

shall have no Dominion,
The Next Waltz //

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Available from:

Dominion Press
1325 Imola Avenue West - Suite 527
Napa, CA 94559

First Printing: January 1991

Special Thanks

To Ritch Brinkley for letting me use his own ideas regarding William's background. You gave him life.

To my husband John, who says doing this is fun and really means it. You always 'blow the rest away.'

To Woody, who inspires Sherri when she needs it the most. By all means, keep it up.

To Vicki, who came to unstick me when I got stuck and drove me when I couldn't drive. Editing and friendship above and beyond the call.

And to Nanette and Kellie, who were there for me whether I needed my spirits lifted, my rear-end kicked, or my writing edited. I could not have finished this book without you.

Dedicated to:

All of the wonderful fans who have written, sent gifts, telephoned and in so many ways given me their incredible love and support. You keep the Dream alive throughout the world. Thanks are not enough.

And that very special group who kept my house in laughter and tears for our three-day marathon: Janelle, Jean, Joan, both the Lindas, Mary Ellen, Nanette, Sherri, Susan, and Vicki. You make the journey beautiful.

To My Readers:

With *The Next Waltz*, I continue my idea of what 'really happened' after "Invictus." As you know from having read "*. . . Shall Have No Dominion*", I could not leave Vincent to face the rest of his life alone, without the woman he had come to love so deeply. Such a thing was totally incomprehensible to me. Hence, the writing of "*. . . Shall Have No Dominion*" was a catharsis as well as an obsession. What continues to astound me is the overwhelming support I have received from fans all over the world. You gazed upon my vision with open minds as well as open eyes, and for this, I will be forever grateful.

Writing *The Next Waltz* was much more difficult than I had anticipated. These people wanted to tell their story, their way, and no amount of coaxing, ranting or raving from yours truly would sway them. They stole and changed my plot, twice; ran away with all of the scenes, and invariably made the book theirs. They had a little help from me, but I will be the first to admit that this story belongs to Vincent, Catherine, Father, Pascal, William, Eric, and everyone else who demanded a voice. I thank them for allowing me to tell their story.

*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*

I

Vincent awoke to the soft sounds of early morning. Only the occasional tapping of the sentries played across the pipes, and he heard no sounds at all from Father's chamber. The hour before dawn was his, as it was most mornings. But this was not most mornings.

The warm, woman scent of her reached out to his senses, urging him to lean his head the few inches necessary to bury his face in the softness of her hair. *Catherine*. She moved slightly in her sleep, snuggling back against the warmth of his naked body and Vincent smiled. She had heard his silent call, even through the shrouded mists of sleep.

Softly, so as not to awaken her, Vincent ran his palm gently down her arm, luxuriating in the exquisite softness of her warm skin. She was everything he had ever wanted, ever dreamed of - all fantasies fulfilled in this one, small, delicate woman. He kissed her bare shoulder, letting his lips linger against the faint saltiness of her skin as he tasted her again. How many times during the night had his lips explored the satin corners of her body? How often had he awakened to the gentle pressure of her mouth against his? They had spoken without words, letting their minds merge as their bodies joined to bring more than mere pleasure.

Vincent closed his eyes and nestled his chin against Catherine's hair. He wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her even closer. She fit so perfectly against him. Her warm bottom teased his thighs and he felt himself responding.

Vincent smiled, realizing that years of denial would not be appeased by only two nights.

"License my roving hands and let them go," he murmured, opening his eyes as his hand covered the soft, plump roundness of her breast. "Behind, before, above, between, below" His voice trailed off in a husky whisper as he savored the delicate softness of her. He watched his once-despised fingers travel gently across her skin and was awed anew by his boldness. *Beautiful. She is so beautiful.*

Catherine awoke slowly, relishing the warmth she knew at once was Vincent. Her back pressed against the strong width of his chest and his legs were warm behind hers. Had she ever felt so protected? So cherished? So loved? She promised herself never to let him awaken alone again.

His fingers cupped her breast, and Catherine sighed as his fur slid erotically across her skin. She heard him whisper, and smiled. *Donne before breakfast?* Warm lips nudged at the skin beneath her ear and she arched her back as Vincent's tongue teased her earlobe.

"That tickles," she whispered, turning toward her sweet tormenter.

"Does it?"

Vincent smiled down into Catherine's iridescent eyes. The light from the small night lamp bathed her in delicate shadows, illuminating the perfection of her skin as his gaze traveled over her. He moved his arm up to Catherine's shoulder and gently pushed her to her back. The love he saw shining from her eyes made his breath catch. She raised a hand to his cheek, stroking the short hair and resting her fingers against his lips. He felt her touch tingle through his body, heightening his already

responsive senses. He pressed a kiss against her fingers, letting just the tip of his tongue play against her skin.

"Good morning."

Catherine's voice was passionate and full of promise. Vincent lowered his head and enjoyed the pleasure of their first "good morning" kiss as husband and wife. Her soft lips opened for him in sweet invitation and Vincent lost himself in the wonder and delight of her mouth blending with his.

"Good morning, Catherine Wells," he whispered, when the kiss ended. Delicately, he planted kisses across her cheek and down the column of her neck. He felt her pulse quicken and lingered to stroke his tongue across her collarbone.

Catherine's arms wound around Vincent's neck, holding him to her as she savored the caress. At last. To awaken in his arms each morning, to know that he was finally hers, completely, always. *Catherine Wells. Vincent's wife.*

"My wife," Vincent said, echoing her unspoken thoughts. He buried his face in the warm valley between her breasts, moving slowly from side to side, savoring the contrast of her soft breasts against his nose and cheeks. Her skin held the fragrance that was hers alone, a scent that reminded him of everything she was, everything she had become to him. They were so different, yet they had come together again and again, blending perfectly. She had taken him into her body, shared her fulfillment in ways he could barely comprehend. How he loved her.

Catherine tangled her fingers in the rough silk of Vincent's hair as his wandering mouth traveled slowly over her. His tongue stroked delicately across the hardened peak of one breast before his lips tightened around her. Catherine closed her eyes as he tugged gently at her nipple. Her back arched

and she pressed herself against him, feeling his mouth enclose more of her as he began to suckle.

"Vincent . . . " she gasped, feeling the pull of his mouth like an electric current running through her body, " . . . Vincent."

Her response shimmered through him. Their bond, their ability to share completely every touch, every emotion, shook him. He could feel her need for him, her hunger, growing, rising with each caress, each stroke of his tongue. He wound the fingers of one hand through the silky strands of her hair as his other hand wandered slowly across the warm skin of her belly. The muscles beneath his fingers tightened, anticipating his goal.

Catherine moaned as Vincent gently stroked the damp heat at the juncture of her thighs. Instinctively, she opened her legs, pressing against his hand. He deepened the caress, sliding his fingers across overly sensitive flesh. She bit her lip, trying not to cry out.

Vincent caught Catherine's cry with his lips, kissing her with a hunger barely under control. He plundered her mouth with his tongue as his fingers explored her. She was wet, hot, and he felt her melt against him as he took her higher. She was his lover, his wife, the embodiment of every dream, every desire he had ever felt. He covered her leg with his, rocking against the warm softness of her thigh. It was exquisite torture and he felt himself growing harder, hotter. He moved again, knowing it wasn't nearly enough.

Catherine's hands tightened in Vincent's hair, caressing him as their tongues danced. Sensations whirled through her mind and body; the taste of him, the harsh sound of his breathing, the varying textures of his unique body as he moved against her. She trembled and slid her hands over his hard, muscular shoulders. She wanted him, needed him to become a

part of her. She could feel her hunger fusing with his, burning them, doubling and redoubling as their bodies and their minds demanded satisfaction.

But it was his body that stroked her, his body that caressed her from breast to toe. The erotic glide of his hair across her skin, sensitized each nerve ending and Catherine shifted her legs, moving against him, letting her body speak for her.

Vincent gasped as the heat of Catherine's warm skin urged him even closer, and he moved to cover her. Resting his weight on his forearms, he settled himself against the cradle of her thighs, his eyes closing at the first caress of her hot, delicate flesh. He took a deep breath, trying to ignore the rush of heat that washed over him as Catherine arched her hips. He had to slow them down or it would be over too soon.

"How blessed . . . am I . . . in this discovering thee . . .'" he groaned brokenly, remembering the poem he had begun so long ago. He had let his hands rove, given them license to explore the wonder of this magnificent woman and in doing so had made their bodies burn.

Catherine made a sound deep in her throat, feeling Vincent so close yet not a part of her. Restlessly, she stroked the breadth of his shoulders, back and forth in a frenzy of need as she moved her legs in restless invitation. When he teased her again, she raised her head, biting none too gently at the curve of his neck.

Vincent felt the lovebite shiver down his body and he smiled. He had learned during the night that pleasure *did* build with tiny pauses of frustration. And, he loved to see his Catherine totally without restraint, without control. He framed her face in his hands, pushing aside the sweat-dampened tendrils

of hair that lay against her cheeks. Passion-glazed eyes gazed up at him with a desire beyond hunger, beyond need.

"To enter in these bonds is to be free," he whispered, as he slid into the warm, moist haven of her body, his eyes saying what words could not. "Then where my hand is set my seal shall be."

Catherine heard Vincent's voice as if from a far distance. His seal had been set on her the first moment she looked into the haunted depths of his eyes. She had always been his, *would* always be his. He moved within her, slowly, sending a quivering shudder through her body, through her mind. She wrapped her legs around his hips, pressing against him, taking him even deeper into her warmth. Her arms tightened, holding onto his strength as she felt the first, faint tremors of completion.

Vincent moved faster, deeper, as Catherine stiffened beneath him, her body pulsing, pulling him with her into fulfillment. His senses screamed, overloaded with sensations, bombarded by the powerful climax shaking him. He would have cried out, but Catherine's mouth was there, covering his, taking the cry from him.

Vincent gave himself up to her, sharing the kiss until their shuddering ceased and they could breathe again. After a few silent moments, he moved carefully to his side, taking her with him, unwilling yet to leave her.

Catherine snuggled against Vincent's chest, inhaling the warm muskiness of his skin, as she enjoyed the softness of his hair against her face. Her body still quivered with the aftershocks of their loving, with the warmth of him inside her, and she closed her eyes, savoring each sensation. Without conscious thought, her mind wandered through the miraculous tentacles of their bond, and she knew Vincent had been waiting

for her. She smiled, sharing the happiness he felt as their minds joined completely.

I love the way you quote from Donne.

Her words whispered through his mind, almost as if she had spoken aloud. Vincent smiled and rested his cheek against her hair. Contentment and peace flowed over him like warm rain on a sultry New York summer night.

And I love the way you answer.

He raised his head, looking down at the small woman nestled in his arms. "You answer with your body," he whispered, smoothing the silken tangles of her hair with caressing fingers. "You answer with your heart, with your mind." He leaned down to press a tender kiss against her love-warmed lips. "If ever any beauty I did see, which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.'"

Catherine lay back against the pillows and reached up to touch Vincent's cheek. In the dimly lit chamber, shadows covered his face in shades of grey. But there were no lingering shadows in his eyes or in his heart. She stroked his cheekbone, the high arch of his brow and smiled.

"If you 'desire' me any more than you already do," she teased, "we'll never get out of this bed." Catherine watched as Vincent's eyes swept over her, taking in the rosy flush his loving had left on her body.

"I could not desire you more, Catherine," he told her, stroking slowly down her arm before twining his fingers with hers. "Your touch, your taste . . . " He brought her hand to his lips, and softly placed a kiss on each finger. His eyes burned a searing path to her heart as Catherine heard all that was left

unsaid. They were one heart, one soul, one body. Each touch, each thought only bound them more.

"I love you, Vincent," she said softly. "I will love you until time no longer exists and beyond." She sealed her vow with a kiss, loving the sweet warmth of his lips with hers. It was a kiss of promise, of things yet to be.

"Time will never end for us, Catherine," Vincent answered, knowing his words were true. "You have proven this . . . by being here, by loving me."

"Always."

Always. Vincent echoed the vow in his mind as he took her mouth in a deep, all-consuming kiss. He lost himself in the warmth of her, in the sweetness of their passion, until the familiar sounds of their awakening son called him back. *Later.*

Catherine smiled, silently agreeing as she watched Vincent get up from the bed. The air in the chamber was cool but not uncomfortable. She followed his movements, enjoying the sight of her naked husband as he bent over the crib to change Jacob's diaper. He moved with unconscious grace, unmindful of his nudity. Catherine felt her heart warm, knowing it was her love that had helped him to see himself as the beautiful being he was.

She watched as he nuzzled his nose in the curve of Jacob's neck, and groaned with him when fiercely strong little hands pulled at his hair. Love flowed around and between them, encompassing her as well. And when Vincent walked back to the bed with his squirming bundle, Catherine sat up and held out her arms.

"This is usually the time we take our bath," Vincent said,

placing a quick kiss on his son's forehead as he gave him to his mother. "We will need to rearrange our schedule." He smiled, sharing his memories of other mornings.

"Maybe if his father didn't fool around so long in bed in the morning," Catherine teased, "our son wouldn't have to wait for his bath."

Vincent dropped a quick kiss on Catherine's smiling lips before moving to pick up his drawstring pants from where they lay on the back of the chair. As he slipped them on, he watched Jacob snuggle against the warmth of Catherine's breasts, content to be hugged and cuddled, unconcerned with baths and breakfast.

"Are you cold?" he asked, sitting beside them on the bed.

Catherine laughed as Jacob gave her a loud, smacking kiss on her cheek. "A little," she told him, hugging the chubby, miracle that was their son. She looked up into her husband's eyes and smiled. "He's very much like you," she said, turning to lay Jacob on the quilt in front of her crossed legs. He kicked up his feet, and she tickled his pajama-clad toes.

"In what way, Catherine?" Vincent asked, putting his arm around her bare shoulders as he leaned closer.

"The way he loves," she answered. Her voice was as soft as a summer breeze and as quiet. "He loves without reservation, without question." She held her hand out to the baby, and he grabbed eagerly at her slender fingers.

"And he loves you," Vincent said, quietly. "As his father loves you." Vincent entwined his fingers with theirs, studying the contrasts, the differences: Catherine's small, delicate fingers, the fragility that hid her strong spirit; Jacob's tiny baby-fat hands,

reaching without restraint towards the people who had created him; and his own, once hated, hidden, strange - now covering those of the two people who made his life complete. It was Catherine who had shown him that his hands could give pleasure, could know love, and it was Jacob who embodied that love.

"Yes," Catherine whispered. Vincent looked up and saw the shine of tears glistening in her eyes. He bent his head and took her lips in a kiss that spoke, not of passion or desire, but of love that knew no boundaries, no barriers; love that was as endless as it was strong, love that would burn brightly until time itself ceased to exist.

Long moments later, Vincent lifted his head and gazed down at the beautiful woman in his arms. Her eyes opened, bright with unshed tears. She smiled and touched his chin.

"The Tunnels will be waking up soon," she said softly, "I can't very well greet Father without any clothes on."

Vincent stroked her bare shoulder and watched the tiny gooseflesh that erupted on her cool skin. "Then you know of my decision."

"Yes."

Vincent searched the bond for any hesitancy, any argument. He sensed a slight disquiet, but it was faint and quickly gone. "Do you agree, Catherine?" he asked.

"I expected it," she told him, covering his hand with her own. "You love them, Vincent. They're your family. You would want them to share in your happiness."

Vincent heard the tenderness and warmth behind Catherine's words. Their love had always been their greatest strength, their greatest joy. Whatever doubts she had, whatever fears, were cast aside by the knowledge that their love *would* endure. He pressed a soft kiss against the equally soft skin of her shoulder.

"I will find something for you to wear," he said, rising from the bed. Father had been more than a little disconcerted when he learned of Jacob's existence. Vincent could only imagine what would happen if Father were to find Catherine, nude, in their bed. The thought made him smile.

"Jacob's fallen asleep again," Catherine told him, watching as he searched the bottom drawers of the old walnut dresser. "And your sense of humor is decidedly warped."

Vincent chuckled. "I will admit that I enjoy seeing Father at a loss for words," he said, finding what he wanted. "It happens so seldom." He looked up, his fingers tightening on the material in his hands. "You could change your mind about your dress and boots," he said. "Are you certain you want them packed away?"

"Yes," Catherine replied quietly. "I'm certain."

"Even the boots?"

Catherine thought of her bare feet beneath the blankets and sighed. "Even the boots," she told him. "They're from a different time, Vincent. I'm a part of *this* world now." She smiled. "High heels seem a little impractical down here anyway."

Vincent nodded and walked back to the bed, holding the garment in his hand. Catherine saw the humor fade from his

smile as his eyes roamed over her bare breasts before meeting her gaze.

"When you came to me, Catherine," he breathed softly, "when I saw your beauty, touched you . . . there were truly no words."

Catherine held out her hand, clasping his strong fingers in hers. "You didn't need words, Vincent," she told him, feeling his love like the hot sun of summer, warming her. "You were eloquent."

"And you, my love, are poetry."

He handed her the shirt. It was cotton, faded with many washings and patched on the elbows with denim. Catherine took it, smiling, as he sat on the bed beside her.

"Was this yours once?" she asked, fingering the soft cloth.

"A long time ago," he told her. "I thought I might have given it away." He smiled. "You will look adorable in it."

Catherine laughed and began to stretch out the drawstring neck so she could slip it on. "I'm a wife and a mother, Vincent," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not supposed to look 'adorable'." She started to pull the shirt on when Vincent stopped her.

"Not yet, Catherine," he said, brushing his hand lightly across her fingers. She watched as he opened the pouch that lay on his still-bare chest. *I'll cherish it.*

The crystal sparkled little in the dimly lit chamber. Its many facets hardly shone as Vincent held it, dangling from his fingers before her. But the radiance Catherine felt as she

looked at her gift, came, not from the light in the room, but from within Vincent's heart. *I wanted to give you something from my world, something for you to carry with you. A keepsake.*

Catherine smiled, ignoring the tightness in her chest and the tears that again filled her eyes. *It comes from our deepest chamber. It reminds me of a piece of eternity.*

Vincent placed the necklace carefully around Catherine's neck. He lifted her hair, and gently kissed the nape of her neck. The necklace was a symbol, just as the wedding band she wore.

"Every moment since that night," he said quietly, "I'm reminded of what a gift life is."

The shirt lay forgotten as Catherine raised her hands to Vincent's face. She spoke to him with her eyes, with her heart, with the gentle fingers the slid across his cheeks into the golden brilliance of his hair. She covered his lips with hers, sharing his breath. Vincent's arms enfolded her and she shared with him the feeling of rightness as their bodies touched and warmed. *You are the gift, Vincent. You are my life.*

Vincent heard her silent whisper, felt her love singing through his soul. His arms tightened, and he stroked the delicate length of her spine, bare beneath his hands. He didn't know what he had done to deserve such a love, such a gift. But he would cherish both, and protect them from whatever lay ahead. Her body tightened beneath his hands as she shared his unspoken thought.

"You're frightened." It was a statement, not a question, and as his words whispered over the softness of Catherine's cheek, Vincent kissed away the remnants of her tears.

"A little," she told him, lifting her face for another kiss. "I want to them to accept me, Vincent. I can't leave you now . . . I won't." She sighed, and leaned into his arms.

"We must trust in those we love, Catherine," he said, holding her closer. "They are my family. We must have faith in them."

Vincent felt Catherine's acceptance as she lifted her head and smiled. "I have faith in you," she told him. "And I have faith in our love." She kissed him quickly on the mouth and picked up the forgotten shirt. "But, I think I'd feel more comfortable meeting Father with clothes on."

"I am certain he would agree with you."

The people Below were beginning to stir; the sounds on the pipes growing with the start of another day. Vincent listened to the familiar sounds of morning as he picked up his now wiggling and wide-awake son. They watched together as Catherine struggled into the oversized shirt, smoothing it down over her thighs as she knelt on the bed. She *did* look adorable.

"I am *not* adorable," she argued, sitting once again and sliding her legs under the blankets and quilt.

Vincent handed Jacob to his mother and straightened the covers before joining her beneath them. "Yes," he said firmly, pressing one cold, bare foot against her calf, "you *are*."

Catherine cried out as his icy toes tickled her leg. Jacob squealed with her, and together they fell against Vincent's warm body in a tangle of arms and legs. They were still laughing when they heard the voice from the chamber entrance.

"Vincent? Is something wrong with Jacob? I thought I heard . . . "



II

The silence was strong enough to be felt. Vincent saw the stunned look in Father's eyes as the older man stumbled slowly to the chair. He lifted Jacob from his chest and handed him to Catherine. She had moved away at Father's first words, and the thoughts running through her mind were troubled, apprehensive. Vincent gave her a quick kiss of reassurance and rose from the bed.

"Father," he began, squatting beside the chair, "something miraculous has happened." He covered his father's shaking hand with his. Vincent was not at all sure that Father even knew he was there. He squeezed Father's hand. "Your eyes do not deceive you, Father," he said softly. "Catherine *has* come back to me."

Vincent watched as changing shadows flit across the face of a man who looked suddenly older. He thought of lighting another lamp and some candles, and saw Father's gaze shift. Vincent turned. Catherine was moving quietly around the room, relighting the candles he had set out the night before. In a moment, the chamber glowed with their shimmering lights. Vincent smiled and watched as his wife rejoined their son on the bed. The shirt she wore ended at her knees and her bare legs and feet made her look entirely too young. *And adorable.*

Catherine groaned and lifted Jacob into her lap. "Tell your daddy to behave," she told the baby, turning him so that they both faced the chair. Jacob blew a loud, Bronx cheer and

Catherine laughed. "That's telling him." The tension in the room eased somewhat.

"Catherine . . . is it really you?" Catherine looked up and smiled hesitantly.

"Yes, Father," she said softly. "I know you must be confused," she hesitated, noticing the subtle changes in Father's eyes as he straightened, his demeanor almost rigid.

As she looked at Father, Catherine realized that something strange was happening. In her mind memories and images that had been only frightening shadows until now, were taking form. She hadn't known until this moment how much she had forgotten. When she spoke again, her voice was shaking. "I can try to explain . . ."

"You had no right! No right to put my son through such agony!" Catherine shook her head and bit down hard on her lip. The images came faster now; dark, dreadful images that threatened to overwhelm her. Father's angry words rang through the chamber.

Vincent tried to intervene, "Father . . . "

Catherine watched the older man shake off his son's restraining hand, giving Vincent no time to explain. His glaring eyes accused and judged her. Hadn't they always? Hadn't she known, somewhere deep inside, that this would happen? Was Father the reason for her sudden fear? Could his anger be responsible for the grim visions that hovered like demons at the edge of her awareness? Catherine looked away, focusing her eyes inward, drawing on the strength of her bond with Vincent. Such love, such gentleness, then . . . *No! He can't see this! I can't let him see this!*

Vincent rose from Father's side to go to Catherine. Father's words had hurt her. He knew this, felt it. Vincent reached out to touch her shoulder and there was a brief moment when her pain called to him, looking for warmth, for healing, then . . . nothing. He tried again to reach her mind, to comfort her through their bond, but felt only a slight shuddering as he called to her. Jacob began to whimper and Vincent sat on the bed, enfolding both Catherine and Jacob in his arms.

"For months my son has mourned for you," Father continued bitterly. Vincent ignored him, concentrating on reaching Catherine's mind. "Has he told you of the nightmares? Of the nights when his screams would bring me running into this chamber?" Father's clenched fist pounded the arm of the chair. "How *could* you!"

"Enough, Father!"

Catherine's trembling worried him. There was more here than a reaction to Father's anger. He searched the bond again and still found himself cut off, adrift without her. Hesitantly, he touched her cheek. "Don't, Catherine," he pleaded softly, turning her toward him. Her eyes were bleak and tore at his heart. "You promised, love," he whispered. "You promised never to leave me."

Vincent watched as she took a deep breath, holding Jacob closer, trying to calm him. "I won't leave you, my love," she assured him. "I'm here for you always." She looked away from him, and Vincent saw her fingers shake as she smoothed her hand across Jacob's hair.

Vincent sighed, knowing she had purposely misunderstood his words. He stroked the gentle slope of her cheek. "Catherine . . . "

She shook her head, looking up at him with tear-glazed eyes. "I can't explain," she whispered. "For now, Vincent. Only for now."

Vincent drew a deep breath and turned to the man who watched silently from the chair. He was the leader of the community. *Father*. The one the people listened to, looked up to. If they could not make him understand, what hope did they have?

"Your anger is unwarranted . . . Father." Vincent saw that Father noticed the hesitation. Good. He tightened his arms around his wife and son, watching Father's frown deepen. "If you can restrain yourself for a moment, I will try to explain."

Catherine heard the icy tightness in her husband's voice. Even without their connection she knew his anger, his pain. Her own pain cried to be free, but she denied it, locking it away with her memories, behind the closed doors of her shuttered mind.

"Catherine?"

Vincent's voice had softened as he whispered her name, but she looked up slowly, hesitant to meet his gaze. Would he understand? Would he forgive her? Catherine gathered her strength and looked directly into Vincent's eyes. What she saw there filled her heart.

"I love you, Catherine," he whispered, his love shining down on her like a benediction. "And I trust you. If you feel you must do this, then I will try to understand." He kissed her gently on the mouth and for a long, wonderful moment, Catherine forgot about the dark visions.

"Vincent . . . "

Vincent raised his head. "In a moment, Father," he said, not looking away from the woman in his arms. He often forgot how fragile she could be, how easily bruised. She wore her hard-earned strength like a shield, guarding the soft delicacy of her heart.

He smoothed his hand down her still tousled hair. "I will explain to Father," he said, watching the shadows slowly retreat from her eyes. "Somehow, I will make him understand." He kissed her again, giving gentle reassurance with his lips. "You could give Jacob his bath," he suggested, with a sad smile. "For some reason we are behind schedule this morning."

Catherine returned his smile, seeing in his eyes the strength that would always be there for her. Was she being a coward? Was she wrong in closing herself off to him? Vincent gave his strength as he gave his love: unconditionally. Could she not do as much? Catherine sighed, realizing the answers to her questions would have to wait.

"Thank you, Vincent," she whispered, tightening her hold on their restless son. "We'll be waiting." She rose from the bed, pausing briefly to glance at Father's unyielding face. His eyes challenged and condemned. Catherine turned away.

Vincent watched his wife and son leave the room. The bathing chamber was directly next to his, and there was little chance they would encounter anyone this early. He closed his eyes, looking inward, hoping for some sign from her. There was only Jacob, silently telling him that all would be well. *I hope so, my son. I hope so.*

"Do you think that's wise, Vincent?"

Vincent opened his eyes and rose from the bed in a fluid burst of energy. "What could be unwise in a mother giving her son a bath, Father?" He answered coldly.

Disregarding his father's imperious gaze, Vincent strode to the shelves and began to gather a clean diaper and clothes for Jacob. He tried to calm himself, but could not. He had seen the condemning look Father had given her, had seen the pain in Catherine's eyes.

"Well, aren't you going to tell me what this is all about, Vincent?"

Clothes and diaper fell to the floor as Vincent whirled around. Anger rose in him like steam from the lower chambers. It seethed and poured from his mind like lava, racing down a mountain. Vincent took a deep breath and willed his thundering heart to calm, but it was as if Catherine had taken all his softness, all his gentleness with her. She was his light. The rest was darkness.

"You have always mistrusted Catherine," Vincent began, not answering the question. "Why is that, Father?" He paced the length of the room, knowing he must maintain his distance; expend, somehow, the dark energy filling him. "What did Catherine do to warrant your distrust?" He took another deep breath, and another, continuing his journey around the chamber.

The bits and pieces of his childhood, his adolescence, stared at him from every corner, reminding him of how solitary his life had once been. He had lived within the pages of his books; had journeyed with the heroes, warmed himself by the light of their fires, shared the love of Maid Marion, Guinevere and Estella. Had shared, but never truly *known*, until Catherine. She had opened doors he never could have entered, brought him the kind of love he had never dared to hope for.

He looked at the large painting hanging on the wall across from his bed. Kristopher had captured the luminous quality of Catherine's eyes, the enormity of her love for the man who held her in his arms. Vincent's breath caught in his chest as he remembered another time when he had been angry, when the darkness had threatened to overwhelm him, when he had doubted even his own humanity. *Look at me . . . what do you see?*

I see the man I love.

Vincent closed his eyes, his breath slowing as he felt Catherine with him once again. Her love flowed through his mind like a gentle caress. The darkness, the anger, was gone. *You have always been my light, Catherine.* He turned and picked up the book she had left for him the night before. He would try again to make Father understand.

"I want to read something to you, Father," Vincent said, sitting on the edge of the bed as he turned to the marked page. He looked up, seeing confusion as well as anger now, in his father's eyes. "It will help me to explain." Father nodded, and Vincent began to read.

"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 . . . "

Vincent looked up, meeting Father's troubled eyes before he continued, his voice stronger, firmer, as he read the next line. "But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you . . . "

As the last word was spoken, Vincent looked up from the page. "Catherine has come back to me," he said softly. "She did not deceive us, Father. She was not hiding from me. She has been making a journey - a journey unlike any other, a journey across boundaries beyond measure."

Father's hands clenched on the arms of the chair. "This cannot be, Vincent," he argued. "Such a thing is not possible."

"It *is* possible, Father," Vincent said quietly. "Our love, our bond made it possible."

"But, she cannot be real. She is a shade, a spirit."

Vincent thought of the hours spent in Catherine's arms; the warmth of her body as he loved her, the quickening of her pulse, the sound of her voice, the wonder of awakening beside her. Catherine was no mere spirit, no shade come to haunt him. He closed the book and put it back on the table, then rose and kneeled in front of Father's chair.

"I do not pretend to understand completely, Father," Vincent began, grasping the hands of the man who had cared for him as long as he could remember. "But I know that Catherine is as real as she needs to be." He looked down at his own hands, seeing them differently now. "I have felt her heart beating under my palm, Father," he said, looking up again. "I have seen her holding our son in her arms, *known* the warmth and gentleness of her touch." He paused, trying to find the words.

"Catherine told me that her physical presence here is a gift," Vincent continued, "A gift never before given." He squeezed Father's hands. "Can you not open your mind and accept what your senses tell you is true? You have seen her, Father, heard her voice." Vincent suddenly remembered a time

when Catherine had come to him, sensing his need, opening herself fully for the first time to their bond.

"Do you remember when Eric fell in the maze, Father, and we were trapped?"

"I will never forget it," Father murmured. "We nearly died."

"But Catherine came to me, Father. She felt my need and she came. Without her aid, we might not have survived."

"I know this," Father admitted. Vincent waited, hoping he would say more, but Father remained silent. With a deep groan, Vincent stood, stretching his cramped legs. Why could Father not understand? Why was he acting as though he resented Catherine?

Vincent felt his impatience growing. "We spoke of Catherine," Vincent said, sitting again on the bed. "Do you remember?"

"We spoke of many things, Vincent. I had a head injury. You were attempting to keep me awake."

Vincent sighed and shook his head. *Patience, my love.* Her gentle whisper swept through him, calming his restlessness. He wanted to go to her, to feel her warm arms hold him to her breast, to know again the feeling of completeness he felt only with her.

"I remember your words, Father," Vincent said finally, "even if you do not."

"Were they so important to you?"

"Yes. They were important." Vincent closed his eyes, remembering that time, remembering the moment he had known just how deep his bond with Catherine went. He saw it so clearly. Could Father truly not remember? "Your words gave me hope, Father," he said, opening his eyes. "You had been so against my relationship with Catherine, so opposed to my going Above to be with her. Your words made me believe that perhaps you were beginning to see, beginning to *know* what Catherine's presence in my life meant to me."

Father removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose with trembling fingers. "I know what Catherine meant to you, Vincent," he said shakily.

"Do you, Father?" Vincent asked brusquely. "Do you *truly* know?" He struggled with his impatience. Part of him wanted to leave, to take Catherine and Jacob and find a place where they would not need explanations and arguments to be together. Another part of him remembered the times Father had been there for him, struggled with him, cared for him. Surely the man who loved him like a son could be made to understand.

"When I told you that the bond between Catherine and I was stronger and deeper than we had imagined, you said it was as if our 'destinies were inexplicably linked.' Do you remember?"

Father sighed, closing his eyes. His wire-rimmed glasses dangled from his hand. Vincent had never seen him look so old, so tired. "Yes," Father whispered, "I remember."

Vincent leaned forward, resting a hand on Father's knee. "You told me it seemed as though our hearts 'could transcend time and space, circumvent the laws of physics and probability.'"

"The laws of physics are exact, Vincent," Father said wearily. "There is no room for ghosts and spirits."

"But, Father," Vincent argued quietly, "is there not a law that states matter and energy cannot be created nor destroyed, but only changed? Catherine is neither ghost nor spirit," he continued. "I cannot tell you exactly what she *is*, for truly I do not know. But, Father . . . all of my senses, every part of my mind, my heart, my body, tell me that Catherine *has* transcended those laws you spoke of. Our love, our bond has enabled her to come back to me, to *physically* be with me." Vincent took Father's free hand in both of his. Perhaps if he knew how much things had changed . . .

"I have given Margaret's ring to Catherine, Father," Vincent said. "Yesterday, at the Chamber of the Falls, we exchanged vows. She is my wife." He squeezed Father's hand, willing him to see the truth in his eyes. "Whatever she is or is not, Father, Catherine *is* my wife. She is the mother of my son. I will not give her up."

Vincent could feel the silence, like walls closing in around him. Even the pipes were more quiet than they should have been. As if, they too, were waiting for Father to speak.

"I am not asking that she leave, Vincent."

"But, you *do* ask something, Father. I can feel it."

Vincent watched silently as Father got up from the chair. He turned, pinning Vincent with a hard stare. "Yes, I ask something of you," he said, clasping the back of the chair. "I ask that you give serious consideration to the dangers of what you are doing." He looked toward the unmade bed and Vincent saw the shudder that went through him. "You do not know where

this will take you, Vincent. You cannot think . . . " Father hesitated, as though the words could not be said.

