

# MISSING

by Amber James

(from *Crystal Cavern Five*)

There was the soft silence which follows early morning rain, as Catherine jogged along the roadway in the park. The newly-risen sun was warm and held the promise of another hot day, as it covered her in dappled light, filtering through the trees she ran beneath. The colours were vibrant and alive, her senses were overwhelmed by the multi-hued collage surrounding her. She felt a part of this living, growing miracle.

Catherine rejoiced, knowing how Vincent would react to the emotions radiating from the depths of her being. She knew their bond enabled him to be a part of any strong feelings she experienced. This had, all too often, caused them both great pain, but today there would be no grief or sorrow, only the elation and wonder of the moment.

She moved from the roadway onto the grass, feeling the soft springy turf under her feet. Catherine looked down and smiled - all she treasured in life was there beneath her, so near but so distant from her world and those who walked its surface. Lost within the love which surged through her, she thought of Vincent, of all he had become to her. He had told her once; a long time ago. "*Wherever I am, I am with you.*" She had not fully understood then, but as time passed, the bond which held them strengthened and she had come to understand this unity as a precious part of all they were. So close to him, she felt, it was as if he were there by her side. It seemed so right when she smiled and said, "Vincent, I love you so much, I wonder if you truly understand how vital you are to my happiness. My joy now is only because I know you share all this with me."

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The day Below had begun early as usual, Vincent had been awake since the dawn. The accuracy of his body clock was astounding, knowing always the time of day. He sat in his great chair waiting for Catherine to enter the park Above. She had been right in her belief - he wanted to share as much of this experience as he could. This was the closest they might ever come to the realization of the impossible dream of sharing the beauty of the park, in the sunlight, together.

This morning, Catherine's reaction to her surroundings was so strong, he had no trouble and was quickly lost in all she experienced. Time ceased to have meaning, as that within him which was Catherine, delighted in the sunlight Above.

Father entered Vincent's chamber wanting to discuss Catherine's stay Below, but as he looked at his son he realized this was not the time. Father had no knowledge of Catherine in the park so far above them, and was unaware of the feelings Vincent was sharing with her now. Just looking at him, Father could see the joy and love which held his attention, it shone from his eyes, seeming to fill the chamber excluding all else. He knew whatever Vincent was experiencing must be from Catherine. He marvelled anew at all they had become to each other.

The old man felt like he was intruding on a private and very intimate moment, and with an embarrassed smile he left as quietly as he could. He paused once and glanced back. Vincent sat in his great chair with his head back, his face towards the roof of the chamber. His eyes were closed, but Father knew whatever he was seeing now, he was looking through the rocks over his head, and into her world where his heart had its home.

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All too soon Catherine's run came to an end and she left the park to return to her apartment. Lost in the intimacy of the shared experience, she failed to notice a man who was following her at a discreet distance. He made some notes in a small book he took out of his tracksuit top, then got into a dark car nearby. After Catherine had entered the building, he made a phone call from the car and drove away.

She was soon in the shower, thinking only of the delights of these Saturday morning runs. In some ways, it was the highlight of her week, a time of sharing. She was not able to experience as wide a spectrum of Vincent's feelings as he could of hers, but she knew he would have been sitting Below, concentrating on all she felt. This made it a special time for them both.

Her greatest desire was to share the sunshine with him. To watch it set behind the mountains, to walk through the woods and see the shimmer of a stream as it trickled through the sunbeams between the trees. She knew he would never agree to take the risk of being Above in daylight. Yet, she had a knowledge within that he wanted this too. Again, she wondered how Vincent could accept exile from her world, an exile which kept them apart.

The hot water purged away the cares of the past week's work and she felt invigorated. These scarce free work weekends were an eagerly awaited event. She was certain Vincent was as thrilled as she was that all the loose ends of her work had been tied up, so that the next forty-eight hours would be time to spend together.

Catherine dried herself and slipped quickly into her towelling robe. She made herself some coffee and curled up on the couch, lost in anticipated pleasure.

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Father returned to Vincent's chamber later, in the hope this was a more suitable time. He paused in the doorway and was met with a sight which delighted his eyes; Vincent engrossed in one of his beloved books.

