

# When You Walked Away

by Rosaura Wells

*Warning: I have hesitated in publishing this fanfic for over 7 years now, because I don't want to offend anyone, but even after all this time, I really feel this is one of my best works so I'll do it with a warning (hoping it isn't too big a spoiler, you can skip it if you want):*

*This fic is about a broken Vincent, so if you want to read about the gentleman we all worship, please chose to read something else. I myself have written a bunch of stories about him and am working on another (an entirely fluffy, classic short one - less than 20 pages).*

*The present one takes place after the 21st episode of the first season ("Ozymandias"), but with another ending.*

*"Memories of echoing growls and torn skin – his skin - came confusedly to his mind: the night he had ripped Catherine's punch from his chest – her wedding night... the first time he had sensed the ultimate mock to their dream. Reminiscences of when he still lived as the human he would never be. It had not been the beginning of the agony."*

*This is about a Vincent beyond the beast. A tarnished knight. Mainly drama and angst and mystery, no fluff.*

*Catherine isn't idealized.*

*Some characters of the series (few, I promise) might belie certain assumptions we made about them.*

*Not 3S, but you'll find Diana here. And she does have something going with the beast –his way to reach for Catherine- at the beginning -only this chapter, I swear!-, though of course it doesn't hold a candle to love and doesn't survive his re-encounter with his true beloved.*

*(And 7 years ago my English wasn't that good, so even though I've gone over the entire fic, correcting, you might find some mistakes.)*

*I want to thank Zara Wilder, who read it (without warning, poor soul) as a favor to me, and suggested some changes. You know what an amazing writer she is. The remaining mistakes are my own.*

*IF you choose to read, enjoy!*

## Chapter 1

"Did you see her?"

Diana stood, staring into Vincent's eyes. *Is that your greeting?* She wasn't stupid enough to ask.

"What you felt was the latest attempt against her life. She was not hurt." He breathed deeply

as he looked to the floor, then to the ceiling, as if thanking every god he knew about. He must have prayed fiercely for Catherine to be safe. Diana looked away.

"Why do you ask me? I know you ran as soon as you..."

"Her fear disappeared quickly... I never arrived... How is she doing?"

His voice was soft, caressing... not her... She fought back the tears, and succeeded: practice makes perfect.

*Just to do something.* Diana walked through the chamber he had improvised for himself. Some blankets on the floor, some food, candles... rock and wood... there was nothing more. Diana picked a piece of wood from the floor.

"I no longer see her: she isn't working. Hard to sneak in unnoticed with two bodyguards, harder to catch someone," Diana laughed without humor. "But she is safe, and she is eating her cereal. Burch has enough money to assure it."

His growl comforted her somehow. She wasn't the only one in pain.

The piece in her hand was irregular, but man-made. The dim light hid the details from her eyes. She approached the light, curious. It was a statue. A woman. Vincent must have made it with his claws. Her features were painfully familiar.

Diana pitched the wood to the farthest corner of the chamber.

"She must be meeting her husband now"

His growl confirmed it. He still could feel the woman he had once loved – he still loved....

*That's why I came now,* Diana thought. *So pathetic...*

"She has left you behind."

"There was more at stake," he barked. "She sacrificed herself... the noblest thing..."

"But she left you, and you..." Diana turned to him, opening her arms to indicate the chamber. "You stopped living."

"What was I supposed to do? Continue there? Pursue my life?" He growled ironically.

"Catherine exchanged her life and our dream for those tunnels."

Was he speaking about his past? Her look of curiosity wouldn't get any more information out of him: he was already covering his face, focused in memories far too painful.

"She exchanged her life for yours."

The wall withstood his punch... once again... Diana wondered why it hadn't collapsed long ago.

"And I would have left mine... and this body... but it was not my decision."

He growled. His eyes went darker – Diana could feel it, even without light. His hands went to his heart. Catherine... with Burch... selling herself for Vincent's safety.

Diana's body foresaw what was about to happen... readied itself for it...

It didn't come as a surprise when Vincent crushed her against the wall and kissed her fiercely, leaving marks of his fangs on her tender lips. His hands fought her clothes while his body thrust with developed skills, even before the layers of clothes – more hers than his, since he didn't need much more than his fur - had disappeared, fuelling their passion with the coldness of these forgotten-by-God tunnels. He liked it that way, his violence being the fitting distraction for the certainty he couldn't bear – that Catherine belonged to another man.

Diana didn't fight, didn't help either: he didn't like her to caress him. Yet, he carried her to climax after glorious climax, and when he reached it, his majestic roar almost made her convulse in pleasure.

*I have it*, she thought sleepily, while she heard his heart returning to the normal, the deep beat she had learned to love. I have what she never had.

"Diana, my heart belongs to her."

*You read my thoughts.*

"A result of physical intimacy. It will disappear with my body's ache."

Shrugging – as much as the covers would allow - her hand reached for his manhood, but he stopped hers. She drowned the anger, turning to look to the ceiling... not looking at him, not touching him – he had done none of that to her, after their climax. This time he had taken off just the indispensable garments; she wasn't too cold.

*I don't need his heart*, Diana thought. *If I had it, he wouldn't risk me into this.* Diana licked her lips, the blood in them making her wonder when the next opportunity would arise.

"You no longer say that you're sorry."

"I've never been a hypocrite: I keep doing it..."

"... and I like it, as I told..."

His head was turning away now.

"Never as these times," his voice came, drowned. "I understand why God asks each man to possess only the woman he loves."

Not for the first time, Diana wondered where he had learned to think like this. It must have been a gentle place – a gentle world.

"Do you try to reach her?"

"Through you," he agreed. "When we have sex the same time she..." He gasped. "It's sometimes as if it was with her."

*I would have preferred that you lie.*

"I never learned to lie."

"Because of God?"

He was silent for a moment, then he sat on the improvised bed.

"God would rather have me lying than hurting you like this?"

He snatched his pants and stood to wear them. No shyness – there had never been. The candles gave light enough for her thirsty eyes to drink in him.

*I would love you.*

He didn't answer.

"She has been involved with too many crimes lately."

"I will stay close by..."

"I wish you luck. With the agony it'll bring, you'll need it."

She gathered courage to stand – her naked skin was to feel the chill - but he passed her the pants. She held them in her hands, looking at him, her need for his love plain in her eyes. He

didn't look.

"I'm leaving," he informed her. "Feel at home"

His pale seed flowed from her body. The only thing she would ever have from him, and she had it just because Catherine hadn't. Her trembling hands grasped her belly, as if she could retain it, along with the memories.

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## Chapter 2

Vincent lifted his head to Catherine's world – the world of power and angels. She was close by - he felt her.

As she moved, he moved with her. Parallel words, parallel ways. Not quite the same beauty.

He had been following her for some time now. When she slept, he tried to catch a vision of her dreams, to feed his restless ones. When she ate, he sometimes stopped to take a bite of something he had found somewhere. When she drove a car, he ran behind her, risking his life wildly in the roughest tunnels. She was never alone, and he reached some amount of peace.

The lion's face softened as he got a flash of her beauty. She smiled down, not quite looking at anything.

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"Thank you, Josh!" she answered brightly, as he picked up the notebook for her. "So what about Roxie's birthday?"

"She loved your present, and sends a hug."

The man's expression didn't change... it could be because of the dark glasses... but his voice was kind and real.

"I liked her, when we met. I would like to play with her... what a shame that it would put her in danger..."

There is no life without limits. She smiled.

From the day of her wedding – from her betrothal, actually - there had been worse days: days in which she had cried her soul out because of such memories, nights in which silent tears would fall on Elliot's naked skin. Excuses she had made. Eyes closed while her husband made love to her – daydreams of Vincent's cry of ecstasy in her ears. So she wouldn't fake hers.

"Your humor has improved," Harry intervened.

She stared at him, not seeing him actually.

"And that's an understatement," Josh pointed out. "For some time now, you have been..."

They changed a look. Peaceful, perhaps? Normal?

Time cures everything.

She answered coolly." Rich people tend to be a bit neurasthenic. Wonder why..."

It happened then. She would remember it as if it had happened in slow camera. The hellish sounds – explosion, bullets. Harry covering her with his body as Josh tried to respond to the fire, his body convulsing with its potency. As he fell she saw the enemy... no masks, just faces lined in determination. As that of Joe, when he was actually working...

Harry pushed her behind the blinded car.

"Give me a gun."

He didn't answer, focused in keeping them alive. If she took the spare firearm from his pocket, the moment of distraction would kill them both. Damn. She crawled under the car, to see some of the enemies falling. There were too many of them. If she could just reach Josh's body... Josh's body, she realized with horror.

The moment Harry fell, she knew they were dead.

Then, there came the growl. She shivered with relief. It took her a moment to turn her gaze to Harry. He was more wounds than skin. She checked his pulse, nonetheless. Sure enough, he was dead. Not now, Cathy, she fought back the tears. Careless... we were careless... Just because we were near the house, it didn't mean we were safe. She bit her fist, drowning the scream.

All around her there was blood, and more screams. No one had escaped. She didn't dare to look until the noise stopped. Vincent was pushing the last man against a wall and beat him and beat him and...

"Stop!" Catherine cried. "Stop it, Vincent." She hugged him from the back, limiting his movements. There was a frustrated growl as he turned, rage plain in his face. She wouldn't be quick enough to run, she didn't ever try... just kept holding him, eyes now closed, bracing herself for the pain, for the nails on her back as he tried to rip her out. She didn't see the flash of recognition in his eyes. She didn't open her eyes until his mouth fell over hers.

He never felt her fighting back, or pushing him. Her movements, if anything, made him crush her to his body, moulding her to him until she recognized him. Then she gave in, with neither fear nor pleasure. He wasn't a stranger, yet he was strange; the Vincent she knew had never done this – though perhaps she had wanted him to.

Eight months stood between them.

There came the voices, and his gaze over hers, full of surprise and sorrow – not guilt: sorrow - and he was gone. She had nearly no time to rub her mouth with the back of her hand, before Elliot's men arrived.

The closest ones formed a protective ring around her while the others traced their surroundings. She had no idea of how Vincent had escaped.

"Are you hurt?" someone said.

"I'm all right," she assured them. "Did someone survive? Anyone?"

She was already crying.

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"She didn't respond." Vincent's dark growl almost made Diana cover her ears.

"Why did you kiss her?" she barked, fully aware of the answer, and of the fact that she had no power to change it.

His fits hit the rock once... twice... his forehead followed.

"It's obvious that she doesn't want you back in her life."

She looked away, fully aware that he was crying.

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"Mrs. Burch is tired. Leave her alone, please."

All investigators stood and thanked her for her patience. People she knew, people she had shared her meal with... they obeyed her orders as if she was a princess. I am she thought, bending her head. And because of that, she was left alone, a blanket covering her, a cup in her hand. Pretty classic, Cathy, she thought.

A jewelled white cat rubbed against her leg.

I would have pushed harder, insisting in interviewing the witness. I am... was... much better than they are.

The tea was warm in her hands.

"Mr. Burch on the phone"

The maid picked up the phone and turned on the speaker. Faraway sounds echoed in the room.

"Cathy! Are you all right?"

She simply shook her head. Anything else, and she would throw up.

"They will pay, Cathy, I promise..."

"They are all dead...", she muttered.

"Their bosses, all the way up to God. You'll have their heads..."

She looked at the phone, blankly.

"They are all dead, Elliot... All of them..."

And she burst in tears.

"Cathy!" he called. "Cathy, look... You are safe. Our house is a safe place. Don't leave until we know..."

"Will you come?"

She felt the answer in his pause.

"Cathy, do you know what I am working on?"

Catherine nodded rigidly.

"It would be the biggest project since..."

"Burch's tower, I know."

"We have brought a team of specialists from all around the world, just the best of them. I cannot leave now, Cathy. The second meeting would..."

"It's fine, Elliot. I will be fine"

He seemed to be struggling against himself.

"Are you sure?"

"I am. It's not the first time I have seen someone die," She marked the irony, but he didn't want to hear it. Nor the first time you are travelling as I fight it alone.

"I would like to spend some time in my old apartment. With your men at the door, there's virtually no risk, it's too high. Do you mind?"

"I would be too busy to call for the next days."

"That's a deal." she faked a smile he couldn't see.

"Thank you, Cathy," he sighed. It was the best credit her acting skills would have. "Good night. Sleep well."

As the sound turned into a rhythmic beep, she reached for the cat. It squirmed uncomfortably in her arms. She didn't notice its nails, merely the warmth it brought.

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"She is there"

The beast stood, and Diana stood with him. She had been getting over a case with him – although, for once, he hadn't been quite helpful. Her thoughts were still with Heathcliff's murderer.

"There?"

"Our balcony." His voice caressed the word: our, as in shared. "I will go to her"

Taking his cloak, he headed to the exit... until Diana stepped into his way.

"You know that there is no way to stop me, don't you?" he said quietly, a dangerous rasping in his voice.

Her blue eyes defied; his, stayed steady and sure, and she surrendered. But as he left the chamber, she asked, "If she wants you... if she gives herself to you... Will you accept her back?"

He stopped for a moment.

"Do you have to ask?"

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He drank in her shape, braced on the balcony, staring at the distance as some romantic figure. It enthralled him and blinded him at the same time. Such beauty... How had he dared to want it? To dream of touching it? His features softened, then he looked away. Happiness was bittersweet and not to be taken in large doses.

"They are dead...," she said. "All dead... all dead..." Like a mantra.

*They deserved it*, the beast thought. But the man said, "Your life was worth it... for them."

"All dead..." Her wide eyes sought the distance. "All dead..."

A fat cat, at her feet, nosed her and licked its snout. Vincent sniffed slightly. The breeze carried a metallic smell towards him. With a silent curse, he stepped forth.

"You are still covered in blood."

"All dead..."

He took her in his arms and carried her into the shower. The cold water made her shiver. Her first response.

"Wash yourself," was his order.

As if awakening from a nightmare, she stared at him, then at the shower, then told him to leave. Clean clothes were, nonetheless, inside the bathroom when she finished her bath... clothes she no longer used to wear...

"Thank you," she muttered.

Through the door, she heard his words.

"Don't mention it."

She was trembling when she walked out. He had lit the fire, and her silk nightgown didn't expose much of her; but the coldness inside persisted.

"Come here," he stretched his hand; she stepped in and took it.

He made her sit close to the fire. The cat didn't come, and it was nowhere to be found; scared of Vincent's snarl, it must be, shivering under some cushion. Not that she cared.

Surrounding her with his arms, he sat behind her. A shiver of strangeness ran down her spine. He, on the contrary, behaved naturally. His body was feverish, as animal skin. Without conscious decision, she found herself leaning on it.

"Do you want me to recite something for you...? To help you sleep..."

She nodded.

Despite the months stretching between them – as many as those they had spent together – his voice was familiar. It quieted her feverish thoughts. She couldn't understand the words – the language foreign, one she had never learned – but the sound was musical. She found herself, not trying to fall asleep, but fighting it back... and failing.

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She was awake long before dawn. The fire was extinguished, but he still watched over her, holding her closely... a pleasant surprise, even if she couldn't see anything more than his shadow. She wondered fleetingly if the old Vincent would have stayed.

"Vincent?"

"Mmm-mmm?"

"Why did you come?"

He blinked. "You called me"

"Will you always be there whenever I call you?"

A heartbeat, and then: "Will you want me there?"

She snuggled closer. Does she think of me as a teddy bear? His body responded furiously to her closeness; he didn't ever try to temper it.

"How have you been, Vincent?"

"Enjoying the gift of life you gave me." She didn't hear the irony, never imagined there was some, for she didn't know this Vincent. "What about you?"

She tried to sit, but his arms held her still. Her head rested on his shoulder. Her breath, now, caressed his neck, but he didn't mind.

"It's not so hard"

She looked out, beyond the balcony doors. The breeze made the curtains waver.

"It's kind of boring. I can't work; it's not forbidden, but I'm in enough danger without putting myself on the line." She smiled.

"I see."

There was something missing, she felt it even if she couldn't put a finger on it. It unnerved her.

"Once you said that if you... if you loved him... nothing would have to change... between us."

She bit her lip, understanding the question in his voice, all too well. She had made it herself, whenever Elliot wasn't there, whenever he was, whenever she felt the empty void in her heart where love for a husband must have been.

Nonetheless, who was this Vincent who dared to ask?

His arms twitched as he let her go. For the first time she looked into his eyes. Had they been this grey before? As his stare held hers, everything else vanished.

"Would you stand such a friendship?"

An unnatural laugh rose to his throat, but he muted it. The old Vincent must be somewhere inside; he sought him, for the answer he would give. The best phrase he found was a confession: "No hell is worse than the lack of you"

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"She wants us to be friends," he growled.

Diana didn't try to approach him.

"Burch paid a price for her"

"She isn't a whore!" he barked, for the first time looking into her eyes. "Her sacrifice was made for me."

"His was for her."

"She doesn't love him! She doesn't...!"

"Belong to him?" she laughed. "If not, she wouldn't..."

She found herself up the wall, his claws gripping her coat – his nails piercing it. His body approached hers menacingly.

"This... you would never allow her to see this."

"This is the Vincent she thought she would love"

As Diana suffocated, she met his eyes, and time stopped running. She remembered how she had met him: her heart beating as she waited for Catherine's secret, his shadow bringing light, the way he had bowed to put the lamp on the floor - fearless, having nothing to lose.

From the moment she had been assigned to the case Catherine had just left – Abey's case - Diana had felt something odd about the investigation... about its perfection: there were very few mistakes, all clues became proofs, and there were too many hints whose source was nowhere to be found; and as Diana looked through Catherine's old cases, she recognized the same phenomenon in them. She must have a secret source. When the official inquiry reached a dead end, Diana aimed at finding that resource instead. It hadn't been hard for her to discover Catherine's mystery... not quite the same help the lawyer had had in Abey's case, but still... Diana had never regretted the deviation.

By the time she finally met him, she had already imagined that there must be something strange about him; she didn't flinch at his looks. What she had never guessed, was his living, breathing power, his serenity, his control and his madness; the world inside of him. He would have been a voice calling for her to stop, to look deeper, to find what was first and endless. He would have been her salvation. But he was broken. His power lured her, conquered her mercilessly and with no regards for her soul.

What a paradox, then, that all she cared to remember at the moment of her death was her killer.

"Are you all right?"

She coughed and breathed deeper, her back half turned towards him. His arms tightened around her, but she slipped from them.

"You convulsed," he said.

He wasn't mad with worry, but his arms were still extended as if pleading for forgiveness. She eyed them without suspicion as she coughed again. His warmth told her he would help (try to, anyway) and it made her feel strangely safe.

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Sighing, Catherine put the book aside, the cat on the floor, and rose. There were green appetizing apples on the table, just waiting for her teeth. One of the privileges of a wealthy life... along with time...

Yes, there was time enough to do anything: to watch TV, to play, to read... Unfortunately, she couldn't use it for much more, since it wasn't wise to leave the place. Perhaps that was the reason, but when she was her daddy's child she had never gotten so bored.

A discreet knock on the door distracted her for a minute.

"We are changing sentries," the man warned her. "Are you all right?"

"I am."

There were also her friends; now they were working and living and... catching criminals. She sighed. Her time as a detective, from this distance, seemed no less than a list of successes.

And there was Vincent.

Her body found the balcony before she had even thought about it. This was her favorite place, where she came to dream... and yet, the sounds of life, almost twenty floors below her, unnerved her. This golden paradise at this hour seemed nothing but a bus stop.

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"Vincent!"

He hurried, as if fleeing from light; but the caller walked into his path. He cursed soundly. It was early, everyone Below was working, no one was supposed to see him as he retrieved some things from his old chamber. But he wasn't paying attention. He hadn't noticed the presence. Again, it was hard to hear Mouse's steps.

"OK good?" the boy said, smiling. "Grabbing a book?"

He growled softly, hiding his treasure into his cloak.

"Must see everyone," Mouse said. "Jamie misses... Father misses... children..."

Vincent tried to escape. The boy blocked the way again.

"Miss Vincent's Catherine too. 'Lost two friends instead of one,' Pascal said."

Vincent looked at the rocky floor, letting the boy speak. Much later, he would realize how easily he could have fled; he would wonder why he hadn't. As Mouse fed him with news of the ones he had once loved, he could think of nothing else...

Some steps sounded behind him. Just then, he pushed Mouse aside... not as rudely as he had deserved. No one else saw him. In fact, no one believed Mouse. Vincent was already a ghost, a myth to his very world.

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There was a rose... inside a book, in her bedroom... A red rose.

There was another, its thorns piercing a piece of paper. "*I have missed you,*" it read.

The third rose was in his hand.

She walked to him, and felt the void filling. Her smile hid a burst under layers of sweetness.

"This one has no thorns," he assured.

She received it in the calyx of her joined hands.

"It's beautiful," She wasn't looking at the rose, afraid she would burst in tears. He wasn't, either.

"It is."

It was a courting. She answered the way she always had: mystified, enthralled. For it had always been a courting. He wondered how he had deceived himself into thinking that they were just friends... that loved each other, but were still friends. Months. He had deluded himself for months, thinking that he could keep this chaste... platonic... and why? This path,

sooner or later, ended in...

He gasped at the thought.

"Now I must go."

"So soon?"

"I have something to do."

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He was reading. Diana stopped at the entrance, braced on its wall, astonished. All the candles in the room surrounded him, giving him light enough... and a glowing circle for his golden skin, in a corner... the only lightened place in this chamber.

"Diana," he acknowledged, not lifting his gaze.

She shook her head.

"I have never seen you read."

"You knew I liked it." He turned the page, looking absently at it. A finger traced it.

"I had noticed you quoted."

She stepped into the chamber and looked over his shoulder. It was hard to focus in the book, when his handsome shape was in the middle.

"Shakespeare"

"My favorite," he commented, while lifting a cup of wine to his mouth.

"Do you want me to read for you?"

The purple liquid entered his mouth, and she savored it, enthralled.

"I have never seen you drink."

He smiled. "So many things you haven't seen of me..." *and you still claim to know me.*

"Did you steal it?" she pointed to the bottle.

He received the question with much more indifference than she felt, and answered with another: "Would it be the worst thing I have ever done?"

He read for a moment more, turned the page.

"No, I didn't," he answered at last. Nothing more.

She sat beside him, hugging her knees. Funny, how she didn't feel quite a part of his enchanted world, even being among the same candles.

"So... you are much more in control than yesterday..."

"The beast is content."

"Are you fighting it again? Don't you know by now it's useless?"

"My darker brother and I are content with walking side by side. I just need to control some things. Kissing her, for example." His tone was indifferent, and his gaze was on the book.

"The deep respect I have for her, helps somehow; it became visceral through the months we spent together."

Respect...

"Didn't you kiss her already?"

"Just once," he admitted.

So... not last night... Diana's eyes narrowed. Did it feel like a triumph? Like a retreat, a coming back to his former self? However, the ending was implicit: eventually I won't have to struggle anymore.

"There are more crucial matters to discuss." His eyes deviated towards her, just for a moment. Despite the candlelight they reflected, she could see them relaxed. "Do you know who is trying to kill her?"

"There are a lot of people wondering just that"

"I ask you to investigate it"

There was no question in his gaze, it was halfway between a compliment and an order.

And why not?

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### Chapter 3

"Vincent!" Catherine ran to him as a child would. "I missed you!"

"I know. I felt it." His head dropped to one side, wondering.

She breathed deeply, her lungs filled with happiness rather than simple air.

"Would you like to walk with me?" he asked.

"I would," her gaze was nostalgic. "I would, very much... but there are men around the apartment, assuring my safety..."

"Let's climb down the balcony."

Her eyes glittered.

"Can we...? Would you...?"

He smiled mischievously. She had never seen him do so.

"Little blue bird, would you want to stretch your wings out of this, your golden cage?" He bowed graciously.

She giggled in delight.

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"I haven't done this since..."

"Since you were trapped in that elevator," he remembered.

They paced side by side, in Central Park. To look at him was easy now, but she rarely saw his

eyes. As if it was painful to look at her, he avoided it.

"Yes... but I used to do it, often, when I was a teen."

"To escape your parents?"

"To escape myself... the girl I was supposed to be..."

"It's hard to meet other persons' expectations," he commented.

He hadn't touched her since he had left her on the floor... much like the Vincent she once knew. If his closeness had unnerved her at first, now the unmet yearning, no longer familiar, drove her crazy.

