

“Finding Cleopatra”

A Story of **“Beauty and the Beast”**

By Judith Nolan ©

The lady strolled into Vincent’s chamber on silent feet. Regal and haughty, she paced the room with her head high, pride evident in every slender line of her body. Her luxurious fur coat of tan brown and rich cream had seen better days – now muddied and dirty in places — but she wore it proudly, as if she’d been born fully clothed in such a fine garment.

She blinked, stopping short and voicing a small sound of discontent, when she saw Vincent reclining on his bed. Presumably she’d been looking for solitude and had expected the chamber to be empty at this time of day. It was barely past noon and most of the tunnel dwellers were gathering in the Long Gallery for the midday meal. Vincent had settled for helping himself to a thick roast beef and cheese sandwich, generously slathered with extra mustard, before retiring to his chamber and the assorted collection of books Peter had recently given him, content with his own company.

Now his unexpected visitor tilted her head to one side, regarding him curiously with wide green eyes, but the haughty expression didn’t leave her face. Drawing back towards the door she paused to reconsider him, seeming to debate whether to stay or go. Finally choosing the former, she approached him once more, neatly placing herself on the end of the bed, before reclining to stare at him solemnly, waiting impatiently for Vincent to acknowledge her.

“Hello...” Vincent lowered the Reader’s Digest magazine in his hand, frowning with curiosity at his uninvited guest. “Where did you come from?”

The lady in the fur coat stretched, arching her back, obviously pleased with his attention. She appeared to smile as she got up and approached him cautiously, as if not entirely sure of her welcome, but seeming to take it as her due. She was evidently unused to rejection, as she came right up to Vincent’s face, invading every inch of his personal space, her green eyes never leaving his until they were virtually nose to nose. Her pink tongue appeared, flicking across her mouth as she reached to tap his free hand, encouraging direct physical contact between them.

“You are very sure of yourself.” Vincent put the book aside as he hitched his body upwards in the bed, resting back against the pile of pillows and cushions behind him, making no move to touch her.

The lady in the fur coat didn't seem to like or accept the idea of his unexpected retreat. She wasted no time in pursuing him, coming right up to him again, pushing her way into his attentions, making her demands evident by the beckoning look in her eyes and her expectant air. Again she tapped his hand, demanding his caress.

"You don't like taking no for an answer obviously..." Vincent frowned as he put his hand to the back of her head, sliding his long fingers into the deep warmth of her fur coat.

The lady approved wholeheartedly, moving her head against his touch, encouraging him to explore further. She turned, arching her back once more, allowing Vincent easier access to the long sleek lines of her spine and flanks, running beneath his hand like a silken stream of caressing warmth.

"Now I do wonder where you came from..." Vincent frowned at the forward lady making the most of the physical contact.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, green eyes ablaze with satisfaction, but she didn't bother to answer as she moved down the bed and turned, working her way slowly along the full length of his body, nudging and fondling as she went. She slid caressingly across his powerful thighs – from one to the other and back again – before turning to push her head several times against his lower abdomen and then travelling with intense deliberation up over his chest and shoulders. Finally returning to his face, she rubbed her cheek slowly back and forth against his, a whisper from the corner of his mouth, green eyes now half-closed in blissful happiness. All the while she made soft murmurs of approval, becoming very sure of her welcome.

"Now I am certain that someone must be missing one as affectionate as you..." Vincent reached with both hands to bring the fur coated lady up before him, holding her away when she sought to kiss his face. "You are far too pretty to be all alone in the world."

She didn't reply — but her expression mirrored her discontent as Vincent sat up and deposited her on the bed beside him. She turned her head to lightly nip at his wrist with her small white teeth, more in warning than a wish to inflict actual pain. She was by no means done with him yet, and he should be aware of that fact. *She had chosen him, after all...*

It was then that Vincent saw the intriguing collar his unexpected visitor was wearing. It had been hidden in the thick fur around the base of her neck. As he handled it – much against the lady's vocal protests — it flashed and sparkled in the lamplight, reflecting a myriad of rainbow colours. And in the centre, tucked beneath her small, pointed chin hung a heart-shaped medallion that Vincent suspected was solid gold. He looked closer, seeing that it carried a tiny inscription engraved with black enamel cut into the gold.