Father's belief that his son was unaware of his presence faded as the soft voice filtered from behind the book.

"Come in, Father. I wondered how long it would be before you returned."

Shaking his head, Father smiled as he said, "I did not realize you were aware of my earlier visit. You certainly seemed to be caught up with something other than my being there. I was sure your mind was on whatever Catherine was doing."

Vincent rose from his chair as he reminded him, "When Kristopher came upon Catherine and I in the park, you thought I had no sense of him because we were lost in each other. I told you then that is not how it is. Earlier, I sensed no urgency in your approach. I was sure you would understand."

Father sat in the chair which had been vacated for him. "Vincent, I know how brief your time together is, and how precious are the rare moments you share. Believe me, I do understand, I only had to look at you to know no one had the right to interrupt what you were experiencing with her. I could feel the power of it myself."

He could see the glimmer of a smile on his son's face as his mind returned for the briefest moment to his Catherine, then the look was gone.

"I am all yours now, Father, you have my undivided attention."

"Not for long, I hope," Father stated. "I came to ask you if Catherine will be here for lunch. William is getting impatient. You know how he loves to spoil her with all her favourite dishes."

Vincent shook his head and there was a lightness and humour in his voice as he replied, "I am meeting her in an hour, so William will get the opportunity for one of his special lunches. You all spoil her, given the slightest chance, even you, Father. William is not alone in this."

"Yes, I suppose we do," he said as he rose to leave. "Catherine means so much to us all, we take our pleasure in the things we know will please her, it is our way of showing her how we feel. You know she is greatly loved by us."

As he left the chamber, Vincent gathered up his cloak and said in a soft whisper, almost to himself, "She is so worthy of our love, Father. Who could not love her?"

Once again he rejoiced in the fact she had chosen him above all men. It had taken him a long time to accept, but now he knew the truth of her love. With a light heart, he left his chamber to meet her and marvel once more at her beauty, her commitment to their dream.

Vincent made his way through the tunnels to Catherine's apartment block. Daylight in the world Above made it impossible for them to meet anywhere else.

After all this time she knew her way to the main living areas, but she would still wait at the threshold for him, if she were there first. It was almost as if she waited for his invitation, his welcome to join him in his world. Vincent took great pleasure in leading her through this labyrinth which was his home.

As time passed he quickened his pace, eager to hold her in his arms once more. His long stride and rapid pace brought him to the threshold first, and he waited. His impatience grew and with it his sense of her, heightened. She was near, he felt her excitement, and physical presence. He held his breath and his heartbeat quickened as he heard her descent. She walked through the shaft of light, a curtain between their worlds.

Smiling at him, her eyes shone brightly with delight, for all she saw in this gentle giant who held her heart, a willing captive, in his powerful hands.

Vincent found himself unable to speak or move as he gazed at the woman he adored, and felt again the exquisite pain her nearness brought when mixed with his desire. Then he looked beyond the beauty and found within, the deep green of her eyes, emotions for which there are no spoken words, for none are needed.

They stood a few feet apart, frozen in time, their love and desire for each other washed over and covered them in its depths.

"Catherine, you are so beautiful," he told her, moving forward and wrapping her in his arms.

She was surprised at this, as he rarely initiated any physical contact. It was always she who, opening her arms, invited his embrace. Winding her arms about his waist, she felt once again the comfort and security of knowing this was where she belonged.

His hold slackened and he held her away from him. His breathing had become ragged, she could see him struggling to subdue those emotions he found unacceptable. Catherine recognized this great urgent desire he battled to keep in check, for within her was its twin. Her fight was just as hard. Sometimes she was sure the struggle was greater for her because she could never accept the limitations his fears imposed. She had to break the silence between them, before the pain of regret for what could not be began to have a depressing effect on them.

"Oh, Vincent," she whispered. "I have waited so long for this weekend, we have so little time together. I want to hold you and never let you go."

His head was lowered and she recognized the effect her words had on him. Almost too soft for hearing, his voice came to her.

"You know we are a part of each other every moment. Even when separate we are never apart. You are always with me, as I am with you."

