

Lost in the Tapestry

by Cindy Rae

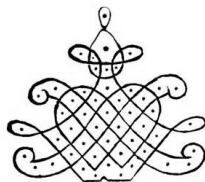


Chapter 1

Lost



*If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. –
Lewis Carroll - Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Road.

The road wavered a bit before him, then settled into firmness. For a moment, it looked like something woven out of fine cloth, the colors all from one type of palette, mostly softer hues: varying shades of white and tan with splashes of red, blue or green mixed in.

And then it didn't look that way. Then it looked real, like a winding road that snaked its way up a hill. The road was where his eyes were looking, so it was the thing he noticed first.

For a moment, it had been woven yarn. Then it was more like hard-pack mixed with stones, the image the yarn had tried to convey as it recreated a cobblestone road. A road Vincent was walking on, right now.

"...and keep thieves out of my saddle bags. It's insulting when a thief steals another thief's stuff. Makes me feel like I've been outclassed."

It was Devin's voice, though neither of them were riding the old mare that walked alongside them. Devin had her reins, and led. Vincent was simply walking at his brother's side. Both were wearing tunnel clothes.

Dreaming? Vincent's mind asked.

Of course. He was dreaming. *Must be.*

Yet even as Vincent gave himself that answer, it felt wrong, somehow. For one thing, it felt too "sudden." He was now in the middle of a conversation, not the hazy, shifting, beginning of a dream-story that might or might not make sense.

For another thing, he recognized the landscape, or at least thought he did. It looked like the tapestry. Exactly like it. Until it didn't.

Tapestry. Something about the tapestry in the Great Hall? ... Vincent struggled to remember, and couldn't.

"Where are we?" Vincent asked his brother. He nearly stumbled over one of the loose cobblestones. *Do I ever trip, in my dreams?*

Now his big toe felt a little sore. And not "dream-sore." It actually twinged, just as it would have if he'd really stumbled.

"Where we've been heading to for two hours," Devin answered.

"Don't worry. It's just over the hill. I have a few pennies left for the stable. Then we'll get something to eat."

It was broad daylight, and they were both sweating. All sweating, including the horse. *They owned a horse? But of course, the tapestry was full of those.*

In the tapestry, it was also perpetual springtime. Yet, Vincent knew that was wrong, as well. Something in his big body said "autumn" to him. "Autumn," and not the beginning of it. *Late October. Near Halloween.* Brigit O'Donnell's words came to him: *When the walls between the worlds grow thin.*

He swore that was right. Yet the springtime air was in his lungs. It carried the scent of honeysuckle.

Vincent's eyes took in the strange scene around him. Colors continued to shift some, and solidify. *The walls between the worlds grow thin, then thick again,* he thought. It was an odd conclusion, for a dreamscape.

"The sun is up and I'm out in public," Vincent said.

Even in... whatever this was, Vincent's first instinct was to be cautious. It was broad daylight. Well after noon, if the sun was any guide.

"Devin, people will see me." Vincent's worried tone conveyed his concern.

Devin smiled his easy smile.

"Yeah. Good thing it's not a beauty contest then," he jibed.

They continued up the gradual rise, the clapping of horse hooves keeping up a steady tempo. Trees on either side of the road were cleared, well back of the path itself.

Devin behaved in no way which would indicate they should seek cover.

"What *is* this place?" Vincent asked, figuring that in dreams, you often got the answers you were seeking just by asking them.

"South of Oz, North of Shangri-La," his brother answered flippantly.

"Or, if that doesn't do it for you, right smack dab in the middle of York." Devin swatted at a fly that had homed in on his neck.

"York? You mean New York?"

"King Charles is from old money, so I'd say it's 'Old York.' But you can call it 'new' if you want."

A rickety cart came over the hill and simply clattered down toward them. Devin clearly saw nothing wrong with the two of them trudging up the hill, out in the open. Vincent realized too late that his hood wasn't even up.

What is going to happen? Vincent wondered.

He was all but ignored by the family who rode by, except for a little girl on the back of the cart who pointed at him and smiled, shyly.

Vincent tracked their progress with his azure gaze. “How is it... how is it no one thinks much of my appearance?” he asked, his leonine brow knit in confusion. He even touched his gloved fingers to his face to make certain he still looked like himself. He did. Inside his mouth, his tongue checked for the fangs he already knew were there.

Devin took a pull from a waterskin before he answered.

“All kinds of people coming for this. Tourney rules. ‘Open to all’ means ‘open to all.’ You won’t be the only ... unique one here. Gossip in the last town says there will be guys from China. And some gypsies. Not to mention a voodoo priest with a big mask and a bad attitude.”

“I am a bit more... unique than someone from China,” Vincent stated. A man tugging a goat along by a length of rope passed them, following the cart. He did spare Vincent a long look. But nothing more than that.

Devin continued to prattle as they proceeded up the hill. “I hear a wizard conjured an ogre, and is entering it in the lists. Compared to that, I think you’ll kind of blend.” Devin sounded convinced, if not convincing.

Vincent stared at the landscape, which had mostly stopped shifting from “cloth” to “real.” The color scheme when it was fabric was so familiar, until that rather limited range of hues “smoothed” into

reality. Vincent only half-listened to Devin, as he watched the world around him continue to “take shape.”

“Besides,” Devin continued, “you’re not entered in the lists. I am. Now be a good squire when we get there and keep us from getting poorer, okay? I can’t be expected to win a mare *every* time I play cards.” He said it with a little pride, as he patted their companion’s neck.

Vincent took in the rather old mare and his grinning brother. “Did you cheat?” Vincent asked.

“You wound me.” Devin put his hand over his heart. “No, I didn’t cheat. I just know better than to try and fill a straight from the inside.”

They knew each other here, yet they didn’t. Or at least, Vincent felt as much. One part of his brain told him that he’d gotten up with Devin this morning and come all this way on foot, leading the mare between them as she carried their few supplies. The other part said he’d woken up in his chambers, had breakfast with William and Cullen, and then... what? Again, the blonde brow furrowed.

Devin picked up on Vincent’s frown of concern as the lion-faced man struggled to remember. Devin took Vincent’s consternation for something else.

“Don't worry, Vincent. People come from all *over* for this tourney. Distant lands, distant shores. Places most of the locals have never seen. They'll think ... whatever they want to think. That it's a mask, or that you're one of the street players. Or even just that you're not from around here.”

Not from around here is putting it lightly, Vincent thought.

The old mare whickered as Devin nudged her along. He patted her sweaty, tan neck again. "There are a lot of different types of people in the city right now. It's not like a chance to be the future king isn't a big deal. Just tell them you're from out of town. Shangri-La, maybe." He chuckled at his own humor. "They'll probably look twice, but nobody will really care."

Vincent nodded. *Yes. Of course.* Whatever vision or bit of fancy this was, though his form was still unique, he could clearly walk outside.

The rules of the dream, he thought. The answer *felt* right, even if he knew something more was going on, here.

Because again, he couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't a dream, even though it should have been. A tree at the top of the rise looked silk-stitched, and then like an actual pine. Vincent's mind reached through his confusion. The notion that this was somehow connected to the tapestry would not go away. Had he been near it? His mind struggled to remember, and couldn't.

The ground rose steeply as they crested the hill. A castle loomed large, ahead of them. Again, it looked like a woven cloth picture until he stared, and then it shimmered into realistic existence. So did the vividly blue sky behind it.



He bumped into the mare as he stared. She snorted her disgust at him, and bumped him back, a little.

"Sorry." Vincent didn't remember ever apologizing to a horse before. Or, for that matter, having been near one, outside of the carousel, or a wind-up toy he'd kept in a box of treasures.

The sway-backed mare snorted her acceptance of his apology. The odd trio continued to make its way toward the castle, and its adjoining town.

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Road.

No, not road. Barn.

His view ... wavered, for lack of any better description, and Vincent thought he seemed to "jump forward" in time, just a little. That was a thing common in dreams, too, yet this still had a different quality.

For one thing, though he could remember none of the particulars, he knew they'd just stabled the horse and had a meager meal on Devin's pocket change. He also knew they were there for the tournament, though Devin had already told him that. And he knew that he was inside the barn, arguing with Devin.

"This is foolhardy," Vincent said, aware they were in a room full of real horses this time, and not the carousel variety. He thought he recognized an almost pure white one with dark eyes from the Great Hall tapestry. She all but batted her long eyelashes at him.

Again, he was aware he was in the "middle" of a scene, rather than in its beginning.

"I'll say it's stupid," Devin answered. "Do you see how much they want for a decent room? Tournament prices!" His tone conveyed his disgust. "We'll bed down here in the stable. There's always room in the loft."

Devin was in the middle of unpacking their saddlebags. There was a bedroll for each of them, already untied from the worn saddle. Some few articles of clothing. Not much more.

"I mean being here," Vincent clarified. "It is foolish to be here. We should be back home. Safe."

For some reason, he knew asking Devin for more details about this place would do him no good. For one thing, Devin had already answered those questions and more, in that space of time he didn't remember living through: They were here as part of one of Devin's schemes. He was entered in the tourney, falsely posing as a lesser knight. Vincent was to act as his squire, to support the ruse. There

was money involved, and the chance for a little adventure, for Devin. Of course.

Devin's voice conveyed his customary disdain for caution. "You want us to leave now? And miss all the fun? That's so like you, Vincent. So like Father, too."

It was? Vincent's mind still scrambled over why this scene seemed so dream-like, yet wasn't. Was there a deeper purpose to this flight of fancy? Or was that the point of being here, if there was a "point" at all? So he could have an adventure with Devin, the kind he hadn't been able to have after Devin had left? Was that what he was supposed to do in this odd place? Have "fun" with Devin?

Perhaps this is a dream after all. It must be.

But again, the impression that this was no dream, no wispy bit of subconscious night vision, persisted. For one thing, he could smell the horses, and, to no small degree, Devin. Vincent knew his dreams didn't convey scent, at least not like this. He remembered the smell of honeysuckle on the road. And if what just dropped out of the white horse was any indication, the smells in here were about to get a whole lot stronger.

"And what is it we intend to do once this... tournament starts?" Vincent asked. He had no clear idea what they were getting into, exactly, but maybe if he asked enough questions he could sort it out.

"What we planned on. I'm Sir Devin." He placed one hand over his chest. "At least when anybody else is in earshot, that's what you call me. And you're my trusty squire." Devin tugged a passable cape out of his bedroll. It would cover his less-than-high-class clothes, some.

"Passing me off will get me a few entries in the lists, and I'll make us some pocket money." Devin smiled broadly, already anticipating the fun to be had in his new identity.

For the first time, Vincent noticed a poster pasted up on one of the support beams of the barn. "Tourney open to all!" its red letters screamed. There was a picture of a knight on horseback, as well as two men skirmishing with swords, in the foreground.

Vincent eyed their unpacked gear. Nothing large enough to be a sword seemed like it was in there.

"You're not going to beat a field of challengers, Devin." Vincent's voice held a note of caution.

Devin chuckled at the idea. "Of course I'm not. But I'm going to beat a few of them, before the heavy armor hits the field. There's a small purse for each match I win."

"Enough to cover your medical expenses?" Vincent asked. *Fine. If this was some sort of misbegotten fantasy, he would go with it.* Trying to sort out other particulars was doing him no good anyway.

At least someone was cleaning up after the horse.

"Barely enough for bread," Devin replied. "But it's not the *purse*, Vincent. It's the side betting. I'll bet on me and rake in some cash for us both." He lowered his voice, even as the barn emptied of other tourney-goers. "Then, when I figure we've gone far enough, you bet against me and I'll throw the match."

Ah. Typical Devin. Always a bit of an angle to play.

"No." Vincent knew better than to get tangled up with one of Devin's schemes.

"Come on. Everybody does it. I'll let you keep half." He set a blanket on a nearby bench, sure he could convince Vincent to join him.

If history was any guide, he was right.

"Besides, who knows?" The elder Wells brother pulled a familiar copy of A Tale of Two Cities out of a bag. "Maybe I'll fall into the lap of a certain princess." He said it with a wink and a grin, and Vincent knew he wasn't serious. Or at least, he hoped he wasn't.

"Don't even joke," Vincent chided.

"She's rich. Very. And an only child. And I never joke about money."

King Charles. Wealthy, with an only child for an heir. Vincent began to connect some very particular dots.

Devin pulled out a piece of paper he'd folded and tucked inside the book.

Without knowing why or how, Vincent suddenly knew they were both speaking about Catherine. Devin passed the paper to Vincent. It was another advertisement for the tournament, and from the looks of it, it had been ripped off a tree. A drawing of the castle loomed, with the dates of the days dedicated to the fighting. The second week in April. It was indeed springtime. A soft image of a very distant princess was outlined in the window of one of the higher towers.

Yes. It was her. Catherine. He'd know the shape of that profile anywhere.

Her hand in marriage was promised to the victor.

"Can't really tell from this picture, but they say she's pretty. Think she is?" Devin asked.

"What is the meaning of this?" Vincent responded, the sensation that this was not a dream suddenly seeming far more persistent. And important.

"It's what we came all this way for." Devin shrugged. "Don't worry. Tourney's open to all, no matter what. Even the commoners. Saying we have land is just a way to get me clear of some of the cheaper fights. No sense getting bruised up wrestling a bunch of farm hands."

Vincent took in the poster again. Marriage to the princess was being offered to the final winner of the games at the end of the week. It kept with some sort of tradition, having something to do with her age. Vincent furrowed his brow.

This all feels so wrong, yet so... real.

Still holding the paper, he sat down on a bench near the stall where the tan mare now whickered. The plank felt hard, and it bowed with his weight. That seemed like too much detail for a dream, especially one he didn't think he was having, anyway.

All of the other men in the stable had left to tend to their business. It was time for the evening meal, and in many of the inns both the drinking and the betting were about to start. Vincent wasn't sure how he knew that. He just did.

Bread and circuses. No. That's Roman. This is medieval.

"We should not be here. I should not be here," Vincent said.

"We shouldn't be anywhere else," Devin shot back. "Come on, Vincent, have a little faith. The purses can get huge as the tourney goes along. The betting is insane."

The rough wood of the bench was dry. A splinter jabbed itself into Vincent's finger as he gripped the edge, paper still in hand. He swore the blood was real, as was the sting. Even though it was an inconsequential wound, it sharpened his awareness. *What was going on here?*

Suddenly, he became worried for Devin. If Vincent could get hurt...

"Bet then. But don't fight," Vincent urged.

"I have to fight. We need money to stake a bet, so I need the purse from the first match. Don't worry. I know what I can handle." He was his usual, overconfident self.

Vincent tried to absorb it all. They were entering a tournament for Catherine's hand, where Devin would fight and Vincent would do... what? Nothing? It seemed beyond wrong. *Wake up. It's time to wake up.* But he knew he wouldn't. Devin simply continued to regard him.

Where is Catherine? Is she in the castle? Is she near?

"This isn't a game, Devin." Of that, Vincent was increasingly certain.

"Pardon you, but I don't think you've looked up the definition of 'tourney,' lately," Devin riposted. "Don't worry. Lady Catherine has enough coin to keep me interested."

"You'll risk your neck for her for her money then." Vincent's tone conveyed his displeasure. He held his hand out for emphasis. The one with the bleeding finger.

"Might as well. She has enough of it." He shrugged.

"I pray you lose then." Catherine's calm voice came unexpectedly from the barn doorway.

Vincent felt almost as if thinking of her had conjured her. Her soft yellow dress was form-fitting to the waist, then gorgeously layered, as it fell to her ankles. There were two guards with her. And the look in her green eyes was... unforgiving.

Devin turned toward her silk-clad form, all easy charm and smiles.

"Princess. Your visit is ... unexpected," Devin said.

"Apparently." Catherine swept into the considerably less than regal space, her presence somehow elevating it to a higher status just by her being there.

"I hope you have your funeral planned." She was clearly not in the mood to suffer fools gladly. "If Sir Stephen doesn't kill you, Sir Elliot will."

Well, that was blunt. Vincent thought.

"Yet here I am. Sir Devin of... Deep Haven," Devin introduced himself.

Vincent would have bet the blanket he seemed destined to sleep on that Devin had just made up the name.

"And I'm willing to risk all for your ... *lovely* hand." Devin extended his own, but she withheld hers.

"Deep Haven?" She arched a finely sculpted – and very familiar-eyebrow. "I've never heard of it. And 'risk all for my bank account,' you mean." Her eyes flashed a bit of emerald fire. She hadn't so much as spared a glance for Vincent.

"A lot of people have never heard of it. Deep Haven is ... small." Devin gave Vincent a wink. "Barely more than a hole in the ground."

Catherine seemed disinterested in his description as she brushed his words aside. "I came to ask you to reconsider fighting. I'd like you to withdraw your name."

Good. That makes two of us, Vincent thought, wiping his finger on his pants. The wound was inconsequential.

Devin chuckled openly at her request, a somewhat dangerous thing to do around royalty. He shook his head "no."

Catherine's expression took on the displeased visage of a wealthy woman not used to being refused.

She continued to ignore Vincent completely, a thing he found beyond strange, and fixed her attention solely on his older brother. She gave Devin a long, measuring look.

Then she took in the mare, appraising it as the farm animal past its prime that it was, and Devin as worth not much more, financially.

"I came here to see if I could talk some of you into withdrawing, try to save your necks. Now I find I might enjoy the sight of you being knocked on your butt."

She still refused to acknowledge Vincent, who was startled both to hear her use the mildly inappropriate term and to hear her use modern language. Shouldn't they be saying "Thee" and "Thou" here? Yet they weren't. Vincent realized they hadn't been, even as he'd been walking with Devin up the road.

Catherine's withering glance continued to assess Vincent's irrepressible brother. Devin gave her his best "handsome rogue" grin.

"You may want to rethink who to cheer for, Lady. I'm not like the others, the ones who *claim* to love you but are here for your money, just like I am. You'd have freedom with me."

"Freedom?" The eyebrow lifted again.

"Freedom." He held his arms out, expansively. "The very best thing in the whole world to have. I'm here to win your money. I admit that. But I'm not here to tie you down." He was all disarming guile. "And I won't be around much, after the wedding. Just now and then."

Catherine's expression showed her disbelief at his cheekiness.

He moved to step closer to her but the advance of her guards made him think twice about that. Still, Devin stood his ground.

"I like to come and go," he continued smoothly. "Marriage to you won't change me." He was blithely supercilious with Catherine's royal self. Vincent realized that Devin was enjoying needling her.

Her disparaging look could have leveled a building. *Or a keep*, Vincent thought.

"That's arrogant. And you offer me just as much of a sham as the others." She was dismissive. And she'd still barely given Vincent a look.

"Perhaps it is a sham. But it's a *better* sham. Think about it," Devin offered, still teasing. Probably.

Catherine gave her regal head a tilt. "It does not bear thinking on." She eyed his leather vest and boots. Both were of second-hand quality, in spite of the cape that tried to cover the former. "But on the off chance you deserve to be saved, that someone would mourn your passing..." at that, she actually *did* glance Vincent's way for a second, "I do ask that you remove your name from the lists." Her green eyes held Devin's brown ones steadily.

"Why?" It was Vincent who asked it.

She shot Vincent a look that suggested it was impertinent for someone of his station to speak to her, unbidden. But she did deign to answer, though the information was for both the Wells brothers.

"Pretenders fare badly here. The unlanded men are barely foot soldiers. The nobles, the ones who really stand a chance in this, are... uncompromising. Sir Stephen has a twelve-foot long lance, and a better horse than yours. So does Elliot. So do Tom de Gunther, and half a dozen others. Better horses. Better armor, better weapons. And a better squire." She raked Vincent with eyes that were not unkind, but which were uncompromisingly truthful.

Devin leaned forward as far as the guards would allow.

"Perhaps Sir Stephen's big lance is a way of overcompensating for what he lacks... somewhere else."

He was clearly trying to rile her. Vincent wasn't sure if he was succeeding. Or if that was a good idea.

"He will kill you. If you make it that far." Catherine clearly wasn't rising to the bait.

"Yet the competition is open to all," Devin nudged.

She drew in a deep breath, as if she were explaining something to a simpleton. "That is tradition, not reality. Commoners do not win, 'Sir' Devin. It just preserves the illusion of everyone having an equal chance."

"But we don't, do we?" Devin acknowledged it as he stepped away from her. "I don't need an illusion, Princess. I'm the cleverest rogue on the field."

"Sir Tom keeps a knife up his sleeve," she prodded.

"So do I. And I know how to throw mine," Devin answered.

But Catherine was persistent in trying to get him to withdraw. For whatever reason, it seemed important to her that he not be hurt.

"And when you miss? Or hit his armor, or his shield, and it bounces to the ground? What will you defeat him with then, 'Sir Devin of Deep Haven'? Your devilish smile?"

He crossed back over to her and leaned in again, as close as the guards would permit. This whole scene was so wrong that Vincent wanted to scream at it. Roar at it. Whichever.

"At least you've noticed I have one. Promise to cheer for me? A little bit?"

Vincent was disgusted. And still confused. This was no dream. But what was it?

Catherine's expression was similar to Vincent's. "It won't matter if I do. And no, I won't."

Vincent watched her. She moved with familiar elegance and grace. For that matter, every subtle thing about her reminded him of his Catherine: the tilt of her head, the set of her shoulders, the color of her hair... She *was* his Catherine, yet ... she wasn't.

"Why care?" Devin seemed curious about that. "Why does the great Princess Catherine care which idiot wins her?" Devin asked. It was something Vincent wanted to know, as well. Was her heart the same as his Catherine's?

"It... it isn't who wins that concerns me." She said it with the kind of forthright honesty Vincent knew he admired in her. "It's who loses, and what it may cost them. Calling it a 'tournament' or a 'contest' doesn't make it less bloody."

She was emphatically trying to appeal to both of them. Vincent saw the concern in her lovely eyes.

"I've seen games like this before," she explained. "Common men beat each other down, and the wealthy sit and bet, until they enter the lists

themselves. The poor don't stand a chance against the rich. You'll be badly hurt. Possibly maimed. Killed, even. It's been known to happen." She was being honest. She was being Catherine.

"Are you warning everyone?" Devin asked.

"Just the commoners," she stated with characteristic candor. "The rich can take care of themselves."

"Ah, the commoners. So... that would be me, Sir Joseph Maxwell..."

"Joseph Maxwell is the captain of the palace guards and is known simply as Joe. He does not pretend he holds land, 'Sir' Devin." The charge that he was a fraud was obvious, as was the fact that she wasn't fooled.

"My lands are far away. And um... hard to reach," Devin said. Devin Never gave up on a good con until he had to.

She folded her arms. The hands were ringless, but the nails were impeccably manicured. They looked so familiar. Again, she was his Catherine, in her way.

"Did you leave your armor there?" Her derision was plain to hear.

"What you're wearing will not save you."

This Catherine had a sarcastic streak. Or perhaps both Catherines did, and this one was simply using it to try and convince Devin to quit.

"What I'm wearing is lighter. It lets me move faster."

"It is clothing. Elliot Burch's longsword will take off your arm."

Even though he'd insulted her by admitting he was courting her for her money, she was truly concerned for him. Her guards were standing near, but it was clear she was unafraid as she moved around the barn.

There is strength in you. I feel it. It was an impression that came to Vincent, even here.

And the scene was still so wrong it made his great jaw tighten. How could she not know him? How could she even be involved in something as ridiculous as a fight for her hand?

She turned back toward her guards and the topaz clip that held her hair up and away from her face gave him a hint. It had taken him a moment to realize: Her face was flawless. She bore no scar. She was the perfect princess, here.

Devin casually called after her. "I'll take my chances, Lady Catherine. You might wager a coin or two on me." She turned again. He gave her his most outrageously handsome smile. The Devin Smile. The one that had disarmed too many people to count. "It will increase your wealth, after all," he added.

"More money. Just what I need." Her voice dripped irony. Now she *was* being sarcastic. Openly.

"How easy it is to knock it when you already have it," Devin returned, giving her one biting remark for another.

Were they actually arguing with each other? Vincent held his tongue, knowing somehow that shouting at her about anything would do no good.

Her eyes looked tired, then resigned.

"'Easy' is the last thing it has been," she said, in a voice that was almost a confiding one. Vincent believed her. Devin's eyes flickered. Perhaps he believed her, too. At least a little.

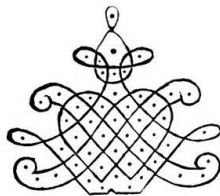
Her expression softened to one who was asking for a favor. "At least tell the others who stay here that I hope they will leave, for their own sakes. Will you do that for me?"

Vincent nodded, but Devin, for some perverse reason, seemed to want to vex her.

"Even if I do, they won't quit, Princess. Or at least, most of them won't. Some believe the illusion of equality your people are selling them. Others..." He let his voice trail. "Well. Others have their own agenda." He included himself in that description.

She gave her head a tilt, as if she were considering something. "I might have you arrested." She said it with no heat, but no humor either. They all knew it was an empty threat. Still, she pushed the threat Devin's way. "It will save me time in the royal box, if nothing else. You're a fraud, 'Sir' Devin." Her voice mocked the title as she turned to go.

"Well, yes. But I'm a very *good* fraud, Lady." Devin got in the last word.



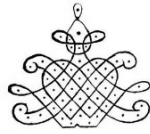
Lost In The Tapestry

Chapter 2

Wanderer



One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. "Which road do I take?" she asked. "Where do you want to go?" was his response. "I don't know," Alice answered. "Then," said the cat, "it doesn't matter." -Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.



Vincent woke up to realize he was exactly where he'd lain down; he was in a loft over a room full of horses. Horses who had been fed dinner, then left in a stable all night. The stench was pungently ripe.

So much for that hope, he thought.

Part of him had hoped that perhaps sleep would find him back in his own bedroom. He doubted it would, but it was his last avenue to pass all this off as some sort of amazing dream.

But, no. His back was stiff, there was straw in his mane despite the blanket he'd used, and Devin was suiting up and giving instructions from below. Vincent took in the scene, now certain that whatever *this* was, he was here for the duration, whatever *that* was.

He wondered just how he'd come to be here, and how to leave. Was there something he had to do here? Something he had to find out? A place he had to go? A mirror to break somewhere, so a spell could be broken? Or made?

He had no idea. He only knew that Devin was fussing at him to get a move on, and there were only trail mix bars for breakfast.

One step at a time, he thought.

Even though Devin wasn't slated to enter the field until late in the afternoon, he wanted to be there early. It would allow him to not only size up the competition, but make a few wagers, mostly on himself.

“Put the bridle on ... Rosinante there, and bring her with us to the field,” Devin instructed.

“Not the saddle?” Vincent asked.

“There’s no need. I’m not going to ride her, Vincent. I’m not even sure if I could,” he answered honestly, eyeing the sway of her back and the age of her teeth. A farm animal. Definitely a farm animal. The last thing she’d ever done of merit was plow a field. Probably not a very straight one.

“We’ll put the blanket on her back to hide some of her more obvious... imperfections,” Devin explained, eying the sway of her spine. “I’m going to come in with her, and stand near her. It’s an implied threat, and why I won’t have to fight until late afternoon. I’ll outrank most of the villagers and farm hands by title, and the unverified knights on foot by default.”

Vincent nodded at the merits of the plan. Of the two of them, Devin obviously knew far more about being a fraud.

“I take it you’ve done this before,” Vincent commented, sweeping the blanket over the mare.

“What? Passed myself off as a knight to enter a tournament? Not once. Passed myself off as somebody I wasn’t, and convinced everyone?” Devin gave him a brilliant smile. “All the time, little brother. All the time.”

The first day of fighting went fairly well, all things considered. They arrived well after the earliest matches, Devin insisting that a “minor noble” would be incurious about what went on with the “rabble.”

The farm hands and stable boys Devin didn't want to bother with mostly cleared themselves out of the way, as the morning gave way to the heat of afternoon.

The lower classes fought and sweated in the sand of the tourney field, and Vincent recognized several faces among them. A gypsy brawled with Red, one of Jason Walker's men. Someone from the deaf gang Laura had once been a part of took on a man Vincent didn't know. Street toughs he thought he recognized fought with members of Shake's gang. It was bare-knuckled brawling, wrestling, and whatever martial arts skills Red had brought to the game. The winner could advance, if he chose to.

Though Princess Catherine and her father were in attendance in the royal box, the stands, Vincent noted, were barely half full. Those in cheap seats were mostly common people. The nobles had little care for what were clearly the lower-class games, and the vendors sensed few coins to be made, here.

Fist fights and wrestling matches in the dirt were not what most of the populace wanted to see. They could see that at home. Still, opening day was opening day, and there was a certain “festival” atmosphere to be had.

The king's banner flew on a nearby pole, the golden scales of Justice on a background of midnight blue.

Vincent wondered if the king owned a statue similar to Vincent's own, and concluded he probably did.

Catherine, gorgeous in bronze-colored satin, sat next to her father in a throne-like chair, though the latter clearly paid only so much attention to the day's proceedings. One of his pages bestowed a small purse on the winner of each match.

The scattered crowd applauded, sometimes with enthusiasm, if the fight had been a good one.

Vincent thought he recognized some of the faces of Helpers, in the crowd. It was hard to tell, given that many of the spectators were a bit distant. Like most people in the games, Devin and he had had to wait at one end of the field, standing either amongst other contestants or near the horses, under a great striped canopy. The nicest thing Vincent could say about their accommodations was that at least they were in the shade. Mostly.

Devin came to the lists as the afternoon waned, and beat his first opponent, a man Vincent swore he'd seen before but couldn't place, at first. Then he remembered. Naj. The man who'd preyed on children.

He was fearsome to a child, but a coward as a man. Slender and pock-marked, he was agile but not strong. Devin threw a roundhouse punch that sent him into the dirt, much to the cheers of the scattered crowd. It seemed Naj was disliked here as much as he was elsewhere.

Devin's second opponent was drunk by the time the match came around, and that was a forfeit. Devin seemed disappointed by the outcome, and stopped long enough to whisper a threat into the drunk

man's ear. His name was Eddie, and he was too intoxicated to mount the horse he'd brought, a gelding wrapped in circus colors. He'd sat down heavily on the mounting steps, too drunk to even stand. Devin had grabbed his lapels and said his piece.

Vincent didn't recognize him. Something about Charles the Dragon Man, perhaps? That seemed right. Was Charles here? Vincent looked around, and prayed that he wasn't.

Devin looked disappointed that he hadn't gotten a chance to punch Eddie, at least once. He collected the purse, anyway.

Vincent noticed that the areas he moved through had stopped "shifting" from cloth to real, and simply remained part of the landscape to his eyes. Whatever this was, it seemed he was becoming more accustomed to it.

Time, similarly, did not "skip" so drastically or so often. He'd "jumped" from one fight to the next, once, and later found himself under the canopy, watering the mare with a bucket he didn't remember picking up. Neither leap forward seemed drastic.

The late afternoon sun beat down on the field, either way. As he patted the mare's sweaty neck, he "sensed" that time, like the landscape, was "settling in" around him. It felt soothing, and like it left his nerves less jangled. He could explain it no better than that.

Either he was becoming a part of this place or he was learning to accept it more readily. He had no idea which one was more true, or if either was. Being with Devin seemed right. And if having dust in his nose from what got kicked up in the fighting felt uncomfortable, it also felt familiar. Life Below was often dusty, if nothing else. It was a

strange predicament, where certain things about being here felt wrong, yet others felt unerringly familiar.

He watched one fight between two members of the Tong get "called" for failure to engage. One had only so long to size up an opponent before a referee stepped in and declared the fight null, apparently. Rotten vegetables flew after that one.

He also saw two people he didn't know throw awkward punches until they both simply became too tired to fight anymore and a draw was called. The day felt increasingly long. Whatever this was, for the moment, it seemed to be playing itself out in "normal" time, as much as it could.

Vincent tasted the dust in his mouth, both the dust the fighters kicked up and the sheen of dirt that seemed to hang over the common crowd like a thin cloud. He knew this was too real for dreaming, or even hallucinating. For whatever it was worth, he was here. He knew it.

He did get a few looks from the other people, but Devin was right. For the most part, he was dismissed as a lower-class being. Poor. Untitled. Without rank, or position. Odd, but not unwelcome. Devin's servant. A "squire" at best, and not much of one at that, just as Catherine had said. People gave him a hard glance, eyed his patchwork clothing, and then looked away, dismissing him as unimportant.

It was a strange kind of invisibility, in its way, one many economically disadvantaged people could relate to. It was a thing he'd never felt before, and a thing he realized Catherine (neither of them) had never experienced a day in her life.

Mrs. Dalby was wiping down the rails and steps that led to the royal box, her black skin gleaming in the sun. Vincent was fairly positive no one noticed her, despite the brightly colored wrap she used to keep the dirt out of her hair. Other servants scurried about the box and the stands, equally unobtrusively.

Is it class that makes us invisible to each other, or is it something else? Vincent pondered, glad the long day at the field was finally starting to wind down. He had no real answers. But he knew the questions were important.

Still, after the day's fighting drew to a close and the crowd dispersed, Vincent's innate sense of caution prompted him to keep his hood up as they stabled Devin's 'mount' then went for a walk in search of dinner.

The two brothers moved through the crowded, cobblestone streets, part of the ebb and flow of humanity around them. Conversation buzzed its low hum, and cooking smells came from several of the doorways.

Vincent was careful out of habit and a sense of self-protection, as much as anything else. Yet here again, his large self attracted some sidelong looks, but no real questions, or comments. A street performer gave him a wink and mentioned "nice get-up," while a man with several children simply remarked, "It takes all kinds."

Devin threaded his way easily through the crowd with Vincent in tow, and Vincent realized that his brother had clearly been here before. That sounded right. This Devin, just as he'd told Princess Catherine, moved around frequently. He seemed to know where they were

headed without having to ask for directions. Vincent simply followed his lead.

“Devin, is Charles here?” Vincent remembered to ask as they wound their way through the streets in search of a meal.

“King Charles? Here?” Devin looked around as if he thought Vincent had spotted the monarch. He hadn’t. “No, it’s the princess who sometimes goes out among the commoners,” Devin answered. “The king rarely does.”

“No, not the king. Charles. Your Charles. The Dragon Man. Is he here?”

“Why in hell would I bring him here?” Devin asked, as if Vincent were quite mental. “It’s enough I got to threaten Eddie a little, and watch him embarrass himself. I keep Charles away from him, just in case. He’s back home, Vincent, don’t worry. He’s safe.” Devin patted his brother’s shoulder.

“Back in... ‘Deep Haven,’” Vincent confirmed.

Devin shot him a look at the use of the fabricated name. “Back in the tunnels, sure.”

So those existed here, too. Yet this was clearly a place for those who lived Above. At least this part of it was.

That might explain why all the people Vincent saw that he knew were either topsiders or Helpers, but no Tunnel dwellers, other than himself and Devin, who could barely be counted as that, given his love for travel.

“C’mon, I’m starving,” Devin prodded as they walked. “There used to be a decent inn, this way. Well, not too decent. But the kitchen was clean enough and the food was okay last time I was through here. And it was cheap. Let’s go.”

If this isn’t a dream, what is it? If it didn’t it stop when I “woke up” this morning, how do I get it to do that? Vincent asked himself for at least the fifth time that day.

Devin wove them through bustling streets. Vincent recognized some faces from the park, and again, a Helper here and there. No one seemed to recognize him.

Devin was dirty, only a little sore, and in good spirits, holding a much larger purse, though the coins were mostly copper. He’d used the horse as collateral to bet on himself. If nothing else, they should be able to eat better that night.

“It is crowded,” Vincent commented, not sure he liked this press of humanity.

“Wait a couple days. The population of the city will double by the time the swords and lances hit the field.”

As they pressed on through a serpentine-like alleyway, Vincent realized that he better understood the nature of Catherine's warning to Devin about the dangers inherent in the fights.

With each group of matches, the combatants seemed either larger, or better skilled with whatever small weapon the early fighting allowed, or both. Vincent and Devin had stayed until the last match. One of the Silks had squared off against Shake, the man Vincent had tried to

save from a bomb blast. Both had knives. Once again, Shake went down into the dirt and didn't get back up. Vincent didn't know if the wound was mortal or not. But he knew Shake was dead back in Vincent's own world.

King Charles Chandler had spent most of the day seated next to his daughter as the action unfolded on the field. Courtiers had milled about him, and he often simply ignored the fighting among the lowborn men on the field to engage in conversation with the people near him. His daughter, however, had looked on with worry. She clearly did not like this. She also was clearly a part of it.