"*Cleopatra...*" He peered to read the name. "Is this you?" He looked down into the lady's adoring green

eyes as he lay back against the pillows again.

She yawned, as if the discovery was of no consequence and she dismissed it as such. Her tail swishing with discontent, Cleopatra stared at him. She had not come here to make small talk. She climbed back up onto Vincent's chest and sat there, watching him unblinkingly. She leaned down, again coming almost nose to nose, making small noises in her throat, nudging at him with her chin, trying to encourage him back to the more pleasant pursuit of mutual caresses.

"Are you in here, Vincent...?" Father's voice queried from the doorway. "I just wanted to ask you if —"

Cleopatra turned her head, hackles rising and hissing her discontent at the unwanted interruption. With her back arching in displeasure, her tail swishing with deliberate intent; she stood to face Father as he limped into the chamber.

"Good heavens..." Father stared. "Where did that come from?"

"I have no idea." Vincent smiled at the look of comical dismay on his parent's face. "I was reading and she walked in, making herself quite at home. She seems to have assumed the role of my protector."

"It certainly looks as if it doesn't like me." Father approached cautiously, taking the chair before Vincent's writing desk, keeping a close watch on the cat staring him with unblinking green eyes. "I wonder how it found its way all the way down here."

"Well, she has expensive tastes." Vincent sat up slowly, the cat accepting the new position in his lap without complaint, but maintaining its rigid stance as he swung his feet to the floor. He held the collar away from the animal's fur and the stones caught the light again.

"Diamonds...if I'm not very much mistaken. They certainly don't look like cheap paste." Father leaned as close as he dared, peering intently. "But it seems as if our expensive lady has fallen on hard times. You can see her coat's in quite a mess. I wonder if she's strayed from home or maybe been dumped. Though you would think they would have taken the collar. It looks to be worth a considerable sum."

"I have no idea what has befallen her." Vincent shook his head. "There is no one connected with the tunnels – beyond Lady May – who could afford such expensive baubles, especially for a cat. And I know from experience she disapproves of keeping any animal as a pet."

"Well, I would say someone will be looking for that collar by now." Father scratched his greying head. "Perhaps if we asked those who live Above. Maybe one of our helpers can help us identify the animal. It surely cannot have strayed that far from home. She looks too well cared for, even in her present condition."

“Perhaps Catherine will have some idea...” Vincent reached to unfasten the tiny strap clasp that held the collar in place. “I will send a message to her and show her this. She has the connections to discover the owner.”

Cleopatra made no move to disagree as he stripped her of her wealth. She seemed glad to be finally free of the heavy confinement. But, as Vincent put her aside and got to his feet, pulling on his cloak, she sat back quickly on her haunches before leaping agilely from the bed to find a position of command on his broad shoulders. She stood there, balancing easily, curved around the back of his neck, looking very pleased with herself. She leaned down to rub her cheek against his once more, purring loudly.

“Well, I never...” Father marvelled at the animal’s keen sense of balance. “It seems she doesn’t want to let you out of her sight. Not for a second.”

Cleopatra slanted him an unblinking look of dismissal as her tail flicked lightly across Vincent’s face, the rumbling sounds of her contentment intensified. She settled herself more securely and seemed to say, *well, what are we waiting for...?*

“I’m not sure where all this is going...” Vincent batted the waving tail aside.

“Well, I don’t think you have ever been ‘owned’ in quite this way before, Vincent.” Father’s shoulders shook as he chuckled, following the unlikely pair into the tunnel beyond. “She seems to have really taken a shine to you. Wait ‘till the rest see this...”

“For only as long as it takes to find her owner.” Vincent ignored the lady’s blatant appeal for more caresses. “I guess the best place to start is at the meal table. I’ll see who is left in the Long Gallery. I can leave her with the children while I go to see Catherine.”

