

# *Nothing But A Bond*

*By Cindy Rae*

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## *Chapter One*

### *A Shadow in the Darkness*



She was young, not much less than his age, he guessed, whatever that unknown number was. He'd seen her leave in a small sedan, and now watched her return to the same parking place she'd left, his blue eyes slitted with interest.

The shadows of the parking garage in her building gave him cover. The left rear wheel of a Cadillac gave him a hard backrest, one he leaned against gingerly, lest the metal make contact with his injured left shoulder blade, and an even worse

gash, on his bandaged side. People moved in and out of the busy space, while he waited, staying concealed.

His bare feet were sore from where the New York pavement had left them burned, and a cut across his left heel had a tendency to bleed. His back stung, but there were ways to lean so that he could get some relief. Still, sitting felt like a blessing, after days spent standing, crouching, squatting, or leaning against dumpsters, trying to get shade, shelter, or whatever else he could scrounge, from those.

His side ached. The wound was deep. There was nothing to be done for that, save what he'd already managed to do.

He adjusted his back so that the shoulder blade didn't accidentally brush against the hubcap. A burn there had a tendency to throb in general, especially when the skin contacted anything heavier than his torn shirt.

His eyes remained fixed on the woman's car. She'd peeled in fast, from the street. She drove like she was in a hurry.

She threw the car into park, hard, her agitation showing in the way she also slammed the driver's side door, as she emerged. The car was blue. Her eyes were green, and her hair was a sandy color that was not entirely blonde nor brown. She hooked her hair behind her ear as she walked. There was a scar in front of it; a long one.

And that was almost everything he knew about her.

Except that he could feel what she was feeling.

Which was to say he knew about her almost everything he knew about himself.

Other than the fact he knew he wasn't human, of course. In that, she seemed to have the advantage over him. In that, it seemed everyone did.

The garage smelled of gas, exhaust, metal, dirt, and concrete. There was dust from the street mixed with the scent of hard rubber tires, old oil stains, and the occasional puddle of antifreeze. It was a grimy, unpleasant mix.

Even with that as a given, he knew he smelled much worse.

He also knew he didn't dare move from where he was, didn't dare reveal himself to her, or ask for her help. Not yet. She wasn't alone in the busy garage. A couple dressed for a night out shouldered by her, as a woman in heels clicked her way to a sporty red convertible. Cars moved in and out of the space, ferrying their inhabitants he-knew-not-where.

His survival instinct told him he needed to remain hidden. Considering that instinct had kept him alive so far, he wasn't inclined to argue with it.

She slung a tan purse over her arm, as she walked toward the elevator doors. Her stride was an impatient one. *She's agitated*. He watched every step she took, away from him.

For the last few days, he'd followed an internal beacon to her, for miles, to this very spot. From across the city, he'd come to her. By night, he'd moved from alley to shadowy doorway to rooftop to dumpster, trying to make his way in her general direction, undetected. By day, he'd mostly sought a place to hide. The sun had set and risen at least three times, during his journey. Often, his progress had seemed glacially slow.

During daylight, he could barely move at all, and he knew it. There were too many people on the street. Far, far too many. People were to be avoided. All people, as far as he knew.

*But not her...* Like every other instinct he had, he knew this one was right

Two nights ago, he'd tried moving by rooftop for a time, thinking he could make better progress above the ground than on it. But that had been no better, for getting him closer to her. Not every building had a roof he could leap to, from the adjacent one. Climbing down from a multi-story building, one full of people, was slow work, and a thing done only under the cover of darkest night, and away from the city's incandescent lights. The effort of climbing was often a wasted one, and it cost him his strength, as it aggravated the torn flesh near his waist. And moving vertically brought him no closer to her.

Sometimes, he could sense *her* "moving" throughout the city, but she seemed to stay in Manhattan, at least. And now... here she was. Her booted heels made a tapping sound on the concrete, as she walked away.

*I know you. I don't know you. But I do*, he thought. *How?*

The journey to reach her had felt impossibly long, and he didn't like the sensation of her moving away from him, as she walked. It couldn't be avoided. He'd come too far to risk detection, now.

He'd gotten this far by stealth. He'd not risk himself, now. The last few days had been a blur, save for the instinct to find... her.

At least the endless-seeming trek finally had brought him close to her. He'd had no real idea where he was going, as he'd made his way to the woman whose name he didn't know. She was just a direction he followed, like a homing signal.

But he knew *her*. Which was to say he *felt* her.

*I feel you. Inside my heart. You. Only you.* She'd been a presence, whispering in his brain since he'd first broken free of his restraints. Before that, probably. He wasn't sure. Much of the last week was an utter blur of pain and deprivation. He knew it might be a blessing that he couldn't remember some parts of it, considering the parts that he could.

Then again, "not being able to remember" had been the point, somehow.

*"You will forget,"* a sinister voice had whispered, as a long needle had jabbed his manacled arm. A shadowed face in a golden mask had hovered near. *"Forget!"* it ordered.

That had been days ago. How many, even he wasn't sure. There'd been no way to measure light from day, where they'd held him.

And now, he had other concerns. A van that needed a ring job sputtered by, belching smoke, as it travelled. Breathing it in made him fight the urge to cough, and the smell made him want to retch, as he watched *her* walk toward the elevator.

A couple got out of a station wagon and took their two young children by the hand. It was early evening, and pedestrian traffic was busy, in the garage. The family rushed to reach the elevator also, then fell in step just behind the woman he sensed.

The woman he... loved. *Loved*. He felt it in his heart, deeply. He *loved* her. He knew it. He just didn't know why he did.

Love was a *feeling*, not a memory. And he held it hard, to his bruised chest. There was so little else to hold on to, right now. So very little else.

*Who are you, beautiful woman, with the scar on your face? How does my heart know you? How does it... adore you? You are worried, and you're afraid. You're trying to conceal your concern from others, even as it gnaws at you. How do I know that? How can I... feel it, inside you? How did it lead me right to where you are?* He had no answer for any of the questions. He had no answer for anything.

*"You will forget."*

The parking garage remained busy, and he dared not break cover, no matter what he felt for the woman; not when he could be seen by others. Instinct bid him to stay put. Obeying that voice had gotten him here, from miles away. That, and a deep well of strength, one he'd drawn from incessantly, since this ordeal had begun.

He was tired. Beyond it. Thirsty, injured, and sick from carbon monoxide fumes. He'd been travelling in stealth and fear, just to reach her; spending energy that came from he knew-not-where. He'd stopped to hide for rest when he could snatch some, scrounged for any kind of drinkable water, wrapped the deep and bloody gash on his side, favored the cut on his foot, and moved steadily forward, mostly in subterfuge and in night shadows. It was far less than a "plan." But it had gotten him this far. And "this," no matter how bad it was, was better than the imprisonment he'd escaped from.

He was lost, in a city of millions of people, and he knew it. He had been, for days.

She opened her purse and dug for something. He didn't know what. The family behind her drew closer, talking amongst themselves. *I know you. I don't know*

*you, but I do.* Her brow furrowed, as she snapped the purse shut, and waited. She glanced out toward the street, not at him, but at the deepening color of the sky. He sighed. They both did. It was an odd sensation, to do that in unison with her.

Daylight had been reflexive dread, thanks to how exposed it made him feel, and how much it slowed his progress toward her. He'd spent much of the last day trying to creep through alleyways, moving from cover to cover, as he maintained his course in her general direction.

He hadn't needed to see his reflection to know what he looked like. He was at least that self-aware.

Until the day's sun had finally set, he'd spent at least three of the last several hours wedged between two buildings, using trash cans as a barricade, of sorts. He knew only that he needed to keep trying to reach her, no matter how slow his progress. He'd understood that every step brought him closer to her, and he'd used that to keep himself upright, and on his bare and bloody feet.

*And now, here we are,* he thought. *Whoever "we" are.*

He knew he couldn't stay here in the garage much longer. The fumes were hard to bear. Even as the belching van ambled out into traffic, its smell lingered. The fact that he had a sensitive nose was giving him no joy, at the moment. Then again, the notion that anything had ever done that was as foreign to him as everything else, right now.

His link with her still mystified him. He'd *felt* her return, as much as he'd seen and heard it, from this vantage point. *How?*

He didn't know. But it seemed like a part of him. Of that much, he was sure. She was "centered" in his brain, even as she was standing in front of the elevator, arms crossed, waiting for the car to come down. The family stood near her, and the father bent down to pick up his little girl. The woman he sensed barely acknowledged them, as she watched the numbers descend.

He would have to make his presence known to her. Would she know him? Would she help?

*She must.* He had no other hope. Literally.

Yet, he still dared not call out to her as she continued to stand near the elevator, checking her watch, as she waited for the metal doors to open.

*She's still worried. And impatient.*

He *felt* it from her, and again, marveled at that. Her anxiety was deep, and it warred with his own exhaustion. He'd been feeling her concern for more hours than he could count.

The couple with the two children stayed back, as the bell dinged and the elevator doors slid open. A woman pushing a stroller emerged.

He watched the blonde woman he knew he loved go in with the family, punch the elevator button to her floor, then stand there, frowning, as the doors hissed closed, over the lot of them.

Tilting his head upward, he sensed her progress, inside the narrow box she now rode in. Second floor. Third. Fifth. She was going a long way up.

Sighing, Vincent knew he had at least one more arduous climb in store.

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## *Chapter Two*

## *Binding*



Vincent sat on one of Catherine's dining room chairs, head down, his tangled hair falling forward in dirty, lusterless streaks, on either side of his face. The hair was matted, in spots, and filthy, everywhere. In that, it was much like the rest of him.

His once-white top shirt was a torn, grime-streaked disaster, and the thermal one he usually wore beneath it, nonexistent. His vest was gone, the shirt was blood-spotted on the back, stained on the side, and his pants were heavily soiled. The remains of a green muslin sheet he'd scrounged had been torn into strips and used to bind an injury to his left side, and it was dark with dried blood, from just beneath the curve of his rib cage to around near his back. He was breathing open mouthed, as he tried to gather strength.

"Water." She barely made out the words from his torn lips. "Clean... water... Please."

Catherine wasn't sure if he could stand for the trip to the sink, but sure he needed what he asked for, she raced into the kitchen. It surprised her that he followed. It surprised her that he could.



"I'll bring it to you," she told him, as he leaned his weight back on a kitchen stool. Her pupils were dilated with excitement and concern, and her movements were quick and jerky, as she opened a cabinet door and yanked out a drinking glass.

She turned on the tap, but before she could put a glass under the faucet, his hands were there, cupping, drinking, and cupping again. He held the water to his dirt-streaked face, washing a cut over his cheekbone, then drank some more.

"Slow. Slow down. You'll get stomach cramps," she fretted, wanting to place her hands on his back, and not knowing where to do so, thanks to his various wounds. He was injured. Everywhere. He'd been missing for over a week.

He gulped, even as he knew she was right, and barely cared. *Water. Clean water.* The simplest things were like a godsend, right now.

It had not rained in days, and he couldn't risk stepping into the light to try to steal something to drink. The only hose he'd found had been clamped down, no way to turn the faucet without a wrench. The dumpsters had been better at feeding him than keeping him hydrated. Stray puddles in the alleyways had contained gas or oil, mixed with whatever water they might have had.

He filled his clawed hands with the flowing water from her faucet, and splashed his face again. He lifted his head, then let the furred fingers thread through the tangled disaster that was his hair, at the temples. *Breathe. Just Breathe. Safe. Water. Thank you. Thank you, for water.*

It would be impossible to say that washing his face made him feel human, since he clearly wasn't that. But it did make him felt better - even though his stomach did indeed begin to cramp.

"Vincent, do you even know where you are?" she asked. She'd already ascertained he was missing huge chunks of his memory.

*Vincent. My name is Vincent. Well, that's settled, at least.*

He gave a scant look to the kitchen. "Your apartment, I presume." He drank a little more; slower, this time.

She nodded, as he rinsed the back of his grimy neck with a wet handful of tap water.

"Do you remember ever being here, before?" she asked, handing him a dish towel.

He didn't want to shake his head, thanks to a spike of pain that persisted near his right temple. He had a headache. One that had grown worse as he'd become more dehydrated. He gave her his voice, which sounded better for having drunk the water.

"I remember nothing. I didn't even know my name was 'Vincent' until I heard you use it. Though yes, it sounds right, to me."

He wiped his neck dry, then set the now dirt-streaked towel down, and resumed washing at the sink. He continued to rinse his arms under the flow of the faucet, wincing when the water hit the raw skin at his wrists. When he was done, he filled the glass she'd tried to offer him, and sipped from it, more slowly, this time.  
*Thank you.*

"Do you know who I am?" she asked. Her green eyes were the color of a stormy sea. A very worried one. Worried and incredibly relieved, at seeing him alive.

*You're the woman I love.* He set down the glass and glanced to an area over her shoulder. "The mail says your name is 'Cathy.'" He indicated her kitchen table. It held a postcard from a woman named Jenny.

There was a worry line between her otherwise smooth brows. Even with that, he thought she was beautiful. Very.

She was trying to take him in all at once, mentally and physically, and she knew it was simply impossible. *One thing at a time. He's safe. He's alive. One thing at a time.*

"Catherine," she corrected gently. "You call me Catherine, always. You've never called me 'Cathy.'" Her eyes went in the direction she'd seen his go, and she realized where he'd gotten the name. Jenny always used the diminutive form of her name.

*My God. You really don't remember anything, do you? What did they do to you?*

Vincent felt her flash of concern. But more, he felt her name, as he repeated it, in his sensitive mind. *Catherine*. He breathed in the word, mentally. Breathed in the gift of it.

*Catherine. Yes. That was right. More than right. It felt... fated, somehow.*

*Catherine... You are... Catherine. Your name... is Catherine.*

The sound of her name was a resonant thing, in his heart. The three syllables moved like a trio of shifting chords. There was low music in them, but so much more. The sound of her name was a deep, precious thing to him. He treasured it.

*Catherine*. The sound reverberated comfortingly in his inner ear, and settled in a place where he'd only just realized it had been missing from. He *felt* her name, rather than just heard it. He felt the sound of it. He'd *been* feeling it, in a way, much the same way as he felt he was in love with her. *Catherine. Not Cathy. Of course. Catherine... Yes, that was right.*

Whether his love for her was requited or no, he knew the sensation that tugged at his heart strings for what it was. *Catherine. I know one deep truth. Only one. I am very much in love with you.*

"Catherine." He rolled the name over lips that were chapped and cracked. His voice sounded almost tentative, as he said it.

"Catherine," he said again, surer, this time. She watched him "feel" her name as he enunciated each syllable.

"Catherine. My Catherine." It was a reverent whisper of sound.



Her smile was wan as she beheld him with her lovely eyes. "I am surely that." She reached out to hold his bicep, and the relief in her eyes was a palpable thing. "And you're my Vincent." He felt the rush of love from her. "You are," she repeated.

*Am I? God. How very ... fortunate. For me.*

His stomach growled. They both heard it. "Catherine... is there something here I could eat?" he asked.

Feeling like a fool for not having offered him something sooner, she pointed to the table and bid him sit on the stool. He was unsteady on his feet, and Catherine realized he was probably starving for something that wasn't dumpster leavings. She shut off the still-running tap water as she tore open her kitchen cabinets.

She began to raid her pantry for everything that could be eaten, immediately. A package of cookies. A box of crackers. A jar of applesauce. Everything she set out on the table, he began devouring. He was dragging oatmeal cookies through the applesauce, as she dug cold chicken out of the refrigerator, leftovers from takeout.

"Careful... go as slowly as you can," she urged, not trying to slow him down for the sake of table manners but for the sake, again, of the discomfort gorging would bring to his midsection.

He nodded, but kept eating, trying to slow down, but only so successfully.

She had no idea when his last meal was. Neither did he, barring what he'd managed to scrounge out of a garbage pail on Broome Street.

"I'll make you some tea. You like tea. You drink it often." She reached for the canister.

"Do I?" He had no idea. But if it was drinkable or edible, he was game. The cookies were half gone. He started in on the chicken.

She refilled his glass of water from the tap, filled the kettle, and set it on the stove.

The minute she turned on the gas burner, he went backward, the kitchen stool clattering to the floor.



*Heat. Fire. No!* He threw himself against the far wall, lips pulled back in an unholy snarl.

"Vincent! Vincent, it's just the stove. It won't hurt you!" she cried out, turning to him. His fangs were completely bared.

"Shut it off!" He barked the words, his posture one of dread, but his face one of fury.

Catherine quickly did as he bid her.

"Easy. Easy!" After she flipped off the burner knob, she held up her hands in a placating posture. He was breathing hard, and staring at the stove.

*Fire. Something about an open flame. Had they... burned him?*

His head shook back and forth, breathing deeply, to pull in oxygen. "No fire! No!"

"Vincent," Catherine was afraid to ask, but she knew she had to, "Did someone... burn you? Hurt you with fire?"

*Burn, yes, but not with an open flame.* He remembered an electrified prod, of some sort. He remembered sweating, in a room that boiled with steaming, oppressive heat; a room where he could get no ease, as he felt the sweat leech his strength away. Electricity burned as a torture, once he was good and wet. But fire itself? No. Not that he could remember.

Yet, there was something about the sight of an open flame. Something that he knew appalled him...

*The insidious voice whispered instructions. "Fire is fear. You hate it. You cannot stand an open flame. Fire is fear. You hate it. You cannot stand an open flame..."*

"I don't ... like it. Keep it ... away, Catherine." He was trying to regain his composure and struggling to do so. He'd knocked over the jar of applesauce, but miraculously, it hadn't broken, just spilled.

"Shhh, it's okay. I won't turn it on." She tried to placate him. She kept her hands up, her tone soft, meant to be a soothing one. "It will be all right. It will." She picked up the stool and looked around her kitchen. "Is it okay if I heat the water in the microwave?"

He looked to where she did. A white box with a numbered dial on it looked wholly unfamiliar. Much like everything else in the room.

"I do not know what is a ...'microwave,'" he stated. He had no idea if that was because he'd never seen one, or like so much else, he had, but he didn't recall it.

She pointed to the small appliance that sat on a kitchen shelf. "This. It warms things, but there's no flame. You won't see a heat source. It cooks it on the inside."

Vincent barely nodded, watching her as her delicate fingers set the knob and pushed a button. In a few minutes, she'd made tea. Laced heavily with sugar, he found he did indeed like it.

He liked her, more.

She was beautiful, and caring, and the part of his life that was not related to her felt... gone. Ripped away, every part pulled clean out of his mind, out of his memory.

Other than what he felt for her, he felt ... blank inside, for lack of a better word. He had no memories to draw from, for his life. Not even memories of her, or of them, together.

Yet, she felt like the only "alive" thing he knew. Possibly because she was. He realized he missed the touch of her hand on his bicep, then dismissed the feeling. She couldn't keep her hands on him all the time, after all.

His stomach felt full, but tight. She'd been right about the need to eat slowly. He'd gulped most of the water and wolfed down the food, and now he was uncomfortable. He stood from the stool because it helped with the pain in his stomach. When that made him tired, he leaned his weight back against the small table, as much as he could. She was talking about how long he'd been missing, and fixing him more tea. He knew he wouldn't drink it.

He inhaled deeply, as the quickly-taken-in meal did its work. Second wind. Third wind, thanks to the adrenaline shot from seeing the flame from her stove. It didn't matter what wind. He stunk, and he knew it, even without breathing deeply.

It had been hard to catch any sleep under the best of circumstances, but he knew harsh smells kept him awake. Nothing smelled harsher than he did, right now. And he knew he needed to clean at least some of his wounds.

"Catherine... is there a place I could wash? I could use the sink..."

But he needed something larger than that. Much larger. They both knew it.

That bathing was a request of his, considering how tired he was, told her all it needed to. "I can show you to my bathroom. There's a large shower in there."

He nodded, letting her lead the way.

"Vincent, as soon as we get you clean, let you rest ... we'll get you Below, I promise."

He eyed her warily. "Below" was like more of where he'd escaped from. A dark, close space. Air either too hot or too cold. Confined, with no way to move, freely.

"Why would I want to go... below? Below what?" he asked.

She hesitated, shocked at the question, but still processing how complete his memory loss was. "There's a system of tunnels beneath the city. It's where you live. Your home is there," she said, as she indicated the open door to her bathroom.

"No," he answered shortly, stepping in ahead of her. She followed, though he took up a good bit of the available floor space.

He looked around. There were white tile walls and a medicine chest mirror. A huge shower stall, and a bathtub that looked too small for him. Chrome and frosted glass shower doors, a separate sink, and hamper. He liked the light color of it all. He did not like that it was windowless. It felt like it would be easy to become trapped, in such a room.

"Was this place familiar to me?" he asked. The faucet fixture looked different than the sink in her kitchen. Two knobs marked "H" and "C" sat gleaming in silver chrome. *Chrome. Something about metal. But not silver. Gold...*

His head ached, and trying to remember made it worse. He gave it up, for now.

Catherine stepped carefully around him to show him how the shower faucet worked. "No, it's not familiar. You've never been in this room, I don't think."

He nodded his understanding, then turned up the water, imitating her movements. The controls seemed simple enough. The increased spray caught the shredded sleeve of his shirt. A wealth of cuts and bruises peeked out, beneath its tatters.

"Vincent, who did this to you? Do you know?" she asked. Steam rose from the spray.

Vincent shrugged. If he ever did know, he no longer remembered a name. But for this recent event, he did have a memory. A very chilling one: "A thin man," he recalled. "Tall, with a beard. His face is scarred. He wore a mask to half-cover it."



Again, the image of the gleaming chrome fixtures jogged a certain mental picture into focus. "The mask... it was made of metal. Bronze. Or gold, perhaps. The light was dim. It was hard to tell which."

Catherine's face went utterly pale, as her form became completely still. "No." She could barely say the word.

He knew something he'd just said had shocked her. Inside the bond, he felt her stunned amazement. It was the sensation of being almost slapped, mentally. *No!* He sensed the word from her, heard it, felt her recoil, then draw herself up, even as he watched her do it all.

"No. That... that is not possible." Her voice nearly shook. "The man you're describing... he's dead."

Vincent wasn't indifferent to her reaction, but he was indifferent to her pronouncement, not because he didn't feel her stunned surprise, but because he disagreed with her verdict. "Apparently not," he returned, checking the water temperature with his fingers. Steam began to rise.

He wrestled with divesting himself of the remnants of his shirt, but the dried blood on his side was making removing it, and the makeshift bandage, problematic at best.

Catherine's hand reached up to slow his efforts, not willing to let his declaration go. "No, Vincent, I mean it. Paracelsus is dead. You killed him yourself. His... his body is buried in the catacombs, next to his wife, Anna."

Vincent exhaled tiredly, too weary to care about names, at this point.

"Then I was held by a ghost. With a taste for pain and suffering. Catherine, please..."

He yanked at a mangled sleeve that gave way at what remained of the seam. It came off. He gingerly pulled it down so it didn't make contact with his injured wrist.

When the cloth cleared his arm, Catherine could see why he was careful. There were bruises on his huge biceps, pressure bands of damage caused by secure

restraints. *The hair on his arms is probably hiding more cuts and scrapes*, she reasoned, trying not to stare.

The skin at his wrist was raw, and abraded. A wide strip of torn skin encircled it. *Handcuffs? No. Too wide. Manacles.* She'd spent too much time in law enforcement not to know what that looked like. And as impressively powerful as his hirsute bare arm was, she knew they had more important things to deal with, right now. *Paracelsus. It can't be. It can't. Can it?*

Catherine fought to hold down a sense of panic, at Vincent's completely unexpected revelation. Vincent felt it, as it flowed through her.

"If it's Paracelsus, he knows where I live," she said. Her pupils were blowing wider, and he could taste her fear. It was flooding her tiny system, and left a bitter flavor, under his tongue.

Her hands went to his side, to help him with the torn cloth that was serving as a bandage, there.

"But it can't be Paracelsus!" she insisted, trying to assist as he unbound the cloth. It was coming. Slowly.

"We're... we're not safe, here," she declared, as her fingers searched for where the next strip of cloth started.

He could feel the depth of her concern, and it had what he could almost describe as a "remembered" flavor, for her. This obviously wasn't the first time she'd been afraid of this man. Vincent took that information in and processed it, fighting the fatigue of his pushed-to-the-limit brain. He could sense that she was very afraid of the man who had hurt him. *Had he... hurt her, as well?*

She was nervous, and trying to be careful, as she fought with the makeshift covering at his side. Dried blood held it fast, in spots.

"Or at least, we're not as safe as I'd like you to be." She tried to ameliorate her prior statement, and bank what she was feeling. She didn't want him to be afraid because she was.

*You're fighting down fear.* He felt that, as well.

"The longer we stay here, the more vulnerable you might be. I was taken right off my balcony, once." She was honest with him, as she tried to help him uncover his torso, sending fearful glances toward the bathroom door.

He stopped her hands from trying to tend his side, and she looked up at him, as he did so.

"Someone took you? Hurt you? Because of me?" He touched a questing finger to the fall of her hair over her cheek. "Was it where you got this?" he indicated her scar, and his expression changed. He had a look in his eyes that could only be described as vengeful.

"No." She shook her fair head. "That was... something before. A different time, Paracelsus took me to use as bait, to draw you. You saved me. The man who... maybe did this to you, Vincent... he's very evil."

He felt her struggle some more, internally. It was like she was wrestling with something completely unbelievable.

"But it's... he's dead. I *know* he's dead. It doesn't make *sense*." Her eyes looked hopelessly confused, as her hands went back to the chore of trying help him unwrap his injured side.

*Her mind and her feelings... they're at war with each other.* It was an incredible sensation, in his sensitive mind, as what Catherine felt and what she knew did battle, within her.

Vincent felt her confusion as he also resumed trying to remove the rest of the soiled shirt, getting rid of the filthy scraps of fabric that kept him covered. He ripped at the cloth of the other shirt sleeve, and it gave way at a rent elbow. He pushed it gingerly down, again avoiding contact with his wrist. He continued divesting himself of the troublesome fabric, until he realized her eyes were still moving toward the bathroom door, the living room, and the space beyond.

*She's terrified. Fighting it, and... terrified.* Whatever was going on in Catherine's mind, he could feel the fear, winning.

That could not stand. Moving around her, Vincent exited the bathroom and crossed her living room to check the balcony doors and make sure they were locked. Then he did the same with the balcony doors in the bedroom, and the locks on her living room door.

*She has a deadbolt. Good.*

She followed him as he shot the bolt on the lock, then set the chain.

"If anything comes through those doors to hurt you, I will kill it," he stated with supreme directness.

Catherine stopped and stared, knowing she'd never heard Vincent use the word "kill" that way, as if it were an oath, between them.

"Vincent..."

He was very direct. "I do not think I can go to this... Below, Catherine. If my being here endangers you, however..."

She shook her head. He liked the way her hair moved. He did not like the worry he saw in her beautiful green eyes. There were storms in them.

"Vincent, it's not me, it's you. This is a very dangerous man."

Vincent swayed on his feet, again, and leaned against the locked living room door.

"Catherine...", his voice became a whisper. "I am near the end of my strength. I am filthy, and cannot sleep smelling of... offal. Please, just let me wash. I will leave after that, if you wish. This is the safest I have been in days, no matter what you feel about the dangers."

That much she understood.

She could be just as direct as he was. "You're not going anywhere." Those same, worried eyes were firm with conviction. Reaching for his hand, she took him back into the bathroom. "Not anywhere," she repeated for emphasis. "You have to swear. You've been missing for days on end, and I..." she swallowed down remembered fear, as it fought with the newly rising one. "You can't leave me. No

matter what. Whatever this is, we'll face it together." The green eyes were pleading.

"I swear." It was the easiest promise he'd ever given. And, as far as he knew, the only one.

*She's strong, yet tender-hearted.* On some level, he knew it, even without a memory of her. Knowing that, he was sorry for what he knew she was about to see, as they returned to the bathroom.

The remains of his shirt had been split up the back, the waist-wrapping bandage keeping much of his torso hidden. The blood made the fabric stiff, and it stuck to his skin in more than one place. The stiffness made it hard to continue unwrapping it, and the blood stain was larger, the closer they got to his skin.

"Do you have the strength to stand inside the stall?" she asked, adjusting the head of the shower so that it aimed higher. He was taller than she was.

*By a good bit,* he realized. An utterly stray thought flitted across his consciousness, even in his distress. *I wonder if the difference in our height makes it awkward, when we kiss?*

He snapped himself back to present concerns, longing to immerse himself in the warm, clean water.

"To get clean again... anything," Vincent answered, wanting the warm spray more than he wanted anything else. His bare feet ached on the hard tile, and his body was beyond fatigued.

She saw him sway, again. "Careful," she warned.

Looking down and to the side was doing nothing good for his balance, as he tried to tear at strips of the ruined bandage, with his nails.

"Blood has stuck the cloth to my skin, and my strength... fails me. Will you help me stand under the water?" he asked.

She was surprised, but pushed the thought aside. Normally, Vincent wouldn't ask her to do any such thing with him. But the circumstances were far from normal, and he was gravely hurt.

"Of course I will. Just... we need to get the rest of this ... bandage undone, and the remains of your shirt off you. I'm right here," she reassured him, both of them stepping into her shower stall fully clothed.

Warm water soaked his clothes and relaxed his aching muscles. He groaned with relief and leaned against the wall. Catherine turned down the spray so it wouldn't hit him so hard, and adjusted the temperature to something close to tepid. His skin looked raw, in spots. And... burned, near his shoulder blade, partially visible through the rent shirt. Catherine tried not to stare.

"God, that feels so good," he said, still leaning against the tile as the water simply ran over him. In a few minutes, his shredded clothing and the bloody bandage were sodden. He turned around, and Catherine saw that the remains of the shirt were molded to his skin. The soiled fabric was hanging from his broad shoulders, delineating a massively solid chest. He put his head under the spray, and groaned again; in comfort, not pain.

The soaking allowed the remains of the makeshift bandage and destroyed shirt to peel away from his skin without causing any more damage, though what Catherine saw made her stomach clench. As the formerly white muslin shirt took on the water, and molded itself to his skin, she could see parts of his torso through the sodden tears. Blonde chest hair darkened and laid flat, as the water continued to soak it. Water bore the shirt down, and a formerly hidden collar bone came into view. One with a bruise on it. The remains of the shirt couldn't hide a welt on his less injured side.

He had more hair than other men did, and Catherine expected as much, and expected there were probably some other bruises she couldn't see, because of it.

He turned again, and even the areas of hair on his otherwise magnificent back couldn't completely hide the cuts and bruises, there, either. All were proof that he'd fought hard for his freedom.

*And while they chained him down*, she thought, hating John Pater a little more, even though she knew his being alive was impossible.

*Perhaps for Paracelsus, nothing is impossible*, Catherine thought, swamped by the morass of emotions she was now dealing with.

Vincent tugged the remains of the tattered shirt up and off, and let it simply fall to the tile floor. The strength that was still keeping him on his feet was now obvious, in spite of all the damage he'd taken. He was built for power. His entire torso screamed it. The massively broad shoulders capped a tapering form, one lined with both hair and muscle – and injuries. The sheet he'd used as a bandage still clung to his side, though it was looser.

Catherine bent down and moved the cloth out of the way of his feet, so they wouldn't get tangled in the fabric.

He was taking on the brunt of the water, but they were both still getting wet. Catherine stood and finished unwrapping his side as best she could, as the remains of what used to be a green cotton sheet finally came away, completely.

It was then she saw what was the worst of his injuries: From his side to near the small of his back, above the rise of his left hip, a long, deep gash bled, with the running of the lukewarm water. The white tile was turning pink.

"You're bleeding. Badly," she said, trying to turn him so more of him caught the spray.

"I know." He sighed, over the sound of the water. "I can't get it to stop. When I run, or breathe hard, or even turn a certain way, it opens up again. The best I could do was rip the sheet and bind it." He turned so that his chest was under the spray, so she could see the wound he couldn't, thanks to its position on his body.

"This is deep," she said, trying to see, with water splashing into her eyes. "God, who did this to you?"

"A window, for that one," he replied, turning so that the spray hit the tops of his shoulders.

"You were cut by the glass?"

Vincent nodded. "They held me in a hot, dark room, beneath the ground. Once I pulled free of the shackles, I climbed," he said, not wanting to tell her that he'd killed a guard, to do it.

He paused to lift one arm so he could rinse beneath it. The warm water felt beyond price. "When I found my way up into what looked like a large, empty room, I went out the only window. The glass was thick," he finished, turning, and then leaning on his good side, against the wall.

"Where were you? What part of the city? Do you know?" she asked.

He shook his head, barely. "Near the water. I think. I couldn't see it, but I could smell it. There were... shipping containers."

"That sounds like the warehouse district, near the docks. Maybe," she said, trying to see how bad the deep cut was.

The warm water ran down his long frame, as Catherine continued to inspect his injuries. Above the deep gash on his side, there seemed to be a few other cuts, though the hair on his back hid much from her eyes, she knew. Where the hair was thinner, near the top of his shoulders, she could see some bruising. It did nothing to detract from the latent power in his shoulder muscles, but the sight of "more wounds," like everything else, caused her heart to sink.

*You were hurt. They hurt you. The thing I was so afraid of, when we couldn't find you, and they did it.*

He felt her heart's sorrow, and turned, reactively, trying to take the sight of his abused back from her eyes. He rolled his shoulder so that it caught more of the spray, and sighed, as it hit the side of his neck.

In spite of his injuries, Catherine could only stare at a view she'd never before seen. A wealth of wet, silky hair lay flat down his torso, thanks to the force of the water, and it painted his magnificent chest in shades from bronze to golden. His abdomen was as well-muscled as the rest of him, and his body hair thinned, there, as it arched down. There seemed to be less damage to his front. Or perhaps it was just that the hair was thicker on his chest than it was on his back.



Catherine's eyes travelled down the length of the most muscular body and arms she'd ever seen, trying to inspect him for damage without looking like she was. The skin around his left wrist was absolutely raw. The right one, less so. It matched the red lines above his ankles.

Of all the ways Catherine had ever envisioned seeing him half-nude for the first time, this wasn't it. He was battered. Injured. In pain, even. He winced when the water hit the part of his back that had been burned.

And he sighed deeply, as he continued allowing the cleansing shower to work its magic. Very deeply. *Thank you. Just... thank you.*

As the warm water continued to trail down his skin, Catherine felt... *offended* that anyone had abused him in any way. He was clearly strong, and as beautifully formed as she could ever have imagined. The muscles of his abdomen were perfectly delineated, perfectly formed. But that beauty had obviously been ... damaged, for lack of any other word. Maliciously.

*They hurt you. Oh, Vincent. How could they hurt... you?* It seemed impossible to her, even though it clearly hadn't been, for someone else.

Dirt and grime ran in grey rivulets down his hirsute body, and Catherine both longed to touch him and feared she'd somehow hurt him, if she tried.

He winced again as the water sprayed against the burned shoulder blade. The skin there was a light shade of pink. She reached around him and adjusted the shower nozzle a little higher, so it caught him on the upper back, neck and head, more.

"Thank you," he said, grateful for her care, as she stepped back to give him room.

He felt the wave of sorrow she was feeling before she said anything.

"My poor Vincent." Even over the sound of the water, he could hear the distress in her sympathy.

He reached out a hand and caught her neck, pulling her in so he could plant a brief, firm kiss on her forehead.

"I'm better now than I have been for days," he replied, feeling a dumpster's ambience sluice off his skin.

He'd closed his eyes as he kissed her, missing the look of surprise on her face, at the gesture. *You don't kiss my forehead. You kiss the crown of my head. Sometimes*, she thought, wondering at the sensation.

Vincent, eyes still closed, hadn't caught her shocked expression, and was otherwise engaged. *Clean, flowing water. A Godsend. Thank you. Again.* The blue eyes remained closed, and all but refused to open, so great was his pleasure.

"Please tell me there's soap," he asked.

The part of her that felt a little startled by the kiss also felt like an idiot for not offering to help him wash. "Of course there is," she said, grabbing it from a tray, and placing it into his huge palm.

He held it for a long moment, and she realized by his sluggish movements that he was spending his remaining strength, just standing up in her shower.

Taking the bar of soap back, she carefully washed his massive, hirsute chest, his arms, and as much of his back as she dared touch. Her fingers learned his bare skin for the first time, but barely registered what they were telling her. The muscles beneath her hands were hard, and well formed. He was more impressive here than she'd ever imagined. But his arms hung limp, as she worked, and he turned to rinse without being asked to do so, groaning in something like rapture, as he felt the skin come clean.

"Thank you, Catherine." She barely heard him say it.

While she washed the parts of his back she dared to touch, he shampooed his hair as much as he could, until holding his arms up over his head simply left him too depleted. She finished it for him. Though the hair was still tangled, at least it was clean.

"You have no idea how good this feels," he said, letting the wall bear a little more of his weight, as he continued to lean against it.

He remained propped up against the tile, seeming to simply abandon himself to the cleansing spray. The water at their feet was filthy, as it slid down her drain, but then began to run clearer, save for the trickle of blood from his side that had never stopped flowing, once the tattered bandage had come off.

Catherine's blouse and slacks were plastered to her skin. His patched pants hung low, with the weight of the water.

"I'll get the rest," he indicated he would handle washing the remainder of his body, much to her relief. "Is there something I can wear?" he asked.

Catherine turned over control of the soap to him.

"I'll get you something. And be right back. You won't fall?"

Again, he *sensed* her concern just as she gave voice to it.

*Such an odd sensation*, he thought. *Odd and... intimate.*

"I came across the city and climbed your building to get to you. I can stand in your shower, Catherine," he said, tired, but trying to reassure her.

She wanted him out of there. The clear water was still tinged with pink, from his side, and the last thing she needed was for him to fall, in her shower stall.

"Stay leaning against the wall. I'll be right back."

Utterly soaked, Catherine ran to her bedroom, to dig out a change of clothes for him.

She returned to the bathroom to find him right where she'd left him, though he was turning off the taps.

She could tell by the glazed image of her shower door that he'd divested himself of the ruined pants. His wet hair clung to his head and streamed over his shoulders, giving his high cheekbones an even more chiseled, feline appearance. The short, blonde beard on his face was bright gold again, rather than the dirty blonde from the city grime.

He inhaled as deeply as the pain in his side allowed, now grateful that that action no longer caused him to wince from the smell. He felt better. Tired, yes. But better.

"This is an old robe of my Dad's." She held up a thick, dark blue concoction. "And a set of fleece left behind by Nancy's husband. He's not as tall as you, but he's broad shouldered, and they fit him loosely." A black set of fleece joined the robe, over the shower stall door.

Vincent had no idea if he'd ever met either man. But he knew he was about to be grateful for their leavings. Anything to avoid having to put on the torn, sodden mess that was his clothing.

"You need a towel."

He accepted her offer to help, as she cautiously entered the shower with a huge bath sheet, her eyes averted from his now nude form. He took the towel from her as she scooped up his clothes and "bandage," and tossed them in her bathroom sink, to drain.

"Can you get out by yourself?" she asked, watching him wrap himself through the frosted glass. He nodded.

The thick, clean softness of the towel was sheer luxury, against his abused skin.

"I can," he reassured her. He eyed her over the top of the shower stall door.

"You're shaking. Cold."

She was.

"You need to get dry," he said.

She *was* cold, and they both knew it. Her wet clothing was beyond stuck to her skin and Catherine realized she'd forgotten to turn on the heat before they'd piled into the shower, together.

"We need to get the bleeding to stop." She replied, concerned about the gash.

"We'll wrap it. Go, Catherine," he ordered.

"Come sit in the chair at the dining table. I'm afraid you'll fall, in here," she fretted.

Her hair was as wet as his was, her face long free of any makeup. Her blondish hair looked darker, and it was stuck to her skin. The scar over her ear was more obvious, like this, and something about her looked so young, so vulnerable, he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and hold her, until she felt better.

*If only I had the strength*, he thought ruefully.

He'd turned up the temperature of the water while he'd finished bathing, and its heat had caused his abused muscles to grow lax.

*Later. I'll hold you later*, he promised himself, trading the towel for the robe, as he stepped out of her shower.

He allowed himself to be led to the chair, at least satisfied that she'd grabbed a towel for herself, on the way out of the bathroom. He gingerly eased his way into the fleece pants as she went into her bedroom to throw on dry clothes. The soft cloth felt like a kind god's blessing, though the pants rode up his calves. There was a cut on the left one of those, but it was scabbed over. He had no idea where he'd even gotten it.

He sat back in the dining room chair he'd used before, sighing gratefully at the sensation of being allowed to take his weight off his feet, again.

Shirtless, and with the robe open, he was trying to use the towel to stop the bleeding from the deep cut that ran from his side around to his back. Catherine emerged from her bedroom and crossed to him, immediately.

She had dived into the first thing her hand had hit, a pair of butter soft jeans and a loose grey sweatshirt. Vincent realized that the former clung to her feminine shape as much as the latter obscured it.

She'd dried off haphazardly, the towel still around her neck, and he knew she wore no bra beneath the shirt, which was emblazoned with the word "Columbia." The subtle change in her shape registered instinctively, in his brain.

Her eyes went straight to the wound he was trying to tend. "Let me see," she demanded.

"It's just a deep gash. If I could just lay still for just a few hours..."

Catherine took the towel away. It *was* a deep gash. And it was several inches long. She folded the towel into a square. "Can you hold this against it? Or lean back?"

Vincent nodded, then realized something.

"My feet are bleeding, again. On your carpet."

They were, spottily, and if he thought she gave a damn for the rug, he was crazy. He took the towel she still had around her neck and put his hair covered feet on it.

"They'll stop," he reassured her, knowing they would. They had, before. He resumed trying to tend the injury to his side.

"We're getting you a doctor. For your back, and side. For everything." She reached for the nearby phone.

"No!" he barked, snatching the receiver from her grasp. Its buzzing sound was an alien tone, to his ear. "I want no one! No one but you!" His tone was adamant, and she could see worry, fear even, in his blue eyes, as the dark pupil began to widen.

*Fear reflex*, she thought.

Considering what he'd been through, she knew she couldn't blame him for his reaction. But she also knew she needed help. She wasn't a doctor. And she wanted one for him, right now. Badly.

"Vincent, please." There was worry again, in her green eyes. "I know you don't remember anyone, but I swear on my life you knew this man, and he was a friend to you, and to me. He's known me since the day I was born. I'm frightened. You're badly hurt and I... all of this...it's more than I can treat with Band-Aids and rubbing alcohol."

She *was* frightened, and again, he felt it. She had been frightened, for days. Her anxiety had spiked at the name "Paracelsus," and seeing him now wasn't calming her nerves, any. He knew she was telling the truth about her concern for his injuries.

He knew that the deep cut that began on his side and extended around to his back would slow, but not stop, bleeding. He was fully aware that it was robbing him of strength. The burn mark on his shoulder blade stung like hell, thanks to the shower, and now the robe, and he knew the coming adrenaline crash was going to leave him muscle sore, and kittenishly weak. He'd been living on garbage can leftovers and sheer willpower for days. He'd had no decent sleep since he couldn't remember when, and less comfort.

*But... she was frightened.* He felt it as if the emotion were his own, in his mind. Fear was crawling through her, even as she was trying to bank it. He could sense it, just like he'd sensed much else about her.

"I take it you aren't a doctor," he replied, still holding the phone.

He tried to tease, even with gallows humor, but he could tell by the look on her face that the jest had been a failure. She looked shocked by the statement. As if everything he didn't remember had to keep asserting itself, in her awareness.

*Yes. I really don't know. I know nothing about you at all,* he thought. It was a sorry truth. The open phone line continued to buzz.

"I'm a lawyer," she answered. "And there are some law professors who'd tell you I'm not even a very good one of those."

She continued to face him, as she explained. "Your father *is* a doctor. But he doesn't have a phone. So I want to call —"

"I have a father?" His tone was incredulous. Her telephone was a forgotten thing, in his hand.

She shook her head, realizing that once again, they were dealing with his loss of memory. "No, not like that... I mean, he doesn't look like you. I don't know who your real father is..." She hastened to explain what was all but unexplainable. She

knew he was following her every word. "You were found... abandoned, outside St. Vincent's hospital. The man who tended you... you call him 'Father.' He's a doctor. His real name is Jacob Wells."

None of the information penetrated his memory, and he told her as much. "I remember none of this."

The dial tone changed to a kind of beeping, indicating that the receiver had been left too long with the connection open. He eyed it, warily.

"Please, Vincent." Her green eyes were pleading. "Please."

*Have I ever denied those eyes anything?* He wondered. *I don't see how I could.*

"All right," he gave back control of the phone. "But you'll... stay near?" It was a child's vulnerable plea, issued from a bleeding giant. One who was afraid he was going to have to fight himself clear of one more thing, one more situation, before the night was over.

She pushed back his damp hair and returned the kiss to the forehead she'd got in the shower. He adored the sensation. Her voice, when it came, was full of both her concern, and her conviction.

"You've been missing for over a week, and I've been terrified for every second of it. I swear I won't leave you alone for a minute. Not for anything. I promise." She waited until he nodded, to toggle the phone and start punching in Peter Alcott's number. Vincent's sensitive ears heard the connection being made.

"Peter, it's Cathy. He's here. Right now. And he's hurt. Deep cuts, mostly, a bad one on his side. Abrasions on his wrists and ankles. A burn mark on his back, please just... just get here fast, okay?... Yes, he's conscious. But there's more. Hurry."

Vincent heard the phone click dead on the other end before she even returned the strange machine to its cradle. He didn't remember ever using such a thing, but right now, he didn't remember much of anything else, either.

"You should probably lie down. Let me tend your feet, at least." Catherine moved toward the bedroom.



He probably should. But at the moment, his stomach began growling with a vengeance. He was hungry, again.

"I will. But before I do, is there more food? I... I know I ate before. But I swear I don't remember my last decent meal."

"Stay on the chair. I'll bring it."

She brought out the remaining cookies, then opened a can of peaches for him and dumped it into a bowl, figuring the sugar in the syrup would do him good, if nothing else did. Then she fetched a roll of gauze, for his feet.

He started in on the fruit, feeling the sugar hit his system. Fourth wind. Or more. He knew that in reality, he'd lost track of the number. Making his way to her had been... exhausting, in almost every way.

"Where you were held... Can you tell me anything more?" she asked as she rolled gauze around the arch of his foot.

He shrugged, between bites. "The window I came out of, it wasn't very large. It was ... a metal room. A locked door I couldn't pry open, with my hands."

She stood, and set the remaining roll of gauze aside. "That still sounds like the warehouse district, near the docks. The doors are reinforced to protect the cargo. You say that below... it was hot?" She knew that sounded like Paracelsus' lair. But also that the distance there was likely too great for him to escape from, especially with no memory.

*Unless there's a short cut under the docks. I know there are tunnels, there. Elliot and I walked through them, once.*

He nodded. "When I first woke up... There was a room made of stone. Braziers, and... relentless heat. Then... a different place. I passed out in one room and woke up in another. Hissing steam. A boiler, perhaps. I don't know. My eyes were wrapped, for some of it."

Catherine nodded. "Boilers and steam...That sounds like the area near the shipyard. And for heat... I don't want to even get into where that sounds like," she

said, remembering Paracelsus' domain. John had been a cold man. He'd liked to stay near warm places.

And even knowing that, Catherine struggled to not pursue that line of thinking. *It sounds like they took him from the tunnels down to where Paracelsus lived... then moved him to the docks. Why? Why not just kill him, from the first? They had ample opportunity. Was someone planning on... selling him? Putting him on a ship?*

Catherine couldn't discount that possibility.

Vincent gingerly lifted his feet to set them on a clean place, on the towel. *At least I'm now clean*, he consoled himself, taking that as no small virtue. *And I'm fed, and for now, safe. And you. Beautiful you. You're my salvation.* His blue eyes wouldn't leave her.

Catherine remained near him, and kept one careful hand on an uninjured section of his huge shoulder. He liked it there, on instinct. *Stay near me. I love you. Your hand on me feels... so good.*

The peaches tasted wonderful, and he drank all the nectar. Untainted by garbage, blowflies, or the decay those indicated, it tasted like a gift fit for a sultan. *Thank you. Just... thank you.*

Just as he finished it all, Peter Alcott knocked on Catherine's door.

~~

## *Chapter Three*

### *Her Hands*



Nothing about the grey-haired, fairly dapper-looking, composed, gentleman seemed familiar to Vincent, but by now, that was the norm.

He looked kind, and Catherine seemed as if she trusted him, completely. The feelings Vincent sensed through her were all good ones. That was enough.

They removed everything from her small dinette table, making room for Peter's medical bag and equipment. Vincent removed the robe, and Peter inspected the gash on Vincent's side with a medical professional's calm, as he painted it with iodine. He brought a table lamp over and adjusted the shade so that it aimed the light toward the wound.

"That's far more than just a deep cut. We're going to have to close it," Peter said, confirming what they all thought, already. "This is nothing I haven't done for you before, Vincent," the doctor reassured him. "You can barely see it for the hair, but there's a scar on your elbow you got jumping off the rocks at the Great Falls, with Devin. I gave you that one, too."

Peter prepared what he would need, and Vincent sensed him empathically, as he watched. Though Vincent's sense of Peter wasn't nearly as deep as it was of Catherine, he could discern the older man's sense of his own capabilities. He knew what it was he was about. Peter was steady and reassuring, as part of his profession. He projected competence.

Vincent also knew that on the inside, Peter was agitated, just as Catherine had been. Agitated, but controlling it; a lifetime of dealing with crises had taught him well.

Vincent turned his arm to see if he could find the mark the old man spoke of. He was right. The thin line of an old scar was there, hidden by his wealth of body hair.

Vincent knew nothing of the Great Falls. Or anyone named Devin. But he knew he didn't like the stainless steel scissors, the curved suturing needle, or anything else Peter Alcott was removing from his bag. The orange iodine smelled bitter. Vincent didn't like that, either.

