacob sat on the bed. Both had known he would be coming, and had gotten ready for their walk to the Dining Hall to have breakfast.

"We anticipated your arrival, Vincent," Catherine said, as she walked over for her good morning kiss. Folding her into his arms, he lowered his lips to hers. Catherine's lips opened, and Vincent accepted the invitation; gladly. She tasted of mint and honey. The feeling of oneness that always came when they kissed, warmed him to his toes. Vincent was loath to let her out of his arms; however, he felt Jacob's impatience. Obviously, Catherine also acknowledged their son's feelings, as reluctantly she broke off their kiss.

Still within the circle of his arms, Catherine turned and addressed Jacob. "Daddy and I understand that you want to eat," his wife told their restless son. "Momma simply needed her morning snuggle." Catherine turned back to Vincent, and kissed him once again. This kiss was shorter, and quickly given. "You and I already *had* our snuggle," she reminded Jacob. "Don't you think that Daddy was entitled to a snuggle, too?"

Vincent understood that both he and Catherine knew Jacob was ashamed of his insistence. They walked together to where their son sat, and Vincent picked

Jacob up into his arms. “Momma had *her* snuggle,” Vincent told him, “Now it is your turn.” Vincent held Jacob tightly, letting him feel every bit of love that his father held in his heart.

“I’m sorry, daddy.” Jacob whispered. “I know that momma deserved a snuggle too.” His son had wrapped his arms around Vincent’s neck, and his head rested against his father’s shoulder. Vincent felt tears drop onto the skin beneath his hair. He kissed Jacob on the ear and whispered, “There is no reason to cry, Jacob,” he said. “Momma and I know that you are very hungry,” Vincent paused, and Jacob lifted his head. “Did you know what makes you so hungry all of the time?” Vincent asked.

Jacob shook his head, looking into Vincent’s eyes. “It is all of the energy you burn throughout the day. Food is energy; and you use up a lot of it every time you take your walks, or play with your friends.” he explained. “Your daddy uses up a lot of energy, also. Both of us burn through that energy faster than most people.”

“Why daddy?” Vincent knew the question had been inevitable. Instead of answering, he put Jacob up onto his shoulders. “Daddy will answer that question at another time,” he said. “Right now, momma has the stroller, and we are going to breakfast.”

When they arrived at the Dining Hall, their usual places were vacant. Vincent knew that the whole community were glad of Vincent’s happiness. Those who had been here for years, had never thought to see him with a family of his

own. Therefore, all were delighted for him. The knowledge overwhelmed him at times, to know how fortunate he was to have such friends as these.

Vincent found Jacob's highchair and put it at the end of their table. Catherine sat down at the table in the first seat. The stroller beside her. He knew Jacob would help Catherine to keep an eye on the twins, when he went to get their breakfast.

"The kitchen made oatmeal muffins this morning, if you would like one," Vincent said to both Catherine and Jacob.

"Can I hab one wit my oatmeal, daddy?" Jacob asked. "I'm really hungry."

Catherine shook her head. "Just oatmeal for me, love," she answered. "I don't use up quite the energy that you two do." Vincent nodded, and walked to the counter. As he walked, Vincent looked around for Nathaniel. He located Lena and the children at another table far from theirs. However, Nathaniel was not with them. This told him Nathaniel was going to avoid both Father and him, as long as he could. Vincent thought this might be a signal of Nathaniel's shame. He hoped it was not something else.

Vincent brought back their food on a tray. Along with the oatmeal, canned milk, and honey; there were three muffins. "I brought one for each of us," he explained, at Catherine's look. "You may not *think* that you do not use as much energy as Jacob and I, however I have seen you crawling around on the rug with the twins. That takes energy," he continued. "I am not always there to help you, and the twins are trying very hard to walk now. Save the muffin for later, if you wish, but at least you will have it when that energy of yours flails."

Taking the seat across from his wife, Vincent handed her both the oatmeal and the muffin, taking a moment to put his down before he placed the same on Jacob's highchair tray. Catherine smiled, and wrapped her muffin in the small square of toweling that had covered them. "Thank you, Vincent.," she said. You're very sweet."

"Tank you, daddy. I like oatmeal muffins. Just like the oatmeal in my bowl." Vincent watched his son deciding which to eat first. After a minute of contemplation, Jacob grabbed his spoon and started with his oatmeal. While he had been deciding, Catherine had added milk, and a small bit of honey into his bowl. "It's perfect," Jacob said to his mother. "Just how I like it."

They ate their meal in silence, although throughout the dining hall, people were conversing, and mothers were admonishing their children. Vincent smiled. He had not had to reproach Jacob since the incident with the red crayon. On the whole, their bond kept Jacob in check. More than likely, Vincent thought, because he knew that either of his parents could hear what he was thinking, whenever they might care to intrude. Of course, Jacob also knew that his parents valued *his* privacy as much as they valued each other's.

Jacob was the first to finish his oatmeal, as usual, and took a bite of his muffin. "Oh, daddy," he said, "this a very good muffin. William is a good cook."

"William has four helpers, Jacob," Vincent told him. "It was Amelia who gave me two muffins early this morning when I went to check on Mouse."

"You were gone quite a while," Catherine said, from across the table, "Certainly, not all of that time was spent looking in on Mouse."

Vincent smiled at his wife, knowing she had been very busy while he had been gone. “No,” he told her, “I saw Pascal to give him the news, so he could spread it through the system, I then went to see Elliot about Mouse Ed..”

“Did you learn what Elliot has decided to do?” Catherine asked. “Is he going to try and finish the project without Mouse”

“I believe not, Catherine. There is a problem with the footbridge.” Vincent said. “They need a way to get to the other side of the river. We decided that waiting for Mouse to be completely well would be the superior arrangement. Elliot said that Mouse would be the one to come up with an idea that would be the best, and I agreed. If anyone can think of a solution, it’s definitely our Mouse.”

Vincent entered the Mirror Pool chamber with only a little trepidation. He did not like confrontations. To be honest with himself; he knew he always tried to avoid them. Thinking back, Vincent recalled the last time he had been involved in a confrontation.

It was with Father, he remembered; vividly. When Catherine returned to him, his father’s reaction had been extreme. He had never known the man to be so unreasonable; so angry. His own reaction, as he recalled, had been equally extreme. In his entire life, he never remembered a time when they had fought so violently. Even when he first told Father of the bond between the two of them, after Vincent saved her, Vincent had tried to describe their connection to Father. His reply had

been that she would only bring him unhappiness. Vincent remembered his words to Father; “then I will be unhappy!”

Of course, the later confrontation regarding Catherine’s return, was tremendously louder; and angrier. He never remembered a time so filled with bitterness. All of the light Vincent had felt upon Catherine’s return, became dark and unrelenting. He had roamed the room, attempting to calm himself as he argued; but to no avail. Then Catherine had come back from giving Jacob his bath. She had not even taken the time to dry herself. She was covered only in a towel; Jacob no longer with her. Water dripped from her body with every step, as she came to him; holding him close. Almost instantaneously, the darkness was gone. The light she brought with her, covered his dark thoughts; calming him as nothing else ever had.

Vincent remembered vividly, her caresses; the soft kisses that covered his face and chin, The warmth and light of her presence was a balm to all of his senses. The argument was not over, but Vincent’s anger, was. When Father saw that Jacob was no longer with her, he raged again. Repeating why she should not have been allowed to take Jacob.

Catherine’s answer was simple; “I almost ran into Mary on my way here,” she explained. “It was remarkable. She just held out her arms for the baby.” Turning to Father she continued. “All she said was welcome home, Catherine. Vincent has missed you.” The argument was not yet finished, but it *was* over.

In his mind, the upcoming talk with Nathaniel reappeared. Lena was not forthcoming with the details of exactly what occurred with Cathy and her father. The only question she answered, was where Nathaniel had gone. She told Vincent that Nathaniel always went to the Mirror Pool when he needed to think. He told her he liked the quiet stillness there.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent walked into the chamber of the Mirror Pool. Nathaniel was sitting on the sand, looking up with, Vincent thought, the expectation of seeing the shimmering of false stars. He did not turn to look at Vincent as he walked closer, and sat on the sand beside him

“If you’re going to give me a lecture,” Nathaniel said, not turning his head. “you can skip it. There’s nothing I want to hear, and nothing you have to say that will change what happened. Don’t waste your breath.”

Vincent continued to look at Nathaniel. He did not speak; he only watched the man he thought of as a friend. If Nathaniel could wait, so could he. If nothing else, during his life. Vincent had learned patience. They sat on the sand together for many minutes, before Nathaniel finally turned to look at him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her,” Nathaniel said softly, turning away again. “It was an instinctive reaction. I couldn’t help it.”

“What made it instinctive, Nathaniel,” Vincent asked, equally as softly. “You must have had a reason,” he continued. “I have never known you to hurt anyone; let alone a child,” he paused. “Cathy is *your* child now, as well as Lena’s.”

Nathaniel bowed his head, then turned back to look again at Vincent. “Don’t you think I know that?” he answered. This time his voice was harsh, as he continued. “I love Cathy as I love her mother and David. And I’m ashamed of what I did.” He paused for a moment; looking intensely into Vincent’s eyes in silence.

“Then *why*, Nathaniel,” Vincent asked. “What brought on such anger? Father told me about his meeting with you. The hatred he saw in your eyes, was considerably alarming to him.”

“I’m sorry about that, Vincent,” Nathaniel said, “I really am.” Once again he looked down at the sand. “Father caught me at a bad time,” he explained. “I still hadn’t calmed down. He should have waited.”

“Father thought it important to speak with you as soon as possible.” Vincent told him. “He believed his concern for both you and the child, was warranted,” Vincent paused, “As do I,” he added, finally. “Would you please explain what the children did that so upset you?”

Nathaniel’s reply, was not what Vincent expected. “It’s a long, ugly story, Vincent,” Nathaniel said; quiet again. “Are you sure that you really want to hear it?”

“Only if you want to tell me. And only if it explains your extreme behavior.” Vincent sat silently for a long time, as Nathaniel continued looking down at the sand, sifting some with his fingers as Vincent watched him getting his thoughts together. After no little while, Vincent heard him take a deep breath before he began to speak.

“It goes back to when I was a kid, Vincent,” Nathaniel began. “My father, or as I usually think of him, the man I had to live with; was not a good man.” He paused, throwing sand toward the water, then gave another harsh laugh.

“Actually, that’s one heck of an understatement. He was a hostile, spiteful, disgusting piece of trash!” Nathaniel paused again, shaking his head. “I’m cleaning up my language here, Vincent. I promised Lena that I wouldn’t cuss in front of the children. It took a while, but I finally found a way to hold it in.” He lifted his head, looking at Vincent again. “That man didn’t hit my mother or me, but he did a lot of

emotional damage to both of us. As you were able to tell,” Nathaniel added, “mine still hasn’t left me.

“When I got to be thirteen, I began to deliver newspapers. I didn’t have a bike, so it was very early in the morning when I had to delivered them. Did a lot of walking,” he paused, “That way, I still could make it to school on time. He worked nights, so he was never home before I left. I’d carry my papers in a big, canvas bag, and my schoolbooks in my backpack. I took the job delivering papers, because I needed a way to get out of there, when I graduated from high school.” Nathaniel sighed, heavily. “Neither my mother nor that man knew about my job.

“I was planning my future, even then, Vincent. My plan was to spend what little money I got from my job, on baseball cards. I figured that by the time I was eighteen, they might be worth enough that I could leave; maybe even go to community college.” He lifted his head again, this time looking at the water. “I didn’t buy just any cards, Vincent, I bought the oldest ones I could afford. Even at that age, it occurred to me that they would be worth more money, later,” Another of those harsh laughs filled the room. “When I was a junior in high school; I had been saving for five years. My stack of cards was pretty large by then, and I had some really good ones. That was the year it finally happened,” Nathaniel sighed, pausing again. “I had stashed my cards in a place where I thought they would be safe from him. They weren’t. I got home from school one day, and found that all of my cards were gone.

“I looked under every floorboard in my bedroom, thinking that they might have slipped out of my hiding place. I knew it was hopeless, but I had to try.” He turned back to Vincent. “That’s when the man walked in. He had a nasty grin on his face, and suddenly I knew: he had taken them. I really tried to stay calm, Vincent; really I did. But, when he started to laugh, I just lost it. Doing all that walking delivering my papers, and carrying my books, had made me pretty strong by then. I hit that bastard with my fists, until my hands were bleeding. Guess he

didn't think that I would ever do something like that; but I did. By the time I walked out of that house, his face was unrecognizable."

Nathaniel again paused. "That's what made me so angry at Cathy, Vincent. he said. "The kids were playing with the baseball cards I collected when I started working. I was trying to buy the same ones that were in my stolen collection. Seeing them in another person's hands, just set me off. My mind instantly went back to that other time, and I lost it." Nathaniel looked away. "At least I spanked her. I could have really lost it and hit her the same way I hit him.

"I am really sorry about what I did," he continued. "I've apologized to the kids and to Lena. But I get the feeling that it will be awhile before they forgive me."

Vincent did not answer for some time. He was taking in everything Nathaniel had said to him. He had been correct; the story *was* ugly. It was quite a while before he spoke. Vincent decided to take the story back to its beginning. "You left your home," he finally said, in a quiet voice, "Did you ever go back?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "Nope. I knew that if I did, there would be a repeat of the beating. This time it would be me, who would be hit. I understood that I could never go back."

"Do you know what happened, after you left?" Vincent asked. He couldn't believe that Nathaniel wouldn't worry about what his father might do to his mother, with him gone.

This time there was a smile on Nathaniel's face. "My mom left too," he answered, "She took off the next night, while he was at work; moved in with her

sister. I didn't find out for a couple of years, but when I did, it really made me happy."

"So, where did *you* go?"

Nathaniel's smile faded. "It was very hard, Vincent," he said. "I didn't have many friends back then. There wasn't anywhere for me to stay. So, I hitched with a trucker to a couple of cities over, and got a job," his smile returned. "I looked older than I was, so I found a job loading heavy boxes in a supply warehouse that sent the boxes to grocery stores in the area. Made decent money, so I found somewhere to stay, in a place this old lady had made into a sort of boarding house."