But as he moved along the tunnel and into the dining area, where people were still lingering after the midday meal – closely followed by Father who seemed in imminent danger of a mirth-filled collapse – others began returning to gather around him, intrigued by the sight of Vincent and his new companion.

“Hey, look, it’s a cat!” Kanin asserted, rather unnecessarily. “Where’d ya get it, Vincent?”

“She seems to have chosen me,” Vincent replied, looking uncomfortable with all the extra attention. “She walked into my chamber. I wondered if any of you know her. Or have seen her in the tunnels before now. She must have found her way down here somehow.”

“Not me, Vincent. But she’s so pretty...” Ellie fetched up next to them, followed closely by Eric, Samantha, and a whole host of the tunnel children. “Is she yours? What’s her name? Can we keep her?”

“Cleopatra,” Vincent told her. “Well, according to the name on her collar.” He held out the diamond studded item for all to see. “And no, she is not mine. Nor, I suspect, can we keep her.”

“Wow!” Kanin leaned closer for a good look. “Bet that’s worth a fortune. What ya gonna do with it, Vincent?”

“I thought Catherine might be able to help us...” Vincent raised a hand to remove the animal from his shoulders, but she hissed her displeasure and dug her claws into his thickly padded vest, crouching low behind his head. Rather than starting a protracted argument he wasn’t sure he could win, he left her alone. Balancing and proud, wrapped around the back of his head, Cleopatra signalled her pleasure by rubbing herself against the thickness of his hair, purring contentedly.

“Well, she looks like she could do with a good grooming.” Ever practical, Samantha hurried away and quickly returned with an old hair brush. “Sit down here, Vincent.” She indicated the long settle at the dining table, tugging at his clothing to make him do her bidding.

“Very well.” Vincent subsided onto the seat, tolerating the situation for now.

“I need someone to go and find Geoffrey for me. I wish to send a message Above.”

“I’ll go. I know where he is...” Kipper put up his hand, before scampering away.

“Good pussycat...” Samantha cooed, getting no argument from the animal as she set about putting her luxurious coat into good order again. Obviously knowing her own worth and beauty, the cat pranced and swaggered the full width of Vincent’s shoulders, but not once did she offer to dismount her lofty perch, even when Vincent tried once again to dislodge her.

“I guess you’re stuck with each other.” Father sat down beside them, but keeping a respectful distance as Cleopatra turned her narrowed green stare towards him again. “It’s love at first sight...”

“I’ll bet she’s hungry! I’ll see what I can find.” Not to be outdone in attentions by Samantha, Ellie hurried off to speak with William. She returned with a plate heaped with titbits, the portly cook following close in her wake.

“And I was just getting used to Mouse and his damned raccoon.” William regarded the cat with a jaundiced eye. “I don’t want no cat raiding my supplies or making any more mess around here. Make sure you keep her on a short leash. Or get rid of it.”

“I have no thought of keeping her at all,” Vincent complained, as Ellie fed his companion one small piece of food at a time. The cat consumed the proffered feast in record time, but with dainty elegance.

“See, I knew she was hungry,” Ellie remarked with satisfaction. “And now she’s cleaned up, she’s even more pretty. Couldn’t we all keep her, Vincent, please? She looks really lonely.”

“I’m sorry, Ellie, but by the look of this collar, she already has an owner who will be missing her terribly.” Vincent showed her the expensive item before returning it to the safety of a pocket in his cloak.

“Should have taken better care of her, then.” Ellie grumped, her face mutinous. “What ya gonna do now, Vincent?”

“I will contact Catherine and give her the collar and the details. Somehow I doubt I can persuade to take the animal as well.”

“Since it seems to have decided on you, Vincent, then she will only find her way back here again.” Father’s expression was still full of barely suppressed mirth. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his son’s obvious discomfort. “In my experience, cats always have a mind of their own.”

“Then the sooner I give the collar to Catherine, the sooner our little friend can go home. I’ll send Geoffrey with a message asking her to meet me at the drainage tunnel as soon as she can get away.” Vincent deliberately lowered one shoulder towards the floor as he rose from the settle, but the cat was having none of it. She simply clung to the thickness of his vest, her green eyes full of feline satisfaction as she quickly readjusted her position to accommodate the unexpected dip. Vincent straightened on a discontented sigh.