*Bear it*, he willed himself.

It turned out to be a thing much easier thought than done.

The instant the needle touched his skin, impressions of how he'd spent the last week flooded his mind, all fighting for dominance.

*He'd been poked, repeatedly, by something sinister and sharp, perhaps a needle, or the tip of a long pin. The man in the golden mask had been like an evil child having a bit of sadistic play. The wounds weren't deep, nor were they even readily apparent, given their nature, and the wealth of hair that covered him. But the series of pin pricks had been painful, and had sensitized the skin, prior to other abuse. Vincent suddenly remembered the sight of a needle being held as a threat, near his eye.*

*"Such beautiful eyes. Should we take them?"* It was a hiss of remembered, whispered sound, in Vincent's ear.

"Here we go," Peter warned, putting in the first stitch.

Vincent's negative reaction was immediate, and it wasn't a growl. It was a full-throated snarl, near to a scream.

He swung his arms and turned with the sound, knocking the lamp to the floor. When he glared at Peter Alcott, his fangs were bared, his arm was raised, and his hand was poised, clearly in a position to strike.

The still-on lamp illuminated features that were decidedly beastly. *His claws look... extended, somehow*, was all Catherine could think, realizing she'd rarely seen him in fighting mode this close, and when the lighting was this bright.

Peter knocked over a bottle of antiseptic he'd been using, in his haste to back away and create distance, between them.

"Vincent!" Peter's tone was sharp, but astonishingly, the snarling, spitting creature before him remained just that, furious, and content with his own rage.

Since childhood, Vincent had shown an extreme tolerance for pain. His reaction to narcotics made anesthetic all but impossible, but fortunately, he'd usually managed any discomfort with admirable aplomb. Aside from the stitches Peter had administered to his elbow, he'd set a fractured fibula once, in Vincent's adolescence, and along with Jacob, had witnessed or tended cuts and sprains too numerous to count.

He now realized that treating a memory-less Vincent the same way he always had was a terrible mistake.

Peter kept backing up, but Vincent advanced on him, the look of the big beast's killing self, in his blue eyes. Catherine was horrified.

Peter's legs hit the back of one of her chairs. "Cathy..." He was about to tell her to run. Get clear of what was possibly about to become a bloodbath. They'd miscalculated. Peter knew the sting of the needle would hurt. He just didn't think it would cost him his life.

"Vincent, no!" Catherine shouted, stepping between the two males, one of whom thought he might be about to die, the other one sure that was correct.

"No! Vincent, no. Please, don't!" She willed her voice to sound firm, but not panicked. And she said it authority, as she laid her hand on his arm.

In the swirling, snapping, red mist of his rage, Vincent felt her. Again. *There she was. There.* Her hand was on his arm. Her small, delicate hand. The strange link that was always there between them was pushing its way through to him, somehow. Emotions from *her* warred with the feelings raging inside of *him*.

Hers was the stronger force.

*Catherine. Catherine.* Even in her upset, he sensed her will, and her strength. She was the calming pool; the anchoring tie. *My Catherine.* He thought the words, even as he felt them, again.

The red mist lessened, and the screaming beast inside him sought her, and gentled. He looked at her face and became lost in eyes that were so grey-green, he didn't know the name of the color. He only knew they belonged to the woman he loved, and to his sense of his own, best inner self. Her eyes belonged to him as much his as his own vivid blue ones did.

*Calm. Peace. Return to me.* The message was clear.

She wasn't actually speaking, or even necessarily thinking it, in those words. Yet Vincent could have sworn he heard it, and felt the message instinctively, inside his incredibly sensitive mind. He could also swear she'd done this before, though he had no memory of the event. Something about this was almost... familiar, if he could use that term. It felt right.

The gentling sensations came at him in waves, negating the wild savage that beat at his brain. The red mist cleared. The grey-green color he had no name for took its place.

*"Love. It was love."*

Words he didn't even remember ever hearing quelled the instinctive warrior inside of him. He could feel them from her. *Feel* them... enveloping him, drawing him back to himself.

*"It was love."* Something in him knew it was the first time she'd ever said the word to him, that way.

Slowly, he lowered his arm, keeping his eyes trained on Catherine, as he did so.

*I'm here. I'm here. Stay with me.* She barely blinked. Again, no words were said aloud. But he knew he felt them, and followed them. *I'm here. I'm with you, Vincent.*

Breathing in deeply, he collected himself, and looked nowhere but at her. After a moment, he glanced back over toward a rather pale Peter Alcott.

Speech, not a thing Vincent could use when he was his wild self, returned.

*"Damn you! Stay away from me!"* he swore at Peter. The silk thread and a curved suturing needle still dangled from his side.

Peter took him in. *Damn you? Had Vincent ever sworn, before?* Peter knew it was an odd thought to have, considering what had just happened. And he could tell by the look in Catherine's eyes that she was thinking something similar.

She spoke up, maintaining the calm tone in her voice, staying close. "It's all right. I promise you it's all right. Peter is one of your oldest friends." Catherine looked between the two men. "I swear he means you no harm." Her words belied her concern. She kept her hands on Vincent.

That was probably a good thing, all the other things considered, Peter realized. He wasn't sure if Vincent had responded to her voice or her touch, first, but he'd clearly responded to something.

Vincent cut the thread with the surgical scissors Peter had left on the table, and tugged the one stitch the doctor had managed to put into his side back out. The orange strip of iodine could not camouflage that the wound was about to bleed harder, again. Raising his arm had pulled at the torn flesh.

"Stay away from me with needles." Vincent barked shortly, clattering the scissors back onto the dining room table. Catherine could see him inhaling deeply, fighting the adrenaline rush the raging creature within him always caused. He snatched up the stained towel, and reapplied it over the gash.

Peter and Catherine exchanged a wordless look. Vincent caught it.

*Worried. She's worried. She's afraid of me. Or for me.* Vincent could feel it coming off her in torrents, through the strange connection they shared. He could sense a similar kind of disquiet from the old man, too. Vincent's brain took in their emotions, and felt a separate kind of exhaustion, from having to deal with that, on top of everything else.

Peter regained his composure and his professional decorum. He picked up the needle from the carpet and sterilized it, again.

"Vincent, I vow to you I wouldn't be trying to do this if I didn't think it was strictly necessary. I promise I'll work as quickly as I can, and put in only as many stitches as are absolutely needed."

Catherine shot the man who'd delivered her a look. *You're still considering going through with this, after that?* Her expression conveyed her doubt.

"You're sure just bandaging it won't do it, Peter?" Catherine asked, her eyes worried for them both.

Even Vincent knew it wouldn't. It was far more than a bad cut. A surgeon would hardly have cut him deeper.

"If it was his arm, I'd wrap it tight and let him carry a scar. Keep it absolutely still, until it scabbed over. But the wound is over his ribs. He can't not breathe, Cathy," Peter replied. "And every time he does, the wound can't close."

Vincent sighed. "He's not wrong. Every time I breathe deeply, or turn, I bleed. I try to sleep, and can't control my breathing, or how I shift. It's deep, Catherine," Vincent said, blowing out air, and with it, the remnants of his tension.

Catherine knew it had to be bad if he was confessing that stitches were still needed.

"I came through a window, and it didn't break cleanly," he explained to Peter. "There were jagged pieces still tight, inside the frame. The shards were large. I know I caught my side on one as I went out. Then I landed hard, on my feet."



"God," Catherine breathed, realizing what he'd suffered, anew. Now she knew how he'd cut his bare feet, as well. He'd come a long, bloody way, to get to her.

Peter gathered up the things he needed and set them aside.

"Cathy, I have an idea for this. I can't sedate him. And it would take half a dozen men to hold him. But I think you could do it."

"Me?" Catherine asked. Vincent looked equally skeptical.

"Just... put a large towel down, on your bed. Have him kneel on the floor, lay across it, then put his hands in yours. You just hold his hands, or his forearms. I'll work fast." He picked up his bag.

A pair of questioning eyes tracked him. "It's a trick an old nurse taught me, during the war. Sometimes they ran out of anesthesia, near the front lines."

Catherine didn't ask for further explanation. But she couldn't hide her worry.

"Peter, he doesn't know you." Catherine stated the obvious, as she fretted about what might happen when Vincent felt the needle prick his skin, again.

Peter moved his supplies into the bedroom, talking as he went. "No. But he knows you. On some deep level, he does. More than 'knows.' Trusts."

Catherine and Vincent followed him and watched as he set up his tools again, this time careful to keep sharp objects out of Vincent's direct line of sight.

"I don't think he'll hurt you, Cathy. But I do understand if you don't want—"

Vincent's tone indicated he was righteously offended at the suggestion. "I would *never* hurt her. *Never*. I *adore* her. Completely." His declaration rang with conviction, along with his indignation. *I'd die, first*, he thought. Loudly. His expression proclaimed it.

Catherine had never heard him use the word "adore." But she knew she believed he'd never hurt her. She'd always believed it. She fetched a clean bath sheet and laid it across her bed.

"Do you think you can hold still if she has you?" Peter asked. "We've already cleaned the cut. I'd just paint it with iodine again and put the stitches in. I'd be

behind you. You'd feel it, but you wouldn't see the needle, as long as you kept your eyes locked on her."

Vincent took himself to the far side of her bed, his back to the terrace doors. *Will this day, this night, never end?* he thought.

He gave a resigned sigh. "If we are going to attempt this, we should do so now. I can't stop the bleeding and I can't promise anything other than I swear I won't strike her."

"Oh, Vincent," Catherine's voice was full of sympathy.

He reached out to touch her face in what Peter could only call a loving, reassuring gesture.

"It's all right, beautiful Catherine. If you say this man is here to help me, I believe you. I can feel your concern in the link between us. And I can read it in your eyes." He got down on his knees and lay forward across the bed, extending his arms.

"Hold my hands?" he asked, as Peter stepped behind him.

"Of course," Catherine replied, walking to the opposite side of the bed from him. She knelt down.

Vincent stretched across it, his back a mangled thing, crisscrossed with the harsh marks of his treatment, and bloody, from the gash that couldn't heal. He lay his hands trustingly on the bed, beckoning to her with a gesture of his fingers.

She slid her hands in his, and held them.

"I once said these were my hands," she whispered, as Peter readied fresh silk.

"I can't imagine that I would ever disagree with anything you said, beautiful woman." He held her gaze with his, and her eyes swam in azure. His expression of trust was familiar, even though his memories of why he trusted her were gone.

*I swear he's never called her "beautiful woman" out loud, a day in his life, Peter thought. It's just that he doesn't remember that he hasn't.*

Peter went down on one knee, hoping the posture made him seem less threatening. "Let's hope second time's the charm," he stated, letting Vincent know he was about to begin, again.

Vincent nodded. Even though he kept his gaze trained on Catherine's face, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Peter's hand dip. Vincent tensed, as the needle pierced his painted skin. His jaw set, and the muscles in his arm tautened, but he willed his fingers to stay loose, so that he wouldn't scratch Catherine, or hurt her in any way.

The pain was a bearable thing. The instinct to strike, less so. He willed the urge back down.

"Was it... long ago?" Vincent asked through gritted teeth, trying to get her to talk to him, to get him through these moments. He desperately wanted to turn around and swing at Peter. Desperately.

Catherine looked confused. "Was what long ago?" she asked, feeling the tension in him. He could crush her fingers, if he wanted to. Clearly, he didn't want to.

"My hands. When you said... they were... yours," he grunted. Catherine watched Peter pull the silk tight. One down.

She willed a tear back. "No. Not so long."

It was the night he'd told her about the disaster that had been Lisa, but she wouldn't bring that up, now. But she knew he needed the distraction of a story, so she tried to tell him one.

"It... it was late at night. Black, with no moon, I don't think. But you... you like the moon. You once told me you remembered the first time you ever saw it."

Catherine watched Peter's hand dip, again. *Two stitches. How many more to go?* She knew the cut was long.

"Did I?" he asked, tensing his jaw again, against the expected pain to come. *Keep talking to me Beauty. Please.*

"You were very young. You said it was round, and full. Beautiful, I think you said..."

The third stitch went in. Peter was working fast, like he promised he would.

"I think you've been a little in love with it, ever since," she continued.

*Not like I'm in love with you*, he thought. And since Vincent now had almost no "filter" between what he thought and what he said, he gave her the words aloud.

"Not like I'm in love with you," he proclaimed, hissing on an exhale.

Peter lifted his gaze to hers as he pulled the silk tight. *Keep going*, his eyes told her.

She couldn't think of anything more to say about his love for the moon, or any other topic, and she struggled with that, for a moment. She slid her fingers down, so he could comfortably hold her forearms, rather than her hands. He seemed to like that better. His grip was firm near her wrist, but he refused to increase the pressure so that it hurt. Her delicate hands all but rested on his massive forearms, so that she wouldn't touch the abraded skin on his wrists. She felt the jump in his pulse as the forth stitch went in. The powerful muscles under her hands tautened, and bunched.

"Is there a moon out, tonight?" Vincent prompted between clenched teeth. He turned his head, a little, but his back was to her terrace. He couldn't see the night sky.

"This had better be worth it," he said to Peter.

Catherine knew she had to keep his attention on her. "There is. There is a moon."

His gaze came back to hers. She thought she'd lied, and would have to pretend to see it over his shoulder, through the balcony doors.

It astonished her to see that she wasn't actually telling a falsehood.

"It's a crescent moon," she described. "Barely there. A Cheshire cat smile between two buildings. Like the cat is floating in mid-air," she described.

He nodded his understanding, and kept an almost unblinking gaze on her. *Keep talking to me. I need you.* It wasn't the sense of pain. It was the sense of self-preservation he was fighting to keep in check.

"That's... that's from a book," Catherine said, scrambling for conversation. "Alice in Wonderland. Do you remember it?" she asked, praying she was distracting him enough.

"I'm not sure." Sweat popped out on his forehead, and bathed the double crescent shape that marked his upper lip. He didn't elaborate, as he held every muscle tense. Five stitches. Then six.

"Stop," Vincent said, panting slightly. "Move away from me, Doctor. For just a minute."

Peter nodded, and stepped back, leaving the needle hanging.

"Vincent?" Catherine asked.

She felt his arm muscles try to relax. "It's all right." His voice sounded dry, again, like before he'd drunk from her faucet. "I just need... to catch my breath." He swallowed, and the low timbre of his voice sounded more normal, again. "It's hard to stay still when I want to strike him," Vincent explained.

Vincent pulled air in, his pupils dilated from pain, or effort, or both. He was fighting down adrenaline, and not for the first time, that evening.

"Peter, please," Catherine begged for it to be over. "Hasn't he been hurt enough?"

"How bad is the pain?" Peter asked Vincent. "On a scale of one to ten?"

"Three. Maybe four. No more. It's a hard pinch, then I feel the pull of the thread. I just... *don't like it*. My *instinct* is to swing at you for it."

Peter understood. After what Vincent had obviously been through, he wasn't even surprised.

"We're at least half way home. We can do this," Peter encouraged both the people sprawled across Catherine's bed.

Vincent's hands relaxed their grip on Catherine's forearms, and he breathed in again, deeply, then nodded for Peter to continue.

"Tell me about Alice in Wonderland," Vincent instructed Catherine, before Peter could jab him again.

Catherine couldn't keep a tear from falling. "It's about a little girl. Just an ordinary little girl. She's... bored with her ordinary life. And she gets... lost. So lost. In a magical place, where all the rules seem changed, and everything she thought she knew doesn't work, anymore. And she doesn't understand what's happening, at first."

Catherine realized how very much parts of that description applied to herself. She gave his arms a gentle squeeze. *I love you*. It was in every centimeter of her touch.

"But she's found, too," Catherine continued. "And she goes on an amazing adventure, where all the things she thought she knew seem like they're turned upside down."

Seven stitches. Peter's idea was working.

Now, talking seemed easier. "I used to feel like that, sometimes. Back when we first met," she confided. "Back when you first found me. Like Alice, down the rabbit hole. Not sure of anything I'd find."

Vincent nodded again, no longer sure of his ability to speak. His beast wanted to come out. Badly.

Eight.

Her voice was breathy, and he adored the earthy timbre of it. "But you did find me. You did, Vincent. And I swear my life was never the same, since. I love you. I love you so much." The declaration came from the depths of her soul.

*This is so hard. So awful, and so hard*, she thought.

Nine.

He began to growl. It was involuntary, and low, but there.

Peter's voice tried to steady both of them. "Hold on. We're almost done. I swear we're almost done. We have to be," Peter stated. He said it for Vincent's sake, as much as Catherine's.

"Stay with us, Vincent." Peter's voice never lost its steady tone of calm. The growl diminished, and gave way to a man's heaving sigh.

Vincent was sweating, everywhere. Perspiration lined his upper lip, and darkened the blonde arch of his eyebrows, and the hair at his temples. Catherine felt it on his palms as his grip tightened near her wrists, fractionally, then loosened, again.

He willed the savage in him down. "I love you." He ground it out through clenched fangs. "So much. It was all I knew. All I still know. So much."

Ten.

"You're a light... in the darkness." His voice was rough. It was all true. *It's all true.* Which one of them had said that, to the other? He had no idea.

"And I love you," she returned, owning his blue eyes. "You're a blessing in my life. Always."

Eleven.

"You're the salvation of mine," Vincent returned.

Peter worked smoothly. "One more. Just one more, Vincent."

Catherine could have wept from Peter's declaration. Almost as much as she could have wept from Vincent's.

Vincent felt Catherine's relief as he felt the last pinch of the needle. His shoulders were tension-knotted, his chest and arms were wringing wet from the effort to remain still. When Peter cut the thread Vincent dropped his great head forward on the bed, exhaustion overtaking him.

He felt Catherine surge across the space, covering him protectively with her small body, wrapping her arms around his head and neck, making cooing noises in his ear, as Peter put a thick bandage on the wound, then cleaned up.

"I love you," she repeated, into his fur-traced ear. "Always. I love you so very much, Vincent."

"Love you," he returned from beneath her, exhausted. Peter drew away from them, and put the rest of his things away.

*There. I have you. We made it.* She kissed his temple, and tried to send him all her love.

"Can you climb up on the bed? I want you to sleep," she instructed. She felt him nod.

Catherine had the feeling he was spending the last bit of strength he had to obey her. She tossed the soiled bath sheet aside and yanked down the covers, as he crawled beneath them, laying on his good side.

The good doctor watched Catherine tend the man who both was Vincent, yet interestingly, wasn't, in a way. Peter wasn't sure how long ago Vincent had read Alice in Wonderland. But the fact that one of the most literate men Peter knew couldn't really recall the story, concerned the physician in him, deeply.

*It isn't just faces and names he can't remember,* Peter realized. *It goes far deeper than that.*

"I think it's safe to say neither one of us ever wants to do that again," Peter said smoothly, helping cover Vincent to the waist as he checked the large bandage over the stitched wound. "A little more water would be good for him, Cathy. And sleep. Lots of it," Peter proclaimed.

"What about his feet?" she asked

"They're clean and you wrapped the one. Let's leave them for now. Let bedrest help them."

Catherine stepped away to get the water. Vincent's protest was immediate.

"No! Stay near. You promised you would." He reached out from the bed, suddenly. He was going to tear the stitches. Not for anything did Catherine want all of them to endure that, again.



She immediately returned to his side.

"I'll get it," Peter stated. "Then I'll go tell Jacob we've found him, that he's all right... considering. I'd rather he not move around too much for a couple of days. Are you okay with him staying here?"

"Of course. There's no question," Catherine replied. "Peter, I'm just... the man Vincent said did this to him. It was a man with a scarred face. And a... a golden mask."

Peter's face registered his shock, and he froze. "That's impossible."

"I know. That's what I said. I'm afraid he's in danger, here."

Vincent felt that Catherine was talking over his head. It was not a sensation he necessarily cared for.

"It's the tunnels he was taken from. I'd say he's more at risk there than here," Peter reasoned.

"I have no memory. I did not leave the room," Vincent reminded them both, grumpily.

"I *want* him to stay here," Catherine said to Peter. "I was worried sick. Of course I want you to stay," Catherine soothed Vincent, addressing him directly.

Peter nodded his approval. "Good. The gash on his side was the worst of it."

"Yes, but what about his memory?" she asked.

Peter tried to soothe all of them on that score, knowing there was very little to be done for it, one way or the other. "Amnesia is usually temporary. I'd feel better if I knew just what caused it, but for right now, let's just let him get his strength back. One thing at a time."

Vincent stretched his legs out tentatively, on the luxurious mattress. It felt like a heavenly benediction. This time, the sigh was one of comfort.

"Those feet will be tender for a couple of days." Peter opined, telling Vincent nothing he didn't already know.

The man who'd brought Catherine into the world reached into his medical bag. "Keep him off them as much as possible, and wearing good socks, if he needs to walk. He can take antibiotics," Peter fished a small bottle of pills out of the satchel and set them on her nightstand. "But nothing much for pain."

"Just tell me he'll be all right," Catherine begged, stroking back Vincent's hair. His blue eyes were full of gratitude.

"I think he will be. He heals quickly, Cathy. You know that. Now that the bleeding's stopped, he can start to get his strength back," Peter assured them both. "Broth if you wake up in the middle of the night, or soup," he instructed Vincent. "After that, you can have whatever you want."

He brought back the water, and gave Vincent two of the white pills.

Catherine nodded, as did Vincent. Peter thought the huge Beast's head looked out-of-place on Catherine's satiny white pillow. He clutched her hand and placed a loving kiss on its back. And though Peter understood the gesture of affection, he'd rarely seen Vincent indulge in such a thing.

Vincent kept the back of her hand against his cheek, holding it as if he needed it there to keep on living. Peter could see the calming effect it was having on his patient. And the agitation that stayed with Catherine, even as she sat on the bed, next to her love.

"Peter ... it couldn't be Paracelsus. Could it?"

Peter shook his head. "No. It couldn't be John," he said, unequivocally. "John is dead."

"Are we sure?" Catherine couldn't help but have her doubts. The wily old Alchemist had seemed to cheat death, before.

"Cathy... his body is in the catacombs," Peter reasoned.

"But... are we *sure*?" Her expression was growing more concerned, and her mood was affecting Vincent, who began stirring restlessly, on the bed.

"Cather... ine." Vincent's voice was weaker, but her distress was communicating itself to him.

"Calm down, Cathy," Peter whispered. "I'll fill a larger prescription for you for ampicillin and call into your work. You have an antibiotic resistant strain of strep throat. Very contagious, and nasty, but nothing a few days of bedrest can't handle. I'll call Joe Maxwell for you, since you shouldn't talk."

Catherine nodded, and willed herself to calm, seeing Vincent relax, as she did. She leaned closer, and scooted nearer to him, keeping her hand in his. Vincent closed his eyes, and quieted, immediately.

"Thank you, Peter." She rubbed her thumb across the back of Vincent's furred hand.

*I'm here. I'm here, my love.*

Peter set the glass by her bedside. "I'll tell Jacob to post sentries at your basement entrance, and a couple more across the street from your building, and in the park. You still have your gun?"

Catherine nodded toward her nightstand drawer, and tugged it open.

"Right here."

"Keep it close. I don't like this. Any of it. You have a doorman downstairs, but the last time you were taken, it was right off your balcony."

"Erlik. I remember."

Vincent stirred at the mention of the name. He didn't remember it. But he didn't like the sound of it, either.

Peter nodded toward her balcony doors. "If anything sets foot on that balcony, shoot it," Peter instructed, collecting his coat. "I'll send Kanin or Cullen up to --"

"No. No one. No one else." Vincent's voice came from the pillow, and he raised an exhausted head as he forced his eyes to open.

"Vincent..." Peter began in a cajoling voice.

The great head shook again. "You... don't understand. I can *sense* you," he told Peter. "Not like I can sense her, but I can. You're worried, and so is she. Very. I can *feel* it."

Catherine and Peter exchanged looks. A memory-less Vincent wouldn't understand the sense of empathy he normally possessed, and wouldn't be used to coping with that.

"I've felt what seems like half the city in my head, for days. It's... beyond exhausting. I don't *know* anyone else. I don't even know *you*. Just her." He kissed the back of Catherine's hand, again, supplication and love contained in the gesture. "I just want her. I'll protect her. I swear."

"Vincent, you need rest. Not another fight with whoever did this," Catherine insisted. "There are people who love you. Who would protect—"

"No one who held me followed me." He cut her off, uncharacteristically. "I'd have known if they had." His eyes held Catherine's. "Please. Just us. At least for a while. I swear I won't let anything hurt you."

Catherine nodded, unable to refuse him. "If you promise to rest," she bargained. He dropped his head back to the pillow, more than eager to comply with that.

Peter nodded.

"Call me in an hour, if you need to get in touch. By then, the lookouts will be posted. I'll pick up some things for him and drop back by, tomorrow morning."

Catherine nodded. Peter collected the rest of his medical supplies, and let himself out.

Vincent tugged on her hand. "With me. Please?" He pushed aside the blanket, trying to make room for her.

Catherine nodded, and gingerly tucked her legs under the turned down cloth.

"You have no idea how good it feels to be in the same room with you," he said, happy to be alone with her again, and to feel her beside him. More than happy.

*At peace. Whole. Saved.* The words whispered in his brain, and they astonished him. All were things he thought never to be, during his grueling ordeal.

*You are all to me. All,* he thought.

She adjusted the lethal contents of the nightstand drawer and settled back next to him, staying whisper close, her back propped up against the padded headboard. She kept one hand on him, and one near the drawer.

"Love you. Always," he sighed, closing the azure eyes again, so he could finally give his exhausted body over to sleep.

Catherine watched, as he drifted down into a deep, dreamless slumber.

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## *Chapter Four*

### *Someone to Watch Over Me*



Catherine stared at the dark balcony doorway, watching the crescent moon she'd described for Vincent track its way across the sky. The gauzy curtains remained still and undisturbed. Her gun remained near.

Her love remained nearer than that. He'd barely moved, since he'd fallen asleep in her bed.

*You're here. You're safe.* She sent the thought to him as she stood guard over him. She looked down at her sleeping love, swearing the words were true, and to reassure herself that they were just that.

*I was so afraid. For days, she thought. Thank God you found your way to me. Thank God for our bond.*

They would all have to figure out why he had no memory, and when it might return. She wouldn't consider that it wouldn't happen. And they would still have to figure out who had taken him, exactly where he'd been held, and why.

All were considerations for another time. For right now, the sheer relief of knowing he was still alive and would be well again, supplanted all other things, in her mind.

*I love you,* she thought again, and not for the first time, while he slept. Sometimes, she even whispered it, as she sat up, near him.

His hand did not stray far from hers, and his breathing was as deep as the sutured cut in his side would allow.

Vincent knew she stayed near, even in his sleep. *I feel you. I love you.* It was a constant, internal refrain.

He drifted, feeling as if he slept on a cloud. The clean, even mattress was heaven, compared to what he'd been resting on, prior. Sleep. Blissful, quiet, comfortable sleep. It was wonderful. He kept "feeling" her near him, in the firm bed. He reached over and held her wrist, sometimes, or slid his hand down from there to find her delicate fingers. He felt her brush the hair back from his forehead; felt her shift her legs a little, when she'd been in one position too long. He moved his pillow over so that his head was all but in her lap, at one point, then moved back, giving them both room. He stayed turned toward her, the injury to his side allowing no other position, but he also remained there simply for the pleasure of constantly facing her way.

He felt muscles that had been forced to stay tense for days, relax. He felt the benevolent effect of a good mattress, clean sheets, much-needed rest, and of her nearness.

*You are my rock. You are my ... home.* The words felt like the right ones.

He kept his hand on her, keeping her gently “chained” to him, and he winced when he tried to shift over and lay on his back. The warning tingle of pain sent him back to his side, again.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, he laid close beside her, and shifted, slightly. He barely opened his eyes, as he took in her night-drawn form. He was watching her, as she watched the balcony.

She'd turned off the bedside lamp, and the room was cast in blue shadowfall and ambient light. There was a security lamp on the side of her building, and while it lit the area near her balcony, its light didn't reach very far into the room.

Her face was a study in silver, blue, and shadow. Her steady eyes stayed fixed on the balcony doors, her fingers almost idly tracing the area near his temple, brushing at a lock of his hair. She was utterly beautiful.

He already knew he loved her. He laid there, and felt the emotion swell, inside his chest. He knew that beneath the extreme worry and fears she had at the moment, she loved him, as well, and that she did so with a warrior's fierce determination. There was strength in it, and yet, there was also an incredible brush of gentleness in it, as well. He felt that, too.

*Being loved by you... no man could ask for anything more from this world,* he thought.

The deep comfort of that sensation made his still-sleepy muscles relax even more.

A lone tear tracked down her lovely face, as she stared through the gauzy curtains.

"What's this?" he asked in a whisper, reaching up for the thin trail of moisture on her impossibly soft cheek.

She was startled to realize he was awake, though groggy. "I was... so afraid I would never see you, again," she confessed, taking in his drowsy form.

Her confession seemed to rouse him, and he looked at her, then out toward her balcony, then back again. He kept his eyes steadily on her downturned face.

"Out there...The only thing I could feel was you," he whispered. "The only thing I *knew* was you. It's all I still know. I'll always find my way to you, Catherine." He knew it was not a meaningless boast. It was the utter and complete truth of his existence. *I'll always find you. Always be a part of you.*

Her fingertips wandered, and began to trace his bangs, near the hairline. He liked that she kept her nails short, and manicured. He wondered if he'd ever told her that, before. He could feel the slight brush of her fingertips on the sensitive skin of his forehead.

"Thank God you had the bond to help you find me," she whispered back. "Thank God Paracelsus couldn't... rip that away from you." *The way he ripped your skin,* she added mentally.

He knew that she had been afraid for him. Deeply. That she was still afraid for him. But not afraid *of* him, and he was well aware of the difference. He knew others *would* be afraid of him, and perhaps even should be. But she wasn't. *My warrior. I hope I've told you how brave you are.*

As naturally as breathing, he put a hand to the back of her neck, and tugged her lips down, to his.

It was an awkward, upside down kiss. Her lower lip nestled with his, while his riven, upper lip explored a little, tasting. He felt the tension in her back at the awkward angle, and maybe something else. When she rose, she stroked his cheek, lovingly.

"Vincent--"

"You need to sleep," he declared, cutting off whatever she'd been about to say.

"You can't stay up all night, Catherine. And there is no need. We're safe, here.

You've been thinking those words. Been thinking 'you're safe' to me, for hours. I



am. And if I am, so are you."

"Go back to sleep," she deflected. "You need it."

"No more than you do," he argued, though she highly doubted that was true.

"Lie down, Catherine," he urged. "There's no need for this. Peter said he would send friends to keep watch. The doors are locked. I will shield you, if trouble comes."

Catherine took in his words. His first instinct was to protect her, always. Even not remembering anything about her hadn't dispelled that. She felt the fatigue of the day, the fatigue of the past several days, take hold. She was both wired, and tired, but dared not sleep.

"I'll make a pot of coffee. It will be all right," she answered.

Sitting up a little, turning his body carefully, he simply took hold of her ankle and pulled her down the bed. She yelped with surprise.

"Stubborn woman," he accused, tugging her body up against his, once her bottom was in the middle of the mattress. He stayed between her and the balcony doors, nestling himself closer, once he had her approximately where he wanted her.

"Beautiful, stubborn woman," he amended.

He tugged the blanket up over her, and enclosed her body so that it lay in the curve of his. Spooning. It was an intimate position, and it implied that intimacy, not that he was heading in that direction. Just that he was very unselfconscious about the fact that her backside was now settled into the powerful angle created by his bent legs, nestled against his dormant sex.

Catherine almost frowned in confusion, then pushed the feeling away, afraid he would feel her disquiet. This was not the sort of thing "her" Vincent would have done with her. But it was enveloping, and warm, and even as the back of her thighs sensed the power in his, she felt herself giving in to the urge to close her eyes. *Just for a few minutes. Just a few.*

Laying down called her body to slumber, and he could sense it as she stayed next

to him. "That's it," his husky voice encouraged. "You're exhausted. Sleep, Catherine. Just for a while. Close your eyes. Dream, next to me."

A soft rain began to fall, unusual for the middle of the night, but not unheard of. He'd have blessed it, before, as a way to get water, and a way to move through the city, unbothered. Now, he was grateful for shelter, a soft bed, and his woman, warm and beside him.

"The rain will keep anything inside. Of those who were on guard, I left none alive to track me. Sleep, now."

The sentence drew Catherine's attention, and startled her back to wakefulness. Again, there was the almost casual claim that he had killed others. Free of guilt. Free of remorse, or shame. Even though his actions had been completely justified, it was not a thing he'd normally have said.

*Memory must have a powerful influence on such things.* Catherine worried over his declaration.

She felt his head come up, off the pillow. "I startled you, just now." His honeyed voice was near her ear. "I felt it. Can you tell me why?"

*Damn. I have to control what I'm thinking, better. But it's so hard when he's so different. And so hard when he's so... near,* she admitted to herself.

"You're usually not so... dismissive when you have to kill," she whispered.

He seemed to think about that. "They were evil. I'm sorry. I know of no other way to be," he replied softly.

That much was true, at the moment.

"It doesn't matter," she eased his mind. "What matters is that you are here, and that you're safe." She squeezed the arm that still held her midsection.

After a few moments, when he said nothing more, he felt her begin to drift, again. The evening's trials had worn her small body down, and she was in her bed, sheltered and warm.

*Rest.* He tried to send her the impulse through their bond, but wasn't sure if it

worked that way. So far, he was only sure he could read her. It had been the thing that had saved him.

He quieted behind her, knowing if he spoke of other things, she would stay roused. He felt a keen desire to watch her sleep; and an even stronger desire to sleep with her next to him, just like this.

Keeping his arm across her middle, he nuzzled the soft, honeyed fall of her hair. The smell seemed familiar, and wonderful. It spoke of safe places, of a pervasive, quiet kind of joy; of warm and loving times he could not remember.

He felt her begin to drift down. It was a sweet sensation, inside their bond.

*You are such a miracle, to me,* he thought, forgetting the ache in his side and the sting of his back, for moment.

The rain intensified. Anything hunting them would have a hard time of it. They were safe, for now.

"I love you so much," he whispered, even though he knew she could no longer hear him.

He exhaled his exhaustion into her tresses, and followed her down into deep slumber.

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## *Chapter Five*

### *You're Safe Now*



Vincent's eyes opened, slowly. Very. Then, he immediately wished them shut, again.

Everything hurt. From the bottom of his torn feet to the tip of the two nails he'd ripped breaking open a lock on a dumpster, he hurt. The side ached. The shoulder stung like an abomination, especially when he tried to lay on his back. The muscles in his back, arms and legs were unutterably sore. If hair could hurt, he swore his would have. Every bruise, cut, scratch, strain and pulled muscle were making themselves known.

It didn't hurt "more" than it did when he'd been trying to reach her. But it did seem to be doing that in concert. Vincent swore that everything about him ached, right now.

On the other hand, there were several other things to consider, all of them far more pleasant.

The twinge in his side was nothing like the stabbing pain it had been, when he either exerted himself, or tried to draw in a deep breath. Peter Alcott's ministrations were doing their work. His stomach was still full, after yesterday's gorging, and his lips, for the first time, were not parch-cracked and dry. He no longer smelled of city refuse and the constant effort it had taken to reach her. There was a luxurious mattress beneath him, and a clean sheet draped across his midsection.

*Safe. You're safe, now.* He had no memory that the thought was exactly the first thing he'd ever said to Catherine.

She was still nestled beside him, her weight the barest dip in the mattress, compared to his.

He'd spent most of the night on his good side, thanks to the pain across his back. Her pillow was still under his head, as was his crooked arm. The other one was resting lightly across her waist, and she was laying on her back, her face turned a little toward him.

He stared for a long moment at the sleeping, beautiful woman he knew he owed his life to.

Her closed eyes were shadowed, beneath the lashes, and not just from the incredible rigors of last night, but from many of the days before it. Other than that, her fair skin was flawless, save for the scar on her cheek.

*So small. So... delicate.* He wanted to trace a line down her nose to her lush, full lips with a wandering fingertip, but knew he'd wake her, if he did.

Then, she shifted, on the bed, and he felt her begin to rouse.

"Good Morning, Beauty," he said, keeping his voice low. Catherine opened a bleary eye. Light was filtering into the room. She glanced to the nightstand. The drawer that held her gun was still open. The water glass was still on the table, right near the lamp.

She looked back at him. Green eyes filled her awareness. The bedside clock flipped over to 7:30.

"Mmm. Morning. I guess I did fall asleep. I'm sorry."

A blonde eyebrow quirked, slightly. "I wanted you to sleep. It's not as if you had an easy evening, either, lovely Catherine. Or an early one."

He pushed back the sheet, knowing he'd traded the discomfort of sleeping covered with garbage bags for the discomfort of waking with a full bladder.

Vincent swung his legs down, unaware that he audibly groaned as he did so.

Treading gingerly on aching feet, he took himself to her bathroom. When the heavy pile of her carpet traded itself for the cool tile, he didn't know which one to bless more, on his heels. The carpet was lush, and soft; but the even, smooth chill of the tile was a relief to heels that had run over hot pavement and through littered alleyways scattered with tin cans, broken bottles, and other refuse.

Catherine got up almost as he did, snagged the glass off the table, and headed into the kitchen. She tidied the mess there, recapping the jar of applesauce and returned some of the packages to the pantry. Then she changed places with him in the bathroom.

As she looked around the white-tiled room he'd just occupied, she realized that he'd also tried to clean up, some. One of the towels they'd used was dripping on the bar, and his ruined shirt and makeshift bandage were now stuffed into the small trash can. His patched pants hung over the shower frame, dripping themselves dry.

When she came out, he was sitting in the dining room chair he'd used last night. He was still bare-chested, and looked exceedingly... male, for lack of any other word Catherine could think of.

"Peter says we need to keep socks on those feet. I'll get you a pair," she declared.

She did so, and he accepted them. He eyed the white pair of men's athletic socks speculatively. "Were these mine?"

She shook her head, again realizing the depth of what it was he didn't know. No, the socks weren't his. He didn't leave his clothing at her place, ever. *You don't leave any clothes here. There's no reason for you to.*

She decided to simply answer the question at hand. "My dad used to come over, some mornings, and try to get me to go for a run in the park with him. He left a gym bag behind. I have a pair of tennis shoes of his, but I don't think you're the same size."

He nodded, and accepted her charity. The thick cotton felt good on the bottom of his feet.

"Under no circumstances were you to leave that bed," she scolded. "I was going to get up early and make a tray and see if I could tempt you to eat. Then pull the blankets back up and let you sleep some more." She clearly had their morning planned.

"I'd rather be up. At least for a while," he said, rising, and following her back into the kitchen.

He breathed in, deeply and experimentally. *Ow.*

"How are you feeling, this morning?" she asked, putting toast in the toaster. He didn't seem to mind that, the way he did the stove.

"Far better than I was yesterday," he replied, following her movements with interested eyes, as she did mundane things he had no memory of ever seeing. She tugged open the refrigerator door and poured him a glass of orange juice. Then she fiddled with the machine that clearly made coffee, dumping what was still in the carafe in her sink, and running fresh water into it.

The smell of the wet grounds was strong, when the old coffee filter hit her garbage can. It was a familiar smell, in the dumpsters, and his nose wrinkled at it, slightly. He still had a sensitive nose. That, like so much else, was just a fact of his existence. He was learning that, as he learned everything else.

"If you'll give me a few moments, I'll scramble some eggs," she said, referring to using the stove, clearly indicating he might like to leave the room. "Then I'll make a tray and bring it to you, in bed."

He shook his head and rolled his shoulder, experimentally. He'd left the robe in her bedroom, and was still a bare-chested titan, in her kitchen. "I am truly not hungry, yet, Catherine. My stomach is still full from last night."

"Would you like to sit on the sofa? You might be more comfortable, there." She seemed a bit nervous, as if she was trying to put a little distance between them, and he had no real idea why, not understanding how odd the spectacle of him, half-naked and standing in her kitchen, was for her.

"I may be better suited to the kitchen, for the moment," he said, liking being in

the same room with her and having his own reasons for favoring the stool over a chair. "The stool is a place to sit without me having to lean back," he said, not liking the look of ... something that crossed her face when he mentioned his injuries.

She pulled a coffee cup out of a cabinet, as he filed where she kept those. She stared down into its empty white depths as if she didn't quite know what to do with herself, at his information.

The machine that browned bread popped up.

"The toast will be fine, for now," he said, trying to put her at ease.

She nodded, and pulled a crock of margarine out of her refrigerator. Grabbing a plate, she set about slathering the toast full of the spread.

*She's worried. Very.* He could sense it from her, even though her expression said she was trying to maintain her equilibrium. *She's still thinking about last night,* he concluded.

His low voice broke her concentration, not that putting margarine on bread required that.

"Catherine... thank you. For all of this. For ... everything." He said it quietly as she set up their small breakfast on the equally small kitchen table.

She nodded, and he angled the kitchen stool over so he could sit at the table, comfortably.

"So, your memory isn't any better at all?" she verified.

To that, he shook a rueful head. "No. There is nothing more. My shoulder is stiff, and would likely benefit from another visit to your shower. But I know no more than I did, yesterday. Other than the bleeding in my side has finally stopped, and that I ache, just about everywhere."

He reached over and picked up her hand before she could pick up her toast. "And the most amazing woman in New York saved me from a horrible fate, and tended my injuries, that I might become well again." He kissed her fingers, then released



her hand and took a bite of the light breakfast she'd made, just to please her.

Catherine looked down at her own hand. Her fingers were warm, from where he'd brushed the kiss across them. *Another unexpected gesture*, she thought.

Just as the other "unexpected gestures" had done, it made her feel slightly off-balance, and she knew she was filling that sense of nervousness with conversation. "I'm not much of a cook, but I can make sandwiches or something, later ..."

A knock on her door interrupted her offer. They exchanged a look, and Vincent rose, though Catherine wasn't sure if it was to hide or to interpose himself between her and the living room door.

"Cathy, It's Peter," came his voice, through the white wood.

Relieved, she went to the door, nodding to Vincent to at least step near to the louvered doors of her bedroom, just in case. He did so.

She opened up and Peter entered quickly, as Catherine shut the door and flipped the lock behind him. Vincent emerged and stayed near his love. Peter carried his medical bag in one hand, a paper sack, and a battered-looking brown leather valise, in the other. Catherine recognized the latter as Vincent's, though he didn't. Peter had clearly been down to the tunnels. He settled everything on Catherine's dining table as he chatted.

"Jacob is nine kinds of relieved and so is everyone else." He nodded toward Vincent. "I told them you might need some things. Of course, they wouldn't let me go without sending along these." Peter opened the paper sack he'd left on the table and extended it to Vincent. Catherine recognized the aroma, immediately.

"What's this?" Vincent asked.



"Strawberry muffins, courtesy of William." The look on Peter and Catherine's face told Vincent they clearly expected him to have one.

*From desperate to coddled. How life changes in a few hours,* he thought.

"Who is William?" Vincent asked, reaching in to take one. He still wasn't hungry, but it smelled wonderful. He took in half of it in one bite, clearly showing the incisors that could have no other name but "fangs."

Peter exchanged a small glance with Catherine. Among other things, that also wasn't the way Vincent normally ate. He usually picked at the bread, and put it in his mouth, keeping his rather formidable teeth from showing. Catherine's return glance told Peter she registered that also, as Vincent finished the treat off, then reached for another.

It was Peter who answered the question about William. "William is the man who's been making those for you since you were a boy. When you and your brother were naughty, you'd have to go into his kitchen and peel potatoes, for penance."

Vincent shrugged, having no memory of such things. "So in addition to a father, I have a brother?" His brow furrowed, as he wondered what else it was he didn't know about himself.

"Devin. I mentioned him last night." *Though I just realized the name meant absolutely nothing to you.* Peter, too, was realizing how complete and far-reaching Vincent's amnesia was.

"He's your adoptive father's child. Actually, he didn't know that, for a while, as it

turns out," Catherine supplied.

"That sounds ... complicated," Vincent said noncommittally. He bit into the still-warm muffin, wolfing it down. "These are good."

"And how are you feeling, this morning?" Peter asked solicitously.

"Sore. Not really hungry, though these taste good to me. I'm afraid my lovely one and I took in no broth, and simply slept straight through the night," Vincent stated, not catching the exchanged look, but sensing the nervousness in Catherine, again.

*What? What is it?* Vincent thought.

Peter was being watchful, like the physician he'd been trained to be. '*My lovely one?*' His slightly raised eyebrow said it all. In addition to the endearment, he noticed the careful way Vincent stepped, as he walked around the table. Not a limp, exactly, but he was clearly favoring the left foot. *He's left handed, so he's left-footed, as well.* It was a simple thing to know, as a physician, and tended to explain why some injuries favored one side over the other.

"You must have needed the rest or you wouldn't have slept through," Peter approved. "Take an extra dose of antibiotics, now that you're fed and rested, and try to stay off those feet. One of the cuts is deep, and none of us want to go through giving you stitches, again." He unlatched the valise, as he said it.

Vincent's look told them all he agreed with that.

"These are also yours," Peter said, removing some articles of clothing from the threadworn bag.

Vincent nodded, eyeing the bundle of cloth that came out of his ancient luggage. A white shirt, and a thermal one. A greyish quilted vest, and a pair of pants made of dark corduroy. The latter were age-worn, patched at the knees, and soft. To some degree, they reminded him of the pants he'd been wearing when he'd made his way to Catherine.

And he had no memory of any of it as being his, whatsoever.

Peter pushed the bag over to Vincent. "There's more," he prompted.



Reaching deep into the bag, Vincent pulled out an item near the bottom. It was large, and the reason why Peter had needed the big receptacle at all.

Yards and yards of dark, patchworked fabric came streaming out of the old luggage. It was black mixed with brown, trimmed with leather. There were deep pockets sewn into the lining. And it had a large hood.

"A cape," Vincent said, the fabric bunched in his hands. It was full of the smells of Below. Candle smoke, oatmeal soap, dust, and a trace of his own body's smell.

"This was surely mine." He said it with no question at all, in his voice.

"You wore it everywhere," Catherine said, smiling at the fact that it seemed at least a little familiar to him.

"Everywhere Above," she amended.

"Everywhere Above," he repeated, running his fingers over the heavy leather and wool. He knew why the hood was so deep. It would give him a way to obscure his leonine features, if he had to. His gaze lifted to hers, understanding in it, if not recognition. "I wore this. I wore this so I could come and see you," he said.

Catherine's expression brightened. "Do you remember doing that?" she asked, excited that the object she most associated with him was perhaps jogging his memory.

He looked down at the dark cloth, clutched between his hirsute fingers. "No. No, I don't," he said, dashing her hopes. "It's just... I know that it's what I would do.

Anything to be near you, Beloved." He trailed a long strand of fringe between his finger and thumb, inspecting it, as he said it.

Peter caught the look Catherine shot his way. *Yes, he uses endearments. It's not the first time.* The message telegraphed itself, between them.

"I... I'm glad you at least have some sense of it," she told him, a little dismayed to see him drop the entire thing back into the satchel, as if he didn't care about it.

He frowned at the contents of the battered piece of luggage.

"There's another loose shirt in there," Peter indicated, trying to be tactful about Vincent's half-dressed form.

There was. Vincent took it out, since that seemed to be what was expected of him. It was hand-made, and made of white muslin. It was similar to the one his captors had split up his back.

"You're normally very ... circumspect, about your form," Peter said politely.

"So I gather," Vincent replied, looking at the pile of clothing that would keep him covered from ankle to wrist. He eyed his bare chest. Aside from the marks of his abduction, he saw nothing wrong with it.

Catherine and Peter continued to have a conversation with each other, with their eyes.

Vincent looked back inside the bag. In addition to a pair of sturdy work boots, there were a few more loose articles of clothing. Vincent was unsurprised that the contents were worn, oft-mended, and well-used. The clothes he'd made his way to Catherine in had clearly been of similar quality. He fingered the items as if he'd never seen them before. Which, both Peter and Catherine realized, he hadn't, as far as he knew.

"Tell them we said 'thank you,'" Catherine said, speaking for Vincent, when he didn't say anything more.

Peter nodded, either not noticing Vincent's quiet demeanor or desiring to smooth the moment over.

“So... how did our patient pass the first few hours after I left?” He aimed the question at Catherine. “Anything come up?”

“*Still* in the room, and my shoulder is sore. I ache in places I didn’t realize I had. But on the whole, I slept, and the rest of me feels much better... Thank you.” He tacked the last on as if he knew it was expected of him. He glanced Peter’s way, not liking the feelings Catherine was broadcasting.

*He’s making her more nervous than she was before*, Vincent concluded, having no idea as to what was actually driving that.

Vincent left the leather bag where it was. If he wanted to change clothes, he’d do it later.

“So, you say you slept straight through?” Peter confirmed.

“Mostly,” Vincent replied. “I rested well enough. It’s Catherine who didn’t get very much sleep.” He spared her a look.

“I was nervous. And... I’ll take a nap, later,” she assured them both.

“Any dreams? Nightmares? Anything that felt like a memory, to you?” Peter inquired, still keeping his focus on Vincent. *He’s wary. He’s... not comfortable about something, right now*. It didn’t take a genius to discern it. And Peter had known Vincent from infancy.

Vincent sighed and shook his head. *This man is Catherine’s friend, and he did help*. He didn’t question that Peter’s efforts to aid him had been sincere ones. He just didn’t like the sensation of being interviewed. Especially not by a man. He swallowed past the feeling and answered. “Nothing. Nothing I can remember.”

Peter produced a full bottle of white pills from his medical bag. “More antibiotics. I’m sorry, but I can’t give you anything for the aches. You react badly to opiates of any kind.”