He slowly raised his head and she became lost in love's immeasurable depths which called to her from two pools of blue brilliance before her.

Slowly, he took her hand as they walked through the underground maze. There were no words, only a oneness defying understanding, reason and description. Catherine left her world behind with a full heart and let him lead her into the only place she longed to be, with him in his world.

Catherine smiled as what could only be described as a welcoming committee greeted her entrance to Father's chamber. They all, 'just happened to be passing', when news of her arrival echoed along the pipes. A good hour was spent exchanging news and sharing plans, before Vincent and Catherine could be alone with Father. He was delighted with the visit - he looked forward to all she could tell him of events Above, and to the journals Peter sent with her.

Vincent left the chamber and Father beckoned her to a seat in front of his. Before she sat, Catherine fondly kissed the top of his head. He smiled at her.

"Well," she exclaimed. "What a reception! I feel like a VIP."

Father felt very much at ease as he joked, "I think you had better start a fan club. We could have regular meetings, exchange views and all the latest scandal in your life."

Catherine laughed, and a puzzled glance from Vincent, who had just entered the chamber with her case, sent her into fits of giggles - something she had not done for far too long.

The puzzled look was changed for one of bewilderment. She tried to stop and found it impossible, looking round at Father, she found he too was fighting to keep a straight face.

At last Vincent's curiosity got the better of him. "Is this something we can all share, or just a select few?"

Father had managed to regain his self-control, but she was in such a state, the tears were now running down her face.

Father diverted Vincent's attention by asking his advice on yet another of Mouse's inventive plans. This time, the water diversion planned in great detail seemed workable and would be of immense help to the whole community. Vincent studied the diagrams, but from time to time he looked over at Catherine, who was calming rapidly. She set about making them tea and soon normality returned.

Vincent sat in the large chair facing Father, they had left Mouse's plans on the table at the rear of the chamber, but continued discussing the implications of his ingenuity.

Catherine came over with tea for the two men, making a second trip with her own and a large cushion which she placed at Vincent's feet. Drinking her tea in silence, she curled on the cushion with her head resting on his knees. The deliberations continued and Vincent seemed engrossed in the many facets of this new idea. Father couldn't help but notice the way his son ran long claw tipped fingers through Catherine's hair. Such a casual gesture, but full of meaning. His son seemed so relaxed and at ease when Catherine was Below, but when she returned Above, Father knew he would see the pain in their parting. His mind flew back over the years, he remembered the contentment he found in his own heart just being in Margaret's presence brought, and he took delight in the surety that Vincent had discovered the same peace.

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Father's chamber was empty now, silence settled like a familiar soft mantle, disturbed only by the multi-toned tapping of relayed messages. He had gone to spend time with the children, as he always

did after lunch on Saturdays. Vincent was reading to Catherine at the waterfall. There was a tranquility within the life of this community, never to be found Above.

The couple's afternoon was shared with Byron, Shelley, Keats and other old, dear friends. Catherine had sent a substantial amount of fresh fruit Below last evening, when Vincent collected her things, so they took turns to eat and read, as time raced by.

He closed the book he had been reading, and tilting his head in that so-endearing way, he asked, "Do you know there is a concert in the park tonight?"

Catherine's face lit with joy. "Oh, Vincent, how perfect. You are going to take me?"

He held his hand out as he rose to his feet and nodding his assent, helped her from the ground. Unable to conceal her excitement, she continued, "Have you any idea what they are playing? You know, don't you? Tell me, please!"

Catherine threw her arms round him and hugged him, as with a clear twinkle in his eye, he told her, "Vivaldi!"

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Below the park the unknown audience listened in silence, strains of Vivaldi echoed around them. Vincent looked down at Catherine lying in his arms, eyes closed, lost in the music's power. He marvelled once again at the miracle of her love. He thought back to when he had listened to the music alone, when Catherine was a stranger in a strange world. He remembered how much the music had meant to him then, recalled the joy in his heart the first night he brought Catherine here. He remembered every visit since then, each piece of music and moment they had shared in this place they had made their own.