“Aw, come on now. Like all women, she just needs a firm hand. You show ‘em who’s boss like this...” William reached for the cat — and beat a hasty retreat when she bared her fangs and hissed sharply at him.

“I’d say the cat won that round...” Newly arrived in the hall, Cullen sat down next to Father, grinning around the huge bite he’d just taken out of his sandwich. He chewed quickly and swallowed before continuing, “Let her be, you lot, she’s made her choice already. Vincent’s big enough, he can cope.”

“Go and see Catherine, I think that’s a good idea. It’ll be all right, Vincent.” Father remained seated, his shoulders shaking with merriment, which soon escaped his control, and he leaned against Cullen’s shoulder as his scowling son left the dining hall, his cloak billowing behind him.

The old man had decided any further involvement on his part wasn’t welcome or needed. He was sure Vincent could handle it. Besides he had a community to run, tasks to oversee, even if most of his workers seemed to have decided to follow their friend and mentor on this new, unexpected adventure.

After talking with Geoffrey and sending him swiftly on his way with a message for Catherine, Vincent

walked steadily towards the surface and possible salvation from his predicament. But he was beginning to feel a little like the Pied Piper of Hamelin with a chattering stream of tunnel children, interspersed with several curious adults, following in his wake.

A few minutes later Mouse appeared from a side tunnel, his hands full of treasure only he knew the worth of, closely followed by Jamie. He stopped short at the sight of the noisy gathering.

“Where are we going?” He seemed to accept the crowd — *following Vincent’s lead, with a strange cat riding high on his shoulders* — as an everyday occurrence not worthy of further comment. “Need Mouse to come too?”

“Vincent is going to see Catherine...about a cat.” Samantha pointed to the animal with pride. “We’re all going along to see what she says. If nobody wants her, we get to keep her.”

“Well, I want to see that.” Mouse fell into step with the rest, Jamie sighing in his wake, but prepared to be diverted from her self-appointed task of keeping Mouse’s boundless enthusiasm in check.

“You know we still have a ton of work to do on the new project...” She pointed to the articles clutched tightly against Mouse’s chest. “We can’t just go off somewhere else, because you want to.”

“Later, maybe. This is fun. You go then, if you need to...” Mouse offered the goods to her. “Here, take these down to the Mousehole...”

“Not without you, Mouse,” Jamie complained, backing up, hands raised in denial. “Winslow won’t be happy and who knows when you’ll show up again. I don’t know what to do with all this stuff.”

“Okay good, okay fine. Then we go this way...” Mouse skipped a few steps in excitement. “Winslow will be fine, you’ll see. And Vincent’s Catherine is very pretty. She’ll like the cat. It’s pretty too. Wonder where it came from...”

“The cat’s not for her, Mouse!” Samantha flashed in exasperation. “We’re going to find the cat’s owner. It has a really fab necklace, all made of diamonds. Someone must love her really well.”

“*Diamonds!*” Mouse’s guileless blue eyes widened. “Good for cutting stone and other diamonds. Maybe the owner doesn’t want it anymore.” He raised his voice to be heard over the babble of voices. “What’d think, Vincent? Do we get to keep it? You can ask, maybe...”

“What I think is this foolishness is getting way out of hand.” Vincent stopped, turning back to frown at his straggling cluster of followers. “Surely all of you have better things to do?” Cleopatra choosing to swish her tail across his face with feline agreement in the same moment rather spoiled the desired effect.

“Yes...well, maybe...”

“I mean, I guess so. Look, we do have that pipe that still needs seeing to and Father said...”

“What about you...? Need a hand? I’m going your way.”

“I heard Mary say she’d love help with some mending. You want to come with me and see what she wants us to do?”

“I know there’s still some leftovers from the midday meal I didn’t get around to trying...”

