



“...Shall Have No Dominion”

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Dedicated to

Those who continue to believe that "with love, all things are possible."

With particular thanks to John, Nanette, Linda and Vicki for their unending support and faith in both dreams.

And to all of those people throughout the world who believe that the spirit of the Tunnels can and should be brought into the world Above. The light of your love has pushed back the darkness.

Author's Note

Like all true obsessions, this novella arose out of the need to come to terms with a situation that affected me deeply - personally.

For me, both as an individual and as a writer, the Tunnels became real. They exist. As do the people who dwell in them.

Mary is caring for the children, Father is watching over us all, and as long as dreams survive, Vincent has his Catherine.

Though they go mad they shall be sane

Though they sink through the sea

they shall rise again;

Though lovers be lost love shall not;

And death shall have no dominion.

Dylan Thomas

I

Vincent looked away from the small volume of poetry in his hands to gaze again in wonder at the face of the child sleeping so peacefully in the crib near his bed. *He is such a miracle, such a gift.* He closed his eyes as his mind filled with the image of the love now lost to him. "He is so like you, Catherine," he whispered, feeling her presence so deeply that he thought he had only to open his eyes to see her standing before him.

After a long moment, Vincent took a deep breath and opened his eyes. But the room had not changed. Light from the many candles still threw flickering shadows against the walls, and the small nightlamp near Jacob's crib glowed just as brightly as before. He and Jacob were alone.

Vincent set the book down and stood up, stretching his arms over his head. The day had been long, and the muscles in his shoulders ached. He knew he had done too much today, but the restless energy that had plagued him of late would not let him be still. Only in endless hours of manual labor could he find release for the tension that wound his body and mind into tightly coiled springs.

He sighed and moved closer to the crib, knowing that Jacob's presence and the bond they shared could sometimes still his restiveness. "I wish I could remember the moment of your conception, Jacob," Vincent whispered, leaning over to gently kiss the soft brown hair that had only recently appeared on his

son's head. "Perhaps the memory of that one time of love would help to ease this horrible aching." He nuzzled Jacob's downy head, lingering to savor the delicate scent and texture that was so much like Catherine's.

"Waiting up for Jacob again, I see."

Vincent raised his head and smiled. This had become a nightly ritual: Father checking on his son and grandson. Vincent understood completely Father's need to see that all was well with them.

"Of course," he said softly. "I have learned it's far easier for us both if I sit and read until Jacob is ready for a dry diaper and a warm bottle." He ran his fingers along the edge of the crib rail, watching as Father settled into the chair beside the bed.

"Have you found that book of Yeats I've been searching for?" Father asked, gesturing to the small volume lying on top of the quilt.

"Not yet, Father," Vincent said, as he moved away from the crib and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I have looked among the books here and in the older children's classroom, but no one has seen it." He watched the older man shake his head in exasperation. It was not often that Father misplaced any of the books in his vast but slightly disorganized library. "It will be found, Father. Have faith."

"Yes, of course," Father replied, looking towards the crib and the small boy sleeping there. "Perhaps one of the children

has borrowed it," he said absently, obviously thinking more of Jacob than of the missing book.

Vincent always felt renewed at the sight of his father and son together. Even after months of quiet healing, the wounds to his spirit were sharp and aching. He had been plagued again and again by nightmare visions, taunting him with the same scene. *Too late, too late.*

Only in the last few weeks had the nightmares eased, bringing instead the unending restlessness that grew with every passing day. He read and reread Brigit O'Donnell's book, "300 Days", hoping to find again the comfort it had once brought him. The words cut deeper now, their poignancy ringing all too true in his ears. He had not known, when he and Brigit had met, just how alike the paths they walked would be.

"If not Yeats," Father said, interrupting Vincent's thoughts, "then what is it you have there?" Vincent handed Father the book. "'Arnold's Poetical Works,'" the older man read from the binding. "Matthew Arnold?" Vincent nodded. "Ah yes, we read him quite often when you were younger." He turned the book over in his hands, as though studying it carefully. "Is this yours?" he asked, as he returned the volume to his son. "I don't remember having seen it before."

Vincent ran his palm over the leather binding, remembering how he had found it, among the clothes Catherine had worn while she stayed with him in the Tunnels, healing from her father's death.

And he remembered the poem - that one, short poem, marked carefully with a thin piece of blue ribbon. How could she have known when he had not?

"I believe the book was Catherine's," Vincent said, his voice sounding huskier than usual in the quiet room. "I found it among her things in the guest chamber." He opened the book to where the worn ribbon lay, waiting like a sentinel to lead him. "There is one poem marked." He ran a clawed finger across the page, smoothing the already smooth paper, feeling again that intense sense of her. "It is strange," he murmured, "I have no recollection of having seen this book before today." He looked up, hoping to see something in Father's eyes that would reassure him. He saw only concern and the lingering question of the marked poem.

"Will you read the poem to me, Vincent?"

"Yes, of course." Vincent paused, letting his mind wander across the page. Again he thought he could feel her presence beside him in the room. It was as though she called to him through their broken bond. Was he losing his mind? Had the emptiness in his soul finally eaten away at his very sanity?

"If it's too painful . . ." he heard Father say.

"I'm sorry, Father," Vincent whispered, shaking his head, "my mind is wandering tonight. You must forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Vincent." Father reached out and covered his son's hand with his. "I know how much you miss her." He grasped Vincent's hand tightly for a moment,

then leaned back in the chair again. "Read the poem, Vincent. Give words to your sorrow."

Vincent nodded, then in a subdued voice, began to read.

"Each on his own strict line we move,
And some find death ere they find love.
So far apart their lives are thrown
From the twin soul that halves their own.

And sometimes, by still harder fate,
The lovers meet, but meet too late.
--Thy heart is mine! --*True, true! ah true!*
--Then, love, thy hand! --*Ah no! adieu!*"

The room was hushed. Only the constant echo from the pipes broke into the stillness that had settled around them. Father took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose with shaking fingers. Vincent put the book down and reached out to comfort the man who had so often comforted him.

"There is pain, Father," he told him, grasping Father's shoulder with a firm but gentle hand. "But it's such a sweet pain" He sighed, remembering the night he and Catherine had walked the city - the night when the worlds of light and darkness had, for a brief moment out of time, come together.

"You know I am here for you, Vincent."

"As you have always been."

The sound of rustling blankets broke the stillness of the room. Vincent smiled and stood up, retrieving a clean diaper

and wet wash cloth from the basin and shelf he had recently installed in his chamber. His son, the small miracle who linked his soul with Catherine's, was awake.

As he bent to lift Jacob from the cradle, Vincent let the wonder of his child flow through him. It was always like this now. The bond between father and son had grown stronger with each passing day. Although only a few months old, Jacob always watched the world around him through intense and eager eyes.

Every journey together was an adventure; one that Vincent shared with unbounded pleasure. They saw the world through each other's eyes: The new and the familiar blending into something that was theirs and theirs alone. The only thing missing in their world was Catherine.

Vincent held Jacob close to his heart, feeling the soft touch of his child's breath against the open laces of his shirt. *She's here, my son. Death has no dominion. She's here.* He cradled Jacob within his large hands, drawing him back until their eyes met. A wave of intense serenity passed over Vincent's heart, bringing with it a quiet sense of peace. For a moment, the aching restlessness was assuaged.

"Vincent? Are you all right?"

Vincent nodded absently at Father's soft words, his eyes never wavering from those of his son. A small hand wiggled free of the crocheted blanket Mary had made and tiny fingers touched Vincent's cheek. It was a touch of comfort, of reassurance. Vincent closed his eyes, unable to stop the tears that fell soundlessly onto the small fingers.

"He is trying to comfort me, Father," Vincent whispered huskily. "I can feel it." Slowly opening his eyes, he watched as Jacob's tiny fingers wiped at the short, wet whiskers on his father's face.

"He is a remarkable child."

"Yes," Vincent murmured, turning slowly to lay his son on the heavy quilt covering the bed. His mind was still reeling from the strength of the emotion that had poured over him through their bond. Was it possible for a child of seven months to know such a depth of emotion? It hardly seemed possible.

"With love, all things are possible."

Vincent's hands shook, and for a moment he forgot to breathe. He could have sworn the voice he had heard was Catherine's. Taking a deep, calming breath, he turned his head and looked at the older man sitting in the chair beside him. "Did you say something, Father?"

"No, son." Father frowned, and Vincent looked away, feeling suddenly guilty. Father had been through so much because of him. "I didn't hear a thing," Father continued. "Of course, I haven't your exceptional hearing." He paused and Vincent could sense the concern that was always uppermost in Father's thoughts. "Is something troubling you, Vincent?"

Vincent looked back down at his son. He was pulling gently at the fur on his father's fingers and gurgling happily to himself. Perhaps it had only been a thought formed through the bond - a fleeting fragment of what Catherine might have said to comfort him. Either that, or he was truly going mad.

"It was probably Jacob that I heard, Father," he murmured, releasing his hands from his son's grip long enough to finish changing the boy's diaper. "Our bond is growing so strong that I sometimes believe he is actually speaking to me."

When he finished putting on the clean diaper, Vincent handed his son to Father and completed his task, putting the wet diaper and wash cloth into the diaper pail Mary had given him.

"I still find that quite astonishing, you know."

"What's that, Father?"

"The sight of you changing a diaper." Father chuckled and Vincent caught the answering wave of tenderness that poured from his child. He turned to watch as little Jacob tugged at Father's beard. Father laughed and pulled the small hand away, kissing the tiny fingers. He looked at Vincent. "Mary is becoming rather annoyed with you, Vincent," he said, pausing to nibble on the small hand he held. "She complains that you rarely let Jacob out of your sight, and says your carrier reminds her of a kangaroo's pouch." Actually, *I* consider it quite ingenious."

Vincent removed the warmed bottle from the small electric warmer Mouse had "found" for him and started to hand the bottle to Father. It was part of the nightly ritual they shared. Vincent fed Jacob during the day, while the late evening feeding belonged to Father.

Tonight, for some inexplicable reason, Vincent wanted to feed the baby himself. No, he *needed* to feed Jacob, to be

alone with his child and with his memories of Catherine. His fingers tightened around the warmed bottle.

"I take Jacob with me because he needs me to be with him, Father," Vincent said softly.

"Yes, and you need to be with him. I understand that, Vincent. I only wish I could convince Mary."

"Mary has other children to care for, Father," he said, leaning forward to brush his finger across the silkiness of his son's cheek. "Jacob and I have only each other."

Vincent looked up, hoping his words had not wounded. "I did not mean that as it sounded, Father." He sat on the bed, looking into the warmth of his father's eyes. "What flows between us is very hard to explain," he began. "It's very much like the bond I shared with Catherine, but so much more, also." He put the bottle down on the bed and clasped his hands on his knees. He only hoped he could make Father understand. He didn't mean to exclude him, that would be unthinkable, but something . . .

"What is it, Vincent?"

Vincent looked up from his clenched hands. "I don't know if I can explain, Father." He took a deep breath, trying to find the words. "Perhaps it was finding Catherine's book, or the poem." He frowned and shook his head. "That poem, Father. How could she have known? Why would she have marked it and then never shown it to me?"

"I admit that the poem is horribly appropriate, Vincent," Father sighed. "As to how and why Catherine found it, I have no answers for you."

Vincent leaned forward to press a kiss on his father's forehead. It was late, and although he knew the turmoil of his thoughts would not let him sleep, he also knew that he could not add to Father's burdens by telling him of the disturbing restlessness that filled him.

"You help me with the questions, Father," Vincent said softly, "that is more than many sons can say." He leaned back and held out his hands, smiling as the baby in Father's arms reached back to him. "Would you mind very much if *I* fed him tonight, Father? I need . . . " He looked up, surprised when Father stood and handed the squirming child into his outstretched arms.

"You need the warmth that only this tiny part of Catherine can give you, Vincent," Father said gently.

As he held the child against his chest, Vincent knew the truth of Father's words, but he found comfort, too, in the strong and gentle hands resting on his shoulders and the lips that pressed a kiss against his hair. "Be well, my son."



Vincent savored the peace that surrounded him as he sat in the chair feeding his son. Nestled snugly against his chest and

arm, Jacob's small hands tried to grasp the bottle as he sucked noisily at its contents.

The pipes had quieted with the deepening night and Vincent listened to the slight sounds of Father getting ready for bed in his chamber nearby. He loved the night, the darkness that brought to a halt the clamor of the daylight hours.

Even in their home below the city, night and day held to their dominion. But Vincent claimed the darkness as his own. Through it, he had wandered undisturbed through cold, wet city streets. Within it, he had found Catherine. And through her, he had shared in the life he was destined never to share by light of day.

The faintest whisper of a breeze caressed his cheek, bringing Vincent back from his musings. He looked toward his chamber entrance but there was nothing to account for the rustling air. Looking around, he saw the book of poetry he had laid, he thought, face down on the bed.

The book lay open across the patchwork quilt, its pages turned to the sentinel blue ribbon. The breeze came again, and as Vincent watched, one page fluttered up and over, covering the ribbon with its tissue thin form, baring different words to his sight.

His breath stopped for a moment, as through his mind a once-lost fragment of poetry floated as softly as the breeze.

". . . and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be."

Vincent took a deep breath, willing his thundering heart to slow its cadence. The room was filled with her, the very air trembling with her presence. On shaking legs, Vincent rose and placed his now-sleeping son on his stomach in the crib. He covered him with the blankets, then hesitantly stood back to survey the room.

Nothing moved in the shadows. No shade of night lent its spectral pattern to the familiar chamber walls. Vincent took another deep breath. The sense of her had not left him. It was the bond, and yet, not the bond, for it was stronger than he remembered. It permeated his senses, his being, filling him with love.

No longer trusting his legs to hold him, Vincent sat on the bed, his strong hands gripping the quilt. One clawed finger caught on the edge of the small book beside him, and he looked down.

In stark relief against the yellowing page, the printed words struck like a blow to his heart. So many nights in weeks passed he had remembered these words, learned years ago through Father's teaching. They had been his balm, his prayer for some small bit of consolation. Tracing the page with one trembling finger, he began to read aloud.

"Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again.
For then the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.

Come, as thou cam'st a thousand times,
A messenger from radiant climes,

And smile on thy new world, and be
As kind to others as to me.

Or, as thou never cam'st in sooth,
Come now, and let me dream it truth.
And part my hair, and kiss my brow,
And say --*My love? why sufferest thou?*

Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again.
For then the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day."

When the last word shuddered past his lips, Vincent lifted his head, knowing that he would see Catherine standing at the entrance to his chamber.



II

She wore the dress he had always thought so perfect for her. The soft white wool fell smoothly across her shoulders meeting in gently draping folds at the rosette between her breasts. Around her arms was wrapped the matching shawl she had laid aside when welcomed to complete their circle. Winterfest - a time to remember the past and dream of the future.

"Can I lead you through the dark?"

Her voice was as he remembered it, subdued and whisper-light in the stillness of his room. Only the words were different. It was *he* who had asked the question, he who had led her through into the light.

"Catherine . . ." Vincent's voice faltered as he searched for words through the rush of feelings overwhelming him. A wave of love more intense than he had known even through their bond, washed over him and wrapped itself around his heart; making it difficult for him to breathe. He watched her smile and remembered how many times he had longed to kiss the dimple that appeared on her right cheek.

"Can I lead you through the dark?"

Vincent drew a shaky breath, willing himself to be calm. Whatever this was, shade, spectre, shadow of his dreams, she was an answer to his prayers. Father's Winterfest words came

to him then: " . . . *even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as we share the light.*" He knew, now, what she was waiting for him to say.

"There is no darkness, Catherine," he whispered, "when you're with me."

Vincent saw her smile and she came closer, her white boots making little sound as she neared the bed. He watched in awe as she crossed the short distance between them. She looked so real, so substantial. Candlelight glimmered against the antique gold and pearl earrings dangling from her ears, and made her hair gleam with hidden lights. His hands gripped the quilt as he willed himself not to reach out, afraid that if he touched her, she would disappear.

The presence he had felt so deeply these past few weeks, the restlessness; could it have been Catherine reaching through all the barriers of time and flesh? But how was he to know? Again he wondered, *if I touch her, will she disappear?*

She stood only a few feet away from him, staring down at the child nestled among the quilts and blankets in the small crib. Vincent watched as she reached out a hand and pressed her fingers lightly against Jacob's cheek. She turned, and the tears he saw behind her lovely eyes made his throat close with pain.

"I told you he was beautiful," she whispered.

"He is, Catherine. Very beautiful."

She smiled through her tears, looking at him as though she would memorize every detail, every line of his face. She tilted

her head slightly to the side, and Vincent remembered the gesture with aching clarity. He asked the question he knew she was waiting for. His voice almost inaudible.

"How is this possible?"

She moved the few steps it took to sit beside him, and Vincent felt his heart thundering within his chest as she reached out to take one of his hands in both of hers. The touch was Catherine's, yet so much more.

Before, when she had touched him, their bond had been strengthened by the tangible connection between them. Now, it was as though his very soul soared across time and space to become a part of her. He felt every thought, every emotion compounding again and again like a geometrical progression.

His mind tried to cry out that this *could not be*, that his Catherine was gone, lost to him. But his heart spoke different words, laying siege to even the strongest intellectual arguments.

"How is this possible?" he managed to ask again. He was afraid, so very afraid - not of what he saw before him, but of watching her fade away like a misty dream. She looked so real, and through the small hands holding his, he felt the beat of her pulse. Surely this was more than any dream, any spectre of his lost love.

As though knowing his fears, Catherine pulled his other hand away from the quilt and brought his hands up to her face. The softness of her lips against his fingers made him tremble.

"With love, all things are possible."

Vincent closed his eyes, savoring the comfort of her words and the touch of her lips on his hands. He *had* heard her voice speaking to him earlier. The sense of her presence had been real, not imagined. He struggled to compose himself. It was hard, so hard to find the words.

"I have known, Catherine," he said, opening his eyes, allowing himself to drown in the love he saw reflected in hers. "For weeks, now, I have been feeling something extraordinary, something stronger even than the bond I share with our son." He paused, wondering briefly if he could say what was in his heart. Her hands tightened on his, and he swallowed past the lump in his throat. "It has been so difficult, Catherine. There were times when the pain crushed me. Only knowing that Jacob needed me, counted on me, gave me the strength to go on."

He looked down at their clasped hands, at the small fingers from which he now drew strength and love. "Tonight, when I found that book . . . that poem, I was consumed by my sadness, by my loss. Our son reached out to me, not only through the bond, but with his tiny hand, offering reassurance, giving me comfort and hope. It was as though he *knew* something miraculous would happen - something just like this."

Catherine leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Vincent closed his eyes, delighting in the feelings that coursed through his body.

"Our child is an old soul," she said, her voice a whisper-breath against his skin. "He's a very wise and remarkable child."

At the touch of her lips against his, Vincent's eyes opened in wonder. It was the fleetest of touches, barely the whisper of

a caress, but it touched his soul. He sat very still, watching Catherine's face as she planted soft kisses against his chin, his cheeks, his forehead. He fought down the urge to kiss her back, not knowing what would happen if he did.

And that had always been his fear. What *would* happen if he kissed her, really kissed her; the way he had always wanted, the way he knew *she* had always wanted? And now, after all that had gone before them; how could he not? But if he touched her, would she disappear?

Catherine pulled back, taking the sweet joy of her lips from his face, and Vincent shivered, instantly feeling the loss of her touch. Shaking her head slightly, she frowned at him. "Don't you believe in me, Vincent?" she asked. "Don't you believe I'm here?"

Vincent's tears fell unheeded across his cheeks as he looked at the small, fragile form beside him. "How can I, Catherine?" he groaned, "How am I to believe in the reality of something I *know* cannot exist? How am I to believe that you are not simply an illusion?"

"Touch me, Vincent," she whispered. "Touch me."

She brought his hands up to her face and Vincent felt the satin smoothness of her cheeks beneath his palms. Her skin was warm to his touch, even in the chill of the night air. He let his hands explore the width of her cheekbones, the soft indentation beneath her ears, and his fingers slid gently into her hair.

Vincent moved closer, bringing her body into the curve of his arms. He leaned forward, pressing his face against her hair.

The scent that had always been so much a part of her, filled his senses, bringing with it a joy that overpowered all reason and reality. He could feel her pulse beneath his fingers, the warmth of her breath against his neck.

Catherine!

His hands moved without hesitancy to her back and he drew her into his arms, pressing her close to his heart, burying his face in the curve of her neck and shoulder. His tears fell on the velvet skin above her collarbone and he kissed them away, savoring the taste of her on his lips through the salt of his own tears.

He had never dared to touch her like this, to put his lips against the delicate velvet of her skin; to savor the feel of her beneath his lips, his tongue. The scent and taste of her intoxicated him.

Her arms tightened around him and Vincent could feel each of her fingers as they grasped his shoulders. The round curves of her breasts pressed against his chest, taunting him as he moved to bring her even closer. His hands delved beneath the softness of her dress where it dipped low in the back, and he relished the delicacy of her shoulder blades beneath his fingers.

Catherine!

Willing himself to pull back, Vincent looked at the flushed face of the woman in his arms. Taking deep, gulping breaths, he watched the rise and fall of her breasts, drank in the familiar features of her beloved face, and saw the immeasurable love shining from her eyes. Speech eluded him. He could only stare,

unembarrassed by the tears that still fell unchecked from eyes drowning in want and need of her.

Catherine lifted her hand and trailed one finger ever so slowly across his lips. Vincent's eyes closed and he shuddered. Her finger moved almost hesitantly to the cleft in his top lip and for a second, his breathing stopped. Then he gasped as he felt her tongue, like a blazing trail of fire, burning across the path her finger had made.

Her touch set off small explosions throughout his body. He shook with the force of them, pulling her back into his arms. This was what he wanted, what he had denied himself for so long. His mouth found hers, waiting, open and warm, and Vincent kissed her the way he had always dreamed he would.