“Do I?” Vincent asked, eyeing the bottle. “Thank you.” he added again, hoping that now Peter would leave.

“I’d like to examine the stitches, if I may?”

Vincent was about to refuse, but he saw the hopeful look in Catherine's eyes. *Please cooperate*, it said.

"My Beauty seems to think it is a good idea," he said wryly. "So... very well."

Vincent caught another look Peter exchanged with Catherine. "What is it?" he asked the question aloud. "The two of you keep... communicating something with each other. I don't understand?"

It was Peter who spoke. "I don't believe I've ever heard you call her that. That's all."

Vincent's eyes flickered to Catherine. "She's the word 'Beauty.' Only a fool would not say it. Often."

*Perhaps.* Peter allowed mentally. *And it may well be how you think of her, how you've always thought of her. But it isn't how you speak of her.*

"We agree on that, I suppose," he said smoothing the moment over as he removed his jacket and cuffed his sleeves. He tugged on a pair of blue examination gloves, similar to the ones he'd worn last night.

"The bedroom again?" Peter prompted. "I promise I won't use a needle, this time."

"It's not a thing that can be done right here?" Vincent was aware he sounded a touch querulous. He didn't really care that he did.

"Faster if you can lay down, I think. Easier to check your feet. Won't take a minute. Cathy, will you get me a cup of coffee and a couple slices of toast? I was on the run, this morning."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go in with —"

"We'll be fine. Light butter please. Oh, and strawberry jam, if you have any. And ... a couple more pieces for Vincent, just to make sure. He'll need to take his medicine on a full stomach. The last thing we want is him vomiting, with stitches in his side."

Catherine nodded, and Vincent inclined his head also, indicating she should go. He knew there was nothing to fear from this older man, though he still admitted he wasn't entirely comfortable with him.

They adjourned to her bedroom, and Vincent removed the socks on his feet, and unwound the hasty gauze bandage Catherine had used to wrap his instep. It was blood-spotted, but not badly so.

"I'll leave more gauze and surgical tape for Catherine to use on you," Peter said. He gestured for Vincent lie down on the rumpled bed.

"You wanted Catherine out of the room. Why?" Vincent asked cannily, complying, nonetheless.

*Smart man. Some things haven't changed.* "Because I don't want her to be upset by anything I ask you, and she probably will be," Peter said forthrightly.

He peeled back the surgical bandage on Vincent's side and looked at the stitches. "This should heal fine. Might scar, but there's no fever in it, and it's not leaking," Peter said. He eyed Vincent's back, wrists, and ankles.

"What kind of metal?" Peter asked, not liking the looks of his right wrist, as he handled it.

"Iron."

"Not steel?"

"No. Iron. It was dark, and heavy."

Peter's mouth pressed into a thin line, as he examined the damage. "You don't react well to tetanus shots. You seem to have a natural immunity, so we'll let that one go." He carefully inspected the more abraded wrist on the other hand.

"Chained to a table?" Peter asked.

"To a wall," Vincent answered. Peter was aware of the difference. The latter made it almost impossible to sleep.

"Why is the left one worse than the right?"



"It was the first hand I pulled free of the wall. I used it to free the second," he replied, watching Peter carefully, as he worked. He dabbed the marred skin with antiseptic cream.

"It's deep, but it's scabbing. Healing. The wounds look clean enough," the doctor declared.

"I washed in her sink, before we climbed into the shower together."

Peter maintained his cool physician's detachment, at the use of the mutual pronoun, and the description. He let the comment pass, as he continued his inspection.

"The ankles don't look as bad."

"They aren't. I pulled the restraints free, with my hands."

"How sore are your feet?"

Vincent shrugged. "I was barefoot when I jumped through, and cut my feet on the glass. And the pavement was hot. Sometimes."

Peter gently inspected the soles of his feet. They too, were healing. "Are you sure all the glass is out of the wounds?" It looked like it was, but it never hurt to ask.

"I'm sure. I wouldn't have been able to stand on it as long as I did, otherwise."

"Anything else?"

"Everything hurts, this morning," Vincent repeated, aware he sounded unhelpful.

"Headache?"

"No. Not since last night."

"Stomach ache?"

"When I eat too fast. Last night, for instance. It passed."

"There's a cut on your calf. It probably itches, considering."

"It does. I don't know where I got it. Climbing in and around garbage cans, perhaps."

"You did that a lot?"

"That is what's in an alley." Every answer was succinct.

"You don't like me." It was a candid statement, and not a challenge.

Vincent took the other man's measure, and realized if he was nothing else, he was bluntly honest. "I don't know you. She's more nervous when you're in the room. And I..." he looked away. "I have an instinct to keep her to myself. I can't explain it any better than that." There was no sense lying about it.

Peter took out a stethoscope, and listened to Vincent's chest.

"I'm probably one of the few people who's going to tell you that's completely understandable, considering."

He reached into his bag and tossed a tube onto the bed.

"That's an antibiotic cream for your wrists and ankles. It will also help your feet. I suggest you use it. You can wash it off when you bathe, then re-apply it. Don't get any into your eyes." Vincent nodded at the instructions.

"What were you beaten with?" Peter asked, knowing the subtle marks on the big man's back for what they were. What Catherine took to be minor cuts were actually welts.

Vincent realized why Peter had wanted Catherine gone from the room. *Thank you*, he thought. *You're kinder than I realized.*

"My belt. Don't tell her," Vincent said, knowing his tender-hearted love would weep for it.

"The shoulder?" Peter asked, manipulating the skin slightly. Vincent was sporting a raw area near the top of his shoulder blade.

"Burned, with something that made electricity. A cattle prod, perhaps. Then I strained the muscles, when I pulled free of the wall."

There were a few other marks Peter couldn't identify, but didn't care for. "What else?" he asked. "You can tell me, Vincent. You know I'm not here to hurt you."

Vincent pushed back the hair on his left forearm. What could have been cuts from the broken glass from the window weren't. Three concentric lines angled up his arm. "This, with a knife, while I was chained. The threat of a something sharp, near my eye, and fire... bothers me." *It terrifies me, actually.* "Though I wasn't burned. And a needle mark," Vincent catalogued, showing the bruise on his upper arm from the needle stick.

"A needle? You were injected?" Peter asked, immediately interested.

"It's why I can't remember," Vincent explained. "His voice said, 'You will forget.'"

Peter shook his head, wondering. "The more we get into this, the more it *sounds* like John, though I didn't know that torture was his preference."

"Catherine said this was an evil man." Vincent sat up as Peter used peroxide to clean the cuts on his bicep.

"He was," Peter said shortly. He looked at the injection site, and noted the bruise. It was clearly a few days old. Peter kept the rest of his examination brief.

"You can shower, if you take off the gauze pad, but try not to get the stitches too wet. Pat them dry, if you do. Warm water will do the soreness in your shoulder good, and help the welts on your back heal."

His kind eyes conveyed a world of regret. "I'm sorry, Vincent. So sorry that anyone ever did this to you."

Vincent had no reason to think the pronouncement was less than sincere. "Thank you." This time, Vincent knew he meant it.

"No broken bones?"

"No."

"Sprains?"

"The wrist ached, the first day." He showed the torn nails on his hand. "I had to break a padlock on a dumpster and dive for cover. It isn't serious."

"And the deepest cut was to your side, when you jumped?"

"Yes. There was a guard in the outer room. Once I went through the door, it was... brief. But the door to the street was steel, and locked. So I went through the window."

Peter nodded at that.

"I know I promised not to use a needle, this morning, but I'd like it if you'd let me draw some blood. You don't have human blood chemistry, but I've seen it before. There's a chance I might be able to figure out what ... someone... injected you with; what's causing your amnesia."

Vincent didn't like the idea of being poked by a needle, but he knew Catherine would agree to it. He nodded his permission.

"You think it is not this man? This... Paracelsus?" Vincent asked. Peter was quick, as he collected his sample.

The doctor shook his head in the negative, as he worked. "John Pater, the man who called himself "Paracelsus," is dead. He was grasping, ambitious, greedy, and brilliant, in his way. And he was arrogant, and he wanted you to be the son he never had. But he *is* dead. Months ago. And by your hand." He stored the blood sample and capped the peroxide.

Vincent nodded at the information, then looked toward the louvered doors.

"Catherine... I can feel her in the kitchen. She's worried. It's like she's standing in the room with me and I can sense the look on her face, sense her disquiet. You... you know of this?" Vincent did not like that he had to ask this man for anything, but again, he also knew Peter Alcott wasn't here to hurt him, but to help him. And that Catherine trusted him. It was enough.

Peter nodded. "That is a thing you call 'the Bond,' between you. You're empathic with most people. But with Catherine, it's far deeper, more intimate a thing."

*Intimate. Yes. That's the word for it.* "She is mine," Vincent said simply.

Peter Alcott shook his head. "Vincent... be that as it may, and I don't dispute it for a minute... that's not a thing you would ever *say* about her."

Vincent's eyes registered Peter's... what? His disapproval?

Vincent was confused. "But it's true. There is no reason not to say it. We... belong to each other. With each other. Completely."

Vincent put the borrowed socks back on, stood, and hitched up the ill-fitting sweatpants. Peter noticed he didn't ask for his tunnel clothes. They both moved back toward the living room, nearly colliding with Catherine, as she came through the louvered doors, bearing a cup of coffee for Peter.

"It looks like everything's healing well. I told him he could shower, just try to keep the stitches dry. If they get wet, just pat them, gently." He took her proffered cup, and Catherine's eyes moved, between the two of them.

"I'll get the toast," she stated, knowing the two of them had talked, but not knowing what about.

Peter watched as Catherine went into the kitchen, Vincent close on her heels. It wasn't a space Peter could ever remember him entering, before. Yet, now, he did so with ease, wanting to be near her.

*Curiouser and curiouser*, Peter thought.

Peter watched how Vincent moved, in the confined space. He didn't look uncomfortable to be there. Peter noticed that he favored the stool, for a place to sit, but leaned on it more than he actually sat on it.

When he bent his knee, the ribbing on the bottom of the sweatpants bothered the cut on his calf.

"I'm going to go change," Vincent announced, Peter understanding "why" a bit better than Catherine probably did. The elastic band at the bottom of the pants would irritate his already abraded skin.

Catherine smiled at that, and Peter knew her approval caused Vincent to feel similarly pleased.

"You'll call for me if you need me?" Vincent asked, glancing toward her balcony doors, where sunlight now streamed. That didn't seem to bother Vincent, either.

"Of course. It's broad daylight. We'll be fine," Catherine said, reassuring him, as he departed, grabbing a pair of his pants out of his bag.

He took them into the bathroom, and shut the door.

"So. How is he, really?" Peter asked Catherine, in a lowered voice.

Catherine sighed. "I'm not even sure I know how to answer that," she replied. "Up and around. Changed. He's very ..." She struggled to find the right words.

"Open, with how he feels and what he's thinking. He's not quite the way we know him, not as reserved, or introspective. I know, Cathy. I picked up on it, too." Peter heard the water in her bathroom sink come on.

Catherine quickly told Peter all she could, including her impressions of how he'd passed the night, what he'd eaten that morning, and the odd, almost... comfortably intimate way he'd been treating her.

"He... says things he doesn't normally say. He's... freer. Comfortable without a shirt. He wasn't... unsettled that I had to climb into the shower with him, to get the dirty bandage off his side, or that I saw him shirtless. He's more... direct."

"He also swears, at least mildly," Peter observed. "And the memory loss is troubling me for more than one reason. It doesn't seem confined to a period of time, like the recent trauma. It's far reaching, and nearly complete, to some degree."

"I take it that's odd?" Catherine asked.

"It's all but unheard of, without surgery or massive head trauma. The kind that causes severe brain damage."

"You know Vincent is... different than other people. That he ... reacts differently, to things like narcotics." Catherine replied.

"He does," Peter agreed. "And I don't deny that's playing into this. And to a real degree, his reaction to toxins, opiates, and a host of other things are very... unpredictable."

"I can think of someone who would have delighted in doing this to him,"

Catherine asserted, hearing the taps in her bathroom turn off.

Peter listened attentively, knowing who she was referring to. He stared at the closed bathroom door.

"Cathy, don't call me insane. We are sure this is Vincent?"

Catherine shrugged. "He has the bond with me. You can't fake that. And now you're thinking Paracelsus is involved, too. That this is a disguise."

Peter shrugged, brushing his concern away. "I sewed him shut. That's no body suit. It's him." Peter rubbed his own forehead, processing his own question, and trying to come up with answers.

"John cast a long shadow. But the damage Vincent did to his chest..."

The bathroom door opened. "The damage Vincent did to whose chest?" Vincent asked, rubbing his hands on a small hand towel. Some of Peter's cream had clearly been applied to his wrists, and he'd changed out of the sweatpants and into his tunnel slacks. The broad, golden chest was still bare.

"Paracelsus. The man we think did this to you, but couldn't have," Peter said.

Vincent took in the only two people he knew in the world. "The name still means nothing to me."

Catherine spoke up. "Paracelsus had a warren of tunnels he used, both near the surface and far below it. Do you know what part of the docks you were held in? What direction you came from? Could you find your way back, if you had to?"

Vincent shook his head. "I don't think so. I was focused on going forward, not back. I had to travel wherever there was cover, wherever the street or alley wound. Sometimes I went back over my own steps," he explained.

Catherine's hopeful expression faltered.

"The building I first came out of... I know there was water near. The sound of a large ship. I considered trying to hide on one, but... I felt you," he offered.

"That does sound like the warehouse district near the port terminal," Catherine said. "I want to go look, but..."

"But you're going to stay here and take care of our patient. I'll have Cullen and James look around. Take some others," Peter said.

"Tell them to be careful," Catherine urged. *We all know how dangerous Paracelsus could be.*

"You know I will."

Peter's medical pager chose that particular moment to go off. "And that would be my cue to get to the hospital, pronto." The older man grimaced, as he pressed a button on a small black box he produced from his coat pocket.

Vincent had no idea what the little rectangle was, but he was pleased if it caused Peter to leave. He was far more at ease when he was alone with his love, in spite of the understanding he was reaching with the physician.

"An emergency?" Catherine asked.

"Somebody's water just broke. No rest for the obstetrics department." He looked at Catherine. "Sleep. I mean it, Cathy. You're run down. The sentries will come to help if there's trouble, and rest is the best thing. For both of you."

Catherine could only nod.

"When should we discuss taking him down?" Catherine asked.

The pager went off, again. Peter grabbed his medical bag.

"I don't know. Not until he can walk steadily, for certa—"

"*Still* here," Vincent intoned, still not liking it when they talked as if he was incapable of making decisions.

"We'll talk about it later," Catherine said, as Peter dashed to her door. She closed and locked it, behind him.

She sent Vincent a weak smile, which he returned.

*He hasn't had much more rest than I've had,* she thought.



The two of them wandered back into her kitchen, and she once more used the microwave oven to make him tea. He settled himself on his now-customary position, on her kitchen stool.

"I'll figure out lunch and dinner while you nap," she said. "Because... you know." she said, nodding toward the gas elements on her stove.

He glanced toward her appliance. "I don't know what it is, exactly. I don't mind heat. But the sight of open fire appalls me."

"I imagine the burn on your shoulder blade has something to do with that," she said somberly. He watched sorrow cross her beautiful green eyes. It was a look she wore too often, when she considered the harm that had been done to him.

Mentally, he disagreed with her assessment. Electric shock was not an open flame. It was fire he was wary of, not her outlets, or anything else along those lines.

She folded her arms as the microwave dinged, and he could feel sorrow weighing on her lovely shoulders, as she pondered what had been done to him, and for how long.

*Enough of this.* He would not have her sad every time she thought of him.

"I can feel everything healing already, thanks to your good care," he said. It was true.

She bolted from the kitchen, as if propelled on a spring. "Care! Your antibiotics! You haven't taken them, yet."

He would have reached for her to stop her, but she was too fast for his injury-slowed reflexes. Over-extending his arm when he had stitches in his side was hardly a winning idea.

She brought back the opened bottle and shook out two pills, setting them near his cup. *She's still nervous*, he realized. "Thank you," he replied, swallowing the medicine.

"I'm so glad you're all right. Or that you will be," she amended, the look in her

green eyes full of sincere sympathy.

Forgoing more tea, he picked her hand up again, and tugged on it. At first, she wasn't sure what he was asking for until he turned his body and opened his legs, pulling her into the vee of them, and half-settling her on his lap.

"Vincent... what? I..."

"Shhhhhhh." He shushed her, wrapping one arm around her while his hand stroked her cheek, lovingly. "You have had no better time of it than I have, with less for reassurance that I was still alive. You had to be afraid for a long time. You still are."

Resisting at first, she sighed against his big body, trying to let at least some of the tension drain from her small frame, knowing he could sense her disquiet. It seemed so odd to be sitting like this, and against his bare skin, to boot. Usually, when she leaned against him, he was swathed in two shirts, a vest, and his cape.

She let the knowledge go, as she forced herself to relax against his strong chest. Muscles she'd always felt were there, were bare, and welcoming.

"I was afraid," she confessed. "I was so ... worried, constantly. We just... we didn't *know* anything." She relived a fraction of her terrors from the last week. "Had you fallen somewhere? Were you trapped? Caught by a rock slide, spotted by some stranger? I just... I didn't know. I couldn't find you..."

"Shhhh. Shhhh," he repeated, keeping her against his warm body. "It's all right, Angel. Beautiful Catherine, I am here. I will be well. I found my way to you, as no force on Earth can stop me from feeling you," he said, brushing a soft kiss across her the top of her head.

She nodded, laying her cheek on his shoulder a moment, accepting the simple gift of comfort. She didn't know what to do with her hands, unable as she was to wrap them around his back, comfortably, and not quite sure where to put them thanks to his half-dressed state. She ended up just keeping them in her lap.

She felt his strength, both the physical kind and the emotional one. *You're here. You're safe. You're alive. I was so afraid.* She swallowed past the remembered

fear, and let herself be comforted

"Now, *you* eat something. Before it gets colder," he prompted after a few peaceful minutes, pushing her a little way toward her own chair. She went, almost reluctantly.

For less than the change he could find on the street, he'd have swatted her gently on her gorgeous backside, as a way to tell her everything would be fine. It was a gesture he'd seen when he'd been pinned in the alleys, as a way two people sometimes communicated a kind of playful affection. He refrained from indulging in it, sensing she might not welcome the familiar gesture, right now.

She picked up a triangle of toast, and ate, obediently.

He joined her, despite his lack of any real appetite.

*If it pleases her, that is enough*, he thought.

"After your shower, I want you back in that bed, Mister," she informed him, pleased that he seemed to like her meager attempt at cooking.

"Yes, Mother," he replied, finishing what was on his plate. She smiled.

*There. That was better.* A thought occurred to him. "A mother. You said I had a father. Do I have a mother?"

And as quickly as Catherine's fledgling good mood began, it was banished, replaced by something more somber, in her mind. Vincent, sensing her change of mood inside their bond, cursed himself for asking the question.

"You... you never met her. You were a foundling, outside St. Vincent's Hospital. Father said the woman who found you was named Anna. But... she died. By the hand of the man who... who I keep thinking did this to you, but couldn't have. I'm sorry, Vincent."

He took in the information, but seemed unfazed by it. "I don't remember any of it, Catherine. It doesn't have the power to make me sad."

Catherine realized how true that was. *If we don't remember our sorrows, do they still shape us?* she thought, aware that there were a few sorrows of her own

she'd love to forget.

"There are several older women in the tunnels who are utterly devoted to you, however." She tried to put a kind spin on his situation. She knew Mary, Elizabeth, and many of the others who had known him as a child and after, were very fond of him.

He took in her words, as he watched her finish her light meal. *'The tunnels.'* *It sounds like a dark, cramped, narrow place. Like a place I would truly not like. Like the place I escaped from.*

He asked her no further questions along those lines. To cover his silence, he sipped his tea, letting its warmth relax the muscles in his abdomen.

They finished eating, and he carried his dishes to her sink. When he turned on the tap, she saw he meant to wash them.

"Vincent, you are not going to do dishes!" she scolded, shooing him away from the sink.

"You cooked. I should clean. Is that not the way things are usually done?" he asked. He had no memory of such a thing, but it seemed fairly obvious.

Her frown was obvious, as well.

"Well, maybe, but not for us." She turned off the faucet and showed him what looked like another low level kitchen cabinet, but with a series of buttons on top. "We have a dishwasher," she proclaimed.

She opened the door, and showed him a white wire rack, which slid out, and took on their plates and cups.

"So we do," he said, watching her as she loaded it.

"I'm sorry," he apologized unnecessarily. "I seemed to have forgotten how to use some of your... appliances," he said, remembering that yesterday he'd not recalled anything about her microwave oven, and hadn't cared for her telephone.

"You didn't forget." She smiled brightly as she slid their silverware into the basket. "You never used this to begin with." She added soap and closed the door,

her fingers going unerringly for the 'start' button. He heard the sound of the machine, humming to life.

*Interesting.*

Vincent wondered how he could not know how to work such a common device, and decided that perhaps it was new to her kitchen. Either that, or the memory of it, along with so much else, was just gone from his mind.

*But no, that wasn't right. She said I've never used this.*

"Shower time," she declared, clearly done with the chore, for now. "I'll get you a clean set of towels and make sure you've got a fresh bandage laid out for your side. Think you'll be okay?" she asked, hooking her hair behind one ear.

"I think I braved the distance across the city to your doorstep. A few minutes in your shower should not be too difficult a challenge," he said wryly.

She nodded at that, and dropped her head as she moved around the kitchen, restoring order to it. Blue eyes tracked her progress.

She closed an open cabinet door, and fiddled with putting the lid back on the tub of margarine. She returned the milk to the refrigerator, and wiped down an already clean counter, picked up her cup, took a sip from it, then carried it to her sink. *You're nervous, and filling the moment with menial chores*, he thought, saying nothing.

"I should have put this in before I started the machine," she said. Even her normally steady voice had an agitated edge, for some reason.

*Not nervous. Upset. She's upset*, Vincent realized, understanding it was an emotion that had been simmering beneath her surface all along. She was keeping her hands busy with whatever chores she could find, but her nimble mind was... worried. Sad. *Upset*. Yes, the last one was the correct word.

"Catherine."

Her name. Her name in his voice. The beautiful, resonant syllables caressed by a tongue that had loved them since the first moment he'd ever heard them. The

sound, the one sound she'd thought never to hear again, the one she knew she'd miss the most, when she was terrified that she'd never see him again.

Her cup clattered in the sink, and she simply gripped the edge of it, struggling to find the courage inside her to keep a normal facade going. Vincent had just sat in her kitchen, having breakfast, almost as if it was a thing they'd regularly done. Then he'd tugged her into his lap for a warm embrace, bare chested. But the skin on his torso was damaged, and her heart wept for it.

But she couldn't weep. There were too many other things to do, too many things to consider, from the utterly mundane to those which might influence whether he continued to remain safe or not.

Her world had gone from fine, to devastated to utterly unbalanced, and the veneer of "everything is going to be all right" was wearing her down, almost as much as the fear had.

"Come here." He was right behind her, and he turned her shoulders, lightly, bringing her around. She crashed into the wall of his bare chest, adoring the feel of it, and marveling that it was now becoming familiar. And in a way, that was what was wrong, too. Her Vincent would never stand bare chested with her, in a room. Any room. Much less one that belonged to her.

Her tears, when they came, were sudden, and free falling.

"I'm sorry!" she apologized, reaching to hold him to her, then realizing she couldn't, thanks to the damage to his back. "I don't even know why I'm upset!"

"Don't you?" he murmured, softly, guiding her arms up around his neck. He kissed the top of her head. "Don't you, my brave love?" He rubbed his cheek across the top of her hair, the gesture so familiar, the words so not.

It wasn't that he'd never paid her a compliment. It was that calling her "my brave love" was like calling her "Beauty." It wasn't that he'd never used the words separately, just not... combined, that way.

The feel of his titan's form was utterly familiar to her, in its size and shape. The brush of his cheek across the top of her head was so welcome a thing she could

have sobbed for it. Again. She fought back the urge. *You're familiar. And not, she thought. And I love you so much.*

"You've been run to the end of a very long tether," he said, resting his arms around the small of her back. He held her loosely, as he often did, yet... more intimately, somehow.

She pulled away a bit and looked up at eyes she adored. Ones she had been afraid she might never see, again.

"You had it so much worse," she said.

He lifted a hand and brushed her cheek with his thumb. "It wasn't a competition, Catherine."

She nodded that he was correct, and drew in a deep, steadying breath. *I'll be okay. We'll be okay. I know we will.*

"Better, now?" he asked, knowing she just needed to release some of the tension of the last several days. If his ribs weren't sore and his back a stinging mess, he knew he'd help her to release that in other ways, as well.

She pressed a light kiss into his palm. "I promise to hold myself together long enough to write a message to Father and tell him you passed the night comfortably. You did, didn't you?" Her sea-colored eyes searched his face.

"Like the most grateful of newborns. You? Once you finally got to sleep?"

She nodded in the affirmative, but dropped her eyes, and he knew she wasn't being entirely honest. He'd felt her near him, in the night. Her sleep had been restless, and too light for nightmares.

"Liar," he accused, gently, planting a kiss at her hairline. "Sweet Liar," he amended, giving her another brief kiss.

Again, they were words he never used, and a gesture to match it. *And that might be the very least of our problems, at the moment.* Catherine knew that much.

"I'm so worried, Vincent," she confessed. "This isn't resolved. We're still not sure who we're dealing with, and I don't know what we can do to help you remember

who you are."

"We'll find out what we need to know, on the first. And time will likely take care of the rest." He stepped back and brushed a tender kiss across the back of her knuckles as he disengaged them. "Go and tend to what you need to. I'm going to go enjoy the pleasures of your shower once more."

"Don't get your stitches too wet," Catherine cautioned, as he moved toward the bathroom.

"Mother Hen," he accused her gently, closing the door behind him.

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## *Chapter Six*

### *Awareness and Ablutions*



The day passed, and Vincent slept in her bed, for most of it. When night came, he polished off William's muffins, and tried to sit up and talk to her, but a weariness he couldn't explain dogged his large frame.

"You heal best when you sleep," was all the explanation Catherine could give him.

He nodded at that, and passed the night peacefully, curled near her slight form, much as he had the night before.

The next morning they slept in, and he arose feeling far less sore, though the muscles in his shoulders still wanted the hot spray of her shower, again.

He took his turn in her bathroom while she laid out the clothes they'd sent up for him, along with a copy of Walt Whitman. For Catherine, the dark, familiar fabrics did much to stabilize her sense of "things are going to get back to normal."



She talked briefly with Peter Alcott on the phone, then fixed Vincent the same light breakfast she'd fixed yesterday.

*He's not very hungry in the morning, but he likes a large lunch,* she realized, if how he'd eaten yesterday was any indication. It surprised her that after three years of being together, she'd only just realized such a mundane thing.

*Then again, how would I know?* she reasoned.

*We'll give him another day or two to feel better, then take him down,* Catherine thought, rummaging through the kitchen to check the expiration date on some of the items in her refrigerator. She called Joe and used her best raspy voice to tell him she was feeling awful, but that the antibiotics were helping; that she wouldn't see him the rest of this week, but that Monday was likely.

She hung up, knowing what that meant for everyone in her office, but unable to do anything to help it. *One thing at a time,* she reasoned.

Peter called again, telling her that Cullen and James had very little to report. Wherever Vincent had been held, there were no obvious signs of that, by now. Broken glass would have been swept up, and the window repaired. The buildings were locked, with no way to enter, or even remain in the area, without attracting suspicion.

*Oh, well. That's one dead end. For now,* Catherine thought, turning back to more mundane matters.

She returned to the kitchen, realizing she now spent more time in this room than she had in probably the last month of living here alone. It was a nice space, but not a large one. Most of the apartment's floor plan gave space to the living area, rather than to this one.

*I guess architects realize how little time New Yorkers have to cook,* she thought, hearing the water in her bathroom shut off.

She tugged over some cans. They'd have canned soup and sandwiches, later. She shuffled through the contents of her cabinets, trying to figure out what she else could make either without using the stove, or fairly quickly, when he was in the

other room.

When she looked up, he was lounging inside the kitchen doorway, damp-haired, barefoot, shirtless, still, and looking entirely too sexy for her peace of mind. He caught the blush of her cheeks, as she quickly looked back down.

"What is it?" he asked, again and as always, sensitive to her moods.

"Nothing. It's just... I'll go get you a shirt. Unless you want the robe?"

He looked down at his exposed chest, the wealth of body hair covering him as effectively as any clothing ever could. Her words reminded him of Peter Alcott's, from yesterday.

*She was flustered.* It was something he'd sensed from her several times, now. More often than he should have, considering what he thought he knew about them.

But there were reasons he why hadn't put on the robe. "It's all right," he brushed aside the offer of a shirt. "It's warm enough in here."

She poured a cup of coffee before the machine was through brewing the latest batch. Vincent noticed that her hands shook, a little. "No, you... you're a modest person."

She spoke about "him" as if "he" wasn't here. Which in a way, he still wasn't.

"I'm making you uncomfortable," he said. Now he could identify the odd sensation which kept simmering inside her, and realize it for what it was. "I'm sorry, Catherine." He wasn't sure what transgression he'd committed. He only knew he sensed her discomfort.

"It's all right. You can just wear the robe, for now. I pulled some of your things out of the bag. There are a couple of your shirts and vests in there." Now she really was blushing.

How to tell her he didn't feel comfortable in the thick, heavy robe?

"If it wouldn't offend you, I would rather not," he said simply.

She closed her eyes and set her hands on the counter. How to explain to Vincent

that this really was not "him?" That he was modest to the point of reserve, and that he would no more lounge half-naked in her kitchen doorway than he would jump off the bridge into the abyss? And that the sight of his shoulders, which looked even broader out of clothing than inside it, if that was possible, was just plain... disconcerting, to her, on a fairly primitive level?

He watched her reaction, both seeing and feeling her state of upset. He sighed internally. And perhaps a bit externally. There was nothing for it but to say it, outright.

"Catherine, my back stings, and not just the shoulder. I spent most of the night on my good side, again, and it woke me when I rolled onto my back. The robe helped when I was cold, but after a short time I... I can't wear it, comfortably." He stepped close, not wanting to say the words from across the room. Not wanting to say them at all. She looked up as he came to the edge of her personal space, not expecting the words that were to come:

"I was whipped."

She dropped the cup. It clattered to the counter and spilled, but didn't break. Realization dawned, in the storm-colored eyes, and he hated himself for it.

"No." If there was a more fruitless, reflexive denial, neither one of them knew what it was.

She blinked, and stared at his chest, her eyes travelling to his shoulders to see if she could see the marks there, as well. Yes, if you looked for it, you realized what they were. On his right shoulder, two pink lines she'd taken for scratches could now be identified as welts. The long hair on his head and his body hair did much to hide the abuse, but she knew she should have known. The shirt he'd arrived in had been rent up the middle, and had been blood-spotted.

*Of course, she thought, struggling with the words, and the image they conveyed. They chained him with manacles. Then... They ripped his shirts up the back, to expose the entire area, and someone had... like an animal...*

She burst into tears for reasons she couldn't name and ones she could, and grabbed him to bury her face in his naked chest, then held her arms out to her

sides, not wanting to hurt his back all the more.

"Shhh," he said again. He tugged her arms low so they rested across the small of his back, down from his bandage. Apparently, the welts were worse higher up. She remembered that except for the area of the shirt that had covered his side, she'd seen the worst stains on his shirt near his shoulder blades, remembered washing him gently, thanks to the burn and the telltale signs which looked like scratches, but she now realized were... something else..

"I'm so sorry!" she forced out between sobs.

"Shhh. Shhhhhh. It's all right. You didn't do it," he soothed, holding the back of her head against his chest with his clawed hand. *Don't. Don't cry. Not for me.* Her distress was hard to bear. "It will heal. It is healing, Catherine."

"For days, I kept being so... afraid someone was hurting you. I tried everything I knew to find you. And I didn't even think..." she wiped her cheek with her fingertips, as she tried to draw away from him. "I tried to find you. I sat still and tried to get a sense of you, and I couldn't."

She shook her head, hating herself for what she perceived as a failure, on her part. "I only went in to work so I could read the police reports, check the news, the hospitals, the... the m-morgue." She clearly hated saying the last word. Vincent could only picture her at a desk somewhere, dialing the number, terrified for what she might find out.

"I filed for continuances or accepted plea deals on all my cases, then... Then I'd leave work and go search, Below. When that didn't work I scoured the park, looking for a sign of you." She shook her head, again. "When that didn't work, I didn't know what to do, so I just... got in my car and... drove. I drove... everywhere." Her eyes looked so hopeless, he couldn't stand it.

"You can't think I blame you for not finding me. Catherine, even I know our bond doesn't work that way."

"It did, once." She was firm about that. "That's why I was so frightened. I couldn't feel you... calling to me."

He wasn't even aware it was a thing he could do. "I didn't... call to you. I simply felt you, after a while," he said, understanding that there might have been a difference. "If not for you, I don't know where I would be, right now." His voice was a low, sure rumble.

She sighed, but said nothing, just shaking her head.

"You're exhausted. Still. And I... am... fine." He spaced the words out, so she could understand the incredible difference in his life, from the day before yesterday to now.

"The shower felt good, but the heat from the water and then from the robe makes my skin sting, that's all. I promise you I'm warm enough."

*Of course. That's why you slept on your side, all night, curled next to me. Because when you laid on your back, that made your skin warmer, made it burn.*

"Turn around. Let me see. Now that it's morning. Afternoon," she corrected herself.

"No. It will only upset you, more," he refused. *Perhaps I should try to bear the robe after all, he thought. Or at least the lighter of the shirts.*

"Let me see, Vincent." She was tough, even in her sorrow. Reluctantly, he did as she bid him, having no idea what it looked like, exactly, but knowing the marks would be there, once you looked for them.

They were. Much was hidden, to her searching eyes, thanks to the soft pelt of down that covered his skin, not to mention the long mane of his own, still matted hair.

But his body hair was thinnest over his ribs, and several angry streaks were pinkly visible. She'd thought they were scratches, of some sort, perhaps gotten when he'd gone through the window. Now she knew better.

"They hurt you," she said, and he could feel her anger, through the bond, could hear it in her voice.

"They won't again," he replied simply, stepping away from her. The hair on his

head had saved him from some of it. The same hair that was a mass of snarls and tangles, still.

She wiped her eyes, and glanced toward her balcony doors, where daylight continued to stream in. "I feel like you're so exposed, up here in my apartment. That you'd be safer, Below. But... that's where you were taken from, they think. Someplace between your Chambers and Chinatown." *Am I doing the right thing, keeping you here? I am, aren't I? For now?*

"I have no desire whatsoever to go below the ground," he said firmly. "Or to leave your side." His voice was firm.

Peter Alcott's knock was all but expected. Once again, he examined Vincent in Catherine's bedroom, but this time, she was there, refusing to part from his side.

"Jacob sent some people down to the warehouse district." He told Vincent the same thing he'd told Catherine, over the phone. "They couldn't find anything. Not even the window he came out of," Peter said, checking the stitches on Vincent's side. "This is looking much better." He was pleased with the results of his handiwork.

"Considering how much time it took to reach me, I'm not sure I'm surprised about that," Catherine replied, giving her love an encouraging smile. "There would have been plenty of time to clean up any... evidence."

Peter tested the skin near the wound for signs of fever. There wasn't any.

"I feel as if every time you're here, I'm being poked and prodded again. Much more of this and I fear we may not be friends, Doctor," Vincent said.

Peter re-bandaged the stitches as he smiled his most genial smile. "You'll thank me in a couple days, when you're feeling more like your old self. In the meantime, just rest as much as you can, and we'll get you back home as soon as --"

"I am home." The three words were said with unarguable finality.

Peter was taken aback at the blunt choice of language.

"I know you think that this is that, for you," Peter said cautiously. "But I promise

that the place you ... that you used to call home is better shelter for you. And full of people who love you. People you... obviously still don't remember. But they are there. Waiting to see you, again."

Vincent said nothing to that, as he got off the bed, put on his socks, and padded out into Catherine's living room. Peter noticed he stayed near the gauzy balcony doors, and looked out over the daytime city.

*He's trying to be near the most open space. That's why being in her apartment doesn't bother him. No matter where he is, he's close to the balcony doors,* Peter thought. He shot Catherine a look, then stood in the living room, directly behind Vincent. *I'm going to try something.*

"You are... comfortable in this room?" Peter asked, knowing he shouldn't be.

"Yes." Vincent picked an apple out of Catherine's fruit bowl. Peter watched as he rolled it from hand to hand. If Peter didn't know better, he'd swear the big man was nervous about something.

"Vincent, this apartment isn't a place you've ever been wholly comfortable."

Something inside Vincent bristled at what felt like an accusation. "I'm fine." The monosyllables were given with extreme shortness.

"You are far from fine."

"You're pushing. Shut up." Vincent said, adding another thing he never said to the list.

Catherine provided the voice of correction. "Vincent, you never say 'shut—'"

"Stop telling me the things I never do!" he snapped at her, letting her feel his temper, as well.

Catherine was surprised. He almost never raised his voice to her. And it would do no good to tell him that, for obvious reasons.

Peter saw the dilation of Vincent's blue eyes, and knew he was ready to fight. He also knew why.

*He wants to stay near her. The idea of taking him somewhere else threatens that.*

"Catherine isn't going anywhere, Vincent. Going home doesn't mean you'll be separated."

*Doesn't it?* Vincent thought. The very idea gave him a hand tremor. He gripped the apple so hard it bruised.

"Vincent, considering what you've been through, wanting to stay close to Catherine is perfectly normal, I assure you," Peter said.

*You have no idea what is perfectly normal for me.*

And again, because his filter was thin, he gave Peter the words. "You have no idea what is normal for me. Knowing me before, doesn't mean that you do."

Catherine's green eyes looked helpless.

"Peter, what's causing this?" she asked.

"Psychotropic drugs... hypnotic suggestion..." Peter said, trying to run a mental list.

"You know exactly who that sounds like," Catherine said.

Peter sighed. "I know."

Vincent began to apologize. "Forgive me, Catherine. I didn't mean to--"

"I know. It's all right. It's all right, Vincent." She walked up to him and laid a small, delicate hand on his arm, to reassure him. Once again, Peter witnessed the calming effect that had.

Vincent's voice dropped low, using his most honeyed, most persuasive tone. "I swear I didn't mean to shout at y---"

"I know you didn't. I have to stop comparing you to yourself," Catherine hugged him very carefully, and gave him a weak smile.

"I do love you." He reassured her; and saw her smile falter.

*Not at the meaning, but because apparently, this too, is a thing I never said, he thought. Or seldom said. Or seldom-to-never said when other people were present. Whatever the case is.*



"I know you do," she replied simply.

Catherine turned to Peter. "Tell Father I don't know when we'll be down. Why don't you... tell them to give us a few days, Peter? No visitors, not yet. Not until he's a little stronger."

Peter took Vincent in, seeing the tension in his shoulders relax, at her suggestion. *The thought of leaving her upsets you, even as the thought of staying with her calms you. And you like standing near a day-lit balcony. Interesting.*

"I think that would be a good idea," he said. "I'll let Jacob know." He let himself out.

Vincent spent the rest of the day much the same way he had the other. Eating, sleeping, tending his injuries, and talking to Catherine, in snatches of conversation. He discovered he preferred her books to her television, and fresh fruit to canned. There was not so much more to know, considering where he was.

Catherine realized that Peter was correct. That though he didn't mind her kitchen, as long as the stove was off, he liked to be near the view of her balcony doors. Even when she drew the shade against prying eyes, he liked being near the glass, though whether that was because he liked the doors for the view he could get out of them or because they were an exit to the room, if he needed one, she didn't know.

*He didn't like the bathroom, when we first stepped into it, she recalled. Is that because with no windows, it felt like a trap?*

She took over the chore of bandaging his wrists and ankles, and though he saw her frown, she said nothing more about how sad the damaged skin made her. Peter's ointment was doing its work. The scabbed skin looked much improved.

They napped for a while, a thing Catherine would have sworn she wouldn't be able to do.

Something about sleeping near him was so incredibly comforting, but she couldn't place her finger on precisely why. Like so many other things with him right now, it just "was."

The afternoon grew late, and slipped into a quiet kind of evening.

"I think it's time we addressed the problem with your hair," she told him, after they'd shared canned soup, for dinner.

"My hair is a problem?" he asked.

*He doesn't know that the matted mess isn't normally the way he wore it?* "It's a thousand snarls," she answered.

"I take it that too, isn't normal, for me?"

She smiled gently, and shook her head.

"I simply concluded it had been allowed to grow long, and given the snarls, it was high time to cut it," he stated.

Catherine's jaw dropped open.

He almost laughed at her horrified expression. It was then she realized he was subtly teasing her.

Her voice was actually a bit shaky. "You... you weren't actually going to..."

He rose from the table. *Did I tease you so seldom?* he asked himself, wondering at the nature of whatever usually passed for "humor," between them.

"No, Beauty. But there were more important things to attend to. And considering how bad it is, dealing with it wasn't something I was looking forward to," he replied.

Her smile was brilliant. "That's because you've never used my incredibly luxurious conditioner," Catherine stated, going to fish a deep blue bottle out of her bathroom closet.



“You think that will help this... disaster?” he asked.

“I’m sure of it.” Her enthusiasm couldn’t waver.

She set one of her dining room chairs close to the sink in her kitchen, fetched a clean towel, and several other supplies she swore they’d need.

Vincent took his place, leaned back as much as he could, and let her have her way.

If “lather, rinse, and repeat,” were the normal directions for a shampooing, this was that, on steroids. She washed it three times, using the sink’s aerator to pull the suds out. When the water finally ran clear of the soap, that was when she brought in what she referred to as “the big guns.”

“Botanical Hair Serum,” he read from the bottle.

It smelled like oranges, and a deep, heavy oil. Olives, perhaps. It was off white, and incredibly silky. She put some between his thumb and first finger, just so he could feel.

He started to have fantasies about touching it to her skin before she even began working it into his scalp.

Sitting on the chair, leaning back against her basin, a rolled towel under his neck, for comfort, Vincent gazed upward, as she studiously vowed to save his matted mane.

The lotion made it smell like spring-turning-into summer, in the room, and he had

the rather provocative view of the underside of her breasts, the difference between a kitchen and a hair salon being that there was no way she could stand behind him, to work.

She poured the tantalizing concoction into her hand again, and again, and he felt her nimble fingers work it through, from root to tip.

“God, that feels good,” he admitted, as he felt her rub conditioner through the snarls, then gently pick them apart, with her fingers. A knot near the back of his neck and been annoying him steadily, as it gathered in and pulled on the small hairs at the nape.

“Do you like it?” she asked, tipping the bottle over a third time. The price tag was still on it, and it seemed prohibitive, though he had no real way to judge.

“I very much like it,” he sighed, closing his eyes against the very tempting view. Her fingers worked through the hair over his ears, on either side of his head, until they drew through with no impediment.

He felt her smile, inside their bond; sensed her contentment at her success.

“Hm. I’ve wanted to do something like this to you for a ridiculously long time,” she revealed, taking the ends of his hair and making a ‘scrubbing’ motion with them between her palms, as she continued to work in the viscous potion.

It was a stray comment, and one she hadn’t really thought about, until he opened his eyes and his blue gaze pinned her.

“Then why didn’t we?” he asked. He knew he’d be the last man in the world to protest her touch, much less such... decadence.

She blinked, looking startled by the question. He watched her expression as she scrambled, mentally, for the answer.

“I just... that’s not something we do,” she said, not sure how to explain it any better than that. “We usually stay out on the balcony,” she soothed, deciding that it might be better to discuss the things they did do, rather than the things they didn’t. “When you come up, we usually talk about what happened that day, or you read to me.”

He knew he'd flustered her, and saw her cheeks go pink, even as he knew her hands went still.

"And...?" he prompted her for more details.

"It's um... it's often late. You h-have to get home, after a while," she stammered. It was the truth, but it concealed other truths, between them, and she wasn't sure if he knew it. How to explain to Vincent himself what they were, and what they weren't? She had no real idea how to begin, not about this. She could barely describe it to herself.

He watched her a moment, and he could tell she was trying to gauge her answer, somehow. After a few seconds, she simply returned to her chore, and he closed his eyes again.

"Thank you for doing this for me. You're... incredibly kind," he said, adjusting his neck on the makeshift "pillow" so she could finish.

"I'm... it's my pleasure," she replied, content to start rinsing his hair clean.

The slick oil left his thick tresses feeling almost indescribably soft, and he felt the difference, as her elixir began to rinse away.

"I think we should wash it, again. So it doesn't come out greasy," she said, knowing she'd used far more of the hair serum than the capful the bottle recommended. He was right about the cost. That didn't matter.

He rose from the chair, and grabbed the towel.

"Why don't I do that in your shower, so you can rest? You've been standing over me for nearly an hour, Catherine. Your back is starting to hurt."

It was, but for the world, she wouldn't have admitted it. Then she realized she didn't have to. He'd felt it, through the bond.

"I... yes, well, all right. If you think you can manage without getting your stitches too wet..."

"I will be fine. And you will be relaxing." He tugged her forward for a soft, quick, brushing kiss of thanks, across her forehead. "Mind me, now," he instructed. "I've

been trouble enough.”

Catherine blinked. Had Vincent ever asked her to “mind him” before? She knew he hadn’t; that he was far more likely to tell her she had to follow her own will than to follow his.

I... all r-right. You’re sure you’ll be okay?” she asked, aware that she was stammering a lot, all of a sudden. Her lawyer’s training usually forbade that.

“I’ll be fine.”

He took his half-naked self out of her kitchen without a backward glance.

--

He shampooed his hair (yet again) feeling the deeply rich, slick oil run down his back. He couldn’t avoid getting his stitches at least a little wet, but at least breathing was becoming easier. Much.

Something else about him was wanting attention, however.

The oil had a sensual feel, as it slid down his skin, and an erection that was only half there, in her kitchen, now made itself known. It was a familiar ache, and he knew that as an adult male, it was hardly his first one.

He considered taking care of things in her shower, then decided to simply turn the temperature down on the faucet, and allow his body to cool. If anyone was going to bring him to orgasm, he wanted it to be the woman he utterly adored.

The possibility that that had never happened between them didn’t even present itself to him. He knew how deeply he loved her, and that there was a passionate edge to his regard, along with the emotional one. That knowledge seemed to settle certain other questions he might have had. Incorrectly.

*I’ll wait. I’ll wait until we’re... together, again. That will make it that much sweeter,* he thought, realizing that if he could be thinking about sex, he was recovering well, indeed.

The lather from her shampoo was thick and creamy, its luxury a foamy echo of the conditioner. When he emerged, one of her large, fluffy bath sheets waited for

him, on the towel bar. He pictured himself wrapping Catherine in it. *I'll have to convince you to take another shower with me, perhaps*, he thought, then dismissed the notion, before it could cause another reaction. There were practical concerns to attend to, here.

He patted the stitches dry, gently, unable to see some of them, thanks to how the cut trailed around to his back. His hair still felt silky soft, and he noticed the wide-tooth comb on her vanity. He wasn't sure about the protocol here, but he didn't know if there was anything else he could use, either.

Away from her very watchful eyes, he inspected his healing form in a long mirror affixed to the back of the bathroom door. The blonde body hair was darkened by the water, and lay in long, smooth streaks down his large frame. He knew he was powerfully built. That strength was what had enabled him to endure, and to reach her. Though by no means vain about his physique, he understood its purpose, and its prowess. The muscles in the broad shoulders had served him well, as had the power in his legs.

He turned his attention to his injuries. The marks on his wrists were shrinking in size, and they felt better already. He figured they would finish healing soon enough, though the deeper cut was still sore when he turned his hand a certain way. He poured hydrogen peroxide over it, then applied Peter's cream, and dressed it with a fresh bandage.

His back felt better, and he rotated his shoulder, testing for stiffness. There was less of that. Aside from the two ripped nails, his hands were the strong weapons he knew them to be. He knew he'd be passable, in a fight, as long as he wasn't too outnumbered. It was an important thing to know. Perhaps the most important thing he could know, for now.

Other than the fact that he knew he never wanted to leave Catherine. That, he thought, was a given.

He heard her rattling dishes, on the other side of the bathroom door. It seemed like she was focused on trying to either feed him, dress his wounds, make him swallow two large white pills, or get him to sleep. Perhaps he'd talk her into

reading with him, a while, tonight, or listening to music. Something not too taxing. Something so that she could get used to having him near, some more.

Vincent liked the sound of that, on instinct.

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## *Chapter Seven*

### *"Shakespeare Knew Everything"*



The third day of sleeping in her bed, he could truly feel his strength returning. *Not bleeding will do that for you*, he thought, stretching carefully, as he decided he could finally tolerate a shirt. He padded his way into her living room, loosely dressed in tunnel pants and the soft white shirt. His feet felt better, as well.

She was sipping a cup of coffee as she looked out the balcony sheers. He wasn't sure how long she'd been up, but clearly, she'd preceded him.

"Vincent, you're up. Go... go back and lay down. I'll bring you a tray, this time," she said, happy that she was up well before him. He could smell the plate of eggs that was cooling in her kitchen.

"I'm all right. I'm feeling much better, this morning." He looked out at dawn's light as if it was a thing he often saw. She realized that considering he couldn't remember much, and at least some of those days had been spent above ground, he was probably as familiar with the sun as he was with the moon, at this point. It was an odd conclusion.

"Do you? Do you really feel better?" she asked.

For some unaccountable reason, the question brought the glint of tears to her eyes, immediately. She was as surprised by them as he was.



*Stop this. I have to stop this.*

She set the cup down on the nearest flat surface. "I'm sorry," she said, swiping at them. "I don't even know..."