"How is everyone Below doing?" she asked.

He breathed deeply and looked to the sky. "They miss you."

"So do I." Her arms folded as if to protect her. It's not as if I could go visit. Wait...

"Vincent, why don't we go see them right now?"

He stopped. She nearly left him behind before noticing; then she turned.

"Catherine, I cannot... I'm sorry."

Few things would surprise her as this did.

"Why?"

He was shaking his head quietly.

"Is it Father?" He always feared my leaving him. "Does he hate me now?"

"No, Catherine; this has nothing to do with you."

"Now you're scaring me. Have they...?"

"Things have happened. Please, don't ask right now. There is no reason to be scared."

*Oh, there is*, the beast inside said. She feels your change, can't you tell? The creature didn't mind resting for a while... as long as he was allowed to play with his brain. *It's not time to open Pandora's box*, the man answered firmly.

"I assure you, Catherine: it doesn't have anything to do with anyone living Above or Below." Sure enough, the beast laughed, limits are always grey. "You will know in time"

As he faced her, he regretted his denial. Would it be worse? But facing his father was unthinkable, and he had no will to explore why.

For the first time since they had met again, she needed to know something, and she observed... really observed. The way he moved, the way he dressed. All of it had changed. His grace, always perfect, now had an openly sensual side. He wasn't just comfortable: he was glad that he had this body. She could swear his clothes didn't have nearly as much layers as they used to. When she had – there was no other way to say it - slept in his arms, she had felt it, but just now she made the connection.

She touched him again to be sure. Her fingers slid into the fur on the back on his hands, up into the sleeve, half the length of his forearm. There was no shirt, and while she explored there was a vibrating sound, from deep within his chest. His head was turned right and down, so she had no way of reading his expression. She approached him to listen. It was a purr.

"Vincent?" she called.

The sound stopped, and Vincent sighed.

"Catherine," he said, his voice barely husky to her ears, but to his, plenty of meaning.

"Perhaps we should talk about this later."

"The fact that you don't want to lead me Below?"

Her voice was mewling. He nearly whined, but the sound died in his throat.

"Everything"

"That, I would delay. But..."

She walked into his arms, hers surrounding his chest. His arm came to embrace her. He would never know where he found the strength not to crush her to his body, moulding her form to his, making her... his.

"My touch pleasures you."

Oh, yes. And in more secret places it would...

"Don't play with fire, Catherine. You would get burned."

"I know how to protect myself."

"You really have no idea, do you?"

She froze, then her body relaxed. He was the one to retreat; she was the one to grab him, to hold him against her. She was used to ignoring his warnings.

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"What are you doing?" Diana wondered.

Vincent stopped rubbing his forearm. Nails substituted his palm. It was hard to notice while he paced so quickly. Even in her lightened apartment.

"Vincent?"

There was a sound, deep in his chest. It rose quickly to a growl as he turned.

But it was his gaze what made her step back.

"I cannot hold back your dark side, Vincent," she said. "This place can't either. If you'll lose control, you might as well do it right now."

Vincent's fur glowed darker. Her heart was beating in her throat as she closed her eyes, getting the distinct impression that this time the beast wouldn't be content with sex.

The hit, nonetheless, didn't come.

"What am I doing here?"

She opened an eye, then the other.

"Stopping yourself from rubbing your skin against your chamber's walls, I guess. But if you were looking for smoother walls, be my guest."

She walked to the fridge and opened it, her heart stilling into her chest.

"Do you want a beer?"

He kept pacing, back and forth, just out of the lights' domain. There were enough shadows... she had made sure of it. For him to feel comfortable. She didn't turn her head towards him. The can made a sighing sound, as it opened. She sipped once. Then the can fell, spreading beer all over the floor.

His body on her back would be the only thing she hadn't expected... except for his mouth on the hollow of her neck. Even she could say it wasn't what he needed. She wasn't...

"It's Catherine."

He cursed soundly near her ears, and he was gone.

"She is aroused"

Somewhere something fell. Loudly. Something else followed, with the sound of broken glass. Some old lamp. Things didn't matter to her, but Vincent never stumbled into things.

"Give me that."

A chess piece flew towards her and she caught it. A bishop.

"To break things won't make you harder to read. You might as well get used to it."

A deep silence warned her.

"She wanted me."

It was kind of the weirdest thing she would take right now. A stab to her stomach, in other circumstances. Now it just pricked her a little bit.

"I want you too. Why didn't you take her?"

"We weren't exactly in a chamber," he growled.

"So what? We were in the catacombs when..."

"That was different."

*Because it was with me?*

"Nicely caught."

She put the bishop beside the closest candle. Her eyes were wet, and Vincent could even smell it she laughed to herself. So why pretend?

"She's your goddess, I'm your bitch. Sure as hell you have no reason to respect..."

"Do you?" he interrupted.

"What?"

"Do you respect yourself, Diana?" He paced towards her, his silhouette getting clearer as he emerged from darkness. "Have you ever showed me how to do that?"

"Oh, it's the philosophic crap again."

"I give you what you're eager to receive. Don't ask for my respect if you can't stand it."

Diana growled. Helplessly, raggedly. It was a mewling beside what he could do. Ridiculous, even to her own ears.

And yet, it made him run away.

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Whatever Catherine was hoping for at her waking time, it wasn't a hand caressing her arm. At first, she shook it, but the sense got nicer until she couldn't mistake it for a fly. Thank God she didn't pronounce any names.

His breath caressed her ear, soon enough his tongue followed. A plain, wrinkled tongue. Not Elliot's.

"Shhhh," he said.

Vincent...

She had learned once that in waking there was a moment of drowsiness, powerful as a drug's effect. You could commit a crime at that exact moment, with no legal consequence. The minute would absolve the killer. So she stilled her moral sense – or rather beat it to the back of her head. But who minds the difference? She wasn't guilty for answering to his kiss. Hot as it was.

Besides, it would as well be a dream. As it became slower and wetter, and his hand came to hold her head – gently... as if she would break... she found hard to think otherwise. Hard to think at all. The long repressed craving was there, fuelled by the night, the aloneness...

"Wait," she gasped.

As if he hadn't heard, his mouth travelled a path from her scar – last remnant of the night when they had first met - through her neck towards her breasts.

"Vincent..."

His hands held hers over their heads as he kissed his name. She couldn't help but arch into his body, now on hers – his weight welcome, even now. A feeling of strangeness overcame her, even as she raised her knees to cradle him. There was his weight and his smell and all the memories she had fought so hard to keep silenced; but... was he there?

"Vincent!"

This time he answered: his eyes hovered over her, two spheres of grey-blue... rage? She discarded the thought as soon as it came. He – the man - had never been upset with her... never shown it, anyway... never looked at her with such an expression in fact.

Wasn't it the same?

"You never told him to wait."

The words hung on the air. Was this his voice? Such words couldn't belong to him! She hadn't seen him pronounce them – she wasn't watching his mouth - but wasn't his chest the one vibrating against hers?

The light came, unexpected as it would in a castle. Vincent flinched.

"You won't be seen," she assured him.

An impersonal voice came from the screen. "There is a call for you, madam."

He was a silhouette against the light; an enormous, powerful shadow between her and the rest of the world.

"Be quiet." Her hand fought for freedom, but he gave it none. "I have to answer, Vincent. Just let me..."

A heartbeat, and then he let a hand go. They both heard a dull sound – something had fallen – as she tried to reach a button. He relaxed, letting his weight fall over her completely.

Her voice sounded almost strangled: "Aaron, I'm in bed"

"Did I wake you?"

"It's my fault... for not telling you"

"Are you all right?"

"All right, Aaron... I'll let you check... let me dress"

The button made a sucking sound while being pushed again. Vincent looked at it, uncertain.

"We won't be... heard now"

But his gaze told her that he had nothing to say. A shiver of fear travelled through her.

"He got suspicious... If I don't let him in..."

"Does your heart belong to me?"

She froze. Why... that question... now...? His eyes burned her with their ferocity; she had to look away... but while doing so, she remembered.

"Vincent... the man I love... is you."

She felt him tremble, and a fierce joy possessed her... for being possessed by him. Maybe it was an echo of their ancient Bond, coming to life. She didn't know. Didn't care, really.

"Then, you belong to me."

There was more surprise than pain. Through the layer of silk, his fangs found her right breast. Not much blood tinted her dress. She didn't cry aloud. She hadn't moved when he parted – her hands were still attached to the pillow, and her eyes, staring up, where in the absence of his eyes, there was the ceiling.

But there were knocks at the door.

"Madam?"

"I'm coming!" she cried, while wrapping a gown around her. A look to the bed, and she decided to close the bedroom's door. "I'm here," she gasped.

Outside, there was only one man.

"I'm sorry, madam, but your call turned out to be a visitor," this one said. "I need to ask you about your latest attack."

Aaron, behind the woman, shrugged. He seemed quite helpless for a bodyguard.

But the woman wasn't easy to deal with, either. Just the fact that she had arrived there, with the strong security posted to avoid it, spoke of constancy and decision. Catherine watched her, looking for further clues. The visitor dressed like the classic detective, and even then, not too carefully. Her red hair made Catherine think of hell's flames.

An offered hand interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm Diana Bennett. I'm in charge of your case now"

Catherine wondered why the caller's hand twitched around hers. Bennett was looking at her wrists. Catherine's hand retreated quickly.

"I surely didn't expect a visitor so late in the night."

"It's barely past ten." *Really?* The clock answered: it was 10:07 p.m. "Nights are longer in winter."

The detective looked straight into her eyes. Bennett's eyes recalled Vincent's – at least, the pair of Vincent's eyes Catherine had last seen. It made her shiver.

"Please, sit down," she muttered while breaking eye contact. "So... Must I tell you everything from the beginning?"

"No. I read the statements." Bennett's voice came from the table. She was arranging something on there. Ew! Catherine would have said; but she approached the table instead. "Sit down, Mrs. Burch. We have little time to waste."

As she sat, Bennett slid a photo towards her. There were just buildings. The neighborhood didn't seem the kind Mrs. Burch would visit often. Catherine lifted her gaze again, asking for an explanation.

"It's close to where you were contacted for the first time." A short nail pointed at some graffiti. "This got my attention. Do you recognize it?"

"You must have gotten something wrong" Catherine straightened her body. "The first attack wasn't there."

"I said 'contacted' Now please, take a look. Does it sound familiar?"

Catherine frowned at the picture. She had been there, she remembered it; but it had been months ago, she had been still working at the time. She didn't even remember if she was already married.

"Someone gave you something, back then: a small book. Is that true?"

A bulb lightened in her mind.

"It had fragments from a book I loved... The *Velveteen Rabbit*." Her gaze focused on Bennett again. "How did you know?"

"You left it among the evidence. Do you have any idea of who sent it? Do you remember the messenger?"

"It was a child, I think..."

"Can you describe him?" Even while Catherine shook her head, Bennett insisted: "any detail...?"

"I barely saw him, months ago; I can't give you anything more..." Catherine snorted and grimaced as if smiling. "And I frankly can't see where both things connect"

"This made me think about your name."

The graffiti remained under the detective's nail. It wasn't big for New York's standards. The golden color was unusual, though. It said: "*Light a candle*." A new photo slid beside the first one: an enlargement of the C; two more followed slowly. There were small figures, and at first, it was hard for Catherine to focus on just one, so many there were. One figure's gracefully stretched legs guided her to another animal that was pressed against an imaginary floor, as if hunting; other cat's bright green eyes called her attention.

"Your maiden name, I mean... Can you see the similarity?"

There was just one point in common: the cats' mouths: all of them were open. Their cries

sounded in her ears. She looked from one figure to another, looking for a shelter –something, anything, different. They didn't say "Meow" but "Cathy, little cub of ours, come here..."

"Mrs. Burch!"

A hand between her eyes and the pictures snapped her out of the nightmare, and she shivered, and then lifted her gaze, confused for a moment; then she shook her head.

"It's hypnotizing"

"'Chandler' and 'Cat'..." The detective insisted, pointing to the enlargements one by one. "Do you have any idea of what it meant?"

"It's obvious." Her iris went from side to side, wondering: "How is it that no one had seen it?"

"No one looked, I guess."

A heavy tiredness weighted her shoulders; almost a sadness. Catherine stood and wavered towards the balcony door.

"So... someone wanted to contact me..." She moved the curtains to see the sky. "Must this one be also the one menacing me?"

"This painting was finished on June 12th"

Dates were slippery in Catherine's mind now that her agenda was so empty. It took some time for her to understand the allegory; she didn't flinch when she did.

"Dunclin was the painter. Is this name familiar to you?"

"A new prodigy," Catherine answered vaguely.

"He is more famous now than he used to be back then."

The detective's straight gaze tickled her shoulder. Catherine looked back, and found Bennett's head slightly dropped one side.

"This kind of work is too detailed for a child."

Catherine seemed to ignore the comment, but something fit inside of her. Bennett didn't miss her shiver.

"You know how it goes, Mrs. Burch. You must tell me..."

"Do you have something else?" she interrupted.

A heartbeat, and then: "Right now, no"

"Can I keep the pictures?" Catherine hurried to ask.

"I am sorry, but I can't allow it until the investigation has ended." *You knew that.*

Catherine nodded tiredly.

"Here is my card" The roughness of paper scratched Catherine's half open hand.

Her tone of voice was all business now. Catherine got the distinct impression that the detective was avoiding her eyes. She picked another brief glimpse of an enlargement while Bennett collected them.

"Please, call me if you remember something else."

As soon as the detective disappeared, Catherine dropped to the bed, and turned to watch the ceiling. Expressionless, dull. It took some time for her to notice the warmth of the bed. It might not be Vincent's, but she still wrapped up in the covers, nosing the pillow.

The phone rang just before she fell asleep.

"Hello"

"Cathy!"

"Hi, Dad!" She elbowed the bed and braced on it, passing the phone to her other ear. "What a surprise!" she said ironically.

"How is my little girl?"

"You don't have to call every night, Dad..."

"I know that you have been in worse... situations, Cathy..." His discomfort was obvious.

"And I won't listen again to the: 'you shouldn't have left my office' talk."

"I won't say 'I told you'...", he sighed.

"But you told me. I know..."

"No, Cathy, I really didn't call to remind you of that."

She bit her lips, as an itchy silence fell over them. Her fingers played with the white blankets.

"You are grumpy today," he pointed out warily.

Patting the bed, she faced it.

"It's funny that you called just now. I wanted to ask you something."

"Tell me."

She hushed, knowing that she would spoil his sudden cheer if she spoke; but once announced the question... Should she change it?

"Do you still have mom's work?"

The silence on the other side of the phone was sign enough.

"You remember it."

"I was young, but I wasn't a baby"

"Why do you ask?"

It was her turn to be quiet. Why had she asked?

"They must be somewhere in the attic." His voice cracked, and he coughed to mask it. Pretty obvious, for a lawyer, Dad. "I hope you don't want to see them"

A slight breeze entered the room, making the curtains weave, painting the floor with ghosts.

"No... I guess not..."

"Listen, Cathy..." His fake cheer wavered for a moment, as he thought of a subject to move onto. "There's a golf meeting next Sunday. Will Elliot be in the city by then?"

"I'm not sure," she said distractedly.

Thank God he didn't have cameras to see her as they talked. If he had, he would have seen her tears.

"Can I see at least my daughter?"

"As soon as the office leaves you time," she answered.

"Do you promise?"

"Do you?"

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Garson entered the room just in time to stop the knife on its way to her wrist. Thank Jake, he thought. He had to give the camera-guard a promotion; watching this woman was equivalent to two full-time jobs. He himself was getting tired.

"Sweetheart, you don't have to do this."

It felt like déjà vu to see her looking out – beyond the darkened window. She had released the knife the moment she had felt his hand. She was ashamed. She was always ashamed.

"How did you know?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he slid the cutting half of the knife into its sheath and into his pocket. If I let her do it, he thought, how much time would it take for her to recover? How much damage would she do? How much attention would she need this time? It was nearly worth the try.

"Is it the pain?"

"My child," she said in a throaty whisper, then cleared her throat slightly. "I want to see my child."

What takes so long? He could see her reflection in the glass window – her make-up was melted, but it didn't seem disgusting in her. She was sad. Why did she have to be sad? His teeth clenched, he frowned. Didn't the child hear the mother's cry? Was the child that careless?

"I know, sweetie."

"Isn't there a way to enter that house? To be closer...?"

And now, he didn't know what to say. Not with a false name he thought as he looked into her begging eyes, nor with the true one. He turned his back to her as he looked for a chair and placed it before hers. It took slightly more time than it must. Still, he hadn't gotten an answer for her. Pulling up his pants, he sat down with a sigh.

"I try to contact your kid," he whispered. "I do. Give me time"

"It have been months since I last saw her. And she needs care."

He shivered. Care...

"Can Maxie come?" she whispered quietly.

Her craving look made him feel sick. Sick of himself, for keeping them apart. Sick of her, for making that so essential. Sick of fear.

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## Chapter 4

"Detective Bennett"

"It's Catherine Burch."

That livened her up completely.

"Am I hearing traffic?" Diana asked.

"I'm doing some fieldwork." Her voice was speedy, cheerful.

Diana stretched on the chair and closed the file she had been reading.

"It seems that I've found something more," the blonde said.

"Are you protected?" God help us... If she is attacked... An image of Vincent being shot came to Diana's mind, the same image she had been fighting for weeks.

"I'm fine, Bennett I'm close to the graffiti you showed me. Come and see."

Diana hung up without another word.

"Cover for me" she muttered to her astounded partner by means of farewell. It took her half the time it safely should, to reach Catherine.

The ex-lawyer was facing a wall. She looked completely fragile in her pink shirt; the three well-build men that were all over her didn't help the effect. The one facing Diana met her halfway.

"Do you carry a gun?"

"I'm a detective," she cut him. "Of course I do."

Even after Catherine's order, menacing gazes followed Diana as she stepped closer.

"What did you find?"

Catherine's eyes never left the painting as her closed hand extended. It opened slowly. Some hairs of the lock it held clang to the parting fingers.

"Where did you find it?"

"Where I looked for it," Catherine answered. "It's a part of the signature."

"How would you know?"

Diana touched the lock of hair carefully, as if it were an insect – fragile and disgusting.

"How?" she asked again, lifting her gaze.

"A painter in the family."

There weren't that many people in Catherine's family. She could guess.

Instead of taking the hair, Diana walked towards the graffiti and looked for the signature. The cats seemed to look at her. Their mouths were hundreds of dark caves of hell.

"Wasn't the painting itself a signature?"

"It would have been once."

The artist's name was sketched on the right side.

"Dunglin changed his signature."

"You must go home," the detective ordered without turning.

Catherine faced her. The detective's legs were apart; she seemed a fighter. All I never was,

Catherine thought. For some reason, Vincent came to her mind; Bennett wouldn't need protection. Somehow, it made her jealous.

"I would really want you out of here, Mrs. Burch"

"It's a forbidden pleasure, to walk the streets," she smiled.

"You're playing with men's lives, for a pleasure." And not all of them are up here.

Catherine stepped beside her. A hand hovered over the wall. She is smiling, Diana noticed. Her operational mind archived the data and started to seek its meaning.

Just then the bullets came. Diana's guts warned her seconds before, and as she covered Catherine the bodyguards formed a shelter against the wall. Catherine looked pitifully small among them; Diana had made her point. And it was worse than she had expected: either the attackers were ghosts or, more probably, hidden at some of the front buildings. Untouchables. Catherine's men shot at random.

"Shielded vehicle," the darkest one muttered, waving his hand.

The gunfire had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. However, they had to move, and they did, head down. Diana looked swiftly around as the guard grasped her arm; he wanted her close and under surveillance. It would have annoyed her, if she didn't have other things in mind.

"It smells wrong."

As it used to happen in streets like these, they were much emptier and more silent after the shooting. Diana looked around again, trying to find some clue; her ears were wide open.

It seemed professional work. Yet, none of the bodyguards had been touched. It must have been on purpose. Was this one the same attacker? Was it a warning? What for?

Then she looked at the wall. She read it twice, before she surrendered again to the man's pull – not without shaking off the grasp, just to make a point.

The car wasn't far away, but it took minutes for Diana's mind to decide if she should tell Catherine what she had read carved with bullets on the painting. Meanwhile, the movement around helped her think: a bodyguard ordering the driver to leave, a wide-eyed Catherine grasping her heart.

"You must be more careful," Diana mocked, shifting in her seat.

The car's seats were incredibly soft. The compartment also had two divisions separated by a crystal panel; the bodyguard's was smaller; the passengers even had a bar. Catherine fitted in here. She seemed fragile – why would Vincent love such a lady?

Diana decided against telling her. After all, what she had read would be just a gang's name; gangs protected their territory. She would have to check: if it wasn't a band they had registered, it would be a rising one, or require further investigation. It didn't seem that dangerous, though, or they would all be dead. Most gangs never warned. It was true that they would have a lot more explaining to do with a killing. As it was, maybe they only hated some artist's work.

Yet, what kind of freaks of Marti's writings gathered under a name such as "Ivory rose"?

\*\*\*

"She will get herself killed," Diana stated as soon as she reached his chamber – which was what he named his sty, though it now seemed almost worth the fancy name.

"I will make sure it does not happen." His voice came from the densest darkness.

"She should make sure herself. She's a freaking dad's girl."

It would be easier if she saw him. She knew he could see her perfectly, should he want to look at her, and it was annoying to be held in such a disadvantage.

"Can't you light a candle?"

"When I'm ashamed, I seek refuge in darkness."

"Pretty good for a psychological self-diagnosis." Diana's short applause echoed through the chamber as she looked around. "It makes me wonder if you want congratulations or the logical question."

"None of them, thank you."

"I'll still ask: what are you ashamed of?"

Something like a brief air current, or a sigh, touched her nape, but when she turned he wasn't there.

"A breeze," he guessed from right before her.

There was no way he'd be so quick... was there? However, he never lied.

"Catherine went on her own, to investigate."

"I guess you gave her some questions." There was a voice behind his own.

"You did ask me to help with this."

"I did."

"Then don't you dare blame me for doing so. She was childish and..."

"Enough," he said calmly, merely advice.

"And don't you dare blame me for interrupting you, turtledoves."

In the darkness, something shifted, straightened. She never saw it, but something told her, maybe her instincts or her own sense of him.

"So it was you."

He knows I'm guessing. He has to know. To use a conjecture to bring forward a truth wasn't her style, not in personal relationships – if she ever had one. She despised herself for it; but there had been clues. Whether she like it or not. Half of her had hoped that it wasn't real, or at least, that the trick wouldn't work. A deep breath was all she had in way of painkiller.

"Is that the reason why you're ashamed?"

"Partly."

Her fingers ran through her hair.

"Look, Vincent: if you want to tell me, you may as well do it now. If not, stop with the teasing."

Had there been a chuckle?

He was divided, she knew it. A part chuckled, a part regretted. A part loved, another despised. A part wanted to tell her. Another, was ashamed. He drove her nuts wondering which was

which.

"We were shot at."

"I know"

"You were there, weren't you?"

She had the impression that he was moving, in a slow pace. Not quite the same one he was accustomed to. An image flashed in her mind: Vincent, hearing shots and throwing himself to the ceiling, about to burst through the ground, in hopes of saving his precious goddess. It brought her some wicked comfort.

"Why did they shoot?" He interrupted her daydream.

Sometimes, she didn't know if she really loved him.

"They wrote something in the wall. With bullets, can you believe it? I checked it. Incredibly, there are some gangs with that name in the area, not many. None of them used to be close to that alley. I asked Joe to watch them. They are under surveillance as we speak..."

"A name."

"Not Catherine's." She waved her hand. "I still feel in my guts that your precious Catherine isn't exactly out of this."

"The name?"

"Ivory rose."

The silence down there was terrifying. It got deeper as his thoughts did, when they were too chaotic for her to speculate about them.

In the darkness, she never saw his left hand reaching for his chest, closing around thin air. Another rose had hung there once. Memories of echoing growls and torn skin – his skin - came confusedly to his mind: the night he had ripped Catherine's pouch from his chest – her wedding night... The first time he had sensed the ultimate mock to their dream.

Reminiscences of when he still lived as the human he would never be. It had not been the beginning of the agony.

"I get it that you have an answer."

"We'll see," he said. "After you exhaust your own."