No one behaved as if this were an unusual way for her to secure a husband. Indeed, this was somehow seen as something she had to do, like it was part of her birthright to watch men scrambling over themselves for her wealthy attention. The scattered commoners in the stands were clearly entertained by the spectacle. Vincent very much doubted that Catherine was.

It was like this in your world, too, wasn't it? Vincent had thought as he'd gazed at her. *Men trying to outmaneuver each other so they could get next to you. Other people watching, talking about it.*

He remembered the times her face had appeared in the newspaper, sometimes in the society pages. *It's more literal here, but the dynamic isn't so different. They compete for you. Others gossip about it, like it's some kind of sport. Was that what it was like, Catherine? Some huge... spectacle with you at the center, unable to stop any of it?*

The fact that the princess hadn't enjoyed herself wasn't lost on him. Perhaps Catherine hadn't enjoyed it back in their world very much either, he realized.

The fact that the tourney contestants were largely drawn to the princess thanks to her wealth was clearly part of this, her money as undeniable a fact as her position, or her beauty. His own Catherine's situation was markedly similar. Neither Catherine seemed fond of certain things her wealth caused. The princess had told Devin as much. The look on her face as the fighting had gone on had simply confirmed it.

"Ah, here we are." Devin's declaration interrupted Vincent's musings. They were in front of a low, nondescript building with a narrow door. People milled all around, some of them entering, while others left the establishment.

"You want to go in, or wait for me here?"

The fact that Vincent could enter a public building was still a thing that astounded him. It also left him uncomfortable. Four close walls felt very much like a trap.

"I will wait outside," Vincent decided. The low-ceilinged, square building didn't look like a place he would be comfortable standing in. Vincent avoided it on instinct.

Is that why I don't enter her apartment unless I have to? Vincent asked himself. *The ... square-ness of it feels like a cage?*

He had never bothered to define just why stepping across her threshold gave him a vague sense of disquiet. Was that part of it?

Having been raised in the tunnels, he associated the straight lines of constructed rooms with a certain sense of claustrophobia, an impression of feeling “hemmed in.” He wasn’t sure if that had anything to do with why he’d entered Catherine’s apartment so seldom. He’d never thought about it before. He only knew the pub, with its narrow door and very low roof, didn’t seem like the place for him.

“Okay. I’ll be right back. Try not to get into trouble,” Devin instructed with a grin. It was a teasing kind of advice, with Devin clearly in a good mood after his day’s winnings.

Vincent waited outside as Devin secured their dinner. A few more customers flowed in and out of the establishment, one of them a young woman in the daring, low-cut costume indicative of a prostitute. Vincent recognized her brunette curls and fair skin from the park. Some things, he realized, didn’t change much.

Other people passed by him on the evening street as well, many of them families or young couples out for an evening’s stroll. The city was filling, as Devin said, thanks to the goings on at the tourney field. The tournament was the common subject of conversation, and snippets of passing chatter reached Vincent’s ears.

“...but the early fights were good...”

“Early fights are crap. Wait until the halberds come out. Then you’ll see something.”

“She sure is pretty. Wonder how much that gown cost?”

“... gotta get married some time. She’s gettin’ up there, for a first-time bride.”

“Charles wants to be a grandfather before he’s too old to enjoy it.”

“... like her hair better when she has it down, or up?”

“... I want a jeweled comb like that.”

“I wonder how much money she has...”

“What would you get if you could buy anything you wanted?”

The fragments of street talk flowed over Vincent, almost making him feel as if he were back home in the Whispering Gallery, with its myriad sounds.

It was a comfortable way to pass the time, but as the chatter about Catherine and her father continued, Vincent realized some of the cost the wealthy and privileged paid for their fame. Her name was bandied about. So was her father’s. Comments about her hair, her clothes, her prospects for marriage. Celebrity made her fodder for the conversation of strangers. She was like an object they could pick up, inspect, comment on, then put back down again.

Had it been like that for his Catherine, back in New York? It couldn’t have been... yet, again, on some level he knew that it had been. In New York, like here, Catherine Chandler had been gossiped about.

His own life was almost astonishingly anonymous, by comparison. While that had been by design, of course, it also had kept him from understanding certain aspects of Catherine’s life.

The Catherine in his world, like this one, was a beautiful woman and heir to a fortune. She'd made the papers when "Gunther's girlfriend" had gone missing, and then society pages when she'd stepped out with Elliot Burch. She was known for being Charles Chandler's daughter. In either realm, she seemed identified by her association with the men in her life and the money she had, and not so often for her own merits as a person.

Do you know they talk about you, Catherine? Do you know they remark about what you're wearing and how much it costs? About how much you have and how much more you'll get? And nothing about you, your kindness and your goodness? Do you know? Does it make you sad? Did it make you sad back in New York? Did you have to learn to ignore it, so that it did not consume you?

Vincent listened some more as he waited for Devin to emerge with the food. Many of the comments centered on the amount of money King Charles was worth, and by extension, Catherine's "value" as a bride. Though it seemed his kingdom was not large geographically, it was a wealthy one. Powerful men came here to do business, knowing Charles and his laws would see them treated fairly. Charles seemed well-liked, or at least well-admired for his business acumen, which was considerable.

Vincent realized how many of the conversations about Princess Catherine revolved around silly things, and again he chafed at that. Whether or not she wore her hair up or down seemed a topic of some consideration, in addition to the color of her gown and the detail work embroidered down the sleeve, or whether or not she looked better in a square neckline or a round one. It all seemed so... inconsequential,

in subject. And almost as if she were being dissected by strangers: picked apart and turned over, as if she were something they owned, that they could either praise or criticize, as they wished.

None of them seemed to wonder if she was marrying for love. But of course, she wasn't, so there was no reason to discuss it.

There is so much more to her than you can see, he thought.

Devin eventually emerged with a hot meal contained in a metal pail. Vincent walked in an introspective silence as they returned to the stables and made their way to their very modest quarters, noting others had done much the same.

Some, the beaten ones, packed for home. Others sat down on the benches with plates similar to Vincent and Devin's own.

The brothers ascended to the loft and settled down to eat. It was just a simple stew, and Vincent couldn't identify the gamey meat in it, but the gravy was thick, the vegetables fresh, and it was filling enough.

Vincent toyed with the idea of telling Devin that he was not "from" here, that this was all some strange kind of vision to him. But the flavor in his mouth was real, and even had a touch too much pepper. How to even bring up that a part of him didn't believe this was real was beyond him. Plus, he couldn't explain the part of him that knew it *was* real, even as he knew it was impossible.

So he decided against conversation and simply ate with his brother, enjoying the companionship of Devin's steady presence. Whatever this place was, Devin was a part of it, just as he was, now.

The meal passed quickly. Devin stacked the mess to one side.

“The tourney starts a little later, tomorrow. Opening day was early thanks to the pageantry. You can walk around some, in the early part of the day, if you want.” He handed Vincent some coins.

“Where would I go?” Vincent asked, still utterly unaccustomed to this type of freedom.

“Anywhere,” Devin shrugged. “There’s a good bookstore near the center of the village. A decent park that runs practically right up to the palace. You pick. Just be at the field a little after lunchtime. Then back again by late afternoon.”

“That’s when you will fight?”

“That’s when I will win us some more money.” He shook the now heavier bag. His side bets had paid off nicely.

“Devin...” Vincent’s voice held a note of caution.

“Get some sleep. Tomorrow is another one,” Devin advised, straightening out his blanket.

“I don’t like this. Don’t like this for you.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I can handle. And a childhood spent wrestling you and Winslow gave me some advantages,” he quipped.

“Don’t lose any sleep. We’ll be long gone before it gets too serious out there.”

“The man they called Shake might not agree with you.”

“The man they called Shake was way overconfident. That isn’t me.” Devin tugged off his well-worn boots.

“Isn’t it?”

“Vincent, I promise you I haven’t stayed out of a dungeon this long thanks to not knowing when to quit. I just wish I’d had the chance to punch Eddie in the mouth a couple of times.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” Vincent settled down near his brother. Devin stretched out.

“If you knew him better, you wouldn’t say that. Sleep.”

Devin rolled over on his side, indicating the conversation was over. Vincent knew Devin wouldn’t be dissuaded, especially since he’d won two matches with hardly a scratch on him.

Giving up the argument as a useless one, Vincent hunkered down beneath his blanket, missing the soft feeling of his bed back home. He hoped (but he knew it was in vain) that this time, when he “fell asleep,” he would wake up back in his own chambers, having had a very unusual series of ... what? Night visions? Spirit walks? There was simply no other way he could explain the odd events that now seemed a part of his life.

Time, though it had seemed to settle and not jump so much, still felt “funny” here. Though he’d been through a day and a half in this place, somehow he got the feeling it was a much shorter amount of time elsewhere. He couldn’t explain that sensation. It just seemed like something his body was telling him. The long day felt short as well, and in a way he couldn’t explain. Either way, he’d have to actively look for a way out, starting tomorrow. He did not want to become “trapped” here, somehow.

Armed with that resolution, Vincent turned over in the stiff hay and drifted off to sleep.

He woke up just before dawn in the stable again, the smell of nearly a dozen nags needing their stalls mucked out a most unwelcome alarm clock. Devin was already gone, having taken their dinner container with him, presumably to return it to the pub. It was likely that he'd also place some of his bets for the day. Vincent shrugged at the knowledge. Devin was Devin. As irrepressible here as anywhere else.

Vincent dressed quietly and came down from the loft not sure exactly what to do about his current situation, or where to begin. A few of the other squires were also readying for the day, not far from him. Though Devin and Vincent had both conveyed Princess Catherine's message to them, all had stayed on unless they'd been beaten.

Eli was there, brushing down an old bay gelding whose saddle had mismatched stirrups. They looked like something that had come out of Eli's shop, back in Vincent's own world.

Both horse and man looked quite old, and the latter didn't show any signs of recognizing Vincent. Neither did a very hunched-looking version of old Sam. No one Vincent thought he knew seemed to know him, except for Devin. Perhaps that was because they were brothers. Vincent didn't know.

The other residents of the barn he'd never met, and wasn't sure if he should, considering not only how self-absorbed they all were, but that some of them might end up in competition with each other. It was a thing that kept them from being too friendly with one another.

None of them commented on Vincent's unusual appearance, though he did garner a few stares. He kept his gloves on, not wanting to show his hands if he didn't have to. His face had already been seen, so there was no sense taking pains to cover that, at least not in here. *Or anywhere else while I'm here*, Vincent realized.

He was what he was. That didn't seem like something that would get him killed, here. If this place had no other virtues, at least it had that one.

Everyone seemed to simply go about their lives, in this unusual world. And he'd been somehow drawn in, to be a part of it.

Even though he knew he should follow his resolution of last night, that he should perhaps go follow the road back out of town, look for some sort of "exit" to this land, the chance to walk in morning sunshine in the park was too rare and too wonderful to be missed. He tended the mare then ventured out, liking the sense of adventure it gave him. He understood, a little, why Devin was like he was. This was exhilarating, to no small degree. Again, the sense that he was here to have some sort of adventure persisted, and he allowed himself to relax enough to enjoy it.

Clear of the barn and its smells, the crisp, sunrise-washed air entered his sensitive nose. Someone was baking bread somewhere. The castle loomed large as he trudged up the hill toward it. Morning dew carried its own wet fragrance as he neared the park Devin had mentioned. A riot of morning glories climbed up the park's main entrance gate.

He indulged the urge to wander over into the greensward, and take in the morning-time colors. Hedgerows lined well-manicured paths, and

a profusion of pansies encircled a lamp post. Birdsong was a riot of sun-greeting cacophony, like many instruments tuning up in an orchestra, but not yet ready to play together. There were few people out. In a way, this world was just waking up, getting itself going.

Since it was still very early, he was surprised to find a certain princess in the park. He was surprised both thanks to the time of day (his Catherine was not an early riser), and the commonness of the scene. She was far from her royal box, or a fine carriage. A lone guard stood well distant from her as a jogger trotted past. Her nose was in a book.

She looked relaxed. Or at least as if she was trying to force herself to relax before the day became another trying one.

She was sitting on a public bench, the guard well back but within calling distance, so she could have some semblance of privacy. Judging by the looks she received from the few commoners in the park, it was not unusual to see her among them. Perhaps this was a secret she shared with the earliest of the early risers: that she would come here in the morning, but only if they wouldn't tell, so she could avoid being mobbed.

The early hour and the shelter of a jasmine hedge afforded her what peace it could. It was hours until the tourney was set to start. It felt early even for breakfast.

"May a squire approach?" he asked her. She looked amazingly lovely in a gauzy green dress that suited her surroundings perfectly.

"Is your master withdrawing from the lists?" she questioned, looking up from her book.

"No," Vincent admitted, "but he is trying to talk other people into doing so, at your behest," Vincent added. "Though that may simply be so he can thin the field of competition."

"I suppose I had that coming," Catherine replied, indicating with a nod of her head that he was welcome to come closer.

It still bothered Vincent that she didn't seem to know him. At least they were about to rectify that, some.

She set the book on her lap. It was a familiar one.

"You like to read," he commented, eyeing the cover. Idylls of the King. It was a costly treasure.

"Sometimes when the world becomes too... real. The books help," she said, indicating with a gesture of her hand that he could sit, if he wanted to.

Such an odd statement for this fantasy world, Vincent thought. He settled beside her on the bench.

"I'd not have thought to see you in the park ... my lady," he confessed, remembering to tack on her title. Should he be calling her "your majesty?" Maybe, but she seemed fine with "my lady," or "milady," as he'd heard her called a few times yesterday. He missed calling her by her name alone, but that didn't seem right, here.

"It's a public park," she returned casually, glancing up at the greenery. "I used to climb a tree not far from here, when I was a little girl. My father tells me his heart was in his throat, but he let me do it anyway." Her voice was full of her love for him.

“It’s hard to let people we love do something dangerous, hard to let them be brave, sometimes,” he allowed. He was aware of the times they’d discussed that very thing, back in his world. “Hard to let them do what their heart tells them when we’re not sure they should.” *Was that what he was supposed to learn here? That he needed to let her ‘climb trees,’ take more risks? There had to be a purpose to this place. Was that it?*

She nodded at his description, but added nothing more by way of comment.

“I’ve been thinking about that quite a bit, actually,” he confided to her. He had. Both here and back home.

“It is hard to make decisions for other people. Or for ourselves, sometimes,” she allowed.

“It is that.” He tried to study her face without looking like he was doing so. Absent the scar on her cheek, he realized how flawlessly lovely her complexion was.

“You were surprised to see me here?” she asked, after a moment. It was said mostly to break the awkward silence, between them.

“Let’s just say I pictured you someplace... more regal,” he said carefully.

She looked around the dew-swept park as if she could picture nothing more lovely than this pretty patch of nature. “I’ve spent my life in some of the most beautiful rooms in the world,” she stated. “Places where crystal glitters and music reaches your ear no matter where you

sit in the room." A squirrel chose that particular moment to toss down an acorn from a nearby oak. She chuckled at him.

"I'm not saying those places aren't lovely. But they aren't all there is."

He agreed they weren't. But he had trouble seeing her confined to simple spots like this one all her life.

"Besides, as I said," she continued, "it is a public park. Even royalty is part of the citizenry."

"They are." He conceded her point as a young woman pushed a baby carriage past. "But the gentry usually have something more... private."

"More separate, you mean," Catherine said. Her mouth became a thin line of... what was that? Regret?

"As if the wealth doesn't separate us enough," she tacked on.

He took in her words. *Did I do that, too, Catherine? Did I keep you separate from me because I thought I knew where you belonged, where you'd be most comfortable?*

He inclined his head at her remark and pulled open his cape so that the guard standing away from her could see he was reaching only for his own book, and not for a weapon.

"What do you have?" she asked, watching with fascination as he pulled forth a white volume with red letters. He showed her the cover.

"Charles Dickens?" she guessed correctly, looking at the "CD" initials on the cover. He nodded and flipped the book to its spine to show her the title.

"Great Expectations." She smiled. "I've never read it."

"Would you like me to read you some?" he asked, already opening the cover. He showed her the small painting inside, and she leaned closer to him, intrigued.

"Please," she replied, smoothing her soft green skirt with her beautiful hands.

His voice began caressing the words with their own soft seduction, and reading it to her took him back. Back to her first terrified days in his world. Back to when the story showed how much Pip pined for Estella, and Vincent's own sense of longing came through in all the paragraphs that followed. Back to when she drank tea from Chinatown and left her scent on his bed linens as she slept there. Back to when he'd fed her soup from a spoon, and calmed her fears. Back to when her slippered feet had paced the worn carpet as she worried, and he'd helped her through all of that.

Back to when the story had been both a distraction and a bridge, between them.

He'd begun falling in love with her when he read the classic tale, and he remembered that, for the first time in a long time.

Loving Catherine had always seemed so pervasive a thing he could not quite remember ever not loving her. But now he did. Now he remembered that he had been one person at the beginning of Great Expectations and a different one near the end. And then at the very end, on her balcony.

On the night when he'd come to her terrace and they'd finished the book by reading it to each other, he was someone else, entirely, inside. Someone far different from the being who'd carried her to Jacob, months prior.

She'd had the last page. But he'd had hundreds of them, before.

He gave them to her now, again. Again, and for the first time.

Her lovely scent settled all around him as they sat on the park bench. The fragrance she wore was tinged with roses, and it was familiar. Pearls swung in her ears, just as they often did.

"I need to forget the dream of being a part of you." He remembered the words from years ago as this Catherine stopped him from turning the page so she could admire another illustration.

But he never had done that. Had never stopped holding onto that dream, even when it seemed in tatters. Never had. Never could. And now, for whatever reason, he was here with her. At least this part of... whatever this was, felt right.

They read together in the park for a long time, and even took turns, reading. If his voice seemed to tire, Catherine took a chapter, or even read from her book to him. He loved the husky, breathy quality of her voice. He always had.

Did you know I was falling in love with you even then, when we were new? Did you know that when you left I slept at night with the scent of you all around me? That I dreaded each day, when it grew more faint? Did you know I hated the day I came back to find Mary had washed my bed linens, and it took your scent away? That I sat trying

to remember the sound of your voice, long after I could no longer hear it? Did you ever know? Did I ever tell you?

He knew he was guilty of paying half-attention to her story as she read to him. When she looked up, he felt as if a comment on the tale was called for, so he gave her one in this world that he'd given her in the other.

"Lancelot was fatally flawed. Destined never to find the grail," Vincent mentioned, as she closed a chapter of Idylls. He knew what she was going to say next. Because he'd heard her say it, before.

"Still, he was the greatest knight of all," she responded, just as he predicted she would.

Then, something she hadn't said that night, the night they'd stumbled into Kristopher Gentian: "I wonder why he still searched, sometimes," she mused. "After all, it was so ... hopeless, for him."

Yes. Yes it was. Lancelot, the flawed betrayer, would never find the holiest of holies. He was good. But he wasn't good enough. It was his fate. Vincent knew he felt a kinship with Arthur's fallen knight, that neither of them felt worthy of the prize they longed for.

"Perhaps, sometimes, for some of us... there is no real hope of victory. There is only the struggle." It was a fatalist's view. And in some ways, it was the one Vincent had been raised to carry: that the effort was good enough, but the outcome was hardly assured. Jacob's lessons had not meant to be harsh, but some had been hard. It was unavoidable, considering the world that normally sat over Vincent's head. A world he could never have, no matter how "good" he was.

It was a dark comparison of the similarity between Lancelot and himself, he realized.

Catherine dropped her eyes to the cover of her book. "That's such a sad thing to say. To think. To have to live with," she acknowledged.

It was. And he didn't remember if he'd ever said that to her either. He was beginning to realize how much of himself he'd kept locked away.

"It isn't so bad," Vincent confided. "When the struggle is all there is, do it well. That way, at least you'll know you've done something right."

The smile he gave her was a soft one, and he watched her process the words and nod in agreement.

"I know. It's what I've been trying to do. It's why I try to keep my head up, at the games. But sometimes, it's hard."

Her soft agreement startled him. It took him a moment to realize that in both worlds, and much like him, his Catherine endured her own struggles with just that sort of determination.

"Sometimes it is hard," he said quietly. "But it's worth it."

Vincent saw her, and saw her clearly, the woman she was in both places. His Catherine gave everything she could even though she didn't have to, proving herself, daily. She had no hope of eradicating crime in the city. But she never gave up trying to help those who had been touched by it, never gave up trying to stop it from happening. One of them was indeed Lancelot. Perhaps more her than him.

Again, Vincent felt like he both knew her and was realizing things about his own Catherine, for the first time.

"There is strength in you." His voice was beyond gentle.

"Is there?" she asked, then sighed. "I hope so. What looms before me is..." she caressed the cover of her book, "daunting. Like a quest I can't win, but must be a part of anyway."

He set his book aside. It was time to talk about this. And with this Catherine, who was so much like his own. "The thought of being a wife to the victor? This does not please you?"

Her lips tightened into a thin line, again. "The thought of being commerce does not please me. But my father and I have talked about it, and he is right. The competition is upsetting, but it is voluntary. No one has to be there but me." She shrugged wryly at the offhand description of the games.

Again, she caressed the cover of her book, seeming to draw comfort from its presence. "An open tourney is not an evil thing, and marriage to one of them is bound to happen sooner or later. My father even gave me an opportunity to make my own choice, before this. It just didn't work out."

"He did?" Vincent sounded mildly surprised. The tournament wasn't the only way she could choose a groom?

"He did. I was once engaged to Sir Stephen." She blushed a little, embarrassed.

Ah. Yes, that was right. So that had happened here, too?

"I take it you... changed your mind." Clearly what had happened between her and Stephen the second time he'd re-entered her life hadn't happened here. Or at least it hadn't happened yet.

"It seems he's here to try and change it back. Along with all the rest of them."

"Indeed. The field is large," Vincent acknowledged.

"Your brother among them." She smiled at the small jibe. "At least tell me he's only here to make a few coins, then leave."

"He's here for the adventure of it, and to win a little, yes," Vincent admitted. "We grew up poor, like many here. Yet we were rich, in some ways. Very."

The look in her eyes was one of grateful acceptance. "I'm glad for you, then," she said, squeezing his gloved hand.

"Do you believe in magic, Catherine?" he asked, knowing he needed to broach the subject of a world outside this one carefully, with her.

"Of course. It's part of our existence here. Part of everyone's existence everywhere, I imagine," she replied. The response was a helpful one. He already knew that the people here were more accepting of different possibilities, thanks to how they tolerated him.

He ventured in. "And if I told you that in another place... another world... we are... closer?"

"Other worlds. Yes. My tutors tell me of such things. Other realities. Other times. It stretches the imagination to think of it, doesn't it?"

She tilted her head in a gesture which nearly echoed his own. "And we are closer in a different one? Like ... friends?" she asked.

He was pleased with the ease with which she'd accepted his words.

"Like friends. And ..." *more*, his mind whispered, but what he said was, "like... like we are trying to find our way through a dream, sometimes."

It would indeed be a dream for her to be with him, considering not just his amazing face but the rest of him. That was true no matter what park bench they sat on, or what time of day it was.

Her smile was subtle. He wasn't sure she believed him, not completely. But she did smile.

"We'll just have to hope it is a good dream then," she said.

He inclined his head, accepting the words he'd given her when she'd awoken from being shot by Mitch Denton. In his world, he'd told her that. In this one, the phrase seemed destined for her. *A good dream. Yes.*

"Would you like me to read Great Expectations to you some more?" he asked. Her smile was... sun-eclipsing.

"I would like that very much," she replied, settling her back against the wooden bench again. Her outward expression relaxed, and then...

He could feel it. A subtle "push" in his solar plexus. Her heart was turning toward his, just as it had in his world, and during the reading of this same book. Perhaps their fates were bound to the story, and to each other, no matter what world they were in. It was a comforting thought.

Is this when it started? Vincent asked himself. *Is this the page we were on?*

Vincent let the feeling envelop him, the sensation both familiar and new. *This is what love feels like when it's new*, he realized. *When it's new, and uncertain. So fragile. So... strong.* When he'd sensed it from her the first time, he'd had no idea what it was. Now he knew. Now he recognized it. He allowed himself a moment to feel its birthing wonder, then realized she was still waiting for him to read.

Vincent opened his book to where they'd left off, and continued Dickens' classic tale. Time-wise, the book was an anachronism. But, of course, so was hers, by Tennyson. He wondered if good books, like him, "fell through" here, somehow. He hoped they did.

After a few moments of reading, however, the guard came over and whispered something in her ear, and she nodded.

"It's time. I need to go," she said, rising. "Will I... will I ever see you again?" They were the words she'd given him on a long-ago balcony, back when they were both unsure of each other. Back before... everything that had followed.

He gave her a different answer than the one he'd given her on her night-swept terrace. Vincent inclined his head. "If it pleases you to, Lady."

She accepted his answer with a regal nod and he watched her walk away from him, down the tree-lined path. Sunlight shone through a hole in the interwoven branches over her head. It came down like a soft benediction, blending highlights into her hair.

She was his Catherine, in this world or any other. She just was.

"Heyyyyyyy, Vincent." The voice was both familiar and slurred. And it surprised Vincent, by calling his name.

"Rolley?" Vincent could barely believe what he was seeing. But it was indeed Rolley, sitting against a wall in the shadows of an alley, trying to escape the afternoon sun.

Vincent had spent the rest of the morning trying to retrace his steps back down the road he and Devin had come in on, but to no avail. No matter how long he walked or where he looked, there seemed no clear way "out." The road was a road. It simply went on and on.

Perhaps this isn't about someplace I have to go. Maybe it's about something I have to do, he wondered. He'd returned the way he'd come, and rejoined his brother.

Devin's early contest had gone well. The elder Wells had won, but he'd had to reveal his knife in the first match, negating the surprise of it. He'd used it to pin a man's sleeve against the tourney field wall, when the other man had pulled his own, much larger blade from a back sheath. Devin's strike had forced the young man to drop his weapon as useless.

Vincent hadn't known who Devin's opponent was for a minute, then something about the stringy, dirty blonde hair struck an awful, and familiar chord. Vincent realized it was one of the younger Outsiders, the one who had wanted to cut Catherine's scar out with the knife.

The match had been decided by surrender. On the sidelines, some of his fellows stood, booing.

Vincent had been making his way back through the town to get a small sack of horse feed when...

"Heyyyyy, Vincent," Rolley repeated, slurring the words some more. Rolley was clearly high.

"You... you know me? You know who I am?" Vincent asked.

"Course I do. Vincent. Helped me play. Piano. Before everything. Before Miss Kendrick." Rolley was the first person besides Devin who had recognized him.

"Where are we, Rolley?" Vincent squatted down in front of his friend. Rolley smiled and his head lolled.

"You know where. Lost. 'M always lost, Vincent."

So was he.

"Lost where? Where are we lost, Rolley?" Vincent needed to confirm it.

Rolley looked around.

"Me in the drugs. You in the tapestry. You in my trip, man. In my smacked-up trip."

Vincent was in Rolley's drug-induced vision? No. That did not sound right. More like Rolley was in Vincent's, only Vincent had taken no drugs.

"Rolley... You are certain we're in the tapestry? The one in the Great Hall?"

Rolley chuckled, a dry, wheezing sound, almost painful to hear. "Looks like it." Rolley looked around and, for a moment, Vincent got the impression he was seeing cloth, and seeing it change to "walls" or "street." Much like Vincent had done, when he'd first arrived.

Rolley's inebriated-sounding voice continued. "Shoot up, come here... Stayyyyyyy... " His voice drifted off on a long note. "I like the tapestry. Always liked the tapestry," he said, rousing a little. "Come here a lot ... in my head. You?"

Vincent shook his head. "No. I've never been here before. Rolley, how do I get out?"

Rolley laughed again, a raspy sound, like his body was unused to making that effort. He moved his hand in front of his face and watched it "trail" for a moment.

"Drug wears off... it kicks me out." But he was smiling as he said it, clearly in the throes of a heroin-induced rush.

"You... you see the tapestry in your visions? But I am not on drugs."

Rolley shrugged as if the information meant nothing to him.

"Don't need to be. It just helps. Faze you in. Faze you out." He smiled at his own poor joke, then mentioned, "Don't fall down. I did, once, down them back stairs of that damn castle. Left me bruised ribs it took six months to heal."

Rolley shifted his back against the hard wall and rubbed his left arm with his right hand. Vincent realized he was stroking his injection site.

"How long?" Vincent asked. "How long will you be here?"

"Gonnnnnne." The black head lolled left to right. He was sweating in the shade. "Gone by the middle of the... night." His head wobbled as if his neck was incapable of supporting it. "Out of medicine. Out of luck. Out of everything." Rolley sounded sad for a moment, but then smiled the beatific smile of the stoned, and continued to watch his hand wave again.

"Rolley, I'm here by accident. I need to know how to get out."

Rolley said nothing, and continued to stare at his hand. Vincent grabbed it.

"Rolley!"

But Rolley was past where he could be reached, for the moment. Past where the pain of losing Miss Kendrick and a talent he'd forsaken could make him feel anything.

Though Vincent tried to speak to him for several minutes, he couldn't get him to say anything more.

The tapestry. The one that hangs in the Great Hall. Yes. Vincent rose, and looked around. The shape of the skyline was definitely familiar, and though it made no sense to be "in" the tapestry, it was something he'd suspected, to some degree, all along.

Something about Rolley's confirmation of it caused Vincent's memory to clear. *Ah. That's it. In my world, Winterfest is a little more than a month away.*

The recollection of being in the Great Hall by himself, of sitting near the tapestry nagged at him, and he knew that was right. He'd gone in to see what repairs might need to be made to the furniture, but he'd been drawn, as he almost always was, to the beautiful old pictures hanging on the large wooden dowels. He'd pulled over a stool and been... thinking, as he sat there, staring at the illustrations woven by an utterly unknown hand. Realizing that once again, he'd stand in front of them with Catherine, soon.

He'd been in a sort of wistful reverie. In some ways, his relationship with Catherine had grown from the last year, when they'd stood in that spot together. And in some, he admitted, it felt like it hadn't. They'd seemed "stuck in one place," like the tapestry pictures.

It was late October in his world. Less than a week before they were destined to go out into her city, together. The week when the walls between the worlds thinned to almost nothing. Yet he'd felt many walls between him and Catherine, lately. Many walls between their two worlds.

He'd sat there and wondered what he'd say to her when he brought her here again. Wondered if their story, like the one on the wall, seemed "mired" somehow. Like they were repeating familiar scenes with each other but moving no closer toward anything meaningful. Was she afraid? Was he? He wasn't sure, anymore.

He only knew he'd been sitting in front of one of the larger sections, grateful for the privacy of the now-empty room, lost in his own thoughts. The beauty of the images tugged at him as it always did. He'd been thinking about Catherine; more than daydreaming and less than fantasizing. And...

And then he was on the road, lost in the tapestry. Now he remembered it.

"Rolley, I need you," Vincent prodded again, turning back to the only person who might be able to help. "I need help, need advice, need directions. Is there another way out? Does anyone else from our world come in here? Does Narcissa? Sebastian, even?" Vincent named the old sleight-of-hand artist who visited each Winterfest. He felt he needed someone who was in touch with magic of almost any kind.

"Go 'way. Go away, Anthony." Rolley swatted at him.

"Rolley..."

His voice became mournful. "Narcissa. No. Not for yearsssss," he answered, but whether Rolley thought he was answering Vincent or talking to his dead brother Anthony, Vincent couldn't tell.

"One Winterfest, maybeeee," Rolley slurred. "She don't get into all that castles and dragons shit." He weaved his head from side to side, moving to a slow tune only he could hear. Vincent half-wondered if it was the "Moonlight Sonata."

“Sebastian?” Rolley surprised Vincent by answering some more. He seemed so lost in... in wherever he was. “Nah. Not that I know. Who knows? People come. People go. Leave... pieces behind.”

Rolley drew up his knees and put his head down on them, crossing his arms over the top of his close-cropped head, effectively shutting Vincent out.

Vincent knew Rolley would not speak to him again.

Vincent returned to the tourney field in time to see Devin win by virtue of a boomerang throw which disarmed his opponent as it injured the Chinaman’s hand. Clearly, Devin had picked more up in Australia than a cheesy accent.

It took the judges a moment to decide whether or not the odd weapon he’d kept tucked behind his back was allowable, but since it had no spiked edges (like a mace), and wasn’t shot from another weapon (like an arrow or crossbow bolt), it was decided that it was legal. After all, it was little more than a curved stick to the untrained eye, and staff fighting had been allowed since the first day.

Devin took his victory over a member of the Tong, who still complained in Mandarin Chinese after they were done.

“You’ve been lucky,” Vincent told him.

“Derek Saunders picked up a few things here and there,” Devin replied, happy with the purse. “Let’s go get dinner.”

The last full day of fighting among the commons and pretenders (a polite word for the unverified gentry) held a buzz of excitement. Devin's forays into the more difficult games made Vincent uneasy and he spared his brother no few lectures on the subject.

All the contestants left in the games had beaten other opponents and had advanced in the fighting. The landed knights still waited while the commoners fought, basically for copper coins and bragging rights.

As he'd done before, Devin had parlayed his winnings into a larger stake, but knew this was likely to be his last day on the field.

Vincent also noticed the crowd in the stands growing larger and more attentive. The royal box was filling with attendants, and Catherine's expression grew more strained, though Charles often held her hand or tried to distract her with conversation.

Rather than a castle page announcing the match, Mr. Smythe (in very refined robes) began listing the names of the combatants, and how they had won their prior matches.

Devin took his first bout more easily than he should have, with a wrestling move Vincent remembered Winslow teaching both of them when they were boys. The slower, heavier opponent struggled for a while, but eventually wore himself out as he thrashed in the sand. Larger men often had greater strength but less stamina, and it was an advantage Devin used as he kept his opponent pinned.

Still, Devin had not gotten by unscathed, and Vincent didn't like the look of the bruise that was coming in on the side of his brother's neck.

The younger Wells brother was still trying to convince the elder one to pull out of the games when Devin's second match was decided by a withdrawal.

The contestant slated to take on Devin decided the damage to his ankle would keep him from advancing. Devin took both purses. Vincent recognized the second opponent as being one of Jason Walker's people. He didn't know the first one.

Vincent also realized that injuries, when they occurred, were becoming more serious as experienced fighters took each other on. Devin had been lucky. Again.

Vincent counted two broken arms, the questionable ankle, and at least four decisions by knockout, during the course of the afternoon. Heavy weapons weren't allowed on the field, not yet, but a small knife or a thin staff could still inflict damage.

Devin had begun wearing leather arm bracers and a wider belt, just in case. It wasn't much, but the former had saved his forearm from a nasty bite, and the latter gave his abdomen some small amount of protection. The bruise on his neck had come from having to close with a larger opponent. He was past due for some kind of injury, and knew it.

His advantage in the games was his agile mind, Vincent realized. He was very good at assessing the weaknesses of his enemies. *Probably something he had to learn all those years on his own*, Vincent thought.

"We're probably done here," Devin confirmed as he weighed his latest pouch of coins. The stands were more than half full, and vendors had begun making a brisk trade.

“Tomorrow we show up and I see who I draw. If I figure I’m good for it, I’ll go one more time. If not, I quit. Happy?”

“Happy is the last thing this is making me. But perhaps with you done, I can go home.” It was a hope Vincent had, that Devin’s departure from the tourney meant he could then return to his own world.

“Home. Sure.” Devin rotated his shoulder. “Just be glad I don’t have to fight that guy.” Devin nodded toward the center of the field.

Vincent didn’t know how he’d missed him before. Probably thanks to his being late to the earliest matches or to being gone talking to Rolley. But there he was.

In the last match, the “ogre” showed up, and Vincent was shocked to recognize Erlik. A figure in dark robes sat in the stands, watching with interest. Paracelsus? It had to be. So this was the “wizard who had conjured an ogre” Devin had spoken of.

He beat one of the men who had been Lisa Campbell’s bodyguard. John. The one who had bloodied Catherine’s nose. They were both large men, but Erlik’s strength and savagery won out.

John, the man who liked to break arms on both women and men, nursed a broken one of his own, and surrendered before the damage could get any worse. Which was to say, before the compound fracture could have a twin on the other side.

Smythe declared Erlik the winner, and Vincent and Devin exchanged a look.

“If you draw him tomorrow, you withdraw or I’ll pick you up and carry you off this field,” Vincent said, his voice brooking no argument.

"If I draw him tomorrow, I wet my pants and then withdraw," Devin answered.

**

Vincent realized that time must have "jumped" on him again. Without knowing exactly how he'd come to be there, or when he'd made the climb, he nonetheless knew right where he stood. It was later that same evening. And he was standing on the balcony of a certain princess.