But she did know, and so did he. Crossing to her in a pair of quick strides, he tugged her in, and held her with a firm hand, on her shoulder.

"You had to be afraid. For too long." He sensed her trembling agreement.

"Every second of it," she agreed. "And minutes too many to count. I was terrified for you. For days," she said into the soft shirt he now wore.

"My love should never be thus," he said, positive he was correct.

She sighed. "You don't call me that, either."

Vincent closed his eyes, over the pronouncement. "So Peter Alcott assures me. What do I call you besides 'Catherine?'"

She shook her head but held him tighter, then loosened her grip on his side, aware of his stitches. "Nothing. You call me Catherine, and I call you Vincent. We've never had... pet names for each other."

He dropped his head overtop hers, planting a kiss on top of her sandy crown. *That may well be, but I promise you I dreamed of a few,* he thought, but didn't say.

She took in a deep, steady breath. "I don't know what this is. I think I'm fine. Then I... I just react."

"Fear... changes us. You are healing as much as I am. And perhaps just a bit slower?" The second was asked as a question, as he tipped her chin up, gently.

"I don't see how that can be, considering you still don't remember who you are," she said.

*Perhaps I don't need to. Perhaps I know everything I should, right now. Like how lovely you look when you're standing in morning light.*

"You had to be afraid for a long time. And now I am nothing but a burden for you.

Let me get you something?" he offered.

She gave a wan smile as she wiped her eyes. She knew he wanted nothing to do with her stove, but it wasn't needed. "You're never a burden. And you know where the toaster is," she managed.

He went into the kitchen with her on his heels. They were going through the bread. "We'll need to get some more of this," he said, carefully settling two pieces into the toaster, imitating what he'd seen her do, yesterday.

"Mmm. Wait until you taste William's. It's much better. I was thinking that later tonight, we might try to go down. I think it's a thing we should try, Vincent."

Vincent let his hand linger on the lever, at her pronouncement. *Go Down. Below. Away from her. But...*

"That is... if you're feeling well enough? And not until much later," she hastened to add. "Nighttime. We can make it to my sub-basement, but for obvious reasons, I want to do that when no one is around."

"For obvious reasons," Vincent concurred, feeling the spring catch on the lever as he let it go. *If this is something you wish, then ... I suppose... we should?* He didn't know. He had no way to. At the moment, he felt as caught as the warming bread was, and just as destined for a dark, low place.

He felt like this was "home." But he knew he had another. He said nothing more. He knew it would do no good to argue about wanting to stay here. This light, airy, sunny, safe place wasn't truly his home. Both she and Peter Alcott insisted on that. *Very well*, he sighed, internally. There was no sense fighting it.

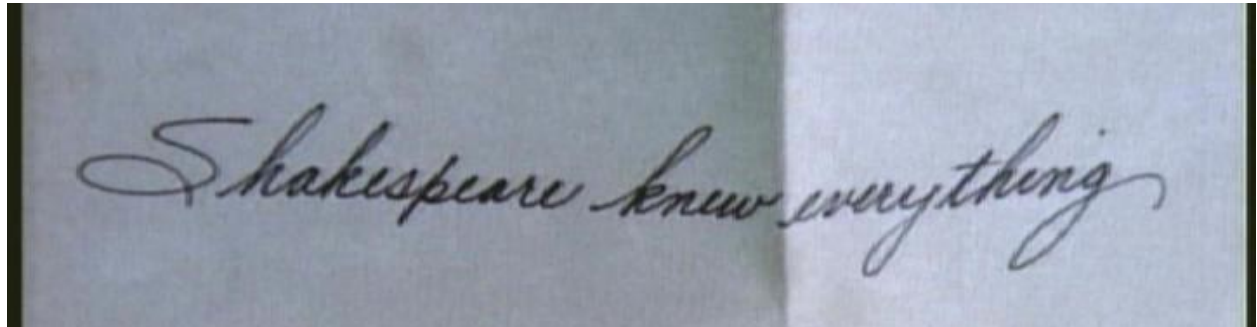
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They spent the day near each other. She showed him her television, again, but he was still fairly unimpressed. He enjoyed her stereo far more, and her book collection.

"This is old," he said, his hand going to her book of Shakespearean sonnets, almost unerringly. He tugged it out of its slipcase.

"You gave it to me," she smiled, hoping some part of him remembered it.

*Did I?*



He read the inscription, and the sonnet, marked by the long-dried rose.

"For thy sweet love remembered," he quoted, running a taloned hand down the page.

"Do you remember the verse?" she asked, curious. He seemed drawn to the books, but not because he remembered reading them.

He studied the page. "Some few lines, perhaps," he said, trying to let the words settle, and find purchase, inside his heart. "I think I remember the feeling of sending it to you, more, though I've no memory to connect it to."

His pronouncement made Catherine even more curious. "When you read this... can you tell me what you're feeling?" Catherine asked. If there was one thing he could speak about, it seemed to be that: how he felt.

He frowned a bit, as he looked at the page, trying to touch the memories it invoked. *'I all alone beweepe my outcast state...' We were... separated, somehow.* He felt the pang of it. *Separated, and trying to find our way back to each other? Is that right?*

"Separation. Love... and... fear. I was... desperate, in some way, when I sent you this. Were we... angry with each other? Did I... displease you, in some way? Disappoint you?" he asked, lifting his eyes from the page to hers.

Realization caught Catherine unawares. *Desperate? What an incredible word.*

She remembered the events that had preceded the book being left on her

*balcony. I'd been falling in love with Elliot. And you knew it. You had to know it. Of course that would make you... desperate. No matter what I said. And then... and then Elliot and I blew apart. And when I came home... this was here. For me. Sent by you.*

She the first time she'd met Elliot Burch, and the internal conflict she'd fought, as she'd been falling in love with him. She and Vincent had been very new to each other, back then.

*"Don't struggle so, Catherine. We both knew this day would come."*

She remembered him saying it to her, back when her job at the DA's office was still a new thing, as well, back when Dr. Sanderle had been treating the deep cut on her face with antibiotics, and her father had hoped she'd return to his firm, one day. It all seemed so long ago, now.

She'd gone to the museum where Elliot was donating a roomful of art. Jenny Aronson had been with her. And... and she'd met Elliot. She now knew that Vincent probably first sensed the first stirrings of her attraction, for the handsome millionaire.

But she and Elliot's budding romance had imploded, and he must have felt that, as well. The book had been on her balcony, waiting for her. It was her way back to Vincent, a bridge of sorts, between them.

"Did I?" he prompted, at her silence.

She shook her head. "We've never been... angry with each other, I don't think, though our situation has... frustrated us, often enough. And you've never disappointed me." She stood near, and kissed his shoulder, through the soft, white shirt he wore. "But you're right that we were... struggling, then. It was when we were new. Just... beginning, with each other," she stated, not wanting to rehash a difficult past.

He took in her explanation, and seemed to absorb it into his huge frame. "Then I should have brought you volumes, and not just this one thin tome. And an entire bouquet of red roses, rather than just the one. So you would be more certain of my intentions," he said, settling the book back on the shelf so that he could draw

her into another embrace.

*No. No, you don't send me a dozen red roses. In a crystal vase. That was Elliot's trick. You send me one. When you want to meet, when you leave me a note... you send me one. And I swear that one means more to me than any bouquet possibly could.* She embraced him more fully, allowing more pressure in the hug. *I'm so lucky to have you,* she thought.

"You did just fine," she answered, feeling it.

She smelled like the shampoo she favored, as well as the other things she applied to her body. Soap, deodorant, even the laundry detergent she used. It all combined to make something he could only identify as "the Catherine smell." He liked the clean scent, tinged with rose water.

"It's funny to think about how long ago that all was," she said, as he held her.

He felt the memory of Elliot Burch pass over her awareness, like a cloud that blocked the sun for a moment, and then moved on. He did not remember the man's name, but he felt that there had once been trouble, between the two of them. That he had perhaps nearly lost her, because of it.

He felt her push the memory away and let it go, no trace of it lingering, no wistfulness attached to it. Whoever his rival had been (and as beautiful as she was, he was aware she would have had some of those), he'd clearly been the victor. She sighed, as she moved her arms lower down his back, out of reflex, and he liked the feeling of her "settling" into his arms, and against his big body.

"It's getting time for your pills," she said, eyeing the mantle clock. She was nothing if not a studious nurse. It was indeed time for those.

"In a minute," he said, adoring holding her, feeling the curved, small shape of her beneath the casual sweatshirt she wore. This felt familiar. This felt right.

*She's small, even for a woman,* he realized, and her athletic shoes gave her little, in the way of height. He liked where her head rested, just against his breast, and he was aware that in heels, it would nestle only a bit higher, yet still beneath his shoulder. He was also aware that she often stood up, just a little, on the balls of

her feet, when they embraced, and that he could feel the alluring roundness of her woman's breasts pressing to him, just below his solar plexus. One hand brushed her back in a soothing motion, and he felt her sigh.

*My love should never be thus*, he thought again, knowing she was still letting a good deal of internal tension go. She'd been terrified about his missing status, for days. He knew she'd had at least one bad dream about it, while they'd slept near each other, last night. It had passed.

The mantle clock chimed. That was the sound that meant two more of Peter Alcott's white pills and a glass of water were about to go down him, no matter what.

"I'll get them," he said, feeling her draw away, and knowing a bit of regret for it.

"I'll bring you a plate. You're still supposed to take them with food," she replied, returning to the kitchen.

His eyes automatically dropped to the feminine sway of her backside, as she walked away from him. Though the intention to make love with her was a ways off, yet, thanks to his convalescent status, it was closer than it had been, before.

He looked back at the book. "*Shakespeare knew everything*," he quoted himself internally. *Did he know you are the most beautiful woman in the entire world? Ever?* he thought.

She brought him the medicine. A soft breeze moved her curtains, as she dumped them into his outstretched hand. "We'll spend the day together, have dinner, then get you home," she said, turning to go back into the kitchen to fetch him something to take the pills with.

The daylight through her sheers was shifting, as the sun proceeded across the sky. He knew that meant sunset wasn't so very far away.

*But... I am home.* The notion wouldn't leave him.

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## *Chapter Eight*

### *No Way Home*



It was after midnight when Catherine and Peter Alcott took Vincent down through her basement entrance, so that he could return home.

Which was to say they tried.

Vincent, in truth, didn't even care for her basement. The small, windowless area looked cluttered, unkempt, and narrow, none of the things her apartment characterized. (And many of the things the alleyways he'd had to wind his way through did characterize, in contrast.) To Vincent's way of thinking, this was very much like what he'd tried to escape from, not what he wanted to go toward.

Catherine pushed a stack of boxes aside, as Peter kept watch at the door. She showed Vincent the opening in the wall. She assured him that this was how she reached him, often.

He took in her explanation, as he stared into the unfamiliar darkness.

For Vincent, the entrance down into his world was like looking into the Abyss. The Abyss which he couldn't really remember, yet felt inside him, as he stared into the

rectangular hole. Somehow, it looked like a toothless mouth, waiting to swallow him whole. The straight lines of it made it feel like a trap; similar to the sensation he'd had when he'd stepped into her bathroom, only much worse.

"Come on! It's just a short ladder, then an open room. The floor is sandy, and there's enough light to see," she encouraged, preceding him.

Reluctantly, Vincent went forward. *If this is a thing she wants me to do...*

Catherine went down first, a thing that made it easier for Vincent. He would not let his love go down into that strange, foreign hole, alone.

He grasped the rungs, not liking how the cold iron felt, underneath his hands. He went down, feeling much the same way. When his foot touched sandy soil, he fought the urge to climb back up. As Peter came down the ladder and stood next to him, Vincent closed his eyes as he suppressed the urge to flee.



On an indrawn breath, he forced them to open, again. *I must do this.*

Father was there in the room, waiting for him, and the embrace he gave Vincent was beyond strong. There were tears in the old man's eyes. An older woman embraced him, as well. *I don't remember you. Either of you.*



Vincent felt sorry for them, but had no connection to them. He didn't know Jacob. He didn't know anyone. And there were quite a few of them, to not know, standing in pathways, as they all moved forward.

The scene played out again and again, and each time, Vincent confronted the blank emptiness inside himself. Some of the ragged-looking people told him their names. Others simply seemed to expect him to remember, when he saw them. All of them looked kind. All of them looked shabby, and like they belonged with the old clothes Peter had brought up for him.

For the first time, Vincent came to understand that the patchwork on his clothing was "normal," not just for him, but for this entire place, whatever it was, and how ever far it extended. That this was how they survived, on cast-offs and leavings; the kind of things he'd seen in the dumpsters, when he'd been hiding in them.

*It's a world built on what no one else wants,* he thought.

He could scarcely imagine a more dismal fate. And it wasn't simply because of their poverty. It was more than that. The very air around them all felt... oppressive, to him, and close. Everything felt that way. The walls, the low ceilings, the crowd... The hair on the back of his neck went up, unseen by anyone, but felt, by him.

Vincent kept going down the line of waiting people, all of them smiling, all of them... hoping to be acknowledged, by him. Be recognized. Be... loved.

*Blank and nothing. Blank and nothing.* It was the repeated sensation, as Vincent made his way through the strange, stone refuge that everyone insisted had been his home.

Names came at him. Not one was familiar.

*Zach. Rebecca. Jamie. Mouse. Why was a boy named after a rodent?*

Though he and Mouse had exchanged greetings a few minutes ago, it was that name that bothered him, if not the boy himself. He was odd, in his way, as Vincent knew he was, himself. *He's another thing no one wants, or has use for.* The thought was not a pleasant one, and he felt the cruel charge in it. He didn't

feel it was malice; just simple truth.

The old man everyone called “Father” had a limp. There was a young woman who spoke to him in sign language, clearly deaf. Many were elderly. Though several of them looked normal, Vincent knew they weren't, not really.

*What normal person lives in a hole in the ground?*

Someone else stopped him to welcome him home. A man named Pascal. He seemed... awkward, and alone. Vincent tried to remember him. *Blank*. He tried to recall what he'd ever felt for the small, squat, homely man. *Nothing*.

The faces. There were dozens of them. Hundreds of eyes, young and old, and they stared at him, even as some of them tried not to.

Vincent had no answer for any of them.

For days of running and hiding, he'd avoided the eyes of others, on instinct. He'd hidden in deplorable places and ached, and bled, and sweated, all to avoid being seen.

Now, it seemed like there was no way to avoid that.

They were all looking at him. Some with hope, some with joy, some with worry.

All with expectation. They all expected (or at least hoped) to be recognized.

“Welcome home, Vincent,” a little brunette girl said. She gave him a winsome smile. He had no idea who she was.

“Yes, yes, welcome,” an older woman greeted him. Her silky, greying hair was piled on top of her head in a prim little bun. The look of affection in her eyes said they were very close.

It was like looking at an utter stranger. A very expectant one. The greeting was repeated, again and again, with always the same results. Vincent's blue eyes flickered down the line of what felt like an assembled multitude. He did not know one person, in their number.

Catherine's hand was in his, and it tugged him forward. He went because she was asking him to. Not because he wanted to.

His expression became closed off, the deeper in they moved, and the crowd, sensing his discomfort, actually became fairly quiet.

Finally, a little girl near the first turn tried to speak. She had brown pigtails and an open, hopeful look.

"Vincent?" she asked it as a question.

He'd never seen her before in his life. Whatever it was that she wanted, he had no gift for her, either in his hands or in his heart. Vincent struggled, and reached.... and came up empty. *Blank. And nothing.*

"I'm Sama-" she began. He cut her off.

"No," he said, almost under his breath, not sure what he was answering. "Just... 'no,'" he repeated, not liking this feeling. Not liking it at all. The too-full-of-people world reminded him of all the emptiness inside him. *Are they empty, too?* He had no idea. Perhaps he didn't know them because there was nothing about them to know. He felt the nihilism of that, and the emptiness of it was threatening to pull him into it, even as the incredible weight of stone over his head threatened to crush him. "Just no," he said again.

Even with the bond, Catherine wasn't aware of what was about to happen, but Peter Alcott was. The blue eyes began to dart left to right, the indication of an animal, seeking escape.

The rocky ceiling seemed impossibly heavy, and the corridor increasingly narrow. The mass of humanity lining the walls made that even worse, and Vincent could feel the air growing less available. Lantern light was eating the oxygen, and he could go no further, in spite of Catherine's urging.

"No," he repeated the word again, this time louder, and to Catherine. She could feel him plant his feet, halting their forward progress.

Sweat bathed Vincent's neck, and he could feel himself fighting down the urge to run. Peter stayed near, liking none of it.

"Here are your chambers," Catherine said smoothly, not picking up on the level of his distress. "You'll feel better, in there. It's more private," she said, tugging him

gamely on.

He followed simply because it was Catherine doing the asking. And felt his thighs begin to tremble, inside his loose, patched pants.

They'd left the brazier unlit, aware of his dislike of fire as they were of his amnesia, but he swallowed bile and resisted the urge to run. Battery powered lanterns revealed the cluttered bedlam of his chamber. *This... is where I live?* He didn't recognize so much as one object there.

Trying to take in the room had a similar effect as the rest coming Below had. It seemed both unfamiliar and ... cloying, for lack of a better word. *More of something no one else wanted. And too much, of that. It's too close, in here. Much too close.* He wanted the airy lightness of Catherine's apartment. Desperately. He looked up, on reflex.

The room had an upper and lower entrance. It was then he realized how truly deep he was, inside the earth. *My God. There's a world, above me. Crushing down...* He looked around, but the gesture wasn't an exploratory, curious one. It was a frantic one.

*Too far. We pushed him too far,* Peter realized.

Peter knew the fully dilated pupils and sweating palms for what they were. He knew that Vincent was about to have a panic attack. Or something close to it.

"Cathy, move back," Peter warned. "Don't block his access to the doorway."

*We can't let him run. If he gets lost, he'll die down here,* Peter thought.

"... and over there is your bed," Catherine said, overtop of Peter. She'd been finishing the running monologue she'd been delivering, practically since they'd arrived. But she did hear Peter, and she stepped away from the doorway entrance, as she took in his warning.

Vincent's voice was unmistakably sharp. "We need to leave! I need to leave. Now!"

The words came almost on top of each other, and it was then Catherine realized

the depth of his fear. He was not just "confused" or "disappointed" or even "sad," or "nervous."

He was terrified, and struggling to manage it.

Looking around, Catherine realized that despite the unlit brazier, that the wealth of objects in the space contributed to a claustrophobic ambience, that the wall of stone which stretched up to the ceiling and the second level was a visual reminder of how deep in the earth they were.

The pipes tapped, and Vincent heard a passing subway train. Like everything else, it only served to heighten his distress.

Peter's voice was firm. "Cathy, take him back out. *Now*. He needs to go."

Catherine looked from Peter to her love, to the expectant eyes of those gathered near his doorway.

"Peter, please, let him try--"

Peter dropped his voice. "Cathy, he's sweating in the chill, and he's mouth breathing. His pupils are too wide and he's about to either bolt or fight, and I don't want to see either thing happen, with this many children close by."

The physician carefully slipped what he hoped was a reassuring hand on Vincent's elbow, drawing him back.

"Easy, my friend. We're taking you back up. Getting you out of here. Cullen, clear the corridor. I want an empty pathway back to Cathy's ladder."

A grizzled man nodded, and began herding the bystanders away.

Vincent wanted to turn his body, but felt strangely leg-locked in place, as the fear did nothing but build.

*Frozen in fear.* For the first time in his life, Vincent understood what the words meant.

It was Catherine who pulled him out of it, once she understood what Peter was saying.

"Vincent..." She said his name, but his ears were starting to ring. "Vincent, please. Come with me?" she asked, tugging his hand so that he turned. His eyes bored into her beautiful face, and he let it fill his vision, so that he wouldn't look at the millions of pounds of rock over their heads, waiting to kill them.

"Cath--rine," he could barely choke out her name.

"Yes. Yes, Vincent. Come with me. I'll take you someplace safe."

He heard her, but missed some of the sound, lost to an echo-ey pounding inside his ears.

"Co- w-me..." she said, and he could barely follow her meaning.

His pupils continued to blow wide, and Catherine could see the glint of fangs as he tried to breathe. He walked like an automaton, unable to look up at the tunnel pathway, eyes fixated on her.

*She was shelter. She was safety. She was all.* His heart told him no other truth, but that one.

A three-way intersection loomed before them. He didn't like the choice of it.

*What if she doesn't know the way?* "We need to get out," he stated. It was punctuated with a near growl

"We are, Vincent," she tried to sound soothing.

"We-a-V-cttt."

"Now!" he barked, tugging her by the hand, furious with the choices before them.

"Easy," Peter said, as Catherine saw what he had already seen. Vincent's palm was sweating in hers, and perspiration drenched the collar of his shirt and began dampening the front of his quilted vest, making a dark "V" of moisture, as the sweat gathered into its heavy folds. But for the cool tunnel air, he'd have been soaked, in spots.

"Go left," Catherine directed.

"G lef." He did so. At Peter's questioning glance, she explained "The park exit is

closer than my place. I don't think we have the time."

Vincent's voice was rough. "There is a city over your head. Concrete. Steel. Skyscrapers. Weight... unimaginable. Can't you *feel it*, Catherine? He demanded, as he stalked through the tunnels, willing himself not to run, not to drag her.

"Easy, big man." Peter kept pace, slightly behind the couple. "The exit to the park is just a few turns up ahead," Peter advised, nudging Vincent left, again, as he tried to go right.

*It's an impossible maze, down here.* He was utterly lost, and knew it. The feeling only succeeded in heightening his anxiety. He tried to bear right, but a torch lit hallway stopped his progress. He screamed at it, and threw himself away from the open flame. *Fire! No!*

"Vincent?" Catherine could only say his name, as she struggled to keep up. The sorrowful eyes of some scattering tunnel dwellers marked their progress.

"Jamie, take the torch down. Clear a path to the park exit. No fire," Peter ordered. Jamie did as he bid her. Vincent could make no sense of the sounds Peter made, other than the one word he hated: fire.

"Too many people, like rats in a trap. It will all come *down*. God, is there not so much as one window, in here?" *But of course, there wasn't. They were all beneath the very earth Manhattan was built on.*

"Peter, the Music Chamber?" Catherine asked, thinking the grate would show him the night sky, and calm his fear.

"Is not what he needs. Don't let him run, Cathy. He'll get lost. We're taking you out, Vincent." Peter was grateful that golf and tennis twice a week kept him spry. Vincent's long stride was devouring tunnel ground.

"Where? I need to get out. *Where!?*" he demanded, the last word given on a snarl.

"Just ahead. The path to a metal door. A gate, then a tunnel just beyond, that leads straight up into the park." He caught some of the words, but mostly he followed her pointing hand.

Vincent pulled loose from Catherine and ran straight for it.

It was then that they realized he didn't remember where the mechanism was, to open it. His hands pounded on the steel.

Peter reached up, and pulled the lever. The heavy metal door slid back, slowly.

"Home. I need to go home," Vincent demanded, throwing open the gate and pushing his way through the doorway the moment his big body could fit.

"But you are home!" Catherine called out before she had time to think about it.

He was through the circular entrance tunnel and scrambling through the drainage ditch before Peter could even arrange to close the door behind them. By the time Catherine could reach him, he was standing in the grass, bent double, his hands on his knees, taking in huge draughts of night air. His clothes were sweat-soaked, his breath, heaving. He looked like a runner in oxygen debt.

Catherine ran up to him, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. The collar of his shirt was sodden. Peter came up right behind her.

"Breathe. Just breathe," Catherine said, keeping hold of him. Vincent simply nodded, and did so. *Air. Sweet air. Open. Thank God.*

Catherine's green eyes questioned Peter's. *What in the world?*

"Panic attack," answered the good Doctor Alcott. "And about as severe a one as I've ever seen."

"He's afraid of the tunnels? But that's not possible. He was *raised* there, Peter."

"I've never seen that... God-cursed hole in my life," Vincent said, knowing it was untrue, empirically, but feeling that way, just the same.

Peter nodded, keeping his eyes on Vincent's bowed back. "Keep your head down," Peter advised. "Better yet, just sit on the grass. You're not going anywhere for a few minutes, anyway," Peter said, pushing down gently on Vincent's shoulder.

Vincent realized he was right. The passing of his terror, the help of the oxygen, it was all leaving him with a kittenish weakness. He felt dizzy. His stomach wanted



to pitch. He sank to his knees, still gulping in air. He dug his hands into the soft grass, just seeming to need the purchase of the open ground, of feeling his clawed hands anchor himself to the soil.

"He was raised there. But he doesn't remember being raised there," Peter answered Catherine. "He has no memories to comfort him, from which to draw strength."

Peter squatted down beside Vincent, still not liking the dilation of his eyes, but approving that his breathing was starting to slow.

Vincent forced out words, speaking to Catherine. "Stay near. Your... hands." Vincent gulped, willing his heart to slow down. The ringing in his ears lessened, and he could at least understand them, now. "Keep your hands... on me. It feels... better... when you do," he told her.

She thought back to his reaction when he'd been frightened, in the tunnels, and then further back to when touching him had brought him out of the mania that had been induced by Paracelsus' drugs. *My touch... helps him? Physically?* It was something she'd have to consider, later.

She complied with his request, still confused as to Vincent's sudden and extreme overreaction.

"It's like he was terrified of something," Catherine said.

"It's like he was programmed that way. Claustrophobic. A thing he's never been, in his life. And yes, I'd go with a hypnotic suggestion, for the cause. Maybe something augmented by the drugs they gave him," Peter said, putting his fingers to Vincent's neck so he could check his pulse. It was still racing. "It started in your basement. He was starting to sweat, then."

Catherine shook her head. "And who do we know who loves hypnosis?" she asked. Catherine looked back down the pathway to the tunnels. She turned a little, and it lessened the contact her hand had with Vincent's shoulder. He reached up and held her hand there.

"Stay. Please." She increased her grip, and held him fast.

"I will. I am," she replied.

"He wasn't this way in your apartment, was he? At all?" Peter asked, knowing Catherine's apartment was actually much smaller than the area they'd just left.

She scanned her memory. "He's seemed... a little leery of my bathroom, at first. It's small. Much smaller than his chamber."

"It is white. And ... well lit," Vincent gulped the words. Peter nodded to her.

"Cathy, think about it. If you wanted to keep him Above the ground, unable to go down, and you could only make him afraid of one thing, two at the most, what would they be?"

Catherine searched for an answer. *Darkness. Darkness, perhaps.* But as soon as she thought of it, she knew that wouldn't work. A combination of torchlight, candlelight and lamplight would show him the way.

"They made him afraid of fire."

"Yes, and fair enough, but that's reaction, not just suggestion. Every animal is instinctively afraid of fire. It's an easy fear to play upon, to heighten, by any means. I'm talking about making him afraid of something he's never been afraid of, before."

Peter looked back toward the shadowy drainage culvert. "Every tunnel entrance I know of would require him to travel through dark, narrow places. Places with buildings on top of them."

*Claustrophobia.* Her mind latched onto the word.

Catherine knelt in the grass next to her love. His breathing was returning to normal. His eyes had lost that glazed and panicked look.

*Of course. It's why you stand near my windows, isn't it?*

"I think it's why he likes being near your balcony," Peter said, realizing it at the same time.

"Vincent... Vincent look at me. Are you afraid of close spaces?" Catherine asked.

"Cathy, not now," Peter warned. "Don't make him think about them."

Vincent simply nodded in answer, and then gagged, trying to hold down his last meal. Catherine was immediately contrite, as she tried to embrace him, and send him her strength.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she apologized.

He let the nausea pass, loving the feeling of her embrace. He recovered his equilibrium and answered, "I can bear the small size, if I have to, as long as I can stay near a door."

He brought his head up, wanting to look at the night sky. The huge space of it seemed to comfort him. He let go of the ground, and pulled his clawed fingers back through the damp hair at his temples, feeling the benediction of the night air upon him.

"I slept in a dumpster... though... the lid was propped enough so I could... breathe," he said between gasps.

He watched what was now a half moon track across the night sky. *Air. Open air. Open air and the moon. Yes.* The comfort of it was a tangible thing, as Catherine's slender arms continued to stay around them.

He shifted his gaze back to his companions, and took in their worried, expectant faces, as he felt his stomach continue settle, his heartbeat continue to slow.

"But you aren't wrong. I don't want to travel ... downward. Where it feels like the world is above me."

They all knew that he was stating the obvious, at this point.

*So, with no memory, you climbed up my building to reach me. Up, because you couldn't go down.* Catherine realized.

"He's never indicated that he wants to go back home, or that he feels safe, Below," Catherine admitted to Peter. "He's been quiet, whenever I've mentioned it."

"Or flatly refused, in his way," Peter recalled. "I'd say someone conditioned him

to be instinctively phobic. Fire, tight places, the notion of the weight, over top of him... Things you'd normally associate with the tunnels. Easy fears to prey upon. Or to... suggest." He raised a grey eyebrow. *And yes, I know who you're thinking of, right now.*

Catherine kept her hand on Vincent's shoulder, even as he returned his hand to hold hers there.

"So that no matter what happened, even if he got away..." Realization was coming, for all of them.

"So that no matter what happened, he wouldn't be able to find his way to safety, even if he did escape. If 'escape' was what it was. If he wasn't just turned loose."

Vincent shook his head, at the last. "I wasn't. I had to kill a guard to get out."

"Did the man who held you seem like he cared much for human life, Vincent?" Peter asked, almost rhetorically. Vincent shook his head.

"Vincent, the man you killed... was there anything... special about him?" Catherine asked, remembering Erlik.

Vincent wasn't quite sure what she was asking.

"Only that he was of good size, near to my own. Dark hair. Dark eyes."

"But he was... human?"

Vincent's brow furrowed at the question, and realized it hurt to do that. The headache was back. With a vengeance.

"Of course. What else would he have been? Do you mean... was he like me?"

Catherine shook her head. "No. No, not like you. You're the only one like yourself we know of. Did he say anything to you? Have any kind of accent?"

Vincent was about to shake his head, then thought the better of it. "Only the man in the mask spoke... Ever."

Catherine shrugged at Peter, who returned the gesture. *We can do this later*, his look told her.

Just then, Jamie called to Peter, from the mouth of the tunnel. She'd given up the torch for a lantern.

"Peter! Father's here! What should I tell him?"

Peter exchanged another look with Catherine. "I'll go," Peter said. "Take him home with you, Cathy. Make sure he drinks, when he gets there. He's dehydrated." Peter waved over a blonde, young woman Vincent barely remembered meeting.

The doctor put a helping hand under Vincent's arm. "Jamie will follow you, at a distance." He nodded toward the direction to his young friend. "She'll come for help, if you need any," he said, loud enough for them all to hear. Jamie prepared to do as he bid her.

"It will be okay, Vincent," Jamie stated. She set down the lantern, knowing he was afraid of fire.

Vincent thought to himself, *Will it? What good is this slip of a girl, if there is trouble?* But then his natural sense of empathy gave him the answer, as she came forward. There was confidence in her every step. *Fighter. She's a fighter. A fierce one.*

Catherine supported his other arm as he rose, helping to steady Vincent as he got to his feet.

"I'm sorry. So sorry," she said to him. "We were trying to help you, not hurt you. I swear."

"I know you were." He hated the fatigue that was setting into his muscles. "Just... don't try to help me that way again. Please." His head was down as the other three exchanged knowing glances. *He can't come home. Not right now.* They might as well have said it aloud.

He stumbled off in the direction of her apartment with Catherine, Jamie following close behind.

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## *Chapter Nine*

### *Phantoms and Fears*



"I've never in my life," Jacob told Peter, as Catherine was helping Vincent cross the park.

"I know. I know, Jacob. It was... incredible," Peter replied.

"That Vincent... *Vincent*, of all people... would not be comfortable in his own home!" Jacob fretted, walking back through the tunnels with his longtime friend.

"Yes. It's very strange. And severe. Most amnesiacs are initially uncomfortable in any new place, but 'home' tends to jog the memory. Once they acclimate themselves, they settle right in. And start to remember."

"There's no head injury? No brain trauma? You're sure?" Jacob asked.

"I checked him out myself, and looked as closely as I dared. There was nothing. You saw the hair on his head. He hasn't been shaved for a surgery, and there are

no bumps or bruises, even though that's a bit of a wives' tale."

"Psychological trauma, in addition to the drug he was given? Perhaps... combined with the electric shock he received?" Jacob was fishing for any way to explain this, and he knew it.

"Could be, certainly. He was held. He *was* hurt. But... I don't know, Jacob. He was subjected to pain, to deprivation. But the worst of his injuries were actually caused by him, when he escaped from whoever was holding him. He *was* held, he was tormented. Painfully. But anyone meaning to kill him had ample opportunity to do that." Peter worried the information over in his mind. "They went to great lengths to make sure he didn't know himself, but... what good does that do anyone? Outside of the one person we know *couldn't* have done this?" he asked, meaning Paracelsus. "None of this makes sense."

"Do you think someone... wanted him to escape? Eventually?" Jacob asked.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "I've consider it a possibility. Truth to tell, I don't know what to think. None of this seems like it was done for a reason, one way or another. I ran his blood, and can't find anything, though that doesn't mean much, since I don't know what I'm looking for. Jacob, I have all kinds of bad feelings about this."

Father's mouth set itself in a grim line. "You surely wouldn't be the only one. He didn't recognize *any* of us. Not one."

"Someone's made him afraid of places and things he's not normally afraid of. That's going to be a lot harder to treat than a drug injection," Peter admitted.

Mouse met them in the hallway, his voice a study in anxious hope. "Vincent coming back?" Mouse asked, eager for positive news.

Peter shook his head. "No, Mouse, not right away. Vincent is... he needs to be with Catherine, for now. It's ... it's what he wants."

"But... Vincent comes home! Everybody said! Just had to keep candles away!" Mouse resisted the idea.

Father spoke up, and placed a comforting hand on Mouse's dejected shoulder.

"Yes. Yes, he tried, Mouse. We'll wait for a while. Let him get better. Then we'll try again. Later." *Much later. Maybe weeks. Or months. Longer?* Jacob mourned the thought.

Mouse nodded, sadly.

"Chin up, my friend," Peter told Mouse, but the words were for Jacob, as well. "You know she'll take good care of him. We will bring him home again, later. Tell the others for us, please?" Peter asked, knowing the tinker desperately needed something constructive to do.

"Okay, fine." Mouse nodded at that, and took what comfort he could, heading off down the passageway.

"Do you think that's true? That he'll come home?" Jacob asked, worry in his eyes.

Peter nodded. "I do. I don't see why it wouldn't be. If this is from an injury, say, when he went through the heavy glass window, it should heal in time. Though I think it's a long shot that that's the cause."

"He reacts badly to narcotics. John's drug lasted much longer on him than it did on other people," Father observed.

"He did say he was injected with something," Peter acknowledged.

"Yet you found nothing in his blood stream?" the other physician asked with interest.

"Nothing I could identify. Nothing obvious. Then again, I can't say I knew what I was screening for, Jacob."

Father nodded. Treating Vincent for anything had always been difficult. And had often depended on his body's own natural ability to heal.

"Vincent said something interesting when we were up in the park," Peter mused. "That only his captor spoke to him. That's a conditioning tactic for brainwashing."

"To make the subject dependent on one person. I've read about it."

"It's very effective. Whoever this was, Jacob... they knew what they were doing."



"So... you don't think this was some... random accident. Some person who bumped into him, and..."

"Considering he was lost in the tunnels, originally, I was never in favor of that idea, to begin with."

Peter rubbed the back of his neck, as they entered Father's chamber. A pot of tea, long gone lukewarm, sat in the middle of the table. Jacob poured some, anyway.

Peter dropped his voice to a low register.

"You know who Cathy thinks caused this."

Jacob rubbed his own neck, in sympathy. "I know. I can't even deny that the description fits. Dear God, for that fact, I can't even deny that the modus operandi fits. Kidnapping, drugs... The hatred of Vincent, hypnosis... John was a master mesmerist. Hypnosis would explain... much of this. He... had a gift for it, Peter."

"You say he caught you, that way?" Peter asked.

Jacob nodded. "All I know is, that one moment, there was a gun in my hand. I meant to shoot him, Peter. I truly didn't want to. But I meant to, if I had to. He pulled a pocket watch from a drawer. The next thing I knew, I was in a closet, coming to. A bump on my head and blood on my face. Groggy, from some sort of sedative."

Peter shook his head.

"So you think that's part of this?" Jacob asked. "Hypnosis?"

Jacob shrugged. "Vincent has a fierce will. But then, I'd like to think the same thing of myself." And they both knew how that had turned out, when it came to dealing with the Alchemist.

"I'm still not ruling out whatever narcotics he was given. John was into both. But Jacob, we can't be talking about this! The man who named himself 'Paracelsus' is dead!"

Jacob sighed, heavily. "Perhaps he had a twin. A very evil one."

Peter sighed as well. "Considering this is John we're talking about, that's a telling statement," he replied, declining the offer of tea with a wave of his doctor's hands.

"We're sure only Vincent was affected, was taken? There's been no further trouble near the hub? All the Helpers are accounted for? Nothing missing? No one else gone? You're sure?" Peter asked, trying to know how to help Vincent.

"Not a thing. We've been checking since this started. It's like the day we told you he was missing. It's as if the earth swallowed him whole, somewhere between the hub and Chinatown. But no one saw anything, and no one else was affected."

"That's a lot of area." Peter knew the route.

"And we've been over every inch of it."

"Cathy feels certain he was held near the docks."

"Considering the amount of time he was missing, it would have been easy to take him there. John knew of passages that no one else di-- I'm sorry, Peter. Even I'm doing it."

Peter templed his fingers, before him.

"Jacob. We're sure, *absolutely certain* John is..."

"His eyes were open, his pupils were fixed." Jacob cut him off.

"I know this sounds insane. But this is John, we're talking about. Could he have feigned his own death?"

Father considered the question, as he rubbed a very weary hand over his chin.

"The blood was very real, I assure you. Stains of it are still on the carpet, over there," Jacob nodded toward the area where the Alchemist had breathed his last.

Peter acknowledged the small stain that no amount of scrubbing would bring out.

"You checked for a pulse?"

"I truly didn't think I needed to. By the time I got here, Vincent had already... well. You know."

"Eviscerated him. Horribly."

Jacob nodded. "And very, very thoroughly."

"You say it was Mary who wrapped the body? Who carried it down, for her?"

Jacob looked up, and to the left. The direction the eyes tracked to, for memory.

"Cullen took him, along with James. Neither of them knew John from the early days. Somehow, it seemed easier, that way."

"None of the younger men?" Peter asked. James had spent time in the navy, and Cullen was far from a green recruit.

"No. Somehow, it didn't seem right."

Peter shook his head. "The mask, the voice, the drugs, the physical description Vincent's given of him... It's almost as if someone wants us to *think* it was John who held him."

Jacob shrugged. "If that's true, I have no idea who it could be. Thanks to people like Mitch Denton, I can say we've had our challenges, over the years, but I can't see someone like Mitch throwing their lot in with John, before he died."

Peter considered. "Mitch Denton? Hmmm. What do you think? He's got a hatred for Vincent, true enough. He didn't know John, but his father did."

Jacob shrugged. "It could be. Anything 'could be,' at this point. God knows Mitch despises this place, and surely he detests Vincent. But I thought he disappeared after the last time we saw him. Perhaps he's even in jail, again?"

"I'll ask Cathy to check into it. Anyone else spring to mind? Someone strong. A man with a taste for torture, and who knew about John."

"We know that... thing who took Catherine is dead," Jacob replied, discussing Erlik. "To lift and chain Vincent, he would have to be someone strong."

Peter nodded. "No one has seen anyone new, lurking around?"

"If anything, it's been quiet, lately. Or it was, until Vincent's abduction." Jacob rubbed his temple, indicating that a headache was coming on. *We're chasing a phantom. And my son does not know me.*

The rigors of the day were taking their toll on everyone, as Father stared at his cold teacup. "Thank God he found his way to Catherine. That's all I have to say." Jacob shoved the cup back, realizing he didn't want tea any more than Peter had.

Peter rose. "For that, I think we *all* need to say a little prayer of thanks. Whoever took him, I think they meant him to die horribly, Jacob. Horribly... and maybe even publicly."

Jacob's old face went pale, at the last word. "That someone would be so cruel..." It was one of Father's worst fears, for his son.

"They clearly didn't want him to be able to reach shelter, if he should escape. Either that, or he's suddenly and spontaneously developed a case of claustrophobia, thanks to what he went through. And none of us think that."

Father shook his head. "I want him home. I want him back where he belongs, where he's safe. He's too... exposed up there. But I can't deny how... relieved I was the moment you told me he'd found his way to Catherine."

"That bond of theirs saved his life," Peter said, buttoning his jacket.

"And likely not for the first time," Father replied, reaching for his walking stick, preparing to escort Peter out.

"Don't bother. You're exhausted. I'll show myself out, then check in on Vincent and Catherine. You'll be all right?"

Jacob nodded. "I'll be all right. I just... miss him, Peter," Father confessed.

"I know you do. I think, deep down, he misses you, too," Peter consoled, laying a comforting hand on his old friend's shoulder. *Chin up, Jacob. We'll figure this out.*

"Peter..." Jacob stopped him as he went up the steps to the exit.

"If you think he'd be all right with knowing it, please tell him... well, please tell him we all love him. That we want only what's best for him."

Peter nodded. "I'll pass it along."

"He's asleep," Catherine said, as she opened her door a crack, before removing the chain and pulling it wide.

"I think he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow," she reported, ushering Peter inside. Peter peeked in through the open bedroom doorway. Vincent was indeed asleep. Soundly, according to his breathing, though his hand searched a little, at the empty space next to him.

"He's staying in your room, still?" Peter asked.

"For now. I suppose it's time I pulled out the sofa bed. It looks like he's going to be here a while longer," she replied, pouring herself a cup of coffee from the carafe. "I stayed near him the first few nights, obviously. Want some?" She held up the pot.



Peter declined. "Jacob offered me tea. Everyone is trying to get me to drink something, it seems," he said, watching her set the carafe back on the warmer then tap the side of her ceramic mug with a nervous fingernail.

"He'll be all right, Cathy."

Her green eyes shifted from the mug, to Peter's face. "I wish I was sure. Peter, it's his home! He was in a panic."

"Easy, honey. He should be all right. Really." Peter hoped he didn't sound like he was just offering a platitude.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

"Because if it's hypnosis, it will lose its power, over time. Minds don't like to be played with, and Vincent's is stronger than most."

"And if it's drugs? You know how much John loved those, and Vincent is sensitive to them. He was still hallucinating from the effects of John's narcotic for hours, after other people had stopped after only one."

"After which they often died," Peter added. "His constitution kept him on his feet. And any narcotic wears off."

"The street drug he was exposed to was supposed to wear off," she persisted. "But it didn't, not for a long time."

Peter nodded at her logic. "He was overdosed. And you brought him out of it."

Catherine leaned back against the counter, and took another sip of the coffee that had been there since morning.

"I seem to have lost my touch, then, when it comes to bringing him around," she observed.

Peter wasn't so sure that was true. "I'm sure you haven't. He wouldn't be alive right now, without you, Cathy. How's his side? His back?"

"He still favors the side, but you can see it's better. He says the shoulder itches."

"A sure sign it's healing." Peter patted her shoulder, clearly meaning to go. There was nothing more he could do, here.

"Just to be sure, Jacob and I would like you to see if Mitch Denton is still in the neighborhood, maybe. He has a history with ..."

"He's serving time in Chicago for felonious assault. They wanted his rap sheet from New York, so we sent it. That was last month."

"You're sure they still have him?"

"They should. Thanks to his priors he got the maximum sentence. Parole shouldn't even be mentioned, yet."

"I know this sounds crazy, but would you make a call to be sure?"

Catherine nodded. "Soon as I can. Do you think that's who did this to him?"

Peter shrugged. "Honestly, none of this is like anything Mitch would pull. But he's

strong, and he's devious. He hates Vincent. And he knows the tunnels."

Catherine set down the cup. "I'll make a call, but I don't think it's him," Catherine replied. "Vincent said the man who held him was tall, but slender."

"Yes. But that the guard was close to his size. I just... I think I'll feel better if we at least know it's not Mitch."

Catherine nodded, realizing she didn't want the coffee any more than Peter and Jacob had wanted old tea. She tossed the contents down the sink.

"He was so... not himself," she said of Vincent.

Peter studied her worried expression. "I know it sounds crazy to say this, Cathy, but he *is* healing. He's in much better shape than he was a few days ago. He was on his last legs when he came to you."

Catherine agreed. "I know. I just... the thought of Vincent afraid to go home. It... it's *incredible*, Peter."

She turned her head toward where she knew Vincent was laying, and Peter had a moment to study her beautiful profile.

*At least he found his way to you*, Peter thought.

"It is that. How are you bearing up, Cathy? Will you be okay?" he asked.

"I will. I am. I was... terrified when he was missing. No matter how tough things get, this is much better than that," she replied. "As long as I keep him away from an open flame... and out of the tunnels, he seems just fine. Just... not like himself, exactly." She was clearly worried. It had been a long day for all of them.

Peter nodded again, knowing exactly what she meant. "By that I take it you mean how freely he expresses his affection for you. He's still doing that?"

Catherine nodded. "He hugs me. Often. He looks like he's almost ... comfortable inside my apartment, a place he avoided, before. He's called me "My love," and "Beauty." He never did that, before."

Peter nodded in understanding. "And he's sworn at me. He's using phrases he's heard, but never emulated; things he must have heard on the street, maybe. And

he's comfortable sitting in a room with broad daylight coming in through the windows. A thing he would have avoided on instinct. I see it too, Cathy."

Her brow furrowed, as her attorney's brain worked at the puzzle. "Why, Peter? How? How can he be Vincent... yet not be?" Catherine asked.

Peter considered her question, carefully. "Memories are where our sense of self comes from, and where some of our inhibitions come from. Maybe where all of them come from. Has he been violent, at all? Done anything to scare you?"

Catherine shook her head. "No, he... he growled at the gas burner on the stove, when I turned it on to make tea. Threw himself against the wall. But that was fear, not... not aggression."

Peter looked toward the wall she indicated. "Anything else?"

"If anything, he's... sweet. Curious. Kind. He tries to help me around the apartment. He's... less reserved, but still considerate. You know Vincent."

Peter nodded. *Yes. I know Vincent. But does Vincent know Vincent?*

"I have an early shift at the hospital, and an afternoon at the free clinic. Good-night, Cathy. Call me if you need anything. And I do mean anything." Too tired to ponder any more, Peter kissed Catherine's proffered cheek and let himself out her door.

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## *Chapter Ten*

### *I Do Not Know You*



When Catherine opened that same door the next afternoon, she was almost unsurprised to see Jacob standing there. Dressed in the same suit she'd seen him in when he'd gone to see Margaret Chase, he looked both out-of-place, and determined, as he leaned on his walking stick.

"I thought since Mohammed couldn't come to the mountain," he explained, glancing over her shoulder into her apartment. Catherine stepped aside and took his overcoat. She knew it helped him blend in with the other New Yorkers, though the lapels of his jacket and the tie were a touch wide.

"Come in. Father, please know you're welcome to visit, any time. He's getting dressed in the bedroom."

Jacob entered Catherine's apartment, realizing how many signs of Vincent were

there. Two mugs of tea sat on her dining room table, along with plates she'd yet to clear. A pair of his books were on her mantle, and his leather valise was near the door.

He emerged from her bedroom looking much as he had last night, dressed in his usual clothing, though without the cape, which was draped across the back of one of her couches.

"Vincent," Father greeted him.

The blue eyes flickered with no awareness, and it was then that Jacob realized that the last time they'd met, he'd been dressed in tunnel garb, and hatless. Jacob removed his grey fedora, and watched recognition return.

"You're the one they call 'Father.' They say you took me in. I'm sorry, I... I don't remember you." Vincent kept his distance.

"I did indeed," Jacob replied. "Such a long time ago. I uh... brought you these," he said, adding to the small stack of books on the mantle. "It's your copy of Shakespeare's plays, and er, a bit of Virgil."

Catherine watched Vincent watching Jacob. His big body was tense.

"Did I... like Virgil?" Vincent asked, aware that Catherine's eyes were on him.

"Not always," Jacob admitted, remembering teasing Vincent about that, when they were trapped in the cave-in, together. "But it was a thing you learned to like. To love."

The parallel was clear. The old man was hoping that Vincent would do that again, with him; not to mention the rest of his tunnel family.

When Vincent advanced to where Jacob stood, there was no unkindness in him. But if they were all honest, there wasn't much in the way of kindness, either. His next words were blunt.

"I do not know you. Or any of them. I walked into what felt like into the belly of a beast, farther and farther, and I knew no one. I don't know you any more than I don't know them. I just don't know you less. I don't know anyone at all. Or

anything about the place you live in, other than I desperately wanted to leave it.”

Jacob’s eyes closed over pain. “I understand that. You must also know we’re not... giving up on you, Vincent.” He glanced around the tastefully appointed room. It looked so... unlike what he was used to; and so unlike what Vincent was used to.

“We used to play chess together, a few times a week. I should have thought to send up a board.”

“I wish you wouldn’t bother.” The reply was swift, and the blunt tone was unchanged.

“Vincent!” Catherine’s voice betrayed her dismay.

Blue eyes begged for her understanding, if not Jacob’s. “You have no idea what this feels like. No one does. I look at him... at them... and it’s like staring into a... a great hole. One that wants to swallow me. I sense his concern, and his sorrow. I all but... drowned in it, last night, from everyone. They all look at me, expecting something. But I look back at them, and it’s like... like staring at a blank wall, then looking into a deep pit of ... nothing.” *Blank and nothing. Over and over again. Endlessly.*

Vincent backed away from Jacob, clearly not liking the sensation of being near him. “Blank and nothing. Blank and nothing. Over and over. No ... purchase, no comfort... and all the while, the city over my head threatening to come crashing down on me.” He was pacing, and standing very near her balcony doors, even as broad daylight streamed into the room.

