

# The Ties That Bind



"Naomi," said Jacob Wells, "William has accidentally left a fresh loaf cooling by the oven. Vincent is still in the kitchen -- will you go and ask him to bring it in as well?"

The little girl looked up, startled, from her seat nearby. "Me, Father?"

"Yes, child, you. Hurry along, now." The common supper was just getting underway, rather later than usual tonight after a children's poetry recital. Amid the pleasant commotion of the tunnel-folk calling out greetings and taking their places, Father returned his attention to the thin, curly-haired man sitting opposite. "Now, about those bookshelves, Cullen, my boy..." But the conversation hadn't gotten very far along before he noticed that Naomi, who was usually happiest on any errand involving Vincent, hadn't yet stirred from her place. "Naomi," he said with a trace of impatience, "I think I asked you to do something for me, didn't I? Hurry, now." He watched her begin to leave her seat before turning back to Cullen.

A moment later -- "Naomi," came a soft voice from the door, "why are you limping?"

Something in the tone made Father swivel round, scowling. He saw Vincent passing a food-laden tray to a surprised Pascal; saw Naomi hesitating halfway to the door, balanced precariously on one foot. As Vincent stepped toward her, she looked as though she wanted nothing more than to scuttle underneath the nearest suppertable.

He knelt in front of her and she ducked her bright head, unwilling to meet his eye... but her little hand clutched at his wide shoulder as she steadied herself.

"What is it, Vincent?" Father demanded. He could see she was keeping her right leg bent, the toe of her shoe barely touching the ground. When Vincent felt along her knee, she flinched visibly with pain. He rose at once, catching her up in his arms, moving toward the table where Cullen and Jamie were already sweeping her place-setting back out of the way. He settled her firmly on the table's edge, near Father. Naomi looked around a little wildly, alarmed to see that everyone, adults and children alike, were watching curiously. "I didn't do anything!" she protested to the room at large.

"What on earth -- ?" Father could see that the knee of her muddied corduroy trousers was torn, and stiff with some dark stain. "Why, it's blood."

Deftly Vincent rolled her trouser-cuff upward, his great hands trapping and dwarfing the little leg between them.

"Oh, my God," Jamie breathed, staring over Father's shoulder. "Look at *that*."

The child's knee was bruised and swollen. The bloody handkerchief she'd knotted round it only partly hid the gash beneath. A clumsy attempt at washing, sometime earlier, couldn't conceal the fact that blood had run right down into her sock and shoe, and dried there. Father touched the encrusted makeshift bandage and Naomi cried out, her little hands flying to shield it.

"How did this happen?" he asked very calmly, not looking up, concentrating on what he could see of the injury.

"I fell down." And then, as though seeing the knee for the first time herself -- or seeing it through their horrified eyes -- Naomi burst into noisy tears.

"Do the rest of you children know anything about this?" the patriarch asked.

Vincent glanced up to see that every child in the room had silently gathered round them. He said, "Geoffrey?" and saw the ten-year old shake his head, his freckled face stricken and pale. Vincent turned his attention back to the little girl, whose small tear-streaked face was now turned fearfully up to his. "It will be all right," he said softly. "Father?"

The old man, whose grey head was still bent intently over the injury, now straightened in his chair. "Well. This is going to require stitches." His face was grim. "But it looks to be an absolutely filthy wound. It will need some careful attention first."

Vincent lifted Naomi into his arms, careful to keep the injured limb extended. She cried out, "Where are we going?" as he started toward the door.





"To the hospital chamber," he said softly. And as she drew breath to protest -- "Don't worry. It will be all right."

Father was close behind. "The rest of you," he sighed, "please, go on with your suppers. This may take a little while."

"Father," Mary called after him, half-rising from her chair, "shall I come? Do you need help?"

"Thank you, Mary, but I think Vincent and I can manage, this time. Please, finish your meal -- I know you've had a long day as well."

Once in the hospital chamber, Father busied himself with preparations while Vincent settled himself and the child on one of the cots and helped her out of her shoes, socks and trousers.

Naomi looked down sorrowfully at her bent and bandaged knee. "I hurted myself."

"Yes," Vincent nodded, equally somber. "I can see you did. Shall we see if we can make it better?"

Father returned to them, arranging a trayful of instruments and a basin of water on the bedside table before pulling up a straightbacked chair for himself. Vincent saw that he'd removed his tattered fingerless gloves, and washed and disinfected his hands. "Now, let me see... Oh, yes, I think we can do something about this." This hearty reassurance was spoken for Naomi's benefit as Father reached out and tugged gently at the clotted kerchief.

Flinching away again, she tried to prevent him touching it. "Don't, don't!" she cried. Vincent caught her hands, tucking her firmly against his side.