Some of the adults answered together, looking uncomfortable, shuffling their feet and nodding. Most dispersed, returning to whatever work they had been diverted from – but Mouse and the children remained – stubborn in the face of their mentor’s evident disapproval. They were not going to be shamed into retreat. They were still very keen to see how it was all going to end.

Jamie was forced to set her teeth and cling to the remains of her temper. She would stick around too. *Maybe Mouse would soon get bored, if nothing more exciting happened, and they could get back to the task in hand...Winslow was waiting for them, impatient to get busy...*

“All right, then...” Vincent sighed, knowing he had won only half the battle. He turned back to the tunnel, lengthening his stride, not looking behind to see if his following could keep up. Cleopatra leaned down to caress his cheek with hers, purring happily. She seemed to be enjoying the show immensely.

Despite his discontent, Vincent was beginning to feel a sense of sneaking admiration for his unwanted companion. She faced everything in her path with equanimity and determination. Made good use of whatever tools came to hand to achieve her goals. He glanced up at her and her green eyes smiled back at him with feline satisfaction. Her purring intensified once more. *She certainly looked like the proverbial cat that had swallowed the canary and followed it with a whole bowl of cream...*

They wound their way steadily upwards towards the surface, heading to the junction door linking their hidden world to Central Park and the drainage tunnel entrance where Catherine would hopefully be waiting. Vincent had told Geoffrey to make sure she knew it was an urgent summons. He deeply disliked drawing her away from her more important work, but it seemed to be the only way to solve the situation.

“Finders, keepers on the necklace eh, Vincent?” Mouse had worked his way up to his friend’s side, trotting to keep up with his longer stride, the items clutched to his chest jangling and clanking. “Mouse could use the stones. Topsiders don’t leave diamonds just lying around. Very hard to come by.”

“We shall have to leave that to Catherine’s judgement, Mouse,” Vincent replied. “No doubt there will be an owner. Topsiders also don’t allow expensive pets to wander away without making some effort to recover their property. Which is why we cannot think of keeping the animal or her collar. It’s just too dangerous. It will create unwanted attention if anyone saw her come Below.”

“Okay fine...” Mouse sighed gustily. “But we can ask Catherine...” He brightened. “She’s a lawyer. She’ll know what to do. Reward, maybe?”

“The very reason I am going to see her.” Vincent shook his head, his words underscored with exasperated amusement. “I am sure she will know what to do.”

They all clustered around as Vincent reached the steel door that closed the Central Park portal to their underground world. Mouse hurried to operate the lever and the door slid open silently. Beyond the barred gate Catherine was indeed waiting. Vincent felt a deep sense of gratitude she had come so promptly to his summons.

He glanced around at the ragtag bunch of followers he couldn’t shake. On a deep sigh he reached to open the second gate and bending forward —Cleopatra once more adjusting her position on his shoulders — he stepped into the junction entrance. As he straightened to his full height again, his adherents spilled through the door behind him, or jostled for a better vantage point in the mouth of the tunnel.

Using his stocky body and coming in low, Mouse managed to gain a front row position beside his tall friend. He’d deposited his burden of equipment out of harm’s way behind him, against the tunnel wall. He watched Catherine hopefully. He hadn’t given up the idea of asking for the necklace...*if no one else wanted it, of course...*

Catherine looked about her at the clustered group, her face mirroring her confusion. “Vincent...what is all this? Your message said it was an urgent matter. You needed me.”

She glanced up at the cat riding high on his broad shoulders and her mouth twitched slightly, her eyes gleaming with suppressed amusement. *But it was already too late...* Vincent could feel the ripples of mirth flowing along their bond, their deep emotional connection. He sighed.

“You can see my predicament...” Vincent shook his head as he spread his hands in frustration. “I do need your help, Catherine. The matter is urgent, or I would not have asked to meet you in daylight. And as for the rest of us, there are tasks they should be getting back to.”

He glanced behind him, wishing he could be alone with his love, but that was obviously impossible. The murmuring crowd of followers ignored the broad hint as they surged closer, falling into expectant

silence, keen to hear whatever Catherine had to say next.

“You seem to have acquired a rather fetching new friend.” Catherine indicated the cat.