*He should be farther inside the room. Maybe even in the kitchen. Away from windows. Away from... light.* Jacob thought.

*He’s upset himself remembering last night. He wants the open feel of the windows,* Catherine thought. She sent Jacob a sympathetic look.

Father knew he had to go. That in being here, he was only upsetting his son.

“If others come, I’ll tell them just to leave things at your door,” Jacob told Catherine. “I don’t want any of the children... hurt by this.”

"I understand," Catherine replied. "Please tell them I'm sorry. That we all are."

Father considered the predicament they were now all in. Vincent, it seemed, could be nowhere but here. And Catherine couldn't avoid her job, or her friends, indefinitely.

"You need to ... return to your work, soon." It was another worry the tunnel patriarch had.

"After the weekend, yes. I... we'll figure something out, Father. I'll resign if I have to. But... part of me thinks I might be able to help, by going back. I can check on Mitch Denton, for one thing. Make a few inquiries near where he was probably held. Maybe come up with something else."

Jacob nodded at that, knowing if there was one thing he couldn't do much about, it was her work schedule.

"I can only hope you find something," he replied. The older man moved toward her door. "Good-bye Catherine. Vincent. You'll let me know if there's anything I can do?"

Catherine nodded and came forward, though Vincent simply remained still, on the other side of the room. Father opened her door, dismay in every line of his old frame. He looked every one of his years, whatever that number was.

"Of course I... I mean *we* will," she agreed, waiting for Jacob to turn his back on her and head toward the elevators, before she closed the door on her guest.

Vincent could feel the sorrow inside her, and the conflict.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. For not remembering. For making an old man feel... unwelcome. I don't know what else to say," Vincent offered.

Catherine knew he hadn't meant to hurt Jacob; that he'd been honest in how he felt. There was no sense censuring him for something he hadn't caused and couldn't fix. She gave him a sad smile.

"Whatever this is... it's not your fault. It's just... he loves you. Very much."

She could see her words disheartened him, further. Not because he was sad for

having disappointed Jacob, but because he knew he'd disappointed her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. It was the best he could offer her, by way of an apology.

"Oh, Vincent, if there's one person who isn't to blame for this mess, it's you," she replied.

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True to Jacob's word, no one else from the tunnels asked to come into the apartment, though Jamie knocked on the door when it was close to evening, and handed over a basket of dinner. Catherine accepted it, and gave her young friend a heartfelt hug, which was returned full bore.

"He has to come back," Jamie said, as she held Catherine, tightly. "It's just... it's not the same, without him..."

"I know. We're trying. We'll figure it out, Jamie," Catherine consoled, not quite sure she believed her own reassurances. "Thanks for coming up, and for the meal."

"William is obsessed with making everything he likes. We're all going to be eating pot roast and strawberry muffins until he runs out of the ingredients."

Catherine gave the young woman a reassuring squeeze. "Tell him I said 'thank you.' Tell him we both did." She knew that the latter was untrue, but felt it needed to be said.

Jamie nodded, and left.

Vincent watched Catherine from the louvered doorway to her bedroom, as she set the basket on the table. "That was the girl who followed us home, last night."

"Jamie. Her name is Jamie. I don't... I can't say how many years you've known her," Catherine replied wearily. She began pulling out bowls. It was still warm.

"I have nothing for them. Whatever it is they expect of me... I have nothing for it," Vincent said, emerging from her bedroom, where he'd heard every word.

"I know," Catherine said sadly. "You're just... you're a *part* of them. A huge part. I think maybe... all of them are realizing how much, right now."

*Am I not a part of you as well?* he thought.

“The food... smells good,” he said, aware not only that it did, but that she seemed to like it when he made some sort of “connection” with the place and people everyone considered his home.

She said nothing, as she removed a loaf of fresh-baked bread, and set it on the table.

Vincent’s voice was low. “I... I know I disappoint all of them. Disappoint y—”

“Nothing you’ve ever done has ever disappointed me,” she said quickly. “I just... we’re going to have to figure out how you’ll manage, when I’m not here. If that happens.”

She was weary from the worry of it. He could sense as much. On that at least, he could assuage her.

“I can stay here and tend to things. You’ll only be gone during the day. No one will come here, especially when you’re not home.”

Catherine was still worried, as she fetched cutlery from the kitchen. “Vincent, I know you think this place is safe for you, but really, it isn’t. You’re too far... into my world, here. Much too far from safety – or at least what you used to think of as safety. Too exposed, here. I have friends who drop by, sometimes, in the evening, and a boss who does that, unexpectedly, when he thinks there’s a need to. The building superintendent sometimes needs access to the apartment, for whatever reason. He has a key.”

She uncovered a slab of roast beef with potatoes, and kept talking. “That doesn’t happen often, but...” She shook her head. “I can keep them all away for a while, I guess. I just think...”

She was struggling with all of this, and it was then that he realized that she wanted him back under the ground just as much as Peter Alcott, Father, and all the rest of them seemed to.

Vincent watched her set the table, aware that the chore was just something to keep her hands busy. He could sense the depths of her concern. She was a dog

with a bone, and the bone was “him.”

“Catherine, if this is about my safety, I promise you I’ve survived far worse than anything—”

She shook her head in denial of what he was about to say. “For you, I understand that this is a place to hide, or shelter. But it’s only temporary, it has to be. In my world, for you, there are no safe places, not really —”

“Sometimes, we must leave our safe places.” The words came to him smoothly, and unbidden. *Wait. There’s more. More to the line.* His sharp mind struggled to connect the first part of the saying to the rest of it. ““And walk... and walk...”” he struggled to remember the rest.

““And walk empty-handed among our enemies.”” She finished the quote for him. Catherine saw the look on Vincent’s face, and watched him struggling to recall one of his favorite quotations. “Do you remember that line?” she asked, watching him wrestle with it, mentally.

He “pushed” inside his mind, hunting for why he loved the quote. *This meant a great deal to me, once,* he recalled that much. Then, the image of a book came to him.

“Red. The book is red. No... orange. Black letters. Large. A ... a number?” he looked confused.

“300 Days,” Catherine said, smiling a little. “You do remember something.” Her relief at that was palpable. “Maybe that’s a good sign.”

*I remember it somehow brought me to you. I ... have that feeling. We were... together. Outside? At dawn? How is that possible?* The image of her facing him, outside and in the daylight, came to him. Her hair was swept to the side in a fairy-tale style. *There was... sunlight on your face, as you looked at me, outside. How?*

“We... have something to do with this book?” he asked, still trying to remember. An image came to him. A brunette woman. Not Catherine. That didn’t seem right. For him, there was only Catherine, at the moment.

She supplied the answer to his puzzlement. “We met the author. It was our first

Halloween together. You... you said the book meant a great deal to you, when you read it; that it opened doors, and reminded you to... well, to do the things she had done." Catherine knew she'd find her copy of 300 Days, to give to him. She kept it in her bedroom, next to Owl Woman And Other Fables.

Vincent looked backward and hazily saw a distant day. One he had almost no memory of living through. "We...walked. Then sat. There is sunlight all over you." He stared hard at her, while he hunted the memory. "Are we... near water?"

Catherine's smile was immediate at the notion that his memory was indeed returning, in pieces. "Yes! We watched the sun come up together. Near the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge."

*Did we?* Vincent struggled to hold on to the image of her face. Her hair was different, but her eyes had never looked so green.

Then, like trying to snatch a ghost, the image faded, in his mind.

"300 Days." He repeated the words, seeing the cover of the book come into sharper focus. The author's name came, as well. "Brigit...Brigit..." He began to struggle again, and felt a headache coming on.

"Brigit O'Donnell. You went Above, so you could see her that night. There was trouble. A man wanted to kill her. You... saved us both."

Of that, he had no memory whatsoever. Catherine watched his eyes as they hunted, but came up empty. He shook his head. "I don't remember."

"You gave me another book of hers, as well," Catherine said, wanting to keep him thinking about the author he recalled. "Sort of a book of fables, but it's meant for adults, as well. Do you remember that?" She crossed the room to fetch it from her bedroom.

"No." *Perhaps*. No words or images came to his mind. But again, a *feeling* did. It was the sensation of being... enchanted, by something.

She pulled the two books out of her bedroom and brought them to him. The larger one fairly screamed its bright color at him. The second one was far more subdued, much softer. And older.



He flipped through several pages of both volumes, ignoring their cooling dinner, on the table. That the same woman had written both books seemed incongruous to him.

"The same person didn't write these," he said, looking at the disparity between them. "That is, it was the same woman, but she was one person here," he said, touching his fingertips to Owl Woman, "and another one here." His hand passed over 300 Days.

Catherine nodded at his insight. "She wrote the first before she met her husband. The second one after he was killed," Catherine explained, watching him as he handled the two very different books. He seemed more drawn to the children's book than the adult one.

"Every book changes us," he said softly, liking the feel of the old cover of the smaller volume. The binding was cracked and some of the pages were dog-eared. The dust jacket, if it had ever had one, was missing. It had seen much love. "We're one person when we open the first page... and someone else, by the end," he said, scanning the beginning pages of the fable. *Once Upon a Time...* The words passed through his consciousness.

"I ... I suppose that's true," Catherine said, watching the thoughtful expression on her love's face. *I never knew you thought that, about books.*

"A man's mind, once stretched by a new idea... never regains... never regains..." he struggled with the words, not knowing when or where he'd learned them.

"Never regains its original dimensions.' That's Oliver Wendell Holmes," she finished the quote for him, again.

"He was an author?" Vincent asked.

"A judge. One of my law professors had that saying framed on the wall of his office." *I know I was one person at the beginning of Great Expectations, and another, very different one, by the time we read the last chapter together,* she thought.

"I didn't know you felt that way, about reading," she said. *Then again,*

*considering the limitations of his opportunities, why wouldn't he? Catherine knew that books were the one way he could "see" the world he was barred from. Is that how we bring you back to yourself? By re-introducing you to the books you used to love?*

"I take it we never spoke of it," he said, remembering the feeling the quote had originally given to him. He'd felt powerful. Uplifted.

"No. I don't think we ever did. You... we read together, often. But sometimes... well. There just isn't much time, Vincent. These days I've been off, been at home... This is very unusual, for me."

He said nothing to that, and simply nodded his understanding.

He set the children's fable down and stepped away from it, seeming to have no urge to pick up 300 Days at all.

"Would you like to read them, together?" she asked.

"Perhaps." He sounded doubtful.

Catherine sensed his reticence. "We'll look at them, later. Maybe they'll help more of your memory return," she offered gamely.

"Perhaps," he repeated, not sure that was entirely a good thing, as he embraced her. His heart warmed, at her nearness; but he didn't like her declaration that time spent with her used to be a short, seemingly stolen thing.

*Would it be so terrible a thing, if I stayed with you?* It was a thing he thought, but knew he couldn't say.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

### *Angels Stand in Scattered Light*



He went down Below with her once more, this time, unannounced, and not so far in. There was no one else there, and he was clearly uncomfortable as he descended her ladder. But she urged him no farther through the tunnels than her threshold. This time, he managed to stay a few minutes more, without panicking. They stood mostly in the antechamber near her ladder.

He held onto one of the rungs, and looked up at the light. Catherine studied his face, as the scant illumination from above painted his features in bright relief. *No angel is more beautiful than you are, right now*, she thought.

Catherine set a reassuring hand on his arm. "It's all right. I'm here. I'm right here, Vincent. Are you... are you sure you wouldn't rather try the entrance in the park?"

He shook his head. "The tunnel wall is concrete, and closed in. I don't want to step into it, on instinct. The sensation is much the same when we come down from Above, through the door in the wall. It feels like both are trying to... devour me." He tried to offer her whatever assurances he could. "This is not... good. But it is better than it was the first time." He inhaled deeply, held it, then let it go, trying to dispel the tension that was owning his large frame. "It is better," he repeated.

They both knew he was there just to please her, more than anything else. Catherine watched him for the signs of panic he'd shown before. So far, there were none. But he hadn't ventured far into the room, either.

"This place... what happens here?" he asked, knowing not much could. It was Spartan conditions, at best.



“Happens?” she asked. He could sense her mind searching her memories. “Well... nothing happens, not really. This is usually where we separate. You walk me up, and I...” She followed his eyes upward. “I go up. While you ...” She didn’t really want to finish the sentence.

“While I watch you. While I stay down.” His eyes met hers, and held a moment, before he glanced around the small chamber. The floor was sand. The walls, tumbledown brick and stone.

“Do you have any sense of this place?” She asked.

He took a moment to answer, needing to overcome his fears so he could reach into whatever his inner voice was trying to tell him. He stood a moment, head down, hand still grasping the firmness of the ladder.

“This is a sad place. But not... sorrowful.” He struggled for an explanation.

“Poignant. I feel... poignant, when I stand here,” he said, stepping away from the ladder a bit, to see if the feeling changed. It didn’t.

“This is the parting place.” He said it so firmly, she knew he remembered the feeling of it, even if he never remembered doing it.

Blue eyes scanned the walls, no hint of recognition in them. To Catherine’s, he looked almost like he was measuring something. The room, for lack of anything else to see.

“This place... being like this... do I stand here? This feels wrong,” he said.

Catherine prayed some sliver of memory about his home was returning, even as she processed his words.

“No, no, actually. You usually walk me as far as the break in the wall over there. Then I go on ahead.”

He stepped toward the area she pointed to, not much caring for going deeper into the earth, but wanting to see the view from where she indicated. *How does it look when I part from you?* He wondered.

“Remain there,” he said, when she tried to follow him, hoping it would bring him whatever sense of security her presence provided. She did as he bid her.

He couldn’t go all the way back to the broken wall. Couldn’t... will his feet further. But he did make it a good distance.

Knowing he’d walked much farther than this, yesterday, helped his sense of equilibrium. So did the fact that there was no one else here but the two of them.

“Stand there. Just stand. In the center of the light.”

He watched her as Catherine did so, and the image was so familiar a sensation, he all but sighed from it.

She was standing in dancing dust motes, light streaming down from above. Though dressed in casual clothes, the light made a nimbus of her honey-colored hair, and accented the soft breadth of her shoulders, inside a long trench coat. Her dark tan slacks accentuated the delicate, feminine shape of her legs, and the belt made her waist look impossibly small. She looked up at the light, then back down at him, and for a moment, her face was painted in shades of gold and ivory, as she stood in scattered light.

“You look ... like an angel, standing there,” he said.

*You said that to me once before. At a different entrance, a long time ago.*

The compliment needed no response, so she didn’t make one. She simply stood still, hoping he would remember something more.

“Turn around. Please. Face away from me,” he instructed.

She did, and the fluttering of the hem of her coat reminded him of the angel wings he'd all but just accused her of having. She stopped turning when her back was to him. She didn't look up, this time. If anything, she looked downward, a bit.

*And now you still look like an angel. One who is leaving me,* he thought.

The sensation was familiar enough to cause a feeling of heartbreak.

He wanted to tell her they had to leave this place, together, that they had to go. But he willed himself to step backward, to the break in the wall, just for the familiarity of the poignant pain.



*I've felt this before. More than once. More than many times,* he thought, aligning himself with the shattered bricks. He put his hand on them, to steady himself.

The bricks, like the vision, felt familiar to his fractured sense of recall.

*I said good-bye to you here. I said good-bye. The first time I ever did it. Love... slammed into me, and I felt it. And yet I... I knew I had to let you go.*

The feeling of it was there, so wrenching, so true, that it would not be denied. He remembered nothing, of the particulars. Not why they'd had to part, or how long he'd known her, or even why they'd met. But he knew they'd parted here, and it had changed him. This was indeed "The Parting Place."

He looked to where his hand rested. It was where his height naturally bid it to go. He was willing to bet that if stone could hold memory, this one was full of his.

*You left. You had to. And I could do nothing but watch you go.* He knew it was true. Then, a parting impression, to add to the others: *How... impotent this feels.*

"I want to leave, now," he said, leaving the area behind as he advanced on her with long strides. His voice was just a touch hoarse.

He wasn't sporting the look of fear he'd had the other night. Catherine thought his expression was one of ... dislike, more than anything else. *Okay, not good. But better than a full on panic attack,* she thought, considering the visit a small victory, of sorts.

"We should return home," he said, his hand on the ladder once again.

Neither one of them thought he meant his chambers, when he said it.

"All right. Wait here, just a moment. Let me go up first; check the way." She climbed up the ladder ahead of him.

He watched her go, then looked once more at the spare area, now so desolate-feeling, without her in it.

*'No shadow of another parting from you.'* The line came unbidden, into his head. He had no idea where it was from, but it seemed important, to him - to them.

Then it seemed gone.

She looked down through the opening and motioned for him to come up.

*The Parting Place.* He climbed, hoping to never see the sparse, sandy room again.

--

"So aside from the memory of me on the bench near the water with you, and some verses, some quotes ...You... you can't remember faces, or names. But... but you remember feelings?" she asked later, trying to pierce what all this was. She'd been asking him questions since they'd returned to her apartment. So many, that they'd actually seated themselves at her dining room table to have the conversation.

He nodded. "The stones in that place made me feel sad. Your balcony makes me feel happy. I'm content to be in your shower, though I get no feeling of familiarity

from it," he elaborated, trying to help her understand how he was perceiving the world.

"And the tunnels, especially when you go deeply into them, that makes you feel afraid," she added.

They both knew it did. "I don't *like* it there. I don't think I like it anywhere. On the street, I was aware I had to remain concealed, and the pressure of it was constant. Below..." He shook his leonine head in denial of wanting to go there.

"I only know I want to be with you." He reached for her hand across the table, and took it in his. "That that need overrides all others. It almost blots out all reason, it is so strong." He knew he was trying to explain the sensation of being in love with her.

"I know I adore you. That I belong... close to you. With you. I'm sure of it," he finished.

He felt the truth of it. Felt the comforting sense of peace her nearness evoked. He felt her love, just as he felt his own love for her. Her touch was a joy, in his heart, and a quickening, in his blood. He loved holding her, for all the things it made him feel. Proximity was required for that. Being close to her was necessary. He knew no other way to say it than how he had.

She shook her head, again, bewildered by him. "Vincent, I love you so much. We love each other." Her soft voice struggled to explain more of what they were to him, so he could understand it. "But you have to know that the... the way you're describing things, that... intense need to be here. It's not that way with us, not how we... not how we deal with being together."

"Are we a thing that must be 'dealt with?'" he asked, not liking her choice of words. Catherine realized she didn't much care for them either. They just seemed to fit, at the moment. She tried again.

"Our lives, our responsibilities, who we are... They often... divide us from each other, for a while. We do often separate, right in that place we just came from. But we deal with it. Sometimes we don't see each other for days; sometimes longer."



He looked confused. Utterly. When he shook his head in denial of her words, his silky mane of hair shifted around his broad shoulders.

"No. That can't be right. I ... I *feel* that it isn't right, Catherine. I would...I would fight such a thing." He rose as he said it, and went toward what was now his customary place of comfort, her balcony.

She had no response to that. What could she say to refute him, and how should she even try. He was telling her how he *felt*, not describing how things actually were, between them.

He turned back to face her. "Is it... is it that you do not wish us together, very often? Because I promise you that such a desire is not mine."

In spite of his amnesia, he knew how he felt. *Was this just not something I've ever said aloud to her?* He was confused by her description of them.

She rose, and moved to join him. "It's not... it's not about who is responsible. It's a mutual decision. One we reached together."

"We discussed this, then? This... enforced separation?"

Now it was Catherine who shook her head in the negative. "No. Not... not discussed. It's... it's that our lives are complicated. Intense. Our worlds don't... well, they don't intersect naturally and--"

He gestured to the world, outside her windowpanes. "My home is minutes from yours. The drainage tunnel you showed me is literally a swift run and a fast climb from your rooftop. There's a way to reach me from your basement. Or for me to reach you."

She shook her head. "That way is dangerous to use. There are people near. We don't dare risk exposure."

He was clearly perplexed by whatever she was trying to tell him. It utterly warred with what he knew he felt for her. "I understand that. It still doesn't—"

"You often have other obligations. Or I do." Just because he couldn't remember those, didn't mean they didn't exist.

"Ones that keep us out all night?" He was still confused, and clearly trying to sort his way through what to him seemed like a morass of contradictions. Nothing she was saying aligned with how he felt, inside. *I want to be near you. Every minute I can. Every minute you will let me. Every minute I can... wring from the day. I know it, Catherine. I do.*

That much he knew. *You love me. I know it. I sense it, in your heart. You can't feel so differently than I.*

"The way we are right now, this isn't 'normal' for us," she replied. "Yes, sometimes, what I do keeps me out. Other times, there are people in my life who demand my attention. You can't come near me, when they are."

She was trying to answer him, yet struggling with it, just as he was. How to explain to Vincent about a person he didn't remember being, and situations he didn't recall having a hand in creating? Sometimes, when he stayed away, she had no real idea why. Those things were his business, and she didn't question them, just as he rarely questioned her. They both knew they led very separate lives.

*What is this? What are we?* He couldn't help but wonder it.

He felt her internal difficulties as she tried to explain "them" to him. Felt her struggling inside their bond, as well as visibly, in front of him.

She reached over and squeezed his fingers, trying to reassure him. "We are... very devoted to each other," she tried yet again. "And within that devotion is the ... surety that we each feel the other mustn't be... negatively impacted by the other's life."

He had no idea what she was talking about. None. Whatever fine point she was trying to make was lost on him, lost on the urge to be near her, and stay there.

The blonde head continued to shake in the negative. "Catherine...It took me nearly three of the longest days imaginable, to reach you. My feet were bloody and my throat was parched and I smelled like the refuse I'd been sleeping in." He squeezed her fingers and let them drop. "I was bleeding, sore and knew nothing of myself. And I *still* swear I could have picked you out of any crowd, even though I couldn't remember your name." The blue eyes were piercing, and the tone was

soft, yet adamant. "I swear that the minute you embraced me, the word "home" whispered in my brain. That I knew your scent, and the comfort it brought with it, before I even knew my own name, again."

He opened the doors to her balcony, and let the nighttime air rush in. He breathed it in, taking in the smells of the park, and the city, beyond it. The cooler air brought no comfort, and no peace.

"I don't want to leave here, Catherine. I can say it no more plainly than that. But if it is your wish that I go..."

She stood beside him, her anxiety as evident as his was. "Of course that's not my wish," she said, horribly unsure if she was saying the right thing. "How can it be, when all I've ever wanted was to be near you, to--" *love you*. but she cut herself off before she could finish the sentence. She drew in a deep breath.

"I fear that being here may do you no good, while trying to go Below may help restore your memory. Most of the memories you have... they were forged there. And the people...they're your family, Vincent."

"You are my family." He said it with a level of conviction that was unquestionable. They were words he'd never given to her. Never.

She dropped her eyes, accepting the very unexpected declaration as far more than her due.

"Father raised you. From since the day you were born. He loves you. They all do."

"I remember nothing of them. Any of them. Worse, I *feel* nothing *for* them, Catherine. Whereas what I feel for you..." he let the sentence trail. "Without it, I would still be lost in the city. Without it, I would likely be dead, right now. Or in a cage, wishing I was."

She stepped closer to him, craving his nearness, and wanting to comfort him. She heard the regret in his voice. *Don't send me away. Don't send me back there*. He might as well have been shouting it.

"The other day... among all those people... I... just..." He struggled to explain, and it was then that Catherine was aware that he rarely struggled to say how he felt

about her, but was wrestling with words, when it came to the world Below.

"When I was in those caverns... when we were walking through them... It's like... I can sense all of them wanting me to remember them, wanting me to love them. And I don't. *I can't.*"

He could only hope she understood. "The pressure of it reminds me of my... my failure, and the... the sorrow of it is hard to see, in their eyes," he confided, wrapping his huge arms around her.

She gave him a reassuring squeeze. "I can understand how that would be true," she replied, feeling the evening breeze caress them both. *It will be all right. It has to be.* She all but willed it to be true, and he felt her do it.

"When we go in that place your ladder descends to, I feel only the sense of parting it brings me. And the wish for a swift reunion. It is... bittersweet, at best."

She did understand what he was describing. She'd felt the latter emotion often, herself.

His voice was a whispered plea. "Please, let me stay near you. Just for a while. Just until we can decide... something."

"Of course you can stay here. Of course you can. I just... I worry that you'll be bored here, for one thing. This is an incredibly small space, compared to what you're used to."

"Considering I spent two nights sleeping in dumpsters, I promise you I am not... chafing for room," he confided, not wanting to bring up the harsh conditions he'd endured to reach her.

She simply held onto him, and didn't reply.

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## *Chapter Twelve*

### *Disarray and Dreams*



One day trailed into the next, both of them aware that they were about to pass from one sort of time together to a different one. He began sleeping on her pull-out sofa, not liking the change, but recognizing she felt the necessity of it. They tried to go Below, again, this time through the drainage culvert, rather than through her basement.



His reaction wasn't as negative as it had been. But it wasn't good, either. Repeatedly trying to get him to go down, or bringing familiar things up to him, was all anyone could think to do, so they did. He grew tolerant of candlelight, but still didn't care for a torch. They considered any progress forward a small victory. Catherine clearly kept hoping those would add up.

Vincent knew they were all trying to help. He was still uncomfortable with that, along with all the other things he was uncomfortable with. Peter and Father

debated the wisdom of sending him his journals, with both of them deciding against it. It would do him no good to read the private thoughts of a man he couldn't remember being. In desperation, Jacob boxed up some of the objects in his room and sent them up so he could have them, hoping that they, too, could trigger some form of memory. After riffling through the pile of what looked like a hodge-podge of refuse, Vincent left it sitting to one side.

Everyone seemed to be hoping something would cause more memories to return, for the big beast who now lived in Catherine's apartment with her.

If there was a more vain quest, Catherine had no idea what it was.

The look in the children's eyes went from one of hopeful expectation to disappointed resignation, each time he either tried to come down, or someone who had been to her apartment came to deliver either a meal, or the freshest batch of news.

Catherine, always the one to answer the door, was the one who had to deliver the sad tidings to them. No, Vincent seemed no better, in spite of the fact that he was clearly healing, physically. No, he had no plans on returning, and no one knew when he would.

The sorrowful look in the children's eyes mirrored the look in the eyes of the adults. Wherever Vincent's memories of all of them were, no amount of prodding by any of them brought those forth.

He even swallowed down his disquiet, and forced himself to go farther in than just the antechamber beneath Catherine's building. He made it to the place where the broken ground would force them to leap from any semblance of 'her world' and into his. She knew that he'd gone that far just to please her, and no one else. He made the jump. And then he leapt back. He would go over again, but only if she preceded him, across.

They both knew it was the distance between them that he disliked, and the vivid reminder the large space between them symbolized. *I will only tolerate this world if you are in it with me.* He might as well have said it out loud.

Nothing helped restore his memory. Not visiting his chamber (again) as the

claustrophobic feeling lessened, but refused to go away, not offering to play chess with him, to engage his mind in a game he loved, not showing him the books he prized, the chamber he used for a classroom, the Whispering Bridge, the Chamber of the Falls, the mirror pool... none of it. *Blank and nothing*. The words came back, and Vincent gave them to Catherine.

The hub was a maze to him, and it was Catherine who had to tell the tunnel folk that he was more apt to become lost than not, as he tried to negotiate the passageways inside his own home. Mouse was still a stranger to him. Samantha too. Everyone was.

By the weekend, Vincent had shortened their visits increasingly, as the futility of them led him to chafe, and grow more quiet. He clearly wanted to leave the place. He clearly did not want to be there at all, and wouldn't have been, save for Catherine's urging.

Catherine knew that Monday morning was coming, fast. She had no excuse not to return to work. Quitting over the phone would only bring Joe Maxwell screaming to her door. Short of resigning, she knew she would have to return to her job, somehow. She even wanted to get back, hoping being there might put her in touch with some clue as to how to help him. She knew she wanted to look through police logs for anything unusual. There were resources at her office that she didn't have, here.

But what to do with Vincent? He would not go down Below, without her urging him to it. He left when she did, as well. His sense of relief when they were back in her apartment was palpable. And again, so unlike what she knew Vincent to be, normally, that it was jarring, as a contrast.

Back in her apartment, he sensed her worry.

"It upsets you that I do not like to be Below," he stated, knowing what the bond was sending him. That was another thing she wasn't quite accustomed to. He "read" her often, and did nothing to disguise that fact.

"It's just... I know they love you. I know it's where you belong. Belonged," she said, holding her hand up to cut off his protest. "And you loved them, Vincent,

you did," she reassured him that the affection borne didn't just go in one direction.

"It appalls me that I cannot remember it," he admitted. "But it is still... difficult to see them. To feel their expectations of me, and know I cannot meet them, cannot give them what they want." He eyed a small elephant he had no memory of owning. It sat next to a tiny replica of the Statue of Liberty. Neither looked like they belonged in her apartment; and he had no earthly use for them. But a young boy named Geoffrey had insisted he have them, so he'd brought them back up, after their latest unsuccessful visit Below.

Catherine hung her purse and headed for the refrigerator. She felt like indulging in a glass of wine. After the week she'd had, she felt like she deserved one.

"We'll just keep having to hope. I'm going to pour a glass of wine, before dinner. Would you like one?" she asked, as he opened the picnic hamper William had insisted they take back up with them.

"Please," he answered, setting a crock of beef stew on her table. She brought in two bowls. *Leftovers from the pot roast William sent up*, she realized, returning to the kitchen to pour the wine.

As they sat at the table together, Catherine realized she wasn't hungry. Vincent must not have been, either. Both of them seemed far more content to simply move to the balcony and drink from large glasses, as they watched the city lights brighten, and increase.

"It's a spectacular view," he said, sipping the wine. "And this is good."

It was good. It even played with a memory he almost had. One where he had drank something very like it. But it hadn't been from a glass. He looked down into the amber colored liquid, and almost "saw" an earthenware tankard, surrounding it, rather than the delicate glassware. Then, the memory was gone.

He shrugged, and took another swallow. Wisps of his past danced just outside his reach, as they were wont to do. But they were regularly about the feelings he had for Catherine, or some few objects which actually did manage to stir his memory. They were never about the other people in his life, the ones who lived beneath



the ground.

Catherine's voice became tentative. "Vincent... I have to go back to work soon. I already called my boss. It's either that, or hand in my resignation. And figure out one heck of a story. Joe would be down here in five minutes, if I tried to just quit."

"That is a thing you must not do," he said, watching her trace the rim of her glass with a forefinger.

"It's just... you'll be here all by yourself," she explained.

Vincent eyed her door. "If the number of people from Below who keep bringing me things keeps increasing, I can hardly think that will be true. And if it is, it will only be until you return, at the end of the day. All will be well, Catherine."

She tapped the glass, then chewed a thoughtful nail.

"We could send you to Peter's. His home has tunnel access. It's easier for you to get to, than mine."

"I have no desire to go there. Is it your wish that I leave?" He looked confused. Stung, even. He set down the wine.

They always seemed to circle back to that. "No, no," she said, setting down her drink as well, so she could draw his hands in hers. "It's just... like everything else, this is new territory, is all. Very new. For me, as well as for you."

He nodded, accepting her appraisal. "Then we will learn it, together."

"I'm... feeling very tired," Catherine said, realizing the wine was going straight to her head. "Will you forgive me if I turn in early?"

He inclined his head in a gesture that made her almost think he had his memory back. "Of course. Sleep well. I will stay up a while longer, before I go to sleep."

"Don't forget to take your antibiotics. Peter says the stitches can come out, soon."

"I won't forget," he reassured her.

He watched the city lights only a few minutes more, before he too went to bed. It

had been yet another long day.

--

*She was dressed in white, but the material was loose, and he was brushing it down her shoulders before she could even protest, not that she was about to.*

*Her skin seemed whiter than the fabric, and smooth, beneath his questing mouth.*

*He warmed her neck, and felt the quickening of her heartbeat, beneath his sensitive lips. She was excited, and her arousal had a feminine flavor that was very different from his own.*

*'She wants to accept me into her body,' he thought, realizing how different that felt than the male counterpart, the urge to claim, to fill.*

The pendant weight of his testicles gathered, and the tightness in his nether skin sent him a warning.

*"I love you," he whispered, pushing the samite fabric farther down her arms, watching the bodice of the loose-fitting gown drop to her waist. Her breasts were a gift fit for a sultan, and the curving indentation of her waist was an artist's call to paint a canvas.*

*"You're beautiful. So beautiful," he breathed, right before he took her left nipple into his questing mouth.*

*She made a high, feminine sound of surprise, and arched her back, and he held her tightly to him, letting her feel the strength of his growing erection. He was hot for her, and throbbing. He wanted her to know. Wanted her to be aware of the power she wielded over him.*

*'Be merciful,' his mind begged hers, his hands going to the fabric at her hips. 'Love me,' he thought, tugging down on the cloth.*

*"I do," she replied aloud.*

And in Vincent's clearest, most recent dream of making love to Catherine, they did just that, exquisitely.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *A Life More Ordinary*



Her time away from work was ended. That, too, was a fact that lay between them. Monday morning came with the wholly unfamiliar sound of a blaring alarm clock. It startled them both from their respective beds.

It was the beginning of a routine that they both knew they would need to adjust to.

He watched her every move, in the morning, and grew even more in love with her, as he did so.

She rushed in the morning, and he tried to stay out of her way as she did so. The beautiful suits and tailored blouses that lined her closet now had a purpose, and so did she. She slept until the last minute, then dove into the shower for a hasty morning ritual. The best he could do was learn how to operate her coffee maker and at least see to it she had a piece of toast in her hand before she dashed out the door with her briefcase.

For Catherine's part, she ran down anything that looked like a lead, at her work. She came up empty. But she was surprised at how very "normal" being back at her desk felt. The world Above took her back as one of its own. Joe Maxwell even told her he was glad she felt better.



She gave a wan smile, as she tracked down work orders for broken glass, on the docks. All of it had to be done in addition to her regular cases.

It didn't matter. Nothing bore any real fruit.

Her desk phone rang and she was informed that two of her cases had pled guilty for a reduced sentence, and that an abuse victim was on her way up, for an interview.

It all felt so... routine, almost 'ordinary,' in its own way. Catherine couldn't shake the feeling of it. *Is this how we do this? Just... pretend it's all going to be okay, and hope it will be?* She had no idea. But she still didn't like the idea of Vincent being in her apartment in broad daylight, without her there. The tunnels were too far away, too difficult to reach, from there. Any chance at safety was.

After two days where she was clearly nervous about leaving him by himself, things got better.

Peter Alcott came by and removed his stitches, while Catherine was still at work. Vincent was almost glad of the old man's company, considering he was not yet accustomed to being alone in the apartment.

The kindly doctor couldn't stay. The rectangular device he wore on his hip summoned him to the hospital once more. But his visit had interrupted a day that found Vincent doing little more than making up the beds and tending the unloading of the dishwasher. He'd watered her rose bush before dawn, and moved the ivy into what would be a sunnier spot, when the sun rose.

Some time between late afternoon and early evening, her key turned in the lock, and he welcomed the sound. She always announced herself before she came in, just to put him at ease.

She brought dry cleaning in, and he helped her bundle herself in through her own door.

"I went down to the docks, today," she began without preamble. "I might have found the building you came out of, but I don't know. The glass is fixed. I wanted to ask them to dust for prints, but I couldn't justify that," she informed him, laying down the plastic covered clothes. "And if you were in there, there's the chance they'd pick up one of yours."

He understood, as he watched her settle her briefcase on the table. "I managed to get in. If you killed a man in there, the body is gone," she added.

"Were there traces of blood?" he asked.

She shook her head. "The floor is too heavily stained to tell. Trucks move in and out of there. Again, I could order a test for it, but I'd have to say "why." Crime lab people don't just show up for no reason."

Vincent accepted her words. "I have been here more than a week. We've had no trouble, and the people Below report none. I'll take that as a good sign," he replied.

"Is your memory any better?" She knew it was a question everyone asked him. She couldn't resist.

Then, she realized she shouldn't have, as she saw the regret in his blue eyes. "No. But I read some of Whitman. I... think I remember some of the words, from before."

That wasn't unusual. If there was anything he seemed able to remember, it was the words from books, just like he'd remembered the Brigit O'Donnell quote from 300 Days.

She nodded at that, and set down her purse, then went into the bedroom to change.

He eyed the suits she'd picked up from the cleaners. The expensive clothing confirmed how small she was, he realized, though he remembered few women he could compare her to, and none whose clothes he remembered hanging inside a closet.

She emerged from the bedroom in a casual shirt and slacks. He liked watching her move about the apartment. Liked watching her tuck a leg underneath herself, before she sat on the sofa, or in a chair. He tried not to look like he was studying her, as he simply sat on her couch, and feigned interest in his book.

After a little while, she did the same, choosing a file to read, rather than a novel. Her hair fell forward to obscure her face, when she looked down, the nearest thing Vincent knew to a sin. Her face was lovely. The scar on her cheek somehow made it lovelier, still.

She was springtime fair, with just a blush of pink in her cheeks, either when she sat on the sunlit balcony or took the stairs up to the apartment, something he realized she did, sometimes.

"Your day was a good one?" he asked politely. She nodded, and flipped a page over.

"It was. But now I'm back at the grind, and annoyed that I couldn't find out any more about who hurt you."

He had no reply to that.

--

That day slid into the next one. His sleep, that night, was dreamless, though he vividly remembered the one where he'd made love to her. It was an image that stayed with him, throughout the day. Having no memories of his past to call on, that "past" was now rapidly becoming the events of the last week. The events, and the dreams.

*I love you. We're... beautiful, together.* He knew it was true.

The new days between them developed a certain rhythm. She wrestled bags into the door, and he helped. She made a light supper, and he helped. She talked

about her day, and it was full of legalese he had no recollection of knowing, if he ever did. She explained the terms he didn't know. He saw the heavy law books on her shelf, full of the terminology she used. His love was brilliant. His love was beautiful. There was no doubt in his mind it was so.

There was a kindness to her that he would have sensed even without their bond. With it, however...

Work brought out a side of Catherine Vincent could only admire. She cared deeply about what she did, always. Her soul was a compassionate one. And by extension, a passionate one. She felt things deeply. He could explain her no better than that, and didn't need to. He loved her, and was aware that that feeling was deepening, as he stayed with her. He loved her more now than he had a week ago. He would feel even more, a week from now. He was sure of it.

He was deeply in love with her. He knew it as an unshakable truth, as an essence of being. She loved him, as well. He knew that, too, and marveled at its different, more nuanced, more feminine flavor. There was a fierceness to her, also. He knew she'd love with all that she was.

As he continued to heal, he hoped the time to confirm that would be "soon," between them.

--

Her fourth day back at work had not been a good one, for her. It was evident in every line of her body, as she came in the apartment door. She'd been delayed at work, and necessary errands had delayed her even longer.

She'd had to go grocery shopping. In spite of William's largesse, they'd been going through her supply of bread, tea, and toiletries. She'd had to make a stop.

*Compartmentalizing.* The word came to his sensitive mind, even though he had no use for it, himself. *She was compartmentalizing. It was how she got through her day.*

*Both now, and before all this happened,* he realized.

She pulled milk and tea bags out of the paper bag, and stowed both where they

went. The frown line between her brows persisted, as she took out the makings for salad and began to set them on the counter.

"A boy... Kipper, brought up a casserole," Vincent said. A foil wrapped pan was in the oven, waiting for her to turn it on.

"I don't want a casserole. I want something cold," she said, lifting out a plastic container of tomatoes she felt sure she'd paid too much for. She showed him the loaf of bread he'd indicated they'd needed, and set it in the box. Her expression was... dark, for lack of a better word.

"May I help?" he asked.

"I've got it." Her tone was short, though she didn't mean it to be.

Catherine realized that, as a woman who lived alone, she was used to far more privacy than she'd been getting, lately. Going back to work magnified the lack of down time, and the day itself had been an unpleasant one, case wise.

"I am a burden for you. Something more you must carry," he said, as she slapped a head of lettuce on the counter.

Catherine tried to stop taking her bad mood out on him, or at least to stop projecting it. And his statement wasn't true.

"I need to eat whether you're here or not. I just... I had a bad day, Vincent. It will pass."

He stepped closer, and dropped his voice to whisper softness. "Not just 'now.' Other times. Other days, both bad and not. Even before I... before they took me."

She stopped moving around the kitchen and stood, as the words washed over her. Yes. Sometimes it was hard. Fielding her friends, juggling her work life with her personal life, unable to tell anyone, missing him when he was gone... *Well, at least that burden is lifted*, she thought.

She gripped the counter and closed her eyes, feeling the weight of some of her choices. On a "good" day, she wouldn't have felt them so keenly. But today had not been a good day.



"Sometimes," she allowed, letting herself stop for a minute, and just feel it. She'd been racing ahead of exhaustion for what now felt like weeks on end, ever since he'd been missing. Before, truth be known.

His huge, warm form moved closer, still.

"Let me share the burdens with you, Catherine." His voice was warm honey. "Let me help."

She dropped her head and shook it, the soft hair moving in gentle waves, as she did so.

"We're not together enough." She was referring to before, he knew. "I'm not sure how to let you help when it gets like this," she confessed, knowing one of her cases, the abuse one, was not going well.

*The first is no impediment to us at the moment, and the latter I can take care of, myself,* she thought.

"You've had a trying day," he said, tugging her away from the counter and into the living room. He astonished her by guiding her into the bathroom. He reached over to turn on the bathtub taps, then adjusted the water so that it was warmer.

"Sit. Soak." He surprised her again by lifting her calf and easing off her heels.

"I am positive if I had to go through the day on these, I would feel no better than you do," he quipped mildly, asking for the other one with a gesture of his hand. She gave it to him, steadying her balance with a hand to his shoulder blade. That was healed, as well.

"Put bath salts in. I'll bring you tea. While you soak, I'll finish dinner."

"Vincent, you don't have to wait on me."

He stood, and eased her jacket off her shoulders. "You give too much. And take too little for yourself." At her look of protest, he silenced her with a finger to her lips.

"You tended me with far worse, Catherine. Let me return your kindness, if nothing else."

"But you were hurt," she said, even though his finger still rested against her lips. He loved the sensation of her warm breath on his fingers.

"And are you not 'hurt,' now?" he asked, then left the room.

Catherine put in the bath salts and stirred up the water, adjusting the temperature up to a warmth that made steam. She waited for him to bring the tea before she continued undressing. He set the cup on the edge of the porcelain near her hand, then inclined his head as he left, pulling the door to, but leaving it slightly open.

"Just in case you need anything," he clarified, indicating he would hear her.

*What would her soon-to-be-naked self ask Vincent for?* Catherine wondered idly, as she unbuttoned her blouse. The mind boggled, at that one.

She tossed her clothes in the hamper and eased her way down into the warm, fragrant water. As she soaked, she did indeed feel a good part of the day melt off her tired skin. From the ajar doorway, she heard music. He'd turned her stereo on for her. Debussy. She was too tired to remember the name of the piece.

It felt very vulnerable, she realized, to be nude and soaking in a tub, while a not-even-closed door stood between them. Vulnerable, yet safe. She knew he wouldn't enter unless she bid him to, and knew he was there, in her apartment, doing as he said he would. She heard the knife on the cutting board, and then heard him moving around, setting bowls on the table. She lingered in the bath, letting her thoughts drift.

*Vincent. So different. So still the same, yet so very different, from his usual self.* She couldn't imagine her Vincent taking her into the bathroom and drawing a bath for her, easing her out of her shoes, and insisting she climb in while he tended to mundane chores in her kitchen. It just wasn't "him," somehow. For one thing, it required entering her kitchen, and staying there.

She washed her hair quickly and reached for the towel, aware she was keeping him waiting, and not entirely comfortable with being naked in a tub of water while he was fully dressed on the other side of the door. For whatever reason, this was different than the days when she'd taken a quick shower, while he'd

amused himself listening to her stereo. She wasn't sure why.

*Oh, hell*, Catherine swore mentally. She glanced up at the empty robe hook, realizing she'd brought no bathrobe in with her. Alone in the apartment, it wasn't a problem. But a mad dash wrapped in nothing but a towel wouldn't do, and she definitely didn't want to put on her work clothes again, just so she could go get a decent wrap.

"What is it?" Vincent asked, from the other side of the door, before she could even frame the request. "You're annoyed. Does the music not suit you?"

*Yes. Yes, the music suits me. The bath salts suits me. The way you're catering to me suits me. And it all seems ... incorrect, somehow.*

She was also aware of one other thing. He'd just read her, in the bond, and used it to see to her comfort.

*Is that what the bond is for? Making sure I have a robe?* she asked herself. She knew that it wasn't. Except for this moment, of course, when that's exactly what it was.

"I... it's fine. I just... I forgot to bring in a robe," she said, allowing the small inconvenience to stand for the larger ones that still threatened to overwhelm her.

"I will bring it."

Catherine rose quietly from the water and stood on the other side of the door, processing what had just happened. *The bond*. He'd felt her irritation through the bond, and responded, literally instantly.

How many times had her Vincent known what she was feeling, before, and say... nothing? How many times had he wanted to help, but been unable to, thanks to the distance that so often separated them?

Catherine had no idea. To a certain extent, she'd never been entirely sure how sensitive the bond between them was. Surely, he didn't pick up on every minor nuance of her day? Obviously, he knew when she was in danger. It brought him on the run.

But a bad day at the office wasn't "danger," and a minor irritation in the bath wasn't a strong, pervasive emotion.

Was he "listening for her?" Had "her Vincent" ever done that?

In an odd flash, she realized he had, at least one other time. A time so long ago she'd all but forgotten it, and never thought to ask.

*The night I broke things off with Tom. That night, an hour later, he came to my balcony, after not having seen me for eight months. What are the odds that was a coincidence?*

She knew there was practically none.

*He was sensing my emotions. He had to be.*

"Will this one do?" he asked, thrusting a familiar white robe through the crack in the door. It looked odd, there, hanging off his furred finger.

"Yes. Yes, thank you," she answered, taking the proffered bit of satin, aware she couldn't ask "this Vincent" about something that had happened long ago, and about which he likely had no memory.

She could sense his large presence standing on the other side of the doorway.

"Catherine? Are you... all right?" he asked, sensing her turn of thoughts, yet unable to discern the particulars.

She wrapped herself in satin, and pulled the waist sash tight.

"Yes. I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

She heard him move away from the door as she grabbed her wide-toothed comb and scowled at her reflection.

*There's too much going on. When all this is over, you need a vacation,* she scolded her looking glass, mentally. She began to comb out her damp hair.

The pretty smell from the bath salts still permeated the tiled space. Roses. It reminded her of something. The weather had been dry lately, and she'd forgotten to water the plants on the balcony.

Knowing she'd forget if she didn't take care of it right now, she emerged from the bathroom and went straight to the terrace doors.

"Catherine? I..."

He watched her sail past, tugging the doors open to step out into the late evening.

She picked up the watering can, meaning to fill it.

It was already half full.

Testing the soil of the plants with her fingers, she realized he'd tended them all, already. She frowned at the buds on the rose bush, for a moment, realizing that it wasn't she who'd coaxed them into being there.

"Something troubles you?" he asked.

"N-No, not really. You watered the plants," she observed, tracing a budding stalk on her rose bush.

"A few times, now. They seemed dry. Would you rather I didn't?" He could not name the riot of emotions moving through her. They were shifting and changing. He doubted if even she could characterize her own mood, right now. "Is this another thing I never did, for you?"

The scowl returned. "Yes. It's another thing you never did for me. You didn't need to. I usually took care of it. It was my plant."

He nodded, watching her, as she traced the rim of the pot with an idle finger.

"I know it rained the night after I came to you. But that was days ago. The rose bush looked dry," he said.

"Do you remember this plant?" she asked, wondering if he did.

He stared at the long stalks, struggling to place a memory. One tried to come, but it vanished, like smoke. Something about her. *She'd... pricked her finger on a... a thorn? Was that right?* He wasn't sure, and the more he grabbed at the memory, the farther away it seemed.

"It seemed... precious to you," was all he answered, turning back toward the table.

It was, and always would be. But like everything else, how he knew that fascinated her.

She went into her bedroom to put on more than the thin robe she now wore.

The hangers from her dry cleaning were all settled neatly on the rod that extended from her bathroom door. The area in front of the balcony doors had been swept clean.

Though he hadn't touched her personal belongings, he'd clearly been tidying up. A stack of folded towels sat on the foot of her bed.

*He's been doing laundry?*

When she returned to the dining area, he pulled out her chair for her and seated her. The simple meal sat before them on her table. The salad filled a wooden serving bowl, and fresh squeezed lemonade sat in the glasses. He must have made it, too.

"Did you actually make lemonade?" she asked.

"I don't care for the powdered mix. Is it all right?" he asked.

It was, but again, she couldn't picture him doing something so mundane.

"Every time you think of me handling food it bothers you. Unless it's tea. Can you tell me why?" he asked, putting the napkin across his lap as she did the same.

"It's just... not a thing you usually do. In either world. Below, William cooks for everyone."

"Ah, yes. William. The portly man in the long apron. He is the one who sent up the muffins, and everything else they keep bringing?" he asked, connecting a face to the name.

She nodded.

"I take it I never cook for you, here." he surmised.

"I barely cook for me, here. I usually bring home something in a box, or eat Below, if I visit at mealtime."

"I should see to it you are better tended." He lowered his eyes as he said it, and began taking in his meal.

*Should he? Was that right?* Catherine wrestled with his assertion.

"You have other responsibilities." She defended him to himself.

"None of which are more important than you," he replied easily. "Will you speak to me of what happened today?" he asked. "Or would it be best if we left the subject alone, now that you are clear of your work day?"

