

Series 16 - Consequences

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by Angie

Truth or Consequences

.... parting is such sweet sorrow.

- William Shakespeare

Catherine finished her work above and gratefully changed into Tunnel wear. She had been working in the brownstone's office and she felt she had to look the part. However, her advancing pregnancy was making the garb a chore. Soon she would delegate what she could.

As soon as she entered the tunnels she felt a sense of peace. She always forgot how noisy the City was until she felt the quiet of the tunnels surround her. Of course, they were not completely quiet. There was the tapping on the pipes – messages back and forth between sentries, the community, the helpers. And the rattle of the trains far above. Neither of these things detracted from the magic, though. They were an integral part of life below. If they had stopped, she would have felt bereft somehow.

She always used the brownstone's tunnel entrance now when she went above. The risks had increased in recent months. The outside world had become less friendly and more dangerous. No one took any chances. The entire community now used the more secret ways. The brownstone had become one of them. On the outside, it had a sign which declared it the headquarters of an obscure Zen sect. It was enough to explain the frequent comings and goings from its below-street door at all hours – but discouraged the merely curious. The main door, up a few steps, was reserved for special visitors and Catherine herself.

She and Vincent had an attic suite in the brownstone and they usually spent their evenings and slept there. Very soon, just prior to the birth, they would live there round the clock. Then when their son arrived, even Vincent would not be going below as often. He had been adamant about that. In the meantime, he still spent considerable time in the tunnel community, trying to deal with as much outstanding work as possible - and learning to delegate. He was there now.

She rounded the tunnel curve and entered Vincent's chamber. Despite her long association, she could never quite think of it as hers, or even theirs. He dominated the space as he did all others, unobtrusively, but definitively.

He was an inveterate pack rat and every flat space had books or eclectic pieces he loved. Catherine felt no desire to discourage his untidiness. It was who he was and she loved all of him, inside and out. She did not try to change him in other ways either. He had done that for himself. He wore less now, was less concerned about his unusual appearance and seemed happier than ever. Their love grew and seemed to know no limits.

It was now almost lunch time, and she could feel that Vincent was nearby – probably in Father's chamber. She looked around and spotted the one thing that bothered her about the man who was her life.

On the table was a cardboard tray containing an untidy array of tiny paper cups – another empty chocolates box. The helpers indulged Vincent's sweet tooth shamelessly. A month or so ago, she had had a sudden addiction for chocolate cherries and Vincent had happily shared it with her. That had lasted a couple of weeks – and now she could not look at one without feeling sick. Vincent though, had simply switched to other candy.

She had to admit he did not seem to experience any adverse effects. He never put on weight and Father assured her he was not diabetic. Certainly he didn't get cavities. Candy was his only food fetish – although when he was doing hard labour he ate enough of William's food for three men. She worried nevertheless. Surely it could not be healthy to eat so much refined sugar.

The box on the table had not been there after breakfast. Someone must have brought it down. That meant Vincent had wolfed down these dozen or more treats this morning. How many others was he demolishing when she was not around? He knew of her concerns very well – and was usually more careful about his leavings. Something must have distracted him.

Suddenly she felt him behind her and he whirled her around and gave her an all-enveloping hug. She melted into him. He was so deliciously warm and solid. She felt his breath on her neck just before he kissed her ear. It was hard to think while he held her like this – and he knew it. Reluctantly, she pried herself loose and stepped back so she could look him in the eyes. She realized he looked decidedly guilty and knew he had caught her concern about the chocolates. She sighed.

"Vincent"

"I know Catherine. Don't say it."

Vincent looked at the table and kicked himself mentally for forgetting to dispose of the remains before she returned. He bent down and pulled her to him, kissing her before she could think of anything else to say. She willingly returned it and they stood thus for some moments, until they were both gasping for breath.

The lunch signal rang over the pipes and Vincent, for once was grateful for the interruption.

“Shall we go for lunch?” he whispered in her ear.

Catherine sighed again and took his arm in answer.

“As if we could miss a meal! This discussion isn’t over, Vincent. I’m worried about you.”

“I know my love, but I can never refuse a candy. You know that.”

That gave Catherine an idea as they walked down to the dining hall.

Lunch was the usual buffet of sandwiches and William’s wonderful soup. This time it was ham and split pea – one of her favourites. She loaded up a bowl and then a platter with sandwiches and Vincent carried it and his own soup bowl to a table.

“What are you doing this afternoon, Vincent?” Catherine asked, careful to project just casual interest.

“Mouse wants to show me a new confluence of pipes he found - one we can use as a minor back-up to our main pipe chamber. It escaped our notice because it’s quite a bit lower and in an area where we don’t generally go. Pascal is coming with us. It’s not as large, apparently, but it should allow him to delegate some of the work. I’ll be back before supper.”

“I think I’ll try and tidy up my annex.” Catherine told him. “I’ve neglected my housekeeping shamefully. Then maybe a short nap.”

“Yes, you must not get overtired, Catherine.” He patted the bulge in her middle affectionately.

They finished off their meal and Catherine ate one of William’s date squares washed down with tea. Vincent managed to gobble two in short order – but did not go back for a third as he would usually have. She stored that information away.

They said a quiet goodbye at the entrance to the dining hall and Vincent strode off in the opposite direction toward the Pipe Chamber. Catherine turned back and went into the kitchen. William was stacking dishes and bellowing orders to his two washer-uppers. The children all took turns helping him and his loud supervision passed right over them. They smiled at Catherine and she grinned back. Everyone knew that Williams’ bark was worse than his bite – the latter being non-existent.