"I had my own room," he continued. "and she provided a hot meal every night. It was really nice. No one yelled, no one screamed at anyone; just the quietest place I'd ever known. It was what I thought heaven must be like."

The silence lingered, as Vincent was alone with his thoughts. It was at times like this, when he realized how lucky he had been. Even having to live Below all of his life, and never being able to go Above in the sunlight, was far superior than what many of the other people here had suffered. Yes, he had been lonely many times; but that was little in comparison.

"How did you come to be here, Nathaniel?" Vincent asked, breaking the silence. "Were you living close to New York?"

"Actually, Nathaniel answered, "I was living in Jersey. There were men around in my new job, who were just like the one I grew up with. I would never have left my little haven, except when the old lady died; her son was selling the house. Everybody had to move." He stopped talking for a few moments, his smile

gone now. “So, I picked New Jersey. Don’t really know why, maybe I thought being around people again, would help my loneliness. Obviously, it didn’t work out that way. I took a bus into the City, because the people there, talked about it a lot. So, I came to check it out for myself.”

“And, what did you find?” Vincent asked, quietly. He was rather certain what the answer would be; as he had spoken to many people Below who found the City to be anything but a hospitable place.

“It only made me feel more isolated. After trying to find work in a shipyard, or some other place where my strength would be an asset, I was lonelier than ever. Since I was homeless, I spent a lot of time in different shelters. One night I found myself at the Mission on Delancy.”

“And you met Clarence.” Vincent declared. “That was a long time ago. I did not realize that was Clarence was already at the mission then. Was it Clarence who told you about the tunnels.”

“Exactly,” Nathaniel confirmed. “I stayed at the mission for longer than I had ever been allowed to stay in any of the shelters. Clarence and I spent a lot of time talking. I loved listening to him play. He plays his sax like no one I ever heard before.”

“So, it was Clarence who talked to one of our other helpers. That was who sponsored you.” Having a helper tell the council the reason why someone needed and wanted to live Below, was the natural order of things. Then Vincent remembered the two who had only been advocated for by Catherine; Jenny and Joe. The thought made Vincent smile. Jenny and her dreams, had made speaking with Joe Maxwell, a priority.

The meeting had been much different than any one of them expected. Joe had already known about Vincent *and* Jacob. He explained to them that Diana had said nothing during the hearing that took place, after the location where Gabriel had held Catherine, then Vincent, was destroyed. She would only say that she was the one who shot Gabriel. It wasn't until she moved to Chicago, that the letter and videotape arrived in Maxwell's mail. Both pieces of evidence, told the tale of what had happened to Vincent during his capture; and showed him leaving with his son. It made for a very different result than the one they expected.

After the meeting, when everyone who lived Below had suddenly appeared, Catherine had asked Joe to come Below and listen to the children give a concert. It reminded Vincent of what Father had mumbled under his breath, as they all, including Maxwell, walked to their home Below the building. Father's words made him smile then, as the remembrance of them did now: that it was just what he always wanted; another attorney in the family.

Vincent turned back to Nathaniel, who looked as though he was awaiting some sort of punishment. "I will explain everything to Father, Nathaniel," he told him. "You have enough to do, getting your family to believe again in the man you are now. Have you told your story to Lena?" Vincent asked.

"No, Vincent. I haven't. It's such an awful story," he said. "Lena has had enough burdens in her life; I didn't want to add to them."

"Perhaps you should tell her anyway, Nathaniel. It would be better for Lena to know the reason behind your unusual behavior," Vincent advised him. "It may help her to understand, and forgive you sooner, knowing the truth."

Chapter XVIII

When Vincent finally returned to their chamber, Catherine and the children were getting ready to go to dinner. He saw Jacob sitting on their bed, and the twins securely tucked into their stroller. Catherine walked to him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

His day had been long, and somewhat exhausting. As he held his wife, he sincerely wished to ignore his hunger and his dinner, and just lie down on the bed. At the thought, Catherine leaned back and looked at him.

“If you’re really that tired, Vincent,” she said softly, “why don’t you stay with the children, and I will get something from the kitchen for the three of us. The twins have already eaten and there is no one who cannot wait, if they want to talk with you..”

Vincent brought her tightly back into the circle of his arms, and sighed. “Do you know just how wonderful you are?” he asked, kissing her cheek. “You have made me so very happy, Catherine, and your light, your warmth, and the comfort you have brought me through the years have become an integral to my entire being.”

Vincent kissed her with every part of him instilling in her, the truth of his words, Her lips parted beneath his, and he took the kiss deeper, taking all that she could give to him.; returning all that he could give to her. Catherine was the light to his darkness; the other piece of his soul. When he finally ended their kiss, Vincent continued to hold her tightly. He was hesitant to let her go, but his weariness had become overwhelming.

“Lie down,” Catherine whispered, as she slowly backed out of his arms. “I can feel your fatigue. Please rest, and let me take care of dinner.”

Vincent looked down into her worried, green eyes, and sighed heavily. Although hesitant to acquiesce, he gave in and walked slowly to their bed. Jacob got up, and stood watching as he let himself lie down, and without even bothering to take off his boots, rested his head against the pillows. Vincent closed his eyes, and sleep overtook him.

Catherine entered the Dining Hall alone. It was strange, not having Vincent and the children with her. The silence was deafening. It was never completely quiet in the Dining Hall at dinner time. With a feeling of unknown confidence, Catherine looked around at her silent audience. She guessed, that they too, felt the absence of Vincent and their children,

“Where is Vincent?” Father asked from his usual seat at their long table. Catherine turned his way, walking over to kiss his cheek.

“Vincent was exhausted when he got home,” she told him. “I asked him to please lie down and rest, while I brought back dinner for the three of us.” Catherine decided to take a moment, and sat down next to her father-in-law. “I left Jacob and the twins in our chamber.” Father started to say something, but she intuitively

knew what he was going to say, and answered his yet unasked question. “The babies are asleep. Jacob is sitting on the floor beside their crib, and both he and Vincent will know the instant they wake up.”

Catherine stood, and kissed him again. “Don’t worry, Father,” she said “Everything will be fine until I get back. You worry too much.” She turned and headed toward the counter to see what she could take back with her.

As she passed the next table, the sound of Nathaniel calling her name, stopped her. Catherine turned toward his voice, and saw him standing up by Lena and their children. “What can I do for you, Nathaniel?” she asked. The children were between them, so she spoke to him from where she stood.

“I just wanted to let Vincent know that I, um, had the discussion we talked about. He was right,” He looked down at Lena, and she smiled at him. “Please let him know that everything has worked out just as he said it would. Could you do that for me, please?”

“Of course, Nathaniel,” Catherine answered. “I’ll tell him as soon as he wakes up.”

“Thank you, Catherine,” Nathaniel said, sitting back down. Catherine looked around to see if anyone else had something to say. She found Elliot, but he just smiled, and kept on eating. Ever since he came to live Below, Catherine had found that he stopped to eat more than he ever had in the City. She smiled back, and continued her walk.

When she reached the counter, William was already there, with a small tray. On it were three pieces of his warm bread, and three bowls of his chicken and

vegetable casserole. She guessed that he was making use of Henry's generous gift, while the vegetables were still fresh. She knew about it from Vincent's conversation with Amelia early that morning. It looked delicious and smelled even better. There were two cups of tea, and a small cup of apple juice for Jacob.

"Thank you, William," Cathrine said, "Isn't this one of Vincent's favorites?" She started to pick up the tray, but it was a little heavier than she thought. There was no way she could carry it back to their chamber. Catherine thought for a moment, then began removing some of the dishes to the side, hoping to make the tray lighter. She would have to make two trips, but that would be better than spilling everything on her way.

"Would you like me to carry it for you?" William asked. "Everybody's in the kitchen are having their own dinners, so they won't need me for a little while." William walked from behind the counter, and took the tray. "Lead on," he told Catherine.

"You're very sweet, William," Catherine said to him, as they walked through the Dining Hall, and into the main tunnel. It led to almost everyone's chamber and passed some of the classrooms. Catherine was happy to know that she could finally find her way around without an escort.

"Don't let my kitchen helpers hear you say that, Catherine," William said softly. "They think I'm some kind of strict disciplinarian," he told her. "Don't go ruining my reputation."

Catherine laughed as they continued walking. She was still smiling when they reached their chamber. Jacob quickly got up off the floor, as William put the tray down on the small table in the room.

“Hi, William,” Jacob said. “You helped momma bring dinner. You’re very nice.” He walked up to William and gave him a hug around his knees.

William looked down, and ran his hand through Jacob’s hair. When he looked back up at Catherine, he was grinning. “You two are definitely gonna ruin my reputation.” Catherine laughed, as William put the tray on their small table, and walked from the room.

“Wats a reputaton, momma?” he asked, walking over to the table to look at its contents.

“A reputation, “she answered, “is how people think of you.” She looked around, trying to find a place where Jacob and she could sit down and eat. Vincent was on the bed, and the small table was covered by the tray. “Why don’t you sit on the rug in front of the hard-backed chair, and use it as a table,” she suggested. “Momma can sit in daddy’s chair, and eat her dinner there.”

“Okay, momma,” Jacob answered cheerfully, “I never sat on da rug to eat before.” he told her, walking over to sit in front of the chair. “Dis will be fun.”

Catherine smiled, and put Jacob’s food on the seat of the chair in front of him. “Be careful when you drink the juice,” she told him. “Try not to spill any on the rug.”

Jacob scooted closer to the chair. “I will be careful, momma,” he told her. “Promise.” Catherine was very proud her young son. He ate his casserole slowly, and was holding on to his cup of juice with both hands. After watching for a few

minutes, Catherine covered Vincent's dinner with one of the babies wash cloths, then finally sat down in Vincent's large chair, to her own dinner.

Father was listening to Mouse's chest when the boy opened his eyes. "How are you feeling Mouse?" he inquired. "Do you feel any pain?"

"Where?" Mouse asked. He was looking around the room. Father thought it was obvious Mouse was puzzled about his surroundings.

"You are in the hospital chamber, Mouse." Father answered. "Do you remember falling into the river?"

Mouse looked back at Father. His brow wrinkled, as though he was trying very hard to remember. "Cold," was all that he said.

"Father put his hand on Mouse's forehead; finding it dry and cool. There was no sense of a fever. "As soon as you feel better," he explained, "you will be able to go back to your chamber."

Mouse began to rise from the bed, but Father's hands on his shoulders, stopped him. "Not yet, Mouse," he said. "I want to be certain that you have fully recovered before I allow you to leave." He saw Mouse thinking it over, before he leaned back against the pillow once again.

Father gave a sigh of relief. Mouse had always been known for his stubbornness. “Very good,” he told him. “You need complete bed rest for a few more days.” He lifted his hands from Mouse’s shoulders, and stood up. “We were all very worried about you,” he continued. “Everyone here has been anxious, Mouse. They were afraid that you would not recover. Vincent was especially concerned for you.”

“Vincent?” Mouse smiled a very sleepy smile. “He’s my friend.” With those words, his eyes closed and he returned to sleep.

Charter XIX

When Vincent opened his eyes, he heard Elliot's voice. Turning his head, he looked on Elliot and Catherine conversing with each other. Catherine was sitting in his chair, and Elliot sat across from her in the other. Although their voices were low, it was easy for him to hear the conversation.

"So, you've finally decided to go back and finish up the platforms?" he heard Catherine ask.

"Yes, I have," Elliot told her. "Cullen and Thomas and I talked together yesterday, and we came to the conclusion that the bridge would have to wait until Mouse was ready to come back to work. It's a waste of time to let everything stand still while Mouse is unavailable, The rest of us can continue working until then. We discussed how to finish making the last two platforms, and at least, get them attached to the shore on our side of the river."

"If I remember correctly, you never *did* like wasting time," she said laughing. "You even told me once that you considered sleeping as a waste of time," Catherine continued. "I'm glad to hear that you're going to be working again, Elliot," Catherine said. "You've looked pretty antsy for the past few days. Getting back to work will be good for you."

Elliot laughed. "When have you seen me look antsy?" he asked her. "I've only seen you at some of the meals. Doesn't seem to be enough time to judge my attitude."

“Ah,” she began, “but I knew you when you were Above, Elliot. You were always busy. And the times you weren’t, which were seldom, I admit; you just had this anxiety around you.”

“Antsy, huh?” Elliot laughed again, and Vincent decided to make himself known.

“I believe Catherine to be right, Elliot,” Vincent said, getting up slowly from the bed. “You have changed considerably since you and Mouse began your project. It looks to both of us as if the self-assured Elliot had returned.” Vincent went to stand behind Catherine; wrapping his arms around her from behind the chair.

Catherine turned her head, and smiled. “You were listening?” she asked softly. “Of course you were,” she said, answering her own question, “Every now and then I forget how much better your hearing is.” She turned back to Elliot. “Vincent can hear the slightest sound,” she explained. “All of his senses are much better than yours or mine.”

“Must come in handy around here,” Elliot replied. “Between the pipes and the subway trains, I can sometimes lose my train of thought. Even after being here for so long,” he told them, “and although I’ve become used them; when I’m trying to come up with a delicate calculation, it just slips away from me.”

“So that is why I sometimes see your ears stuffed with waxed-covered paper,” Vincent commented. “I had wondered about that.”

“I thought it was pretty inventive,” Elliot said, smiling. “I didn’t come Below thinking I would need ear plugs.”

Vincent smiled back, thinking of a series of books he had read by Patrick O'Brien. "Did you know that the physicians on sailing ships during the Napoleonic wars, sometimes used the very same thing during battles?"

"Damn." Elliot said. "I thought I had created something new," he paused for a moment, then said. "I guess history really *does* repeat itself," he whistled softly. "The Napoleonic wars, huh? That means I've reinvented something from the early nineteenth century. Not bad."

Catherine laughed. "Not bad at all, Elliot," she told him, as she looked back at her husband. "Vincent has been a voracious reader since he was very young. There's not much he doesn't know about history."