Her annoyance wasn't unexpected at all.

"Maybe you should remember that her life is threatened and... not least... she is bored," she snorted. "To bring her little friends to an open field to watch a small firing show... not that I'd mourn over the dark boss' life..."

"With that, I would help... if you don't need her tonight, that is..."

"Going to bring shame on yourself again?"

He moved closer, gathering things.

"Probably... but I have to see her. You'll understand once you..."

"... fall in love, I guess you were to say?"

"Fall in love."

His voice, this time, was deprived of humor.

\*\*\*

Burch's manor had a nursery, where traditional colorful toys hovered over ghostly cradles and dust slowly covered those teddy bears in the armoire. It was pretty traditional, painted in blue, but two of the cradles were pink. Who'd guess, Burch preferred girls? In the adjacent room, the oldest children's beds waited patiently for their not-yet-conceived owners.

Catherine sat in the armchair and lifted her feet, as she reached for the candies' drawer, once again deciding that they would expire long before any hypothetical kid would eat them. She always came here when she was depressed, or bored to death. The colors helped, and the silence... She wondered sometimes how she would manage once the place was full of cries. Still, when she was really bored, she wanted to fill it herself... which, of course, seemed to be her role.

*Chocolate... arrrg...*

She opened the envelope anyway, while looking beyond the windows to the security party – complete with alarms and anti-aircraft. All those men would give his lives for hers; everyone knew. Not legal? Who cared?

Elliot hadn't called yet.

Some scratching sounds came from the door, where she had left the cat. Cursing softly, she took a bite off the chocolate. The bitter aftertaste reached her in a heartbeat. They didn't make good candies anymore. Perfect things don't last, she thought. Never. There were flashes of the Vincent she had once known. She looked to the armoire, her attention fixed on that teddy bear that always seemed to observe her. *Damn, he could.* Not that she would examine its eyes for cameras. Not that she wasn't sure already. She stared down.

Beyond the window, a lark called its mate.

There was something brilliant in the carpet. This one was thick, so it was hard to see little things there; but there was the glitter. Catherine kneeled. It was a sweet. An old sweet. She grasped it without thinking, lifted it – it clung to the carpet, where the sweet had shed - and childish colorful memories of tasting and smiling came to her. She hadn't seen this kind of candy in years, not even in specialized stores.

She lowered it, and there was another. It must be safe to reach for it; this one hadn't exploded. And she was home. Crawling frog-like, she grasped the other. And the following one. When she lowered the fourth one, she had already realized that it was a path. An ambush. Not that she cared.

It happened quickly: baby cries, the door kicked, gunshots. She caught a sight of the firearm still raised in the man's hands, then she walked before it. Her mind was stuck, wondering why he had killed a baby. The sound had changed to a wavering noise, about to vanish. Its source came to be a music player.

As her bodyguards moved around her, its colors shifted to black and white. The blue player was bleeding sparks. Ray forced it open, exposing the cassette... and its own sparkling bleed of tape.

"I want it repaired," she said dizzily.

Two bullets had reached the wall. What a mess. They would have to cover the holes before the kids could come. In fact, they would move the nursery; to know that there had been shots

made her nervous.

She would be a good mom.

"Sorry, madam," Ray explained, his eyes never leaving hers. "We heard noise here..."

"You are not sorry," she barked. "You don't have to pretend. Leave now." As they left in order –no faked rush - she added, "And bring the cassette as soon as it's fixed."

A baby shirt hung under the player. It hadn't been touched, thank God. It looked familiar, but Catherine herself had chosen some baby clothes for the nursery – not that she wouldn't use it at some point. Folding it, she carried it to the babies' room. Whoever moved it to the wrong place? The fabric was incredibly soft; it seemed secondhand. Maybe it was Elliot's, a keepsake or something. She had never thought that he would want his children to wear his own clothes, but it's sweet she thought, smiling as she left the garment in the boys' drawer.

This room hadn't changed, she looked around and saw nothing new or damaged. The armchair seemed as comfortable as before. The candies' drawer remained open, lively papers drawing children to the chemical poisons inside.

But toys had rolled over the cradles, letting some dust fall on the mattresses.

Catherine looked around, uncomfortable, and turned off the lights before leaving the room. She needed a new safe place in the manor.

As she walked, candies stuck disgustingly to the palm of her hand. She hadn't noticed they were still there. Opening one, she allowed the sweet into her mouth. At once the disgusting flavor reached her. The expiry date must have been a decade ago.

"Madam, your husband," someone called from an adjacent room.

She entered compliantly to the video-conference room: Elliot's new toy. Apparently, watching the micro-expressions of those who were to make a contract with you, was worth paying for the luxurious technology, not yet in the market. To see him in black and white, while interacting with him, still gave her the chills. The white cat tailed her; she had forgotten it.

"Cathy! I just learned..."

"I'm OK," she recited. "Don't worry."

"I was in a meeting..."

"I knew..."

"And the nursery...!"

"I know..."

"Why were you there?"

"That was my chosen place to dream."

The silence made her lift her gaze to Elliot, for the first time. He wore a slight smug smile. Puzzled, Catherine dropped her head to one side.

"I didn't know you wanted children, Cathy."

The shock was almost electric.

"We'll work on it as soon as I come back. You just gave me further reason to hurry."

Catherine swallowed hard and moistened her lips. That was not what she had meant... and still, she didn't find in her the strength to tell him. Perhaps she did want a child. Perhaps who

the father was became secondary as she ran out of time.

"But for now..." Elliot forced himself to be serious "You didn't play the tape, did you?"

"No."

"Then you must go to your apartment."

"Why?" she flinched.

Her apartment tasted like Vincent, and the one she had met the previous day... She didn't like him... or she did, and she didn't like it... She shook her head violently, without succeeding in shaking off her confusion.

"Someone entered a room without us knowing," Elliot explained. "And that person was close to you, close enough to hurt you. I have no way to know, in that enormous place, if it was one of the cooks or a janitor. I want you close only my best men until I find out."

"I understand."

And still, she shivered.

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes," she said what she knew she must. "Be well."

"Sweet dreams, Cathy"

As soon as the image turned black, she kicked the floor. After a heartbeat she kicked it again, and then increasingly fast until the shoe lost its sole. A childish tantrum, ridiculous for someone her age. She wanted to yell, but couldn't. She was to stay calm and act like the expensive woman she was.

The screen began to shine again. Catherine lifted the cat – not paying attention to its warning claws - to reach the control, and turned it on.

"Catherine," Elliot mewed on the other side.

She breathed deep, and throwing the control to the seat, she forced herself to meet his eyes. She hoped he wouldn't see anything she didn't want him to.

"They told me you faced the gun."

"They were aiming to babies' cries," she explained. "I didn't know it was a record."

"Please, don't do anything like that again."

She moistened her lips as she nodded.

He seemed to turn around, his back to her, and she also did, reaching for the control.

"And... Catherine..."

This time, as she met his eyes, he was smiling.

"You'll make a wonderful mother."

Something hot and spicy nestled in her stomach. While, once again, she turned off the screen, she thought that she needed a new shelter, and fast.

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"You took it!"

Gar tried to hold her, eyes closed as her nails sliced him everywhere she could reach. Despair made her strong.

"You took my keepsake!"

"To bring your kid..."

A nail entered his mouth, and his tongue flinched against the piercing pain, as he restrained the finger with his lips. What a mock to the lovemaking they had once revelled in; now he protected himself from her, and her from herself all the time. Max being the only reward in their dreadful history.

Sobs ended up clouding her muttering. He let go of her finger warily and made her sit down. Her agitation vanished slowly.

"I needed it, sweetheart. She is there now - there was no time to ask you. It had her handwriting."

"Is she there?"

Sparkling green eyes asked anxiously. His heart felt heavier.

"She is surrounded... all the time. No one can go there, don't you see?"

He thought he had heard an "I do", but it could be just wishful thinking.

"He can. He has to tell her..."

"I have to..."

Gar sighed, gesturing for the doctor to come closer. This one hesitated briefly. Gar couldn't blame him. Damn, I no longer can blame her man. "*He left you there, sweetheart.*" Gar had told her once. "*Don't cling to his memory, don't be faithful to him; he doesn't deserve you. You aren't his anymore*". Excuses he thought about now, while gathering her golden hair out of her face; hunted eyes stared back to him. As much as Gar had despised him, if she had hurt Max the way she had hurt the kid... *I would have done the same thing.*

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## Chapter 5

The door tinkled while opening. She didn't lift her gaze from her ice-cream – a wonder of flavor, fruits and cream, or so the commercial said - trusting her men to meet the intruder. Whoever hadn't read the "CLOSED" note outside the parlor... though if it was a child... No, she couldn't risk it anyway...

"Cathy!"

It was her father's voice, and his eyes were the ones she met when she looked up.

"Da..."

"I didn't know you still came here."

"I own it," she said dazedly as she stood.

The wall's colors didn't help her headache. Red, blue and green... for God's sake, how could children bear such a rainbow on walls? And still she herself used to love it. I'm getting old.

"May I sit down?" He pointed towards the chair in front of her.

She nodded and let her body fall on her own chair.

"Do you want something?" she offered.

"Beef?"

She choked, and he reached forth to pat her back, laughing.

"It was a joke! I know they serve only sweet things here. And you know I don't have a sweet tooth."

"Old."

His strokes went a little rougher.

"All right, Dad; you don't have to make me spit my lungs." She swallowed and coughed again, just once.

"Roger."

He watched her men.

"You are more guarded than the local prison."

"I feel like a prisoner"

The bodyguards didn't as much as blink.

Her teaspoon sank into the upper ball – strawberry - and pierced it twice.

"You haven't touched it," he pointed out.

"I have eaten five already. Do you want some?" She pushed the dish towards him.

"You're a little old for making me eat what you don't want."

She smiled at him. His father was older than she had last seen him – more wrinkles, more white hairs. Her stomach turned upside down. The same girl that, in tears, begged him never to die. The same one that had just lost her mother was still inside of her.

"Back then what I left was what you liked..."

"I can't believe that you exchanged your beef for my dessert," he chuckled.

"I can't believe you allowed me to." She saw him shake his head, and the comparison with the Dad she had just remembered hit her. "I guess you just humored me... after mother's..."

The smile vanished as he looked down, shifting his feet uncomfortably.

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

Now it was she who looked down. Family gestures.

"It just came to my mind."

Silence stretched, an unwelcome guest staying for too long.

"I guess you didn't come to taste my ice cream," she smiled at him. "Tell me."

"You should tell me," he said. "Why did you send for me?"

Her frown was the first signal of trouble.

"I didn't..."

He eyed her, frowning himself as he felt his pockets and extracted the paper. A look at it and he handled it to her.

"Here."

It was brief: "We're down the corner, at the parlor. If you want to, come meet us. Cathy"

"It's your handwriting."

"I see," she said. "But I must have written it years ago..."

And yet, the paper wasn't even yellow. She felt its softness; it was of good quality. There had been a time when she wouldn't have known the difference. As she turned the note, she read the other side: "You promised!"

"I found it on my desk, Cathy; not in the attic."

Something cracked as it fit in Catherine's mind.

"Could this be from the assailant?"

As soon as she muttered it, the paper became a snake about to bite. Or it would as well have, by the way her dad snatched it away, tearing it apart as he did, while her men grasped their guns. A ghost enemy Catherine thought.

I must have shown it to Bennett

"Can I have it?"

"Oh, no, Cath," he said, staring at the piece still in his sweating fist, which further ruined it. "I don't want it close to you."

"Fine. Ray, do you have a plastic bag?" At his nod, she ordered: "Put the pieces there, please, and carry it to the lab. I want fingerprints, DNA, whatever."

Charles offered his hands to the man, for him to collect the stuck paper. His gaze never left his daughter.

"I didn't know you had specialized resources..."

"I'm not supposed to have them, but... Elliot got me a permission to use some very expensive government facilities." She shrugged. "He calls them playthings."

"He obviously can afford it..."

Catherine wondered why he was smiling, and a flash of her wedding came to her mind. The answer was the same: money matters.

"I want you to remember that the attacker might as well be after Elliot," she growled softly. I am in danger because of him, she meant; a lawyer's mind would catch it if he wanted to. He didn't.

However, how on Earth would that help?

A knock at the door broke the mood.

"We are closed," one of her bodyguards announced.

The door still opened, and a kid entered. His awkward smile vanished when three guns aimed at him.

"It's a message for you, sir," the boy extended a hand to the older man, while looking at the

others. His pale face seemed a pin-pong ball, gaze jumping from one gunman to the other. As soon as the paper was out of his hand, he turned around and ran. Catherine caught a movement in a corner of her visual field, and Ray was gone too.

"What does it say?" she asked.

His father's face was paling visibly.

"Nothing."

Not likely.

"Would it have something to do with this case?"

He hesitated before answering – frozen smile. That was as good as words.

"Ray, you can come in."

The poor child almost fainted into the man's deadly embrace. His legs didn't even touch the floor. Her soul bled for him; but if she touched him, if she just neared him enough for him to endanger her, he would be dead. Those men wouldn't risk Elliot's rage, much worse than the police's. The child was collateral damage.

"What's your name?" she wondered - gaze fixed in the child's one, gentlest voice, all the tricks she had learned with the DA.

"Tom, ma'am" he said.

"You're in serious danger, Tom. If you approach me, you'll die."

The boy gasped, looking at the two men around her, whose gazes held no gentleness. By announcing his possible death, she had become a threat too. Even if she just wanted to help.

"I'm saying it clearly, for you to understand, Tom. But you can move freely..."

A signal to Ray, and he hesitantly lowered the boy, but still grasped his shoulders. The guns were aiming at him again.

"I would want you to share an ice cream with me, and tell me everything you know about whoever wrote this note."

He paled further, if that was even possible.

"I did, ma'am"

Distress. It wasn't good.

"Don't move," she hurried.

Things froze around her.

"Why would you come handling a letter?" she asked slowly.

"Someone paid me for it, ma'am" he answered. "For writing it, and delivering it as well."

You got tricked, she thought. Whoever sent you, didn't really care if you died.

"All right, Tom. Can you please tell me whatever you remember about that someone?"

"He seemed to be Chinese, ma'am. He dressed funny, as Chinese do. He smiled at me and told me to give his friend a note."

The child hadn't breathed during the speech; no wonder he ended up gasping. Poor, frightened boy...

"That's all right, Tom. Can you describe him for us to draw him?" His hesitation was palpable. "I don't want you to make up a description; if you can't remember, we'll understand."

No one seemed understanding in the room. Still, he shook his head, gaze fixed in hers as if he knew death was coming and couldn't watch it.

"Good. Now I need a way to get in touch with you. You'll give your address to Jorge, there." she pointed to the gentlest bodyguard; thank God he had had sense enough to put his weapon away. "We won't disturb you unless we need you. And I promise – I do," she insisted, looking into the child's eyes, "that we won't threaten you. Now... Do you know anything else that would help us?"

The boy shook his head again, swallowing. The poor thing was sweating heavily.

"Look... if you tell us now, we won't have to call you later," she said. "You have nothing to fear, Tom."

Hard to believe, when two very large men with huge firepower faced him.

"Do you want some ice cream?"

"I don't have any money for it, ma'am."

"I'm inviting you."

"I'm not hungry."

No wonder.

"Good-bye then, Tom. Please, forgive our behavior. Ray, guide him outside and give him five."

The boy kicked all the way outside, then his screams quieted all of a sudden.

"Five?"

"Five hundred in cash," she shrugged. "We scared the hell out of him; it will be easier to forget if he writes it down as business. I'd give him more if I thought he could handle it. I don't want him to be traumatized." The ice-cream was melting on the spoon. "Now... can you show me the message?"

"Please, don't ask that of me."

She flinched and looked at him.

"Dad, if that note would help..."

"It's just trouble, trust me."

"Dad..."

"Please, respect my criteria in this."

She held his gaze.

"I know you wouldn't endanger me because of a secret, dad," she said slowly. "You know you must show me that."

He looked straight into her eyes. In his there was a shade of guilt.

"That important, eh?" She frowned.

Her men ringed them as wolves.

"Tell me this couldn't help me," she asked.

She couldn't use her men's strength against her father, could she?

"Tell me, Dad," she begged.

"This has nothing to do with bullets," he said slowly, "and it reveals a part of my past that I myself would want to forget. You must respect your father's wishes regarding this."

And still, both of them held their breath – both, victims of protection - until she sighed.

"All right, Dad."

But something was broken.

"See you later?" he tested.

"I'll be at my apartment."

"I know." Again her gaze asked. "Elliot told me," he added.

Men's alliance.

"Bye, dad"

She didn't see him leave, but her men followed him closely.

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Fifteen minutes she had stood in front of the apartment. The hand holding the key trembled when it neared the lock. Her men were close, but just then, Ray asked:

"Do you want us to check the place for you again?"

The detonator.

"No! Thank you, Ray."

"Do you have any reason to suspect there is some danger inside?"

"No, I'm sure there isn't."

Had they noticed the crack in her voice?

"In fact, I would rather not have you check on me each minute. I'll call you boys at midnight, for you to know I'm all right."

"By then you could be dead, madam. Please, let us..."

"No. I'm serious. I'll come back to you in half an hour. Under no circumstance you can come in."

Ray pressed his lips together. His gaze, full of suspicion, wavered between her and the flat. But it wasn't his job to question her, and she had no reason to want to be murdered – or that he thought.

"We'll wait, madam."

At last, the key fit and turned.

Her place was dark, dark enough for her to see just the balcony; there was a full moon tonight. The breeze gently moved the curtains. She smelled no dust; her employees had done their work.

"Half an hour, madam," the man reminded her.

She closed the door behind her and placed her forehead against it, as well as a hand, at

head's height, but sliding downwards. Her back was completely exposed.

"I love you," his voice said.

She flinched, turning, as her key fell from her hand.

"Are you all right?" Ray asked beyond the door, having heard the sound.

She turned quickly and answered before facing him again.

He was kneeling on a corner. She felt it, though no physical sense provided her with the info.

"Must I leave?" he asked quietly.

"Don't, please!"

"You are scared of me."

She swallowed hard. How to deny it? How to agree with it, without shattering her memories of them?

"You don't have to say anything. I won't try to... harm you... assault you." His voice did crack.

"Or anything..."

Ghostly fangs pierced her right breast. Funny, how she hadn't noticed the pain before.

"Would you let me heal it?"

"Vincent," it was a breathless, whispered scold.

"Let me..." he plead.

She never saw his hand until it touched her.

"Let me..."

"You just promised..."

"Am I hurting you?" He had stopped abruptly.

"You know what you're doing."

A heartbeat of silence.

"I'm seducing you," he replied quietly.

His voice didn't reveal any guilt at all. She gasped.

"Don't you think that's dishonest?"

"I don't," he answered; his breath barely touching her nape now. He was circling her. "You belong to me."

"I don't." She spoke; even as his low growl warned her. "In the eyes of the law..."

"To this city's laws, I don't exist," he pointed out. "Is that true?"

She turned around, never finding his gaze.

"Don't I exist for you?"

"Vincent!" she called. "How can you say such a thing?"

"You are saying it," he indicated quietly.

She could hear his heart breaking, under all this growling and power. She reached for him; something must have guided her, for his arm was just where she sought it. Her soul reached for him as well. In the deep silence that followed, she could almost hear him purr.

He moved too fast for her to notice: his arms pushed her back against his warmth. She tightened, bracing herself for a fight she couldn't possibly win; but he stayed still.

"Let me take care of you."

"Would you do it without my consent?"

"Is that what you want?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you want me to ignore your words... to attend to the feelings that throb along with mine yet belong to you? Are you too shy to decide? Where is your courage, that you can't face yourself?"

His breath was warm against her ear. She looked through the balcony doors, never hearing her own trembling sigh.

"What happened to you?"

The coldness shook her. He wasn't close anymore, she could say it.

"Are you still here?"

Her voice echoed in the room. There was no answer. Then, all of a sudden, his voice returned, making her cringe.

"The moon has never looked white, ever since you left," He sounded casual. "Blue. I don't know why I never saw it before."

She spied through the balcony doors. He was right: the moon was a scary blue, like a disremembered ghost.

"And the stars... they are cold, haven't you noticed? But I can't bear the sunlight..."

"Have you tried...?"

Her eyes opened wider as he barred her mouth with a finger. But it wasn't as bad as she thought, since he answered:

"I have. Even Below, there are places... places where no Abover looks... holes in this floor, in that ceiling... But sunlight burns as Hell's fires"

"Vincent..."

She stepped towards the voice, then felt he had moved.

"I love you, and I want you," his voice darkened as he spoke. "I never told you before, did I?"

"No."

She turned around, but she met just darkness.

"Nothing would keep me away from you... but your rejection."

She turned to the balcony too late; the curtain was wavering one last time. There was no way to say if he had gone. Only her instinct. Yet, she was certain of it.

"Madam"

Ray's voice.

"I'm here."

"You haven't turned on the lights. Are you all right?"

With trembling hands, she did what he expected her to. A swift look around assured her that there was no one else.

"I am. Thank you, Ray. I'll sleep now."

Another push to the switch, and the apartment was dark again. Some part of her hoped Vincent had returned as well; other part didn't. The silence was oppressive.

"I should call Bennett," she said to herself.

The detective didn't answer; a machine did.

"Bennett, Burch here." She was brief. "My father received a note..."

"Catherine?"

Her name in the woman's voice startled her.

"What on Earth were you thinking to leave a message? Do you have any idea of how hunted you are?"

"I'm..." About to apologize, she stopped. "You should have reached the phone quicker!"

"I'm off-duty, at home."

Catherine stretched her ears. Bennett is gasping she noticed. The thought made her tremble. She counted on Bennett implicitly; she hadn't thought the detective would be... Sick? Human? Catherine shook her head, knowing that she was unfair. You were in the DA, and yet entitled to be sick. But it was hard to be in the victim's place... and it was hard to relate to Bennett She felt... betrayed. And scared. Mostly scared.

"So? What did the note say?"

"The first one had my handwriting; it invited him to meet me. The second one was for him, and he didn't let me see it."

"Your father."

"Yes."

"Why wouldn't he let you see something that important?"

"I insisted. Apparently, there is a secret in his past, and he thinks it has nothing to do with... shooting."

"Mrs. Burch, we know all this has little to do with shooting."

Her formal way of calling her put her back in her zone of comfort. She wondered why the detective – professional as she was - had called her by name. It wasn't comfortable anymore. And Catherine didn't like Bennett enough for making an exception.

"The first note... your handwriting?"

"I could have written it... but it would have been years ago..."

"Do you remember it?" Diana insisted.

"I remember lots of similar notes, nothing specific"

"Can I see the paper?"

"It's being examined as we speak," Catherine assured her.

"Your facilities...?"

There was a silence.

"You knew."

"I know everything about you."

Not everything, Catherine thought as she looked to her balcony, and the moon she now knew was blue. Her heart sank to her stomach. I hope.

"Do you remember what it said... textually?"

Catherine squeezed her memories.

"No, but it wasn't long. It said that we were at the parlor down the corner, and invited him in. The other side said '*you promised*'"

"We, in plural," Bennett checked.

"Yes."

"Can you think about the other part of the 'we'? Would that be Jenny, or Nancy?"

Catherine flinched.

"How do you...?"

"I know everything. Answer."

It's refreshing to be on the receiving end of orders once again, Catherine thought sarcastically.

"I don't think so... we met in college..."

"So the note may be older," Diana conjectured.

"I hadn't come into the parlor in quite a long time."

"How long?"

You guess. Don't you know everything? Catherine breathed deep.

"Early teens, I think."

"Did you have any friend back then?"

"Not the kind my father would meet," Catherine muttered.

"So we are talking about a time when: A) your father had time to meet you at the parlor – or you thought so - and B) you weren't afraid that he and your date would not get along."

"I guess that sums it up."

"Now I need a name."

But as hard as Catherine thought, she found no one.

"Let's go to the second note. Your father said it was a secret."

"He said it was a part of his past..."

"A lover..."

"No!" Catherine cried.

Through the phone she could almost hear Bennett's eyebrows raising.

"No, I'm sure. He was devoted to my mother's sickness. Even after her death, it was years before he dated anyone."

"How can you be so positive?"

"I know my father."

"Do you know what secret he was talking about?"

Catherine bit her lips.

"However, a vengeance over your father would be a possibility... and a fresh angle from where we hadn't studied it... we would find something. I'll pay extra attention to your father's enemies."