He ran his tongue across her teeth, exploring the different textures and tiny imperfections he found there. He grew bolder, letting his tongue roam into the secret corners of her mouth, finding such heat and softness that he was left almost breathless.

But it didn't matter. Her breath was his. His breath was hers. They shared more than a kiss, they shared their souls. Vincent knew this even through the intensity of the passion that engulfed him. He felt her mouth slant across his, seeking his kiss from a different angle, opening even wider, and he answered her in kind. The pounding of his heart echoed in his ears as he devoured her mouth.

He had dreamed of this - longed for this. Why had he held back? There was no darkness here, no absence of light. There was only the burning glow of their desire, of their love.



He could feel everything so plainly. Every touch he gave her came back to him tenfold. It was even greater than before!

Before . . . His mind echoed with the thought, with the fleeting glimpse of a piece of time forgotten on the edges of his soul.

Vincent forced himself to pull his lips away, yet held Catherine against his chest, leaning his cheek on her hair. He took deep, shuddering breaths as he looked down. Directly in front of him, lying in his crib, was tangible proof that he and Catherine had loved, physically loved. *Before . . .*

He rubbed his cheek slowly across the satin of her hair, listening to the sound of their harsh breathing in the quiet room. Why couldn't he remember? Why were there still so many gaps in his memory? How could something so powerful be lost to him?

"It wasn't truly lost, Vincent," she reassured him. "Nothing we shared has ever been lost."

Vincent slowly lifted his cheek from Catherine's hair. It took a strength of will even *he* found difficult. He couldn't stop holding her, touching her, savoring the scent and feel of her.

"You must explain this to me, Catherine," he said, reaching up to take her hand from his shoulder. He held on to her, his tangible link to the intangible. "You must tell me how this is possible. Help me to understand. Help me to know what is happening to us."

She leaned against him and he drew strength from her. "I once told you that I had to hold on to some of my certainties," she said. "Do you remember?" She laughed softly, rubbing her cheek against his shirt. "That painting on the wall belies those certainties, Vincent. I should have known that." Catherine looked up and he saw a world of certainties in her eyes. She smiled. "Look at Kristopher's painting, Vincent, " she demanded softly, "really look at it."

He turned, studying the large oil painting that hung across the chamber from his bed. It was the first thing he saw each morning; the last thing he saw each night. It had helped to keep him sane when the world around him crumbled beneath his feet, leaving him bereft and alone. This painting was the only likeness he had of Catherine. So here, in this chamber where her presence was always so deeply felt, Vincent had spent hours staring at Kristopher's rendition of their love.

"You ask me if I'm real," Catherine said. "Was Kristopher real?"

Vincent studied the painting, much as he had during the months since he and Jacob had returned to the Tunnels. But now he was seeing it through her eyes as well. It staggered him, this new merging of their minds. He struggled for a moment, but she was there, willing him to see, to remember.

"I saw him," Vincent told her quietly. "I touched him. He was solid. He was tangible, real."

"As *I* am solid. As *I* am real." Vincent felt the touch of her hand as she stroked his hair. It was achingly familiar. Her arms came around his shoulders, and she leaned against his

back. "When you visited Narcissa to ask about Kristopher, what did she tell you, Vincent?" Catherine asked.

He stared at the painting for a moment, seeing in his mind the face of the thin, young man who had painted it. "Narcissa told me that spirits seek their own level, that there are chains that bind them. Chains such as love . . . and dreams." He turned within the circle of Catherine's arms, looking for answers in her shining eyes.

"Which of these binds *you*, Catherine?" he whispered, "Which keeps you here? Love or dreams?"

"A bit of both, and more," she told him. "My love for you has always gone beyond any limits, beyond any boundaries. The dreams I dreamed of sharing a happy life with you, those too, knew no boundaries. Not in *my* mind, not in *my* heart. Those dreams were real." She sighed, and the sadness in the sound pierced his heart. "I wanted those dreams so much, Vincent," she whispered. "I never let you know it because I knew how unhappy you already were, but I *wanted* those dreams."

Catherine stroked his cheek, and Vincent let her soft caress soothe them both. "Even now I have those dreams," she continued. "I still have that love. That hasn't changed." She paused, and he watched the flickering candlelight shadow the hollows of her face. "And I've found that sometimes dreams really *do* come true," she told him. "And I've learned, Vincent. Oh, how many things I've learned."

"What, Catherine? Tell me."

She shook her head. "It's hard to know what is memory and what isn't." She smiled shyly, stroking his face again, and continued. "I've learned many things you already knew, Vincent. And some things that were unknown even to you." She smiled, leaning forward to press a soft, sweet kiss against the skin her fingers had caressed. "But then, I thought you knew everything."

She rested her head on his chest, and Vincent savored the soft weight of her against him. "I know that we were meant to be," she told him. "I know that we have been before, that we were meant to be together in this life, and that we will be again."

She grew quiet and Vincent listened to her even breathing, rubbing his cheek against the silk of her hair. "What else have you learned?" he prompted.

"I'm bound to you through so many things, Vincent." She looked up, and love poured like a wellspring through his heart. "So many visions, dreams, needs, hopes - and so very much love." She paused, looking at him expectantly, and Vincent slowly leaned forward, his lips placing a gentle, healing kiss on hers. She smiled at him, and he felt in his heart that she knew how difficult it still was for him to touch her like this. "Do you remember that moment when I first pushed back the hood of your cloak and looked, really looked, into your eyes?"

"I'll never forget it, Catherine. That was the moment I began to live."

"Yes, Vincent. Just as it was the moment *I* began to live. We recognized each other - our souls, our spirits in each other's

eyes. You gave me courage, as you always had. As you had done so many times before."

"What other times, Catherine?"

"Times you cannot remember, love. Times long past." She leaned forward again, nuzzling his chin, and Vincent sensed that these little touches gave her strength, gave her the encouragement she needed to continue. Their eyes met and she smiled. Vincent felt the smile echo within him, like a mirror reflecting back the happiness he saw on her face. "Look at the painting again," Catherine told him. "What do you see?"

He turned his head, unwilling to leave the circle of her arms or discourage her touches. "I see the woman I love, held in my arms."

"Yes, and you see those arms holding me, sheltering me. You see me holding on to you, to your hands, even through those heavy gloves you wore to hide the hands I love. This is what Kristopher saw, Vincent. This is what Kristopher knew. 'I am large' he said, 'I contain multitudes'. I didn't understand, then, what he meant.

"But you and I are bound by so much more than what we shared in this life, even through our bond. You are empathic, Vincent. You sense things most men can only dream of. But with me, it was more than a sense." Vincent nodded, not trusting his voice. "You knew when I was sad," she continued softly, "you knew when I began to make changes in my life. And you came to me." She kissed his chin, and Vincent savored the velvet of her lips against his face. "I wasn't certain that I'd ever see you again," she told him. "When you came to my balcony,

when I saw you standing there . . . I had missed you so much, Vincent." She leaned her face against his, and he tightened his arms around her. "Did you know?" she asked.

"I knew," he answered softly. "I had tried to stay away, to let you find the courage that lay within you. But there was no way I could forget, no part of me that did not cry out to see you again. You had touched some deep part of me, Catherine, a part no one had ever touched before. It was as though a part of my soul had gone with you; had moved Above into the busy streets I dared not walk."

"He felt the sudden wetness of tears and knew that she was silently crying. "You were with me, Vincent," she told him. "When I walked down the street . . . sometimes I would look at a grate in the sidewalk and think to myself 'Vincent is Below - Vincent is safe.'" She hesitated, and he felt her kiss his wet cheek. "That first night on the balcony," she continued, "I wanted to stop time. I wanted to believe that what I was reading was true, that there wouldn't be another parting for us."

Vincent thought of that night, and how he had told her of their connection. "I loved you even then, Catherine," he confessed. "I loved you as I had never loved another human being. But I could feel your thoughts, the emotions running through your mind. You cared for me, yes, I knew that. But as a friend, as someone who had helped you through a terrible time. I saved your life, Catherine," he told her. "You were grateful."

"Gratitude," Catherine murmured, "such a mild word for what I felt about you that night." She burrowed closer and Vincent continued to stroke his hand lightly across her back. "I

had thought I would never see you again, yet there you were." He felt her smile, though behind the smile he caught a sense of some deep, lingering pain.

"And later," Catherine continued, her voice a soft whisper within the silent room, "you knew when I was in danger." She lifted her head, and Vincent was forced to look into the deep, troubled waters of her eyes. "So many times you saved my life, Vincent," she said, hesitantly. "So many times. How could you blame yourself for the *one* time when you could not save me?"

"I shall always regret that, Catherine," he said, feeling again the rage and helplessness he had felt during those moments high above the City. "No words of yours will change it," he told her. "Nothing you can explain, nothing you can say to me will ever change the helplessness of that time. Our bond was broken . . ."

"No," she cried, leaning back to place her hands firmly on his cheeks, forcing him to see the pleading in her eyes. "Our bond was *not* broken, only changed for a time - rearranged by the life within me. The moment Jacob was conceived, the bond between you was made. It was necessary." He saw her take a deep breath, and he waited; knowing there was more she needed to say.

"I didn't know at the time what was going to happen," she confessed. "And I'm still not certain of everything. But I do know that it doesn't matter. What happened in that cavern was meant to be. It was the only way I could bring you back to me. And I would do it again, Vincent. I would have done anything - anything. You were my life. You *are* my life."

Vincent stared at the woman in his arms, knowing . . . absolutely, that what she was saying was the truth. He saw it in her eyes, felt it through the bond that connected them. She had loved him enough to risk everything - everything.

"Don't you know that my love for you was never one of limits or boundaries?" Her hands tightened against his skin, as she softly kissed each corner of his mouth. "I need you to believe that, Vincent. There are no limits to our love. There are no boundaries.

"When I kissed you and you opened your eyes, there was no darkness; only our love, and your need to be healed." Her tongue skimmed across his lips, as though she would heal him again, now. "You needed to be healed, Vincent," she told him. "You needed to be loved. How could I not have loved you, healed you?" She opened her mouth against his, taking his breath and his lips for her own. Vincent reveled in the taste of her, surrendering himself to the wonder of her warmth.

Her kisses *did* heal him. They renewed his spirit, called forth all the light and life that had crept hurt and wounded into the dark corners of his heart. Vincent felt the strength of her love like a wonderful elixir, soothing him, reviving him, filling him, until there was no part of his soul not illuminated by her light.

"I had wanted you, all of you, for so long," Catherine murmured, her hands moving against his scalp. Vincent turned his head, rubbing against her hands, wanting more of her touch. "You were so hurt, so bruised. When you opened your eyes . . . that look in your eyes was my undoing, Vincent," she confessed. "Part of you was calling to me. And I answered. I answered in



the only way I could; with my kisses, with my body. I don't regret that. I could *never* regret that." Vincent saw tears, like luminescent jewels filling her eyes.

"I was afraid, Catherine," he whispered, holding her tightly against his chest. "I had those feelings, those needs you speak of. Surely, you know that. But to give in to those feelings, to lose myself in my desire. I saw only the darkness, Catherine, and I was certain it would destroy me, certain that I would hurt you and destroy our love. I could not take that risk."

"But there was no darkness with me, Vincent."

He shook off her gentle touch, drawing away from her, pulling back to clamp his hands firmly on her shoulders. "There was darkness, Catherine. You saw it! Time and again you saw the darkness of my being. You saw what that darkness could do!"

"I saw you protecting those you love, Vincent," she argued. "I saw you conquer that darkness, turn from it."

"Not in the end, Catherine! Paracelsus called forth that darkness, and it was there, inside me, waiting, yearning to be free, just as I had always feared."

"Paracelsus *made* you believe that the darkness had devoured you, Vincent. He made you doubt your humanity. But know this, Vincent. There was no darkness when we loved." She covered his hands with hers, gripping them tightly. "You were mine, Vincent!" The passion, the vehemence of her words shook him. "Our souls were linked long before you took this form, long before Father found and cared for you!"

"None of us is truly light or darkness. We are made of both; we *exist* in both. There is no day without night, Vincent. There is no night without day." He watched as she shook her head, and felt each breath, each tear, as she fought to calm herself.

"Do those here Below think you anything less than a man, Vincent?" She asked finally. "Do Mary or Pascal or William think less of you because you are different than they?"

"How can they?" He answered softly, "The proof that I am a man lies sleeping in that cradle."

"Jacob is *not* proof of your humanity. *You* are proof of your humanity. Open your heart," she demanded. "Open that incredible mind and listen to me.

"Jacob is proof of our love, of our dream. He is proof that our love gave life, not darkness. *You* - you are proof of your humanity, Vincent. Your caring, your loving nature, your love for me, for Father, Mary, for all those who live here." She pulled at one of his hands, drawing it away from her shoulder to rest on the warm skin above her heart. She held it there and Vincent felt each staccato beat echo through him.

"You once told me about a dream you had, a dream in which you had never been born. Do you remember?"

Vincent nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Almost of their own will, his clawed fingers were moving restlessly over her skin, drawing dangerously close to her breast. He forced himself to look into her eyes, to ignore the warmth of her flesh. But the

silkeness of her skin; skin he had only touched in dreams, beckoned to him.

"Was the world a better place without you, Vincent?" He heard Catherine ask. "Was my life a better life?" He shook his head. Her heartbeat thundered beneath his hand, and he felt himself drawn to that heartbeat, drawn to the womanly curve of her breast. "The world was *not* a better place," Catherine continued. "My life was only a shadow, a shade of what it could have been, what it was with you. How *could* you doubt your humanity after such a dream?"

Vincent shook his head, trying to focus on what she was saying. He heard her, but as if from a far distance. Her heartbeat was like thunder moving from her flesh to his. "It is in my nature to doubt, Catherine," he said, finally.

"Yes," she agreed, "just as it is in your nature to love. Doesn't your love exceed your doubt? No one could have loved me more than you, Vincent. No one. If I had never met you my life would have remained incomplete. *I* would have remained incomplete. You gave me strength, hope, courage."

"You would have found your way eventually, Catherine."

"Perhaps," she agreed, pressing against his searching hand. Her soft skin had grown warmer where he touched it, and he looked down in wonder at the contrast of golden fur on ivory flesh. "My way has changed, now," she whispered.

Vincent looked up, catching the subtle difference in her voice, in the cadence of that heartbeat beneath his fingers, in

the emotions that passed through the bond. "Yes," he agreed in a husky whisper, "many things have changed."

He felt the gentle touch of her hand, pressing his more firmly against her. "Not as much as you believe, Vincent," she whispered. "Not as much as you might think." She leaned forward, pressing her cheek against his.

Her face was wet with tears and Vincent could not help but kiss them away. She tasted of love, of hope. She moved her head slightly and their lips met. She tasted of passion and Vincent was intoxicated. He drank his fill, searching out the hidden caverns, reaching with his tongue into the depths of her mouth. He could drown in her!

Catherine's small hands pulled at his hair, bringing his body closer. Vincent felt his fingers slip beneath the soft fabric of her dress and he groaned, realizing the subtle change in texture was her nipple growing taut beneath his palm. He gasped for breath, tearing his lips away from her mouth, his hand away from her breast.

"Hold me," she pleaded, her breath like fire against his skin. "I'm real, Vincent. I exist." Her lips burned kisses into his neck, moving up his throat to the sensitive skin beneath his ears. He leaned back his head, as without thought he offered himself to her searching mouth. He folded her into his arms, holding her tightly. He had never dreamed, never imagined such pleasure. It took him beyond boundaries, beyond limits.

"I love you," she whispered, taunting his mouth with another kiss. "Accept that, Vincent. I love you as I have always loved you, as I *will* always love you. No matter what form you

take, no matter what form *I* take." She kissed him deeply, lingering as he had lingered. He lost all sense of time, any sense of being separate from her. After the kiss ended, she stayed locked in his arms, and he could feel her trembling.

"I am bound to you through so many dreams, through so much love. You must believe that," she said.

"I *do* believe that, Catherine. What I feel with you now is more than the bond we once shared, more than I could have ever hoped or dreamed for."

She lifted her face, and what Vincent saw in her eyes filled him with wonder and awe. "There is so much more we both dreamed, Vincent," she said, tracing the curve of his lips with her finger. "There is so much more we could share." He watched her eyes, radiant in the soft light of his chamber, and knew that no shadow of darkness would keep him from her.

"Our son is the symbol of our love, Vincent. He is the physical expression of that love." Catherine's hand caressed his cheek, gliding slowly up into his hair. "Jacob was conceived in love, in the love it took to bring you back to me," she whispered.

Vincent closed his eyes, luxuriating in her touch, losing himself in the pleasure she gave him. "But I need you to give me that love," she told him, "to *give* to me what I once took in desperation." The words were a whisper of breath against his mouth, and he both felt and heard her soft plea. "Make love to me, Vincent."



III

She felt his acceptance even before he started to speak and her joy was boundless. *At last!* The thought echoed from her heart to his and back again, making Catherine smile. *At last.*

Without hesitation she twined her arms around his neck and pulled him toward her, bringing his mouth to hers. Here were those lips that felt so right against hers, here was the warm cavern of his mouth, waiting for her tongue's exploration. He kissed her back, and there was nothing tentative in the way his mouth fit to hers, nothing restrained in the passion that melded them together. She felt radiant, aglow with an inner light that she knew he could feel as well as see.

Catherine was still unaccustomed to sharing their bond in this way, in being able to feel his response as deeply as he had always felt hers. It had started with only fleeting impressions; knowing where he was, that he was thinking of her. But it had grown over the months and she cherished it, knowing it was part of what enabled her to come back to him.

His hands moved across her shoulders and Catherine lowered her arms as her dress slid gently to her waist. His palms rubbed lightly across her naked back, lingering against her shoulder blades, taunting delicately up and down the length of

her spine. She trembled as he teased her with the backs of his fingers, the soft fur unbelievably erotic against her sensitive skin.

"Vincent," she whispered, as his hands explored the curve of her waist. "you're not being fair." She longed to touch him as freely as he was touching her. Wanted to explore, as he was exploring. He held her against his chest and the softness of his shirt rubbed against her breasts, making them ache.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. He leaned back, looking down, and Catherine watched as his blue eyes darkened with passion. He was watching the rise and fall of her breasts and she knew his delight in just being allowed to look at her.

"Touch me, Vincent," she pleaded. "Please touch me." He looked up and Catherine knew she had not needed to ask.

"For me, Catherine," he said softly, "this is our first time. Truly, our first time. It must be perfect. *I* must be perfect." He stood up slowly, watching her eyes as they followed his every movement. He felt her longing, her hunger. It burned brightly between them, shimmering through their bond.

"No one is nearer to perfection than you, Vincent," Catherine whispered. "Don't you know that? With all your doubts, with all your fears, you are still my Lancelot." She smiled and he knew that she remembered. "Yes, he was flawed, but he was still the greatest knight of all. Guinevere would not have had him change, just as I would not have *you* change."

Smiling, Vincent unlaced the quilted shirt he wore for sleeping and pulled it over his head. The leather pouch he always wore lay nestled in the hair covering his chest, and as he

slowly lowered his arms, Catherine reached out her hand, touching it.

"You have held all of our treasures alone, Vincent," she told him, stroking the soft leather. "We will hold them together now . . . you and I." The backs of her fingers touched his skin, and Vincent gasped. Her touch had the power to ignite him, arousing him until he wondered how it was his legs could still stand. The shirt fell to the floor as he reached up and removed the pouch from around his neck. He laid it reverently on the bookcase behind the bed before taking her wandering hand in his and pressing it harder against his heated skin.

Catherine smiled, watching him struggle to calm his breathing. She'd have to get used to it, this sharing of thought and sensation. Just knowing she aroused him, aroused her in turn. The spiral was endless, soaring above anything she had ever shared with him. She squeezed his hand and stood up, burying her face in the warmth of his chest.

The scent of leather and candles mixed erotically with the musk of his skin, and Catherine inhaled deeply. She moved her face slowly across the golden hair that covered him, amazed by its softness. She felt Vincent's hand slide across her back, bringing her even closer, and she held her breath. He was going too slowly, and it was beautiful torture.

"I love you, Vincent," she whispered.

"As I love you."

Catherine's tongue roamed freely across his chest, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. He felt himself harden, everywhere. Her tongue found and teased at one of his nipples, and his breath caught in his chest. Heat enveloped him, burning him, and he knew his self-control was rapidly slipping away.

With shaking hands he pushed down the dress that was still bunched at Catherine's waist, and it fell in a pool at her feet. She sat back on the bed, and he knelt before her, pulling off her boots as she ran her fingers lovingly through his hair. Her stockings were silk, and ended at the tops of her thighs. Between them, a tiny wisp of ivory satin beckoned to him, giving him only a glimpse of what lay beneath. Her beautiful breasts were bare in the candlelight.

Vincent took a long, shaky breath as he reached up to carefully pull down the first stocking. The sight of his clawed fingers against the fine silk stopped him. "They will tear, Catherine," he said raggedly. He raised his face, knowing she didn't need to see his eyes to understand, but wanting not to look again at the sight of those hands on her body.

"These are *my* hands," Catherine said, reaching down to take hold of the hands that were bringing him such pain. "These hands were meant for love, Vincent." She kissed his fingers one by one, holding tightly when she knew he wanted to draw away. "They have fed me, comforted me, protected me and loved me. They do the same for our son. I won't have you thinking that these hands are unworthy. They are beautiful. *You* are beautiful."

"Catherine . . . "

"I know what you're going to say, Vincent, and it doesn't matter. It never mattered." She filled her mind with images, with remembered touches and the unique feeling of unity she had felt only once before, with him. "These hands won't hurt me, Vincent," she promised. "These hands," she continued, laying her cheek against his fingers, "and this body, have given me the greatest pleasure I've ever known."