"It's dried right into the wound, I'm afraid," Father scowled. "We'll have to try and soak it free." So saying, he took several clean, soft rags from a stack there and, wetting them in the basin, compressed the sopping cloths over the stiffened linen. With another, he began cleaning the dried blood from her foot and ankle.

"What are you going to do, Father?" Naomi asked tremulously.

"Well," he said gently, "do you remember when Vincent cut his arm, Above, that time?" He did not say, *On the rooftop, when we almost lost you*, but saw the memory of that night widen her blue eyes. "He was very badly cut -- oh, much worse than this -- and do



you remember, I told you that he'd had to have stitches. We went into his chamber afterwards, and looked."

"I remember," she said, knuckling the tears from her cheeks. She remembered that night... and the flashing knife, and the way Vincent's blood had blackened his clothes and the snow. She looked at his big wrist where it lay along her leg, and at the snowy sweater-sleeve that hid the now-faint scar. "Am I going to have stitches too?"

"Yes, indeed," he answered, "just like Vincent. But first we're going to have to clean that wound, so it doesn't get infected."

"Is it going to hurt -- that, and the stitches?" she quavered.

"Well." He sat back, looking very serious. "That's the thing, of course. I'm afraid it *will* hurt a bit -- but not for very long, and I promise you that afterwards it will feel better than it does now. It does hurt, doesn't it?"

Her eyes welling up again, she nodded. She was remembering the nightmare of her recent capture Above, when a young white-coated doctor had lied to her about a similar hurt. Father wouldn't lie to her, she knew.

"And I know," he went on, "that it must have hurt terribly when it happened." That had to have been at least two hours ago, given the state of her knee; and since Naomi was usually more than happy with the attention of having her bumps and bruises seen to, it could only mean she'd been hurt playing in one of the hazardous areas forbidden to her. Then she'd hidden the injury as best she could, hoping it wouldn't incriminate her. How like the child, he realized -- to think they could know the source of the injury just by looking at it! Well, they could discuss all of that later. He began lifting the wet towels away. "How long did you think you could hide this from us?"

"Till now?" she said in a small, hopeful voice -- and then gasped as he went to work on freeing the makeshift bandage. "No, no, *no* -- " But the cloth came away finally, causing the merest seepage of fresh blood.

"Oh, dear," Father said under his breath at the sight of the wound. It was a ragged gash nearly three inches long, running down the inside curve of her knee, almost to the bone. The most cursory examination showed him the tiny bits of gravel and grime ground into it. No wonder she'd been limping so badly, he thought; given its placement, every step would have caused the lips of the cut to gape afresh, confining bandage or no. He shuddered to think what such an injury might have meant, had she still been living on the streets Above. Gently he worked the joint back and forth, ignoring the child's little squeaks of protest. "Well," he said finally, relieved. "I don't think there's anything broken, or sprained..."

You've only wrenched it a little. And there are no torn ligaments either, thank heaven."

"Linga... linga -- "

"Never mind," he told her. "It means you're a lucky girl, and we've only the cut to deal with. Now Naomi, I'm going to have to clean this up a bit, before we can even think about stitching it closed." As he spoke he turned to the tray, to marshal the clean cloths and antiseptic he would need. "I'm afraid it's going to sting a little -- "

"I don't want any stitches." Her chin began to quiver.

"Well, child," he said gently, "you can't very well run about with a hole like that in your leg -- why, it would never heal properly on its own."

"I don't want stitches!" she cried, and turned her little, pinched face up to Vincent's. "Do I *have* to?"

"Now you know Father wouldn't insist," he murmured, "if it wasn't necessary."

"I'm very sorry, love," Father went on kindly. "But we really haven't any choice."

"Then I want Catherine!"

He sat back, nonplussed. "Catherine?"

"*I want Catherine to come!*" She shrank back into Vincent's sheltering warmth, kicking her heel free of Father's grasp.

"Naomi!" Vincent sounded shocked. He caught her ankle firmly, lest she do herself some further harm. "Catherine is Above. She may be working late -- "

"I want her to come *here!*" She burst into a veritable storm of tears, fending off all comfort and restraint.

Father was nearing the end of his patience. It was long past the time this injury should have been seen to. He ran one hand back through the rumpled gray of his hair. "Vincent," he said, raising his voice in order to be heard over the din, "this is doing no good. Please hurry and ask Catherine to come Below, if she would. I know it's very short notice, but..."

"Of course, Father." Vincent could barely conceal his surprise, and Naomi hiccupped once and was still.

"And as for *you*, young lady -- " Father took hold of both her small bare feet, pausing to make certain that he had her full attention. "Vincent will go and ask Catherine to come. No



promises, mind you -- but I'll try to wait to put the stitches in until, hopefully, she arrives." An hour, perhaps less if they hurried, he thought; time enough to disinfect the wound, and numb the area thoroughly. "But while he's gone," he went on meaningfully, "I want your promise that you'll try to be brave, and let me clean out this laceration."