“William, I need to talk to you,” Catherine said, grabbing his arm to get his attention.

He turned to look at her and nodded. “You scamps better have these done by the time I return,” he told his young helpers. “Let’s go into my office, Catherine.”

Catherine was surprised. She had not known he had an office, although it made a great deal of sense when she thought about it. She followed him behind a long row of shelves filled with dry goods and through a stone doorway that had been deliberately cut to mimic William’s substantial girth. She giggled and caught his sideways glance at her, his mouth twitching.

“Kanin’s little joke,” William explained, unnecessarily.

His office was small, but crowded with cookbooks. The walls were hung with oddities from the culinary world. There was a two-foot long pair of chopsticks and a ladle that would have held the contents of the average stew pot, among other things. There were also two comfortable chairs and a desk which held only a long ledger book.

“Please sit, Catherine. What can I do for you? Would you like some special maternity treats?”

“Your food is wonderful already, William. I don’t know how you could improve it. But no, I came to discuss Vincent’s eating habits, specifically, his addiction to candy.”

“Ah yes, I’ve noticed our Vincent seems to be eating a lot more of those these days. It can’t be because you are any less sweet.”

William never missed an opportunity to deliver a jibe. Catherine ignored it, blushing slightly. She pushed on.

“Any idea why, William?”

“Well, Catherine, he has always loved sweet things, but until fairly recently, we never had luxuries like chocolates and candy down here. I made some home-made honey candy and fudge occasionally, but there was never a lot of it. They were special treats, usually for parties or birthdays.”

Catherine was beginning to understand. “Are you saying that by ensuring the community lacks for nothing, I am encouraging them to eat more sweets?”

"Well, not exactly," William said slowly. "But our suppliers, now that they are making regular shipments of a greater variety of staples, always include a few treats. We don't order them, I assure you, but somehow there is always a box or two of chocolates or some assorted bags of candy in the mix. Vincent often assists in bringing the goods back, so he knows this. I'm sure some of that candy never reaches my larder. And some of the helpers, I'm sure, have seen the glint in his eyes and give him a box of chocolates on the sly. I save what reaches me and dole it out carefully to my young helpers as treats."

"I see," Catherine remarked softly. "How can I ensure that Vincent does not keep getting this stuff. A little is fine, but he's eating a box or more of chocolates a day. I worry about him. What would you suggest?"

"Nothing simpler, Catherine. When I put in my order, I will expressly ask them to put in nothing but what I ask for. Vincent always comes here to join the pickup party. I'll start making my own fudge and other candy again – probably a lot healthier anyway. I'll put him to work. I need a strong arm to mix the pot - it takes a lot of stirring. He'll be paid in more modest amounts than he's been used to, but I don't think he'll complain. We only order in about every two weeks, so in-between he'll have to be satisfied with you." William gave her a friendly leer.

Catherine laughed. "Thank you William. I think that should work very well. Vincent's away with Pascal right now, so I think I'd better check his chamber for any hidden treasures. I'll give you any I find. He'll have to be satisfied with your desserts in the meantime."

"Right you are, Catherine. I'll make some extra sweet ones though. We don't want him to go into withdrawal."

She rose to leave and leaned over to plant a kiss on William's broad cheek. "Thanks again. I hope this works," she threw over her shoulder as she left.

"It will," she heard him rumble behind her.

Back in Vincent's chamber, Catherine did an intensive search that would have done credit to a detective. She found a bag of sweets under his socks in the wardrobe, another in an old boot, two boxes of chocolates on top of the wardrobe, another pushed behind a bookcase, and a large plastic-wrapped brick of brittle bubbly stuff neatly tucked behind a pile of books. She left that on the table. It was a home-made treat, she knew, and one she herself liked. She broke off a golden piece and sucked it happily. She had not seen this in years. One of the helpers must have made it. She broke another piece off.

She carried the piece of bubbly candy and the extra sweets back to William, who was still in his office. He thanked her for the donations, then noticed what she still held.

"Do you make any of this, William," she asked.

"Why, that's sponge toffee! I don't think I've ever made it down here, but I can certainly do so," William declared. "It's very simple – and I'm sure your big sweet tooth would love it. It might even compensate somewhat for the lack of chocolates. I'll get some made today and bring you a piece."

"Better and better," Catherine smiled, hugging the big man. "I want to keep him happy. See you."

Over the next few days, Catherine noticed that Vincent was quieter. She caught him rummaging in various places, when he thought she wasn't looking, or pretending to re-arrange things. She said nothing, however. They had shared the sponge toffee with great delight and, with William's willing cooperation, she had made sure there was always some about. Vincent was looking a little puzzled, though, she thought.

Delivery day arrived. Cullen was assigned to accompany the work party and Vincent was asked to help William, which he did willingly, especially when he learned what he would be doing. She went to the kitchen with him and he seemed to be quivering a little. Was he feeling the lack of ultra-refined sugar in his diet? His hands were shaking slightly as he sampled the hot fudge mixture in the big wok-like pan. She put her hands around his waist from behind and sent him her love along the bond. She felt him stiffen a little and realized he had figured out the deception.

He kept stirring the pot with great energy, until William declared it ready, then he moved away from her to pour the contents into the greased trays. Catherine sensed a tension that seemed ready to explode. Nevertheless, Vincent carefully scraped the pot with the big wooden spoon, his eyes closed.