Catherine was inside her opulent rooms. And she was weeping. Sobbing into her arms, actually.

Vincent closed his eyes against her pain, knowing it went so much deeper than the physical kind. This pain was overwhelming her, and try as she might, she couldn't stem its relentless tide as it took any happiness she possessed and drowned it under separate, pounding waves of sorrow.

She was bereft.

Seated at a table, her head on her arms, she was trying to hold in the sounds of her despair, but couldn't hold in the shaking of her small, soft body.

He hadn't meant to cross her threshold uninvited, but still, he entered. When he bumped a chair with his foot, her head rose but she didn't turn around.

She mistook the sound for something else, the opening of her door.

"I'm sorry, Daddy." She grabbed for the embroidered silk handkerchief that was tucked up her long sleeve and applied it to her tear-streaked face. "I know you hate it when I cry. I just... Please... Just pick one of them. Pick any one of them for me. I'll marry who you choose, just..." She dabbed at her cheeks and wiped her eyes some more. And tried to steady her voice.

"Don't go through with this, don't put them through it. I'm not in love with anyone in the lists, so they're all the same to me." She rose from the bench near the wash basin and snatched up a small wash rag and soaked it in the basin at her elbow. She pressed the cool, wet cloth to her face, then lowered it as she continued speaking, her back still to him.

"If the tourney continues, they'll be hurt. Some of them will be killed, more than likely. There's no sense in it." She held the cool cloth against her over-heated cheeks again and tried to compose herself before she turned to face her father, who she clearly thought was in the room with her.

"Do the lives of strangers you do not love mean so much to you then?" His voice was soft. She turned abruptly.

"Vincent!" For a moment, the look in her eyes and the way she said his name was so familiar, he thought she knew him, just as Rolley had. Could that happen here? He didn't know. But he thought she recognized him.

"Yes. It's me, Catherine." *Finally. Perhaps the logic here is also mercurial, like in dreams. Even if this isn't one. Perhaps she knows me, now.*

"You. You're a ... a rogue's squire and the Devil's own version of a fool if you think you can be in here. Don't presume on ... on a few chapters in a book to give you such ... liberties." She slapped the wet cloth down on the table. His hope fell as her face showed only the recognition of their brief acquaintance, and little more. And the feelings of affection he'd sensed inside her were far too new to presume upon, he realized.

"Do you know what they'll do to you if they catch you in my rooms?" she demanded.

Probably the same thing they'd do to me if they caught me in them back home, Vincent thought wryly.

"I think the woman who sobs for strangers will not turn me over to their justice. Besides. We both know I mean you no harm." His voice was a soft balm.

Did they? Did they know that? Princess Catherine studied his long form and realized it was so, even though she couldn't begin to explain the feelings of trust she had in him. Something had happened in the park. Something she wasn't ready to acknowledge, yet.

"And we *were* in the middle of a very good book," he added. "Two good books. You must admit that, at least."

Her green eyes looked as worried as he'd ever seen them, and she was clearly in no mood for banter.

"You *must* tell your master not to fight when his name is called." Ah. She was still determined about that. "I've begged Joseph Maxwell to

withdraw and I think he'll listen. Some few others. Please, squire. If... if what passed between us the other morning means anything ..."

"Vincent." He liked it when she said his name, in either this world or the other. He just now realized how much. "My name. Vincent." They were the words he'd given her the first time she'd asked.

"Please, Vincent." His name sounded so familiar in her soft voice, yet so unfamiliar, as well. She was saying it without the deep love in her heart. Without the love he knew would grow there, and be recognized one day. What he'd barely sensed from her yesterday wasn't even acknowledged by her. Not yet. He was still too... impossible a thing.

She was looking at him as if he were someone she knew, but not yet as someone she knew she loved. He realized how different it made her sound. How different it made his name sound, on her lips.

I love you. You'll find your way to me, Catherine. You will. You just have to believe we're possible. Even as he thought it, Vincent realized how much that description applied to himself, as well. He also hadn't thought they were possible, once upon a time. There were times when he still didn't, to some degree.

Catherine continued to stare at him with the green eyes he knew he'd sell his soul for. She was confused, and... struggling. With many things. Too many, and all at once.

Her hair was held back by golden combs, and again, he found the lack of her scar somewhat... disconcerting. Not to mention the rest of the scene. Her rooms were velvet-draped and silk-stitched. Dark, heavy wood dominated the room. A wide throne-like chair sat against one

wall, wide enough to qualify as a “dinky sofa.” There was art on the walls and a chest full of her jewels.

And she’d been sobbing like she was the most impoverished woman in the kingdom.

Vincent wondered if that wasn’t because she was just that, in her way.

“The heavier weapons are being brought up for the later matches tomorrow. People will be hurt, Vincent. The time for bloody noses is over. You must convince Devin. And all the others you can. Please.”

Very well. If she wanted to talk about the tourney, that was what they would discuss.

"I’ve talked to him and he’s decided to take his chances, see who he draws. The others are here for their own reasons, whatever those are. I... Sir Devin does not often heed my advice, though I’ve tried in vain to get him to stop this," Vincent allowed. "He has a tendency to think he knows best, or at least to believe he can make the best of any situation. I think many do the same."

Her husky tone conveyed her dread. "The men he fights... I know them, Vincent. Or I know their type." She shook her head. "They will not show mercy once the fighting starts in earnest. You *must* convince him to get clear, before he advances in the lists." Her pleading look was full of candor, and warning.

"Yet you would be married to a ... merciless man? By your own definition?" he asked.

She crossed away from the basin and lifted her shoulders in a soft shrug. "Mercy is the gift of a loving heart. I'm not sure if any of them

have that... More's the pity." She seemed to consider something, then said, "There are dark places..."

In all of us. He thought it as she said it. He never realized how firmly she believed it, understood it, until now.

"Perhaps mercy is a thing that can be taught. In time," she added.

"The quality of mercy is not strained; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath..." His mind quoted Shakespeare. She wasn't Shylock's daughter. But she had at least a little in common with her. Neither one of them was going to get a love they didn't fight for, for one thing.

Vincent knew she was pinning her hopes for mercy on wishful thinking, but he also knew that she had no choice, or felt like she didn't.

"And if it can't be?" he asked softly. It was her fate in the balance, here.

Her assessment of her own future was a blunt one. "I expect to be treated well, thanks to what my father is worth." She looked down, and twisted a gold bracelet around her arm. "More? Well. Let's just say I don't know if I can hope for much."

Was this what her life was like, before him? Not this extreme, perhaps, but... this? Hoping for the best while dreading the worst? Always knowing that her fortune somehow figured into the equation, when she had a suitor? Vincent hadn't known. He'd had no way to know. Nothing in his life gave him insight to these kinds of realities, the kind wealthy people, especially wealthy women, dealt with.

When she'd told him in his world, "There are dark places in all of us," he thought she'd been trying to mollify him after what had happened with the Outsiders, trying to say she understood, when he felt she had no idea how that could be possible.

Now he realized it was a thought she'd carried all along, and perhaps had known it all too well, thanks to her other assignments—and perhaps even her own self-reflections.

In a way, it felt like he was not only meeting her anew, but that he was seeing her a year or two before he'd come to her balcony, back when her life had been thoroughly entwined with her father's, and with Tom Gunther's.

She'd been a fascinating woman, trapped almost as much as he had been, just by a different kind of snare. He hadn't known. And not knowing had made a good bit of difference, as it turned out. He'd pictured her in the lap of luxury.

He'd just never understood that her luxury had come with a sometimes terrible price.

Vincent's realizations were stark ones. "Devin may not be wrong then. He would make an ... undemanding husband for you." Not that it was going to happen, but Vincent now realized why Devin had said what he had. Devin had clearly understood more about her situation than Vincent had. Life spent Above had certain advantages, when it came to such insights, apparently.

Catherine's voice remained sad, but there was a little anger in it, too. "You wish me married to a scoundrel who does not love me and will happily spend my fortune on his next whim or his next adventure?"

Alone, yet shackled, while he takes his pleasures where he will?" Her eyes were bright and color stained her cheeks, both from her previous tears and from her current temper.

His reply was emphatic. "No. Cath -- Lady Catherine, I do not wish that for you, and I never will. It's just..."

His gaze moved over her lavish surroundings, at the beautiful woman who seemed to fit here, so well. He knew he was helpless to stop the forces that were in control of her fate. To some degree, he'd always felt that. That the overwhelming nature of her life Above was something he couldn't compete with, couldn't stand against. That he could love her, yes. But about everything else he was nothing but unsure.

And now here he was, feeling as impotent as ever. It was a galling reality.

"There are things about your life I am only just now starting to understand," he said. "What Devin said...It may be a better fate than others which await you. Not that I'd wish it for you. I'm learning, Catherine. That's all I meant."

She nodded in understanding and looked down at her ringless fingers. Fingers which would sport heavy jewelry, soon. They both knew it. Vincent could offer her little in the way of comfort. The common games were ending. He'd never entered the matches as a commoner. He was not a noble and was not entered in the tourney, and as such, he was forbidden to fight for her. In this life, like in any other, he was thoroughly aware of his limitations.

What was more, he... he was what he was. Still. Even here. Beneath her. Far beneath. Here, and everywhere else. Vincent realized that there were more than a few parallels between the two worlds, here, and he was experiencing many of them.

Was that what all this was about, what it was designed to be? Some kind of... test, for him?

"Would a life with a charmer who doesn't hold my heart be better?" she asked, giving his assessment back to him. "Is it better if I end up pledging my life to Devin? Will he want children, do you think?" She raised her eyes. "Will he give me a wedding night?" Her tone was almost accusatory.

The image of anything remotely like that was a knife in his gut, and it was a familiar one. He'd felt its piercing sting the night he realized she might do more than simply date Elliot Burch, as she fell in love with him.

"I don't know," Vincent answered honestly. "He might." Vincent rasped the reply, and hated the thought.

"If he doesn't, I have no hope of becoming a mother." Catherine said, sadly. "If he does, I have the touch of a man I do not love to look forward to ... followed by his abandonment. And this is my 'good' choice." She paced the wide, ornate room, letting her anger build, some, and preferring it to her sorrow.

"You see the problem." Her tone became biting. He wondered how much the old Catherine had had to use sarcasm and deflection to hide the hurts she'd been feeling, in her old life.

"And that, you say, *that* is the *best* I can hope for..." She let her anger build a little more, allowing it to chase the overwhelming sadness away. Vincent said nothing, watching her pace away her frustration. She wondered if "his" Catherine ever paced. He wondered if this one would try to grow a rose bush, one day. He wondered why he wondered.

She worried herself back and forth across the room only a few more times until the anger, like the sorrow, dissipated some.

"I do this. I worry myself into exhaustion, sometimes, then try to gather strength for the next day. It will do me no good. The tourney is the tourney. And you..." He saw the moment her mind fastened onto another topic.

"How did you even get *in* here?" she asked looking toward the open balcony doors.

Surely he hadn't... she wondered.

"I can climb," was all he answered.

She took that in, and assessed him steadily. "If you fall on the way back down, you'll break your neck. I am very high up."

In more ways than one, he thought.

"I've been apprised of the danger. Catherine... do you know me at all? Or... do you have some gift of foresight, here? Do you know who it is who will win you?"

She shook her head at his odd questions. "The only thing I know at this point is that the man who wins can claim me if he wishes to. If it's

Tom de Gunther I'll be a trophy. If it's Stephen, well. I'll be locked in. Locked into whatever perfect fantasy he'd concocted for both of us."

Her eyes looked beyond sad, and Vincent saw her future as she saw it. Also as "his" Catherine must have seen it, to some extent.

"What about Elliot?" Vincent asked.

"Where Devin would leave me at home alone, Elliot will insist on taking me with him everywhere, an expensive ornament for his ego, and a broodmare for his line. That doesn't mean he doesn't love me, or can't learn to. That means that's how it is." Her description was uncompromising.

"Catherine..."

"Lady Catherine. You forget your place." There was enough aristocrat in her to pull off an icy tone.

"My place?" Vincent felt his frustration level rising. "And what would that be?" Now it was his turn to show temper. He'd had more than enough of this horrid farce.

"Where you've made it. Beneath mine, no matter who wins me a few days from now," she shot back.

Well, that was a damning proclamation for both of them. And she was not intimidated by the warning tone in his voice.

His rose a little more. "Do you know how wrong this is? How utterly wrong? It's like a dream I can't wake up from, and I've tried." He let his voice carry his frustration.

"Try living it from my chair at the tourney. It gets no better, believe me," she retorted, turning away from him in a swirl of beige silk. Her leg contacted the bench, and she stopped. She dropped her head, feeling the weight of her defeat. Vincent felt it roll off her in waves.

He brushed his anger aside, trying to help her, as always. "Tell me how to make this any better," Vincent asked.

She shook her head at the futility of the request.

"I fear Tom de Gunther," she confessed, her back still to him. "I thought him handsome once, but of all of them... he's cold inside. He hates people he can't use. He won't let me do... anything good, if I go to him."

"Tom Gunther will not have you, Catherine." Vincent used the name he knew from his own world, and kept his voice steady. He was sure he was right.

"What makes you say so?" She turned. Her eyes were curious.

"Where I am from... you already dismissed him. Long ago."

He knew the words made no sense, but he prayed that in the world of the Tapestry, they somehow did.

"Who did I chose?" she asked. Again, she seemed accepting of the idea that there was a world – or perhaps worlds- outside her own.

"Do you know?" she prompted him.

Me, he realized. For all the good it did either of us. You chose me.

Somehow, he knew he couldn't say that to this Catherine. Not yet.

"It doesn't matter. It isn't settled yet," he deflected. "It wasn't Tom."

He needed to think. He'd had to take in too much today. Too much about her. Too much about himself. Was he why they were stuck, and unmoving? Or was it her? For weeks now, months... it seemed like they'd been... trapped, by something.

"Tom won't win? You're sure?"

Vincent nodded his head. She seemed to take comfort from his words.

"Oh. Well. Well that's something, then." She didn't question his pronouncement. And it did bring her some comfort. She was nobility. She was bred to accept her fate, even if others thought she was born to rule it.

Again, Vincent couldn't help but ask himself: *Was it like this for her back in New York? Did she always feel that she had a fate, a destiny she didn't want and couldn't escape? No. No it wasn't. And yet...*

"Are there more like you back in ... Deep Haven?" Catherine asked.

Vincent actually managed a small smile as he answered her.

"No. There is no one like me. Anywhere."

And you didn't mind, he realized. You dreamed our dream with me anyway. He understood how true that was. Could it still be?

"But the people in... Deep Haven are kind. They live as best they can. They... sheltered me, when I was young," he explained.

"Good," She smiled her pleasure at that fact. "We would want all people so... generous of spirit."

"They have little in the way of money. But in spirit... yes. In spirit they have wealth. Great wealth, sometimes." His voice sounded wistful.

"Are you homesick?" she asked.

"More than you can possibly imagine, right now," he confided.

"I'm glad in that... that other world you spoke of ... I'm glad we're friends," she told him, and he knew she meant it.

He inclined his head at her pronouncement, a gesture his Catherine would have recognized immediately. The Princess gave him a smile, the small, half smile his Catherine often gave when she was working through something. He both missed his love and knew she was standing right across from him, in her way.

There was nothing more to be gained by hinting at a different future neither one of them possessed, at the moment. The hour was growing late and Devin would wonder where he'd gotten to. Vincent realized how little more they had to say to each other. If he told her they were far more than friends, she might think him anything from as crazy as Stephen Bass to as fraudulent as Devin to as mercenary as every "suitor" she now had on the field.

"Good night, Ca-- Lady Catherine." He made the correction quickly and his deep, rumbling voice caressed her name. "I will see you tomorrow at the tourney."

She still gave him her small smile. Talking to him had solved none of her problems. But it had helped to have someone to talk to, someone to confide in; and at least she was no longer in tears.

"You know I am forbid to favor one knight over another," she confided. "My father says it is not wise. But... if you can't convince him to withdraw, please tell Sir Devin and the others that my thoughts are with them. That I hope they do not get hurt."

"I will tell them." He regarded her lovely form for a long moment. "Do not lose hope, my lady."

"Since we both know I will not get to choose for love, I think 'hope' is the one thing we can both be sure I lack, Squire Vincent." She tried to look brave as she said it, but her slight smile faltered, a little.



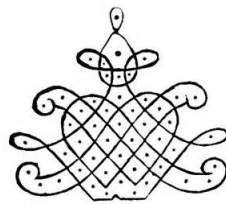
Lost In The Tapestry

Chapter 3

Noble



Imagination is the only weapon against reality. ~ Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.



He slept with the horses and woke, miserably, with the sun. Vincent had given up hope that sleep would find him back in his own bed, or at least back in his own home.

Luckily for him it hadn't rained as he'd slept. At night, he could see a patch of starlight through a hole in the barn's thatched roof, but dawn brought the sun's warming rays. It might have been a romantic turn of

events, had he not still been concerned with how much longer he might be forced to remain here.

As it was, the starlight did little but make him homesick for Catherine's balcony, and the sunlight felt simply... foreign.

Once again, the smell of horse dung greeted his sensitive nose as he climbed down from the loft, picked up a shovel, and began cleaning out the mare's stall. Other squires did the same for their horses. Devin was already gone, either off to place more bets or get into some other form of mischief.

If there was a virtue in having many of the earlier fights out of the way, it was that at least more of the participants had gone home, so the barn was not as full as it had been. That helped with the smell, if nothing else. (That, and the fact that the gentry stabled their horses in less leaky accommodations.)

Mucking out the stall was a squire's job, so Vincent did it. Though it was the worst kind of menial labor, it was still not lost on him that he was standing near a live horse, and in a room full of others, with the sun warming the morning air. Insects buzzed, and birdsong split the sky.

Though he increasingly longed for home, it was also not lost on him that this was indeed an amazing adventure, one he could never have, normally. He could stoke a tan mare, and she was growing to like him. Who knew when he would have such a chance to be near such an animal again?

He patted the horse's soft neck after he finished his chore. "We'll need to get you back home, soon. Have Devin take you back to your own pasture on the way back," he murmured.

The past-her-prime-but-still-good-for-a-short-ride-with-a-small-child lady before him seemed to nod her equine head in agreement.

Vincent picked up a curry comb and brush from a nearby bench, and ran them across her soft hide. He wasn't sure if he was doing it right, but some things felt instinctive, even as the entire setting still seemed foreign to him. His shoulder twinged a little from lifting and carrying the sacks of horefeed, but not badly. The mare seemed to enjoy and appreciate his attention. There was pleasure in that, for him.

His stomach growled as he finished the task. He took care of her breakfast, then set off to find his own.

It was as he went to locate something to eat that he finally found someone who could explain what had happened to him; or at least someone who could explain part of it.

The artist with the backward cap covering a riot of brown curls was sitting near a place where they sold pastries, tea and hot chocolate. He was sketching on what was probably a borrowed drawing tablet with a thin piece of charcoal.

As Vincent drew closer, he could see the sketch was of Catherine. Her upswept hair was identical to the way she'd worn yesterday, at the tourney.

"You do fine work," Vincent complimented, watching her left shoulder take shape.

"Not like I haven't sketched her before. Hello, Vincent." Kristopher barely looked up.

"You know who I am?" Vincent's voice revealed his surprise. He'd thought Kristopher was just another character here, like Eli or Sam. *Or for that matter*, he realized, *Catherine*.

The dark mop of curls shook as Kristopher chuckled. "That's a ridiculous question, considering there's a painting of you two hanging in your chambers done by me, isn't it?"

Vincent was startled. "You... you are not from this... place, this time, either?"

Kristopher Gentian gave the big beast in front of him a raised eyebrow. "I like to ignore all the lines, remember?" He finished the area of the sketch he was working on, and moved his hand to a different place on the tablet. He chatted while he worked.

"I refuse to see the lines, the lines that exist..." he made a few more of those on the sketch pad while he talked, "and you see lines when they aren't even there," Kristopher remarked. "Quite a pair, aren't we?"

Vincent had no idea how to answer that, so he ignored the jibe for the moment.

"Have you learned how to wake up from this place?" Vincent asked.

"I'm not asleep, Vincent. Neither are you. You're sitting on a chair in front of the tapestry, all but unblinking. You're fazed, not sleeping."

Fazed. That was a word Rolley had used. Perhaps it was as good as any other.

"This isn't a dream," Kristopher continued. "Your shoulder is sore both in this world and that one. You're not used to working with a shovel the way you have been, much less mucking out a stall, or carrying those heavy sacks of feed through town over your shoulder. Devin should be paying you more a little more—"

"Fazed?" Vincent wanted the conversation back where he wanted it.

"Fazed. Or phased. Pick your spelling. You're here. And there. Like me, only different. Don't get hurt in here. And don't die in here. It is real."

Vincent blinked, and tested his stiff shoulder. "Rolley said something about that."

"Yeah. I see him around sometimes. Pity."

Vincent rolled his shoulder again, glad he hadn't fallen from Catherine's balcony.

"How did... how did this happen?"

Kristopher shrugged at that. "Vincent, there are doors between the worlds, everywhere. Heck, the Whispering Gallery, where the sound falls through. The Abyss, where everything falls through. Your home is full of them. The Mirror Pool. The Catacombs. Doors. *Everything* is a door, if you use it like one." His tone indicated he felt like he was explaining something obvious. At Vincent's nod, he continued.

"The tunnels are full of them. Up Top has them too, but this one..." he indicated the air around them with the hand that held the charcoal, "This one is special."

Vincent eyed the ghost's mischievous smile. "You mean the tapestry is special? Special in what way?"

"It's art. Art is *always* special. Art is *always* magic. *You* try putting a three dimensional image on a two dimensional surface." His tone let Vincent know that the feat was far more difficult than most people realized. He began outlining Catherine's gown in broad strokes.

"People come. They stand in front of the tapestry." He added shading to the point of her shoulder. "Most of them think the same thing. 'What would it be like to live back then?'" He waved the stick of charcoal in the air again and gestured. "Then they move off..." He drew part of Catherine's arm. "But a little piece of them stays behind. Tunnel magic. Art magic. Magical things for magical people. You. Me. Rolley. Nothing about any of us is ordinary, is it?"

The savant, the boyish spirit, and the... well, whatever it was Vincent was. No, Vincent realized, there was nothing ordinary about the three of them, at all.

"So usually, we all leave a small part of ... ourselves here?" Vincent asked, looking around.

"Ourselves, even some bits of the other people we knew... we're all what our experiences made us. What the other people in our lives made us. So we take them with us. Or leave them behind." Kristopher indicated the crowd of morning shoppers.

"That explains why people I know, people Catherine knew... why they are here. She looked at it, as well. With me."

Kristopher nodded and finished with Catherine's shoulder, then moved on to her neck and the femininely soft shape of her ear.

"Kristopher... why am I here?" It was the answer he'd wanted since his arrival. "Was it an accident? Or is there a reason? Some... purpose to be served? I cannot discern what all of this is supposed to be, for me."

"It's your phase. I'd say that's your choice, wouldn't you?" His hand barely slowed down.

"But I don't know which one is correct."

The piece of charcoal stopped moving for a second, then continued.

"Oh. Well. It doesn't matter, then."

"How can it not matter?" Vincent was incredulous.

"Because if you don't know..." an earring settled itself in Catherine's ear, ... "nobody else is going to. You'll bounce out when you do." The artist never lost his smile as he worked. "You'll go when somebody either shakes you out of it, calls you back to your side of the tapestry -- or you figure out whatever it is you need to figure, and snap yourself back. Probably."

The disclaimer was of little comfort, but it was more than Vincent had known, before.

Vincent considered the unique artist's words.

"How long have I even been here? Do you know?"

Kristopher tilted his head to the side. The charcoal stick actually stopped moving, for a moment. "A few minutes out there. Days, in here. About five minutes for a day, give or take."

He lifted his hand away from his latest sketch and flipped back to prior pages. He fanned creations inside the sketchbook for Vincent, showing him pictures of the crowd, the fights, and a few more of Catherine. One was of Vincent and Devin, walking with the mare between them, back on the day he'd arrived.

Five minutes for a day. That meant he'd only been seated in front of the tapestry for about twenty to twenty-five minutes. How long until they missed him? Until they sent someone into the Great Hall looking for him? Someone to shake his shoulder and bring him out?

With dismay, Vincent realized he could be here for many more "days."

He'd gone into the Great Hall very much alone, wanting the privacy of it, needing a place to think. He'd told the others he was going to inspect the condition of the dowel rods on which the tapestry hung, but in truth, he just wanted the peace of the big room.

Several people knew where he was headed, but none were likely to come looking for him, for a while.

Kristopher flipped back to the page he'd been working on. His amazing hands worked their "magic" while Catherine's lovely profile came into sharper view. Her head was slightly turned away from the viewer. The talented artist deftly sketched the strong, almost stubborn line of her jaw.

"For a while, I was wondering if I was dreaming all of this. Or imagining it," Vincent said, still looking over Kristopher's shoulder.

"Imagination is the only weapon against reality," Kristopher quoted Lewis Carroll.

"You are certain about the movement of time?" Vincent knew Kristopher's relationship with time was... dodgy, at best.

"Time is a funny thing in here," he commented. "But heck. Time is funny everywhere!" Kristopher's grin was huge. "But you know that. And this is way too much serious talk!"

He flipped the sketch pad closed and moved to stare longingly at a tray of sticky buns. "If I had money, I could eat," he hinted.

Vincent produced a few of the coins Devin had given him.

"Will this achieve what you want?"

"Great!" the artist enthused, seizing the largest coin. "Now we just have to get *you* to do that."

Do what? Buy food? Or achieve what he wanted? Vincent had no real idea which one Kristopher referred to as the artist picked out his breakfast.

"You have to know what you want before you can have it. Usually." The last word came out around a mouthful of pastry.

Vincent realized he didn't know what that even was, in either world. In his own home, he knew he wanted Catherine. And, in a way, he knew he couldn't keep her close to him, not without taking the choices of her life away from her. It was a dilemma he wasn't sure had a solution for. With that as a given, well. It made other conclusions almost impossible to entertain.

In this world, he knew he wanted to help the Princess Catherine to a happy life, but he had no idea how to even do that, considering her circumstances. Not to mention his.

Sighing, he bought breakfast from a man who sold hot cross buns. *Perhaps I'll ask Kristopher more about this place*, he reasoned, as he waited for his change. At the moment, what he mostly wanted to do was go home. More than that ...

Vincent gingerly cradled the sweet bread wrapped in thin paper. When he turned around, the mercurial youth was gone.

**

The tourney arena was abuzz, even before the fighting was set to start. Vincent noticed that the stands were filling, and that Devin was waiting for him, relaxed, but watching the crowd.

Vincent looked up in the royal box to note that while Charles was seated there, Catherine wasn't. Courtiers bustled about, and the murmuring crowd was clearly looking forward to something. The air fairly crackled with excitement. It was apparent that whatever was about to happen, it was greatly anticipated.

"They're waiting for something." Vincent didn't need his sense of empathy to feel the pulse of expectation as it thrummed through the crowd. "Do you know what this is about? Is it because of the day's matches?" Vincent asked.

"Not a clue. It's not like I've exactly done this before," Devin answered.

"Catherine isn't in her chair."

“No. But a couple of her ladies-in-waiting are still in the box. Odd.”

The younger Wells brother realized that Devin had a sharper eye for details than he did.

Vincent had no idea what this was about. The tourney field had been raked smooth, but no horses were now on it. Those in the lists all stood to the side, within the arena walls. An elaborate blue and gold pavilion had been set up at one end of the field. A pair of Charles’ banners flew beside the now-closed entryway. Merchants hawked their wares in the stands, mostly food and drink. The smells of ale and roasting meat blanketed the crowd. Anticipation hung in the air like the aroma of the food.

This felt much different than the other days. It just did.

“Here comes something,” Devin observed.

Through a narrow door in the wall, a line of men walked into the arena and stood at the center of the oval field, facing the royal box. Mr. Smythe entered, and gestured toward the line.

"My noble lords and ladies! Gentles, nobles and commons! It is time for the elevation to the peerage!" Smythe’s voice rang over the hubbub of the crowd. Deep purple robes couldn't camouflage his portly frame. His large spectacles still sat on his nose. His widespread arms gestured expansively to both the spectators and the men who'd just come in.

The large crowd applauded. Vincent suspected that Kristopher was somewhere in their ranks, but couldn’t find him.

A lovely, dark-haired woman Vincent recognized as Jenny Aaronson stepped closer to Catherine's empty chair, bearing a huge, beaten copper bowl in her arms. Charles poured a few drops of oil into it from an expensive-looking flask and nodded to her. She then moved to stand behind his chair, the large bowl still cradled in her arms.

King Charles nodded to Smythe.

"May the candidates for peerage step forward!" he directed.

The line of men advanced a couple of paces. At the same time, the flaps of the ornate tent drew back, revealing a simple, yet large chair mounted on a dais, with a broad step at its foot.

Smythe made his way over and extended a hand inside the guarded pavilion. Catherine emerged, wearing a beautiful, violet beaded gown. An ornate amethyst necklace adorned her throat. Vincent had never seen anyone look more elegant.

"The elevation to the peerage?" Vincent asked Devin.

Devin looked over the mixed assembly. "Ah. I get it. Her father's men." Devin nodded to the line of hopefuls who still stood facing Charles. "People who have done him favors, waiting for this day. Businessmen, people he trusts, or owes. A couple good soldiers, just to keep the guards happy. Not nobles. Not titled, despite their money. That's the point. She'll make one of them a lord." Devin nodded toward Catherine, who was walking over to them, accompanied by Smythe.

The line of men straightened expectantly.

"Do they know who she'll choose?" Vincent asked.

"I doubt it. Only she knows. But it will likely be someone her father has told her to pick," Devin whispered.

Catherine's gown glimmered in a soft, pale shade that make him think of spring blossoms. Crystals sewn into the silk made it glimmer in the sun. Jenny Aaronson moved down the steps of the royal box and made her way to the tent Catherine had just emerged from.

"One. Only one." Smythe's voice rumbled over the crowd and over the hopeful candidates. "Anyone on the field." He gestured toward the line of nominees.

"Lifted from the common life. Made noble. Made highborn!" He held a scroll in his hands, the confirmation of a lordship. The audience leaned forward, buzzing about the likelihood of it being this man or that. Many of the candidates were well dressed, but some wore soldier's gear, as Devin had noted, and one was dressed as a priest.

Vincent could sense the tension in them, the anticipation. This was important to them. And it was a masterstroke of diplomacy. Fighting was not the only way to attain rank in Charles' kingdom. Loyalty, perseverance, faithfulness, business acumen, upholding the law ... all those had their rewards, too.

Charles Chandler's intelligent gaze followed his daughter, and Vincent watched the king's eyes settle on a young man in the line of candidates, then slip away from him. Vincent had no idea who he was. King Charles was trying to give nothing away.

Smythe's normally soft voice boomed across the crowd. "With one gesture of goodwill, the highborn stoop low, and raise the lowborn up high. There is hope for all!" He drew out the moment, as Catherine

inspected the ranks of those the crown had felt might be deserving of this honor. Several men squared their shoulders as she walked down the row of thirty or so souls. It was understood that just to be in the line was to have royal favor.

Vincent could name only a few of them from Catherine's old life. Greg Hughes was in their number. So was the police officer Paracelsus had killed, Jimmy someone. Vincent remembered his picture from his obituary in the paper. Some of the men wore the dark blue cloak of the palace guard, but there were others, as well. At least two were attorneys, judging by their badges of office and the quality of their robes. They looked like they had money, but no official title as yet, apparently. Vincent had no guess about most of the others.

Catherine made her way back down the line, the hem of her gown dragging in the soft sand. Various men inclined their heads as she passed, and the audience held its collective breath.

"One. Only one, princess. But whomever you feel is most deserving." Smythe gave her instructions she didn't need, but she inclined her head, accepting his words. They were for the crowd, anyway.

Vincent saw her hesitate in the middle of the line. She squeezed the hands of several people as she went by them. Others looked with cold, expectant eyes, but for them she barely spared a glance.

Vincent looked over toward the large pavilion. Jenny Aaronson had set the huge bowl she'd been carrying in a low stand, and inclined her head. Whatever this was, it was nearing completion. Charles leaned forward in his king's chair, expectantly.

Vincent didn't know how he knew she was about to choose none of them. There was no firm bond between them, here, or at least, there was not the connection he was used to. He was aware that he'd been developing some kind of vague sense of her, if he concentrated. At other times, he knew he could not feel her at all.

She felt both different than "his Catherine" and very much the same. He could define it no better than that.

He could not explain what he felt. Could explain none of what had been happening to him since the instant he'd found himself walking down a road with Devin, as Devin led a swaybacked mare, much less explain Catherine. And yet...

Yet he had a feeling. It was just a tingling across his consciousness, like fingertips racing lightly over piano keys. But it was enough. And the sensation came only right before she surprised all of them.

Something in the way she stood, perhaps. Something in the way she tilted her head or in the lift of her shoulders. Something told him what was about to happen, or at least, what wasn't. She was about to choose none of them. Of that, somehow, he was certain.

The candidates all waited. The crowd waited. The gentry and the commoners alike, waited.

And then she pointed right at him.

"This one," she said, indicating his squirely self. She crossed to him, tugged his gloved hand, and pulled him forward onto the raked sand of the tourney field. Her hand was in his. He had no choice but to follow.

For a hanging second, all was still.

Then it was... eruption.

The men on the field looked confused. The commoners in the stands looked... overjoyed, and they shouted, clapped, and stamped their feet on the wooden boards with pleasure. Vincent watched King Charles watch the crowd as the ear-splitting noise rolled back and forth across the tourney field.

"Foul. The squire was not among those invited to attend," protested a rich fool near the end of the line. Vincent, Catherine, Smythe, and perhaps the man he was standing beside heard him. It was likely that few others could.

Catherine's voice was firm. "Tradition says I must choose from the untitled men, from anyone on the field. The knights and their squires here are 'on the field,' my Lord."

Most of the other men held their place in line and held their tongues. At least five of them had the good sense to bow their heads immediately, honoring Catherine's choice. Jimmy had a bit of a smile.

Smythe held out his arms in an expansive gesture.

"The future queen has chosen!"

The crowd, which had not yet dimmed in its enthusiasm, increased its volume as they shouted and applauded some more. Bedlam reigned in the stands. This was clearly unprecedented. Unbelievable.

"Go and secure your father's blessing, Lady," Smythe said, nodding toward the royal box. "Then do what you must."

Catherine accepted his instructions as they all knew she would. Those who had hoped for the honor Vincent had received - and was still befuddled by - were leaving the field in a line. A few of them seemed to need the royal guards to subtly convince them to move, but most didn't.

"What are you doing?" Vincent asked, as she kept a smile pasted on her face for the crowd. She waved a little, with her free hand.

"Saving your life. And your knight's. Play along." She tugged him toward King Charles, who was smart enough to see already why her choice had been a terrific one.

Vincent was literally the lowest of the low, on the field. A servant to a previously unknown knight, a knight who had fought against the commons, thanks to his unrecognized rank. Added to that, Vincent's special appearance marked him as a misfit, and an outcast. He might be able to walk in public here, but that did not mean he was an accepted part of society.

By choosing a singular being of no rank, Catherine had chosen to bring hope to the hopeless. She'd made Smythe's words ring incredibly true.

"They're going to talk about this for years." Charles leaned down to her, handing her a small box atop a folded piece of thick cloth. He gave her a kingly smile of approval.

"You'll have to soothe some ruffled feathers," Catherine replied, just loudly enough so that only Charles and Vincent could hear. She accepted the gifts and handed them to a dark-skinned young woman who had come forward, seemingly out of nowhere. Vincent

recognized Edie, as she bowed deeply to both Catherine and the king, and made her way to the tent where Jenny Aaronson now stood.

"Ruffled feathers are what gold is meant to soothe," her father replied, indicating that Catherine's stunt was going to cost him some money, but that he was not displeased.

"You're sure this is the man you choose?" Charles prompted.

"This is Vincent," Catherine replied simply.

"*Sir* Vincent in an hour," Charles smiled.

Minstrels had struck up a tune on the field. Vincent was content to be led, but he truly had no idea "to what." Bearers had come up behind the pair and had rolled a long strip of red carpet from the royal box to the tent where Jenny and Edie now stood waiting. The tent held a pair of guards and some few others in attendance. A juggler was keeping the crowd entertained on the far end of the field while dancing minstrels held the middle of it.

Vincent caught sight of Devin, who was still applauding heartily.

A pretty little girl who looked about Samantha's age came forward with a basket. She proceeded to spread a mix of red and white rose petals on the carpet.