Naomi bit her lip. She didn't know the word "laceration," but she knew about being brave. It meant they wanted you to do something *hard*. But he was looking at her so intently, so expectantly that she could only nod.

Vincent took this as his signal and got up quickly, propping two pillows behind her in his place. "Do as Father says," he murmured, touching her face. "I'll be back soon."

"Oh, and Vincent," Father called after him, "on your way out please ask Mary to come in. I'm going to need some help while you're gone."

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An imperative tapping startled Catherine awake. She sat up, spilling case-notes to the floor, only then remembering she'd gone to bed early and taken her "homework" with her -- and, she thought ruefully, had apparently fallen asleep over it. Under it. In the *midst* of it. She glanced at the clock; it was still early, not even eight-thirty. *You're getting old, Radcliffe*, she thought muzzily.

The tapping resumed as she tried to gather up the loose-leaf pages scattered over her lap and the coverlet. Finally she gave up and flipped it all aside, not caring where the pages fell as she grabbed her robe and hurried toward the French doors. "Vincent?"

He was standing just outside -- so close, in fact, that she nearly banged him with the door as she stepped out. "Catherine," he said at once, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but..." His eyes took in the pale green satin of her pajamas, her heavy-lidded eyes and pillow-mussed hair. "Were you sleeping?"

"No, it's all right," she said, belatedly belting her robe. "I just dozed off. Too many nights working late at the office, I guess. I wasn't expecting you tonight." She noticed that he looked surprisingly disshevelled and out of breath. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Catherine," he began again, almost apologetically, "Naomi has been hurt. It *isn't* serious," he added hastily, seeing her alarm. "She's cut her knee. But she's very upset, and she insists on having you there before she'll allow Father to stitch it up. I know it's late, and I'm sure she'll understand if -- "

"Of course I'll come!" she said, feeling an adrenalin rush that banished any further thought of sleep. How could they think she might not? "Just give me a minute to throw on some jeans. Will you meet me Below?"

"Come to the Park entrance," he told her. "I'll meet you there; that will be faster."

Hurrying breathlessly through tunnels past familiar turnings, Vincent's own doorway and then Father's, they could hear the faint, weary wailing of a child who'd been crying for too long.

"I'm very sorry, child," came Father's voice as well, "but we really cannot wait very much longer. Now just as soon as Mary returns -- "

They rounded the corner and in an instant Catherine took in the scene; the lamplit hospital chamber, the glittering steel tray, and Father seated, leaning toward the tear-stained little girl. Some small sound alerted Naomi then and she cried, "Catherine!" and threw out her arms, almost knocking Father's spectacles off.

Catherine felt her heart contract. "Oh, Naomi -- " Hardly aware of crossing the chamber, she clambered up onto the cot and wrapped the child round in a big warm hug. Naomi whimpered into the soft brown suede of her jacket.

"Oh, sweetheart, what?" Catherine murmured. "What can be so bad?"

"My knee -- "

"Yes, Vincent told me you hurt yourself -- "

"And Father wants to do *stitches!*"

"Is that all?" Catherine pulled back far enough to wipe the child's tears with a corner of the sheet. "Father gave me stitches once. Didn't he tell you?" She saw Naomi's blue eyes widen as she shook her head. "Well, he did... Do you remember my telling you, once, that Vincent found me in the Park, just as he found you?"



Naomi glanced toward Vincent, standing behind Father, and then back again. "He rescued you, too."

"Yes." Holding that gaze intently with her own, Catherine was conscious of a listening stillness elsewhere in the chamber as she went on. "And I told you I'd been hurt, remember? Well, Father stitched up my... my cuts, too."

Naomi drew a shuddering breath. "Where?"

Catherine reached up and pushed the soft wing of light brown hair back, behind her ear. "Here. See the scar?" With a fingertip she traced the vertical line of it, just behind her left cheekbone; the single lingering reminder of that night. No need to tell the child there'd been others, the marks of vicious wounds that only a more modern kind of surgery had been able to eradicate.

"Did it hurt?" Naomi asked; and the thought of that hurt reminded her of her own, and set her chin to quivering all over again.

"A little... but Father knows all about fixing these things, and pretty soon I forgot all about it."

"Will I have a scar, too?"

"Maybe, just a little one." She squeezed the little girl tighter, thinking, *As if she doesn't already have scars enough!* There were faint, thin lines criss-crossing Naomi's back (easily forgotten by the child, who could not see them, but a constant reminder to others whenever she was undressed); and, Catherine knew, a broken arm that had once been left to heal on its own. Not to mention other things which, like broken bone, left no visible trace. Fear. Neglect and uncaring. The casual brutality of the unloving... Betrayal, and abandonment.