"So, I'm learning," Elliot answered, as he got up from the chair. "My team is waiting for some last-minute instructions. We're meeting tomorrow morning, then we'll be off. Time for me to be leaving," he paused next to Vincent. "I'm glad you heard our conversation," Elliot told him. "Now you know that we'll be getting back to work, and the time won't be wasted. Should I stop by and tell Mouse?" he asked.

"Please do," Vincent replied. "if he is awake, I am certain he would want to know." Vincent paused. "However," he continued uncertainly, "it might make him anxious enough to try and leave the hospital sooner than he should."

"Then maybe I'll hold off." Elliot told him, "Mouse needs to be one hundred percent, if he's going to come back and help me to redesign the bridge." He left the room, and Catherine got up from the chair, walking straight into Vincent's waiting arms.

“Did you have a good rest?” she asked him, from her place against his chest. “You looked so very tired when you came back.” Vincent held her tighter, and kissed the top of her head; resting his chin on her hair.

“I did, Catherine,” he told her, enjoying the feel and scent that was hers alone. “I slept deeply.” He raised his face, and looked around their chamber. “Where is Jacob?” he asked, “I see empty bowls and cups on the table.”

“If you look closer,” Catherine answered, “you will also see your dinner underneath that bit of cloth.. Jacob and I ate some time ago. He’s gone back to his room,” she stopped and kissed him lightly, “Jacob told me he was going to ask Father to read to him, and then he was going to sleep.”

“And you did not wake me?” he asked in surprise. Catherine looked at him, and shook her head.

“You just told me, Vincent, you slept deeply,” she reminded him. “Both Jacob and I could feel how very tired you were. Of *course* we didn’t wake you.” She rested again within the circle of his arms. “Jacob and I finished our dinner, he gave you a kiss on your cheek, and then he left,” she sighed. “You know how very self-reliant Jacob is; even though he’s only two. He’s very like you, Vincent. I’ve never known another child his age, to act as he does. It’s as though our bond has made him grow far beyond what a child his age should be like.”

Vincent let her words and thoughts, merge with his. Catherine was correct. Their bond *had* made Jacob wiser than his years. “Did Narcissa not call Jacob an “old soul,” Catherine?” he asked. “Perhaps between the wisdom he was born with, and our bond, Jacob has aged more quickly than other children.”

“No perhaps about it, my love,” she answered. “Jacob is most assuredly an old soul. Someday, he will be a very wise man; an individual capable of anything he sets his mind to.”

“I can only wonder what that will be,” Vincent whispered softly.

The next morning, as Father sat in his study, going over Elliot’s new plans once again, Nathaniel walked quietly into the room.

“I’m not disturbing you, am I Father?” he asked. “I can come back later, if that would be better.” Father looked up at his visitor, and took off his glasses, laying them on the blueprints in front of him.

“Not at all, Nathaniel,” he answered. “Now is as good a time as ever. What is it you wished to talk about?”

Nathaniel shuffled his feet, and Father could recognize both the hesitation, and anxiety in Nathaniel’s demeanor. “Well,” he began, ‘I wanted to apologize for the way I acted the other day. I know that I treated you very badly,” he paused, as if getting his thoughts together. “You caught me at a very bad time. I was still really

upset; both because of what I had done, and because I couldn't explain it to you. I was ashamed and angry," he paused again. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Father thought that Nathaniel's plea was heartfelt, and he sighed with relief. "I am very happy that you came, Nathaniel," he told him. "Yes. I forgive you. Vincent explained some of your past to me, and from what I gathered, spanking your child was an instinctive reaction on your part."

"Yes, Father," Nathaniel agreed. "It's an old wound. I thought it had healed, but that day I found out it was still very present. Vincent gave me some advice, and I followed it," he paused again. "After I told Lena, I felt that maybe I had put the past behind me at last. At least, I hope so."

"That could not have been easy," Father told him, "However, I am happy to hear you tell me of it." Father watched Nathaniel's face change, as he smiled at him.

As Catherine and Vincent headed to their noon meal. This time, Vincent was pushing the twins in their stroller. Jacob came out of Father's study, and began walking with them.

"You missed your morning snuggle," Catherine remarked. "Were you talking with Father?"

Jacob stopped walking, so Catherine and Vincent did the same. “I sept a real long time,” Jacob told them, looking up at Vincent. “I guess dat I was as tired as you, daddy,” he explained. “I sept until after breakfast,” he continued. “Fader was talking to someone wen I was getting dressed, so I stayed in my room and read the book dat Catty gab me again,” he grinned. “I even tink dat I read some of da words all by myself,” he told them. “You read it to me, daddy, so I guessed at some of da words, I tink dat I got some of dem right.” Both Vincent and Catherine felt how proud he was of his accomplishment.

“That’s wonderful, Jacob,” Vincent told him. “Both momma and I are very proud of you. And we *did* miss you this morning,” Vincent said. “However, when we awoke, we felt that you were sleeping, so we chose not to wake you.” He let go of the stroller handle, and Catherine replaced Vincent’s hands with hers. She smiled as Vincent picked Jacob up, and put him in his usual place on his shoulders. “You must be *very* hungry now,” Vincent said, “Come with momma and me for lunch. I will ask William if could let you have an extra sandwich.”

When they found their usual seats, Vincent retrieved Jacob’s highchair from where it was kept for him. Taking him carefully from his shoulders, Vincent sat Jacob down on the seat. Attaching the highchair tray, he kissed his son on the cheek, and walked to William’s counter.

There were still a few plates with sandwiches on them, so Vincent knew that there was more than likely, an extra one for Jacob. William’s bread was always cut in thick slices when they made sandwiches, and so they were very filling. However, he had felt his son’s hunger, so an extra sandwich was most definitely called for.

“Hi there, Vincent,” William said, as he walked to the counter. “I noticed that Jacob wasn’t at breakfast this morning. Is he alright?” He looked at their table and smiled. “Looks like he’s okay now,” he said, turning back to Vincent. “What

can I do for you? His smile became wider, “Maybe an extra sandwich for our boy?” he asked.

“You read my mind,” Vincent said, returning his smile. “I suppose you know Jacob enough, to realize how much energy he burns throughout the day.”

“You should *say* I do,” William replied. “I’ve watched that boy grow and run around the tunnels ever since he first learned to walk. And my memory is still pretty good. I even remember a time when he would get up very early and wake up the kids in the boy’s room, just to get them to play with him.” William laughed. “I also remember how you stopped it. Grab him another sandwich, Vincent. They’re tuna and tomato today. We’re still using up Henry’s vegetables. Probably make some more casseroles for tonight.”

Vincent smiled, and added another sandwich to one of the plates. “Thank you, William,” he said, “And as far as your casseroles go,” he continued. “You have always known how much I like them.”

“Hey,” William said, “I’ve watched *you* for years, too.” He turned and took a tray from the stack at the end of the counter. “Here,” he said, “I’ll put the plates and cups on the tray for you. Everyone is drinking tea, but I’m giving the kids some more of the apple cider I made. Had to use up the rest of the apples before they went bad. Kept a few others to dry for slices. Should last us a while.”

“You are remarkable, William,” Vincent told him. “I have never known you to waste a single thing.”

“Learned how to do that, a very long time ago.” William explained. “Now, go feed your family. I’ve got to help the others get these dishes washed.”

Vincent returned to their table, tray in hand. He sat down across from Catherine, and passed the plates and cups to both his son and his wife. Catherine glanced at Jacob's plate. "Two sandwiches?" she noted. "I guess we were right. Jacob is just as hungry as we thought."

"I'm *very* hungry, Momma," Jacob agreed. "Daddy ast William if I could hab an extra sandwitzt."

As they were eating, Vincent remembered a certain birthday party. "Did David have his birthday party while I was gone?" Vincent asked, putting his sandwich down. "Did he not have a birthday during the time I was gone?" He felt Catherine's look, and turned to her.

Did something happen, love?

That was not too many days after the spanking. The party was postponed.

Vincent suddenly realized the timing of the incident, and knew why the party had been postponed. He looked at Jacob and saw that he had also put down his sandwich, and was looking back at him.

"Catty's momma said dat da party would be later, daddy," he told him softly, "Catty's daddy was still mad. Day didn't come to breakfast, or anyting for a long time."

"I spoke with Lena one day when she was taking Cathy to the preschool Rebecca started," Catherine explained to him. "She was still upset, and let me

know that they had decided to celebrate David's birthday, when everything calmed down. She looked very embarrassed, so I hurried back to our chamber. Jacob was there with the twins, and you know he would have told me if anything had happened during the few minutes I was gone."

"Thank you, Catherine," Vincent said. "I felt nothing of this while I was gone," he reached out his hand and touched hers. "Thank you for sparing me this," he told her. "You knew what was happening with Mouse," he brought her hand to his lips and pressed a short kiss against her fingers. Looking back up at her he said, "Now you know how I keep some things to myself," he reminded her.

Chapter XX

Elliot had left the worksite with Cullen and Thomas, when he went back to the Home Chambers to visit Mouse and apprise him of the situation. “Cullen and Thomas are working together on one of the last two pontoons and rafts. All of the necessary wood has been treated, which made it possible for Thomas to help in the construction.”

“Bridge?” Mouse asked from his bed. He was sitting up, and looked much better than the last time Elliot had seen him.

“I started a few preliminary ideas; nothing solid; just some ideas,” Elliot told him. “I’m waiting until you’re able to come back to the site, and help work it out with me.”

“Cement?” Mouse asked. Elliot smiled, as he had been expecting this to be one of the first questions Mouse would ask.

“While you’ve been recovering, I sent the crew to purchase everything we needed,” he told him. Elliot was trying to take his time in explaining the work they were doing. Mouse was a genius in many ways, but Elliot wanted to be certain that he conveyed everything clearly, so that Mouse could stop worrying. He had seen the anxiety in Mouse’s eyes, on his last visit.

“We’ve gotten the cement, the extra wheelbarrow to mix it in, the protective gloves and respiratory masks for whomever works mixing the cement,” he

continued. "We even came across a couple of hoes for mixing it. All we need to do now, is to level the ground. Then we can start getting the cement mixed, poured, and install the initial girders. I'll need you to help decide on whether we use piers, or abutments. For that, you need to get well, Mouse."

As Elliot finished speaking, Father walked into the chamber. "Keeping Mouse company?" he asked Elliot, as he passed him to go to Mouse's bed. Father was very glad to see Mouse sitting up, and looking much better. It was obvious to him, that a week spent in bed there, had helped him considerably.

"Yes," Elliot replied. "Had to check on how my partner was doing. Looks like he's feeling a lot better."

"Just let me listen to your breathing, Mouse," Father told him. He put his stethoscope against Mouse's chest and told him to take a deep breath. As he moved the stethoscope around, he continued to hear no sound of wheezing, no crackles or rhonchi; that would have suggested mucous blocking his airways. He listened to Mouse's breathing with the stethoscope moved to Mouse's back, and still heard no sign of congestion of any kind.

"You are breathing quite normally, Mouse," Father said, smiling. "I am going to release you from our hospital. However," he emphasized. "I want you to remain in your chamber, for at least another week. That means you absolutely cannot return to that place below where you were working."

The look on Mouse's face, told Father that his announcement had been met with the reaction he had expected. He looked back at Elliot. "Would it be possible for you to stay with Mouse for the next week?" he asked. "I am afraid that Mouse has a different sense of time than the rest of us. It would be reassuring for me to know that you were staying in your chamber with him."

“Certainly, Father,” Elliot replied. “There’s no reason why Mouse and I can’t begin working on the new designs while we’re up here.” Father saw him look to Mouse for his agreement.

“Okay, fine,” he finally said, folding his arms across his chest in defiance.

The day of David’s birthday party finally arrived. Catherine watched as Jacob took extra time to dress in his very best clothes. He took time to find his favorite shirt, and the jeans handed down to him by one of the older children. Catherine smiled, as Jacob went through his chest, looking for the exact pair of socks that matched his shirt.

Vincent came into Jacob’s room, and Catherine turned and walked directly into his arms. As he held her, she whispered, “I have never seen our son so happy to go to a birthday party, Vincent,” she told him. “Is it because David’s party was postponed due to Nathaniel?”

“I believe so, love,” he whispered back. “I have just spoken with William, and it seems everyone has made a great effort to be there,” he paused to kiss her softly on her lips. “ Mary has even cancelled school for the day.”

“Momma,,” Jacob said, “I tink I’m ready to go. I just need you to tie my soos for me.” Catherine left the circle of Vincent’s arms, and they both walked to

the bed where Jacob sat. Catherine bent down to tie her son's shoes, while Vincent checked on the twins in their stroller."

"Looks like we're all ready to go," Catherine said, as she stood up. "Do you want daddy to carry you on his shoulders, Jacob? Or would you rather walk by yourself?"

"I'll walk by myself," Jacob answered. "You said dat I was a big boy now."

When they entered the Dining Hall, Catherine was surprised by how very full it was. There were children and parents sitting at every table. Kipper, Eric, Jeffery, Zack, and Samantha were sitting together. Their heads bent toward each other in what she thought must be an interesting conversation.

She continued to look around, and saw Nathaniel and his family, sitting at a small table set up especially for them. It was in the middle of the large room, so that everyone could see them. David and Cathy were laughing at something Lena was saying. It made her very happy to see them like that again.

"It looks as though even some of our Helpers have come down for this party," Vincent told her. "Peter is sitting next to Father, and next to him, even Pascal has taking part in the celebration. I also see Michael down the same table, sitting next to Brooke."

"I believe you're right, Vincent," Catherine replied. "Olivia is here with Luke, and even Gavin and Anne-Marie have brought little Ellie." She looked around at the farthest table. "Even Sarah and Faye are here. The only ones who seem to be missing are Thomas, Cullen, Narcissa and Elizabeth."

“I just found Elliot,” Vincent said, “He is sitting next to Mouse,” he paused. “And Jamie is sitting between Mouse and Philip. That could become interesting.”

“They certainly wouldn’t start an argument during the party, Vincent,” she said with some hesitancy in her voice, “Not with everyone around, surely.”