"I cannot think *what*, Father?" Vincent asked. "I cannot think that I am a man? I cannot think that I can love as a man?" Vincent tried to calm his breathing, to calm the anger he felt growing within him. He rose suddenly from the bed and began to pace the room, needing the release of movement for his pain. He looked inward, seeking the warm assurance of Catherine's presence. Like a beacon lighting his way in the darkness, she was there. Vincent took a deep breath, feeling her love surround him. He stopped and turned to look back at the man he thought he knew.

"I will not allow you to denigrate what Catherine and I have between us, Father."

"Then, I ask that you consider the ramifications of Catherine's presence within this chamber," Father continued. "Think of the example you set for those who look to you for guidance. Think of the children, Vincent."

Vincent felt the biting pain of his claws as they bit into the palms of his clenched hands. "Love is an example for everyone to follow," he told Father. "Catherine is my wife. I am not ashamed of my love for her, nor is she ashamed of her love for me." He moved to stand directly in front of the older man, but did not reach out to touch him.

"Our son is the direct result of that love, Father," Vincent continued. "The people you speak of *know* this; as do the children. Has it not been said that the greatest gift a father can give his child is to love the child's mother?" He hesitated before clasping Father's shoulders with his stinging hands, wanting, needing him to understand.

"Catherine comes to me in light, Father," Vincent explained. "Not darkness. There is no darkness in our love. Why do you insist on covering it in shadows?" He stared into Father's eyes, searching for a reason, an answer. He saw only the bleak emptiness of loss, of illusions crushed and broken.

"I cannot allow this to continue, Vincent," Father said, grasping Vincent's arm. "You have no idea of the risks involved."

Vincent tore himself away from the man who had raised him. "No idea?" As if he had called them, memories cascaded down, one upon the other. Memories of other times when he had questioned Father's motives, wondered about the man who claimed to love him. He saw himself, shaking with the need for reassurance, his unknown illness eating away at his soul as he had asked: *Am I a man?*

Vincent covered his ears with his hands as he heard Father's answer reverberating through his mind: *Part of you is.*

"No!" Frightening visions of his dark beast raged within him, reaching out to subjugate and conquer his soul. Dark mixed with light until his mind was filled with conflicting images. His hands clenched into fists as he fought against the pain. Then it was gone.

Warmth flowed over and through him. Gentle fingers caressed his hands, his scalp, stroked the taut planes of his face. Soft lips trailed across his chin, leaving heat and comfort in their wake. Vincent opened his eyes.

She hadn't taken time to dry herself. Puddles of water were forming around her feet and dripping hair stained his shirt. Still, Catherine continued to caress him, using the tenderness

and warmth of her touch to chase away his dark demons. He folded her in his arms, letting her love surround him.

Catherine clung to him, wrapping her arms around his waist to hold him to her. She had expected Father's hostility, but not on this level. How could he have done this? She burrowed her face against the solid strength of Vincent's chest, inhaling the musky leather scent of him as she listened to the strong cadence of his heart.

The enormity of his pain had caught her unaware. She had been laughing with Jacob, watching the sturdy kick of his splashing feet in the small pool, when she had first felt Vincent's displeasure. Instinctively, she had known that whatever Father had said to him was distasteful.

For a moment, she had concentrated, listening with him through the stronger bond that now connected them, trying to understand. She had remained silent, letting him know she was near, that she loved him. Then she had felt Vincent cry out, heard his need and his pain as though it was her own.

She had scrambled from the pool and laid Jacob on a towel as quickly as possible. Without taking the time to dry off, she had pulled Vincent's shirt over her head, and wrapped Jacob tightly to keep him warm. She had had only one thought: to get to Vincent.

Vincent rubbed his cheek over the wet tendrils of Catherine's hair as her hands smoothed gently up and down his back. He concentrated on those hands, in the quiet way they comforted him, soothed him. He kissed her temple, enjoying the scent of homemade soap on her skin. He kissed her again and felt the slight trembling of her body. The last of his dark memories vanished, leaving him to be filled with Catherine's love. He looked up, feeling Father's eyes watching them.

"You are wrong, Father," Vincent said, the strain of the last few minutes evident in his voice. "You are wrong about the risks, and you are wrong in thinking that you might somehow prevent us from being together." He tightened his arms around his wife, but his gaze never strayed from the old man standing defiantly before them. "Please, don't make me choose between you."

They were words he had never thought to say. Father had cared for him, raised him, taught him, and Vincent loved him as a dutiful son. But it was Catherine who held Vincent's devotion, Catherine whose bond with Vincent transcended all others; Catherine, his wife, and the mother of his son.

"You are making a grave mistake."

"No, Father," Vincent said quietly, "the error is yours." He took a deep breath, knowing the words must be said. "I am no longer a child who will blindly accept your every word as law."

"There was a time in my life when I did, Father; when I believed that I could never know the physical love that exists between a man and a woman. That time is past. You taught the child, Father. You loved the child . . . Catherine loves the man."

A stillness settled over the room, until Vincent could discern every breath, every movement in the air around them. Day was beginning for the rest of the community and he could hear people calling to each other, getting ready for the morning meal and preparing for the work to be done.

"I can see that there is no use in trying to discuss this matter with you, Vincent," Father said, as he straightened his shoulders and moved away from the chair. "As long as you

continue to think with your . . . body, instead of your mind, you will not be able to listen to reason."

Vincent rubbed his hands gently across the back of Catherine's wet shirt, hoping she had not seen the cold contempt in Father's eyes. "The last function of reason is to recognize that there are an infinity of things which surpass it," Vincent reminded him. "Until you are willing to open your mind and understand that, there is nothing for us to discuss."

"Where is Jacob?" Father asked. "She left with the child and returned alone. Where is he?"

Catherine felt Vincent's body tense against hers as she lifted her head. His arms tightened and she gently kissed his chin. "It's all right, Vincent," she told him. "Trust me." Without leaving the warmth of his arms, she turned slightly. Catherine had felt his contempt, but seeing Father's eyes made it somehow worse.

"Jacob is with Mary, Father," Catherine told him. At his intake of breath, she smiled, pleased to have shocked him. "There are some people in this world who love without question," she said softly. "People who give their love without conditions or restrictions."

She turned back to Vincent and this time her smile was warm. "I'm sorry, love, but when I felt your pain I didn't stop to think. I pulled on your shirt, grabbed Jacob and ran into the corridor." She stroked his cheek, then let her fingers wander over the sensuous curve of his mouth. "Mary was there before I knew it," she continued. "It was remarkable, now that I think about it. She just smiled and held out her arms for the baby."

Catherine looked back at Father, wondering what he was thinking. "All she said was 'welcome home, Catherine. Vincent has missed you.'"



III

Catherine watched from her cross-legged position on the bed as Vincent took the nightgown from the top drawer of his dresser. She recognized it as the one she had worn when she stayed Below. After Father had stormed out of the room, Vincent had gotten her a towel for her hair and wrapped the patchwork quilt at the foot of the bed around her shoulders. It warmed her body, but did nothing for the chill of Father's animosity.

She heard Vincent sigh. "I did not expect such a reaction," he said, turning towards her. "Father has never been an unreasonable man."

Catherine wanted to look away from the sadness and pain in Vincent's eyes, but it was impossible. She understood his sadness, felt his pain. "Perhaps Father only needs time, Vincent," she said gently. "He's bound to change his mind once he sees that our love only brings you happiness, not darkness."

Vincent smiled, and Catherine suddenly felt the chill on her heart receding. "Our love *does* bring me happiness, Catherine," he said. "Now that we are together, I am happier than I ever thought to be. We must not let Father dim the light of our love." He moved toward her and she saw the way his hands gently caressed the cloth of her gown. He had the most expressive hands, the most fluid walk of anyone she had ever

known. She could be content just to look at him, twenty-four hours a day.

And she could now. She had all the time in the world to look at him, to touch him, to love him. She would give him more happiness than any man had ever known, more love than he had ever imagined. Within their hearts was a love that could never be equaled, could never be destroyed. They were bound for eternity.

She looked at the nightgown in Vincent's hand and smiled. "Why did you give me your shirt this morning, if you had my nightgown all the time?"

Catherine felt the heat of his gaze as he walked slowly towards her. "I have always pictured you wearing one of my shirts," he said softly. "It was a fantasy, a dream image I kept in my heart."

"And did I fulfill that fantasy?"

"Admirably."

Catherine laughed and glanced down at her bare legs peeking out from beneath Vincent's shirt. The morning was flying and she still wasn't dressed. She sighed, thinking briefly about blow dryers and curling irons as she rubbed the damp towel one more time through her hair.

"Father will not openly oppose us, Catherine," Vincent said, as he handed her the nightgown. "Mary has seen to that." He took the towel from her hand and kissed the top of her damp head. "I have heard word of your return go out over the pipes. Mary is calling it a 'miracle of love.'"

He watched as Catherine stood up to take off the shirt. As she pulled the hem over her head, Vincent groaned. His need for her was far from abated. "I can see that I will need to speak to Cullen about a door for our chamber."

She stood very still, looking at him as she held the shirt in front of her. Although he could not see her breasts, Vincent could picture them vividly in his mind. He closed his eyes, feeling again their softness, the sweet-salt taste of her skin. His body warmed with the memory. He felt Catherine smile and opened his eyes.

"You're not being a great deal of help, you know," she said, her voice low and teasing. "I don't have to be in your mind to know what you're thinking." Vincent saw the darkening of her pupils as his thoughts merged with hers and desire sparked between them.

"I have no experience with this, Catherine," he said, pulling her gently into his arms. "There are moments when my need for you overwhelms me." Catherine felt his lips against her hair. The shirt fell from her fingers and she twined her arms around his waist, holding him close.

"It's the same for me," she whispered against his chest. "I hear your voice and I want you." She rubbed her cheek over the soft quilting of his vest, listening to the strong beating of his heart. "I see you move and I want you." Vincent's warm palms rubbed gently against her back, arousing and soothing at the same time. "I feel your touch . . . " His fingers teased the sides of her breasts, soft fur gliding erotically over her skin. "I want you, Vincent, please . . . "

Catherine's soft plea tore through him like lightning. He brought his hands to her head, holding her face between his palms as he kissed her with all the desire fiercely burning

through him. He took her mouth without delicacy, his tongue searching, hungry for her taste. He would never get enough of her. She was a fire in his blood, his soul.

When Catherine's lips closed around his tongue and gently sucked, the tenuous thread holding Vincent's control snapped. He wrapped his arms around her hips and lifted her, groaning as she rubbed her body against him; once, twice. He turned, falling back across the unmade bed as he pulled her down with him.

Catherine trembled, straining to be closer, to ease the incredible hunger surging between them. His mouth devoured her; lips and teeth and tongue. Her vision blurred and she closed her eyes, knowing only the touch of his hands on her bare skin, the sweet plundering of his mouth, the sound of his harsh breathing. With shaking fingers she unfastened his pants and pushed them down over Vincent's raised hips. Heat and power filled her hands. Satin and steel. Arching her hips, she guided him home.

Vincent's breath hissed through his clenched teeth as Catherine's warm body enclosed him. He tried to hold back, to prolong the sweet agony of being on the edge, but she was rocking against him, pulling him deeper, stroking him with her warmth, her love. He grasped her hips, holding her tightly as the surge of heat slammed through his body. Breathless, he shook in mindless pleasure, knowing only the indescribable moment when Catherine cried out his name.



Catherine felt the deep rumble beneath her ear and lifted her head from Vincent's chest. Resting her chin on her crossed arms, she looked down at him. He was laughing - quietly, breathlessly, freely. Eyes as blue and guileless as the sky sparkled up at her with uninhibited joy. She smiled, kissing his bristly chin.

"My God, Catherine," he said breathlessly, "that was . . . "

"Insane?"

"Incredible." He said it slowly, painting her a picture with every syllable. "Exhilarating, astonishing . . . incredible." When he took her mouth this time, it was with delicate, lingering sips. Their kiss became a celebration of every joy they had ever shared. Catherine gave herself up to the wonder of it.

Vincent heard the commotion at the very edges of his awareness. He broke off the kiss and rolled over, pinning Catherine beneath him for a moment as he listened. Smiling, he kissed her quickly on the lips and pushed himself off the bed.

"I think you had better put this on," he said, picking up the nightgown and tossing it onto the bed beside her. "We are about to have visitors." He tucked in his shirt and fastened his pants, chuckling as Catherine bolted from the bed and shimmied into the gown. She looked wonderfully dishevelled and thoroughly loved.

"Vincent? Catherine?"

Vincent put his arm around Catherine's shoulder and squeezed. "Come in, Mary," he said, smoothing some of the tangles near his fingers. He knew she was worried, apprehensive about what lay ahead. He bent his head, placing a

reassuring kiss on her cheek. "They love you, Catherine," he told her. "All will be well."

When Mary entered the room with Jacob a moment later, Catherine smiled and held out her arms. She wanted the comfort of his sturdy arms, the warm, baby smell of his skin. She cuddled him close as Mary passed him to her.

"Hi, babyface," she murmured against his cheek, "You all fat and happy now?" Jacob placed a smacking kiss on her nose and Catherine laughed, kissing him back.

"Our son is happily eating his way through William's well-stocked larder," Vincent said, watching with pride and pleasure as the two people he loved most in the world shared a kiss. Jacob's thoughts were a swirl of delight and wonder as Catherine nuzzled his neck and tickled his tummy. Vincent found himself sharing in that delight, experiencing the absolute joy of a mother's love.

"Jacob is a wonderful child, Vincent," Mary said, patting the baby's well-padded bottom. "You mustn't give Catherine the wrong impression." She smiled and handed Catherine a small bundle of clothing. "Lena thinks these may fit you," she said, shaking her head when she saw Catherine's bare feet. "We're not certain of the shoes, but the tights will be good and warm, and I think everything else will fit you."

"They'll be fine, Mary," Catherine said, leaning forward to kiss the older woman's cheek. "Thank you."

"Catherine?"

Catherine turned toward the familiar voice. Mouse stood hesitantly at the chamber entrance, his childlike eyes wide with curiosity.

"You're back."

Catherine smiled. If only everyone could look at life as simply as Mouse. "Yes, Mouse," she said, "I'm back."

"Good," he said firmly. "Better than good." He smiled, entering the room with his usual energetic bounce. "Better than better. Vincent missed you."

Catherine looked up at her husband, placing a lingering kiss on his cheek. "I missed him, too," she whispered huskily. Vincent's arm tightened around her shoulder and Jacob wrapped his arms around her neck. Their love encircled her, warmed her, and Catherine smiled. She could feel the bond strengthening, growing every moment they were together.

"Don't go away," Mouse told her, "ever again."

"Never again," she whispered.



Hours later, Catherine walked alone into Vincent's chamber. The morning had been full of people, full of questions, and she was achingly tired. She sat on the bed and began to untie the serviceable, but somewhat large suede boots. When they were off, she stretched out on the bed and lay back against the pillows, closing her eyes.

Father had been conspicuously absent during their sojourn through the Tunnels, but Mary had been unswerving in her acceptance. Her presence had been a balm to both Catherine

and Vincent. Still, some of the people had been hesitant, frightened by what they could not explain, awed and apprehensive of miracles.

Catherine closed her eyes and thought of all the people she had met in the dining hall that morning. By the time they had arrived with Mary, breakfast was long past and William and his helpers were getting ready for lunch.

At his first sight of her, William had enveloped her in a great bear hug, surprising everyone; Catherine most of all. His eyes had glistened with unshed tears as he whispered his happiness in her return. He had fled then to the main kitchen, returning minutes later with oat muffins, dried fruit, and tea.

Catherine already knew from previous visits that although some families, including Vincent and Father, had small kitchens of their own, most preferred the friendliness and convenience of William's domain. Today had been no exception, and as she and Vincent shared their meal, more than a few people wandered in.

Mouse came back with Jamie and Catherine had smiled as she watched him practically drag his friend to her chair. There had been no hesitation in the young girl's eyes as she looked from Vincent to Catherine and back again, only a reflection of the love she obviously saw before her. Her happiness in Catherine's return had been genuine and open.

Catherine had always loved the family atmosphere of the hall; the endless conversations, the laughter of children. She especially remembered the soft lingering glances Vincent had given her when she would visit. Her time with him had always been precious, measured in minutes and hours instead of days and weeks, their touches confined to clasped hands and hugs.

This morning, however, time had stretched out unmeasured before them. The looks Vincent had given her had been just as lingering, just as soft, but filled now with the promise of days and nights yet to be. She smiled, remembering.

He had sipped his tea, watching her over the rim of his cup, his eyes dancing in the flickering lights from dozens of candles and a few strategically placed electric lamps.

"I lift the glass to my mouth, I look at you, and I sigh."

His husky whisper above the din of conversation had made her blush furiously. She chuckled, remembering how Vincent's cup had clattered against the table a few minutes later, as her foot crept furtively up the calf of his leg.

"Still laughing at me?"

Catherine opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "Everyone at that table knew exactly what you were thinking," she scolded. "That gleam in your eye was easy to recognize."

Vincent laughed and sat beside her, pushing playfully hip to hip until she was laying in the middle of the bed. He stretched out beside her, pulling her back against his chest, her head resting in the crook of his shoulder. He sighed, feeling the tension of the morning fade as he held Catherine in his arms again.

"We spent years believing we could never be together, Catherine," he said softly, stroking her hair. "That the happiness granted to others could never be ours." He kissed the top of her head, resting his cheek there. "The gleam you say lights my eyes is a reflection of our love, our completeness. Nothing will ever dim that light, Catherine. Nothing."

Catherine put her hand on Vincent's chest, feeling the strength and solidity beneath her fingers just as she felt his love and happiness within her heart. She was not the miracle, he was. This beautiful, gentle man who was her husband, her lover, the father of her son - *he* was the miracle.

"If you but knew
How all my days seemed filled with dreams of you,
How sometimes in the silent night
Your eyes thrill through me with their tender light,
How oft I hear your voice when others speak,
How you 'mid other forms I seek -
Oh, love more real than though such dreams were true
If you but knew."

Vincent clasped Catherine's hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a kiss into her palm. Her voice had whispered through his soul, reminding him of the day Catherine had given him the small book of poetry, old and worn and inscribed with her mother's hand; a gift of love to Catherine's father. How many times had he read it since, thinking of her?

"I want you when the shades of eve are falling
And purpling shadows drift across the land;
When sleepy birds to loving mates are calling-
I want the soothing softness of your hand . . ."

Vincent felt Catherine squeeze his fingers, and he looked down, knowing she was watching him. "A different poet," he explained, "but the words are just as true."

"The words were always true for us, Vincent," Catherine replied, "It just took us longer to realize our dream."

Vincent thought of everything that dream entailed. "Catherine," he said, rubbing his chin against her hair, "I told you

this morning that I trusted you, that I would try and understand why you closed your mind to me." He paused as a tremor went through her body. "I love you, Catherine," he told her softly. "That will never change. But how can I understand if you do not tell me?"

Catherine sighed and pulled Vincent's hand close against her breasts. He felt the heavy beating of her heart as he waited for her to speak. A subway train clattered in the distance, reminding him of the world Above; a world that had once taken everything he loved.

"I'm sorry about this morning, Vincent," Catherine began quietly. "I know I promised that I wouldn't shut you out again." She raised his hand to her lips and Vincent felt her soft kiss against his fingers. "I don't know why it happened, but when Father started yelling, my mind began to fill with the most horrible images. I didn't know what they were at first, they were mostly shadows. But then, they started to become clearer. I began to remember, and I knew that I couldn't let you see them. I couldn't bear to give you that pain."

Vincent squeezed Catherine's fingers and placed a soft kiss against her hair. "No pain could ever be greater than the pain of losing you, Catherine," he told her. "And no joy greater than when you returned to me." Vincent felt her tears. "You say the images were shadows," he said gently, "then let them remain shadows. If they intrude again, share them. They will only be half as frightening if I am with you."

Catherine moved against him and raised her head. Her eyes were shiny with her spent tears. "I'll try, Vincent," she murmured, kissing his cheek. "You are my strength, my world, my love." Her breath whispered across his lips and Vincent wrapped his free hand in her hair, waiting. "No shadows will

ever change the love I have for you," she said, finally giving him her mouth.

He took it gently, letting his tongue tease her lips in appreciation of their softness. He tangled his fingers more deeply into her hair, holding her closer, and Catherine moaned. Vincent eased his tongue into the waiting warmth of her mouth and the kiss became a reaffirmation of their love. Nothing could come between them now; neither shadows from the past nor the wrath of an angry man.

When the kiss ended, Vincent held Catherine close, knowing she relied on his strength, on his love. "I feel your exhaustion, Catherine," he said. "I would have this be easier for you."

"I know." Catherine looked at Kristopher's painting. It made her feel stronger, somehow, remembering the continuity of their love. "It could be worse," she told him. "At least none of the children seemed afraid of me."

"The children love you, Catherine," Vincent said. "You have always been special to them."

"And they've always been special to me." Memories drifted, half-remembered through her mind, touching Catherine with a kaleidoscope of emotions. Children caught in a world without love, without caring, orphans cast adrift on lonely streets. They were only shadows, though, and she was not afraid. "Do you think Eric will be scared, Vincent?"

"I cannot say for certain, Catherine," he answered. "We can only hope that his love is stronger than his fear." He rubbed his cheek against her hair, and Catherine closed her eyes, resting in his love. His voice was a soft, husky whisper as he began to speak.

"We must assume our existence as *broadly* as we in any way can; everything, even the unheard-of, must be possible in it. That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter."

Catherine listened to the silence that followed Vincent's words. His voice was still, but she felt his emotions whirling in conflicting circles, as he searched for an understanding of Father's reaction.

"You're thinking of Father," she said gently, squeezing his hand. "Are they his words?"

"In a way," Vincent said. "The words are from a book Father once gave me." He sighed, and Catherine felt his sorrow. "I cannot understand him, Catherine. He should be happy for me, rejoice with me . . . yet, all I feel from him now is the bitterness of his withdrawal."

"I don't know what to tell you, Vincent," she said. "Maybe time is all he really needs. He may not remember that 'even the unheard-of, must be possible.'" In the union of their hearts, she felt him smile.

She opened herself to the pleasure of being with him, of being home. The scents of candlewax and deep, rich earth surrounded her. The music of the pipes blended with an occasional subway train, their harmonies bringing memories of shared poems and cups of herbal tea. She smiled, knowing that if she listened very hard, she would hear the laughter of children.

"Did you mind leaving Jacob with Olivia?" Vincent's arms tightened around her and Catherine turned to rest her chin against his chest.

"Of course not," she said sincerely. "I could see how much little Luke adores him." She pushed herself up and kissed his cheek. "After all the commotion this morning, I could use a little quiet time with my husband."

Vincent listened to the sounds of the passing day, knowing that as much as he might like to stay there by her side, someone was certain to need his assistance. Hadn't Pascal mentioned something last night about the pipes in the Eastern Sector?

"What you could use," he told her, "is a little rest." He felt her exhaustion as though it were his own, and rubbed his hands down her back in a gentle massage. He smiled as she arched beneath his touch. "I *said* rest."

Catherine chuckled and nuzzled his neck, her scent and the softness of her lips against his skin made him tremble. "Spoilsport," she teased.

Vincent groaned. "Not a spoilsport," he murmured, "just practical."

"Afraid I'll wear you out?"

"Perhaps." Vincent felt Catherine's laughter pour over him. He thought that this must be what sunshine felt like, pouring down through a dazzling blue sky, to warm him inside and out. Even Father's strange behavior could barely dim the incandescent light of Catherine's love. Joy filled every dark corner of his existence, illuminating the shadows, bursting through his aloneness in a blaze of light.

"Catherine," he said, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before, "perhaps it is not enough for everyone to simply know of your return. Perhaps . . . they need to see that you are part of us now . . . that you are a part of me."

"How do you mean, Vincent?"

"I believe we should have a wedding ceremony, repeat the vows we made, before the entire community." He brought his hands up to her head, entwining his fingers in her hair as he gently lifted her face. "Perhaps, if they see the reality of our commitment, take a part in the celebration . . . "

Catherine scattered soft, quick kisses across Vincent's face. "Yes," she murmured excitedly against his skin. "It's a wonderful idea."

She remembered Lin and Henry's wedding; the strength of her love for Vincent pulling at her, making her look up at him standing so wondrous and handsome on the stair, his eyes full of love and longing . . . and she had wished . . .

Vincent's hands tightened in her hair and Catherine saw her memories echoed in the deep blue of his eyes before he closed them. His lips teased her mouth, brushing slowly in a soft journey of exploration. Catherine sighed, wondering vaguely at the desire even this innocent kiss could provoke. He skimmed her mouth again, quickly this time, then pulled back.

"Winterfest is less than a month away," he told her, his fingers gently massaging through her hair. "If we had the ceremony soon, it would perhaps make things easier."

"Are you worried about Winterfest, Vincent?" She had completely forgotten about the celebration of thanks.

"Not worried, Catherine," he said, pushing her hair back from her face. "Just anxious to have everything as comfortable for you as possible."

Catherine laid her head back down on Vincent's shoulder, thinking of all the complications Winterfest would bring to an already difficult situation. Father's ire, Helpers from Above who might not understand.

"That may not be possible," she whispered.

"One thing at a time, Catherine," Vincent said, his strong hands rubbing her back gently as she lay against him. The movement was slow and hypnotic, and Catherine could feel herself drifting on the edge of sleep. "First we will have our wedding, then perhaps Winterfest will take care of itself."



IV

Vincent lifted the long section of galvanized steel pipe and slipped it carefully into the pipe hangers he and Pascal had just finished bolting to the roughhewn granite wall. The strange amalgamation of different sized pipes had been coupled together by Nathaniel and Cullen and hauled carefully to the worksite. It was Vincent's task now, and Pascal's, to see that the extension to the communication system was properly connected.

Vincent glanced at the stack of pipe sections still lying next to the wall and wiped his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. The work had been long and tedious, but when completed would assure a modicum of safety for the families who would be living there. In the world Below, communication was not a luxury, it was a necessity.

"There's talk on the pipes about Father," Pascal said softly. Vincent sighed and silently threaded the anchor bolt through the end of the hanger. Mouse's last foraging expedition had yielded a generous assortment of metals which had then been fashioned into the J-shaped mountings. Vincent grimaced as the wrench slipped on the makeshift parts.

"There is always talk on the pipes, Pascal," Vincent said finally, putting down the wrench. "Father gets his share, as do the rest of us."

"Yes, but this time it's different. I'm worried."

Vincent hunched his broad shoulders, working out the kinks before he lowered himself to the packed dirt of the tunnel floor. He leaned against the wall, bringing one leg up to rest his hands on his knee.

"What is it, Pascal?" He asked wearily. "Are you also frightened by Catherine's return?" He shook his head, closing his tired eyes. "I would not have thought it of you."

Vincent felt the weight of Pascal's thin hand on his arm and his eyes opened. He saw no fear in his friend's eyes, only the hurt caused by his careless words and a deep need to be of help. He was ashamed.

"Forgive me, Pascal," he said, covering the man's hand with his larger one. "This problem with Father has me fighting shadows. You have always been my friend, Catherine's friend. I should not have thought harshly of you."

Pascal smiled and sat down next to him, offering his canteen. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Vincent," he said, making himself more comfortable against the dark wall of rock. "It's not like this sort of thing happens every day, is it?"

Vincent relaxed, thinking how good it was to be able to talk about this. "No," he said, taking a long drink, "it certainly is not the sort of thing that happens everyday."

Pascal looked away as he took back the canteen and replaced the cap. "Those rumors on the pipes say Father is angry, Vincent," he said, "that he doesn't want Catherine to be here with you." He turned his head and Vincent saw the confusion and concern in the dark shadows of his eyes. "That doesn't make any sense."

Vincent nodded, then leaned his head back against the cold stone. "I do not understand him, Pascal," he murmured. "All my life, he has cared for me, watched out for me. He, of all people, should understand."

Water sloshed in the old canteen as Pascal turned it in his restless hands. "Some of us think Father's jealous, Vincent," he said quietly. "That he feels threatened by Catherine's new place in your life."

Vincent sighed and closed his eyes. The same thought had crossed his mind, but he had dismissed it; thinking Father above such a petty emotion. "Perhaps that is the case, Pascal," he said. "If so, Father will have to come to terms with it." He opened his eyes, staring at the dark bedrock in front of him. "Catherine is my wife," he said. "For the first time in my life I feel complete." He looked at his friend, needing him to know how much had changed. "I no longer feel as though I am standing in the cold, watching the warm fire of another's hearth. The years of my aloneness are over, Pascal." Vincent paused, taking a deep breath.

"Since I was a child I have been apart, even here in the tunnels. Surely you remember how my differences kept me separate from so many things. Devin tried to include me, but all of you could go Above. You could climb trees, ride the carousel, sit on the grass on bright summer days. These were all things that I could never hope to do." He sighed, closing his eyes again as he remembered the first time he had believed that love could not be his.

"As I grew older, I would see, would wonder . . . There were others, growing older as I was. I would see them flirting with one another, kissing. And, I would think . . . someday. Then . . . when Lisa left, I knew what Father had told me must

be true; that I should never hope for that kind of love; that the desire and joy felt by men would never be mine."

"And then you found Catherine."

Vincent opened his eyes. "Yes," he whispered reverently, "And then I found Catherine." He paused, remembering the first time she had truly looked at him, pushing back the hood of his cloak, showing no fear but only kindness and concern. In that moment she had held his heart.

"It was the beginning of a new world for me," he said. "A world I never thought to know." He smiled, letting his thoughts soar above the sadness of their parting to the reality of her existence again in his world. "She brings me such peace, and so much joy," he said wondrously. "I never imagined, Pascal, I never imagined there could *be* such joy." He looked away, suddenly embarrassed by his outburst.

He had never spoken of these things to anyone but Catherine. Even his discourses with Father had been of a less intimate nature. It amazed him, talking freely to another man about his joy with Catherine. '*Another man.*' Could it be that he finally thought of himself, truly thought of himself as a man?

"Then, that was what I saw last night," Pascal said hesitantly. "When you were coming back with Jacob . . . when I stopped you near the Whispering Gallery . . . I noticed something different about you." He shrugged and fiddled with the stethoscope hanging like a treasured heirloom around his neck. "It wasn't anything specific, just . . . well, like you were shining from the inside out."

Vincent smiled. "All my life I've read stories of the love between a man and a woman." His voice was hushed, as husky and deep as his emotions. "*Romeo and Juliet, Wuthering*

Heights, Great Expectations, but I never really *understood* them." He tilted his head up, watching the flickering shadows from the torches dance like whirling couples across the tunnel wall.

"Intellectually," he continued, "I could grasp their meaning. But it was Catherine who showed me what love really meant." Vincent rose from the cold floor, feeling the passing of time and the call of work still to be done. He held out his hand to Pascal. "It was Catherine who truly believed in me as a man," he told him.

"I, uh, figured that out, Vincent," Pascal said, accepting Vincent's hand. "After all, Jacob didn't get here by himself."

Vincent chuckled, feeling the warmth of his blush in the cool tunnel. There were advantages to looking as he did. Some things did not show. He picked up a bell-shaped coupling near the stack of pipe, and began to fit it to the section he had just mounted.

"Our son is a miracle to me, Pascal," he said, "Just as his mother has always been a miracle. Our connection, our bond, Catherine's and mine, is stronger, deeper than ever before, and Jacob shares in that bond." Pascal handed him the wrench and Vincent tightened down the coupling, not really seeing the steel pipe and metal beneath his hands. In his mind he saw Catherine as she had been by the Falls, waiting for him, watching for him.

He turned, smiling as he handed back the wrench and lifted the section of pipe Pascal indicated was to go next. "It is more than a bond now," he said thoughtfully, slipping the long section into the hangers. "It's as though our minds and hearts were linked . . . held together like these pipes." Vincent ran his hand along the length of galvanized steel, feeling the differences

between the narrow end of the coupling and the wide end, marveling at the connection that held the two sizes of pipe together.

"Do you know what Catherine is doing now?" Pascal asked, his voice giving away his curiosity.

Vincent closed his eyes, concentrating on the part of his mind that joined to hers. It hovered, like a wispy cloud, on the edge of his vision; a peripheral lantern to guide his way in the darkness.

"She was sleeping when I left her," Vincent said softly. "Now she is with Jacob . . . and Olivia." He opened his eyes again and smiled, seeing the wonder on his friend's thin face.

Pascal whistled softly, shaking his head. "I can't imagine being that connected to someone."

Vincent watched as his friend studied the diagrams for the new section. Pascal had been born Below. And, if Vincent remembered correctly, at least ten years before he had been found. Pascal had grown up with the pipes as his music, the codes and signals a legacy from his father. But what of Pascal the man?

"Why have you never married, Pascal?" Vincent asked, watching his friend's face for any sign of uneasiness. He had never been one to ask such personal questions, and could not quite understand why he was doing so now. Perhaps, he considered, it was only that he wanted everyone to have such joy.

Pascal looked back at him, smiling. "I never found that kind of happiness, Vincent," he said, his smile widening.

"Actually, I've never found anyone I wanted to be with more than I wanted to be with my pipes."

Vincent shared his friend's laughter, wondering why he had never taken the time to talk like this with him before. He slipped another anchor bolt into the mounting and retrieved the wrench. "Pascal," he began, as he tightened the bolt. "I want to have a wedding - something the entire community can take part in." He gave the wrench a strong twist, then handed it to Pascal. "What do you think?"

Pascal ran his slender fingers along the length of pipe, gauging the thickness, rapping gently with the wrench against the steel to hear it's distinctive song. "Sounds like a good idea," he said. "Might make everyone feel more comfortable."

"Are you uncomfortable, Pascal?" Vincent asked, not quite certain of the answer.