Father spoke softly, recognizing her pain even if he didn't understand its source. "Thank you for coming, Catherine. I know it's late."

Her eyes came up to meet his, surprised. "How could I not come?" she asked. He saw her look around her then for the first time, taking in the nearby pile of pink-stained rags before her gaze fell naturally to the little limb he'd been working over, and to the wound itself. Her face paled with reaction. "What can I do?"

"Vincent, could you bring that light a little nearer?... Thank you. Well, with Mary's help she's been very good, actually... holding still while I cleaned the dirt out of it. But Mary was called to handle some crisis in the nursery, and we will need some help for the, er, the last part."

Just out of Naomi's sight, behind the basin, Catherine could

see that he'd laid out surgical needles and thread. Two syringes also lay on the medical tray, and Catherine's gaze flickered toward the miniature icebox where the tunnel-community stored their few perishable medicines; the hospital chamber was one of the few Mouse had wired for electricity. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Novocain," Father answered. "I used it to deaden the area around the gash. But I'm afraid that it did rather upset her."

Catherine, wincing as she pictured the needle pricking painfully along the edges of the raw wound, found that perfectly understandable. She bowed her head to kiss the damp blonde curls, and the child clung to her. Vincent had laid his cloak aside, and now settled quietly on Naomi's other side, filling his eyes with the sight of them.

Father cleared his throat. "Now, if we're all ready, here is what I'd like for you to do. Catherine, if you would just lie back with Naomi, and hold her... that's right, just like that. No, child, you don't need to watch this. Vincent, please hold her leg very still. This won't take long..."

Naomi wasn't crying any more; but Catherine, lying with her arms around the little girl, could feel the small body quivering with exhaustion and fright. She looked up along the muscled curve of Vincent's back, and the tensed jutting angle of his shoulder, and slowed her breathing and willed her voice to be steady. "Shhh... it's all right, sweetheart," she murmured. "Almost over now..."

And it *was* done, more quickly than she expected. Father was deft and sure, and had a wealth of experience with such childhood injuries. Only once did he say, almost impatiently, "Vincent, she's trembling so -- you *must* hold her more firmly." But finally he breathed a sigh of relief. "There... that should do." And as Catherine loosened her grip he went on, "Now, all we need is a little tetanus shot -- "

"No more shots!" shrilled his patient, and jackknifed upright; but Vincent used her own momentum to tip her gently over his knee. She felt her underpants peeled down an inch or two -- and then the deep sting of the needle. This was the final straw for Naomi; but she found her sobs -- and her self -- muffled in Vincent's all-encompassing embrace. Catherine struggled upright beside them, surprised at how shaky she felt.

"All right," Father was saying, "all right, love. All finished now." He reached out to pat the thin, heaving little back. "You've been very brave indeed. In a moment, Vincent will put you to bed."

"In my chamber," Vincent added softly. "Would you like that?"

After a long moment, and without lifting her head, Naomi



nodded into his chest.

Father sat up straighter, rolling stiff shoulders, meeting Catherine's eye as she leaned her head on Vincent's shoulder. He was rocking Naomi very slightly, and Catherine moved with them to that small comforting rhythm. She saw Father take off his spectacles and rub the tender bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger; and she realized with surprise that he was weary and shaken too -- none of which had come through in his manner with Naomi.

He watched his son cuddling the child, rocking her toward calm and quiet... then returned his attention to the young woman. "Did you think, my dear," he joked *sotto voce*, "that we doctors have no feelings?"

Her green eyes widened at his tone. "No," she smiled. "I didn't think that."

"In the world Above," he went on, still softly, "doctors are advised never to treat those they love. Wise advice, but a bit impractical here Below." His gaze returned to the little one, now quiet, still huddled in Vincent's arms. "It's the first time we've had to -- to hurt her, to help."

"Last fall, when I was visiting my friend Nancy and her family in Connecticut, her little boy stepped on a rake. I drove them to the emergency room, but... they just whisked him away, behind closed doors." She remembered the howling toddler being borne off down the hallway on a stretcher, and how Nancy had cried. As a friend she'd been helpless to do anything but sympathize, then, and she was surprised to find herself thankful not to have been relegated to such a role, tonight. "We couldn't watch or help, but we could certainly *hear* him."

Father nodded. "That's easier for the doctors and nurses, although of course it's more frightening for the child. They believe they can work more quickly without the interference of the, er, the parents." His eyes shifted suddenly, from her to Vincent, and back again; taking in a scene that for all the world seemed to be a young couple, solidly comforting their own child. He blinked away this rather distracting illusion.

"Well, they *were* very quick..." Abruptly then she caught his thought and, a little flustered, heard her own voice trail away.

