

## IT'S HAMMOCK TIME!

By JoAnn Baca

*Dedicated to the Catherine's Balcony quarantine-time chatters, who wondered how Vincent would enjoy his very own hammock, and especially to Gonda for her expert advice.*

"This was delivered to my apartment for you." Catherine handed a large brown box to Vincent. "It's from El Salvador."

"It could only be from Devin," he replied, eagerly reaching to take the package from her. He shook it, but the unmarked box offered no clue as to its contents. Not surprisingly, the name on the return address was unknown to him, and so was the location: C. Quezaltepeque.

"I see he's up to his old tricks with a fake name," she commented drily, her lips pursing to hold back a smile.

Vincent didn't acknowledge her comment as he sliced open the tape holding the lid closed. Inside was a mass of braided cord topped by a folded note. He lifted the note out of the box and set the latter atop his writing desk. A quick look at the handwriting confirmed his guess. "Yes, it's from my brother."

He sat on the corner of his bed and gingerly unfolded the thin paper, then read aloud.

*Feliz Navidad, Vincent, from an archeological dig at Concepcion'  
Quezaltpeque!*

*Don't worry, little brother, the troubles in El Salvador are over, and I'm with a group of archeologists invited to examine some recently discovered Pre-Columbian artifacts and to excavate the site.*

*The citizens just held their annual Hammocks Festival (I kid you not!). Apparently El Salvador is a big producer of hammocks. Every home here has several – in the living room, on the porch, pretty much wherever they can hang one. And they all get used – a lot. I've been using one myself since I got here. It takes a bit of getting used to but once you do...the sleeping is fine!*

*So anyway, I bought this one from an old guy who's been hand-making hammocks for decades. It's made of synthetic filament, so it should last a long time. I'd thought about getting one for the Old Man, too, but decided he'd never be cool enough to use it!*

*Enjoy, little bro! [In a pinch, it can sleep two!]*

*Love,*

*"Alejandro Nueva"*

Vincent set the note aside and reached into the box to extricate his gift. The intricately woven hammock was colorful – alternating stripes of brilliant red, blue, yellow and aqua made for a sharp contrast to the muted shades prevalent Below.

Catherine smiled freely now. "That's...quite something."

"Yes..." he replied, already wondering what to do with it.

"There doesn't seem to be any place to hang it in here," Catherine mentioned as she looked around his chamber.

Vincent replied defensively, "I'll find somewhere." He wasn't going to admit that his brother's first gift to him in years was fairly useless given his environs.

Diplomatically, Catherine retreated from the conversation. "I promised Samantha I'd take a look at her science project. Perhaps now is a good time to see her, while you're...dealing with your hammock."

She kissed him on the cheek and made a clean getaway, leaving him pondering over the situation.

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Catherine had been right, much as it pained him to admit it. One end of the hammock could not easily be tied to any of his furniture. He couldn't use the large statue that dominated his chamber because it wasn't secured to its base, so it would topple if he tried. The column by his chamber entrance was sturdy but he couldn't get the hammock tightly tied to it – any weight put on the hammock caused the ties to slowly slide down the column until it rested close to the ground.

The ladder up to the walkway above his chamber seemed workable; tying one side to it would hold the hammock steady. Perhaps if he attached the other end of the hammock to one of the cross-hatched metal struts near his chamber entrance? Of course, that would make his own bed inaccessible unless he ducked under the hammock. But he couldn't find any other structures in his chamber far enough apart to string the hammock and secure enough to handle his weight.

Sighing, he decided to settle for this option. If nothing else, he could at least tell Devin he had slept in the hammock, should the question ever be raised. One night would suffice.

Vincent carried out his plan and was gratified to see the hammock stay in place several feet about the floor. Gingerly at first, then with more force, he leaned his hands into the hammock, pushing with his full weight against it. It held.

He was congratulating himself as he turned and sat on the edge of the hammock, ready to propel himself into it...when the hammock sagged significantly, dumped him out, and he found himself bottom first on the rug.

Grateful he was alone, Vincent stood, brushed himself off, and once again sat down into the hammock, taking great care to land closer to the far side this time, instead of the edge nearest him. Yes, that was it!