"You are to precede me," Catherine said, stopping and indicating the path with something of a regal flourish. It was a broad gesture, meant to be seen by the crowd. She inclined her head toward the waiting pavilion.

"What is about to happen?" he asked.

"Nothing you will find unpleasant, I don't think." She indicated the waiting assemblage.

"Catherine..."

"The highborn will show humility to the low. I'm going to kneel in front of you, where they can all see."

"No!" The idea appalled him.

"Vincent." She bowed more deeply, still indicating the path made by the rug, with her hand. "It came to me last night. If I can only save one or two people, then one or two is what I will save. This is what I want, and it will help you and Devin. If you refuse, I'll just have to do it to one of the others, and frankly, I don't feel like going down on my knees in front of Mark Coolidge." She named one of the young bucks who had looked at Catherine expectantly. And she kept the smile pasted on her face as she talked through her teeth.

She motioned toward the path with her open palm, again. This time, he stepped onto it.

The crowd stood and convulsed some more, as Vincent strode toward the blue and gold striped canvas. It seemed to hold a piece of his destiny in this place. He knew without looking that Catherine trailed him, occasionally waving to the crowd.

The juggler traded places with a sword swallower, and Vincent approached a large, ornately carved chair that was vaguely reminiscent of the one that sat near his desk back home. It was less than a throne but more than a simple seat. He could describe it little better than that.

The chair sat on a slightly elevated dais. As Vincent sat uneasily, a wide green cushion was brought for Catherine's knees.

"This is wrong, Catherine. You should not kneel before me," he said. He was clearly ill at ease with this entire idea.

She inclined her head slightly, a gesture of deference, meant to be seen by the crowd. And kept talking the whole time. "It is wrong that the family you are born into determines so much of your fate. I can save so few. At least let me save you and your brother, Vincent."

With regal grace, she slowly bent her knees and took her place before him. The shouts were thunderous. Jenny stepped nearer. So did Edie.

"They're going to take off your shoes so I can wash your feet and hands," Catherine explained.

"What?! No!"

"It's all right, Vincent. I promise not to hurt you." She was teasing him as she said it, and her smile was real, not forced. She was enjoying his discomfort, and he was dumbstruck.

Edie had removed his right boot before he could even develop a plan to flee. He just realized the cloth she'd carried was to be used as a towel, for him.

"My feet are different," he warned, as Catherine poured water into the bowl from a silver pitcher, and the little girl added some of her rose petals to the water.

"It's all right. No one will see but the few here, and they are sworn to silence. You are not the first person who was... special who has been in this circumstance."

No, no he wouldn't have been. Even among Charles' nobles he'd seen a man with a club foot and one whose back was markedly stooped, nearly hunchbacked.

But there was "special" and then there was him. Knowing that other people who lived with particular circumstances had done this before him did not mean he was comfortable with anything that was about to happen.

Jenny was unlacing his other boot. The leather was worn and there was a hole forming near the toe. The dark-haired woman tugged off the boot and deftly set his footwear to one side.

"You'll be able to afford better shoes in a few minutes," Catherine said simply, easing a heavy sock down his leg and off his foot.

His hairy, blunt-clawed toes came into view as the socks were stripped away. Edie gasped, then schooled her expression. He'd tried to warn them.

"You have strong feet," was all Catherine said.

Years of royal training had taught her to conceal her true reactions. Or perhaps she wasn't really put off. He had no idea. He'd never shown her his bare feet before, in either world.

A pair of pages moved the bowl from the stand and set it before him so he could use it to soak. Catherine gently grasped his ankle and settled his broad left foot into the huge bowl.

"Catherine, I am not comfortable with this," he confided. The crowd finally began to settle down some, and turn its attention to the performers on the field. Catherine, meanwhile, looked up into his eyes and took in his disquiet.

Her green eyes met his blue ones, and Vincent swore he could feel a flicker of the bond pass between them. "We must all do things we are not comfortable with, Squire."

She tried to send him encouragement. "There is a purse of gold and silver for your troubles, and I mean to show that this is a thing that can be done with grace, and dignity. Please allow it. Done wrong, it looks like I'm being humiliated, rather than you being elevated."

Their gazes locked, and Vincent sat back in the chair, gripping the arms to steady himself while she set about her chore.

She held the silver pitcher up high so the crowd could see, then added more water into the ornate metal bowl.

"This water is from the Crystal Falls. It is pure enough for a baby to drink, and it has been warmed for your comfort." She let it trickle out, slowly.

Vincent watched Catherine pour the water gently into the huge basin, which now contained oil, rose petals, water, his left foot, and at least some of his misgivings.

"Tell me if it's too warm," she warned, putting her fingers in the way to blunt the force of the water and test its temperature.

"It isn't," he replied. If it had been scalding, he wouldn't have protested, but as it was, the declaration was not a lie. The reddish hair on his foot darkened, and fanned out in the water.

Catherine gestured for the box Edie had carried atop the huge towel. Again, she held it aloft a moment, so the crowd could see, then lifted a cake of soap out. She behaved as if nothing was amiss.

Now Vincent understood the significance of the box she'd collected from Charles. The soap had come from her father, and he'd poured oil into the bowl with all the crowd watching. Catherine's handmaidens were part of this, there to support her. It was all to indicate that a royal decree had been made, and a blessing given.

"Soap from Paris," Catherine said, holding the large rectangular bar in her palms.

"All the way from France?" he asked, marveling as a luscious almond scent reached his nose. It was an expensive luxury. She nodded a little, at his question.

She dipped her ringless fingers in the water, and stirred it all a little more. Over her shoulder, the sword swallower was being replaced by a fire eater. The crowd loved all of it.

Vincent forced himself to relax, as the fragrant water's warmth seeped up his leg.

"You're not ticklish, I hope." She smiled at him a little, cupping water in her hands to dribble above his ankle.

"I don't think I am," he answered, suddenly fascinated with the way her soft hands looked next to his dark, furred skin. Could no one see

what he was, here? How different he was, how alien, especially compared to her?

He leaned down to her, hoping only she could hear. "Catherine, do you not see what is before you?" he asked, as she began to soap the lower part of his calf muscle and ankle. Her hands stopped their ministrations for a moment.

"Here, we see more what is in a man's heart than what is in his form, but yes. I see you, my -- I was about to say "My Lord," but that is not yet." She smiled. "I see you, my Vincent."

Her Vincent. Yes. He was her Vincent. The accidental endearment filled him with a secret pleasure.

I have been and will ever be "your Vincent," he thought. *And though you are not "my Catherine," here, you are.*

The soap slid like a sensual caress along his skin, and it was clear she was taking her time with him. Whether that was for the benefit of the peasantry or because she was simply enjoying doing this for him, he couldn't say.

The sensation of the bond had quieted again. It was either barely there or it wasn't there at all, between them. He could only guess at what she was thinking or feeling, as her beautiful hands slid along the back of his hamstring.

After a few minutes under her touch, he guiltily admitted that he didn't want the impromptu bath to stop, now that it had begun. The sensation of her hands on his sensitive skin was beyond sumptuous.

She rubbed the arch of his foot and pulled the tension out of the ends of his toes, one at a time. It felt divine.

He almost hated removing the left foot from the water, even if it meant the right could have a turn.

The bowl was emptied and made fresh, while she dried his now very clean left foot. It was going to feel like a sin to put his used sock back on. Her voice was low, but steady.

"We have not much time to speak. There's the bag of money to go with your title, and the title itself." She blotted the water from the top of his foot, her gaze lowered as she worked.

"Now, you must listen to me," she continued. "It is not a king's ransom. But it will buy you a small farm or a fast ship, or a ... or a new life. It's a way to get yourself started. You hold rank, now. You will be Sir Vincent." She looked back up at him. "Your life is changed. Forever."

She would change my life, forever. But... not this way! Not with money! And definitely not without her in it!

She rubbed down his left calf with the towel, then glanced back up to make sure he understood her directions. He simply nodded, not knowing what else to say.

Did she not understand that there was no life without her in it?

But of course here, she didn't. Because here, she was ... different. Not a part of him, yet. Free. And yet not free.

She simply continued with her instructions: "Your brother has done well, but this is a great boon for your family. When we are through here, tell him to withdraw with honor, and go home. You can live a happy life, Vincent."

She'd settled his right foot into the cleaned bowl and was now pouring the water in. She spread more rose petals around with her fingers and added a touch of the oil. Behind her, the dancing minstrels had moved to the side. A troupe of tumblers was doing acrobatics in the sand of the tourney field.

"What about you?" he asked.

She glanced up, finding it an odd question. "My fate is as it has ever been, my... Vincent."

She soaped his right foot, and, again, he admitted to loving the incredibly sensual feel of her slim, strong fingers against his most unlikely flesh.

He knew his hands would come next, and realized that at least in this world, she had never seen those hands, thanks to his gloves.

"My hands are different, too," he warned her.

She inclined her head in simple acceptance. "Of course they are," was all she said as she massaged his instep with the silky lather.

The crowd had settled down some, able to see little except the view of Catherine's back as she knelt before Vincent. They were mostly watching the acrobats as Catherine continued with the chore she'd been assigned. When his right foot was rinsed and dried, the bowl

was taken out of the way, and Catherine placed her hands on his firm ankles. Her voice was a firm benediction.

"May your feet never retreat in service to the crown. May they bear you swiftly when swiftness is called for, and help you to hold your ground when you must. We do not yield to tyrants. And we do not yield to doubt."

Yes, to the first. I don't know about the second, he thought, fascinated by how serene, how composed her expression was. Royalty. She was born to it.

He was aware it was some sort of blessing, and he inclined his head in acceptance of her words.

"Your hands now, my ... Vincent," she said gently.

Reluctantly, he pulled his gloves off his unusual hands. Even Jenny, who had been stoic to this point, gasped, but Edie stared straight ahead. Catherine seemed to take the hair-sprinkled fingers and pointed nails in stride.

"I tried to warn you," Vincent said softly, terrified of her dismay. There was none, on her face.

She lifted her chin a notch. "In a few minutes you will swear fealty to the crown," she said. "I am the crown. Then, these will be my hands."

It was all right. He knew it was. And he knew she'd said the words "these are my hands" before, standing with him on her balcony. He inclined his head again.

"You would not be the first person to wear gloves - or something else, to try and cover a difference," she said with equanimity, sending Jenny a scolding look.

Catherine's manners were as regal as the rest of her, and Vincent began to understand her description of this ceremony. Done well, they both seemed elevated. Done badly, or with distaste, and she would seem petty. Choose a braggart and she might even seem humiliated. The crowd would remember it, whichever way things went.

"Catherine, why did you do this? Why choose me, when you were supposed to choose one of the others?" he asked. There was more to this than saving Devin from his own foolishness.

She kept her eyes on her chore. "Because I am trapped by what I am. But you aren't. I'm chained here, even if the chains are made of gold. But you are free. And that means your life has potential, beyond the city walls. I beg you to take that freedom, Vincent. To take it and ... use it for whatever you can, whatever good you can do, whatever pleases you."

He gulped. Hard. Her words sounded so close to the ones he'd given to her when she'd been about to leave for Providence, it sent shivers up his spine.

She was trying to do something good. Something beyond good, something noble.

And it would doom them if she succeeded.

But what if what I want is right here? Next to you? What then, Catherine?

A smaller, yet equally impressive copper bowl was brought, set on a low stand, and again, the ritual began. Vincent's mind swirled as she took his hand in hers.

"You've been cut." It was deep, and though the wound was not a fresh one, evidence of it bisected his palm. She approached it tentatively, with soapy fingers.

"We live. So we bleed," Vincent rasped, not sure of his voice. She was careful anyway. Almost hesitant. She was clearly trying not to cause him any pain.

"You're not going to hurt me, Catherine," he reassured, giving himself over to her care. *In this world or any other.*

He knew that was true, and he did not just mean physically. No matter what their trials had ever been, he trusted her implicitly.

Their situation may have caused him pain from time to time, or circumstances had, or chance, but there was no pettiness in her heart, anywhere. On that he would willingly stake his life. Belatedly, he wondered... had he ever told her that? That there was a nobility to her nature, a caring part of her that he not only loved, but utterly trusted?

"I don't think you would ever hurt me, either." It was an odd reply, yet seemed completely right. She didn't raise her eyes as she said it, but kept lathering his hand. Her touch across its back and down his long, strong fingers felt like sensuality itself.

The left hand was rinsed as she indicated he was to remove the glove on the right one.

Did I tell you to live a life without me? Did I say it because I knew you could go where I couldn't?

He knew he couldn't ask her. It wasn't this Catherine he'd ever had the conversation with. His thoughts continued to swirl as she bathed him.

She set his proffered glove aside, and wondered if he was aware how much a man's hands told about his life. His were large, and strong. The calluses on his palm marked him as a laborer, but he also had the ones on his fingers particular to those who held a quill for a long time.

He writes, then, she thought. And with his left hand.

He also read often, judging by the singular mark on the side of his index finger, the one that would turn the page, but end up smudged with ink after a time.

She remembered how much she loved hearing his voice in the park as he read, how he often kept his gloved index finger on the top of the page. *A working man who is also a literate one.* He was a rare combination.

The silky hair marked his hands as unusual, and the gloves marked him as self-conscious about that. So he was educated and he worked hard, but he did not like being so... exceptional, physically.

Yet she'd seen him carry himself with an almost princely grace. He did not like being different, yet he accepted it with a nearly regal poise,

Catherine realized. His concern was for the reaction of others. He didn't want anyone else to be uncomfortable around him.

He has empathy for other people. He's sensitive to their feelings. In a different life, what a fine king he'd make. She brushed the back of his furred knuckles in an almost absent-minded caress.

His hands were hard from whatever rough work he did, and he'd picked up more than one scar, though the hair on his forearms hid at least some of those. She had no idea how he'd gotten the long cut across his palm, but it had been a deep one.

In spite of the fact that she'd seen him tending one, she could tell he'd probably never ridden a horse in his life, as he was missing the calluses made by holding the reins between his fingers, and his gloves did not have the subtle marks of that, either.

He was what he was. Lowborn. Exceptional. Exotic, in a way she couldn't quite name. And fascinating in a way she couldn't quite qualify. *Why am I drawn to you?* she wondered, adding more water to the bowl. She knew she was drawing out the ritual. She just didn't want to examine "why" too closely.

She couldn't tell if he'd ever held a sword. His hands had the strength for it, but she doubted if he'd had the opportunity to train with a proper weapon. Even low-quality steel could be expensive, and if his boots were any indication, he didn't have enough money to afford a decent piece of leather for a sole, much less a decent blade.

His amazing fingers were long, and slightly tapered. His nails seemed to end in an almost natural point. Perhaps that was a custom where he was from. She didn't know.

She'd also noticed his fangs, though he tried to hide them. She'd seen them when they'd read together, in the park. She knew some of the tourney contestants came from places where they filed their teeth, or even decorated their bodies with elaborate tattoos. She wondered if he had any, and decided that with all his obvious body hair, he probably didn't.

Catherine was intrigued by rare things, on instinct.

Is that what this is? she asked herself, as she gently pulled the tension out of his fingers the same way she'd pulled it from his toes.

His differences made him unique, to be sure, but he was not the only singular man here.

Those who had travelled from China struck her as also inscrutably exotic, and men like Erlik had savagery to go with their brutishness. Not that she considered Vincent a brute. No, whatever this was, it was singular to him.

Something was forming between them, and Catherine wasn't near ready to name it for what it was.

She shrugged it all aside. It didn't matter. She was going to rescue him, him and his brother. That was good enough for her. It would have to be.

"You're certain there are no more in Deep Haven like you?" Catherine asked, dripping oil into the rosewater.

"None," he replied, his slight smile almost wistful. She returned it.

"I'm going to save you." She said it with the confidence of a woman who had been taught that money fixed almost everything, and who was about to hand him a bag of gold.

"Yes. Yes, you are." *You already did. What is wrong, then, between us?*

And he did not mean "back home" when he asked, mentally, *Who is going to save you?*

He knew that back in his world, she had indeed saved him, but not in the way she meant. Yet she *had* rescued him. Almost as much as he had rescued her, if not more so.

She'd thrown a life line (or would that be a love line?) down into the years of loneliness. The decades of aloneness he thought were his to bear, interminably. She'd spared him from the sorrow, from the bitterness he tried to fight against, and sometimes failed. Yes, she'd saved him. From the isolation his uniqueness had fostered, she had saved him, back in New York.

But their relationship had seemed suspended back in his world, and as he stood in this one, he'd not quite been able to understand the reasons why they seemed... immobile, for lack of a better word. He was simply sure they were valid ones.

"*Vincent, whatever my fate is, I accept it, gladly.*" When had she said that to him, in his world? And how was it she was still trying to do that, now? Accept him gladly?

"After you collect the purse, and your brother, you must go," the princess before him instructed, drawing him back to the moment at

hand. "Run. Leave this place, and never return. York is where the wealthy, and the powerful rule. One bag of gold and silver coins and a newly minted title won't put you in their ranks, not really. It can be dangerous here."

She wanted to make sure he understood how much he still did not belong here, make sure he had no pretensions. She wanted him away from the city, sensing he would be safer back among his own people.

"If it is dangerous, you should leave too, then," he said.

Her eyes lifted to his. "Run away from what I'm supposed to do?" Her eyes were full of questions. "What would you think of me if I did that? ... And what would I think of myself?"

Again, those were words he recognized. The docks. She'd said it when he'd asked her to stop pursuing Mitch Denton. Mitch Denton, who had shot her in the back.

A fresh drying towel was brought as the question remained unanswered, between them.

Just like when she'd held his ankles and said words of fealty, there seemed to be a benediction about to be given. She clasped his huge hands with her much smaller ones.

"May these hands serve the crown faithfully, and --"

"No."

The word was said simply, and with strength. Her eyes flew to his. *No?* But that was treason, and over what was really just a ceremonial

moment. Even Edie's obsidian eyes flickered at his refusal. So did Jenny's.

"Vincent..."

"Not for the crown. Not for my family or yours, or God and country. Not for some principle or some purpose or some ideal. But for you."

He leaned closer to her. "Just for you, Catherine." His mouth was dangerously close to hers as he said it, his powerful hands clasped in her oh-so-delicate ones.

His words washed over her, and he watched their impact. His princess was blushing. "Just for me?" They were so close their breaths mingled. The look in his eyes was one of assent.

"Just you. Only you."

"These are truly my hands, then," Catherine said, foregoing whatever customary speech she'd been about to give. She kissed his hands, the left and the right one in turn, the sensation filling him with the same loving acceptance it had done on her balcony, nearly a year ago.

"They are yours," he confirmed, his voice nearly as choked with emotion now as it had been then. He put his gloves back on, but remained seated while the bowl and bathing things were taken away. Jenny and Edie put his socks and boots back on his feet.

"Don't stand up yet," Edie warned.

A bearer brought forth a small square pillow, a leather bag heavy with coins atop it. As she'd said, it was enough to change his life. To change it forever.

And it was so far and away from what he wanted both from her and for her that he would have hurled it into the crowd if he thought it would buy her a way clear of her current situation.

Still kneeling, she held up the bag of money so the crowd could see, then tied the pouch to his belt. The raising gesture was repeated as she presented him with the scroll containing his papers of elevation.

“You are now Sir Vincent of York,” she whispered. “Smythe will announce you to the crowd.”

He felt no different.

“I liked being your Vincent so much better, my Catherine.”

She didn’t correct his failure to use her title, and only Edie and Jenny were close enough to hear.

Edie put the soap back into the box while Jenny made a show of folding the towels. It was all so the crowd could see that the ceremony was nearing a close.

“Don’t stand before she does. It’s disrespectful,” Edie instructed, her back to the crowd and her dark eyes on Vincent. “But she’s trying to appear humble, so don’t let her stand up first either.” Vincent nodded his understanding.

Jenny began placing the silver pitcher and oil flask back in the bowl. When she was done, she also turned to Vincent.

“You have no standard of your own, milord, because you are so new. That means you are free to use Princess Catherine’s colors until you decide your own.” She indicated the blue standard that flew beside

the door of the tent. Edie fussed with straightening the train of Catherine's gown before she tried to stand.

"Your official title is Sir Vincent of York, Knight to the Crown," Jenny continued. Her head bowed, indicating that he now outranked her. She slipped his scroll of elevation into a velvet bag, to protect it, and handed it back to him so he could tuck it in his belt.

"I had a dream about this day," she whispered near his ear and then stepped back into place, beside and slightly behind the chair. Edie had done the same. They were now ready.

Vincent extended his hand to his lady. "This isn't over," he whispered to Catherine, rising from the chair as he helped her rise from her kneeling position on the cushion.

If she'd been about to reply, he couldn't have heard it. Once they stood up, the crowd took that as the signal to burst into spontaneous hysteria, again.

"Lords and Ladies, clergy and commoners. I give you your knight ... Sir Vincent of York!" Smythe introduced.

The fever pitch of sound rose again, and Smythe tugged his right hand, while Catherine took his left. He scanned the crowd, uneasy at their wild praise.

He wanted to tell Catherine as much, just as he felt her drop his hand and leave him in Smythe's company. Her guards returned her to the royal box, Jenny and Edie trailing behind.

Smythe held him in the center of the field for a moment, then returned him to his original position beside Devin. "You are a lord

now, my Lord. And we shan't hold that against you." He smiled good-naturedly. Smythe bowed low and backed away, as the crowd cheered some more. Some began to throw roses, and petals of other flowers.

Vincent was uncomfortable with all of it.

After the applause died down for the last time, the tourney workers rolled up the rug, dragged rakes through the sand again, and struck down the royal pavilion and replaced it with the canopy for the horses. They were readying the field for the upcoming fight. He would not have to endure this approbation for long.

Reflexively, Vincent pulled up the hood of his cape as he stepped over near the horses. The gold weighed heavily on his belt. He could not wait to give it to Devin, to be rid of it. Already it felt like some kind of chaining thing.

The broad grin that split his brother's face was almost too ridiculous to be borne.

"You done good, little brother." Devin clapped him on the back as Vincent removed the sack from his belt and passed the bag of money and the scroll to Devin.

"Keep your hood up," Devin whispered as he drew closer. "As good as this is, we're now targets for every thief and fraud in York."

"You mean people like you?" Vincent nudged.

"Yeah. But like I keep telling you, I'm a *good* fraud," his brother replied with his usual sense of humor, turning to secure the bag inside his cloak.

Vincent shrugged. There were too many guards around for there to be trouble, and Vincent seriously doubted that Devin couldn't handle a pickpocket. Or give one lessons, for that matter.

"She says we should leave, now," Vincent relayed the message.

"Figured as much," Devin answered.

The afternoon's melees continued, this being the last official day of the undefeated contenders. By the end of it, no Outsider remained but Hog, all the members of the deaf gang were out, though Lincoln had advanced fairly far before he was waylaid by a man Vincent recognized as Mundy, who was in turn defeated by Howie, from the Silks. Vincent knew that Howie would withdraw from the lists after today. He was content to sit on the sidelines with a snow globe, shaking it happily and watching the plastic "snow" fall.

At least he's alive in here, Vincent thought glumly.

Devin withdrew with honor by virtue of Vincent's good fortune, not that he wanted to take anyone else on anyway. Erlik's opponent also withdrew, wanting none of the ogre.

It had been an amazing day. As Catherine left the royal box with her father and ladies-in-waiting, the crowd stood and cheered, louder than Vincent had ever heard them do that, for her. The King was clearly pleased, as he escorted her from the tournament site.

"Okay, time to pack it in, little brother." Devin leaned back in a chair at an inn that evening. He'd finally convinced Vincent to come inside. "In

the morning we'll get ... 'Rosinante' out of the stables and take her back home."

Rosinante was Don Quixote's horse. Vincent wasn't sure he liked the similarity right now. Fighting for a lost cause was not what he wanted.

"Don't tell me that name is the one she'll continue with." Vincent was drinking ice water out of a pewter tankard. The extreme cold bothered his upper lip.

Devin simply shrugged. Something was bothering his very large brother. Something besides the temperature of his drink.

"Perhaps we should call her 'Carousel,'" Vincent continued, turning his mug on the table, watching it leave rings of condensation.

Devin took a swallow of beer, keeping his brown eyes on the newly minted lord. "We can call her Harvey the Doctor, if you want to. Won't improve her pedigree any." He took another sip. "But she'll get us home without us having to carry our gear. Say, you can afford your own horse now, if you want. Want to check out the stables in the morning and see what's being offered for sale?"

Vincent had no intention of placing himself on the back of a horse. Or, for that matter, returning home, just yet. He knew it.

"I cannot leave, Devin. Not yet."

Devin blinked. "Want to stick around a couple more days? See who wins?"

"Something like that," Vincent answered, nudging the tankard away. At least they could afford to sleep in a bed, tonight.

"Okay. I'll get us a decent room. Vincent..." Devin did not quite trust the inscrutable look that had been on Vincent's face since this afternoon's ceremony. A pair of patched capes protected their anonymity. But Devin wasn't sure if anything was protecting his brother's heart, just now.

Vincent lifted his crystal blue eyes and met Devin's brown ones.

"Just don't get any ideas," Devin warned.

No. No, of course he wouldn't.

"They say the games tomorrow are for the few undefeated winners left of the commoners and the newer gentry," Vincent began. "Can I enter the lists now, if I wish to? I'm a noble. They say the games now belong to them."

"See, those are the kinds of ideas I'm talking about." Devin stood, flipped the chair around, and swung his leg over. "Don't do it, Vincent. They'll eat you alive. Skirmishing among the lowborns is one thing. And you didn't even do that."

Ah. So I can enter.

Vincent was about to retort when he realized something.

"She's nervous."

"Who?"

"Catherine. Princess Catherine," he amended.

"I would be too, if I were her. She hides it pretty well. Must be all that royal training. Did she say that when she was washing your hands?"

"No. I don't mean I *heard* that she's nervous. I'm not talking about earlier today. I mean I *sense* that she's nervous, Devin. Right now. Up in her rooms." It was the bond, and Vincent recognized its attempt to truly establish itself between them.

This felt like long ago. Like before, when he'd sat in the tunnels and felt its unfurling...

The amazing sensation felt so new. Like a brushing of soft wings.

Is she reaching for me, or am I reaching for her? he wondered.

Then, like now, he had no answer for the question.

"I forgot this sensation. The newness of it. The ... opening of it. I forgot what this felt like."

He had. As odd as it sounded, the bond was a "feeling" all its own, and it had felt different in its various stages.

Like falling in love, it had felt one way in the beginning, then another, later on. It was tremulous, now, and breath-catching. And again, it was sometimes there, then not, then back again. *A brushing of soft wings*, Vincent thought again. It tickled, mentally.

"I'm going to save you," she'd told him. It seemed that that instinct set something in motion, between them, both in this world and in his own. In either place, the bond strengthened when one of them was determined to save the other. He didn't know why. But it seemed true, both now and three years ago.

Vincent wished he could find Kristopher again and ask him about it, but the young ghost was maddeningly absent. Vincent could spot him

nowhere. Even Rolley had not returned. Perhaps it didn't matter. Perhaps neither one of them knew. Perhaps, whatever all of this was about, it was for him to determine. Kristopher had tried to tell him as much.

"This feeling. I forgot what this was like, Devin," Vincent repeated.

"You're changing the subject," Devin prompted, wanting Vincent's promise that he was not about to do something stupid.

"Not really," Vincent replied. "She's...confused. Nervous. As I said."

"Mm. Must be tough to not know which idiot is going to get you," Devin replied, pretending to drink the beer as he watched his brother, and measured what to say.

Devin never drank liquor when he wanted to stay sharp, though he would sometimes order a glass of wine or rum to give the impression he was drinking, or if he wanted others to think he was addled. Con man's trick. Devin wondered just how many of those he was going to need to get Vincent out of this.

"Devin, I know this is going to sound strange to you, but... I feel what she's feeling. Right now. She's... there are storms within her. She's fighting her disquiet."

Devin set down his drink. Carefully.

"Little brother, she's rich, and she's beautiful. Right now, there are worse problems to have." Devin said it bluntly, but not unkindly.

"Neither her wealth nor her appearance seems to have solved those problems," Vincent returned.

"No. But it's not as bad as some of the ones we have, when food is scarce, or there isn't enough medicine." Devin was hardly going to spend time feeling sorry for a woman who wore diamonds to match her pearls.

"Devin... there are worlds beyond this one we are sitting in. Worlds where you take every journey you ever dreamed of, and are still as irrepressible and ever, and I am still... me."

He checked Devin's face for a reaction to that, but like Catherine, he seemed accepting of the words.

"Vincent, if there's a virtue in travel, it's that you hear stories about everything. I do understand what you're saying. I really do."

Perhaps he did. At least on some level.

"Then understand that I think this is right."

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Shakespeare's philosophy," Devin, conceded, tweaking Vincent over his love of the bard. Vincent nodded at that.

"So?" Devin raised a sardonic eyebrow. "You're you and I'm me. Visiting other places is kind of what I do, Vincent. It's kind of who I am."

Yes, yes it was. And as such, Vincent knew he wanted Devin's support.

"If I tell you that in one of those worlds... and for all I know, in all of them, I love her, that I'm bound to her, I swear it's true. I think I'm here to find out why we are... frozen in that other world. Why we are struggling."

Devin's canny gaze pinned his brother.

"Figure anything out?" Devin asked.

"In both worlds, we are separated. By many things."

"No kidding." Devin's voice was wry.

"Did I keep her there? Isolated? Keep her there when I should have kept her with me? Do you know? Is that why I'm here? So I understand?"

"She isn't choosing to stay with you," Devin pointed out.

That would be correct both in this world and in the one Vincent had left behind, though to be fair, they were new, here.

"That is true. On the other hand, I have not been... building any bridges to that end," Vincent replied.

"Yeah? Why not?" Devin asked, eying a pretty barmaid while Vincent knew Devin was really paying attention to every word. It was his talent to look disarming.

"I... our lives don't ... *fit* together. She isn't ready to leave her world for mine."

Devin chuckled at that. "Yeah. Giving up that comfy throne to sit on our cast-offs hardly seems like a reasonable choice."

Vincent accepted Devin's rather narrow view, even as he knew the censure in it was mild. Devin's brown eyes met his blue ones. Brotherly affection shone in them.

"Little brother, considering she can summon half a dozen soldiers by lifting her finger, and thus have me thrown in a dungeon somewhere, she's probably never going to be my kind of people. But if she's yours, why not tell her so?" Devin shrugged at the question as if it were obvious.

Whether it was a baited one to point out he could never have her, or a sincere one to urge him to action, Vincent wasn't sure. Devin's advice was often of a ... variable nature.

Still, Vincent mulled that very question. But he *had* told her so in his world ... hadn't he? Of course he had. In his world at least, Catherine knew he loved her, and she loved him. He would die for her. He would kill for her, and had.

Yet...

Yet they were still not together in the way his heart longed for, and they had moved no closer to any particular goal in his own world than he was likely to in this one.

"She's going to get married, Vincent." Devin's words interrupted his musings. "To one of her own kind, and definitely sooner rather than later. She's going to have kids one day, and be an amazing mother. Let it go. Let her have that."

Though the pronouncement was harsh, hadn't Vincent himself thought the same thing? Wasn't it something he'd wrestled with, mentally, almost from the first? If she was going to become a mother, wouldn't that preclude him, almost reflexively? Unless...

"Besides, Jacob has enough to worry about as it is, between the risks we both take."

And there it was. Devin had let him have his fun, have his fantasy for a few moments. A dose of reality was called for. Vincent had the impression he was being reeled in.

Vincent had never imagined Devin as the voice of reasonable - or even unreasonable - caution.

"Is this the man who punched Mitchel Denton in the nose as a child, and took me on a midnight ride in the park?" Vincent asked. Catherine's nervousness was easing. She was busying herself with something.

"It's the man who has dealt with a whole lot of people out there, squire -- Sorry ... Milord. And who knows a whole helluva lot more than you do about calculating the odds."

"Is that what this is? A math calculation?" - And worse, was that what Vincent himself had turned them into?

"Sooner or later they tell me everything is," Devin answered smoothly.

"You are the last person I know who ever believed that, Devin."

"I am the last person you know who *looks* like they believe it, but yeah. I know it's true." Devin leaned forward across the table. His brown eyes were uncompromisingly steady. Without turning his head to the crowd he began a commentary:

"Look down the line at the bar, Vincent. Two of the guys drinking there can handle themselves, if there's a fight. Four others think they

can. The blonde woman on the end used to be a whore. It's a stain you can't quite wash off, even when you leave it behind. The pony-tailed one in the low-cut blouse still is one, and she's wall-eyed on uppers. All of them have a certain amount of ... time to them. A certain amount of time left to either enjoy their lives or be miserable about them. There are some things they're likely to do. There are some things they'll never do. They're people, yeah. But there's a definite ... math to them."

Devin clearly had a talent for sizing people up, or at least for knowing a good deal about them at a glance. It was a gift he'd likely used, often.

Vincent looked down the bar, overlooking the men but taking in the women. A poorly dressed girl who looked like Lena was wiping down tables, making an honest living, if a less than savory one, as a barmaid. She looked tired, and yes, the marks of her former life still showed. As to the one Devin insisted was trying to turn a trick... Lucy? Was that Lucy Vincent saw? Lucy and Lena?

The crowd kept shifting, and it swallowed up some people as it disgorged others. The man Mitch Denton had killed with a car bomb sat next to the man Catherine had saved from Mitch, along with his family. This realm seemed so full. Full of... everyone.

"Is Ellie here? Is Winslow?" Vincent asked, understanding that he was seeing both the dead and the living, here.

"Safe and sound back in... Deep Haven," Devin said, using the pseudonym. "Why?" Devin asked.

"No reason," Vincent deflected. In this odd realm it seemed few lines were observable.

"Why am I here, Devin?" Vincent finally asked the first question he should have asked his brother, back when they were on the road. But Devin was no help.

"Beats me. I always figure when I go someplace, its either pure chance, or there's something there I have to figure out." Devin rose, and tossed some coins on the table. It would do no good to try and dissuade Vincent anymore. Of that much he was certain.

"I'll get us that room. See you later?"

Vincent nodded, watching Devin weave his way through the crowd.

Before he left, he slipped Lucy and Lena some coins, and told the former to go home alone. She did.

"You've *seen* this world. There is no *place* for you in it."

How could she sound so much like him? Was that part of the magic of this place? To give his own words back to him, so he could see how they sounded?

Her voice was adamant. And if she'd been "nervous" at some point before the conversation started, now she was near panic. For him.

"Then I will go with courage. Go with care." His arms were folded across his massive chest, and he was as adamant as she was, as he stood in her rooms.

"You have lost your mind. You have very literally lost your mind, Vincent. You were supposed to just take the gold and..."

"And what? Just go? Leave you to a fate you neither want nor care for? Catherine... no. Just... no."

They had been arguing for the last ten minutes, both inside her room and on her balcony. He wasn't giving any ground. Neither was she.

"You going insane isn't going to change that," she persisted.

"Then sanity is overrated and clinging to it is unwise."

"Do you know how insane *that* sounds?" she asked. He did.

"I know leaving you to marry a man you do not love *is* insane. Very."

"You're mad."

"Then we're all a little mad here." It was his day for Lewis Carroll, apparently. "It will be all right, Catherine."

"All right is the last thing it will be!" She crossed the large room to him, her worry in her eyes. "Vincent, whatever you're thinking... don't. Nothing you are planning is going to be easy."

"It never is," he allowed. "For the moment, I just need you to understand something."

'She's never going to be my kind of people. But if she's yours, why not tell her so?'

"I love you. I have always loved you, and we have always saved each other. Always. I am going to save you from this, just as you saved me from... from an almost unendurable aloneness, where I am from."

Her green eyes were huge. And they were afraid.

"Vincent, this could cost you. It could cost you... everything."

He noted she did not return the words. That was understandable. Neither had he, the first time Catherine had given them. He didn't like it. He understood it, but didn't like it. Had Catherine felt that way, too? He realized she probably had.

"Then I will pay... everything. All I am. All I could ever become." They were words he'd said to Lena about how much he loved Catherine in what was starting to feel like a different life. Rather than hoping to leave here, he now prayed no one shook his shoulder back in his own world, interrupting this vision. There was something he needed to do.

"I can't let you do that. Can't let you *pay* that," she insisted.

How often had he thought the same thing, about her? That being with him would cost her too much, cost her... everything? That he couldn't let her pay such a steep price for their love?

"Yes, you can. You must. You have to be willing to let me pay whatever price I am willing to give, Catherine."

She drew herself erect.

"*Princess* Catherine. It's time you remembered..."

