
Shall Have No Dominion

Part Three

O Sweetest Song

Dedication

Through the long days, and the insane days;
the summer from Hell and the months without sight,
you have been there for me and with me.
You know who you are. Know that I love you.

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*You and me - all that lights upon us, though,
brings us together like a Fiddle-bow
drawing one voice from two strings it
glides along. Across what instrument
have we been spanned? And what violinist
holds us in his hand?
O sweetest song.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

I

The pipes were quiet. Only the tread of tired footsteps and the murmur of gently-said "goodbyes," whispered through the corridors of the home chambers. Catherine leaned her head against the solid warmth of her husband's strong shoulder and felt his arm tighten around her.

All through the Winterfest celebration, Catherine had felt the magic that surrounded them. Like gossamer threads of light it had woven itself through their hearts and through their souls, holding them within its gentle embrace. She remembered Vincent's eyes as they had danced; the flames from a hundred shimmering candles reflected back to her, bathing her with the iridescent light of his love. The gentle chords of Rolle's music had been slow and caressing, keeping time with the beating of their hearts and the melody of the Brahms waltz.

Now, as she and Vincent made their way slowly toward their chamber, Catherine turned her mind forward, knowing somehow that Narcissa's promise was coming true. She smiled, thinking of all the possibilities inherent in miracles.

"Your love has always been a miracle to me, Catherine," she heard Vincent whisper. "From the moment you first came into my life, I have known that miracles exist."

Catherine stopped walking and looked up into Vincent's eyes. The light from the torches cast wavering shadows across his face, and brought out in stark relief the ethereal beauty of the man she loved. She reached up to touch his cheek, enjoying the warmth of him beneath her fingers.

Words could not begin to express how much she loved him. Only through their bond, that wondrous connection that grew now with every passing day, could she share with Vincent the depth and delight of her feelings.

Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.

Catherine smiled as Vincent's thought flowed through her mind, letting her know that he was there, sharing the wonder, the warmth. *My times be in thy hand. Perfect the cup as planned.*

Vincent turned his head, pressing a gentle kiss against Catherine's fingers, as he wrapped his other arm around her and drew her close. How delicate she felt within his arms, how soft and feminine against the blunt hardness of his body. Vincent lifted her gently, until only the tips of her shoes touched the ground. He felt her breath move in a whispers touch across his cheek, as he brought their mouths toward the kiss they both wanted. Catherine wrapped her arms around his neck, and he felt her fingers stroke his nape, sending shivers of anticipation down his spine.

It was always like this; every kiss as new as the first. Vincent hesitated for a moment, feeling the warmth and softness of Catherine's lips as they waited, open and anxious under his. He moved his mouth slowly, taking her breath, sharing the taste of the spiced cider that was still on his tongue. He felt the burst of pleasure that shivered through her as their tongues touched, and he deepened the kiss, holding her even closer.

"...but Michael, it's so romantic. It's like they're the only two people in the world."

"Brooke..."

"I do wish, upon occasion, that my son would remember they are *not* the only people inhabiting these tunnels."

"Oh, Father, sometimes I don't think you have a romantic bone in your body. Don't you remember what it's like to be in love?"

With a reluctant sigh, Vincent ended the kiss, resting his forehead for a moment on Catherine's before he set her gently on her feet again. Reality had followed them from the Great Hall and now stood watching with looks that ranged from awe to annoyance. Vincent listened to his wife's silent plea for tolerance and sighed again as he looked from the love in Catherine's eyes to the faces of those who stood around them.

"I am sorry if we embarrassed you, Father," Vincent said softly, "but certainly a kiss between a newly-wed husband and wife is not so odd an occurrence in these tunnels. Catherine and I are not the only ones here who share a deep and abiding love."

"I realize that, Vincent," Father began, "but . . . "

"What he wants to say, Vincent," Brooke interrupted, "is that it's not the same when you and Catherine kiss. Really. You can practically see the sparks." She turned toward her companion. "Do you know how to kiss like that, Michael?"