“I do not believe so, love,” Vincent reassured her, putting an arm around her waist. “Oliver and his entire concert group are also here with their instruments. I do believe we are going to have a concert either during or after David’s party.”

“It looks like this is going to be a party to be long remembered.” Catherine told him, looking up into his beautiful eyes.” Vincent gave her a quick kiss, before he went to get Jacob’s highchair, and Catherine sat down in her usual seat. After setting up the chair for Jacob, Vincent joined her. The conversations and laughter continued to surround them, until William brought in a very large sheet cake. Putting in front of David, he added one candle, and lit it with a match. He stood nearby, as Lena began to speak.

“This is David’s very first birthday,” she said; loud enough that her voice was easily heard in the large, but silent room. “I’m glad that so many of you decided to join us for his celebration. My whole family thanks you all,”

She bent down, to tell David, “Now, you make a wish, and blow out the candle,” she told him. David looked up at her, and Vincent had never seen such a huge smile on the little boy’s face.

“Wat wis for, Mommy?” he asked.

“Whatever you want,” Nathaniel told him. “Absolutely whatever you want.”

“Do I hab to say, daddy?” he asked softly, with a bit of hesitation. Nathaniel bent, and kissed his son on the cheek. He also reached over to give a kiss to Cathy.

“No,” he told them bot,, “you don’t have to say your wish out loud. It’s *your* wish, so you can keep it to yourself.”

David smiled, screwed up his face, and closed his eyes. It was apparent to everyone, that he was concentrating hard on his wish. A minute later, he opened his eyes, and blew out the candle in one, huge blow. Everyone applauded, making David turn his head to look around him. Vincent watched as David’s eyes opened very wide. It seemed to him, that David had not known just how many people were at his party. He grinned again, and turned to his parents.

“Yots people, mommy. Vite dem, daddy?” he asked Nathaniel.

“No, David,” he told him. “Everybody just wanted to come and wish you a happy birthday. A first birthday is very special,” Nathaniel looked around them at the full room. “”Like Lena said, thank you all for coming. We really appreciate it.”

When Nathaniel finished speaking, William walked the short distance to their table. “Time to cut your cake,” he said to David. He took the one, small candle, and handed it to him. “Do you want to keep it?” he asked. David nodded, and William put the candle into David’s hands. “Hold on to that,” he said. “It’s supposed to be good luck, and make your wish come true.”

That was a superstition of which Vincent had no knowledge. He thought that William may have just invented it for David. At times, William could be such softie. Vincent laughed. The only time he had heard that word, was when Catherine used it to describe him.

You are a softie, Vincent. Your emotions have always been soft when you think of me or the children..

Vincent smiled, and leaned over to give her a warmer, longer kiss. Instead of taking his usual seat across from her, Vincent had taken a seat at their table, *beside* her. Catherine received his kiss, as she usually did; with all of the love and warmth within her. It was like this every time: a blending of their souls, and always of their hearts.

Suddenly, everyone but Vincent and Catherine were clapping. Vincent reluctantly ended the kiss, and he and Catherine joined the crowd.

“Happy, happy, birthday! Happy, happy, birthday. Happy, happy, birthday, David!” All of them repeated the chant three times, with two claps between each line. It was the loudest sound Vincent had ever heard in the hall. At a quieter sound, Vincent looked down at his smaller children. The singing and the noise of clapping, had obviously awakened them. However, neither cried, nor made a fuss of any kind; they sat, holding hands, and smiling.

“Catherine,” Vincent said softly in her ear, “Look at the twins. I believe they are actually enjoying the singing.” Catherine reached out a hand to Jacob, and they both looked down into the stroller.

“Day like moosic, momma,” Jacob told her. “Day are smiling.” Vincent saw the quizzical look on Jacob’s face and laughed.

“You are quite correct, Jacob,” he told him. “Although it is very loud, both of them *are* enjoying what they are hearing.’ Vincent looked at Catherine as they shared the same thought, “All of our children are unusual in different ways,” he said. “Most babies would be crying, and both of them are almost singing along. It is astonishing.”

Dennis, Amelia and Christine, had been waiting on the side of the table behind William. All of them had a stack of small plates in their hands. William began to cut the carrot cake made especially for David’s party, and passed him the first piece. “The very first piece,” he said to David. “always goes to the person having the birthday. Today, it’s you, David. I hope you like it.”

“David turned to his mommy,” How eat, Mommy?” he asked, looking perplexed.

“Mommy will feed it to you in little pieces, David,” she answered. “Is that alright with you?” David nodded, and Lena gave him a small piece of his cake on an equally small fork.

William’s four helpers passed the plates to everyone in the hall, as William placed a piece of the cake on each. He had made the sheet cake very large, and it looked to Vincent, as if there would be enough for everyone. William had obviously planned for this very large gathering, as he was cutting the cake into small, but uniformed pieces. They were so very uniform; Vincent concluded that William must have measured and marked the places to cut before the cake was placed on the table.

When their pieces arrived, Vincent helped to cut Jacob's with a small fork, and then handed the fork to his son. "I believe you can take it from here, Jacob," he remarked. Jacob smiled, then bit into the first piece of the carrot cake. After he finished the first bite, Jacob quickly put another piece into his mouth

"It's almost as good as cocolot," he told them. "Can I hab one of dees on *my* birfday?"

"Of course you may," Catherine said. "If a Helper has brought in another bunch of carrots when it's your birthday, I'll ask William to make one for you." Jacob just smiled, and kept on eating.

It was an hour later, when Vincent saw Oliver, Amanda, Patrick, and three violinists; Ellen, Robert, and Beth, get up from their seats to where their instruments were resting. Another small table held the two flutes and the three violins. Oliver's cello rested against it.

"Time for the concert," Vincent said, taking Catherine's hand. "I wonder what the children have chosen for today." After they took time to tune their instruments, Vincent's wondering ended. The six children were playing, not only a difficult piece, but a beautiful one. It was one of Vincent's absolute favorites; Chopin's Nocturne in E flat Major.

Vincent closed his eyes and let the music surround him. It was a most beautiful piece, and the children played it without error.

He had only lately heard the piece played on the grand piano by Rolle at the last Winterfest. Rolle must have asked the older couple with whom he stayed, if they knew of another arrangement made for these particular instruments. It must

have taken almost daily rehearsing. He could not help but wonder where the children had found, not only the time, but a quiet place to rehearse, where they would not be overheard. It was astonishing, that they had not been found out.

“Wasn’t that the Chopin Nocturne that you love so much?” Catherine asked, when the music and thunderous applause had finally ended.

“The very same,” Vincent told her. “To learn and then play such a difficult piece so precisely; they must have been practicing for weeks.”

“And, no one ever knew?” she asked. “I don’t know how they did it.”

“Neither do I, Catherine. Neither do I.”

While Catherine walked with Jacob, pushing the stroller home, Vincent was having a discussion with Pascal regarding the extension of the pipes. He had assured her, that he would not be gone for very long, as he gave her a lingering kiss, before he walked over to speak with Pascal. Vincent wanted to catch him before he left the hall.

“May I have some time with you, Pascal?” Vincent asked, as everyone around them walked past them and out into the tunnels leading home.

“Of course, Vincent,” Pascal answered. “Why don’t we sit back down.” Each got comfortable on the bench before Vincent began.

“Are most of the available men finding the pipes and the metal we need Pascal?” Vincent asked. “I’ve been trying to spend as much time as possible with Catherine and the children, since we brought Mouse to the hospital and Father.”

“I’ve noticed,” he answered. “You’ve only looked in on us a couple of times since we came back. I figured you were spending time with your family,” Pascal paused. “Most of the men are going Above a few at a time, to see what they can scrounge from dump sites, and some of the places we’ve found things in the past. The going has been slow, but I think we’re finally making some headway.”

“Have you any idea how far you’ve gotten? Do we have enough pipe for at least the first mile? And how are the couplings and hangings coming? Has there been time enough for some of them to be made?”

Pascal laughed. “Slow down, Vincent,” he chided. “One question at a time, please.”

“I am so very sorry, Pascal,” Vincent said, apologetically, “It is only because I have been so concerned, since the incident with Mouse. We almost lost him.”

Pascal put a hand on Vincent’s shoulder, holding both of the pipes he constantly carried, in his other hand. “That’s perfectly reasonably, Vincent,” he said, patting Vincent’s shoulder. “I was just as scared as you. Losing Mouse would have been a tragedy for everyone in the community.”

Vincent put his hands on both of Pascal's shoulders, squeezing them gently. "It could have happened to any of us," Vincent told him. "Our community could not exist without you, my friend." They stood in silence for a few moments, before Vincent let go of Pascal's shoulders. "You have always been a good friend to me, Pascal," he said. "I thank you for that."

Pascal blushed and tightened both hands around his pipes once again. "Now," he began, "getting back to your questions." he paused. "I can answer the first one. Yes, everyone has helped out, and we have enough pipes to fit at least the first mile. They're different sizes, of course, but when all of the couplings are finished, I think they'll hold together well."

"And how *are* the couplings coming?" Vincent asked. "Have you enough scrap-metal to make the couplings, and the J-hangings?"

"I'm afraid that finding the scrap-metal has been difficult. I've got Larry, Richard, and Dave going through some places where old cars have been abandoned and dumped. They're going to try to cut some of the metal off of the cars with the metal cutters we've got. They were sharpened after we finished the Eastern Sector."

"It has been that difficult?" Vincent asked. "You and the men that helped you for that sector we put together, did not have a great deal of trouble," he said. "Or did they?"

"Sure," Pascal said, "It was easier last year, but this year has been really hot Above. The men are becoming exhausted from the temperature and the humidity. I put them on shorter shifts. If one of them passes out from heat exhaustion Above, it could be disastrous for him, and could be just as disastrous for us Below."

“I understand your concern, Pascal,” Vincent told him, “and I agree with you entirely. I read about heat stroke and heat exhaustion when I was read through Father’s medical journals, as a teenager; both can be deadly.”

“That’s why the shorter shifts. Maybe it will cool down a little in the autumn. It’s already August,” he said, “Maybe the temperatures will start coming down soon,” Pascal paused. “Why don’t I show you what we’ve managed to gather so far?”

It was late when Vincent returned from going over what the men had picked up so far. The party itself, lasted longer than one party usually did. However, with the room full, the singing, and the passing of pieces of cake, it had taken more time than what was considered normal. Then, of course, there had been the beautiful concert by the children. It had truly been a glorious party.

Then he had spent the last few hours going through Pasca’s collection of pipes, and the different pieces of metal . Together, they had spent quite a bit of time, planning where to begin, and how far what they had already collected would reach.

Vincent knew it was very late. Catherine and the children had surely been to dinner, and Jacob was probably in bed. He was humming the opening of the Nocturne, when he reached Jacob’s room. Father had already retired, as both his study, and the small bedroom behind it, were dark and still. He passed quietly,

entering Jacob's room. As he thought, his son was looking at the pages in another of his books, waiting for Vincent.

"I am sorry for being so late, Jacob." Vincent said to him, as he sat on the edge of the small bed. "I was going over the new pipe plans with Pascal."

"Dats okay, daddy." Jacob told him. "I knew you'd come eventuly." He held out the book to Vincent. "Dis is a different one, It's not long, Would you read it to me, before I go to seep?"

Vincent took the small book, recognizing one of the books from his old toy chest. "I have not seen this one for a very long time," he told his son. "It is from my old chest, I it not?"

"Yes, daddy, "Jacob said, smiling. "It's all about elepepants. I like elepepants." This son lied back on his pillow, waiting for Vincent to begin.

"Tobar was not an everyday, ordinary elephant..."he began,

"You were gone so long," Catherine told him, when he walked into their chamber. "that I already took our children to dinner. However, after dinner the twins were very patient. I think they were waiting with me. It got so late, that I

finally fed them, although, I know how much pleasure it gives you to be with me when I do.

The look she gave him, was one of love and invitation. However, instead of lying *in* their bed, Catherine was sitting *on* their bed. Their minds meshed once more.

“The bathing chamber?” Vincent asked, although he had already heard the invitation. “Then you know of my fatigue.” Vincent stood quietly; as Catherine came to him.

Putting her arms around his neck, she leaned lightly against the warmth of him. “Of course, I know how tired you are,,” she said softly. “I can feel every strain in your back and shoulders. What in the world were you *doing* when you spoke with Pascal? Hauling lumber?”

Catherine felt Vincent’s hands at her waist, as he pulled her closer. “That is precisely what I was doing,” he told her, looking down at her with his incredibly blue eyes.

Years ago, when she had first looked into those eyes, she had felt something calling to her from deep within her heart. Although he had not wanted her to look at him, she had taken down his hood; and had somehow known that he was her destiny. Catherine continued to stare as she remembered all of those wasted years.

“They were not wasted, Catherine,” she heard Vincent whisper. “They were years in which our bond grew, as did our love.” Catherine smiled and stood on her toes so that her lips could meet his. Again, his hands moved; this time to frame her face against his palms. Catherine opened her mouth and Vincent’s mouth quickly

followed. Her tongue touched the different textures of his teeth, the taste that belonged to Vincent alone. As the kiss warmed, so did their bodies. Catherine wanted so much, to feel his naked body against hers. With that thought, she pulled her lips slowly away.

His eyes were darker now, as she knew hers were as well. “Why don’t you get out of those heavy clothes, and put on your drawstring pants?” she suggested. “I’m already wearing my nightshirt. Come with me to bathe, and I will massage all of your aching places.”

“All of them?” he asked. She knew his thoughts included more than a mere massage; they made her smile.

“I promise,” Catherine told him. “Every single one.” As he began to remove his clothes, Catherine sat back on their bed to watch. Nothing was sexier than the sight of Vincent’s naked body. This time, it was *he* who smiled.

Catherine put her arms around Vincent’s neck once again, as he carried her to the bathing chamber. She had planned the night so carefully before he arrived, that the candles along the stones, lit the room perfectly. There was just enough light to cast their shadows against the walls, as they entered the room.

Catherine heard Vincent’s chuckle as he let her feet hit the stone floor. “You certainly planned well, love,” he whispered. “Had I not been so tired, I would have known.”