Catherine drifted along with the violins, wrapped in the warmth and safety of his arms. Her heart danced with the vitality of the piece. How she loved Vivaldi!

She felt Vincent tense slightly and she opened her eyes. His head was turned away from her, and she knew by the way he held his head he was listening to sounds that were nothing to do with the concert.

She tugged at his sleeve. "What is it, Vincent? Is something wrong?"

Vincent laid his hand on hers. "It is nothing, Catherine, I was listening to the pipes. Peter is Below. We were not expecting him, that is all."

She knew how acute his hearing was and felt a little puzzled. She had seen Peter two nights ago when he gave her the medical journals for Father. He had said nothing then about a visit. Settling back into Vincent's arms, she told him, "Father will be pleased, you know he enjoys Peter's company, and I shall feel less guilty at depriving him of yours."

The next hour passed in a brief moment. Vincent's sudden movement caused her to jump. He looked at her and she saw only worry, confusion.

"It's Father!" he told her. "Something must be wrong, he never comes this far." Vincent was on his feet and running before she had taken in the implications of what she had been told. Rising, she put on her shoes and followed in haste. As she neared a sharp turn in the tunnels she could hear Father's rapid chipped voice.

"I have no idea who did it, Vincent, but Catherine will have to go Above and sort this out, now, tonight."

Catherine felt a sudden panic and rounding the corner, she came upon the two men.

"What has happened? Why do I have to go back Above?" she demanded.

Father gave her a helpless look, he was clearly out of breath. Vincent passed on the news Peter had brought. "It seems you have been reported as a missing person. Police are searching for you, even as we speak."

Catherine looked and felt confused. "Missing?" she exclaimed. "Who would do that? Why? I don't understand."

Father had managed to get his breath back now and continued, "The police have been searching for you. Peter was asked if he had seen you, or knew where you might have gone. Because he is not related, they would give him no information. He was told you had been reported missing, nothing more. He thought he had better check you had got here safely, as he knew you should be Below. He could not understand why the report had been actioned in such a short time, and has returned Above, now he is assured of your safety." Father looked at her disbelieving face. "Catherine, you must sort this out!"

Catherine turned to Vincent and saw clearly the sadness he felt, knowing she must return so soon. They walked Father back to his chamber, then Vincent accompanied her to the entrance of the park. If the police were in her apartment building, her sudden emergence from the basement would be impossible to explain away.

The metal door sealing his world from discovery by hers opened and they stepped though into the intersection.

She looked along the tunnel leading into the park, she must walk through it now and out into the night, leaving all she loved behind her.

He felt her sorrow in this parting and he took her gently into his embrace. With harsh clarity, the pain emanating from deep within his Catherine bombarded his senses; she clung to him as if her life depended upon the security of his hold. She was crying softly, her tears soaking into the fabric of his shirt.

He bent and kissed the top of her head, whispering, "Catherine, know I shall be there for you, should you need me."

She looked up and in his face saw the strength and reassurance she needed. Speaking with difficulty, she fought back the tears. "It seems so unfair. We have been looking forward to this time together. Two days, that's all. Such a short time, surely it's not asking too much. Whatever fate brought us together, and tied us with such a secure bond, seems to seek only to keep us apart, denying us even the shortest time together."

Knowing she would not willingly leave his embrace, he took her arms from around him and stepped back. Holding onto her hands he reminded her, "Once you told me, we would have to measure our time in a different way. That can never change. Do not spend time tormenting yourself with what we cannot be, but immerse yourself in all we are, and know there is no equal in either of our worlds."

Smiling, she nodded, "Yes, you are right, knowing the reality of our love is enough. I will be back soon, I promise. Wait for me."

As she walked away from him she heard the echo of his soft tones. "Always, Catherine, always."

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Catherine walked across the park, making her way to the home of one of the helpers. Thomas greeted her with obvious relief, as her disappearance had been reported on the news. She picked up the telephone and dialed a number she knew well. It rang out and was answered by the one person

she was sure could help. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Hi, Nancy. It's Cathy, I need a favour." She explained all that had happened and asked Nancy to provide her with an alibi. Nancy was the only friend she had trusted with their secret. It was Nancy's words, 'Follow your Heart', which had brought her back to Vincent's arms one night; she had never regretted it.