"No. Just Catherine. My Catherine. Here, or wherever we are. You'll know it, too, one day. You'll see." He sounded certain because he was.

If she couldn't appeal to his sense of reason, perhaps his sense of self-preservation could kick in.

"Vincent, this isn't like the other matches. Tomorrow, the fighting starts in earnest."

"I believe those who left the tourney field with broken bones will tell you that the fighting did indeed start in earnest already. Isaac Stubbs

fought Jason Walker. Though the former prevailed, Isaac's injuries will keep him from advancing."

Catherine's voice rose. "Both fought in no more protection than street clothes, with Jason in some sort of ... lion costume so he looks like you!" She was close to losing her temper, and trying to contain that. She reached for some measure of royal decorum and tried to be her most persuasive.

"These were the early matches, Vincent, the ... street fights among the lowborn, or the unverified ranks. The winners are all expected to take whatever purses they earned and go *home*." The emphasis in her voice indicated he was to do exactly the same, that she had even helped pave the way for that eventuality.

"I know what you expected. I know what you planned. No."

"Tomorrow the nobles enter the lists. Better prepared. Better armed. Better trained!"

"So you've said, Catherine." He was as implacable as her stone fortress.

"Then why? ..." Her anger wasn't true anger, but fear masquerading as ire. She was frightened for him. Very. Their bond was strengthening, and he could feel it.

"I gave you the gold so you could have a choice, Vincent! A choice in your life! So you could have a life with ... no limits!"

"Ah, but there is no life without limits, Catherine. You yourself told me that." And he was starting to understand what she'd meant.

"I never said any such thing," she denied.

Technically, this Catherine was correct. They'd never had a conversation that had begun with Michael's kiss and ended with a discussion about their limitations.

"Besides, you can't enter." She seized on her last hope. "You didn't fight through the early games with the other commoners, and you aren't a nobleman. Starting tomorrow, only the undefeateds among the commons or a verified noble can ..." Her jaw snapped shut as he raised an eyebrow at her.

But he was a noble. He was one, now, thanks to her.

"I can't believe this." She felt very slow to not realize she'd handed him his doom, earlier. "You have everything to live for. Your whole future is in front of you."

"That is true no matter what." He sat down on the finely upholstered sofa in her room, the one that could seat one person comfortably, or two uncomfortably. Or at least very closely together.

"Your fear is tiring you. Sit with me," he coaxed. "Let this world do as it will without you. Just for a while. I will read to you." He pulled his book from the pocket of his cloak.

"You will *read* to me?" She was incredulous at his calm, if not his audacity.

"Vincent, please." She took the book from his hands and set it to the side. She kissed his fingers again, as she had when she'd washed those same hands, earlier that day.

She was falling in love with him. He could feel it tumbling through her system in earnest, though it was fighting with her fear at the moment.

"I'm afraid for you," she said.

"Sometimes, my Catherine, we must walk empty-handed among our enemies."

She threw his hands away. "Don't quote Irish peace activists to me!" She was frustrated with his answer, and it was showing.

"I would rather quote Dickens to you. Will you let me read?"

"Sacrificing yourself will not change my fate, 'Sir' Vincent." She used his formal address pointedly. He was elevated now. And they were still incredibly far apart in almost every way. Ways that he was slowly seeing were unimportant.

"I have no intention of sacrificing myself. I have only a question for you, if I win."

"If you win? By what stroke of ... providence do you even see that happening?!" She was hitting new heights in her incredulity, and trying to decide what to do. "If you need more money..." She reached for the pearls at her ears.

"This isn't about money, Catherine. It is about how I feel about you. How we feel about each other. I may have thought it was about money, for a time, or the possibilities that brings, in my other ... realm. But I am learning better."

"What do you mean? Vincent, I know you believe what you're saying. But I don't understand you." Now he'd confused her.

He caressed the leather of the book, perhaps realizing for the first time why he'd chosen this particular one to bring to her, so long ago. Great Expectations was a tale of a man separated from his love thanks to his lack of money, of social standing. Pip and Estella were from two different worlds, just as they were. And they'd both had much to learn.

"For a long time, I was aware of the advantages your fortune gave you, and treated those advantages as a kind of obligation for you, one you had to fulfill." He inclined his head at her. "But then, that is you serving your fortune, not your fortune serving you."

He opened the book to the place where they'd left off. "I think you will like the next chapter," he said as she fretted.

"My Vincent," she tried to mollify him, "please, I beg you to reconsider this."

"And I beg you to not forbid it, even though every part of you wants to. Providence is when something is meant to be, Catherine."

She held his gaze and her eyes wavered. The man she was falling in love with was asking her to allow something. Something that might get him killed.

"This isn't like other fights in the tourney." She tried reason, again.

"It's... it's chess as much as it's brute force. They will have every advantage over you. Have far more pieces on the board to play with than you have."

"It is fortunate that I am good at chess, then." His voice was soothing, and meant to reassure.

She had no idea what more she could say to dissuade him. She moved beside him and sat on the edge of the ornately carved seat that was too big to be a chair and barely large enough to be called a couch. He was about to risk his life, and for now, all he seemed to want to do was read her a book.

It made no sense. None at all. And yet... in some part of her, it did. She rubbed her temple with a well-manicured finger. Fighting with him had given her a headache.

She looked at the very worn book he'd probably gotten from Smythe. Or a refuse bin.

"Great Expectations." She murmured the title, as aware as he was that it had something to do with them. But they were impossible. They just were. "Is that some kind of bad joke?" she asked.

He gave her his most coaxing smile. "No, no, it isn't. It is some kind of wonderful story. A story that begs you to believe, just a little, that when all odds are against you, the impossible may still happen. Be with me, Catherine. Be with me and listen, and fall in love with me a little more..." He knew she would. Just as he would.

"How did you know I ..." but she stopped when she saw his raised eyebrow. She closed her mouth, and swallowed, giving herself a moment to regain her poise.

"Very well." Her voice calmed, and he could feel her accepting him. "But it's still insanity. And I asked Mr. Smythe about your book. That story has two endings, you know."

"This is the edition with the happy one," he said, running his unique hand down the page until he found the paragraph where he would begin.

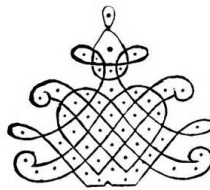
His gorgeous baritone caressed the words like a long returned lover:

""That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me,"" he read.

The sentence reminded him of the day he'd first met his Catherine, when she'd been savaged - and the several that followed it.

""But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day..."

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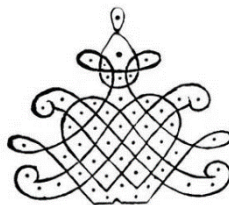
Lost In The Tapestry

Chapter 4

Challenger



*I can't go back to yesterday- because I was a different person then. ~
Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



**

"You're out of your mind." Devin's voice didn't brook even the beginnings of dissent.

"So Catherine assures me. May I use your wide belt? It is better than mine, and may help slow a blade to my back."

"I'm smaller than you."

"It's a belt, Devin. It will adjust."

The two traded leatherwear as Devin watched his fool of a brother suit up for what would likely be his last day on earth.

"At least take Rosinante over there," Devin prompted.

Vincent shook his head. "I can no more picture myself on the back of a horse than I can picture you with a mermaid's tail."

"Take my boomerang, then. I learned how to use it in Australia. It will disarm someone, at least. You're allowed to have any kind of weapon, now."

"No. I have no idea how to use it."

"Take my knife, then."

"Devin, I don't use a knife. We both know what I use, when I need to injure a man." It pained him to admit that his "knives" were at the end of his fingertips, and in the sharp fangs of his mouth.

Still, Devin tucked the pocket knife into the leather of Vincent's left boot. "Look, I don't know how much good it's going to do either. But I'm going to stick it in your boot every time you fight just to make myself feel better, if not you."

The older brother took in the picture the younger one presented, hoping he wasn't doing that for the last time.

"This isn't sane, Vincent. They're in armor. And on horseback. With swords."

"I will handle it."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"At the least," Vincent tightened the belt around his waist, "it should not make you feel worse."

Devin sighed. "Say you pull the first one off. Say you manage it. What then? You can't mean to go through to the end of this thing."

Vincent simply refused to answer.

"Some of them are used to killing people for a living, Vincent."

"Then I will handle that, too."

Devin locked his fingers behind his head. "I should never have brought you here." His brother was clearly as worried as Catherine had been.

The blue eyes looked quizzical at Devin's declaration. "Why? Why, when all our lives you dared... everything? Even to dream dreams that included me? Wasn't that what going Above... or even you travelling to this place... was all about? A promise that someday I, too, could be a part of something?"

"You are a part of something." He meant the tunnels.

"I need more," Vincent said simply.

Devin had no answer for that, and he understood that feeling all too well.

"You're my brother. If anything happens to you..."

"Then you will have to be the one to explain it to Father. I won't envy you the chore." It was a subtle kind of jest. "All will be well, Devin," Vincent reassured his suddenly very concerned brother.

Devin didn't think so. But as Vincent adjusted his gloves and collected his patchwork cape, Devin had no retort for him.

**

The fighting went much as expected in the early morning. Most of the lightly armed and armored contestants fought a match or two, then withdrew, half with silver in their pockets for providing both entertainment and something to bet on. Some had done quite well. Some had been defeated early.

Master Henry Dutton, the attorney who had attempted to defraud Margaret Chase, was dressed as an esquire, but unfortunately for him, also fought like one. He was well-armored but not very skilled with the mace he carried. By the end of the fight he nursed a broken arm, not to mention a sore jaw.

Two men who looked like they had stepped out of an ancient Chinese painting did better. In this world, they were warriors of China, though in Vincent's, they were simply members of the Tong. They battled all but unscathed, wielding bamboo staffs with deft skill.

Most contestants fell somewhere in between. Vincent recognized Sir Colin, Lisa Campbell's ex-bodyguard. Wide-built and dressed like the mercenary he was in either world, he emerged from his first brawl of the day with a few bruises, but no major injuries.

In the undefeated category of the early, common-born combatants, only a few indicated a desire to advance. Erlik still stood, having nearly broken a man's back as they sparred. So did Hog, the raggedly dressed sellsword of an Outsider who fought using a heavy length of chain.

Vincent drew the latter in his first round of combat. As a lesser noble, not to mention a freshly minted one, it was considered a statement regarding his lack of rank that he was fighting a commoner. That left Colin with Erlik, the last of the Commons, and put Mitch Denton (whose claim to nobility was likely thanks to simply threatening a man with a gambling debt out of his title) into the list on horseback, against one of the young men Vincent remembered stalking prostitutes in the park.

Of the first three matches, Erlik prevailed over Colin, nearly choking the life out of him once the two closed on each other, Colin unable to fight any other way once he'd been disarmed.

Mitch easily dispatched his much lighter, less experienced opponent. Denton's black armor gleaming darkly in the sun, and his black horse barely broke into a sweat as Mitch simply overpowered his underwhelming opponent. The boy had a fast horse but no discipline, and expensive armor couldn't save his sorry hide.

The chamfron, the head armor on Mitch's stallion, made it look like a dark unicorn, though he never dropped his head to use it as an impaling weapon. He hadn't needed to. Mitch had simply knocked the youth off his horse and beaten him with his fists until he gave the sign of surrender.

Vincent's fight was also remarkably brief.

The whirl of Hog's chain was almost a familiar sight, and Vincent thought it odd that it was so identical to the one Hog had used in his world. Heavy. Slow. Iron links rusted with age, and slick with oil from somewhere.

Hog stank of an acrid kind of sweat which seemed unique to him, and it was an odor Vincent had forgotten until the two advanced nearer to each other on the tourney field. The crowd was clearly on Vincent's side, though many lamented his lack of a weapon, since many kinds of those were now allowed.

Hog's chipped yellow teeth gave his oily smile a broken look. Vincent could not believe that such an evil man would be allowed to compete here. But in a world where Erlik and Mitch Denton were in the lists, anything was possible.

Devin watched as Vincent took off his left glove and tucked it into his belt, leaving the right one on. He closed his fist to hide his claws as much as he could, and then advanced a little. Devin had no idea what he was about to do.

The chain twirled and Vincent waited, knowing that patience was called for. Close too soon and he knew he'd find that chain wrapped around his neck. They were in an open space, so Vincent was aware that had no advantage of ground, as he'd had inside the tunnels.

He didn't need one.

Not known for his patience, Hog eventually let the chain fly, hoping to catch Vincent on the shoulder, or across the face. With a deft step to the left, Vincent grabbed the chain out of mid-air with his gloved hand and used it to pull Hog forward. His ungloved hand raked Hog's heavy

midsection, not a mortal wound, not this time, but certainly a match-ending one.

"I killed you in a different place," Vincent hissed to Hog's terrified face as Hog began to feel his own blood spilling. The soulless eyes knew fear as Vincent shoved him away, and Vincent hid his bloodied claws inside a closed fist. He did not want to reveal all his advantages in the first match.

Vincent put his glove on quickly as the crowd cheered and Hog fell backward into the dirt, his filthy shirt darkening from the rents to his abdomen.

Vincent knew he would have to clean his glove, later. He also knew that Hog would never touch Catherine. It was enough.

The roar of the assembled onlookers covered Hog's howls of pain and surprise. Vincent's eyes went to the royal box. Catherine was there, her eyes looking worriedly right at him. He didn't like that she'd seen him wound a man in such a bestial way; he knew it was unavoidable, but still didn't like it. Didn't like it in this world any more than he liked it in his own.

Devin, squire to him now that Devin had withdrawn from the lists and their fortunes had reversed, came forward from his position and wrapped Vincent's cape over his shoulders in a sweep of patchwork cloth and victory. The crowd erupted again, as Devin tugged Vincent back toward the safety of the sideline, and it was Devin who waved to them jauntily, not Vincent.

"You all right?" Devin asked as he put on a phony smile for the crowd.

"I am fine. He's nothing I haven't killed before," Vincent answered tersely.

Devin shot him a cryptic look. "Whatever you say. His kind are a dime a dozen. Let me see your hands."

"Not here. I need privacy."

"The chain that wrapped your hand. Did you break any bones?" Devin knew it would be a disaster if he had, and an expected one, considering the weight of the links Vincent had grabbed out of the air.

"That hand is fine. I need to wash the other one. Get me to water, Devin." Vincent uttered the words in a low voice, clearly uncomfortable with whatever was now caught under his nails.

They were announcing the next match. Vincent didn't know either man.

"Come on. The crowd will be busy with this. Move off to the canopy where they stake the horses."

Vincent did as Devin bid him, and watched his brother dip a leaky bucket into a horse trough so that he might wash. Grateful for Devin's care, Vincent removed his glove so that he could clean the blood from his hand.

"Being part of the nobility doesn't seem to have changed the facilities much," Vincent observed as Devin placed his body between Vincent and anyone else who might be about to enter the wide canopy used to shade the horseflesh. Horseflies buzzed, and the smell of animal dander hung in the air.

"You'd be amazed at how much your life changes... and how much it doesn't, when you have money," Devin said. Of the two of them, he would know.

"I'll get us a tent and have it set up in an hour. Since we're stupid enough to be here, we might as well be comfortable."

Vincent nodded at that.

Vincent finished cleaning himself, glad to be rid of the gore. The other hand bore a pressure cut across the fleshy part of his palm, nothing more.

"You have to stop this." It was Catherine's voice, from the doorway of the animal tent.

"You are missing the match," Vincent observed, noting her high color. She looked resplendent in a soft green gown. Emeralds swung in her ears.

"Devin, tell him. If you have any love for him at all, tell him. Go home. Go home, both of you."

"Leaving sounds good," Devin said.

"No," Vincent stated overtop of him.

Catherine was not pleased with the latter's refusal.

"Vincent, the heavy armor is already starting to come in, and tomorrow, polearms are allowed. You can't beat that. You can't best a charging horse, or hope to claw a man wearing plate!"

"No, Catherine. I am not leaving you to marry the likes of... the likes of the animal I just had to put down."

Catherine's frustration was obvious. "I was never *going* to marry him, or any of the others you've seen! Don't you understand how fixed this game is, Vincent? How rigged it is against the poor, no matter how strong they are? The ... boy Mitch Denton knocked in the dirt had a better chance than the man you just injured did!"

Devin looked around, aware her voice was getting loud. And public.

"How is the game rigged?" Vincent asked.

She stepped closer, realizing her voice should be lower. "You don't think money buys you an advantage, when it comes to a fight?"

Catherine asked. "Stephen has the steadiest horse on the field and he fights with a lance. He never even has to touch the men he beats."

"Is he who you want?" *You did, once.*

"If he wins, he wins."

"You didn't answer the question." Vincent's voice was sharper than he'd intended. Now they were arguing. Devin eyed the exchange, feigning disinterest as he dumped out the bucket.

"That's because the question doesn't matter!" she exploded at him. Her volume made some of the horses whicker. She lowered it again.

"If I prefer Stephen, or Elliot, or any of them, it makes no *difference* Vincent. Tom de Gunther makes no *difference*. Until he does, if he wins." She was trying to point out to him the inevitability of her

situation. "And you make less difference than they do." She was angry and spoiling for a fight.

He stepped closer to her.

"Catherine, in a different life... a different kingdom... It is not like this. We are not like this." At Vincent's unsubtle glance, Devin moved away, giving them privacy.

"We? There is no 'we.'"

"There is. You just have to believe in it."

She looked up at him, and something like hope glittered in her eyes.

"You keep saying there are two worlds, and we stand in both. I understand magic, Vincent, I do. I understand things like fate. I've lived with mine for too long not to." She searched his clear eyes for some hint of help, of understanding. "Did you fight for me there, too? Is that why you're doing this?" She was trying to discern him.

"Yes. I did fight for you. Today isn't the first time I've beaten that man."

She looked confused, but hopeful still.

"You're who I marry, then? In that world?"

He had the good grace to drop his head. He wouldn't lie to her.

"No. We are not married."

"Oh." Her voice held a chill. "I see." She stepped away from him, looking a bit frosty. "I'm your... doxy, then."

Doxy? Was that even a word? He didn't need to ask its meaning.

"No. We do not... disrespect each other that way."

She was clearly befuddled by whatever he was trying to say.

"I'm sorry. You have me confused." She was. And she was still annoyed.

"We love each other, Catherine. Deeply."

She was trying to find hope, and unsure where it lay.

"In this other world. I love you? You love me?" Perhaps this was best approached carefully.

"Yes. With my whole heart, I love you."

"Who am I married to?" She asked it with some dread, as if she suddenly seemed afraid they were having an affair of some sort.

"No one."

Her delicate brow furrowed. "Then why aren't I married to you?" The question seemed so simple, for her.

"You ... we... you have other opportunities, there, and I have almost none. I can't leave...Deep Haven. I am not accepted above ground. Because of the way I am."

She nodded, understanding that, even here, he was a different man. But she still did not understand completely.

"And we love each other," she affirmed.

"Very much. Sometimes so much, I think it will break me," he confessed. Odd that he could say that to this Catherine, but had never said it to his own.

"But... you will not make me your wife." She was trying to pick her way through what was keeping them apart.

"It's ... not a thing we've discussed," he said.

"Why ever not?"

"Perhaps... for us that's not important."

If it was possible for a princess to snort, she did, in disbelief.

He tried to clarify his position. Both in his own mind and so that she could understand it. "I mean to not cage you. I mean to offer you the choices of your life. It's... complicated."

Again, she snorted a little. "Is one of the choices you mean me to have whether or not I will marry you?" she asked.

She could see by his embarrassed expression that he'd never asked.

"Ah. So you've never proposed. So I never have to answer. Clever. Is it Elliot you mean me to have, then?"

"No!" He shouted the word. The horses were obviously starting to not like this conversation.

She stood away from him a little bit, clearly hurt by what she perceived as a rejection. He tried to explain, without placing blame.

"You... you stayed with me for a while. But you had to return to... all of this," he said, indicating the area outside the palace.

"Do we speak of marriage?"

"No."

"Is there someone else? For either of us?"

"No. Catherine, in my world, you are a different person."

"Oh. I am not a princess, then? Not highborn?" Perhaps that had some bearing on this? He could see the question in her eyes.

"Well, you are. Not quite like this, but you are."

"Who will marry me?" she asked.

"Does it matter so much?" She seemed caught on this one point.

"Of course it matters!" She raised her voice as if she were speaking to a simple child, and the horses be damned.

"How can I know what choices my life holds until I have at least that settled? How can I decide about children, or the future, or what I must do to prepare for all of that?"

Vincent blinked at her conclusions, and at her candor.

"Am I at least a good person in this... kingdom? Are my people happy? Do I try to do good by them?" Confusion was running rampant inside her.

How to even begin to answer all of that?

"Yes. Yes, you do very well by them. You bring many people justice. Many benefit from your compassion."

"My people are well, then?"

He hedged a bit, at that. "It is a huge... kingdom. One person can only do so much. Even a princess."

"But I help? I help them?"

He nodded at that, grateful to be on some sort of solid, positive ground with her. "Yes. Yes, you help them. You do, Catherine. Your bravery to that end is... it is a beautiful thing to behold."

"And I do this... with no husband at my side?" Her lovely brow was knit with consternation again.

Ah. They were back to that.

"How... very lonely I must be." She almost whispered it.

"No, no, you aren't lone - " But her look froze the word in his mouth.

She wasn't. She wasn't lonely. She couldn't be. His mind struggled against that realization. *He was, he was the lonely one. That had been his lot. By virtue of what he was. She wasn't the lonely one. That was his burden to bear... wasn't it?*

Vincent's mind stumbled over the word he'd claimed for himself long ago. Surely she wasn't that. *Surely* she wasn't lonely. She had the world to choose from. She had the whole --

The Princess dropped her head. For whatever reason, this man would not offer to be her groom. She didn't understand why, not completely. But she understood loneliness. "If you won't marry me, I guess I'll just have to hope that that Catherine... I don't know. Finds someone. Someday." She tugged on a handkerchief she'd pulled out of the sleeve of her gown.

"Catherine, it's not like that. In my heart... I know we are meant for each other. But..."

"But you will not offer me that choice, for whatever reason. How sad for you. How sad for me." She shook her head.

Vincent's mind was struggling to process her logic, and see if it applied to their other life.

"If you win me, what will you do? Will you be like Devin, and just... leave me?"

Devin's head came up at the mention of his name. Though he pretended to be far enough away to not hear them, the shaded area did not offer that kind of privacy.

Vincent's blue eyes met hers. "Would that be so bad? It would give you choice in your life."

"The choice of aloneness. Of half a life. One with part of a love, and little fulfillment." She shook her head. "What should I do with that life? Give to charity? Start a garden? Learn to knit blankets for other women's babies?"

Oh, lord. She'd been doing just that, back home.

It was part of what had felt "wrong" between them, part of why he'd needed to think.

In bits and pieces... she'd been doing things to fill her time. More volunteer work at the crisis hotline. A larger container for their rose bush. She'd asked Mary to teach her to crochet and helped make something for Luke...

They'd all been worthy things, but... was she really lonely? Wasn't that what her trip to Nancy Tucker's had been about? Her increasing isolation, as she tried to be a part of his world, yet had to leave it for her own, ultimately?

His princess stood there, awaiting a reply.

"You can't mean to have my children." Vincent's expression was stern.

Her look was uncompromising. "If I loved you, I would want no one else's," she said simply, and turned toward the doorway. She looked over her shoulder and gave them a parting message.

"Your hand got hurt. Pour something on it. Make sure it doesn't become infected." The order was given to Devin as much as to him.

**

By late afternoon, the wealthy knights came into the lists and the day changed in earnest. It became a different kind of fight, just as Catherine had predicted. Multiple banners from their houses flew over the arena, and once again most of the winning fighters from the morning took their purses and withdrew from the contest.



It was understood that no matter what had gone on before, those had been but preliminary events. These were the main games, the ones the populace had really come to see. The commoners' boxes exploded with humanity, and the regal, shaded ones began to fill steadily. Vincent could all but feel the population of York pressing in on the space

Of the common men, only Erlik remained, brutish but victorious. Paracelsus had his pet. Vincent would have been counted in their number, but for his elevation by Catherine.

Vincent recognized only a few of the noblemen, most from pictures in the newspapers back home, some pictured with Catherine at some charity event or other.

Mark Coolidge was in their number, in spite of his consideration among the untitled men in the elevation to the peerage. Clearly part of soothing his family's ruffled feathers over Vincent's elevation had

been allowing him to fight as one of the gentry. His wealth, doubtless, had some influence on that.

He was well armored and well equipped, with a polearm at his side and a decent mount. He squared off against a man Vincent didn't know, but who had wanted to date Catherine when she'd gone to Nancy Tucker's.

They fought each other spiritedly. Mark Coolidge won, but both sustained injuries, so Mark withdrew his name from further combat, nursing a broken shoulder and a bruised ego.

Even though the matches were supposed to be random draws, Vincent knew who he was going to face before he even got there. Erlik. Again. Somehow, he just knew.

They'd set the two monsters to fighting each other. It was almost predictable.

Still, the end was not assured, and Vincent had no trouble remembering he'd nearly lost the first fight with Erlik. Like Hog, the big brute swung a chain over his head, making it nearly impossible to close with him. He was also massively strong in this world, stronger even than he'd seemed in the other.

After a moment, Vincent understood why. Vincent detected the glimmer of Paracelsus' narcotic around Erlik's nose. Drugs. Erlik was high, aggressive, and all but incapable of feeling pain.

The audience gasped as the chain was used like a whip, and cut the air, striking the ground with a threatening thwack of metal linkage. It would break a bone easily, if it made contact. There was no safe way

to grab it out of the air. And Vincent knew he was going to take at least some damage if he was going to close with his opponent.

Money was changing hands in the stands, and Devin looked worried. From the royal box, Catherine's face was still, and pale. Kristopher Gentian was standing on the ground to her left, looking nearly as worried as she did. That wasn't good.

The sun was baking their bodies and Vincent knew he had only a few seconds to strike a blow or a foul would be called, and Erlik would be awarded the match for being the more aggressive of the two.

Left on their own, Vincent could have waited for the big brute to tire, or to make a mistake. Here, he had no such option. The sand was running out of the five-minute glass.

But Erlik was Erlik, and he was frustrated at having no target in his grasp, no victim he could pummel. Had he but waited, the match might have been his, by default. But Erlik was no tactician that way, and no good at strategy, especially when high.

He brought the chain down hard, but not fast enough to catch Vincent. Irritated to have missed his agile opponent again, he scooped up sand from the ground and threw it, his frustration evident.

It was the opening Vincent had been waiting for.

Failure to draw the chain back in left it laying on the ground. Vincent leaped to step on it, closing his eyes against the spray of dirt. The wind didn't favor him, but it didn't matter. They were going to close with each other, just as they had done before.

Vincent swung, half blind, knowing it would be a miss, but needing to gauge the distance. When he felt Erlik's arms come around his upper torso in a crushing embrace, he knew what he was about to do.

The same thing he'd done before: bite.

Vincent screamed a battle cry and sank his fangs into the neck of his opponent. It was a brutal way to end a man. And it was just as effective in this realm as it had been in the other.

The crowd gasped and the big man dropped, holding his neck as he bled. Vincent knew no power in the world would save Erlik. He spat blood and turned away from his handiwork, stopping only long enough to pick up the chain from the dirt and heave it against the nearest wall.

The crowd bellowed its approval and Paracelsus shot him a look of pure hate. Vincent fought the urge to pick the chain back up, charge the stands, and wrap it around the alchemist's neck. He knew he'd be disqualified if he did. John Pater was not a combatant here, at least, not directly.

Vincent breathed in, aware that his ribs were sore and his eyes stung. He moved toward the modestly sized tent Devin had bought with some of their winnings. At least it gave them shade and some privacy.

"Water," he told Devin when he staggered into the shelter. Erlik had had traces of the glittering chemical dust on his face and beard. On the chance some had gotten on him, Vincent wanted it gone.

Devin brought him a bucket, and Vincent dunked his head into it, letting the water wash him, throwing back an arc of it when he tossed

his mane back. "Anything that glitters on me. Get it off. But don't breathe it in."

Devin understood, and brushed at his brother's shoulders, seeing nothing but wanting to be sure.

Water darkened Vincent's mane to copper, and made grime of the sand on his shirt. Vincent was a ragged victor. But he was a victor still.

"We need to acknowledge the crowd and collect the purse, or it's not official," Devin said.

Vincent nodded his understanding.

Devin tugged him back into the arena, and raised his mighty arm in a victory gesture. The crowd ate it up. Catherine's eyes were huge, her face unsmiling.

She hates this. Hates being at the center of it. This is what she was trying to avoid. This... bloodshed.

Charles Chandler inclined his head in Vincent's direction, and Smythe delivered the day's purse. Devin pocketed it, and sent the portly man on his way.

The sand of the arena was being raked clean for the next match. Tom de Gunther was going to fight Mitch Denton. Vincent wondered which one of them would win, and realized he didn't care.

"Your back is bleeding," Devin said, seeing the dark stains of spotting blood. He put Vincent's cape over him, quickly, hoping no one else had noticed.

"He gouged me. It's not deep," Vincent said.

"And your ribs?" Devin knew the bear hug Vincent had been held in was meant to crush bone.

"Sore. Not broken. I don't think." They stood near the entrance to the tent.

Two horses pranced for the crowd, on the field. Vincent's match was already forgotten.

"How much more of this?" Vincent asked.

"Today. Tomorrow. The next is the last. We can be done here right now, Vincent. Let's just..."

"No."

"She's not going to marry you. Her father will buy you off. They'll think of a way. Their kind always does."

Vincent shook his head. "We'll see," was all he said.

"You cost me something today."

Vincent knew the voice, and didn't need to turn to verify who its owner was. Paracelsus.

"I cost a lot of people," Vincent replied, knowing it was true in many ways.

John advanced into the tent and Devin stepped forward to intercept him. Vincent waved him back.

"For some reason, I didn't think to find you here," Vincent admitted.

Paracelsus shrugged his ebony-clad shoulders. His tunic looked similar to the one he wore when he'd held Catherine. Long. Undecorated. Severe.

"Whyever not? Every good court needs a wizard... Vincent."

Vincent wasn't sure if John knew his name because of the match or because of some other reason. Paracelsus was a slippery creature.

"You aren't a wizard. You're a chemist," Vincent answered.

"And a mesmerist. And a genius. And many other things. And you?" His brow lifted while his obsidian gaze was uncompromising. "You're a monster."

"Hey." Devin didn't like this.

"But you were the better monster, today." Paracelsus inclined his head to acknowledge Vincent's victory.

"You know they were never going to let her marry him. Why set him to fight?" Vincent was curious. The look on John's face told him he admired Vincent's ability to reason.

"A simple thing. Debt. Have him win a few more matches and the crown would either be begging me to withdraw him or bribing me to, just to make sure. Either way, I win. Or I would have. You killed my creation. My poor unfortunate... 'son.'" He used the word a bit loosely. "So. Whose son are you? I don't think I know."

Ah. So Paracelsus was like the other characters here, and not "special" like Kristopher or Rolley.

"I don't know. Does it matter?" Vincent wanted to give nothing away.

"It might. It just might. Your lineage might be... fascinating." The crafty eyes were shrewd.

"Not to you. And you have no sons." Vincent's voice became terse.

Devin watched the exchange with undisguised interest.

Paracelsus feigned a disinterested look. "Erlik was not my true son, of course. But he was a thing I made." His voice was all silk and rattlesnakes. "My progeny are ... varied." He pinned Vincent with soulless eyes.

Vincent said nothing to that.

"What is a king without an heir, Sir Vincent? Do you know?" John asked.

Vincent shook his head, subtly, keeping his eyes focused on where John put his hands, just in case. John spread them wide.

"Nothing," Paracelsus answered. "He is nothing, Vincent. Just a mortal man like other men. Destined to go into the ground. And leave nothing behind."

Devin's voice pierced their exchange. "Thanks for the genealogy lesson. You can go now." Devin also was watching the older man's hands, not liking the atmosphere in the tent.

"He has a blade up his sleeve," Vincent warned.

Devin stayed back.

"And you have ten at the end of yours," John acknowledged.

"Goodbye, Vincent. I hope your injuries are not too... troubling." He

said it with a bit of a sneer as he departed. Vincent knew relief that he was gone.

"Well, that was remarkably unpleasant," Devin commented.

"You have no idea," Vincent replied.

"You are to come with us, milord."

The guard looked familiar. Vincent had seen him at the tent when Catherine had washed his feet.

"It has been a long day and I've already had one visitor," Vincent replied. His back was aching and there was little he could do about it. A warm towel helped, but cooled quickly.

"Lady Catherine... requests it." The guard leaned forward so only Vincent could hear. "It is not an order. You are not under arrest, and the Lady bid me make you understand that it is not a royal command. It is an entreaty, my Lord. She is worried about you."

Still not used to the title, Vincent nodded and rose stiffly from the bench; he donned his shirt and vest before following the guards.

It felt fairly odd to enter the castle by way of the front door. Front portcullis, actually. The maids, pages, and various other inhabitants gave Vincent a look, some curious, others admiring. Either they still didn't know exactly what he was, or they didn't care. Vincent realized some of them had been near the tourney the day Catherine had knighted him.

He was escorted to a huge room dominated by marble stone fixtures. A fireplace held a flickering welcome on one wall. A large table sat to one side and a gigantic marble bathtub dominated the space.

The woman who had held the bowl when his feet had been washed was there, pouring steaming water into the tub. Jenny looked up when he came in.

"Where is Catherine?" Vincent asked, entering the space cautiously.

The curly-haired brunette hefted another pail filled with the heated water for the tub.

"Arguing with her father. Probably. She had to stay for the rest of the competition."

"Who won?" Vincent asked.

Jenny shrugged, and continued to pour. "Tom de Gunther took his victory. So did Elliot Burch. Neither will make a good match for her, though of the two of them, I'd favor the latter."

"He is stronger?" Vincent asked.

Jenny shrugged again. "He's better-looking. In my opinion."

"And what is Catherine's opinion?"

Her voice came from the doorway. "That gossip is an ugly pastime. One neither gentles nor servants should indulge in."

Her cheeks were a bit pink from the argument she'd just had, and she looked regally annoyed in a light blue silk gown and pearls.

Jenny Aaronson bowed her head, rebuked, and backed away from the tub, chastised.

"Go fetch Peter Alcott," Catherine instructed Jenny shortly. Her gaze moved to Vincent. "They said you were hurt, today. In the second match."

Vincent eyed her carefully. "Rumors of my demise are greatly exaggerated."

"There's dried blood on your clothes. That's not exaggerated. Strip and get in." She turned her back to him and uncorked a glass bottle.

The sharp smell of mint hit his nose. Menthol. Medicine, for his back. He didn't move.

"For God's sake, Vincent, you can keep your undergarments on. Just... get in, will you? I'm sending Jenny for the royal physician." She nodded to her friend's retreating back. "There's a guard outside the door to protect your virtue." She gave him a touch of sarcasm with her bad mood. Then she tried to soften her voice. "Just... just let me see, will you?"

She was asking, and he was cautious. And... curious. Was this a way to gauge how his Catherine might react to seeing his nearly nude form?

"What makes you think I'm wearing anything underneath?" he asked.

"If you're not, I'll get you something."

She couldn't be shaken, couldn't be shocked. He wondered how this would go.

The temptation to soak in a large, warm tub of water after a week spent washing out of a horse pail or a trough was beyond appealing. The fragrant steam itself was its own lure. Muscles he'd have to use tomorrow ached from the fight today. He knew the water would help. He also knew he was rationalizing, somewhat.

Obediently, Vincent dropped his gouged vest to the floor. His shirt was indeed bloodstained.

"Some of it isn't mine," he said, watching her eyes. They closed. In sorrow or relief, he wasn't sure, but they closed over that particular revelation.

"I know," she whispered softly.

She turned her back so he could undress as much as he would, then waited while he stepped carefully into the tub. It was slick and smooth, and the water was clean and beyond warm. A selection of perfumes and oils sat inside a wall niche. He realized this was her private bath chamber.

"Jenny said you were arguing with your father." The water felt sinfully good.

She scattered some lavender petals in it, and poured in some of the minty oil. "Your back is cut," she deflected.

She clearly didn't wish to discuss her conversation with the king. She dipped a huge sponge in the water and squeezed it out over his shoulder. He was back to thinking himself in a dream state, though he knew he'd never had a dream like this. At least, not since puberty, and that was long before Catherine.

She dabbed the sore areas with the sponge. He winced. This was definitely not how he pictured the first time he might be nearly nude with her.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," she said.

"It wasn't your fault, Catherine. Fighting him was my choice." He watched his body hair drift outward in the water as he wet his arms and then settled them on the rim of the tub.