"Only when I'm away from my pipes."



"Luke has grown so, Olivia," Catherine said, watching from her chair as the toddler handed Jacob a small, stuffed bear. "He looks a lot like Kanin." Jacob took one look at the bear and immediately tried to fit the bear's foot into his mouth. Catherine sighed. She was beginning to realize that *everything* found its way into her baby's mouth.

She looked up, wondering at Olivia's silence. The young woman's gaze was turned inward, her face a study in serenity.

"How is Kanin?" Catherine asked quietly. "Do you hear from him? Is there a way . . . ?"

Olivia's smile lit her face with a kind of ethereal beauty. "Yes," she answered softly, "Kanin writes to me through one of the Helpers." She picked up the stack of diapers from the bed and carried them to the dresser. On the braided rug at her feet, Jacob and Luke fought quietly for possession of the soggy bear.

"He doesn't blame you, Catherine," Olivia said, coming back to sit in the matching, but mismatched chair next to her. "And neither do I."

In comfortable silence they watched their children play. Catherine marveled at Luke's patience as Jacob carefully examined and tasted each of the little boy's toys. Her son was very much like his father, a true sensualist. She smiled.

"Tell me about the wedding, Catherine. Have you decided on a date or a place yet?"

Catherine looked at the quiet woman beside her, seeing the shyness and hesitancy behind her attempt to make friends. She felt suddenly guilty about barging in like she had, but she was unaccustomed to idleness and had gone looking for her son.

"We really haven't been able to discuss it at all," Catherine said honestly. She was just beginning to realize the true speed at which news traveled Below. "It's going to be difficult, what with Father . . . "

Olivia nodded. "He's being awfully stubborn, isn't he?" She looked at Catherine with kind and worried eyes. "Mary said she's never seen him act so childish." She looked down at her hands then back at Catherine. "Mary doesn't usually say much about Father, but I think she's angry with him. Mary adores

Vincent and Jacob." She paused, picking nervously at a thread in her long cotton jumper. "She wants them to be happy."

"That's all I want, too," Catherine sighed. She covered Olivia's fingers with hers, squeezing lightly. "Have you seen Father today?"

"He came by earlier to play with Jacob," Olivia told her. "He usually does that when Vincent is out working somewhere and can't take Jacob with him. Father knows that Jacob stays with me when Mary is teaching the younger children's classes."

"Does Vincent have a schedule of some kind?"

"Everyone has some sort of schedule, but then everyone here knows what everyone else is doing practically before they do it," she laughed. "Kanin always said that the pipes were better than a party line telephone." She grinned, shrugging. "He explained it to me once . . . the party line, I mean. I thought it sounded crazy."

Catherine laughed with her, finding that she genuinely liked Kanin's wife. She looked away remembering the last time she had seen Kanin. "I'm sorry, Olivia," she said softly. "I know that isn't much help, but I am sorry."

Olivia stared at her for a moment, and Catherine wondered at the quizzical look. "It's strange, Catherine," she said at last, "to see you here, to talk to you like this. If I didn't *know* what happened . . . well, I wouldn't know." She shook her head, smiling shyly. "Does that make sense?"

"As much as anything does, I guess." Catherine leaned her head back against the top of the chair and sighed. "When I first came back," she began quietly, "it was as though I still had a part of me in that other place. I don't know what to call it,

exactly, and, now, I can't really remember it all that well. It's fading."

Olivia's gaze was steady and questioning although she remained silent. "Yes, well, I don't understand it either." Catherine told her softly.

"Does Vincent know?"

"I'm not sure," Catherine admitted, watching Jacob scoot carefully towards her across the braided rug. "Our bond is so much *more* now, than it was. We're connected in so very many different ways." She smiled and leaned forward, lifting Jacob into her lap. "To tell you the truth, Olivia, I wish Vincent *did* know. Maybe he could explain it to me."



V

"It should definitely be held in the Great Hall."

"No, in the Chamber of the Falls. It's so beautiful there."

"It's far too dangerous for the smaller children."

Catherine listened with only half an ear to the debate going on around the long dining table. She smiled as she fed Jacob another spoon of mashed carrots. Beside her, she knew Vincent was listening, silently weighing each option, his steady blue gaze intent upon each speaker. She had always admired the way he listened, really listened, to what people said.

"What about Father's study?"

Catherine felt the discussion come to an abrupt and breathless halt. She didn't look up. She already knew who they were looking at. "Whatever you decide is fine with me," she said calmly, knowing that Vincent was not the only one who realized how much Father's rejection was hurting her.

"Vincent's wedding," Mouse said, taking another piece of warm bread from the basket near his plate. "Vincent should choose."

"It's Catherine's wedding, too, Mouse," Brooke reminded him. "A wedding should be romantic and wonderful," she said dreamily. "Something you can remember forever." Her eyes

widened as with a sudden thought. "Will you invite Michael? Oh, you have to invite Michael."

Vincent squeezed Catherine's hand where it clasped his beneath the table. He would have to speak to Father soon. Catherine's anxiety was growing, eating away at the confidence and strength she had worked so hard for. He could not let it continue. Even Jacob had been affected. Vincent had felt more and more the sense of confusion as his son tried to comprehend the strange, hostile emotions being directed toward his parents.

"You have all made excellent suggestions," he said, letting his steady gaze rest on each person at the table. Mouse, Mary, Brooke, Jamie, Olivia and Luke; they had accepted Catherine without question, extending to her the same loyalty and love they gave to him. It pleased Vincent to know that open minds and hearts were the rule Below, rather than the exception. But, still, the exception was one that could not be ignored. "Catherine and I will discuss your ideas and let you know of our decision."

He rose from the table, putting his hands on Catherine's tense shoulders. "I need to relieve Nathaniel so that he may have dinner," he told her softly. "If you need help finding anything, ask Mary." Ignoring the anticipatory stares from around the table, Vincent leaned down and turned Catherine's face toward him for a kiss. Though not the most passionate they had shared, it was enough to elicit sighs from Brooke. Vincent smiled as he raised his head and gazed into his loving wife's eyes. "We will most assuredly have to invite Michael."



Vincent stopped on the gallery stair. Below him, sitting at the table where they had played many games of chess, sat Father. His hands were clasped firmly below his chin, his elbows propped on the table before him. His eyes were closed and the glasses he wore for reading had been tossed carelessly atop the small, open book on the table.

For all his anger, Vincent could not help but love this man. Without him, he might not have survived. Although it was Anna who had found him, it was Father who had cared for him after her death. What would his life have been, if Father had not interceded? If he had not kept John Pater from taking him as his son? The answer moved Vincent's footsteps forward.

"Father?"

The older man raised his head slowly, his eyes blinking the room into focus. He cleared his throat, straightening in his chair. "Vincent," he said, stiffly, "it's very late. Was there something you needed?" He put on his glasses and picked up the book, seemingly engrossed in its pages.

Vincent walked slowly down the winding stairs, wondering if this was simply a fool's errand. He had searched his mind, his heart, to find the words that would make Father listen. He had roamed the perimeter, checking entrances, re-lighting torches, making certain the world Below was safe for another night. But his mind had never ceased to question, to look for a way to be reconciled with Father, to make him understand.

"We need to talk, Father," Vincent said quietly. "You have had the entire day to brood. The pipes are filled with conjecture." He gripped the back of the chair directly across from Father, his knuckles tight as he tried to retain control. "Even the children can speak of nothing else."

"Then, Mary needs to discuss with them the idleness of gossip. What I do, or do not do, is of no one's concern."

Vincent slapped his palm against the hard edge of the chair's carved, wooden back. "Surely, you cannot believe that, Father," he said. "You are the head of the Council. Yours is the strongest voice. You cannot expect to be ignored, even when you separate yourself from the rest of the community."

Father took off his glasses and carefully folded them before laying them on the table. "Is that what you think I'm doing, Vincent?" he asked. "Separating myself from the community?"

"What other conclusion can there be?" Vincent stared hard at the man who had guided the lives of those Below for so many years. "You take your meals in your chamber, you refuse to speak to anyone who dares to mention Catherine, you surround yourself with your fear and anger like a miser with his gold. Tell me, Father . . . what conclusion *should* we reach?"

Vincent watched as Father rose slowly from the chair. He did not look up, but reached for his walking stick, moving with hesitant steps around the room.

"Why, Father?" Vincent asked softly, his voice a plaintive cry in the stillness of the night. "Why do you hate Catherine so?"

Father's steps faltered, and Vincent watched as he leaned heavily against his stick. When the old man finally looked at him, Vincent saw more than anger, he saw pain.

"There were times, in the beginning," Father said quietly, "when I hoped you would forget Catherine, forget the bond, the dream I saw growing between you." He paused, and Vincent

watched silently, accepting Father's jolting and unforeseen words as truth. "But you continued to see her, to take countless chances . . . my God, Vincent, do you realize what that scientist might have done with you had he not been stopped?"

"I accepted the risks, Father," Vincent answered, "And it was Catherine who found me."

"Yes," Father cried, "and Catherine who put you at risk time and time again!" He took a deep breath, trying, Vincent thought, to regain control. "You took chances," he continued, his voice somewhat steadier, "terrible chances. I remember the nights when you would come back from Above, your cloak torn, your hands . . . " He closed his eyes, trembling and Vincent started to go to him. "No," Father said, putting out his hand as if to hold Vincent back. "No. Let me finish.

"I watched the bond between you grow. I saw the love you shared become the focus of your life. And, after a time, I accepted that, Vincent. I even understood it." Father's eyes flashed suddenly with a flare of turbulent light. "What I could not understand, what I could *not* forgive, was what she made you *do* in the name of that love." Father's stick clattered as he hit it against the sideboard, shaking the many candles burning there. "Dear God, Vincent . . . how many times did you kill for that woman? How many lives ended, because of your love?"

Vincent stumbled back from Father's violent words. How had he not known? How had Father hidden such feelings from him? Had his bond with Catherine overshadowed even this?

"All this time . . . " he whispered. He felt the chair behind his knees and slumped into the seat. He didn't close his eyes, for what he might see within the mirror of his memories would be far worse than Father's merciless face.

"And do you know, Vincent, I *did* forgive her even that?" Father laughed, but there was no mirth in the ragged sound. "When Catherine walked into that cavern, when she brought you back from the darkness, I actually began to forgive her. In my heart, in my mind, I weighed the other lives against yours . . . and I forgave her. Finally. Absolutely."

Father sighed deeply as he moved back to the table. "My feelings have little to do with Catherine as she is now," he said, putting his hand on the back of Vincent's chair. "That she has returned to you *is* a miracle. A miracle I can neither dispute nor deny.

"But, when I see her with you, when I think of how much deeper, how much stronger that love must be . . . now, that you are intimate . . . I can't help but be frightened of what will happen. I can't help but think that it will all begin again. And, this time, you will lose yourself forever." Father moved away, returning to his chair. "That is your 'why' Vincent. That is your answer."

The night sounds from beyond Father's chamber barely intruded into Vincent's awareness. Like the web of some angry spider, Father's words had woven themselves around Vincent's heart. They enclosed him, strand by strand, separating him from warmth and light, leaving him struggling alone in the darkness. *Like an animal.*

Her voice burst through his pain, shattering the darkness, lighting his night with her love.

No, Vincent! Don't think that! You're not alone. We're here. Jacob and I are here. Don't let his words do this to you. They're only words, Vincent. They're only words. Our love is stronger than his words.

Vincent closed his eyes, concentrating on Catherine's image, focusing on the dazzling light in his mind. "Words," he murmured, "only words." He felt their son's presence beside her, his innocence a soft shimmer within her light. Bit by bit, the pain retreated, taking with it the web of Father's anger.

"All seems infected that the infected spy," Vincent murmured to himself, "As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye." He rose slowly from the chair, one hand clutching the leather pouch suspended from his neck. "You saw what you wanted to see, Father," he said softly. "You believed only what you wanted to believe." He began to pace, his long strides taking him away from Father's condemning stare.

"When I killed, Father, do you honestly believe it was with Catherine's blessing? Can you really be so cruel as to think that she somehow goaded me to violence?" He stopped suddenly, and turned, his breath quick and shallow. He held out his hands. "What I have done . . . *I* have done! Whether to protect Catherine or to protect those who live Below, it was my hands, Father - *my* hands which killed. If there was a beast, then that beast was here - inside of me."

Vincent listened with his heart to Catherine's soothing presence. He no longer feared losing himself, for she would not leave him. The years of aloneness were over, for she and Jacob would always be there within him, part of him.

"We discussed this once, your Catherine and I," Father said, fiddling nervously with his glasses. "Did she tell you? When John first sent that reporter to hunt you down."

"How conveniently you remember, Father," Vincent said. "You could not remember words spoken when we faced death together, yet you can remember these. Your memory is astounding." Vincent did nothing to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

Father's fingers tightened on his glasses, and Vincent thought for a moment that they might break. "I do not deserve your scorn, Vincent," Father said. "When I spoke to Catherine it was at her request. I remember her words because they echoed what I had been feeling." He dropped the glasses and rubbed his brow. Lines of pain etched his forehead. "Catherine told me that she blamed herself for the killings," Father said quietly, "that what you did, you did in *her* name."

Vincent heard Catherine's whisper echo the words. They only confirmed what he had known: that she felt responsible for what he had done. But if Catherine held herself accountable, so should Father.

"Your mind seems to be selective in what it allows you to remember," he said. "How many have I killed in *your* name? How many lives ended in the protection of these tunnels? How many bodies lie at the bottom of the abyss? If you demand an accounting, Father, then demand one of yourself!"

Vincent breathed deeply and leaned against the old wrought-iron staircase, his anger abating as weariness settled over his shoulders like a heavy coat. It was late and the day had been unusually long. He wanted nothing more than to go to sleep, holding his wife in his arms throughout the night. He looked at Father and saw the pain, the anger, still simmering in his eyes. He shook his head, wondering how two people who loved him could be at such odds. For he knew that Father *did* love him. In his way.

"It is late, Father," Vincent sighed. "And placing blame for past actions will not change the outcome of those actions. We are both in need of sleep." He paused, waiting for an argument, but Father remained blessedly silent. "No matter what your feelings toward Catherine, or to her presence in my chamber, she *is* here Below," Vincent said quietly. "She and I have

exchanged vows, and we intend to repeat those vows in the presence of anyone who wishes to share our happiness.

"Catherine is my wife, she is a part of me, Father - as our son, your namesake, is a part of us both."

Vincent pushed away from the stairs and moved slowly to Father's side. "You told me once to respect the past, but not to confuse it with the present, nor see in it the future. Can you not do the same?" He covered Father's hands with his, trying for a long, silent moment, to see behind the anger, to the love he knew was there. "You are my father," he told him. "The love I have for Catherine and Jacob does not diminish that which I have for you.

"And you need not be afraid," Vincent continued, squeezing the hands that had cared for so many. "The darkness is controlled. I can no longer lose myself. Jacob and Catherine are with me. We are connected, always, through our bond. And our bond is formed of love.

"I cannot begin to describe how it feels, Father," he continued, unable to keep from smiling. "Just know that I am happier than I have ever been." Vincent bent down, kissing Father's cheek. "Share my happiness, Father," he pleaded. "Be happy *for* me. Please. We will watch over the future together."

Vincent watched Father's face as he waited for an answer. The old man's eyes were closed, the fingers of one hand moving unsteadily across his forehead. In his mind, Vincent heard the soft whisper of a lullaby as Catherine put Jacob to bed. He sighed, needing her arms. There was the faintest pressure against his hands. In Father's eyes he saw hope, and tears.

. . . tomorrow will surely come.



Later, after his final sentry check, Vincent stood lingering for a moment at the entrance to their chamber. Only a few candles remained burning. The faint light of Jacob's night lamp covered his son's face in soft, wavery shadows, showing the deep slumber that only a child can enjoy.

"Come to bed, Vincent."

At the sound of Catherine's voice, Vincent forgot every care of the long, weary day. He moved toward her, smiling as he began to remove his vest. Undressing had never been such a pleasant task before.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he whispered, sitting on the bed to unlace his boots. Catherine sat up and Vincent felt her soft touch on his hair.

"I was cold," she said, stroking his shoulders.

Vincent pulled off the boots and stood up, taking off the rest of his clothes before he slid quickly beneath the covers. Catherine was right. It was cold. He watched as she pulled his old shirt over her head and folded it neatly beneath her pillow.

"It'll stay warm this way," she explained, "and I won't have to get up to look for it later." She snuggled close and Vincent slipped his arm beneath her shoulders, laying back against the pillows. Catherine settled into the curve of his shoulder, her arm wrapped warmly around his waist.

Vincent closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of her skin against his, her breath gently fanning the hair on his chest. He wrapped his arm tighter around her, gently stroking the curve of her waist. There was nothing he could not face with Catherine by his side. She was more than a part of his heart, she was part of everything that made him a man. Vincent smiled and felt the joy filling Catherine's heart.

"It must have been an interesting day," she said softly, her hand exploring the expanse of his ribs.

"An incredible day," he told her. She caressed the nipple beneath his long hair and Vincent gasped. Her fingers moved on, and he could breathe again. "Surely," he said in a thick whisper, "you know of my day."

Catherine looked up, tilting her head slightly as she gave him that look he so loved. "Vincent," she said, "I don't keep tabs on you every minute." She shook her head in mock disgust. "I only barge in when you need me; when your emotions are so strong that I can't feel or see anything else. Isn't it the same for you? Don't you have to concentrate to know exactly what I'm doing or thinking?" She sighed. "Being in two places at once, even in your mind, is not the easiest thing to do." Catherine laid back down, taking a moment to kiss the nipple she had teased.

Vincent smiled and kissed her hair. "But I felt your joy just now," he said, reaching for her wandering hand. "When I thought of my conversation with Pascal, I could feel your joy." Catherine evaded his fingers, leaning over him as she propped her forearms on his chest.

"That's because I'm right here, in bed with my husband," she said, smiling, "cuddling his nice, warm body, and occasionally sharing his thoughts." She kissed his chest, licking her way back

to his nipples and Vincent felt himself growing even warmer. Catherine's chuckle was a husky purr against his skin.

"Then, you know what I came to understand this morning," he groaned, determined to share with her the delight of his serendipitous discovery.

"Something I've known since the moment I looked into your beautiful eyes." Catherine pressed gentle kisses across the breadth of Vincent's chest. His hair tickled and she rubbed her face against him, savoring the different textures of the man who was her husband.

She raised herself up on her arms, looking at him, admiring the beauty of his hair spread out against the pillow. "I told you once, Vincent," Catherine said softly, "when I look at you, I see the man I love." She pressed a chaste kiss against his mouth. "I've never seen anything less than a man when I've looked at you." She kissed him again, lingering this time, caressing the cleft in his lip with her tongue. "And, lately," she said, slowly drawing out the words, "I've seen considerably more than most."

Vincent laughed and wrapped her in his arms. He rolled over, pinning Catherine and her marauding fingers beneath him. He groaned in defeat as she ran the palm of her other hand lightly down his spine. "And you will see more still, if you persist in doing that."

"Promises, promises."

Vincent shifted his weight to his forearms, kissing Catherine's shoulder. He paused to nuzzle the curve of her neck before he pulled back, gazing into her eyes. There were so many things he wanted to say, and she must have sensed how important it was to him, for she stopped her teasing.

"This morning, with Pascal," he began, "I truly thought of myself as a man. For the first time, Catherine, I found myself really talking to him; sharing my thoughts with a friend in a way that was entirely new for me. I have *never* done this, Catherine." He paused, sliding his hands into the softness of her hair, delighting in this greatest of all freedoms, touching his wife. "Always, there was a part of me held back," he continued, "a part of me that did not belong, did not fit. Only with you, and sometimes with Father, have I ever been able to share my thoughts so freely."

Catherine freed her arms and twined them around Vincent's neck, bringing his mouth down to hers for a gentle kiss. "In Dad's book," she whispered, "there's a very small poem, one that I always used to read when I was growing up. It says:

'Oh, the comfort - the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe
with a person,
Having neither to weigh thoughts,
Nor measure words - but pouring them
All right out - just as they are -
Chaff and grain together -
Certain that a faithful hand will
Take and sift them -
Keep what is worth keeping -
And with the breath of kindness
Blow the rest away.'

She sighed, gazing up at the man who was all things to her. "I always wondered if *I* would ever have friends like that, friends who would 'blow the rest away.'"

"And did you find them, Catherine?"

"Yes," she told him. "Jenny and Nancy were friends like that." Catherine smiled, stroking the strong cord in his neck

with the backs of her fingers, loving the strength, the warmth of him beneath her skin. "But yours is the hand I treasure most. Your hands always held what was worth keeping, Vincent." She looked into his eyes, seeing his love, like her words, pouring from his heart.

"If there were things I didn't tell you," Catherine whispered, "thoughts I never shared, it was only because I couldn't bear adding to your pain." She touched his lips, silencing his denial. "That was a terrible time for us, Vincent, and what I told Father may have been true for me then . . . but the past is behind us. All of that is behind us. 'Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.'"

Vincent smoothed Catherine's hair back from her face, tucking the silky strands behind her ear as he savored the warmth in her eyes. How gently she eased his pain, with Tennyson and touches.

"Father will find his way, Catherine," he said. "I am certain of it." He kissed her cheek, then the soft hollow beneath her ear. "He is surrounded by love," he whispered against her neck. "What greater climate for forgiveness could there be?"

"He has to forgive himself, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "And that will be even harder than forgiving me."



VI

"I'll be gone most of the day, Catherine," Vincent said, placing his energetic son into the jumpseat Mouse and Jamie had made for him. The sight of Jacob bouncing happily in the special chair never failed to make him smile. "Have you decided to teach Mary's class this morning?" he asked, turning to watch his wife as she finished dressing.

Catherine slipped the cotton and lace undershirt over her head and smiled. "I think so," she told him, sitting on the bed as she slipped into her grey tights. "Mary knows I don't have any experience, but that doesn't seem to matter to her." She pulled up the heavy cotton material and smoothed it over her legs. Not the height of fashion, but decidedly warm. And warm was what counted in this new world of hers. She stood, pulling the tights the rest of the way up.

"Experience is not the criteria by which teachers are chosen, Catherine," Vincent said, as he walked across the room toward her. "It is a person's rapport with the children and the willingness to teach that is important. Young children are like sponges, absorbing everything around them."

"Our son wants to *eat* everything around him," Catherine said, slipping into her skirt and blouse as she watched Jacob gnaw on his stuffed terrycloth cow. The baby laughed and threw the toy into the air. Catherine laughed with him, for she knew this game.

He would toss any number of his toys up into the air, then pull them back with the length of elastic Olivia had wisely suggested Vincent use to attach them to the chair's tray. It was a game he never failed to enjoy, and one Catherine loved to watch.

"Our son is merely discovering his world, Catherine," Vincent said, putting his arm around her shoulder. "He has found that there is a wealth of experience to be gained with a taste." He leaned down and kissed her temple, skimming his lips across her cheek until he found her mouth. "Just a taste," he murmured.

Catherine sighed and closed her eyes, giving herself up to the sweet passion of Vincent's kiss. She loved the freedom with which he touched her now, as though he couldn't wait to discover the new sensations, the endless possibilities awaiting him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and enjoyed the moment, knowing they had an eternity of moments still ahead.



Catherine took a deep breath and entered the classroom. She recognized most of the children, although there were some new faces, and a few whom she had only met once or twice. They sat in a variety of chairs at the two tables in the small room, and their expressions held a mixture of curiosity and anticipation. She put her tablet and pencil down, admiring the antique desk Mary used. It was obviously well cared for, the walnut wood polished to a high gloss. She looked up and Kipper smiled shyly. Jeffrey was sitting beside him and his grin

was wide, his emotions spread happily across his face. Catherine smiled back, the nervousness in her stomach easing off somewhat.

It had been her idea to help Mary teach the children. There were so many of them now, and they all needed so much. Many of them, she knew, would never venture for more than a few hours a day into the world Above. Others, like Michael and Devin, would find their way among the crowded streets, searching for more than this world could provide. Either way, it was the duty of those here, their 'sacred trust', Mary had told her, to see to it that these children grew up ready for whatever life held - Above or Below.

"Everyone's here except Eric," Samantha said, smoothing the skirt of her jumper as she sat even straighter in her chair.

Catherine gazed around the room. "Does anyone know where he is?" A room full of suddenly solemn faces gazed back at her. "Oh," she murmured, looking down at the small book in her hand. So, Eric was going to be a problem, too.

"He's not mad or anything," Samantha told her. "Not like Father."

Catherine looked up, wondering what these children thought of Father's repudiation of her. "Is he afraid?" she asked softly.

Jeffrey answered, giving Samantha a telling look. "No," he assured Catherine. "I don't think he's afraid, exactly. He's just acting kind of quiet."

"Is he all right, Jeffrey?"

"Yeah, he's all right. He just needs some time by himself. You know how it is."

Catherine smiled wanly and nodded. She did indeed. "Well," she said, looking at the anxious children in front of her, "we'll just have to carry on without him today." She opened Vincent's book and carefully turned the pages. It was an old copy, one of the first American translations. Catherine smiled; so much love, so much courage between these covers: *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. She had been more than willing to begin her sojourn into teaching with this incredible story. Mary could not have chosen a better beginning for her.

She looked up, her smile widening as she saw Samantha and a dark-haired boy she didn't recognize, open paperback editions of the same story. "Who wants to begin?" she asked.

Samantha looked around the room, then stood up, clearly intending to be the first reader. Catherine nodded as the girl cleared her throat and began:

"Saturday, 22 January, 1944,
Dear Kitty,

I wonder whether you can tell me why it is that people always try so hard to hide their real feelings? How is it that I always behave quite differently from what I should in other people's company?

Why do we trust one another so little? . . . "



"Eric?"

Catherine entered the cavern slowly, her shoes hesitating on the sandy floor. Near the edge of the pool sat a small, thin boy, his shoulders hunched, arms crossed on raised knees. At the sound of her voice he turned, his eyes wide behind the large, thick glasses.

"May I talk to you, Eric?" Catherine asked, sitting in the sand beside him.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Catherine remained silent as he turned away again, his gaze fixed on the clouds moving in undaunted splendor across the surface of the Mirror Pool.

"I've only seen it once before in the daytime," Catherine murmured, watching the darker reflection of sun and clouds. "It's beautiful." The clouds raced and danced, pallid counterparts to their sisters in the world Above.

"I miss it sometimes."

"What do you miss, Eric?" she asked, looking at his small, pale face instead of the dancing clouds.

"Everything," he answered. "I miss everything."

Catherine looked out on the water again, wondering what she could possibly say. Did she miss everything? "I miss the trees most," she told him quietly. "I used to climb trees." She smiled, seeing in her mind a little girl perched high on a branch,

her father waiting breathlessly below. "I would climb so high that the only thing I could hear was the wind."

"Were you scared?"

"Sometimes," she said, thinking about another tree, another day, and the fragility of time. "Yes, sometimes I was scared."

"But you climbed 'em anyway."

"Uh, huh."

Eric uncrossed his arms and began drawing random patterns in the sandy dirt. "I get a little scared sometimes, too," he admitted. "Sometimes, when I think I'll never see the sun again, or swing in a swing, or climb a tree; I get a little scared."

Catherine was surprised. Didn't he *ever* go Above? "Don't you go Above with Kipper and Jeffrey?" she asked gently. "They go Above sometimes, don't they?"

Eric turned away, his arms wrapped tightly now, around his knees. "Yeah, they go," he murmured. "But I don't."

"Why not, Eric?"

He took a deep breath, looking out over the pool. "Cause then I get *really* scared. There's lots of scary things up there that Kipper and Jeffrey don't know about." He looked back at Catherine and she saw the shadows of frightening memories haunting his eyes. "They're pretty smart, but they don't know everything." He closed his eyes and rested his head on his knees.

Catherine laid her hand on Eric's head, stroking lightly across his thick hair. Did Vincent know how frightened Eric was of the world Above? Did Mary? Or had the children somehow managed to keep Eric's fears a secret between them. Surely, the other children knew.

"Do the others know how you feel?"

"Some of them," he answered. "Kipper and Jeffrey know, and Samantha. You can't keep anything secret from Samantha." He sighed. "Daniel and Timothy know. Daniel used to tease me, but Zack made him stop."

Catherine smiled, recognizing hero-worship when she heard it. "You like Zack a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah, he's neat."

"Have you ever thought of going Above with Zack?" she asked. "He could keep you safe, couldn't he?"

"Nah," Eric said, lifting his head as he picked up a handful of sand. "Zack's not big enough. He's neat, but he's not big enough."

"How big would Zack have to be, Eric?" Catherine asked, knowing what his answer would be.

"Oh, I guess as big as Vincent." He watched the sand run like water through his fingers, and picked up some more before looking up at her with hopeful eyes. "I could go up with Vincent," he suggested. "I'd feel safe with Vincent."

Catherine let her hand fall to his shoulder and squeezed gently. "Vincent can't go up, Eric," she reminded him softly. "Not in the daylight."

Eric frowned. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. They'd want to catch him for sure." He looked down at the sand he held, and Catherine wondered what he saw there. "Vincent's pretty special, isn't he?"

Catherine smiled. "Yes," she whispered, "I think so."

Eric looked out at the water. "You forget how different he is when you see him all the time. He's just Vincent, you know?" He threw his handful of sand and watched as it drifted across the surface of the pool, splattering the clouds as they sailed by.

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "I know." I've always known, she added silently.

"He should be scary," she heard Eric whisper, "but he's not." Catherine sighed and closed her eyes. Perhaps, it was her.

"Am I scary, Eric?" she asked softly. "Are you afraid of me?"

Eric turned, looking at her, studying, Catherine knew, the changes he saw. Her hair, bereft of blow dryers and curling irons looked a little different; her clothes, well, the drawstring blouse and long, full cotton skirt were definitely *not* Manhattan chic, but they were soft and lovely. And the scarves she had belted around her waist added a nice touch. Still, if just her being here scared him . . .

"No," he told her finally, meeting her eyes. "I'm not afraid of you." He smiled for the first time. "Angels aren't scary."

Catherine smiled back, shaking her head. "I'm not an angel," she assured him.

Eric frowned. "Then what are you?"

Catherine thought for a moment, wondering if she even knew. "I'm kind of like Vincent," she said. "I'm something that has never been."

Eric reached for her hand. Catherine swallowed, afraid she might cry. "Does that mean you can't go up top either?" he asked.

"Yes," she admitted, "in a way." She squeezed his hand, enjoying the smaller fingers entwined with hers. "I don't *need* to go Above, Eric," she said softly. "Not anymore. Oh, I miss the trees and the sunshine, just like you. But I've learned that those are such small, insubstantial things compared to what I have here."

She smiled and turned again to watch the water. How pallid that 'real' world seemed to her now. How much more brilliant, this world of love. "I have love here, Eric," Catherine continued. "I have a husband, a son, and all of our family, like you and Jeffrey and Samantha."

"And Father?"

"Yes," she said quietly, barely hesitating, "even Father." Eric scooted over in the sand, stopping only when their hips touched. Catherine gently wrapped her arm around his shoulders, hugging him close. He buried his face against her side.

"I didn't mean to listen, Catherine," he said, his voice shaking. "I was going to go right back to bed, really I was. Then I heard Father start yelling at Vincent. He was saying awful things, about you, and about Vincent killing people. It was scary, Catherine, and I didn't want to listen."

"But you did."

Eric nodded, and Catherine held him closer, resting her cheek against the top of his head. "Father was so mad," he told her. "I've never heard Father mad like that, not ever." He paused, taking a deep breath. Catherine could feel him tremble. "Doesn't Father love Vincent anymore, Catherine?"

"Sometimes, Eric, fathers do foolish and terrible things. But that does not mean they love their children any less."

The deep, cultured tones were unmistakable. Catherine kissed the top of Eric's head and turned around to face the man standing at the entrance to the cavern. He looked older, as if each day had stretched itself into years. He moved closer, leaning on his stick, his limp more pronounced as he walked on the awkward sand.

"Mary is quite frantic, young man," Father said, as he came toward them. "You missed both the morning and noon meals and your classes." He stopped beside them and Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. Behind his gruff words his dark eyes were gentle.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Enough, I think, that it will be difficult for you to talk Mary out of any cookies after supper."

"William made cookies?" Catherine smiled. Eric obviously had a small boy's weakness for the sweeter things in life.

"Oatmeal, I believe."

Eric's pensive look made Catherine squeeze his hand. "Maybe you better talk to Mary," she urged him softly. "If you explain, I think she'll understand. Mary loves you very much."

Catherine watched silently as Eric made up his mind. She had the distinct feeling that he was uncertain about leaving her with Father. "Will you be okay?" he asked, very, very softly, confirming her suspicion.

"Of course, Eric," she said, giving him a quick hug. "I think Father is all through being angry."

Eric seemed to think about that for a moment before he stood up. Then Catherine watched as her small hero turned to the old man. "Vincent says that words can hurt just as much as hitting somebody, and that's why we shouldn't call each other names and say bad things." He took a deep breath, his fists clenched at his sides. "You said some *really* bad things to Vincent," he continued, "and it made him hurt a whole lot." He glanced quickly at Catherine then turned back to Father. "I think maybe angels can't *be* hurt like people can, but Catherine says she's not an angel; she's like Vincent, and that means your words are gonna hurt her, too."

"You're right, Eric," Father said, "words *can* hurt. And my words to Vincent were very harsh." He paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. "When you love someone, Eric, you sometimes think you know, better than they, what is best for them."

Catherine watched Eric tuck his hands beneath his arms, frowning as he tried to make sense of Father's words. It was a moment before he spoke. "Like when you tell us we shouldn't do something 'cause we might get hurt," he suggested.

Father cleared his throat. "Yes," he said, "that is one example."

Eric shook his head. "How is Catherine's being here gonna be bad for Vincent, Father?" he asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Eric," Catherine interrupted quietly, "Maybe it would be better if Father and I worked this out between the two of us."