Nancy promised her assistance and Catherine waited the agreed hour before leaving for her office.

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Joe Maxwell sat at home waiting for news. If all Elliot Burch told him was true, Cathy was in great danger. He hoped and prayed Elliot's fears were groundless. Rising from the chair, he went to make himself yet another cup of coffee when the phone rang.

"Yes," was all he said.

"Is that Joe, Joe Maxwell?" He didn't recognize the voice.

"Yes, it is."

Nancy continued, "Cathy Chandler asked me to phone you. She's on her way back and wants to collect some papers from your office. She said to tell you she needed to work on the Hubert case before Monday morning. Can you meet her there at 11:00 pm? She can't get them, they're locked in your desk."

Joe sounded stunned. "Chandler's been with you, all day?"

Nancy knew she had been believed so she continued. "Yes, why shouldn't she have been? She told me she wasn't in work today."

He didn't want to cause alarm, there had been too much panic already. "No, she wasn't due in. I just didn't know she intended leaving town. Thanks for passing on the message, I'm on my way. Bye."

"Bye," said the voice on the other end. He hung up, wondering why he had listened to Elliot Burch; the man always brought trouble.

After he had made a few phone calls, still angry, Joe left for the office, feeling a fool.

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"Sorry it's so late, Joe," Catherine said as he approached. "We were so busy chatting I forgot about the time. I thought if you were around I could make an early start on Hubert in the morning."

Joe looked very uncomfortable and took Catherine's arm as he propelled her towards the door.

"Let's go up to my office," he said. "There is something I want to tell you, and I am expecting someone to join us."

"Who?" she asked.

Once in his office she sat on the couch whilst Joe went off to get some coffee. She heard the door open and, expecting Joe with the coffee, was surprised to find Elliot Burch standing in front of her.

He knelt down, taking her hands in his. "Cathy, thank God you're okay. I thought they had taken you."

She looked both puzzled and angry. "Just what is going on here?" she demanded. "Of course I'm all right, why wouldn't I be?"

During the next hour, Elliot explained to Catherine how he had bought some run down property near the sea front. He was involved in a refurbishment programme which was government sponsored, providing inexpensive rented homes for those without a place of their own. There were some who did not want this scheme to go ahead, and he had received threatening letters. Elliot admitted a man in

his position often received 'hate mail' of various sorts, and this had all been filed away where it belonged, in his waste bin. Then a week ago, the letter he now handed to Catherine had come. it was short and very much to the point. In large block capitals she read.

**YOUR PRETTY FRIEND IN THE DA OFFICE MAY NOT LOOK SO PRETTY IF YOU CONTINUE BEING STUBBORN. IF THE WATERSIDE PROJECT GOES AHEAD, YOUR FRIEND COULD END UP AS PART OF THE FOUNDATIONS.**

Elliot went on to explain he had asked Cleon Manning to organize a round-the-clock watch to ensure her safety. She had been seen entering the building after her jog in the park. No one had seen her since.

He had gone to her apartment on Saturday afternoon to explain things to her but there was no sign of her there. Her front door was unlocked and the place had been searched, he feared she had been kidnapped, so he alerted the police and went to see Joe Maxwell.

Catherine was horrified and angry. She turned to Joe, who had returned with the drinks during Elliot's narrative.

"Joe, will you take me home, please? I haven't got my car."

Joe nodded and she left with him followed closely by Elliot, who felt yet again he was in the midst of another of Catherine's secrets, and as before there would be no explanations. There would only be the pleading look in those amazing green eyes and her soft voice saying, "Trust me, Elliot, please! I can tell you no more."

He knew he would do just as she wanted, he would refuse her nothing. The last time he had said "No," to her, that one small word cost him his dream of a life filled with her love.

Catherine's apartment was not in the state she feared it would be. It had been searched, not ransacked, and there was some relief in this. The police search had been called off when Joe notified them she was safe, but one man remained at her door watching a locksmith busy changing Catherine's locks.