"Because of me. They're all getting hurt out there because of me." She continued to sponge his back.

All of them. Yes. She has quite the list of suitors. He felt a touch jealous for no good reason he could name. And aware that it was a feeling he held in both worlds. Her wealth did indeed give her many choices. One of them was for partners. He didn't like that. He never had.

"Are you bathing everyone?" He regretted the words the instant they left his mouth.

The sponge stopped. Then it continued.

"You're angry with me. Because we had words today. Because I can't stop this," she answered.

"No. I'm angry because this shouldn't be happening at all."

"We agree on that, at least."

She soaped the sponge and began to bathe his shoulders and arms. It felt so good he nearly slipped under the water and drowned. If she was put off by his hirsute form at all, she gave no hint of it. And the

Bond had chosen this moment to be particularly silent, so he could glean nothing from it.

"You have a bruise."

She seemed unfazed by the amount of body hair on his torso. It thinned on his back, and he knew he did indeed have a bruise where Erlik had locked his hands together and squeezed.

You should see the other man, Vincent thought.

"You never answered me. Are you going to check on everyone this evening?" He didn't know why he felt like needling her. He knew he'd never say it to "his" Catherine, even though her kiss with Elliot Burch still stung his ego.

Her look was icy. She dropped the large sponge into the water, letting it splash. She moved away, clearly upset with him.

"No. I'm not going to check on everyone this evening. But I did check on some. I already talked to Sir Greg. He's agreed to withdraw. He'll receive a good-sized purse. He needs it to help his mother. Elliot won't give up. Neither will Stephen. He's obsessed. Tom hates to lose, so I don't know. But I can at least get you out of harm's way, if you'll listen. If you'll let me."

"Devin said you might try some such thing."

Catherine didn't like being thought predictable. Or that it was an easy guess that she would offer to buy him off.

"Vincent, it's no fault if you quit now. You advanced farther than Devin ever could have. Tell me what it is you want that will get you to stop this. If it's in my power..."

"I am curious. Why think I will accept a bribe?"

She dropped her eyes. "Because. You said it yourself. We are not married, in ... in some other world. There's no reason for you to risk your life, here. The prize is nothing you want, Vincent."

Her words stung him.

"Catherine... the fact that things are... unsettled between us. It doesn't mean I want to see you with someone else." He didn't. Even when he thought he'd wanted her to fulfill her life's promise by taking a different path than his, he knew he couldn't stand the thought of her with another man.

Now she was confused. "In your other world. Does Elliot want me? Does Stephen? Does Tom? As a wife?"

Vincent realized that even mad Stephen Bass had offered her at least the trappings of a marriage, and Elliot had actually proposed. He wasn't certain about Tom Gunther, but in a way, he was.

Of course they had offered her marriage, at some point. Or would have, had she seemed the least bit receptive to the idea.

"I see," she said, and he realized that when he hadn't answered her, no answer was necessary.

"It is more complicated than you make it sound." His back hurt and his ego was taking a bruising.

"But they want me, Vincent. Each of them does, in his own way. It isn't love maybe, not exactly... but... Each of them is willing to try and make me a good husband."

"You think I can't do that?" He was insulted at her implication.

She dropped her eyes. "I think you don't want to, for whatever reason."

He was stung again by her words, and he sat soaking in the water in a kind of sulky silence. He hated having this conversation while sitting in bathwater. There just seemed no other way to do it.

He gripped the side of the tub. "Do you love them? Any of them?"

It was a hated question. Because part of him *knew* the answer, and hated it, as well. He'd *felt* her falling in love with Elliot Burch when that had happened. She'd been engaged to Stephen Bass, had worn his ring. Tom Gunther and she had "dated," the polite euphemism for "lovers" in the nineteen eighties. Vincent couldn't picture her sharing her bed with a man she didn't share her heart with, on some level. So they were words he dreaded, in either world.

To give this Catherine credit, her answer was a considered one, and he had the impression it would very much mirror his own Catherine's feelings.

"Stephen was a part of me when my father sent me away to school. He helped me study and he was smarter than I was. I think I saw safety when I looked at him. I thought it was love, back when it was easy for me to confuse the two. But that was a long time ago, and he still feels it, even though I don't anymore."

She returned to the tub and picked the sponge back up out of the water. His eyes never left her face.

She wiped down his arms with the sponge, keeping her gaze on her task rather than look directly at him. "Elliot burns hot, and moves quickly. He's self-made and having me would be ... verification for him that he's left his poverty behind. He thinks he loves me. I have no idea if he does. He'll be a better king than the other two, someday, though parts of his heart are... dark. Perhaps unreachable."

You have no idea what dark-hearted and unreachable is, Catherine, until you've seen what is inside of me.

"And Tom Gunther?"

"Tom is Tom. He's from old money and my father approves of him. He's ambitious and ... cunning. He was paying suit to me before the tourney started, knowing this day would come. He has plans to enlarge the kingdom. He has plans for me."

"And do you want to be part of these plans?"

"You keep asking me what I want. Keep presenting it to me as if I had a choice." She squeezed water out over his forearm.

"I love you. I would give you that choice."

She backed away from the stone tub as if she'd been burned.

"You're the only one who doesn't really want me, who gives me no choice at all and calls it 'choice.'" Her voice was firm and her color was high. "Elliot might keep me as an ornament, but you'd do that and not

even ..." She blushed, and he knew what she was thinking. That he'd keep her as an ornament and never make love to her.

He wanted to protest the notion, until he realized that that was exactly what he'd been doing lately, in his world. He'd been keeping her near, loving her all he could, but not asking her either what it was she needed or wanted, so they could put their lives together. He'd once told her they would be "truly together" once they'd faced their fears and moved through them. But he'd neither told her his nor asked her about hers.

"Is this the truth I'm supposed to see? That men like Tom or Elliot or Stephen would keep you as a... a beautiful thing to grace their lives with, but little more? That at the end of the day I've done little better, and no different? Do I wake up after I understand?" He was still trying to pierce the mystery of why he was here, and how he could leave.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He knew she was telling the truth.

A guard pushed the door open and Vincent recognized a very stately and expensively dressed Peter Alcott. He pushed up the sleeves of his deep blue robes as he crossed to stand near the tub.

"Catherine tells me you were injured in the fighting today. Would you stand up out of the water for me?"

Vincent glanced rather pointedly at Catherine.

"He's modest, for someone who fights in an arena," Catherine scoffed, moving to leave. "See that you tend him," she ordered with queenly

imperiousness. "And make sure he gets the clothing." She indicated a pile of folded items one of the servants had just brought in.

Peter nodded at her instructions as she swept from the room with her usual regal air. Jenny pulled the door closed behind her.

Vincent stood, the cooling water running off his hirsute body. His thigh-hugging briefs protected his modesty, but little could save him from Peter's frank appraisal.

"You've always been like this? Built like this?" He inspected Vincent's claws.

"Yes."

"How? Do you know?"

"I have no idea. I was found."

"We're all found by somebody, boy," he said it as he dabbed a white cream on Vincent's back. "This will keep the cuts from getting infected. Did you get any of the glitter dust on you?"

"You know about that?"

"Everyone with half a brain or a job in medicine knows that Paracelsus and Alexander Ross both... dabble in chemicals. Stay away from John Pater. He's one of the few men here who are truly evil."

Vincent rotated his shoulder, and winced.

"Does it hurt when you breathe?" Peter did not like the look of the bruise near the middle of Vincent's back.

"Some. Not as much as it did earlier."

"You might have pulled something. Or have bruised ribs. You should withdraw tomorrow. There's no shame in it."

So. Peter, too.

"Did Catherine tell you to say that?"

Doctor Alcott shook his head. "I brought that stubborn young girl into this world. But no, she didn't tell me to convince you to quit."

"She seems determined to have people withdraw from the matches."

Peter Alcott eyed him speculatively. "She hates seeing people in pain, Vincent. She lost her mother young. It had an effect on her."

Vincent considered that.

"She's seen me kill a man," Vincent stated. What effect might *that* have on her ability to love him?

More in the other world than in this one. And again, I never told her that fear. That she'd seen the monster in me... too often. Too often to be able to truly love the man.

"I don't know that either of the two you took on were 'men,' strictly speaking. Erlik was John's creation, and no one likes to even consider what would have happened if he'd have won. The other was a sadist who enjoyed frightening women."

"Yet the competition is open to all."

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But then, life is like that. Open to all."

Peter rummaged around in his bag.

"But the rules are actually different than what others think they are," Vincent pointed out.

"That too isn't uncommon, is it?" Peter remarked, dabbing a tan, odorless paste on the bruise.

"I don't know. I am not from here," Vincent remarked, waiting patiently while Peter finished.

When he was done, Vincent dried himself with a thick cotton towel. Its high piled fabric felt as luxurious as the cerulean robe Peter offered him.

Peter put the tools of his trade back into his physician's bag. "Sir Vincent, I don't want to see Catherine hurt," he stated.

"Neither do I," Vincent replied.

"Then either let her go to any of them, or hold her for yourself, and never let her go. Take care of her, and hold her dear, and treat her like the priceless treasure she is. But pick one path. Because you can't--."

"Have both," Vincent finished for him. "Peter, this is a ... a fantasy realm for me." Vincent tried to explain his dilemma. "It isn't real. Yet Kristopher Gentian tells me that if I die here, then it will be so in my world. Is that true? Do you know?"

Peter Alcott rolled down the sleeves of his tunic and regarded Vincent with kindly wisdom. "I only know that death, love, and some other things are permanents, Vincent. That they transcend the times and the places they touch. That they define us, even."

"Do you know why I'm caught here? Why I can't get free?"

Peter sighed. "I'm not sure if anyone is 'caught' here, so much as it's a place some people seem allowed to see. But if I had to guess why you haven't returned yet ... right now, I'd say it was because you have unfinished business. Wouldn't you?"

Vincent nodded. He could only agree.

"You'll leave a tiny piece of yourself here, you know. We all do."

Would he?

"How do you know?" Vincent asked.

"Because, my friend, that's how life works. We always leave a part of ourselves anywhere we've been. Can't avoid it."

Peter closed up his heavy medical bag and moved toward the door.

"Good night, Sir Vincent. Good fortune tomorrow. I really do mean that. Catherine is a special woman. She deserves something... special to happen for her."

"Thank you, Peter. For whatever it is worth, I agree with you. With my whole heart."

Peter liked his answer. "Catherine said the clothes were for you. I suggest you try them on." Peter nodded in the direction of the items on the table, and left the Venetian-tiled room.

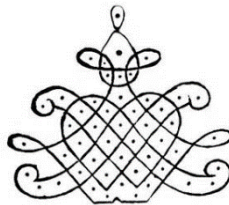
Vincent crossed to the hefty pile of clothes laid out on the marble surface. It wasn't just clothing, Vincent realized, as he lifted it, fingering the burnished tan vest and belt. She'd brought him a set of banded leather armor, with matching gloves, and boots that went up

past the knee. They fit. *Of course they do. She washed my feet and her handmaiden held my boots.*

The white top shirt was some type of soft, linen-like material. A white undershirt that was really a thin form of interwoven mail links completed it. It would slow a dagger, at least.

It had taken no small amount of effort to have this made to his size. He knew that meant something: That even though she'd been begging him to leave, she had more than a feeling that he wouldn't.

He'd need protection. She was trying to offer him all she could.



Lost In The Tapestry

Chapter 5

Victor

~ ~ ~



“Now that we have seen each other,” said the Unicorn, “if you believe in me, I’ll believe in you.” ~ Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.



Sir Stephen Bass was possessed of the most magnificent piece of horseflesh on the field. It was a fact no one disputed. Sir Stephen was a consistent collector of “only the finest things,” and, as such, his mount was simply a further extension of that philosophy. It was part of why he wanted Catherine. It was also part of why he was undefeated.

Though Lord Elliot's Andalusian had a finer pedigree and Tom de Gunther's courser had been trained by the best horsemen for miles, Stephen's big bay destrier had those certain, almost infinitesimal advantages that made it the superior animal.

His chest and nostrils were just a little wider, for taking in air. His legs, just a touch longer and more heavily muscled. He was brighter than the others, IQ being just as indefinable a thing in horses as it was in human beings. His shoulders moved with a heavy grace and his haunches had the dense musculature that would allow him to push off hard and establish a run, even when carrying an armored knight. His ears twitched almost indolently, as he sorted out the sounds that meant something to him and his master from those that meant nothing. Every distinction gave them both an edge in the games.

His training had been fastidious, just as Stephen himself was fastidious. It was widely rumored that the big warhorse played a huge part, almost an exclusive one, in Stephen's victories. As a man who fought with a lance, the beast was paramount to his winning strategy, and as an animal worth more than a small farm, the horse was Stephen's prize possession - a fact he would not consider changed until he won Catherine.



Obsessed in either world, Stephen kept a narrow focus as he set his eyes on the greater prize: he was determined to win Catherine's hand. No other outcome seemed remotely possible to his twisted mind, and no cost was too great to bear, especially if it was borne by someone else. He'd shattered at least one tip of his lance as it had destroyed the shield of his latest opponent and sent him to the infirmary with a shoulder wound that likely meant the man had permanently lost the use of his arm.

Sir Stephen did not consider himself a ruthless man. He considered himself a driven, precise, intent, intense, worthy, intelligent, superior, controlled (and controlling) and purposeful one. If permanently injuring an opponent (or killing him) got him a step farther in the lists, he would do so. If having an opponent withdraw out of fear got him a step farther in the lists, then that was acceptable also.

It was all the same to Sir Stephen Bass. It was the results that mattered, in everything.

He fought with the calm composure of a man who did not expect to lose. He fought with a lance because he did not like the thought of having to touch an opponent to beat him. He fought well because, he reasoned, there was no other way to do anything.

A lance was a heavy thing, and lance-fighting was not for the faint-hearted. A horseman's lance was a stout tree limb made mobile, sharpened into a spear, then attached to the breastplate with an arret and grapper, a hook that kept the lance where it should be, and a ring that kept it from moving backward into him on the impact.

Momentum was the key, so speed was vital. A breaking lance often sent pieces flying, sometimes into the opposing horse and rider. Stephen was allowed any coronel of his choice on the end. His had three spikes, making it look somewhat like a crown. It was tradition. The vamplate that protected his hand was larger than most. Safety first, Stephen reasoned.

He was allowed to keep three such lances on the field, in keeping with tourney tradition, and in case the first one shattered.

He'd never needed to use the third one.

His skill was legendary, and the horse was a hard sprinter, even in armor of his own. The horse's barding, a chamfron for his head, and a crinnet for his neck, were only slightly less decorated than the man's. Stephen had sold his deceased mother's jewelry to buy it. He figured it well worth the investment.

Thus far, he'd been right.

The horse gave Sir Stephen the speed he needed to turn a heavy piece of pointed wood into a ferocious weapon. A rider with a lance could take down an armored opponent, and the rate of momentum equaled the amount of damage inflicted.

Bass was better than fair with a jousting spear or a sword. But thanks largely to his mount, he was unstoppable with a lance. The weapon negated the strength of his opponents, since he rarely had to close with them. Many of his victories were kills, either on the field or soon after. His victims often died of their injuries after the match.

It seemed that no matter what world Stephen Bass inhabited, something other than himself moved him forward.

Which was not saying the man himself wasn't a threat.

The armor he prized was both tough and ornate: fully jointed, decently visored at the helm, and inlaid with gold scrollwork.

He was a declaration to the field, and he was a declaration to Catherine. "I am here to win. I am to be respected. My taste is impeccable. My victory is assured."

The oddsmakers had him as the favorite, three to one.

"How much did you wager?" Vincent asked Devin, as they made ready inside the tent.

"Half of it. See? I'm learning to be conservative," Devin answered, holding Vincent's gloves.

"Which one of us did you bet it on?" Vincent asked, adjusting the belt Catherine had given him. "Bass or me?"

Devin cut him a look. "You know who I bet on. Still. I'd rather you fought Elliot Burch instead. Bass fights cold. There's ice water in his veins. He never makes a mistake."

"Sir Elliot does not seem exactly mistake-prone," Vincent said, tugging the vest down in the front. It fit perfectly.

"Huh. 'Sir' Elliot. He's no more a lord than you a-- than I am," Devin corrected himself.

"Burch has a fortune. His wealth is ... considerable." Vincent was clearly concerned with his other rivals as well. Devin handed him his gloves.

"Mmm. They say he was a pirate before he became landed gentry. Watch him with a sword and you'll believe it." Devin tightened Vincent's arm bracers, then put a staying hand on his brother's wrist.

"Withdraw, Vincent. Please. We'll both watch Burch beat Tom de Gunther together." That match was slated for right after Vincent and Stephen's.

"I heard Elliot is a builder," Vincent said, tugging on the gloves and ignoring Devin's plea for sanity. "That he plans to erect a great tower to his glory." Again, things true in one world were often true in another.

Devin sighed. "They all erect towers to their glory, Vincent. It's what the wealthy do."

Devin looked over the banded armor Catherine had gifted Vincent with. It was, of course, of exceptional quality. And it was not going to save his life.

"I don't think she would do that," Vincent said, adjusting his fingers inside the heavy leather gloves. Metal stays sewn into them protected the backs of his hands.

"Do what?" Devin asked. The front of the vest was closed with a series of latches rather than ties. It was marvelous work. And it still wasn't going to stop a lance.

"Catherine. I don't think she would build a tower for vanity's sake."

"She doesn't have to. She already lives in one." Devin checked to make sure the mail undershirt didn't bind. It, too, fit perfectly.

"Shouldn't you be worrying about Bass, first?" Devin tucked his knife into the sheath built inside the boot. Nice. There was a place for it, just on the outside of the left leg. Still, the knife was mostly a good luck charm at this point. It was useless against armor.

"I mean... I don't think she would use her wealth for... self-aggrandizing things," Vincent clarified.

Devin shot him a look. "Don't. Don't think it, Vincent."

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "Think what?"

"Think about falling in love with her. You can like her well enough, and that's fine. You can think she's attractive and nobody would blame you. But don't fall in love with her." Devin's tone was firm.

Vincent eyed his adventurous brother speculatively.

"That doesn't sound like you. That sounds almost like Father."

Jacob Wells' only biological son looked long at his little brother, hoping that if he could dissuade Vincent from the idea of loving Catherine, then he could dissuade him from the fight.

"It's not that I think you can't have that kind of a life with *someone...* eventually," Devin qualified, making an allowance for Vincent that Jacob never had. Devin tried to inject a note of sympathy into his voice, as Vincent tried to remember that this was the man that had dreamed dreams which included him.

"It's just... she's so far out of our *league*, Vincent. Everything you think you'd have to fight through to get there..." he shrugged. "It wouldn't be worth it. You'd exhaust yourselves just trying to hold things together."

To a large degree, it seemed like that was exactly what they'd done, back in New York.

"Love is sometimes inconvenient, then, Devin. That doesn't make it impossible." *Which one of them was he trying to convince?* Vincent wondered.

"Their kind don't marry commoners, little brother. She might play with you for a while, but that's it."

"You sound jaded," Vincent observed.

"One of us better. This thing you want. *It's something that's never been, Vincent.*" Devin held the blue eyes with his brown ones for emphasis.

Vincent leaned forward just a bit, for emphasis as well. "Then we will *be* something that has never been." He was positive that what he'd

just said was unshakably true. It made no predictions for their future. But it did define what they were, for him.

Devin sighed again, capitulating as much as he could.

"Listen. I don't know how you're going to pull this off, but I know this much. Stephen Bass' destrier is huge, almost courser-sized, and well trained. Very. The horse is a big part of why he wins. Now, that armor they're both wrapped up in is heavy. If you can tire them out... maybe you have a chance." *But I doubt it.* Devin tried not to let the thought show in his eyes.

Stephen's lance had a long reach and they both knew it. Long enough to rarely miss. Especially an opponent who was on the ground. Vincent couldn't outrun a horse, and there was nowhere to hide, on a tourney field.

Trumpets sounded a starter's claxon outside the tent. It was time.

As Vincent emerged from the tent, Bass entered the tourney field with his visor down, already spoiling for a fight. While other armored knights often entered the arena with their visors up, or helmets off, so they could wave to the crowd and be recognized, Stephen was clearly not here for celebrity, or to have his ego stroked. Not now. He was here on business. And his business was deadly. His inlaid armor gleamed in the sun.

"There's still time to withdraw," Devin said, *sotto voce*, as Vincent adjusted his shirt beneath his vest.

"I've no plan to withdraw," Vincent replied, letting the cheers for Stephen continue as Catherine's first love pranced his horse around the field.

Catherine sat in her chair, trying to look calm. The knuckles that gripped the arms of the throne-like seat were white.

"I can't believe you're doing this without so much as a cheap sword."

The more Devin watched Sir Stephen guide the horse into position, the less he liked it. There was no weak spot in either barding or armor, at least none he could see.

"I have no need of a thing I've never handled. There are ten knives on my hands already, Devin. Plus the very fine one you put in my boot." It was a bad joke, and Devin wasn't in the mood for those.

"Vincent..."

"Devin." Vincent clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I am going to do this. Bet more on me, why don't you? While there is still time?" He took in Bass while he said it.

Devin cocked his head to one side. "You have a plan?"

"No. But I have an idea."

Devin tried not to roll his eyes. "In that case, I'll need the money for your funeral. Vincent, this is real, not pretend." *Seeing* Stephen versus just talking about him was taking its toll.

The worried look in Devin's brown eyes told Vincent all it needed to.

This is real, not pretend.

Either Devin was referring to the difference between their childhood and their adulthood or he, like Kristopher, was trying to tell him that if he were hurt or killed in here, the results would be the same back in the Great Hall, in New York.

"I don't think any of us is pretending here, Devin. Tempting though it may be. I think outcomes here mean something. Something real." He did. He knew they did. He had already learned so much about Catherine. So much that he hadn't considered, before.

The nearby guard nodded to Vincent. Stephen had taken up his position at one end of the field. It was time for the kingdom's newest knight to take his own position, so that the match could start.

The crowd erupted when Vincent strode forward through the soft sand. The volume escalated as he stepped to center, and he felt the wild vibrations that the noise created as they washed over him. He faced the horse and rider who both knew they were here to kill him.

He tilted his head a little, in a gesture that would have looked utterly familiar to his Catherine, back in New York. He was concentrating. Or, at the very least, he was considering something.

Vincent sifted through the cacophony of the spectators as he searched for a different sound. And it wasn't one from the crowd. He remained in the center of the tourney field.

"Move back," Devin said aloud, knowing Vincent couldn't hear him, of course. Stephen held a twelve-foot lance. He did not have far to move to strike Vincent from here.

But Vincent did not move back, and Devin wondered if it was his plan to close with the other man early, trying to negate the length of the lance by getting under it before the horse could establish a run.

It was a bad plan. He'd simply be knocked down, and Bass would let the horse do its work. Like all war horses, the animal had been trained to inflict trampling damage over fallen opponents.

But Vincent looked neither left nor right, nor up at Catherine, nor to the crowd, nor back at Devin. He simply stood in the center of the field, staring straight ahead.

Smythe waved the banner which called for the fighting to commence. Bass lowered his deadly lance and prepared for the charge. The shorter field meant he didn't have time to hold it upright, then lower it in mid-stride, so he took aim now.

Vincent had perhaps fifteen seconds left to live.

And then the horse did... nothing.

Stephen kicked its flanks as the animal, who had given him three straight victories in this tourney and countless wins in others, refused to go. It stared ahead, refusing to move his hair-covered front feet.

Vincent stood still, as unmoving as the horse, and simply continued to stare, reaching inside the animal's equine mind.

Bass kicked again, harder, and this time the horse shook its head, or tried to, setting the crinnet on its neck to rattling as the sectioned pieces jangled against each other. The human-looking negation seemed incredibly out of place on an animal who not only knew what it should be doing, but knew it should be doing it *now*.

Bass dropped his shield so he could tug hard on the reins as the big animal began to whicker and side step. For a moment, the crowd thought the animal was finally preparing to charge.

It wasn't, and Stephen knew it. The horse should be setting its back feet in the sand, and preparing to spring forward onto his front ones. If anything, the big bay destrier was stepping backward, wanting nothing to do with the large being who stood open-handed in the middle of the tourney field.

Sometimes we must walk empty-handed among our enemies. Vincent stood his ground.

Spectators in the crowd chattered amongst themselves in amazement as the big man simply continued to stare, utterly dominating the well-trained beast's mind. Vincent knew a flash of relief that his experience with junkyard dogs could extend to warhorses. He was also grateful for a week spent with the mare.

It had been a guess. Not a certainty, but a guess. Vincent had no idea which animals he could cow and which he couldn't, whether "breed" had anything to do with it or training could overcome his attempt to dominate. He knew Arthur seemed unimpressed by him. He knew his ability to intimidate dogs sprang from the animalistic instinct to establish an alpha presence. Some of the raptors in the park seemed "able to feel him," as he tried to touch their very different minds. Some didn't.

The warhorse clearly could, and didn't like the sensation, as Vincent subjugated its will.

Stephen, in the meantime, was having his other problems.

A lance was a heavy thing, and was usually held upright during a charge until it was lowered and used as a ramming device. Smaller ones might be balanced entirely by the strength of an arm, but long ones used the arret and grapper bolted to the user's armor, to help him hold the weight steady and diffuse the impact. Once in the lowered position, the rider had to bear the weight and aim. Unwieldy as anything other than a mobile battering ram, a lance was not meant to be held in the lowered position for long periods

While the piercing tip was thinner and therefore lighter, it was also often capped with the coronel, the extra weight making it nearly impossible to balance cleanly. It was heavy on one end, by design, a thing that made it almost impossible to hold for very long, when extended.

Had the horse been still, Stephen would simply have returned the lance to its upright position. But as it was, he was fighting to pull the resisting animal's head forward with the reins, and struggling to keep the lance from overbalancing him. It was like trying to hold a small tree in one hand, while controlling a suddenly very unpredictable, very strong, very heavy beast, with the other. A beast that was pulling the wrong way.

Vincent was fairly certain all he had to do was wait.

Stephen screamed his instruction to the hapless animal, which by now was bobbing its head high and low, and setting its ears back. Its mouth dripped saliva around the bit. Nervous hooves now clearly pranced backward, and he'd have gone through the wooden fence at his flanks if he could have.

Steel sabatons enclosed Stephen's feet, and his kicks would have drawn blood but for the animal's barding. As it was, both horse and rider were beginning to panic.

With the lance lowered on Stephen's left side, Vincent simply stepped to the horse's right, away from the deadly point of the useless skewer and its hapless rider. The lowered lance couldn't be brought up and re-aimed anywhere near in time, and Stephen couldn't simply swing it over the horse's head without hitting it in the neck, as it bobbed its head and whinnied.

Vincent began to advance on the pair, and he knew the desperate horse was about to dislodge Stephen an instant before the rider did.

Sir Stephen's reason for his victories dropped its back haunches in a move that would have looked like the command to sit, on a dog. Having no choice but to abandon the lance to the dirt, Stephen dropped the big weapon which had guaranteed his wins, just as the destrier made a slide out of his back and essentially shook the armored man off.

Stephen barely made it clear of the animal's flanks before the big beast rolled to the side, then scrambled back up, and trotted as far away from Vincent as it could get.

On the ground, Stephen Bass was a ridiculously easy target. The armor he used for protection made him awkward and slow. Lance fighting was a game for heavy armor and a decent buckler. It took two squires to dress him and a third to help him get on his horse. The only other weapon he had, a sword that almost never came out of its sheath, was still tied to his saddle, now some distance away.

No one realized that Sir Stephen Bass was quite mad, until the moment they saw him pull his helmet off.

Wild eyes stared first at Catherine, his prize, and then at Vincent, his enemy. Vincent recognized the look of terror, and of insanity, in the rich man's gaze.

"NOoooooooo!!" he screamed, searching around madly for a weapon he could use against Vincent. The lance was a useless piece of sculpture on the ground, as were the spare ones of those. His scream drove his horse even further away.

"It isn't fair!!" he shouted, yet also began to cry. Vincent advanced toward him, bent on ending this. He passed the royal box.

Catherine's voice reached him from her place above the tourney field.

"Please. Don't hurt him. I know it's your right to, but... don't." She was standing, leaning out, as she said it to him. The words were meant for Vincent alone, though some others nearby may have heard. As far as Vincent knew, she hadn't pleaded for anyone else's life up to this point.

"Because you loved him once?" Vincent asked, but did not take his eyes off Stephen Bass.

Stephen scooped up a handful of sand in one palm, fixing to throw it.

"Because I know there is something between us that I can't even understand. And he doesn't deserve to die. He's sick, Vincent. Obsessed. Please."

Vincent nodded, knowing it was all true. Catherine's feelings for him were becoming clearer to her. And Stephen Bass was a thing to be pitied, in either world.

Still, the man who thought himself to be Catherine's future husband was not going down without a fight, no matter how inept a fighter he was, in his rage.

The sand flew ineffectually, but he used the dirt hanging in the air as a diversion, and an opportunity to grab a dagger from one of the tourney guards standing against the wall.

When Stephen turned back to Vincent, he was armed, wild-eyed, and nearly drooling, with the depth of his unbalanced state.

"Drop it," Vincent said shortly. "I am not going to kill you. But I will tear you through your armor if you resist."

Blue eyes met mad hazel ones, and the Stephen Bass of this world realized just what the insane Stephen in the other world had known.

"You're for real, aren't you? Not a mask. Not a costume. A monster. Just as you are?"

Sir Stephen stared, transfixed for a moment, then swung. The blade whizzed by Vincent's abdomen, and then Vincent closed with him, lifting him by the throat with one hand, as he disarmed him with the other.

"Just as I am," Vincent hissed. "And I will *never* give her up to the likes of you," he vowed, fighting the urge to break Stephen's neck in this realm, just as he'd fought the urge to do that in the other.

He'd forgotten this moment, this jealousy, this bloodlust. Forgotten the... rush of it. The fact that Catherine wasn't wrong about Stephen didn't mean Vincent had forgotten that this man had owned her heart, once.

In their other reality, when he'd confronted Stephen, Catherine had been held captive, and been very afraid. In this one, she was... much the same, Vincent realized. Afraid for what was going on in front of her. Afraid for both of them, and for different reasons.

Vincent threw Stephen away from him and into the dirt.

"Get up and I swear I will snap your neck," Vincent growled, and Stephen knew he meant it.

The disarmed guard came forth to reclaim his dagger and keep Stephen down, charging foul. Charles Chandler stood, indicating the match was done. The crowd roared its approval as someone led horse and weeping rider away through the stable gate.

Vincent moved over to the royal box, and inclined his head in what he hoped looked like a decent bow to the future queen of this place.

"Thank you," Catherine said.

Smythe pushed a bag of winnings into his hand. It was heavy. Heavier than any of the others.

"Don't pay me for this." Vincent tried to give it back. "This was a sorry victory. In any world."

Smythe insisted. "To the victor, the spoils, Sir Vincent," Smythe said.

Was that what he was? The victor, here? It didn't feel like it. This victory felt much like it did back in his own world. Like he had saved her from a bad fate, but that he had cost her a piece of her innocence, when he'd done it. Not to mention some of his own.

Elliot Burch might have wanted to marry Catherine, but Stephen Bass had been her lover, once. He'd tasted her, and held her through the long night, a thing Vincent had never done.

Vincent knew a lick of jealousy at that, and didn't like the feeling. It felt like poison. Here, and everywhere else. That Bass still lived was a thing that rankled a part of Vincent he didn't like to claim. Again.

Smythe stepped away, giving the people their champion. The money still sat in Vincent's gloved hand.

He poured silver coins struck with Charles' likeness into his palm, then threw them into the poorer part of the crowd.

The cheers that ensued were deafening.

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"You know, it's not like we can't use money," Devin remarked, as Vincent washed up in the tent.

"This isn't about money." Vincent had calmed since the fight, but he still felt on edge.

"Bite your tongue. With your fangs," his brother chided. "Everything is about money. About it, or about what can be done with it."

"I threw it mostly to the poorest of them. They needed it more than we do."

"Why? Because we've won a few bets? We'll run through it. It will buy some food for Below. Maybe some medicine. A winter's worth, if we're lucky. Maybe we can get something nice for Narcissa. Or tools for Winslow. Books for you. But it will go, Vincent."

"Then it will go. Is already gone," Vincent corrected, wondering, not for the first time, what had attracted Catherine to Stephen.

"It's nicer to go home with full hands than empty ones. It's all I'm saying."

Vincent knew that Devin would hardly be going home "empty handed."

"You're going back then? Back home?" Vincent confirmed. Somehow he knew that there, like back in New York, Devin was a mercurial soul. He was sometimes home, and sometimes gone, but regularly prone to wander.

"Probably. I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll just buy a ship and pass myself off as a captain." He looked toward the direction of the ocean.

Vincent shook his head. In any realm, Devin's wanderlust was incurable.

"I still don't understand how it is that they accept my face, Devin," Vincent confided. "Bass knew. It made him afraid." *As it should.*

Devin shrugged. "They don't... accept it. Not like you mean. They accept the rules of the tourney. *Anyone* allowed to compete means 'anyone.' Even you. Even me." He shrugged again. "I could bring Charles the Dragon Man here, if I wanted to get him killed."

Vincent scrubbed the tourney dirt off his hands and face in a tin basin.

"He was afraid of me. Stephen Bass was. He knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I was a... monster. That this isn't a mask or a disguise. That it's who I am."

"You aren't a monster." Devin was quick to defend him. "Others know it isn't a mask, Vincent. But you're a winner out there, and there's a big difference between being different as a winner and being one a loser." Devin shrugged as Vincent continued to look to him for answers. "That... and they're just not as... afraid as Bass is. Inside," Devin added.

Devin's explanation had a familiar ring. Mostly because it mirrored a thought Vincent had always had. *I once told Catherine her world was full of frightened people.*

"Why do you think that has something to do with it?" Vincent asked as he paused in what he was doing.

Devin looked to one side, master of the casual air. "Beats me. You always said most people are afraid of their aloneness. Maybe the others aren't as afraid of being alone as he is." Devin set Vincent's armor on a small table, and wiped the dust off the leather vest.

Vincent continued with the chore of cleaning his hands, thinking about Stephen Bass, and all Vincent knew about him. He suspected now what he did the first time he'd faced down Bass over Catherine:

His soul is ugly inside. Ugly and frightened and jealous. Full of envy. Full of fear. He's afraid that what he sees on my outside is what lives in him inside.

Vincent reached for a towel as he sifted through memories of his first confrontation with Bass.

The night he'd saved Catherine from Stephen had been a blur of travel and fighting and blood, mixed with sirens. Catherine had been very afraid, and in the time it took to reach her, Vincent had tasted her fear on his tongue, like a bitter pill.

She knew her old love was a madman. It was a hard thing to face. And though Catherine had faced dangerous men before, Stephen's assault on her senses (if not her person) was different. This was someone she'd once loved. Someone she'd planned to build a life with.

She'd had no way to know that Stephen's condition would get so much worse since their failed engagement. That "opinionated" would shift to "delusional," and "focused" would change to "obsessed."

By the time Stephen had re-entered Catherine's life, he was not only a functioning psychotic, he was adept at hiding it.

Until the night he'd taken Catherine as both a prisoner and an intended bride. Their lives had collided. All three of them. And the... sheer terror that had shone in mad Stephen's eyes had registered to Vincent, even then. He'd looked up from the ground, horrified, in both places, there and here.

And then Vincent had forgotten, as other events unfolded. He'd been more concerned with Catherine. Who had been more concerned that

he'd be caught above ground and this far from the tunnels. He hadn't wanted to leave her then. But he knew he must.

He didn't like remembering any of it. Too much of it reminded him of why they struggled.

"Elliot Burch just knocked Tom de Gunther on his ass," Devin said, bringing Vincent back to his current situation. Devin stood peeking outside of the tent flap. The crowd was roaring as the match concluded. Vincent nodded at the information.

"I need to go settle the bets. Put some of it in a bank, for now. Meet me at the inn for dinner?" Devin asked.

Again, Vincent merely nodded.

"Devin... she asked me not to kill him." *There, and here.* "Her heart is kind. Do you think it... means anything?" he asked.

"Meaning, do I think it means she still loves Stephen Bass? I have no idea. I'd say it's more important whether or not she's learning to love you. Wouldn't you say?"

Vincent lifted a blonde eyebrow. "That is a different tune than the one you were singing before the fight," Vincent observed.