"Not a woman," Catherine insisted stubbornly. "Lawyers make lots of enemies."

Bennett sounded delighted. "This time you got the messenger, didn't you?"

"It was a child. I have the address, but I really don't think he'll know anything else."

"I would want to check."

"Trust me in this" Catherine said. "I used to investigate, too. He spoke of a kind Chinese man, traditionally-dressed. There were three guns aiming at him, and still he said he couldn't draw the man or describe him further. He was paid to write the letter..."

"Then he might know what it held."

Catherine would have hit her head against the wall.

"See?" Bennett said amenably. "We have to seek that boy and ask him."

"He fears me."

"Give me the address and I'll follow this clue"

"No!"

"Mrs. Burch." In Bennett's voice there was iron now. "I'm investigating this, which means it's my responsibility to keep you alive. Don't you want to be alive?"

Catherine bit her lips.

"Mrs. Burch, are you there?"

"I might have an idea"

"Do you?"

There was some disappointment in the detective's voice. With that, Catherine could deal. Her feeble idea would be worth trying.

"I'll make a pair of phone calls. Could you meet me tomorrow – first hour?"

"I would prefer tonight."

"Dangerous address."

"We can't afford the child to forget anything."

Catherine sighed.

"Let's make it..." She checked the clock. "Nine thirty?"

Bennett weighted it for a minute.

"Your place?"

"Yes."

"You better have something good."

The call ended abruptly with a tone.

"I will, Bennett I will."

She steadied the receiver between ear and shoulder, as she used that hand to make the call. The other found the phone number.

"Ralph... yes, I know it's late, but... No, it's not broken... In fact I'm not calling about the screen-phone... At my apartment. Could you come for a minute? I need to discuss something."

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Catherine smiled from a corner, watching as Bennett opened her arms cross-like, so Ralph could cover her with wires. The detective seemed pale, and as much as she tried to mask it, she was quite obviously scared. And impressed. Mostly, scared.

"Be careful!" Bennett protested. Turning her gaze to the bodyguards, she scolded: "Don't you dare film!"

"They don't have cameras, Bennett," Catherine informed her casually.

"I hope."

That wasn't exactly the most dignified position for being watched. Of course, that couldn't be helped. While the expensive devices must be placed under the lady's supervision, there were at least two possible threats for this one in the room, so her bodyguards wouldn't allow it... unless they were present too, keeping her in sight. Which summed five persons to make Bennett feel as a freak.

"Spread your legs, please," Ralph ordered, in his very French accent.

Catherine still smiled while facing the very pissed off woman that was already more than half bound. You did need a lesson, she thought, no longer ashamed of herself. You had it coming. Vengeance felt oh, so good. And cleaned up her system.

And however, there was no way Catherine would leave all the emotion to Bennett; she had to be there when the plot was revealed... even if virtually. A head-cam, microphones and earphones would take care of that. Expensively, but effectively too. They had taken the smallest devices they had found with so little time in advance – Japanese ones. Bennett could carry them. And Catherine could afford it.

"Turn on the screen, please."

The display reflected itself, Ray just disappearing from the image – having fulfilled the request. Bennett was quiet, perhaps too awestruck. And it was impressive. To watch television was a part of daily life; to make it as one walked, a live broadcast for other person to see it, was quite a different thing. Screen-phones were at an entire new level – even when one got accustomed to it. And Ralph – despite the French accent - was an artist.

"Let's test the microphone," this one suggested.

The women looked at one another – with some disgust.

"I'll go to my bedroom" Catherine offered. "The detective here is chained..."

"No... I could use some practice in moving"

To be fair, Bennett walked more gracefully than Catherine had thought she would.

Ralph closed the door behind her, and handed Catherine something. It was a heavy box, very much like a walkie-talkie.

"What do you want to know?" Bennett asked from it.

Cathy found the button to speak. A red one.

"All right, it works from this part. Yours?"

"Yyy! Trying to turn the volume down."

"That button allows her to hear you" Ralph confirmed, "and the blue one is for you to hear her." Catherine tested them. "You have both controls."

Catherine weighted the box.

"Can't I interact with the display in the same way?"

"Yes, but your voice wouldn't be transmitted..."

"That would prove not to be required."

"Humor me, Bennett"

"I'm doing so."

Catherine grinned. She knew – they both did - that the detective wouldn't have allowed this, if Catherine hadn't been the one with the witness' address. An interchange. So far, it had been satisfactory - to her.

Ralph took the box from her hand.

"She can come back," he said, adjusting something in it.

"So..." Catherine watched her walk, somewhat stiff. "The plan is..."

"There is no plan, Mrs. Burch," Bennett said tiredly. "It's an interrogation – a pretty informal one, to a child. In fact, it doesn't deserve that name..."

Catherine's gaze could have killed.

"Then why were you worried...?"

"I'm just used to free motion." Bennett defied her with a gaze. "And to have such a thing is vital in fieldwork – not to mention New York streets at night. You should know that..."

Her satisfaction triggered something ugly in Catherine, but she never got to answer.

"All right," Ralph fingered Bennett earphone. "I lowered the volume."

"Must we test again...?"

"Getting late. I'm going now." Bennett headed to the door, retrieving a piece of paper from the nearest table. "The boy's address is it?"

"Go," Catherine assented.

The lady's hungry gaze followed the detective until the door closed. No one interrupted the silence – and no bodyguard left - until she sighed and turned to Ralph. The walkie was on the table, its light turned off – as was the device itself, Catherine guessed. What he handed her now was the control of the screen.

"The monitor is recording everything..."

"I thought I couldn't talk through it..."

"And you can't," Ralph wasn't known for his patience "You can rewind the record or fast-forward it, just like the screen-calls. It overwrites every thirty-six hours." Wow "You didn't give me time to get best resources."

"Do we need more hours?"

"It depends on what you use it for," he reminded her; not that he cared, but she hadn't given him much data. "Do you have any question?"

Catherine watched the control.

"I think I can manage."

"You have me on the other side of the phone."

He took his coat and left.

The screen showed the windshield. Bennett was driving faster than she should. A chess bishop wavered between her and the road.

"You need both hands on the wheel," Catherine said to the box.

Bennett didn't answer, which must mean that it was turned off. The blonde found the switch.

"Do you hear me?"

"Mrs. Burch," she answered. The speedometer's needle moved slightly right.

"Don't break that equipment."

Catherine's heart beat faster. She was back. Through other person's eyes, but she was back.

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## Chapter 6

The treadmill was all Charles could see through the sweat falling to his eyes. Speeding. Faster. All he could hear was his own breath as he fought for oxygen. Still, he was left slightly back with each second; this speed was three times what he could hold. It might give him a heart attack.

He almost wished for it.

His feet reached the back of the machine and he fell to the mattress behind. He just lay there, too tired to even see in colors.

Yet, he could think. Barely. His first thought was for his wife. He snarled, punching the mattress once. There was no escape. He hit again, and again, using whatever little strength he had left, but the image didn't disappear. The last time he had seen her. How the life he had dreamed for them had crumbled apart.

Who was digging up these memories? Who was so heartless? To what purpose?

"For him to say the truth..." To what purpose?

And again, there was his beautiful Caroline. His hand rose, sketching her face in the air; the same moves Carol used to make on canvas... so much time ago; but he needed no picture to remember every feature. All Chandlers loved deep enough, and there was the child they had made together –out of love. She simply loved too hard.

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Warmth spread from Catherine's shoulder to her arm and chest. It felt nice. Vincent looked down at her – his eyes reflecting the lights and shadows of the screen.

"You must sleep," he whispered.

His voice – magnetic as it was - broke the spell. Her hand clung to the cup of coffee as he turned his head to the screen, to the walkie.

"A project...," he concluded.

The screen showed green and white walls, and iron doors. A nurse's uniform sleeve entered for a moment the vision field. Echoes came from the walkie. The place was deserted.

"A hospital...," the scholar accurately identified.

"Why did you come?" she interrupted.

"I was worried"

A door. The nurse appeared with a key; then there was darkness. Then, light. There were filing-cabinets, all around; each one of them showed dozens of folders.

"I'm here," Bennett said, her voice strongly distorted through the device – moreso to his sensitive and unaccustomed ears. "Now... Any ideas?"

Catherine pressed lightly the red button.

"Isn't the nurse around?"

"She is looking for the files," the detective informed her.

"Let's wait for her."

She let it return to its position. Thank Ralph. Bennett wasn't meant to hear all of her secrets.

"Catherine...," Vincent called. "It's nearly dawn. You need your sleep"

"I've been waking up half of New York to get permission to do that," she pointed at the screen with her chin, her gaze ever leaving it. "I won't go now"

His back was to her, and his face, half turned to her, half to the darkness. She couldn't see it. Still he could see her, for he said: "You look tired... and stubborn," he insisted.

*That's an odd word, for you to use.*

"I'm fine, I'll sleep later"

He paced briefly back and forth, beyond reach. She barely could make more than his shape and the sound of his steps.

"What happened?" he asked.

The first thing coming to her mind were baby's cries, and bullets. And Elliot. Way too much.

"My father got a note, and he didn't want to show it to me. We're looking for what it said."

"It mentioned that place." Vincent tried to follow her reasoning.

"That child she interrogated... he wasn't very useful, but he did happen to remember a name: Phoínikes. Apparently the word was rare enough that it got his attention. It turned out to be a doctor."

What child? Why was he questioned? Vincent's own doubts piled up, but fearing to disrupt her train of thought, he settled for assuming: "He works there."

"He died, but he used to work there... according to Bennett's contact. Oh, Bennett is the detective you just heard," she explained, some anger in her voice. "She is on my case and..."

He did not hear anything else; the trembling of his heart in his ears covered all sound. He kept looking at her, seeing her lips move – a part of him craved that move on his mouth even as he thought.

Why had he not foreseen this? Of course Diana would meet Catherine: she was working on her case – he had asked her to. "Detective," she had said. However, he hadn't expected them to work together. Catherine did not know... anything. What would happen to them if she learned? What if she knew Diana was his friend... his... lover?

How dirty that word sounded.

"Catherine..."

She looked at him – at the shadow she could see-, all serious and...

Loving...

His voice got tangled in his chest. He breathed in, deeply. He was supposed to tell her. He was supposed to be crystal clear... a gentleman. At least he owed her... them both... the truth.

"Diana is... more than a detective...", he whispered. "She dug in the secrets you kept, and she found me."

He kneeled, half begging her forgiveness without words, even before saying: "She has been supporting me, ever since... when the loss of you overwhelmed me... when I had not even the dignity of the beast. When Burch... loved... you..."

He forced himself to look into her eyes – levelled with his. For whatever pain he would see there, he had caused it.

"I have used her body to feel you." He saw her comprehension, her despair; he felt her silent cry. Something was dying in her.

From the safe darkness, he kept looking at her. Silent. Immobile. How to tell her, without triggering in her the despair he had just foreseen. He had to be frank with her. Had to. Even if, at the time, they hadn't been seeing each other, nor could he anticipate they would ever again. Even if she herself had been... intimate... with another, much more often than he himself had. He still owed her the truth.

Yet he couldn't be blunt about it just to relieve his own conscience. Perhaps it would be better to wait, until he had chosen his words, until opportunity arose. This was hardly the time.

The black box emitted another buzz:

"They're here"

Mounds of files lying on a white table occupied the screen. As the image shifted. As Diana sat - they got taller.

"Do we have to read all of them?"

"I hope not," Catherine breathed.

"What was his specialty?" Vincent asked quietly, as he sat beside her on the sofa.

She rubbed her eyes before answering.

"His patients were wealthy... big fishes... That's pretty much all I know..."

"Let's take a look."

A file grew to fill the monitor. It was completely brown; no name, just a number. It opened and all went silent as they processed what they were seeing. The characters; those were not quite the ones they had expected. Catherine held her breath, but of course nothing changed; in fact, the image stayed immobile until Bennett reacted:

"Greek."

"The name...", Catherine realized. "He was an immigrant."

"A paranoiac one." There was sarcasm in Bennett's voice. "As if he had to further protect his patient's secret."

For a moment, the screen shifted to the walls, the piles of papers covering them and the iron door.

"I need more time with that piece of paper," was Vincent's request.

The scholar kept looking at the screen, elbows on his knees. The very image of focus. Catherine's heart skipped a beat, and her gaze never left him as she took the walkie to her mouth and pressed the red button. Lightly.

"Bennett, look at the file."

The screen framed the paper. There were yellow spots. The handwriting was strange in itself, and very tight.

"Next page," Vincent demanded.

"Next page," Catherine transmitted faithfully through the walkie.

Diana turned the page. Catherine had the impression that the hand on screen was trembling.

"Münchhausen's syndrome," was his conclusion as sat back, and suddenly she found him overwhelming. Physically, even.

"You know Greek," Catherine concluded.

"That patient comes from India," the man informed her, ignoring the rhetorical non-question.

"Perhaps we should start with another file."

"That mustn't be the one, Bennett," the lawyer transmitted.

"How do you know?"

Catherine turned off the button.

"How much time do we have?" he asked quietly.

"I pulled some strings. They allowed the detective to go in and be guided to the files... they won't cover for me."

"Until dawn, then"

Pride filled her lungs as she looked at him in silence. Pride and certainty. Deeply ingrained from the times when his presence meant everything would be all right. Part of her knew this was her putting him on a pedestal; but it wasn't as if he didn't deserve it. The other part – the part that knew how good he was - was sure. Whatever it was, they would find it.

"Your father didn't want to show you," he said quietly, his same face dark with the changing lights of the screen he kept looking to.

"The note ordered him to tell me something."

"Your father wishes you well, Catherine." He dropped his head, staring at his hands. "Some secrets are worth keeping... and respecting."

The darkness was too deep for her to read him.

"Do you know something?" the woman asked anxiously.

"I would have told you, if I did."

"Then what was it?"

"A feeling."

A forest came to mind, and she shivered. Nothing else he would have said could have had that effect on her.

Diana's hand slid down the files. The smell that upset her, for once, wasn't dust, but perfume. Perfume, here. She usually had a good sense of smell, exacerbated now. She could distinguish the scent the nurse had worn, from this one, the one that remained here. Somewhere. And she had to find it. Even if just to not go crazy thinking of what Vincent would be doing with Catherine now.

There. Diana closed her eyes and took the file to her nose. Violets. It was all over it, and it smelled expensive.

"Bennett?"

"I'm opening another dossier"

But the brown folder was empty, no piece of paper inside.

"Now this seems like a thriller," Diana said with humor.

Catherine was pacing. Her head was thrown back, then forth as she massaged her temples with a hand. The other held the walkie tightly.

"Did the note say anything else?" Vincent asked.

"I never read it! That doctor..." She pointed the screen violently. "That was my only clue... my way out of this... prison!"

His prison Below, her prison Above... As he looked at her, Vincent wondered at the symmetries of life.

"The answer is not always in the lost page," he recalled quietly.

"This time it is."

His heart beat furiously as he stared at Catherine, all senses opened to her... to any sign of noticing... Diana's answer had been to his voice.

Thankfully, Catherine's attention was in the new color the yellowish folder had.

"Lucky, I brought my pencil."

The graphite left blank scars -tight handwriting, foreign characters. But this time, Catherine's attention was drawn to something, the only familiar thing there.

"What is my mother's name doing there?"

"I don't know, but you got someone who would," Bennett pointed at the bottom of the page. "Nurse Garson L. Robins. Funny name, isn't it?"

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"How do you get a residence like that with a nurse's salary?"

"He doesn't work as one anymore," Diana stepped closer to the wall; it was taller than she was. "He won the lottery or something; then he invested."

"The original money?"

"No idea. But he had no criminal record; if there was any investigation, he came clean."

"The American Dream," Catherine's sarcasm sounded clearly through the line.

Diana rubbed her eyes. Daylight was disturbing.

"I'm going in."

She couldn't hear the bell; but a voice sounded:

"Robins residence. Can we help you?"

"Detective Diana Bennett I need to interrogate Mr. Robins concerning a case I am working on."

"Mr. Robins is sleeping."

Still?

"Please, return at 7 o'clock in the afternoon. He would be available then."

Another buzz, and the device got quiet.

"Ideas?"

"Jump over the wall."

"I thought you were more traditional."

Diana looked around for weak points. No one wanted this case to be solved, more than she did. At 7 o'clock she was going in, with or without Mr. Robins' permission. What a shame that daylight made impossible for it to be now.

"Change of plan, Bennett," Catherine's line opened with a buzz. "Go back later and interrogate him; if not... I'll get the information otherwise."

Damn you will, Diana thought, even as she assented. He won't get closer to this place, no matter what I have to do to make sure of it.

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Catherine turned off the screen. He stood close to the wall opposite to the balcony, daylight to his back. The rest of him was on paradoxical darkness. The way he is.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

"Will Father worry?"

The answer came a second too late; she was too tired to notice.

"No. I am more... independent now."

*I wonder what that means.*

"Then, I guess I should make some breakfast."

She looked around, eyes wide opened – just in case they wanted to close - with purple rings under her eyes as she smoothed her dishevelled hair. She seemed a little lost, but the second her eyes fixated in her bedroom, she stood. She still grasped her walkie. A bed... It was all she needed. It seemed like a dream when she fell on the fresh blanket. And for once, his voice was unwelcome as it suggested:

"Perhaps you would want to report to your men, before."

He was standing at the edge of the room. She stared at him for a moment before realizing what he had said. Could she even find the strength to take the suggestion?

"After that you must sleep. I can cook."

He seemed a little humorous. Catherine saw him leaving, then she punched the mattress as she sat. The walkie fell on the carpet with a soft muted sound. The lady had no energy to pick it up; she needed it all to stand up.

She reached the living room just as he disappeared in the kitchen with a graceful billowing of cloak. A fairytale prince, boiling eggs... she liked that more and more...

Ray's prosaic knocks interrupted her musing.

"I'm fine," she yelled; some exasperation slipped into her tone. "I had a rough night, so don't call, OK? I'm going to bed..."

"Can you show yourself, Ma'am?"

She stumbled to the door, then she opened it and stared at them.

"See? Alive."

"All right, Ma'am. Forgive us." They seemed really sorry. *Do I look that bad?* She closed the door before thinking too much of it, and threw herself to the sofa with a deep sigh of relief.

She didn't know anything else until Vincent shook her gently.

"Your back will hurt if you stay there," he said.

Her first official sight of the day, was his face, shining at daylight.

"Breakfast is ready."

The lady shook her head slightly – dazed by the sight. His forearm behind her shoulders helped her sit.

"I guess I can't party overnight anymore. I'm getting old."

"Hardly."

She didn't laugh, afraid her head might hurt. And her stomach was killing her.

"Let's try that food."

Just looking at the table made her mouth water. It wasn't just the food: the ivory tablecloth – *where had he found it?* - made her remember best times, and the serviettes – she never used them anymore, but in formal meetings, and the apples cut to seem roses on her dish.

"How long did I sleep?"

"An hour."

"You are a genius"

He didn't eat. He sat there through the entire breakfast, looking at her with the shadow of a smile and that incredibly gentle look in his eyes.

"I'll scold you later for not sharing; now I'm tired. Will you come with me?"

"As long as you want me to"

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She was about to wake up. He would know. Their empathy, as always, told him everything; and being here, as close to her as he could – her back to his abdomen, his arms around her, claws gently resting on the back of her hands - he didn't fear that. For Elliot wouldn't come to take what he had paid so dearly for. No man's kisses – so to speak - would reach him through their bond. No kisses, but his.

"Vincent."

He shifted, leaning over her body so she would see him. This morning, when she had awakened, it had pleased her to see him.

"Are you awake?" he asked quietly.

She opened her eyes and blinked, moved away from the light. Then his presence called to her. Her eyes, in daylight, had shades of blue.

"Where did you learn Greek?"

He dropped his head to one side. In this position, that made him look funny.

"Father wanted us to know where some words came from. Greek. Latin. I liked ancient languages. I am good at them."

"It's good to have a partner like you."

"I'm unique," he pointed out; and he was just half joking.

Still smiling, she turned further, to lay her back on the bed. It was comfortable... and unwise, for now no shoulder was in his way to her mouth. He looked at it and licked the back of his lip, just lightly. She saw it. Her eyes kept looking at the hollow between his lips.

"So this is how it starts," she said quietly.

"We both knew."

His hand came to cup her cheek. It looked enormous beside her head. She wondered, with a

mixture of dread and awe, if he would keep her still, fully knowing he'd stop if she wanted him to. She didn't fight, though, as his mouth covered hers.

The first kiss was a pressure – a test. The second time, as their lips met, his tongue moved against her lower lip, inviting her to open her mouth to him. She looked at his eyes – grey, rainy eyes - and submitted.

Their clothes rubbed the mattress with a hissing sound as she turned, and their thighs intertwined somehow. His hand, very slowly, rested on her back. The other – the one behind her - supported her head as his tongue touched her neck for the first time. Her skin tickled all over when he neared her ear; she felt it on her buttock; it wasn't his left hand: this one hovered down to her thigh. Its same warmth melted her. Her only reason to think that she wasn't in Heaven, was his body between her arms – held loose, with all the remaining strength there was in her.

"You're trembling," she whispered.

His sigh on her nape made her shiver, but his trembling stopped. He groped for her hand and kissed the palm. His eyes were closed, until he turned them to her. Catherine's throat closed. There was his soul, stripped.

Pain. Loss.

Her fingers reached for his face and brushed his cheek lightly.

*If I could just erase...*

She lifted her face to his, never breaking the link between their eyes. Their empathy was very quiet. Being a breath from him, she held his gaze for a moment, then she kissed him. Her right hand, for once empowered, grasped his nape; she needed his support, until she braced herself on the bed.

Vincent looked at her. She was pushing him, more with his will than with the hand now on his chest. She wanted him to lie down. So he lay down slowly on his back, trembling violently before forcing his muscles to relax.

Catherine looked at him, there, on her bed... How many times she had imagined this? How many lonely nights she had evoked this dangerous, forbidden dream? Lying. Helpless. Daylight touching his golden skin – his strange face now differently lightened. His eyes looked as naïve as she had imagined they would.

She lay down, braced on her left elbow. Her right knee bent so the thigh lay across both of his – not quite covering them completely. The free hand came to caress his neck, sliding down. How she wanted to kiss him there – her lips shivered in pure craving. *Better to go slowly*. She bit the lower one as she caressed her way to his open shirt. His chest was dark, partly in shadow, partly because of the hair there. She quivered a little as she tangled her fingers there; her eyes closed. For a moment, she forgot to check on his feelings.

She never felt the closure of his shirt. When she opened her eyes, it was torn open. She couldn't read his expression.

"Are..." She cleared her throat. How could her voice sound so husky? "Are you... comfortable... with this?"

He clutched the hand on his chest, pressing her skin to his. His expression had darkened, and she shivered, thrilled. Her smile was that of Eve.

Catherine kissed him. On the cheek. On the shoulder. Easy... she whispered to herself as she bent over him again; but she forgot it the moment she kissed his neck – his corded,

powerful neck. Her fingertips touched his furless side. His control was crumbling spasmodically. Now she could hear him -a mixture of purr and growl and moan- and there were no words to express what it did to her.

And still, as her chest rubbed against his, she knew there was something missing.

He hid his face on her shoulder. His very body clung to her – sank in hers, as much as clothes allowed: his arms around her, his thighs between hers. She fell back on the bed, unbalanced. The moment she felt his weight on her, she knew what was to come.

He, on the other side, had no idea of how to do it.

And still, his body had its own ideas. Her secret moistness whetted his pants, to the very place that most craved for it. He moved against her, and she gasped, her knees lifting as her own body looked for his. For completeness. His hand violently wrestled with the fabrics that kept them apart. A button drove into her thigh as he thrust, not fully released. She didn't notice any pain.

For emptiness was filled.

He held her tight, all his weight on her, her lungs burning. She held him tight, her heels pressing him closer. His gasp on her ears, the brush of his cheek against her, made her every muscle contract. Keeping him inside.

"I love you," she gasped.

He kissed her fiercely, as if wanting to devour the word – violently, carelessly - as he thrust again. The hold of his pants loosened with his same moves. Her gasps were his complete world – and her nails on his back, and her warmth, and her sweat; the clutching of her womb, just the beginning. The bond was him, himself, for he could no longer know how he learned what. But did it matter?