She heard the elevator stop and turned to see Elliot walking toward her. He looked at the locksmith as he said, "Cathy, I hope you don't mind I asked him to come and change the locks straight away, I wanted to make sure your things were safe."

She smiled at Elliot and he looked very uncomfortable, like a schoolboy who had been caught doing something he shouldn't. She knew whatever he had done was because of his love for her. She couldn't be angry with him for long.

"Thank you, Elliot, it was thoughtful of you." She watched the look of concern disappear to be replaced by a broad smile.

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Vincent returned Below in the early hours of the morning. Father was still awake waiting for news when Vincent came down the few steps into his chamber, and sat in the chair opposite.

"Well, Vincent, what has been happening? Do you know anything yet?" he asked.

Vincent shook his head in answer, Father could see how anxious and restless his son was. Tension showed clearly in every movement, as his huge hands opened and closed in a nervous and uneasy way.

Father knew Vincent didn't want to talk but his concern prompted him to ask, "Catherine? Is she all right?"



"Yes, Father, she is well," came the soft reply. "She is angry and puzzled about something. She is not alone."

Father seemed surprised. "Not alone! How do you know that? Can you tell me?"

Vincent sighed, he could sense reluctance in his voice as he explained, "Our bond is something beyond explanation, unique to Catherine and I, but there are others she is somehow linked to in a different way. I know when she is with one of them, as now."

Father probed, "Do you know who she is with?" For a second he saw a fleeting look of anguish in Vincent's eyes as he was informed.

"Yes, she is with Elliot Burch."

Vincent rose from the chair and walked across the chamber, picking up a book. He stood with his back to Father, flicking through its pages, a clear indication there was no more to be said.

A few minutes later he returned the book and sat once again in the chair. Father sat quietly with a medical journal, pretending to read, but his mind was in such turmoil he could concentrate on nothing.

Vincent's eyes were closed and his breathing was soft and regular. To most eyes he would seem asleep, but Father knew this sight well. Vincent had reached her, through their bond, and only some emergency would disturb him before he chose to become a part of his world again.

After some time, Vincent stood and picked up his cloak. It was at this point Father realized he had 'nodded off' and Vincent's sudden movement roused him.

"I am sorry, Father. I did not intend to wake you."

Father rose stiffly from the chair as he nodded. "I know, Vincent, but it is time I was in my bed. Is that where you are bound, or are you going elsewhere?"

Vincent put his arms about Father and held him for a moment and told him, "I am going Above, Catherine is alone now. I have waited long enough." He slipped on his cloak and walked up the short flight of steps.

"Vincent! Be careful, daylight is not far away."

There was a deep sorrow in the young man's eyes as he turned back. "Do not worry," he replied, "I know how close dawn is."

As he left the chamber, Father heard him continue in a soft whisper, "However long the night is, dawn always comes too soon when I am with Catherine."

The old man sighed and shook his head, feeling angry. How cruel was a world which could keep these two separated through its ignorance and intolerance.

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Once the new locks were in place, Catherine persuaded Joe and Elliot she would be quite safe. She was exhausted! Looking at the clock she was surprised to find it was almost 4:00am. The night had flown, and yet had seemed to last forever.

Going into the bedroom to collect her coat she heard a noise on the other side of the front door. There it was again, a light knocking.

"Who is it?" she shouted, feeling a little alarmed.

The voice on the other side shouted back. "You okay, Miss Chandler? It's Ted Johnson, I work for Cleon Manning. Mr. Burch asked me to keep an eye on you. I thought I heard voices. I'm sorry if I've disturbed you."

Making sure the strong security chain was in place, she opened the door as far as the chain would permit. "Can I see your ID please?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, sure." He passed the card through the narrow opening. The ID looked genuine and she recognized the distinctive grey uniform.

"What do you usually do?" she asked him.

"Oh, nothing like this. I work in the offices. Mr. Burch's offices, then this came up. It's overtime and I got a wife and kids, every penny counts." He sat on the chair outside the door, took out a flask and poured himself a coffee.

Catherine noticed how he wrinkled his nose as he drank. "Something wrong with the coffee?" she enquired.