“Who doesn’t seem inclined to leave me, no matter what I do to try and persuade her.” Vincent shrugged. “She assumed this position some time ago and is utterly disinclined to change her mind. Father has never been so entertained. He treated it all as some huge joke.” He grimaced. “But I suppose I cannot blame him. I will admit I can see the perverse humour in my predicament. So, Catherine, this is Cleopatra, according to her name tag. She found me.”

“And you need me to do...what?” Catherine frowned. “How can I help?”

“Cleo appeared from nowhere, wearing this...” Vincent reached into his pocket and extracted the diamond collar. He held it out. “I can see it’s very valuable. Father is convinced it’s genuine.”

“Ohh, gold too...” Mouse breathed reverently, edging closer for a better look. “Good gold. Best kind...” He rubbed his hands together, his blue eyes tracking the necklace enviously as Catherine took it from Vincent’s outstretched hand.

Keeping pace with him, Jamie dug him sharply in the ribs with her elbow. “Don’t interfere,” she hissed. “Leave it to Catherine. She knows what she’s doing.”

“Well, I can tell you straight away this is a Cartier piece...” Catherine handled the collar with reverent certainty. “And, I believe the mounting is twenty-four carat gold...very nice. But it beggars belief that anyone would use it as a cat collar. It looks like it was once an eighteenth century choker crafted for a wealthy lady. And I’m almost sure I’ve seen this before somewhere...” As she turned the piece over the diamonds twinkled and shone, even in the diffuse light from the tunnel mouth. “It must be worth a small fortune.”

“Told ya...” Mouse crowed happily. “Mouse knows everything. Good gold...”

“So someone must be searching for our friend here. Or at least for the fortune she carries.” Vincent put an absent hand to Cleopatra’s head. She pushed against it fondly, rumbling deep in her throat. “She is obviously not used to life on the streets. We can only assume she has run away or been dumped.”

“I can certainly ask around, Vincent.” Catherine approached slowly, lifting her hand for the cat to sniff at. Cleopatra seemed to accept her readily enough, even allowing Catherine to fondle her ears and stroke her chin. “So, one uptown girl to another, how about giving Vincent a break, Cleo,” she wheedled. “Surely it must be time to get down off him now?”

"I've been trying to get her off me all afternoon," Vincent complained. "She seems to like the view."

"Cats have minds of their own." Catherine grimaced, running her hand down Cleo's arching spine. "My childhood cat, Milo, never did anything he didn't want to. I guess it's one of nature's immutable laws."

As she spoke — and with the complete contrariness that characterised all of her species, big and small — Cleopatra leapt from Vincent's shoulders to the tunnel floor with lithe grace, flicking her tail. Once down she turned back to wind her way around and between Vincent's booted legs with fawning affection, as if trying to make amends for her recent behaviour.

"Well, I'll be..." Samantha breathed, expressing Vincent's inner thoughts exactly. "She was just waiting for the right moment."

"I don't suppose there is any chance you might..." Vincent looked hopefully at Catherine. "She could go with you."

"I'm afraid she will be far safer with you here, than in my apartment. I'm not at home for most of the day." Catherine was forced to deny the yearning appeal in Vincent's blue eyes. "And an animal shelter is out of the question. She is obviously a very valuable animal, despite the collar. A ransom situation could develop if she was recognised. I'll make some inquiries and get back to you as soon as I can. Until then —"

"We'll look after Cleo...until you get back." Eric and Ellie surged forward as one compact unit, their smaller size bringing them to the front of the watching group of children. Ellie sat down next to the cat, enticing her into her lap. Eric hovered anxiously at her shoulder, trying to make his presence known by clicking his fingers at the feline and making cooing noises.

"It seems you have no shortage of volunteers." Catherine smiled at the frustrated look in Vincent's eyes. "They will keep her busy."

Taking pity on him, she put a hand on his arm to draw him to one side, leaving the rest of the group to cluster around the cat, which made the most of the extra attention. But her green eyes still tracked Vincent's movements, keeping him in sight.