"Yeah. Well. Figuring you were going to die and then watching you live through it without a scratch is starting to have an effect on me," he quipped, then turned serious. "Vincent, I don't know what this is that has ahold of you. But... watching you reach for it... I can't help but... well, marvel at your courage."

Vincent's brow furrowed. That had been Jacob's observation, back in New York. Perhaps "marveling at their courage" was a thing meant to happen, in any setting.

"Catherine is being courageous, as well. She has no... brother to help her as she struggles." *No one to watch her on her side of the river, and pray for her safe passage,* Vincent thought.

If that had been true in New York, it seemed doubly true here. For the first time, Vincent truly realized the size of the leap of faith he'd asked of Catherine. Having her presented as true royalty here highlighted the huge gap between them, not that Vincent needed any reminding of it. Yet she'd taken that leap, in his world, and taken it with a beautiful will.

Though lovers be lost, love be not... No. We are not lost, Catherine. We will never be lost. We are... struggling, some. But we are not lost.

He'd told her he sensed strength in her. She would need it. In either reality.

Devin left the tent as Elliot collected his purse from the crown and the crowd dispersed, leaving Vincent alone with his thoughts as he finished preparing his armor for the morrow.

He mulled over the conversation with Devin as he ran a soft cloth over Catherine's gift. She *was* generous, and kind. And meant for a very different life. The odds were against them, in both places. And yet, he could all but feel her heart turning toward him. All but sense their destinies trying to find a way to intertwine.

Was this what he was supposed to realize? That they were as a poor bet to begin with, but a better one, in time? That at the start, they were as hopeless a cause as Devin (and doubtless Jacob) had seemed to think they were? That the effort it would take, the amount of stamina it would require, might drain them both before they could decide what they were to each other, if they weren't careful?

That he'd thought much the same himself, on occasion, in his world, when times were at their darkest?

This place had a way of painting things in their starkest tones. If nothing else, that made it easier to cut to the heart of matters.

Catherine was a princess. Her father was a king. Paracelsus was an evil wizard, and Devin a bit of a rogue. All while he, Vincent, was lowest of the lowborns, struggling to climb his way up, fighting back her suitors as he would fight for her other causes, back in his world.

But the fighting, in his world, had co-mingled, and he'd not remembered how really separate the fights were.

It was one thing to save Catherine from Mundy, as he terrorized a building full of seniors. It was a different one to pull her back from Stephen Bass, or to obliterate Mitch Denton's army, for daring to hurt her. Still another to defeat the members of the Tong, or brawl with people like Naj to save Eric and Ellie. The latter two had nothing to do with her, romantically. They had been two different kinds of threats. One to his home, and one to small children. They had been fights, yes, and bloody ones at that. But they had been different ones.

Vincent realized that the matches here had taken him through a certain kind of progression. Hog would have raped her to death, and thus the threat to her was severe, and immediate.

Back in the tunnels, Hog was but one of many people Vincent had killed that day, and the savage self he'd had to unleash to quell them all was a hated thing. Vincent had been humiliated that Catherine had seen it. She'd had to beg him to stop, to bring him back to himself.

Erlik was a different story. Erlik had been the stronger of the two of them. Paracelsus had thrown him against a monster he should have lost to. He hadn't won thanks to cunning, or skill, or strength. He'd won thanks to a simple bit of biology. He had fangs in his mouth. Long ones. And another difference between him and other men had saved Catherine's life. And she'd seen it.

Stephen Bass was an easy victory in both places, when it came to fighting. But she'd loved that man in the dirt, once. Loved him enough to consent to marry him, back when her dreams were as young as she was. No power Vincent had could undo that, or change it. He simply had to accept that though Catherine had had past liaisons, her future was with him.

And now Elliot Burch. He was next. Vincent had moved from fighting his way through her severest threats to fighting his way through men she had been in love with, once. There was a certain clarity to it, once you stopped to look. The first two had been because she'd dared to love him. The next were because she'd dared to love someone else.

Clear of all that had gone on in between times, in his world, the “lesson” that Peter Alcott had hinted at was easier to see. And to understand.

He could either be beaten because of what he was, or because of what she was. Or he could give up entirely. He’d been pressed to withdraw, more than once. But he’d refused to, at every turn. Refused to give up.

Or, he could understand that the two of them, just as they were, had a destiny to fulfill with each other. Whether or not they succeeded might just depend on both of their abilities to reconcile themselves to that fact.

He wasn’t sure. But he knew he wasn’t giving up. Not here, and not anywhere.

Have faith in us, Catherine. Have more faith than I’ve had, sometimes, he thought.

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King Charles’ guards were not as polite as Catherine’s had been. He was ordered to appear before the crown. The fact that Vincent accompanied them without resistance did not make it less of a command.

The room they led him to was opulent. It was spacious, velvet-hung, and gilt-appointed. The king’s wealth was on display. The king himself was... relaxed, by comparison. Seated on a large chair that could only be referred to as a throne, he was the picture of wealthy power. He was clearly at home with a certain amount of ostentatious trappings.

More, he looked very much like a man who was born to his position, as opposed to one who had scrambled for it.

Elliot Burch could wear a crown all his life and never manage to carry himself the way this man does, Vincent realized, sensing the difference between old money and new.

"Your brother probably ... mentioned this meeting would happen," the king said forthrightly, as Vincent entered the room.

"He did. I believe I should be honored that it is happening with you in person." Vincent gave a slight bow.

"You thought I'd send someone else?"

"I thought..." Vincent searched his agile mind. In his world, Charles Chandler was already deceased, but even in life, he'd been a distant figure, one Vincent was not likely to know well.

Charles had a nobleman's power on either side of the tapestry, and Catherine's utter devotion as well. Intelligence shone from his eyes, and a certain degree of kindness, as well. Vincent realized that the king had a lawyer's mind and a father's protective heart.

"It doesn't really matter what I thought." Vincent watched the other man carefully.

Charles dismissed the guards with a wave of his hand as he rose from the gilded throne. After a moment, they were alone.

"Isn't that... risky? Being alone in a room with me?" Vincent asked.

Charles descended the two steps that elevated the chair from the rest of the room. He crossed to a painted table and lifted the top off a heavy crystal decanter. He poured amber liquid into a beautiful glass.

"I wanted this conversation to be private. And it's only risky if you're a danger to me. Are you a danger to me, Vincent?" He poured another glass for Vincent.

Vincent considered his answer carefully.

"I must be. Or I wouldn't be here."

Charles' curious eyes shot to Vincent's. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't think either of us is going to pretend you do not wish Elliot Burch for a son-in-law. Or are you going to bribe him, as well?"

Charles picked up his glass and sipped, taking the time to choose his next words carefully, also.

"You seem like a good man. A bribe would only insult you." He set Vincent's glass near his hand. "I ask only that you consider what is best for Catherine."

Vincent held his palms up in a peacemaker's gesture.

"With respect... that is an odd stance coming from the man who put her in this position. Erlik could have won her. What would you have done then?"

Charles set down his drink, justifiably rebuked, but not liking it. This conversation was not going the way he'd anticipated.

"People..." Charles seemed to reconsider even that word, "people like Erlik are necessary evils in this kingdom."

"They are evil, I grant you that." Vincent's blue eyes were frank.

"They are the foot soldiers in what is sometimes an ugly war. Men like Paracelsus move in shadows. Sometimes, they're necessary."

"Men like Paracelsus move for their own agendas, not yours. He knows no loyalty. Sire." Vincent tacked on the last.

"No, but that's what makes him predictable. As long as his interests are aligned with mine, he's a tool. Sometimes a useful one."

"He is merciless, and evil."

"Right now, I'm not sure any of us here are doing any 'good,' Sir Vincent. And we're certainly showing little mercy. You killed Paracelsus' man the other day. It's one of the few deaths reported in the games not attributed to Stephen's lance."

Vincent inclined his head, accepting the charge that he'd killed Erlik, but feeling no need to apologize for it.

Charles reached inside his doublet to pull out a silver locket suspended on a heavy chain. He'd kept it hidden under his clothes, and near his heart. He opened it, showing Vincent the tiny portrait of the lovely woman inside. Its larger twin hung on the wall.

Charles crossed to the beautiful portrait, done in oils. Was this more of Kristopher's work? Vincent didn't know. But she was clearly a beauty, and her warmth shone from her green eyes. A young queen.

Young, and holding an infant. The face of the woman could have been Catherine's own.

Vincent realized for the first time something that Charles already knew. Catherine was the image of her mother.

"I miss Caroline." Charles gazed wistfully up at the portrait. "She was such a gentle soul, and so beautiful. Stubborn like Catherine. Shy though, in her way. I don't think she ever really got used to the idea of being the queen, and that suited me just fine." He sighed. "When we were together it was just ... she and I. And all the rest of the world just ... fell away."

He folded his arms across his velvet-clad chest and looked up at the image of his wife and infant daughter. Vincent came to stand beside him.

"She loved Catherine," Charles continued. "And Catherine loved her. There was not a day that went by when they weren't together, weren't... enjoying each other. Caroline would hardly allow me to hire a governess for her education. They'd have tea parties together, in the throne room. The *throne* room, mind you, not some parlor, or the nursery." He smiled at the memory.

"I'd come in with some... head of state on my heels, someone wanting a treaty or a contract or a concession, and... there they'd be. My wife and my daughter. Sitting on the floor with little cups in their hands, their dresses sprawled everywhere. Having Catherine's stuffed animals 'talk' to each other. Cathy always held a stuffed rabbit."

The Velveteen Rabbit, Vincent thought. Even here, the old story followed her.

"Perhaps she knew a tale about it, and prized it," Vincent offered.

"Perhaps. But Carrie's death was hard on Catherine. So hard. Harder, I think, than it was even on me."

Vincent looked at the portrait, seeing the expression of perfect love pass from mother to child.

"Carrie wanted her to be happy. More than anything else. A happy life. Just that. It seemed such a little thing to want, at the time. But it's been so... elusive for my daughter." Charles' face showed his concern.

"Catherine has a very loving heart," Vincent said. "I'm certain that, when her mother died, you tried to help her all you could, through what must have been a very difficult time for both of you." Vincent's sympathy was sincere.

Charles mentally walked down a lane full of sad recollections. "It was difficult. But I had Catherine to keep me on my feet, keep me going." The king turned to face his daughter's suitor. "I've built up this kingdom for her, Vincent."

Again, Vincent inclined his head. "And you would rather not see it fall into the hands of a commoner. I am not here for her kingdom... sire."

Charles shrugged. "It likely doesn't matter whether you are or not. The two are linked. Inseparably. Catherine can no more be something else than you can. Wealth follows her. Along with her obligations to do right by our people."

Catherine can no more be something else than you can. The words imprinted themselves, on Vincent's keen mind.

Yes. It was a thing Vincent himself had struggled with. Entwining their lives meant his limitations would pass to her, to a very real degree. But he'd held them apart as much for her advantages in life as for his disadvantages.

Her life Above had more potential, not just than his did, but more than almost any woman's did. She was not Lena, or Lisa, seeking refuge from her life's choices.

Vincent snapped himself back to the conversation at hand.

"And you feel that end would be better served if Eliot Burch sat in your chair one day?"

"I feel that end would be better served if the ..."

"Stop it." Catherine's voice cut off the end of her father's sentence.

"You are not going to do this, Father." She entered the room, the look on her face one of stormy intentions.

"I hope you haven't been here long," she stated to Vincent. "Has he bribed you to withdraw yet?"

Vincent shook his head. "We were perhaps just getting to that part – or something about doing the honorable thing. Why? Were you about to ask of me the same thing? Again?"

Catherine's surprised expression told him he'd offended her.

"I was not bribing you! I was trying to *help* you! It was my fault you were allowed to fight to begin with! And I didn't want you to get killed! You idiot," she tacked on.

Charles watched the exchange with some interest. Catherine had been bred to never show anger or name-call. *This big, leonine man must be having quite the effect on her*, the king mused.

"You have done nothing but tell me to leave since I arrived," Vincent pointed out.

"No, *you* have done nothing but think you should leave since you arrived, remember? Your first day? You were telling your brother to go. But for me knighting you, you'd have been gone behind Sir Devin, days ago. With a sway-backed mare and a little silver in your purse!" she charged.

"Things have changed." He was implacable.

"Things! Things have..." She put her fingers to her temple, and got hold of her temper. Her father had raised her not to do this. Not anywhere in public, but especially not in this room.

"Tomorrow will be a very big day for you. No matter which way the match goes," Vincent pressed. She'd loved Elliot Burch once. Did she, still?

"Vincent. You must believe this: I do not want to marry Elliot. If I did, I'd have done so long ago."

Vincent's heart leaped at the news. She did not love Elliot, did not want to marry him...

"Do you want to marry me?" he asked.

Her expression became pained. "I don't know. You haven't asked me, and *that* was not a proposal I can even consider, much less accept!

And if I put you in the position where you might be able to ask, you might die getting there."

"What are you trying to say?"

They were both pointedly ignoring Charles, who was keenly watching their exchange.

"That whatever my father offers you to leave, I want you to take it." Her voice was firm. And she sounded like Devin. "You can withdraw, with honor. Or, hell. Just throw the match, tomorrow."

Name-calling and swearing. My. Charles was fascinated.

"But you don't love Elliot," Vincent confirmed.

Her green eyes were tormented. "Vincent... whatever it is that keeps us... keeps us apart," she referred to both worlds, even if she didn't know it - "it is there, and it is real. You said you know me in another place, and that we are no more married there than we are in this one."

She let those words sink in for her father's benefit as much as for Vincent's. Charles was a king. He understood that there were kingdoms beyond this one, and accepted that some were magical.

Catherine drew in a deep breath before she continued: "Vincent, my mother died when she was very young, not so much older than I am now. If I am to be a mother to children, if I'm to be a true queen someday... well." She looked down and pleated the front of her violet silk gown with her hands. "I suppose I'd best get started. None of us knows how long we have. And if I take after her, I might not have very long."

Charles' face looked just as stricken as Vincent's. He didn't know his daughter's thoughts had taken this particular direction.

"Cathy, you can't make decisions based on that," Charles began.

"Catherine, this is not how we are meant -- " Vincent stated overtop of him.

"Stop it! Just stop it, both of you!" Her voice rose again, and her color was high. "None of us can know the future. We can only know the past. There is only so much strength in me, and there is no more for this. Let it be Elliot. Or dig Stephen up out of the dirt and let it be him, even. I don't love either one of them, so it doesn't *matter!*"

"Do you love me?" Vincent asked. It was something both men in the room wanted to know the answer to.

"Vincent, the moments in the park... I hold those as treasure. But my life doesn't exist independently of what I'm feeling. I can't just wish it all away if I love you. Besides ... I don't know you," she said honestly.

You don't know me. A thing that had now been said in both worlds, though in the other one, he'd said it to her, not the other way around.

Vincent looked to the side a moment before he held her eyes again.

"Perhaps that is my doing. Perhaps it is yours, as well. I do not always show the places in myself I don't want others to see. And when I do... sometimes it seems as if people are pretending to look at only the parts of me they want, or need."

He stepped closer to her, his booted foot stopping very near her pearl-sewn slippers.

“Do you love me?” he repeated.

She looked down. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter if I do,” she hedged.

“Do you ... love ... me?” He persisted, spacing the words but delivering them in exactly the same tone.

“Vincent, I’m not going to give you an answer that will put you on the point of a sword.”

She was being stubborn. So like his Catherine. And so like he had been, when it was she who’d said the words first, and it was he who had withheld them.

“Do you love me, Catherine Chandler? Because I love you. With all I am. With all I will ever become.”

She blinked back tears and he could see her fighting the instinct to admit it. Much as he had done. So much like what he had done, back in New York.

His voice was a soft whisper of reassurance. “You don’t have to say it. You just have to feel it. I know what that is...” His voice was a soft seduction. “You do love me. You’re just afraid of what it will mean. It's all right, Catherine. We will make it all right.”

Tears tracked down her fair cheeks.

“No. I have to say ‘no.’ Even if I feel it, I have to say ‘no.’ I’ll get you killed, Vincent. You were already hurt on my account.”

Yes. And not just on the tourney field. He'd been grievously injured in New York, more than once. While not all of those injuries could be attributed to her, or her work, some of them could be.

"And that's what you've hated all along. The notion that anyone would be hurt in this. But especially someone you... care about." He was careful not to use the word "love," again.

"Of course. Of course it is," she said, as if explaining the obvious to a small child. She brushed the tears aside.

Of course. Ah. Was that what was bothering her in his world, as well? That he'd gotten hurt on her behalf sometimes?

The look on her face told him all it needed to. Yes. Yes, she was afraid that her love for him would cost him his life, one day.

If that was a burden she carried in his world as well, he realized how terrible a kind of guilt that must be. Why it sometimes seemed she was as trapped in one place as he was.

He had to banish this, immediately, at least for this Catherine, who was, after all, Catherine.

"I was injured because I stepped onto the field with a man who was as vicious as he was strong. Don't take what others do onto yourself, Catherine. The guilt will eat you alive, if you do." He watched her carefully for signs of capitulation.

"The guilt of that will keep us apart," he warned.

Had it been? Had that also been part of their problem? She'd remade her life, remade herself into a woman she could respect. Her

work at the DA's office gave her focus and purpose and drive, all things she'd lacked when she'd worked for her father.

But the job also entailed risks. And they'd not always navigated those successfully. Was that part of what he was supposed to see? That one of the "fears" she had centered entirely around him, just not the way he'd assumed? That she was afraid she might get him killed? Vincent realized for the first time that the Catherine from his world must be dogged by such thoughts.

He knew, for his part, that the sight of her lying in the street, shot by Mitch Denton, still had the power to give him nightmares.

Why should her reaction be so different? Vincent realized.

Charles, meanwhile, decided it was time for an intervention.

"Cathy." He used his daughter's nickname. The one from her childhood. "I want to see you happy. You know that. No matter what." He tugged her into his kingly arms for an embrace.

Her green eyes misted. "I know. I just... it's just that I'm not even sure what that is, anymore."

"I understand. Love is strange that way, isn't it?" He looked at Vincent over Catherine's head, and an understanding passed between them.

"This isn't like when you let me climb the tree in the park," Catherine told her father.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it's just like that, Cathy. Maybe it's knowing you have to take a risk sometimes, and not be afraid to fall. That I have to let you take that risk, too."

Yes. Yes, it is like that. It is so much like that, Vincent agreed mentally. He realized how wise a man Charles could be, on either side of the tapestry. No wonder Catherine had been so devoted to him.

Vincent spoke up as Catherine leaned against her father's chest. "I'm not sure if she can be a queen in your world, if she loves me, stays with me in mine." Vincent said it to both of them, but had eye contact with Charles, as the words passed between them.

The king gave a small smile. A father's smile as he brushed a kiss across his daughter's lovely head.

"No? Well. I guess she'll just have to settle for being a queen in yours, then, won't she?" Charles concluded.

Tears streaked down Catherine's cheeks again, and she stepped back and looked between the two regal males before her. They could not have looked more different. And been more similar.

"You're both mad. And I love you both. So much." She threw her arms out and embraced the two men in her life, squeezing them hard. Charles gave her a quick, hard hug, then stepped away.

"Thank you for understanding, Daddy." She stood near Vincent, leaning her head on his arm a little. "It means so much to me."

"I know. And you know I can't show favoritism, Cathy. Tomorrow I won't even be there, until the end of the match. It's your day. Yours and... the victor's," he said carefully.

"I know. Still. Knowing that you've met him, that you understand..." She blinked back happy tears, as she looked from her father to Vincent.

"We still have one hell of a day to get through, Princess," Charles told his hopeful daughter as he broke his own rule about swearing in the throne room.

Catherine nodded. They did.

"Nice leather armor," he complimented Vincent.

"She gifted it to me."

Charles guessed as much. "Looks like it fits you well."

"It does."

"Elliot Burch fights with a longsword. It won't stop that." Charles gave a gentle warning.

Vincent put his arm around his love and brushed a soft kiss across a worried Catherine's forehead.

"It wouldn't stop a lance, either. Perhaps the trick is to not need it to."

--

Vincent second-guessed the urge to go and see Elliot all the way to the villa the wealthy knight was renting for the games. He knew he had to meet this princely rival, come face to face with him, and see just who it was that vied for Catherine's hand.

Vincent knew that there was a time in his life when he'd thought Elliot an almost predictable match for the only woman Vincent would ever love. He wanted to see if that were still true. And on the very real chance that he would lose tomorrow, he wanted to make sure she would be well cared for.

Servants ushered him into a nearly all white room. It was a perfect foil for the dark man who inhabited it.

"The oddsmakers say you will win tomorrow. That should please you," Vincent commented, as he stood in the doorway of the villa Elliot occupied for the games. Gauzy curtains danced in a sea-swept breeze. Elliot had a view of the ocean.

The very handsome knight took in his unexpected guest.



"I've rather learned to ignore oddsmakers. But just to be safe, I've pretty much decided to leave my horse in the stable tomorrow. Nice trick, by the way."

Vincent inclined his head, accepting his praise as he accepted his opponent's intelligence.

"And, by the way, the odds aren't as they seem. They used to be ten to one in my favor. I think it's dropped to something like five," Elliot tacked on.

He was tanned and fit. Comfortable in a dark tunic edged with gold thread.

"Four, according to my brother." Vincent took him in. The tastefully appointed villa made him look like he was on vacation, not fighting for his fate. "Will you place a wager?" Vincent asked.

The grin was immediate, and the trim beard highlighted a steady jawline.

"Vincent, I always bet on myself. Will you?"

He seemed relaxed, and unintimidated. To further show that, he waved his attendants away. "I take it you'd like to speak privately. Drink?" Elliot offered, indicating a decanter and glasses of richly cut crystal.

Vincent shook his head.

"Can it be that you don't trust me?" Elliot raised a sardonic eyebrow as he poured water from a nearby pitcher into a heavy-bottomed goblet instead. "It's all right. I never poison anybody. That's a woman's weapon." He poured a second goblet full. "Not that I begrudge them using it, mind you. Women have so few weapons."

He held the glass out to Vincent, who took it, yet didn't drink. Elliot simply shrugged and took a sip.

"So. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You defeated Alexander Ross. And then Sir Tom de Gunther," Vincent said.

"That I did. Truth to tell, I'm amazed the former made it as far as he did."

So was Vincent. But to be fair, Elliot had done a thing Catherine herself hadn't managed to do. He'd beaten Ross. Vincent told him as much.

"In a different place, Catherine meets Ross. It is not incorrect to say that she loses much to him," Vincent said.

"Catherine has many fears," Elliot stated evenly. "Ross knows how to play on those."

"Don't you? Have fears?" Vincent asked.

His reply was self-protective: "Apparently not as many as Catherine does."

He stepped away toward the wide windows. The sheer curtains looked out into a small garden, before the drop-off to the sea. Light poured into the room, accenting everything from the crystal to the lines around Elliot's blue eyes. He was a man in his prime, and he knew his own power. He'd given up a good deal to get here. And at the mention of Catherine's name, his blue eyes had softened, involuntarily.

"You're in love with her." Vincent stated it as a fact, because he knew it to be so. He also knew that of all the men who had come to the tournament, the two of them were likely the only ones entered into the lists who could truly claim that.

Elliot stroked his dark beard. "That's not a difficult thing to be. So, I gather, are you."

"She is everything to me," Vincent said candidly.

Elliot regarded the amazing being in front of him, knowing he wore no mask, wore no costume. But Elliot was not Stephen Bass, and he didn't have Stephen's fears.

"She isn't, to me," Elliot said with a dose of harsh honesty. "I have a business to run and an empire to finish building. But she *would* be loved, Vincent. She'd be cared for. And she would be free to be herself. She'd lose nothing, if we made a bargain."

Vincent inclined his head at the pain of those words.

"If she and you made one? Or if you and I did?" Vincent asked.

"Either way," Elliot responded. His voice became gentle, almost a beguiling thing. "Think about it. In this whole, wide world, what is it that you can offer her? That isn't a criticism. It's just a question."

Vincent knew it. He also knew he was listening to the voice that had made Elliot millions. Vincent knew his reply.

"All that I have. All that I am." The answer rang with surety. It was a question he had answered before.

Elliot shook his head slightly. "I can't say the same. Part of what I am isn't even ... what I am."

"And what is that?" Vincent inclined his head with the question.

"A... peasant, for lack of a better word." Elliot took a long swallow of water.

"I also am... not exactly what I appear," Vincent said, thinking of his dark side.

"That must be a story, then," Elliot said, setting down the glass.

They were at ease with each other. They didn't necessarily like each other, but neither could Vincent bring himself to dislike this man. Elliot, more wary of the two by nature, was less sure. This was his rival. That much he knew.

"I can offer her wealth, Vincent. It's the chance to do great good."

A certain truth became clear in Vincent's mind. "She already has wealth. Already does great good with it."

"Not this kind. Not with this much potential. There's a reason her father wanted my name in the lists."

Potential.

The potential for Catherine's life. The nearly limitless possibilities offered to a woman with above-average intelligence, compassion, and wealth. The means to do good things. Great things, maybe.

Vincent knew the limits of his own life, and knew a marriage to him brought her nothing but burdens.

"And you are in love with her?" Vincent wavered, knowing the answer, but needing to hear it from Elliot's lips.

"I am. I swear I am. I can take care of her, Vincent."

And Catherine loved Elliot. Or she *could* be in love with him. Vincent distinctly remembered the terrible sensation of Catherine falling in love with Elliot Burch, when that had happened back in New York.

If he, Vincent, stepped back, Elliot would step in, would fill her heart.

For whatever that was worth.

It sounded like the right thing. Like the right thing for Catherine.

Throw the match. You could still do it.

Yet something in Vincent rebelled at the thought of it. *No. I did not come this far to stop now.*

"I will leave you to your... business," Vincent said, eyeing the stack of papers on one of Elliot's marble-topped tables. Designs for a new castle. A big one. A central tower seemed to all but pierce the sky.

Elliot nodded a good-bye, sensing the potential for victory in his grasp. One of his skills as a negotiator was to know when to back off, and that time was now. He knew not to press any advantage he had.

He'd leave this unique being to think. To think, and foster his own self-doubt. Tomorrow, Vincent would either throw the match or he wouldn't. Either way, Elliot was *fairly* sure of a victory.

As Vincent left, Elliot did not say the one thing that had been bothering him since Vincent had stepped into the room, uninvited.

He did not say that when Alexander Ross' magical powder had clouded his vision for a few moments during their fight, what he had seen.

The powder worked on the fears of the other person. Always. It *always* showed its victims something they dreaded.

Elliot had seen two things: One, himself reduced back to poverty, working on a dock somewhere.

The other was Vincent, as he took Catherine's outstretched hand, and led her away to a different life. A life apart from Elliot's, to a place he couldn't follow.

Elliot watched the big man go. Vincent's shoulders still looked impossibly wide even as his figure shrank, as he walked down the long hallway to the awaiting courtyard.

Tomorrow was going to be interesting.

--



Lost In The Tapestry

Chapter 6

Conqueror



Everything's got a moral if only you can find it.

~Lewis Carroll



"You're not supposed to be here." Catherine was torturing a silk scarf between her worried fingers. The deep night was a soft cape, over her shoulders. Softer, even, than his.

"I know," Vincent stated as he swung his legs over the railing of her balcony. "Do you want me to go?"

She shook her sandy-haired head. The amber highlights shimmered in the candlelight.

"I didn't say that. I just... I admit I'm frightened. More now than ever. Loving you made that worse, Vincent, not easier. What are you going to do against Elliot tomorrow? Do you even know?"

He'd had a few hours to let his visit with Elliot sink in, and just as Elliot had predicted, old fears were surfacing.

"Perhaps that is in part what I am here about. Do you want me to fight him, Catherine? You have to think carefully, before you answer."

He knew she needed time to think, and they were running out of that. He also knew she'd been doing little else since he'd seen her in the throne room, that afternoon.

Clearly, the hours in between had not been kind to either of them.

Elliot's reputation as a force to be reckoned with now dwarfed that of every other candidate who'd come to the lists. The ferocious Stephen Bass now seemed like a deranged puppy by comparison, and the methodical Tom de Gunther like an unimaginative dolt.

"I know I don't want either of you to get hurt. And I know that it's likely that *you* will be." Her green eyes were full of a remorse she was not responsible for. Not now, or three years ago. Yes, someone was about to get hurt, between Vincent and Elliot. And this wasn't a first time for that.

Vincent watched her fears work their way across her lovely face. She hooked her hair behind her left ear, revealing the perfect, glowing skin

of her left cheek. Seeing her without her scar was a unique thing for him. One that still had the power to jar.

She was uncompromisingly beautiful, in either world. Yet, he found he missed the familiar mark she carried on her face. It was like a badge of victory.

The fingers that had adjusted her hair returned to the scarf. "How do I say this is a good thing, when we both know it isn't?" Her green eyes were frank, with the question. "When we both know all of us will bear some kind of pain for what happens tomorrow, between us?"

Vincent nodded, respecting her quiet sense of wisdom. Yes, that was how it had been in New York as well, among the three of them.

Whenever Elliot was mixed in between him and Catherine, emotional blood was about to be spilled - if not the physical kind.

"We struggled with this in our world also, Catherine." Vincent's voice was steady. "For whatever it's worth, Elliot does love you. Not as I do. But he does feel it. No matter which of us prevails tomorrow, all of us will at least have the comfort of knowing you are loved."

"Did I love him, in return?" she asked, needing to know.

Vincent considered his reply. He distinctly remembered the sensation of Catherine falling in love with Elliot, when that had happened. "You did, for a time. But things happened. He is... complicated."

Yes. Yes, he was. Elliot's "complications" had effected many outcomes, for all three of them.

"And that hurt you, that I loved him." Catherine guessed correctly.

"It did," Vincent admitted. "But we... managed our way through it."

"Did you forgive me for it?" she asked, trying to understand how it had been.

Vincent's voice was unwavering in its certainty. "There was nothing to forgive. We both risk our joy, as well as our pain, with each other. Elliot felt the wound of that, as well."

He had. Catherine's ultimate rejection of him had been hard for the rich man to take.

She'd loved Elliot, for a time, in New York. She'd even agreed to marry him, once, though "love" had not been her motive. And then she'd become more sure of her love for Vincent, and rejected Elliot. They all had a complex, intertwined history, at best.

Catherine knotted the fine strip of cloth between her lovely fingers, and he sensed her disquiet. He hadn't meant to come back to the palace tonight. But he'd felt her tension like a coiling snake in his belly. It closely mirrored his own feelings. Or perhaps it just helped to cause them.

"Elliot is a king in your world. Even without your father's crown." Vincent had now made the same observation in both places.

"He is," Catherine agreed. "It's... It's a good thing to be."

He thought she was through with the observation, but was surprised when she wasn't.

"But it's not all there is." Her steady green eyes met his blue ones, squarely.

Vincent tilted his head. "I know you feel the love that is growing between us. Meant what you said when you asked me to spare Stephen." Vincent said.

"Stephen needed a doctor, Vincent, not a beating." Her voice was full of compassion. "I pray he finds one. He has many scars on the inside."

Don't we all? Do you still love Elliot? Am I here to slay that dragon once and for all, or to do the opposite? To give it life?

"Does a part of you still love Elliot Burch?" he asked outright. *Was this the thing I am here to understand? Is that the point of this test? That I should have stepped back, from the beginning? That our love, beautiful as it is, wasn't the only love she could feel, the only love she could find?*

Catherine had the good grace to drop her gaze, at the question. "I don't know what is between Elliot and myself," she said in a forthright manner. "I met him once, a long time ago. He was donating art to a museum. Flaunting his wealth, yes, but sharing it as well. Dazzling... everyone. Dazzling me. Do I love him still? Did I then?" Her brow furrowed, at the question.

"Since it didn't even matter... since it has no power to affect any outcome before us ... I suppose I've never even thought about it. Not really," she admitted.

She raised her gaze to his. "In a way, I can sense that part of me... tried to love him. Tried to find happiness with that, find peace with it. Please don't hate me for that. He seems to... to want me very badly. And you..." Her eyes held the bright sheen of tears. "There is a part of

you that seems to think I would be better suited to some other life. A life you can't give me."

There was. He knew there was. It was a weight he'd carried like a constant stone. It was a thing that stood, sometimes, like a wall between them. A wall he climbed over each time he went to her balcony. A wall he tried to ignore, sometimes, and one that seemed to overwhelm him, at others.

Find someone, Catherine. Someone to be a part of. He'd said it from the first.

"You would marry him, if he won? You would be happy?" Vincent needed to be sure that no matter how the fight tomorrow turned out, she would be all right.

As always, she seemed to accept a fate she could not relish. "I would... marry him if he won, yes. If I don't, all that's gone before is meaningless, and the men who were hurt, who died, died for nothing. If my word has no value then I have no value." Her appraisal was frank.

"But I cannot speak to ... happiness. He is a very... intricate man, Vincent. Like you are, but in a very different way. I would wish a different fate for myself, perhaps. But I will do whatever I must. I never had control of this outcome, anyway." She shrugged.

Vincent blinked, a little startled at the grim assessment of her choices, or more precisely, her lack of those.

She has no control? But how could that be? When she was the one who always had—

Then came the realization of how true it was, how she'd been repeating it, often, here, and he'd listened, but not truly understood.

In his world, she'd rejected Elliot thanks to the moral greyness the builder found himself comfortable in. She'd had no control over the collapse of their relationship, and even less control, if that was possible, when he'd crashed back into her life, and nearly gotten them both killed in the process. And she'd kissed Elliot, then, while wishing it was Vincent who stood there, wanting her kiss.

Her offer to marry Elliot hadn't been an act of love, but an act of protection. She'd been trying to save his home from the builder's latest project. Her dealings with Elliot had often left all of them heart-sore, one way or the other. Dealing with Elliot had rarely been her choice, and the outcome had never been pleasant.

Yet Vincent knew that her relationship with him had moved no mountains lately, either. They kept themselves back from one another, either saddled by her cares or his. She was no closer to blending her life with Vincent's now than they had ever been. She seemed to have no power to change that. Nor did he. The fears he held, which kept him apart, were his own. She could love him. But she could not compel him to accept that her life belonged entwined with his, not just lovingly, but both firmly and irrevocably.

He'd needed her to be able to untangle her life from his. She'd needed to be tied to him, with threads that were both gossamer and steel. It was why this Catherine had been so adamant about the fact that they'd never married, why she'd been confused by that, as well.

She accepted his heart was committed to hers. But wanted a life that did that, in the bargain.

I never had control of this outcome, anyway.

If this is my fate... I accept it. Gladly.

In many ways... it's been the most amazing year of my life.

To be fair, she'd tried to tell him, in his world. Tried to tell him that she'd already accepted the limitations he feared. It did not make those limits go away. But it gave them no power to hurt her. She had not accepted the notion of living with him. But she'd never thought either of them should find another, or would be happier that way.

"What if I win? What if your fate is to be with me?" he asked.

At first, he'd entered the tourney determined to save her from a truly bad match, to save her from people like Erlik or Bass. Zealots, like Ross, or brutes like Hog or Mitch Denton. Some he'd fought, and some he hadn't had to, not here. But he had in his own world. And he'd done it all to save her from them, to save her from the danger they represented. Most were not good men. Many would see her come to harm.

But now, that clarity between "good" and "evil" was no longer quite possible. Elliot could be morally ambiguous at times. But he was not, strictly speaking, a "bad man."

"If you were my fate..." she let the sentence trail a moment, and then the light shone in her eyes. "Then I would accept it, gladly."

She would. She had. It was the thing she had said before, and the thing she'd tried to tell him. She'd said it. Then she'd said it again, in different ways, all trying to get him to listen:

If this is my fate, I accept it. Gladly.

I've been all over the world. But I've never felt really fulfilled, the way I do now.

There are dark places in all of us. I love you.

"You've been trying to tell me something. I've been trying to hear it. Today in the throne room I asked you if you loved me. I know that you do, Catherine, I know that you're learning to." He held his hand his palms up, asking for patience.

"And I know there are so many more things that complicate it, that complicate us, but... at the end of all of it, I know we love each other. That *is* the important thing. Perhaps it's the only important thing." His blue eyes held hers.

She wanted to believe in the two of them. He could see it in her beautiful, green eyes. "We take such risks, Vincent. It seems like we've been taking them since the day I met you."

Ah, now there was her fear. Her fear, which kept them at arm's length, at times. And again, the entire time he'd been here, that was the concern she'd been repeating. That he would be hurt if they continued. Or, just as bad, they'd continue until he was hurt, and that would end them.

Vincent held her fear inside his mind, letting himself feel it, for the first time, the way she felt it. It was not a thing he'd ever done. It left a metal taste, on his tongue.