"Hell no," he replied, "It's just that you always get a funny taste when it's been in the flask for a while; tastes sort of stale."

Catherine smiled. "I know just what you mean. We have a machine at work which seems to do the same thing. I'm going to make some fresh now, want to come in and have one with me?"

Ted looked worried. "I can't leave my post, it's a sacking offence."

Catherine argued, "If you're here to keep an eye on me, you can do it much better with me."

He seemed pleased with her reasoning. "A fresh coffee would taste good after this," he told her, brandishing the flask.

She took off the chain, let him in and locked the door behind him. Catherine went into the kitchen to make the coffee, she returned to find Ted Johnson with another man standing just in front of the door. The second man was holding a gun and the cold smile on his face struck terror into her heart.

This terror was felt by another who now sped to her side as if all the hounds of hell snapped at his heels.

The man with the gun spoke with a quiet effeminate voice. "Thank you for letting us in, Miss Chandler. It was much easier and quicker too."

Catherine froze, but only for a moment. She remember all Isaac had told her; use whatever is at hand. She looked at the steaming black coffee in her hands and then at the two men. Only one seemed to be armed and she walked towards him.

"What do you want?" she asked.

His cold voice answered. "We want Elliot Burch to be a little more co-operative. When he sees what we have done to re-arrange your face, he will be."

She knew Elliot's fears for her safety had been justified - these men were a real threat to her. Making a quick decision, she threw the contents of the two cups into the face of the armed man. He screamed and staggered, falling backwards over a small coffee table, hitting his head on its corner. The injury was severe enough to draw blood and left him out cold on the floor.

As the gun fell from his grasp, Catherine lunged for it, but the uniformed man got to it first.

Cautiously she backed away, he followed her.

"You can't escape, Miss Chandler."

She got to the balcony door and out onto the balcony where she knew Vincent had just arrived.

"How you gonna get away, you gonna fly?" he taunted, following her. Stepping onto the terrace, he

took four paces forward then sensed someone else there. As he slowly turned his head, she could see clearly the moment his eyes alighted on her protector; the horror on his face spoke louder than any words could. He turned to face Vincent, his own safety making him forget the purpose of his visit. He backed away as a low growl started in Vincent's throat. The colour drained from the man's face, he held out the gun and Catherine could see his finger tighten on the trigger. She made a grab for the gun but the man held on. In the struggle for its possession the gun went off and the attacker fell dead at her feet.

Catherine was shaking from head to foot. Vincent took her in his arms, but the sound of sirens in the night announced the arrival of the police. Someone must have heard the shots and phoned them.

Catherine looked up at Vincent, her face a picture of confused emotions. "Please go quickly, the police will be here any second. Wait for me Below, under the building. I will come as soon as I can."

With a brief nod, he vanished silently into the night.

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This time there were no unexplained injuries and the formalities were over quickly. Joe appeared on the scene, angry that Catherine had been the subject of this attack.

The two men were known to the police and could be directly linked to one of Elliot Burch's opponents, so Joe phoned him to pass on the news.

Once she had convinced Joe she was unharmed, she told him she intended to return to Nancy's house for a few days. Joe readily agreed to this and told her the break would do her good.

The soft grey light of dawn was filtering through the windows as he left, and she was beginning to feel the lack of sleep. A quick shower and a change of clothing soon brightened her. She spoke to Nancy, thanking her for the help she had given and asking her for an alibi for the next couple of days, should she need one.

Nancy readily agreed. "I will do anything I can to help, Cathy. You and Vincent have so little time together, if I can give you the chance for more, you have only to ask."

"Thanks, Nancy, you will never know how much this means to both of us."

Gathering her things together, she left her apartment to begin the long descent by way of the stairs into the basement. Soon she was climbing down the iron rungs which led to his world.

Walking through the shaft of light, she found herself wrapped in the strong arms of the man she loved. Clinging to him, drawing from his strength, she let the warmth of his love fill her to overflowing.

Catherine cried and between the sobs told him, "They're both dead. I killed them both."

Vincent said nothing, but she knew he understood only too well the feelings of guilt and horror which followed the realization that, because of her actions, two people would not now see the sun beginning its climb into the blue sky above.