Catherine knew her thoughts had reached him when they came tumbling back to her in a wave of elation and joy. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes." She reached for him as he knelt before her on the rug, wanting to feel his arms around her, his mouth where his hands now roamed. "Let the touch of thy finger thrill my life's strings," she whispered, "and make the music thine and mine."

Vincent stood, his heart overflowing with love for the strength and the wonder of this small, gentle woman. She had accepted and used the bond to heal him, to show him how right it was for him to touch her, how totally she believed in the measureless boundaries of their dream.

He watched as she slowly lowered and removed each stocking. She made a game of it, flexing each leg, teasing when she realized the effect it was having on him. Vincent smiled and sent his own images through the bond - erotic images he had only dared to imagine in his dreams. He was pleased when he heard her gasp.

"I never knew," she whispered, removing the final bit of white silk from between her thighs. She wanted to be naked for him, to come to him with nothing between them but their love.

Vincent bent down and picked Catherine up in his arms as he knelt in the center of his bed. He held her tightly, feeling the warm press of her breasts against his chest as he held her close; not wanting to let her go. His mouth found the sensitive spot where her neck and shoulder met and he felt her wrap her legs around his waist, pushing herself against the heat pulsing beneath his thin, drawstring pants. Her head fell back, giving his mouth access to the sweet velvet of her throat and Vincent groaned, moving one hand down to cup the soft curve of her bottom against him.

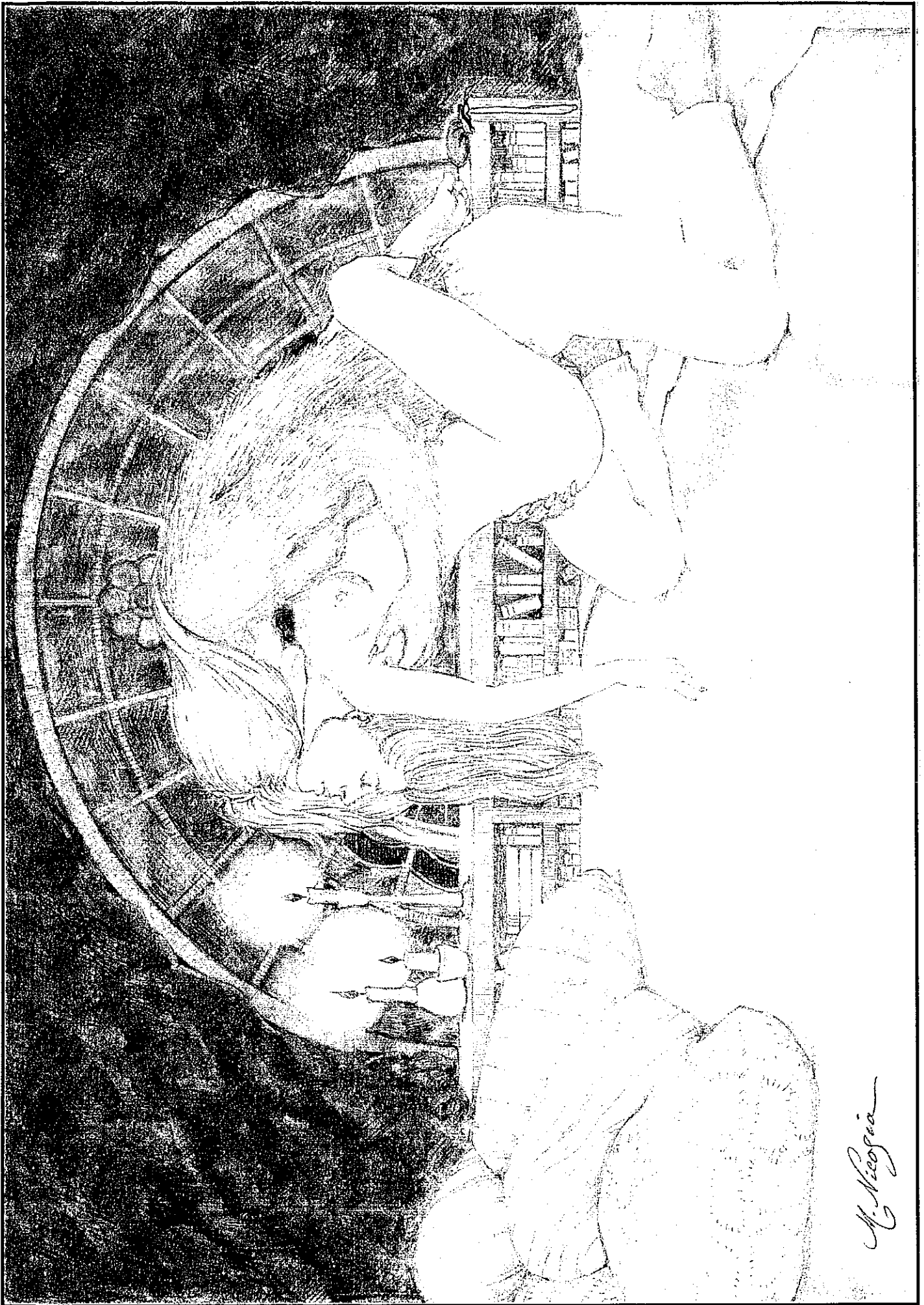
Catherine let herself go limp in his arms as he slowly lowered her to the sheets. He wanted her; wanted her with a desire he had never allowed himself feel before. Her legs tightened around him and he looked down into her smiling, green eyes.

"We didn't share the bond in the same way then, Vincent," she reminded him. "It was easier for you to have your secrets." He groaned as her lithe legs tightened around him and pleasure shot through his body.

"You have no secrets, now, Vincent," Catherine whispered.

"None at all," he huskily agreed. He looked deeply into her eyes and watched her smile widen as she slowly unwound her legs from around his waist. He moved back from her and with shaking fingers untied the drawstring waist on his pants and kicked them carelessly to the floor.

Catherine knew that if she looked at him forever, it would still not be enough. The beauty of him, the power of him, was almost beyond belief. He was a man, yet so much more than a



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man. His differences were not only outward, but of the soul as well. That such a splendid and beautiful soul should be contained in an equally magnificent body was only right.

"Catherine . . . "

She raised her gaze, forcing herself to look away from everything but his eyes. There were such promises in those eyes. "You *are* beautiful, Vincent," she said softly, knowing he had felt her thoughts. "You *are*." She held out her arms and he covered her naked body with his.

If he lived until the end of time, Vincent knew that he would never forget the moment when he first felt Catherine's naked body touch his - from breast to toe. He sucked in his breath, closing his eyes to let his other senses become aware of what he was experiencing: Velvet and silk, the softness of her breasts pressed against his chest, the warm, womanly scent of her skin, heady now with the unfamiliar scent of her arousal. Had his senses ever been this acute? She was in his mind as well, and he felt her there, like an ethereal glimmer of light on the edge of his consciousness.

Catherine had told him before that she thought him beautiful, but he hadn't been able to understand. He did now. To Catherine, all of him, truly *all* of him was beautiful. Just as all of her was beautiful to him.

He looked at her lying beneath him on the bed, waiting for him, wanting him. What he felt now, the totality of their bond, left no room for doubts.

"I love you, Catherine," Vincent said, moving within the warmth of her arms. "With my soul, with my heart, with my body . . . " He bent his head, taking her lips with exquisite care. Her mouth opened under his and he drowned in the taste. She was fire and light, and love in every color of the rainbow.

His hands could not be still. They skimmed across the satin of her shoulders, brushed lightly against her nipples, and slid down to the sensitive skin beneath her navel. With every touch, every caress, Vincent lost more of his control. His breathing grew harsh and his ears filled with the throbbing cadence of his heart.

Catherine explored, too. She delighted in the golden hair beneath her palms, cherished every part of him with her hands and with her mouth. His glorious hair fell like a shimmering curtain, teasing her flesh as he moved above her. She could no longer curb the wildness that was filling her. *Set it free, set it free!* Without conscious thought, she bit lightly at the straining cord in his neck, grazing it with her tongue to both soothe and excite.

"Catherine . . . "

Vincent closed his eyes, trying to find some semblance of control. She was his love, his mate, the twin soul that dared to break the infinite boundaries of existence. And he needed her more than the breath in his body.

Holding her in his arms, he turned to lay back against the pillows, bringing her with him, against him. He felt her smile and watched, dazed as she continued to touch him. She ran her hands down his chest and he took pleasure in her enjoyment of

him. Slowly, her fingers moved lower, testing the skin and soft hair above his hipbones. He trembled as her palms slid perilously close to the coarser hair between his legs, then clenched his teeth, gasping when her hands met at the juncture of his thighs. He bit his lip to keep from crying out as she discovered the different textures of him, her delicate fingers investigating the extent of his desire.

"Catherine," he groaned, unconsciously arching into her hands, "No more, please." His need was a pounding reality, the thunder of his heartbeat pulsing through him. His hands clenched in the quilt, twisting it between his fingers, pulling at it in his need.

Her hands were filled with him - the heat, the strength, the power sheathed in burnished satin. She caressed the many textures of him, exalting in the feel of him beneath her fingers. He groaned, and moved into her caress, sharing both the joy and the torment of his pleasure.

Desire burst like the light of a thousand candles through Vincent's mind. He clasped her hands and rolled over, pinning Catherine beneath him. She arched her back, bringing him against the cradle of her thighs, pressing her warmth against him. It was too much. It was not enough.

Rising to his knees, Vincent let go of her hands and sat back on his heels, taking a deep, gasping breath as his fingers slipped down her silken body to touch the soft curls between her thighs. His breath lodged somewhere in his chest as he watched the hands he had so often cursed, tenderly and delicately exploring the wonder and velvet of her.

"I love you, Catherine," he whispered, raising his head to look up into the lambent glow of her eyes. She smiled, and words were suddenly unimportant. Their bond, the connection that defied all logic, all infinity, permeated his soul.

He leaned forward, resting his forearms against the bed, as his tongue explored the subtle textures of her breasts. He suckled her, tasting the delicacy of her against his tongue, the beading of her nipple. Her body arched beneath him, pushing her breast against his lips and Vincent took more of her into his mouth, wanting to please her, to give to her everything. Her fingers clenched in his hair, and he slowly raised his head, allowing her to bring his mouth up for her kiss.

Catherine felt consumed, devoured by emotions that flooded her, drowned her in need. She opened her mouth more fully, dueling with his questing tongue. She wanted to be part of him, needed to be part of him.

Her hands moved down his body, pulling him forward until he kneeled again between her legs, closer, this time, to the intimate passage awaiting him. She clutched the back of his thighs, exploring and kneading the strength of his hard muscles.

Vincent rocked his hips forward and felt the erotic sting of Catherine's fingernails over his sensitized flesh. He gasped, moving again, touching for one delicious moment, the warmth of her.

"Vincent . . . " Catherine's body arched toward him, and for the briefest moment he remained poised above her, watching the changing lights and shadows of her face. He felt her heat, the welcoming dampness as her legs parted to invite him in.

"Now, Vincent . . . " she whispered, her tongue licking at the hollow of his neck, " . . . please . . . " Catherine's eyes looked up at him, incandescent and radiant with love.

"Forever, Catherine," he vowed, feeling the perfection and limitless beauty as he made them one. "All my life and forever."

Vincent had thought there could be no greater pleasure. He was wrong. She surrounded him, enclosed him in the velvet sheath of her body. He cried out, arching his back to go deeper, further than he thought his body could reach. Catherine wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him into the vivid brightness of her body and her soul.

He found her rhythm, his movements achingly slow, drawing out each descent - each retreat. He lowered his head, teasing her mouth, her neck, her breasts with the tip of his tongue. Catherine responded in kind, moving in counterpoint to the arching power of his thighs, licking at the tiny cleft in his lip.

Vincent's mind and body melded. He arched deeper, higher, reaching to the inner-most part of Catherine's being. Her hands reached for his, clutching at his shoulders and he knew the wondrous moment of her release. He felt her body tighten around him, seizing him in spasms that pulled him deeper. He watched her bite her lip to keep from crying out, and instantly his mouth covered hers, opening her lips, his tongue following the movements of his body as he lunged forward one long, last, incredible time.

His body shook with the intensity of his explosions. Nothing had prepared him for the power, the strength of such release. Vincent flung back his head, breaking off the kiss, and

cried out - his body demanding that he give voice to its liberation.

"Catherine!"



IV

He thought his heart would burst. It was so full; so full of joy - so full of love. Catherine had crossed unfathomable barriers, barriers of time and reality to share this with him, and the magnitude of her love left him humbled.

"Nothing, Catherine," he whispered, "no description I have ever read . . . could begin to describe what we just shared." He lay upon her breast still, waiting for his trembling body to gain enough strength to move.

"There has never *been* anything like what we just had, Vincent," she told him softly. "How could anyone else put into words what only we have shared?" She turned her face, kissing the clawed fingers entwined with hers.

Vincent raised his head and looked deeply into Catherine's eyes. He was still within her, the sensation so extraordinarily beautiful that no words were possible. He saw a reflection of those feelings in her face, in the warm, sparkling depths of her eyes. She smiled and in the soft glow of the candles, Vincent acknowledged that she was his light; had been his light from the moment their eyes first met. The darkness was powerless before her love.

"You always knew," he said in wonder, lifting himself onto his forearms. He bathed her face with soft, sweet kisses, feasting on the taste of her. This night was a journey for his

senses, taking him down unimagined paths. There were several yet he wanted to explore.

"I trusted in your love, Vincent," she told him. "Your love holds no darkness for me." She turned her lips to his, pleading silently for a kiss. He licked gently across her bottom lip, then shared his mouth with her, kissing her deeply; looking for tenderness within the passion.

Catherine shared in that tenderness, knowing he still needed to heal. Even through his kiss she felt the doubts that still plagued him, the thought that somehow, this time with her was only a very vivid dream.

She knew that his gift to her, the gift of his body, freely given, had begun a chain of events that would change his life forever. Parts of her memories were still nebulous; vague and indistinct images. But one thought, one image stood out from all the rest: She was his, had *always* been his; through lives too numerous to remember, through times too ageless to measure. And now that love had brought them a second chance; a chance that could bring them the life they were always meant to have - together. But nothing was certain. And even second chances were tied by innumerable strings.

When the kiss ended, Vincent moved to lay beside her. He felt a faint glimmer of uneasiness within Catherine's mind and wondered if he had in some way hurt her. He had wanted to be gentle, but in his passion and the rush of his desire, he had lost all sense of caution.

"You didn't hurt me, Vincent," Catherine said softly, moving as she had always done, into the niche against his

shoulder. It was different now, of course, and Vincent smiled, remembering all the times he had only dared to dream of her naked like this in his arms. Before, he had needed to be content with holding her through layers of cotton and wool, of envisioning the silkiness of her skin, but never really feeling it. Now, the scent of her filled him, the softness of her hair tickled against his chin, and against his naked chest.

He allowed himself the freedom to stroke along her side from waist to knee, awed by the velvet softness of her skin. Against the winter roughness of his palm she was the tranquil breeze of a summer's day. Light always, to his darkness.

His hand moved cautiously inward, investigating the delicate skin above the place where her thighs met. He marveled that this small place had once held his child.

"Thank you for our son, Catherine," he said quietly, looking up as his palm covered the delicacy of her. "I only wish . . ."

"Yes," she whispered, "I know." For a long moment, he felt silence, like a cleansing benediction, surround them. "I have regrets, Vincent," Catherine told him, holding tightly to the strength she found in his arms. "But I regret nothing so much as not telling you about our baby."

Vincent kissed her hair, resting his cheek against its softness. "Why didn't you tell me, Catherine?" he asked. "I have asked myself that question time and again, but have never found an answer." Vincent felt her reluctance, her doubt. An outpouring of emotions washed over him, confusing and

concerning him with their intensity. "Were you ashamed of having loved me, Catherine?"

Catherine turned quickly in his arms, framing his beautiful face with her hands. "No, Vincent," she cried, "Never." She kissed him, giving him her love, her memories with her lips. They were beautiful memories, ethereal and otherworldly, meant to soothe and to heal. Surely, he could feel that she had never been ashamed of loving him, that it was love which had called her back to him.

"I tried to tell you, Vincent," she began, watching the hidden shadows behind his eyes, stroking the furrow between his arching brows. "I almost *did* tell you." She paused, looking for the right words. Emotions alone would not do here. He was still so fragile, still so unaware of his own humanity.

"When I first found out about our child, I was stunned," Catherine began. "I had never imagined, never dreamed that something so miraculous could happen. I remember going up to the maternity ward of the hospital, just to look at the babies behind the glass. Your child, I thought, Vincent's child is growing within me." His arms tightened around her and Catherine kissed him softly on the lips before resting her head once again in the curve of his shoulder.

"I wanted so much to share that with you, Vincent. I was determined to tell you."

"Why did you change your mind, Catherine?" he asked softly. He shared her pain, felt her pain, through the bond, and it was all for him. Her disquiet, her sorrow, was for the pain she

had brought to him. He stroked her hair, imparting forgiveness, though there was nothing to forgive.

What could she say that would not hurt him? She pressed her lips against his chest, surrounding herself in his scent, in the warmth that had always been her security. "When I came down that night you were so upset," she raised her face, letting him see as well as feel the honesty of her answer. "I found you sitting here, and at first you wouldn't even look at me. You didn't even want to talk to me.

"You kept telling me that you should have felt my presence, should have *known* I was coming, rather than having the sentry bring word. You felt so guilty because our bond had been lost to you." Catherine realized that her tears were falling only when Vincent reached out, using his hair like a handkerchief to wipe them away. The gentleness of the gesture made her cry even more.

"Oh, please, Vincent," she moaned, "don't look at me like that. Don't you understand? It wasn't your fault the bond was lost to you, it was *my* fault. It was my fault and you blamed yourself. You were so hurt, so alone. Even without our bond, I could feel your pain like a living thing inside my heart." Catherine took a deep, shaky breath, gathering her strength to continue.

"I told you . . . there were other gifts . . . that perhaps the bond would return." She reached up to kiss his cheek, tasting the salt of his tears mixing with hers. "Please, don't cry," she whispered. "I wanted so much to tell you about the child our love had created," she whispered. "But what I had taken, I had taken without your consent, without your knowledge. You didn't

remember, Vincent. At first, you didn't even remember my name. How could I tell you that when I took your love, when I took what you should have been able to give freely, willingly . . . call it innocence, or what you will; when I took that from you, and Jacob was conceived, the bond went to him."

"But, Catherine, you could not have known that. Even I did not realize the bond I had with Jacob until the moment of his birth. I only knew that some part of my soul had been torn away from me, that something very rare and very precious between us was lost."

"I *didn't* know about your bond with Jacob, Vincent," she said, "not then. That knowledge came . . . later. I only knew that I had caused you pain. You were hurting terribly, and I knew that in some way it was connected to what I had done, what I had taken. I couldn't tell you about the baby then, Vincent, I just couldn't." She hid her face against his chest, finding reassurance in the beating of his heart beneath her ear.

"You are my love, Catherine," Vincent said, kissing away the rest of her tears, "And you have given me a beautiful son." He held the back of her head with his hand, lifting her tear-streaked face to receive his kiss. "You gave me light and life when I knew only darkness. You shared dreams I never dared to dream alone." He found the warm softness of her mouth and explored it, tenderly, gently, arousing her through slow, languorous touches. He would heal her, soothe her, as she had once healed him.

Turning to his side, Vincent reached out his other hand to stroke Catherine's leg, letting just the edge of one clawed finger tease the inside of her thigh. Her flesh was velvet; warm and

soft beneath his caress. She caught her breath and he smiled as her leg moved restlessly under his hand. He shifted her, lifting her leg to let it rest across his hip, as he stroked slowly across her hipbone to the delicate skin below.

"Vincent?" Her voice was hardly above a whisper, husky with want and need. The sound pleased him, making him lean down and lick her neck, ending his taste of her at the hollow behind her ear. Her body trembled, and she wove her hands through his hair. He could feel her urgency, her desire growing with every touch.

"Yes, my love," he whispered, teasing her thigh again. She opened for him, warm and wondrous and wet. Slowly, cautiously, Vincent caressed her with the back of his fingers, feeling her dampness against his golden fur. She arched against him, and he deepened the caress, savoring her sweet softness. Her low moan made him tremble.

Catherine was his light, his beacon; burning before him always, illuminating his darkness. He kissed her ear, delicately testing the rim with his tongue. She turned her head, her mouth open and seeking. His lips were there to meet her, his tongue teasing hers; then plunging into her sweetness, showing her how they would soon be joined. Vincent's caressing hand stroked across her navel, then traveled higher to taunt the peak of her breast. He moved closer, his thighs pressing against hers.

Vincent!

Her cry soared across the bond, surrounding him with her love at the very moment he surrounded himself in the heat of her body. Vincent groaned, unable to keep silent within the

welcoming incandescence that was Catherine. They were one. Nothing, no one, would separate them again.

Vincent recognized the difference in this joining. There was no frantic rush of sensation, no tumultuous yearning toward something yet unknown. He savored the silkiness of her, leisurely explored the variances of taste and texture beneath his hands and mouth.

"Look at me, Catherine," Vincent whispered, moving gently within her. "Open your eyes."

Her eyelids fluttered as he watched her obey. Her eyes were almost black, their green depths aroused beyond measure. "I love you, Catherine," Vincent whispered. He moved again, and each movement was delicate, precise, each touch exquisite and tender. He took them slowly, softly, toward their completion, and saw his joy reflected in Catherine's eyes when they lay shaking and satisfied in each others arms.

"I love you, Catherine," he whispered.

"As I love you."

He kissed her still-trembling lips. Tiny pulses, like after-shocks, quivered through her body. Vincent closed his eyes, feeling them all the more. Their bodies and minds met and converged on levels he was only just beginning to comprehend. It was different, now, his bond with Catherine. Somehow he felt that she was a part of him, truly a part of both his mind and his soul; a part that he could never lose.