He drank her last cry – his name - and the final wave came over him. He closed his eyes. He drowned. Everything stopped existing for endless time, and then:

*Don't go.*

"I won't," he answered.

Sobs tore her apart. He thought he was crying too.

"I love you," he breathed in her ear.

For the first time since he could remember, he was sated. No hunger tinted his love for her. In peace. Full. He lifted his head to look at her. Her face was turned one side, eyes closed, mouth still slightly opened with the insinuation of a smile. Transfixed. Epiphany. He caressed her cheek with his furry nose and she gasped lightly. Bending further, he caressed her neck, and the upper part of a breast. The mark he had imprinted.

"Ma'am? It's late afternoon. Can you show yourself?"

Catherine's gasp echoed in the room as she shrank – thighs closing around thin air, arms hugging herself. The warmth escaped nonetheless. She was naked – more naked than ever-, and Vincent was gone. The screen blurred absurdly in the wall, in front of her.

"Ma'am?"

The world engulfed her with all its rules.

"Answer, please, or we'll go inside..."

"I was asleep."

She looked blindly at the button she had just pressed. Beside it, there was the black box that sent her voice to Diana - Vincent must have picked it up. So many buttons to keep the pieces of her life apart.

"Is everything all right?"

"All right." she repeated.

"We thought we had heard something"

"Must I open the door?"

"No," he said quickly. "It's not necessary. My apologies, for interrupting your sleep."

Her finger stayed in the button she had just pressed again. She felt Vincent's eyes on her. What to do with it?

She pressed the button again.

"What time is it?"

"Six o'clock, ma'am."

The colors of the room were paling, as they spoke.

"Thank you."

She slid from the mattress, her thighs slipped one against the other as she walked to the bathroom. Her dress settled on her by itself. As soon as she entered and closed the door, she slid to the floor, biting her lips and shivering.

Vincent was on the other side, his hand pressed to the glass, willing it to disappear.

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Diana curled up, shuddering. She couldn't cry. Beside the bed, her clock: 6:00, the big green letters informed. She had to get up. She had to get dressed, and drive to their new suspect's house.

He had been trembling too.

Diana pressed her thighs together. The clutching of her own womb's muscles made her flinch, and the wetness...

"I love you," he had said.

*What has he made of you*, she thought. **A voyeur?** She blushed and her face sank into the pillow, even as she smiled humorlessly. There was something ironic, indeed. The nausea hadn't disappeared, either.

Fuck...

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## Chapter 7

Catherine didn't speak to him as she grasped the control. Newly bathed, she felt much more in control. She just didn't know what to say to him... or how to look at him, for that matter. Instead, she weighted the black box and took it to her mouth.

"Bennett?"

"What were you doing?"

"You don't expect me to answer that, do you?"

The screen was turned on; a creamy wall showed.

"Are you inside?"

"It's polite to come on time."

"You should have waited for me."

"How long?"

Catherine bit a harsh response. There was someone coming – a woman, with long nails and a fancy haircut - her eyes looking straight at Diana.

"He'll see you right away,"

The point of view rose and passed the woman. A minute later, Diana answered:

"See? He rewards punctuality."

Vincent's gaze was on Catherine – he must be close to her bedroom's door. Hard as she tried, she couldn't avoid to picture him, arms crossed, his back against the wall, and his eyes piercing blue into her soul. She tried to ignore his presence; but it itched all over, made her shiver with memories too new...

"Bennett?" she called, almost for help.

But Diana had arrived at Robins' study. From her – their - point of view, the scholarly environment was obvious in the tall bookshelves covering the walls, the sober desk covered with documents... there was little more. On the desk, there was the picture of a teenager, dressed in green. Diana neared it. Something looked familiar there.

"Detective?"

She turned to the voice. A grey-haired man was entering the room. He limped a bit, but there was something sensual in his lips as he smiled.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm working on a case, and it led me to Dr. Phoïnikes. I understand that you worked with him."

"Yes."

The man walked slowly beside his desk, to stand before it.

"Did you ever know Caroline Chandler?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to talk about her."

"Why?"

"I'm sure you know the answer."

"You must keep your patient's confidentiality," she tested. "Yet, this patient's daughter is in danger now. I'm sure her mother would understand."

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but if that was the purpose of your visit, you wasted your time."

Diana was taking the pictures out of her pocket.

"Do you recognize this woman, Mr?"

His expression showed he did. It revealed more: he wanted to keep the picture. He took the images in his hand and looked at each one of them before answering:

"I have never seen her."

"I need the truth."

He looked right into her eyes as he lied again:

"I have never seen her, detective. I know she is my patient's daughter; they are so alike... But why do you assume I have seen her before?"

"She has been attacked. Do you know why?"

He looked at her, then shook his head slowly.

"What was she being treated for?"

"I can't answer that."

He left the pictures on the desk, facing the wood.

"I'm not investigating her death, Mr Robins."

"I didn't kill her." He smiled slightly, as if the mere thought was ridiculous to him.

*Like mother, like daughter.*

"You had an affair... how far did you go?"

Catherine flinched as the nurse straightened - a serious expression on his face.

"That question is simply offensive. I won't answer that."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Robins, but I need to get to the bottom of this. I don't really care about morality. Can you please answer the question?"

He looked at her, then said:

"It has been twenty years. Why would Caroline be under investigation?"

"Why do you call her by name?" Diana pointed out sweetly.

Whatever had been left of his smile disappeared.

"Am I being interrogated?" he asked quietly.

"It was just a remark."

"It sounded to me like an accusation,"

"Why would I accuse you?"

"Bennett, be careful!" Catherine said through the machine.

It was too late.

"I admitted you in my home, detective," he pointed out, his voice freezing, "and you are being impolite, to say the least. Please, leave now."

She looked straight at his eyes as her lips tightened, until she asked: "May I have the pictures."

"Sure."

His back was the last thing she saw of the study. She stepped resolutely towards the chilled night that awaited.

"You pressed too hard," Catherine scolded.

"That way, he gave me some answers he didn't want to."

"For example...?"

"Your mother wasn't completely insane."

"We never said...!"

"Her file was in the psychiatry department; that much we know."

Catherine swallowed.

"Think positive, Mrs. Burch: Mrs. Chandler might not be guilty."

"My mother did nothing..."

"... but to sleep with Mr. Robins"

Catherine opened her mouth, speechless as the screen turned blackish.

"How can you...?"

"I wonder..." Diana interrupted, as her gaze turned to her hands, where she still held Catherine's pictures. She glanced through them: a young Catherine smiling, Catherine in her wedding, Catherine on a horse... and one that Catherine didn't recognize at all. The girl in it looked like her, though.

"You can't just take that without an order..."

"Relax, lawyer," Diana mocked her, "It's not a proof I would present in court."

"You just stole...!"

Diana turned the picture. Someone had written something behind.

"*Max*," Diana read aloud, more for her than for her bossy charge on the other side of the line.

"I wonder if she lives here."

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Catherine's indignation vanished.

"Come. Bring it. We'll take it to Edie..." she planned.

The screen's image shifted from one view to another, as if Bennett was looking around. Catherine closed her eyes, still feeling as if her head was moving out of control. Seasick.

"I guess I've got a best way to find out."

The screen showed walls again. It moved so fast that Catherine looked away.

"Couldn't you just... ask the secretary?"

"I trust my guts."

She was looking straight to a set of green curtains.

"There is light inside"

"There is no one."

Catherine had almost wanted her not to be right, but the screen wavered from one side to the other of an empty room.

"How were you sure?"

"I have a good ear."

The room was beautiful, painted in green but furnished in cream: a bed, a chest of drawers, a mirror, a cuddly bear...

"She doesn't stay here for long."

"No, it's too perfect" Catherine agreed. "As if it came straight from a movie"

I wonder if this girl does exist at all.

Bennett opened a drawer with a swift movement. Catherine bit her tongue, as the screen showed pants and bras. Bennett's hands hovered over them, not touching - she hadn't found anything remotely clue-like. At least, the detective was being careful.

"But these have been used."

"That doesn't tell us who the girl is."

"Anxious, now," Bennett said neutrally, while closing that drawer. The image shifted again.

"That does," the detective pointed out, as she approached a picture. Mrs. Robins and Max, dancing; over them, a cartel hung: "Father-daughter ball." It wasn't the only picture. Max kissed a boy in another one, and she received some kind of prize in a third one.

"There is no mother," Bennett said. The image shifted again.

Just then, Catherine felt his closeness, and the rest of the world disappeared.

He was beside her. *He hasn't looked at the screen.* She shivered, hoping he'd come closer, hoping he'd leave... not knowing what she would do if he did. When his voice came, she closed her eyes and swallowed.

"You were ashamed."

She pressed her thighs together, as the wave of memories came. His weight. His size. His voice. *"I love you."*

The completeness...

"Did our... lovemaking... cause you shame?"

"I have other things to do now, Vincent..."

"You sound helpless."

The control trembled in her hand, and she put it between her thighs. Never before she had been so aware of his dark nature.

"You keep closing our bond to me."

"Of course I do."

Everything stayed still. She thought he had moved, but with the bond so tightly closed what she could feel from him was very little. Her talent with it had never been great to begin with. She felt he was split: the part of him that was puzzled, and the serene part that mourned her shame. Nothing deeper.

"You have changed."

"So have you."

"You have darkened."

There was a silence, and then his answer:

"Of course I have."

She wanted to turn, to face his eyes, but she was scared. She would see it – the change - when she looked straight to the eyes of the only thing she hadn't wanted to change.

"Did you feel it... before?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

*Of course you did...*

"Is that the reason why you are ashamed?"

"No," she whispered. "Why would that shame me?"

She whetted her lips, but she couldn't keep them from trembling. There was still the question in his eyes, and she felt it – even though she didn't see them. She dropped her head.

"The right thing to do," she said slowly, "was what we did before... To leave each other... To relinquish our dream... I committed to another."

The sound grew from stifled to thundering growl. Something warm ran down her cheeks.

"I can't love him... but I owed him..." Her voice, in its quietness, overcame his and echoed as if in the silence. "I owed him to not meet love again. To not meet you..."

"How can you say this?"

"Mrs. Burch, are you there?" Bennett's voice came.

"Mrs. Burch, are you all right?" her men asked from the door.

Her title seemed to echo, mocking them.

"I am!"

"We heard..."

"... a movie." She cried her answer.

She was looking for their empathy. His internal deepness had turned it off, even though she had a feeling that... He was serene, once again. The growl had stopped. His shadow walked around her, quiet and dark as a predator. She turned her ear to him, almost afraid of losing her last sense of him.

"Your lips say that you belong to him," he didn't hesitate at the words, "but your heart says otherwise..." His voice surrounded her as he did. "I know it... I feel it... I feel your love... for me..."

She looked down as she shrunk, knees bending, arms coming slowly to hug herself. Yet, as

much as she tried to keep him at her back... There was no way... There was no way to hide... from him...

"That's what shames you."

In that whisper, there was a roar of triumph.

*You shouldn't be...*

"I know," he answered, his voice now cool. "Your shame does not bring me pride nor pleasure. "Yet..."

Something warm touched her back where shoulder and neck met; she shivered, willing it to be a caress.

"I was afraid...", his voice purred, "of your rightness... If you were to send me away..."

The mere thought left him breathless, drowning, then... *I can't...* A languid thought of hers.

Her craving was fulfilled. A tender finger slid following the curve, and she exposed her neck slightly before noticing.

"What can't you do?"

She didn't answer. He neared her neck, his face just out of her vision field, but his warmth... There was nothing like his warmth, caressing her arms down her shoulder. Suddenly, the back of a hand slid her hair over her shoulder, freeing her nape.

"What can't you do?"

She breathed out. Dizziness was engulfing her; she didn't know if her eyes were open. She just knew of the tickling on her other shoulder, as he rubbed his nose against it. His fur was softer than she had ever thought.

"What... What are you doing...?"

"Rewarding you," he said with humor.

She shivered. His breath was caressing her nape, and it felt...

"Stop."

*Please, don't stop...*

He smiled, but didn't answer to any of her pleas. He had his own.

His arms slid around her waist and gently pulled her to him over the back of the sofa, until she sat there. His left hand rose, the wrist caressed her right breast through the sweated silky fabric and he let it slide – the peak caressing the palm - until there were his fingers.

She gasped, anticipating, but he simply caressed the covered skin with the back of his fingers. His mind was with his other hand, heading to her nether places. She opened her thighs, then closed them tightly before he had gotten there.

"Do you want me to stop?"

His breath, from behind her left ear, melt her. She leaned back, and he came forth to support her.

"Stop."

"I nearly can't hear you, Catherine"

The edge of her dress was the only thing caressing her as he lifted it.

"You know you must stop."

But when he started kneading her nipple, she simply forgot his other hand... until it reached its goal, of course. His middle finger slid in thick cream between her nether lips. She gasped and breathed out slowly.

"Why?" he asked.

By then, Catherine had forgotten what they were talking about. And how to speak.

Vincent closed his eyes while he breathed out and let himself be carried by her storm.

His face neared her neck, and he let his lips slide over her skin, opening and closing them so the sensible wet mucous inside would do the job. His right hand sank deeper, never letting the claw touch her; her thighs closed around. This time they seemed to be keeping him where he was. He stepped forth, wanting to feel all of her against him. Her hands moved for the first time, to hold his left hand to her breast. He had been teasing it; she wanted it to stop... and not to stop.

With a low growl, he took her to him and half turned her.

"Mrs. Burch...", the dark box called, with Diana's voice.

She noticed the pressure first, in her breast and straight down to her womb; then, the wetness there. It wasn't his hand. She reached up to grab his neck, to keep it just where it was.

"Mrs. Burch... are you looking at this?"

Her moans were driving him crazy. He needed her down, on the floor... on any horizontal surface, where he would love her.

"Mrs. Burch, your silence has been most welcome, but it has served its purpose. Now can you bring your Greek dictionary?"

He roared at the screen, releasing her breast. Catherine still held him tight. In a moment, her frustration would reach him through the empathy they shared... making his more difficult to bear. As he looked at her enthralled face, he was about to grasp the box himself and send Diana to...

And still, he knew he must stop. Catherine needed to be there. Whatever Diana had found, it would have something to do with her mother.

He felt her gather her control, even before opening her eyes. Thankfully. He didn't think he would have held back if her wide pupils had ordered otherwise. It was hard enough to bear her panting.

"Let me down," she whispered.

He was about to let her on the couch, when she fought.

"Not here."

The sofa Burch had bought for her... *Don't want to soil it.*

"Bennett?"

"Finally," the detective whispered. "I thought this might interest you"

Yellowish pages, covered by Greek characters, just like the ones Dr. Phoínikes had left back in the archives. In fact, they could easily have come from there.

Vincent was very silent. Diana's camera was focused on the papers, still. It hadn't taken so

long for the scholar to read the previous files. Catherine wondered what was taking him that much time. She didn't dare ask.

In fact, she wondered childishly if they'd talk ever again. She was deeply ashamed, in two different levels. A particular image came to her mind and she blushed as she tried to blink it away. His innate sensuality, previously suspected but not to this extent, was making her lose control of her thoughts and partially of her actions, as she felt helpless and naïve, a bit like a virgin. And to think that I'm supposed to be the experienced one... Exciting as it was, she was well aware that these thoughts and practices were to be had only with her husband, and that she couldn't get herself to care enough.

"I have to go," he whispered.

"What did it read?"

He wasn't looking at her. Gathering his cloak seemed to require his full attention. His grace made her think back to the way he had moved, and her gaze wavered until she looked away.

*You seem like a teenager, for God's sake*, she thought. She didn't like it. She didn't like being out of control. She didn't know what she had got herself into. Vincent, of all men... She no longer knew this man. Even though she loved him...

"I'll be back in an hour," he said. "Will you be all right?"

She nodded, and he was gone.

She breathed deeply. The room seemed enormous now. And safe. And unnerving.

"What... What do you think?"

"I don't know, Bennett," Catherine answered between clenched teeth. "I don't read Greek"

A heartbeat. Diana closed her eyes as relief washed over her. They aren't together.

"Could have told me so before. Maybe you should read this instead."

It was a cute pink folder.

"I found the papers here"

Diana opened it revealing pieces of paper folded letter-style. In the first one of them, in childish, big letters, she could read: "*Mom.*"

\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

Charles tore the brown paper apart and stepped back, staring at the canvas; through the slit he saw a lock of golden hair, an eye, a nose and a smug smile. He took a sip from his glass and pressed his lips together.

*This is strong*, he thought, balancing the glass on his hand as he stared at the strange mirror he had uncovered. After twenty years, it still brought too many memories. They felt as if they weren't his. The lawyer stepped back and sat on the couch.

A deep voice came from behind.

"I assume those were hers"

"Are you Death?" Charles commented, mockingly toasting with his glass.

"I mean you..." *no harm*. Vincent didn't utter the last words; it seemed futile when the man's eyes looked so clear.

"I guess it's pointless to ask how you entered"

Vincent walked slowly around him.

"You are puzzled."

"You are fearless," Vincent stated in answer.

"It's useless to be afraid."

Catherine's father, Vincent thought. The scholar's gaze went to the bright images before the both of them.

"Your wife had an incredible talent"

"Some people say so," Charles answered with a smile.

"Your daughter..."

"Leave her out of this."

Charles had stood, no longer relaxed, and now he looked around. Vincent retreated further to the shadows.

"I would never hurt her."

The older man opened his mouth, frowning, and what Vincent felt from him... it wasn't quite the response he had been expecting.

Very slowly, he explained: "I realize that to you I am a stranger but... Please, know this: that I have and will protect Catherine, watch over her and love her, always."

Charles chuckled, then laughed. A spider trembled in its cobweb, and Vincent's claws became fists.

"Protect... watch... love."

This man's pain came in waves, and Vincent gasped, as if drowning, when it washed over him.

"I am not Caroline Chandler," the beast pointed out.

"Caroline was the best..." Charles' voice shivered, "the best person anyone would expect: the prettiest classiest woman, the kindest wife. She wasn't guilty..."

"... but of loving too much," Vincent added quietly.

Charles looked straight to the darkness, and to him.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I came for Catherine."

Charles narrowed his eyes.

"She is in danger," Vincent continued, "and this secret you keep would save her."

"Do you think I would have kept it from her, if that was the case?"

"Love has blinded you"

Charles shook his head, but his back was now to the visitor. He was walking towards another

picture. A deer. It would have been sleeping, but Vincent's empathy said otherwise.

"A bullet?"

"A game"

"Was it you?"

Charles shrugged.

"She took good care of the animal... until it..."

"As she did with Catherine."

Charles's jaw clenched.

\*\*\*

The park was green and smelled like spring, and Gem was sneezing at every flower its doggy snout could find. The ball hit just before her.

"Bring it, Gem," Cathy called. "Come here."

Charles put a hand on her hair. "Leave her alone."

Her dad's hand was heavier as she tried to look up – higher than his colorful Sunday suit. His shoulders were low and his nose, red like a clown's. Beyond his head, there was blueness and white soft clouds, and the upper branches of a tree.

"Come here, you two."

Mommy's extended hand held a basket; Daddy hurried to take it. A yellow cloth had blossomed like an ugly flower on the field. Cathy's belly growled, anticipating pastries and soft drinks and candies. Gem wouldn't get any because bad dogs didn't deserve children getting in trouble for them.

There was also another man, already sitting in front of Mom. Catherine narrowed her eyes – she faced the sun - as she looked at him. She didn't know him. He looked like Peter in some funny way. A Peter with an angular nose, and golden skin.

"Look, Mommy!" she complained while running. "Gem won't listen!"

"Let her be."

Cathy had forgotten the dog already, her eyes on the cake.

"Carol, you're spoiling her," Daddy said.

Cathy stuck out her tongue.

"I understand that you haven't been well." The strange man also sounded funny. "How are you feeling today?"

"Very well, Sir, thank you," Cathy answered, remembering her manners for a second, before turning her eyes to her mother's hands, hoping that had earned her an extra slice.

"I'm glad," the guest said. "What happened?"

"More, Mommy, please?!"

"I know, Cat." Mom smiled at her; but she had stopped serving for a moment. "So... you're a

lawyer."

"No, Charles and I met in high school. I'm a doctor."

"Oh, great! Do you know Dr. Alcott?"

"I haven't had the pleasure, I'm afraid. I've read some articles of his, though. He has an interesting point of view concerning birth defects"

The cake was great: sweet and creamy, just as she liked them. Mom had baked it as Cathy watched from the distance she was allowed to – she couldn't wait to eat them, even before all the ingredients were mixed, so Carol had established some rules. The new component Mom had been using came in a flask, like those carrying medicine, so Cathy didn't mind not trying that one beforehand; medicines tasted bad.

"Dad, may I climb that tree later?"

"No, you may not, Cathy, and you know it." Daddy was firm. "We spoke about that. You're still sick."

"But I don't feel any pain, Dad!"

"Cathy, the doctors are still looking for what you have. You can't take chances."

"I'll be careful, I promise!"

"Catherine, no!"

She flinched and her eyes filled with tears. Dad rarely yelled at her, never in front of strangers. Even he noticed, for he looked one side and the other and muttered an apology. Cathy had never felt so ashamed.

"Charles, go," Mommy said. "I'll take care of her."

"You always do," he answered, but there was something in his voice.

Biting her lips, Cathy held her temper. Big girls didn't throw tantrums; Dad had said so. But she wasn't hungry anymore. That's why she let Gem finish her cake. Daddy had lost his appetite too. The doctor also let his plate on the blanket, and they walked away together. Eventually, Cathy couldn't see them.

"I'm sorry, Cat," Mommy said. "Your father is nervous"

Mommy's skin felt fresh and soft, and smelled like violets. Cathy liked being hugged. It was almost worth the trouble.

"Do you want to climb?"

Cathy's sobbing stopped.

"Yes," she answered warily, barely daring to hope.

For a moment, Mom said nothing. Then Cathy sat down again and looked into her eyes. Mom's eyes were similar to hers, and her smile too; specially when both were being bad girls.

"Then go, Cat," she smiled. "But hurry." Cathy was already standing when she heard "Let's not tell Dad."

That was always their promise. Cathy nodded as she ran, beaming, to the closest tree – her favorite. The breeze under her made her feel free. She didn't feel the roughness of the wood, the little scratches in her hands and knees. The main trunk finished too soon. Cathy sat where its branches joined, like in a throne, and looked away. From this place, she could see a lot of things, and no one saw her, because no one looked up. There was a woman with a cat,

all dressed in pink. There was a man dressed in grey torn fabrics; he seemed like a homeless person, but he was fat and she liked his smile. Another man dressed like Dad, but it couldn't be him, because he was crying; another tree hid whatever company this one might have had.

Cathy rolled over herself and climbed up. The branch gave birth to others and became thinner. Cathy looked down and smiled at her mother.

"Can you climb farther, Cat?" Mom challenged.

Cathy nodded, before really evaluating the next branch. If not, she wouldn't have. Even she could see it wouldn't support her. But she wouldn't go back on her word (a challenge was a challenge) so she tightened her jaw and went forth.

Then she got dizzy, and grasped the branch harder, and blinked, trying to see clearly. Her hands seemed slower than they used to. Her eyelids were heavy... heavier than in the morning, when Mom woke her up for school.

She never heard the crack, though she did see her mother beside her before fainting; Mom was smiling like an angel.

Cathy woke up in the hospital.

"Mom?"

Daddy sobbed a smile.

"She isn't here, sweetheart."

Cathy remembered cries, and Mommy's voice, calling. She wondered what that meant. But as she moved, her thoughts wavered in another direction.

"Where's my hair?" she asked, still groggy.

"They had to cut it, sweetheart. To fix your head."

"Was it broken?"

"Yes. You have been sleeping for quite some time, now"

She never got to see Gem again. It ate something poisonous at the park; they found it dead in the middle of the yellow cloth, lying on the base of the cake. Though she'd learn of that much, much later, being already a teen. For the time being, they'd tell her the doggy was spending the holidays in a farm, barking at all the little chickens and eating lots of bacon and generally being happy.

That was also the last time she saw Mom. Daddy said she had died. Later, when she asked, Daddy explained she had been sick for some time. Cathy thought that's why she seemed like an angel in her last memory of her. But she missed her.

\*\*\*

"She must hear it from you," Vincent said quietly.

Charles felt his pants where his gun used to be.

"Would you kill me, to protect the secret?"