The thought really shouldn't have surprised him, Father was realizing. More than any of the other children they'd rescued from varied crises Above, Naomi had attached herself to Vincent and Catherine exclusively and tenaciously. It was as though she sensed the magic their love had brought into the world Below; and into her own small world, which before had been loveless.

At that moment Naomi shifted position a little, and Catherine

caught her breath sharply as she glimpsed the wound again -- now stitched blackly and meticulously shut, and purpled with mercuriochrome... or perhaps merthiolate, or iodine. She wasn't sure which, but seemed to remember it was something certain to sting like hell. She realized she was holding her breath; let it go, and felt Vincent turn his head at her reaction. His lips brushed her hair. "I didn't think it would be so bad," she whispered. "I don't know what I expected. But, such a little leg -- such a big cut -- "

"It is always more alarming -- for me, at least," Father agreed, "to see a such an injury done to a child, than to an adult." He looked to his son. "I want you to keep cool compresses on it, tonight. It's likely to swell, and be painful again by morning."

"How did it happen?" Catherine asked, and saw the older man hesitate, looking toward the little girl, plainly not wanting her to overhear.

"It's all right," Vincent whispered. "She's nearly asleep."

"I shouldn't wonder, after all this," Father sighed, his relief evident. "We think," he answered Catherine softly, "that she was playing alone in some forbidden place. The Maze, or the Catacombs. And she fell; she did tell us that. But she concealed it for hours... and come to think of it, I didn't see her at the poetry recital. Did you?" He waited to see Vincent shake his head. "Well. We shall have to keep a sharper watch, I can see that." He turned back to Catherine. "At any rate, she hid it from us. We didn't discover she'd been hurt until suppertime. Probably she thought the injury itself would tell us where she'd gotten it. I'm sure she just didn't want to be punished. I suppose we'll have to talk about that, in the morning..."

"You don't really think that's all there was to it, do you?" Catherine said mildly.

"Eh?" The old man's gaze sharpened. "What do you mean?"

Catherine did not raise her voice, or lift her head from Vincent's shoulder. "I mean," she said, "that you know how she's lived, Father. You know that when she lived with her mother and that drug dealer, she had to learn to be strong; she was his victim too, and he would have exploited any sign of vulnerability or weakness, just as he did at the end." They all knew how, on that winter's night, Corbin had used the child's awful need; had told her that the mother he'd murdered was still alive, simply to lure her into his trap. "And all those months, living on the streets. You know she couldn't show any sign of weakness there, surrounded by predators of every shape and kind..."

"Well, yes, Catherine, but here -- ?"



"Here," she went on relentlessly, "she is still that child. A little 'tough guy' by appearance, even when she isn't really in *fact*. She did exactly, here, what she would have done there. And there's something else. Naomi's only been here since last autumn. She can see, I'm sure, the trouble she causes everyone -- "

"Oh, no." Father looked appalled. "We don't think of it -- "

"Of course you don't. It's how she'd *feel*, though... especially after being caught Above last time, and having you all involved in the search. And while she does seem to test you a lot in smaller ways... didn't you once tell me that all the newcomers, children and adults alike, are afraid you'll find them too much trouble?"

" -- And will cast them out again. Yes. There is that." Father stroked his beard. He thought of Lena and Jamie, Michael and Geoffrey... even William. All of them had tried so hard at first not to be a burden, to be unobtrusive almost to the point of invisibility. Naomi might not have been able to make herself invisible, but she'd tried hard to make this injury disappear. "The last thing she would wish to do, then, would be to reveal she'd gotten herself into trouble yet *again*. I think I see your point." His mouth quirked ruefully. "You've given us something to think about, my dear."

"Yes," came Vincent's soft voice as well, hardly more than a breath across her brow. "Thank you."

Father pushed his chair back. "Now, why don't the two of you put her to bed. Mary and I will straighten up here, and one of us will bring you the compresses. Easy now," he warned, needlessly, as they rose. "Oh, Catherine -- " He reached toward the tray again, and then put several little orange pills into her hand. "Give her two of these baby aspirin with water, would you? And two more whenever she awakens again. I don't think we'll try anything stronger, until we've seen if there's any infection. I don't want a bandage on it until then, either."

Catherine hesitated a moment; then leaned forward quickly and kissed his bearded cheek lightly before turning away.

" -- Catherine?" He waited, conscious of Vincent's eyes upon them both, until she paused. "Catherine... I'm glad Naomi wanted you here tonight. Perhaps I didn't make that clear -- er, tonight, or at other times -- but there was a *rightness* to it, tonight... I couldn't help but see it. At any rate, I'm very glad you could come when the child needed you."

"... Thank you," she said finally, her voice hardly more than a whisper. With a small, shy smile, then, she moved toward the door.

Father waited until Catherine had gone out ahead, and spoke

again softly. "Oh, Vincent."

He turned in the doorway, the child asleep in his arms. "Yes, Father?"