“Then,” she said, also in a whisper, “it would not have been a surprise.” Catherine raised her arms above her head and took off her nightshirt. She saw, in

her mind's eyes, Vincent remove his pants. "Get into the water, Vincent," Catherine said, "lean your arms against the stone, and I'll get Mary's soap."

She heard Vincent step into the water as she took the soap from where it lay in the small nook carved into the ledge of the stone. She smiled, as Vincent thought again of furry roses. The memory was of love and warm bodies awakening together.

Catherine turned and entered the bath. Vincent was indeed leaning his arms, as well as his head, against the stone ledge. She walked up behind him; reveling in the strength and beauty of his wide back. Golden fur called to her, and she filled her hands with soap suds before touching him. Her fingers moved against those shoulders as she heard his low groan.

"I must have found the right places," she said, softly. "I can feel your tight muscles under my fingers. You did more than just move lumber." She let her thumbs move to the spots that ached the most, and heard him groan again.

"That is the spot, love," he whispered, "The exact spot."

"So, I noticed." After a few minutes, Catherine let her hands move up to the muscles of his neck. There too, the muscles were tight. "Just what *was* it that you were doing?" she asked, bending down to plant a soft kiss against his many-textured hair.

"Besides moving lumber," Vincent answered in another whisper, as his muscles loosened slightly, beneath her fingers. "Pascal and I were sorting the metal they had collected so far. It took much longer than I had imagined." Catherine saw him lean his head to the side, as her hands moved to his lower back. He was so tall,

that the water covered him only to his waist. Adding more suds to her hands, Catherine pressed as hard as she could against the taut muscles she found there. She asked no more question, but concentrated her entire body and mind in releasing Vincent from his pain. For she *did* feel his pain; it lingered in her body as an echo to his.

Catherine believed Vincent to have almost fallen asleep, when he said, “You are doing wonderful things to my body, love. I do believe this calls for reciprocity.”

“Does that mean you intend to do wonderful things to *my* body?” Vincent turned around, and Catherine felt the entire warm length of him against her. The feel of his golden hair against her body, had always made her shiver; as she shivered now.

Suddenly, it seemed to her, that Vincent was standing; carrying her to the bench where their towels lay. Lowering her slowly to her feet again, Vincent took one of the towels, and wrapped it around her. Catherine watched as he dried himself with the other; thinking that instead of the towel, it should be *she* licking the beads of water clinging to his body.

He chuckled again, as he put on his drawstring pants. Of course, he knew what she was thinking. There was no division between them when they both wanted to make love. In a moment, Catherine was in his arms again, as he carried her back into their chamber, closing the door with his bare foot.

Before lying her near their bed, Vincent took the towel from around her body, and gently began to dry her hair. Catherine, however, was in no mood to wait. She took the towel from Vincent, and taking one of his hands, led him the

few inches to their bed. As she felt the blanket beneath her still damp body, Vincent brought his own against hers.

He touched her face, and Catherine again, was looking into those beautiful eyes. When his lips came to hers, their mouths opened together, sharing more than a kiss. Their minds and souls were one. As their bodies moved touch for touch; hard against soft, Catherine's legs parted. She wanted so much to be filled with him; to feel complete.

One of Vincent's hands moved down her body, and into the soft curls he found there. Catherine knew he felt her desire, as it matched his own. Touching her gently, Catherine moaned, moving her lower body, to press against his hand. Then one of his fingers gently entered into her.

Vincent, come to me now! Vincent's finger was suddenly replaced by the hard warm, length of him. He came into her slowly, gently easing into the heart of her. Catherine wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper. He still moved slowly within her. She felt him attempting to slow time; as if he too, wanted to be one with her as long as possible.

Their bodies had other ideas though, as Catherine felt the spasms of her release take her. Only then did Vincent increase the pace of his movements. Her mind was one with his, as her release felt like it could go on forever. Then Vincent's release joined with hers, and they gasped together; their bodies in total harmony.

When each stopped shaking, Vincent moved to her side, and Catherine felt as though she would never move again. The day had ended perfectly. She was wrapped warmly in Vincent's arms, as hers were wrapped around him. This was the way she wanted it to be, and would be; for the rest of her life.

“Grow old along with me.

The best is yet to be”

‘Rabbi Ben Ezra’

Robert Browning

Fini

References

“An Ever-Fixed Mark.”	William Shakespeare
“Rose of all my days”	William Butler Yeats
“Mud”	Polly Chase Boyden
“The Naughty Soap Song:	Dorothy Aldis
“License my hands,,,:	John Donne
“The Purple Cow”	Gelett Burgess

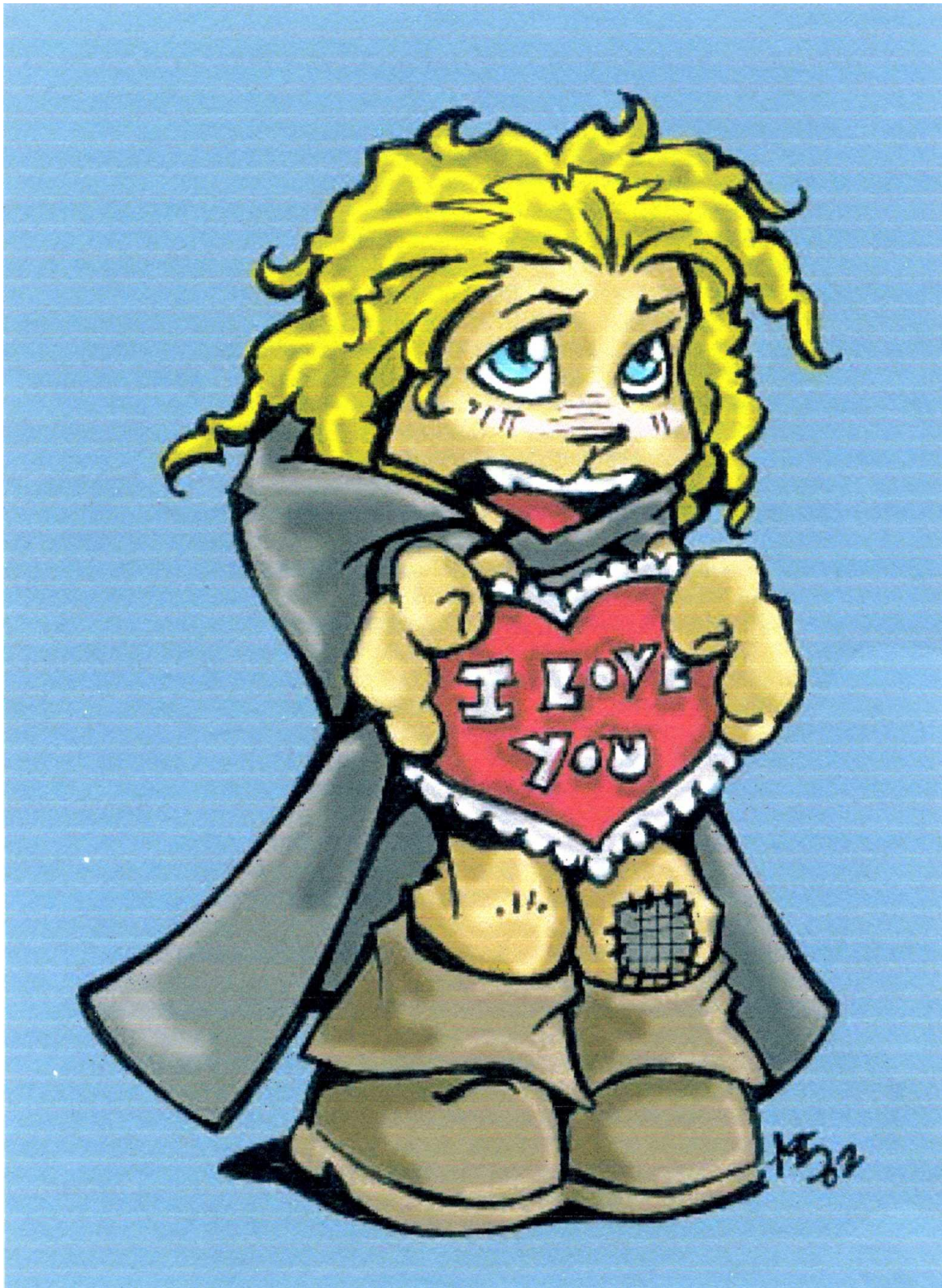
“Portions and parcels...”

Alfred Lord Tennyson

“Hyperion”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Prose poem



APPENDIX

The material in the appendix has been posted before and is thus not part of the actual conzine. It's included here so fans who haven't read the earlier portions of *The Drawbridge* story (Part 4 is new and within this conzine) have easy access.

THE DRAWBRIDGE*

By

JoAnn Baca

I've long been fascinated by the concept drawings done by Syd Dutton for our series. Recently I was lucky enough to purchase one of his original drawings, and it has sparked dreams of what might be...



** Note: Part One of this story was posted on BBTv, the Classic B&B Google Mailing List, on January 12, 2022, during the celebration of Vincent's birthday, Part Two was posted for Winterfest Online 2023, and Part Three appeared in the 2023 San Diego Convention conzine. They are reprinted here for easy access.*

PART ONE

It had intrigued and baffled both Vincent and Mouse for years: the heavy wooden drawbridge stuck in the upright position just steps from the entrance to the Great Hall. It had been created gods-knew-when by who-knows-who. The ropes or chains that had once fitted into the sturdy metal rings at the top had long since worn, rotted or fallen away. And no amount of searching on their part, or poring over the oldest maps of Below, had revealed any useful information about it.

How could they open it? And more importantly: where did it lead?

Father was content to consider it a mystery, on a par with how the Great Hall itself had been carved from the solid rock around it, or how the steps leading to the Great Hall's doors and down, down, down into depths rarely ventured into were created. But not Vincent. And when Mouse began to explore beyond the Home Tunnels, his curiosity matched Vincent's. For this and other so-far-impenetrable mysteries of the Tunnel world were begging to be solved...

As he set the heavy beam in place to secure the Great Hall's doors after yet another Winterfest celebration, Vincent's gaze shifted to the darkness below him. Although a few torches were set in the walls beyond the Great Hall doors, there was nothing past them other than an increasingly dangerous, steep and uneven rock staircase descending into nothing deemed useful to the community.

"Ready?" Mouse, beside him, was decked out with a lantern in each hand, a backpack on his back, and another dangling from one shoulder. Lengths of rope were secured to the bottoms of both packs, and from his belt hung several water bottles which bounced against his hips as he impatiently rocked from foot to foot.

Vincent dusted his gloved hands and then reached for a pack and a lantern.

"Ready." Like Mouse, he wore a modified headlamp, but his was the usual kind, attached to a kerchief tied around his forehead.

They had previously explored the more-accessible turreted column to the left of the drawbridge. Was it a flanking tower? Part of a keep? It seemed to promise easy access, and the possibility of stairs leading down and into what was behind the drawbridge. Unfortunately, it was a dead end; they had climbed up and peered inside numerous times, but the tower itself was an empty cylinder, sealed completely, but for the window-like openings on its upper level.

“Climb first?” Mouse held up several pitons.

Shaking his head, Vincent replied, “We already know we aren’t strong enough to pull the drawbridge down, and there’s nothing for it to rest on, even if we did somehow manage it. We can’t risk damaging the stair and pathways beyond.”

Mouse nodded and dropped the pitons into a cross-body satchel he wore.

Vincent hefted the large pack onto his back, securing it with ties across his chest.

Both men turned and headed down the dark stairway.

Hours of exploring both before and after a quick lunch had brought them no closer to finding another way to approach the area behind the drawbridge. They had covered this ground on previous exploratory hikes, but decided to search it again, on the off chance they had somehow missed something before.

They hadn’t.

“Which way next?” Vincent knew that Mouse had an uncanny ability to divine connections hidden behind tunnels, caverns and chambers – ways to access or circumnavigate areas that even Vincent was unable to discern. But this puzzle had baffled even Mouse, with his extraordinary skills.

Mouse shrugged. “One way.” He pointed. “Another.” His hand flicked in a different direction. He shrugged again.

“Well, I always like to start by going left,” Vincent said, smiling. “Perhaps because I’m left-handed. Shall we?” He indicated one of several dark spaces which promised corridors tall enough for them to travel for a long way.

“Already tried it. Lots.”

Frowning, his companion pointed to the next corridor over.

“Tried it too. Lots more.”

Holding back a smile, Vincent held out a hand, palm up. “We must go somewhere, Mouse.”

The younger man looked around, studying their environment, until he suddenly grinned. “Go up!”

“We’ve been...up. The stairs lead to the Great Hall and the Home Tunnels, so...”

Mouse shook his head vigorously. “Up,” he repeated, this time pointing to the ceiling above them, the rock there punctured by a large hole Vincent was certain he hadn’t noticed before.

“Find a way above. Follow it.”

They had about a dozen pitons. They could go upwards for a way, assuming the cavity in the rock didn’t narrow.

“Is there another level where this hole comes out?” Vincent wasn’t certain he had ever seen such a thing on any map, but then, he hadn’t seen a level above the one where they stood at all – not unless he counted the level far above their heads where the Home Tunnels were.

Mouse laid his lantern down and pulled off his pack and satchel; the water bottles followed. “Going to see.”

Vincent did the same with his own pack, retrieving only the coil of rope, which he placed around his neck. He took a hammer from his belt and handed it to Mouse.

“I’ll boost you up and hold you until you hammer in the first few pitons.”

The younger man nodded and lifted one leg, accepting the boost and, after hammering in a piton, he scrambled to kneel and later to stand on Vincent’s broad shoulders, while the older man stood stock still, steady and steady.

“OK good!” Mouse shouted, panting from the effort. “Three in! Push!”

Vincent took hold of Mouse’s booted feet and heaved him up until he felt Mouse grasp and pull himself up to rest a foot on the lowest piton. He heard more

hammering. Mouse disappeared completely up into the hole in the rock ceiling. Suddenly, the shout he had hoped for: “Found it!”

Vincent thrust his lantern as high into the opening as he could. Above him, he could faintly make out Mouse’s face peering down at him.