"You mean, by yourselves?"

Catherine smiled. He was determined to be her hero. "I don't think Father walked all this way just to yell at me, Eric," she said. "But I'm glad you were here." She rose, kneeling on the sand to give him a hug. "I love you, Eric," she whispered, kissing his small cheek.

Catherine watched through tears as Eric ran from the chamber, his short legs hurrying home to cookies and Mary. "I love you, too, Catherine," echoed in every corner of her heart.



VII

"He's a very special child."

Catherine stood up, brushing away her tears as she looked at the man beside her. "Yes, he is," she agreed, "very special."

They stared at each other for a moment, and Catherine found herself shamefully pleased that it was Father who looked away first.

"Will you walk back with me, Catherine," he asked hesitantly. She watched as he looked toward the Mirror Pool. Faint stars shimmered as twilight overtook the day. "I fear my leg will not let me stand for any length of time." He sighed. "And there are so many things I feel I should say to you."

It was not 'Father', patriarch of the world Below, nor even Jacob Wells, medical researcher and renown scientist, who asked quietly for a moment in which to explain himself. No, Catherine knew the man talking to her now was simply her husband's guardian, the man who had, for over thirty-five years, loved Vincent even more than his own son.

"Of course, Father," she said softly. He nodded, and began walking toward the cavern entrance, his steps achingly slow. "Is it the cold making your leg worse?" she asked, coming abreast of him.

"That," he answered, "and other things." He paused and Catherine got the impression that he was choosing his words carefully. "Age, perhaps," he continued. "I am sixty-six years old, Catherine." He shook his head. "Dear God," he muttered, more to himself, she thought, than to her, "can it really have been so long?" When she remained silent, he sighed.

"Alas, how right the ancient saying is:
We, who are old, are nothing else but noise
And shape. Like mimicries of dreams we go,
And have no wits, although we think us wise."

"Euripides," Catherine said softly. When Father stopped and turned to her, Catherine smiled. "Second year Philosophy. Required reading."

"Do I know you at all, Catherine?"

"No," she answered, "I don't think you do." They walked in silence for a moment. "Why is that, Father? Why haven't you let yourself know me?"

Father sighed and Catherine heard the echo of age and weariness in the sound. "Ten thousand men possess ten thousand hopes. A few bear fruit in happiness; the others go awry." He met her eyes and in the dim light from the torches Catherine saw his sorrow. "Perhaps," he said, "I saw in you more than simply a threat to Vincent's happiness, Catherine. Perhaps, I saw the foreshadowing of something far worse."

"Perhaps," Catherine suggested, "you saw Lisa." She heard the sharp intake of his breath and knew she had been right.

"You know of that?"

"Yes," she said simply, "Vincent told me everything."

Father sighed. "I've wondered lately if I might have done the wrong thing, permitting Lisa to leave so soon after . . . " He turned to her, and Catherine stopped walking, waiting for him to continue. "I did not send Lisa away, Catherine," he told her. "No matter what Vincent believes, I did not send her away."

"Maybe not, Father," Catherine said, "but she left, nevertheless - without a word. Would it have been so much, do you think, to have let them say 'goodbye'?"

"I was so afraid for him, Catherine. If you could have seen . . . his illness. He nearly died."

"And you thought it would happen again. Because of me."

"It *did* Catherine," Father said sadly. "Eventually, it began again, just as I had always feared. Dear God, when I think of those dark days"

Catherine let the silence gather around them. The corridor in front of Father's study was empty, the stillness broken only by an occasional message from the pipes and the distant sounds of the evening meal.

"Come in, Catherine, please." Catherine followed Father into the chamber, watching as he eased gingerly into his chair. He leaned back with a sigh of relief.

"The past two days have been very difficult for me, Catherine," Father began. "Vincent and I have exchanged harsh words, very harsh words. I can only pray that these words have not caused irreparable harm." Father paused, and Catherine remained silent, watching as he nervously ran his hand up and down the arm of his chair.

"I love my son, Catherine," he continued. "He has been the nucleus of my life for over thirty years." He took a deep breath and turned away for a moment, before facing her again. "Vincent tells me that he can no longer lose himself, that the darkness that comes upon him is controlled. Are you certain?"

"Yes, Father," Catherine said. "We're certain. Both Jacob and I are *with* Vincent, now. We're a part of him."

"I, ah, noticed that your touch seemed to calm him yesterday morning. Is that always the case? Please, don't think me insensitive for asking," Father added hastily, "but I need to know."

Catherine shook her head, wondering if this was the father asking, or the physician. "I don't find the question insensitive, Father," she told him. "And yes, my touch can calm him, but it's more than touch, Father. It's a linking of our minds, of our souls."

"And Vincent never loses control?"

"Now, you're being insensitive," Catherine said quietly.

Father cleared his throat. "Then I beg your pardon, Catherine, but for my own peace of mind I must ask. When Vincent, ah, loses control, he doesn't harm you, does he?"

"Never."

Father leaned back again in his chair and rubbed a hand down his tired face. "I never thought to be asking these questions," Father said wearily. "I never dreamed such a thing would come to pass. Perhaps that is why I was so ill-prepared." He sighed. "Most fathers, I suppose, know that in time they will need to let go, to watch their sons marry and raise their own

families. I have always believed that this was not a possibility for Vincent."

"And you reinforced that belief. Until you made him believe it, too."

"Yes, I did. And I would do it again. Catherine, you don't understand . . . I'm a physician. I have seen the brutal results of forced sexual relations. And I know my son. Do you believe he could live with himself if he were to do such a thing? No. I did what I thought was right."

"And now?" Catherine asked. "What about now?"

"I still have reservations."

Catherine closed her eyes and took a deep breath. What was there left to say? "Father," she began, opening her eyes. "Euripides also wrote that we should 'waste not fresh tears over old griefs.' The past is behind us, where it belongs." She paused, gazing at the pieces of Father's life, stored like memories, in the corners of the large room.

"My being here is not an accident of Fate," Catherine continued. "I'm here because of Vincent, because of our love, our bond. All the powers of Hell couldn't keep us apart, Father. Nothing will ever do that . . . not even you."

She moved to kneel beside his chair, her hand resting hesitantly on his arm. "When Vincent was ill," she said softly, "he quoted a verse to me, over and over, as if it were imperative to him that I understand and believe those words." She squeezed his arm through the layers of cotton and wool. "It was as if he knew, Father, as if he saw what lay ahead for us."

"Vincent's dreams, his precognitive abilities," Father said, "have always been a part of who he is."

Catherine looked away, unable to meet the sad resignation in the old man's eyes. Her voice was barely a whisper as she began to speak:

"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."

On a whisper of air, the last line faded into the silence of the chamber. "Vincent and I will always be together," Catherine said after a while. "In our minds, in our hearts, in our bodies, we are one, Father. Whether you approve or disapprove, you cannot change what is."

"Nothing is secure, nothing keeps," he quoted softly.

Catherine smiled and touched his hand. "Vincent once wrote to me that Shakespeare knew everything," she said. "I don't remember him mentioning Euripides. Why not try: 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds, admit impediments'"

Father chuckled and clasped her hand. "I could grow fond of you, Catherine."

"That's all I ask, Father," she said. "We have all been given a second chance. For me, it is a chance for a life here Below with Vincent and Jacob; for Vincent, it is a chance to be a man, totally, loved for everything he is." She paused, squeezing his fingers. "For you, Father," Catherine said quietly, "I think it is a chance to finally see Vincent as a man - to *accept* him as a man."

Father frowned and Catherine looked down at their clasped hands. "The first time I told you that I loved Vincent, you said my love would only bring him unhappiness. I asked why. Do you remember?"

Catherine felt the shiver that ran through him and she gently stroked his fingers. "You said: 'Because part of him is a man.'" Catherine took a deep breath, holding back the tears that threatened as she raised her gaze. She needed him to see her pain, needed him to feel it with her. "I never forgot those words, Father," she whispered shakily. "Part of him."

She struggled with the power of that memory, for it defined the very thing that had kept them apart. Vincent's perception of himself had been given to him by this man, by those Below who loved him. How narrow their vision, how limited their idea of humanity.

"When I think of Vincent, Father," Catherine began softly, "I think *only* of a man. When I see Vincent, I see only a man. A beautiful man, a unique man, but a man."

Father's face faded to a soft blur as the tears she could not stop blended with the candlelight. "That is the difference between us, Father," she continued. "To you, Vincent has always been 'part' man. To me, he has never been anything less than the man I love."



"William," Catherine said wearily, "I need a cookie." She leaned against one of the large worktables in the main kitchen and groaned. "Actually," she amended, "I need *several* cookies - several *large* cookies."

The big man on the other side of the table grinned and handed her two thick, golden brown cookies from a teddy bear shaped jar on the counter behind him.

Catherine smiled her thanks and bit into one, closing her eyes for a moment as the sweet taste of brown sugar and oatmeal melted on her tongue. "William," she sighed, "these are heaven. No wonder Eric loves them so much."

"Eric loves all my cookies," he said, shaking more flour onto the table as he prepared to knead a large mound of bread dough. "Little boys love cookies. Comes with the territory."

The smell of yeast and flour assaulted Catherine's senses as William punched the still-sticky dough. She watched, enthralled as he punched and turned, punched and turned. "I always wondered how you did that," she murmured.

The look in William's eyes made her laugh. "You've never made bread?" he asked.

"William, I've never even seen anyone *else* make bread." She took another bite of cookie as he shook his head. "You have to realize, people move differently in Manhattan. They rush, they hurry. It's a world of convenience, William. Everything is instant. They want things - now. They don't have time to wait. Baking bread takes time."

"Life takes time," he told her, dividing the dough into nine separate parts. "Every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor."

Catherine smiled, shaking her head as she finished the last bit of cookie. "Not you, too," she laughed. "I don't recognize that one, so it can't be Euripides."

"Nope," William said, "from the Bible." He picked up one of the smaller mounds of dough and began shaping it. "Of course," he continued, "that's a translation. My mother used the old language . . . German. That was one of her favorite sayings." He smiled, pausing as he remembered. "She had a saying from the Bible for everything, I think. You could never go into her kitchen without hearing a verse from the Bible."

As William set the bread to rise, Catherine thought of how little she knew of him. It was the same with most of the people living Below. They seldom spoke of their life Above; the life they had abandoned, or that had abandoned them.

"Would you mind if I asked where that kitchen was, William?" Catherine asked quietly. "If you'd rather not tell me, though, I'll understand."

William set the loaf pans on the counter and turned, wiping his hands on the towel at his waist. "I don't mind telling you, Catherine," he said. "That was another life, another William. But it taught me a lot, and I think about it now and then." He took two more cookies from the jar and handed her one. "My mother's kitchen was in Pennsylvania," he told her, taking a bite of his cookie. He smiled, obviously savoring his labors. "They're Mennonites," he explained. "Old Order Amish. I was the oldest of thirteen. Seven brothers and five sisters." His smile faded with the last bite of cookie. "Haven't seen any of them in over twenty years."

"That's a long time."

William turned, putting the lid on the jar. "Yes," he said quietly, "it is." He shrugged and folded his arms across his massive chest. "I didn't fit there, Catherine. After a while I couldn't take it anymore. This is my family now," he said, "Vincent, Father, Mouse, Jamie, Pascal, all of them. They wouldn't know what to do without me." He grinned, looking over her shoulder. Catherine smiled, knowing Vincent had entered the kitchen.

"I knew you would be here," Vincent said, wrapping his arms around Catherine's waist as he came up behind her. "No one can resist the smell of William's cookies." He rested his chin on her head, and drew her back against him. "Especially someone who has missed her dinner."

Catherine laughed and covered his arms with hers. It felt so good to lean against him, to savor his warmth and the scents of leather and candlewax that seemed so much a part of him.

"It was worth it." She said, leaning her head back to smile at him. "I think everything is finally settled with Father."

Vincent kissed her lightly on her upturned face. "I have just spoken to him," he told her softly. "In fact, he is watching Jacob. He said that he will contact Peter for us tomorrow." Vincent looked past her to the man who stood watching them; his round face a mirror of their happiness. "We are going to have a wedding, William," Vincent said with pleasure. "Is it possible to have food and drink for everyone without depleting our stores for Winterfest?"

"I think so," William said. "Mr. Wong and the others have been pretty generous this year. Ought to be more than enough for both."

"Good." Vincent released Catherine and turned her to face him. "A week from today, then?" he suggested, holding her gently by the shoulders. "It will give us time to speak to Peter, and William will be able to arrange his schedule."

"Don't worry about me," William said. "I've been wanting to cook for this party for a long time." His face became solemn, and when he reached out his hand, Vincent clasped it warmly. "Only thing I ever really accepted about the Plain People was the idea that a man needs a wife and children." He squeezed Vincent's hand, but his gaze rested on Catherine. "You're good for him, Catherine," he said, his voice low and hoarse. "You've made him happy."



Vincent remembered William's words later, as he leaned back against the pillows watching Catherine get Jacob ready for bed. She made a game of playing with his toes, and the baby gurgled and laughed happily at her. Vincent looked down to the bare toes peeking from beneath the hem of Catherine's nightgown and smiled. With her freshly washed hair tumbling around her face and her small body wrapped in the voluminous gown, Catherine looked almost like a child herself.

"Your daddy's being silly, babyface," he heard Catherine whisper loudly. "He's thinking 'adorable' again."

Vincent laughed and reached across the bed, caressing her hip and the small, rounded cheeks of her bottom through the cotton gown. "There is nothing wrong with adorable, Catherine,"

he said softly. "And I was thinking of how very happy you have made me." He stroked the curve of her hip, feeling the delicacy of her bones.

Catherine smiled as she struggled to get Jacob's wiggling legs into his pajamas. "Adorable is fine, if you're a babyface," she said, as she picked Jacob up and handed him to his father. She put the wet diaper and washcloth into the diaper pail and washed her hands in the basin.

"I have meant to ask why you call him that," Vincent said, holding Jacob firmly as he scooted over to make room for Catherine on the bed. The baby was sprawled happily across his chest, trying to chew on the ties holding Vincent's shirt.

"I call him babyface," she said, sitting next to him, "because that's what my mom called me." Catherine reached out to take the wet, chewed tie from Jacob's mouth. "And, because it seems to fit him." The baby blew bubbles at her and she laughed.

"As 'adorable' fits you at times," Vincent insisted, placing a finger beneath her chin to turn her face toward him.

"Catherine," he continued, "you are so many things to me; beautiful, sensual, intelligent, wise . . ." He leaned forward, bringing their lips together for a short, delicate kiss. "You are so full of love. And, you give it, not just to Jacob or to me, but to everyone here. All of our family is warmed by your love." He ran his finger lightly over the soft skin of her throat, pausing at the hollow beneath her ear where he felt her pulse quicken. He smiled.

"Do you know," he said, moving his finger over the curve of Catherine's jaw, "that until today I had no idea of William's background? I have known him for almost half my life, but until this evening, he has never spoken of his family."

"Never?"

Vincent smiled and shook his head. "Father and the Council learned enough to admit him to the community, but he did not speak of any family."

He sighed and looked down at the baby now sleeping contentedly against his chest. "William is a good man," he said, gently rubbing Jacob's small back. "It must have been very difficult for him to leave his home and his family."

Catherine snuggled under Vincent's arm, finding her spot in the crook of his shoulder. She covered his hand with hers, sharing the warm, baby-softness of their son through him. His fingers linked with hers, silky fur sliding across her skin. Jacob moved in his sleep, finding a more comfortable position atop his Father's broad chest. Catherine smiled, watching as he scooted his knees forward, his little bottom pointing to the ceiling.

"It amazes me that he can sleep like that," Vincent whispered, leaning his head forward to press a light kiss on his son's downy hair.

"Children are amazing creatures, Vincent," Catherine said quietly, "They adapt, they bend like willows in the wind. If they don't, they break." Her voice trailed off with a sigh and she cuddled closer.

"You are troubled," Vincent said, tightening his arm around her. "What is it?"

"It's Eric," she told him. "Do you know that he's never gone Above? Not from the day I brought him here." She squeezed his fingers. "I'm worried about him, Vincent. He needs to face his fears, not hide from them."

"You are concerned that, like the tree, Eric will break under the tempest of his fear."

"Yes." She lifted her head, turning to look into the face of the man she loved. "We can't let him break, Vincent," she said "We must help him to bend."

"We will," Vincent promised, kissing her trembling lips. "We will."

Catherine knew that for a long time she would see Eric as he had been that afternoon, hands tucked beneath his arms, yearning for sunshine and swings. Vincent held her throughout the long, troubled night.



VIII

"I apologize for the urgency of my message, Peter," Vincent heard Father say, "but we felt it necessary that you come with all due haste."

"That's all right Jacob," Peter answered, "just tell me what's going on."

"The fault is mine, Peter," Vincent interrupted, stepping down into the study. "We did not want to wait." The two men were seated at Father's chess table, their tea cups still full and steaming. Vincent moved to stand beside Peter's chair, squeezing his father's shoulder as he passed.

"I still don't understand," Peter said. He turned to Father, his face a mask of questions. "What on earth is the emergency?"

"I guess you could say I am."

Peter whirled in his chair at the sound of Catherine's voice. Vincent reached out to put his hand on Peter's shoulder, lending his strength and his support.

"Cathy?"

Catherine walked slowly into the room, feeling her heart beating harder, faster. She couldn't decide whether it was fear or anticipation. Peter was her only link to both worlds. Could

he understand? Could he accept her? She pulled up a small footstool and sat in front of his chair. He remained silent as she took both of his hands in hers, her eyes willing him to acknowledge her return.

"Cathy?" he said again.

Catherine smiled, squeezing his limp hands. "Yes and no," she told him softly. "Cathy Chandler is gone, Peter. That much is true. I'm Catherine Wells now." She smiled up at the beautiful man standing behind Peter's chair. "I'm Vincent's wife."

"It's incredible," he murmured. "They told me . . . " He caressed her fingers, rubbing them gently between his own. "When I got back from Europe . . . I heard . . . " He shook his head, his tears falling heedlessly down the stark plains of his face. "How, Cathy?" he whispered.

Catherine looked at Vincent, both seeing and feeling his faith in her gentle persuasion. "Our bond, Vincent's and mine, is an ageless fusion of our spirits," she said softly. "The miracle of that bond, that love, has enabled me to be here, to have a new life Below with Vincent and our son."

Peter's mouth opened but it was a moment before he spoke. "That's impossible," he said, moving his fingers to her wrist. "I'm touching you - I can feel your pulse." He turned, looking at Father. "Jacob," he said, "certainly as a man of science you can't believe this?" He shook his head. "There's got to be another more logical explanation."

Catherine watched as Father sat forward in his chair, his arms folded beneath his chin. He gazed at her for a moment, and Catherine knew he was remembering their words. He sighed deeply, then looked again at Peter.

"I have been reminded in the past few days," he began, "that 'there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in' our philosophies. Believe me, Peter, when I tell you that this was not an easy thing for me to accept either."

Catherine smiled at Father's understatement. "Peter," she said quietly, "think of me as the Velveteen Rabbit. I am here, I am real." She lifted his hands to her face. ". . . once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

Peter smiled and Catherine knew she had gotten through, past the man of science and medicine, to the man deep inside who loved her. He rose from the chair, pulling her into his arms. She leaned into his hug, happy that his acceptance of her had come so easily.

"When can I call Jenny?" Peter asked, pulling back to look at her. "And Susan . . . My God, Nancy and Susan . . . "

Catherine covered Peter's mouth with the fingers of one hand, shaking her head. "No, Peter," she said quietly. "*This* is my world now. It's all I want, all I need." She gazed past his shoulder to where her husband stood in silent support. "I'm not a part of that world anymore. I don't belong." She smiled and softly kissed his cheek.

"I won't go above, Peter," Catherine continued. "I don't know that I could." She shrugged. "I remember very little about that 'other' place. It's fading now, more with every passing day. But, I do know that the world Above doesn't belong to me. It isn't mine anymore."

This time when she looked at Vincent, he moved around Peter, his pride and love eloquent in every look and step. He put his hands on her shoulders, and Catherine leaned back against his strength.

"The day after I returned," she continued, "Vincent and I exchanged vows . . . privately, at the Chamber of the Falls. We will share a life, Peter."

Vincent drew her closer and said softly: "Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow . . . The two-celled heart beating, with one full strike."

Catherine turned and touched Vincent's chest, her hand feeling the strong, heavy beat of his heart. She smiled and he leaned down, his lips gently caressing hers. It was another seal of sorts; a quiet declaration of how their relationship had changed. When the kiss ended, they turned as one, to face Peter.

"We are going to repeat those vows," Vincent said, his voice carrying all the love and pride Catherine felt inside his heart. "We want to share our love, our commitment with everyone in the community."

"You are the only tie between the life I had then, and my life now, Peter," Catherine added. "As you are a tie to both worlds. Be here for us, Peter. Share our marriage with us, please."

Catherine smiled as Peter reached out and took her hand. Holding it gently, he reached for Vincent's right hand and brought them together.

"If ever there were two people who deserved happiness, it's you and Vincent," he said, holding their hands between his palms. "God bless, Catherine."



Catherine looked at the beautifully crocheted dress Mary held in her arms. The yarn she had chosen was light beige, but shot through with threads of silver, so that with every movement the light from the lamp and candles danced and played within the intricate pattern Mary had used.

"Oh, Mary," Catherine whispered, awed by Mary's gift, "it's wonderful. I've never worn anything as beautiful."

Mary smiled and put the dress into Catherine's hands. "I started it last year," she said, "after Winterfest." She covered Catherine's hand with hers and Catherine felt their gentle strength. "You mean so much to us, Catherine. And you are everything to Vincent." She looked away for a moment, no longer meeting Catherine's eyes.

"I've been here twenty years, Catherine," Mary began. "Vincent was a teenager when I came to this place." She paused, and Catherine thought of all the questions she would love to ask, of all the wonderful memories Mary could share. "He was strong, even then," Mary continued. "And that inner strength saw him through some terrible times." She sighed and raised her eyes. "I love all the children here as if each were my own. And Vincent is one of those children. He is Father's son, but he is my son, too."

"I think he gets his gentleness from you," Catherine said.

Mary smiled. "Oh, Father has his gentle times," she said, "he just forgets sometimes that children grow up. And when they do, they don't need us as much anymore." She patted Catherine's hands. "Give him time, Catherine. He's not so old that he can't learn something from his children."

Catherine leaned forward and kissed Mary's cheek. Her pale skin carried the scent of violets and roses, like the sachets

Catherine had seen in the trunk at the foot of Mary's bed. She smiled, knowing the warmth of Mary's arms as they enveloped her in a quick hug. Vincent could not have had a more loving mother.

"Mary? Is Catherine . . . ? Oh, here you are."

Samantha swept into the room and Catherine watched, enthralled by the girl's energy and independence. There was nothing artificial about Samantha. And she had yet to learn that tact was sometimes necessary; much to the chagrin of some of the boys. Catherine had discovered that Samantha's quick tongue had done considerable damage to more than one fragile male ego.

"Is that your wedding dress?" Samantha asked, sitting gingerly on the edge of Mary's bed. She reached over the mound of pillows Catherine had piled around Jacob, and tickled the baby's feet. Jacob kicked happily, gurgling and waving his fists until Samantha let him catch her fingers.

Catherine smiled, feeling her baby's pleasure. "Yes," she said, moving toward them, "isn't it lovely?"

Samantha looked longingly at the dress in Catherine's arms. "You'll be beautiful in it," she said, gazing up at her. "You have the figure for it." She sighed and Catherine bit her lip, knowing she shouldn't smile. "That kind of dress clings something awful," she added. "If you don't have a figure, you can end up looking like a stick, or a lumpy sack of potatoes."

"Samantha," Mary scolded softly, "what a thing to say."

Catherine smiled then, but it was a smile of understanding. She had been this age once. "Give yourself a while, Samantha," she said. "You'd be surprised what a few years can do."

"I know," Samantha said, resignedly. "It's just so hard to wait."

Catherine laughed softly and wrapped one arm around Samantha's shoulders. "Don't worry," she told her, "pretty soon you'll be as old as Rebecca and you'll wonder where the time has gone."

"Oh," Samantha said, prying her fingers from Jacob's grasp, "I almost forgot." She bounced lightly off the bed, looking at Mary. "Rebecca told me to say that she and I are going to be late to dinner." She glanced at Catherine for a moment, then smiled as she looked back at Mary. "We're working on something *very* special. It's going to take us a little while to finish."

"I thought Rebecca was busy with the Winterfest candles," Mary said.

"Oh, she is," Samantha told her. "I know, because I'm her helper. They're going to be extra, extra special."

"I'm sure they are," Mary said, lifting Jacob from his cocoon of pillows. Catherine smiled as her son instantly snuggled his nose against Mary's neck. She knew that he recognized his special people not only by what he saw, but what his other senses told him as well. Violets and roses would always be Mary. His emotions toward her were vividly bright and strong. "Don't be too late," Mary said as Samantha headed towards the chamber entrance.

"We won't be," Samantha assured her. She turned to Catherine. "I missed Vincent at class this afternoon," she said, fidgeting with the scarf belt at her waist. "Father taught it, and he's not half as much fun. Vincent's not sick or anything, is he?"

"No, Samantha," she said, knowing how much the children worried. "He's gone to see Narcissa about the wedding." She smiled. "We know she's probably heard about it already on the pipes, but we wanted to personally invite her. Vincent told me not to expect him until after the evening meal."

"Oh, that's okay then." She grinned and hurried from the room.

Catherine turned to Mary and smiled. "Did we ever have that much energy, Mary?" she asked, shifting the wedding dress over one arm as she picked up the small denim bag that held Jacob's bottles and diapers.

Mary came to stand beside her, holding Jacob, and looking at the empty chamber doorway. "I'm not certain I ever had that kind of energy, Catherine," she sighed. "Samantha reminds me so of Lisa."

The worry in Mary's voice made Catherine lean over and kiss her cheek. Jacob kissed her too, and Catherine smiled. "Well, then," she said, as they started towards the dining hall, "we better tell William to stock up on vitamins. Looks like we're all going to need them."



Catherine was still smiling later as she watched Mary and Father at dinner. Everyone was so happy at Father's change of heart that they were going overboard to please him. Everyone, that is, except Mary. She seemed to be ignoring him; something, Catherine surmised, that he was totally unused to. She listened quietly to Father's quiet coaxing, wondering if another relationship was about to change.

"Catherine?"

Catherine turned to look over her shoulder. Pascal stood a foot away, nervously biting his lower lip. It was obvious that he was disturbed about something.

"What is it, Pascal?" she asked. She sent a silent message to Vincent, focusing on the subtle richness of his presence as she asked if he was all right. *All is well, love.*

"Ah, well, there's a Helper," he said hesitantly, "well, not *exactly* a Helper; waiting at the 14th Street entrance. Wants to get in touch with Vincent." He fiddled with the pipes in his hands, looking anywhere but into her eyes.

"Does this 'not exactly a Helper' have a name?" she asked. Vincent was with her, sharing, listening. If the message turned out to be important, he would know of it.

Pascal closed his eyes for a second, then straightened his shoulders, obviously gathering his courage. Catherine's curiosity grew. Who could possibly cause this sort of reaction?

"Her name is Diana," he said with a sigh. The resulting responses around the table were instant and almost unanimous.

"Dear God."

"Oh, my."

"Could be trouble."

After Mouse's succinct comment, the table became silent. Catherine glanced at each person, seeing their worry and concern. She smiled, trying to reassure them. They had no way of knowing that Vincent had never really been without her. His memories of that time were *shared* memories; like old photographs they lay in the back corners of her mind, waiting to be taken out and looked at again. Catherine knew everything there was to know about this particular woman; even why they were reacting as they were.

"It's okay, Pascal," Catherine said, reaching out to put her hand on his arm. "Really." She rose from the bench and looked at Mary. "Could you watch Jacob for a little while, Mary?" she asked softly. "I shouldn't be long."

Mary nodded, but when Catherine turned back to Pascal, he was biting his lip again. "It's really okay, Pascal," she told him. "Vincent knows." His eyes widened. Then, when he finally understood, he smiled.

"Right," he said firmly. "I'll guide you."

Catherine didn't need to point out that she was familiar with that entrance. She knew Pascal's offer to guide her was more of an offer of companionship during the long walk. It was also, she thought, an offer of friendship, should she prove to need a friend nearby.

"Thank you, Pascal," Catherine said, squeezing his arm. "I'd like that."

As they walked unhurriedly through the torchlit tunnels, Catherine sensed that he was watching her. "Does my being able to talk to Vincent like I do bother you, Pascal?" she asked quietly.

Pascal smiled and shrugged. "No," he said. "I don't think so." He paused for a moment before going on. "Vincent and I talked about it. I was curious. Can't imagine ever being that connected to someone."

"Not like you're connected to your pipes, huh?"

Pascal laughed. "Vincent told you about that, did he?"

"Vincent tells me a lot of things . . . now. Do you know, Pascal, I used to dream about having a life here Below with Vincent. And in all my dreams, in all the fantasies my imagination would create, we were never happier than we are now."

"Imagination decides everything: it creates beauty, justice and happiness, which is the world's supreme good."

Catherine shook her head, smiling. "That's wonderful," she told him, "and so true. It sounds familiar. Who wrote it?"

Pascal cleared his throat. "My namesake," he said. He stopped for a moment, listening, Catherine thought, to the sweet music of his pipes. The tappings echoed around them, the system busy with after-dinner chatter. "My father named me after Blaise Pascal," he said finally, turning left into another tunnel. "He was a seventeenth century French philosopher and scientist. My father always read to me from a collection of his letters." He laughed, and Catherine enjoyed the warmth of the sound. "He and Father used to have such arguments about philosophy and theology." He looked at Catherine and grinned.

"I used to hide in Father's study and listen," he admitted. "Great hiding places in that room."

Catherine laughed with him, picturing a much younger Pascal hiding behind the cupboard in Father's study.

"We're here, Catherine."

Catherine looked at the gate in front of her. Made of tarnished brass, it seemed to her to be a flashier version of the drainage tunnel entrance in the park. She sighed. So many memories bricked up and abandoned along with the remnants of that other gate. How many memories would be awakened here, only to be abandoned later?

"Do you want me to stay?"

She turned to Pascal, knowing her smile was fainter now. "Maybe for a little while," she said. "I'm not sure how she's going to react" She shrugged. "We've never really met, you know."

Pascal turned and pulled down the lever that opened the door. As soon as the door was open, the gate was pulled back and the woman Catherine knew to be Diana, entered the tunnel.

"Where's Vincent?"

Her words were directed at Pascal, and Catherine got the distinct impression that Diana was not happy to see him. Catherine stayed in the shadows, listening and waiting.

"Vincent couldn't come," Pascal told her. "He's down in the lower chambers. Won't be back for hours."

Diana crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall, looking around her. "Then you'll just have to take me to . . . "

Catherine moved away from the shadowed tunnel wall into the light of the single torch. She remained silent, watching large, wide eyes grow wider as Diana recognized who stood before her.

Pascal drew closer, solicitously putting a hand on Catherine's arm. "Diana Bennett," he said politely, "this is Catherine Wells, Vincent's wife." He paused to give Catherine a quick smile, then moved away, shutting the outside door and the brass gate. "Do you want me to wait?" he asked.

Catherine smiled and shook her head. "No, Pascal," she said, "but, thank you. I can find my way home." Pascal gave her a quick salute with his ever-present pipes and turned, going back the way they had come.

Even the constant tapping from the pipes couldn't cut through the silence that lingered at the 14th Street entrance. Catherine thought of all the things she should say, of all the things Vincent might want her to say. Nothing seemed right, so she kept silent; watching, waiting for Diana to speak.

The young woman rubbed her neck nervously with a shaking hand. She looked so sad, so very alone. Did this woman have no one? Is that why she wanted so very much to love Vincent?

"This can't be real," Diana murmured, leaning her head back against the wall. "I *know* for a fact that this can't be real."

Catherine smiled. "Facts are all accidents . . . , " she said softly.

"What?"

"Sorry," Catherine said, smiling as she moved closer. "It seems to be catching after a while." She stopped, frowning as Diana leaned even closer to the wall, sliding her back down it until she sat on the dirt floor. "Are you afraid of me?" Catherine asked anxiously. Hadn't Vincent mentioned that Diana was somewhat intuitive? Why on earth would she be afraid?

"I don't know," Diana said. "I don't know *what* I am. But, I know what you're not."

"And what's that?"

"Here. You're not here," Diana said firmly. "You can't be. I saw your . . ."

Catherine sighed. "I know what you've seen, Diana," she said quietly. "You were the main investigator on the case. You even have a special wall . . ." She turned away, pushing aside the vivid pictures her mind was composing.

Please, Catherine. No.

Vincent's soundless words split apart the pictures, replacing them with images of love, of dreams now fulfilled. Silently, he stroked away the fragments of despair, leaving only joy and the happiness they had found together.

Catherine covered her lips with the tips of her fingers and noiselessly sent her husband a kiss. *Thank you, my love.* She turned, seeing Diana watching her. In the harsh light from the torch the woman's face was colorless, her eyes full of denial.

"What you see before you now, Diana," Catherine said calmly, "is real. No matter what you may want to believe. I am here. I exist in this world."

Diana made an exasperated noise in the back of her throat. "And what exactly am I supposed to be seeing?"

Catherine ignored the woman's hostility with a deep sigh. She had seen this attitude before; with Lisa, with Lena. Jealousy was not an unfamiliar emotion to her. But, damn if she wasn't getting tired of having to explain and justify herself. She was here. She was going to stay. Still, she owed this woman.

"What you're seeing," Catherine said patiently, "is the power of love. Vincent told you about our bond, our connection. Well, that bond and that love enabled me to come back to Vincent; to physically be here, to live out a life with him and with our son."