He held Catherine tightly in his arms, wanting - more than anything - to stay, exactly like this, until morning. The gentle touch of her hands soothed and calmed him as they traveled across his back. His eyes closed as languor stole over him, covering him like a blanket of love. At the edges of his mind, he heard Catherine's voice, like an illusive lullaby.

"Sleep and I'll be still as another sleeper,
holding you in my arms, glad that you lie so near at
last.

This sheltering midnight is our meeting place,
no passion or despair or hope divide me from your
side.

I shall remember firelight on your sleeping face.
I shall remember shadows growing deeper as the fire
fell to ashes and the minutes passed."

Vincent smiled, and lying in his lover's arms, drifted into
sleep.



V

"I never should have left him, Narcissa," Catherine said, sipping on the steaming brew the older woman had set before her. "He'll think my being there was nothing more than a dream." She set the cup down on the cluttered table and shook her head. "I never should have left."

"And what would you have done when the Father walked in to find out why his son was sleeping so late, hmmm?" Narcissa asked, bending over the table to pick up a small bag of herbs lying near Catherine's arm. "There are few doors in the Home Chambers," she reminded her. "And the Father . . . well, he's used to having his way. That is his domain, child. And Vincent is his son."

Catherine ran her finger around the rim of the heavy, chipped cup. It was obviously hand-made, for the edges were not quite round and rim not quite level. A miniature moon and stars had been carefully sculpted into the clay before it was fired, making it perfect for the world in which Narcissa lived. She picked it up in both hands and smiled. "Vincent made this for you, didn't he?"

She heard the woman beside her chuckle and felt a warm, comforting hand on her shoulder. "Many years ago," she said, "when he was a boy looking for answers. He would come to me and we would speak of things. Much as you and I are doing now."

Catherine sighed. "He's not a boy any longer, Narcissa," she said, her fingers tightening around the heavy mug. "He has a son of his own now."

"Yes," the older woman quietly agreed. "A son he fought a devil from Hell to find, a son he would have died for." The hand on her shoulder tightened, and Catherine looked up into the clouded eyes that she knew saw so much more than the rest of the world.

"You have always been a symbol of the daylight to Vincent, Catherine," Narcissa told her. "You could walk in the sunshine, see the things he dared not see. If he kept a part of himself from you, child, it was only because he thought he had to protect you from the darkness."

"But there is so much light in Vincent," Catherine said. "He is so gentle, so beautiful. How could he think that any part of him could be repulsive to me?"

Narcissa started to move away, but Catherine caught her hand, holding it tightly between both of hers. "I love him, Narcissa," she said, her voice heavy with concern. "I have always loved him. When I look at Vincent I see only the man I love; not some monster, not some beast who can tear a man to pieces. Why can't others see him as I do?"

"It is because you *do* love him," Narcissa said, shaking her head, "that you see into Vincent's gentle soul. You love him. And you have accepted him for what he is in this life; who he is in this life. But not everyone sees Vincent through your eyes, child. To some, he is a force to be controlled. He is a man, yes, when he has himself under control. But when the darkness

comes upon him, when he can no longer control the rage and the anger that tear at his soul, he becomes something to be feared." She sighed, and the sound swept through Catherine like a chilling wind.

"Vincent has more control than any man I've ever met, Narcissa," Catherine told her softly. "We were in love, deeply in love." She gazed away from her companion, looking instead into the flames flickering from the dozens of candles around the room. "I wanted him, Narcissa," she continued, her voice hardly a whisper above the raging of the winds outside the chamber. "I wanted him as a woman wants the man she loves; all of him." She sighed, feeling the tears which welled up behind her eyes. "I fought so hard with myself," she continued. "I knew he was afraid, and I didn't know how to get past that fear."

"So you tried to block these feeling from your mind."

"Yes. I tried to tell myself that I should be content with what we had, with the love I knew he felt for me. But God, there were nights . . . nights when I would have to leave him, or beg him to make love to me." Her voice faded away into the night and the hissing of the wind through the rock walls.

"You did what you thought best, child," Narcissa told her. "And the past is only an echo of what will be. You have seen that. You have seen what few people are allowed to see. And now you have the chance to begin again. Vincent gave you the gift, freely, of his own will. You have told me this. The winds of your fate and Vincent's are in motion. It will be up to him to find his way, Catherine. You have done what you can."

"But will it be enough?" she asked hesitantly. "You've tried to explain these things to me, and I'm grateful beyond measure. But even I don't know what's in store for us. How can I help Vincent to believe, when I don't know myself what's gong to happen?"

Catherine felt the old woman's arms go around her and she was instantly enveloped in the smells of patchouli and sandalwood and the warmth of timeless wisdom. In Narcissa's embrace she found acceptance, and a quietude that stilled all of her unanswered questions.

"You will find your way, child," Narcissa reassured her. "Just as Vincent will find his."

Catherine sighed and rested her head on the older woman's ample bosom. "I've been reading that book you gave me yesterday," she said simply. "I sat beneath the falls and thought about all the changes, all the little things I let pass by before." She lifted her head and smiled, kissing Narcissa's cheek. "*Fireflies* is a wonderful book. Thank you."

"Clouds are hills in vapour, hills are clouds in stone,- a phantasy in time's dream."

"Perhaps that's what we all are, Narcissa," Catherine said. "Just "a phantasy in time's dream."

"Vincent needs that dream, child. And he needs you to make it come true. A gift like this is a rare and precious thing. It should not be wasted."

"It won't be," Catherine assured her. "I won't let it."



VI

Voices . . . murmurs . . . the pipes. The sounds of early morning penetrated his sleep, waking him slowly, bringing him gently into the new day.

He turned on the pillows, reaching to pull Catherine back into the warmth of his arms. The elusive scent of her enticed him and he opened his eyes. *No!*

Vincent sat up instantly, looking with desperation around the chamber for a sign that Catherine had not gone. Except for her scent, and the faint trace of her in his mind, there was nothing to show that she had ever been there. *No!*

He closed his eyes, focusing his mind, searching for her through their bond. He could feel her near him, as he had for the past few weeks, but nothing as strong as what he had experienced last night. Why had she gone? How could she have left him?

Another presence intruded into Vincent's thoughts, demanding to be acknowledged and fed. Vincent opened his eyes and looked down at his son. He smiled, knowing that the serenity passing through his mind originated with Jacob.

"Are you saying that I should not worry?" he asked, tossing aside the blankets and quilt. When the cool air of the chamber hit him, Vincent realized he was totally naked. Surely then, Catherine had not been simply a vision sent to taunt him in the night. "Do you, perhaps, know something that I do not?"

He had had dreams of her before; dark dreams that left him shaking and empty when he awoke. This had been more

than a dream, more than a vision. She had been real. He had touched her, kissed her, held her warmth and softness in his hands, felt her body enclosing him.

"If it was a dream, Jacob," he murmured, pulling on the pants he found discarded on the floor, "it was a dream such as I have never had."

Vincent gathered the clothes he and Jacob would need, feeling his son's eyes on him as he moved around the room. Unlike other babies Vincent knew, Jacob seldom cried or fussed when he was hungry or wet. Vincent sensed that he waited patiently for his father to take care of him, secure in the knowledge that as long as Vincent was near, all would be well.

It awed him; this total trust. From the moment he had first looked into the calm, dark eyes of his son, Vincent had known the absolute certainty of his child's love. He would cherish that love, nurture it, just as he would cherish and nurture the astonishing intellect behind it. Vincent knew he was only beginning to discover the wonder of his son.

"Ready for your bath?" he asked. Tucking their clothes under one arm, he picked Jacob up and carried him down to the small bathing chamber he and Father shared. The pool had existed as long as Vincent could remember, fed by the same underground stream that swirled through the Chamber of the Falls and the Mirror Pool.

Additions to the room had been added over the years; shelves carved into the rock walls, crude but efficient plumbing added. But the pool itself remained unchanged. To Vincent,



the quiet water had become a haven, a place to share an undisturbed moment each morning with his son.

Jacob wiggled within the confines of his arms and Vincent could feel the baby's impatience. "In a moment, Jacob," he chided, "Have patience."

He let their clothes drop onto the roughhewn bench next to the pool and laid Jacob down beside them. "Patience," he repeated softly, removing his son's pajamas and diaper as the baby kicked his legs in an attempt to help. It was more hindrance than help, but Vincent smiled, enjoying the sight.

When Jacob was undressed, Vincent spread a towel on the floor for him and laid the baby on his stomach. He undressed quickly, watching Jacob all the while. Although his crawling was still rather limited, it would not have surprised Vincent to see Jacob diving into the water. Playing in water was something his son loved best.

As soon as he was undressed, Vincent picked Jacob up and walked with him into the shallow pool. He sat on the bottom, letting the water swirl around him. It was only a few inches higher than his waist and with Jacob held firmly in both his hands, Vincent leaned back against the rock ledge.

Jacob's arms curled around his father's neck, as Vincent stretched out in the confines of the pool. There was more than enough room for him to sit comfortably with the baby. "Happy now?" Jacob slapped at the water, joyfully splashing his father's face. Vincent chuckled, nuzzling his wet chin against his son's fuzzy head as he used a washcloth to gently wipe behind the tiny

ears. Holding this small miracle in his hands never failed to move him.

"Your mother would enjoy this," he said softly, kissing his son's wet cheek. Vincent could easily picture Catherine sitting in this pool with them. Jacob splashed again, this time pulling at the wet hair on his father's chest. Vincent sensed the fleeting thought that flew at him through their bond and laughed aloud.

"No?" He raised his son above his head, catching the drops that slid from Jacob's small feet onto his tongue. "Perhaps you're right," he agreed, thinking about the way Catherine had felt in his arms. "If your mother joined us in this pool, bathing would no longer be uppermost in my mind."

Vincent lowered his arms and kissed Jacob's cheek. His son's small hands tried to grab the washcloth as he finished the baby's bath, but Vincent knew there was little time for play this morning, and would not let the cloth be caught by the chubby fingers.

"We have a long way to go," he said, carrying Jacob from the pool and reaching for a towel. "Narcissa's chamber is far, and we must pack what you will need for the journey." He wrapped Jacob in the towel, and held him close to his chest.

"We *must* do this, Jacob," he said as he rubbed the towel against his son's small body. "I must have answers that Father cannot give me." He sighed, and looked into the trusting innocence of his son's eyes.

"What am I to tell him, Jacob?" Vincent whispered, hoping for some kind of an answer. Love, like the ripples in the

pool, swirled across his heart. He kissed his son's head, his lips lingering in the softness of Jacob's hair. "Somehow," he sighed, "I do not think Father will understand."



"No! Absolutely not! It is out of the question."

"Father . . . " Vincent watched from his place at the small table as his father paced awkwardly around the small confines of their shared kitchen.

"How can you consider taking Jacob on such a foolhardy journey? I will not permit it!"

Vincent allowed himself a small smile at his son as he offered him another spoonful of oatmeal. Jacob returned the smile, smacking his lips greedily as he gummed his breakfast. He was tucked firmly into the little seat Jamie and Cullen had fashioned for him. It had just enough room for comfort without allowing him to tip over and it fit perfectly on the small table.

"Father, I do not need to ask your permission," Vincent said calmly. "Jacob is my son."

He watched as Father scowled and sat back down. Vincent felt an unfamiliar sensation through the bond and turned just in time to see his son spew oatmeal in the general direction of Father's chair. As much as he tried, Vincent could not completely hide his laughter.

"I believe Jacob agrees with me, Father."

"That much is obvious, Vincent, even to me."

Vincent wiped the oatmeal from the table, as he silently sent a soft rebuke to his well-meaning son. The baby blew through his lips, letting what was left of his cereal drip down his chin. Vincent used Jacob's bib to wipe it away, then fed him another spoonful; confident that this one would remain in place.

"It was, however," Father said, "a succinct way to make his point." He sighed and Vincent knew the argument was over. "I *do* worry about the both of you, Vincent," Father said, leaning across the table to take his grandson's small hand. "Narcissa's chamber is so far, so many things might happen."

"Father, I understand your concern." Vincent covered both Father's hand and Jacob's with his. "It is concern born of love. They do not love that do not show their love."

"I taught you all too well," Father sighed, as Vincent let go of his hand. "You use my teachings as arguments against me." He took a long sip of his tea and reached for another of William's dried-apple muffins. "However, I had intended to speak to you this morning, Vincent," he continued, taking a bite of the muffin.

"I surmised as much, Father. You don't often have my favorite breakfast waiting for me when I awaken."

Vincent smiled and fed his son the last bite of oatmeal. Father viewed hot cereal as little more than 'gruel' and would not eat it. Finding a pan warming on the stove, the canned milk

and honey he liked waiting on the table, had told Vincent without words that Father had something on his mind.

He had hoped to waylay the discussion by speaking of his journey to Narcissa. Now, of course, that was not to be. He decided to spare Father the embarrassment of asking the question he knew was uppermost in his mind.

"Thank you for breakfast, Father," Vincent began, watching the replete smile on his son's face as the baby yawned and turned his head against the softness of his chair. Vincent smiled and Jacob smacked his lips, his eyelids already drooping. "I'm sorry we were so late, but my night was rather . . . restless."

Father cleared his throat. "Yes, I heard you cry out."

Vincent's smile was only in his heart. *So, that, at least, had been real.*

"Was this nightmare as bad as the others, Vincent?" Father's hand covered his shoulder, squeezing slightly to offer comfort. "I remembered what you told me, that you wished to be left alone at such times, but it was very difficult for me not to come to you."

Vincent covered Father's hand with his, but did not look up. What could he say? What was the truth? Should he confess to the vision? *Was it only a vision?* Could a vision bring such joy? Could a vision feel so warm, so alive?

"My sleep was restless, but there was no nightmare, Father," he said, honestly. He thought of the many nights he had awakened, crying and alone, his need for her tearing at his

soul. "' . . in sleep we are united at the heart of night and darkness, and we are strange and beautiful asleep.'

"Catherine lives within me, Father," he said softly. "She is part of everything I am, everything I ever hope to be."

Vincent looked at his sleeping son, and thought of all the things Catherine had told him. If he believed, truly believed that she was with him, would always be with him, what endless possibilities did the future hold?

Vincent smiled and looked up at his father. "I see Catherine when I look at our son," he said. "She is a part of us both. Every moment, every memory of her is etched inside my soul. She will never leave me." He closed his eyes, seeing again the moment when he had held her, naked, in his arms.

"There was a book," Father said, interrupting Vincent's erotic vision. "I can't remember who wrote it, or where it came from, but I remember someone loaning it to me once, very long ago." Father shook his head and the smile on his face was wistful, as though his thoughts had drifted back in time. "The butterfly counts not months, but moments," he quoted softly, "'and has time enough."

"Perhaps," Vincent answered quietly, "but the butterfly is first a caterpillar, Father, and so lives more than once."

In the silence, that followed, Vincent realized the truth of his words. They had come, unbidden, to his tongue. He smiled, and through his bond with Catherine, felt her smile, too.

"We will be leaving as soon as I get these things cleared away," he said, gathering their empty bowls and spoons.

"Leave them, Vincent," Father told him. "The sooner you leave, the sooner you will return. I will take care of these."

Vincent stood and picked up the backpack he used when he and the baby went on longer excursions. It was already filled with what they would need. Vincent adjusted the straps on Jacob's 'kangaroo pouch', securing it tightly across his chest and shoulders. He then slipped the backpack on, setting the weight firmly into place behind him.

Narcissa would know. She would tell him the truth of his vision. "Jacob and I will be gone the entire day, Father," he said, gently lifting his son from his seat. "Do not look for us until after the evening meal." He placed the sleeping child into his 'pouch', taking a moment to place a gentle kiss on Jacob's cheek.

"I am still not reconciled to this, Vincent," Father admonished. "If this journey has something to do with your dream . . . "

Vincent leaned down to kiss away his father's frown. "Please, trust me in this, Father," he said.

"But, what do you expect to find there, Vincent?"

"A butterfly, Father. A beautiful butterfly."



VII

Vincent walked unhurriedly through the main tunnels. Theirs was a close community. There were no strangers here. Everyone around him had shared, not only in the joy of his parenthood, but in the grievous loss of Catherine. When he could not, they had gone above to mourn in his place. And when Jacob was returned safely home, they had rejoiced with him, joining to welcome Jacob into their world.

He saw the smiles and waves directed his way as he proceeded through the busier tunnels toward the lower levels. Vincent answered in kind, sensing that some of them longed to travel, if only vicariously, with the adventurous father and son. He wondered what some of them would think if he told them of Catherine's visit. He smiled. They would probably believe him mad.

Vincent searched his mind for something Father had once told him. What was it? He tried to remember the quotation as he entered the Whispering Gallery. It had become a game of sorts, his trying to best Father's literary knowledge. Father was far too well read to be threatened, but Vincent had heard him say that their contests kept his mind sharp and agile. Yes, that was it!

"There is pleasure sure in being mad, which none but madmen know."

Vincent stopped in the middle of the bridge. Yes, he would surely be thought a madman. He put his hands on the rope railing and looked out into the endless colors and textures of the cavern. *Ah, but such a happy madman.*

He listened to the echo of voices whispering through the enormous chamber. Did Catherine's voice whisper as one of these? Had she been nothing more than a shade, a memory? He closed his eyes, focusing on her presence, the awareness of her that was growing stronger as each hour passed. No, there was more here than simply memory. No memory had ever felt so warm, tasted so sweet, or loved with such passion. No memory had ever touched him until his body shattered into a thousand pieces, only to be reformed and made whole again in Catherine's light.

He pushed away from the railing, taking a deep breath as he passed across the bridge. Catherine's voice was not an echo, nor a fragment passing through his mind. Catherine's voice was love, calling to him through limitless boundaries; breaking those boundaries to set them both free. He must believe that. He must, or surely he *would* go mad.

Vincent felt the tiny foot that kicked him lightly in the ribs. "Yes, Jacob," he said, looking down at the wide eyes of his son. "You are correct. We should be going." He smiled and patted Jacob's well-cushioned bottom through the carrier. "It is still quite a distance."

He walked on, watching the way Jacob's eyes gazed in wonder at the world around him. The tunnels here were dimly lit, but the baby did not seem to notice. There was nothing to suggest that Jacob's sight was not every bit as good as his.

Vincent was pleased to think that his son might have inherited something from him other than his empathic gift. Good eyesight was so . . . ordinary. He smiled, turning toward the narrower passageway that led to the lower levels. The light almost disappeared for part of the way through this particular tunnel, but Vincent could still make out every crevice and rock on the stone walls beside him. Variegated patterns colored his journey with wondrous shades of grey.

He smiled and stroked his son's head. "Well, perhaps 'ordinary' is not quite the right word."

The narrow passage widened after a while, and bands of opalescent light shimmered around them. Vincent felt the changing patterns of the air as it danced past their faces, racing its way to the Chamber of the Winds. He laughed aloud and felt the answering delight from his son. They were almost there.

Vincent had played often in the Chamber of the Winds as a child, and knew the way well. He had loved the wildness of the winds, the way they whipped his hair around his face, the fierceness of their whistles as they flew by him on their quests toward the unknown. He had always thought that somehow the winds spoke to Narcissa; that they told her of wondrous journeys and fantastic realms only the winds could see.

As they entered the fantastic chamber, Vincent held his hand firmly over the back of the knitted hood covering Jacob's small head. The winds were more than wild here, they were primordial. They shrieked through the antediluvian gallery like a thousand banshees haunting the night.



Vincent knew that Jacob felt no fear of the shrieking madness around them. Catherine had called him an old soul, a remarkable child. As they passed through the howling chamber into the outer passages leading to Narcissa's home, he thought of what she might have meant by those words.

His education had been extensive and varied, encompassing almost every subject. No son could have had a better teacher in Father. But Narcissa's knowledge was of magic and of spirits, those questions not answered in Father's scholarly texts. He would not count the journey far if some of his questions could be answered.

"Ah, Vincent, welcome."

Vincent entered Narcissa's chamber cautiously, since he could never be certain of what he would find. At times, her chamber was home for a myriad of candles, their lights throwing thousands of crooked shadows against rock-hewn walls. At other times, it was much like the home chambers where the rest of the community dwelt. But always it held a sense of otherworldliness, as though through her chimerical visions, Narcissa allowed the worlds of light and darkness to blend. Here, it was always Samhain. Here the *sidh* and mortal man dwelt together.

"And you have brought little Jacob. Come in, child. Sit." Vincent removed the backpack and sat in the large, straight-backed chair Narcissa gestured to. "I have made some tea," she told him, moving to the other side of the room. "Some teas heal, Vincent," she said, "like the Father's medicine. Other's are meant to soothe. My tea will soothe you, child."

Vincent loosened the carrier, and pushed back Jacob's hood, allowing him to look around. He could feel the delight in his son's new discoveries and he shared them with him as he waited for the tea. The scent of patchouli and sandalwood permeated the air. This close to the wild winds, more lingering scents flew quickly into oblivion.

Vincent thought the table beside him might once have served as Narcissa's dining table, though now, wooden bowls and bottles of every shape and size covered nearly the entire surface. Some looked to be filled with aromatic herbs, some with rocks and crystals, and some with mixtures Vincent could not readily identify.

One crystal in particular caught Vincent's eye. It was shaped nearly the same as the one he had given Catherine. She had worn it always, treasured it, as she had said she would. It was part of his world, a part of him, and it had been hers.

He had found it, lying in the dirt, as he fought with his dark beast in the cavern where Catherine had saved him. He remembered the vision; Catherine's voice, reminding him of his son. How many times before had he heard her? How many times since had he felt her presence, like a shadow, just beyond the candle flame?

The necklace lay, as did his rose, in the leather pouch around his neck. Catherine had touched the pouch, caressed the gift she had made and given him. She had told him that they would hold all their treasures together now. What did she mean? Was this her promise never to leave him?