Catherine was now feeling very guilty. Had she gone too far? Vincent looked at her out of the corner of his eyes, then turned to face her.

"Catherine, you are a meddler - but a delectable one. I know you orchestrated this out of love for me, so I can

hardly hold it against you. But I can hold this against you.”

He crossed the distance between them in one long stride, caught her in a hug and pushed his pelvis against her. The bulge of his manhood made her groan as his passion flared along their bond. He bent down to kiss her and she could taste the sweet candy on his lips.

William interrupted with a bellow. “My dears, if you aren’t going to work, get out of my kitchen! You’re distracting me.”

Vincent shot him a look that made the big man take a step backwards, but he recovered quickly and a huge grin spread across his face.

“The fudge will be ready by supper time,” he declared, turning back to the pot and lifting it into his sink for washing.

Catherine found herself carried in a pair of strong arms at breakneck speed back to their chamber. Vincent flicked down the privacy rug, dumped her on the bed and lay next to her, almost ripping her clothes off in his eagerness.

“Vincent ...,” Catherine gasped as the last of her clothing was flung away and he began some very concentrated foreplay. “You haven’t been this eager for weeks.”

Vincent slowed, but did not stop massaging her gravid body. It felt wonderful. She found herself gasping for air.

“Catherine, you were missing the most important part of the equation when you calculated I was eating too much candy – the reason for it. I found it helped to ... um ... distract ... my libido enough that I didn’t miss you quite so painfully when you had to go above. Also, your pregnancy is fairly advanced and I didn’t want to press you.

“Maybe I overdid it with the candy,” he conceded.

He grinned at her. “Now my sweet you know the truth - and must suffer the consequences.” He began to nuzzle her in various places with great deliberation and considerable skill.

Catherine began some massages of her own in her favourite place, and mumbled into his furry chest.

“Hmmmpph. William was on the right track, after all. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And admit I am a slave to my desires?” Vincent mumbled into her elevated belly button.

“Well, Vincent, thank goodness I never guessed the truth. Your consequences are quite delightful.”

Afterwards, spooned into him, somewhat amazed that his arms could still surround her, Catherine reflected that Vincent had triumphed. William would ensure he never lacked for candy and she would make sure he never suffered from lack his other addiction – herself.

Vincent, as if he read her mind, nuzzled her ear. His love for her was sweeter than any candy and she returned it happily.

END

Together

*His love was passion's embrace: - as a tree
On fire by lightning, with ethereal flame
Kindled he was, and blasted.*

- Lord Byron

He rested against the wall where a headboard should have been, a pillow behind his back for comfort, although comfort was far removed from his thoughts. His long legs were stretched out beside her.

Her cheek rested on his chest, her mouth almost on his nipple. He could feel her breath teasing his fur as she slept.

On her chest, almost in the same position, lay their son. She had half-covered him with one side of her hospital gown. The room was very warm, so they did not need blankets.

He had never felt so at peace. He could feel his son's contentment through the newborn's bond, as well as hers. They were each distinctive, like signatures.

He looked down at the two most precious people in his life and sighed. Nothing had prepared him for this overwhelming sense of fulfillment.

...

It had been a stressful few hours. They had come here to this windowless room in the brownstone she had renovated. This particular room was used by Peter and Father for "special" patients and was starkly clinical, mostly stainless steel with minimal furnishings. There was a lot of complex-looking equipment. They had not wanted to take any chances with her labour - and privacy, of course, was essential.

He had sat next to her, holding her hand, transmitting all the love he possessed to give her strength. He had sensed the fetus as well, which was restless and uncomfortable in its too-small enclosure. He had tried to project a sense of the welcome awaiting it, of the rightness of what was happening.

She had pulled him to her, after a particularly violent contraction and kissed him full on the lips. He had not been able to prevent a shiver of delight at the touch. She had felt it, he knew. She then made it plain she wanted him closer, holding her.

Peter had insisted he undress completely, in the room next door, before being allowed into the sanctum. He had been given a hospital gown. He wore it open side to the front, but it did not reach past his waist. He put on a pair of drawstring pajama bottoms. The latter's loose front opening was obviously not designed to close - and didn't. He had swallowed his embarrassment when he returned, then realized that neither Peter, nor Samantha who was assisting, cared in the least about his modesty. He was not their patient. They were only concerned with Catherine. He would have been excluded from the room until it was all over, he realized, had she not demanded his presence in no uncertain terms.

He had attended many births below of course, but it was different when the woman he loved beyond all else was delivering their first child. He was afraid that his concern would affect her through the bond, so made himself relax and feel confident, figuratively and literally. All he could give her was his strength and support - and unbounded love. That was all he had ever been able to give her, but she had always insisted it was enough. Now she was about to give him a gift without price.

He had been shown how to sit behind her on the narrow bed, his legs on either side of her. She immediately took hold of them, with a strength he found amazing, almost cutting the blood flow to his feet. The contractions had increased in frequency now, and she was told to begin pushing.

Her head rested on a flat pillow between his legs, just touching his manhood. He could feel a few strands of her soft hair through the gaping opening of his pants. As her convulsions increased, her head had rolled closer, arousing him, to his further dismay. Fortunately, he was able to bend over a little and hide the problem with the gown, although no one was looking at him. Their attention was focused much further down, where his son was emerging into the world between her upraised legs. He watched intently as a red and wrinkled head crowned. He leaned over and took her hands into his own and wrapped them around his legs, trying to transmit his strength as he felt her strain massively.