Diana shook her head. "Nobody loves like that," she said soberly. "I don't believe in love like that."

"Then, I feel sorry for you, Diana," Catherine told her softly. "You'll never know what it's like to be loved for all that you are and all that you can be. You'll never have the feeling of being so connected to another person that you can sense their joy and their sorrow. You'll never be everything that you were meant to be." Catherine paused, knowing that Diana would never understand. This woman's eyes looked outward, away from her inner voices. She would never know their song.

"' . . . one voice from two strings . . . "
Catherine smiled, looking within and hearing Vincent.

"I got used to being alone a long time ago," Catherine heard Diana say. Catherine looked up and saw her opening the outside door.

"I can't take anymore of this," Diana continued. "You say you're Vincent's wife - that you're Catherine Wells. Okay, good for you - you're Catherine Wells. But don't try to make me believe you were Cathy Chandler once. I'm not gonna buy it."

She opened the gate, and Catherine could see how tightly she held the metal pull. "Cathy Chandler died. I know." She shook her head, then turned back, looking into Catherine's eyes. "I even shot the man responsible."

Catherine watched silently, seeing a lonely, empty woman, determined to deny the possibility of miracles.

"I just want to forget this place," Diana said, her voice as flat and barren as her eyes. "So tell Vincent I won't be back. I was wrong to come. There's nothing for me here." The clang of the gate echoed behind her as metal hit metal, and Catherine could hear the crunch of gravel beneath Diana's boots as she hurried away.

"But, I never got to say thank . . . you."

"She would not have accepted your thanks, Catherine."

Catherine turned away from the gate and saw Vincent standing in the shadows near the bend in the tunnel. She shrugged and moved toward his open arms. "Whether she accepted them or not," Catherine murmured, entering the warm security of his embrace, "I should have offered." She rubbed her cheek against the soft quilting of his vest, savoring his nearness.

"You tried, Catherine," Vincent said, "but she could not hear you." He held her tighter, inhaling the scent of her hair as she leaned into him. "Pascal told me once that 'we only consult the ear because the heart is wanting.' Perhaps, one day, Diana will learn to hear with her heart."

Catherine looked up at him and Vincent's heart heard the eloquence of her love. When she held his face between her soft hands and kissed him, he heard the eloquence of her passion as well.

"Let my heart be wise," Catherine quoted softly, her breath a whisper against his waiting mouth. "It is the gods' best gift."



IX

The day before the wedding, the pipes were filled with news of Narcissa's journey upward towards the Home Chambers. Children who had only heard about but never met the mysterious and mystical old woman, asked Catherine endless questions.

All day Catherine smiled, answering the questions as best she could. Yes, Vincent had personally invited Narcissa to the wedding. Yes, she was happily surprised that Narcissa had decided to join them. No, she didn't know how long Narcissa planned to stay.

It wasn't until after the evening meal that Catherine managed to find a quiet moment in the relative solitude of their chamber. Vincent had gone to act as Narcissa's escort through the unfamiliar maze of tunnels. Mary was busy preparing another guest chamber, and Peter and Father had retired to Father's study to work out the final preparations for the wedding the next day.

"Well, babyface," Catherine said, smiling as she buttoned up his pajamas and lifted him from his crib, "looks like it's just you and me for a while." Jacob laughed and threw his arms around Catherine's neck. "You like that idea, do you?" she asked, savoring the sweet, innocent joy that surrounded her.

Jacob's emotions were no longer overwhelming. But as he grew, the bond between them grew with him, and there were moments when Catherine had to sort through the confusing jumble of Jacob's thoughts. His quick and agile mind was open to discovering the world around him, and seeing the world Below through her son's eyes had given Catherine a whole new perspective on what it meant to be a child.

"How about a story?" Catherine said, as she sat with Jacob in the chair by the bed. She ran her fingers through the silky down on his head and kissed him gently on the cheek. "One story with your bottle, then we'll go snuggle down in bed and wait for Daddy." She helped Jacob hold onto his bottle, then settled back into the chair.

"The gingham dog and the calico cat," she began, "Side by side on the table sat . . ."

The poem was a favorite of Catherine's and its sing-song cadence never failed to amuse her audience, whether or not they could understand the words. As Catherine recited the story of the two toy animals, she gradually became aware of the hush that had fallen over the busy pipes. She looked down at the sleepy face of her son and smiled, removing the bottle as he yawned and smacked his lips. "The old Dutch clock it told me so," she whispered, "and that is how I came to know."

Catherine placed the empty bottle on the table and rose slowly from the chair. Careful not to wake him, she put Jacob into his crib and covered him; smiling as he wiggled into his favorite position.

The mobile Jeffrey had made sparkled in the lamplight, as the aluminum foil-covered moon and stars glittered down from where they hung above the crib. Catherine touched the small, crescent moon with her finger, making it dance in the light. The

foil that covered the cardboard was thin, like the kind found in cigarette packages and she marveled at the time and patience that had gone into Jeffrey's gift. And the love; her son was surrounded with love.

Catherine closed her eyes, feeling Vincent's silent call as he let her know that Narcissa was on her way to their chamber and that he was going to meet with Father and Peter. She smiled and sent him a soundless kiss. She had come to treasure their silent communication, knowing that no matter how far away he was, Vincent was always with her.

She moved away from the crib and walked toward the chamber entrance, picking up Jacob's toys and moving his jumpseat from its place in the center of the room. Their son had quietly taken over. He would soon need a chamber of his own.

"Catherine, child. Are you there?"

Catherine took a deep breath, trying to calm the sudden nervousness that gripped her. She could almost hear the pounding of her heart. "Straight ahead, Narcissa," she said, going forward to meet the old woman. "Come in, please."

"Ah, Catherine. It is good to see you again, child. Very good to see you."

Catherine smiled and moved into Narcissa's open arms. Nothing less than a hug would do, and Catherine found herself surrounded by the scents of patchouli and cardamom.

"I'm so glad you came, Narcissa," Catherine told her. "I have so many things to tell you, so many questions to ask."

"Of course you have questions, child," Narcissa said, holding onto Catherine's hand as she pulled back to look at her. "With change there are always questions. Has this not always been so?"

"Then you know?"

Narcissa laughed and squeezed Catherine's hand. "Of course, child. Why else would I make such a journey? You and Vincent, you are married in your hearts, always. I do not need to travel so far to know this. I have come for you, child - to answer your questions, to ease your heart." She looked around the room, and Catherine wondered how much she saw through her eyes, and how many of her perceptions came from inner voices.

"I see what needs to be seen," Narcissa said quietly. "All other things, they come from the heart."

Catherine smiled and led Narcissa to the chair where she had fed Jacob. Narcissa paused to look down at the sleeping child and examine the shiny mobile hanging above his crib. When the old woman was settled and comfortable, Catherine sat on the bed, reluctant to begin. Narcissa reached out and took her hand.

"The changes, Catherine . . . they frighten you."

"Some of them," Catherine admitted. "I suppose it's only right to forget about that other place, that other world."

"It is a world of spirits, Catherine," Narcissa told her. "But why would you want to remember such a place? You are not a spirit."

"That's just it," Catherine groaned, squeezing Narcissa's strong fingers. "I don't know *what* I am anymore. Every day when I wake up, I wonder at the changes. I wonder what part of me is going to fade away next."

"What do you mean, child, 'fade away'?"

Catherine took a deep breath. "My memory," she said, "I'm losing my memory. No, that's not really it. I've lost memories. Specific memories."

"They are important to you, these memories?"

Catherine thought a moment before speaking. "No," she replied, "I don't think so. It's not as if I've forgotten my father or my mother. The memories that are deeply rooted in love still seem to be intact. Vincent and I have been talking about it this past week. I was afraid that I would begin to forget things we had done together. But I haven't. I can still remember vividly what I've done with people I care about. It's just that there are other things that seem to be fading like shadows."

"You are in the sun now, child," Narcissa said. "What need do you have for shadows?"

Catherine smiled. Life's common denominators; light and shadow. "Then I shouldn't worry about it?"

Narcissa chuckled and patted Catherine's hand. "There is no need, child," she told her. "You are *becoming*."

Catherine laughed, wondering if Narcissa and Father had ever tried to have a conversation. "Becoming what?"

"Why, becoming real, child. You are becoming real."

Catherine held her breath, not daring to let herself believe what Narcissa was saying. She was alive, she knew that. She was a living, breathing, feeling entity. But there was real, and there was *real*. For Catherine, real was her life with Vincent and Jacob. *Real* was . . .

Catherine, is something wrong? Are you all right?

Listen, Vincent. Listen.

"Narcissa," she said softly, taking the time to form her whirling thoughts into words, "are you telling me that I'm becoming real as in - I could have another baby, real?"

Catherine watched Narcissa's smile widen. "Little Jacob, he would like company?"

"Narcissa, please don't tease. Not about this." Catherine felt herself shaking, wondering . . . "The one thing I regret above all others," she told the old woman, "is that Vincent didn't get to share in my pregnancy." She looked away from Narcissa's dark searching eyes, down at the rug below her feet. "Part of the memories that are fading are of that time," she whispered. "I remember so little. If I could get pregnant again . . . Narcissa, is it possible?"

Catherine!

"You are changing, child," Narcissa said. "I have seen this and you have told me. Do you not remember when you first came to see me? You were part of that other world. You belonged to that other world. This is no longer so. You are of *this* world now. And in this world, there is always room for babies. But there is time yet. You will know."

Vincent burst into the room, his eyes radiant with the love and joy that was pouring through his heart. Catherine left the bed and ran into his arms, holding him close as the wonder of Narcissa's words filled them.

Catherine heard Narcissa's soft chuckle as she walked past them. "You are *becoming*, child," she reminded her. "You are not there yet."

"But I will be," Catherine whispered in Vincent's ear as his arms tightened around her. "I will be."



X

Catherine muttered under her breath as she fumbled with the hairclip of rosebuds in her hand. Barely open, the red and white roses looked beautifully elegant and fragile. Her fingers were shaking so badly she could barely hold them. They were a gift from Peter, as were the boutonnieres for Vincent and Father, and Catherine couldn't have thought of anything more perfect. No doubt, Vincent had been involved in their selection.

She smiled, remembering how busy he had been the past week with the preparations. He hadn't let her do a thing; giving her time, instead, to talk more with Eric, and to take care of Jacob. Calmly and patiently, Vincent had seen to every detail. It would be the most perfect wedding the Tunnels had ever seen. If, of course, she could ever get these flowers into her hair. She was still reeling from Narcissa's words.

"Having problems with that, Catherine?"

Catherine sighed and turned toward the entrance of their chamber. "Can you find Mary, Peter?" she asked, holding out the hairpiece. "I can't make my fingers do anything right today."

Peter chuckled and entered the room. Catherine thought he looked especially elegant in his grey wool suit. The tie, as usual, was pure Peter; silk, and bright Christmas red.

"Let me give it a try," he said, taking the roses from her shaking hands. "Susan used to wear bows and ribbons all the time when she was growing up. I used to be pretty good at it."

Catherine stood still, remembering times when her father had done very much the same thing for her. Sadness, like an unexpected summer shower, rained over her; misting her eyes and clogging her throat.

"Thinking about Charles, aren't you?"

Peter's voice caressed her as his hands covered her shoulders. "He would be very proud today, Catherine," he said gently. "Charles wanted you to be happy. He wanted you to be loved."

"I know, Peter," she whispered. "Vincent spoke to Dad at the hospital." She bent her head, remembering. "And Dad came here once, to the Tunnels." She looked back up at Peter and saw the questions in his eyes. "It's complicated," she said. "But Dad approved, Peter. He understood and he approved."

"Then he knows how happy you are. And what a miracle of love this marriage is."

Catherine wrapped her arms around Peter's waist and hugged him tightly. This man journeyed through two worlds, and now he would carry with him the memory of a love that had transcended both.

"They're starting to play, Catherine. Hurry up, or you'll miss your own wedding."

By the time Catherine looked up, Samantha had already gone back the way she had come. Only the echo of her voice

and the faint sound of the children's string quartet playing in Father's study were left to attest to her quick visit.

"Come on, Catherine," Peter said, holding out his arm.
"Like Samantha said, you don't want to miss your own wedding."

Catherine smiled and carefully wiped her eyes before taking Peter's arm. "That can't happen," she said softly. "I have it on the very best authority that they won't start without me."



Vincent listened with only half an ear to the romantic Mozart string quartet the children were playing. Instead, he concentrated on his link with Catherine, his gaze fixed on the entrance to Father's study. He felt Catherine's presence, the wonderful blithesomeness of her being, drawing closer with every passing second. His heart thundered beneath the ruffled silk of his shirt, its cadence attesting to the state of his nerves. Not even the soothing melody of "The Dissonance" could calm him.

The moment he saw her, Vincent forgot to breathe. She was the personification of Byron's poem; beauty beyond measure, walking toward him on Peter's arm.

*'She walks in beauty like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies . . .'*

Vincent felt Catherine's joy, the delight from his silent praise, as she took her place beside him. She looked only at him, her eyes shining bright and glittering in the light of the many candles. Vincent knew this moment would be forever engraved upon his heart.

He took her hands: Fragile, delicate, hands, resting now with trust and love within his own. He no longer despised those things which made him different; but saw them, as Catherine did, unique and beautiful in their own way. Even his hands, hated and despised for so many years, had proven capable of tenderness, had given care and love. And with time, they would help bring another child into the world. He closed his eyes, unable to help the tears of joy that filled them.

"Shall we begin?" he heard Father say.

Catherine blinked, her own eyes misting as Vincent's strong emotions were amplified through their bond. She squeezed his hands, and he opened his eyes, his love a beacon of azure blue light shining down on her.

"Shall we begin, Vincent?" Father repeated.

Vincent cleared his throat and looked at the man who stood beside them; his quiet dignity an impressive sight in the glow of a hundred candles. Behind and around him, vases of red and white roses lent their silent, fragrant beauty to the room. He turned back to Catherine and smiled.

"By all means, Father," Vincent replied quietly. Around him the room grew quiet. Father cleared his throat.

"This is a momentous occasion," he began, "not only for Vincent and Catherine, but for all of us who have been witness to the miracle of their love. The vows they repeat here today

will be a testament to that love." He paused, taking a deep breath before going on. "There are times in our lives, when memories long forgotten, grow strong again; forcing us to remember the past, to look at those things which we have said and done, to weigh them, one against the other." He paused, and Catherine felt the intensity of his gaze as he focused on her alone.

"Then," he continued, "there are times of great joy; such as this one. Moments when your heart becomes so full, that you question your right to have so much happiness." He cleared his throat and Catherine saw the pain in his eyes just before he looked out again at the people gathered in the room.

"My life has not been without its share of mistakes," Father said softly. "Most of them are long past, and cannot be changed. The future, however, is still a blank page upon which a man may write what his heart dictates." He reached out to touch the back of Catherine's left hand where it lay within Vincent's gentle grasp. She felt the slight tremor of his fingers and looked up at him. Whatever Father was about to say, it had not come easy.

"I once heard a fine British actor speak a line with such conviction, such feeling, that the memory of those words stayed with me for many years. Though I had long forgotten them, they have risen, this past week, like the Phoenix, to guide my heart." He looked down at Catherine's hand, then met her eyes.

"Can you forgive a pigheaded old fool, for having no eyes to see with, no ears to hear with, all these years?"

Catherine barely heard the collective gasp that went through the room. In the breathless stillness of that moment, Father had let everyone know that he now accepted her, truly

accepted her as his daughter. Catherine leaned toward him and gently kissed his cheek.

"Of course, Father," she said quietly. "After all, it's your second chance, too."

Father smiled warmly. "Well, then," he said, clearing his throat again, "let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments" He returned her kiss, then moved to stand behind Vincent with Mary and the baby.

If hearts could burst from happiness, Vincent was certain that his would be doing so. Father had asked to speak a few words, but Vincent had not known what he intended. It had not simply been an apology, but rather, an act of contrition. "Thank you, Father," Vincent said softly.

He gazed into the shining depths of Catherine's eyes, knowing how deeply Father's words had touched her. Still holding her hands, he raised them to his lips, pressing a soft kiss on the back of each one. He smiled and squeezing her hands gently, began to speak:

"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."

Catherine remembered the first time Vincent had spoken those words to her. Then, as now, her eyes had filled with tears

and she had tried to find her voice. She felt his fingers move lightly over the gold filigree wedding ring she wore, and knew that he too, was remembering. *I love you, Vincent.*

As I love you, Catherine. Throughout eternity.

Catherine didn't bother to fight the tears sliding down her cheeks. They were heralds of joy and she welcomed them. Smiling, she emulated Vincent's gesture, raising his hands to her lips, reminding him with a kiss that these were her hands, and she had always loved them. Her voice was tear-choked, but strong as she repeated 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 knew they moved together as one because they were one. And the kiss they shared became a glorious celebration of the possibilities of being inherent in miracles. He ended the kiss slowly, meeting Catherine's eyes as their lips parted.

Like a dream.

Better.

He smiled and rested his forehead against hers. "Much better," he whispered. "Much better than any dream I ever dreamed."

"Vincent, it's about time you let me kiss the bride."

Vincent reluctantly lifted his head, smiling at Peter as he turned. "The first of many, no doubt," he said, looking at the happy faces surrounding them. "Can I rely on your discretion if Catherine and I decide to leave early for our honeymoon?"

Peter laughed and clasped Vincent's shoulder. "The bane of all bridegrooms has always been the time between the ceremony and the getaway." He leaned forward, hugging them both. "You can rely on me," he whispered.

Catherine remembered the soft words hours later after she had been kissed on the cheek by almost everyone, including a very shy Pascal. Mouse had opted for a hug, foregoing the dubious pleasure of a kiss. Catherine smiled, remembering how he had blushed.

"You realize of course," she heard Vincent whisper in her ear, "that in a few years Mouse will be back to collect on that kiss." She grinned and turned, planting her own kiss just below her husband's ear.

"Nope," she murmured, standing on her toes to nibble his earlobe, "he's too late. Mouse will just have to find somebody else to kiss."

Vincent put his arms around her and Catherine leaned her head against his chest. "He might be doing just that," he told her softly. "Look."

Catherine turned within the circle of his arms and glanced at the bottom of the iron stairs where Mouse stood talking to Jamie. Each held a cup of William's spiced apple cider and their heads were close together. Catherine smiled, watching as Mouse nodded vigorously at something Jamie said.

"This could get very interesting," she said, covering his arms where they wrapped around her waist. "I can't wait to see what happens."

Vincent laughed quietly. "This is something I believe Mouse will do slowly," he said, holding her tighter. "And you and I have somewhere else to be."

Catherine leaned her head back against his chest and snuggled closer. She was more than ready to be alone with her husband. "Then why aren't we leaving?" she asked sweetly.

"We are," Vincent told her. "Everything is prepared. We need only kiss our son goodbye and we can begin our journey." He kissed her cheek, then trailed his lips down the curve of her jaw. "Are you quite certain that three days will be enough of a honeymoon for you?"

Catherine shivered as Vincent tasted her skin with the tip of his tongue. "Three days is all you can spare, Vincent," she murmured. "Mary told me how much there is to be done between now and Winterfest." She bit her lip to keep from moaning aloud as he nibbled gently at the hollow beneath her ear. "What exactly do you plan on doing, anyway?"

"Everything."



XI

Catherine stared in awe at the quartz crystals glittering like jewels in the light of Vincent's torch. Though not as overwhelming as the Crystal Cavern he had shown her earlier, the walls around them twinkled gently, as though studded with a thousand stars.

"Vincent," Catherine sighed, "it's beautiful."

"I discovered it a few months after Narcissa told me of the Crystal Cavern," Vincent said, turning to place the torch in the wall sconce he had installed only a few days before. "When we spoke of having a honeymoon, this special place came to mind." He smiled, watching as Catherine looked at the other things he had brought to the chamber during the past week.

"How in the world did you manage all this?" she asked, touching his arm. "And how did you keep it a secret?" She smiled up at him and the twinkling lights seemed somehow brighter. "I love it," she whispered, "but I don't know how you did it."

"I had help," he said, unable to take his eyes from hers. "Mouse, Cullen, Nathaniel, Jamie, almost everyone wanted to be involved in some way." He lifted his hand and ran his fingers through the shining silk of her hair. "Nathaniel and I brought the bedding, Cullen the table, Mouse and William put the provisions together, and I believe Jamie and Samantha took care

of the candles." He smiled, remembering the special packing he had done himself. "Even Peter and Father gave me suggestions."

Catherine shook her head and her hair caressed his fingers. "I can just imagine what *those* two suggested," she laughed. The sound traveled down his spine, making him tingle.

"As for keeping the secret," Vincent said, moving closer, "I know how cognizant you are of my privacy, Catherine," he told her quietly, "even within our bond." He kissed her; brushing his lips very lightly across hers, as he twined his other hand into her hair. Holding her head between his hands, he stroked her lower lip with just the tip of his tongue, tasting the orange-scented lip cream Mary had made for her.

Catherine parted her lips, and Vincent accepted her invitation, fitting his mouth to hers as he tightened his fingers in her hair. They breathed as one, love shimmering around them like the twinkling jewels in the walls.

Vincent's heart was racing by the time he ended the kiss, moving slowly back from the temptation of Catherine's soft mouth. They had time; three days in which to discover the 'everything' he had spoken of. He closed his eyes, reining in the overwhelming sensuality he had only recently discovered within himself. He had never really considered himself to be a sensual being, but with Catherine, each day held new discoveries that only made him long to know more.

"Come," Vincent said, "let me show you what I've arranged."

Catherine looked up into her husband's sparkling eyes. His sensual teasing aroused her so quickly, so thoroughly, that it

took her a moment to gather her wits. Then, she smiled. Three days. Could a person survive that much pleasure?

"We shall soon see," Vincent whispered, unbuttoning the woolen cloak Mary had loaned her for the journey. Catherine let him take the heavy garment from her shoulders, kissing his cheek before he moved to hang the cloak on a brass hook set into the wall behind them.

Catherine turned once more to face the chamber that would be their home for the next three days. The floor was covered with a braided rag rug, its colors muted into shades of grey in the soft light. A small, low wooden table sat near the middle of the room. Next to it was a box neatly filled with provisions. She smiled, seeing a brown paper package marked 'Catherine's Cookies' prominently displayed on top. On the table were several candle holders and a shoebox full of the candles Rebecca and Samantha had made for the wedding.

The bedding Vincent had spoken of consisted of a double mattress covered with pale blue sheets. Two fluffy new comforters had been neatly folded and placed at the foot of the bed. Three large, plump pillows lay at the head of the bed, their cases precisely matching the sheets.

"Peter," Catherine said softly to herself. "This has to be the wedding present he mentioned." She felt Vincent's hand at her waist as he guided her further into the room.

"He insisted," Vincent said. "He told me that he wanted to give us something practical, but something we could enjoy as well." His hand tightened at her waist. "Peter must have read my mind."

Catherine chuckled. "He probably read *both* our minds," she told him. "Then again, you still haven't solved the problem

of a door for our chamber." She shook her head, feeling her face grow warm. "I never realized before how well sound travels down here."

"Does that embarrass you?" Vincent asked softly.

"Only when I know I've been particularly loud the night before," Catherine said, turning to smile up at him. "Of course," she teased, "it's all your fault. But you should see Father and Mary's faces some mornings."

Vincent kissed her lightly on the forehead and smiled. "I have," he told her. "In fact, Cullen and Nathaniel have promised Father to have the logistics of the door worked out by the time we return. I believe Mouse is helping."

"Now, I'm embarrassed."

Vincent gathered her into his arms and nuzzled the soft skin below her ear. "Don't be," he whispered gently. "I have never heard anything more wonderful than the sounds you make as I bring you pleasure. Every moan, every cry renews me. You make me whole, Catherine."

His mouth slid gently down the soft skin of her cheek to nibble lightly at the corner of her mouth. Her arms tightened around his waist and Vincent felt her fingers rub sensuously against the small of his back. He ran his tongue across her bottom lip, asking and receiving the sweet softness of her mouth as she opened for him. She tasted of cinnamon and apples and love.

Vincent's fingers slid gently down her back, looking for and finding the ties that closed her traveling dress. Deftly, his mouth still holding hers captive, he began to unravel the ties. Inch by velvety inch her back was revealed to his questing

fingers, and as the last tie came undone, Vincent pushed gently at the opened cloth, baring Catherine's shoulders.

He groaned low in the back of his throat as his hands rubbed lightly across her collarbone and down to the gentle rise of her breasts. Their softness called to him to explore, to find the hard, sensitive points that even now pressed against him through the barrier of their clothes. He moved his hands lower, pushing the dress down her arms and off. It slid past her waist and hips, landing in a pool at her feet. Vincent rubbed his palms gently across her nipples and she gasped beneath his kiss.

Catherine raised her arms, her hands clenching in the rough silk of Vincent's hair. His calloused palms called lightning from her sensitized nipples, and it streaked down her body, warming her, readying her. She moaned and sucked lightly on his tongue, bringing it deeper into her mouth. Her need for him intensified with every touch of his hands, and when his fingers plucked gently at her already taut nipples, Catherine cried out, pleasure burning through her.

At the sound of Catherine's cry, Vincent sank to his knees on the rug in front of her. He rubbed his face lightly against the skin between her breasts, his hands moving slowly down her sides to rest at the indentation of her waist. Slowly, delicately, he tasted the sweet saltiness of her heated skin, his tongue shaping the underside of each breast, the plump softness of her. He felt her heart pounding beneath his mouth and knew her anticipation, her need. Her breasts strained toward his questing tongue, reaching out, wanting and needing to feel him taste her. Her nipples waited, taut and rose-colored in the flickering torchlight. Like awakened rosebuds, Vincent knew they would bloom even more under the gentle care of his mouth.

With a sigh that was more of a groan, he swept his tongue lightly over one, rigid nipple. Catherine's breath hissed through

her clenched teeth. He touched her again and she moaned. "Please . . ." Vincent watched her change under the gentle rasp of his tongue. He blew lightly across her tight skin then took her into the warm depths of his mouth.

Pleasure shimmered through her like the sun rising on a hot August day. She held the back of his head, pressing him to her, needing him, wanting him more with every gentle motion of his mouth. He moved to her other breast, treating it with the same lavish care and her hands clenched, her fingers sliding down past his neck beneath his shirt.

"Vincent . . . "

Her ragged cry broke over him and Vincent slipped both hands beneath the waistband of Catherine's cotton tights and panties. With one strong sweep downward, he bared her hips and legs.

Slowly, Vincent trailed his hands up the back of her calves, his fingers testing the softness of her skin and the tightness of her clenched muscles. His long nails teased the delicate skin behind her knees and he felt her sway toward him, her balance overpowered by her response to his touch. His fingers moved higher, stopping at the gentle curve of her bottom as they moved inward to lightly touch the warm treasure hidden between her thighs.

At the first probing touch of his fingers, Catherine moaned and her knees began to buckle. "Not yet," she heard Vincent whisper. "Not yet." His hands moved quickly, holding her hips steady as his mouth moved down across the tight skin of her belly. He kissed the jutting curve of her hipbones, his lips marking a sensual path above her soft, curling hair. When his tongue touched her, no power on Earth could have kept her

standing. Like a melting candle, Catherine slid down into his arms.

It took him only a moment to remove her clothes and shoes, and he tossed them aside, his only thought to become one with her, to hear her cry out with the pleasure he would give her. Vincent groaned and stood, holding Catherine in his strong arms. He carried her to the waiting bed and laid her gently on top of the sheets.

Catherine watched, her breathing quick and shallow as Vincent undressed. His nimble fingers unlaced the shirt and drew it quickly over his head. She ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips, eager to press her mouth against the hair covering his beautifully defined muscles. She saw the change in his breathing and looked up into the glittering depths of his eyes; dark now, their pupils almost black.

"Everything," he whispered, his hands working the belt buckle at his waist. He unclasped his belt and slid it from the loops, then sat beside her, untying the leather laces on his boots. Catherine ran her hand down his back, luxuriating in the contrast of soft hair and hard muscle. When the boots lay beside the bed, Vincent stood again, and Catherine watched breathlessly as he removed the rest of his clothes.

Vincent stood for a moment beside the bed, looking down at Catherine waiting silently for him to come to her. In the light of the single torch the flickering shadows teased across her bare breasts and legs, and the translucence of her pale skin made her look as though she had been carved of ivory. Desire glazed her eyes and he watched as her tongue spread moisture over her lips. She wanted him, as she had since the night she had first returned; lovingly, passionately, hungrily. It seemed to him that each time they made love, the need grew stronger, the bond, deeper.

"You're beautiful," Catherine whispered.

Vincent smiled, feeling the admiration that filled her as she looked at him, nude and aroused in the torchlight. *Let me show you how beautiful you are to me.* He knelt on the bed, bending over her slightly as he trailed his fingers across her lips. Catherine's mouth opened and her tongue caressed the soft skin between his fingers. He caught his breath, his body burned by her delicate touch.

His hands moved lower, and he watched as her already taut nipples tightened even more, anticipating his touch. Vincent caught each nipple between his thumb and index finger, and rubbed lightly, looking now at Catherine's face. Her eyes closed and she arched her back, pressing her breasts into the strength of his caressing hands. Vincent bent his head, suckling first one breast and then the other as he felt Catherine's fingers roam across the muscles of his shoulders, then down his sides to his hips. His thighs clenched, muscles tightening as her hands moved between his legs, finding him, holding him.

Vincent groaned as Catherine's palms caressed the hot, hard length of him. He gasped, and his mouth left the softness of her breast as gentle fingers held and stroked him. Without conscious thought, he moved against her hands, his body growing harder, hotter with every passing second. One of her hands moved lower, fondling the delicate, tight flesh lying between his thighs and Vincent cried out as the fire of her touch blazed through him.

With gentle insistence, Catherine urged Vincent all the way down onto the bed and into the warmth of her arms; rubbing against him from breast to knee. Her fingers slid into his hair, stroking the sensitive skin behind his ears. Every sweet touch made him tremble and Vincent took her mouth, his tongue tasting and teasing all the dark, warm places calling out

to him. He moved above her, making room for himself between her parted legs.

Now, Vincent. Don't wait. Now.

Hearing Catherine's silent plea, Vincent braced his weight on his arms, holding her face gently between his strong hands as he watched her eyes, dazed and dark with passion. Slowly, carefully, Vincent probed her delicate softness, entering her in tiny increments, letting her take him gradually, until all he could feel was the satiny wet warmth of her, surrounding him, holding him within her.

For a moment he paused, letting the feeling of completeness overtake him. Catherine had been made for him; made to take him within the small confines of her body, made to fit over him like a velvet glove. And, he had been made for her; to love her, to give her children, to live with her and care for her throughout time.

Throughout eternity.

Vincent bent his head, his lips and tongue finding Catherine's mouth as he rocked his hips forward. She moaned and wrapped her legs around his hips, taking him deeper. Vincent's fingers twined in Catherine's hair and she arched beneath him, the rhythm of her body matching his as they moved together in a dance as old as time.

Tension coiled, hot and heavy within him as Vincent felt the first, sweet pulses of Catherine's release. Then, every muscle of her body was clenching, tightening around him, holding him captive; drawing him into the blinding light of her climax. Vincent threw back his head as pleasure overtook him, shaking his body and soul with each pounding heartbeat. Their voices blended into a song of ecstasy that only they could hear.



"Vincent," Catherine whispered, her voice husky and deep in the stillness of the room, "I think we blew a fuse."

Vincent's low laughter quivered through Catherine's body as he wrapped her more tightly in his arms. They had barely moved, their bodies still trembling with the aftershocks of their shared passion. And it wasn't until this moment that Catherine noticed the darkness around them. The torch that had burned so brightly when they arrived was now little more than a glowing ember.

"I seem to have forgotten to light the candles," Vincent told her softly. "Does the darkness frighten you?"

Catherine snuggled closer, inhaling his warm, musky scent. It reminded her of soft touches, deep kisses and pleasure beyond measure. "No," she murmured, "I'm not afraid of the dark." She kissed his chest, rubbing her cheek gently against him. "I'm not afraid of anything when I'm with you."

"Good," he said, running his hand down her back, "because there is something very special I want you to see." He moved slowly out of her arms and rose from the bed.

"Now?" Catherine lay back against the pillows, watching as Vincent picked up one of the comforters and tucked it around her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of her cocoon for only a moment before she felt herself lifted from the bed. "Are we going somewhere?" she mumbled, twining her arms around Vincent's neck as he carried her out into the tunnel.

There was no light at all in the small corridor, at least, no light that Catherine could perceive. She closed her eyes and let Vincent carry her away. Naked as he was, he certainly wouldn't be going far.

They traveled only a few yards before Vincent turned and entered a tiny, warm room. Catherine heard the rush of water and she felt moisture in the air around her. She opened her eyes. This room was even darker than the tunnel.

"You have a sauna I don't know about?"

"Something like that."

Catherine felt Vincent shift her in his arms, sliding her out of the comforter's warm embrace and into the heat of his bare arms. "Why is it so warm in here?" she asked, trying to see in the dense mist.

"Hot springs."

Catherine felt Vincent's arms go out from under her only moments before her feet touched the hot, swirling water. She sighed, and let herself sink into the tiny, bubbling pool. The water came to the top of her shoulders, and as she sat down, Catherine put her hands down on the bottom, feeling the smoothness of rock beneath her palms. She tilted her head back, resting her neck on the lip of the pool. Her muscles were beginning to melt like warm wax.

Vincent kissed her cheek and she smiled. "Aren't you coming in?" she asked, sleepily. "It's wonderful."

He laughed softly, and tucked a strand of wet hair behind her ear. "In a moment," he told her. "I have to go back for the towels."

"Don't be long."

Catherine closed her eyes, letting her other senses take over. The water swirled and hissed around her, and she moved her arms across the surface, enjoying the tingling sensation of the bubbles against her skin. She wondered where the water came from and where it went. Vincent had told her that there were many underground rivers and springs that kept the community supplied with fresh water, but she had never envisioned the Tunnels as having their own hot tub. The thought made her smile.