"Narcissa," Vincent began, no longer having the patience for the dictates of politeness, "something extraordinary has . . ."

"I know why you have come, child." Narcissa looked down at him through eyes that Vincent knew saw things the rest of the world never imagined. She placed a cup of steaming tea in front of him, and sat on a high, cushioned stool beside him. "Drink, Vincent," she said, chuckling. "It is not only the Father who enjoys his tea."

"You expected me?" Vincent sipped warily at the pungent brew. Its flavor was as unexpected as Narcissa's words. He smiled, recognizing the cup he had made for her so very long ago. For some reason, today it reminded him of Catherine. And the stars he had carefully carved into the clay seemed to shimmer in front of his eyes. But Narcissa's chamber did that to him sometimes; making the real world seem far away and the world of shadow-light and elf-light seem somehow natural.

"Why of course, child. Who else would you come to for answers to those questions burning in your heart? Father may think me a mad, old woman, Vincent, but you have always believed in the strength of my visions. I knew you would come."

Vincent put down the tea, watching as the leaves settled on the bottom of the cup. "Was it real, Narcissa?" he whispered.

Narcissa clucked her tongue, reaching out to take Vincent's hand. Her fingers rubbed gently across his as she spoke. "Hers is a beautiful spirit, Vincent," she told him. "Her spirit shines like the crystals in the Crystal Cavern. Why do you deny her?"

Vincent looked up, meeting the grey-white eyes. "But to lose her again . . . she felt so real, Narcissa. Her scent, her presence beside me . . . " He paused, breathing deeply, putting his thoughts and confusion into some semblance of order. "I still feel her beside me. I still feel her presence within my soul."

"Of course you do. Her spirit is with you. Her spirit is bound to yours. It was always bound to yours. Even in your darkest moments." She continued to rub her gnarled fingers soothingly against his, and Vincent felt himself calming.

"Remember, child," Narcissa continued, "remember the other times, the dark times when her spirit called to you and you were there for her. Now, your spirit has called to her, through all the barriers of time and space. And she is here for you and for your son."

Vincent held tightly to Narcissa's sturdy hand. "I want her to be real, Narcissa," he entreated, his eyes filling with tears. "I want her to stay."

Narcissa patted Vincent's shoulder with her free hand. "Then why do you fear she will leave you, Vincent? The love between you is very real, as it has been through ages past.

"I have told you before, child, there are chains that bind us; chains of dreams, chains of love. Her spirit is bound to yours through many dreams, through much love. It has *always* been bound to yours."

"Then, it was real . . . what we shared?"

"It was as real as your love for each other is real."

Vincent paused to think and to relive the moments he had spent in Catherine's arms. He had felt her heartbeat beneath his mouth, felt the warmth of her body surround him as he made them one. He heard Narcissa laugh as she pulled her hand from his.

"Such thoughts, Vincent, to share with an old woman."

Vincent looked up, startled to know that his thoughts had been clearly seen in Narcissa's mind. He could feel his face growing warm even in the cool air of her chamber. Some things were not meant to be shared.

"Drink your tea, child," she said, patting his shoulder. "Why not let your son come with me while you decide what it is you wish to believe. The truth is not measured only by the words in Father's books, Vincent. You must look within your heart, as well." Narcissa lifted Jacob easily from his carrier, and the baby wrapped his small arms around her neck, gurgling happily as she carried him to a small table on the other side of the room.

As he sipped his tea, Vincent thought over everything Narcissa had told him. Catherine had said almost the same thing. Could it be that they *had* loved before, in a different time, in a different place? His love for Catherine had been instant and all-encompassing. Had he truly recognized her soul? Could they be together even now? Were they meant to be together yet again? He had come for answers and found only more questions.

"Your questions will be answered, Vincent. Have patience."

Vincent watched as Narcissa spoke to Jacob, telling him a story about himself as a child. She held the baby firmly in one arm while she sprinkled a powdery substance across the still waters of her 'looking bowl'. He wondered at the visions she saw there. And he wondered what his son would see when he looked into the water. Would he see the future? The past? Would he see the face of his mother as she had appeared last night?

"Narcissa," Vincent said, "when I arrived, you already knew of Catherine's appearance. How is this?"

Narcissa smiled, but did not look up from her task. "Your Catherine came to me yesterday, Vincent," she said calmly. "And she came again this morning. Just as you come to me now. She is a woman of great passion, of great love. And that love is yours, Vincent," she told him. "If you will allow yourself to accept it."

Vincent's cup clattered against the hard wood of the table. Bit by bit, reality was crumbling around him. "You spoke to Catherine?"

Narcissa chuckled and looked up at him. "Of course, child." She smiled and shook her head. "The Father, he thinks me a crazy old woman, but you, Vincent; I had thought better things of you." She looked down into the water, letting Jacob see with her.

"You think living here all alone, apart from all the people, there is no one for this old woman to talk to. But you are wrong, Vincent. There are spirits who visit me, spirits who talk to me. The dark is my friend, child, as is the light. Your

Catherine was a spirit of the light, always. And I comforted her when she could not reach you. Now . . . well, that is something the two of you will have to talk about. There is much for you to decide.

"She walks another path now. Just as you do." Narcissa looked up and her nearly blind gaze penetrated his heart. "Your Catherine told me that you made her believe the world was filled with possibilities, Vincent," she said gently. "Now, it is *you* who must see the possibilities. It is *you* who must decide which path to choose."

Vincent looked down at the cup held tightly between his fingers. It was up to *him* to choose? It was up to *him* to see the possibilities? He traced the crude stars with a clawed finger, seeing once again the young boy who had come again and again to Narcissa for answers, and found only more questions. Nothing, it seemed, had changed.

He sighed and looked up, turning to watch as Narcissa whispered into Jacob's ear. The baby rewarded her with a nuzzling kiss on her cheek. It was something Jacob had only done with him and Father. Gratitude, and love rippled through the bond he shared with his son. Whatever vision Narcissa had given him, Jacob was more than pleased.

Vincent closed his eyes, knowing that for the moment, he could not speak. It was Catherine that Jacob had seen in the waters. He had seen her, and he had known. If his son could accept, why couldn't he?

"He is young yet, Vincent," Narcissa said, handing Jacob back to him. "He is still a part of things not wholly of this

world. The young see things with eyes open to what is around them. It is only when you grow up that what you see changes."

"You are not a child, Narcissa," Vincent said softly, "yet you see what others cannot."

"Ah, but my eyes are young, Vincent," Narcissa laughed. "And I never let myself grow up. That is the secret. You may grow old, but you must not let yourself grow up."

Vincent held Jacob close, needing his son's warmth, his scent. Jacob put his arms around his father's neck and Vincent was awed by the love surrounding him.

"If it is true, Narcissa," he said, "if last night was not just a vision of Catherine, but the reality of her, then I must see her again." He closed his eyes, willing the tears back.

"I *need* to see her, Narcissa," he whispered, not trusting his voice. "I cannot lose her again. The pain of her loss almost crushed me once, and it is still so deep. And Jacob . . . Jacob has never known her at all. If our spirits are bound, Narcissa, does that mean she will be with me always?"

"She will always be a part of you, Vincent. Just as she is a part of your child. But your Catherine is bound to you by more than dreams and love. She is bound to you through *lifetimes*, Vincent. Did she not tell you this, child?"

"Yes," he whispered. "She tried."

"Then listen to her, Vincent. Listen to your heart. *Understand* with your heart."

Silence enclosed them, until even the winds outside the chamber seemed still. Vincent opened his heart, his soul. Like a siren's call, the words he had spoken to Catherine, the words she had whispered in his arms, poured into his mind.

"Though they go mad they shall be sane
Though they sink through the sea
they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion."

There were long moments when the only sounds Vincent heard was the heavy beating of his heart and the echo of his thoughts in the silent room. Then, as though some enchantment had suddenly lifted, he heard again the whistling of the wind, the rustling of Narcissa's skirts, and felt his son's hand, comforting and warm against his face.

"I think you have your answers, Vincent," Narcissa said, laying a gentle hand on his. "Now, go. Enough visiting for now. Take your beautiful son to his mother, child. She is waiting to see him."

Vincent stood up slowly, putting Jacob carefully into his carrier before picking up the backpack and strapping it on. He moved slowly, as he was still trembling. "Where will I find her, Narcissa?" he asked. "Where is Catherine?"

"Go to the falls, Vincent," she said. "Visit your special place. Your Catherine is waiting there."



VIII

Vincent sat on the ground beside the small hollow in the tunnel wall. They had left Narcissa's chamber behind an hour ago, and still had another hour's journey before them. Jacob needed to be fed and changed, and Vincent knew this resting spot was as good as any they would find along the way.

He felt his son's impatience clearly, knowing it was partially a reflection of his own. "You have to eat, Jacob," he said, bringing out the bottle from its resting place within the two-part backpack. The thick quilt they used for such excursions lay beside him. It made a fine, cozy nest for Jacob. "You don't wish to be wet and hungry when you meet your mother, do you?"

Vincent smiled as he bent to nuzzle his son's tiny nose and Jacob laughed, pulling at his father's hair. There was no doubt in Vincent's mind that Catherine would indeed be waiting for them. What happened in Narcissa's chamber had banished his uncertainties. He still had questions, but they could wait. He had Jacob, and now he would have Catherine. No man could ask for more than this.

"Most of the day is still before us," Vincent told his son, "so there is time, yet, for a dry diaper and a little rest." He unsnapped Jacob's denim overalls, baring the chubby legs encased, to the very tops of his thighs, in bright blue woolen socks. Vincent smiled. "Mary would never forgive me if you

were to get a rash through my neglect, Jacob," he said, changing the thickly padded diaper.

Whether because he was Vincent's son or Father's grandson, Jacob received more than his share of hand-made presents from the women of the Tunnels. Those who had no children, or whose children were grown, were forever giving sweaters, nightshirts, vests and socks. Vincent ran his hands down the length of Jacob's well-covered legs and smiled. Mary was very fond of making Jacob socks.

The baby kicked at Vincent's hands as he resnapped the overalls, admiring the leather moccasins Jamie had given Jacob just last week. There was a wealth of skill and patience in the finely crafted shoes. His son was fortunate to have such a loving, caring family.

Jacob kicked harder, this time, against Vincent's hand and through the bond Vincent caught his son's insistence. "Your bottle is here," he said, picking Jacob up and settling him in the curve of his arm. "Go to sleep, now," Vincent whispered, leaning back against the rock wall as his son hungrily devoured his meal. "Rest, so you miss nothing that is yet to come."

The Chamber of the Falls!

Vincent saw it clearly in his mind. It had been their place of solitude, a place where moments stolen from her life Above and his Below, could be shared quietly, together. Although they had shared other places, the falls had been very special to them both. Vincent had meant to take Jacob there, eventually, but his memories of Catherine, his pain, had not allowed that journey before.

He looked down at the marvel asleep now in his arms. Vincent kissed Jacob on the cheek and laid him on his stomach in the middle of the folded quilt. He rubbed his son's back gently, waiting for the bubble he knew would come. The soft sound made Vincent smile. Even the smallest part of Jacob's life was a continual gift to him. He moved closer, nestling his precious bundle against his hip. He had often held Catherine in almost the same way.

Memories wove themselves through his mind, taking him back to other times, to days spent with Catherine by his side. He smiled, thinking of the presents he had packed. The special gift, entrusted to him long ago, and the small book: A last-minute thought; a reflection of other books they had shared. He had found it, at the bottom of his chest, lying beside the small box. How long ago had he read it? Years upon years. He had loved the magic of it, the beautiful way the writer had of painting enchanted pictures with his words. Today was a day for sharing such a book, for giving such a gift.

There were many other books they had shared. Far above the sound of cascading water, he had often read to Catherine; read to her of hills, green and golden, of pebbles, swirling in their streams.

But their special place had been for other things as well. Beside the falls, Catherine had decided to live in his world, had spoken of her need to stay with him and not return Above, where her father no longer lived. And later, when she thought she had failed him, he had explained to her that she was of *both* worlds, and that wherever she was, she carried their light. She carried their dream.

It had been difficult for him to let her go that day, but even more difficult to let her stay. Her presence, so close, her nearness and her desire calling out to him through their bond, had made him hunger for a closeness he had thought could never be. Then, they had only dreamed of love; separately, each hiding behind small touches and furtive hugs.

And *how* they had dreamed! Vincent leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His hand stretched out, touching his sleeping child. Then, even the smallest dreams had seemed impossible. Now, the reality of the most impossible dream of all, slept warm and snug by his father's side.

"Whoso loves, believes the impossible."

"Yes, Catherine," Vincent whispered, feeling her quiet presence within his heart. "O Lyric Love, half angel and half bird, and all a wonder and a wild desire."

He felt the sweetness of her laughter, like music floating on the edges of his mind, and he smiled. To have her beside him, to share their thoughts like this forever, there could be no limit to his joy.



Vincent and Jacob passed through the outer chambers, lingering long enough for the baby to gaze with wide eyes at the stalactites hanging from the ceilings like faerie chandeliers, glistening with the water that formed them.

His son's impatience gave way to astonishment and Vincent sensed the random thoughts flickering through Jacob's growing mind. He held tightly to the bottom of the carrier as Jacob wiggled around to get a better view. Jacob's thoughts were fleeting, his mind moving on to another idea even before Vincent could grasp the previous one. It was as though Jacob had a need to be filled with knowledge, a hunger for everything that fed both the spirit and the mind. The chambers here were a wonder for the senses, and his son had no desire to leave a single one unsatisfied.

"There is more, Jacob," Vincent said softly, moving forward to take them into the main chamber. "There is much, much more."

Vincent's voice faded with the rush of falling water. Catherine was waiting; sitting in the spot they had shared so often in the past. She wore the dress she had worn last night, and her shawl was wrapped loosely across her shoulders. She was smiling, and her face glowed in the shimmering light. Words, like so many empty shells, contained nothing to describe her. She was all things to him, all life to him. And she was here.

Catherine felt Vincent's joy, like an unfolding rose, blossoming inside her heart. He stood at the very entrance to the cavern; strong, tall, beautiful. So very beautiful. She drowned in the beauty of him, letting him feel everything, hiding nothing from his eyes or from his heart. Her love, like the endless water of the falls, flowed between them, filling the chamber with shimmering vibrations. She saw them, glittering like tiny points of light, reflected in his eyes. Love - the endless bridge of time - connecting them, bringing them together,

creating their child. Catherine saw Jacob hold out his arms to her, reaching for her, touching her soul.

Vincent was staggered by the emotions sweeping through the bond. His mind had been open - totally open - sharing his son's first glimpse of this special place. It was something Vincent rarely let happen. There had to be control, some small bit of control, blocking off at least a corner of his mind, even with his son. But in that quick, unguarded moment, when Jacob had seen Catherine, there had been no time to take control.

In a split second, his love for Catherine, his joy at seeing her seated by the falls, had coalesced with *her* happiness, *her* love for him, and for their child. And into the blending of their minds, their emotions, had stumbled the tiny empathic soul who united them both.

Like a hall of mirrors, reflecting time after time the images perceived, Jacob returned those images, resonated those emotions, hurling them back at Vincent's unguarded mind. They reverberated through his brain, echoed again and again, until he could barely stand. He reached for the wall, steadying himself against the solidity of the rock.

Joy, love, hope, desire, need; all poured through him, amplified a million times, blinding him with the light, tearing at his mind with its resonance. He closed his eyes, but the brilliance remained. He tried to close his mind, but the sound continued, and would not be stilled.

Vincent leaned against the rock, breathing hard. The bond was total now - complete. Intensified to an unbearable degree by the child who linked them, body and soul. His mind

cried out into the blinding light, and as suddenly as it began, the light was gone - the echo stilled.

"Oh, God, Vincent," Catherine whispered, moving slowly toward him. "What happened?" She leaned against his side, her legs like soft wax beneath her. She was appalled at what she had done, at how she had hurt him. Narcissa had said nothing of this. Their bond wasn't supposed to hurt. She felt weak, but she felt no pain: not like the pain she had felt coming from Vincent. "I don't . . . know what I did," she murmured. "I couldn't . . . control it." She touched him and he trembled. "I hurt you!" She could feel it, like a blade slicing through her heart.

Catherine's legs would no longer hold her. She slid to the ground, her hand clasping Vincent's leg as she fell. Her strength was gone. She leaned against his thigh, crying at the pain she had given him. That she should do this, that she should cause him such pain . . . far better to leave than to hurt him like this.

"No!" Vincent grasped her hand, turning to lean his back against the rock wall. "No, Catherine." He reached out his other hand, burying his fingers in the softness of her hair. Vincent lowered himself to his knees, resting his forehead against hers, taking deep, calming breaths. "No." His voice was a harsh whisper as he kissed her cheek. "You will . . . not . . . leave me."

"But I hurt you." Catherine's tears fell silently down her cheeks and he kissed them away. "I felt . . . your pain, Vincent," she whispered. "Pain . . . that *I* had caused." Vincent bent down, covering her trembling lips, soothing them and making them his.

"Catherine," he said gently, linking his fingers with hers, "it was not you." He kissed her again, feeling her heal beneath his soothing touch, feeling himself healed in turn. He longed to deepen the kiss, to take the healing further, to heal himself completely, but now was not the time. Jacob needed them.

"It wasn't me?"

Vincent could feel her hurt, her confusion, but it was only that. There was no amplification, no doubling and redoubling of what she felt. And from Jacob, there was nothing at all.

"Vincent?" Catherine's voice was so soft, so hesitant. It hurt him just to hear it. "If it wasn't me . . ."

"It was Jacob, Catherine," he said softly. "It was our son." Vincent lifted the silent child from the carrier. His usually brilliant eyes were dark and shadowed. Vincent held him to his chest, stroking his back, trying to soothe him with gentle touches and soft sounds of love.

"Vincent?" Concern and fear tinged her heart, and he reached out his arm, bringing Catherine against his chest to rest her head beside their son.

"He's confused, Catherine," he told her. "Jacob doesn't know what he has done, cannot understand. He knows only that he has caused me great pain. He's hiding - from himself, from us."

Catherine reached out her hand, covering Vincent's, touching Jacob through him. "How is he hiding, Vincent?" She could feel the small body trembling beneath their joined hands.

She closed her eyes, trying to focus on what her child was feeling. She had learned to do it with Vincent, and she had thought, for just a moment . . .

"No, Catherine. Not now," Vincent said gently, lifting her head so she could see his eyes. "He's lost. You cannot help him alone." He sighed and pressed a reassuring kiss against her lips. "You do not yet have the knowledge to do this alone. Jacob and I have been through something like this before. I know what we must do."

Vincent kept his mind open, looking for any sign that Jacob had not retreated too far even for him. He knew, also, that most of what he felt, Catherine would feel, and she was already frightened. He could not frighten her more. They needed to work together to bring their son back.

"Vincent, tell me what to do."

He looked up from their child, letting himself bathe in the soothing green depths of her eyes, warming himself in her love. Together they were stronger. Together they could do this. He nodded, taking a quick moment to kiss her cheek.

"Remove the backpack, Catherine," he said, wearily. "I will need to stretch out. My strength is nearly gone."

Catherine rose, going behind him to investigate the pack, checking its intricacies until she had unbuckled the straps and pulled it from his back. Vincent sighed and leaned back completely against the damp wall. Jacob lay across his chest, still and silent.

"Will he be all right, Vincent?" She was trying to be strong, he knew, for both of them. Their child was such a precious gift. Anything that hurt him, hurt them as well.

"I believe so, Catherine," he said, stretching out his legs. "But, we must begin to heal him. If you could find the quilt, it's in the right-hand section of the pack." Catherine found it easily, and laid it across Vincent's thighs. "Yes," he said, softly, still regaining his strength. "Make a nest of it. Fold it around him."

Catherine's hands shook as she wrapped Jacob within the warm folds of the quilt. He was so motionless, so absolutely still. Though his eyes were opened, she knew he did not see. She bent to kiss his pale cheek, tasting her tears as they fell against his face. She felt Vincent's hand rub lightly across her back, giving her courage.

"Sit next to me, Catherine," he said softly. "And if you can, try to open your mind totally and focus only on Jacob. We must do this together, it is the only way."

Catherine leaned against him, putting her arms around his waist, her head against the solidity of his chest. She could feel his concern, for Jacob, for her. If she could only understand . . .

"Jacob's mind was like a prism, Catherine," Vincent explained, using words, preparing her for what was to come. "When we saw each other, when you saw Jacob; our joy, our love, all of our emotions, went to him, *through* him. He amplified those emotions." Vincent paused, looking for the words. "Jacob and I were joined, Catherine. I was there, in his mind, sharing the wonder of this cavern. It was my fault. I was unprepared. I should have realized . . ."

"How could you?" Catherine whispered, stroking his back, tightening her arm around his waist. "You told me once before, Vincent, we are something that has never been. It is even more true for Jacob. How could you have prepared? How could you have foreseen this?"

"Because I have lived with it, Catherine. I have lived with this 'gift' my entire life. I *know* of its power. I know of its strength. But our son's gift is greater. And he is so very young." Vincent looked at the baby. His eyes were still dark, full of shadows. "It is time," he told her. "Clear your mind, Catherine." Softly, he kissed her cheek. "And do not be afraid."

Vincent put his hands around the quilt, lifting Jacob so the child's face was only inches from his. He focused his mind, gently, slowly, piercing the black shadows around Jacob's consciousness, going deeper into the dark place where he hid - alone. Beside him, almost in a whisper, he heard Catherine humming the lullaby she had sung for Ellie. *Yes, love. Yes.*

There was the faintest flicker of light, but Vincent sensed it, just at the edge of the void. He focused on that faint beacon, searching for the tiny spark that would rekindle his son's closed mind. He found it, and sent soft images of love, of sharing toward the terrified child's mind. Catherine's song was clearer now, and he knew she understood the need to break through the darkness with love, with light.