"She must be very effective, in the courtroom."

"And elsewhere," Vincent agreed enigmatically; and with just the ghost of a smile, he went out.

In Vincent's chamber, Naomi was awakened long enough to be given two aspirin (which were met with none of her usual resistance), and to be buttoned into a warm nightgown before being tucked into the big bed beneath the stained-glass window.

"Rest now," Vincent whispered. One great hand behind her head, he laid her gently down.

Tiny fingers caught at his wrist. "Don't go away."

He left his hand where it was, still cradling her head. "I won't go away."

"Catherine?"

"I'm here," she answered.

The child's eyes fell closed. Only when Vincent was certain she was asleep did he carefully slip his hand from between her head and the patchwork pillow. He turned then and Catherine came into his arms naturally, impulsively.

The front of his sweater was tear-damp against her cheek. She breathed in the familiar scents of beeswax and leather, and the clean male warmth of his body, and the trembling tension seemed to drain from her very bones.

"I felt your reaction," he told her. "When you saw it."

She pulled away, just far enough to look up into his face. "I think my heart stopped for a second." And then, again: "I don't know what I expected to see. After all, it wasn't appendicitis or open-heart surgery, but..."

"You couldn't bear to see her hurt," he said simply.

"I kept thinking, what if she'd hit her head instead. We might still be looking for her. We might have thought she'd just



gone Above again -- "

"Don't." He shook his head, refusing to let her torment herself with thoughts of such dire possibilities. Then: "While Father was working, I... felt the love you have for her."

"That tremendous rush of feeling..." She shook her head. "Did it surprise you?" When he opened his mouth to protest, she went on: "I know it surprised *me*."

"That you love her?" he asked, perplexed. "That you felt protective?" For there had been that, as well.

"Not exactly. But that I felt so..." She struggled for the right words. "So *possessive*. No, that's not it, exactly. But it was like that." A feeling, she remembered now, of *What are you doing with my child?* -- But she couldn't say that, it sounded ridiculous.

"The feeling seems to be mutual," he reminded her. "Naomi wanted you there. Not just me; and not Mary."

"I hope she didn't hurt Mary's feelings."

"Mary knows that Naomi has attached herself to you almost from the beginning. After all, yours was one of the first faces she saw, Below, while she was recovering from the fever. I'm sure Mary understands."

"Good... but I'm not really sure *I* do." Catherine leaned into his embrace again, but turned her head upon his chest so that she could look down at the sleeping youngster.

Someone cleared her throat softly out in the corridor; and after a discreet moment Mary herself entered, carrying a tray which she placed on Vincent's writing-table. "Catherine," she smiled, after a glance toward the bed and its tiny occupant. "I'm so glad you could come. Naomi was so upset."

"She's asleep now, at least for a while," the younger woman sighed, stepping free of Vincent's arms. "What have you brought?"

"A pitcher of cold water from the spring by the Falls, and some towels for compresses."

"Thank you, Mary," Vincent said quietly. "Are the other children all right?"

"Yes, although... some of them do feel guilty about 'letting Naomi get away' to get into trouble again. Kipper, and Eric. And Geoffrey, especially, was upset that she'd been hurt. Father's gone in now to reassure them, but..."

"I'll speak with Geoffrey in the morning," Vincent nodded.

The boy had become Naomi's self-appointed older brother, and seemed to feel a tremendous sense of responsibility toward her. The fact that she adored him too didn't interfere with her propensity for mischief in the slightest; and occasionally it really was more, Vincent felt, than any ten-year-old should reasonably have to bear.

As Mary set about arranging the things she'd brought on the bedside table, Vincent hesitated, looking at Catherine, his whole demeanor bespeaking his indecision. She knew what he was thinking, but he spoke before she could preempt him -- "It's late," he said regretfully. "I should take you back."

She crawled up onto the end of the bed, careful not to wake Naomi, and folded her legs Indian-style. "Oh, I'm not leaving."

His blue eyes widened. "You're not?"

"Of course not."

He looked at her with something that might almost be mistaken for consternation. "Catherine, you have to go to work in the morning. What of -- "

"You let me worry about that," she said with an authority she rarely exercised here.

"But Joe -- ?"

"And you let me worry about Joe, too. Lord knows it won't be the first time he's had to accept a lame excuse in lieu of whatever he *suspects* is going on." She caught a glimpse of Mary's hidden smile, and felt a rush of affection for the woman. "No, really, Vincent," she went on as he seemed about to insist, "if you think I'm going anywhere tonight -- that I could just 'stitch and run' -- well, you've got another think coming."

His expression now was clear; she was happy to see that it was *definitely* consternation. He began, "Catherine, I can't force you to go -- "

"Darn right," she said, filing his admission away for later and more leisurely perusal. "Besides, I have a very important responsibility here tonight." She saw his eyebrows lift enquiringly; and raising her hand, she opened her fingers to show him the remaining orange tablets. "Remember? Father left *me* in charge of the aspirin."