With a huge gasp, she pushed their son out completely and he felt her relief - and their son's distress at the

bright lights and sudden loss of warmth and comfort. His robust cry broke the silence and echoed around the room. That sound was the most wonderful music he had ever heard. He projected calm along their bond, but could not be sure the child felt it. She did, because she relaxed with a sigh.

He wrapped his arms around her in the cradle of his legs as she lay exhausted. Their son was laid on her belly while they allowed the final rush of nutrients through the umbilical cord. Then they cleaned away the afterbirth.

The birth smell filled his nostrils and he looked closely at the blood-covered little form. The hair stuck out wildly on the tiny head, limbs were flexing, the mouth was open, the cries now plaintive. He could see nothing unusual – which was a further source of amazement.

Then they tied off the cord and took the baby over to a metal table a few feet away to be cleaned, measured and weighed. The coldness of the metal raised a cry that was part shriek from that tiny body and they all grinned at each other.

She hugged his arms to her and Peter affirmed that what they saw was true. Their son was perfect. Their love for each other and their son ran along their bond, gathering this new life into it as well.

She found his hands again then, refusing to let him go, even as Samantha sponged her clean, meticulously. Reluctantly, she let them shift her enough to remove her gown and slide on a clean one. Then she had him move her further up so she could lay against his chest and hold their son against them both.

Soon after, Samantha pulled a sheet over them as far as the child and they were left in peace. The room was so quiet that there was nothing but the sound of their breathing, all three in harmony. A beautiful, quiet symphony, he thought.

Now, as he looked down at them both, he marveled at the sight. He felt her stir on top of him. He desperately wanted to hold his son. He had waited so long for this joy that a few more minutes should not have mattered – but it did.

She must have sensed this, because she opened her eyes and turned to look up at him. A smile brightened her face. There was an invitation in her eyes. He bent down to her and kissed her lips, softly but thoroughly, and felt her joy through the bond. Yes, their bond, which had been a bit impaired during her pregnancy, was definitely fully operational. He saw her recognition of that as his undiminished love ran along it to her.

“Lift me higher,” she demanded softly.

He carefully pulled her up a little further, until her head reached his chin and she lay across his torso, her buttocks resting on his hips, her legs between his own. He lifted his knees slightly and crossed his ankles, making a cradle that enclosed them both under the tent of the sheet.

She lifted her head and smiled, inviting him to take his son. He gathered up the small body from her chest. His son felt warm, his skin as soft as silk - like that of his mother's, he thought. He moved his head down over the small body, kissing his forehead and nuzzling a tiny hand that lifted to him as a pair of brilliant blue eyes regarded him. He ran his nose along his son's body, the scent of him heady, wonderful. He cupped the small bottom in his hands and marveled at the wriggling new life he held. There were still no words to describe the sensation. He felt such happiness that his heart was thumping with it. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Her arms lifted to him and he placed their son on his chest next to her. Then they held him together.

She looked up at him again and he sank his mouth onto her gently. She sighed.

Their son decided at that moment to fret and he shifted his arms so she could move the baby to her breast. She placed a bloated nipple into his tiny mouth, kneading the breast to encourage the flow.

Those blue eyes looked at her now and then he began to suckle, closing them again, as if in ecstasy.

Strangely, he found the sight of his son on her breast immensely sensual and felt the shiver along their bond that told him she felt his emotions.

She gazed up at him over the head of their son and shifted a leg a little, feeling his penis' slight arousal. Her eyes were filled with love for him.

He sighed as her head again dropped onto his chest. She rubbed her free hand down his fur, kneaded his chest,

then ran her hand around his ribs to hug him.

As she closed her eyes, he brought the sides of his gown around them to enclose them in his heat, pulled the sheet up higher, then circled them both with his arms.

He watched their son nurse greedily, sucking with a strength that amazed him, felt his urgency along the bond. He could feel her thrill at the sensation and something else – deep joy.

He leaned against the wall again, let himself drift into an almost-nap, surrounded by – and surrounding - more contentment than he could ever have imagined.

Once their son had finished and had quietly fallen asleep, she held the baby in the crook of her arm, inside his, and he felt her fall asleep too. He let himself do the same.

...

He awoke sometime later as the door to the room opened. He saw the smiles on the faces of Peter and Samantha, confirming again that everything was allright.

His innate sense of time told him it was now mid-morning and he realized his back was stiff as he shifted slightly.

Peter told him there was a much more comfortable room ready for them. Without further ado, he lifted up his love and their son in his powerful arms and padded after Peter. He was shown into a bright room. A large tree outside the window cast a dappled, golden glow over a much larger bed with a padded headboard several pillows and a full set of colourful bedding.

Samantha lifted the blankets and sheets out of the way for him and stood by in case he needed help.

He sat on the edge of the bed and moved himself carefully to the centre, holding his precious burdens close until he could let himself down, then placed them beside him. Neither had awoken in the transfer. He smiled his thanks to Samantha as she lifted the blanket to cover their legs, stopping there when his furry hand bid her to. She gave him a small folded towel, which puzzled him. He put it behind them, against the headboard.

Then Peter gave him a broad smile and they both left the room, leaving him alone with his family again. He liked that word - "family." It was something he had never expected to have, in the true sense of the word. He was fortunate beyond anything he had dared dream.

Now he could feel the warmth of the sun on his back, a sensation that never failed to delight him. He closed his eyes and drifted into a nap.

...

When he awoke, it was because she had moved within his embrace. He looked down at her and accepted the invitation for another kiss.