Jacob stirred in his arms, and Vincent felt their child coming back to them. He filled his mind with images of Jacob and himself together in their bathing pool, of sharing their private times, their love. The baby moved again, and his eyes focused, meeting his father's penetrating blue gaze. Vincent

allowed himself to smile. Jacob's eyes were glazed, but he was looking at him. He had come out from behind the nebulous shadows.

"Catherine," Vincent said softly, "you must help me. There is another thing we must do." He rose unsteadily, holding Jacob close to his chest. Catherine supported him, her arm tight around his waist, bracing some of his weight against her slight body.

"Anything, Vincent," she whispered, through her tears. "Anything."

"There is a shallow pool, beneath the falls. The path is to the left of the entrance. We must go there." He moved slowly, holding his son tightly, leaning on Catherine. The way was not far, but he still had not regained his strength. "I need to get into the pool with Jacob," he explained, as they walked slowly towards the water. "The water . . . I believe it will bring him the rest of the way back."

When they reached the pool, Vincent handed Jacob to Catherine. "Undress him, love," he said softly. He sat on the edge of the pool and with unsteady hands, removed his clothes, hearing the sounds Catherine made as she undressed the baby. His thoughts blurred, the images unfocused and hazy.

Naked, Vincent slid off the ledge into the shallow water. It was cool, but not icy; invigorating to all his senses. He felt his strength returning as the water swirled gently around him. Yes, it was what they needed. He turned, reaching out to take Jacob.

Catherine felt no embarrassment as she walked around Vincent to the ledge of the pool. He had been too distracted to realize she had every intention of joining them in the water and she felt the yearning in him touch every part of her nude body.

"Catherine . . . "

"Both of us, Vincent," Catherine said softly, as she and the naked baby in her arms joined Vincent in the pool. "He needs both of us."

The water was brisk, and came almost to the top of Catherine's breasts. She shivered, rubbing her hands against Jacob's back. He wiggled, trying to turn in her arms. His movements were no longer sluggish, but strong and very powerful for such a small child. Catherine knew he was trying to get to his father.

"Vincent?" She looked up and Vincent was there, beside her, watching; his eyes filled with love.

"Give him to me, Catherine," he said, smiling. "Our son loves the water, and he has a tendency to want to . . . " His words were interrupted by the splash of Jacob's sturdy feet as he kicked vigorously at the water. " . . . play."

Catherine laughed and handed the squirming child to his father. Jacob was whole again. She leaned back against the rock ledge, content to watch father and son together in the water.

They were beautiful. Wet, Vincent was more magnificent than anything she had ever seen. The sight of him holding their

chubby son against his naked body left her breathless. But she was afraid to touch him, afraid her feelings would again overwhelm and frighten their child.

"Come here, Catherine." Vincent held out his hand, sensing her fear. "It will be all right." She moved toward them hesitantly, her slight body causing barely a ripple in the water. Vincent caught his breath. The water teased at the tops of her breasts, and the cold had hardened her nipples, making them stand out, taunting him. When she was near, he wrapped his arm around her naked shoulder, bringing her into the warm shelter of his embrace. She leaned her head against him, and Vincent felt her smile.

"Jacob is staring at me, Vincent," she whispered.

"That is because he has never seen anything so beautiful." He bent his head to kiss her hair. "And you're his mother. He knows this, Catherine. He feels the ties to you, deeply. The bond connects us all." He held her close, savoring the love that flowed from her, knowing Jacob felt it, too.

"I didn't mean to hurt him, Vincent,"

Vincent kissed her cheek, rubbing his face against her hair. "You did not hurt him, Catherine," he told her. "Please, believe me. You caused him no pain. It was something I should have foreseen, but did not. It will not happen again." His lips moved across her cheek, taking a gentle kiss from her wet mouth. "He understands now. He knows how to protect himself, to protect me." Her lips parted beneath his, and he breathed in the sweet warmth of her. His body tightened, and he moved against her in the rippling water.

The splash was abrupt, soaking, and not all together unexpected. Vincent pulled back from Catherine and laughed, holding tight to the wiggling child who pulled at his father's wet hair.

"It seems to me we've had this conversation before, Jacob," he said, smiling. "And I see your opinion has not changed." He looked at Catherine, sensing her confusion.

In the moment he had taken Jacob from her arms, Catherine had cut herself off from the part of the bond he shared with their son. They were still connected, he knew her hurt, her pain, but only on the very edges of his mind; faintly, as though she had closed a door to him.

Vincent clasped her fingers with his free hand, lifting them to his lips. Watching her eyes, he slowly licked the water from each finger, delicately sipping the moisture from her skin. The pupils of her eyes widened, and she drew a shaky breath.

"Jacob is fine now, but he should rest," he said softly. "In fact, I would not be surprised if he fell asleep in a moment or two. I can feel his exhaustion. When we are all warm and dry, I'll tell you what he thought of the three of us sharing a bath." He led Catherine to the edge of the pool and passed Jacob into her arms. He smiled, giving her a gentle kiss across her moist lips.

"Hold him tightly, love," Vincent said. "He is a bit slippery." Catherine held the baby with both arms wrapped firmly around him. Jacob was staring at her, leaning against her naked breasts, his small arms wrapped lovingly around her neck. Catherine smiled, and the baby leaned forward, giving her a

nuzzling sort of kiss. Catherine held him closer, trying not to cry. He was so precious, so beautiful.

Vincent watched his son as he became acquainted with his mother. Jacob's kiss told him, as did the bond, just how much she already meant to him. They would heal, together. He moved forward. Claspng Catherine's small waist with both hands, he lifted mother and child onto the ledge.

Catherine held her breath. The soft fur on Vincent's arms rubbed sensuously against her hips as he lifted her. She expected him to let go once she was sitting, but his arms tightened, and she felt his hands clasp together at the back of her waist.

He stood below them, the water of the pool shimmering around his hips. Catherine could not tear her eyes away. Every muscle, every line of his wet body glistened in the fleeting patterns of sunlight filling the chamber. Drops of water dripped from the whorling patterns of hair on his chest, and Catherine ached to taste each one; to dry him, inch by beautiful inch, with her mouth.

Vincent watched as Catherine's tongue ran slowly across her top lip. He did not need the bond to tell him her thoughts. He saw them in her face, in the dilation of her eyes, in the tautness of her body as he held her lightly within his arms. Had Jacob not been resting comfortably on her breast, Vincent would have been more than willing to let her fulfill those thoughts.

"Do that again, Catherine," he whispered, his throat suddenly dry from the images filling his mind.

"What?" Her voice was less than a whisper and he knew she shared his visions. Vincent leaned forward, stopping when his face was only an inch from hers.

"Lick your lip again."

Catherine felt her stomach somersault within her. His voice was hoarse, breathier and more sexual than she had ever heard it. She looked at his mouth, then at the desire glittering in his eyes.

"Lick your lip again, Catherine," he repeated.

Catherine could not look away and she couldn't refuse. Slowly, her tongue crept out of her mouth. Vincent's tongue was there to meet it. He took her mouth with a possessiveness he had never shown her before. She was his, had always been his, *would* always be his.

Vincent felt her response as he deepened the kiss, taunting the warm depths of her mouth with his tongue, teasing the edges of her lips with his teeth. He knew she wanted to hold him, but her arms were around Jacob. Her frustration pleased him, and he wondered momentarily at his reaction. Was this part of loving? Did the pleasure intensify if you built it, layer upon layer? He would have to give it some thought. Later.

"Catherine," he whispered, when he could finally force himself to end the kiss. "We need to get dry and Jacob has fallen asleep." He drew back and braced his hand on the ledge beside her, pulling himself out of the pool.

Water streamed from his body as he smiled and held out his hand to help Catherine up. Her eyes were full of promises and yearnings. "There is yet time," he promised, as she held Jacob carefully with one arm and reached out to take his hand.

Vincent gripped her hand firmly, pulling her to her feet beside him. Her eyes were wide, following each rivulet of water that flowed down his tall frame. His smile widened as he wondered when the steam would begin to rise. The look she gave him was incendiary. "Later, my love," he whispered against her lips. "Later. First, I have a story to tell."



IX

". . . and he didn't want me to share the tub?" Catherine looked from Vincent's beautiful eyes to the baby sleeping contentedly on the quilt beside them.

"Let us just say he prefers to bathe with only one parent at a time." Vincent smiled, tightening his arm around Catherine's shoulder. He still felt possessive, needing her close, needing to touch her. He ran his hand up and down her arm, wishing he could feel her skin beneath the cloth. "Are you still cold?" he asked softly.

"No." Catherine smiled and removed her shawl. She folded the soft material, using it as a blanket for Jacob. He slept on his stomach, his face squashed against the quilt and his bottom pointing up. He would be a very handsome man someday. Almost as handsome as his father. She turned to look at Vincent and found him watching her.

"I love you, Catherine."

Such simple words, so easily spoken by most people, but words that meant everything to Vincent. Catherine knew that. She knew his heart, his soul, better than anyone ever had or ever would. There was no part of him she didn't love, no corner of his soul, his mind, or his body that she would change.

"Then, let me share that with you, Catherine," he said, moving to enfold her in his arms. "You hold yourself apart. I can feel it. Why?"

Catherine looked down at the strong arms enclosing her, folding her against the warmth of his chest. She leaned back, covering his arms with her hands. "I'm still afraid, Vincent," she whispered, holding tightly to his hands. "You were in such pain, and there was nothing I could *do*."

Vincent pressed his face against her hair. "You have crossed such boundaries, Catherine," he whispered, inhaling her scent and the scent of the water still clinging to her hair. "Narcissa has explained this. *You* have told me this. Time, death, have no dominion over our love." He held her close, pressing her tightly against his chest. "Only you, Catherine," he said, urgently, "only *you* hold sway over this."

He let go of Catherine's hands and turned her within the circle of his arms. She was still afraid, but Vincent knew now, that he could banish that fear. He slid his hands up to frame her face and kissed her, pouring his love and his strength into her, giving freely of his courage and his certainty. She answered his kiss, pressing against him, taking his mouth as he gave it, deeply, passionately. Long moments passed before Vincent could tear his lips away, but there was something more she needed to hear.

"Catherine," he began, his voice no more than a husky whisper, "during my pain, I felt your thoughts." Vincent stroked the softness of her cheek with one hand, holding her gaze with his, needing her to see the truth she would not allow herself to feel. "Through all the elemental power of those emotions,

through the blinding light, the sounds, I remember only one thing clearly. One thing, Catherine." He paused, breathing deeply, holding her gaze as he watched her tears fall. "You thought to leave me," he whispered. "You thought it would be better to leave than to cause me pain." Her eyes closed and Vincent leaned forward, kissing away her tears.

"Yes." Her voice was hardly a breath of sound. Vincent leaned his cheek against hers.

"There could *be* no greater pain, Catherine," he told her. "There *was* no greater pain for me. When you were lost to me nothing consoled me, nothing brought me peace." Vincent felt her barriers, like the fragile rock formations in the cavern, begin to crack beneath his words. But he knew the strongest words were yet to come.

"My journal was useless to me, Catherine," he continued. "I could not form my thoughts. My mind wandered, looking for a sense of you; waiting for you to come back to me . . . I tried to read, but the books we had shared were empty. Only one book, one story, held any interest for me." He paused and raised his cheek from hers. "It held me because I knew what Heathcliff was feeling. I knew his pain, his yearning.

"Look at me, Catherine," he demanded, gently. "Look at me." She raised her tear-streaked face, finding his gaze. "Be with me always - take any form - drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! . . . I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!"

Vincent's words cut through Catherine's heart, tearing down the barrier she had erected to protect him. She flung

herself against him, wrapping her arms around his neck, clinging tightly, holding herself against his warmth.

"Never!" she vowed. "Never." Catherine let all her feelings, all her love travel freely through the bond. *I won't leave you, my love. I won't leave.*

Vincent held her tightly, knowing it was only part of what they both wanted, both needed. He wanted to make love to her, to *be* a part of her.

She lifted her face for his kiss, finding the warmth of his lips, his mouth, answering his need. She ran her fingers through his hair, then slid her hands to his waist, opening herself to the various textures of him, opening herself fully to the bond. She was part of him, *had* always been a part of him. She would never leave him - *could* never leave him.

Vincent wanted to absorb Catherine into his body, take her into his soul. With insistent lips he explored her mouth, her throat, the soft hollows behind her ears. She trembled, and he bit lightly at her neck, soothing the lovebite with his tongue. She was everything he desired in life and he hungered for her.

"Vincent?"

He drew back, watching his clawed fingers skim lightly across the shoulders of her dress. She had told him so often that his hands were made for love. He pushed gently at the cloth and it fell in a pool at her waist. His breath stopped as he stared at the perfection of her breasts. The candlelight in his chamber had hidden the translucence of her skin, the pale rose color of her nipples.

She was so delicate, so beautiful. Hesitantly, he allowed one hand to move slowly down across her collarbone toward the fullness of her breast. His golden fur looked so out of place against the pale satin of her skin.

"Your hands are mine, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "There is no part of me that doesn't long for their touch. Don't you know it? Can't you feel it?"

He looked up into her eyes and smiled. "When I see the beauty of you, Catherine . . . when I allow myself to explore that beauty . . . " He gently stroked across the peak of one soft breast, watching it harden and change beneath his hand.

"When I see the wonder of you," he whispered, his hand resting on the soft underside of her breast, "the tangible evidence that you are with me, in this place, in this time - it overwhelms me." He moved his hand higher until her breast was resting in the warmth of his palm. "I feel your heartbeat beneath my hand, Catherine, and I know that you are real - as real as any woman ever created."

Vincent leaned forward and tenderly kissed each breast. The velvet of her skin against his face was exquisite, and he paused to lay his head there, listening to the quickening tempo of her heart. It spoke to him of need and love: of all the things he had never thought to feel again.

He lifted his head, touching her lips lightly with his before pulling her dress back into place. There were things he needed to tell her, thoughts he must put into words. Words were magic, Narcissa had once said, and magic was power. He needed the magic of powerful words.

"You say you will be with me forever, Catherine, and I believe you. You have never lied to me, never promised something you could not give. But I need to give the same promise to you."

He turned, reaching around her for the backpack. Finding the tiny box hidden within, he took it out and opened it; letting his gift lay within the palm of his hand.

"This was Margaret's wedding ring, Catherine," Vincent said softly. "Father entrusted it to me after she died. It is mine to give to the woman I love - to my wife."

Vincent did not have to look up to see her tears, nor say the words for her to know his love, but he did both. With his empty hand he cupped her chin and lifted her face, seeing the tears falling freely from her eyes.

"No, Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change:
Thy pyramids built up with newer might
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
They are but dressings of a former sight. . . .
Thy registers and thee I both defy,
Not wondering at the present nor the past,
For thy records and what we see doth lie,
Made more or less by thy continual haste.
This I do vow and this shall ever be;
I will be true, despite thy scythe and thee."

Vincent slid his hand past her wet cheek to his outstretched palm. He picked up the delicate, gold band, holding it carefully between his fingers. The filigree work was intricate, made with love, Father had told him, to be worn with love.

"Shakespeare *did* know everything, Catherine," he said, seeing in her eyes, the dancing lights that made him believe all things were possible. "You are the only woman I will ever love. Will you wear the ring? Will you be my wife?"

Catherine tried to find her voice, but it was choked by tears. What words could say the things she felt? What words? She reached out her left hand, laying her fingers across his. "I love you, Vincent," she whispered, watching as he put the ring on her third finger. She searched for words and looking into his eyes, found her answer. Her voice shook as she spoke her vow.

"O never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seem'd my flame to qualify.
As easy might I from myself depart
As from my soul, which in thy breast doth lie:
That is my home of love: if I have ranged,
Like him that travels I return again,
. . . For nothing this wide universe I call,
Save thou, my rose: in it thou art my all."

Vincent's hand closed tightly over Catherine's delicate fingers, squeezing them, acknowledging the love within her choice of words. They were an echo of his, a complement of the vow he offered. He lifted Catherine's hand to his lips, then pulled her into his arms.

Catherine understood the urgency of Vincent's kiss. They had been given a second chance - a chance that could not be taken lightly, or abused. His promise, his vow to her, was an affirmation of the love they shared. A love she knew was measureless and never-ending. He had yet to know the totality of the gift they'd been given, for it was something she herself

was learning, slowly, step by step. Even Narcissa could not yet tell her the full extent of what had happened.

Catherine let herself be drawn into the kiss, memorizing the textures of his lips, the tiny cleft that was so sensitive. Her tongue explored the differences of his teeth and loved them, for they were part of his uniqueness. She explored further, teasing the roof of his mouth. She trembled when he groaned and held her tighter, his hands moving relentlessly down her back to her hips.

She moaned, knowing his need was as great as hers. Sharing the bond increased her pleasure, showing her what Vincent had known for years, that even the smallest touch between them was a delight. Last night they had discovered together, that delight could become exquisite joy.

"You have always brought me joy, Catherine." Vincent's voice was hoarse as he ended the kiss, knowing he must.

"I want to bring you joy, Vincent," Catherine said, running her hands through his beautiful hair. "I want to bring you more joy than you can imagine." Was there a limit to the joy his soul could hold?

Vincent sat back and looked at his wife. *My wife*. Even thinking the words gave him joy. She wore his ring, they had exchanged vows. He clung to her hand, feeling her strength, her love.

"My husband," she whispered, bringing his hand to her mouth. "Catherine Wells." She smiled. "I like the sound of that."

"As do I."

A different sound intruded, one that Vincent had heard very seldom. Jacob was crying. As one, Vincent and Catherine turned to the baby lying next to them on the quilt. Vincent had watched as Catherine dressed the already sleeping child and laid him on the quilt. He had been exhausted by the ordeal, and had not awakened. Vincent picked him up and the crying stopped.

"Do you think he was trying to get our attention?" Catherine asked, reaching out to grasp the tiny hand before he could pull her earring.

Vincent smiled. "Perhaps. I become single-minded when you are in my arms." He watched as Jacob reached out to touch the ring Catherine now wore. The delicate gold sparkled in the shimmering lights of the cavern.

Catherine felt Jacob's easy acceptance of her presence. Though his emotions were not as easily read as Vincent's, she sensed he was not at all surprised to have his mother with him. She smiled, knowing at once that Narcissa had prepared the way.

"Did you have a good visit with Narcissa?" she asked.

"It was enlightening," Vincent told her. "She mentioned your visits, explained again what you had already told me. But, then, you knew I would visit her."

"Yes," she said. "I knew. You'd spoken of her many times, told me about other questions you'd asked her."

Catherine leaned forward and kissed her son's soft cheek. "I knew you would go to her. And when I came . . . with my questions . . . Narcissa was there to help me." Catherine watched as Vincent put Jacob down and prepared to change his diaper. *This* she had to see!

Vincent felt her amusement as he unsnapped Jacob's overalls and reached into the backpack for a clean diaper. He smiled, and turned, holding it out to her.

"Would you like to do this?" he asked, innocently. Catherine's laughter merged with the sound of the falls.

"Not a chance," she said, shaking her head. "I want to watch." She smiled and leaned back against the rock wall, looking very pleased with herself. Vincent shrugged, feeling the laughter and love converge.

"I've become very proficient," he said proudly, struggling to remove one of the large safety pins without sticking his wiggling son.

"So I see."

Jacob seemed to be enjoying his father's awkwardness, squirming around more than usual as Vincent exchanged diapers. "Spitting cereal again, Jacob?" Vincent asked softly. The baby looked at him with innocent but sparkling eyes, and Vincent laughed.

"Spitting cereal?"

Vincent looked at Catherine and smiled. Jacob had stopped wiggling long enough for him to finish his task and was now more interested in trying to pull off his moccasins. Vincent grasped Jacob's hands, and helped him to his feet. The baby laughed, balancing precariously on his father's strong thighs.

"It happened this morning at breakfast," Vincent told her. "Father was not happy to learn that I was taking Jacob to visit Narcissa." He felt her concern and turned, picking the baby up in his arms. "Catherine," he began, "there are so many things I want to ask you, so many things I want to share." He smiled as Jacob held out his hands to his mother and Catherine reached up to take him. The sight of them together would never fail to move him. Their love was a cleansing wave across his heart.

"Why don't you give me Jacob's bottle, Vincent," Catherine said, enjoying the baby kisses sweeping her face. "I can feed him while you talk." She grinned and gave Jacob a loud kiss on the cheek. He laughed at the noise and tried to imitate it.

Catherine looked up at Vincent, feeling his eyes, his warmth, like a soft covering around them. "Tell me what I've missed, Vincent," she said softly. "Tell me about Father, Jamie. Tell me about our family."



X

"Do you know how beautiful you are?"

No portrait of mother and child could surpass what Vincent saw before him. His wife, his son. Catherine looked up from where Jacob lay in her arms, and her eyes were beacons of light and love. She smiled at him and shook her head.

"Any beauty you see comes from you, Vincent," she told him, gently stroking Jacob's hair. "from what *your* eyes perceive beauty to be."

"No, Catherine," he answered, "the beauty is within you." He sat to the side of them, leaning against the rock wall, watching as Jacob finished his juice. Once, long ago, he had dreamed of seeing Catherine like this, holding their child, feeding him. But there had been no bottle in his dream.

He saw Catherine bite her lower lip as she tried to hide a smile. Clearly, she knew his thoughts. "I can think of no lovelier sight, than our child feeding at your breast, Catherine." His voice was no more than a thick whisper on the air.

She looked up and Vincent could see, very clearly, at the back of his mind, the image of Catherine, in a different life, suckling a different child. And he knew, somehow, that the child was his.

"Next time," she promised.

The image stayed with him for a moment longer, then vanished. Vincent closed his eyes, willing his heart to slow. "Catherine . . . " His questions hovered, unasked, through the bond.

"Please, Vincent," Catherine said, reaching out to gently caress his hand. "Not now. Later, I promise. There are so many things I don't yet know, so many questions even I don't have the answers for. I'm not avoiding your questions," she told him, "I just need some time."