The hand grasped just air. There had been no reason for carrying a gun in his own attic.

"Carol's destiny is my business, not yours."

"It concerns Catherine"

"Why would you care? As far as I know, she is married to someone else"

Vincent's deep, low growl was startling just to himself; Charles couldn't hear it.

"I will tell her," Vincent warned. "Tonight; you might want to call her first."

"I need time... to meet her... a nice place... It's not a matter to discuss over the phone."

Vincent pressed his lips together, looking at the man. He was - quite obviously - lying. Even if not... even if he planned to tell her...

"There is no time to waste. She is in danger, and she is not the only one." Diana appeared briefly in his mind, dressed in shorts and shirt, a book in a hand as the other one grasped a beer. "Once again you must choose between her well-being and that of your wife... Just this time, Caroline is a memory, and Catherine, a living human being... and your child."

The word echoed in the room for a long time, until Charles realized the oppressive presence was gone.

"Are you in there?" the lawyer asked. When no answer came, he hesitantly walked to the shadows. No fist met him there, no knife. Just silence. In a way, he feared it more. His glass shattered to small pieces and he gasped and cursed feeling the painful pricks in his hand, blood falling on the image of the deer.

\*\*\*

"Who was it?"

Garson's hand rested on the woman's back, as he looked through the window.

"Catherine's friend, it seems."

"Friend?"

"She says Catherine is in danger."

"In danger! I told you... I told you she needed me!"

She was now grasping his shoulders, her nails piercing them. He looked deep into her eyes. There was no way to separate the genuine worry in them from that of her sickness.

"Do you really have nothing to...?"

"Where's Max?"

He disengaged from her violently and walked away.

"Please, Gar..."

"It's not the time for you to see her." He clenched his teeth, then added: "The detective... She asked about you... and me..."

He looked at his beloved, as she covered her face.

"Did she figure it out?"

A heartbeat later, the door thumped as the man left the room.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 9

Catherine threw herself to him as soon as he came. His arms encircled her slowly.

"What happened?"

"The cassette..."

She stared at him, speechless. He tilted his head, but she just took his hand and led him inside. The cassette player made a buzzing sound as it rewound. Catherine's hands were shaking; she closed them in fists. He hugged her, placing his chin on her head. There was no safer place for her. Not even her father's arms.

She pressed a button, then hurried to another as she cursed.

"I hit 'record'."

"The recording must be long enough without the first second," he pointed out quietly.

She looked at him as if he had just hit her.

He gently stretched past her to let the sound flow from the machine. A baby's content. Nice voices – the mother's babbling. Laughs. Catherine started to cry, but he knew it wasn't sadness. His powerful ear insulated the baby's voice; it didn't sound like Catherine.

"How many times have you heard it?"

She hid her face in his vest.

Vincent's left hand pressed her against him, as his right one groped for the walkie and offered it to her. The coldness of the plastic against her shoulder made her cringe. A cold breeze came from the balcony, the sounds of the city at night stayed still for a moment. Then she grasped it.

"Bennett..."

She rubbed her eyes with the back of the same hand, and waited. Vincent's cloak brushed against her legs, and she closed her eyes. *He was so close, and still... How to face him... after what they had lived together... after what they had done?* She couldn't even fathom what she was to do when Elliot called again. *What about when he got back?*

"Bennett...!"

"Don't yell," he scolded her gently. "We must be patient"

"She might be sleeping."

"She doesn't work by schedule," Vincent muttered. "She must be close by."

Catherine felt for the screen control, and called again as she turned on the screen. It didn't change; the image came all black.

Frowning, Catherine thought aloud: "What's happening here?"

She neared the screen. The black in it didn't seem as if the camera was covered, but...

"The camera must be damaged..." he concluded.

"Bennett!"

Catherine turned briefly as she called through the walkie. Vincent was pacing with increasing speed; his face was, once again, in shadows, and his cloak flowed behind him as fog would.

"Stay here... they'll come for you."

"Where am I? Where have you taken me?"

The black box was taken from the lady's hand. It had been Vincent. The latest voice coming from the box had been Bennett's, and she sounded groggy. Catherine looked for Vincent's eyes, but this time he wasn't looking at anything but the box.

"They sedated her," Catherine concluded.

"Be quiet, exercise none of your detective skills, and you'll be all right. My men don't want to shoot you."

"It's Mr. Robins," Catherine recognized.

Vincent simply nodded. He couldn't speak; his heart was pounding on his throat, and the low growl he was hearing could come only from himself. Suddenly, he turned and fled.

Diana was in danger. He had put her there.

"Vincent!" Catherine called from the balcony door.

Already straddling the veranda, he looked at her as she talked through the box in her hand.

"Bennett, it's Mrs. Burch in here."

Catherine hesitated, looking at Vincent for anchor. Would Bennett answer? Was she hurt... losing blood... dying...? Her stomach churned. Whatever happened to the detective, it was her fault.

"Sure it's not her cat?" Bennett whispered on the other side of safety, her banter more a relief than almost anything else. "I'm all right."

"Do you hear me?"

"Obviously."

"Sorry," Catherine said. "Must I call Joe?"

"No time"

Catherine's heart fell to her feet. She understood. Joe would need proof and an order, especially for Mr. Robins' residency. No one wanted to piss off the wealthy. But then... She looked up, to Vincent, and he nodded.

"Have hope," she told Bennett, never taking her gaze from him. "Help is on the way."

And he was gone.

Catherine turned to her apartment, if just to not see him go. Through the glass the dark buzzing screen was visible. Damn it. She couldn't even see if Bennett was in a dungeon or a tower, or even if she was lying down.

"Where are you?"

"As you must have heard, I don't have the answer."

"Please, detective, save your sarcasm for better times."

Catherine thought she had heard a sigh.

"I get no visual from your side."

"I'm wearing the camera. Last time we checked, it worked. I have no further answer."

"It must have bumped on something." Catherine bit her lips.

"I think I'm underground; there are no windows. I'm weak, but not injured. I don't remember anything in the last two hours, after I was leaving Robins' property and told you to turn off the screen. I still smell chloroform."

"What are you doing right now?"

"Wanting to be here?"

Catherine looked up, wondering how this woman had come to know her so well. She knew she must be glad, for being safe; she must be grateful. But how much better she had felt when working on a case, despite the risk and often the event of getting caught. Though knowing Vincent was on his way sure was a part of it.

"At least you can do something," she answered. "What are you doing?"

"I'm seeing how far I can walk while seeking weak spots on the walls."

"Are there any?"

The edges of the box scratched Catherine's hand.

"None so far. Again, I'm too weak to be sure. Why were you calling?"

Catherine's mind went blank.

"Before you knew I had been caught, you called me; that's why you noticed my 'absence'..." Bennett repeated. "What for?"

Taking barely a second to appreciate the detective's cold blood, Catherine answered.

"The cassette someone played on Burch's nursery... A part of it came today. Repaired. There was my mother's voice, with a child... It could have been me; I can't remember..."

"We never spoke about what happened at the nursery."

"I told you what I knew."

"You told me about the cassette and the bullet, nothing else... And the candies you found."

"The ruined ones."

"They led you there," Bennett pointed out. "You told me they were old, the kind they don't make anymore."

"Shouldn't you be focusing in getting out of there?"

"I'm already trapped. Might as well solve this."

\*\*\*

Diana rubbed her upper lip, very aware that the dazzling smell was still there as she turned around in the empty room she had been left in. The neuter orange coloring of the wall and a plain, if strong, wooden door; almost nothing except for a chair, no sound except for that of her own steps and the lady's voice on the other side of the fancy device she still wasn't accustomed to. Sensory deprivation.

"What did you do later?"

"I left the room...," Catherine answered.

"Before..."

"I... tried the candies..."

Diana very nearly pitched the receiver against the floor. Don't kill the messenger.

"That was later. I'm asking about before... Did you leave the room just after your men did?"

"I... No, I left through the other door..."

"Why?" Diana resumed exploring the wall; she didn't need half of her brain for Catherine's babbling.

"I was folding baby clothes."

"Sweet. Why?"

"I found... a baby shirt, I guess... I figured it must go to the babies' room..."

"It was out of place"

"I guess..."

"What kind of shirt?"

"Second-handed..."

"... in Burch's house?"

Despite the sarcasm, Diana's hands separated from the wall, and one of them pressed the earphone to listen.

"Yes, I thought it would be his. It seemed familiar."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

It took the detective a while to realize that she was pacing. In her mind there was an image of Catherine, open-mouthed, half looking for a reason that wasn't there... for she thought this wasn't relevant. Why should it be? Diana's guts said otherwise.

"Mrs. Burch, I'll use a simple psychological test on you. I'll say a word; you have to answer with whatever comes to your mind..."

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Catherine jerked.

"Why...?"

"Candle," was Bennett's first word.

*Safety*... The word had brought to her inner self an image, or rather a mixture of feelings she had almost exclusively felt deep in the bowels of Earth, where the smell of candles and melted wax and the warmth of fire, irrevocably related to quiet evenings spent reading or chatting, where activities meant less than simply being there, where warmth ran deeper than skin; the kind that could only be felt when surrounded by family. In the back of her mind, another image: that of a little girl afraid of the dark, looking at a single birthday candle at her bedside.

"Bennett, I can't..."

"Answer."

Catherine looked at the screen as if expecting to find her answer there. She couldn't give hers, could she? Bennett would ask why and then... I can't tell her about Below... the secret...! She is about to meet Vincent, for God's sake...! Catherine burst towards the bar and poured herself a vodka.

"Your first thought,"

Some of the liquid spilled, but Bennett's intent wouldn't waver.

"Safety"

Catherine took the glass to her mouth and fire went down her throat.

"Ivory rose"

"Safety," she answered again, pressing the button with her wrist. Half the word was lost to her coughing fit; Bennett would just have to guess. Let her think of how unimaginative I am. The back of her hand wiped her mouth, and tearful eyes opened to find the mess she had turned her bar into. Bennett's silence, if something, was a relief.

Had the detective known of her mother's gift, she might have thought she understood, or not asked at all. But in fact, Catherine meant more. As vivid as that particular memory was – some of her childhood recollections, colorful enough to seem to be of yesterday - the anniversary of her almost-death wasn't less poignant in her heart, nor was it less filled with images and smells and texture – that of Vincent's peculiar skin. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear Vincent's voice, and his words, so full of meaning, always. How weird that her love for him had covered even this, her most treasured memories of her mother.

"Painting."

"Yellow," she answered in voice still somewhat throaty, as she went looking for a rag.

"What kind of yellow."

"Wheat."

"Isn't there a closer reference? Closer to you, I mean."

"My mother's hair," Catherine answered, as she left the bottle into the bar.

She never noticed Bennett's silence.

"Like the locks of hair you found in the first painting."

"More or less."

"Let's continue... 'Baby'."

Catherine braced herself on the wood, on the rag, and it took her a heartbeat to answer.

"Lovely."

"That's not true," Bennett said quietly.

Catherine didn't answer.

"Candy."

"Birthday."

"Pain."

"M... mom."

There was a heartbeat before Bennett concluded softly:

"That's weird."

"I guess I felt her pain, when she was dying."

Another pause.

"I see lots of 'mom' in your answers."

"The second answer would be Peter."

"Never mind... You answered twice with the same word. Why?"

Catherine remembered the answer... the original one, to the first word... She bit her lips and looked away. Luckily, Bennett couldn't see it.

"When I was a child," she started "I was scared of darkness; my mother gave me a candle to keep it away. She also gave me a white rose to remember her."

And I was looking for a gang...

"Why did you snort, Bennett?" the lady asked indignantly, pricked by the apparent lessening of the most precious memories of her childhood.

"A wrong lead I was following... Was your mother the one who called you Cat."

"The only one" Catherine answered.

"So she gave you the nick."

"I guess so."

Lots of 'mom'...

"The note your father received, with your handwriting... We spoke about a time in your life, when your father had time to meet you and someone else whom he liked... Could it be your mother?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Catherine answered, "but... over twenty years... It was pristine..."

"If someone had wanted to keep it, as a... keepsake, so to speak... in the proper environment... do you think it would be probable?"

"I can't imagine who would do that, if I didn't and my father didn't even know about the note... It was just a note..."

"Hypothesis, later, please."

Catherine breathed deeply. "It could be."

No other word; but sounds kept coming from the box, so it was the woman who had suddenly stopped answering.

"Bennett, are you there?"

The detective could have fainted. Her blood chilled at the thought. After all, what did she know about the detective's state? Nothing, but what Bennett herself had said. As far as Catherine knew, the other woman would hide an intense bleeding the same way she had hid the sickness Catherine had once suspected she suffered.

"Bennett?"

"I heard something. Could you please be quiet, so I can listen?" the woman whispered.

Catherine sighed in relief, and nodded, mindless of the fact that Bennett wasn't looking. Her absent gaze stayed on the black box for a moment. She couldn't hear what Bennett could; she wasn't there, after all. Deaf to it... as she was blind to the detective's surroundings. She looked at the screen, wrath boiling inside of her. Her hands were tied. When had it happened? How? Did Robins know that she was getting information? Would he find Bennett's microphone, her earphone? Would he take them away?

When had it happened? How much was recorded?

She burst towards the control. Ralph had said... How hadn't she thought of this before? Her senses had been that of an investigator for months... though she had quit almost a year ago... But how could her instincts have dulled so? She had to think to find the right button, then she had the image rewinding. Anxiously, she watched as the screen buzzed, still black. Then grey. Then, a wall retreated; a wall in a corridor.

"I know where you are, Bennett," Catherine whispered; she grabbed the walkie, and repeated it for Bennett's ears. "I know where you are."

"Good girl. Where?"

"Third office, fourth corridor," she scrutinized the rapidly changing image, "... second floor"

There was a heartbeat before Bennett answered:

"There are no windows. Why?"

"I don't have an answer to that."

I think I do...

"Now please be quiet," Bennett ordered.

Catherine frowned as she yanked the button. If Bennett wants to be alone, it's all right with me. The screen was so much more communicative...

It had gone to the beginning; Ralph's hand had just covered the image, and it had stopped moving. Grabbing the control, she pressed "play" and made herself comfortable on the couch. A record of herself approached; not exactly like watching herself on a mirror. It seemed that Bennett was a little taller than she was; she hadn't noticed it before.

The video also recorded the words, but there was none worth listening. She turned the attention instead to her own words to Bennett, wondering fleetingly why the childish, senseless behavior. The logical thing was to respect each other. Bennett was a remarkable detective. Instead, she found that she would never tell her even that.

Bennett – the recorded one - was seeing sunlight.

"What do you want to know?" the screen emitted.

Catherine straightened on her seat. In the record, Bennett was obviously watching the balcony. She didn't want her to do that. It was her secret place – Vincent's haven. She didn't want a detective looking at there. Or in there. And Bennett had walked towards it. In Catherine's mind there was the image of herself, placing her hand against the cold glass, willing her body to slip through it. But it must mean nothing to Bennett. Yet the image in Catherine's mind didn't go away.

"Mrs. Burch?"

"What?" she answered.

"Mrs. Burch, are you there?"

She had forgotten to press the button.

"What?"

Her exasperation wasn't subtle. Bennett's snort mirrored it.

"So what can I do with your smart info?"

"What's...?" *Her location.* Catherine's heart fell again. "Don't make a tunnel."

"Very funny."

"You might simply enjoy it... for some more time."

"You're not the one risking your life with every passing second."

"I thought we had established that I'd want to."

There was a silence.

"Every detective in your team is like you are?"

"Insolent?"

Despite herself, Catherine smiled.

"Did you hear something."

"Nothing specific."

Now she was serious. "You're worried."

Diana's mood wavered, and she put her forehead to the door, then her hand. Oh, I am, she thought, but I can't tell you. It wasn't as if they were friends – what a strange word for Diana.

"Don't get cuddly...", she whispered to Catherine. "Someone here is trying to keep her head on something useful..."

Her hand twitched against the door.

\*\*\*

There was a bang - wood against wall. The device buzzed, and though it kept working, the sound came changed, surreal. Bennett's cry of pain sounded like a banshee's wail.

"Bennett?!"

There was someone else in the room, with the detective. Catherine shook the walkie, frustrated more than anything, but the stranger's words remained distorted; the sound system no longer let her understand. The sounds coming from the woman went through, but Catherine couldn't interpret them.

"Bennett, I can't hear him, so you'll have to repeat it." She paused, but the other didn't answer. "Don't you dare die on me!"

There was a knock on Catherine's door, but she didn't hear it.

She fought with the pants, rather than wear them, as a shoulder – or other - pressed the walkie against her ear. She didn't dare part from it a millimeter.

Another knock.

She had taken her keys before realizing she couldn't just go through the door. But she couldn't simply leave Bennett to her fate.

The third knock made her start.

"Not the best timing, Aaron!" she cried.

"You have a small visitor, madam," he answered formally, fun in his tone... which she had some problem understanding.

"He'll have to wait."

She grasped the walkie and looked around. The balcony? How could she climb down the entire building? Oh, if she could do so like Vincent... but the only lesson she had taken, he had been there all the time. She hadn't been scared. Now, as she bent over the veranda, she shivered. Bennett was in danger; but the danger of climbing down this height was probably bigger. If she fell...

"Bennett, can you answer now?"

Another bang. Then, just a word that sounded a lot like: "Vincent..."

The lady shivered and the box slipped from her hands. Bennett's sounds had just turned to be too clear - for what someone standing right beside her probably wouldn't hear, Catherine, whose ear was practically on the detective's mouth, understood perfectly: she was crying. The fleeting question of how the woman knew of Vincent, practically didn't come, dissolved in pure unadulterated alarm; she had almost tried to climb down the balcony for Bennett, of whom she thought, if reluctantly, as a colleague, and now Vincent himself, who was to her more than her own life, was... what? In danger? The phantom of death hovered, and she didn't even dare name it. There were few things that scary in her world.

"It's safe to come out, madam," a childish voice called from beyond her door. "They are sleeping."

She burst out without question. She needed no proof. The image of her bodyguards on the floor and the shape of a child was of no consequence to her at the moment, though much later she would reflect on the dangers inherent to underestimate children who could carry chemicals just as well as an adult would. Now was not the time, even to identify her small ally - or if it was one, even. As if in a dream - one of those in which she felt as if running without moving at all - she got to her car, headed to Robins' residency. Just as she started the car, it occurred to her that she must have a weapon; she looked for hers, and found it loaded. The lady had never used it.

She never wondered why it was that Bennett seemed to know Vincent so well.

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## Chapter 10

The echo of the loud banging of the door vanished as Diana fell on her knees beside the inert form of the only man she had come to love, carelessly tossed into the room she was kept in, a moment prior. He didn't seem to be breathing. Her throat closed as her hand went to his neck. After what to her senses seemed like an eternity, she had felt nothing. No, no, no, no... She struggled with his clothes, opening or tearing apart what she could, not enough to

uncover him; so she placed her ears on the inner layer – he is so warm... and held her own breathing, as if she could hear a heartbeat that simply wasn't there. When she closed her eyes, a tear slid down, falling on him. She could perform cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, but it required moving his thoracic box to push the heart inside, and Vincent was too much of a giant for her slight form to weight enough.

There...

She had felt a beat – a powerful pump - and his chest rose in a shaking breath. He's breathing. Thank God he's breathing. She had never believed in God until that moment; but then, as she curled up into a ball - listening to the beautiful song of his being alive - all she could do was pray.

\*\*\*

Catherine almost pressed the trigger before she saw it was just a tree... again. "With a relieved sigh, she turned around, to the door. It was open, as the perimeter had been. That this was a trap, was obvious; what upset her the most, was the way they toyed with her. As she walked, as lights wavered, every tree in the garden seemed an enemy; every time, if she shot, she would announce her presence – in the remote possibility that they didn't know of it already - but if this tree had been an enemy she would have been dead, just for hesitating a moment too long. Damn she thought.

She breathed deeply, the smell oddly reminiscent of her childhood – orange peels and spearmint, and occasionally the intoxicating perfume of violets. Crickets could be heard all around, and she tensed as she perceived a hoot, very aware that enemies could communicate with it.

When she walked into the dark building, she actually felt safer.

\*\*\*

The timeless bubble of the room where the redhead cried, was at long last broken.

"It's all right, Diana," vibrated under her ear, a late answer to her tears, to the question she hadn't dared speak, to her prayers.

She straightened at once, her face a half-perfect mask of coldness, as she looked into his eyes, now open. There was no need for showing her helpless, unrequited love, of burdening him and shaming herself with it.

"Catherine is listening...", she warned.

The man flinched and tested his bond with Catherine. Her anguish hadn't wavered by hearing him speak; so Diana wasn't right. Besides...

"Catherine is on the way...", he commented.

The giant tried to sit, but fell back, dizzy, and the woman shushed and held his shoulders to the floor.

"What did they do to you?" they both asked at once.

A heartbeat, and then: "Nothing" she answered.

"Merely drugged," he informed her in turn, his voice too weak to translate the nightmare he was in, the echo of memories of being put in a cage after suffering effects very much like this one. The helplessness.

Relief washed over her, despite the instinctive tightening of her chest, knowing they weren't out of the woods yet, for she had no way to know whether or not his unique physiology would respond well to the drugs, despite his being awake at the moment.

"I have to..."

"Nothing," she answered, steel in her voice. "If you aren't strong enough to shake even my hold, the best you can do is rest."

"Diana..."

"No"

Fear gave her strength, and as he looked into her eyes, he recognized defeat. He was himself more scared of the light he saw there, than of this cage. Love was the enemy over whom no one had dominion.

\*\*\*

Bright lights welcomed the blonde, and she scabbled for the wall and clang to it, still blinking, dazzled.

"I told you she would come".

Catherine faced the voice – female - on instinct, still blind; there was a cry of warning – from Robins, she thought - and the shadows she had just started to see moved quickly. Then, there was a crystalline laugh.

Catherine shivered.

She recognized the man she had seen through Bennett; the woman behind him stuck out over Robins' shoulder, a gesture that was that of a girl's.

"Not the best way to meet your sister," she commented, her voice light.

Catherine blinked, and the image came clearer. The woman was a pale black-haired twenty-years-old girl. Max. She seemed familiar. There was something strange in her eyes.

"Put the gun down, Miss. Chandler," the man ordered. "You won't get out of here alive if you hurt any of us."

Now she could see behind him, where four or five men stood, their arms aimed at her.

"You have my friends."

"They'll die with you."

She wavered, then her head dropped behind the weapon. Carefully, she bent and left the gun on the floor.

"Kick it"

She did, berating herself. Not for having come, not really, for Vincent needed help and she had nowhere else to find it as fast as he needed it. But for getting caught. Whatever detective

skills she had once possessed, were clearly long gone; she had let herself grow much less than acute in these months. I shouldn't have come alone she scolded herself, honestly what did I expect to achieve?

Robins gestured and everyone lowered their guns.

"Now come," Robins invited; there were big purple rings around his eyes. "There is someone who has waited centuries to meet you"

"Dad...!" the woman behind him exclaimed, but he turned to her and interrupted her:

"Wasn't that the reason why you did all of this?"

She bore his gaze for a moment, then she lowered hers; but Catherine could see she loathed it.

"Come."

The former nurse bent a little as he walked, and his back was that of an old man. Catherine hesitated, looking at her weapon and around her; but the squad's eyes followed her closely, weighted as if they were deciding her future; which they were.

"Come!" the girl ordered.

Catherine's gaze defied her, but she obliged.

\*\*\*

Sighing, the man finally sat down, at the third attempt; then stood, wavering, Diana half helping half trying to hold him down. She didn't expect his charging against the door, in fact she recognized the bang only in retrospective, as he tried again with the wall. When he finally fell, she had done nothing but stare at him. Beyond the blood his face seemed paradoxically calm.

"Catherine would come for you," Vincent concluded, "but they've made sure of that by bringing me here." Anger slid in his tone, just for a moment, as he dug in his clothes to retrieve the small darts where the drug had been. "They were waiting for me."

Their gazes met in silent understanding.

"They know."

"I don't know how, but they do. They were targeting Catherine, if they know about me then they know everything."

"That explains why the door and walls are reinforced."

Diana stood suddenly and started to pace before Vincent's silent gaze. He could do nothing, and knew it. It was frustrating and overpowering and made him remember the cage. And he couldn't do a thing, except for saving his energy. So he took hold of himself and sat silently, braced on his still weak arms.