Catherine picked at her food. "I'm having a tough time building a case that proves a man is abusing his wife. In the office down from me, Joe's busy having the same problem, on a racketeering charge. And Ted's fraud case ended up with yet another delay, and a judgment he didn't like. It just wasn't a good day for the home team."

"The case you struggle with. Is the accused person guilty?" Vincent asked.

Catherine nodded. "Yes, I think so. But the evidence of abuse isn't solid enough. The wife waited a long time before she spoke up, so there wasn't physical evidence, and what little there is, is old. Sometimes you can get a conviction - or at least a recommendation for therapy- on testimony and circumstantial evidence, but... I don't think so. Not this time."

"So a man who harms his wife is still free?" he asked.

She nodded, and toyed with her glass. "He's a police officer. That makes him very frightening, for her. Especially since I'm about to go into court with... well, next to nothing. I was hoping to catch him in a misstatement on his deposition. I didn't."

Vincent stirred around his salad with his fork, no longer sure he wanted much of it. "So the man... lied?" Vincent asked, wanting to be clear.

"Through his teeth, more than likely. He has a career to protect and it was always a weak case. The burden of proof is on me. I just don't think I have enough."

Vincent stood and set his napkin aside, and came to kneel beside her chair. Her damp hair was starting to dry, and her face looked fresh-scrubbed, and very young.

"I don't understand. He loved her. He is her protector, her helpmate, almost by definition. I do not understand how a man could ever hurt something so beautiful as the woman he professes to love," he said, brushing aside a damp lock of hair as he lovingly inspected her smooth skin.

Catherine put her fork down, all pretenses of eating a meal set aside, for the moment.

*Don't you?* she thought. *Because it's a fear that utterly dominated your thinking.*

But she knew discussing Lisa Campbell, the fact that for a time, he'd held onto the notion that his hands were not meant to give love, and the various particulars of a past he couldn't remember, were as fruitless as any other similar discussion. So she kept to the subject at hand.

"I admit it's something that always baffled me, as well," Catherine said softly, keenly aware of the loving look he was giving her. If a soul could shine through the eyes, his was there.

"He should be her defender. Not her tormentor," Vincent stated, brushing the back of her cheek with furred knuckles.

Catherine simply nodded at that.

"Something else was troubling you, a few minutes ago. Can you tell me?" he asked.

"How do you know I wasn't just thinking about the case?" she asked, watching, as his gaze lingered on her cheek.

"You were frustrated for much of the day, when you were at work. In the bath you were... puzzled. Is it a puzzle I can help you with?" he asked.

She held his fingers with hers, as she realized he'd sensed her when she'd thought about her breakup with Tom Gunther, and his re-appearance in her life.



"I don't think so. It has to do with something that happened when we first began. The night you first came to my balcony."

She saw his eyes look up and to the left, the usual direction reflex sent them, when accessing memory.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I remember nothing of it. Were you expecting me, at the time?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. It was very unexpected. I just... wondered if you remembered it. Remembered why you came, that night."

"Why come to you? Because you are my love. My beautiful love. I know I cannot remember, but I swear my heart tells me no other truth, but that one."

His face was so close to hers, she swore he was about to kiss her, but for her uncomfortable shifting in the chair.

The phone rang, and the answering machine picked up.

"Cathy? Hey, honey. It's Jen. You on the mend?"

It was Jenny Aaronson, wanting to know how she felt, now that she was back at work, and over her bad case of "strep throat."

*Saved by the bell?* Catherine wondered, not sure if she should curse her ringing phone or bless it.

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## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *The Gulf Between*



Work the next day was much the same, though it lightened a little, since a judge here and there seemed to see things Catherine's way. There was no progress on the abuse case she'd been working on, one way or the other.

Once home, she kept dinner simple, reheated leftover Chinese takeout in her microwave, and liberated the bowl of salad they'd had the day before. It was not lost on Vincent that she didn't care to cook, too much. Out of habit, she either brought home take out or tossed a large salad, for supper, on the days William didn't send anything up.

*No wonder she's thin*, Vincent thought, spearing lettuce on his fork. It was a thing he would have to rectify, he mused, though he detested the thought of trying to cook in her kitchen to do it. He could now abide the warm, yellow glow of candlelight, now that he'd given himself time to re-acclimate to it. But the blue flame from the stove still had the power to make him shudder.

"... so it looks like I'll get a continuance. That frees up my calendar for the next couple of days," she said, looking as if she expected some sort of reply. He realized he'd only half heard her.

"Anything that makes your day easier is a pleasant thing," he allowed carefully, watching as she wiped her mouth and set down her napkin. She hadn't eaten much of the light meal.

"I was thinking that this weekend, that might free us up to do some exploring, Below. Maybe see if some places feel... better to you than others. Perhaps the cavern of the falls? You can see the sky through an opening in the rocks. Or if

you're feeling really adventurous, maybe even the cave where you went for my neckl--"

"No." It was said with no equivocation, and he set his fork down.

He rose from the table, and stood a moment. Refusal was in every line of his large frame.

She wasn't giving up that easily. "You've been doing better. We can't give up on this, Vincent."

"Catherine, I know that all of you think that is where I belong. And I swear to you that I am trying. But I also swear that the farther away I get from you, from here, from these very rooms, the less I like it. An hour I can abide, for your sake. Two, if you demand it. But I've no wish to be there, even in your company. Indeed, your company is all that makes it tolerable as it is, now."

The furrow between her brows was unmistakable.

"I do understand what you're saying. I won't push you to it. But you do understand that this is... utterly ... not like you, don't you?" She gestured toward her furniture. It gleamed with polish.

Vincent shrugged and stepped away from the table, no longer wanting the rest of his meal.

"I understand everyone thinks that. I understand I disagree."

Catherine watched him pace back toward the balcony window, then stop there, looking out. *How to explain to him what he had no memory of?* Especially when the new memories he was making with her seemed to crowd those out?

"Vincent, if I were to ask you to describe your feelings when we go Below in only a few words, could you?" she asked.

*That was easy*, he realized. "Isolated. Separate. Not claustrophobic, not exactly, but... like there is a weight pressing down on me. Like I can feel all of the city, over my head." *And all their expectations, under it.*

"Are you afraid of a cave in?" she asked, pushing back from her own meal.

He struggled with the question, for a moment. "I'm not sure. Should I be?"

"You were in one, once."

The blonde eyebrow raised, slightly, as he came back near to her. "Was I?"

He picked up his bowl and hers, and carried both to the kitchen. She followed him.

"Yes. With Father. I was never more frightened."

He put their dishes in the sink, as she filled two mugs with water for tea.

"You made the salad. I should wash," she said, dividing their labor, instinctively.

He stood back, folded his arms, and let her. She rinsed the tableware and opened the dishwasher door, thinking to add it to the other dishes.

It was pristinely empty.

*He ran the dishwasher then emptied it*, she thought, having trouble picturing it.

"This... cave in. It... frightened you?" he asked.

She nodded, still aware that he was learning how to use her appliances, and had done so. That was a subject for another time, perhaps.

"It was... it was one of the first times I ever told you I was in love with you. After you were rescued." She said, as she turned on the water from the tap so she could rinse their bowls before she put them in the rack.

Realizing the significance of her words, he reached around her and shut the water back off. He turned her to him, and guided her so that he was leaning against the sink, drawing her into the vee of his legs.

"Then it is a thing I am incredibly grateful for, this cave in," he said, tugging her closer. His voice had dropped down a fraction, and his big body was relaxed as he clasped her hands with his and drew her nearer. "I'm sorry if you were frightened for very long. Were you?"

She didn't know how to answer that. And his body was now intimately close.

"Less than a day. But it felt like forever. I was... terrified for you. It was... it was

the first time I felt you in our bond, just a fraction of how you feel me. You were... calling to me. In trouble. And I knew it. Even before they told me, I knew it."

"So you came to me. Because I wanted you near. Wanted you... closer," he said, his voice taking on a seductive note.

Catherine flushed, and disentangled herself from his embrace. She put the cups in the microwave, then made a show of putting the leftover salad into the refrigerator.

"Maybe we'll want this later."

There was only one thing Vincent wanted "later." It was the same thing he wanted now.

Gently, so as not to frighten her, he placed his hand very lightly on her shoulder.

"I miss you," he said softly. The words were a lover's caress. "Miss being with you. Loving you. Miss being in your be-"

"Stop!" Catherine interrupted, whirling before he could finish the sentence. Suddenly, he filled the kitchen, and it was much too small a space. She stepped away from him, and veered back into the living room. He followed no more than a pace or two behind.

Her hand sliced the air, in negation. "We don't... we aren't like that. That isn't part of us." She clarified, as she kept putting distance between them. But Vincent stayed right behind her, clearly confused.

"Catherine, I didn't mean to press you. Simply to say that when you are ready to resume... things... between us, that I am healed, and... ready as well. I miss the feel of you next to me, at night." His voice dropped even lower. "There's no shame in admitting it."

Catherine's mind struggled for familiar ground, or even for the words she knew she needed, now. *Where, oh where to begin, here?*

"Vincent, there is no... 'next to you at night.' Not for us."

"Not at the moment, no, but..."

She shook her head as her meaning began to dawn on him.

"No, not just now. Not ever. We've never... what you're implying," she said, as desperate for a euphemism as she'd ever been.

He blinked at her assertion. Then denied it.

"Catherine, you can't mean that I've never been in your bed. Been your lover," he clarified, so there could be no misunderstanding. "I feel that I have. In here," he indicated his heart. "I dream of it, almost nightly. I see you. Beautiful you. Loving me. We are loving each other."

*Oh, Lord.*

"Vincent..."

"They are the closest things to memories that I have of you. We are... beautiful, together. You're utterly perfect. Glorious, even."

*No pressure there, she thought.*

"Stop. Please." She didn't want him to continue. Didn't want him to say things he'd remember and regret, later. Whatever his dreams were, they were private. This was a thing he'd never discussed with her.

"Vincent, I... I know you mean well. But those aren't memories. They're... just dreams. Or fantasies, perhaps. But they aren't memories. They couldn't be."

He stepped back from her, and took in the words, and their attendant implications. He seemed to have a difficult time processing it.

"You can't mean to imply to me that I am not... yours. In every way."

But her expression did just that. Not to mention a kind of stammering silence, which was suddenly between them. One she tried to fill.

"I... it's just... I mean we feel things, sometimes, but we never... It's not how we... Are you sure you remember such a thing?" she finally asked him, managing to finish the sentence coherently, at least.

"I 'remember' nothing. But I know how I *feel*, Catherine." *Not to mention how you*

*feel, under me.* "I understand what it is that I feel for you," he elaborated, one palm outstretched toward her.

"I... just..." Confusion wreathed her lovely features. She had no idea what to say to him. That much was obvious. "Oh, Vincent." She knew it was a horribly weak and inadequate reply. She just wasn't sure which other one she could give.

"You are beautiful... and the very thought of you fills me with ... longing." He chose the word carefully. "I feel a thirst I know only you can quench. I swear I know the rhythm of your breathing, in the dark. The shape of your leg beneath your skirt."

He gestured broadly. "Blindfold me and I could find you by the subtle cologne you wear, or by how you smell, fresh from your bath. In a city of *millions* of people, I found my way to *you*. Only *you*. I can find you through our bond. I *did* find you through it."

Her expression remained the same. After another moment of awkward silence, he more firmly registered what she was trying to convey to him. It wasn't just that they didn't now, or that they hadn't, recently. It was that they'd never.

"You mean... in all the time I've known you, we've never...even once..."

She shook her head, but also dropped her eyes. The latter was more telling a gesture than the former.

He looked around the room, as if her décor would suddenly be able to tell him the reason "why."

"Is there someone else? Is that why I am so jealous, so possessive of you, now?" he asked.

"You aren't jealous. Or possessive," she said, shaking her head.

But he was. It was all but scalding him, sometimes. As was the fact that she hadn't answered the first part of his question.

He waited in agony while he felt her gather her thoughts. *Another lover. A different man ... It would explain so much. I am not... part of her life. I interrupted*

*it. No wonder they all think I should leave.*

Perhaps she hadn't said anything before thanks to how injured he'd been, hadn't told him of the true love in her life, a love who was... someone other than him.

The idea of it cut him like the sharpest knife. *Unrequited love*. It would explain his devotion to her, and perhaps even some of her feelings for him. After all, it was possible for a woman to love two men, and his form certainly presented all the disadvantages he would need for her to choose the safer of the two options.

Between two choices, he felt he was obviously "lesser" in many ways.

Was he her lap dog, then? Too weak to pull away from her and too in love to give her up, completely? The thought filled him with a certain level of self-disgust.

"Is there someone else?" He prompted again, and the roughness in his voice made her realize she'd not actually answered him.

"No. There is no one. Not for a long time. I...When I first met you I was seeing someone. But I... I sent him away. I think part of me knew I had to."

The answer actually confused him more, though it relieved him, intensely.

"So that I could become your... platonic friend?" His choice of words and biting tone told her just what he thought of that.

Her expression told him she was having almost as much trouble with explaining this as he was understanding it. "It's... we're complicated to explain, Vincent. Too complicated, sometimes."

"Indeed. Considering I am all but reaching for you, body, mind and soul, yet... am told I never have, I'd say we were deceptively simple. We are not... many things, Catherine. Many things I'd have sworn we were, just moments ago."

*I know you. I don't know you, but I do. You're in my soul. You're part of me. How can this be? How could it stand?* He struggled with her assertion. It simply felt... so...wrong.

It was all he could think, and devastatingly, all he knew to say to her.

"You're part of what I think. What I do, what I feel. You're never far from it. It's



like you're *inside of me*, Catherine. All day. Every day. I can say it no differently than that. It's how I found my way to you. How I knew I could *trust* you, without asking."

She stood near, feeling the words hit her like hammer blows. *Yes. We're amazing. Just... not the way you think. And not because I've never... dreamed of it.*

He asked it, almost reluctantly. "I am not a part of you?" The look in his eyes was naked, and needful. He was as stark as he was honest.

She took his hands, knowing he needed gentleness, and not beginning to know how to tell him about the other truths which often governed them. Yes, he was a part of her. But sometimes, he was a very separate part, especially when he felt strongly about something.

"You are," she hastened to say it, before he took her silence as denial. "You are, and you always will be," she tacked on, seeing the tension in his frame lessen, the look of confusion and loss in his eyes diminish.

"But... our lives are... complicated, Vincent." She said, aware she was over-using the word.

His reply was firm. "I am completely yours. There is no 'complication' in that instinct. You sit inside a place in my heart that knows no other."

His brow furrowed, again, clearly not sure he was telling the truth, considering he couldn't remember it.

"Catherine... I didn't... hurt you? With someone else?" His focus became sharp.

"Did I betray you? Is that why you are frightened of me? Of us?"

Catherine's hands squeezed. "No! No, no, Vincent, you are the most... honorable man I've ever met. Ever. It's part of why I love you, so much."

He relaxed a little, clearly relieved at her pronouncement.

"But in a way, it's that sense of honor that... that keeps us as we are," she said, hoping she was finding an explanation he could accept. "I don't regret that. You shouldn't, either," she added.

"Regret?" He bit the word out. "Regret is for someone who has done something, then realized it was done in error. I have done... nothing, and held it as ... what? The truth? A strength? No, I don't... 'regret it,' as you say." He turned away from her. "I am appalled by it."

She watched him pace the room, before he returned to her.

"How long?" he asked.

"What? I don't understand."

"How long have we known each other? Been in love?"

She knew the answer to that damned them as much as some of the others had.

"Three years," she said, dropping her eyes from his, which were boring a hole into her. "But the first one we were apart for much of it. I had to have surgeries on my face, and we just... well, we didn't see each other after I returned to my world, for many months."

"How long after you first confessed your love for me?" he asked. "How long after the cave-in you described, in the kitchen? When you first gave me the words?"

She kept her eyes downcast.

"Two years. Almost."

"So you were brave enough to tell me of your love almost from when we resumed and I... what? Look at me, Catherine."

She raised her gaze to his, reluctantly. Then felt she had to give him an explanation for how she felt.

"You said it in everything you ever did for me." She stated it so firmly, he knew she believed it. He also knew that she was, in some way, trying to justify him to himself. It was an odd argument to have. So odd, Vincent discovered he had absolutely no stomach for it.

He wanted to swear, ripely. *But what would be the use?* he thought.

She could see him struggling to process what he'd only just now realized. They were not lovers. They never had been.

Blue eyes filled with confusion as he turned from her again, and stalked away, toward the terrace doors.

Back in the kitchen, her microwave dinged. The hot water was ready.

--

She found him on the balcony, of course. There were only so many places he could “run” to, in her apartment, and this was the farthest. He was standing in the corner nearest to her bedroom, looking out at the city lights. Or at least pretending he was looking at them.

A cool breeze hit his face, and it helped dissipate a certain amount of his disquiet. The park below him looked lush, and inviting. Like he would like to go there. Like he would like to run there, even.

Though he had few memories, Vincent understood this was instinct, and it was an instinct to separate himself from her. He fought it. Then rejected it. He would not leave her because they were having a conflict. It wasn't fair. And it would solve nothing.

But crowding her inside her living room, demanding answers she was clearly having trouble giving, wasn't much of an answer, either.

So he stayed on the balcony a while, letting the night breeze caress his golden skin, trying to settle at least some of his riotous thoughts.

*Years of loving her and I've never spent so much as one night in her bed, aside from healing there?* If that was true, several of his night dreams - not to mention some of his daytime ones - needed inspecting. *If they weren't memories, what were they? Dreams, like she said? Fantasies?*

Vincent idly wondered if they were dreams about fantasies or fantasies about dreams. And if it even mattered, considering.

The breeze stirred the curtain at his back, and after a while, she came out on the balcony as well. She kept the distance between them, and settled her hands on the balustrade.

"You loved this view," she said softly, trying to mend whatever rift this was, between them.

"Is there someone else? For you? Would you tell me, if there were?" Vincent asked, now utterly confused. He knew they were in love with each other. It was the one pillar he staked his life on.

"There's no one. It isn't that. And it isn't that I don't..." her pause was a long one. *It's not that I don't wonder about it, too.*

"It's just not who we are. It's not something we've... addressed, yet. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just..."

The sentence trailed away, and he could tell by the look in her eyes that she had no idea how to conclude it.



His voice sounded more normal. "No. It's me who is sorry. I... thought something I should not have thought." Blue eyes scanned a light-scattered horizon. She had no idea what he was thinking. But she was fairly sure it wasn't anything good.

"I love you. With my whole heart. There is no doubt in me, Catherine. Of all the things I swear I can't remember, I know that like it's an unshakable truth. Perhaps... the only unshakable truth I have."

He had to say what was burning in his heart. And to say it in no uncertain terms. He continued to stare at the landscape, gathering the words, then, he turned his

gaze to her.

"I know I desire you. In a deeply felt place. One that is hard to wrestle with, sometimes." He was picking through the truths he knew, trying to discern the ones he was mistaken about. She made no reply.

"So I... the vision of you near a bridge, both of us bathed in sunlight. You, wearing a gown straight out of a storybook... that, *that* is real. That is a memory. It truly happened." He was trying to sort his memories from his imaginings, now, "But the image of you dressed in silk, as I brush it down your arms..." He blushed a bit, at the description, or perhaps just the recollection he was having. "That is... that is my imagination."

"Yes," she said weakly, knowing how incongruous that sounded, that the "fairy tale" image of them would be real, while the more realistic, more passionate one would be fantasy.

He sighed heavily, and moved over to the closest chair. He sat down in it. Hard.

"I... I'm sorry. Tomorrow, I'll go. Pack what few things I have here, and just..." he let the sentence drift as well, until he caught her look of trepidation.

"To the tunnels," he clarified. "I'll force myself to do it, maybe just... sleep near your basement ladder, have them set up a bed. Until I'm ready to... accept the rest of it." He shrugged, looking defeated. *How could I... misjudge us, so badly?* It was a question he was still struggling with.

She stepped close. "You don't have to do that." She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I've made you uncomfortable. This is your home. I had no right to assume ... I just...." He shook his head and she could tell by his expression he was utterly grappling with something that completely confused him.

Catherine kept her voice gentle. "You just thought we were lovers. In a way, I understand, Vincent. I won't tell you I wasn't a little surprised by it, but I do understand."

"There was nothing in me that said otherwise." He felt he had to explain.

"Nothing I felt. Nothing I thought *you* felt..."

Again, he couldn't quite face her gaze, and he forced himself up from the chair, then back to the edge of her balcony. He turned from her to continue to look out at the city. He wondered if everyone out there was as confused as he was, right now.

"Your heart is so open," he marveled. "It never occurred to me that... that we weren't... we hadn't..."

It seemed it was half-impossible to finish a sentence.

"At least now I understand why everyone keeps listing the things I don't do," he said with sardonic humor.

"It's not like that," Catherine said, unsure how to explain to him exactly what it *was* like.

He dropped his head a little, and a sad smile crossed his features.

"Catherine, I've seen Below. I am the beloved of small children, most men, and women past menopause. I think I understand my role, now." His sigh was a heavy one. "I didn't mean to assume."

*His role?* Catherine wondered, processing what he was trying to say. *But of course. His role. The role everyone Below expected him to play. The dutiful son, the fierce protector, the unthreatening male who was both helpful, yet not a competitor, for the available women. The teacher. The scholar. The brother. The... eunuch.* The last word hit Catherine hard, along with the realization that it very much described the relationship Jacob had expected his son to have, all his life, with others.

*Was that expectation, that "role" Vincent had grown up with, was that part of why they'd never...*

She knew she had to say something. Anything. And she couldn't damn Jacob, or anyone else, in the bargain. They were his family. When this was all over, that's where he'd be returning to, more than likely.

"Vincent, things between us... we just... never pushed ourselves that far," she explained, feeling lame as she did so.

Vincent took her in. She was all but trembling, inside their bond.

*No. No they hadn't. And they'd had years to try.* A man Vincent couldn't remember being had never made love to a woman he couldn't remember knowing, prior to a bit more than a week ago. A woman he was positive he adored. It made no sense. Until it did, terribly.

*She has no desire for me.* As far as he knew, no one ever had.

Not that anyone else mattered, right now, it was just that she didn't want him, that way. The thought both stung his ego, and he understood the "why" of it. He was too different not to.

*She has no desire for me,* he repeated. There was rue in his understanding.

Yet, the moment he thought it a second time, he knew it was wrong, and the conflict of it drove him back from the balcony's edge, and set him pacing, across from her.

Thinking that she didn't have any desire for him was as wrong as everything else he'd been contemplating this evening. He *knew* she felt desire for him. It was a whisper across her sweet consciousness, and a kiss, like fire. He'd *felt* it inside her. Felt it when he'd stood very close to her, for just a moment, before she'd shoved the sensation away.

The confusing truth still stood between them. He knew he had to ask it: "Is it that you have no desire for me? Is it my appearance? The risk of children?" He was pinning her, and she didn't much care for it.

"It's not that. It's not like that. *We're* not like that, Vincent. You have to *listen*."

"Must I?" he questioned, having no idea what she could tell him to make this sound any better. "What shall I hear you tell me? That I never confessed how you make me feel? That I did, and you found the idea... contemptible?"

"I do not find the idea contemptible!" she denied hotly.

*No. No, she didn't.* As a matter of fact, the prospect of it sent just the slightest shiver up and down her spine, even though she was upset, at the moment. Vincent felt it. And didn't understand, at all.

"I'm sorry," he said, amid their mutual confusion. "I still... It's like a riddle I can't pierce." he shook his head. "I didn't mean to embarrass either of us. And I surely didn't mean to make you feel... pressured to explain an intimate life neither one of us was having."

He decided to confront her with the little he knew. "I know you feel it. I don't understand," he admitted.

"Stop doing that, please," she bristled. "Stop reading my mind."

*Withdrawal. Separation.* He sensed them both, in her. It felt like a mental slap, or at the very least, a shove.

"I can't read your mind. I can't know your thoughts, not that well. Only your feelings." He dipped his head in her direction for emphasis. "And there are times when those fairly... shout at me," he admitted.

She was trying to let her ire simmer down. "Can you turn it off?" she asked.

He considered the question. He had no idea. In the short time they'd been together, here, he'd never tried. He told her as much.

"Not since our beginning have I ever even tried to," he said. *This is my tie to you, my love. Why would I wish it gone?*

She folded her arms across her chest, in a defensive posture. "See, when you say 'Our beginning,' I think of three years ago. You think last week."

Was that what this was about? The length of time on their respective frames of reference?

"Do you know the reasons?" he asked, sensing she was both utterly truthful and still utterly perplexing to him. He knew how he felt about her. The instinct to be her lover was unmistakable. A thing he thought had already happened, clearly.

"I guess you can say we've been taking it slowly," she supplied, knowing that was



the mother of all understatements.

He stayed quiet, waiting for more.

"I think we're both afraid, a little," she confessed. "Or we... used to be," she tacked on, realizing he no longer was.

"Are you frightened of me?" he asked, and then he astonished her. A tear tracked down his golden cheek. The first one of his she'd seen since this had started, she realized.

"Not that way," she answered honestly, worried for him.

"In what way?" he asked.

"I don't know. That... all of it will have been for nothing. That no matter how much we give, or give up for each other... it will either be 'too much,' or not enough. You're sensitive to that. We both are," she qualified.

He took in her words as he took in the panorama of the New York night.

"I love you. That's all I know," he said.

"I know it is," she answered. "Everything is very simple for you, right now. Very direct."

"Too direct?" He had to ask it.

"More... forthright than I'm accustomed to you being, I suppose. It's not that it's unwelcome. It's just that... it's like everything else. It's not what I'm--"

"Used to, from me." He finished the by now familiar sentence for her, then turned back out toward the park.

"I wanted to go for a run. Go tearing through the park. Burn off energy, let fly. But I pushed the urge aside. Was that a thing I used to do?" he asked.

"When you were troubled, sometimes? Yes. You'd go Below to someplace distant, or walk the city, or the park. It was a night like that when you found me. I guess I should be grateful for that instinct."

*Except that it causes distance between us, when you need closeness,* he thought,

not saying it aloud. He knew she'd simply deny it, anyway.

He walked back over to the edge of the balcony, setting his hands on the stone ledge and resting his weight on them. He turned his face to her, as he spoke.

"I swear to you that I love you. Completely. It is the one truth I know. The only truth I think I still know, at the moment," he said.

Her expression softened. "I know you do." She stepped closer to him, just wanting him to be near. He turned, and she dropped her head until it collided with the wall of his chest. When his arms came around her, she sighed. He didn't need a bond to feel the relief in her. He felt it as well, right down inside the marrow of his bones.

*There you are. There is my love,* he thought. They were still that, to each other, even if they weren't... other things.

He held her, enfolded in both his arms, and in the still of her balcony.

"Did I do this to us?" He had to know. "Did I... cause this... disaster, this gulf between us?"

*There is no gulf.*

It was on the tip of her tongue to say it, and they both knew it. She bit the words back down.

"Everything we are, we both take credit for. And if there is blame for it, we both accept that, as well," she responded, still leaning against him. It felt so good.

He felt her relax, felt her tire. It had been an exhausting evening.

Vincent let the moments tick past. "If I tell you that when I think of you, I think that you are absolutely the most beautiful woman in the world... are the words ... unwelcome? Does it make you uneasy?" he asked.

He felt her smile into his chest. "I don't see how it could," she answered, her voice a muffled thing. She lifted her head.

"And when I see you, if I tell you that you are the most charming, most loving, handsomest... man I have ever, ever known, does it make you uneasy?" she

asked.

His smile was slight, but it was there. Whatever this was, they'd settled it, between them, at least temporarily.

"I don't see how it could," he echoed, giving her a brushing kiss across her forehead.

*Tired. She was tired. She'd been on her feet all day. And the last hour had been completely exhausting.*

"I'm going to bed," she confirmed. "Are you going to stay up, some more?"

"I think I will. I'll lock up when I come inside. Sleep well, Catherine," he said softly.

He watched her go into her bedroom, pick up her night things and go change clothes in the bathroom. A few minutes later, she returned to the bedroom, turned out her light, and settled herself under the covers.

Vincent sat on the balcony, feeling her roiled mind as it settled, and found a restless kind of sleep.

He felt her sleep until dreams began to take her, and weariness began to claim him.

Slipping inside, he closed the doors softly, so the sound wouldn't wake her. In the shadowy dark, he pulled out the sofa so he could go to bed. He laid down on the narrow mattress and he settled his head on the pillow. Fingers threaded behind his head, he stared up at her smooth white ceiling.

It only took him a few minutes to realize she'd given him a distance he didn't want.

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

### *Gentle With You*



He spent the day doing much as he often did, with one difference: He began putting things into the leather valise. The disaster of last night lingered, and it had long echoes. He replayed the words they'd said to each other, both inside her apartment and on the balcony. In some way, knowing he'd never been her lover made him almost unutterably sad, and changed what little self-concept he'd formed about himself.

He set "Song of Myself" (*no irony there*, he thought) into the tattered receptacle. He carefully returned Charles Chandler's socks and the borrowed fleece to her, by laundering them and putting them on her dresser, where she'd see them. The shabby pants he'd landed on her balcony wearing went into the bag. The destroyed shirt and his makeshift bandage had long since been discarded.

At first, he didn't want to admit he was actually packing to return to the realm everyone insisted was his "home." But by the time he'd settled the desperately threadbare pants into the old luggage, he knew.

*I can't stay here. Can't keep... disrupting her life this way. At best, I'm a guest who has long overstayed his welcome. At worst...*

At worst he was... what? Even he didn't know the answer to that.

*Catherine is right about one thing. We are hard to define.*

As evening darkened the terrace, he gave the rose bush one more drink. He'd have to tell her about that, since he was about to hand the chore back over to her. He traced a cautious hand up a long, green stem. The tiny knot of a bud was growing on the end. The bush was fairly covered with them. He turned the pot a

quarter turn, so all of it would get an equal share of sun.

A gauzy, dream image came to him.

*She was working, with her back to him. Her hair was pulled back in a haphazard ponytail and a pair of gardening shears were in her hand.*

*"How long have you been--?"*

*"Only a moment."*

It was a wisp of a memory, there and gone. He wondered if it had actually happened, or if it was just something he'd just now conjured up. Considering their conversation last night, he had little to no faith in what he thought he knew.

*But the image came back. Catherine was kneeling next to the rose bush, gathering soil around its base. And she was laughing. At... herself.*

*"I must have appeared pretty ridiculous."*

*"No. You looked... determined."* She had. Then, she'd pricked her finger, and he knew he'd come to her, immediately.

The image faded to nothingness. He didn't try to chase it. He knew that no matter what he thought he saw, or thought he felt about that, no matter how intense his feelings were, that after that moment, he hadn't picked her up, nursed her bleeding finger, and made love to her. He hadn't. He couldn't have.

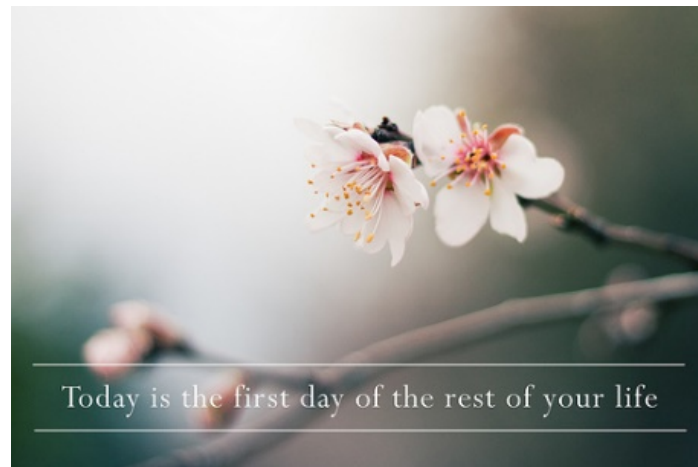
He glanced at the clock, knowing she should be close to home, but sensing, by an internal beacon, that she was still working, and far across town.

--

Catherine didn't like the Victims of Domestic Abuse shelter, even as she blessed its intention, and its purpose. The plain, austere building had no outside signage. An iron gate with a keypad kept out street traffic, and every door and window had burglar bars. What was meant to give the (mostly) women there the impression safety also gave the vague impression of trading one prison for another, in Catherine's mind.

Once inside, some of the furniture reminded her of the same items used by her

tunnel friends. Battered, cast-off sofas and mismatched chairs filled a pair of common rooms, with an ancient console TV set on low volume in one corner. A haphazard shelf held a cluttered collection of books and magazines, and poster art declared “Today is the first day of the rest of your life,” as pastel blossoms bloomed behind the words.



The women and children who populated the rooms were in various stages of their journey, from new arrivals sporting fresh bruises to those who were all but packed and ready to go – either back to their abusers or hopefully, on to someplace better, someplace else. Catherine knew that both options were on the table, for all of them.

Catherine had no illusions that Denise Ramansky wasn't going to be in the former camp. But she wasn't quite sure about what part of the latter was about to happen, either.

“Denise, you have every right to stay and fight this out. See it through,” Catherine said, putting an updated version of a restraining order into her bag. Denise had the other copy.

“I don't want the house. I don't even want my stuff. I just want enough money to get clear and...”

“I know you've been in pain. And put through a lot. But—”

"My Mom thinks I should just go back to him. Get marriage counseling. I'm rocking the boat. I think she's afraid of him, too."

Catherine shook her head. "I think Dave knows if he goes within forty feet of her he'll lose his badge, and I don't think ..."

"Oh, it won't be Dave. He'll send a friend. You see how this is, Miss Chandler? The paranoia of it... that's what eats you alive."

Catherine reached over and squeezed the other woman's hand. "You can put him in jail, Denise. We both can."

"Maybe." Denise took a drag on a cigarette. The ashtray was full. There were no bruises on her thirty three year old face. But there was no joy in it, either. Brown hair hung limply, and dark eyes looked hunted.

"Or the judge believes him, and I'm stuck with nothing, and Dave mad as hell. Pass."

She reached over and signed a petition for divorce. One in which she asked for almost nothing, and gave up rights to their home.

"I'll file this for you. But as a lawyer, I'm begging you to reconsider."

"I don't want to live there. If I did, he'd always know where I was."

"The judge could order it sold. The money split."

Denise rose from the table, not wanting to either hear Catherine's logic, or deal with it.

"There's two mortgages on it, now. How much do you think I'm going to clear when those are paid?" She raked a hand through her dark, straight hair, and tugged it back into a nervous ponytail. "I don't think anyone is listening. I don't want anything like that. I just... I just want to be someone else. Somewhere else," she said, knowing she was living out of a suitcase and would continue to do so.

Catherine sighed, internally, and changed the subject. "The um, the counseling sessions. They're helping?" she asked.

"They're okay. Yeah," Denise said, making the ponytail tight. Her pierced ears

were free of earrings. She'd left with almost nothing, when she'd done it.

"Denise, I know you're scared. Everyone here is," Catherine said, knowing that Denise was trying to leave with far less than she was entitled to.

"Yeah. It's a fear factory, in here."

"It's a safe place."

"You think Dave can't get the number to that keypad, if he really wants it?" she asked.

Catherine rose as well. "I think they change it every other day, there's a camera aimed at the area in front of it, security close by, and ... for whatever this is worth... you're not the only cop's wife who has ever been in this position. You did the right thing. You got out."

"He was getting worked up about stuff. I could see it coming," she replied.

"Maybe I should have just waited. Took the beating. Then maybe I'd have had bruises to show."

Catherine shook her head. "We both know that's crazy, and you shouldn't have. You did the right thing." Her voice was firm.

Catherine gave Denise a hug, feeling like the gesture was woefully inadequate.

"Do you need anything? A fresh magazine? Some toiletries?"

"They do okay by us, thanks. My Mom came by with cigarettes and a new toothbrush. I guess she figured I needed both."

"We'll get you through this. Please, let me file charges formally, Denise."

The other woman looked uncertain, then looked away.

"I'll let you know."

Catherine nodded, aware that most of the last hour had been spent in vain. Abuse victims often didn't bring suit, or if they did, they dropped the charges, later.

"Okay. I'll file the paperwork for you, put these on record. Let you know what happens next," Catherine said, collecting her brief case as she was escorted off



the premises and out to her waiting car.

--

She came home late. Very. It was one of those days when the demands of her office caught up with her, the kind of day Vincent normally wouldn't have come to visit her, back before their lives had been blown apart. It was the kind of day when the work went too long, and the rewards seemed far too few. She was tired, and wanted rest.

Her key hit the lock, as she braced for whatever was about to come next.

She saw his bag, packed and ready to go, on the sofa.

*No. Please, no.*

It had been a tough day. Ted had lost his case. Joe's was not going well. Rita swore she was working on one that was probably going to get thrown out of court, thanks to a question over whether or not the accused had been properly Mirandized. And Catherine had spent the last hour and a half at the abused women's shelter, trying to talk Denise Ramansky into doing something more than leaving with the clothes on her back. Catherine knew the home team wasn't doing very well.

She wasn't ready to see his bag, bulging with his clothes and his personal belongings, and she knew it.

*But maybe he was ready? Maybe his memory came back?*

He was standing near the kitchen. One look at his face told him he remembered no more than he ever had. But it also told her his intention to leave was sincere. He was going to go. He'd probably have been gone already, except she'd been late in getting home.

"I don't want you to do this," she stated plainly, before the voice of reason could call the declaration back. "I... yesterday was a mistake. But... It's okay. I don't want you to do this. Don't want you to feel you have to leave, because of it."

She set a hand on the bag, then hefted it down off the couch, and put it under the

table.

*Out of sight...*

"Catherine..."

"You're not ready to go. Not ready to... be there, again. Not yet." She dropped her eyes. "And I... I don't want you to go, Vincent. Not like this. Please."

There were a dozen things he could say to her, and so few of them which could help.

*Why shouldn't I go, Catherine? Think about it. You could have your old life back, and mine is still waiting for me, even if I can't remember it. Isn't this what you want? Isn't this what... everyone wants? I don't know what we are. I thought I did. When I knew absolutely nothing about myself, I thought I knew 'us.' Shouldn't I go? Shouldn't I?*

He watched her push the bag back a little farther, with her foot, as his internal monologue continued.

*I'm nothing you need, and the size of this place is beginning to grate on me. We both know I don't belong here. Even if I don't belong anywhere else...*

But what he said was, simply: "I'll stay then. Did you have dinner?"

Relief flooded through her. She couldn't handle one more fight, tonight.

"Joe ordered sandwiches after six. You?"

"I ate. Same, though they were not courtesy of Joe." He was maintaining his position across the room from her. Her mantle clock chimed ten. "This is the first time you've been so late. You must be tired." He could feel that she was.

She dropped her brief case where his bag had just sat. "I am. This happens, sometimes, with my job. Five becomes six and six becomes eight and... before you know it you're across town trying to convince some poor woman she should stay and fight the good fight, and the ride home feels like it takes forever." She rubbed a weary hand on her temple.

He nodded at her words. He'd been able to sense her all evening, in their bond.

Her tension level had been steady, and high.

"Did you read, at least?" she asked, noting that one of his books hadn't made it back into his bag.

"For a while," he answered, watching her kick off her shoes. They were trying to re-establish "normalcy" between them, after last night's fiasco. He wanted to offer to draw her a late bath, but figured that after the disaster that had been yesterday, such an intimate thing might no longer be welcome, between them.

*How sad for us, if that's true,* he thought.

"Well. I think I'm... I'm just going straight to bed. I'm so sorry I'm not better company." There was a line between her brows. One of concern, and fatigue. She was feeling overwhelmed by the demands of her day.

"You do not have to ... entertain me," he answered, taking a step toward her bedroom door. He'd been about to turn down the covers, for her.

Again, he brought himself up short, wondering if it was a thing he should still offer to do for her.

"Sleep... well, Catherine. I'll... see you in the morning." Was this stiff, awkward couple them? He hated this feeling, this feeling of... separation from her.

Catherine was aware of it, but too tired to fight it, now. Past too tired to fight it.

*We'll work it out in the morning. Or tomorrow night. Or sometime,* her tired brain listed, as she moved toward the louvered doors.

"Goodnight, Vincent."

"Goodnight, Catherine," he replied.

--

She slept hard, but for only a few hours. When she awoke, her bedside clock confirmed that it was two a.m. She was restless.

*So was he.*

She didn't know exactly "how" she knew he was still awake, and just as unable to

sleep as she now was. Except that she did know. *Our bond*, she thought.

For a moment, she toyed with the idea of simply rolling back over and forcing herself to go back to sleep. But somehow, she knew that sleep would be long in coming, if it came at all. The concerns of the work day melted away, in her mind.

*Only Vincent is important.* It was the last clear thought she had before she padded out to her living room.

His bedclothes were rumpled, proof that he'd at least tried to sleep, as well. He'd clearly given that up, as he stood in the baggy fleece pants she'd originally given him, and the dark robe. He was standing near her closed balcony doors, staring out at a bright moon.

She knew she'd been quiet. She also knew he was aware she was awake, and behind him. Instinct. They were connected. She never felt it more keenly, than in this moment.

"I would be... so gentle, with you," he said, not moving. He didn't turn away from the balcony doors as he let the words go. Hadn't even acknowledged her presence in the room. He hadn't needed to. She knew he always knew where she was.

"I know," she said, stepping closer, but not too close. She stood behind him, as he was outlined by the moonlight and whatever illumination the security lighting lent to the balcony.

"I wouldn't hurt you. I swear I wouldn't. I'd die first, Catherine." He turned his head so that his profile was carved against the white of her curtains. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes. I know you wouldn't," she answered steadily. "I... I wasn't always sure if you were."

He turned around at that.

"Hurting you is like... blasphemy. Breaking an oath. A sin, even. It's the only... truly wicked thing I can imagine. I would never do that."

Catherine sighed. *I know a woman who would give the world for that to be true, with her husband, right now.* She pushed the thought aside.

Catherine stepped closer to him, knowing all the barriers that commonly stood between them were down. This huge being before her was not concerned that he would injure her, wasn't tied up in certain knots about taking away the choices of her life, wasn't hampered by his own past experiences, or even the lack of those.

*It would be so easy just to...*

"Just because we can, doesn't mean we should," she said, struggling for purchase. He held her gaze, and the breadth of his half-covered chest seemed to fill the room. He was virility made solid. Without him moving, she felt him surrounding her.

"I know." He reached out and cupped her cheek when he said it. His gentle agreement surprised her.

Her eyes closed, at the warmth of his palm. His thumb stroked back and forth, on her cheekbone. He waited, infinitely patient, until she couldn't resist the urge to turn her head and plant a kiss in his palm.

His voice was seductively low. "I brought you roses. Books, and poetry," he whispered, watching her fight the prick of tears. "Did I ever bring you myself?"

He dropped his hand and stepped back, as he let the question remain, between them.

"You did." Her answer was a hoarse whisper. "All the time, you did."

But he shook his head in gentle negation. "I don't think so," he said, tugging open the sides of the robe. The coppery skin was once more open to her gaze, the blonde down of his body hair looking a shade darker, by moonlight. His chest was bare, before her. Bare, and glorious. The scar on his side was there, a soft line she knew would fade, in time, much like her own scar had done. He let the blue robe slide down his arms, his intention plain. His voice was a subtle call, in the darkness.

"I don't think I dared. Not until nearly two weeks ago, when 'myself' was all I

*could* bring you."

He let the robe drop to the floor. Now his arms were bare, as well. Arms that had cradled her. Comforted her. Saved her. His wrists had healed. All of him had. He was healthy and whole; returned to her. Saved. Adored.

*You saved me. I saved you. Are we even, now?* She had the strange thought.

He stepped away from the pool of fabric at his feet. "For whatever it is worth, this is what I am, Catherine. It's all I am, all I have. And it's all I know that's mine. But I *swear* I would trust you with it, unquestioned." He tugged at the drawstring on his pants, but held them up, with one hand as they dropped slack. "It makes no sense to me that I should offer you other things, but then never, ever, offer you... myself."

"Vincent..." His name was a soft whisper, in the night. One that said neither "no" nor "yes."

He kept his hand where it was. "Tell me you're not afraid of me, Catherine," he said.

Her hypnotized gaze changed focus from his closed fist to his eyes, shadowed in the darkness, but so piercingly blue they were still visible.

"I am not afraid of you. Not since the first day I first... hurt you," she said, still sorry for it.

He felt the memory lance her conscience.

"You've no need to apologize for a hurt I can no longer remember and one you didn't intend." He held her gaze and slowly opened his fist. Slowly, so she could tell him to stop, if she wanted to.

She said nothing.

He let go of the fabric, and let the loose pants drop to the floor. Kicking clear of them, he stood patiently, awaiting her inspection. Allowing it.

"Whether you ever let me touch you... or not... all you see... is yours."

Even in the dim light, she knew his shape. She'd seen the magnificent torso

before, though not so nude as this, not so completely, with no covering bandage, no waistband of his pants, to bisect his masculine form. Or to hide it.

He was long, steady muscle, and smooth, rolling lines. Every part of him melded into ever other part, a titan's form, blanketed with golden plains of masculine silk, to hide his physique – or in some cases, delineate it. His coppery skin shone against the lighter tones in his body hair, and Catherine couldn't stop her eyes from trailing down his chest to where the smooth lay of arrowing down gave way to the wirier chaff that nestled his sex. His erection was barely begun, awaiting her approval, if not her outright permission.

He took a step away from the puddle of fleece at his feet.

*Tell him to put his clothes back on. Tell him he has to.*

She thought it. But she said something entirely different: "If Michelangelo had seen you first... he'd never have carved a David."

His head inclined slightly, at her longed-for compliment. "I know only that I'm yours. I've no need for the praise of any other eyes. Ever." He was positive of the claim, as he promised her his fidelity.

And there it was, in a way. The understanding that if they were not to become each other's lover, then they never would, with anyone. At least, he knew he wouldn't.

She knew the same thing, for herself.

She tried to turn them back, but there was no real strength left in her voice, and no real will, to do it. "The part of you you can't remember --"

"Please don't say 'would never do this.' Even if it's true, I'm desperately tired of hearing it," he interrupted gently.

"I was about to say... 'would be furious with me for still standing here. For not telling you to put your clothes back on.'"

He played an unfair advantage in that he reached through their bond. There was desire mixed in with her confusion. A good bit of it. Her sense of want had an

incredibly... loving flavor. It wasn't so much carnal as it was an emotional extension of who she was.

*She longs for this. In a different way from me.*

"Who am I, Angel? Beautiful Catherine, who am I, to you?" he asked

Her voice was a raspy whisper. "You're Vincent. You're the man I love."

He licked lips which had suddenly gone dry. "I will still be that. And you will always be my Catherine. Whether I dress myself and step out onto that balcony to give you room, or no."

She closed her eyes over that truth. The words echoed, in her mind. His voice was a soft beguilement.

"You should. You should do that," she said, both of them well aware she hadn't said he had to. She stayed where she was, and allowed herself to be seduced, knowing she shouldn't still be standing there.

He took a step forward, instead. "I would reach into our bond, and make every wish, every fantasy you ever had, be real," he vowed. "Be more. Be the beginning of passion, and not its end. Not because of what I dream of. But because it is what *you* dream of, Catherine."

Catherine trembled, involuntarily. *He couldn't say these things to her. He couldn't.* He couldn't offer her what she didn't even know she wanted, couldn't... be saying the things she knew Vincent usually kept inside.

Catherine's hand flew to her mouth and she choked on a sob.

"Now... I'm afraid!" she admitted it, knowing it was true.

He stepped forward and tugged her into his waiting embrace, utterly unconscious about his nudity.

"Did I make you thus?" he asked, gently, rubbing her back in the soothing motions one might use on a child.

"No. I ... I don't know," she admitted, turning her face so she could pillow her head on his chest. His naked, magnificent chest. She inhaled him, and scented his



sexuality. He smelled like passion's promise, and her core responded, against her wishes. She tried to bat down her desire, keeping this more about what she was feeling emotionally, rather than what he was helping her to feel, physically.

"You cannot be unfaithful to me with me, Catherine. It's not possible." His hands were moving slowly, undemandingly.

"But you don't remember. You don't remember us," she said.

His sigh was oceans deep, and just as encompassing.

"I remember a woman giving me water when I was dying of thirst. I remember a woman holding my arms and telling me about a children's book while a stranger sewed my side together. I remember us, Catherine. And all I know makes me only adore you, more."

She threw her arms around his neck as he stilled his hands, then cradled her back.

He dropped his head so that his lips floated a fraction above her scar. "I'll keep you safe. Keep you loved," he promised, brushing the heat of his breath, barely, inside her ear. She shivered from the contact.

"My Vincent," she whispered back, not sure if she'd just agreed to this, or simply said the endearment because she'd needed to.

"I would bind your life up with mine. Love you always. Cleave to you. Only you. Who else is my lioness?" he asked, tipping her chin his way.

He hovered only a moment, tasting her anticipation before he assuaged it, by finally taking her mouth with his.

It was a drugging kiss, and it seemed to go on forever. He explored her taste and she could sense him, taking it in. She felt his fingers at the buttons of her pajama top, and didn't care. When the blessed relief of pressing her naked chest against his came, it was all she could do not to weep for it.

"Slow... slow," he said, trailing his hands down her sides until he bent a little, rubbing her thighs through the cloth of her pajamas. He did not reach for her waistband, but went down on his knees and rested his cheek against her

abdomen. His hands splayed across her back, keeping her close. He was listening to her body, with both his outer and inner selves.

She bent over him, rubbing his shoulder blades with her palms. The lines of his abuse were gone. The hair was a downward sleeking pelt, and her hands explored it, rubbing both with and against its lay. He moaned contentment at the latter, since it brought her palms against his skin.

He tightened his grip, and turned his head to bless the skin of her abdomen with an almost chaste kiss. "A queen needs worshipping. My salvation needs to be adored," he said, planting his hands on the rise of her hips and tracing kisses across her stomach, paying homage to the place where she would bear children.