Deftly he plucked them from her palm, and reached past Mary to place them on the bedside table.

She turned, wiping her hands on her apron. "I'll be leaving you to yourselves now; I think you have everything you need. William will probably be sending you a tray with some of the supper you missed."



Vincent looked surprised. "I'd forgotten."

She smiled. "I thought you probably had."

Catherine brightened. "Well, I just realized I'm *starving*. Thanks, Mary." After the other woman had gone, Catherine watched as Vincent drew his reading-chair closer to the bedside. Using the water Mary had brought, he quietly went about preparing one of the cloths provided. Then, arranging a "notch" in the edge of the coverlet so that only the child's injured knee was exposed, he applied the cold compress. Naomi stirred fitfully but did not waken.

Catherine said, "I glimpsed a side of Father, tonight, that I don't usually see." She remembered the old man's steadiness during the evening's ordeal, which she thought might have shaken even an uninvolved physician. She had so often, especially in the beginning, considered Father an obstruction -- even an irritant -- that it was surprising, and even a little humbling, to see his caring demonstrated so clearly.

Vincent was gazing at her, as if following the progress of her thoughts. "I think he feels the same way about you, just now," he said.

Almost gingerly, she stretched out sideways and leaned on one elbow. "Of course, I've watched him taking care of *you*... When you've been hurt, Above." She thought of the injuries inflicted by the street-gang, and of his deadly weakness after Hughes had kept him captive. And, she thought with a pang as she always did, the occasional harm he came to in *her* defense. "And I've watched him and Peter giving flu shots, wrapping sprained ankles..."

"The plague," he reminded her -- as if she could ever forget the contagion that had ravaged their small world the year before.

"Yes," she agreed, "but even then there were so many who were sick. Tonight it was so -- so personal. I can't imagine trying to stitch up someone you loved. A child, who was crying. That takes a particular kind of strength, doesn't it?"

"Or a particular kind of distance?" he suggested.

"Oh," she said with a wry grin, "I've never seen evidence of Father being able to maintain much *distance* from anything, have you?"

He smiled, his deep eyes twinkling. "Perhaps you're right."

At that moment William and Luke appeared with generous supper trays. Vincent woke Naomi for a little broth, but she refused anything else and was asleep again almost at once, leaving the adults to savor their late repast.

Catherine was never sure at what point, afterwards, she finally fell asleep; only that sometime after supper, comfortably full and surrounded by soft candlelight and the sound of Vincent's voice, there came a point where she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. *I'll just nap for a few minutes*, she thought, her head pillowed on her arm.

She wakened to the sound of Naomi crying nearby, and the feeling that hours had passed. Stirring, she found that Vincent had covered her with a spare blanket.

Naomi was sitting up against the pillows, her face flushed and tear-streaked. "It's pounding and *pounding*," she whimpered, holding her leg just above the wound, and looking up at Vincent.

Reaching out to cover it gently with his hand, he could feel the heat rising off her skin into his palm. "It's a little inflamed," he agreed aloud, partly for Catherine's benefit; "but I don't think it's infected."

When he turned to prepare another compress Naomi said, "It feels better with your hand there," but didn't complain when he applied another cold-cloth in its place.

Catherine sat up. "Some more aspirin?" she suggested.

He nodded. "I'll go and get some more fresh water."

When he'd gone out, she leaned toward Naomi. "You're being very brave."

"It really hurt," said the little girl, her chin still quivering.

Catherine took the small, hot hand in hers. It was amazing to her, how children seemed to live completely in the moment. There had been worse "hurts" in this child's life. Those early beatings; the terror of seeing her mother killed; the extremes of weather once she was out on the street; her recent "abduction" by a well-meaning Child Social Services... But for now there was only *this* pain, and these moments of comfort.

-- Or uncertainty. "Do you think Father's mad at me?" Naomi asked her.

"Oh, no, sweetheart. In fact, he's probably worried about whether *you're* mad at *him*."

Naomi puzzled this out. "You mean, because he had to give me stitches, and they hurt?"

Catherine nodded. "You know, he didn't like having to hurt you."



"Yeah," the child said, taking a deep philosophical breath. "But I couldn't very well run around with a hole like *that* in my leg, could I?"

This near-perfect mimicry of Father, offered up in all seriousness, made Catherine smile. "No," she said, "I suppose you couldn't."

Then the small leg twitched; and the fresh pain reminded Naomi in a more immediate way of the ordeal in the hospital chamber. "But it really hurt," she quavered.

"Yes, I'm sure it did." She cocked her head. "But did it hurt more to have Father working on it, than it did when you first fell?"

"Noooo," the child said tremulously. "But he kept poking it and poking it."