As he held her, his love calmed the feelings whirling about within her. He released her, picked up her bag and guided her silently, with a sure arm, into the safety of his world.

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Catherine loved the amber light which filled Vincent's chamber from the coloured glass set into the wall behind his bed. She sat now in its glow, unaware of its beauty or her journey through the tunnels.

Vincent was holding a beaker, and she stared at the steam rising from the surface of the liquid inside. A smell she recognized, the herb tea he always kept for her. She thought back to the first time she tasted it. So long ago it seemed, since Vincent had found her in the park Above.

"Catherine, drink this please." His voice brought her back to the present and she took the drink from him and slowly sipped at the hot brew, feeling its warmth spread through her body.

He knelt on the floor in front of the bed and waited until she had drained the beaker, then removed it from her grasp, placing it on the floor by her side.

"This feeling will pass. Rest now," he told her, taking her hands in his own.

Catherine lay back on the bed, he lifted her legs onto its soft covers. She realized how tired and drained she was, and felt only the familiarity and warmth of his cloak, as he covered her with it, before she drifted off into the blessing of a dreamless sleep.

Vincent sat in his chair unmoving, watching her sleeping, thankful she rested so peacefully. He had known the torture his Catherine endured. He had felt the bitterness of being the hand of death. It had always been the only option, the only way to protect and defend, but the knowledge made it no easier to accept. There had been no other way for Catherine earlier, but she would remember their faces for the rest of her days. He remembered faces, dead dying faces, filled with horror, so many of them. They would be with him forever, these spectres who haunted the darkness within him. And the dark part of him which he feared would engulf him one day.

Catherine slept for six hours and woke refreshed and hungry. She was alone in the chamber, but knew Vincent would not be far away. He would go nowhere without his cloak and it covered her still. She snuggled into its warm weight, and wondered what time it was in the world Above. Too late in the day to be in bed, she decided, rising quickly before she had the opportunity to change her mind. Looking around for her things, she saw her bag sitting on the old trunk and with it the case Vincent had brought down for her before this nightmare began.

Locating the bowl and water, she washed, put on fresh clothes, then set about her tangled hair with a brush.

Vincent stopped in the entrance. "Good morning, Catherine, or should I say, good afternoon?" he teased. She put down the brush and held out her hands.

"Vincent," she whispered.

He walked across the chamber to her, as he neared she threw her arms about his neck.

"Vincent, thank you for taking care of me last night. I can't begin to tell you how bad I felt."

He enfolded her in his arms and his love. "Catherine, I know exactly how last night affected you."

She leaned back in his arms and looked into his face as she told him, "Yes, you know, more than anyone, but until last night I had no understanding of the terrible burden you bear. To deliberately take the life of another is a dreadful responsibility, no matter how unavoidable. I only understand that when I led that man out onto the balcony, I was knowingly leading him to his death."

Catherine saw the tears in his eyes as the soft timbre of his voice echoed around the chamber. "I can only tell you, the pain grows less with time. Believe me, it grows less."

Once again, Vincent took the lead and steered her out of the chamber, stopping only to collect a book off the table.

He took her down by the waterfall, a place they both loved and he sat with his back against the rock with Catherine's head in his lap.

The reflected light danced around them, as the falling cascade threw its beams across the immense cavern.

Catherine looked up at him as she asked, "I wonder how long we have this time, before someone or

something forces us apart again?"

Vincent smiled as he stroked her hair. "Who knows?" he replied. "Whatever time we will have will not be enough. It never is... enough. But we will savour each precious moment, fill every second with our love, turning it into a lifetime."

Catherine closed her eyes, content. This was all that mattered, she was here with the man she loved. Time no longer existed for them, for they dwelt outside of time as man counts it. For this one brief moment they were a part of a time which has no measure - eternity.

Only Vincent existed for her now and his gentle voice gave life to words conceived in someone else's love, written in another moment of eternity.

*All other things to their destruction draw,  
Only our love hath no decay;  
This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,  
Running, it never runs from us away,  
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.*

*- John Donne*

END