

Quid Pro Quo

by Flint and Feather

Author's note: Vincent takes an impulsive, lone respite from his smothering life in the Tunnels, and finds no peace in the city shadows.

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Vincent hurriedly passed Father by, with the seeming intent to escape his concerned scrutiny. He swept aside the edge of the tapestry covering his doorway, and disappeared behind its concealment into his chamber. As quickly as his cane could take him, Father limped the short distance after him and halted outside, worriedly clearing his throat.

“Vincent, is there something wrong?”

“No, nothing, Dr. Wells.” Vincent's usual soft, self-possessed voice had taken on an abrupt edge as he inexplicably addressed the anxious man by his professional title.

“Then – I-I'll leave you, Son,” Father stammered, not at all comforted by Vincent's unaccustomed reply.

Try as he might, Father was unable to rest. Vincent had given him no prior reason for going Above, though the man then on watch had reported his exit back to him. Whatever had triggered Vincent's irritability worried Father, as did any perceptible change in his normally placid temperament. Again, he feared a regression; his son's surrender to the inner darkness of his psyche. That dread possibility held troubling vigil over Father's mind.

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When that night had earlier fallen, Vincent's frustration had peaked at having his every move followed and questioned by Father; at feeling unbearably plagued by community individuals routinely placing their every need and want squarely upon his shoulders. Someone was constantly asking after his state of mind in solicitous excess, should he be seen to do no more than lower his eyes for more than a few heartbeats, or appear to be too deep in thought.

Vincent knew that none of this was going to change as long as he remained the alpha protector of them all. And that duty, he would continue to carry out as long as he was needed.

But now, he wished to retreat to the solitude of his room without being admonished and lectured. True, he'd made his rebellious flight to the city outside, and had hoped to return without being seen. Vincent chafed at the misfortune that had forced him back so soon.

Crossing through a blind alley, he had needed to move with unavoidable haste to hide from a trio of boisterous drunks ambling in his direction. There was nothing at hand but an overflowing lidless garbage dumpster set close to the base of one building's wall. He had removed and thrown ahead the bulk of his cloak and pushed his shoulder into the too narrow gap. With his grip firmed on the top edge of the dumpster, he forced his body sideways, fighting the friction of the brick veneer at his back. His final mighty effort met with a protruding shard of metal, and a searing slash beneath his quilted vest. Torn across the chest, he tightly held his silence as he heard the men approach his position. The footsteps and slurred banter stilled close by, followed by the sounds of liquid splashing down.

One youth swore as he remarked on the stink of the piled refuse and from that tone, Vincent knew that they'd soon leave. He waited a short time, then pushed against the upper edge of the immovable container until he'd broken off the base of the rusted shard. When he'd struggled his way out, he pulled apart the front of his vest and shirt to inspect the jagged piece of metal caught under the fabric. The fragment dropped to the ground, and he quickly took up his cloak. None the worse for wear, it was all he needed for the moment.

He had sprinted back home to the Tunnels, and could not avoid the notice of the friend on night watch. The man made amiable inquiry into his outdoor activities and whereabouts as expected, but Vincent gave him a mere nod and made his lone way to the hospital chamber to collect the supplies he needed. Avoiding curious attention, Vincent concealed all beneath his cloak and proceeded at a stealthy stride towards his own room. Father awaited as sentinel; Vincent wished only to dismiss him, too.

Once inside, he dropped his cloak and set down a brown bottle and collection of sealed paper packages on the basin table below a wide mirror. As he washed his hands, he gave thought to an off-hand possibility. Father would hopefully know better than to call upon Catherine at this time of night. He unwrapped a new syringe and prepared a tetanus injection, then took a fuelled lamp to place on an upper shelf beside the mirror. In the light of a high flame within the glass mantle, he stared at his dishevelled reflection. He pulled off his vest to find that his bloodied shirt was torn through at the level of his wound. Giving in to his annoyance at the inconvenience of it all, he ripped off both sleeves and threw the ruined garment to the floor.

Naked to the waist, he assessed the open gash across his tautly muscled pectoral. Although it no longer bled, it needed closing and he couldn't let the ragged edges dry out. Tonight's badge of stolen freedom – one that would mark him forever. He applied

the injection to his upper arm, then tipped the bottle of antiseptic to soak a wad of gauze. He shoved back the long sides of his mane, pressed the stinging compress into the raw wound and scoured through his exposed flesh until every flake of rust was cleaned out.

He opened a sterile package and laid out the implements for the next operation. His working light was bright enough, and he had the advantage of being able to use both hands. He trimmed hair away from the wound and set himself to continue. He knew what to do, but performing this on himself was an untried skill. Picking up a suturing needle, he used the tips of his claws to pinch together the edges of his torn flesh and drove the curved needle through. His cat lip lifted over his teeth as he braced against the pain. With the needle pinched firmly in a holder, he drew it out and tied square knots to finish the first stitch, then scissored off the ends. He concentrated on the motions of his fingers as he continued on across the length of the wound. His repetitive actions became mechanical; each sharp stab of the needle nothing more than a count toward the end.

Vincent blocked an interfering distraction – Catherine's distress for him, pleading through their bond. He couldn't answer now. Father had allowed him this uninterrupted self-absorption, no matter that it was so highly unpleasant. He looked back at the mirror, holding straight, and discerned that his efforts were well-spaced and strong, but his lack of technique would result in six inches of a raised, rope-like scar. Again, no matter. He swabbed the line of sutures with iodine and opened envelopes of bandages.

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Looking careworn at his desk, Father turned his head at the sound of an approach and breathed out in relief at seeing Vincent walk up to his side. He braced one hand on the desk top and pressed the foot of his cane to the floor.

“Father, you need not stand. Why haven't you gone to bed? It's past midnight.”

“Exactly! I had to know if you've been involved in some emergency, Vincent,” he declared with impatience and an appraising frown. “You have a rather strained appearance.”

“No reason to worry, Father. I was merely enjoying a private sulk.”

Father studied him quizzically. “And, what am I to understand?”

“First, I apologize for keeping you from sleep.” Vincent bent closer to speak quietly. “Second, please imagine what it's like to be treated perpetually as a child who needs constant oversight.”

“I do suppose that I've never stopped doing that to you.” Father rubbed his tired eyes, then erupted, “But you called me Dr. Wells!”

“A small, yet respectful tantrum. Do you object?”

“Hardly, since you've explained. I will try to rein in my overprotective instincts for my grown son, if you'll in turn have consideration for my concerns that literally anything could happen to you, out there.”

“Later in the day, I will want to see you – for your opinion on a piece of work I've done.”

“Of – of course. But why? And where are you going, now? You've had no rest?”

Vincent interrupted the outpouring of questions with a raised hand and warm gaze. “I go to Catherine, Father, to set her mind at ease. Don't wait up.”

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