"That's a very enigmatic look."

Catherine laughed and flicked water in the general direction of Vincent's voice. "At least *you* can see it," she said lightly. She opened her eyes, but the room was still dark. "No candles?"

"The air is too moist," Vincent said softly. Catherine felt the water move around her and knew that he had joined her in the small pool. As he drew closer, the scent of roses came with him.

"Do I smell roses?"

"You do."

The scent grew stronger and when Vincent's hands touched her shoulders, Catherine knew it was Mary's homemade rose-castile soap covering his hands. She inhaled deeply, loving the special scent. "Was this Mary's contribution to our honeymoon?" Catherine asked, enjoying the slick feel of the soap between her skin and Vincent's strong hands.

"It was," he told her, his hands gliding down across her collarbone. His fingers teased at the tops of her breasts and Catherine could feel the warm tendrils of passion curling around them. His hands slid under her hair, and she trembled as his lips teased the tendon on the side of her neck.

"Vincent?"

"Hmmm?"

"Are you seducing me again?"

His chuckle was a warm breath at the corner of her mouth just before he kissed her. Catherine sighed, sharing Vincent's breath and touching his teasing tongue with hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, savoring the sensations that assaulted her other senses in the dark room; the heat of the water, the strong, sensuous pleasure of Vincent's hands, the low gentle rasp of his voice as he whispered in her ear.

"Stand with me for a moment, Catherine," he said, lifting her by her waist.

The air in the chamber was warm and Catherine could feel the thick mist rising around them. Although comfortable with the darkness, she wished there were just a little light. She wanted to be able to see Vincent; to watch the glistening beads of water she knew were running down his body. She wanted to dry him with her mouth, to lick the beads away with her tongue.

Vincent's soap-covered hands touched the fullness of her breasts and Catherine's breath broke. He massaged lightly, caressing, shaping, kneading her through the slickness of the soap. His fingers moved slowly, as though wanting to discover every inch of her delicate skin.

Catherine heard him dip one hand into the water and a moment later she felt drops of liquid heat pour over her already aching breasts. She bit her lip, holding back a moan. In an instant, Vincent's tongue was there to soothe and lick the bruise.

"You have forgotten," he whispered, "I can see where you cannot." His hands slid down her belly, pausing to dip into the tiny well of her navel. "Let it out, Catherine," he told her. "Let me hear the sound of your pleasure." His hands moved lower, soap-slick fingers delving through tight, wet curls.

Catherine let the ragged cry go as he parted her soft folds and delicately touched her. The backs of his fingers swept across her most sensitive skin, his soft, wet fur creating eddies of heat that curled through her. She shivered violently, but it was not with cold. She felt his warm breath against her nipple and groaned as he sucked gently, the pressure of his mouth tugging lightly at the taut peak, while his fingers continued to caress her.

"Vincent . . . " Catherine's cry filled the room as Vincent's hands and mouth stroked her. When her knees began to sway, she felt his arms beneath her legs and he lowered her into the water again, rinsing the soap from her as he held her against his chest.

Catherine listened to the heavy beating of Vincent's heart beneath her ear. His breath was audible, harsh and deep above the sound of the swirling water. "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea . . . " she murmured, pressing her mouth against him as she tasted the water on his skin. He tasted of heat and roses.

"By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown . . . " Vincent stood up, his arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders and the backs of her knees. Catherine looped her arms around his neck, pressing tiny kisses blindly across his cheek. He laid

her down on the discarded comforter, and she felt the warmth of a heavy towel as he dried her hair and arms. Catherine felt him move and knew that he now knelt between her legs. She trembled with anticipation, and as he dried her breasts and stomach, she felt his warm breath linger over her, licking delicately at the drops of water on her skin.

"If you were a mermaid," Vincent said, his words a whisper against her breasts, "there would be no soft, lovely legs for me to caress." He kissed her breasts as his hands began to move slowly down the front of her legs. "There would have been no place here for our son to grow," he continued, his lips trailing down to her navel. "No place for the children yet to come . . .

"And most of all," he breathed, "no silken curls to hide the deepest of your womanly treasures."

At the first touch of Vincent's tongue, Catherine cried out, her back arching with the pleasure spreading through her. His hands flexed on her thighs and she moaned, opening her legs for him, giving herself to him in the most elemental of ways. Need coiled within her as he tasted her, learning secrets no one else had ever known. Her fists clenched in the soft folds of the comforter as he licked gently across the incredibly sensitive nub his touch had called from her. She cried out again, and he lingered, tasting her, sipping her, kissing her until every nerve in her body imploded, then shattered into a thousand fragments of light.



XII

Catherine awoke slowly, her mind as lethargic as her body. The scent of roses tickled her nose, and she inhaled deeply, wondering what all these furry roses were doing in their bed.

Furry roses?

When Vincent's question touched her mind, Catherine opened her eyes and realized that she was lying in Vincent's warm arms, her face pressed against his chest. She smiled, and kissed his soft, fragrant fur-covered skin.

Definitely, furry roses.

Vincent rubbed his cheek against the top of Catherine's head and smiled, holding her closer. She too, carried the scent of Mary's soap, and the memory of her skin beneath his hands and mouth made him tremble. The candles he had lit in the early hours of the morning flickered weakly, burned now to little more than stubs. Vincent thought about getting up to light more, then changed his mind, loath to leave her arms.

"We could stay in this bed for the next three days," Catherine suggested quietly, running her fingers across his chest. "Of course, you'd probably have to carry me back home." She looked up, eyes shining, and Vincent kissed her sweet smile.

"If we stayed in this bed the entire time, Catherine," he murmured, stroking the smooth softness of her cheek, "I would

make love to you until neither one of us could walk." He threaded his fingers through her tousled hair and pressed gentle kisses across her face from forehead to chin.

"Think Father would send a search party?"

Vincent chuckled and kissed her arched neck. "Most assuredly," he whispered. "And they would never forgive us the embarrassment."

Catherine sighed. "I guess that means we have to get up."

Vincent nuzzled the hollow of her throat and felt her pulse quicken beneath his mouth. With a groan, he kissed her quickly and rose from the bed, his body already hot and aching. He stretched out his hand, offering to help her up. She looked at his aroused body and smiled.

"Banish that thought from your mind, Catherine," he said softly, his voice sweetly teasing, "or I will not be responsible for my actions."

Her smile widened. "Promise?"

Vincent groaned. "Up."

Catherine laughed and took his hand, letting him pull her gently from the bed. "It would help if you'd get dressed," she told him, hugging him close. "How do you expect me to think when you're walking around all naked and appealing."

Vincent laughed and rubbed his hands down the warm, beautiful curves of her back. "Who is walking around all naked and appealing?"

Catherine's hands moved down to his waist and Vincent caught his breath. Her small fingers teased the sensitive skin below his hipbones. "You're walking around all naked and appealing," she told him, nibbling delicately at his neck. "And if you don't get dressed right now . . . *I won't be responsible for my actions.*"

Vincent picked her up by the waist, his tongue caressing the tip of one breast as he carried her back to the bed. "Then," he murmured, "we will be naked and appealing for a while longer."



Catherine followed Vincent down a dark narrow passage, holding tightly to his hand. The light from his single torch threw dancing shadows across the tunnel walls and she noticed moisture seeping through cracks in the stone. They had been exploring most of the day, as Vincent showed Catherine the wonders of their world.

"The entrance is narrow," he said, "but the room itself is quite large." He turned and handed her the torch, then turned sideways to slither through the opening. When he was through, he took back the torch and lit her way. "Come," he said, urging her with his free hand. "You must see this, Catherine. I discovered it only three days ago."

Catherine squeezed easily through the tunnel and into the chamber where Vincent was standing. He held the torch high in

his hand, its light illuminating what seemed to be a curtain of stone growing down from the ceiling near the center of the room.

"What is it?" she asked. The stone was variegated, the stripes making it look almost like a gigantic slab of bacon hanging from the ceiling to cure.

"I have no idea what it is called," Vincent admitted. "There has not been time to study Father's books on geology, though I am certain this was formed over many hundreds of years. It seems to be part rock and part water."

"I've never seen anything like it," she told him as she stared at the incredible structure. Vincent smiled and kissed her softly on the lips.

"Stay here for a moment," he said. "And you will see beyond the rock and the water."

As Catherine watched, Vincent walked slowly around the perimeter of the chamber, keeping his torch low, his body blocking all but the faintest light. When he was directly on the other side of the room, he brought up the torch and Catherine gasped.

This was no stone drapery, but a sheer, shimmering curtain of color, dancing and alive with primordial elegance. Vincent's light called forth the elemental essence of the translucent stone, banishing the bland colors of darkness and releasing the radiant brilliance of the dawning day.

You are my light, Catherine. You are my dawn.

Vincent put the torch on the ground and walked back to where Catherine waited, her arms outstretched to enfold him.

Like the stone, he had been waiting, caught in the darkness of his being, half alive. Then she had come to him, bringing the sparkling essence of her light, making him whole with her love.

He kissed her deeply, endlessly, threading his fingers through her hair as she held him close. They were the stone and the light, caught in a shimmering dance within each others' arms. This time, Vincent knew, the dance would last forever.

"Vincent? Catherine?"

At the sound of Mouse's voice, Vincent broke off the kiss. Only for an emergency, would Father have sent Mouse to find them. "We are here, Mouse," Vincent called, looking down into the wondrous light of Catherine's eyes, "through the narrow passage in front of you."

Catherine sensed the disquiet in her husband, and with a light kiss, turned with him to face the chamber entrance. Mouse came through the opening a few moments later, the lights on his helmet coming before him.

"There you are," he said proudly. "Told Father I could find you."

"What is it, Mouse?" Vincent asked, his hands on Catherine's shoulders. "What has happened?"

"Lost Eric," Mouse said succinctly. "Went topside. Didn't come home."

Catherine felt a moment of pure terror as she thought of all the things that could happen to Eric if he got lost Above. She felt the reassuring squeeze Vincent gave her shoulders and knew he shared her pain.

"How long has he been missing?" Vincent asked quietly.

"All day," Mouse told him. "Mary's worried. Father, too."

"Are you certain he went Above, Mouse?" Catherine asked hopefully. "Eric could be hiding somewhere Below." Her mind was flooded with thoughts of places she and Eric had discussed, of locations where he might be hiding. If he was Below, she might help find him. If he had truly gone Above, there was nothing she could do.

"Went topside," Mouse assured her. He took off his helmet and ran his fingers through his flattened hair. "Daniel teased him. Called him a baby. Timothy saw him go up. Hasn't come down."

He looked directly into Catherine's eyes for a moment, and she saw his hesitation. He gazed down at the cavern floor, then at Vincent, his hands tightening on the helmet tucked beneath his arm. "Search party's out," he said softly. "Been cold. Getting colder."

Catherine trembled and turned to Vincent, leaning against the solidity of his chest as she twined her arms around his waist. "We have to find him, Vincent," she whispered. "We have to."

"We will, Catherine," Vincent said, putting his arms around her. "We have search procedures. Father will have initiated them." He kissed her hair then looked at Mouse. "Have the children been looking?"

"Zack took Jeffrey and Samantha," Mouse told him, shaking his head. "Said they didn't know where to look. Knew where he went up, not where he would go. Could be anywhere - nowhere."

'Nowhere.' Vincent felt Catherine's shiver as Mouse's words fell into the stillness of the silent room. He hugged her close, then pulled slightly away, his hands moving up until he framed her face. The pain in her eyes tore at his heart.

"Tell Father we will be home by nightfall," Vincent told Mouse softly, his gaze never leaving Catherine's. "We will need to pack our things." He kissed her gently on the forehead. He shared the sense of powerlessness that filled her, for until darkness covered the city, there was little he could do. Vincent turned his head as he heard Mouse preparing to leave. "And Mouse," he added, "tell Father that we will hurry."

"Okay good," Mouse said, putting on his helmet. "Okay fine." Mouse stared beyond him at the curtain of stone as he tightened the chin strap of his helmet. "Found Mouse's rainbow," he noted softly. "Never told anyone." He frowned slightly, then smiled. "Found rainbow - find Eric," he said. He turned then, and hurried back through the narrow passage, the sound of his scurrying footsteps fading quickly away.

"Eric *will* be found, Catherine," Vincent whispered, knowing how much she wanted to believe Mouse's simple words. "He is not lost to us. Our love will guide him safely home."



Catherine patted Jacob's back as she carried him down the corridor to Father's rooms. Mary had asked her to keep Father

company and Catherine was more than willing to work on furthering their developing relationship. Besides, if she was going to spend the night worrying about Eric and Vincent, she could use a little company.

"Not that you aren't company," she whispered to the baby, "it's just that with the 'all quiet' on the pipes, it's so darn silent around here." She adjusted the strap of the denim bag more comfortably across her shoulder as she passed through the Long Gallery. Since she had no idea when Vincent would return, she had packed enough of Jacob's things to last the night.

As she neared the study, Catherine heard a familiar voice in conversation with Father and knew that Peter had decided to stay after all. She smiled, hoping that they would have time together before he had to leave. She had always enjoyed his wicked sense of humor.

"It must be decided by the Council," Catherine heard Father say. "You know the procedure, Peter. Vincent's is not the only voice."

"True," Peter agreed, "but even you will admit that this case is special, Jacob. There's a lot to consider. What about Catherine?"

"What about me?"

Catherine stepped down into the study, watching the faces of the two men seated across from each other at Father's chess table. Father looked down at his hands, then back up at Peter, and Catherine knew he was leaving the choice to him.

Peter stared at her as he ran his finger idly around the rim of his cup, obviously deciding what to say. "I've been contacted by someone who wants to be allowed to live Below for a while,"

Peter said quietly. "It's someone you know better than any of us." He paused, and Catherine hugged Jacob closer, feeling a sudden chill go through her. "It's Elliot Burch, Catherine."

The breath left Catherine's lungs as hazy memories assaulted her. Were they her memories or Vincent's? She walked shakily to the large chair behind Father's desk and sat down, holding Jacob tightly as phantoms of remembrance visited her mind. The baby touched her face, making soft sounds she knew were meant to soothe.

"Elliot was hurt," she whispered haltingly. "Someone shot at Vincent and Elliot moved . . ." she looked up at Peter and Father. They were watching her intently. "Elliot saved Vincent's life," she told them. She closed her eyes, letting the memories wash over her. "Vincent got him onto the dock and then everything exploded." She opened her eyes, staring at the wall as she absently rubbed Jacob's back. "We don't remember much after that," she whispered.

"We?"

Catherine shook her head, focusing her eyes on the men sitting near her. The shared memory was strong; almost as strong as the emotions it evoked. She sighed. So much of the past was fading, becoming little more than uncertain shadows. Only those memories shared through her bond with Vincent remained. How could she explain to men of science, the promise of Narcissa's words?

"It's hard to explain," Catherine said, listening to the soft sounds Jacob continued to make as he lay against her shoulder. "Vincent and I share certain memories." She kissed Jacob's cheek, smiling when he patted her chin. "I never left Vincent," Catherine continued. "Not completely. A part of me was always

with him." She looked up at Peter and Father, hoping they would understand. "We remember those times together."

"It can't be easy for you," Peter said, watching her from over the rim of his cup. "From what I've heard, those times might be better forgotten. You don't need to explain. We're old enough, Jacob and I, to take some things on faith." He turned to the man sitting across from him. "Aren't we, Jacob?"

"I think I would prefer it, Peter," Father said quietly.

Catherine nodded, more than happy to comply. "Someone once told me that it was better *not* to explain all the beauties and mysteries of life. I think he was right." She paused, listening to the continued silence from the pipes. It was not comforting. "So," she said, patting her son's warm back, "tell me about Elliot. How did he find you, Peter?"

Peter cleared his throat. "He telephoned the house a few days ago," he told her. "Said his name was Stan Kazmeric and that he wanted to talk to me about you. He asked me to meet him at the Mission on Delancy Street."

"We have a Helper there, Catherine," Father added. "A Helper your Mister Burch has come to know rather well."

"Right," Peter continued, sitting forward in his chair as he spoke to her. "He seems to be a jazz aficionado, and no one plays jazz sax like Clarence. Anyway, I met Elliot the next afternoon. He's been through some tough times."

Catherine remembered all of Elliot's lost possibilities and the thoughts saddened her. "How is he, Peter?" she asked softly.

Peter sighed. "It could have been worse, Catherine," he told her. "Much worse. From what I can tell, the bullet hit the

posterior scapula, shattered that bone, and exited near the anterior supra-spinous fossa. It shattered the clavicle and tore cartilage while . . . "

"Peter," Catherine interrupted, "at least one adult in this room is *not* a doctor. Do you think you could switch to English? The only Latin I know is related to law, not medicine."

"Sorry. What that means is the bullet went in through the bone at the back of his shoulder and came out through the top. As it went, it shattered both bones, tore all the cartilage, and did considerable damage to the muscles. What care he got was minimal, hardly sufficient for that much damage . . . he's lost all range-of-motion in his left arm. Oh, he can move his wrist without too much pain, and he can bend the elbow a little. There was very little nerve damage, thank God, but for all intents and purposes the man's left arm is useless."

Peter was right. It could have been far, far worse. And, Catherine wondered if Elliot saw his shattered arm as reparation for his initial betrayal of Vincent. "You've told me how he is medically, Peter," Catherine said quietly. "How is he emotionally?"

Peter shook his head and sat back in his chair. "I'm not a psychologist, Catherine. I've spoken to him, listened to him . . . I even asked Clarence about him." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "According to what Clarence tells me, the man known as Elliot Burch is gone. The world thinks he's dead, and he hasn't enlightened them.

"He lost everything, Honey. Everything that made him Elliot Burch has been taken from him or destroyed. The man who comes into the Mission to talk with Clarence and listen to him play calls himself Stanley Kazmeric. And that's the man

who's asking for sanctuary now. He needs a place to heal." He turned to Father. "And I think you should give it to him."

Father got up from his chair, leaning on the back of it as he looked down at Peter. "It is not my decision, Peter," he said soberly. "I have already explained that to you. Whether Elliot is or is not allowed to stay with us will be the decision of the entire Council."

"Do you think the Council will let Elliot stay, Father?" Catherine asked, hoping that her presence Below would not affect their decision.

"I'm not certain," Father sighed. "There are many things to be considered. As you know, there is a gradual process by which a person is granted entry into our world. Only under extreme conditions is this process bypassed. We must be certain of the person's trustworthiness, Catherine. That must remain the most important consideration. Always. We must protect the community. We must consider the welfare of the children." He frowned and turned to look towards the study entrance. "So silent," he murmured, shaking his head. "Has there been no word?"

"Surely we would have heard, Jacob," Peter said gently. "Why don't you sit down and finish your tea."

"Catherine?" Father's voice was hardly above a whisper. "Vincent tells me you can . . . communicate with him. How is he, Catherine? Has he found any sign of Eric?"

Catherine closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on the richness of Vincent's presence. "He's tired," she said, rubbing her cheek against the softness of her sleeping baby's head. "It's very cold. He's worried that Eric won't have found shelter. He's frustrated."

She opened her eyes, her gaze focusing on Father's worried face. "He won't give up, Father," she told him. "He's searching all the places that wouldn't have been safe for the others. Vincent won't stop until he finds something."

"The City is so large, Catherine, and Eric is only one small boy." He sighed deeply and she saw the bleakness of despair in his eyes. "It would take a miracle to find him."

Catherine smiled and rose from the chair, holding her son lovingly against her shoulder. His soft weight in her arms never failed to remind her of something Father had obviously forgotten.

"Have faith in Vincent," she said, placing Jacob into his grandfather's arms. "And remember that our love has already proven the possibility of miracles."



XIII

Vincent merged with the shadows against the dark, empty building. Around him the sounds of the New York night hovered in the cold, still air. Even in the early hours after midnight the city refused to sleep. Horns blared from nearby streets, while screeching tires and wailing sirens attested to the restlessness of the city's population.

The streets here carried the smell of despair, of dreams long ago broken and shattered against the harsh reality of poverty and life without hope. Vincent pulled his cloak tighter about him, searching the deep shadows for some sign that Eric had passed this way. He tried to put himself into Eric's place, to think of where a boy would go to find shelter.

Shelter. The thought filled Vincent's mind. St. Regina's? Would Eric remember the shelter for the homeless? Did he even know of its existence? Could he have found his way there? Questions without answers assailed him as he made his way silently through the dimly lit streets towards St. Regina's.

The clear, cold air bit at Vincent's cheeks, making him all too aware of the need to find Eric soon. He was thankful that no snow was falling and that the frigid, winter wind was mercifully still. Eric could survive the bitter chill of the night only so long as the wind remained calm.

As he neared the small, brick building that housed St. Regina's Shelter for the Homeless, Vincent listened for the

sounds of the people who lived on the streets. Once, when the temperature had been expected to drop below freezing, Vincent had heard the sisters go from person to person, from doorway to alcove, pleading with those who preferred the open streets to the closeness of the shelter, to come in from the cold. Tonight, the doorways were deserted, the sidewalks bare except for the remnants of cast-off lives.

Vincent listened carefully, trying to sort through the sounds that made up the harsh music of the night. He knew from his conversations with Catherine that Eric would not look to anyone above for help. The adults of this world had betrayed him once before, and the lesson learned from that experience still burned deep in his memory.

"It's okay, baby. Don't worry. Somebody'll find us soon."

Vincent recognized Eric's thin, clear voice and hurried toward the sound. At the end of the dimly lit street, against the doorway of a deserted building, Vincent saw a small pile of debris. Part of a large cardboard box and stacks of old newspaper had been piled haphazardly together to form a very small shelter.

"When the sun comes up, I'll be able to find my way back. You just be a good baby 'til then, okay? I'll take care of you. I'll keep you warm."

Vincent moved quickly toward the debris and his keen eyes saw what others had not - the huddled form of a small child beneath the cardboard and paper.

"Eric," he whispered, kneeling beside the makeshift shelter, "it's Vincent. I've come to take you home." He moved aside part of the cardboard and saw Eric lying on another pile of newspaper, curled into a small ball. His arms were wrapped

tightly around his chest and as Vincent watched, something moved underneath the bulk of Eric's coat.

"Who are you talking to, Eric?" Vincent asked, leaning forward. Eric wiped ineffectively at his tears with small, gloved fingers, then unbuttoned his coat and pulled the neck of his sweater down past the top of the bulge. A tiny pink head, barely covered with pale, blond hair, peeked out at Vincent from within the sweater.

"It's a baby, Vincent," Eric whispered. "I found it here in the trash when I was looking for a place to hide." He pulled the sweater back up and rubbed gently, warming the small, living bundle with his body. "I stuck it inside my sweater to keep it warm. It doesn't cry or anything, just sort of whimpers." He looked up at Vincent with wide, worried eyes, the thick lenses of his glasses reflecting the shadows of his concern. "Do you think it's okay?"

Eric buttoned his coat and sat up while Vincent moved aside the rest of the cardboard and newspapers. "We will have to get the baby to Father, Eric," Vincent said, as he pulled the boy's knitted cap lower and carefully picked him up. "Wrap your legs around my waist and hold onto the child. We need to hurry. The air outside is far too cold for someone so young." He pulled his cloak forward, put both arms around Eric's hips and hurried towards the nearest Tunnel entrance.

As he listened to Eric murmuring soothing words to the child, Vincent sent his own words silently to his anxious wife. *Eric has found an abandoned baby, Catherine. Tell Father that it appears to be very young and possibly suffering from hypothermia. Eric seems fine. We should be home within the hour.*

Confident that Father and Peter would have the hospital chamber ready when he arrived, Vincent concentrated on slipping unseen into the back of a small, empty building. This particular entrance had been abandoned as the neighborhood around it deteriorated, but Vincent knew it would be the warmest, most direct route to the home chambers.

He moved quietly down the stairwell, carefully avoiding the rubbish and bits of broken furniture as he went. The door at the bottom of the stairs was open, the large padlock and chain that had held it lay broken on the dirty, cement floor. Vincent ignored the open door and concentrated instead on the cracked cement.

"I have to put you down for a moment, Eric," Vincent whispered, as he lowered Eric to the floor. "Stand to the side while I push this open."

He located the almost hairline fracture he had been looking for, and traced it back to the wall. Using his considerable strength, Vincent pushed at the unmarked lock mechanism. The stone beneath the door shifted, exposing the cobwebbed dustiness of a long-unused passage.

"You will need to go first, Eric," Vincent said. "The way is steep, but the stairs are wide. Climb carefully down to the third or fourth step and wait there for me. When I close this portal you will have no light. Don't worry. Just concentrate on keeping the baby warm and remember that I will be able to see you." He clasped Eric's thin shoulder and felt the faint tremor of his fear. "Can you do that, Eric?"

"Y-yes, Vincent," Eric stammered, sniffing loudly. "I can do it."

"Good." Vincent watched silently as Eric sat down on the dusty floor, one arm tightly around the baby. He scooted forward and with his free hand, held the floor as he bumped down over the first step. Vincent smiled as he watched the frightened boy make his way carefully down the wide stairs. There would be no chance of his falling since he had obviously decided to make the entire trip sitting down.

Vincent waited until Eric was seated on the fourth step before he backed into the passage and closed the lock behind him. As the stone slid shut once again, all light disappeared.

"Vincent?" Eric's voice wavered, his terror barely contained.

"I'm here, Eric," Vincent reassured him. "I can see you just below me." He walked carefully down the stairs, thankful that there seemed to be little damage. "Hold onto the baby," Vincent said, as he bent to pick up the shaking boy. "We will be home soon."

Vincent strode with confidence down the rest of the stairs, and through the abandoned tunnel, holding tightly to his precious burdens. He and Eric were bringing a new life into the community, a life that would thrive and grow with love. For although the baby's body was weak, Vincent sensed a strength of spirit within this small, forsaken child, that even now, refused to give up. The baby would live; a small symbol of hope from a world that discarded its dreams.



"Vincent is almost here, Father," Catherine said, as she helped Mary tuck an extra blanket under the small mattress. The bassinet for the baby was ready, but Father and Peter wanted a bed made up for Eric, just in case.

Catherine straightened and watched as Peter carefully placed a bag of saline solution into a large basin of hot water to heat. Father had explained to her that giving the warmed solution intravenously would be the quickest way to raise the baby's core temperature. He had also explained that hypothermia was very tricky; raise the temperature too rapidly and the baby could go into shock, too slowly and the child would die.

"Did you finally get Jacob to sleep, Catherine?"

Catherine turned and smiled. Mary cared for all the children, no matter how small their problems. "Yes, Mary," Catherine told her. "He's fine now. Rebecca said she would stay with him."

It had been almost an hour since she had relayed Vincent's message to Father. Peter had found a favorite book to read, and she and Father had been playing a distracted game of chess while Jacob slept fitfully on Father's bed. Ever attuned to Vincent's thoughts, their son had been unable to sleep deeply until Eric had been found.

Now, Jacob slept contentedly in his own bed, the gentle presence of his mind only a soft whisper within the bond. Rebecca hadn't needed to stay, but the young woman, like almost everyone else in the community, was wide awake and worried. Staying with Jacob provided her with a way to fill the time. Helping Mary and Father prepare the hospital chamber had been Catherine's.

She felt the gentle pat of Mary's hand on her shoulder and covered it with her own, squeezing softly. "Vincent tells me the child's spirit is very strong, Mary," Catherine said. "Both the baby and Eric will be fine."

Mary turned to look at Father and Peter as they checked the temperature of the solution and discussed the possibility of using gastric lavage on the abandoned child. "Losing Ellie was very hard on him, Catherine," she said quietly. "He hides it well, but . . . it worries me so."

Catherine put her arm around Mary's shoulder and gave the older woman a hug. "Remember Mary," she said, "Father said that Eric's quick thinking has already given the baby the best chance it has of surviving. The baby won't die."

"They're here!" Jamie's voice rang through the hushed and waiting room.

Catherine stayed near the bed with Mary as Father and Peter hurried anxiously toward the door of the chamber. When Vincent entered the room a deep sigh of relief escaped her and she looked up, knowing her husband's loving gaze had found her.

Vincent let himself share in Catherine's sigh. Coming home had never meant as much before. Vincent lowered Eric onto the waiting examination table, then moved back to make room for Peter and Father.

"You were a very brave boy, Eric," Father said, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, let's take a look at your young friend here." Eric supported the baby as Father unbuttoned and removed his coat. Holding one hand around his precious burden, Eric raised the hem of his sweater. Father carefully

lifted the small child and placed it on the blanket Mary had laid out.

The baby wore only a quilted cotton sleeper, and at the loss of Eric's warmth, its tiny fists and short legs moved restlessly. Father pulled the edges of the blanket over the child and turned to Peter. "Why don't you take over here, Peter," he said, hoarsely. "I'll see to our hero." Father cleared his throat and looked at Vincent. "Bring Eric over to the bed, Vincent," he said quietly, "Peter will need room."

Vincent picked Eric up as Mary moved the I.V. stand closer to the table. "Get me the saline solution, Mary," Peter said, as Vincent turned towards the small bed.

Catherine waited for them next to the bed, and as Vincent put Eric down, she leaned forward and gathered him into her arms. "I was so worried about you, Eric," she whispered. "And I'm so very proud of you." She kissed him on the cheek, then held him close. Vincent watched as Eric's thin arms wrapped tentatively around Catherine's waist.

"We are all very proud of you, Eric," Vincent told him.

"Yes, indeed," Father said, coming towards them. "You must tell us all about it later." He put his hand on Eric's shoulder and Vincent saw the old man's fingers tremble. "Right now I'd like to take a look at you." He took his stethoscope from the bag he had laid on the bed, then motioned to Vincent. "Do you think you and Catherine might be persuaded to find this young man a cup of hot chocolate and something to eat?"

"I think that could be arranged, Father," Vincent told him. Catherine kissed Eric's forehead and moved back from the bed. Vincent put his arm around her waist and squeezed. Catherine leaned against him and he inhaled the fragrant scent of her hair,

savoring her closeness. The dark, anxious hours Above melted away with her touch and Vincent knew the sweet pleasure of homecoming.

"Almost everyone is still awake," she told him, turning away from the bed as Father helped Eric undress. Vincent smiled as she unconsciously gave Eric a small boy's necessary privacy. She looked up at him and her warm gaze was filled with promises and love. "We won't have any trouble finding something for both of you," she said.

Vincent lifted his hand to caress her cheek. He knew she worried about him as much as she worried about the children. "I'm fine, Catherine," he said, leaning down to press a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Catherine?"

Vincent and Catherine turned at the sound of Eric's voice. He was tucked snugly beneath the blankets with only his head peeking out from the covers. Father stood beside the bed, Eric's clothes and glasses folded neatly in his arms. Without his glasses he looked very young and helpless, not at all like a hero.

"Could you ask William for a couple of cookies, maybe?" he asked hesitantly.

Catherine looked at Father, and at the older man's nod she smiled. "I think William made some extra, Eric," she told him, "just in case you asked."

"We will return in a little while, Eric," Vincent said, taking Catherine's hand. "Is there anything else you need?"

Eric shook his head, then turned to look toward the other side of the room where Peter and Mary tended to the baby. "Is it going to be okay?"

Father patted Eric's shoulder. "I'm certain Peter is doing everything possible," he said. "You needn't worry, Eric."

Vincent watched as Eric's eyes closed with weariness and he leaned back against the pillow. "I found the baby, Father," he said. "That means I'm responsible."

"Well," Father said, "you can be responsible later. Right now, I want you to rest until Catherine and Vincent return."

"I will," Eric promised sleepily. "Just don't forget to wake me up when they get back with the cookies."



XIV

Catherine wrapped her arm around Vincent's waist as they walked quietly to their chamber. Peter had declared the baby out of danger, and Eric had finally gotten his hot chocolate and cookies. The long night was over and dawn only a few hours away.

"Elliot wants to come Below," Catherine said softly.

"Yes," Vincent answered, "I know. The memory we share of that time is very strong. I understood what was going on when Peter first spoke to you."

"Do you think the Council will approve his request?"

"I don't know, Catherine," he told her. "It is possible. I will speak for him."

Catherine smiled. "I thought you would." Vincent stopped suddenly, putting an arm under Catherine's legs as he picked her up. "What are you doing?" she laughed, twining her arms around his neck as he ducked through their chamber entrance.

"Carrying my wife over the threshold."



Catherine smiled down at her sleeping son as she pulled his blankets back up to his shoulders. One small fist pushed against his puckered mouth and his rear-end, as usual, pointed skyward. She sighed, wondering, as she had for the last two hours, how anyone could be unfeeling enough to abandon a baby to the harshness of the winter night.

"There are many things in the world Above that make little sense, Catherine," Vincent said, coming up behind her. "Not everyone has your compassion, your love." He put his arms around her and nuzzled the back of her neck. Catherine leaned back against him, enjoying the tiny shivers his touch created.

"But she's so tiny, Vincent," Catherine said quietly. "Peter says she's only a week or so old." She covered his arms with hers, rubbing his forearms gently with her palms. "I don't understand how someone could just leave her there like that; alone, in the cold."

Catherine felt Vincent's lips in her hair and his words were a soft sigh against her ear. "She survived Catherine. That is what matters." He held her quietly for a moment, then continued. "As long as our world here continues, she will never again know what it is to be alone, to be unloved. She has a home and a family now, always."

Catherine smiled. "And a very protective older brother," she reminded him. "Did you see Eric's eyes when Peter told him the baby was a girl?"

"Yes," he said. "Eric found her. And now, he feels responsible for her." He kissed her neck and Catherine closed her eyes, remembering how Vincent had found her and brought her to the tunnels.

Broken in spirit as well as in body, she had healed within the warmth of his gentle voice, his caring hands. He had led her away from her pain into the wondrous beauty of his love. He was her 'heart's best treasure', the man whose soul was so connected to her own that nothing in Heaven or Earth could ever part them.