"Please, help me sit up beside you," she demanded quietly.

He lifted her carefully until she could rest against the padded headboard, then sat beside her, keeping his arm behind her to support her. He put a pillow against her lower back and she sighed with relief. She held their son snuggled in the cradle of her right arm against her chest. He had been drooling on her. He gave her the small towel and she carefully wiped herself, cooing at the small, sleeping form.

Her gown had fallen open, revealing two beautiful, swollen globes. As his eyes drank in the sight, he found he could not resist. He moved his head down to the nearest breast and put his lips to its firm roundness. He kissed it gently, inhaling the scent of warm milk and his son.

She looked at him and pushed the nipple towards his mouth with her free hand.

"Please," she said. "He is not feeding enough yet. It hurts. Please."

He shivered down his length at the invitation, but could not refuse her. He carefully extended his cleft around the hard nipple, trapped it with his tongue and sucked gently. The warm fluid filled his mouth, the taste of it thrilled

him. He felt her sigh of contentment.

He felt his son move, as if in response to his own delight, and she moved the baby to her other breast, where he too began to suckle. She put her arm around his neck as she held their son in place with the other, keeping the big head and the small pressed to her breasts.

He suckled only a little, just enough to relieve her pressure, knew from their bond when she felt better. But he kept his mouth on the nipple a little longer, enjoying the warmth and an entirely different but so-wonderful scent. He felt satisfaction to his bones.

A residue of her milk still in his mouth, he moved to her lips and kissed her with gentle passion over the small form of their feeding son. He felt her delight in tasting her own milk.

She sensed something else as well. He groaned into their kiss and shuddered, felt his penis bulge from the pants opening. He quickly broke off and looked away, embarrassed. She turned his chin to face her again, looked at him with understanding.

"Don't worry, love. What you feel is natural. This has all been very hard on you."

She looked down at their son, now sleeping again, then looked back at him.

"There's a cot in this room somewhere. He should sleep for a while now. But first, you'd better diaper him."

He got up carefully and found the cot, put it next to the bed. Then he picked up his tiny son where he nestled against her breast, cupped that small bottom in his big hand, and carried the sleeping child over to the table. He placed him on a towel, but could do no more for the delight which suffused him as he drank in the sight of his son.

He put his nose into the fine, golden hair, planted the whisper of a kiss on that smooth forehead, the tiny nose, the chin. Then he moved to kiss that chest, felt his son's breathing, then that round belly full of her milk. He lifted each arm to nuzzle the tiny fingers on each perfect hand, then he kissed the dimpled knees and nuzzled each foot's curled toes.

Lastly, he kissed his son's penis, which pointed upwards at him. In response, it suddenly let out a thin stream of urine. At his chagrin, obviously transmitted along the bond, he heard her laugh from the bed.

"I told you to diaper him first," she chuckled.

He found a soft cloth and cleaned off the liquid, then found one of the tiny, colourful cloth diapers she had insisted on buying. He lifted their son's legs and positioned his bottom on it and wrapped it around, noticing with relief that it had velcro tabs and did not need safety pins. Then he carried the baby to the crib, lay him softly on his back and covered him with a blanket.

He looked over at her then. She was holding her arms out to him. He clambered onto his side of the bed and caught her in an soft embrace, felt her swollen breasts against his chest. He sighed and kissed her, nuzzling her face, that beautiful face which looked at him with such love.

To his dismay, he was again becoming aroused and he could feel it easing through the slit in the inadequate pants. He caught her humour as she realized the reason for his embarrassment.

"Let me," she whispered, mischief in her eyes as she regarded him. "It will be a while before I can do more for you. You deserve some relief. I am so lucky to have you near."

To his amazement, she put the towel over the opening in his pants and began to pleasure him. His arms dropped from her boneless, and he lay back, his claws reflexively clutching the sheets as his arousal ran along his skin like fire. He was unable to stifle a groan. He gasped for air as she continued her ministrations. He flung his head back against the bed and closed his eyes, giving himself up completely to sensation.

Glorious relief ran along his skin as his juices exploded out. He sagged, his head lolling. She captured his lips and kissed him hard. He realized she had felt his release through their bond, but felt no arousal herself. He had been told that she would not, for some time after giving birth. But it was still a shock. He had come to expect that reciprocal passion. However, he could feel her happiness at being able to pleasure him – and that soothed him.

He pulled her gently closer to his chest and sighed. She had given him so much more than he could have ever imagined in those long lonely years before she came into his life. His gratitude for the blessing of her love

washed over him.

He looked down at her, humbled by what he saw in her eyes, a reflection of his own emotions. Her voice was deep when she spoke softly.

“You are so beautiful when you look at me like that. No one could be more blessed, more loved,” she said, as she stroked his chest.

Her love heated him from within, enclosed him, soft as silk, strong as steel. He sighed deeply and they slept, the sun still warm on his back, like a benediction.

...

When he awoke, she was still asleep. He noticed the towel draped over his pants and decided he'd better clean up. He reluctantly moved away from her, transmitting calm along their bond so she would not awaken. She needed sleep far more than he.

He got up carefully, then padded to the bathroom, caught a glance at himself in the mirror and looked more closely. While he no longer avoided mirrors, he seldom used them – often forgot to. Had these latest events changed him, he wondered, as he stared at himself. His features were as usual, but there was something different. He looked completely relaxed, a little vague around the eyes. Small wonder, he thought. He realized then, that in the miracle of their perfect son, he no longer cared what he looked like.