She was afraid for him. Very. And again, it was what she'd been saying all along.

But Vincent, who could not afford to let fear of injury rule his choices, had pushed the instinct for it aside.

Fear of exposure, of injury was a thing he'd had to learn to banish, so he could live a life Above at least some of the time; so he could live in the tunnels without feeling as if they were a prison. So he could live a life with as much freedom as he could grab for himself.

He knew fear could be a paralytic. So he'd always determined to not let fear rule his choices, when he could. He took risks to be with her. The risk of being seen. The risk of being hurt, or even killed.

Here, she was afraid he'd die at the end of a sword. Back in New York... Vincent let his keen mind consider a few things.

Bernie Spirko, and the beating he'd taken from the Silks... they must have been the stuff of nightmares, for his Catherine. *She's afraid. But not for herself. She's afraid for me.*

She did not like what she brought him, sometimes, any more than he liked what he brought her.

"The grave is a fine, safe place, my Catherine." It was what he'd told Father once, when he'd come home with a bloody palm. "But it is terrible, in its safety. We will... struggle with the risks."

They were. They had. Everywhere. And each time one risk was vanquished, another seemed to rise to take its place. Just climbing to her balcony was a risk, though it was a familiar one.

"But we can't let the perils define what we are. We've been taking the risks. But not enjoying the victories of overcoming them, of winning. Not like we should be."

It was true. They'd both spent too much time on what divided them, and not enough on what united them. More than once she'd declared the risk of seeing each other too great, not knowing how deep that knife went, for him. And when they'd persevered, the time between emergencies sometimes just seemed like a lull between the storms. A place to catch their breath, but not one to celebrate their victory by moving forward, by asking for more.

Each step forward was another risk. One he now knew they had to take, together.

"Catherine... I am going to fight Elliot. And I am going to beat him. Don't ask me how I know. I just believe it." His voice was so firm with conviction she knew better than to doubt him.

"And then?" she asked, casting her eyes down as she tormented the scrap of silk a little more. She was clearly expecting him to simply set her free, to let her live her life as she had been before. He would be near, perhaps. But separate, as well.

"And then I will leave the decision to you," he answered.

She nodded, thinking that fell very much in line with her expectations for them. He would let her call the tune on how they lived their separate lives.

"The decision over whether or not we marry." She was stunned, by his pronouncement.

"The decision over where we live, and how. The people will not accept a beast as a consort for you. We will have to decide what that means for us."

Her green eyes flew to his. "And if I say 'no'?"

"Then I will still love you with my last breath."

"And if I say 'yes'?" Her voice caught on the word. "With my whole heart, yes?"

His voice grew very soft as he stepped closer. The bond sang, between them.

"Then I will be the most fortunate, the most devoted husband in the world. Any world. And I will *still* love you with my last breath." Peter Alcott said they all left a trace of themselves in here, just by looking at the tapestry. If that was true, Vincent wanted no questions, as to their outcome.

She touched the silk cloth to her eyes, brushing away the teardrops before they fell. *A choice. Finally, someone was offering her a choice.* A real one. A chance at love, and a chance at whatever life she decided she wanted.

She threw herself at his huge form, colliding with the wall that was his great chest. He was solid. Real. More real than anything she'd ever known or touched or felt inside. The princess who had a great many things, but very few options, felt overcome by the rush of feelings that threatened to engulf her.

"Thank you. Thank you for trusting me enough to let me decide. Enough to let me have the choice."

"You kept saying all this time you didn't have one, that what you wanted didn't matter, because other things were controlling you. I was trying to listen. Trying to understand." His arms wrapped around her, steadying her small form. She was so lovely. So fragile. So strong, in her stubborn way.

"It was what I always meant to give you, yet somehow failed to, in my world." He brushed her white cheek with his thumb.

"There will be sacrifices," he warned her.

She closed her eyes and barely shook her head in the negative. "There always are. But at least these will be made willingly. By both of us, I hope."

"I can't think of one thing I will have to give up," Vincent said.

"Spoken by every bachelor on the eve of his engagement, ever," Catherine replied, a tremulous smile trying to find her mouth.

"I love you, Catherine. In our world or any other, I love you."

"I –

The knock at her door couldn't have been more ill-timed. She jumped away from him, startled. Charles' voice came through the wood.

Damn. It was thought by both of them.

"Catherine? Open, please. It's me."

He was jiggling the heavy handle, trying to come in. He didn't sound like a king. He sounded like a father. Vincent wasn't sure which persona meant he was in more trouble, right now.

"One minute!" she called, regretting that they didn't seem to have time for a kiss. His mouth was unique. She wanted a bit of time to sort out how to kiss him without committing offense. And to finish telling him "I love you."

Charles pounded again. It seemed that he, too, had had time for misgivings. "Cathy?" His voice rose.

Vincent kept his eyes on her handkerchief. "This bit of cloth. May I have it? Carry it, tomorrow?" It was a beautiful scrap of green silk. And it was stitched with a perfect white rose.

"My handkerchief? Of course. May it bring you luck." She pressed it into his open palm.

"I have your love and your favor. I don't need luck."

He kissed her cheek, swiftly.

"Catherine?" Again the knock. More insistent this time. "Do I hear voices?" Charles called.

"Of course not! I was just... singing a little." She cringed at the bad lie. It was a ridiculous thing to say. They all knew she didn't sing. Much. "I'm coming!" she called. She tugged Vincent out of her room and onto the balcony. He *had* to go.

Vincent's voice was a cajoling baritone. "You love me. Say it. Please." He was complying with the necessity of leave-taking. But suddenly he found he wanted to hear her say the words. Very much.

"I love you. Your turn. Again." She smiled. Radiantly.

His answer was honey on velvet. "I love you with all I am and all I have. And all I will ever hope to become."

It was a lovely declaration, and far more poetic than hers. And her father was about to beat the door down.

"Catherine!"

She thought she heard him give muffled directions to the guard about fetching the key.

"Go!" she whispered, shooing him as she crossed back through her rooms to the heavy door. She rattled the lock, letting her father know she was opening the door.

Vincent was off the balcony before she even lifted the latch. Her declaration of love was a warm thing, in his heart.

**

It was early yet, before the match. Very. There was but one fight today, and everyone knew who was in it and what it was for.

Vincent did as he regularly did since he'd begun fighting in the lists. He came down to the tourney field to inspect the ground. The royal box was empty, and only a few stray groundskeepers were working on the field or on the rails. After today, much of it would be torn down.

After today, it would no longer be needed. One way or the other.

It surprised Vincent, therefore, to see Kristopher Gentian sitting opposite the royal box, sketching in his ever-present tablet. He did not look happy as he glanced up to take in the lines of the wood before him, and the area in front of it. As a matter of fact, his face looked positively grim.

Vincent crossed the open field to where he sat, scribbling furiously.

"You look... disturbed," Vincent said, watching the deep frown on the artist's face as the sketch began to take shape.

"I should. So should you. Bad things are going to happen today, Vincent. Very bad things." His tone was as dour as his look.

"What kind of things?" Vincent asked

Kristopher's reply was chilling. "The worst. Someone is going to die."

Vincent was rocked by that information, even as he took it in. He knew he was here to fight Elliot. But he didn't anticipate having to kill him, and certainly didn't like the idea that it was he who would be vanquished. Mortally.

"Do you know who?"

He watched the stub of a dark pencil fly across the mostly blank page. Lines were made. Some areas started to take shape.

"No. And someone else is going to get hurt. Bad."

"I will fight Elliot today." Vincent felt like he had to say it.

"Yes. I know that." The boyish artist almost snapped the words at him. "*Everyone* knows that. It will happen today. It will happen there."

Kristopher nodded his head at the area in front of the royal box, near the middle of the field. The area he was working on, with both his pencil and his insight.

"Are you certain?" Vincent asked. He knew Kristopher's drawings could be prescient. Proof of it hung in his chambers.

"Positive." The grim answer gave Kristopher no joy. Whatever this was, there was no pleasure in it for him.

Vincent realized that art drove the artist as much as the artist drove the art. Lines hit the page with a certain, frenetic speed. His hand moved quickly. Almost supernaturally so.

The grey lines showed shadow and light, and the scratching of the moving charcoal stick was the only sound between them, for a long minute. Vincent could already see the fence, the royal box, and parts of the tourney field. Vague outlines of people filled the stands; no one face was more identifiable than another. This sketch was early, yet, even as his hands worked faster.

After a moment, a draped character lay face down on the field. His outline was more than vague. Something was spilled on the ground under his form, likely blood. Maybe something else, as well. It was hard to tell. Kristopher's hands would define it a little better, then

they would dart off to draw something inconsequential, like the horse tent.

"Who is this?" Vincent asked, afraid he already knew. The reason for the vague outline was becoming obvious. The figure wore a dark cape. Either that, or the body was already being covered by a blanket. The figure's face-down identity was unclear.

"Don't know," Kristopher said, sketching furiously.

The man was prone, and clearly either no longer alive, or grievously wounded. He wore gloves and boots, and either the hood of the cape or a haphazardly thrown blanket covered his face and part of his form. The black-tipped pencil gave no indication of color, other than shades of grey. It was a dark image.

Vincent watched with almost horrified fascination. Kristopher could not keep the charcoal pencil in one place. It flitted from section to section, as his talent commanded it. He began adding detail to the fence. Then catching the line of the banners as they streamed in the air. Details which did not help Vincent.

"Is it me?" Vincent asked bluntly.

"I said I don't know!" Kristopher shouted, turning his cap around back to front, then sketching some more of the banner.

"Only Elliot and I are scheduled to fight today, Kristopher." Vincent kept his voice gentle, deliberately.

Elliot's hand moved to the royal box. "I know that! Don't you think I know that?"

A man took shape in the royal box, wearing armor on his chest. His head was turned to the side. Lines of a beard came into view. Vincent knew the handsome shape of that profile before Kristopher even needed to add the details to his features.



"Is that Elliot?"

"Yes, I think so," Kristopher answered, clearly frustrated. "I don't know much. But it isn't Elliot who dies. I don't think."

"Show me the character on the field. Draw more of him."

"No."

"Show me!" It was as close to shouting at the artist as Vincent had ever come.

"I *can't*! My talent doesn't *work* that way, Vincent!" It was a cry of desperation as much as sorrow. A plea for understanding.

The young man who would never grow a day older shook his head, clearly upset. He took a deep breath in, trying to calm himself. "I only know this much. One way or another, today is your last day here. You aren't here, tomorrow."

He sounded too positive to even argue with.

The artist's voice conveyed his sorrow, and more than a little pity. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I really am."

Vincent placed a comforting hand on the boundary-breaking youth's shoulder. "It's all right, my friend. Thank you for being here for me. If... if it all goes badly, will you ... visit Catherine for me? The Catherine of my world?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Kristopher could be mercurial, and was not prone to doing the things he didn't want to do. This sounded like one of those things, to him.

"Please. If you can, let her know what happened. Tell her..."

"No! You tell her yourself! Or don't tell her at all!" he snapped as he stood up. "But don't use me to do what *you* should have done, or to tell her what *you* should have said! You're going to have to live to do that *yourself*," Kristopher said emphatically, and with unusual bad temper.

He flipped the sketchbook closed. Either he didn't want to know any more than he did, or the prescient vision had deserted him, or he truly knew nothing other than the sense that something was going to go very wrong, today.

Vincent didn't like it no matter what. He had a painting of Kristopher's in his chambers of him standing with Catherine, painted years before he'd ever met her. Probably. He knew the artist had the gift of foresight.

The youth was shuffling his feet, clearly wishing he were somewhere else right now.

"Be well, Kristopher," Vincent told him. With things as they stood, there was little more that he could say.

"I'm always okay, Vincent." Which was an odd thing for a dead man to reply, considering. "It's you I'm worried about."

Vincent nodded, and let him go as the young man stalked through the sand and made his way out the side gate.

Vincent eyed the ground in front of the royal box. It was there the vision of death had seemed clearest. He sighed, letting the air fill his chest, then letting his regrets go, on the exhale. Whatever would be, would be. He knew he would still fight. But he was no longer certain of a victory.

It was time to go to find Devin and get ready. Time, perhaps, to tell his brother of this world good-bye, and maybe write a letter to Catherine.

Which Catherine might ever get to read it, he wasn't sure.

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Not for nothing was Elliot a self-made man. He was adaptable, and quick-minded. Whatever advantage Vincent had held over Stephen Bass would be negated, today.

The beautiful white and grey charger Elliot favored was left stabled, just as he'd said it would be. There would be no repeat of yesterday, with that.

Elliot had elected to wear the armored breastplate he used for heavy skirmishing, but not much else in the way of plate. He wanted his

chest protected against Vincent's claws, and his back as well, but he knew he'd need to be more mobile on the ground.

A finely wrought mail shirt would protect his arms, but he kept his legs in leather pants and decent boots. He could move fairly quickly, and maintain his balance as he swung his longsword.

Vincent knew Elliot moved with grace, and would be hard to take off his feet.

Cape-less, Elliot looked disturbingly the way Kristopher had drawn him, earlier.

I don't think it's Elliot who dies. You aren't here tomorrow.

A small, spiked shield that was little more than a buckler gave Elliot a way to parry Vincent's swing. The longsword gave him reach. Reach enough to negate the length of Vincent's longer arms.

It looked like it was going to be a bloody battle.

The two men stood in the middle of the field, together, as the crowd applauded. Vincent thought it strange that he and Elliot seemed destined to be both rivals and friends in both worlds, and wondered if he would survive the former to reach the latter, here.

"One of us could concede," Elliot offered, clearly indicating the concession should come from Vincent.

"One of us could," Vincent said, standing in his cape with the hood drawn up. In spite of Kristopher's drawing, he was not going to change what he wore. Fate couldn't be cheated that way, and the dark cloth on the field might just as well have been a blanket used to cover a

different body. Some kind of accident? Vincent could only hope. And it was a faint one, at that.

Catherine looked tense as she entered the royal box for the last time. A few guards and courtiers stood in the space with her, but the throne beside her was empty, since Charles did not accompany her today. Vincent realized the significance of that.

One of them, either he or Elliot, was supposed to sit there with Catherine when the match was ended. This day was for the young, and for the victor. It was for the future, and not the past.

Since the moment he'd found himself walking down a road with Devin, this day had felt like forever in coming. Now it was here.

"Lords and Ladies and honored guests!" Smythe bellowed, holding the attention of the crowd. They quieted, but barely. Excitement charged the warm air. "The final match!"

The applause thundered over them.

Elliot moved off to his assigned place, as Vincent took his. Vincent tried not to be disheartened by Kristopher's prediction, though it was hard. Should he concede, after all? No. That felt wrong, even as the sentence flitted through his mind. No matter how this turned out, he was going to see it through.

He listened with half an ear as Smythe recounted the importance of this one, last fight. Smythe then began to list each man's accomplishments, in the tourney.

When Elliot's name was mentioned, the nobles and the landed gentry cheered, clearly favoring their man.

When Vincent's name was introduced, the commoners erupted, and shouted and clapped for a long time, before becoming silent.

Both of the combatants ignored the sound. Elliot was focused, too focused to be distracted by anything else. Vincent simply knew the applause was meaningless. The approval of the crowd wasn't going to save him any more than it was going to damn him.

There or here, he thought.

Vincent looked over at Catherine, again. Regally arrayed in midnight blue velvet and gold satin, a pair of fine pearls swung at her ears. She looked every inch the future queen, and she'd never looked more lovely. Or more worried.

Vincent wore her favor tucked up his sleeve, and touched the silk for luck, making sure she saw him do it, before he set his booted feet into the sand, indicating he was ready. He was thinking of her. He wanted her to know it.

Her green eyes seemed almost impossibly large in her face. Her dress reminded him of the color of deep night, which reminded him of sitting on her balcony for the first time in his world, as they read the last chapter of Great Expectations.

The joy of all he'd done, and the regret of all he hadn't, rode him hard. He should have kissed her before he left with the dawn, that time. Lord knew, he'd wanted to. So much time between them, wasted.

No, not wasted. That wasn't fair. We each needed time to sort out just how to step toward each other, and when. It was just...

The trumpets sounded. There was no time for regrets now, or woolgathering. There was only time for what lay before him.

Elliot had chosen to take the field without his helmet, though the mail shirt he wore had a cowl. It would deflect Vincent's fangs. There would be no repeat of his victory over Erlik. Elliot was clearly possessed of a nimble mind, and learned quickly. The cowl would probably slow (or even stop) a fatal blow to the neck, if they closed with each other. Vincent didn't know. He'd never had to grapple with someone in chain mail before. He knew it was designed to stop a dagger, and his claws were clearly those. He didn't know if his hands could cut through the metal links, and if they could, how quickly they could do it. He knew it would be next to impossible to tear through the armor at Elliot's chest, at least not before Elliot's sword took off his arm.

The handsome millionaire's face was exposed, and the leather on his legs could be cut through. But Vincent knew he would have to close with his opponent to get to those, and Elliot's skill with the sword he bore was fearsome.

The two men circled each other, and Vincent remembered what Devin had told him about the Elliot Burch who inhabited this world: some said Elliot had been a street fighter in his youth, a dock rat with a bad temper and a way with women. Others said he'd been born to the nobility, and studied the art of sword-wielding in Spain, that his mother was a countess and his father a French Dauphin. Some said he was an illegitimate prince, but a prince just the same.

Devin wasn't sure which tale was true, or if any of them were. Elliot had told Vincent he was a peasant, but that, too, was only part of the story, for whatever it was worth.

No one seemed to know for certain just who he was or where he'd come from, but two things were undeniably certain: he was worth a fortune, and he knew how to fight.

Vincent knew him to be a brave man, and a determined one. It was how he'd made his money, how he'd made his way in either world. – and how he'd made it this far in the tourney, Vincent realized.

In a moment of certainty, Vincent knew that Elliot truly did love Catherine. But also that a marriage between the canny, would-be ruler and the princess would be a disaster, for her.

Elliot wanted absolution for the sins he'd committed, and more for the sins he was likely to commit in the future. He wanted a voice of conscience to speak to him when he failed him. He'd use Catherine as many things: a confessor, an absolver, and as a moral center, and a guide. One he'd sometimes ignore, perhaps.

And while there was no doubt that he longed to sire her children, his use for those children was suspect. He wanted images of himself. He wanted mirrors to look into, none of which reflected the rumored poverty of his youth. Or the moral greyness of his choices.

He wanted, no, he *needed* Catherine to shine him up and keep him presentable. He wasn't an evil man. But he would drain Catherine dry with his needs. He loved her, yes. But he'd never stop using her to make up for his shortcomings.

In five years she'd feel like an old woman, not understanding exactly why it had all gone so wrong. In ten, she'd feel like a crone.

"No." Vincent said it under his breath as he stepped more toward his opponent, who advanced near the center of the field. "She is mine. She was always mine."

Vincent knew he was faster, in his banded armor. He also knew Elliot wasn't stupid enough to swing his sword wildly, and expose his vulnerable side when the swing missed.

It might turn into a long afternoon.

The two opponents circled each other again, tightening the distance now, each looking for an advantage and aware there wasn't one. Vincent could try to wear his opponent down, but had the feeling that strategy might not work. The rules about engagement had been relaxed for the final match, but they still had to fight. The crowd had not come to see two men walk around in a tightening circle. Especially not today.

After a long minute of doing just that, Elliot grew either bored or frustrated, and gave the crowd what it wanted. He raised the sword and stepped in to swing, necessitating that Vincent either move back, or take the point of the blade as it swept across his midsection. The air hissed with the blow. And as the sword went by, Vincent changed direction and ran in, sensing an opening.

Elliot brought his shield up before Vincent could grapple with him, and the steely point in its center reminded Vincent why charging in might be a very bad idea.

The crowd roared its approval that the fight was commencing, and Elliot began a series of slicing, overhanded swings that used the sword like a kind of thresher. Vincent had no choice but to back away. Elliot owned the ground between them.

As Vincent stepped backward and Elliot advanced, a certain part of Elliot's strategy became clear. If he could back Vincent into one of the walls, could pin him in a corner, he could hurt him, perhaps kill him.

Vincent avoided moving toward the corners, aware that meant he was keeping himself near the center of the field, near where Kristopher's vision had unfolded.

Then a vision of a different kind began unfolding in the royal box, and Vincent knew real fear.

No, not just “fear” but abject terror, and for the first time since he’d come to this strange domain.

Catherine was about to die.

Everyone, even Catherine, was mesmerized by the moving spectacle of Elliot’s silver sword whirling through the air. All eyes were on the combatants. The guards were all at their posts save one, and that one was moving freely toward her, inside the box. Only Vincent saw the long knife in his hand, and the intention in his eyes. Without knowing how he knew, he knew.

Paracelsus. Paracelsus in a mask, in a disguise.

A breeze-born scent of chemicals and evil intentions hit his nose and it confirmed he was right at the same moment he knew he was too far away to reach her in time. The screaming noise of the crowd would

negate anything he shouted. Elliot was still swinging, and for Vincent to drop his guard meant his death.

Here it comes, he thought, anticipating the blow that would take his life.

Catherine was just sitting there, her arms gripping the chair. Charles wasn't even there to help her. Every eye was on the field. As were Catherine's.

There was no one close enough to her to see what was about to happen.

They would all see in a minute. In a minute, when it was too late.

"Catherine, move!" he shouted.

The stiletto raised, slightly behind her. Paracelsus was going to stab her in the neck.

"What is a man without an heir?"

Vincent heard the words even over the sound of the crowd. John didn't even bother to disguise his voice.

She didn't move, though. She didn't know why she should. She was just now beginning to turn her head, just now beginning to realize there was someone drawing near her, just now wondering at the odd question. Slow. She was simply too slow to avert what was about to happen.

Now. If he was going to have a prayer of saving her, it would have to be now. Before Elliot's swinging blade broke his shoulder and ended his life.

Someone is going to die, Kristopher's youthful voice echoed in Vincent's brain.

He had nothing in hand, and needed something to throw.

Devin's knife.

In one motion, Vincent pulled it free of his over-the-knee boot and sent it sailing, aware he would only have one chance to save her and also aware that he was now in a position of being able to be stabbed in the back, or to take the downward slice to his neck or shoulder. It didn't matter. If he was going to die, he was going to die.

Elliot wasn't sure what was happening, but he'd not reached his current status in life by being slow-witted. He'd seen Vincent's gaze turn and fix on the royal box, and knew it was either a trick or it wasn't.

Vincent's blue eyes were dilated wide with fear, and it wasn't fear for himself. And he'd sent the knife sailing, immediately, with a kind of mad desperation, toward the box, and not toward Elliot. The steel blade of the sword had made its rotation over Elliot's head and was coming down. It would hit the big beast right between the shoulder and neck.

There were several things about Elliot Burch of which he was justifiably proud. One was the ability to make decisions far faster than most men did, and to make correct ones. He did so now.

In mid-air, Elliot checked his swing and let his longsword fall to the right of Vincent's turned form. He took in what was happening at

almost the same time the guards began to realize something was wrong.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. Everything but Vincent.

Paracelsus' stiletto was still coming down, and it caught Catherine's left cheek; at the same moment, Devin's knife caught Paracelsus' wrist as it spun by. Vincent's aim was true, and the balanced handle broke the alchemist's nose as it knocked the dagger from his hand.

Had Vincent had time to prepare the throw, its force might have cost Paracelsus his jugular. As it was, his wrist ran crimson and he screamed with surprise and pain as Vincent covered the distance between them and leapt up into the royal box, swinging himself over with deft ease.

Pandemonium. Chaos. The sound of swords clearing sheaths and polearms being brought to bear as the crowd lost its collective mind.

They were confused for a moment, then they gasped in shock before they began to scream in dismay. Catherine cried out, clutching her bleeding face as she fell to the floor. The deep cut soaked her cheek and neck with blood.

Vincent saw John Pater reach for the wicked, thin-bladed knife again. It was the last move he ever made, near Catherine.

Vincent's arm came down in a blinding arc as he tore streaks across the evil wizard's throat, then simply picked him up overhead and made to hurl him as far from Catherine as he could get him.

Paracelsus wrestled his ruined mask free as he was lifted. "You are my son at last," Paracelsus gurgled, as his blood stained Vincent's hands. Again.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Catherine.

Vincent heaved the dying body out onto the field, sending John Pater's caped form flying. The midnight blue of his stolen cape covered his face and form as he hit the dirt and then rolled onto his stomach. Coins scattered from under his prone form. Gold ones.

"My gold! My gold!" The evil monster did not even attempt to cover the slashing wounds to his throat as he tried to gather his treasure to him before he died.

Vincent didn't spare him a look.

Catherine. Catherine was on the floor of the royal box, holding her hand to her face. Elliot was coming over the rail to join them.

"Healer! We need a healer!" Elliot shouted. He kicked Paracelsus' knife out of the way and turned to make sure he was being obeyed. Kristopher's scene was complete.

"Catherine! Oh, God, Catherine!" Vincent reached down to hold her, helping her tiny hand staunch the flow of blood.

She looked dazed, and like she was going into shock.

"It hurts," she said, feeling the fire of the cut as it sent her waves of throbbing pain.

"I know. I know it does," Vincent held her close.

"Physic! We need a stretcher!" Elliot's voice assumed the ring of authority as he began issuing orders to the remaining guards. "Make sure the gates are locked shut until we're sure he was working alone," Elliot ordered the nearest one in a low voice. The guard complied.

The crowd was half mad and the guards were finally doing their job, too late. They were securing the box, and one was on the field, checking on a now dead John Pater.

"Did you win?" Catherine asked from the floor, as if that were somehow still important.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter," Vincent said. The ugly gash was just in front of her left ear. Its position was utterly familiar to him.

"It's deep," she said. She knew it was.

"I know, my Catherine." His voice caught. "It doesn't matter, either. You're alive. And I love you. And that's all that matters." *It was. In the other world or this one. That was what mattered.* There were tears in his eyes as he said it.

Elliot began issuing more orders and trying to calm the crowd with hand gestures. He pulled aside another guard.

"Tell Smythe to take the field. Announce that the princess is injured, but that the wound is not fatal. Tell him to announce..." He looked down at the beast-man cradling the woman they both loved, and Elliot knew which love shined purer. "Tell him to announce that Sir Vincent is her champion. I withdraw my suit. We need to find the king, and get him out here. And we need to calm them down before they start a riot."

"Are you all right?" Catherine asked, her sole focus on Vincent, as if nothing else in the world was as important as that.

"I? I am fine. And Elliot is fine. And you will be fine." His voice was firm.

"Cold," she said.

He tore off his cape and wrapped her in it. *Where was the doctor?* Vincent's mind screamed for one, and he half wanted to run her all the way back to Jacob, wherever that was.

Peter Alcott appeared under escort, his medical bag at the ready. He inspected her wound. "We need to get her inside the palace. I can't do surgery here." He took something from his bag. "Catherine, inhale this. It will help with the pain." He held a silver vial under her nose. She did as he bid her.

"You're sure you're all right?" she asked Vincent. The cape felt wonderful. Like a protection all its own. It smelled like him. And he was worried. She could tell. Not just by looking at him, but some other way. Inside her mind, she felt him.

Vincent's hands and the sleeves of the fine white shirt she'd had made for him were bloody. She could no longer sort out whose blood belonged to whom, or if some of it was his.

He simply nodded that he was fine, as he held her close.

"Good. That is... good," Her voice began to sound groggy. Peter's medicine worked fast. The stretcher appeared.

"I will take her," Vincent said, not willing to put her on the litter. He'd carried her Below the first night he'd met her. He'd carry her now.

Elliot nodded as Vincent rose, Catherine in his arms. As Smythe was making the announcement, the sight of Vincent lifting Catherine's clearly injured but alive form sent the crowd to gasping even as they cheered. The dark color of her dress and the cape hid the amount of blood involved, and the injured side of her face was pressed against Vincent's broad chest while her unmarred cheek faced the crowd.

Vincent turned and made his way down the back stairs, Catherine cradled in his arms.

"Wherever I go, you are with me." She mumbled it.

He spared a reassuring kiss for her forehead as his long stride chewed up the cobblestone path. "Yes. With you in spirit, and every other way," he answered.

From the tourney field to the castle entrance, Vincent looked neither left nor right, her injured weight a sad familiarity for him. All during his time here, the fact that her face was unmarked had caught his attention. Now he knew why. Both in his world and in this one, the marring of her face was a thing that seemed destined to entwine them. It was a terrible truth. But it seemed to be a necessary one.

He achieved the palace entrance just as more pandemonium reached his ears. The castle was in an uproar. The king was missing.

Vincent gently laid Catherine on the table Peter indicated, determined to help this doctor as he had helped Jacob, when it came to tending her.

Joe Maxwell approached the group. "The king. They say no one has seen him since breakfast. Vincent? Do you know what that man might have done with him?" The badge indicating that Joe was the captain of the royal guard gleamed at his chest.

Vincent did not want to stop to worry about Charles at the moment, but he knew that, just like the day Vincent had killed Paracelsus in his world, John Pater had kidnapped at least one father. John's obsession with fatherhood was well known.

At least this time he hadn't impersonated one, deciding a guard made for a less obtrusive figure.

"John liked low places, and secret rooms." Vincent nodded toward Devin, who had been following him since he'd emerged from the royal box with Catherine. He pulled a blanket over his love's pale form.

"What's the lowest place in the castle?" Devin asked Joe, who was doubling the guards at all the entrances and exits.

"The dungeon," he answered. "Every castle has one. It's not much more than a storage area here. But there are some cells."

"Check them," Vincent said, seeing how the news was affecting Catherine. She was frightened for her father. Her green eyes were dark with fear, as she looked between the men, and followed their conversation.

"Check every one of them, and look for a false wall, or a loose tile on the floor," Vincent instructed. He barely took his eyes away from her injured face.

Devin and Joe nodded and left, as Elliot came in and hovered near. He stepped closer to Catherine, alarmed at the depth of the wound, and knowing better than to show it.

"You're going to regret this. I happen to know I'm a much better catch," he tried to tease her as Peter prepared her for surgery.

She gave him a weak smile. "I might. But I think this is my fate. And I have to embrace it. Happily." It hurt to smile, but she was trying to.

"Besides. I'll have a scar," she added. She knew it was true.

Elliot saw only love as he looked at her. He was not a perfect man. But he was smart enough to recognize that even without her title, she was very nearly a perfect woman.

"You'll be just as beautiful with it," he reassured her. "Still friends?"

"Always," Catherine said. "Elliot, please help them find my father." Her lovely eyes were very worried. Teary. She was fighting off the effects of Peter's drug, refusing to go down until she knew her father was safe.

"I will. You get better. We'll find Charles, then I'm going to go out and reassure the crowd. And you're going to be just fine." He gave Vincent and Peter a meaningful look.

Peter began sterilizing a needle and thread.

The man who was his own kind of king in Catherine's world left to do what kings did. He left to solve problems, to rule a populace.

"My father. Where is my father?" She tossed her head, and was clearly agitating herself. "Oh, Vincent, did that man hurt my father?"

Catherine continued to shake her way clear of Peter's painkiller. She even tried to get up off the table, as Jenny brought a bowl of hot water over. Vincent held her shoulders, gently.

There is strength in you. I feel it. There always had been, for the people she loved.

"No. No, Catherine, Devin and Joe will find him. Elliot will make things right. Don't worry," Vincent's voice reassured her, and he prayed he was right as he guided her back down.

He watched Peter place a towel under her head. Catherine fought the narcotic some more, as she struggled to stay awake until she could find out about the king.

After another minute, a ruckus in the hall confirmed that the others had been successful in locating King Charles. The monarch's voice preceded his guards and rescuers as he rushed into the room, looking dirty and disheveled, but uninjured.

He'd already been warned of Catherine's injury, but he was aghast to see it.

"Cathy!" he cried as he crossed to her. "Oh, Cathy!"

"He was knocked out in a back cell, along with the guard Paracelsus was impersonating," Joe told the group as King Charles mourned his daughter's injury.

Devin stepped near to Vincent. "There's a secret entrance, just like you said, at the lowest level of the castle. One with a tunnel." His voice dropped. "Might run all the way to ... Deep Haven," Devin whispered to Vincent.

No matter where they were, there seemed to be an entrance between his home and hers.

Vincent simply nodded. He had eyes only for his love.

"Who did this?! I will ... flay whoever did this?!" Charles was weeping, and beside himself with both anger and sorrow. There was a bruise on his head. And he was none too clean, having spent the morning and part of the afternoon in a cell.

Catherine calmed at the sight of him. "It's all right. Daddy, it's going to be all right." Catherine reached for her father's hand. "Vincent saved me." She squeezed her father's hand as her eyes found her love. "I think he will always save me."

The green eyes longed for her father's blessing. "I... I know he isn't who you would have picked. But... but I love him. With everything I am. Everything I'm going to be."

Vincent's eyes closed over the blessing of her words. *Yes. Of course you would do that. I love you, so much.*

"Say you understand," Catherine prompted her frantic father.

"Yes, yes, everything is going to be fine. Just fine." Charles would have said anything to soothe his bleeding child.

"No. Really. Really, it is," she reassured him. "It's like climbing a tree. I won't fall."

A tear tracked down the king's cheek. His daughter was so brave. The irony that she was trying to comfort him, rather than the other way around, was not lost on the father in him.

Peter prepared a strong sedative. She'd worried herself free of the earlier drug.

"I think Vincent will always be there for me. Say you understand. Say it's all right, Daddy."

"I understand. I truly do, Cathy. And it's all right." Charles gave his blessing, aware that it was binding. Also aware that he really believed it. He didn't take his eyes from his daughter's face, but his voice rang with sincerity. "It's all right, princess. I only ever wanted you to find a way to a happy life." They all knew it was true.

At Peter's nod, Jenny tugged the king gently away, and the rest of them, except for Vincent and Peter, stepped back. They had to do this, had to perform surgery on her face. It was the only way to close the grievous wound. Peter set a sleeping potion to her lips. She drank, and the cup was moved away.

"I'm not going to be as beautiful now," she whispered to Vincent, aware that the sleeping potion would take hold quickly.

"You will always be beautiful." He took his place near her head, then leaned in close.

"Marry me. Marry me before it heals," he whispered. "I never gave you that choice, before. Never offered it to you."

Her hand came up to cup his cheek.

"Yes."

"Ten days. Ten days from now, you marry me," he said, aware that in ten days, her face would still carry a rivening mark that would lead to a

scar. Ten days was the amount of time they'd had together, before. Before he'd sent her back to her world, and let that divide them.

"I'll read to you every day." He tried to tempt her, even though she'd already said "yes."

Can we... finish ... Great Expectations?" she asked. She was already starting to feel woozy.

"Slowly," he answered. "I'll hold the last chapter for our wedding night. Does that mean you will? In ten days?"

"In ten days," she whispered. And she pulled his neck down for a kiss.

**

Back in the Great Hall, Vincent startled awake. He was sitting on a stool in the huge room, the tapestry before him. The line of white horses seemed to lead a great procession, as they always had. And in the tallest tower of the castle a beautiful woman stood in the window, barely visible to the crowd.

Behind her stood a large figure wrapped in deep shadow. A cloaked presence who stood near. The shadow of a hood hid his features. A lock of bright hair, red shot with gold, peeked out from underneath.

Vincent smiled.

He knew there was a world beneath the cloth, just as he knew there was a world beneath the city. He wondered if the picture of the hooded figure was always there, and he hadn't noticed, or if it had just come to be, if that was possible.

He realized it didn't matter, either way. Vincent now knew who was in the picture. He knew something else as well: that the grand parade had been a wedding procession. That the jousting knights on horseback were games in celebration of an unbreakable union.

He'd once told Catherine, of her world, that it was an amazing one, full of possibilities, and wonders. It was. But then, so was his.



"Be happy," Vincent bid the couple, rising from the place he'd occupied without moving for the better part of an hour. His back was a little stiff. That didn't matter, either.

"Be very happy," he said, scanning the weavework for familiar sights.

There were none, not really. But if you *carefully* stared at the crowd, Vincent thought you might see a certain captain of the guard or a

certain bearded nobleman, or a certain king, or a certain charming rogue, or even a certain artist.

You could never tell, about tapestries.

He turned, knowing he needed to go to his chambers and dig through his books. He needed to find his copy of Dickens, the one he held most dear. He needed to go to Catherine's balcony tonight, and begin to read her the story again, from the beginning. He needed to stop, sometimes, and talk to her, really talk about all they'd been to each other and about how he wanted to offer her a very particular choice. Wanted to seal her answer with a kiss.

If she said yes, he'd have a last chapter to save.

He had the feeling he just might need to do that.

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No matter what story you get lost in, I wish you love. ~ Cindy



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