*Someday...* the word whispered, a distant possibility.

He dropped slightly lower, mouthing the waistband of her pajamas. He felt her tense when his chin pressed into the area just above her curls, felt desire lance through her like a fire bolt. Yet, still... something. Something else, underneath the want.

*What's this?* he thought, but couldn't say. He held her buttocks steady with his palms and searched for her desire... and her fear.

*She wants me to... and she's afraid of ... something. Others have hurt. Or brought no joy.*

It was a message sent in impressions only, not words. He couldn't even be sure if his interpretation was the correct one, except he knew that it was.

He filed the information where it needed to go, and concentrated on her first desire.

Rubbing his face back and forth against the cloth, he brushed his tongue across the fabric so that she could feel what she thought was his intention. When her legs began to tremble, he simply tugged one over his shoulder, held her against his mouth, and exhaled into the thin material at the vee of her thighs. His unexpected breath warmed her. And then it shattered her.

Repeating the gesture, pushing his warm breath inward, he felt her shudder,

heard her scream, felt her bend over him, weeping. He did it again, and again, and felt her trembling turn to shaking. The taste of her arousal was on his tongue, through the cloth.

"You're going to let me make love to you," he whispered, tugging down the elastic band of her pants. "Not the way everyone else wanted to make love to you. The way you want to be made love to," he clarified, her scent exploding in his nose as he dropped her leg from his shoulder and let her pants fall.

"Beautiful. Too beautiful," he said, planting kisses both chaste and carnal on her curls. She whimpered, as he eased her down to the carpet.

"If I cause you so much as a moment's discomfort, I will know it," he reassured her, laying her down, smoothing her legs straight.

He felt her fear at the words, and knew their source.

She put a hand on his shoulder, her eyes sad with memories he knew he had no part of.

"In a way, I think that's what I was always afraid of," she said, confessing a fear she was only just now aware she had. How to make love to Vincent, when the experience had never been very fulfilling, for her? How, when he would know her... inadequacies, this way, and think they were his own?

"Then you will let me be brave. And let yourself just... feel," he whispered, trying to let her know he intended to take those fears away.

He saw the acceptance in her eyes. And the lingering doubt. "We shouldn't --"

"Do anything you aren't ready for. I agree." He brushed the soft whisper of his breath across her forehead, and closed eyelids.

"I want to hold you," she said.

His huge hand brushed her bangs back from her face.

"Do you?" he asked, as vulnerable as she was.

"More than you can possibly know," she said, tears trailing from the corner of her eyes into her hair.

"Beautiful Catherine. My beautiful Catherine... if all we do this night is hold each other, I swear I will not feel the lack," he vowed, comforting her. "I mean it when I say 'I will not hurt you.' I will be gentle."

"I know you will," she said, cupping his cheek again.

A year from now, or five, he might ask her about her other lovers, if only to know why she was left unfulfilled. But this was not a year from now. This was now, and the ache between his legs was nothing compared to the ache he wanted to build... and assuage, between hers.

With the barest touch, she watched his eyes look up to the top of her head, where his fingertips lay. With his longest finger, he traced an idle pattern around her forehead, down her temple, down her cheek, and to her neck. When he reached her chest he flattened his palm against the most perfect alabaster skin he'd ever seen, and pressed down, wandering an idle palm down her center.

He could feel her tension as he neared her core. She was responding to him, definitely. But there was something... *She just doesn't think she can ... oh.*

"I want to kiss your skin. May I?" he asked, describing a lazy figure eight in her curls.

She looked down to where he was touching her, incapable of speech.

He kept his weight off her, but let her feel the soft brush of his lips against her neck. She tensed when he neared her breasts, but it was not the tension of hopeful anticipation. Again, she was anticipating some hurt of some kind. He felt it.

*Who did this to you?* Vincent wondered, taking what comfort he could from the knowledge that it wasn't him, because it couldn't have been. *Who only took, and left you feeling... bereft?*

Her nipples rose in almost fearful tension, and he watched one palm go flat on the rug, bracing for an unpleasant sensation.

Rather than take the apricot offering in his mouth, he simply exhaled, over it, then moved away.

"Ah!" she cried out, arching her hips involuntarily. He smiled at his own prowess. *She's sensitive. Just very, very sensitive. I see. I understand.* He repeated the gesture on the other side.

"Don't!" she pleaded, wanting more, yet dreading it, at the same time.

Slowly, deliberate as a judge, he lowered his mouth, feeling both her dread and her desire. He settled her raised, puckered flesh at the soft middle of his tongue, rather than at the slightly raspy tip. The taste was exquisite.

Catherine moaned, and he stopped the pressure the instant he felt she needed him to. *Light. Very light. She is delicate, here. Of course she is. I see.* That, like everything else, was information he kept, and held as treasure. *Others didn't know, and for whatever reason, she felt she couldn't say. Ah...*

She stretched, and writhed, as he repeated the tender ministrations to her other side.

*Let me learn you,* he thought as he felt her response, beneath him. She sighed when he settled his weight on her slight form, her arms grasping his back, in welcome.

"Let me learn you, Beautiful Catherine." He said his intentions aloud, a moment before he took her breast again, just as gently, into the warmth of his mouth.

Her response was a strangled cry, unintelligible to anyone but him.

*Pleasure. Yessss.* Her abdomen lifted against his, reflexively, as he sensed her thoughts.

The long, slow night would hear her cry out more than once, and her cradled climax made her weep against his shoulder. He shushed her into the night until she pushed him onto his back, learning him as he had learned her. He discovered what made her ticklish, and discovered what made her sigh. She did the same for him.

"We are lovers, now," he told her exhausted form as the dark before the dawn painted her floor in shades of black and indigo. "In all ways but one."

She threaded her fingers through his, knowing what "one way" he was referring to.

"Why didn't you...."

"Because. You would have regrets, in an hour, if I did. Ones you couldn't explain. Ones you aren't ready for." He kissed the back of her fingers. "And if you had them, then I would have them." He propped himself up on his side, still unselfconscious in his nudity, loving the blush of her well-loved skin, and the replete feeling they'd shared.

"When it is a thing you wish for, I am here, Beloved. And if it never is a thing you wish for ... I am still here. And a night spent the way we have just done will not find me complaining."

"But you didn't--"

"Yes, I did," he said, dropping a kiss on her nose. "Every time you did, I felt it."

She'd stopped counting, two hours ago.

"It isn't the same," she said, brushing a hand across his granite chin.

He chuckled at that. "We are who we are. And considering that I have never been the same as anyone, I don't expect this to be the same, either." He brushed her hair back with a uniquely pointed claw. "That you accept me like this is a gift beyond price. Together, we will make it so that neither of us has misgivings."

*That sounded so much like...* "You mean 'face our fears and move through them?'" she asked, searching the blue of his eyes.

He considered the phrase. "I suppose so. Why?"

She placed a palm flat over his chest, the place where she could feel his mighty heart beating. It was becoming her favorite place to lay her hand.

"It's a thing you once said to me... when I very much needed to hear it," she said, aware that he didn't like references to a person he didn't remember being, but also aware that this time, at least, it was necessary.

"If it gave you comfort, then I am glad I said it." He continued touching her face

with a wandering tip of his finger.

"I love you," she whispered, reaching for his hand and brushing a thankful kiss across his fingers. They'd both had reasons for holding back. Part of her felt things should never have gone this far, when he had scant memory of them, as a couple. The other part blessed that it had happened, realizing that this might have been the only way it could have.

"I wish I could be better about that. Being afraid, I mean," she said, not needing to explain everything, just now.

"That too, will come," he replied. "We'll see. Together."

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

### *A Breaking Dawn*



Catherine sat at her desk very aware that she was literally not worth a damn, today.

Work was getting done. Phone calls were being returned. A request to forensics was getting a certain ball rolling.



And her thoughts were as far away as Venus, and as nebulous as the incredibly satisfied feeling she still swore was gently thrumming, in her well-loved body. She stared at a pile of file folders, aware she should be going through those, just not... quite sure she could rouse the energy to do it.

Had she ever been adored so unselfishly?

She knew she hadn't.

Neophyte that he was, Vincent's fearlessness about being her lover more than compensated for any lack of experience, on his part. There was no place on her body he didn't want to explore, with devastating intentions. Devastating, and,



incredibly delicate ones.

She'd always known he ran a little warmer than the average human being. It was a fact that had communicated itself to her long ago. His hands were warm, whenever they'd entwined those, and though he'd often worn gloves, he regularly sat beside her on the balcony, radiating a soft kind of warmth.

His kisses were warm. Almost hot. No matter where they fell.

He'd treated the sensitive area around her nipples as if he were eating cotton candy, taking them in with a gentleness that not only left her stunned, but that she'd never realized was possible.

Though others had not tried to be inconsiderate, they'd usually been too vigorous, too absorbed with the performance they were giving, she realized.

*I can't believe last night happened. It was so... amazing...*

"... and Dave Ramansky's given his deposition. I'm thinking of offering him a deal. Say, eighteen months probation and counseling, rather than taking it to court? What do you think?" Joe's voice interrupted her reverie.

Catherine had been so lost in thought she hadn't even realized that her boss had entered her line of vision. There were enough file folders open on her desk to make her look like she was checking information from one of them, thankfully.

"Ramansky. Yes. Probation." She yanked herself back to present concerns.

"Plus counseling."

"Yes. That's what I meant. Think he'll take it?" she asked, recovering quickly, and lobbing the ball back into Joe's court.

He shrugged, looking at the case file. "He might. It's his word against hers, though, and cops don't do well with a record. Accepting probation means he admits the charges, so I doubt it. She still at the shelter?"

Catherine nodded, knowing that Denise Ramansky had a horror story to tell and little, in the way of physical evidence to prove it. It wasn't that he didn't beat her, according to Denise. It was that the physical side of her husband's abuse was

spaced apart, and any signs of a violent episode between them was healed. And emotional abuse was difficult to prove as well.

"There are the dental records," Catherine tried to make her case sound stronger than it was.

"Dentist said she told him that her teeth were broken thanks to a car accident. Except there was no car accident," Joe nodded. "I don't know, kiddo, it's a crap shoot. He's got eight years on the force to protect, and we got squat for physical evidence."

"He emptied their checking account and opened up one in his name only. He took her car keys. He listens in on her phone conversations and friends have seen him shouting at her, asking why going to the grocery store took her so long. And he outweighs her by about a hundred pounds."

"And if I'm his lawyer, I'm going to say he changed the accounts because she's a spend-aholic, he took the car keys because he doesn't want her going doing any more shopping, or because he admits to being the jealous type, and they've hit a rough patch in their marriage. He denies ever listening in on her phone conversations, just says, sure, he's in the room when she's on the phone, it's his house and he lives there. And he can't do a damn thing about being six foot one and two twenty."

"Other cops say he has a short fuse. Very short."

"None of them have ever seen him lay so much as a finger on her."

"Whose side are you on?" Catherine asked, sitting back, with her arms folded.

"I'm on yours, kiddo. Look, I know you want Dave Ramansky to go away for a while, or at least get a Probation Officer on his butt. And I know you want his wife to clear out of town with her belongings and half the money in checking, if not all of it."

"I'd be happy if he just stopped slapping her and calling her a whore, when he gets worked up."

"He said, she said."

Catherine sighed. So did Joe.

Joe looked back at the file. "We'll keep the threat of jail time off the table. I'll back it down to a year's probation and an anger management class. He knows he can walk away from counseling any time he wants. And we'll be blessed, if he takes it."

He turned back toward his office, leaving Cathy to the mass of paperwork in front of her. It was going to be one of those days, - in spite of how staggering the night had been.

--

The weekend wasn't truly a weekend, for her. The week she'd been off meant she needed to put some extra time in, and she did that, until the backlog on her desk was caught up. She went to see Denise again, and found she still hadn't changed her mind to either file formal charges, or demand half the marital assets. Other cases seemed to be going better. She logged the overtime and stayed busy.

To a certain extent, that became part of the next several days, for Catherine. Daytime work was a series of the usual things: hard effort, phone calls, some investigations, deposing witnesses, finding out where she was on the court docket...

But the nights...

Vincent was unfailingly waiting for her, the apartment pristinely clean. Though he didn't cook, thanks to still not trusting her stove, he was fine with tossing a salad or slicing up cheese and vegetables, or bread and fruit for her. The dishwasher was always empty by the time she got home. The bloodstains from his feet had been scrubbed out of her carpet. The rose bush was watered and covered with tight blossoms, thanks to his tender care. Her knick-knacks were even dusted.

They fell into a routine where she'd tell him about her day, and ask about his, trying to discern if his memory was any better. They would eat dinner, then read on her terrace, or listen to music, just as they'd often done, before.

And then they'd find they could not keep their hands off each other.

For the most part, the evening would start innocently enough (though even Catherine had to admit there had been one night when she'd walked in, shrugged out of her coat, and Vincent had simply helped her to continue to undress), with conversation, food, and her plans that they would both visit the world Below again, to help him acclimate to what used to be his home.

But the most well-meaning, innocuous evenings often led to bouts of intimate touching, even when Catherine swore they needed to learn to get through a night without longing to undress each other.

One night, she'd been sitting on the sofa, when Vincent, innocently enough, had come out, offered her his hand, told her it was late and that she must be tired, and offered to "take her to bed."

"Is that a euphemism?" Catherine had asked him.

He tilted his head to the side, and in an utterly serious tone had asked her "Do you want it to be?"

She chuckled at him until she realized he was earnestly waiting for an answer.

"I don't know," she'd told him.

"When you do, then we will," he'd replied.

Just as something inside Catherine was waiting for Vincent to regain his memory, something inside her was aware that he was waiting for her to give permission for the physical side of their relationship to advance. Though he'd explored her in almost every way, and she him, in return, they had still not consummated their love.

It was a thing that Catherine worried over, as she didn't want it to become an issue, between them.

Then the other side of her brain thought they should be doing nothing at all, simply letting him finish healing, and trying to find a way for him to return home.

"You are... worrying about us. You should stop that," Vincent said, helping her stack the dinner dishes inside her dishwasher, one evening. He was becoming

very adept at it.

"You read my mind too much," she complained, setting the salt and pepper shakers back where they belonged.

"I told you, I have never read your mind. I have only ever been able to know what you felt, Catherine. You are worried."

"How do you know my concern is about you?" she asked.

"Because you won your last burglary case and you are awaiting one for trial. Because you said things with the police officer's wife are going roughly the way you expected, and that isn't all bad, though nor is it good. Because though I am feeling better, you keep glancing my way when you think I am not looking."

He pushed the door of the appliance closed, and pushed the appropriate buttons.

"I lost my memory. I did not lose a measure of my intelligence," he stated, checking the cabinet. "And we are running out of dishwasher soap."

He obviously wasn't the one who was going to go somewhere to remedy that.

--

Morning sun was now a common thing, for Vincent. Catherine was still messy, in the mornings, and she tidied up in the evening, though his presence there meant that was not so often a requirement.

They'd spent the night in gentle pursuits, slept a little, and then risen to the sound of her alarm. She'd bolted out the door, running late. Both of them blamed the way they'd spent part of the long night, but they also both knew tardiness had been her habit even before they'd begun the tacit exploration of each other's bodies.

The bed was rumpled, the towel from her shower draped across its corner, rather than over the bar. It was just a thing about her. Not a "morning person" by inclination, she often slept in as long as she could, pushing the alarm clock to the limit. She then rushed through her morning routine. He'd wanted to adore her once more, before she'd hastily dressed, then left him, but it was not to be.

*Not this morning at least*, he thought. He smiled at the small disaster that was her - their bedroom. Through unspoken approval, he was back to sleeping in her bed, a thing he found he liked, whether they made love or didn't.

He scooped up the towel to return it to her bathroom. *She's always in a hurry, in the morning.*

It was the thing that prompted what he knew was his first real memory. He set her towel in place over the towel bar, meaning to tend to the other small messes she'd made prior to her exit. There would be a similar spot of clutter in the kitchen that would need tending. A leftover coffee cup, a dishtowel that had been left unfolded, toast crumbs to wipe off the counter. He turned to tend to the mundane chores.

His eyes were drawn to a puddle of fabric, on the bathroom floor.

The shimmering robe was silken, and patterned. Dark against gold, it had fallen off its hook on the back of the bathroom door, and had settled in a haphazard mound of fabric, on the white tile.

He'd never seen her wear it before, but that wasn't strange. Catherine seemed to have an endless supply of nightwear.

He bent to retrieve the fallen object. When he touched the cloth, a current of memory arced up his arm like an electric shock.

He rose, the robe lengthening out, to his wondering gaze. Loose sleeves. A thin tie of a belt, left slack, and dangling in one of the loops. Then... her voice.

The fabric was as delicate and soft as the sound was. *"No... wait. It's dark, yet."*

Vincent's inward eye pushed back the veil of time and memory. *It was nighttime, full dark, and she was wearing the robe, and on her balcony. With him. And her face was... her face was beautiful. And he was studying it, hard, without trying to look like he was. She was seated, and reaching up for him. The sleeves of the robe were falling down her arms.*

*"We still have time."* It was a gentle plea. To him. That he remain with her.



Vincent knew it as he felt it, and felt it as he remembered it. This was no wisp of an image, like their morning near the bridge. It was a full scene, and he recalled how the wind had picked at her hair, remembered the smell of sunlight there, even though the sun had long gone down. Her hands were small, in his. And they were trying to tug him down.

He remembered feeling both elated and unsure. Overjoyed, and despairing. He'd come to say good-bye. *No, no that wasn't right*, he corrected, mentally. He'd come to say... nothing. He'd meant to leave her a book. Great Expectations. And the silky sleeve of the robe he now held had brushed against him, somehow, as she'd tugged him down to sit with her.

*"We still have time."*

He tried to push the memory further, chase the image down. Vincent staggered back a moment, and inwardly, remained staring at her seated form on the balcony, in his mind. Her face was beautiful. Her tone was... entreating. She was so incredibly lovely. And she was so... happy to see him. Happy. Surprised. Relieved.

The bond she didn't even realize they had yet, was talking to him, telling him how she felt. *"Stay. Don't go. Please. Not yet. It's still dark... Don't leave. Don't leave me."*

So he hadn't. And together, they'd read the incredible book he'd brought her. He'd saved the last pages for her. It had just seemed right.

*"... And as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me..."*

Her beloved voice had been breathy, and soft. As gently refined as she was.

*There was something more. Something important. Something important for us. What was it?* His mind searched for the words, but not just the words; the way they'd sounded when she'd said them. Because they'd meant so much, to both of them.

Then of course, he remembered. *"I saw no shadow of another parting from her."*

His eyes closed over the memory, as he treasured it, as he felt it fill him. *Yes. I love you.*

The soft robe remained clutched in his hands as tried to find something more. But the image of Catherine in the robe faded, and then it was gone, like a grey, breaking dawn, chased away by a swift sunrise. But he knew this wasn't a fantasy, and it was far more than the usual, small fragments he'd been previously receiving.

He held the fabric gingerly, between his fingers, then replaced the robe on the hook, where she would be sure to find it.

*'No shadow of another parting from you,'* his mind whispered.

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## *Chapter Seventeen*

### *Night Run*



The weekend came, and the same memories he'd been having intruded on Vincent's consciousness. Some lengthened out. He remembered more details from that night, remembered the hard, smooth quality of the stones as he'd sat there, remembered the image of her, sitting on the balcony while she read the last chapter of Great Expectations to both of them. Her voice was raspy, and he remembered the smell that told him dawn was coming. He remembered the feeling of listening to her read to him. He remembered the feeling of having to go. Of not wanting to, but of having to. He remembered at least some of the journey back across the park, he'd been walking quickly, to avoid being caught, Above.

He said nothing about it to Catherine. Nothing at all.

It was a quiet pair of days, between them. Vincent watched her as she poured over case files, even on her day off. The time she'd taken off work to tend him had put her behind, in her case load, and she was now 'paying her dues," she told him.

He sat on her sofa and read, while she sat at the table and worked. He glanced up, between pages, to watch her. In a way, it was a familiar sight, seeing her at work over case files. And in a way, it wasn't.

The image of her, seen through her sheer curtains, tried to niggle its way into his awareness.

Rather than embrace it, chase it, even, he pushed it aside.

*Will I lose you if you remember?* It was a real question, in a mind which still didn't

really know who “he” was.

*Patience*, his mind bid him. *Patience has got me this far.*

The image of her working at the table through the sheer curtain intruded again, and he stared back at a now-twice-read page, aware that the image of her was a memory. Though he didn’t shove it away, he didn’t pursue it, either.

It led to nothing else. Perhaps there was no reason for it to; that on this particular occasion, nothing momentous had happened.

*“What’s it like, Vincent? To have a love?”*

It wasn’t her voice, or his. It was the odd boy’s. Mouse’s. He was remembering more than just her. He was starting to remember “them.” Barely. An image of bright blonde hair and hopeful eyes stared up at him, in his mind, as the question lingered.

*It’s everything*, he answered himself, having no idea if that was what he’d actually said, at the time.

He turned the page on Shelley, and waited for her to be done with her work.

When she was done, he took her to bed; and made love to her as they had been doing. This time, perhaps, just a bit desperately, on his part.

--

Monday came with its usual, unwelcome alacrity. A by-now-familiar rush out the door lead to another long, solitary day in her apartment. He dumped out the half-full pot of coffee, put her mug in the dishwasher, and went through the by-now familiar routine of straightening her kitchen. It didn’t take long.

He began to pace, knowing the space really was too small, just as she’d said it would be. Then he forced himself to stop doing that, knowing that to become unhappy here meant he would be happy nowhere.

By noon, he finished the last of the antibiotics Peter Alcott had left for him. Aside from a little stiffness in his wrist, he was fairly recovered. Even the scar on his side looked like it was trying to disappear, under the wealth of his body hair.

He went into her bedroom to make the bed, then realized he'd already done it. Likewise, the sink in her bathroom was already clean, thanks to him. It didn't need another scrubbing.

He sighed, and returned to Shelley.

At five, her phone rang, the sound a jangling thing, in the near silence of the room.

"Hi. It's just me." He didn't like the sound of her voice on the tape. Something about the machine made it lose its soft, breathy quality.

"I'm ah... stuck tying up some loose ends," she began.

He listened. Catherine would be working late, again, and she called to say so. Her most immediate case, the one about the abused wife, was requiring more of her time.

"So um... don't wait up or anything. If I'm late, I'm late."

Vincent didn't know the details of what she was doing, since she hadn't been able to leave them on her device. He only knew she'd be forced to stay out even later than she had before.

Well after ten o'clock, she came in the door, utterly drained.

Vincent all but forced her to eat something, then tucked her into bed. He knew that he wouldn't be exploring her body tonight. She was too exhausted.

A prickling of guilt let him know he bore at least a little of the blame for that. Last night had been a long one for her, for both of them, as they moved ever closer to the choice they knew there would be no turning back from.

In between her phone call and now, more snippets of memories had kept trying to push their way through, from his subconscious mind to his conscious one, and they made him feel more insecure about what was next for them.

He still didn't really know who "he" was. But he was now coming to understand how much the life he was currently living had little to nothing to do with him, *per se*. She was right. They all were. This was not "like him." None of the memories

pushing their way in indicated it was.

He sat in the living room, just to avoid being close to her bed, the memories of last night repeatedly playing themselves out, even as he both tried to think of something else, and tried not to.

He'd clung to her, hard, in the dark hours of the night, and loved her with an even more devastating thoroughness than usual. He alone knew why that was.

*If I gain one life, will I lose another? Will I lose you?* It was a thought he couldn't shake, and it was growing into a fear. *Three years.* He knew there had to be reasons for that. He didn't like that that was so.

He sat on her small sofa in shadow, while she slept, admitting to himself that things were changing, whether he willed it or no. The last few days had been too full of old memories. Brief ones, only, but definitely *there*, and most of them centered around her. While there was one snippet about the first time he'd ever beaten the old man, "Father" at chess, and a few more involving Mouse, most of his recollections still centered around her: She was beautiful, in a white gown, and they were dancing. She was smiling, as they listened to a children's string recital. She was gorgeous in a blue-green dress, laughing, and soaked with rain.

*Catherine.*

He pushed the images aside, only to see her as she'd been last night, nude, her back arched, her hand squeezing his forearm as she came. A soft sound had caught in her throat, as she'd forbid his hand to move away, needing it right where it was. When she fell back to the blankets she sighed, and her slowly opening eyes were lambent, and full of love. For him.

*Catherine. My Catherine. My love.*

Vincent shifted uncomfortably in the chair. Nighttime black covered her balcony. His groin was hot, and his skin overwarm to the touch, not that he was considering touching himself. Though of course, things being as they were, he also wasn't considering much else.

His brain felt tired as his body felt anything but. He discovered the meaning of the

words “hot and bothered,” as he watched a low-crested moon drag itself along the tops of the trees.



He wanted her. Catherine. And he knew this was not the time to press her for it.

*What do I tell you? That I completely adore you? That I'm more sure of that now than I ever was? What does it mean that I remember a young, brunette boy's face, and that I scarred it? Anything? Nothing? I am your lover, yet I'm not. What does that mean for us?*

He rose from the sofa and pushed the by-now very familiar balcony doors open. The concrete space was welcomingly cool, and he eyed her rose bush, every bud a little bigger, now. He traced his hand up the longest stem, careful not to get caught on one of the thorns.

*But she had been. She had been caught on one of them.* This, like the other snippets of memory, crashed in, unbidden, with far more detail than there ever had been, before.

*He was looking down, and her bloody finger was cradled in his hand. She was warm, and the smell of fresh-turned earth was in his nose. She'd pricked her finger, like Sleeping Beauty, on the spindle of a spinning wheel. The slight wound had surprised her.*

*Then he'd surprised them both. He'd bent over her, and taken the injured finger into his mouth and kissed it, wanting to take the sting of the injury away, wanting it to heal.*



Vincent remembered it, even unto how her finger had trembled, as he'd held it in his hands. *Then something... passed between us. Something emotional as much as physical...* He knew it had. He felt it was so.

He chased the image, in his mind, knowing it wasn't going to stay. Had he kissed her, afterwards? Apologized? Brought her a bandage? What? He didn't know.

He'd spent all day in such pursuits. Thinking about Jamie reminded him of a time he'd seen her with a crossbow. Shelving a book of poetry had brought him a wispy image of reading it to Catherine, on her balcony, her head settled against his arm. Orion had been over his head, and she'd been nestled against him, safe and close.

*Where everything shimmers and floats.*

He'd straightened the pillows on her bed, and that memory was far more clear, and more immediate. She'd writhed under his hands. Satisfyingly, and with a sinuous kind of beauty that had made his mouth water. That memory, he held in its entirety. Much to his satisfaction.

But for the rest of it... Now it was maddening that he didn't know, and couldn't completely remember. Maddening, and in some way... frightening. Half-knowing was almost harder than not knowing at all. Everything started to feel like a puzzle he was supposed to solve. And part of him didn't even want to, for fear of what it would bring.

He paced her balcony. *What if I remember? What if I remember everything? Does that mean I'll ... go back?* He had no answer for the question. But he knew the idea frightened him. In a way it never had, before.

When his life had been a blank slate, that had been almost easier to bear. At first, survival had been the most immediate goal, and there had been nothing to distract him from that pursuit, even as there was nothing to help him, either.

*Nothing but her, and his sense of her.*

He sensed her now, in the other room. She was sleeping deeply, and too tired for dreams.

Of all the pieces of images he'd courted that day, he'd pursued some, but not others. He was not so big a fool as to understand which ones, and why.

The image of her in a white dress, though lovely, was also disturbing, to him. They were clearly Below. They were alone in a room, and he was dancing with her, though there were no musicians there. He didn't recognize the room. It hadn't been a place he'd seen, on their sporadic visits Below. But he knew they were deep within the earth, and he pushed the memory aside, rather than chase it down. It was the same at the children's recital. The deep earth was all around him, as they stood at the top of a set of wooden stairs.

He realized that even though the idea of going Below had no appeal, he no longer feared it, instinctively. He didn't pursue the memories of "Below," because he knew that was a place that Catherine had only visited, but never lived.

He realized something else. His sense of claustrophobia was all but gone. He could think about the low places without sweating, without horror.

But he couldn't do it without a certain sense of dread.

Images of Father, of Mary, of Mouse, of a black man he hadn't met when he'd gone Below, *Winslow. This is Winslow*, his mind supplied the name – came and went, across his consciousness. He pushed them back, afraid that he had to.

*If I remember all of them... all the dozens of them... I'll lose you. Won't I?*

More memories came, as he stood on her stones. Memories of Eli, and Sebastian. Of Rolley, both young and old. The *Moonlight Sonata* played in his mind.

He should tell Catherine that, shouldn't he? Should tell her what had been going on with him, these last few days? That he was... remembering, more and more?

*No. Just... no.*

Vincent sighed. The park below beckoned to him, and its verdant beauty drew him like a siren's invitation. Cool air. Open spaces. Not the warm, sometimes downright stuffy confines of her apartment.

*You were sanctuary*, he thought to the dark, deep beauty before him, remembering it. *You were freedom. You were blessing.*

He was over the balcony railing before he could think of a reason not to be, making his way down toward the sylvan enclosure of the park. When he was close enough, he dropped silently to the ground. He ran through the first stand of trees and to the wide, damp grass of the greensward, before he was even aware of his intentions.

Within the first few feet of tearing across the open grass, he stopped, pulled off his boots and socks, and tossed them aside. He found he loved the feel of the dew-kissed lawn, beneath the sensitive pad of his healed foot.

*God, that feels good.*

He flexed his toes in the nighttime grass, and for the first time, Vincent realized he was born to be a running creature. It was a thing he had no way to know in the cramped confines of her apartment, or when he'd been trying to make his way to her by stealth, and subterfuge.

He became aware of it now, as he shifted his weight from his heels to the balls of his feet, and dropped his body instinctively, balancing on knees that were ready to sprint. His toes flexed into the soft loam of the ground, and he knew they would dig, as he planted his foot and propelled himself forward.

*On your mark, get set, go!* The words from childhood prompted him forward. He all but felt a push to his back as he began to move, loving the feeling of planting



one foot down, as he lifted the other. Muscles had memory. This felt very familiar.

His stride began to lengthen. And then it began to lighten.

Lifting himself up, he realized that the powerful muscles in his calves were built for speed, as much as distance, and he ran gracefully over the ground, his size belying the rapidity of his passage. He was a cheetah in the dark, and though he was a heavy, masculine creature, he ran like something lighter, and potentially more deadly. He dropped his shoulders low, and felt his arms pump in time with his legs, aware that even at this pace, he was nowhere near as fast as he could go, if he had to.

Sprinting across the greensward, he encountered the next line of trees, and it was there he discovered the true gifts of his form. He leaped nimbly over a fallen log, and cleared a Hawthorne hedge with the agile ease of a hurdler. A stand of pine made him change course, and he turned on a dime, and spun left, avoiding a batch of pinecones, and a disgruntled looking possum.

He put his arms up to cover his face, as he crashed between two close-standing spruce, and he fought the urge to throw himself halfway up the trunk of a grandfather oak, and scale it, hands and feet digging safe purchase into the bark.

He was a climber, too. He knew it without even testing it, here. *After all, I climbed my way to you*, he thought of Catherine.

The white, thin moon tracked his progress across the nightswept park, and he veered away from the concrete paths and security lights, instinctively. He wanted the deep, cool places of a wild forest, even though he knew this wasn't that. He liked the older trees, and knew they were cover for him.

A black man in a satin baseball jacket strolled the path to his left, and Vincent knew the man never saw him, nor knew he was there. He saw some few others, as well. None of them realized a two hundred plus pound behemoth was racing nearby, sometimes across the very ground they'd just travelled.

It felt liberating. It felt powerful.

By the time he saw the lake, he knew he was a sweating mess, and he wanted his shirt and pants gone for the same reason he'd wanted his boots off.

The former sailed over his head. He hated that he had to slow down, to rid himself of the latter.

When the water closed around him, he was a knife in the dark, silently swimming below the surface until the need for oxygen forced his head up above the water.

*Room. Sweet, open spaces, and room to move without bumping into something.* It felt incredible. Both right and familiar, in its way. It felt... liberating.

He took in huge draughts of air and dove down again, his great lungs capable of keeping him below the water for a long spell of time. He was nearly at the middle of the lake, in two deep breaths. Near the other side, in four.

He treaded water for a long moment, aware that splashing would alert others to his presence, and mourning the fact that he couldn't power his way out on top of the water, rather than stroking beneath it. He wanted to feel the long roll of his arm muscles as they broke the surface of the water, wanted to feel the moonlight paint his sides, as he swam.

Realizing that he wasn't going to get out on the other side and simply continue to run naked, across the park, he regretfully turned back toward home, giving a defiant little dive as he did so, not caring who heard the sound of his big body, as it splashed down into the water.

*I've done this before. Swum hard, for pleasure. Perhaps not here, but... I've done it.* The realization was a sure one, even though it was tied to no specific memory of where he'd been.

He dove down for the novelty of it, enjoying the long stretch of muscles that suddenly let him know they'd been confined, too long. The injured side didn't "pull" like he thought it might, and the knowledge pleased him. He touched the mucky bottom of the lake, rolled, and stroked beneath the surface of the water, feeling weeds tickle his calves, as he powered through the long stretch of lake water.

Slivered moonlight continued to trail him, and he saw the white gleam of it above him, through the water, a scythe image trapped in what looked like corrugated glass.

The heat in his groin cooled, though his awareness of Catherine remained a constant force, just below his conscious thoughts. He loved her. He desired her. Both were simple, straightforward truths, and he held them as such.

Physical labor seemed to clear his mind of the other bits of memory that had been intruding in on him all day. That felt good. It felt... relaxing, and like his sharp mind was clear, again.

He broke the surface of the water and swam smoothly, and in near silence. Once he reached the shore he found that the bank was muddy, and he slipped once, and had to go back in and rinse his hand. He stood in deep shadows, content to drip on the dewy grass, and watch the moon track its course. A cloud dragged itself across it, dimming what little available light there was, and making his cover all the deeper.

He collected his pants and had to put them on wet, thanks to having no towel. It was of little consequence. He would change once he got back home. *Back home.* The two words made his heart glad.

As he zipped up his fly, he realized he was not alone.

A group of teenagers prowled along the nearest sidewalk, speaking Spanish, mostly, and laughing. They were boisterous, and passing pictures back and forth between them, talking about some of them.

*No, not just pictures. Postcards,* Vincent realized, hunkering down a few feet away from the water's edge. He knew he wouldn't be spotted. The brush near the lake was thick enough to conceal him.

The noise from the kids sounded ebullient and energetic, with the cards being passed around, and an occasional bottle. If they were in a gang, they didn't look like they were out to cause any trouble, though they were one of the reasons why few ventured into the park at night.

Vincent was wary, though he wasn't concerned. The lake was still to his back, if he needed it, and as it was, they hadn't seen him. His sense of empathy told him they were giving off a playful kind of energy, not a malicious one. They moved past his position, and on down the concrete path, as they laughed with each other.

The postcards were the kind that were bought (or stolen) from spinning kiosks, all up and down the touristy areas, especially those near landmarks. A few of them fluttered to the ground, as the cadre of youths moved on, clearly not caring that they trailed debris, in their noisy wake.

Vincent waited until he was sure they were well past his hiding place before he ventured out. *Time to head home.* He realized that if Catherine woke up in the middle of the night and found him gone, that she'd likely become worried.

He checked on her, through their bond. *Still asleep.*

Prompted by curiosity, he scooped up the fallen postcards. They were New York landmarks, nothing more. He knew he'd never actually been to any of the places pictured in them. He recognized one of the Empire State Building. A model of it existed in the cluttered chamber everyone insisted he favored, underground. He'd seen the small replica the first day Catherine and Peter had tried to take him back to the tunnels; he wondered why he'd wanted it.

He flipped past that picture to a second photo, this one of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, at dusk. He felt an internal tug as he stared at the dark steel beams that spanned the river. *Something about this. But... it's sunrise?* He felt the memory of sitting with Catherine re-assert itself, as he walked back toward home, scanning the last card.

It was a clock. The large terminal clock in Grand Central Station, to be precise.



It was huge, and golden. It had four opal faces, so the time could be seen no matter where you stood. Vincent knew he'd never actually seen it, yet something about it looked familiar. In a way, it looked like a spinning watch.

*A spinning watch.*

The memory lanced his consciousness, and he could no more stop it than he could control it.

The dark voice was full of hate. *"Do you know how much time you have left? Do any of us know that? Do you? Does she?"* The evil voice hissed.

Vincent's ankles felt trapped by restraints that weren't there, anymore, as a man's pocket watch spun, before his eyes. The chain gleamed, and candlelight glinted. A needle pierced his skin.

*"Fire burns. You hate it. Stone is a heavy tomb. There are no safe places beneath the ground, anywhere. Remember that."*

No! He remembered screaming it, but only in his mind. They'd taped his mouth.

*"You'll forget all you knew. All illusions of safety. You'll forget your own name. You will forget. You will forget..."*

The needle stung, and something went in. Something terrible. It burned, and it robbed him of his sense of self. His mind felt foggy, and his muscles wouldn't cooperate with his attempts to struggle free of his restraints.

*"You will forget..."* It became impossible to even hold his head up. The spinning watch was a blur, before his closing eyes.

*No. Catherine...*

Vincent's head snapped toward the apartment, now on the other side of the park.

*I'm too far away*, he realized, feeling his panic start to rise.

Catherine. He had to get back to Catherine. She might be in danger. The thing that had grabbed him might come for her, and she would be helpless to fend it off.

*I'm a fool to run so far, so far away from her. To leave her alone and defenseless, in the night. Go!*

Cursing the impulse that had brought him out, Vincent raced across the park, stopping to grab his shirt, but not stopping to put it on, as he ran.

*Catherine. Catherine!*

He was still in a panic as he heaved himself over her balcony wall and burst through the still-open doors of her living room.

When he unlatched the louvered doors to her bedroom, he realized he'd awakened her, even as he knew it had been foolish to do so. Their bond told him she was safe, and that she was here. He'd simply been too frightened for her to stop and verify it, as he ran.

"Catherine!" He said her name, breathing hard, clearly having come in from outside, wet, barefoot, and terrified.

"Vincent?" she blinked, trying to pierce what had just happened.

She saw no enemy near, but wasn't taking any chances. He saw her reach for the drawer that held the gun.

"No. No, Catherine. You're safe," he said inexplicably, crossing to her in two long strides, and pulling her against his damp chest. "Safe," he repeated, holding her with more strength than he normally would have found prudent.

She ran her hands down his huge, damp arms. "Safe. Yes, of course I'm safe. Why wouldn't I be? Vincent... where have you been? Did someone see you?"

He shook his head, gulping down air, aware that he smelled like pond water.

"I... in the park. I went... for a run. A swim. I saw... teenagers."

He swallowed, and Catherine turned on the bedside lamp.

"I saw this. One of them dropped this," Vincent said, showing her the picture of the clock. He'd clutched it in his hand, all the way back.

Catherine recognized it. Every New Yorker did. "The clock? From Grand Central?" She was clearly confused.

"Not a clock," he shook his head. "A watch. A man's... pocket watch." He swallowed and caught his breath as he turned her loose. "Gold. A pocket watch on a chain. Asking me... how much time I had, and you. Telling me to be afraid of fire, and the weight of the stones. Telling me to... forget. Why would I remember such a ..."

She was pushing aside the bedclothes before he had a chance to finish, and swinging her legs out of bed.

"Because Paracelsus used one." She bit the words out, as she reached for her tennis shoes. She looked at her bedside clock. They had time to get Below before her building came to life.

"Dry off and change clothes," she ordered. "We'll go find your shoes. I know you don't like to go Below, but I swear I'll be with you every inch of the way. We're going to settle who did this to you, once and for all."

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

### *Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot*



Whether it was thanks to the adrenaline still trailing through his system or his sense of worry for Catherine's safety, or even the scattered memories he was slowly getting back, Vincent found that this time, entering the tunnels no longer filled him with a sense of fear. That just as thinking about them no longer frightened him, actually being there didn't, either.

He wasn't sure he could say the same thing for the others, as he disinterred the man everyone insisted had done this to him. Peter, Father, and Catherine watched, as he applied his great strength to the task.

"It is past time we got to the bottom of this," Vincent said, moving the heavy cairn stones, while Peter held the torch, and Jacob the lantern.

For whatever reason, the thought of the city over his head also no longer held the terror it once had. He was no longer afraid of the crushing weight of the skyscrapers, above him. Perhaps that fear had been lessening also, and he knew it. Or perhaps he sensed there might be an even greater fear, buried among the rocks that comprised John Pater's grave.

*Or not buried there, as the case may be.* He tugged aside the stones, longing to know, one way or the other.

They'd interred John next to Anna, but there, the similarity ended. While Anna's marker declared her a beloved wife, John's didn't even hold his real name. He'd wanted to be called "Paracelsus" in his life, and it was that designation he'd carried to his death.

The word was painted, not carved, on the stones. Vincent realized that the rocks they'd used to inter the Alchemist were of the largest variety. It was as if the men



who had put him here were determined that John Pater's grave would keep him in it, no matter what.

After several minutes of heavy sweating, and one moment where Vincent had had to use a good-sized timber to act as a lever, a dusty, wrapped, form came into view.

"I'll do it. I'll look," Peter said, handing Catherine the torch. Catherine nodded. Jacob stepped forward, also.

Carefully, Peter applied a pair of surgical scissors to the strips of muslin sheet they'd used to wrap him in. A familiar, though decaying face greeted Peter's eyes.

"It's John," Peter said, laying his handkerchief over the lifeless eyes. A sneer that looked very much like the one John often wore marked his face, in death. The scarred skin was unmistakable, in its damage.

"You're absolutely certain?" Catherine asked. Having a resurrected John Pater stalk her again had been the stuff of her nightmares.

Peter nodded. "It's him," he said, turning.

Catherine's face fell. She'd been so certain. "Then who in the world—"

"Well. It took you long enough." The voice was unfamiliar to Catherine.

"Tamara?" Jacob asked, watching the spidery woman step out of the shadows.

"Hello, Jacob. Hip still bothering you? John had to practice your walk, you know. There's more to it than just the face. Though of course, faces are what I do."

Catherine watched her step into the light, realizing she had no idea whatsoever who this was. Neither did Vincent. Even Peter didn't seem to know her.

Dressed all in black, she stepped as boldly into the circle of light as if she were a distant friend, just returned to pay her last respects.

"You can't bury him without this," she said, holding up the golden half-mask. "It's not *right* to bury a man without his... face."

Astonished, they all watched as the slender, older woman whisked Peter's

handkerchief away and carefully placed the mask of gold on the alchemist's head. She let the dark string he used to tie it with trail, and dropped the white square of cloth into the dirt.

"There you are," she said lovingly, to the corpse of John Pater. "Back with what you love. Back with who you were." Her regard was fond, as she trailed a bony finger down the wrapped chest. A chest Vincent had destroyed, with his claws.

Catherine looked at Vincent, who stared at the woman. He was wary, and kept his eyes on her hands. Clearly, he expected her to produce some kind of weapon, from the folds of her long black dress.

She glanced up at them all as if she were only now ready to acknowledge them.

"Well, you didn't expect *me* to move the stones, did you?" she asked.

It was Father who asked the question. "Do you mean all this was so you could... re-unite John with his mask?" Jacob asked, incredulously.

Tamara shrugged. "Not his mask. His *face*. After that one took it from him," she indicated Vincent. "You can't bury a man without his *face*, Jacob. It's not seemly."

But of course, they hadn't been able to bury John with the gold mask the brilliant scientist often wore. He'd been impersonating Jacob when Vincent had killed him. It had been all they could do to bury him in a high-collared shirt he'd left behind, much less the golden half-mask that had covered the worst of the damage to his disfigured visage.

Jacob took a step forward. "That can't have been why you did all of this to Vin—"

"It was part of it. You honor the dead your way, and I'll honor them mine ... 'Father.'" She said the word with derision. The two of them were clearly acquainted. And from the looks of things, it was from a long time ago.

She addressed Vincent. "If you'd left Erlik alive, I could have had the stones moved long ago." She walked by him as if that was all she intended to say, before she left.

Catherine stepped into her path, blocking it. Vincent didn't care for their

proximity to each other.

"You aren't going anywhere. Not until we have some answers," Catherine ordered.

Tamara's reply was a little sharp. "You'll get what I decide to give you. And young lady, I promise I've moved larger people than you, out of my way." Her hands dropped to the deep folds of the black skirt she wore. Peter had no idea what she might produce. Vincent interposed his large body between the two women, not liking that this creature should be close to Catherine. But he wanted answers, too.

"Answer her," Vincent demanded. Tamara shrugged the command away as meaningless, which, Catherine realized, it probably was, for her. Her hands relaxed, but stayed close to her pockets.

"You were injected with a sedative and moved; which was actually fairly easy. The tunnels to Chinatown are wide enough to accommodate a food cart."

She paused, while her meaning became clear. She'd waited for him near Chinatown, so that his body would be easy to move. That part of the city was also fairly close to the docks.

"If there was one thing dealing with John taught all of us, it was how to move a large corpse. And of course I had some help. Though I'll be fair and say it took two grown men to lift you. It cost me more than a little of John's gold, but I think it was worth it, all things considered. Don't you?" She said it all as if they were discussing the weather.

"Why not just use them to move the stones?" Peter asked.

"Why, indeed?" was her cryptic reply. She stared at Vincent. "*You* put him there. *You* took his face from him. You should be the one. It's only justice, Vincent," Tamara replied.

"Justice!" Catherine almost spat the word. "Whatever you did to him, I want it undone," she declared, continuing to stand near Vincent, and block the path Tamara would use to leave.

Tamara turned a curious eye to Vincent. "Undo it? I have no idea how to "undo" a

beating, my dear. He'll heal. Damage often does." Thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Pity. John would have loved him, marred. They could have been twins." Her smile was a horrible thing to behold. There were ice picks in her pale eyes.

"I mean the damage you did to his mem—" Catherine cut off her word at the look on Tamara's face, as the older woman rounded on her. Her gaze grew assessing. Very.

*She didn't know Vincent couldn't remember anything? But how could that be?*

But the old eyes were sharp, and so were the ears. She pinned Catherine with a cutting look.

"His... memory? But I did nothing to his memory; well, nothing permanent. What I used was temporary. Not by my choice mind you, that's just the way drugs work. Hypnosis, too. I admit I made sure he'd fear an open flame, I needed that fear to get him to stay out of the tunnels, avoid a place lit by candles and torches. I told him there was no safety, in these halls. And for him, there wasn't."

"Why?" Peter asked.

She barely spared the physician a glance. "Father drove John out of *his* home. So I drove Vincent out of his. As I said: Justice."

"And then?" Father asked.

"I would think that is obvious. I wanted him to either die, or do what he just did. I wasn't particular as to which one."

All eyes were on her. "If... when he escaped, I wanted him to die Above, in a cage, if he was going to die. Or if he wasn't going to accommodate anyone that way, I was fine if he eventually returned here, to help me reunite John with his face. But I had no designs on his memory, other than the very short term variety."

"That's not possible," Peter said. "What did you inject him with?"

Tamara shrugged. "To catch him, to move him? I had a little of what John made, a thing he used to keep Erlik... obedient. It wears off." Again, she lifted a narrow shoulder, and indicated Vincent. "A little of that, mixed with alcohol, to keep him

uncoordinated. I'm not the chemist John was. I'm an artist—"

"You made him drunk?" Peter asked incredulously.

"I needed him... unresponsive, for a bit. The guards are simple-minded, and weak, mentally."

"You hurt him." Catherine's tone was unforgiving. She remembered too well the damage to his back.

"I may have," was all she got for an answer.

"You injected me with something," Vincent said. "You told me to forget."

"And so you did," Tamara said. "John said you were sensitive to poisons, and the drugs make you open to suggestions. So I told you to forget where home was, so you'd have no way to get safe. For a few days, perhaps more, considering it's you. Perhaps a week. Not so much more. Less, if you were human." She let the insult stand. "I thought that was all the time I'd need. Imagine my surprise, when it wasn't."

She stepped away from Catherine, and stood back near John's body. "I have absolutely no idea how you found your way to her."

She nodded towards Catherine and considered the puzzle a moment, seeing if any of them would tell her. None did. When she realized they weren't about to, she stayed where she was, and simply cocked a head in Vincent's direction.

"There was someone else," Vincent insisted. "A man held me."

Her smile was wan. "A tall man? Slender, and aristocratic?" With a deft hand, she indicated her own willowy form. "With a scarred face and a gold mask?" She nodded toward the body. It was then that Vincent realized the "man" who held him had been a woman, all along.

"You made a mask of his face. The way he was, before the fire."

"John bid me to. He needed one, for when he dealt with those Above. He left it with me the day he went to go 'play Jacob.' It was easy enough to use. And of course I had that." She indicated John's golden mask.

"You evil witch." It was Peter who said it. Tamara did not respond to his insult, as all of them realized how far she'd gone to get her revenge, for John Pater's sake.

"You... changed your voice," Vincent accused.

She dropped her voice half an octave. "My voice is low, but nowhere near as low as John's. You heard what you expected to hear, once you saw the mask. It muffles sound, and you were disoriented."

"Do you practice hypnosis, as well?" Vincent charged.

"Oh, you mean the watch?" She produced it from the fold of her pocket and placed it with Paracelsus, as though it was something she'd just now remembered. "I never did have John's gift for changing voices, but who do you think taught him mesmerism? I admit he was better at it than I ever was, but still. A little disorientation and some... polite suggestions, and you were, well... exactly what you were."

"If you wanted me to die, you could have just ..."