She squeezed his fingers, then leaned back, settling Jacob in her lap. His bottle was empty and he seemed to want nothing more than to sit comfortably in her arms. "You were going to tell me everything that's been going on while I've been . . . away." She smiled, leaning down to kiss the back of Jacob's head.

Vincent noticed her hesitation, and through the bond felt a moment of disquiet, but it was fleeting, and gone in an instant. 'Away.' Was that how she thought of it?

"Yes." Catherine said quietly, answering only this one unspoken question. "Now, talk to me, Vincent," she insisted.

Vincent smiled, "Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives," he quoted, watching the blush stain Catherine's face. How wonderful it was to tease with her. Before, he had felt this comfortable only with Father. She had brought freedom with her love, opening endless doors for him.

Endless doors to endless worlds.

Yes.

Vincent loved the slow half-smile on Catherine's face. It spoke to him on many levels, reminded him of many places, many things they had shared. He pulled up one knee, resting his arms across it, knowing she would not settle for only one story.

"I took Jacob to his first concerts last month," he began. "To our special place beneath the park. They were playing choral and orchestral works by modern classical composers." He paused, smiling. "I believe Jacob enjoyed the singing almost as much as the orchestra. We went to every performance."

Vincent remembered how enraptured Jacob's face had looked as the first piece began; the melody carried on the notes of a single violin, while just behind, the rest of the orchestra followed and swelled, as though carried to shore with the tide.

"I hear it in your mind, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "It's beautiful. What is it?"

Vincent closed his eyes and heard it all again, as he had at each of the three concerts. He heard the chorus, each soloist, each lyric, as though it were the first time. "The piece is by Ralph Vaughn Williams," he told her, "and is called *Serenade To Music*." Vincent let the music crescendo to its peak, then diminish to a fading sigh, only to begin again.

"The words . . . Shakespeare?"

"Hmmm. *Merchant of Venice*."

Catherine listened, hearing every note as though she had been beside them. Jacob, too, was sharing the remembrance, his face remarkably pensive for someone so young. Then, he looked back at her and smiled, sharing more than the music. When the memory ended, Catherine glanced at Vincent, knowing he was watching them. "Thank you."

He nodded. Soon the time for questions would begin. "One more story, please?" she asked.

Vincent accepted her question as the postponement it was. "When Jacob was six months old, I took him to see Mouse," he told her. "Of course, Mouse had visited long before, but Jacob was curious. So, one day when Father was busy elsewhere, we slipped away for a visit."

Catherine smiled. She knew Mouse's chamber well, having inadvertently fallen into it on her first foray into the tunnels. She had been there often after that, once working with Mouse to give Vincent his very own piece of sky. He had deemed it to be the very 'eye of the storm'.

"What did Jacob think of Arthur?"

Vincent closed his eyes, remembering. Her thoughts were vivid, and fleeting glimpses of her visions pervaded his mind. He sorted through them, separating his memories from hers. It would have been a simple thing for him to retreat from her thoughts, but he had only closed his mind to her twice before. He would not do so again.

"Jacob and Arthur have become fast friends," he said, opening his eyes to her loving gaze. When Catherine looked at

him, as she did now, the reality she had brought to his dreams, embraced him. It was difficult to think of Mouse, when he would rather think of Catherine. He shifted, making himself more comfortable against the wall. He saw her smile, and answered, silently.

"Do you think Jacob will want a raccoon of his own when he's a little older?" she asked, ignoring the sensual thoughts Vincent was sending her way.

Vincent's eyes sparkled. "Yes, I have no doubt of it. As I have no doubt that Father will heartily disagree."

"Tell me more." Jacob wiggled in her lap, and Catherine held him closer, enjoying Vincent's description of their visit to Mouse. The toys Mouse made for Jacob seemed both wonderful and totally inexplicable. Vincent claimed that neither he nor Father could discern their purpose. Jacob, however, adored them.

"Toys don't *have* a purpose, Vincent," Catherine admonished, "they just *are*."

"That may be true, Catherine," he told her, "But we have asked Mouse to please keep some of them until Jacob is a little older." He smiled. "Father is afraid of what our son will inadvertently devise from the parts." He paused. "Have I told you he likes to take things apart?"

Catherine laughed. "No, does he?" Jacob was trying hard to turn around in his mother's lap, and Catherine helped, pulling him into her arms. "And what things of Daddy's have you taken apart lately, huh?" She bent forward, rubbing her nose against

his. Jacob gurgled at her and wrapped his arms around her neck. Catherine had to close her eyes to keep the tears from falling. He had accepted her so quickly, his love so vast. Her happiness was like her tears, overflowing.

"Don't you think it's time, Catherine?"

Catherine lifted her head, pressing her wet cheeks against Jacob's hair before looking at Vincent. God, how she loved him! Through every barrier devised by Time, he had called to her and she had come. Once, he had even brought her back from the brink of death. No one but Vincent could have done that. No one but Vincent could have called her back now. But how could she explain to him that she had so very few answers to his questions?

"Some things I've been able to show you through the bond;" she began softly, "what happened in the cavern when Jacob was conceived; the images of what will be for us in times to come. But there are so many things I don't know, Vincent." She paused, realizing that he would understand even without her words, but wanting very much to try and tell him of the turmoil inside her.

"I've spoken to Narcissa about it," she continued, "about finding myself suddenly able to see you, to hear you, to watch you here in your world."

"I saw you, Catherine," Vincent said. "I felt the nearness of you."

"Yes, but Narcissa says that the time wasn't right." She smiled and rubbed her cheek against Jacob's hair. "I understand

now why you love her so, Vincent," she told him. "She's a very wise woman."

"Not everyone understands that. Narcissa sees things through eyes very different from those of most people."

Catherine smiled, wiping at her tears while the sweet softness of her baby's mouth touched her cheek. She looked into his dark, perceptive eyes. The tenderness of his gesture had helped her to realize that love and trust would see them through what was to come. Whatever the question - love would always be their answer.

Vincent moved closer, opening his arms, enfolding both his wife and child in his sheltering warmth. "Forgive me, Catherine," he said, gently stroking her hair, kissing her cheeks. "You are here. That is enough. My questions are unimportant."

Catherine looked at him, shaking her head. Answers *were* important to him. *Understanding* was important to him. She traced his lips slowly with just the tip of her tongue before taking his mouth in a deep, lingering kiss.

Vincent threaded his clawed fingers through her hair, holding the back of her head, exerting gentle pressure to deepen the kiss even more. He could feel her love, her desire to give him everything he needed, even the words she could not find. He also felt his son closing his mind, giving them their time to be alone. Vincent let Catherine end the kiss, and they looked down at Jacob together.

He looked like a sleepy cherub, curled comfortably

on his mother's shoulder. He smiled, and held out his arms to his father. Vincent lifted Jacob from Catherine's shoulder and placed him on the quilt between the rock wall and the heavy pack. Then he covered him with her shawl, smiling as the baby sucked on his fist and drifted to sleep.

"It would be so easy if everyone saw the world the way Jacob and Narcissa see it," Catherine mused.

Vincent turned back to her, enfolding her again in his arms as he leaned back against the rock wall. "How is that, love?" he asked softly, rubbing his chin against her hair. He would never be able to hold her enough - not if he lived forever.

"Somehow, this . . . my being here . . . isn't as inexplicable to Jacob and Narcissa as it is to you and I." She nestled closer, putting her arms around his neck and Vincent tightened his embrace, bringing the softness of her breasts against his chest. "When I first realized that I was in the Tunnels, I was afraid," Catherine told him. "And I still don't remember exactly *how* I came to be here. But Narcissa didn't seem at all surprised to find me sitting in her chamber when she came in."

Vincent stroked her back slowly, letting her words flow at their own pace; although a thousand questions had already gathered in the corners of his mind.

"She said that she had been expecting me," Catherine continued quietly, "and made me a cup of tea." She looked up and smiled, her eyes glittering with amusement. "She also scolded me for having taken so long to gather the strength to come back to you."

"The strength?"

"That's the word she used. She told me that my return was a gift - a gift never before given." Catherine leaned even closer, and Vincent could feel her taking strength from his embrace. And he could sense something more; the reason she had asked him to make love to her.

"It was a test, then," he said, not bothering to form his words into a question. Their bond was strengthening with each passing hour, and it was becoming easier for him to see fully into her mind.

"Not exactly," Catherine whispered. "At least, I don't think that's what it was."

"Did Narcissa tell you this?"

"No, Vincent. Narcissa said that my return was inevitable; that in one form or another I was bound to come back to you."

"One form or another?"

Catherine pulled back from Vincent's embrace and looked deeply into his troubled eyes. "When I first came to you last night," she said softly, "I was much like Kristopher. I was solid to you, I was real to you. But like Kristopher my time was limited."

"How limited?" Vincent asked. "Is that why you left me this morning?"

"Yes and no," Catherine told him. "I left because there were things I needed to discuss with Narcissa." She paused, reaching out to touch the lines crossing his brow. "I'm not going to leave you, Vincent," she assured him, sensing in his words and in his mind that he was still unsure. "That's the one thing I'm absolutely certain of.

"When you made love to me last night, Vincent, when you gave me, freely and willingly, what I had taken from you that night in desperation; I began to change. I left this morning because I didn't want to embarrass you," she continued, gazing into eyes filling with awe and comprehension. "If Father had come into your chamber last night, he would not have seen you alone in your bed. He would have seen *me*, Vincent. All of me." She laughed and leaned her forehead against his. "God, the story he could have traded with Peter."



XI

Vincent rubbed his hands absently across Catherine's back, as she buried her face against his chest. Her words had shaken him. He understood why she was tangible and real to him and to Jacob. He also knew why Narcissa had no trouble believing and seeing her. *But Father?*

"Not just Father, Vincent," she said softly. "Everyone in the community. All of our family." He looked down into Catherine's beautiful face, realizing how confused his thoughts must seem to her. "This is my home. Here, with you, I am as real as you, or Jacob or Father."

"Catherine . . . I never expected, I never dreamed." He took a deep breath, inhaling her scent, rubbing his face against her hair. How he had missed that.

"I told you last night, that like Kristopher, I was tangible, real. But now, I am so much *more* than Kristopher, Vincent; because of you, because of our love." Vincent lifted his head and she kissed him, stroking his cheeks, his hair, letting her caress lend credence to her words. "You are my Shangri-La, Vincent," she whispered. "You are my valley."

Vincent closed his eyes. 'My valley.' His body trembled, and he realized, finally, fully, what Catherine meant. He clasped her hands, holding them tightly as he let himself believe - truly believe.

"It is a fragile thing," he quoted, "that can only live where fragile things are loved. Take it away from this valley and you will see it fade like an echo." Vincent opened his eyes, and in the fading silence of his words, her love spoke volumes.

"Yes," Catherine whispered, squeezing his hands. "You understand. I knew you would."

Her joy at his understanding enveloped him, and Vincent surrendered happily to the kisses Catherine rained on his cheeks, his eyes, his hair. *His butterfly.*

"Yes, yes, yes," she whispered, drawing her hands down his chest, taking his breath from his mouth as she sucked on his lower lip. "A butterfly. *Your butterfly.*

"I'm still learning, finding my way," she said, smiling. "Narcissa is helping me, but I'm like you now, Vincent. I'm unique - something that has never been." She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the mouth. "I've told you that we're bound through lifetimes of love, Vincent. Endless lifetimes.

"And because of how that love has grown, we were able to share a bond in this life that made our love even stronger. No two people have ever loved as we have loved, Vincent. Our love enabled me to cross all the barriers; to be here for you, with you. Our love allowed me to come back."

Vincent leaned his head against hers, kissing the sweet softness of her hair, inhaling its scent. "You have spoken of lives we shared before, Catherine," he whispered, "and you have shown me a life that is yet to be." He felt her nod, and stroked his hands gently across her shoulders. "What is true for us *now*,

Catherine?" He pulled slightly away, asking silently for her to look at him. When their eyes met, Vincent saw endless answers to his question.

"We were married today, Vincent," Catherine said, one small hand tracing the sharp rise of his cheekbones. "We exchanged vows, I wear Margaret's ring." She smiled, and he felt the warmth of a hundred suns upon his face. "And in your bed last night, you and I found a unity that no one else has ever known."

Vincent shared the breath she took, taking her mouth in a kiss as powerful as it was healing. He held her tighter, turning so that her body lay against his, letting her know how much he wanted her. She moved against him, stroking him with her thigh and he gasped for breath.

"Do you remember the moment when we became one, Vincent?"

Remember? He would cherish that memory above all others until eternity. Remember? "Catherine, there are no words to describe what I remember."

"In that moment . . . in the instant when you gave yourself to me, you healed our wounds; sealed our bond." Vincent drew in a shaky breath as she leaned into the hardness of his body. "You forgave me, Vincent," she whispered against the burning skin of his throat. "And with that forgiveness came the gift." Catherine kissed his neck, her tongue taunting his already thundering pulse.

Vincent groaned and grasped her waist, lifting her and rising to his feet in the same graceful motion. He had never felt so strong, so invincible. "There was nothing to forgive, Catherine," he whispered, carrying her down to where the deeper pool began. "But, if you like, I will forgive you yet again."

His touch was forgiveness. And fire, and light. Catherine lost all sense of time as layer by layer, Vincent removed their clothes. Gone was the hesitancy, the worry that in some way his clawed hands would hurt her. His gliding fingers aroused, his velvet fur inflamed. She let her mind slide into the oblivion of his touches, feeling them magnify through the bond. When he picked her up and entered the swirling water, Catherine could only cling to his neck.

His arm fell from beneath her knees and she wrapped her legs around his hips, knowing it was what he wanted. The water was deep, too deep for her to stand, but standing was unnecessary, Vincent would hold her. She raised her face, answering his silent cry for her lips.

Vincent was hungry for the taste of her, for the woman-softness of her body touching his, for the tiny moans she made as his hands cupped her bottom, lifting her closer, higher against him. The water rippled gently as he braced his legs and arched his hips, touching the heat not even water could cool.

Catherine moaned into Vincent's mouth. *More! More!* His hands slid tenderly to the backs of her thighs, spreading her, opening her. Catherine's hands tangled in his wet hair, clinging to him as she felt the heat of his penetration.

To be filled with him! Sensation swept over her like a tidal wave. Catherine's mouth found every drop of water clinging to his neck, his shoulders, his chest. She licked at each glistening spark, her body pressing as close as was possible, taking him deeper, deeper into her body, her soul.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the fusion of their bodies, on the rhythm of Vincent's hips against hers, the movement of him within her. The tempo increased and Catherine shared with Vincent the feeling of fullness, the totality of their union. This was more than forgiveness, more than love.

Catherine's hands clasped his strong shoulders, holding on to the solidness of him as she felt her body begin to quiver with the beginning pulses of her release. She lifted her face and his mouth was there for her, waiting. The touch of his lips was all she needed. Her body stiffened, balancing for an instant on the brink, before dissolving into shuddering spasms. In her mind they cried out together, their passion slipping spent, into the void.



"Is it always going to be like that, Catherine?" Vincent asked softly, as they sat together and he dried her damp body with his shirt. He hadn't imagined anything so consuming. But when she shared her feelings, her sensations, he had experienced not only his own pleasure, but hers as well. And he had known that their union was strengthening with each passing hour; enriching him, fulfilling him in ways he had never dreamed existed.

Catherine took the shirt from his hands, using it to gently wipe the soft hair of his chest and back. He felt her press a gentle kiss between his shoulder blades and sighed. Even her slightest touch stirred him.

"Our loving is intense because our love has always been intense, Vincent. There will never be half measures in our love." Catherine smiled, handing him back the shirt before she picked up her dress and stepped into it. Her stockings and boots lay beside her, but she ignored them now, as she had before when they had gone into the pool with Jacob. She sat with her bare feet tucked under her on the quilt, watching as Vincent began to dress.

"As for the other, our connection," she continued, "I had to take philosophy courses in law school, Vincent, but we never studied physics. Narcissa tells me that it has more to do with energy and the lives we've shared than anything else."

Vincent spread his shirt out on the rock ledge to dry and slipped his vest over his chest. He had already put on his pants and socks. Now, he reached for his boots. "Was that the reason it took so long for you to come to me?" he asked, lacing the strong leather.

Catherine smiled, enjoying the sight of her husband dressing. She would never tire of looking at him, admiring him. He was so beautiful.

"Catherine . . ."

She raised her eyes and smiled. "I wasn't evading your questions, Vincent," she said, "just admiring the view." She

settled against the wall, leaning her head back as she stared up at the wondrous patterns of light that flickered through the cavern. "It *did* take some time for me to reach you," she sighed, glancing at him for a moment before looking back at the ceiling.

"I almost managed once or twice before," she paused, smiling. "But I wasn't strong enough." She closed her eyes, and Vincent saw himself in the Great Hall, seeing her face against the tapestries, hearing again the music.

"I heard you, Catherine," Vincent whispered, "I saw you."

Catherine smiled. "Yes, for a moment." She paused, "You told Father that you heard the music only in your memories. That wasn't true, Vincent. We heard the music together. I shared it with you."

"Were there other times, Catherine? I felt you, so close, but always . . . always, there was nothing beyond the flickering light of my candles. I would try to read . . . something we had shared, and feel you listening, there in the darkness."

Catherine reached out her hand, covering his, holding his. "I told you, Vincent," she whispered, "With the forgiveness came a gift." She raised his hand to her lips. "A gift never before given. I'm here to stay, Vincent. *That* is the gift, my love. I am home, and I will never leave you."

Vincent closed his eyes, savoring the touch of her lips on his hand. She was a gift. Had been a gift, from the first moment he saw her in the park. Now, at last, through some miracle he still did not fully comprehend, she was his wife, his lover, the mother of his son. And she would never leave him.

Vincent looked at her, gazing steadily into the dancing green light of her eyes. "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see - So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Catherine raised her hands to stroke the soft whiskers on his cheeks and framed his face, drinking the beauty of him into her, like the bouquet of a fine, vintage wine. His eyes were so wonderfully expressive. She had seen the world in his eyes, through his eyes. So much beauty, so much love. It filled her soul.

"My home is here now, with you and Jacob." She smiled, but knew that he felt the tinge of sadness lingering behind it. "Do you remember when Ellie and I read *The Snow Goose* together?" she asked, again reaching for his hand. "It was right after they came to live in the Tunnels. We read and you and Eric listened."

"Yes, I remember," he answered softly, squeezing her hand. "They were still healing. You gave them great comfort."

"I tried," she whispered, moving to lean her head against his shoulder. The warm scent of his skin beneath his vest helped soothe her memory. "Do you know, Vincent, of all the things in the world, nothing is more important than the children." Catherine smoothed her cheek against the quilted softness of his vest, and felt his hand stroke her hair. "Your world takes care of the children, Vincent," she whispered. "Like no other place on earth." She paused, remembering bits and pieces of her other journey, her other time.

"Sometimes, when I would see things, hear things Above, find children like Ellie and Eric . . . I would think of Samantha

or Kipper or Jeffrey, and I felt better, knowing that Mary and Father . . . and you, Vincent, were here, caring for the children."

Vincent wrapped his arms tightly around her, feeling her pain, sharing her loss. He kissed her hair, letting the wet strands caress his face. "You were speaking of a book you read," he reminded her, hoping to turn her memories to a brighter light.

"Yes," she said softly. "Do you remember what Philip says to Frith, near the end, when the bird circles the lighthouse over their heads?"

"Not precisely. Tell me, Catherine."

"He says, 'The Lost Princess is lost no more. This is her home now - of her own free will.' I'm not lost anymore, Vincent. This *is* my home. Of my own free will."

Catherine leaned the short distance it took to kiss him. Vincent was hers, at last. As her tongue explored the warm contours of his mouth, Catherine indulged in this new freedom. She could kiss him, touch him, caress the hard muscles that lay beneath his layers of clothes. No more barriers, no more doubt. He was her place of safe refuge. He was her home. She shared herself freely, letting him know how much she loved, hoping to make him understand how real she would always be.

"Vincent," she said, pulling back from the kiss. She knew that what she was going to say was something he had not yet considered. But it was a decision that could not be put off. "There's something you and I need to discuss before you and Jacob return to the Home Chambers."

"What do you mean "you and Jacob?" Vincent asked.
"You have just told me that we are going to share a life; that you are my wife in every sense of the word. Why would you not come back with us?" Catherine felt his thoughts as though he were speaking them aloud: He wanted to surround her with love, to hold her in his warmth forever. And it was what she wanted, too.

"Last night was only a beginning for us, Vincent," Catherine said, sighing, "and I have waited years." She kissed his chest where the vest hung open, breathing in the wonderful warm scent of him, then gazed back up into his eyes.

"But there are others to consider," she whispered.



XII

Vincent raised her hands to his lips, hearing and feeling her hesitancy; seeing the pain in her eyes. "What others, Catherine?" She closed her eyes for just a moment, and Vincent saw familiar faces, faces from the community, from his family.

"Not everyone may understand, Vincent," she said softly, her eyes open and pleading. "I don't know for certain. The gift is ours, but it's a gift in which everyone who loves you will share. Except for Narcissa, yours is the most open mind of all, and it has taken our bond and all of my words to make you truly believe in the reality of what we have."

Catherine smoothed her cheeks across their clasped hands, no longer looking at him. "I don't want to frighten anyone, Vincent," she whispered, "Especially the children." She leaned against him, still holding tightly to his hands.

Vincent kissed her knuckles, her wrists, soothing and healing with his mouth, absorbing her thoughts and with them, her pain. They had a choice: they could tell the truth and hope for understanding, or they could lie.

"We could tell them that I had been in some sort of a witness protection plan, Vincent," Catherine suggested softly. "We could explain it somehow; make up some reason for my not going Above anymore. Some of them know that I've always wanted to live here Below with you." She kissed his clenched fingers. "It might be simpler," she whispered.