He knew what her question would be: "How much is everything?"

"How have I hurt you, Diana," he said quietly, and looked down, his mane covering his features. Not that a recognition or even an apology fixed anything.

He heard her pace stop, her breathing coming to normal by sheer will.

"You have done nothing," she said. "Nothing that I haven't accepted or even encouraged. I should have stopped you... the first time... Even before... I should have..." Her next words came muffled by her hands. "You were right. I showed no respect for myself."

"I should have left you... let you go back to your life... Instead, I drew you to me... used you. And for that, I'm sorry..."

"We could have been so much more, Vincent... so much more..." she said, her voice lifeless.

He was shaking his head. Only had Catherine not existed, they would have stood a chance. And he meant no disrespect to this admittedly beautiful, courageous woman, but Catherine was the one for him. What he had with her went beyond anything he would have had with Diana.

"What I have made you do... bear my memories... bear Catherine's constant ghostly presence..."

"You couldn't avoid remembering..."

"No... but I might have spared you the pain of meeting her... that, at least..."

"You were afraid for her life..."

"I put her before you..."

"Could you even avoid it?"

He went silent, and she didn't speak. A heartbeat, and she dared look at him, and her gaze grew hungrier with every passing moment. He felt it. He didn't look at her. He was a coward.

"You have never loved me like you do now," Diana stated.

"My soul was removed," the scholar explained. "In a way, I am getting it back, by being with her."

"By loving her."

He didn't answer for such a long time... Diana bit her lower lip as the first sob shook her.

"You loved her."

For a moment, there was just the silence, and her tears. She cried mutely, always. A memory came to his mind; a memory of them, lying side by side, afterwards. She had cried her soul apart as he remained awake and silent. That had been when she had understood that he wasn't meant to love her.

"Can you judge me?" he asked quietly. "Can you judge any of us?"

"Oh, I can."

\*\*\*

Robins' residency seemed enormous. They could be on the same corridor where Vincent and Bennett were locked up and she wouldn't notice. The lady counted one corridor, two, three... One brown door, two, three... Every place seemed identical to the former one. At the stair she paused and looked up.

"They aren't there," the girl offered as she walked past her; Catherine hated her smile. With a

last look at the stairs, she kept walking. Just then she saw the wall chart: "5th floor".

"Keep walking," a man ordered; she hadn't noticed she had stopped.

It was possible, of course. She was assuming that they were on the first story; but they had slowly moved up on tilted surfaces. It's a labyrinth she thought; interchanging floors, identical light-yellow walls, identical brown doors... who are they trying to confound?

"Here we are," Robins stated. "You must go in, alone."

"Dad...!"

"Sorry, girl."

The squad stayed still. Catherine looked at every one of them; there was no weak link.

"We can't be here all day," Mr. Robins protested.

As he opened the door, he grasped the younger one's arm to keep her near. With a last challenging gaze, she entered...

... into the warmest embrace she could remember.

She stiffened, almost waiting for the woman to strangle her; but this was nice. She smelled like candles, she felt like Mary, and after a moment Catherine understood why: she was wearing clothes much like those of the dwellers Below.

She was crying.

Catherine put her hand on the woman's shoulder, the unexpectedness of the encounter strongly recommended to put at least a bit of personal space between them until identifying the woman and establishing her intentions while empathy told her to wait. She looked around over her shoulder, at the warm-colored room, with nice though not showy furniture. There was no portrait. No poster. No clue.

"Are you a prisoner?" she asked, before the idea froze her, her eyes widening and she forgot all prudence: "Did they take anyone else? From Below? Was it exposed?" *Was it my fault?*

There was a heartbeat before the voice came, sad.

"Can't you recognize me, child."

And she stepped back so Cat could see her.

The lady half-smiled, remembering a woman she had met Below, if just briefly – a silent person, they hadn't exchanged a word before, or so she thought. Then the woman grabbed her hair forming a ponytail, and except for the lack of glasses... there was one of those many secretaries in his father's office whose name she had never learned. But if she looked at her profile, she could see one of the many gardeners of Cambridge.

And she smelled like violets.

The word came out before the idea had really registered:

"Mom?"

The woman smiled, and Catherine trembled violently. Wordless. Breathless.

"Mom?!"

She hadn't cried the day she had learned of her mother's death; it had taken some more time for her absence to be really felt, and many months to understand what the lack of a mother would mean for a girl. She had never cried her soul out, until now. This time, there was her

mother to wipe the tears, as she hadn't done since... Catherine couldn't remember the last time. As her mother's warmth surrounded her again, Catherine felt as if she would never again be alone.

A long, long time later, she found herself sitting on the floor, her head resting on her mother's lap as she caressed her hair, arms around each other as well as they could in this uncomfortable position.

"Am I dead?"

"No, Cat," Caroline answered, "you are very much alive"

"How can this be?"

There was a silence, long enough for her to look up, to find her mother's lips pale and pursed together. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"This is a miracle," Catherine answered herself, and rose to her knees. "Have you been around all these years?"

Caroline smiled, and her daughter responded in kind.

"You saw me... You were in my graduation... Oh, how I wanted you there! I needed you to tell me..."

"Yes, Cat," she interrupted. "You made the right choices... though sometimes you lost sight of the way to happiness..."

"You saw me... with Vincent," she whispered.

"I did."

Her smile was happier, if that was possible.

"You met him the way I had imagined you would: when you were helpless and hurt, he came to you. Do you remember what I told you?"

Catherine didn't, but all of a sudden there was a fear in her whose origin she couldn't gather.

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All of a sudden, Vincent stood.

"We have to get out of here..."

"We established that we couldn't..."

"We must."

The door slid open then, and he covered Diana, but no menace came... just Mr. Robins, hands up and unarmed. They regarded each other.

"You are free," the man stated.

"Where is Catherine?"

"With her mother."

Diana merely blinked, her brain making the necessary connections almost instantly. That phrase, if true, offered only two possibilities; since Vincent wasn't mad with sorrow and grief, one of them was discarded. If Catherine wasn't dead, her mother must be...

"Is she free too?"

"She can come and go as freely as you can. This is her home, as far as I'm concerned."

"Is she with her?"

"She is."

And he was gone. Diana wavered when she lost his support; without him, she felt naked. It, of course, lasted just a second.

"Just like that," she addressed the man. "You'll let us go..."

"Yes."

"After so many deaths... after so much fear..."

"That was me," came from a point behind him, and the woman of the pictures – Max - stepped forward. "I guess I overacted a little; but if she had listened to the signals..."

"I'm talking about dead people..."

Childish eyes looked up at her.

"The prodigal child always gets the party. I'm sick of being the other one. My mother wanted to see Catherine."

There was such despising in her voice, when she pronounced the name... Such hate... At that moment, Diana understood that those who had died had been pawns in this woman's scheme. She had spared them no thought. Sometimes, crime is just someone having the power to play, Diana remembered.

"No mother should be apart from her child."

"There is a reason why Charles sent Caroline away," Diana pointed out.

The male name made the man narrow his eyes, and he went silent for a long time.

"We all are talking about love. You, of all people, must understand."

She stepped back, but her expression didn't change.

"Now give me that microphone."

His hand extended, and suddenly she pulled out the small device, snapping the closest thin wire, and gave it to him. The rest of the cables tangled painfully around her. He looked at the piece of metal:

"You didn't resist"

"Do I have a choice?"

He looked at her, and she let him see her weakness, her bone-deep weariness. Had he known her – her strength of will, her never-surrender policy - he'd have doubted more.

"Where are they?" she whispered.

No one answered.

"You are free to try and find them," Max offered enthusiastically, as if it was a new game she was eager to play.

As Diana stepped forth, she wondered if she would ever leave this labyrinth.

## Chapter 11

The moment Vincent burst into the room, he realized he was too late.

His heart had foreseen it, mourning it in advance.

His eyes not sparing a glance for the woman who had quite obviously caused this, he lifted the unconscious Catherine in his own arms – déjà vu. He let her pretend to help, guide him into a room, call the doctors. He didn't mind their wary gazes on his cloaked figure. He didn't really care what happened to him, though long-established reflexes made him cringe under the foreign gazes.

"Catherine...!" he spoke her name and kissed her hand, tears falling on it.

The machine whistled rhythmically, mocking her weakness and his despair. Caroline, beside them, kissed Catherine's forehead sweetly – almost too sweetly.

No words were exchanged as health professionals moved around. Only when they left, and nothing but the mechanic whistle broke the silence, Caroline explained:

"Catherine has been sick for a long, long time"

*It was you*, he thought, his head bowed to hide pure hatred. *You, whose love is mortal. You... Why didn't I tell her...?*

"I should have known..." Caroline continued. "The emotion... must have been too much..."

*Murderer... murderer... Killer to your own blood...* His fangs now uncovered, he willed himself to focus on the dormant lady. Her cheeks were red, and her breathing, regular, but he had no way to know what had pushed her into this coma... if it was permanent... He had to take her out of here.

Not yet. He forced himself to see beyond the red veil over his eyes. To diagnose her, to realize what she had been given without any tests, might take forever, and Catherine might have no time; the one who had given her the poison must give her the antidote. He hoped Caroline would know where to stop, in order to not kill the very person whom, in such a twisted way, she wanted to protect. A joke of Fate. He frantically summoned his readings on Münchhausen's syndrome; there was no security that Caroline would stop in time.

"Please... please... save her," his throaty whisper sounded weirdly over the machine's cries. "She was lost to me, and now... I can't lose her again. I love her..."

"But you betrayed her," she said gently yet coldly.

For the first time he met her eyes, and he found his own guilt there. He let it wash over him.

"Did you even tell her?" Caroline continued. "Does she know?"

He let Catherine's hand slid from his and retreated.

"Do you remember me?"

He nodded.

"You are a hero, back there... Below... A fairytale prince..."

*And you are one of those who deceived us... who used us...*

"I know what you think," she said. "But you are not a mother – I don't even know if you can be a father." Pain twisted his features at the unexpected cruelty. "You don't know how it hurts to be kept away from a piece of yourself..."

"Oh... That much I know," he interrupted, passion slipping into his voice.

She smiled as she caressed Catherine's hair.

"Do you think that you deserve her?"

I'm wasting precious time... Playing with this woman, while Catherine... And yet, her life would depend on his answer; so he dug into his soul and answered:

"It's not about deserving anymore. It's about needing, about choosing..."

"She chose you."

"Would you judge..." He stopped just in time, and looked away. Catherine's life is in her hands. He couldn't even look at his beloved right now. "I understand that I'm not... suitable... for your daughter," he said. "Do you want me to stay away...?"

"That didn't work out so well," she pointed out.

Her fingers tangled in Catherine's fair hair, and the tension almost made him burst – killing the elder or just pushing her away, he didn't know - but only the sudden stiffening of muscles betrayed him.

Then the door opened and the rest of the Robins family joined them.

"You see... now Catherine has all the attention she deserves."

Max stepped to a chair. Garson merely looked at the pale shape on the bed, his eyes wet.

"She's waking up," Max announced coldly.

When the dormant fingers stretched slightly, Vincent was there. When Catherine opened her eyes, it was him she saw. And she smiled.

"I knew you'd be here." For a moment she simply looked at him, her expression struggling to focus. "Have you met my mom?"

His gaze rose for a moment to meet Caroline's victorious one.

"I did."

Then he smiled at his beloved – that secret smile no one but she could see.

"Is Bennett all right?" she asked.

His expression froze.

"She is."

"I'm glad."

She pushed the sheet, attempting to sit, then she felt his strength on her flanks. In a single fluid movement, she was raised and left with her back comfortably supported on pillows.

"What happened?"

Mr. Robins blinked as Vincent's gaze darted to Caroline, who wore the best motherly expression.

"Oh, Cat, I was so worried...! You fainted and all I could do was..."

Catherine's brow frowned as if she was trying to understand: I had never fainted before; but she couldn't say it, for her mother interrupted:

"Vincent helped me bring you here."

"Did you, Vincent?"

He nodded warily, still gazing at Caroline. Why was she turning Catherine's mind towards him? He couldn't understand, and that was dangerous.

"Now that I've found you," Caroline added as she sat on Catherine's bed, smiling like a girl, "I would want to have you close..."

"She can't stay," Mr. Robins interrupted.

All gazes in the room turned to him.

"If she disappeared, it would draw attention. Eventually it would reach us. We can't..."

"I don't mind," Caroline answered, turning towards Catherine.

"Then I don't, either."

Mr. Robins looked at her daughter in awe.

"I won't leave her," Vincent stated.

His claws, once again, held Catherine's hand; this time, the message was clear: She's mine.

Vincent...! Catherine's awe reached him through the bond, but he stayed still, defying Caroline. Not even when the door burst and a squad of men aimed their guns at him, his gaze parted from the elder's; just, then, his body covered his beloved's one.

Caroline herself seemed taken aback for once. She stared at the men, then at Mr. Robins - whose body covered Max from Vincent's colossal presence - then at her youngest.

"If he moves, you shoot," the girl ordered quietly.

"Max?!"

"I won't let him take her, mother. After all I did to bring her to you... I won't allow..."

Sister? Catherine gasped; all of a sudden, the girls - Max's - greeting had sense, if barely.

"I never asked you to do that...! Garson," Caroline addressed the man, "did you know...?"

"I learned it an hour ago."

"You didn't know? How can such power be put in motion, with you not knowing?"

He didn't answer.

Caroline closed her mouth and her eyes narrowed. Just her hard gulp betrayed her effort as she said: "Catherine is free to come and go as she wishes."

Max didn't seem to be listening.

Vincent gazed swiftly at the man facing him. He was no real opponent to him; but he was determined to defend his daughter with all he had - not that Vincent had ever thought of menacing the girl - even if he didn't agree with what she did. Despite the fighting stance, there were lines in the corner of his eyes, a downturn of the edges of his mouth, the slight dropping of his shoulders... Weariness described his entire expression. Vincent tried to imagine living with these women, having his life twisted this way.

"Max!" Caroline yelled, drawing his mind back to her. "I said 'stop!'"

"You don't know what you...!"

Two slaps, and in the blink of an eye Max was covering a cheek with a hand, surprise and hurt making her look like a child punished for no reason. Robins seemed almost as flabbergasted as Vincent himself was. Caroline still gasped; she herself seemed shocked; and then, wounded, as Max shook her head slowly, narrowing her eyes in disappointment.

"Well, then. I won't help anymore. You keep your dearest child or let her go; I'm not yours anymore."

"Max!"

She was gone; and Caroline just eyed Catherine briefly before following her youngest. Max's men freed the way, parting in neat lines, then followed, backs never to Vincent. A thick surprised silence fell on every one of them as they looked at the door, then at each other.

"Sister?"

"Mr. Robins," Vincent called.

The elder gazed at Vincent, then Catherine. He attempted to mask his guilt with pride.

"I guess I'm your step-father."

Catherine shook her head, mouth agape, the move increasing in speed as if it could block out all thought. Mr. Robins looked at Vincent, who simply stared back at him. He doesn't judge, was Mr. Robins' first thought, as he saw just compassion in this being's eyes; gratitude followed.

"Speak to her," Mr. Robins asked, helpless.

"I will... whenever she is ready to ..."

"You broke my family apart!" she interrupted.

"No!" the defendant exclaimed. "Your father had left her long before... and she was so lovely... so helpless..."

"I don't want to hear this...!"

"You asked..."

"Catherine...", Vincent called, to no avail.

"How could you...?!"

The elder was raising his voice:

"She would be still there! You don't know how it is... a mental ward..."

"Catherine..."

"What!" she addressed Vincent. "Are you standing by him?"

He looked straight at her – his gaze piercing her to the soul - until she felt almost guilty.

"How often were you hurt, when you were a girl?"

She opened her mouth, frowning.

"It's important," he assured her.

"I don't know... I remember hospitals, but since my mother died..."

"You were admitted fifty-four times," Mr. Robins helped; Catherine stared at him. "It was in your mother's medical history," he explained.

"Why would that be on...?"

"Because she was diagnosed partly on that base."

She looked from him to Vincent.

"Your father told you that your mother had been sick," Vincent reminded her. "He wasn't lying; but the kind of sickness she had wasn't mortal."

Her pulse rose as she listened; she didn't know why, perhaps in response to his own...

"She suffers from Münchhausen's syndrome," Mr. Robins concluded.

She gasped.

"In order to get attention, she pretends to be sick....," Mr. Robins explained, "and when you were born, she started pretending for you too."

She knew what it was; she had helped solve an incident concerning it. His father had tried to take her out of the case; she hadn't known why. The child had been taken away from his mother, for good. She herself had taken care of that, for even if the woman was more sick than guilty, the child didn't have to pay for that with his life. To hear Mr. Robins explain it was strange, as if she was once again hearing about it as a third party – all that information she had researched. She hadn't even suspected...

"When you were very little," he continued, "if she said that your head hurt, you believed her – you even started to feel it. She medicated you, she put blood in your urine. Doctors were at a loss concerning your diagnosis; your symptoms didn't fit. Until one of them began to suspect..."

"It must have taken a long time for your father to believe it," Vincent intervened. "He truly loves your mother."

"He's right about... your father...," Mr. Robins supported him. "It took him a while – and a massive amount of proof - to believe... and then, he tried to keep you from harm by reinforcing surveillance over you, without parting you two. It didn't work. Ten more admissions for you at the hospital forced him to decide."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I have tried long and hard enough to ignore these efforts – to think of him as a monster - so what I did would seem fit. Eventually, I came to understand him." He walked away, his face refusing to mask his feelings anymore. "I myself had to part Max from Carol... allowing minimal contact... Carol pushed me away as soon as she found out."

"She remained with you."

"She had to," he corrected her, his face half turning. "To the world, she is dead. We have even managed a close friendship"

But she wasn't listening anymore. Suddenly, the two images – her mother, and that woman who had hurt her son - collided and shattered. Catherine looked down, blindly. How can this be? She rocked back and forth slightly. It's a nightmare... It has to be...

Vincent's hand on her shoulder made her stare at him.

"She loves you so much... so much... that she hurt you..."

His words were a balm for a part of her. The other part thought differently. Sweet empty words.

"Caroline wanted to see you," Mr. Robins said slowly.

She knew he was seeking her gaze; she just couldn't look at him.

"We used your memories of your mother: the candle, the rose... The cassette is of Max, but Caroline's voice hadn't changed that much, and the baby shirt was yours. The same for the note. I'm sorry about the candies, they weren't meant for you to eat..."

"I need to get out of here..." She wavered a little when she stood, and Vincent supported her.

"Will she be back?" Mr. Robins asked Vincent in a whisper.

Vincent looked at him with sadness. *I don't know*, his eyes seemed to say. In fact, he would be relieved if Catherine never came back – the danger, the fear, still fresh in his mind –; though in his heart he knew that Caroline would suffer if Catherine was lost to her for good.

"How can we find our way out?"

"My most tactful servant is waiting outside; he'll guide you."

On the other side of the door, there was a man with no eyes – the eyelids cleanly stitched – who made the signs for "Follow me". Vincent saw him go, then looked at Mr. Robins.

"Yes, he is deaf too," he explained. "That, at least, wasn't my family's doing, but the war's."

No other word passed between them. Vincent's hand pressed Catherine's shoulder and guided her behind the impaired man.

She was very silent, trembling slightly as the bird he had picked up once, in the park.

*What can I do?* he thought. *Oh, Mr. Chandler, why didn't you tell her before?* But he knew that, being in Charles' place, he himself might have left it alone. It seemed that Charles had been misinformed and still thought his wife had died. That being true, there would have been no point in telling Catherine – a child back then – such a painful truth, soiling his beloved's memory in the process. Probably, over the years, the man himself had built a sort of fairytale, erasing from his mind the time in which the secret had weighted on his shoulders – since learning of the woman's condition until learning of her supposed dead.

"Vincent!"

He turned his head, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw Diana coming.

"We're being guided to the exit," he said simply.

Diana stopped, her gaze going to Catherine's slight form. It's not about Vincent, she thought, noticing – painfully – the way Catherine leaned on him. About her mother, perhaps... So she joined them in their slow walk through identical doors and similar corridors. Her hand moved by themselves to her belly as in protection; though she didn't put much thought on it.

"So... the mystery has been solved..." she whispered and looked at him.

He nodded, not daring to look back at her. She had expected it; he wasn't used to having two women who loved him – both of whom he had loved at least with his body – on both sides of him... and one of them not knowing of the other. She still felt that it was wrong: it should be Catherine who knew, who knew everything, for that was their promise – Vincent and Catherine's – to always say the truth. That much she knew. He was far too honest to treat this cynically.

"What do we do with those responsible?"

"I can't..." Vincent's head dropped for a moment. "I can't harm Catherine's blood... unless they mean her harm..."

"Don't they?"

"No...", he whispered, and there was a heartbeat before he explained. "I think they do not. They won't harm anyone else. Catherine would know if they did, and then Caroline would lose her for good. They won't take such a risk."

They followed the deaf and blind servant into a small elevator. Everyone entered, but there was no space for social rules and Vincent kept being massive. By trying to avoid the servant's arm, Diana found herself pressed against the other man. His stiffness was so evident, that just an absence of mind such as Catherine's at the moment, would have saved his secret. And still, he didn't push her away. At any other time, he would have. He just touched her when he longed for the physical comfort she could bring in making it possible for him to lie to himself and pretend she was another. *How strange*, Diana thought, *that after all this time, he would allow...* Her heart fell with the weight of its meaning, of the finality. Not that it was new.

When she opened her eyes, the elevator's door was wide open. No one minded her delay. She still lingered there for a moment, then she stepped forth and his warmth disappeared.

"How weird... to have a murderer who loves..."

"Most murderers love," Vincent stated. "Love breaks us, seduces us into harming others..." He stopped, remembering Garson's face; he felt as if he had been looking into a mirror.

Diana kept silent for a moment, then she said: "Mr. Robins... He is a nurse... a healer... Sometimes I still wonder – childish of me, I know - how can those have children capable of...?"

"She can," Vincent interrupted. "She is too young to understand why she must not. Because she can, she uses all the power she has with no regards for others."

"I had never heard you judge..."

It had been Catherine. When he looked at her, he saw fear in her eyes; recoil. She was recoiling from him. Physically, even.

"I shall leave now," Diana offered, but no one listened.

The detective looked at their shapes, cut against the shadows of the garden they had reached without noticing. That was the last sight she would have of them. Strangely, the main element, the one that would remain forever in her memory, wasn't the momentary distress – his disguised dread, Catherine's anxiety, but the everlasting light in his eyes, in hers – as eloquent as intertwined hands would be. She walked away, her back never at them, until she couldn't see him but a shadow; and then she turned and ran.

No one saw her. Catherine's eyes pierced Vincent's soul, not seeing much – it was as labyrinthine as the tunnels he loved and hated - and yet feeling...

"How have you changed, Vincent..."

"Are you sure...?" he interrupted, his voice trembling yet firm. "Is your wish to speak about this... precisely now?"

She hesitated until her gaze parted from his.

"I want...", she whispered.

He listened, but no other word came from her.

"You want to drown all this...", he completed, "in another mystery..."

She burst forth, walking away from him. He followed. His strides allowed him to catch up with ease.

"Don't try to ignore what you just lived," he advised, fearing his father's blood in her, "otherwise you won't heal."

"What about you?"

Her gasp reached him with difficulty.

"About me...?"

"You are a stranger now, Vincent. I feel... I'm grateful, in part; yet... There are a bunch of things..."

"You don't need to discuss this now, Catherine..."

"Oh, I need..."

"No... and it might bury this trauma in your soul, where it will hurt forever..."

Suddenly, she burst out laughing. He stopped, staring at her as she bent over.

"Forever...", she whispered, grasping her belly in paroxysms of hysteria.

He stepped forth, and suddenly he found himself taking her in his arms. Her acute laugh made him close his eyes. It was so close that he felt it instead of hearing it. And yet, she had to stop. Eventually. And so she did. Gasping. Strange chuckles still shaking her, like sobs after crying, when he lifted his head to her building.

He could not leave her alone. Not like this.

"Take me to your chamber, Vincent," she asked suddenly.

He did not look at her; he did not tremble. The still-burning light of her apartment caught his gaze as he pondered how to get her there. The possibilities were more and more unlikely. He was not comfortable with letting her go alone, but of course he could not simply walk through the front door, and she could not go with him, risking her life - and his - at hazardous heights. Dangerous questions were to be asked simply because of her not being there, that was already in motion and it got worse by the second, but did he have a choice?