“Tunnel! New one! Not on maps! Come!!!”

Vincent gazed at their packs and water; as much as he wanted to take it all with him, the hole wasn’t wide enough to accommodate his bulk while hauling them. He reasoned that, should the space Mouse had found prove explorable, they could return for their equipment. So he settled for securing both lanterns to his belt, and he hauled himself up via the pitons.

Soon he was standing in a large, long corridor leading off into deep shadows at one end. The nearer end was blocked by a seemingly impenetrable rock wall. Mouse was already in front of it, studying it by the light of his improvised headlamp.

Vincent retrieved his hammer – Mouse was careless once a tool was used and no longer needed – then held both lanterns up to provide as much light as possible for Mouse’s inspection. At the same moment, both became aware of a tiny imperfection high up in the rock that did not appear to be natural.

“See it?” Vincent said, just as Mouse crowed, “There!”

Mouse reached for it, pressed hard, and was rewarded by a groaning snick of long-disused metal, and something creaking as it rolled. They stepped back as a hidden door detached from the rockface and slid towards them.

Mouse let out a whoop. Vincent smiled. Both carefully peered into the yawning gap. Then they entered the turret atop the circular column beside the drawbridge. They had climbed up to it several times in the past without finding an exit, but now it suddenly had a floor and an access point.

The trigger they had found had, somewhat ingeniously, not only produced a hidden door but activated a secreted platform that now extended fully from one side of the column to the window openings. With the access door open, it was possible to stand on the platform and gaze down from the windows at the stairs leading to the Great Hall.

The clever design allowed anyone to access the turret from the tunnel side. But with the access door closed, no one nosing about from the turret side could find any purchase. They searched, but there was no trigger within the turret that would open the access point.

Mouse pulled a folded copy of a map of the area out of one copious pocket and, using a pencil stub from another pocket, marked the location of the elusive lock release. He meticulously refolded the map and replaced it and the pencil, then gazed up at Vincent.

“Come with Mouse?” Without waiting for the reply, he scooted out of their newly found door and down their newly found corridor, on to other adventures.

Shaking his head and smiling, Vincent carefully tied the length of rope he’d carried to the brickwork between two windows. It would allow them to simply rappel down from the tower to the stairs rather than laboriously climb down the pitons between levels. They could retrieve their packs later – they were safe enough in the deserted corridor where they had been left.

He then entered the tunnel through the open access door and set off to follow his friend.

Mouse was already so far ahead of him, his lantern light was a mere pinprick in the darkness. “Careful, Mouse!” he called, knowing it was useless, but feeling compelled to warn against the possibility of traps, or another hole that Mouse might accidentally descend into without meaning to.

They traversed the tunnels more slowly once Vincent caught up with his exploring partner, partly so they could map their way, and partly to be on the alert for further hidden access points. The tunnel had to lead to something, otherwise why have such a strong bulwark against entry?

After some time, they almost literally ran into a brick wall; turning a corner, they were brought up short by a rockfall. They would have to find another approach if they wanted to continue along this hitherto unknown tunnel. It was as frustrating as it was intriguing, but they had left their tools behind with their supplies, and it was getting late anyway. Reluctantly, they turned to head back toward the Home Tunnels.

Vincent ruminated as they trudged along, as did Mouse, both silent, both tired from their hours of fruitless exploration along this passageway. There had to be a reason for that protective barrier – why build a drawbridge opening into a long empty corridor?

As they returned to the tower, they held their lanterns aloft, searching for any tell-tale edging that might betoken another hidden door.

Vincent had been letting his claw-tipped nails trail along the wall. His index fingernail snagged briefly before popping out from what had momentarily caught it. “Mouse, I may have found something.”

Mouse angled his own lantern to banish any shadows. The infinitesimal crack came into focus once Vincent ran his fingernails over the area once more.

They looked at each other, their own excitement reflected in the other’s eyes. Vincent turned back to the wall and felt for the hidden release, which turned out to be similar to the one they had already encountered. The same creaking metallic sound greeted them. How long had it been since this entry point had been unbolted? They pushed the door until they got it halfway opened. Vincent slipped his hammer from his belt and placed it so that the door could not swing shut behind them as Mouse, ever inquisitive, burst into the unknown chamber, his lantern held high.

At Mouse’s gasp, Vincent stood quickly, on alert. But then he saw what had caused Mouse’s reaction and stood amazed himself.

The chamber they had entered was enormous, larger than the Great Hall, and taller. Their footsteps echoed in the huge space. The floor was tiled intricately, in a pattern resembling the walls of a Moroccan palace. Colorful tapestries hung from metal poles and braces on second-floor balconies. From the light cast by their lanterns, it appeared that there were at least a dozen of them, not just a few as in their own hall. Against the walls stood intricately carved tables with no observable dust upon them. Torches lined the space, seemingly waiting to be lit. The air smelled fresh, as if the vast room had been in constant use. Everywhere they looked, things were in perfect order, everything tidy and clean, as if its inhabitants might have just left.

Why they felt they should whisper, they didn't know, but they both did.

"Who?" Mouse murmured.

"It seemed like the door hadn't been used in...decades. Yet...this..." Vincent's low rumble was pitched only to reach Mouse's ears. "Let's explore," he suggested.

"You go up to the balcony and look for another exit. I'll check down here."

Mouse nodded and headed for the staircase. Vincent watched to ensure he made it up the stairs safely, then he turned to the left wall and began a slow traverse of the chamber.

Spaces between tables were revealed to be entrances to tunnels leading out, but he didn't follow them now. Instead, he did a mental map of the entire chamber, noting to himself areas where other, hidden passageways might be found. Once he finished his initial survey he met Mouse, who had returned to the main level and was peering into the closest tunnel leading out of the hall.

"Let's map what we've seen," he suggested to the younger man, and Mouse dutifully extracted paper and pencil. They drew the spaces they had explored, noting furnishings and exits. When they had finished, Mouse grinned.

"Look more?"

"It was late before we got here," Vincent reminded him with reluctance. "And now it's much, much later. We know how to find this place again. Let's go back and return tomorrow, with others."

Mouse frowned. "Ours right now. Later...theirs."

"We always knew we would share our findings, my friend. It's why we do this. Come on." He patted Mouse on the shoulder. "Let's be hopeful that William has saved some dinner for us. I'm hungry, and I know you must be."

Mouse resisted his urging, prompting Vincent to add, "Who will feed Arthur? If he starts looking for food..."

Raising his eyebrows as if only now recalling his responsibility to his raccoon friend, Mouse nodded. "Better go! Now!" He raced from the chamber without a backward glance, Vincent hurrying to catch up to him.

As Mouse continued out the entrance and down the long tunnel towards the Home Tunnels, Vincent retrieved his hammer, and marked the doorway latch with a piece of charcoal from his pocket so that they would find it easily when they returned. Then he took one more look at the wonderful found space, already imagining its use by the community. And from here...what more would they find? The prospect of further exploration gladdened his heart, even as leaving their discovery saddened him.

Sighing heavily, he left, his feet set reluctantly on the path toward home.

Tomorrow. They would come back then.

PART TWO

“What did you see? Mouse made absolutely no sense when I ran into him...almost literally.” Father gazed up at Vincent over his glasses.

“I believe we now know the secret to finding hidden doorways,” Vincent advised the older man, whose eyebrows rose in astonishment. “Where we were had not been charted by anyone who created the maps we use, but Mouse made notes.” Smiling, he added, “The large chamber we discovered is in excellent repair and appears to be ready to use.”

Father’s eyebrows narrowed. “Has it been used recently? Perhaps by Paracelsus’ people?” He shuddered at the thought.

“I doubt it. The place was clean. It didn’t have the feel of a lair, but of fastidious former tenants. We found no signs of them, however, only furnishings. There must be a source of fresh air, as it was not musty at all. And with numerous passageways leading out of it, it seems a good base for further exploration.”

The older man beamed. “Excellent! I’ll admit I had my doubts about you two wandering around on what I thought was a fool’s errand but...I’m glad to be proven wrong!” He rubbed his gloved hands together, his mind already in planning mode. “We’ll organize a large crew to join you in the morning. I only wish I could

be with you as you explore further. Just imagine the potential for new chambers! All that space...my, my.” Father’s eyes took on a faraway look.

Vincent chuckled and patted his parent on the shoulder. “Sleep well, Father. Tomorrow we’ll use that Polaroid camera Catherine gave you so you can share in the discovery.”

At the Council meeting convened early the next morning for Mouse and Vincent’s official report, eyes gleamed and smiles wreathed all the faces. Nearly every able-bodied adult and most of the children wanted to join in exploring the newly discovered space. A crew of eight to accompany Mouse and Vincent was finally selected after much wrangling. Those who were disappointed to be left out were reminded that this was just the first of many sojourns into the area, and they would all have a chance to explore.

The selected team hurried to gather their packs.

The first obstacle they encountered was trying to climb the tower beside the drawbridge.

“I’m sure I secured the knots on the rope we left,” Vincent said, frowning down at the coil that was now lying in a tangle at the foot of the tower. “It held our weight last night when we rappelled to these stairs.”

Mouse looked from the window they had rappelled from to the rope, his lips pursed. Then he merely shrugged. He pulled some pitons from his pack, dug deeper, and came out with a hammer.

Zach, the nimblest among the crew, made an inexpert ascent by driving in the pitons until he got to the window level. Breathing heavily from the effort, he began to clamber within in order to tie a new rope for the others to use. He stopped suddenly with only one leg inside the window, then he turned and shouted, “There’s no floor, and there’s only a curved rockface on the other side, no open door.”

Somehow, the access door linking the turret to the tunnel had closed in the night, taking with it the floor that had extended when it had opened.

“Perhaps it was on a timer?” Vincent suggested in an attempt to make sense of the situation.

Mouse frowned and shook his head. “Old system. No clock.”

Vincent realized that Mouse was correct. There could have been no timer on that creaky old locking device.

Had he inadvertently triggered the lock prior to descending via the rope? It seemed the only explanation, as unlikely as it might be. And without the floor to stand on, it was as impossible as ever to look for the internal trigger to open the access door again.

They would have to make their way to where Mouse and Vincent had left their packs. There the crevasse in the ceiling held the pitons they had used to climb up to the hidden tunnel above their heads. It would take time, but they could make good progress from there.

As Zach came down the way he had gone up, more sure of himself now on the metal spikes, Vincent apologized to the crew. “I know you are anxious to explore. This setback is frustrating, but we have another way in, although it’s a bit of a hike.”

Nobody grumbled. “You lead, we follow,” said Cullen, and he slapped Vincent on the back. “Didn’t feel like climbing a rope anyway!”

General laughter accompanied Cullen’s statement, which relieved Vincent. “This way,” he said.

The group descended the stairway carefully, and proceeded to the access point Vincent and Mouse had discovered the day before. It took until lunchtime to get to the spot, the group having to go at the pace of the slowest among them – William, now red-faced with the effort of a long hike, but determined to be among the first to see what had been discovered.

The hole in the tunnel’s ceiling was still there. But the pitons that had been hammered inside were gone. And so were the packs.

Mouse looked at Vincent uneasily. It had been odd that the rope from the tower window had fallen, but they could suggest an explanation for that. This was harder to figure out.

“Why missing? Didn’t fall out.”

Vincent nodded. Even if the pitons had somehow worked their way out of the rock, wouldn’t they be lying in the dust at the bottom of the hole? Was human intervention possible? But who would have braved the long march to their entry point in the dead of night to remove their pitons? And why?

The possibility of someone following them to take their packs was always present. On rare occasions on other exploratory trips, both Vincent and Mouse had seen evidence of temporary campsites, some old, some...not. It was why they carried a few implements and supplies on their persons instead of leaving everything in their packs. Might some intruder have stumbled upon their materials and taken them for their own use? It would have been hard work to dislodge the pitons but...

Disguising their unease, Vincent and Mouse recreated their undertaking of the previous day and hammered new pitons into place.

With nothing else to do for a while, the others rested and ate the lunches that had been packed. If asked, most would have admitted that they had hoped to eat lunch at the tables Vincent and Mouse had described to them within the marvelous newly discovered hall. The hard-packed tunnel floor was a poor substitute, but they were all used to the ground serving as their table while on work crews, so nobody complained.

“Time to go!” Mouse announced as he jumped down from the lowest piton, having placed new spikes carefully. “Who first?”

Zach, emboldened by his earlier climb using pitons, needed little help to hoist himself up and to the floor above their heads. Cullen followed with less grace but fairly adroitly, although it took him twice as long as the youngster.

The rest of the group was less adept at climbing. And after watching one of their number struggle, needing the help of a rope tied to their mid-section to heft them upwards, two of the crew decided not to continue. Charlie muttered something

about not being a fan of spelunking, and Andrew stated that being one of the first to view the new hall wasn't worth this kind of effort.

Vincent was surprised that William was not among those who had decided to give up. But if the heavy-set man was game, Vincent was willing...and the only one able...to assist him in his inexpert scramble upwards, tight fit that it was for such a robust man.

Finally, the crew, minus the two already on their way back to the Home Tunnels, was on the path they had expected to be on hours earlier. While the day had been eaten up by all the unexpected barriers to quick movement, the good humor of the group took an upsurge. They were finally on the promised passageway, with the prospect of an easy walk ahead. They moved forward with anticipation as Vincent and Mouse led the way down the long tunnel.

"This whole area will be pretty close to the Home Tunnels," Cullen remarked. "That is, once we find the direct path that Vincent had promised us...the one that mysteriously evaporated this morning."

His sardonic tone cut Vincent, with its suggestion that some embellishment had been responsible for generating the enthusiasm for this trek. But he said nothing in direct response, accepting the implied criticism, and knowing that the goal, when reached, would justify all that he and Mouse had promised. Instead, he determined to focus attention on productive lines of conversation.

"While we walk...does anyone have ideas on ways to mount the tower more easily than using pitons or rope? Perhaps the drawbridge might be employed for easier access, now that we know the secret of the hidden door latches?"

Immediately, the conversation blossomed with suggestions. Plans were discussed and excitement grew.