He sighed, threw the towel into a nearby hamper, then cleaned and dried himself. He found another towel and padded back with it. He looked in the cot and noticed that their son was still asleep, his tiny lips pursed as if he were thinking. He bent down and lightly kissed the cheek turned to him.

Although he was no longer tired, he crept back into the bed and pulled a cover over them both. She sighed and awoke.

“Would you help me turn over,” she asked. He did that and she gazed for a while at their son in his cot. He felt her joy and spooned himself against her, wanting the feel of her skin against his, put his arm over her. She hugged it to her, kissed the back of his hairy hand, an old gesture that never failed to thrill him. He nuzzled her hair and kissed the neck under it.

She sighed and snuggled up against him, drifted into sleep again. He basked in her sense of peace and the contentment of their son along the bond.

The next few days and weeks would be full of new experiences, but he knew now that they would not be marked with the physical or mental distance from her that he had feared – that he had half-expected in this new reality.

He realized that their child would not, could not, prevent her from giving him the attention she knew he craved. She was now like air or water – necessary to his life, his well-being.

Their son would give them a whole new level of togetherness – although not without some challenges and sacrifices, he was sure. Their next full love-making would be a continued affirmation – and begin a new chapter in their lives. He could wait.

But something else could not. A tantalizing scent was wafting under the door making his nose twitch. He realized he had not eaten in a long time. They both needed to eat – she most of all. He carefully extracted himself from her, slid off the bed and padded to the door, his stomach now rumbling insistently, as if it had finally run out of patience.

Before he opened the door, he looked back. There was another kind of sustenance in what he saw there - and it filled him, heart and soul. His world was complete.

They were three. Forever.

END

Friends

*None are so desolate but something dear,
Dearer than self, possesses or possessed
A thought, and claims the homage of a tear.
- Lord Byron*

He sat as far forward as he could in the chair facing the window, long legs outstretched, hands relaxed on the arms, eyes closed, his head resting on the chair back. His long golden mane rippled in thick waves behind the chair.

He had given himself over wholly to the sensation of the sun on his body. He basked in the warmth heating the thin hospital gown and pants he wore. He could feel it even through the detested slit in the front of his pants – the one which would not stay closed, and had no means of keeping it so.

He never tired of being in the sun. So much of his life had been spent in candlelight and shadows. Catherine had introduced him to sunlight during those first wonderful hours when they had at last consummated their love in her apartment. Now the two loves were inextricably linked and he ached for both, remembering. They had conceived their son, somewhere in that time – a third blessing no less than the others.

They were living in the ground floor suite of the brownstone she had renovated. It was a hospital room, usually reserved for other, special patients. It was just more convenient until she was strong enough to move, able to navigate the three flights of stairs to their attic suite. This also made it easier for William to feed them and for Peter and Father to minister to her and their new son.

But there was not enough basking sunlight here – not like that he could enjoy through the skylight in their own suite. He wouldn't leave her, though, had not since the birth. Her physical presence, and that of his son – plus the joy of feeling both of them through the bond – made it impossible for him to let them out of his sight.

He gradually became aware that she was watching him, felt her feel his enjoyment of this rare treat. She was happy, and that was all that mattered to him. He projected his love along the bond and felt her sigh and drift into sleep again. He let himself nap now, ignoring the warnings that daylight always aroused in his brain – that self-defense mechanism which usually kept him below. There was nothing to fear, here in their own house.

...

A little later, he woke to the sound in the corridor and knew that Samantha was outside with a food tray. His stomach rumbled and he sighed, still reluctant to move from the kiss of the sun. He let his head fall forward and looked outside, where the tree leaves were now tinted red. It was late afternoon and would soon be dark. He would have to move. Already the warmth was less.

Samantha came in and paused. He knew that he was being observed but did not want to embarrass her by acknowledging it. Samantha had been his shadow since she was old enough to walk. He had watched her grow into a woman, now Peter's assistant. Her silence spoke volumes to him. Then he heard the soft clink as she put the tray on the small table near the bed. She left, still without saying a word. She seemed to leave a tangible sigh behind her.

He sighed now, realized he had been holding his breath. But his nose could not be denied. He got up and padded over to the table. He lifted the cover on a large tureen to discover the source of the delightful smell - a thick, beef soup. He dipped a finger in it to taste it, then again. A basket with a large assortment of warm rolls, a cheese plate with fancy carved vegetables, a platter of devilled eggs, two chocolate mousses and a pot of Earl Grey tea completed the offering.

He looked over at her and decided he'd better wake her. She needed to eat to recover her strength. In the cot next to the bed, their son slept peacefully too. She had fed him just a short while ago. The baby's satiated contentment ran along the bond.

He walked soundlessly across the room, stopping just long enough to plant a kiss on his son's rosy cheek. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and reached up to stroke her hair, plant a soft kiss on her cheek. She awakened, opened her eyes and stretched as she regarded him.

"The food of love has arrived," he told her, quietly, taking one of her hands and kissing its palm.

She curled her fingers over his hand and brought it to her mouth, kissing its hairy back and then turning it over to kiss the palm.

"Oh, something smells wonderful," she said, moving her nose along his fingers. She put one of them into her

mouth as she located the source.

"Hmmm ... William's beef soup! That man could awaken hunger in a statue."

He loved the feel of her lips on his hand, something which, along with other revelations, had evolved into this sensual private game.