She shook her head, slightly, negating the charge. "I wanted one of any number of things to happen, Vincent. One of which was you moving the stones. Killing you doesn't accomplish that. I wanted you to think John had held you. After that... Women are more ... fluid in their thinking than men are. It's one of our gifts." She eyed Catherine as she said it.

She gave the watch a last caress, then turned to Vincent. "I knew where you'd be and took a chance. Shot you full of a sedative mixed with alcohol. Cheap and disorienting. You've had alcohol in your system, before. I had to give you something I knew wouldn't kill you. If someone was going to kill you, I wanted it to be the world Above. The world that hates all of us. Well... most of us," she said, indicating Catherine and Peter.

"I think that's how John would have wanted it, too." She waved them all away, clearly not caring if Vincent believed her or not. There was malice in every word.

"Why does he have almost no memory of who he is, still?" Peter asked, knowing that by now, she knew Vincent had amnesia.

Assessing eyes raked Vincent's form. "The answer to that is deceptively simple," Tamara said with wicked glee.

Vincent's blue eyes pinned her, unable to stop her from what she was about to reveal.

"Your dear Vincent has been lying to you." She told them what Vincent couldn't.

"No," Catherine said. She leaped to his defense, clearly not believing the mask-maker.

"Have you been telling her all this time you don't remember?" Tamara asked.

"He *doesn't* remember," Catherine insisted.

Tamara pinned Vincent with her spider eyes. "Indeed? How... fascinating."

Only Jacob realized that Vincent had gone very still.

"And if I were to tell you he's lying? What then, pretty one?" Tamara asked Catherine.

"Be silent!" Vincent ordered. And the minute the words left his mouth, he knew they'd damned him.

Everyone looked between the two of them. Catherine's face registered her shock; and then, her understanding.

"Ohhhh, Vincent," Tamara cooed while Catherine processed. "Did you stay in her apartment? Scrub her back while she bathed, and fetch her coffee? Learn to use an electric can opener? Why Vincent, did you sweep her floors and empty her dishwasher? Or were you too busy scr—"

"I said '*Be SILENT,*' you malevolent hag!" Vincent thundered.

He raised his hand, not in claws, but in a backhanding gesture. He took a step forward when it was Catherine's voice that stopped him.

"Vincent!"

His name. Always his name, in her mouth; the thing that quelled his Beast, and sent it back, within.

But this wasn't something the Beast in him wanted to do. This was something the man in him wanted to do.

He took another step before he stopped himself, fighting for control. Peter and Jacob also stepped forward, none of them quite knowing what action to take.

"Leave," Vincent hissed to Tamara, not wanting them to keep her prisoner, thanks to what else she might do or say. "If I ever find you again, I swear I'll snap your neck and think nothing of it," Vincent threatened. All the color drained from Catherine's face.



Tamara moved toward the exit with affronted dignity. This time, no one stopped her.

"John was so right. Going home is... delightful, in its way," she dared, gliding away.

Catherine's eyes were huge, and they were trained on Vincent, rather than on the departing Tamara. He kept his back to his love, as he stood and regarded the body of John Pater, complete with golden mask and pocket watch. After a moment, the sensation of Catherine's eyes boring into his back made him uncomfortable, and he turned. His father, Peter Alcott, and the woman he loved, were all staring at him.

"How long?" she could barely rasp out the words. He partly read her lips. And hated her expression, utterly.



"Not long. It was already coming in bits and pieces. More since... a few days ago. *Since I loved you, all night, and tried to hold on to that, rather than this.*

His voice was full of his defeat. And his shame. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, now."

*You didn't tell me. How could you not tell me?* The words were in her grey-green eyes.

Tears coursed down her cheeks for a moment. When her vision cleared, he was gone.

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## *Chapter Nineteen*

### *And Never Brought to Mind*



"Leave me. Please," he said, sitting on a stool, in his chambers. He'd moved it away from the table and placed it near a corner, for no reason that she could name - other than he literally wanted to look at nothing, and no one.

"No," she answered.

He turned his head, barely. "I asked you to do that once before, and you complied." He reminded her of the time he'd killed Micah, and the other Outsiders.

*So you do remember,* she thought. "Perhaps I shouldn't have gone, then, either," she replied.

He was slumped in the corner, and turned his body away so that she had the view of his back.

“Why? In God’s name, Vincent why?” She had to ask it.

He all but exploded at her, as he came off the seat. “Because we don’t... *exist*, if I don’t, Catherine! Don’t you *understand* that?!” His hand knifed the air in front of him.

Catherine blinked. “But... but things are different, now.”

“Are they? Tell me, if I come back to live here, *are they?*” He was furious and frightened, and she could all but smell both of them coming off him in equal measures.

“Catherine... we don’t *work* any other way but how it’s been, the last few weeks. We don’t *work*! We *can’t*!” There was hopelessness in his tone. And certainty. He calmed his voice. “We tried.” There was a world of regret in his deep voice.

He turned and ran his hand through his mane. “I had to forget who I *was*, to hold you through the night. Finally! And to be your lover in *some* measure, as if we were always destined to be. Had to... *lose* myself...” he made a fist in the air as he said it, “so that I’d even come into your apartment, be a part of your life.”

He opened the fist and let his palm drop, the gesture one of impotent defeat.

“Don’t you see? If I come back here... what are we, but what we always were?” He gestured to the cluttered chamber. “A half-realized dream that was never going to come true, no matter ...”

“We were working toward it. We were getting there. On our own.”

“We were poles apart and drawing no closer. One of us knows what I was thinking, Catherine.” He would give himself no quarter, and wasn’t asking her for any.

“Vincent... I understand if you’re afraid...”

“Afraid? I am... *bereft*. *Again*.” He held onto the edge of the wardrobe, vastly wanting to throw something against the nearest wall.

She drew closer as if she would put her hands on him, but the heat radiating from his huge frame warned her back.

She kept her voice soft. "We're... lovers now. You have to know that changes things." She tried to keep her voice soothingly low, as a counter to his rage.

"Does it? Does it really? So I'll be in your bed tonight? And the next one? Perhaps?" he demanded.

"Vincent... of course you will. If that's what you want."

"What I want?! *Damn* that woman!" He gestured broadly, indicating Tamara. "I *had* what I wanted! But now..."

He tightened his hands into fists and Catherine saw the lone tear creep down his cheek. When he looked up, the small statue of the Empire State Building caught his eye.

"Devin brought me this," he said, looking down at it, fingering the metal. "He told me it was the highest building in New York, and that one day, if I stood on top of it, I would be able to see another state. Be able to see the ocean. Be able to see... everything."

He dropped his head, as the memory of why he'd kept the small token came back to him. "Devin brought dreams down here to me; he knew this was the only place I'd ever be able to have them."

Catherine watched his misery, watched as he pushed it aside, and lifted his head.

He fought to modulate his voice. "It doesn't work, Catherine. We don't work. There is your world and there's mine. At best, we're temporary guests in each other's space. You can't live here. You can't be... entombed here."

Catherine struggled to pierce the source of his misery, if not his subterfuge.

"So you solved our problems. You came to live with me."

"It wasn't something I planned. It just..." he closed his eyes. "I truly didn't remember. It felt so *good* to be able to say everything I was thinking. Felt so *good* to be able to tell you how very much I love you."

Now she did touch his arm. "Nothing is stopping you from doing that, you know."

He dropped his head, again. "Yes, there is." Then he lifted it, and looked around

the room. Took in all the cast-off mementos culled from countless refuse bins. It all felt like it was there to weigh him down.

“My life will do that. Or yours will. Oh, it will start out well enough. I’ll stay with you until dawn drives me down. Until I have to run across the park to avoid being caught by the earliest of the early morning joggers, but... I think we both know what will happen, after a time.”

“What? What will happen? What is it you’re so afraid of, Vincent?” She stayed put, her hand on his arm as she asked it, and kept her voice low.

“My life. What it is. How it was... built to not include you, or any other woman. After a few days, someone will need something. Just a small something. Something my strength is needed for, or my skill. And I’ll miss you that night, because I’ll be deep at Narcissa’s, or gone to Chinatown again, to help with something.”

She squeezed his bicep.

“I think we’ll survive it,” she said.

“Will we? Will we ‘survive it’ when a day becomes three, and three become five? When your work interferes as well, and the obligations of our days come piling in?” Will we ‘survive it’ when summer comes, and I can only come to you past sunset, a thing that feels like it refuses to even happen, in July?”

“I can come here, you know.”

“It isn’t the same. I could nail a church door to that chamber entrance and we’d still be interrupted.”

“Vincent...” her voice trailed. “Give them a chance. They’re your family.” She dropped her eyes. “Unless you’re... embarrassed, of course.”

“Don’t you ever say that!” Now his anger came at her.

She was having none of it. “What else should I think?” she shot back.

“You should think that I...” He sighed, and turned his face away. “It doesn’t matter, now. It really doesn’t.”

Catherine knew there was only so much she could say, right now. Releasing his arm, she glanced, toward his doorway.

“When you think it does... Vincent, you do know where I will be.”



With a gentle kiss upon his deeply troubled brow, one he wasn't sure he wanted, even as he craved it, she left him.

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## *Chapter Twenty*

### *Tamara Reigns In Hell*



True to his word, they didn't see each other that night, or the next one. There was a journey Vincent knew he needed to make. It was a long one, and it grew warmer as he travelled down. The skeleton in sailor's clothing still marked the way to a domain he thought would be abandoned, then knew wasn't.

It was dimmer, though, here in Hell.

Low braziers burned, and Vincent could swear the smoke was tinged with sulfur.

*Fire and brimstone*, he thought, making his way through the large antechamber where Paracelsus had once held Catherine.

Different passageways led off the main room, but he didn't need to search them all to find Tamara. He simply followed the lit braziers and torches to where she dwelled.

A small set of stairs led to an open room. One that held the tools of her trade. And her.

She looked wholly unconcerned, as she sat at a long table, fussing with something in front of her; a latex mask, fitted over a stand. As Vincent drew closer, he saw who it was.

Erlik. There were holes where the eyes would go, but the rest of it was unmistakably him. Even without his eyes for expression, his face looked brutish.

"Good afternoon, Vincent. Or is it evening, up there?" she asked, wielding a scalpel over a large ear. Erlik had worn an earring.

Vincent didn't dignify her request for the time. "Did you know I'd come?" he asked.

She spared him a glance. "I thought you might. But, no. I didn't know you would." She eyed her work critically. "I never pretend to know what people... or you, will do." She tacked on the insult as she brushed at the ear with a large cosmetic brush. "Making predictions... that was John's hubris."

"And yours is making... these," he said, picking up the mask she'd worn when she'd played at being Paracelsus.

She knew he was going to destroy it. And possibly, her.

"That's not hubris, Vincent," she corrected. "'Hubris' means *false* pride. That is *your* sin. And John's. And possibly Father's for all I know. It tends to be a masculine thing. Some women have it, of course..." She pierced Erlik's ear, and placed an earring in. "... But mostly only when they're either very young, very rich, or very pretty." She brushed at Erlik's chin. "I am none of those."

“Why?” he asked the monosyllable. She didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“Because I couldn’t move the stones, and you could.”

“But Peter was right. You could have paid someone. Or even... hypnotized them into it, if that was what you wanted done.”

“I could have done a great many things,” Tamara replied, settling back, still eyeing the mask. “You took John’s face from him. Not once, but twice. *You* put him there. I wanted *you* to do it. A man shouldn’t be buried without his face.”



She looked up to see his response to that, then resumed work, with the sharp knife.

“You have something of mine,” he said levelly.

She did. It was how she suspected he’d come.

She reached into a nearby basket and tossed his leather pouch to him. He’d been without it since she’d taken him prisoner. It hadn’t been around his neck when he’d found his way to Catherine.

“Does it mean so much? This thing you didn’t even remember you lost, until recently?” Her voice was full of scorn.

Again, he didn't dignify her comment with a civil reply. He checked the contents of the bag, then wrapped it, and tucked it into his pocket. He'd put it on, later.

She pursed her bloodless lips, as she eyed her creation with a critical eye. "John always talked about releasing your true nature. I imagine he'd be a bit disgusted to know that wasn't much more than a stag in rut."

Vincent refused to rise to her bait, as she trimmed the nostrils, carefully.

"He had so many... larger plans," she tacked on.

Vincent pushed down the urge to take off her head with one swipe of his hand.

"Plans? What plans?"

He knew she'd just goaded him. He wasn't going to let her use that to distract him from his purpose. Even if he wasn't quite sure what that was, at the moment, other than to retrieve Catherine's gift to him.

She swiped at Erlik's nose with a cosmetics brush. "Oh, you know John. Or you knew him. He wanted your world, though I've no idea what he planned to do with it. The people are simple. Their faces are fairly... unexceptional."

She eyed her handiwork, and not him. "You want to kill me. Are you going to?" She asked it almost idly, as if she was barely interested in the answer.

"I haven't decided, yet," he said truthfully.

She smiled, just a little. "John would have known. Right now. He would have decided. For that matter, so would Erlik have."

She rose from the stool she'd been sitting on. "Then that's the only difference between you and John. He could be vicious, but he was never hesitant. It made him more predictable than you are."

"Yet you came where you knew I could find you."

"I came to where my studio is. The fact that you know the way is only so relevant, to me."

She fussed with the hair on a wig stand. It was black. And long. Again, Vincent thought of Erlik, as he'd been in life. When she had the dark hair the way she



wanted it, she brought it over to the stand that held the mask. Vincent watched her every move.

“Why? In God’s name, why, Tamara? Why cross me at all? Did you love Paracelsus so much?”

Her pale face didn’t lose color because it couldn’t. For the first time, Vincent realized how lifeless her skin looked.

“Love? Oh, Vincent, I gave up on that idea before the first year they had to bind you,” she said, letting him know how far her history with the tunnel folk went back. “I was... familiar with John, and he with me. I could create my art ...”

“You destroy people and call it art,” he interrupted.

She was quick to correct him. “John destroyed them. Or Erlik did. I simply... made use of the leavings.” She glanced his way, then went back to her creation. “Don’t look shocked. It’s what exiles are left with. It’s what *you’re* left with. Especially now.”

She attached the wig to the mask with a noxious smelling glue. “There. That’s better.”

She stepped back and eyed her latest creation, as she mused, openly. “Your whole world exists on other people’s cast-offs and left-behinds. I’m just using the one thing none of you want to touch.” She shrugged her thin shoulders. “That’s the only difference.”

She picked up the knife again and tucked some hairs in, near the pierced ear.

Vincent wasn’t going to argue the semantics of making death masks from murder victims.

“Was I supposed to die, in that room you had them chain me in? Or did you plan that I’d escape it?” He asked.

Again, the shrug. “I don’t know that it really much mattered to me, since all eventual outcomes I could see were favorable. I thought you’d *either* die in your chains or escape and get caught, Above. Possibly expose Jacob, and the fools that

live with him.”

“That wouldn’t have helped you get the mask back to Paracelsus.”

“No, but it would have ended you. That the other happened was fine with me. As I said, I’m more... fluid in my thinking, than John ever was. John wanted one outcome, and that one, only. I’m content with several.”

She set down the knife, and almost smiled, at the mask. Except for the lack of glass eyes, Erlik’s completed head now sat before her.

“He was a marvelous brute, wasn’t he?” she mused. “Simple, as a child. The kind who love to tear the wings off flies. But very strong.” She glanced Vincent’s way. “He had you. Had you beaten, crushing the breath, right from your lungs.”

Vincent knew she spoke no falsehood. Erlik had indeed been getting the best of him, as they’d fought each other.

“But for your fangs, you’d be dead, right now. How does it feel to know you were only saved because of the monstrous part of you?” She brushed a long forefinger over Erlik’s brutish chin. “Ah, your monster. The part that will keep you away from her, ultimately.”

“I truly haven’t decided about snapping your neck.” Vincent leaned forward, just to let her know that option was still on the table.

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “I suppose you’ve taken everything else from me. May as well take that. Of course... then you really *would* be a murderer. And of a woman, too. Hmmm. I wonder... would you touch Catherine with those claws, after?” She put the question forth as if it were an unimportant one, and they both knew it wasn’t.

Vincent was furious, and it kept him warm. Warmer than the sultry air in the room. “Gloat. Tell me why hurting me mattered at all, to you.” It was an order, and they both knew it.

“Gloating was John’s long suit. It went with his hubris. That isn’t a thing you acquired from him, was it?” Tamara asked, almost conversationally. She picked the scalpel back up, knowing he wasn’t going to kill her, even if he wanted to. And

she was sure part of him did.

"I am not John's son." Vincent stated.

The pale eyes barely flickered.

"Erlík was mine."

There was no emotion, when she said it, and even in his shock, Vincent couldn't quite get himself to move.

*Erlík? Erlík was your...*

*She made a mask from her dead son's...* Vincent's brain couldn't quite catch up with the realization.

She carefully removed her latest creation, and put the mask in an old tapestry bag. She shot Vincent the barest glance, and began putting the surgical tools away.

"Who else protected me from John, when he was in a rage? When his plans were thwarted, or fate was... less than kind?"

Vincent's mind was still captured, with thoughts of Erlík. *Your son. It would explain... much.*

"Do you mean you bore him? Or do you mean..."

"I mean he was my *son*, Vincent. You, of all... people, know what that word means."

He was stock still, and silent.

She raised an almost amused eyebrow.

"Ahh, I see I've satisfied you. Well. Nice to know I can still do that, with a man... a... a male."

He was reeling, and she knew it.

"You can't think I'm going to just let you... walk out of here." His voice was unsteady, but he was sure he was right.

Tamara deftly drew a gun from the folds of her skirt. The one they both knew she had.

"Now, Vincent. You and I both know how terrible you are at controlling women. Let's not pretend you're going to put *me* in that little binding room, where they kept *you* all those years ago. And we both know I'll never see the inside of a jail cell, not without pointing the authorities to your dear little world. I have my revenge, and you have your trinket. We're done."

She backed away, and kept him in her sites.

Vincent began to advance on her.

"The bullets have been dipped in one of John's special poisons. I promise you'll go mad, again, even if I miss anything vital. And I don't think your pretty Catherine will be here to save you, this time."

His feet stopped moving.

"You are insane," he bit out.

She ignored the jibe, as she put more distance between them.

"John was brilliant. But he was also a fool. He spent... hours plotting and planning to get you in touch with the darkness that runs you. The darkness you hate. So silly. So ... ineffective." She picked up the bag.

"No wonder he died. I'd have killed him for his stupidity, too... if I had your claws," she stated.

She circled him like a mildly interested shark, the gun remaining pointed at his chest, while he turned.

"Would you?" he asked.

Tamara shrugged the narrow shoulders, one last time. "John never figured out how to best you, did he? But I did. Oh, Vincent. My poor, dear, homicidal Vincent. The way to break you was *never* going to be through the dark part of you. It was going to be through the light. The light in you. The light in her. The light I *knew* you'd reach for, if only you could forget your sins. So I took them away."

*You hurt me by freeing me? It makes no sense.*

"You... you..."

"Took them away. All away. Swept clean, like a newborn babe. Took your sins. Took the place you call home, even. I took it all – for a while. Just long enough, as it turns out."

Vincent's mind raced. "You intended for me to return to Catherine."

"You haven't been listening. I intended nothing. I simply prepared things so that no matter *what* happened, you would suffer."

His eyes pinned hers, sharply. "You are... *full*... of hate." He said it like a charge, though it was one she clearly didn't care about.

"I'm full of what you, John, and everyone else have left me with. And this is my favorite part, Vincent," Her intense gaze utterly pinned him. "The suffering never ends. Never."

"I am free of you. Free of your poison, and your plots."

"Are you? So... you've been... happy, lately?" It was an arch type of sarcasm, and one he couldn't deny.

"Did you make love to her, Vincent? Press your body to hers in the long dark of the night? Was it lovely? Was it... spiritual?"

He wouldn't dignify her with an answer, but couldn't stop the low growl, in his throat.

"Did she confess all her secret fears to you, in the dark? Did you tell her how beautiful she was? Hold her close? Love her? Did you cherish her, with those hands?" She said it like she already knew the answer. Which, in a way, he knew she did.

*No. No, what they had done could not be some part of an ugly plan. It couldn't be.*

"Do you know what happens when you separate a man from his sins, Vincent?"

Vincent stopped growling and held his stony silence. It didn't keep her from

answering her own question.

"He becomes free. Freer than the birds of the air, of the beasts in the field. Good, or bad... it doesn't matter about that, so much. It's that he's *free*. Free of every weight he's ever carried, every hideous choice that went horribly wrong. Innocent as in his infancy, and even less burdened."

She let him recall it. Let him remember what that felt like. "And just when he's truly free, truly reveling in it..." her voice trailed away, her meaning clear.

"You let him remember," Vincent said, realizing for the first time how thoroughly he'd been played.

Tamara shrugged. "The drug wears off. All drugs do. And, yes. He gets his life back, again. Every mistake. Every virtue, weighed down by every flaw. And you have so *many* of those, don't you? Virtues and flaws?"

The growl returned, then stopped, as he not only understood what she'd been saying, but "felt" it, as well. *Yes. I have many virtues. And flaws.*

"Ahhh." Her shrewd eyes narrowed. "I see it stings."

*Stings?* It had been eating him alive.

"And now, what do you do? What do you *do*, Vincent? Do you go to your pretty lass? Swear you will love only her? Throw herself at her feet and... wreck her life, utterly?"

"I would not..."

*"Of course you would! And you know it better than anyone else! Especially now."* She chuckled. "You want her to move Below, now, even as you can't *stand* the thought. You want to go back Above, back to her, even as you know it's impossible. You don't *belong* there. You barely belong here."

"Killing you might be worth going mad." There was a warning in his voice.

"It might be." She raised a thin eyebrow. "Would that keep Catherine's life from becoming consumed by yours, though?"

He knew it wasn't an idle question.

"Catherine's life will not be ..."

"Bit by bit, it would happen," Tamara interrupted. "Her life would become a shadow next to yours. It would surprise her, the first week she realized she hadn't seen the sun."

Vincent had the impression she was speaking from her own horrible, twisted experience.

"Then it would become more common," she continued. "The places she wouldn't go, the people she wouldn't meet. She'd become... what do you call them? Helpers? Those funny little slaves who are trying to buy their way into Heaven by keeping you all fed?" She backed up so that she stood near a wall, still keeping the gun aimed at him.

"You are evil. You're the embodiment of it," he accused.

She kept the table between them.

"You will suffer and I will enjoy it," Tamara replied. "If that is evil, I'll accept the definition."

"You arranged this. All of it."

"You give me far too much credit. I only arranged some of the *possibilities*. What happened next was up to *you*."

He had to know. "Did you... love John so much? John, who never loved you? Or was it Erlik you loved?" Vincent asked, aware he wanted to give just a little pain back.

Her eyelids fluttered. Barely. But just enough so that he knew he'd scored some kind of hit.

"I don't think I've ever loved anything," she denied. "But I understood him. Them. They both wanted the same things, in their way. And yes, I found that interesting."

"What things?"

"They both wanted two things of everyone, always. Either their compliance or

their misery."

Vincent hated her even more. "And all of this was your way to ensure that happened."

A thin arm lifted, as she reached for a hidden lever tucked inside a niche. A wall of stone slid back, on an unseen hinge. Vincent realized that this had been how Paracelsus had escaped him, the first time. She cocked the gun. Vincent knew better than to move toward her.

"But of course it was. One:" She held up a spindly finger "You come out with no memory, as the wild beast, run through the streets with those wonderful fangs – the ones that killed Erlik - bared, and they put a bullet in you. Stuff you, and put you in a museum. Not the best outcome, but... acceptable, under the circumstances. You don't suffer much, that way, but it's... epic, in its conclusion. John doesn't get his mask back, but he would have liked it, and Erlik would have been avenged."

He watched her adjust the weight of the bag, keeping the gun trained on him, all the while.

"Two: You could lay low. Be that beast, or even the man, but scrounge in garbage cans for food, until you eventually starve, or get caught. They put you in a cage. And you live there until you die. Also acceptable."

He knew how close that had come to happening, as he'd made his way to Catherine.

"Three: Find your way Below, free of your memories. Be taken in, by your ridiculous family. That might not work, for me. So I made sure it didn't."

"So you made sure I'd fear my own home," he said.

"A place beneath the ground, somewhere lit by torches and warmed by burning wood couldn't suit you. It was necessary."

So all she'd needed to take from him was his sense that "Below" was a safe place, and throw in any animal's natural fear of fire. Both were simple suggestions, really.



Vincent stopped to realize for the first time just how vulnerable he was, when it came to narcotics. What half a dozen people couldn't have accomplished with brute strength, she'd managed with a few dollars worth of chemicals.

"Four ... and I actually thought this was by far the least likely outcome: You find your way to someone who can help you. Some Helper, some friend. Perhaps even back to your Catherine. And things between you change, forever."

"Catherine feared you'd come to her balcony. That we'd be attacked, there. But that was never going to happen. Was it?" he asked.

"No. John was sure you were fond of her. And even though I have no idea how you found your way to each other, I couldn't discount the possibility that that might happen, somehow."

"So you... let that... continue."

"Why interrupt one of my favorite possibilities?" That you'd live as a man? Did you bring her tea, Vincent? Did you mop her floors? Be all... sweet, and domestic, trying to please her? Be... so ... not what you are." The last was not a question.

"But you knew I'd remember. Eventually."

"I knew when Erlik brought her down that she'd had no lover, recently. She had the look, even in sleep. And if there's one thing I'm very, very good at, it's reading a person's face. I knew there had to be a *reason* why you weren't intimate with her, so, yes. I knew you'd overcome that, perhaps, if you had no memory of who you were."

"You couldn't possibly know such a thing."

She raised a nearly non-existent eyebrow. "Oh, didn't I?"

Vincent had to admit she was right, even if it was only internally.

"And then to be left with the aftermath of all of that. How does it feel, Vincent? To know you'll never touch Heaven, again?"

"It feels like I want to send you straight to Hell," he answered, longing to kill her. His beast was near the surface. A beast he was sure he couldn't control, and

wasn't exactly sure if he wanted to.

Her smile was a cryptic one. "You killed my only companion. I'm as alone as you are. I just don't pretend, by surrounding myself with fools. Good-bye, Vincent. It's ... nice, sharing the same Hell with you." She slipped through the doorway. The wall closed shut before he could reach it.

He lunged his body across the open space, and screamed his rage, to the uncaring stones.

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*

### *Eden Bound*



The bus terminal was a noisy, busy place, as Greyhounds lined up on one side, and Trailways queued up on the other. Catherine had to be there, even though her own life was in a shambles. A woman needed her. A woman who was leaving. Leaving her husband. Leaving New York. Leaving all of her life behind her, as she started a new chapter in that.

Denise Ramansky stood near an idling Greyhound bus, as she hugged Catherine Chandler good-bye.

"Thank you. For everything you've done. I know you don't agree with this, but..."

Denise looked toward the southbound bus. "I know for me, this is right."

Catherine handed her a packet of legal documents. It contained her divorce decree, half what she and her now ex-husband had in checking, and a few other items she'd need to begin a new life... somewhere else.

"I still think you could stay. Press charges. Perhaps get far more than you're getting now. I won't tell you otherwise, Denise. Dave should be in jail. And you shouldn't have to be the one who's leaving town."

Denise shook her head. A head that was free of bruises and marks of abuse. Denise had no worries that that was about to change for the worse.

Catherine didn't always have the feeling that the victims of domestic violence would stay clear of their abusers. But with Denise, she did.

"I don't want to prosecute him, Miss Chandler. I know you say it's right, and I can't even argue that. But cops don't do well with a record, and ..."

"You do not owe him the benefit of your compassion, Denise." Catherine said, knowing she was going to lose this argument. There was a reason they were here at the bus station, together. Denise's mind was made up.

Denise Ramansky, who could now call herself Barbara Jones, thanks to the request for a name change in her hand, and a New York driver's license to accompany it, disagreed, in her way.

"I know you don't understand this, but... he wasn't always like this. I...I loved him, once. – I don't anymore," she held up a staying hand. "God knows, I don't. Maybe the therapy the judge ordered will help him. Maybe it won't. I don't know. I'm not even sure I care." She looked toward the open doors of the grey, hissing bus. The engine was a steady idle.

"I just know I want to leave. Go someplace else. *Be somebody else*. More than anything, I want that. Just to be ... someone else. Be... me again. Not Dave's wife. Not an abuse victim. Just... Barbara. It was my best friend's name, growing up. She was feisty, and didn't take no crap, you know?"

Catherine nodded, as she thought of Vincent. *Sometimes, maybe we all need to*

*be 'somebody else.'*

"I do. I think I do know," Catherine replied.

"Said what she meant and meant what she said. That was Barbara. I think... I think I could be that, given half a chance."

*I understand. More now than I might have, a month ago.*

"I understand. I really do... Barbara," Catherine said, giving the other woman another hug. "You've been telling us all along that this is what you want. A clean slate, a chance to start over, away from... everything. I guess we're finally listening."

"You done right by me. And thanks for this," she said, holding up the papers.

"There's still a restraining order in there. If Dave even thinks of violating it ..."

"He won't," Denise-who-was-now-Barbara said. "I... he ain't coming after me, Miss Chandler. He knows he screwed up, and he's damn scared of that Mr. Maxwell. I plan on switching busses three more times after this one, and never coming back here, again. Dave's people are here. His job is here. It ate him alive, until it ate us, but... this is the only home he knows. This is where he'll stay." She looked at the air, heavy with diesel fumes.

"I thought I had to stay here, too. Had to be what... what everybody expected. Even though I ain't stayin', ain't doing what you want... you were the only one who wasn't sayin' I should work through it, and stay with him." She gave Catherine a big squeeze. "I owe you for that. You're one of the reasons I didn't just... go back again."

Catherine leaned down and picked up Barbara's only luggage. A grey American Tourister that had come out of a thrift store.

"You know better than to think you owe me anything. I just want what's best for you... Barbara. I don't know what city you'll land in, and I don't want to know, just in case they ever put me under oath about it. But I do hope you find what you're looking for, out there."

Barbara smiled, revealing new dental work. "Me, too. I think I will. As for where I'm going, well... I think no matter where it is, it'll be Paradise, compared to this place."

"You know I wish you the best of luck."

The smile widened, and it reached Barbara's hazel eyes. "I don't need luck," she declared, hefting the bag. "I'm getting' out of Hell and headin' to Eden. No matter where it is."

She climbed on board and the bi-fold doors stuttered closed, behind her. Catherine stepped back, and the huge, lumbering vehicle pulled away from the curb. She knew by the sign on the bus that it was headed to Boston. Also, that it wouldn't be where Barbara Jones stopped to put down roots.

"Good luck finding Eden," Catherine whispered, knowing she had a report to file, back at the office.

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Catherine ate a mediocre meal, and kept glancing toward her balcony, as evening turned into night. It remained empty, as it had for the last several days.

She tugged over a yellow legal pad and thought of writing Vincent a letter, not quite sure where to begin. Slowly, almost painfully, the words came forth.

*Dear Vincent,*

*Today I put a woman named Denise on a bus, and she told me that the one thing she needed to do more than any other was to be someone else, to start over, to start fresh. That some part of her... couldn't stand to be who she was, anymore.*

*Though she comes from a very different situation than yours, I want you to know I can understand the similarities, between you...*

Catherine lifted the pen from the paper, and stopped writing. Did she really want to begin a letter this important by discussing Denise Ramansky? She doubted if she did. She also didn't quite know what else to say.

She tapped the pen on the yellow paper for a few minutes, then realized she was

utterly stuck for knowing what else to add. She closed the tablet, and set it aside.

Looking toward the balcony, she felt Vincent's absence. He wasn't going to come. She felt it, in her heart.

After a few minutes more, she gave up looking, and climbed into bed. She wished he'd come to her balcony this evening. She wanted to tell him that she would listen, while he tried to explain. Wanted to tell him she understood what it was to need to start your life over, or from a new place, thanks to having done that, herself, after her attack, not to mention after watching Denise Ramansky reach the same decision.

The apartment felt very empty without Vincent in it. *I wish you'd come to me. I wish you thought you could.*

Catherine had the feeling that that was a vain hope, indeed.

She rolled so that she faced the balcony. There was no moon, that she could see. But the roses bush was ready to burst into splendor, and a bright star was visible, through the sheer curtains. It was the kind of star you made a wish on. Catherine was fairly sure that Vincent wasn't looking at it; but that the woman she'd put on a Greyhound Bus very likely was.

*Make a wish. Good luck Den—Barbara*, she thought, as she drifted down. *I hope you find what you're looking for.*

*I hope we all do.*

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## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### *All You See Is Yours...*



At nearly 2:00 a.m., Catherine gave up the struggle to sleep through the night. Every time she rolled over in the wide bed, she thought of Vincent. Every time she drifted up near consciousness, she forced her eyes open, so that she could look out through the gauzy curtains, and out to the balcony, hoping he'd be there.

It remained empty.

He wasn't waiting for her, standing in the wind. And she knew with a grim kind of certainty that he wasn't going to be.

At 3:00, she sat up, swung her legs down, and fished her soft boots out from under the bed.

*If Mohammed won't go to the mountain*, she thought, donning a soft blouse and a dark pair of slacks.

She had no real idea what she was going to say to him, or why she was even going Below. Clearly, she'd lobbed the ball into his court. But the night was too long to lay there wishing, and the bed was now much too empty. Her living room was

restored to its customary order, the sofa tucked in. No folding bed stretched into the living room. She should have been content. Her old life was finally coming back to her.

Catherine went from room to room. In the kitchen, she realized the dishwasher hadn't been emptied. *All the chores are mine again*, she thought, not minding that they were. *And you should never have been doing them in the first place*.

She realized that the fact that Vincent had been doing domestic chores was a measure of how bored he must have been while he'd been trapped here. When she checked the bathroom, she found the hamper similarly stuffed. *That's as it should be*, she told herself, knowing she'd grown lax, in simple housekeeping. She knew that Vincent was generous-hearted, a brilliant teacher, and a fierce warrior. The thought of him folding a load of towels had always jarred her.

*That's not who you are. That's not who we are*, she thought. *It's not that it doesn't need doing. It's that you're... you're so much more than sweeping the floor or learning how to use a toaster*.

She had no idea if he thought the same. She only knew that her apartment had never seemed to "fit" who he was – even when he couldn't remember that.

Catherine sighed, and listened to her mantle clock chime, as she went back into the living room. She missed him. It was as simple as that. She pushed out through the balcony doors, wondering if she shouldn't just change back into her night clothes and go back to bed, or at least wait for dawn, before she tried to see him.

She glanced over at her rose bush. From this angle, she could see a single, white rose had bloomed. It was delicately perfect, and reminded her of the one Vincent used to wear around his neck. She'd not thought much of her missing gift, there being so many other things to think about, instead. But now she did.

She clipped off the season's first offering. It smelled wonderful. And it cemented her decision that she wanted to see him, right now.

Tucking the rose inside her pocket, she grabbed her keys and headed for the door.



She had no idea if he was awake, or could sense her approach, but it was far easier to go down through her basement entrance than risk cutting across the park, especially at 3:30 a.m.

Half way down the spiral staircase, she stopped, sat on the step, and tried to re-think her decision.

*Go back. He's angry with both of us, and he doesn't want me here. This is his home, the only home he has. Don't crowd him. Don't push. Things are bad enough, as it is.*

It was sound advice.

Advice Catherine promptly ignored, as she stood up, and resumed her downward trek.

Catherine realized she was just a bit in touch with her old self, at that moment, the woman Vincent had rescued in the park, three years ago. That Cathy wasn't terribly good at listening to her own good advice, either. There was a reason she'd dated men worse than Tom Gunther. Much of that was thanks to a fairly pervasive stubborn streak; one that had bid her go against good advice, sometimes, even while that same stubborn streak had also seen her through law school.

She was well aware she had a tendency to be both obstinate and charitable. It was odd to feel that person back in control.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," she reasoned, the old saw being one she often used to say.

Her boots clattered softly on the rigid metal, the sound keeping her company, as she continued down. Light was hard to come by, on this twisted stair, and Catherine had a moment to realize that when Vincent had carried her down, he would have had a hard time holding forth a flashlight, or lantern. That her first descent into the place that was his home would have been achieved in something very close to total darkness for her, yet he clearly saw all he needed to.

She pulled out her flashlight and shone it on the metal stairway, knowing it was

there, yet wanting the reassurance the light gave her. The middle section was the darkest. There would be torchlight, farther down.

Catherine scanned the metal right to left, just to reassure herself that there was nothing in her path, and that all was as it should be. It was. The solid, iron railing was still under her hands, and the curving steps spun downward, in their spiral pattern.

*Turn off the light.* The instinct came to her. *Do it.*

Catherine clicked off the flashlight and put it back in her pocket. The way was now very dark. Yet... she knew this path. She'd used it before.

She stared into the soft darkness, and felt a certain kinship, with her love. Hadn't his loss of memory been something like this? A view of... nothing behind, and nothing before him? Uncertain, yet somehow, also sure?

*Sometimes, we have to go blindly, and with a little faith.*

Hadn't a terribly injured Vincent done just that, as he'd climbed and clawed his way to her? Gone blindly, with no sure outcome? He'd counted on what he felt. He'd placed his life there. She was amazed anew, at how he'd found her, how much he'd trusted in her.

*Have faith, she told herself. Have faith that what you can't see is still there for you. That what you want is still good. That what both of you want you can have, even if you can't clearly see the way to it.*

She left the flashlight in her pocket and continued to step down, spiraling her way to the bottom, comforted that each step taken in darkness was leading her to some kind of light.

When her booted feet finally settled on stone floor, she knew she didn't have too much longer to go, to reach him.

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Sleep, that night, seemed no more cooperative for him than it did for her. She found him in his chamber, fully dressed, and standing near a shelf of books.

"You couldn't sleep, either," she began, letting herself in.

"We seem... of a similar purpose. I was dressing to go to you when I felt you coming down," he replied, shelving Idylls of the King.

"You... didn't come to meet me." There was no accusation in her tone. Just observation.

*We would have no privacy in a hallway, and I thought we needed some,* he thought. But he knew that wasn't the reason he'd stayed his footsteps.

"I... wasn't sure I had that right."

It was said without rancor and without self-pity. Catherine knew the comment needed a reply. She just wasn't sure which one would help him. Before she could think of what to say, he continued:

"I saw Tamara. I... don't think either one of us will be seeing her, again."

Catherine's expression grew startled, and Vincent realized immediately that she'd gotten the wrong impression.

"We're in a sorry place if you think I killed her." He put another book back on the shelf.

Catherine composed her features. "I'm sorry. That wasn't worthy of you. You're right."

He trailed a long finger along a spine of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry. "You are not so far wrong in thinking it. Part of me wanted to." It was a dark confession, but honesty was called for, here. Catherine was owed that.

He knew there would be a time when he related at least some of what had passed between Tamara and himself. But this was not that time.

He told her about what he thought she wanted to know. "Pieces of what I knew... came back. Just... pieces... At first," he said, jumping from the topic of Tamara to the one of his own memory. "I was... fighting. Struggling, with it."



"You were fighting to remember," Catherine had seen him do it.

The blue eyes couldn't quite meet hers. "No... no, I don't think so." He shook his head as he owned his sins.

"Some part of me... the part that had been working on instinct since before I found my way back to you... I think I *fought* remembering. Sometimes without even realizing I was. I think I *wanted* to forget. To keep it all ... buried."

He dropped his head. "I think I wanted it all to stay forgotten. It wasn't... like a conscious choice. It was ... instinct. I ... hated anything that threatened to take you away from me." He gripped the shelf, hard. "Even... me."

Catherine listened, with quiet stillness.

The great head dropped lower. "Especially me," he added. "Tamara was right that the worst of the disorientation was wearing off, after a few days of being with you. When I couldn't remember... And I truly couldn't... It was because... part of me didn't want to. I think I was... *willing* myself not to."

"And we both know you have a lot of will," she said simply.

He nodded in agreement and let go of the shelf. "Catherine, I was... almost... happy. As ... insane as that sounds to say it... I was near you. Protecting you. Healing, and... being a part of you, of your life. It was... incredible."

"And you didn't want to let that go. I understand, Vincent."

He nodded, slightly. "When the memories started coming back... really coming back... it wasn't because I was trying to bring them forth. It was the opposite. It was happening no matter what I wanted. I couldn't stop it. And... I knew what that meant. For me. For us."

He eyed Song of Myself, then stuck it back on the shelf. "Some part of me just... needed to be the man you found bleeding on your balcony, for a while. The man with... no memory of who he was. Someone different. Someone... else."

She stepped close to him. "Oh, Vincent. I know this won't make sense to you, but I put a woman on a Greyhound bus today, who felt a lot like you do. That she needed to start fresh. And all around her, there were people who didn't want that, for her. Her ex-husband, her parents, her friends. They all thought they knew her, then realized they didn't. They all thought she should stay right where she was. Be the person they knew."

"Because that's ... how they knew her. In that... one place," Vincent said, understanding the dynamic which had bound Denise Ramansky, even though he'd never met her.

Catherine nodded. "You have responsibilities. You take those seriously. There's no sin in th—"

"I acquired a new responsibility, three years ago. My love for you. Yet I made no... room for it, in my life. I just... accepted what I could steal for it. We both did. That wasn't right, Catherine."

He heaved a huge sigh. "Do you know... do you have any idea how afraid I used to be to touch you?" He shook his leonine head. "I had nightmares about it. The kind that make you wake up... wishing you were someone else. Anyone... else." He gestured toward the open doorway, and the world that lay beyond it.

"I was terrified that I couldn't control who I was, that at some point... I'd... forget. Give myself over to... something dark. Something terrible, that I couldn't ... harness."

He moved as far away from her as the room would allow. "I didn't want to hurt you. Ever. So I made *sure* I didn't. I stayed in my world and kept you in yours. And

even if there were good reasons to do that, at the heart of it... I was simply... afraid."

"We all have fears. You ... know that." *You've felt me battle mine, often enough.*

"What a... terrible box I built for us. Then I put us right in."

She shook her head. "I wasn't any better. Or at least I wasn't any different." She stepped closer to him, not liking the extreme distance.

"I don't believe that is so," he replied. *Because I was wrong doesn't mean you were.*

But if there were burdens to bear, here, Catherine wasn't going to let him bear them alone. "In the beginning, I was ... re-making everything. Where I worked... what I did... what kind of person I was. And you were such a huge part of those changes... I never realized what I might be doing wrong when I ..."

"You did nothing wrong," he interrupted.

The sandy head shook again. "Even in my apartment, these last few weeks...we took things very far with each other. But we didn't..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked to the side. They both knew what it was they hadn't done. What they still hadn't done.

Catherine's voice remained steady. "You left that part to me. We both know you did. You had to. And I couldn't tell you in good conscience to go through with what we both wanted. If there's 'blame' because we were trapped, and you think that blame lies with you, I think that needs a closer examination."

She rubbed her jacket-clad arms, as if the room had suddenly grown cold. "I said we shared the responsibility for why we are what we are. The truth is, it was more me than you. You were waiting for me to tell you it was all right. Even... before."

Vincent took in her words, and weighed them, for veracity. There was at least some truth in them. Perhaps it was enough to know that.

"And... before... you were waiting for me to tell you it was a thing I wanted. You hold no more blame than I do, Catherine. At least admit that much."

She wasn't sure he was right. But she was sure she loved him.

"We can take that step. If it's what you want," she said, not dropping her gaze.

"Is it what you want?" he asked, giving her look for look.

"We're doing it, again," she replied with a smile. Amazingly, he returned it.

"I see that we are," he replied. "I love you. I thank you for making me wait until I was... myself, again. No matter how ... challenging a person that can be."

She crossed to him and gave him a firm hug. "Promise me something?"

"Anything." He all but breathed the word out on a relieved sigh. She was in his arms. This felt familiar. This felt right.

He was utterly surprised by her request. "That you'll never empty my dishwasher or dust my egg collection, again. It's not *you*, Vincent. It just isn't who you are."

"Catherine, if it's a thing that needs done..."

"Then I'll do it. Or I'll pay someone to. Vincent... your life... it's not just here. You know I want you and you know I'll always welcome you into anywhere I am, but... you're a prince, where you live. They need you. And it's for more than dusting the furniture, or putting away the forks in the silverware drawer."

He planted a gentle kiss on the crown of her head.

"That is what they need. What about... what I need?" he asked, the last sentence pregnant with meaning.

"Is that me? Say it's me. Because I want it to be." They both knew she was teasing him, yet not.

"It is most definitely 'you.'"

"Then we might have to test your theory about where a church door gets nailed," she said, glancing back toward his doorway.

"We just might," he agreed, knowing that he would indeed have to make some adjustments to his chamber to ensure his own privacy. This prince was about to become inaccessible to his people. Sometimes. And it was right that he should.

"You know, I'm not sure I thought I ever had a right to this," he said, beginning to caress her back in a way that was now familiar, between them.

"Didn't you?" she asked.

“Wanted, yes. But life Below, well... there are always things we want that we can't have. You grow... almost accustomed to it, after a time.”

“And I'm the opposite,” she said, keeping him close to her. “Living a life where there are very few things I couldn't have, if I wanted them. Yet I still found out... I wasn't wanting the right things, Vincent. I settled for far less than I should have, sometimes. Before. Before I met you.”

The caress to her back was starting to dip lower.

“What can we have, together, Catherine?” he asked, raising one hand to trace down her cheek.

Her soft smile was luminous. “I think... anything we want. I... I love you.”

She disengaged them and picked up the lantern from his table, blew it out, and carried it to his doorway. She knew putting it in the hallway was a bid for privacy. After she settled the lamp on the stones, she reached up and dropped the heavy drape which was almost always set in the ‘open’ position, for him. It was as close to a church door as they were going to get, for now.

“You're asking for privacy,” he said, stating the obvious.

“Yes. Yes, I am,” she said.

“They might not listen. They're not... used to it, from me,” he warned.

“They'll get used to it. Everyone will.” She said it with unshakable confidence.

“If they don't...”

“Vincent, I don't think we're going to be interrupted. But if we are... that's not going to define us any more than anything else has.” She stepped closer to him, slowly. “We won't let it. If it happens... well, let's just say I don't think it will happen more than once or twice, before it never happens again.” She cast a knowing smile back toward the door.

It amazed him how easy she was, with that notion.

“Do you remember us now? Everything?” she asked.

His voice rang with the depth of its clarity: “The very first night I saw you after you'd returned Above... you were wearing a beautiful patterned silk robe. The leaves were just starting to turn, in the park, and there was just the barest



breeze,” he said, letting her know his memory had indeed fully returned. “I came to you because of a feeling that had swept through you, earlier that night, and as it swept through you, it swept through me.”

“What feeling?” she asked, stepping even closer.

He searched for a word, then found it. “Freedom. You felt... free of something. Someone. You felt... lighter, somehow. Free to be... what you intended, without needing something you thought you once did. Like you... knew you were doing the right thing. Like... you were a bit afraid, but ... ready to take a chance.”

*Yes. That’s it. That was exactly what I was feeling,* she thought.

“It was like... you knew the world was about to open up for you. That you needed it to. Wanted it to.”

*So you did come to me because I broke things off with Tom. At least in part. You just didn’t know that’s what had happened.*

“I did feel free,” she said. “I felt... ready for whatever was about to happen next. I just didn’t know the effect that would have on you; that it would... *be* you. We hadn’t... seen each other in a while,” she reminded him.

“Your courage to feel free... to let go, to take a leap of faith... that gave me the courage to do that, Catherine,” he said, recalling the moment he’d snatched Great Expectations off his shelf, and gone to her.

“We might be about to repeat that gesture,” she said, aware that it was true. She took an infinitesimal step closer.

His voice was careful; low, and intimate. “I do not think... it would be so bad if we did. Such... bravery has brought us this far.” There was hope in every syllable.

“Even when you had no memory, you were brave,” she said, reaching for his hands.

“I had no memory. But I still had my bond with you.” He gave her fingers a loving squeeze. “It saved my life, Catherine. *You* saved my life. Not just a few weeks ago,” he said, all his love in his blue eyes. “But always. Ever since the first. Ever since I first... held you. Ever since some part of me dared to... dared to wish you were truly mine.” He planted a courtly kiss on the back of one hand.

She brushed his cheek, and reached inside her jacket pocket. "The roses. They've begun to bloom, thanks to you. I brought you the first one."

He took it, and held it to his nose. As beautiful as the ivory one she'd gifted him was, it had no fragrance. This one was loaded with it. The smell was heady. It made him think of springtime, and green things growing. Perhaps... everything growing.

"I have the one you gave me. It's part of why I had to go."

He withdrew it from his pocket and handed it to her. She put it around his neck.

"If I tell you... I love the idea of you wearing this the first time we... the first time we're truly together... Is that all right?"

*Was it all right? It was more than all right.* "Yes," he whispered it, not meaning to. It was just the way the sound came out.

"Of course... I have mine, also," she said, lifting her crystal from the folds of her blouse to show it to him. He'd never touched her intimately while she'd been wearing it. It seemed ... fated, somehow, that they should be clothed only in their gifts to each other, their first time.

"When I lost my memory, I forgot about this," he said, holding her crystal, for a moment. He let it drop, carefully. It settled just at the rise of her breasts. "But when we had nothing but our bond to each other... I still knew. I knew you." He still marveled at that, and all that it had brought him.

"Maybe... you could get to know me just... a little better," she said. A small, teasing smile lifting the corners of the most kissable mouth he'd ever seen.

She took a step back, and held his eyes. She shouldered out of her brown leather jacket. Her hand went to the cuff of her blouse.

*I am going to remember every moment of what is about to happen. I am going to remember it, every detail, always,* he thought. *All of it. Forever.* It was a silent vow.

"All that you see... is yours," she said, unbuttoning her blouse, slowly.

*Every moment. Every... single ... one.*

And before the night was over, he did.



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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.~ Cindy*