When conversation began to lag again, Mouse began talking about the cavern they were closing in on, about the numerous wall hangings, the carved tables, the ready-to-light torches. "Bigger than big!" Mouse said at one point, his arms flinging wide, the lantern in his hand nearly smashing into William's.

“Hey! Watch it!” William managed to avoid the collision by pulling his own lantern back quickly, but it banged against the tunnel wall and the glass shattered. He grumbled loudly at the inconvenience of the lost light.

The climb up via the pitons had been the most unpleasant, unnerving physical activity William could recall experiencing. But that wasn’t the only problem. Today’s unaccustomed exercise had taxed him more than he had imagined it would, and his sweat-soaked shirt and vest were getting uncomfortably itchy. Even the toes of his boots were being uncooperative, constantly catching on stray pebbles, tripping him up. He’d only stayed with the team this long because he’d argued so hard to be included in the first group to explore, insisting he could keep up when other, more fit individuals had angled to take a spot on the team. And he’d tried to keep his spirits up and a smile on his face. But really, enough aggravation and discomfort were enough.

And this was the last straw.

“I’m going back,” he announced.

Apparently, William wasn’t alone in his thinking. Despite the promised proximity to this magical space they had yet to set eyes on, they’d been on their feet for a full day. Exhaustion was setting in, along with the knowledge that there would be a long trek back home before a hot meal could be eaten.

Taking the opportunity presented, Matthew commiserated with William. “Can’t do much without a lantern.” He patted William on the shoulder and added, “Might as well go back with you. We can supervise the youngsters, make sure dinner is edible.”

“Good point.” William was relieved to have company. He wasn’t entirely sure he could negotiate the pitons without assistance. He saw Mouse quietly tie extra rope to Matthew’s pack, and would have snapped at the implication that the extra rope would be needed for him...until he realized he was more grateful than perturbed.

Their crew now down by half, Vincent and Mouse moved them as quickly as they could down the long passage.

Vincent couldn’t blame his tired friends for turning away to head home. Perhaps he had, after all, over-promised in his excitement over their find? The trek was taking

them much deeper into the day than his original plan. And with all the unexpected delays, they would have much less time than anticipated to explore once they entered the vast hall. But he knew they had to be quite close to their goal now.

Yet... A growing unease was intruding at the edge of Vincent's perceptions. He couldn't put his finger on the source but he felt as if he should be noticing something. Shaking his head, he resisted the impulse to chase the source of that unnerving feeling. The prospect of seeing the wonder on his compatriots' faces buoyed him. He pinned his gaze to the upper edge of the tunnel wall, faith in their mission taking precedence in his heart.

On they went.

And on. Farther and farther. Until Vincent finally halted their progress.

Mouse consulted his hand-drawn map. Their measurement of distance the night before hadn't been exact, but it was precise enough that he thought they were in the general area where the hidden release in the rock wall of the tunnel could be found. Yet it hadn't been.

"I hate to say this but...perhaps we made a mis-calculation in the length of the passage yesterday. I suggest we retrace our steps." Vincent winced to see the frowns on his companions' foreheads.

The wearying group turned back the way they had come. Each of them held their lantern high, helping Vincent and Mouse look for that so-far-elusive mark which disclosed the site of the craftily hidden door in the rock wall of the tunnel.

Still it wasn't found.

Vincent felt his throat constrict as he suggested, "We must not have gone far enough the first time. I think we should turn around and continue down the passageway again."

Frustration fueled a burgeoning anger in the remnants of their team, now suspicious that an elaborate trick had been played on them. "C'mon, guys," Cullen complained. "The joke's stale now. Find this supposed chamber soon or I'm going back."

“We would never play such a trick,” Vincent promised. “The charcoal mark is where the access point is, and it’s very noticeable. We will find it.” He looked at Mouse then back at the others. “Why don’t you rest now, and we will go on ahead again,” he suggested, indicating with a gesture himself and Mouse.

He and Mouse left the others leaning against their packs. When they had traveled a long distance, Mouse murmured, “Don’t see them.”

Vincent turned to look at him. “Them? What do you mean?”

The younger man shook his blonde curls, a frown creasing his brow. “No footprints.”

Vincent’s eyes widened as he took in the implication. He stopped and looked down: the only footprints in the thin dirt on the passage floor were the ones they were making now...but, he belatedly realized, that had been true since the moment they had entered the passage.

This was what had been plucking at his perception all afternoon. They had not found the footprints they had left in the dirt yesterday. Not one. They should have been able to follow the disturbance in the dirt right up to the hidden doorway. But he had been too distracted to notice, at least consciously.

Had some breeze through the passageway blown their footprints away? It had been a windy night Above, and it was always possible the air currents were disturbed even this far below the city; it happened on occasion in the Home Tunnels, so why not here? Still...

Vincent and Mouse stared at each other in dismay. Their mission was a failure.

The grim faces of their compatriots greeted them as they returned.

“We apologize. We can’t find the access door. It’s here, but...” Vincent shrugged, keenly aware of the furrowed brows and bitten-back retorts of the four people who had stuck with them all day and into the evening.

Without a word, the band of erstwhile explorers turned and retraced their steps to the crevasse that thankfully still held their newly placed pitons.

Everyone Below was disappointed to hear of the failure of their mission. And nobody volunteered to search again the next day...especially since Mouse had discovered in the morning that his hand-drawn map had disappeared.

Mouse assumed that Arthur had made off with the map, although, if he could have been asked, the raccoon would have claimed no interest in things that were neither shiny nor edible.

The map's loss remained a small part of a larger mystery. And mystery it remained. A flooded section of the Home Tunnels took everyone's attention from planning further exploration. Then two new residents were accepted into the community and needed to be made welcome and accommodated. And soon Winterfest was upon them. As time went on, and other responsibilities pushed the thought of returning to the drawbridge and what lay beyond it further into the future, the prospect of unraveling the mystery faded completely from the community at large. But in his heart, Vincent never let his hopes die; he and Mouse *would* untangle the tantalizing enigma.

And then one day...

PART THREE

The pipe code Catherine had learned was a point of pride for her. For those who grew up Below, it came easily; it was a "language" they had heard all their lives, an inextricable part of the fabric of their world. When adults were accepted into the community, it became an essential element of their daily life, something they had to become proficient in to function within their adopted home. So they applied themselves to it, assisted by everyone they came in contact with, and daily exposure along with feedback from those around them made for enough repetition and guidance that new residents generally picked up the basics within a few weeks.

Helpers didn't learn it. That was no knock on them or their interest in the community Below. They just had very little opportunity or reason to understand what was being said on the pipes. An emergency code of the S-O-S variety was all

they were taught, as Helpers ventured Below only on rare occasions, and nearly always were accompanied by a community member.

Catherine, as Vincent once told Devin, was...more than a Helper. That extended not just to her relationship with him personally, but with the community generally. She was a fixture Below, coming down several times a week, and not only by invitation. She was a consultant on legal matters of various kinds, both for the Council and for individuals who sometimes had unresolved legal entanglements Above.

It was only natural, given her curiosity and her situation, that Catherine would have an interest in learning pipe code. There were many willing teachers; often the children functioned as such, supplementing Vincent's lessons. They were proud that they could offer her help, show off their own expertise, and have a chance to hang out with Vincent's Catherine from time to time.

It's possible a number of the older boys had a slight crush on her, and that made them eager to provide instruction. Catherine merely smiled and accepted their tutelage, paying them back with comic books and pats on the back.

On this day, Catherine was bringing down the birth certificate she had tracked down for Brooke, who wanted to follow in Michael's footsteps and apply to colleges. As she entered the Tunnels from her threshold, she tapped out a message that she was on her way.

Catherine knew that Vincent was on a work detail, so she sauntered rather than move forward with purpose. The pace suited her. It had been a crushingly busy week at work, and she was tired. She would have put off this visit to another day, but the application deadline was fast approaching, and she didn't want to disappoint Brooke.

Catherine rubbed her eyes, a wide yawn nearly causing her to stumble. She ambled on, ruminating on a legal issue she had to resolve for Joe. *Precedents are scarce, so what's our best angle? Joe's counting on me and I don't want to let him down. The bottom line is finding a way to contextualize the issue to our best advantage. Right? Or will Joe think that's too esoteric an approach to the legal issues?*

She was so fixated on the thorny problem as she made turns and traversed long passageways that she paid scant attention to her path, letting her feet find the way. But when she finally focused her attention on the here and now, the tunnel she found herself within felt unfamiliar. How long had she been meandering through these rock hallways on auto-pilot, not noticing her whereabouts?

Catherine turned to gaze behind her. That way was no more familiar than what lay before her. Rolling her eyes at her inattention, she resolved to backtrack until she reached a recognizable path. Perhaps she would be a bit late; maybe she should send another message on the pipes.

Checking her watch, she was shocked to find that over an hour had passed since she had descended the ladder at her threshold. She should have reached the Hub of the community well before now. She was more than a little late; she was long overdue.

Embarrassed at having to declare herself lost, Catherine decided to wait to reveal her situation. Perhaps she could recover her bearings, and then the situation would be just a self-deprecating joke to tell at dinner.

She turned to retrace her steps, pulling her flashlight out of her pocket to aid her inspection of her surroundings. As she moved along what she felt was the most likely path, she chided herself over her predicament. *Chandler, you get into some truly unusual messes. Now...where in the underworld am I?*

The path was leading downward now, but she didn't recall having gone uphill before. Surely the effort of ascending would have registered on her tired brain and she would have caught herself before getting so far afield. But downward she continued to go...and the turns and tunnels were getting darker and more forbidding the further along she went.

She could still occasionally see pipes running along tunnels she passed through, and knew she really should tap out a message on one of them. But something held her back. Realization bit hard: she hated admitting defeat.

It's pure stubbornness, young lady, she thought, repeating in her head the scolding tone of her high school principal on one of the occasions when she had to appear before him, hoping he wouldn't call her father over whatever infraction she had

committed. Yes, she was stubborn. It came from having a lawyer for a father. From a young age she'd had to stand her ground like an opposing attorney in order to win arguments with him.

Being stubborn worked to her advantage on many occasions. Perhaps not this one? *Maybe it's time to surrender to the obvious: I'm lost. Really lost.*

She was many levels below the Hub level now, she was sure. Well...fairly sure. Far away from any sentry posts, of that she was certain. But whether she was several levels under the Hub or a mile away was not something she could guess. Thankful for the flashlight, she continued walking. *I suppose I can't get any more lost than I already am, so I'll give myself a few more minutes before giving up.*

A noise brought her up short. What could be down here with her? It sounded again: an animal-like grunt. A shiver went through her. *What kind of animal could live this far underground?* For a third time it repeated, echoing softly in the dim tunnel. It sounded like...something or someone was in pain.

Frowning, Catherine turned slowly, raking the area around her with light.

Snuffling sounds. More soft groans...

She stepped quietly toward a cavity in the rock wall of the tunnel which she had passed a moment before; it seemed merely a fissure, not a passageway. Yet the sounds were emanating from that place.

"Hello? Is someone there?" Her voice sounded thin and strained to her ears. With more authority, she added, "If you need help, I can get it."

A harsh intake of breath met her words. Fear was in it.

"I won't hurt you. Actually...I'm lost. So you would do me a favor by letting me know where you are, and where I am."

There was no response. But whether human or beast...something had made those sounds of distress. She couldn't ignore them without investigation.

Catherine moved closer to the fissure and she saw that there was indeed a gap there, and that it was higher than her own head. She stepped into it, and was surprised to find a wider cavity, as if the rockface were a door that had been

opened. If she had not heard the sounds, she would have missed the cleverly disguised opening entirely.

Beyond the opening – doorway or not – there was a darkness that felt vast. Summoning her courage, she called out again, “Hello? I’m Catherine. Do you need help?”

She played her flashlight into the gloom and realized with great surprise that she was at the threshold of a large cavern. “I’m going to shine my flashlight around until I find you. I hope that’s all right. You sound like you’re in pain.” She heard no reply so took that as permission to continue.

The flashlight’s beam did not reach the far wall beyond where she was standing. But the cavern wasn’t empty. From what she could see, it contained long sturdy wooden tables with candelabra atop them; their candles were slender and had not been lit.

She let the light play to one side and saw massive panels of intricately woven tapestries hanging from a great height. One of the tapestries seemed to have fallen partway off the iron rod that had been holding it in place.

Amazed at what she was seeing, Catherine forgot for a moment what had drawn her here. All she could think of was Vincent’s attempts to discover what other people had been...or still were...living beneath the city besides the communities of which he was aware - his own and the remnants of Paracelsus’ group. Here, now, was the proof he had been seeking. Vincent would be gratified to know what she had found here as confirmation of his suspicions, and it would be a starting point for further exploration. Her heart swelled at the thought.

The sounds of distress – muted but obvious – were coming from beneath the tapestries. She shone the flashlight along the floor, which was made of intricately carved tiles. The light revealed a tall ladder lying on its side...and someone splayed on the tiles beside it.

Thoughts flashed through her mind as she rushed to the side of the person on the floor. Here was proof of current habitation, not just the existence of tables and tapestries as had been found before, but people. There *was* an entire other community Below!

This community had chosen to stay separate from the others Below for all the decades of the existence of what she thought of as the Tunnel world. In fact, they had been remarkably good at concealment, given that apparently no one in Vincent's world had ever spoken of seeing one of the members of this group. She might be the only one, a feat unparalleled, even if it was totally by chance.

Once she got to the injured individual, Catherine saw that one leg was lying at an unnatural angle. "Your leg is broken!" She burned with remorse that her amazement at finding herself in this place had delayed her in rendering aid to whomever the injured party was. "Who can I call for help?" she asked urgently, kneeling beside the figure on the ground.

"Go..." gasped the injured individual.

"I can't leave you like this. Let me get help and then I'll go."

She lit the person's face. It was a man, sallow-faced and sweating. His dark brown hair was cut in an odd fashion. She let the light drift down his body, looking for other injuries. She would say he was wearing strange clothing but, considering what those Below wore, that wouldn't be enough to distinguish how odd his clothes were in comparison: a rough homespun outfit – an ecru-colored long-sleeved shirt, full and long, still partially tucked into brown knee-length pants sewn from some kind of nubby fabric.