Their bond now transmitted much more than emotions. During the months since they became lovers, her senses had been enhanced. She could see better, hear more and scent quite acutely. She enjoyed being able to snuffle him and know what he had been doing. The pleasure she felt at this game ensured that he never lost an opportunity to indulge it. He smiled now.

"Help me up," she said at last, looking at him suggestively.

He did so and she wrapped her arms about him, a hug that made him tingle from head to toe. He kissed her then, and her love wrapped around him, wound so tightly in his own for her that they were one. Their son was a further silken strand that bound them now. He sighed in contentment. No bonds were more welcome.

He left her mouth and looked at her, decided he did not want to let her go just yet, and carried her to a chair next to the table. He gave her another kiss as he planted her in it.

"I can walk, you know," she said, a little irked. "I must walk around or I will lose the use of my legs – to say nothing of other things."

He looked at her with pretend hurt.

"Let me pamper you a little now. Soon enough, you will have plenty to keep you fit."

He sat down next to her and they tucked into the food. Both closed their eyes in ecstasy as the flavours of William's food met their empty stomachs. By the time they reached dessert and tea, they were both comfortably full. Together they leaned back and patted rounded bellies – and laughed.

"Come," he said. "Let's sit on the couch and ruminate."

The big, overstuffed loveseat had been moved from their den down the hall because they needed a comfortable place, besides the bed, where they could sit and cuddle.

This time he held her hand and let her walk across the room. She was stronger, he could tell, almost back to normal. It would not be long before they could return to their own quarters upstairs – or their chamber below, for that matter. He almost missed the latter, but re-adjusting to a life of candlelight and shadow was getting harder and harder, the longer he stayed in the brownstone.

They had just sat down, his arm holding her against him, his nose in her hair, when Peter came in.

"Well, you two look as if you are enjoying yourselves," he remarked, walking over to them and giving her a critical eye.

"While you, on the other hand, are looking somewhat exasperated," Vincent commented.

Peter grinned. "I did want to talk to you both for a minute or two. I have been hounded by phone calls from Joe and Jenny. They both want desperately to see you both and your child. What shall I tell them?"

The two lovers looked at each other. He held her hand in his big hairy one in her lap. Looking at it, as if for the first time, it suddenly seemed out of place, foreign to her world, almost obscene. She caught that emotion and glared at him with a flash of anger.

"Don't you ever feel like that," she admonished him hoarsely. "You have done more for my world – and me – than anyone will ever know or understand. Your hands belong with me and on me. They are beautiful – and talented," she whispered, looking at him with some of her old passion. It sent a shiver up his spine.

She looked up at Peter, then, decisive. He didn't even try to argue with the resolve he could see and feel in her.

"I think it's time we introduced Joe and Jenny to our entire family, together. See if they can come over the day after tomorrow night – say around seven o'clock. We'll plan a little reception for them if Samantha can help. I think Father should be here too – and Mary. And we want both you and Samantha to attend as well, of course."

It was soon arranged and the next day, a few more household chairs were brought into the room. By early evening the next night, William had used the brownstone's kitchen to prepare a huge platter of petit fours, another with neat lines of assorted cookies - and a mountain of chocolate covered cream puffs. In honour of the occasion, he had prepared a drink of his own devising – an aromatic, citrus-flavoured tea which had become an addiction below.

The guests would, they agreed, be greeted in the living room.

Father and Mary wore their best "Above" clothing and Samantha and Peter were both wearing casually formal clothes, forsaking their clinical uniforms at last. Their hostess had decided to wear a long-sleeved, flowing dress in dark brown. She wore her crystal openly outside it. She also wore soft slippers, her feet still a little swollen. They were felt, with little brilliants and colourful beads sewn onto their tops. He thought she looked like a wood sprite and told her so as he kissed her forehead.

He had not known what to wear, but finally settled on a pair of soft leather pants and a long silk sweater in shades of gold and brown that would complement her dress. He wore a pair of dark slippers, covering his feet for the first time in days. His pouch with her rose he kept underneath his clothes, next to his skin, close to his heart.

He was nervous. Of all of them, he was the one who had most to worry about. He was the reason, after all, that she had had to give birth in the brownstone's hospital room. He was the cause of all this continual – there was no better term for it - pussy-footing around, the constant diversions that kept him safe and hidden from inquiring eyes and dangerous curiosity. He had long ago taken this kind of thing in stride, but her love had made such imperatives even more urgent - and now there was their son to consider.

She sensed his emotional upheaval and walked over to hug him as he stood nervously against the wall by the window of the hospital room, as far from the door as he could get. It was dark outside and the feel of that dark was comforting, even from inside. He found himself wishing he could put on his cloak and hide himself, as was his wont.

"Don't worry love," she admonished him. "You have nothing to fear, nothing to worry about from my friends. I don't want you to hide from them. It's time they saw the man I love. What better time than now? We have put it off long enough. Our son has proven that our love cannot be held within bounds. Neither should you be, my love."

She pulled his head down to her and kissed him on the lips, nuzzling him until he felt all fears dissolve in the heat of her love for him. He sighed.

"I know you're right," he said. "But I must remain someplace while you prepare them for me."

The front door chime rang.

"I ... I'll wait in the bathroom," he said, panic setting in.

"Very well my love. But I won't let you stay there long," she promised as she hugged him again.

He retreated into the room's large, but clinical bathroom and closed the door until just a crack remained. He wanted to be able to hear his cue – hoped he would have the courage to respond to it. It was the most difficult thing he could imagine. He sat down on the lid of the toilet seat, suddenly weak with anticipation. And waited.