"Yes," Vincent said sympathetically, coming back in with the pitcher. "Unfortunately there really isn't any other way to do it."

"I was just telling Naomi," Catherine said, "how brave she's been through all this."

"Yes," he agreed softly, taking his seat again. He poured a cupful of cold, clear water, and picked up two of the baby aspirin.

Catherine cleared her throat rather peremptorily, raising her eyebrows at him.

Suppressing a smile, he turned and relinquished the orange tablets without a murmur of protest.

It was sometime after the child had settled down to sleep that conversation again waned, and quiet filled the softly lit chamber. Catherine never noticed when she dozed off... but she awakened with the feeling that, once again, hours had passed, and it was near morning. She smiled drowsily, wondering if she was developing the time-sense that everyone seemed to have here Below.

Naomi was still sleeping, looking less flushed than she had earlier. Her leg and foot were completely uncovered. Vincent still sat by the bedside, but he was slouched low in his chair, sound asleep. His arm was stretched out, resting on the bed, one large furred hand wrapped gently and warmly around the child's foot.

Propping her cheek upon her hand, Catherine thought of that moment, last night, when she'd heard Naomi had been hurt. She'd come out without a moment's hesitation, and without a thought for the casework she should have been finishing, and which Joe would be hoping to get back from her today.







She thought back over all of Naomi's trials and tribulations since coming to live Below, and worries they'd had for her... and she thought that her feeling tonight had been very like what she'd felt when Corbin had opened the door of the apartment that winter's night\*, and she'd heard Naomi's voice and known he was abusing the child and meant to kill her, the sole witness to her mother's murder. She remembered, too, the recent desperation she'd shared with Vincent when the little girl had accidentally fallen into the hands of the authorities.\*\*

She thought about this child, who had managed to bring her and Vincent closer together, through her misadventures, than Catherine would ever have believed possible. For here she was again, drowsing comfortably in the quiet of his bedchamber, watching him sleep...

Catherine thought of how Naomi had asked for *her* tonight... And she remembered a time, long past, when she herself had been sick. She'd been five or six years old, suffering from a miserable strep infection, and -- she remembered this clearly -- she'd wanted no one but her mother and father near her. An elderly aunt had been staying with them at the time, and she'd offered to relieve the weary parents at the bedside occasionally; and yet much to their embarrassment, Catherine would have nothing to do with the woman, loudly (albeit hoarsely) protesting her intrusion.

Tonight had been like that.

Catherine also recalled that whenever their family doctor sat by the bedside, administering shots, taking throat cultures or committing other protestable acts, her mother always sat nearby; and Catherine remembered that as she cried, her mother's hand would dart out, as though to stop the doctor... It seemed a purely instinctive movement, quickly stilled but often repeated, as though she couldn't help wanting to stop him causing her daughter even the briefest and most necessary discomfort. *Now I know how you felt, Mom*, Catherine thought with a rueful tenderness.

Because tonight had been like that, too.

She'd thought so often, these past three years, about having Vincent's children... giving Vincent a child. Could they? Should they? And what, she'd wondered, would a child of his look like, *be* like? ...Yet more and more often these days she found herself thinking of those children like *this* one, like Naomi -- not in appearance, perhaps, but bright and bold, like this, and full of wonder and curiosity and mischief...

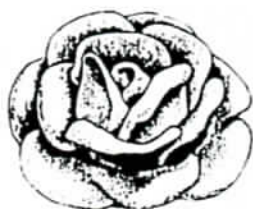
\* *Promises To Keep*

\*\* *Promises Fulfilled*

Catherine thought back over these past hours, and the past months; and she realized that all of this wasn't like *practicing* to have a child, or *training* to have one. This was like *having* a child.

Now completely and irretrievably awake, she sat up and gave her full attention to studying Vincent, who slept on, his hand still warming the child's little bare foot. His hair looked the way Catherine's felt (she combed her fingers back through her own); it fell in a tangled, silky disarray around his shoulders. His tawny face was noble in repose, the candlelight falling gently along those familiar lines and hollows, and flickering over his closed and deepset eyes. *How I love you*, she thought. *How I love your strength and tenderness, and all those things you can't, or won't, see about yourself. I even love that you can't see them, although it gets in the way sometimes... because it will give me the chance to show them to you. I love the fact that even in your sleep you can remember to keep a child's foot warm, because that's the kind of gentleness that tells me you could never hurt me, never, whatever doubts you have about yourself. And it's that gentleness that makes me long to see our children in your arms. Those children "waiting to be born," you once said. And there will be children someday, Vincent.*

Catherine lay back down, pillowing her head upon her arm... and thought once more, *Someday*.



*\*Note from the author: This small, rather open-ended story may be the nucleus for the next "Promises" novel... So don't be surprised if you happen to see it again.*