He was fine until he lifted his legs. Suddenly, he slipped off the other side of the hammock, this time landing flat on his back, legs in the air.

Quickly he got to his feet, feeling foolish. This was ridiculous. Millions of people used hammocks. It couldn't be that difficult to get into one. This time he decided to sit and swing his legs in simultaneously while grasping two handfuls of the hammock...and found himself knees-on-the-ground, hanging from his fingers from a sideways-slanting hammock.

He extricated his fingers with effort, feeling his face grow hot with embarrassment despite being alone. Gritting his teeth, he decided to climb in face first this time. He nearly threw himself into the hammock and grasped tightly to the edges...only to find himself flipping over. He hung on, though, determined not to fall out. The hammock eventually did right itself, but it had swung completely around before doing so. He was now trapped inside, tightly wrapped in a brightly colored cocoon.

Catherine, returning from her visit with Samantha, was stunned by the sight that greeted her. She bit the inside of her cheeks hard to keep from laughing. Was that a growl she heard from deep inside the hammock?

"Would you like some help?" she managed to say without her voice cracking.

A few heartbeats crept by before he managed a terse reply. "Please...."

Wow, that was one mad kitty.

"OK, I'm going to unwind you. You should probably let go of the hammock. You might have to...well...just fall out of it." She thought she deserved a medal for sounding so calm, as if she were merely giving instructions for crossing the street.

"Fine!" That was as much as he could say through clenched teeth.

It was a bit of a struggle, but Catherine managed to push Vincent over and around, much like she would if he were a child on a swing – a very large child on a very stiff swing. She heard the thump as he hit the rug and bit her tongue to hold in her laughter.

At this rate, she would only be able to drink soup for the next few meals.

She refrained from the obvious question. "What happened?" would, at this point, likely send his blood pressure through the roof.

As he brushed himself off, not meeting her eye, Catherine approached the hammock. She waited until she was sure he was glancing at her to see what she would do. Then she centered herself on one side, walked backward until the hammock was halfway to vertical, grabbed hold and sat gently. Waiting until the gentle swinging motion of her descent had stopped, she held the edges of the hammock to give herself some leverage then pivoted her body and swung her legs up and into the hammock. She was lying calmly in the middle as Vincent gaped.

Chastened, he asked if she would show him again how to get into the diabolical thing. She slipped out by holding the middle of the hammock, swinging her legs out and standing up. Since he had seen her do it once, she hardly needed to guide him through it, though, as he was a quick study, and his natural gracefulness suddenly clicked into place. It was easy!

Once he was lying back, resting comfortably, Catherine smiled mischievously and joined him. He was surprised but, considering his predicament of moments before, could hardly complain. Not that he wanted to, really. It felt good to have her lying so close, every inch of her from ankle to shoulder pressed against him. After taking a deep breath, he allowed all the tension to leave his body as he exhaled.

It was quiet in the Tunnels, and the gently swinging hammock seemed to lull them. Catherine snuggled against Vincent, who lifted one arm to pull her closer. They eased together in a new way, one tantalizing to them both. Vincent felt it was worth all his earlier struggles, and even the embarrassment of being caught in such a distressing position, to now be with Catherine in this delightful hammock. Their eyelids drifted shut and they breathed in unison, the peaceful moment one cherished by them both.

The sheltering hammock wrapped them together so pleasantly that neither of them at first could place the creaking sound. It grew until the grating of metal

tearing loose registered as the ladder failing. The hammock crashed to the earth, the fall cushioned by the rug beneath them. Suddenly they were thrown together in a heap of tangled mesh and limbs.

Vincent stared at Catherine in shock for a moment as her eyes widened in surprise. Then both of them burst into laughter.

“Is there a return address on that box?” she asked him, when her tears of mirth had stopped falling and they had caught their breath. “Because I need to thank Devin for this marvelous gift.”

“It was a gift to *me*,” he reminded her.

She pushed the hammock off of her as she replied, “Oh, I suspect he knew exactly what would happen!” When she was free of the woven material, she leaned over, trapping Vincent on the ground. He wasn’t objecting, not in the least, so she took full advantage and kissed him. The kiss was warm and sweet and felt like lying in the hammock together – tantalizing and easy.

*Dear Devin*, they both were thinking at the same moment, *Thank you*.