He heard the doorbell and the sound of feet moving down the corridor to the living room. There were a lot of greetings and then small talk. Still he waited.

Finally, he heard the tenor of the talk change. He wondered why. Then he caught her mild anxiety, then her relief – along with something else. She was feeling smug! Shortly after that, he could feel her coming closer, followed by the rest of their guests.

The room's door opened and he caught the voices of those he knew and then the ones he didn't, obviously Joe and Jenny. The room became a little noisy and he heard laughter and then gasps of delight. He knew that she had picked up their son and was showing him off.

He could also feel that their son, unused to a crowd, was gathering breath for a cry. As if on cue, that loud, insistent bawl soon dominated the room. He wanted to run out then and gather that tiny body to him, sooth it. Instead he sent calm along the bond, knew that she felt it too and was grateful. She had been too distracted to do so.

What was she going to do now? How would she prepare her two friends for him?

Her solution to the dilemma, he found out later, had been simplicity itself. Her friends had already been prepared for him before they entered the hospital room – without any lengthy explanations on her part. A picture was indeed worth a thousand words.

He felt her approach the bathroom, still carrying their child. She opened the door and peeked around it. He was incapacitated by pure fright, knew it showed in his eyes. He felt her decision to take pity on him. She walked in then and held him lightly, their son between them. She looked up at him and smiled.

“It’s alright love. They’ve seen Kristopher Gentian’s painting, so they’ve seen you already, so to speak. They want to meet you. You’ve nothing to worry about. You are so much more beautiful – and less intense – than in that painting. Come.”

He followed her out, a little embarrassed to have to make this historic entry from the smallest room, but was immediately put at ease by what he felt around him. There were the smiles from his family and friends and he quickly located Joe and Jenny. They were a little surprised, probably by his height and build, but there was no fear, no horror, no withdrawal.

He took her arm and approached them, pulling his mouth into a mild smile – one that would not reveal his canines. They were not in shown in the painting – neither were his hands. Kristopher had put him in gloves, for some reason. He kept one arm behind her back, protectively, and the other under their son, just showing enough of it to give them time to adjust. He caught their gaze at his sharp fingernails, but they quickly looked up at him and smiled back.

He looked at Catherine then with relief then - and the look they exchanged sizzled between them.

Jenny pulled Joe to meet them. She bubbled with humour.

“Oh, Catherine, no wonder you kept him hidden away – even from me, your closest friend. ‘Course I might have tried to turn his head - but I don’t think I’d have had a chance, judging by that look he just gave you. Move away and give me room to hug this gorgeous man.”

Catherine moved just far enough aside so that Jenny could put her arms around him.

“Oh, my, he’s delicious! He feels even better than he looks.”

Laughter echoed around the room.

Vincent, his face warm, put his arms around Jenny and gave her a soft hug in return.

“Jenny, you feel pretty good yourself,” he remarked, his mouth twitching. He dipped his head over her and identified a delightful combination of scents.

“I like your perfume – hmmm, sandalwood and orange, with a hint of cinnamon – and something else, violets, I think,” he remarked.

“That’s not fair,” Jenny chided him as she let him go. “I spent a lot of money on what I was assured was a totally unique and irresistible perfume. And here you reveal it to the world in a breath. And with a voice that would melt that expensive crystal bottle they put it in.”

Guffaws broke out at this and Vincent looked around, his face hot. He ignored the compliment, as was his wont, but addressed Jenny.

“Well,” he said. “I wouldn’t dare say the perfume’s not irresistible. But I think someone else here is better placed to truly appreciate it.”

He looked at Joe, who had watched this exchange with a little jealousy and a stiff smile. Joe coloured but came forward and took Jenny’s hand.

“She’s a hard one to pin down,” he said, looking at Jenny affectionately. “So was Cathy, come to think of it. But at least I know now why I never had a chance with her. I’m so glad to meet you Vincent. You are both very special people, very lucky people. I’m honoured to be considered among your friends. We both are.”

Joe held out his hand and Vincent shook it. To give Joe credit, he didn’t even shudder.

"Well then," Vincent intoned. "We should enjoy what good friends always do – good food. Please. Our cook has outdone himself with small treats. Let's all enjoy."

He led the way to the buffet table, and quickly popped one of William's cream puffs into his mouth. He looked around and realized that Catherine had seen him. She had put their son back in his cot and was standing close by with her arms crossed, regarding him with mock disapproval.

He smiled guiltily.

"You're incorrigible," she laughed, putting her arm through his. She looked up at him with an invitation.

He accepted and bent down, planting a kiss on her mouth.

"Hmm ... you even taste good," she said, breaking off the kiss to whisper into his hidden ear. "You are delightful. Jenny was right. You look incredibly handsome tonight."

He looked down at her, whispered back.

"You my love, are more than delightful. You are my sustenance, my reason for living. Even better than William's cream puffs."

"Come," she said, sighing. "We have guests to entertain. Later, I'll show you just what you mean to me."

He snagged another cream puff as he followed her. He was trying to inhale it without being too obvious when he raised his head and caught Father's eye across the room. Humour was vying with an expression of joy - a parent's and a grandfather's love. No child of theirs would ever lack for love or the essentials, but this, their first child, was especially blessed. His eyes suddenly blurred, full of happy tears.

There was no substitute for good friends, as he knew only too well. Kristopher had given them more than just a beautiful painting – it had opened the door to friendship. Friends were as necessary as sunshine. Their son would have both.

At this thought, a single tear rolled down his cheek.

END