Catherine took Vincent into the deeper shadows, away from the tunnel entrance. She turned back to him, keeping his bulk between her and the others. She reached up to take a grip on the quilted warmth of his laced vest, drawing him closer still. She breathed in the warm scents of smoke and leather that clung to his clothing and wished they could be alone together. It was always so good to see him...to be with him. Their time together was often limited and measured...and there was so much she wished to say. *Small chance of that right now, Chandler...*

"I know..." Vincent covered her hands with his, sensing her inner turmoil. "But they just wouldn't leave me..."

"It's all right." Catherine laughed softly at his disconcerted expression. "I'll find out what I can about the cat. But I must admit, to see you at such a loss to know what to do for the best; did make me smile...a little. I'm sorry, Vincent." She raised a hand to stroke his cheek.

"I am glad I can provide you with some amusement." Vincent's eyes gleamed in the darkness, but his loving tone belied the small rebuke in his words. "I have only met one other lady with more determination and spirit..."

"To be held in your arms, to have you all to myself. To go with you wherever you travel Below, and share in all your adventures, would be a rare treat indeed." She drew closer. "I am more than a little envious of your lady Cleo."

"Well, rest assured she will *not* be sharing my bed tonight..." Vincent looked deep into her eyes, his own warming with an intense blue fire as they dropped to study the generous curve of her parted lips. "If necessary, I will stay up all night. She has taken over enough of my life already. She can make the best of it in the children's dormitory until you find out her history."

"You know I trust you, Vincent." Catherine's mouth quirked up at the corners. "But when such a pretty lady is so determined..." She shook her head.

"I am sure I can outlast a mere cat." Vincent's tawny mane danced with his vigorous denial. "But I would appreciate your finding an answer to the puzzle as soon as possible, before she takes everyone's attention away from their work and our safety."

"I'll do my best, Vincent." Catherine lifted his hands to kiss the backs of his fingers. "You will need to give me the rest of the day to check out the details. But I'm sure such an expensive collar couldn't go missing without comment. There may even be a reward. Come to my balcony tonight..." She glanced past his shoulder. "Preferably alone..."

"I will do my best." Vincent smiled on a rueful sigh. "But a certain lady may have other ideas..."

"What if no one claims the necklace...?" Mouse's blond head suddenly appeared at Vincent's elbow. "What then?"

"There are laws about lost property and those who find it." Catherine put her hand on the tinker's shoulder. "But first things first. We must try and track down the owner." She folded the necklace carefully

before putting it into the pocket of her coat.

“Okay great, Mouse will wait then.” He hopped impatiently from foot to foot, his eyes tracking her movements regretfully. “Gold makes best wire. Fix anything, rare find.”

“Come on, Mouse.” Jamie took his arm. “I think Catherine has got the message. We have work we need to be getting back to before Winslow comes looking for us. I don’t like it when he yells.”

“Jamie...” Mouse sighed roughly. “Always bossy. Never any peace. Mouse do this, Mouse go here and there...always doing something for someone else...”

“Be glad I bother to stick around to keep an eye on you. See ya later, Catherine. And thanks.”

“No problem, Jamie.” Catherine smiled as she watched the unlikely pair weave their way back through the crowd, Mouse gathering his armload of equipment as they left the scene, arguing as they went. Catherine turned back to Vincent. “Come to my balcony at midnight. As soon as I get back, I’ll go and talk to Edie over at the Data Center. We’ll see what her computer can find for us. It will be the quickest way and it is a very unusual piece.”

“Thank you, Catherine.” Vincent smiled, draping his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to his side. Catherine took some precious time to savour the moment, resting her head against his shoulder, before whispering her goodbyes and leaving the tunnel folk, to return to her own world.

Nestled in the crowd of children, Cleo watched their close contact and whispered interplay with an unblinking green stare. Her tail twitched, but she made no comment. There was time enough to reclaim what she now saw as her property and she wasn’t thinking of the diamond collar...

...