Catherine's hands tightened on Vincent's arms and her breathing quickened as Vincent's lips explored the tender indentation beneath her ear. "You are my 'heart's best treasure' as well, Catherine," he whispered tenderly. "Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind . . . "

"But how could I forget thee?" Catherine closed her eyes as Vincent turned her slowly into his arms. His lips were gentle, taking the kiss she offered and giving it back to her, doubling and redoubling their shared pleasure. The years of doubt and regret dropped away; their pain only a distant, fading memory overshadowed by the promise and renewal of their love.

"Now I'm your wife," Catherine murmured when the kiss ended. "And someday, I'll give you another child." She watched Vincent's eyes in the soft glow of Jacob's lamp. Deep, luminous flames danced in the darkened shadows. Desire and love - as endless as eternity.

"And this is still our honeymoon."

Catherine smiled and laid her cheek against the hard, warm planes of Vincent's naked chest. She rubbed her face back and forth, luxuriating in the different textures beneath her skin and the taste of him on her mouth. Yes, it was still their honeymoon. And there were many places yet to explore.

Her arms were wrapped around his waist, and she slid the tips of her fingers beneath the soft material of his drawstring

pants. The muscles clenched beneath her questing fingers. And at the sound of his indrawn breath, her smile widened.

"Didn't you mention something a little while ago about a bath?" she asked, sliding her fingers across his hipbones.

"I'm not certain," Vincent whispered shakily. "Refresh my memory."

Catherine stroked the taut muscles of Vincent's stomach, feeling them quiver beneath her fingers. "Don't you remember," she whispered, raising up on her toes to gently bite his ear. "It's my turn with Mary's soap."



Vincent leaned his forehead against his crossed arms and groaned. Catherine's small hands were remarkably strong, as they massaged every bit of tension from his tired shoulders. The water of the bathing pool felt wonderful, but Catherine's gentle hands felt even better.

In the quiet hours before dawn, the community had finally bedded down for what would be a short and exhausted sleep. Vincent knew his body needed rest, but his mind whirled with visions of Eric and the small, shivering baby he had saved. Even though they were both well and in no further danger, Vincent could not help but share Catherine's question of how such a thing could be.

"I thought we decided not to worry about that any more tonight," Catherine murmured, her breath teasing softly against his ear.

"I'm not worrying about it," Vincent said, "only troubled, like you, when I think of all those children that we cannot help."

Catherine sighed and rested her hands on Vincent's wet shoulders, watching the drops of water on his skin sparkle in the candlelight like jewels. She bent her head and licked at the one nearest her, letting her tongue trail from one shoulder to the other. Vincent trembled beneath her mouth and Catherine felt his thoughts take an interesting shift. She smiled.

"Are you really going to let me wash your hair?" she asked, easing her fingers into the wet, golden strands.

Vincent turned around slowly, savoring Catherine's touch. Her gentle fingers moved with him, measuring the length of his hair, the shape of his wet scalp. He smiled as he leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against her bare, glistening belly.

"You can do anything you want, Catherine," he whispered. "Surely you know that."

Her eyes sparkled with delightful intent. "License my roving hands and let them go . . .," she murmured sweetly. "Is that what you mean?"

Vincent smiled and clasped his own roving hands around the backs of her knees, moving them slowly up through the lukewarm water to the rounded cheeks of her bottom. "Something like that," he told her, watching Catherine's pupils darken as he stroked the velvet skin of her inner thighs. Her hands clenched suddenly in his hair.

"Vincent . . . "

Vincent licked a glistening drop of water from between Catherine's breasts and removed his hands. "I'll be good," he said, smiling as he wrapped his arms around his raised knees.

"I *know* that."

There was laughter in Catherine's eyes. Laughter and need. Vincent felt that need now, as he looked into the passionate depths of her eyes. She wanted to give him comfort, to welcome him home from the cold world Above into the warmth of her arms. There were so many facets to this woman; his lover, his wife.

Catherine reached behind Vincent for the soap she had left on the ledge. He kissed the hardened tip of her breast as she leaned over and a tremor of excitement shot through her.

"No hands," she heard him whisper.

Catherine chuckled and pulled back, standing directly in front of him as she worked up a good lather. The sweet scent of roses filled the bathing chamber. "Hold out your hand," she said quietly, dropping the small ball of soap a moment later into Vincent's outstretched palm.

His hair was wet silk between her soapy fingers. Darkened strands of gold slid sensuously across her hands as she worked in the lather. Catherine caressed his scalp, massaging gently with just the pads of her fingers. She heard Vincent groan and felt his total relaxation as he rested his forehead against her breasts. His breath was hot against her wet skin. The day had been interminably long and she knew how very tired he was.

Catherine sighed. Vincent cared so much - *did* so much for the people he loved. They knew his strength, his stamina, and most thought him beyond the needs of ordinary men. But Catherine saw behind the strength, beneath the stamina that kept Vincent going when another man would quit. She had long ago looked into his eyes and seen a pain and hunger that had called to the depths of her soul. He had needed love. Her love. Love given unconditionally, without restraint, without hesitation.

She stroked his hair and remembered the night he had found the book of Yeats upon his pillow. She had come to him that night, knowing he waited. And in the flickering light of the lavender scented candles he had whispered:

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

Catherine felt the soft brush of Vincent's lips in the valley between her breasts and smiled. They shared their thoughts as they shared the confines of the small pool, with unrestrained love and trust. His memory of that night drifted around her, bathing Catherine with the heat of shared passion. Her fingers stilled in his hair. He wanted her as she wanted him; hands searching, mouths tasting, bodies tangled together, making them one.

"Better rinse the soap out," she murmured, her voice shaking as she backed slightly away. "If we try to make love in here, one or both of us is going to catch pneumonia." She

watched as Vincent slid slowly under the water, his gaze holding hers until the very moment the water covered his face.

Beneath the water of the shallow pool, Vincent ran his hands through his hopelessly tangled hair, removing all traces of soap. Though the water was tepid, Vincent felt the heat of his desire warming his entire body. He stood up slowly, tossing his head as he pinned Catherine with his gaze.

"I'll help you with your dress," he said, as he moved closer and cupped her sleek shoulders in his hands. Her skin was cool, but the fire in her eyes burned him. Vincent bent to gently take her mouth, finding more than warmth in the endless possibilities of her kiss.

They dried each other quickly, without languishing caresses, but with silent eyes that promised everything. Vincent slipped into his drawstring pants then loosely laced up her nightdress. Socks were forgotten as they put on their shoes and hurried, hand in hand, down the short, silent corridor to their chamber.

The brazier they had left warming the room still burned brightly, and Jacob's night lamp glowed faintly beside his crib. Vincent tugged at Catherine's hand and she moved into his arms. Her forehead was damp beneath his chin, and the familiar scent of roses lingered in her hair. He moved his hands gently up the back of her dress, loosening the hastily fastened laces.

The skin of her back was like velvet, tempting his fingers and his lips. He kissed the curve of her neck, then pulled back, drawing Catherine's hands to her sides as he pushed the open dress off her shoulders. It fell to her feet and Vincent watched entranced, as she slipped out of her shoes and moved closer. She reached out and untied the drawstring at his waist and his

pants joined her dress on the floor. A moment later, his boots kicked hastily away, Vincent stood nude and aroused, listening to his wife's unspoken praise.

Her thoughts were extraordinarily sensual, and his heartbeat doubled as he realized what pleasure awaited him. She moved against him, her fingers testing the hardened muscles of his chest. Vincent closed his eyes and the breath hissed through his clenched teeth as Catherine's mouth found and teased one of the hardened nipples hidden beneath his hair.

"Catherine . . . "

Her name was a ragged sound in the still air as Catherine's hands stroked down the front of Vincent's hard, tense thighs. He backed up against the edge of the bed, wondering if his unsteady legs would continue to hold him. Her fingers wandered into the coarse, dense hair at his groin and Vincent trembled.

"Vincent?"

Eyes the color of midnight looked up at him. Passionate eyes whose iridescent green was now little more than a thin band surrounding incredibly dilated pupils. Catherine wanted him; wanted to take him and give to him in a way that was more intimate than anything they had yet shared.

Vincent caught his breath, knowing Catherine's mind, seeing with her eyes. He took her hands from his body and raised them to his lips, his gaze locked to hers. He felt the tremor in her fingers as he brushed his mouth against them and realized that he, too, was shaking.

"Anything you want, Catherine," Vincent whispered.
"Anything." He lowered her hands and slowly ran both palms up

her arms and across the smooth satin of her shoulders. Holding her within his hands, Vincent lowered his head, watching as Catherine's eyes drifted shut. She met his mouth with open lips, her tongue welcoming him home.

He took her mouth gently at first. Then, the kiss deepened, their tongues tangling in a sensual dance of need. Vincent groaned and ended the kiss as gently as he began it. When Catherine opened her eyes, Vincent turned, holding her close as they fell gently onto the bed.

He had given her license to love him, and she did; taking his mouth with a tender insistence that made him burn. Her lips were everywhere; teasing his shoulders, the tender skin beneath his ribs. Vincent felt the hammering thunder of his pulse as her tongue teased a searing trail across his stomach.

The first touch of her hands was almost tentative; a soft stroke of gentle fingers against tensed muscle. Vincent closed his eyes as he felt her fingers tease the sensitive crease where leg and torso connected. She ran one, languid finger across the top of each leg and Vincent made room for her hands, wanting, no, *needing* her to touch the part of him that grew hotter and more aching with each passing moment.

When Catherine delicately tested the skin of his inner thigh with her teeth, Vincent caught his breath. Her tongue soothed the tiny bite, bringing a surge of heat into his already burning flesh and he could not restrain the moan that escaped him. Damp tendrils of her hair caressed him, lying against his rigid heat as her lips moved closer. Vincent waited, poised on the edge of an unfamiliar precipice; his entire body aching with need.

Catherine touched him first with her hands, stroking and tormenting him with feather-light caresses that made Vincent

arch his back to get closer. When he did, he met the hot, sweet softness of her tongue.

Something akin to lightning coursed through him, running up Vincent's spine and into every part of his trembling body. Once, twice, she stroked him; making his blood and his body burn. He had to touch her, to . . .

Fingers that had been ready to reach for Catherine's hair, knotted into fists as the heat of her mouth surrounded him. Nothing had prepared Vincent for the feeling of total surrender that came with giving himself to her in this way. Passion, elemental and insistent clawed at him, making his entire body shake with need. He gasped, trying to find breath, hearing the thunderous roar of his blood as it pounded through his veins, pulling him closer and closer to the edge. Then, there was only feeling, as Vincent's body exploded in a shattering burst of light and the low, deep cry he could not contain echoed through the room.



XV

Catherine snuggled back against the warmth of Vincent's chest, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the whispery threads of awareness that were prodding her sleep-fogged brain.

Up. Up.

She listened for a moment, and then realized that the words were audible only to her mind. The loud Bronx cheer and laugh that suddenly reverberated through the room, however, was not.

"Our son is trying to tell us something." Vincent's warm breath whispered over her ear and Catherine smiled as she opened her eyes and rolled over onto her back. There could be no better view first thing in the morning than the sight of her husband looking down at her with his beautiful, love-filled eyes. Jacob's baby cheer sounded again.

"And doing a very good job of it," Catherine said, laughing softly, as she stretched her arms over her head and then around Vincent's neck. "Doesn't he know we've only been asleep for a few hours?"

Vincent leaned over and kissed her softly on the mouth. "That has never been a problem for Jacob, Catherine," he told her, sliding one hand into her hair as he pulled her closer. "He seems to have inherited my constitution."

"Oh, wonderful," Catherine muttered, leaning against the fingers that were gently massaging her scalp. "Just what every mother wants: a baby that only needs two or three hours of sleep a night." Catherine listened to Vincent's soft chuckle and smiled. Sleep or no, it was a wonderful way to begin the day.

Up. Up.

"I'll get him," Vincent said, as he rolled over and slid out from under the blankets. He slipped into his pants, but didn't bother putting on his shirt. The cool air teased his skin as he lifted his wide-eyed son from his crib.

"Da, da, da, da, da."

Vincent smiled as Jacob spoke to him. The baby had his own language, it seemed, but Catherine had assured him that all babies babbled, even brilliant babies like his. He chuckled, remembering how she had teased him. She could always make him smile.

Jacob pulled at Vincent's still-tangled hair, making him wince. "He seems to have his daddy's strength, too," Catherine said from the bed. She had put on the shirt she kept under her pillow and as usual, looked adorable. It was the shirt he had given her on their first morning together.

Vincent carried their wet and hungry son to the bed. He laid the wiggling, gurgling child down beside Catherine, then went to the shelf to get a clean diaper and washcloth. He wet the cloth with warm water from the thermos he kept for Jacob's washing, and turned back towards the bed.

"Hi there, babyface," he heard Catherine say. "Ready to give your mommy a good morning kiss?"

Joy; simple, flawless, and radiant, filled the bond. Vincent paused as he crossed the room and closed his eyes. It flowed through him like a river, bathing all of his senses with the love between Catherine and their son. He savored the sensations, shared in their love, for he was very much a part of it.

Vincent opened his eyes and saw that Catherine was watching him. She smiled, and held out her hand. "Come on, Daddy," she said gently. "Our son wants to say good morning."



Catherine listened attentively as Peter began to put forth Elliot's request to the Council. Father, of course, already knew about Elliot's desire to live Below, but William, Pascal, and Mary had only heard rumors of the surprising request.

Father had called them together during the early afternoon, and now they sat; Mary, William, Father and Peter, around the large desk in Father's study. She and Vincent sat in chairs nearby, as did Pascal. Catherine felt the wariness that filled the room and worried that her presence might be more hindrance than help to Elliot's cause.

"Just a moment," Father said, looking at Vincent. "Has anyone heard from Nathaniel? It's very unlike him to miss such an important meeting."

"I spoke to him earlier," Vincent told him. "Lena's morning sickness has not confined itself to mornings," he explained. "Nathaniel is caring for Lena and looking after Catherine. He knows his duty as the newest Council member, Father. Nathaniel simply believes that his duty to his wife and adopted child comes first."

Father cleared his throat. "Of course," he said, "that is as it should be." He clasped his hands in front of him on the desk and looked at each person in the room. "As all of you know," he began, "Peter has brought a request from the man known to us as Elliot Burch. This man wishes to take refuge with us; to heal emotionally, and I believe, physically from traumas suffered while attempting to aid Vincent in finding Jacob." He paused, and nodded to Peter. "Please, Peter, tell us what you know of Elliot Burch."

"There's not really a lot to tell," Peter said. "As I told you, Jacob, Elliot contacted Clarence at the Mission about two months ago. He's been showing up at least once a week ever since. He listens to Clarence play, they talk a little, discuss jazz." Peter paused and leaned forward in his chair. "About three weeks ago Elliot asked Clarence about Vincent. He asked if Vincent was alive."

"We were separated during the explosion," Vincent explained. "He would have had no way of knowing."

Peter nodded and continued. "Clarence told him that you had been hurt, but that you had healed. Elliot also asked about your son. All Clarence told him was that you had gotten Jacob safely back home. Later, Clarence asked Elliot if there was any message he wanted delivered."

"And was there?" Vincent asked.

Peter shook his head and looked around the room. "Elliot told Clarence that there was no message. The next day, I got the phone call at the house."

"But how did Elliot know to contact you, Peter?" Catherine asked. She was uncertain of her status as a witness for Elliot. Vincent had not mentioned any particular protocol.

Peter took his time answering, and Catherine sensed it was because the pain of his memories was not yet totally healed. "He had you investigated, Catherine," Peter said softly. "When you disappeared, Elliot Burch spent a considerable amount of his time and money finding out everything there was to know about Catherine Chandler."

Catherine listened to the silence, realizing after a moment that it really wasn't silence at all. The pipes were playing their now-familiar songs, and if she listened very carefully, she could hear children playing in nearby chambers.

She had not yet explained to Peter that the time he spoke of had little form or substance for her. So, how could he know that with each passing day, the past faded and dimmed like an old photograph left in the sun.

"It doesn't matter how he found you, Peter," William said abruptly. "What matters is what this man wants. He's a rich and important man topside. What's he want with us?"

"He's lost everything," Peter explained. "There *is* no more Elliot Burch in the world Above. There's only a lonely man named Stanley Kazmeric, looking for a place to rest and heal."

"And you think we should give him shelter," Father added.

"Yes, Jacob," Peter told him. "I do." He looked at Catherine and she saw traces of pain, like shadows haunting his eyes. "Aside from the physical trauma caused by the gunshot, the man is dealing with one hell of a load emotionally. He's lost everything he worked for; his business, his fortune, his reputation. And if that wasn't enough," Peter added, "the police still want him for the murder of John Moreno. He was out on bail when the explosion took place. The only reason he's been safe so far is that he's kept out of sight. Everyone assumed that he died on the Compass Rose, but a body was never found. If someone spots him . . . "

"Then he's a known felon," William said, looking angrily at Father. "Why should we make an exception for this man when we wouldn't make an exception for one of our own? Kanin was forced to turn himself in for something that happened twenty years ago. Why is Mr. Elliot Burch so different?"

"Because Elliot Burch did not kill John Moreno," Vincent said quietly. "I did."

Catherine looked down at her clenched hands. The memories she shared with Vincent were not as nebulous as her own. She knew his provocation, knew the reasons behind this particular act of violence. And though she understood and shared his pain, Catherine knew he would not let her share his guilt.

"Elliot Burch may be guilty of many things, William," Vincent continued. "But not the death of John Moreno." He reached across the arm of his chair and covered Catherine's hands with his own. "The responsibility for this is mine," he said, looking at the beautiful woman he loved. "No one else can be held accountable."

The pain is behind us, Catherine. We can only go forward. 'Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.'

Catherine squeezed her husband's hands and swallowed back the tears that threatened. The past was little more than a shadow, a time that would never come again. It couldn't hurt them now. They had today, and an eternity of tomorrows.

I love you, Vincent.

Vincent leaned forward and kissed Catherine's cheek, then turned back to William and the others at the table. "Elliot lost everything because he helped me," Vincent told them. "It is only right that I help him now."

"But what makes you so certain he can be trusted?" William argued. "He betrayed you once already. Almost cost you your life."

"Yes," Vincent agreed softly. "But he saved my life in the end, William. The bullet was meant for me." He got up from the chair, meeting Catherine's eyes for a moment before he spoke to the other members of the Council.

"The man I knew as Elliot Burch was a complicated and wary man. A man surrounded by bodyguards, trusting no one. The man called Elliot Burch would not have asked for sanctuary. He would have built his own. It is Stanley Kazmeric who asks for our help, our trust. Can we truly, in all conscience, turn away a man who has no one?"

"This man has helped us, Father," Mary said. "I shudder every time I think of that dreadful cave-in. He saved your life; and he saved Vincent's."

"Only after he betrayed him first," William added angrily.

"True, William," Father said, "but as Vincent has pointed out, Elliot repented his betrayal. And he was willing to sacrifice his life so that Vincent could live and continue his search for Jacob."

"Humph. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"

Catherine looked at William's closed, set face. What 'fruits' did Elliot possess that might make William change his mind? "May I speak, Father?" she asked, rising from her chair.

"By all means, Catherine," Father said. "Please do."

Catherine took a deep breath and looked first at Peter, then at the members of the Council. Ultimately, her eyes found Vincent's and his quiet strength encouraged her to speak.

"The Elliot Burch I knew was a very lonely man. He told me once that somewhere along the way, friends had become inconvenient to him. I believe that in becoming Elliot Burch, he lost, not only his family and his friends, but part of himself. He lost Stanley Kazmeric. Then, in losing all that Elliot Burch possessed, he lost Elliot Burch as well.

"Vincent and Peter have both told you that Elliot is Stanley Kazmeric now. That's the name he was born with, so that's the name he uses. But I don't think he really knows who Stanley Kazmeric is any more than we do. Vincent and I are the only people Elliot can claim as friends. And as his friends, we should be there to help him find that lost part of himself.

"The Tunnels are my home now. This is where I've found what it truly means to have a family, to know what it is to be a part of someone, to be connected in many different ways to many different people. Being able to reach out to another person and know that they will be there for you is something

Elliot has never had. He can have that here. You can give that to him. You can help him find the man he could be. Please, give him that chance."

The room was quiet as Catherine sat back down. Through their bond she heard Vincent's silent praise. She had done her best. A few minutes of quiet contemplation passed before anyone else spoke.

"How's a man like him going to live the way we do?" William asked, his voice less harsh than before.

"All of us, William," Mary reminded him, "even you, had to make adjustments when we came here."

"Not everyone is lucky enough to be born here." It was the first time Pascal had spoken and Catherine wondered what he was thinking.

"There's one thing you're forgetting," Peter said, as Vincent moved to lean against the arm of Catherine's chair. "Elliot Burch was an architectural engineer. He designed and supervised the construction of a great many buildings. Think of what use his talent would be to this community. It's possible that Elliot could actually make some of Mouse's more grandiose designs functional."

"I'd like to see that," William mumbled.

"So would I." Pascal stood up and looked around the room. "I was born in these Tunnels," he said. "No one knows better than I do, how hard it can be sometimes, or how good. But there's always room for improvement." He smiled, as he looked pointedly at Father. "Don't you remember what my Father always said? 'Continuity in everything is unpleasant. Cold is agreeable, that we may get warm.'"

Catherine laughed softly at the look on Father's face, as she remembered what Pascal had told her about the arguments he had overheard as a child. She looked at the man she considered her friend and grinned.

"Elliot could be a lot of help down here," Pascal continued. "If it's a matter of finding him a place, or assigning someone to look out for him, I'd like to volunteer. He might be a lot of help augmenting our communications. You all know what a mess the Pipe Chamber has become. And the work would probably do him a lot of good. Maybe all he needs is a chance." He paused, glancing at Catherine before he turned back to Father. "It is not man's nature always to go in one direction," he quoted again. "It has its ups and downs."

The tension in the room dissolved as even Mary snickered. Father scowled, but Catherine could see that he was trying hard not to smile. "Will you *please* stop quoting that damned Frenchman," he growled.

Pascal shrugged and smiled, then his face suddenly became serious once more. "You know that I consider my position on the Council to be a sacred trust. We have a duty and an obligation to the people who look to us to make the right choices about the future of this community.

"Vincent and Catherine are my friends, my family. I trust their judgment. If they tell me that we can help a man find himself while maybe improving our life here, then we owe it to ourselves to give it a chance."

"I agree," William said, nodding. "If Pascal's willing to let this topsider stay with him and follow him around that crazy Pipe Chamber, I'm not going to object. Just keep him out of my kitchen. Don't need any improvements in there."

"Well," Father said, looking around the room, "if there are no objections, then Peter can tell Elliot or Stanley - you'll have to have him clarify that, Peter - that the Council has agreed to let him stay with us for an indeterminate length of time."

"Ah, Vincent," Peter began hesitantly, "What should I tell him about Catherine?"

Vincent put his arm around Catherine's shoulder and she leaned against him. "Don't tell him anything about me, Peter," she said. "Vincent and I will work that out. It will be easier."

"Whatever you say."

"Oh, yes," Father told them. "One more item on the agenda before everyone leaves. We need to decide what to do about the naming ceremony for the baby. With the wedding just past and Winterfest only a few days away, I don't see how we can possibly have a separate ceremony. Does anyone have any objection to letting the naming ceremony take place sometime during Winterfest?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Father," Mary said, smiling as she got up from her chair. "It makes perfect sense and the children will love it."

Catherine tried not to yawn as she listened to the murmuring agreements and the sounds of everyone taking their leave. Her eyes felt decidedly heavy, and nothing sounded better than another six or eight hours of sleep. She rolled her neck, trying to loosen the kinks, and instantly Vincent's strong, warm fingers were there to help. She couldn't hold back her deep purr of appreciation.

"I had no idea that you were so tired, Catherine," Vincent said, holding her against his side.

Catherine snuggled into the crook of his shoulder as they preceded Father from the room. Mary and Peter were off to check on the baby, and Pascal was heading back to his pipes. "I just need to catch up on my sleep," Catherine told him.

"Perhaps if you restrained your more adventuresome pursuits," Vincent teased softly, "you would not miss so much sleep."

Catherine looked up into the smiling face of her husband. She was about to remind him that it was *his* reaction to her pursuits that had kept both of them awake, when she heard Father come up behind them.

"Vincent," Father said, hesitantly, as he seemed to look everywhere but at Catherine, "may I have a word with you?"

"Of course, Father," Vincent replied.

Catherine kissed Vincent on the cheek. "I'm going to visit with Eric for a while," she told him. "And if Olivia doesn't mind, I might even catch a nap."

"Don't worry about Jacob, Catherine," Vincent said, "I'll pick him up in time for dinner." He stroked her hair, his eyes telling her more than his words. "Shall I wake you?" he asked.

Catherine smiled, and she saw Father look away, his face somewhat flushed. Embarrassment showed plainly on the austere planes of the older man's face. She sighed. He would just have to get used to it. She loved his son and she wasn't going to hide it anymore.

"Please wake me," she answered Vincent quietly. "I love having dinner in the hall with everyone. It's one of my favorite times of the day. I hate missing it."

"Then I shall see to it that you don't."



XVI

"How can such a cute baby be so disgusting?" Samantha asked, as they watched Jacob squish the slice of banana through his fingers before sliding it none too carefully into his mouth.

"Jacob likes to get to know his food before he eats it," Catherine told her, laughing. He smeared banana across the tip of his nose, missing his mouth entirely. She sighed and shook her head. Samantha was right. Her adorable son was a mess.

"Are you making disparaging remarks about my godson?" Peter asked from across the table.

"Of course not," Catherine said, helping Jacob take a sip of milk from the small cup Peter had brought for him. The highchair he sat in was from Peter, too. One of the many gifts he had given. "Would I do that?" She asked sweetly. "I'm merely pointing out some of his brilliant idiosyncracies."

Peter laughed and helped himself to another biscuit. He waved it in front of Jacob's nose, getting his attention. "Don't look now, Jacob," he said winking, "but I think you've just been royally insulted." The baby reached out happily for Peter's hand.

Vincent listened to the exchange between Catherine and her old friend. They were so comfortable with each other. Peter's visit had been healing for both of them. He looked

around the table and noticed the interest with which some of the others watched the conversation. Catherine's presence no longer startled anyone. Most welcomed her heartily, and those who were hesitant received stern looks from Mary and William. Vincent smiled. Catherine had many champions. Narcissa, of course, was first among them, but she had gone to stay with Elizabeth for a day or two before returning for Winterfest.

"What's that smile about?" Catherine asked him softly. "You look a little smug."

"Do I?" He turned on the long bench, brushing a strand of her unruly hair back from her face. "I was thinking of how openly you give your affection, how easy it is to love you." He watched the luminous light of her eyes grow brighter as she listened. "A man would be a fool not to love you, Catherine," he continued quietly. "And Elliot was never a fool."

Catherine covered Vincent's hand, pressing it against her cheek. As always, his touch warmed her. She searched his eyes, looking for something that she knew wasn't there. Vincent had no jealousy in his heart, no insecurities about the strength of their love. They were connected, body and soul, until the end of time.

"You're worried about Elliot?"

"I worry *for* Elliot, Catherine," he said, knowing his voice was too low to carry above the familiar noise at the table. "I wonder how well he can adjust to seeing you with me. I know how I would feel, loving you as I do, if I were to see you in another man's arms, with another man's child. He will be in great pain."

Catherine leaned across the small space that separated them and kissed Vincent softly on the mouth. "Then we will

give him the love of friends, Vincent," she whispered. "So that he'll know he's not alone."



Vincent remembered Catherine's words two days later as he stood waiting in the tunnel below Peter's office building. Snow had fallen the previous night, and on the upper levels the air in the tunnels was crisp and achingly cold. Vincent longed for the warmer corridors of the home chambers and the loving arms of his wife.

He no longer looked forward to his nocturnal visits Above. The dark streets of New York City held nothing for him now. Catherine was Below.

Voices from above the stairs drifted down into the sub-basement and Vincent drew back against the cold, granite wall. There were no torches here and the long mouth of the tunnel yawned empty and dark to anyone who happened to look down. The voices grew louder and Vincent recognized one of them as Peter.

"Watch yourself there, Elliot," he heard Peter say. "Hand me your case as you step down. You'll need your hand for balance."

There was no reply, but Vincent heard the sounds of someone moving aside the crates Peter used to cover the small trap door. He stayed in the darkness, listening to the creak of rusty hinges. Peter seldom used this entrance, as it was too easily accessible.

The building was located in the sixty-second block of Fifth Avenue, and both Peter and Father had decided long ago that the use of this entrance would need to be kept minimal. There were just too many people around to make it safe. It was a testimony to Peter's trust in Elliot that they used it now.

"Vincent?"

Vincent stepped out of the shadows as Peter whispered his name. "Here," he said, watching the shadowy forms behind the glare of Peter's flashlight. The light clicked off, and in the faint light from the room above, Vincent looked at the man he had known as Elliot Burch.

The months had not been kind to him. The aura of confidence and power that had surrounded Elliot Burch was gone. This man was in pain; physical, emotional. It showed on every line of his face and in the way he moved; gingerly, as though the slightest step was unbearably painful. His left shoulder seemed out of kilter with the rest of his body and his arm hung at an awkward angle.

Vincent looked into his eyes and wanted to weep. "Elliot," he said quietly, "I am glad you found us."

"You're not an easy man to find," Elliot said, his voice huskier than Vincent remembered. "You're not exactly listed in the phone book." He turned to Peter, lifting the one small suitcase at his feet. "I can't thank you enough, Dr. Alcott," Elliot said. "This means a lot to me."

Peter clasped Elliot's good shoulder and nodded. "You'll be able to heal with them, Elliot," he told him. "Give yourself time." He looked at Vincent and smiled. "There's no better place for you right now, than Below with your friends."

Elliot looked at Vincent, and his smile was painfully sad. "I'd like to think I have at least one friend," he said. Vincent could feel the longing, the hope that still burned within Elliot's heart. He smiled and moved forward, gently taking the suitcase from Elliot's hand.

"Let your friends share your burden, Elliot," he said.

For a long moment there was only silence, as Vincent watched Elliot struggle with the shattered remains of his pride. It would be hard, Vincent knew, for Elliot to allow himself to be helped. The suitcase was not the only burden Elliot carried with him.

"Thank you, Vincent," Elliot said, breaking the tense silence. "I'd appreciate it."

"Well," Peter said, turning to look back at the basement entrance, "I'd better get back up. There aren't too many people in the building this early, but it's safer not to take chances." He looked back at Elliot and smiled. "I think you'll find that you have more friends than you thought, Elliot," he told him, handing him the flashlight. "Here, you'll need this."

"We will look forward to seeing you at Winterfest, Peter," Vincent said, as he watched his friend climb the small ladder back to the world Above.

Peter laughed as he waved back to them. "Wouldn't miss it," he said.

The trap door closed behind him and the light vanished. Vincent heard the soft click of Elliot's flashlight just before the beam of light illuminated the quiet tunnel.

"Come," Vincent said, "we have a long walk ahead of us."

Vincent took care to slow his pace, conscious of Elliot's physical limitations. He wasn't certain how much pain the uneven tunnel floor would cause, but he measured his steps to insure that Elliot's shoulder would not be unduly shaken.

There was so much he wanted to say to this man, so much Elliot needed to know. Vincent sighed, trying to find the words to begin. "What did Peter tell you about us?" Vincent asked, as they walked towards the Home Chambers.

"A lot of things I'm not sure I believe," Elliot told him. The tunnel was wide enough for them to walk abreast, and Vincent was pleased to see that Elliot did not seem to be in a great deal of pain.

"He told you of our laws, though, the rules that govern our community."

"Yes. He mentioned the Council, your father. He also told me that there's usually a long wait before someone is allowed to . . . 'come Below', I think was the phrase he used."

"That is true," Vincent explained. "An exception was made in your case."

"Why was that?"

Vincent stopped and turned toward the man beside him. "You risked everything to help me find my son," Vincent said quietly, watching Elliot's eyes in the dim light. "And in doing so you have lost much. I owe you a great debt."

The beam from the flashlight wavered and Elliot's sigh was deep. "I set you up, Vincent," he said, turning away to look down the dark, silent tunnel. "I let myself be conned, and I set you up."

Vincent put his hand on Elliot's shoulder. "You did what you felt you had to do, Elliot," he told him. "It was a time of great sorrow for both of us. You must allow yourself to heal." Vincent felt the shudder beneath his hand.

"How do you do it, Vincent?" Elliot asked, his voice shaking. "Tell me. How do I get through this pain?"

Vincent sighed, knowing words alone would not be enough. "Father told me that I must not fight the pain, that I must let the pain wash over me, let it pass through me."

"Did it help?"

Vincent squeezed Elliot's shoulder and dropped his arm as he started to move slowly down the tunnel once again. "I had my son and my family to help me, Elliot," Vincent said. "But, I *had* begun to heal. Finally." He knew the time to tell Elliot of Catherine's return had come. If he could only find the words.

They walked in silence, their pace increasing as they neared the Home Chambers. The tunnel floors here were well-worn, and torches lit their way. Vincent saw Elliot look around him, trying to find some kind of logic in a world he barely believed existed.

When they crossed through the Whispering Gallery, Elliot stopped in the middle of the bridge, taking it all in. Vincent watched silently, wondering what his architect's mind must be seeing. The voices whispered around them, fragments of a thousand conversations assaulting their ears.

"This is incredible," Elliot whispered, adding his voice to those around them. Vincent felt his awe and shared it, for the Gallery often had that effect on him.

"There are many beautiful and wonderful things in our world, Elliot," he said, smiling. "Your stay with us will be one of discovery."