Vincent closed his eyes. "I cannot lie to them, Catherine," he told her. "A lie feeds upon itself and grows." He opened his eyes, feeling her lips again upon his hands. He also felt her tears.

"I just don't want anyone to be afraid of me," she explained. "You know how I feel about the children, Vincent."

"The children love you. They will understand."

Catherine smiled, but it was a smile tinged with sadness. "I can stay with Narcissa. No one will even know that I'm around."

"No," Vincent said vehemently. "You are my wife. You are Jacob's mother. You will stay with us." He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly against the thundering beat of his heart. "I cannot be without you, Catherine," he told her. "Now that I have found you again, I want you with me, near me, always."

Catherine wanted so much to make the decision for him: to be able to say to him that a lie was so much easier to believe than the truth. But she agreed with him. She found the thought of lying to those she cared for Below intolerable. How much more difficult then, would it be for Vincent?

"The decision must be yours," she explained gently. "Narcissa agrees with me that it needs to be your choice." She rubbed her cheek against his chest, inhaling the warm scent of him. "I know it sounds unfair," she continued, "but they are your family, Vincent. You know them better than anyone." She lifted her head, wanting him to see what was in her eyes.

"Whatever you decide, I'll be with you, Vincent," she said. "I'm a part of you now, a part of your mind, your body, your soul. No matter what happens you must believe that."

"How can I make such a decision for both of us, Catherine?" He asked, his usually calm voice harsh now, and filled with pain. "If we tell the truth and you are hurt by it, I will never forgive myself. You have suffered so much already."

"Both of us have suffered, Vincent. The pain is not mine alone." She thought, suddenly, of the memories she shared with him; memories of dark nights and darker deeds. She shoved them instantly into the back of her mind, hoping that he had been too preoccupied to feel them.

"Do what your heart tells you, Vincent," Catherine told him, cupping his face between her hands. "It's what you always told me to do." She kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "And even if you decide to keep this our secret, at least I will have your nights - always your nights. I never had that before." Catherine took his mouth deeply, offering glimpses of what the nights would bring.

"Besides," she said, deciding that the day was going by too quickly to spend it worrying, "you don't have to decide right now. This time is for us - for you and me and Jacob. No one will come here today. Narcissa promised." She turned her head, seeing bright, dark eyes shining at her over the edge of the backpack.

"Perhaps I should consult our son," Vincent said, smiling faintly.

Catherine turned around and picked up the grinning child. "Yes," she agreed, "he could probably help." She smiled, tickling his face with her hair. "You look so cute lying there on your tummy. Whoops, wet again?" She looked at Vincent, laughing as the feeling of wetness engulfed her. "Does he always do that?" Vincent nodded, and this time his smile was much brighter.

"It's terrible," Catherine complained, "like sitting in a bowl of water." Jacob gurgled and pulled at her hair.

"All right, young man," she said, grinning, "let's see if Momma can do as good a job as Daddy. Hand me a dry diaper, will you, Vincent? I guess it's time for me to learn. If you can do it, so can I." She laughed. "God, I'd love to see Father do this."

Vincent returned her smile and reached into the backpack for the last dry diaper. The pack was getting decidedly heavier on the left side. He watched as Catherine unsnapped Jacob's overalls. The day had flown away from him. So much to think about, so much to decide.

"Yes," Catherine said, agreeing with his thoughts. "But the night is still ahead, Vincent." He smiled, remembering that none of his thoughts were secrets anymore. Not if she cared to listen.

"Oh, I'll always listen," Catherine told him, looking up and smiling. "I just may not always hear. It's a wife's prerogative to have selective hearing. Nancy told me that the last time I was in Westport." Vincent watched as she finished with Jacob's diaper. He smiled, pointing to the left-hand part of the pack. "Oh, right."

Catherine put the wet diaper into the specially-lined compartment and used the wet washcloth Vincent handed her. "You must take Jacob all over the Tunnels with this," she said, putting everything back in its place. She rummaged through the pack for a moment, then looked up. "Vincent? You didn't bring anything for yourself, did you?" Vincent shrugged.

"Catherine, when I packed this morning, food was not uppermost in my mind." He smiled. "And yes, Jacob and I have had our journeys," he continued, watching as she looked through the pack again and found the last bottle of milk. "Father spoke to me about it only last night. Mary is beginning to complain that she seldom gets to care for our son." He caught himself smiling again as Catherine showed Jacob how to hold onto the bottle himself. Had he ever smiled as much?

Catherine looked up at him, grinning. "No, I don't think so," she said, leaning over to kiss his chin. "And you have a beautiful smile."

Vincent laughed. Sharing the bond with her like this was so new, so strange. And it was continuing to grow, to expand. He was used to having his secrets, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Brooding, you mean."

"Catherine . . . " Vincent caught the hint of laughter hovering just at the edge of his mind, and planted a swift kiss on her lips. "You must remember, love," he said softly, "I have had little practice with teasing." Catherine reached out a hand to grasp his chin, pulling his face back to hers for a longer, deeper kiss.

"You'll get used to it," she whispered against his mouth.

Vincent doubted that he would ever be able to take her touches or her kisses for granted. They evoked so many possibilities, aroused so many of his senses. He wrapped himself in the warmth of her, in the delight of her lips covering his. She became his sustenance, filling him, yet making him hungrier. Vincent broke off the kiss, closing his eyes as he waited for his breathing to calm.

"Why don't you read the book you brought?" Catherine said, looking down at the baby in her lap. "You must have meant to share it with me." She smiled that half-smile he loved so well. "It's either that, or another dip in the pool. And I don't think Jacob would cooperate. Besides, I've always loved *Portrait of Jenny*."

"One of us is going to have to be sensible, Catherine," Vincent said, taking the book from the pack and settling back against the hard, rock wall. It took him a moment to get comfortable and he both saw and felt the smile Catherine was trying to hide.

"*You* be sensible," she said, moving with the baby to sit back against his chest. "You're very good at being sensible." Jacob shifted in her arms, wiggling until he was where he wanted to be.

Vincent wrapped his arms around them, allowing himself just a moment to savor the feeling of having both his wife and child in his embrace. Then he began to read.

"There is such a thing as hunger for more than food, and that was the hunger I fed on"

Catherine closed her eyes and listened to the cadence of Vincent's voice. Words always sounded more beautiful when he read them. They flowed off his tongue like the notes of a melodic serenade, caressing and warm.

She had seen the small book laying inside the pack, and known that he had brought it to share with her. Catherine didn't remember if she had told him how much she had loved that book years ago; when she was a young girl and needed to believe in endless possibilities and miracles born of love. She let her mind drift with the words and the artistry of Vincent's reading, and the hours passed.



"Would you like me to stop now, Catherine?" She had been quiet for so long. Even Jacob's breathing had settled into a gentle sort of half-sleep. Vincent wasn't certain if either of them heard what he was reading.

"No, please," Catherine whispered. "My favorite part is next. Don't stop." She snuggled against his shoulder, and Vincent rested his chin on her hair. How often had they sat like this? He reading, and Catherine drifting on the edge of sleep. "I'm not asleep," she whispered.

Vincent smiled and continued.

"I tried to tell Arne something of what was in my mind, about myself, and about the world. 'We know so little,' I said, 'and there's so much to know. We live by taste and touch; we see only what is under our noses. There are solar systems up there above us, greater than our own; and whole universes in a drop of water. And time stretches out endlessly on every side. This earth, this ocean, this little moment of living, has no meaning by itself . . . Yesterday is just as true as today; only we forget.'"

Vincent laid the book aside and held Catherine and Jacob even closer. He would not forget. He would take his life as it came to him, as Catherine had come to him. He would believe in their love, in their child. And he would not forget. He closed his eyes, resting in the circle of their love.

The hours had passed like water through his hands. "*The wind blows, the sea flows - and nobody knows.*" So many dreams, so many gifts shared. Vincent held them tighter, rubbing his hands across the soft wool of Catherine's dress. Her bare feet peeked out from under the hem and he smiled.

"Are you making fun of my toes, Vincent?" Her question was a whisper-soft touch against his neck.

"Never," he answered, reaching down a hand to caress her small foot. "You have beautiful toes." Catherine's laugh chimed through the cavern.

"Well," she said, raising her lips to kiss him gently on the chin. "You can tease me all you like about my toes tonight, when I come to your bed." Her smile faded, and she kissed him

again. "It's time, my love," she said softly. "It's a long way. You should be going." Vincent pulled her back for another, deeper kiss.

He did not know if he could move. To have awakened this morning without her was hard enough, but to leave her, actually walk away from her - he did not know if such a thing was possible.

"Jacob has no more diapers, no more bottles. You know you have to take him home." Vincent watched as his son held his mother's neck, kissing her cheek, holding her close. His heart was beating frantically. He did not want to leave her.

"Catherine . . . I do not know if I can go."

She lifted her face and smiled. "You can, Vincent. You have the strength, and you have the understanding." Vincent shook his head, but put the book and empty bottle into the pack. Then he stood and picked up his shirt, grateful it had dried. He only hoped he would not have to explain anything to Father before he was ready.

Catherine was as real as she had ever been. More real. For he had loved her body, now, as well as her mind, her soul. She was a part of him; the best part, the dearest part. Everyone who knew him, knew of his love for Catherine. Surely, they would rejoice with him.

"Catherine, about Father and the others . . . "

"Think about it, Vincent," she told him. "Just think about it. I'll be with you. Always. Never doubt that."

When he was fully dressed and had the pack settled on his back, Catherine stood and handed Vincent the carrier, studying him as he adjusted it over his chest.

Catherine kissed Jacob before giving him to Vincent, watching as he settled the baby for his ride. She felt his turmoil and knew that nothing she could say would make it easier. "I'll come to you tonight, Vincent," she told him. "When the pipes have stilled, and everyone is sleeping, I'll come to you." She smiled. "I can be very sneaky when I want to be."

Vincent caught her face between his hands, smoothing his palms over the satin of her skin. Her warmth, her love, soothed him, encouraged him. His fingers wove their way into her hair and he kissed her, tasting again the honeyed sweetness of her mouth. *I believe you. I do believe you!* His hands tightened in her hair. *But, I cannot go!*

"Catherine . . . I cannot!"

Catherine's gentle hands smoothed his hair and caressed his damp cheeks. "Vincent," she whispered. "It's all right. I can go first, if you want me to."

Vincent searched her eyes, searched the bond. She would do this for him. She loved enough to be strong. She *believed* enough to be strong. How could he do less?

Catherine kissed away his tears. "It's not a matter of belief or strength, Vincent," she told him. "Nor even a matter of love. I should have stayed this morning." She kissed him again, this time lingering at the corner of his mouth. "I should have

stayed so we could awaken together, in each other's arms. But I was afraid to take the chance."

She licked gently at his lips, and Vincent obliged her, taking her mouth with the possessiveness he had shown her earlier. Catherine wound her arms around his neck, spreading her fingers across his nape and up into his thick, beautiful hair. If it would help him, she would hold him like this forever.

"You will wake with me every morning, Vincent," she promised. "Every morning for the rest of your life and beyond."

Vincent accepted her promise as he accepted her kiss. Now, he was certain. Jacob wiggled in the carrier, showing his impatience. Vincent ran his tongue softly over Catherine's bottom lip, one, last time, then stepped back.

"Stay here, Catherine," he said. "Stay where Jacob and I can see you when we look back."

"I will," she promised. "Oh, I almost forgot," she smiled, and Vincent saw a hint of laughter in her eyes. "I left a present for you in our chamber before I left this morning," she told him. "Look behind the diapers on Jacob's shelves."

Vincent felt the thrill that ran through her as she said the words. *Our chamber*. One night, one day; only that had passed, nothing more, and his life was suddenly bright and full of light and love again.

"Always, Vincent. Always."

Vincent smiled and drew a deep breath. He filled his eyes with the sight of her, beautiful and barefoot on the ledge beside the falls. "I'll be waiting, Catherine," he told her. Drawing on every bit of his strength, he turned away, walking slowly to the chamber entrance.

At the outer tunnel, he paused, and turned back. She was there, where he had left her, watching him in the waning light, smiling. Vincent turned again, heading back toward the Home Chambers.

His journey was a silent one, spent in contemplation of the day, and the night to come. He thought, also, about Father, and the rest of his family. Would they accept Catherine as she was? *Could* they? So many questions, so many different answers. His pace quickened. He needed the warmth of his chamber, the familiar pieces of his life - Catherine. Vincent smiled, wondering, for the first time, about the gift she said he would find.

"Vincent?"

Vincent turned, startled. He always heard anyone approach long before he saw them. How had Pascal gotten so close without his hearing?

"Vincent? Are you all right?"

Vincent took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, Pascal. It's just that you startled me. I was deep in thought."

"Oh, well, then, I won't bother you. I was on my way to the Pipe Chamber and had a question about the new pipes

we're putting down in the Eastern Sector. But it can wait until tomorrow."

Vincent saw the perplexed look on Pascal's face. "Is something amiss?"

"I was just going to ask you that, Vincent," Pascal said, looking around the tunnel, then down at the carrier across Vincent's chest. "Have a good journey with Jacob?"

Vincent smiled. "Yes," His voice softened with thoughts of how the day had passed. "Yes, Pascal. A beautiful journey." He caught the subtle shifting in his friend's stance as he moved closer.

"You sure you're all right?" Pascal's eyes had widened, making his face look even thinner than it was.

"Yes, I am certain. Why do you ask?" Could it be Pascal saw something tangible that others might also see?

"You just look . . . different, somehow, Vincent." Pascal shook his head. "Well, if you're certain . . ."

"I'm fine, Pascal, truly. But I thank you for your concern."

"Well, then, I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

"Good night, Pascal." Vincent watched as Pascal walked away, his fingers already tightening on the pipes he held in his hands. What had Pascal seen?

Happiness, Vincent. Happiness and love.

Vincent smiled as he hurried across the Whispering Gallery and down the corridors and tunnels to his chamber. Thankfully, he met no one else. Father and the others nearby had already retired for the night. The corridors were empty and silent.

Vincent entered his chamber. No, *their* chamber, and went directly to Jacob's shelf. There, behind the diapers, was Father's lost volume of Yeats.

Catherine!

A hint of laughter colored the bond and Vincent smiled, placing the book on one of his pillows.

Jacob did not awaken as Vincent changed him and placed him under the blankets in his crib. His had been a full day. Perhaps, he would sleep the night. Vincent took off the carrier and backpack. He wanted to put everything away, have everything finished before he sat down to read what Catherine had left for him.

He smiled as he washed up and changed into his night clothes. His wife would be joining him this night. A warm brilliant light tightened his heart. *His wife - his Catherine.*

Vincent took extra candles from the drawer and placed them in holders on the tables and bookcases around the bed, inhaling the faint scent of lavender Rebecca had added to the wax.

When the room shimmered in candlelight, he piled the pillows at the end of the bed and pulled back the quilted cover and blankets, settling himself to wait for her.

On the pillow next to him was the book of Yeats. Inside the book, marking a particular page, Catherine had written him a note. But, not just any note. This one was on beautiful parchment, in her flowing hand. A note he knew he would keep forever. On it she had written:

*Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For lo! my own shall come to me.*

*The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high
Can keep my own away from me.*

The next waltz is ours,

*Forever,
Catherine*

'The next waltz'. Vincent closed his eyes. How many waltzes would they have? How many years of love, of sharing

touches, sharing thoughts? They would watch their son grow, together. Truly, he was blessed.

He put the parchment aside, laying it carefully on the bookcase behind the bed. He smiled, and picked up Father's book, now open to the page Catherine had marked.

There was only one poem on the page. One short, beautiful way for Catherine to answer every doubt, every fear. Vincent's hands shook as he began to read, wanting to hear the words aloud.

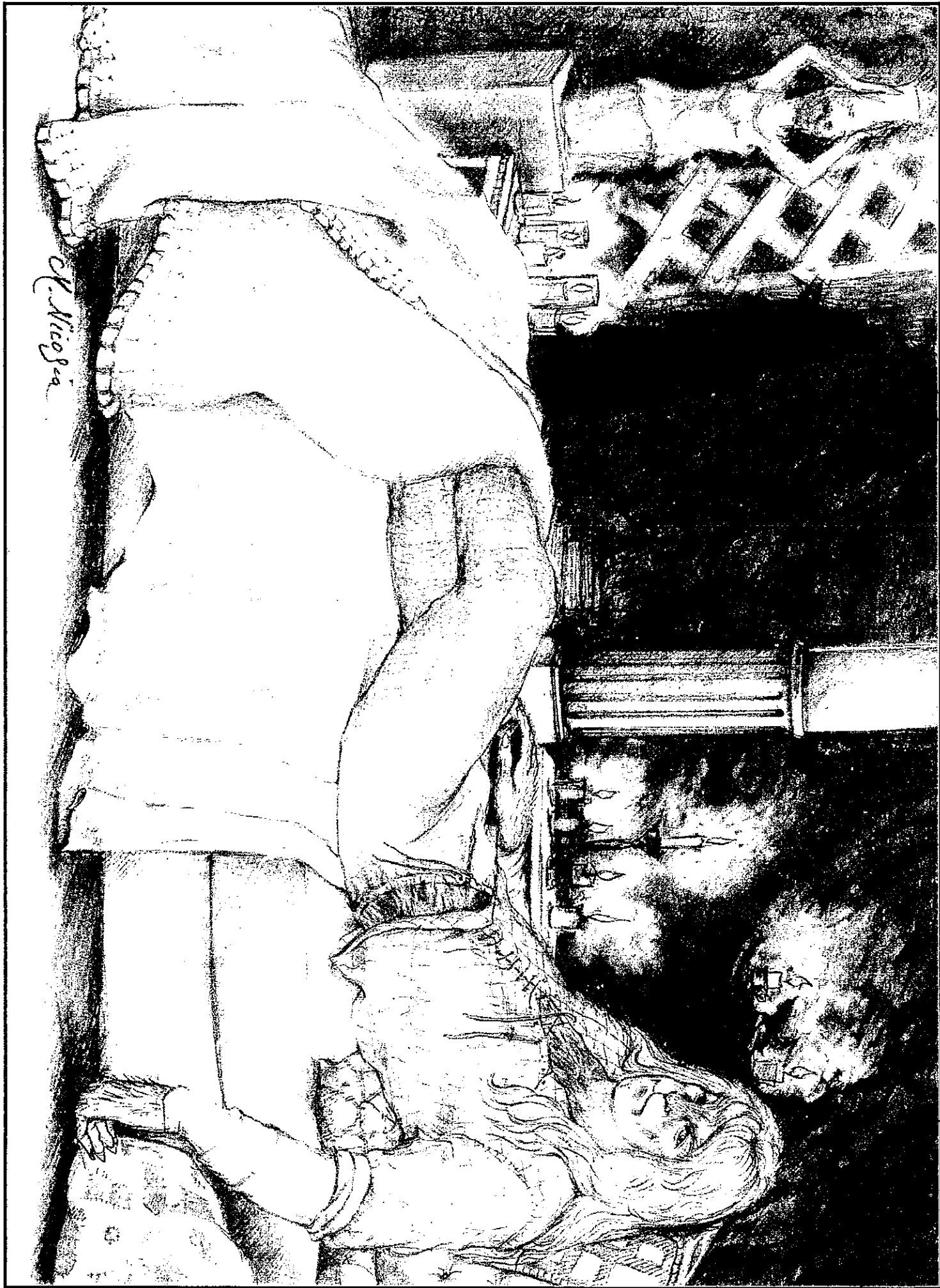
"When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars."

Vincent's smile belied his falling tears as in his mind's eye he stood proudly among those stars, holding Catherine in his arms, waiting for the music to begin.





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the night will more than pay . . . " hence the difference
between what I quoted here and the version on the "Of
Love and Hope" album.

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*We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk,
and see the jewel in the toad's head.
Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff
will stand in our stalls,
and over our heads will float the Blue Bird
singing of beautiful and impossible things,
of things that are lovely and that never happen,
of things that are not and that should be.*

Oscar Wilde

To My Readers

When I originally wrote the last page of the first edition of *"...Shall Have No Dominion"*, it was, in and of itself, a complete entity. However, in the days and weeks following the publication of that first novella, I received letters and telephone calls asking me to please continue the story.

"...Shall Have No Dominion" was my way of coping with an untenable situation. Many of you during the past three years have made it yours as well. Because of this, and because of my love for the characters and the world Below, two more novels, *The Next Waltz* and *"O Sweetest Song"* were born. What had started out as a novella of catharsis for myself, had turned into a trilogy of over 225,000 words with readers throughout the world.

Nothing I have ever written has given me as much pleasure as these novels. That you, the fans of this beautiful show, accepted my vision of Vincent and Catherine's transcendental love, reaffirmed my belief in the limitless boundaries of the human mind.

But when the lonely novella became part of a trilogy, there was much about it that I wanted and needed to expand upon to make it "match", as it were, the parts in the story that came later. With the encouragement of Mary Ellen Nicosia and my husband, John, I made those changes and those expansions. With a little extra encouragement of my own, I also made less drastic changes in *The Next Waltz*.

"...Shall Have No Dominion" is no longer the short novella it once was. Nor is it lonely. It is part of a beautifully-matched trilogy of novels with covers and interior art by Mary Ellen Nicosia. It is also a tribute to all of you who believed the words of Father in the episode "Shades of Grey", by George R. R. Martin and David Peckinpah. During this episode, Father and Vincent have the following conversation:

Vincent: Our bond is stronger and deeper than either of us could begin to imagine.

Father: As if both your destinies were inextricably linked.

Vincent: Yes.

Father: As if your hearts, in their search for union, could transcend time and space, circumvent the laws of physics and probability.

For those of you who believed with me, I can only say "thank you." And I hope that my writing, and Mary Ellen's beautiful illustrations, will give you pleasure for years to come.

Carolyn Kleinsorge
Napa - 1992