Catherine stood on her balcony looking out over the city lights. Somewhere in the distance a clock chimed the midnight hour. She was waiting for Vincent to appear. She couldn’t help wondering if he would come alone tonight, given his new-found pet’s obviously possessive nature.

The soft sound of his footfalls as he dropped down from above alerted her to his presence. He was suddenly there, a deeper bulk of darkness against the night sky, balanced easily on the small dais at the end of the tiled floor. She turned to smile at him as he moved silently forward into the patterns of light and shadow spilling from the open balcony doors behind her.

And he was alone...

"I'm glad to see you." She held out a hand towards him. "You won't believe what Edie and I have found out..."

"You won't believe the trouble I have had in simply coming here." Vincent smiled as he shook his head, taking her hand. "One small lady is extremely upset I would not allow her to accompany me. The entire community has rallied around to sooth her very ruffled fur. William is busy making tasty morsels and the children have all refused to go to bed until she is settled. I don't think Father knows what to do for the best. In one day Cleo has taken over our lives. I hope your news is what we need to hear."

"Well, it is and it isn't." Catherine sighed, taking both his hands in hers. "We did find an owner for both the necklace and the cat." She shook her head. "Unfortunately the elderly lady is recently deceased. She died in her sleep nearly a week ago."

"I'm not sure I wish to hear the rest." Vincent sighed. "But please, continue."

"Well, it seems, when the police broke into the house, after the neighbours reported they hadn't seen the old lady for some time, they found the cat in full possession of her late mistress and unwilling to allow anyone to get near. Reinforcements had to be drafted to the scene and in the resulting chaos; the cat was forced down into the basement. When the animal welfare officers went in search of her, she'd disappeared. They could only assume she had somehow escaped or been stolen. They stopped searching only because no one realised she was wearing a fortune in diamonds, until the old lady's family arrived at her house the next day and did an inventory."

"So that's how she must have found her way into the tunnels, through some unknown entrance in the old lady's basement. I shall ask Mouse to check it out as soon as I get back." Vincent frowned. "But what do we do with Cleo now?"

"I knew I had seen that necklace somewhere before." Catherine turned to pick up a police report from the balcony table. "It's all in here. Apparently the choker is a very famous piece that has been in the old lady's family for centuries. There's even a well-known portrait of an ancestress wearing it. The picture was part of a collection I saw displayed last year in the Metropolitan Museum in the park. They've been tearing the house apart for days looking for the wretched thing. No one knew she'd decided to dress the cat in it."

"If the situation wasn't so sad it would be almost comical." Vincent took the folder and scanned the pages quickly. "Poor Cleopatra. She must have been terrified."

"And it seems the family aren't at all interested in the cat. Apparently they hated the sight of each other."

Cleo was very vocal in her disapproval every time they visited.” Catherine put her hands around his forearm. “They only wanted the necklace back. They didn’t even question where it was found. I told the police she was found wandering in the park by someone who recognised the necklace and brought it to me to be returned. They didn’t wish to be further involved, which is not too far from the truth. I’m sorry to disappoint Mouse over the diamonds, but there was a small reward for its return, so I have accepted it on your behalf. I know you can use the money for one of your projects.”

“Thank you. So now Cleo is truly homeless...” Vincent pursed his lips.

“It seems so.” Catherine shook her head. “Even if they did get along, the family are apartment dwellers and they’re out at work more than they are at home. And they also travel a lot. They asked if I knew anyone who would want to take the animal. I said I would ask around, see what I could do.”

“Cleo of the Tunnels...” Vincent mused softly, shaking his head. “It does have a certain ring to it. I know Eric and Ellie would be thrilled to keep her.” He laughed ruefully. “I never knew a single day could go so far out of control and then seem to right itself...in the end.”

“Cleo of the Tunnels...I like it.” Catherine moved closer, sliding her arms around Vincent’s waist. “Just as long as she knows her place whenever I come to visit. There is only room in your life for one woman and I intend to be her...always...”

“I shall be sure and tell Cleo that, the next time I see her...” Vincent gathered her close, resting his cheek on her hair with a deeply drawn sigh. “Of course, you cannot deny the lady does have excellent taste...”

END