Elliot stuck the flashlight in his back pocket and ran his hand across the rope railing. "Dr. Alcott told me that you were hoping I'd have some ideas for improving things down here." He looked at Vincent and his smile was thin. "To tell you the truth, Vincent, I've been pretty much without ideas these last few months."

"Then we will not press you," Vincent assured him. "When the time is ready, the ideas will come."

They started walking again, and Vincent could hear the sounds of the community as the new day began. "We will be meeting people soon, Elliot," Vincent explained. "What name did you wish to use? I have been calling you Elliot, but Peter thought you might wish to use your given name. We seldom use last names here," he told him. "The choice is up to you."

Only a moment passed before he answered. "Elliot, I think," he said. "I can be Elliot down here with you, Vincent. I'd like that."

Vincent nodded and smiled. He and Catherine had hoped that Elliot would not want to totally deny the man he had been. They halted in the Long Corridor, letting the younger children hurry past as they went to classes. Vincent watched silently as Elliot turned to follow their passage.

"Your son," he said softly, "you never told me . . . is he all right?"

"My son is fine," Vincent said. "You will be meeting him in a moment." He paused, knowing he could delay no longer.

He waited until the corridor was empty, then put down the suitcase and gently clasped both of Elliot's shoulders.

"Elliot," he began, "there is something I have not told you." He sighed, knowing words were sometimes insufficient things. "I told you that I had begun to heal, and that was the truth. What I did not tell you was that there is no longer any reason for my sorrow. Catherine has come back to me, Elliot. She is waiting for us in Father's study."

As he watched Elliot try to make sense of his words, Vincent continued to explain. "I know this is difficult for you to believe, but it is the truth, Elliot. In a moment, you will know this."

Elliot's good hand grasped at Vincent's arm. His fingers were tight, as if he needed his hold on Vincent to stand. "How?" he whispered. "I don't understand. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It is not an easy thing to explain, Elliot," Vincent said. "We thought it best to wait until you were here. Just know that Catherine has made a journey unlike any other. Our bond, our love, has brought her back to me. She is my wife now. And we will never be parted again."

Elliot shook his head and his fingers tightened even more on Vincent's arm. "What kind of journey?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"It was a journey of faith, Elliot; a journey of love," Vincent told him. "Catherine is here. She is as real as you or I. And she is waiting for us."

Elliot gasped and dropped his arm. "Now? Here?"

Vincent smiled. "Around that corner is my father's study," he said. "Catherine is there. Jacob is with her."

"Your son?"

"Yes," he answered softly, "our son." Vincent picked up the suitcase and started toward the study. When Elliot did not follow, he stopped and turned. "Are you coming?" he asked. He watched as Elliot took a deep breath.

"I'm scared, Vincent," Elliot admitted, his eyes troubled. "I'm more scared than I've ever been."

Vincent understood the fear holding Elliot back. He had felt it himself, on cold lonely nights when only memories of love had warmed him. "You have nothing to fear," Vincent said. "Come." He began to walk toward the study, and this time Elliot followed.

They passed through Father's doorway together. Father was sitting at his desk playing with Jacob. Vincent looked for Catherine and found her standing beside the wrought-iron stair, watching the entrance. She smiled, and in his heart Vincent heard her silent words of love.

"Welcome home, Elliot," she said.

Elliot paused at the bottom step, holding the rail with his good hand as he stared at Catherine.

"Cathy?" He started to move forward, then stopped.

Vincent watched as Catherine came towards them. "It's really me, Elliot," she said, holding out her hands. "I'm back." She paused in front of them, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

She glanced up at Vincent and he smiled. This man had saved his life more than once. They owed him the love and the time it would take to heal.

"Go to her Elliot," Vincent told him. "Let our love begin to heal you. You are among friends, now."

The sound of Elliot's broken sob as he went into Catherine's arms, tore through Vincent's heart. He put his hand on Elliot's shoulder, feeling his love for Catherine and hers for him, flow through the shattered man who stood between them. It would take time, but Elliot would heal; surrounded by a love older than time and limitless as dreams.



XVII

Catherine wiped the oatmeal from Jacob's chin, smiling as he smacked his lips, ready for more. "You're the hungriest little babyface I ever saw," she teased. "Where do you put it all?"

"The same place as his father, I should imagine."

Catherine laughed as she fed the baby another spoonful. "They *are* a lot alike," she agreed, looking up at the man sitting across from them at the small table. "Do you know, Father, they even dislike the same things? I tried to feed Jacob some peas the other night at dinner and after one taste he refused to even open his mouth."

Father smiled and gestured with his teacup to Jacob's bowl of cereal. "That he can tolerate the gruel you're feeding him is evidence enough, Catherine," he said. "Even now, it remains Vincent's favorite breakfast." He took a piece of banana bread from the plate Catherine had brought from the kitchen.

"A breakfast you've made for him on more than one occasion," she reminded him. "Could it be you're mellowing with age?"

"I should say not," Father replied with a derisive scowl. "I shall remain pompous and arrogant well into my nineties."

"Here, here."

Catherine put down Jacob's spoon and touched the back of Father's hand. Ever since the wedding, there had been a definite shift in Father's attitude toward her. He often found time to spend quiet moments like this with her and the baby; talking about Vincent, about his dreams for the community. He even smiled more, and Catherine found herself responding to his warmth and subtle humor.

"Thank you, Father," she said softly. "You've made me very happy these past few days." She covered his hand, feeling the scratchy wool of his fingerless gloves beneath her palm. "Vincent and I appreciate everything you've been doing for us."

She saw the amusement in Father's eyes as he curled his fingers around hers, gently holding her hand. "Even the door?" he asked.

Catherine smiled, feeling the heat rise to her face. "Yes," she admitted, "even the door."

Nathaniel and Cullen had just that morning finished assembling the rough cut planks and iron bands that made up the heavy door. Vincent had decided to begin drilling the bolt holes into the thick, stone wall after he took Elliot to meet Pascal. He had explained that with Cullen and Nathaniel helping him, they would have the door installed by evening. Father, he told her, had even asked Gavin and Nicholas to take over some of Vincent's Winterfest duties so that the project could be completed. The door was considered to be Father's wedding present, Vincent had said, smiling; which made its completion a priority.

Catherine felt, rather than heard, the loud wail Jacob put out through the bond. At the moment, being fed was his priority, and there were times when he could be very insistent.

She picked up his spoon and began feeding him again. "You didn't have to yell," she murmured to her gluttonous son. "I would have heard a nice soft, 'Momma' just as well."

"Ma, ma, ma, ma, ma, ma, ma."

Catherine smiled. As apologies went, it wasn't so bad. She heard Father clear his throat and looked up. He looked like a man who had a question but didn't know how to ask it. Had Vincent explained to him about the bond she shared with both Vincent and the baby?

"Your grandson was being rude, Father," she explained. "You may not have heard it, but he just yelled at me."

Father took a sip of his tea, then helped himself to another slice of bread. "Vincent told me that you share his bond with Jacob, Catherine," Father said. "But he failed to mention the degree to which Jacob seems to use it. It's quite astounding when you think about it."

"It's quite astounding when you *don't* think about it," she replied, as she continued to feed her son. "Jacob is very curious about everything, Father. He wants to know, to do, to see, to feel, and he wants to do those things, now. I think he sometimes forgets he's only a baby. His thoughts are so strong, so concrete." She gave him the last bit of cereal, scraping the bottom of the bowl with the spoon. "And even if he *is* a little glutton," she teased, wiping Jacob's messy chin, "he's the most loving baby anyone could ever want. Aren't you?"

Jacob held out his arms and Catherine unbuckled the straps that held him firmly in the special seat. She picked him up, rubbing noses with him as he twined his chubby arms around her neck.

"You're a good mother, Catherine," Father said quietly. "Jacob is a very lucky boy."

Catherine smiled. It was the first time Father had commented on her ability as a mother, and she was glad to know he approved.

"Thank you, Father," she said, rubbing Jacob's back as he snuggled against her shoulder. "I like to think I'm a good mother. Of course, I've got the best teachers anyone could ask for, and the best husband. That certainly helps."

The movement of her hand on the baby's back was putting him to sleep, and Catherine could feel the lethargy slowly covering the vivid colors of his thoughts. She smiled and closed her eyes, leaning her head against the back of the tall wooden chair. She listened to the distinctive music of the pipes and the clatter of a distant subway train. They were the sounds of home, and she treasured them.

"Is it true that you want another child, Catherine?"

His question was softly voiced and hesitant, as though he had been waiting for the right time to ask. Catherine opened her eyes and saw that he was watching her. "Yes," she told him. "Very much." She rubbed her cheek against Jacob's soft hair, wondering if she could possibly tell Father how much becoming pregnant would mean to her.

"Vincent and I missed so much, Father," she said quietly. "When I see Lena and Nathaniel together; awaiting the birth of their child, sharing the changes taking place within her body; I want that same sharing for us. I'm greedy, Father. I want it all."

Catherine kissed Jacob's hair and sighed, looking away from the gentleness of Father's eyes. "My memories of that time are less than shadows now," she said. "I don't remember being pregnant at all, or even Jacob's birth."

"What *do* you remember, Catherine?"

Catherine closed her eyes, searching through her fragmented memories. "I seem to remember most things," she began. "I remember growing up, school-girl parties, and going for ice-cream with my dad. I remember my mother . . . and how it felt to lose her. I remember climbing trees in Central Park and seeing my father far below me, watching. And the lake in Connecticut where we would spend our summers. I remember sights, and sounds and smells . . . feelings, definitely feelings."

She chuckled lightly before going on. "I remember what a twit I was in college, and how surprised Dad was when I decided to go to law school. And friends, I remember friends; Jenny, Nancy, Rebecca, things we did together, places we went." Catherine sighed, opening her eyes to the soft glow of candlelight and the warmth of Father's steady gaze.

"There are some things, Father, stupid things that I did while I was in law school and after graduation, that I'd really *rather* forget. But those memories are still intact."

"Is there some sort of a pattern?"

Catherine smiled. "Vincent seems to think so," she said. "I've told him about the things I remember, and his theory is that the things that shaped my personality, that made me the person I was, are the things that I remember."

"And do you remember how you and Vincent met?"

"Yes," she said softly, "I remember that night. And I seem to remember everything that came after . . . up to a point." Catherine paused, as she thought of how to phrase the rest of her answer. She watched as Father got up from the table and poured himself another cup of tea. When he gestured to her cup, she nodded, wondering if he would understand and agree with his son's conclusions.

"Vincent believes that I remember our years together because they helped me become the person I am now," she told him. "But everything that came after Jacob's conception is a blank. The only memories I have after that are the ones I shared with Vincent, the ones from my time 'away'. And even most of those are fading now."

Father picked up his cup, then put it down again without drinking. He cleared his throat. "I never have known just when it was that Jacob was conceived, Catherine," he said. "Would you mind?"

Catherine shook her head. "No," she said, "I don't mind telling you. It was when Vincent was ill, when I went to him in the cavern."

"Dear God."

"I was so frightened, Father," she said, remembering that dark moment. "I thought his heart had stopped . . . he was so still. I kept thinking 'you can't leave me - I won't let you leave me' and I kissed him." Catherine stopped as the words caught in her throat. She could see it all so clearly, *feel* all the pain, all the wonder as her lips touched his for the first time.

"It was our first kiss," she whispered, as her eyes closed. "Our very first kiss." The memory poured through her like wine, and Catherine remembered the intoxication of that first touch.

Then she saw the moment when Vincent opened his eyes, and she had seen his need; for her touch, her warmth, her love. She had given all - honestly, freely, completely. She opened her eyes. Father was staring into his cup. "You'll have to use your imagination for the rest," Catherine said quietly.

"Thank you," Father replied, shaking his head. "But, I think I shall forego any flights of imagination."

"All children eventually grow up, Father."

"I shall be certain to remind you of that fact when Jacob presents you with a grandchild."

Catherine laughed. "You do that," she told him.



Vincent tapped the star drill with his hammer, turned the drill, and tapped again. Over and over the pattern repeated; tap, turn, tap, turn. Twelve lag bolts meant twelve precisely drilled holes. He looked at the ones he had completed, their lead anchor shields already firmly in place. An enormous amount of labor for only one door.

Cullen and Nathaniel worked behind him, fastening the three, large wrought-iron hinges into the door itself. When the bolt holes were ready, they would lift and hold the door, making certain the holes in the hinges lined up properly with the ones in the stone. As they held the door, Vincent would start the bolts, getting all of them in, and then going back to tighten each one. The door would be infinitely solid, remarkably beautiful, and would assure complete privacy. Vincent smiled, deciding that perhaps it was worth all the effort involved.

"Vincent?"

Vincent stopped his hammering and looked down at the small boy standing in the corridor. "Good morning, Eric," he said, smiling. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Eric moved closer and looked around Vincent, into the chamber. "Is Catherine here?" he asked.

"No, she is not, Eric," Vincent said, squatting down and laying the drill and hammer on the floor beside him. "After breakfast she and Jacob went to visit Lena." Eric frowned, and Vincent clasped his shoulder. "Is there something I can help you with?" he asked, knowing that Catherine had been worrying about the young boy's part in delivering the Winterfest candles. "Perhaps there is a message I can deliver for you," he suggested.

"Could you tell her that I need to talk to her?"

Vincent smiled. "Of course, Eric. Where will you be? Did Father cancel classes today?"

Eric nodded and looked into the room again, watching as Cullen and Nathaniel worked on the door. "It's a secret," he whispered. "What I want to tell her, I mean. You gotta promise not to tell."

Vincent leaned forward as Eric bent toward his ear. "I will keep your secret, Eric," he promised. "But if you want me to have Catherine find you, then you must tell me where you will be."

"Oh, I'll be with my baby," he said solemnly. "That's what I want to tell Catherine." He lowered his voice. "Gavin and Anne-Marie are going to take my baby home with them today," he whispered. "Since Father says I'm the one who gets to name

her, I have to tell them what her name will be." He frowned, tucking his hands under his arms. "I thought you had to wait until the naming ceremony," he said. "You aren't supposed to tell before the naming ceremony, are you, Vincent?"

"I think this is a special case, Eric," Vincent said. "Mary and Faye are very busy getting the nursery ready for Winterfest and Gavin and Anne-Marie have already offered to take the baby to live with them." He squeezed Eric's shoulder. "A baby that tiny needs a lot of love, Eric," he said. "Anne-Marie and Gavin have no children of their own. You may be assured that she will be well cared for."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. I like Anne-Marie, she's pretty. She has long hair like . . . like Ellie. But, see, that's just it. They can't just call my baby, 'baby', so I've gotta tell them her name. I wanted to wait until tomorrow, at Winterfest."

"What if they promise to keep her name a secret until then, Eric? They might, if you ask."

"Do you think so?"

"It would do no harm to ask. I have never found Gavin or Anne-Marie to be unreasonable."

"Does that mean they'd do it?"

Vincent smiled. "It means that you should ask them," he told him.

"Okay," Eric said. "I can do that. And you'll tell Catherine that I need to see her?"

"Certainly, Eric." Vincent stood, watching as Eric turned to leave. He paused, then looked back.

"You won't be hurt or nothing if I don't tell you, will you, Vincent?"

"No, Eric," Vincent answered sincerely. "I will not be offended."

"Oh, okay. I'd really like to tell Catherine, though."

"Then, I shall find her for you."

"Thank you, Vincent," Eric said. He started to turn, then changed his mind again. "Vincent?" he said quietly. "I delivered all my candles. Zack went with me." He smiled. "And I almost wasn't scared a bit."



Catherine watched the expression of total confusion on Elliot's face as Vincent introduced him to Mouse during dinner. Although he could be rather obtuse at times, Mouse seldom forgot anything he considered important. Unfortunately, he had remembered Elliot's first name as it related to his having been caught Above, something neither she nor Vincent had expected.

"Stupid tower," Mouse muttered, putting down his spoon as he looked at Elliot from across the table. He folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head. "Lots of machines, very noisy."

"Mouse," Catherine interrupted, "Elliot was the man I went to when Father and Vincent were trapped in the maze." To her right, she saw Elliot turn his head, looking at her now, instead of Mouse. Catherine could almost feel his unasked questions.

"You and Elliot saved our lives, Mouse," Vincent added. Beneath the table, Catherine clasped his right hand. He smiled and gently squeezed her fingers.

"Your gizmos? Great stuff. Got more?"

"Ah, no," Elliot answered, looking at the puckish young man. "Not right now."

"Oh. Too bad." Mouse frowned and went back to eating.

Elliot turned back to Catherine and she smiled. "Mouse is our resident genius," she told him. "If anything needs fixing or you want anything mechanical, Mouse is the one to see."

Mouse looked up and grinned. "Something's broken, something needs fixing, come to Mouse."

"I'll remember that," Elliot said.

The table settled into a comfortable silence as everyone started to concentrate on the delicious vegetable soup William and his assistants had prepared. It was hot, rich and filling, and Catherine enjoyed every mouthful. She had never really given much thought to food before coming Below. If she was hungry, she ate, if she wasn't, well, it never really mattered. Living with Vincent, she decided, was turning her into a sensualist. All her senses were becoming finely-tuned.

"Where's Jacob, Catherine?" Mary asked from her place next to Father.

"Lena and Nathaniel are bringing him," Catherine told her. "Little Catherine was having such fun playing with him that they asked if he could stay a while. I think they're hoping to get her

used to the idea of having another baby around. Lena said they might be a little late."

"How is Lena feeling? I haven't had a chance to see her lately. Is she all right?"

"Yes, Mary," Catherine said. "She told me to tell you that she's eating the crackers before she gets out of bed in the morning, and Nathaniel's been making her that tea you recommended. She's doing much better."

"Good, good." She turned to Father. "Isn't it about time for Lena's check-up?"

Father smiled indulgently. "Yes, Mary," he said, "I believe it is. Do you think you might remind Lena the next time you see her?"

"Of course, Father."

"Da, da, da, da, da, da, da."

Catherine put down her spoon and looked towards the front of the large dining hall. Lena and Nathaniel were just coming in. Lena's daughter, Catherine, was riding on Nathaniel's shoulders and Jacob was clinging to Lena's neck as he called out loudly and happily to his daddy.

Vincent rose from the table and held out his arms. As soon as he was close enough, Jacob let go of Lena's neck, flinging himself into his daddy's strong embrace. Catherine had seen her son do this before, and was somewhat used to it. Elliot, however, was not. His gasp was loud and his face pale.

Catherine put her hand on his shoulder. "If it makes you feel any better," she said, "I nearly fainted the first time Jacob

did that in front of me." She watched, smiling, as Vincent put their son into his high-chair and carried chair and boy to the table.

"Elliot," Vincent said, stroking the baby's hair, "this is our son, Jacob."

Catherine heard the pride and love in Vincent's voice as he introduced their son, but she was looking at Elliot's face. And there she saw the past, a shared memory stronger than most. In her mind, she heard Elliot's voice; desperate, tormented, alone: *I could have given Cathy the whole world. What did you give her?*

She looked at her husband, knowing he shared her vision. And she heard his words, like a whisper across her soul. *All I could. All I had. All I was.*

Catherine turned back to the man sitting beside her, and reached out her hand, touching his bearded cheek. "Someday," she whispered, "someday Elliot, you'll love enough to give yourself, not the world."

"The way Vincent loves you," he murmured.

"The way I love him."



Vincent pushed the door closed and dropped the latch. It landed with a soft thunk and he shook his head. "This will take some getting used to," he said, smiling. He turned around and walked towards the bed, watching his wife as she sat on the comforter, brushing her hair.

He had lit only a few of the candles, and in the soft light her hair shone with golden fire. He took the brush from her hands and settled behind her, beginning where she had left off. Vincent loved the feel of her hair beneath his hands, and he smiled, knowing the pleasure was shared. They often took turns at night, each brushing the others' hair, indulging their need to touch and be touched.

Catherine leaned back against his hands, and Vincent watched the gentle rise of her breasts as she arched her back. He kissed her naked shoulder and laid the brush on the bookcase. Her skin was warm beneath his mouth and he took his time, trailing soft kisses across her shoulders and down her back. She moaned and he slid his mouth up to her nape, biting very gently where her neck and shoulder met.

"Vincent . . . "

"Make all the noise you like, Catherine," he told her. "We have our door." He felt her laughter as she rolled over in his arms.

"And we have a ventilation shaft," she said, smiling up at him, "just like all the other chambers in this part of the Tunnels."

Vincent leaned down and kissed her parted lips, taking languishing sips that seemed to last hours. When he raised his head, his flesh was burning - from the inside, out. He took a deep breath and smiled as he covered her body with his.

"The ventilation duct in this chamber does not connect to the others, Catherine," Vincent said softly. "It goes outward, away from the rest of the Home Chambers." He wrapped his fingers in her hair and gently tilted her head back, kissing her throat.

"Jacob has had two weeks in which to perfect his ability to ignore us when he sleeps," he reminded her, "so there is no one to hear you but me." He slid his tongue down between her breasts, nuzzling her nipples with his face as she arched her back.

"Sing for me, Catherine," Vincent whispered, as one hand glided softly down her body. "Sing for me, as I will sing for you."

And through the night, they sang - but none heard their song.



XVIII

"The world Above is cold and grey; summer, a distant memory . . . "

Catherine listened to Father's words as she sat beside Vincent, holding Jacob in her lap as the candles were passed and the dark room brightened.

There was magic in the Great Hall tonight. She could feel it. And she knew that Vincent felt it too. It shimmered and sparked between them like electricity during a lightning storm. Even Jacob seemed to know that this night was special. He watched the flickering lights that passed among the Helpers and those who dwelt Below with perceptive and far-seeing eyes.

Elliot had been reluctant to come, but he sat across the table from her, listening to Father's low voice, to Vincent and Mary. Catherine wondered what he would find this night. Peace, perhaps, if he was lucky. Solace, at least, for his battered soul. There could be no better way to discover the underlying thread of their community than by attending Winterfest.

". . . each of us grew stronger . . . "

Strength to give of yourself, to share your knowledge, your love with those around you; these were the strengths Catherine knew she had found here Below with Vincent.

She looked at him now, in the ever-brightening glow of the candles; proud, gentle, wise, strong - he was all these things. He turned his head, meeting her eyes, and she saw that part of him which touched her soul; the light of his love.

" . . . and to remember: Even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as we share the light."

The huge candelabra's were raised, adding their splendor to the room, bathing every corner with their brilliance. Catherine smiled. Winterfest had begun.

Vincent smiled and held out his hand to Catherine as they rose from the long table. Jacob wiggled out of his mother's arms and Vincent caught him, holding the baby firmly with one arm as Catherine took his hand.

Lena had insisted on loaning her a simple jumper of royal blue, and Catherine had found a soft, grey sweater to wear beneath it. The clothes enhanced the green of her eyes and in the soft lights they reflected the warmth of her beauty. Vincent raised her hand to his lips, brushing her fingers with a lingering kiss. Catherine smiled and the room was suddenly brighter for him.

In the center of the Hall, the musicians had gathered to tune their instruments and the gentle blending of guitar, fiddle, and piano could be heard behind the many conversations taking place between friends.

The large grand piano which had gone unplayed for so long had been brought to the Hall and tuned. For Rolle was

joining them this night, and had asked to play. Vincent felt a sense of pride as he watched the young black man stride across the room. The days of drugged oblivion were behind him, and though Vincent knew the battle would be constant and hard, he sensed in Rolle a new determination to succeed.

"He looks wonderful," Catherine said, as they strolled hand in hand through the Hall. "Is he living with one of the Helpers?"

"Yes," Vincent told her, shifting Jacob as their son wiggled around to see the man they were discussing. "Peter arranged for him to enter a rehabilitation program several months ago, and he has been staying with an older couple since his release. They are musicians. Retired now, but they share their love of music with him, and I believe it has helped."

Vincent surveyed the crowd, looking for Elliot. It had been difficult to convince their newest dweller to come to Winterfest. It had taken all of Catherine's formidable powers of persuasion to prove to Elliot that he would learn much more about life Below, if he were to share in their major celebration. Even Pascal, she had argued, took at least a little time for Winterfest.

"Do you see Elliot?" Vincent asked, continuing to look around the large room. "I cannot seem to find him."

"Near the casks, Vincent," Catherine said, "with Peter. I think Peter worried that Elliot would slip away. He sort of nudged him toward William and the wine."

"Peter will be a good friend to Elliot, if he will let him," Vincent said, hoping Elliot would soon begin to heal.

Many of the Helpers called out greetings as they crossed the room, and Vincent found himself feeling very proud to hear their names always linked together: Vincent and Catherine - each half of a complete love.

"Catherine? Vincent?"

Vincent turned toward the familiar voice of the young man he had once sent out into the world Above. Final examinations had kept him from the wedding and Vincent knew how glad Catherine would be to see him. She had been worried about her acceptance among the Helpers and those who had gone to live Above. But belief had gone before doubt, paving the way for approval and welcome.

"Michael?" Catherine said, holding out her free hand as the young man approached. Brooke had a firm hold on his arm, and her eyes were full of worshipful pride. Catherine smiled, knowing her eyes held a similar expression every time she looked at Vincent. "It's wonderful to see you."

Michael took her hand and Catherine watched indulgently as he weighed the changes in her, his eyes assessing every detail. "You look so . . . happy," he said, finally.

Catherine laughed and looked up at her husband and son. "I *am* happy, Michael," she told him. "Happier than I've ever been." She sent Vincent a soundless request, and he bent his head, kissing her lightly on the lips. Catherine smiled and turned back to Michael. "The little boy staring holes through you is our son, Jacob," she told him. "He has a tendency to be a little shy around people until he gets to know them."

Michael smiled at Jacob, and the baby buried his face against his father's neck. "See what I mean?" Catherine said. "Tell me about school, Michael. How is it going?"

"I'm at the top of my class, Catherine," Michael told her. "I've decided to get my degree in Literature. I want to teach." He looked at Vincent. "It'll take me awhile to get my credential," he said. "But when I'm through, I hope to be as good a teacher as you were to me, Vincent."

Vincent nodded, accepting the compliment as he did most things, quietly, graciously. "Thank you, Michael," he said softly. Catherine smiled, knowing he could feel her pride and her love.

"Ah, Catherine," a voice behind her sighed.

Catherine turned and found herself facing a brilliant bouquet of red, silk roses. Behind the flowers, eyes twinkling in the brightly lit room, stood Sebastian.

"Lovely lady," he said, "it warms my heart to see you with us again. Allow me to present this small token of my ever constant esteem and affection." He bowed, and held out the bouquet.

Catherine reached for the flowers with trembling hands, her heart and eyes filling as she touched the vivid display of love. "They're beautiful, Sebastian," she whispered to the elderly magician standing before her. "Thank you."

Sebastian smiled and reached out to Jacob who was watching from his father's arms. The magician touched the back of Jacob's ear, snapped his gnarled fingers, and produced a bright, blue balloon. Jacob laughed and clapped his hands, shrieking with delight.

His cries brought the children and they crowded around, asking for more magic. Sebastian shrugged his shoulders, bowed courteously, and moved away from Catherine and Vincent; his followers trailing behind as if he were the Pied Piper.

"Would you like me to take Jacob?" Samantha asked, as she lingered behind. "I think he wants to go along."

Vincent bent down and handed his wiggling son to Samantha. "Be good, Jacob," he told him. Jacob laughed, twining his arms around Samantha's neck as they started across the room.

"We probably won't see him again for awhile," Catherine said, watching her son disappear within the crowd of happy children.

"Samantha will take good care of him," Vincent assured her. "One of Mary's firmest rules is that the older children learn to care for those who are younger."

"I must admit there seem to be distinct advantages to this extended family," Catherine said, looking up into his gentle eyes. "It gives me time to be alone with my husband."

Vincent smiled and bent to give her a soft kiss. "We are hardly alone, Catherine," he reminded her, his words a sweet whisper against her lips. "The Hall is full of people."

"Is it?"

Vincent laughed and wrapped her in his arms, hugging her in the middle of the crowded room. Catherine closed her eyes and savored the warmth and security of his embrace. She felt the sense of freedom that soared through him as they stood in the midst of his family and friends, revealing their love for all to see.

"Catherine?"

At the sound of Mouse's voice, Catherine opened her eyes and turned her head, not wanting to leave the comfort of Vincent's arms. "Yes, Mouse?"

"Need your help," Mouse said, not meeting her eyes. "Got a problem." He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, his nervousness becoming more evident with each passing second.

Catherine looked up at Vincent and he shrugged. "Is there something I can help you with, Mouse?" Vincent asked.

"No," Mouse told him, looking at him briefly before his eyes darted away. "Need Catherine's help. Can't wait."

"Of course, I'll help you, Mouse," Catherine said, wondering what could possibly be wrong. "What can I do?"

Mouse clasped his hands in front of him and Catherine reached out to touch the young man's nervous fingers. He drew back, startled. "What is it, Mouse?" Catherine asked.

He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "Dance lessons," he said quickly, his words running together in a fast blur. "Need dance lessons."

"Dance lessons?" Catherine couldn't believe that she had heard him right. "You want me to teach you to dance?"

Mouse nodded, and looked behind him. Catherine followed his gaze and saw Jamie dancing with a young man whose light brown hair was almost as long as her own. So, Mouse's problem was named Philip.

Catherine smiled and held out her hand again. "I'd be happy to teach you to dance, Mouse," she said gently. "But

you're going to have to stop being so nervous. You can't learn to dance if you won't touch me."

Mouse seemed to take the entire situation into consideration, looking back again at his friend Jamie, and then at Vincent, who had just been handed Catherine's bouquet of silk roses. Mouse shrugged and clasped Catherine's proffered hand. "Okay, good," he murmured. "Okay, fine."

Vincent enjoyed a fleeting kiss from Catherine before Mouse pulled her toward the other dancers. He watched, entranced, as his wife began to explain the rudiments of slow dancing to his young friend. Elliot joined him, frowning.

"Cathy has a lot of admirers."

"Catherine is a warm, loving woman. She has many friends." Vincent listened to the silence stretch between them, taut and intensely colored.

"Catherine," Elliot mused. "You never call her Cathy, do you?"

"Her name is Catherine," Vincent said softly. "Catherine Wells." He watched her move around the floor. From the corner of his eye he saw Elliot push his hands deeper into his pockets.

"Is that some sort of hint?" Elliot asked.

"If you wish it to be." Vincent's eyes followed his wife's progress, but his senses were attuned to the man standing beside him. There was pain as well as anger behind Elliot's dark, solemn eyes. Vincent sighed. "I would prefer to be your friend, Elliot," he said quietly. "But the choice is up to you."



"It has been said that the child is the meaning of this life. Today, we celebrate the child; this new life that has been brought into our world . . . "

Vincent listened to Father's voice as the naming ceremony began. He wrapped his arms tightly around Catherine, holding her back against his chest as they stood listening to the familiar words. He knew she was remembering, sharing his memory of the last naming ceremony that had taken place within the Tunnels.

He looked down at Jacob, sleeping now in Mary's arms beside them. His face was a small mask of quiet serenity. Vincent smiled. Their son was many things, but only in sleep was he serene. He felt Catherine chuckle as she heard his unspoken thought. He kissed her hair, rubbing his chin against the silky strands.

Throughout the room, groups of Helpers and members of the community stood together. They paused in their conversations, their dances, to take time for the youngest in their midst. The child: the meaning and continuation of life. It was through children that life renewed itself, completing the uninterrupted and eternal circle of existence.

Vincent saw Narcissa standing with Elizabeth; listening, sharing the special moment. And he heard again the words she had spoken: *You are becoming, child*. A promise of continuation. A promise of life. He smiled, feeling Catherine smile with him.

In front of them, Father stood with Eric, Gavin and Anne-Marie. The young boy stood straight and proud. And although Anne-Marie held the baby, it was evident that Eric felt the importance of his responsibility. He had found the child, had brought the new life to the world Below. It fell to him to give her a name.

" . . . And we welcome the child with a name."

"Her name is Ellie," Eric said.



The Winterfest activities were drawing to a close as the hours passed and the energy of the participants lagged. Musicians who had once played reels and polkas had traded their livelier tunes for soft songs of love.

Mary, Faye and some of the older girls, had long since taken the younger children back to the Home Chambers, leaving the parents to have a dance or just find a moment in which to be alone. Subdued conversations instead of bright laughter filled the Hall now, and those who lingered found themselves touched by the sweet air of expectation.

Vincent looked down into the eyes of the woman he loved, watching the glimmering reflection of the candlelight dance within their green depths. He held her waist loosely, his hands lightly wrapped around her delicate body. She lifted her hands to his shoulders, and he felt the tips of her fingers as they gently teased his neck. Her touch thrummed through him and he felt more alive than he had ever been. The air around them shimmered with the electricity he had felt all evening.

"Do you feel it, Catherine?"

"The magic."

"Hmmm."

Like a soft, subtle breeze, the piano's notes lifted on the air, settling into the hushed stillness of the Great Hall. It wrapped around them, like the fine, silken threads of a cocoon, bringing them together. Then, the magic came, pushing gently, as spellbound and enchanted, they moved in a dance meant only for them.

"Tonight, Catherine," Vincent whispered, as they waltzed in perfect rhythm to the music of Rolle and Brahms. He felt the shimmering light of her love enfold his heart and knew that the time of becoming had past.

*' . . . one voice from two strings it
glides along. Across what instruments
have we been spanned? And what violinist
holds us in his hand?
O sweetest song.'*



To my readers -

*I hope you enjoyed *The Next Waltz* and found our continuing journey through the Tunnels to be one that you will want to return to again and again.*

*There will, of course, be a third book. I wouldn't leave you (or myself) wondering what will happen next. The title of book three will be *O Sweetest Song*.*

The writing of this book, however, and its publication date, will be decided by the continuing carpal tunnel syndrome in both my hands, subsequent surgery, and the strength of my three friends, Nanette, Vicki and Kellie, to type endless hours of dictation.

*If you would like information (when available) on the publication of *O Sweetest Song*, please send a self-addressed, stamped, envelope to Dominion Press.*