Indeed, her suggestion was timely.

He turned, and, for the first time in months, he walked through the iron door that was the front entrance to his home.

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## Chapter 12

Irregular tapping on the pipes announced his entirely unexpected arrival. He held Catherine closer, as the messages washed over him. She does not understand, he reminded himself, with relief. He needed time... time to tell her... time to make her understand.

Past time.

"Vincent!" Father called.

He was standing on their way, looking at Vincent firmly; and yet, despite the dim light, Vincent saw the tears in his eyes. The prodigal son stopped, wondering – despite Mouse's former behavior - if he still had a place Below. There was just one way to know. Hesitating, he resumed his pace while claiming:

"Catherine's soul is wounded, Father. She needs sanctuary."

The same word: "Father", tasted strange.

He walked past the patriarch.

And through the others.

It seemed that the entire world Below was meeting there. He walked through them, avoiding all eyes, praying for his arms not to shake, for his tears no to spill. Catherine was already alarmed.

"Later..." to her he whispered.

"Vincent?"

"Later, Catherine..."

She met Mary's eyes, and her smile relaxed her a little. Whatever it was, it was good; or something wrong, being fixed.

Suddenly, there was a deeper darkness, just broken by the glow that came through a stained glass she knew too well. Then there was the falling, and her skin caressed by his mattress.

"I'll put you to sleep," Vincent warned her.

From nowhere – he hadn't left - came a cup that smelled of tea. Warm tea. She didn't even wonder where had that come from. Her hands were cold against the mug. She looked at him, not making his shape from the darkness.

"Drink."

She drank, grimacing at the taste.

"All of it"

"Will you stay here?"

"All the time..."

"Will you tell me...?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"Will you love me...?"

She was already falling asleep – his arms behind her shoulders to help her down, so she felt his trembling.

"I will love you forever, Catherine"

That wasn't what she meant; but before she could utter the words, she was asleep.

He looked at her – his sight much better in darkness than hers was - and for the first time he

noticed the differences. She was different. Slightly, yet... Her forehead had lines that hadn't been there before.

"Oh, how I'll love you..."

But before... before, he had to decide...

He turned his head.

"Father..."

"You felt me."

"Your stick..."

It echoed distinctly now.

"Oh, dear... and I thought I was being silent..."

His father was looking at him; Vincent could see him. Father couldn't see even as much as Catherine. Instead, he felt, as every father did.

"You can hug me now, Vincent"

Vincent did, and slowly Father returned his embrace. He was thin, Vincent noticed. He had suffered. He himself had brought a significant part of that sorrow. Forgive me, the son wanted to say; but it was pointless. He could not help what he himself had done. It had changed him. He was on the other side of the mirror now. There was no forgiveness for that.

"Is Catherine all right?"

"She will be..."

He parted from the embrace to approach the sleeping form of his beloved.

"What about her... new life?"

"She decides."

"Have you...?"

Father bit his lower lip, and Vincent didn't turn, pretending he hadn't heard.

"I hope you both know what you are doing," Father said. "This would get much muddier that it is now."

"Please, reassure the others," Vincent asked quietly.

Father remained there for another heartbeat, then Vincent heard the stick's rhythm fading away.

Just then he fell on the chair.

*What will I do?*

His hands covered his face just for a moment, then fingers intertwined in front of him, elbows resting on the arms of the chair. Comfortable. At home again.

Still, he was not. This was not his home – the home of this being he had become - more than the former cave was. It merely called forth the person he had once been, with the same sense of danger, of walking on a tightrope, he had almost forgotten by living as...

As a beast...

Catherine knew, and yet she knew nothing but the being he once had thought he was... She

didn't know how. Would he tell her? Of his leave from the tunnels? Of Diana...?

He stood suddenly to pace; but a look to the shape on his bed warned him not to. Her sleep was fragile - he hadn't dared give her a strong sedative - his pacing would wake her. He dropped back his head, his fangs slightly showing.

He had lost his chance... of telling her... of displaying the chivalry that had once been his aura – or one of his masks, he didn't care - the nobility Catherine had fallen in love with. So much had happened... they had been carried so far away... He breathed deeper and closed his eyes, trying not to remember. Too far away...

On the other hand, he must tell her. That he had had another lover, was not a secret to keep if they had any hope of building even a semblance of friendship. Though strictly speaking they were not together at the moment, owing no explanations to each other, breaking no vows – as she had been in fact with another more than he had - he still must tell her.

"We promised always to share the truth... always..."

Before the stained glass, against the golden light, dust fell in spirals, as fairy powder would.

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The sofa was enormous. She turned. The surroundings changed later, as in a damaged video game. Damn it!

"Cat!" Mom called.

She stopped behind dad's armchair, waiting for the shiver to vanish as she explored the way. From here to the door, there was a huge empty place; but once there, she would be in darkness. Much easier to hide.

"Come here, my little green-eyed kitty! Come!"

She reminded herself that this was a game.

The scissors in mom's hand made a sound, and Cat's hair bristled.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty...!"

Whatever reasonable part there was in Cat's mind, thought that she was much smaller than she should be. Small as a child, and everything around grew even more by the moment, as if Alicia's magic snack was working slowly in her. When she burst forth, her body felt as that of a cat.

"Here you are!"

Her heart gave a painful beat into her chest but she kept running until her paws slid on the floor. Her tail had been caught.

"I won!" Mom said. "I won! Now, about my reward..."

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"Catherine..."

He held her tighter, shaking her as he did.

"Catherine..."

"Vincent?" she whispered.

"It's just a dream, Catherine. Come back. Now."

Catherine stopped fighting him, and he felt her slowly resurfacing, her moves becoming less erratic.

"She'll catch me."

"No. I have you, Catherine. Come back."

She opened her eyes.

For a moment, dream mixing with reality, she thought a lion had come to save her. She actually saw him, standing in front of her mother, fangs uncovered and a soft growl coming from his chest. A growl that sounded far more intense than it should be, as if her ear was on his chest.

"I'm here..." Vincent said.

"Vincent..."

"I'm here..."

She hugged him, her body shaking violently.

*Was it a... memory?* he wanted to ask; but when she hid her face on his vest... there were no words for what he felt. Every one of his memories of her: courage and softness, beauty and strength, that touching faith she had in him - in him! - came back to his mind, and he found himself helpless, blinded by the beauty he had betrayed and looking away as he held her tighter against his chest.

The cave was cold, but the edges of Catherine's soul felt slightly warm. Vincent kept holding her... for an endless moment out of time... Her nightmare... Her mother... far from her. For as long as Vincent held her, she would be safe... a part of her realized it was a bit foolish, but... She still nuzzled his vest, fully conscious that she wouldn't turn off the feeling of utter safety just because of its lack of sense... the way she hadn't turned off their love, despite its lack of future...

*How did I manage to leave this?*

Just before she lifted her head, Vincent loosened the embrace. He was looking at her the way he used to... but beyond that...

"Your soul... it's broken."

He blinked. She hadn't meant to say it, either; but once said, it seemed just clearer. There was something in him that simply didn't fit where it always had. And Vincent hadn't denied it... even if his expression stubbornly tried to conceal it, even with words.

"This is not the moment... or the place... to discuss such a thing."

There was a slight prick of fear in her, a feeling she concealed enough for him to look just puzzled. She breathed deeply before asking:

"Was it... me?"

She felt him flinch – not physically, but she felt it nonetheless. As she scrutinized his features, she moved away from him. His arms were now loose; whatever resistance she found, it was in her.

"You would never hurt me," he said, and in his thoughts he added: *on purpose*.

"Vincent, am I the cause?"

"Catherine..."

"It's a simple question."

Then, he stood and the darkness cloaked him.

"Not... you, but... what fate made of us." She heard his voice clearer as he stood. "Making us dream, just to take it all away, giving us a bond just to...."

He sighed, not wanting her to know how their empathy - a rare gift, even for him - that had been his promise, had turned into pure torture and shame.

"I didn't want this, Vincent," She shook her head.

"Me neither... Whatever comfort we can extract from it..."

"Not our dream, but our lives were in the line."

He kept staring at her. If she had seen his expression, all she would have made of it would have been sadness. *I wonder*, he was thinking, *I wonder if she loves life that much*.

This chamber had never felt so cold. She looked around, in her chest a barely suppressed call. Come she wanted to say. Please, don't leave me... Fleeting, she wondered what purpose had she had by asking such a thing, and how dearly she would pay for it.

"Is it... the beast?"

She didn't know what to expect – worry, perhaps; a wall to conceal his response - but his answer made her flinch. She moved back on the bed. The chamber still echoed with his... chuckle?

"Sorry," he uttered quietly, his voice as warm and gentle as it had always been. "I had... disregarded that... view on... things... for some months now..."

He had never been cynical. Her mind automatically came up with that childish claim: "*who are you, and what have you done to Vincent?*" A wild part of it wondered if it was possible.

Vincent had warned her often: that the beast was close, that it could control him at any given time, that there were parts of him she hadn't seen... She kept gazing at the darkness where Vincent must be - he was pacing, but she could feel his position - as her back lay on the pillow.

"It's amazing," his voice came from the darkness, "how that... fantasy... guided my path. I guess I have grown up... finally"

"I don't understand..."

Suddenly there was light. A candle. Against the light, his shape. She watched as he lit more.

"Are you comfortable?"

He turned, his eyes full of worry – a feeling he couldn't control, nor would he conceal. He wanted her to see him. The fear in her – the fear of him - licked his skin as hellish flames. A memory of her accusing fear – a fear, for once, not deserved - came from his first memories of her... so much time ago...

"It is all right," he assured her as he sat on his – former - favorite chair. "You are not in danger."

A part of her screamed: she was in danger... whether it was because of him, or because he didn't stand by her anymore... it didn't matter.

"I'm not a threat to you," he corrected quietly.

"A fantasy...?" She cleared her throat. "What do you mean?"

"I meant that there is just me... Not me the man, not me the beast... just me, the being that kills and loves with the same heart... perhaps too much for the same heart to stand."

She looked into her eyes, wanting to find something she could grasp – the safe feeling that Vincent was Vincent and nothing more.

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"Don't worry, Mommy." Max grasped her hand firmly as she kneeled beside the chair. "She'll be back."

Garson, his back leaning on the door, watched over the women he loved. His family. The three of them had been here for half an hour; for almost the same amount of time, the word "danger" had glistened in neon letters in his mind. He couldn't remember the last time he had left Max and Caroline together for such a long period. Today, he had had to take that leap of faith, for Caroline needed it.

"But why won't you answer, Mommy?" she burst in cries

Caroline was crying too - he saw it as he walked towards them.

"Let it be, Maxie," he said. "She is scared..."

Then he saw the spark on the blade.

"Caroline!"

The iron sank into his naked hand. It hadn't addressed him.

"Go, Maxie!" he yelled, not looking at her. "Go! Warn our..."

He gasped as the blade withdrew, intense pain filling him once again; distracted as he was, he didn't see it coming again. Targeting him, now.

In the last moments of his life, the former nurse didn't have time to see what the fate of his own child would be.

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"I insist: we must not discuss the change in us, right now."

His arms ached for her. Today has been bad enough as it is.

"What happened to you?" she muttered.

He had to read her lips. "You know what happened."

"I...", she swallowed. "I left."

The way he looked at her, said everything.

Her constant siren's call made even harder to find the words she needed – words that wouldn't damage her further. How strange that, scared of him as she was, she still wanted him close.

"I understood the need and the struggle," he said quietly. "I was grateful to you... that I want you to be sure of."

"But you suffered."

"So did you." He leaned forth, supporting his upper body on his elbows, on his knees. She felt as if his face was just inches away.

"I prayed for you not to feel it."

"That was not wise" he muttered, looking down. "See, hellish as it felt, it was the only thing I had of you..."

She stood, and when he looked up, she didn't know why she had done so. She felt as if her heart was beating against a knife, cutting itself as it sustained her life.

"What happened then?"

He dropped his head, curtaining his thoughts, his feelings... a part of him that she wasn't eager to see, either. Why did I ask? Her hands became fists, and her well-cared nails sank into her flesh.

"I could not remain..."

Catherine burst into a frantic pace.

He watched her, his heart grieving for her, for them both. Her soft steps would not cover his voice. Must he stop? At least, the part of it she did not know of... Must he protect her from it?

"What do you want me to do, Catherine?" he asked quietly.

"Speak."

"You obviously do not want me to... despite your words."

"You know I have to know."

She was touching things now... his things... his diary, the pen she had given him, that paperweight shaped as Beethoven... Memories came back... so perfect... Yes, she had read that to him, and this cup... this cup she had admired the first time she had been here. She turned around, imagining the objects behind the shapes she could see in the dim candlelight. The book he had been reading to her the last time she had come... it was on the table, its pages to the wood – marking a passage. Funny, she thought she remembered when he had placed it there.

Everything was exactly where it had been months ago...

Exactly...

Her finger felt funny. She stared at it, but the light was too dim...

Then she sneezed...

And unbalanced...

Just to feel as if falling back into him. Then she was all warm, his chest behind hers, his arm around her waist. She couldn't but notice how hard he was trembling, as if she had tripped, not in his chamber, but beside the very abyss.

"Are you all right?" he asked, with shaking voice.

His words sounded like ashes – like dying beauty - like dust.

"Just the dust," she explained. She rubbed her fingers together, the idea settling in her mind.

"Vincent... you haven't... you haven't been here... in months."

An image of her apartment came to her mind; not a memory, for in the image, dust covered the place, and in reality a domestic always readied it for her. She hadn't lived in her apartment in a long time, either. Instead, she had been with...

"That I was trying to explain," he confirmed.

"Then... When...? Where were you...?"

"In a cave... hardly a room... a dark, forgotten-by-God place, just as I felt at the time. It was... strangely comforting. Weeks came and went... I gave in to whatever instinct came over, not caring..."

"With whom?"

He opened his mouth, as shaken as she herself felt; but his expression made her aware of what she had suggested... accused him of, in fact...

"Sorry," she apologized, walking out of his arms...

... or attempting to.

He still pressed her against his chest. She looked up, to his face. Flames colored it in gold and shadows. Nice, she thought, a perfect mixture of his two beings... if he still believed in it. Even as it came to her mind, her thoughts were vanishing under her raced breathing, the quick beating of her heart. She was in his arms, after all.

Suddenly, he let her go. His eyes closed as he did, as if asking forgiveness and, at the same time, letting go of his salvation.

*She was right there, you...* It had been the voice that he had attributed to the beast in him, so much time ago. In other circumstances, it would have made him smile – the power of this place, turning him to old habits...

*If you weren't such a fool, you'd take her,* the beast said. *What's the point in...?*

The problem is: I did, the man interrupted, taking another step back. I took her... I loved her... with my body... and she still does not know me... the way I came to be, after she left.

Vincent dropped his head, breathing deep, and turned his back to her.

*Because of the redhead?* the beast in his mind asked, frustrated. *What's the point? You weren't together at the time, and now that the mate's back you already decided not to see the redhead again...*

*I should have decided it sooner. To set her free... I owed her so much more...*

*The redhead won't come back.*

*Diana understood,* the man answered. *That much she knows me...*

"Vincent?"

He turned his head slightly, not quite looking at her.

"Your heart is wounded enough... for tonight..."

The beast laughed. *Coward,* it said.

*Whatever my feelings are, that much is true*, the man whispered in his mind. Catherine had suffered enough.

*So you won't touch her until you tell her, but you won't tell her*, the beast growled. *Perfect. You seem to have found a new way to make this impossible.*

"I think that I need to know everything... now."

"Don't distract yourself from your sorrow, Catherine. Don't drown it in me."

"I had so rarely seen you react this way... Vincent, why do you feel this... ashamed?"

By the sound of the last words, he knew she had turned and approached.

"You know nothing."

"That's why I need you to tell me."

"What must I tell you?" he said soundly. "Must I recall those nights when I felt your... his..."

He stepped forth, stopped, exhaled a gasped sigh, and a thick silence fell on his chamber.

"What...?" She gasped and stepped back, shaking her head even as she covered it with her hands. He couldn't see it, but he could feel the embarrassment with it. He turned his head.

Five seconds after she left, he followed.

He didn't like being here, anyway. Too many memories to violate. Countless special, holy things that could be tainted by this self he still hadn't learned to recognize.

She had found a far better place: the one where too many words were heard. Near the unsteady bridge, she had pressed herself against a wall, slid down it, crouching as she looked at the infinite darkness below. Even there, bent and making herself smaller, her cheeks wet with sorrow and shame, she looked like an angel.

"Vincent?" The whisper came mixed with too many foreign others.

He stepped out of the shadows that hid him so thoroughly.

"Is that all?"

He couldn't look into her eyes, they looked straight at the abyss, full of awe—dreading it, or wanting to fall. All abysses are that same.

He didn't answer at first; then he said instead: "Now that I would lose you..." His voice quivered, and he pressed a fist against his heart to calm its beating. My last words to her...

"What...?"

"What would I tell you... that wouldn't insult what we once had...?"

"I already forgave you... if there's even anything to forgive."

He gasped.

"Catherine...!"

"Love forgives... and there's no truer love..."

"You don't even know..."

"You had a lover."

Her phrase croaked at the end, the sudden stiffening of her body – he could see it, even in the darkness - echoing it. He stood there as he would have stood in the line between heaven

and hell; a place full of pain but... At least she hadn't sent him away.

Maybe it would have been better, to keep untouched what they had once had.

If it was even possible at this point...

But he wouldn't have stood it.

Never again.

He'd do anything to keep her.

"In fact, I don't know how I didn't guess before," she thought aloud. "Or maybe I did, it was just so... foreign to me. But what else could you have done, to behave like this? I've seen you... take lives... I've seen you at your worst... No other shame comes even close, so what else would make you feel this way?"

He just stood there, hoping for redemption, as she spoke to the echoing abyss.

"And this... confidence... you have in your body, in your ability to seduce, to give pleasure, in your control... It was bound to come to you naturally – I had felt it, even before - but no matter how easily one grasps it... This kind of... expertise... it comes with practice."

Every proof she expounded, felt like a blow. He had never thought that it'd be so obvious. Nonetheless, it was her voice – cold, controlled - what scared him the most. Her feelings were temporally sheltered – his emotional storm, her own focus in words. Then, feeling the wall, she stood. He eyed her, the abyss; the distance was still safe, and yet he walked to her, just in case. He'd much rather follow her there, than let her go.

"The mastery you have displayed goes far beyond me. You didn't come to me as a virgin lover," it was a certainty, and a prick of loss filtered in her voice. "Not that I had a right to such a thing, as if I myself were one. Yet, how am I to avoid being selfish, wanting you for me and me alone. So even though I have no right to ask, I will. Who stole that from me?"

He stood still, then forced himself to step forward. There was the bridge, place of so many mischiefs. His own guilt seemed absurd beside it.

"Shall I name each woman Below...?"

"No!" he turned to her and found her leaning on the wall. Steady. He wondered if she was imagining herself on a court of justice. He could not decipher her expression.

"A newcomer?"

"Catherine..."

"No, you weren't Below. A helper, then?"

He was silent then, so silent... Catherine's eyes narrowed."Lena?"

"No!" he turned to her and found her leaning on the wall. Steady. He wondered if she was imagining herself on a court of justice. He could not decipher her expression.

"No, you weren't Below. Lisa, then?"

"I stopped wanting Lisa long ago."

Catherine's eyes narrowed. "It is someone I know." She pressed her lips together, thinking hard.

"Do you really want to know?"

For some reason, to hear his implicit assent made her feel as if falling. She opened her

mouth to answer, and then a sob came from her chest, another, until she slid down the wall. *No, no, no... It can't be...* Some part of her hadn't believed it until then: that he would love another woman, even if just in body... that her gentleman in shining armor would be part villain... that her source of hope would turn to despair... that her fairytale could bleed... *Incredible!* the cynic in Cathy exclaimed, it turns out to be that he's real!

He looked at her, helpless, wanting nothing more than to hug her... and so unworthy of that...

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"I'm moving."

Joe looked from Diana to the boxes around.

"So I see. You should have notified me sooner."

"I decided it today. They'll have to take those weeks of warning from my long overdue vacation time."

He frowned slightly.

"I thought you were working. The... folders you asked for..."

"Personal business." Her hand wavered in disregard as she kneeled between another box and a pile of books. "So why did you come?"

"I heard that... Catherine was in danger..."

He wondered why Diana was smiling.

"Don't worry, she's got my best man to protect her." *On a permanent basis*, she added in her mind.

He sighed.

"I didn't know that you were aware of it. Thank you..."

All of a sudden she stood and left.

"Diana?" he cried after her, stepping forth yet not sure if she'd want him to follow. "Are you all right? Do you need help?"

The detective pushed the door closed as she retched again. She hoped he wasn't hearing; but it wasn't as if she could help it.

As the sickness vanished, she let herself fall to the floor, sitting on it as she rubbed her mouth with the back of her forearm. She had unhooked the mirror, it was on the floor, leaning on the wall, in the corner, and now her own pale face stared at her from it.

It's a wonder no one noticed sooner. The halo of legend of her strength had masked her temporary weakness. Thank God my sister isn't here. There was the already familiar sense of falling, of helplessness. Diana – the smartest, most trustable detective in the field - wanted to cry. I'm strong. She breathed deeper. I can manage.

As many enemies as she had faced... this one... all she knew about it, is that it brought pain, that her own strength would vanish with the passing of months. At the end she wouldn't have medical care to rely on... no care at all... just in case...

You're absolutely nuts the reasonable part of her insisted, you have to stay, leave your pride

behind, or your treasure would vanish like a dream. Who else can help you...

Diana shook her head. In the mirror, the line of resolve came back to her forehead.

"What a moody little thing you are," she whispered. Her hand reached for her belly – first a finger, then the coldness of her palm. Is your father what just upset you so?

Is he with his love?

Is he happy?

"See, my dear," she whispered, "that's the reason why we can't go back."

She got him... and I got you...

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Vincent was stepping forth, between Catherine and the void, just in case. A sudden feeling of helplessness washed over him, slowing him down. He snarled softly, closing his eyes to gather strength. There was no time to dwell in it, hypothesize about its origin or the erratic way his empathy was behaving. He must explain, she must know... for the ghost would be harder to live with than the certainty.

She was so close to the blackness...

"It wasn't love... not nearly... I just... used... her body," he growled, closing his eyes to the utter shame he felt, "and she gave in because... she felt my struggle... she wanted to help... she... did love me... Eventually, that sent me spinning into an abyss far darker than this one... But sometimes... just for a second... it was as if I could reach you."

She fell silent, and he walked to her, listening to the utter quietness of the bond. Then, he knew.

"You felt it too...," awe sounded in his voice.

"Not much... not nearly enough..."

"Enough to let you find... release."

Her shame came as a sudden wave; and yet, she asked:

"Was yours the guilt, afterwards?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know."

What's there to do, Catherine thought, when your mother hurts you because she loves you... and the man whose life is at your feet, the man you love... he has to take a mistress just to feel you?

"Come."

Vincent stepped forth, stopped. Had he heard what he thought...?

"Come, Vincent."

The next she knew, he was pressing her against his heart – his body as close as it could be, being her curled into a ball.

The abyss had never felt so inviting.

"I don't know why that would affect me so," she whispered close to his ear, "after all I have been through... I have a mother – however crazy - and I have you. And..."

"Catherine..."

The name vibrated as it had done so many times before, leaving a tickle behind – an invitation.

"The void is gone," she confessed. "The dullness... the emptiness... the certainty I would never feel anything ever again. It's gone."

He must not, should not really. He did not know how far her invitation extended. Yet he couldn't help but kiss her cheek – the briefest of kisses, as if scared that she would send him away.

"What are we going to do now?"

He didn't answer; instead, he risked a kiss to her forehead (he could hardly help himself)... then her left eye, her shoulder... Such a rain of kisses tasted like worship, and like despair. His trembling hand supported her cheek.

"I used to wonder where I had found the strength to walk away," she continued, flat against his embrace. "There was no more left in me. I knew... if you came back... if I let you in... Now I mourn that frail attempt to do what was right. For I prefer, to a residence, the second circle of Dante's Hell... as long as you are with me."

Turning around, she looked into his eyes, both chests heaving, cheeks wet with silent tears, and kissed him.

END