His clothing resembled what she had seen re-enactors wear at the Plimouth Plantation in Massachusetts, the location of a high school field trip. In the "living history" area, volunteers wore replicas of 17th century Colonial American clothing. This injured man looked like he had just gotten off a bus from that place...or from the Mayflower.

He had lost one of his stout, large-buckled leather shoes in his fall from the ladder. It lay further than an arm's length away, beside an overturned lantern whose glass was shattered. The darkness must have been total until she arrived with her flashlight.

"Trouble..." He grunted with the effort of saying the word.

Catherine didn't know whether *he* would get in trouble, *she* was in trouble, or she *was* trouble, but none of that mattered now.

She looked for something useful, raking her flashlight beam around the room, and saw a flask beside a toolbox near the fallen ladder. Scrambling over to it on her hands and knees, she grasped it and pulled it close. “Is this water?” she asked.

The man nodded once.

She sat back on her heels and uncorked the flask. Then, lifting his head, she put the flask to his lips. He drank thirstily, and when he seemed sated, Catherine set it down, easing him back into a flat position. She heard his resulting sigh and wondered for the first time how long he had been lying here, in the dark, in pain, and unable to help himself.

Catherine took off her jacket, folded it, and placed it under the man’s head. It was little comfort, but all she could offer. “Please,” she asked, begging this time, “tell me how to get help.”

His lips clamped shut, even as his eyebrows furrowed with pain.

Her frustration was rising. He wasn’t the only stubborn person in this chamber! “If you don’t tell me how to call someone you know, I’ll go find a pipe and tap out a summons to alert my people Below” – how she delighted in saying those last three words! – “to come help you.” She somehow knew he would not welcome more intruders, and she was right, for he lifted one hand in a staying motion.

She waited, impatient, for his instructions, but he remained silent. Surely self-preservation would force his hand. Would he really sacrifice himself to protect his community from further discovery? Then she thought of Vincent, and what she might endure to preserve his safety...and had to acknowledge that possibility.

“If it’s secrecy that’s the issue, please know I’m already keeping the secret of the community a few levels above us – known to you, I’m sure – so one more secret isn’t going to be a problem for me.”

She saw his lips curl upward ever so slightly, but she had not won his trust so easily, she was sure.

In a softer tone, she added, “I’m Catherine. Vincent – he’s the unusual-looking one from that group, which I’m sure you also already know – saved my life by bringing me Below when I was badly injured. I’ve been a friend to that community ever

since, and have protected it and its secrets. I can promise the same for this place, for you.”

Pain warred with pragmatism on the man’s face before, reluctantly, he ground out, “I’m Weaver.”

“Tell me what I can do, Mr. Weaver.” She stood up, expectant.

“Just...Weaver.” He gestured with a jut of his chin at the far wall.

Catherine’s gaze followed the motion and she trained her flashlight in that direction, noticing an old-fashioned bell pull hanging discretely against a wooden cornice set into the rock wall. She went to it. With her hand on the fabric, she turned to him. “What sequence of tugs should I use?”

Despite his capitulation to his need, he still hesitated before saying, “Five rapid tugs for emergencies.”

She gave five tugs on the bell pull but could not hear any ringing. Wherever the bell was sounding, it was not close. “Is that all?”

Weaver nodded. “Someone will come.” He sighed deeply. “Thank you.”

She returned to his side and offered him another drink from his flask. “When did you fall?”

He adjusted his position slightly, grimacing at the pain in his leg. “It’s been hours.”

“You don’t work with another person when you need to use a ladder?” She was surprised that anyone would willingly go up a tall ladder with no one around to hold it steady. Those in Vincent’s community didn’t engage in dangerous duty on their own. But her question went unanswered.

Catherine could tell he didn’t want to reveal more than he already had. And she had so many questions! Who were they? How long had their community existed? Were they the ones who had excavated the tunnels and carved the stairways and built the archways – and that drawbridge that had engaged Vincent and Mouse’s attention - in this world below the city streets? How many of them were there? How did they manage to avoid and evade discovery for so long? But she suspected she would get no answers – not from Weaver, and not from anyone who would show up as a result of her emergency summons. He probably wouldn’t even

answer if she asked what he was trying to fix when his ladder had dumped him to the ground, although it seemed likely he was in the process of working on the tapestry that was half-fallen.

And oh, while they were waiting, how much Catherine wanted to take the opportunity to explore this large chamber and to examine those tapestries. She struggled to resign herself to never having her curiosity satisfied. For her time here, she knew, was ticking away. And a chance unlike any other was going with it. It took all her resolve not to do it. But she didn't want to antagonize or distress the injured man any further. After all, whatever "trouble" had meant, it certainly involved her. So she forced herself to repress her curiosity and neither asked him anything more nor explored the chamber.

They remained side by side, not talking. Weaver's hitched breathing reflected the pain he was in. Catherine was impressed that he had not cried out once from the agony of his broken leg. Was stoicism a part of their community's ethos? She had so many questions...

After many long minutes, she heard heavy footsteps at the far end of the chamber. A voice called out, "Weaver? Having trouble with the tapestry you..."

The voice lapsed into silence once the speaker realized Weaver was not alone, and he immediately blew out his lantern, hiding his position.

Catherine swung her flashlight toward the area from which the voice had emanated and caught a glimpse of another homespun-clad man, this one bearded, golden-haired and slight of frame. His breeches, like Weaver's, ended at his knees, and his stockings were sagging around his ankles. He jumped back out of her line of sight.

Weaver spoke then. "She's a friend of the Pipe Tappers...and lost, lucky for me. Broke my leg. Only heard me whimpering like a sick dog 'cause I forgot to trigger that damned door release when I hauled in the ladder."

Catherine adjusted the angle of her flashlight to find the new arrival again in the darkness. He was staring at Catherine open-mouthed, a mixture of surprise and anger on his face. Then he glanced at Weaver lying on the floor and saw the condition of his leg; the sight spurred him into action. He hustled to the wall where

the bell pull was located and yanked on it, a complex set of tugs that apparently gave more information to those listening.

When he had finished, he addressed Catherine warily. "Got things covered now. Leave."

She disliked the man's dismissive tone but could well understand his aggravation. "As Weaver told you, I'm lost. I need a guide, or directions, back to...the...Pipe Tappers? Was that the term you used?"

"Not my problem." He turned his back on her and began checking Weaver for other injuries.

"Stop it, Chandler," Weaver said. "She'll wander until she dies down here. Small kindness after she helped me."

In surprise, Catherine said, "Chandler? That's *my* name, too!"

"It's what I do, not my name," the gruff man replied.

"Oh!" Catherine was beginning to realize that Weaver's – probably more properly "the Weaver's" - community was much, much different than the one she knew Below, even discounting their clothing. "Well, Chandler, I would appreciate any help you could give me. Blindfold me if you want, but I really do need guidance to some part of the Tunnels from which you feel it's safe for me to contact my friends."

The Chandler considered her comment and grudgingly nodded. "Can do that, I suppose. After we get the Weaver here help."

Catherine nodded, then retreated to the doorway to wait. The Chandler engaged in a discussion with the Weaver which she could not hear, but she assumed the Weaver was explaining the situation further, including her promise to keep what she had seen to herself. At the end of the conversation, she noted the Chandler's glance her way and back to the Weaver before he gave the hurt man a reluctant nod.

A half dozen men came into the chamber soon after, all of them just as shocked and dismayed as the Weaver and the Chandler were to see her. But nobody spoke,

however wide-eyed they were. They worked in silence, stealing glances her way but also following what seemed to be hand signals from the Chandler.

As soon as they had the Weaver's leg stabilized and placed him on a stretcher, the Chandler cocked his head toward the open door and Catherine took the signal to mean she should go out ahead of him.

The Weaver's voice, slurred slightly from the pain medication he had been given, called out, "Thank you kindly, Miss Catherine!"

She turned slightly to reply, smiling gently. "Be well, Weaver."

As soon as she left the chamber, the Chandler did something imperceptible to the rockface; there was no discernable latch, but somehow the doorway slid and disappeared. The rock wall now looked seamless.

Catherine stood expectantly, awaiting a blindfold, while the Chandler checked the pockets of his buff coat, a baggy affair in plain brown wool with lots of buttons down the front. His hands emerged from his pockets empty. Scowling, he growled, "Cannot find a kerchief."

Politely, if somewhat amused, she replied, "Shall I keep my eyes closed for the duration?"

His scowled deepened, then, surprising her, he chuckled. "I shall trust in you, Miss. The Weaver told me to. And after all, you are a Chandler, if in name only."

She laughed. "And I know an actual chandler – in the other community. Rebecca. She's an amazing candle-maker."

He nodded as he pointed ahead of him to indicate their direction. "She is. I've long admired her work."

Catherine kept stride for stride with him as she considered his comment.

As if reading her mind, he added, "Yes, we know of them. Make it our business to, if only so we may avoid them better. Good people, but..."

Guessing his unspoken words, Catherine said, "You have been secretive for so long, you aren't willing to expose yourselves, even to good people?"

He nodded. "It's best. We have our ways. They have theirs."

Catherine hesitated before saying, “Last year two of them found you. Well, found one of your chambers, and how to access it.”

“Aye.” He indicated a turn ahead and they swiveled sharply into a narrow tunnel that culminated in a blank rockface. He put pressure on a point at head height in the sheer wall and a doorway slid open, revealing a staircase. “This will save us time.” He paused on the first step and added, “They caused us much trouble and aggravation, having to seal off that area overnight.”

She nodded. Vincent had been frustrated over the incident for months. She knew he had not completely given up his quest to learn more, especially since he had seen the previously unknown chamber with its tapestries and tables...much like the one she had just been in. He hated unsolved mysteries, and this was the most intriguing one he had come across Below. How delicious it would be to lay this newly acquired knowledge before him, to watch his gorgeous blue eyes light up with interest and possibilities.

But... The simple fact was that she respected this man’s community and its desire to remain hidden. That kept her daydreams in check. She knew from experience how deeply held such wishes were. So she said what the Chandler needed to hear, using the same words she had said once before to another man who put his trust in a stranger.

“I’ll keep your secret.”

He turned to look at her, suspicion on his face, and she added, “Yes, even from Vincent.”

“A big secret like this one? And your man wanting so desperately to find out more about us?” He looked skeptical as he tilted his head to direct her down one particular corridor among a choice of three archways leading in different directions.

“I will respect your wishes. I can’t say I’m comfortable keeping secrets from him, but I will honor the promise I made to you.” She thought of something to lighten the mood. “Give me a penny, and you’ve paid for my silence. In my world, we call it lawyer/client confidentiality.”

He stared at her as if wondering how serious she was. She hoped he could see that she had been joking about that last bit, although why she expected him to know about lawyer/client confidentiality...

Surprising her, he dug into his coat pocket and pulled out a badly tarnished copper penny. "If I ever have need of a lawyer..."

Catherine accepted it with a chuckle but she pocketed it and replied, "Paid in full."

They continued in silence for long minutes. After some time, she began to notice a certain familiarity to the pathways. The Chandler stopped them soon after. He pointed to a nearby pipe.

"You know your pipe code, yes?"

She nodded.

"They have mounted a search for you. Best if you curtail them by telling them where you are...which is close to what they call the Chamber of the Winds, an easy area to get turned around in. They'll come and guide you the rest of the way." He bent to pick up a rock from a small stack on the path and handed it to her.

"Thank you." She took the rock. "I hope the Weaver heals well. If he needs...if you need anything, I believe you know how to find me, is that correct?"

Reluctantly, he nodded.

"Then feel free to let me know. I would be happy to help. And thank you for taking me this far. I promise to pay more attention to where I'm walking in the future." She smiled and held out her free hand, offering a handshake.

The Chandler assessed her for a long moment before conceding to the gesture, offering his hand in return. "I won't say it was a pleasure, but I am heartily glad it was you and not another who happened by when the Weaver needed help. I believe you understand. And I'll hold you to your promise." His piercing gaze could have nailed her to the rockface behind her.

"You may, with all confidence." She nodded, then turned to tap out her message. When she finished, she looked over her shoulder. The Chandler had slipped away, somehow erasing any marks of his passage in doing so.

Vincent was the first to find her, rushing to envelop her in his arms. She was grateful for her rescue, embarrassed that it was necessary, and much troubled in her heart that she could tell him nothing of her recent experiences.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured. “It was stupid of me not to pay more attention to my surroundings. I got off course, made poor choices in taking turns, and caused you all to worry.”

He pulled back to gaze into her eyes. Confusion filled his unique features. “I never felt you were in danger but still... Catherine, why did you not call for me on the pipes hours ago?”

A lie began to form but Catherine pushed it away, not wanting to compromise herself more than necessity demanded. She thought of something else to say, fully certain the Chandler was even now eavesdropping. But even if he weren’t listening, she would honor her promise.

“I...I thought I could find my way. You know how persistent I can be. As I walked along, lost and getting more lost, I was thinking about Mr. Chisholm, the principal who always told me I was too stubborn for my own good.”

All that was the truth...just not the whole of it. But she could live with the sin of omission. She had, after all, been guilty of that particular offense with everyone she knew Above for several long years. And a promise was a promise, even to people who were known only by their occupations and not their given names.

She shivered in the chill air. Now that she had stopped hiking, she was cold.

“Where is your jacket?” Vincent asked, taking off his cloak and wrapping her in it.

In the confusion surrounding the Weaver’s rescue and the Chandler hustling her away from his community, she had forgotten it.

“I must have left it somewhere. I had...used it as padding to rest on.”

Again the lie of omission pricked at her conscience, but she tamped down any feelings of guilt, having become adept at how to adjust what emotions she broadcast through their Bond. As, she had finally realized some time ago, Vincent

had learned to do soon after they met. Perhaps some feelings just couldn't be shared.

“Come, let's get you back to my chamber. You've been walking for hours and need your rest.” With that, he scooped her up in his strong arms and carried her swiftly from the corridor she would never be able to find again to the chamber she loved more than any other.

In the morning, Catherine found her jacket, folded neatly, at the foot of the threshold to her apartment building.