Vincent felt Catherine's laughter as she hid her flushed face against the quilted thickness of his vest. *Coward*, he chided silently. The echo of her soft laughter stole through the bond like a sigh.

"Go to bed, young lady," Father told Brooke. He leaned against his cane, shaking his head as he looked at the young couple. "And I shall expect you to be a proper escort, Michael."

"Of course, Father."

Vincent watched as Michael nudged Brooke hurriedly down the corridor toward the chamber she shared with Rebecca. As they rounded the corner, Catherine turned within the shelter of his arms, raising her face so that they met Father's eyes together.

"She's quite right, you know," Father said, his stern face breaking into a weary smile of resignation. "There is a tangible difference in the air when the two of you touch. And when you kiss. . . " He sighed and moved closer, reaching out to touch Vincent's arm. "I have always wished you happiness, Vincent," he said, moving his hand slowly until it came to rest on Catherine's cheek. "Perhaps it is only an old man's jealousy of all that lies before you, of the life that you now share." He bent down and placed a gentle kiss on Catherine's forehead. "But would a little decorum be so amiss?" he whispered. "Goodnight, children."

"Goodnight, Father."



Catherine watched from the bed as Vincent moved slowly around the room, blowing out all but one large candle on the small table next to Jacob's crib. The air in the room filled with the scent of wax and lavender, and flickering shadows chased across the chamber walls. Vincent touched the small mobile that hung above the crib. And as he stared at the movement of the miniature universe, Catherine felt the sadness within him.

"It's strange not having him here with us. Isn't it, Vincent?" Catherine pulled back the quilts and made room for her husband as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"I know he is not far away, Catherine, that he is in the nursery with the other children. I can feel that he is well . . . that he is sleeping." Vincent took off his boots and socks and reached up to untie his vest. "But still I feel his absence," he added. Gentle fingers stroked through his hair, and he leaned his head back, pushing against her hands, enjoying her touch. The ties beneath his fingers lay forgotten.

"I understand, Vincent," Catherine said quietly, knowing her voice would soothe him almost as well as her touch. "Those were terrible times, and your memory of them is still very strong." She moved out from beneath the quilts and leaned closer, resting her cheek against his back. "I share some of that time with you still, Vincent," she murmured. "I know how it hurts."

"Yes." Vincent reached up and pulled Catherine's hands down around his neck, into his. He held them silently for a moment before he spoke. "Perhaps it is only the sight of his empty crib that shakes me so, Catherine," he said, pressing his lips to her fingers. "It is such a lonely sight; that empty bed, the toys that wait for his return."

"'Little Boy Blue,'" Catherine whispered, sharing the memories of her childhood loss, and the poem that had embodied that loss to her. She had hated the writer for writing it, for it always brought the sadness closer

somehow. "The little toy dog is covered with dust, but sturdy and staunch he stands, and the little toy soldier is red with rust, and his musket moulds in his hands..." Her voice broke when she thought of how close they had come to losing their son, and the pain that lingered within both their hearts because of it. "Bring Jacob back from the nursery, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "We need to have him with us."



The air was still, silent. All the beds in the nursery chamber were filled with sleeping children, wrapped snugly within the patchwork quilts and blankets that covered them. Two, small nightlamps glowed faintly at each end of the room, their dim light doing little to dispel all but the deepest shadows.

But to Vincent's sharp eyes the room was a collage of color and form. Trundle beds stood beside hand-hewn bunk beds, the space between them just large enough to allow for climbing in and out of bed. Original artwork covered the walls around them, crayon-brilliant colors of the world Above hung against the grays and browns of the world they now called home.

Vincent sighed. So many of these children had come to them with haunted eyes and weary souls. Alone, forgotten by the world Above, left to fend for themselves on the angry streets of the city. Did those Above care so little for the future that they would see it die in front of their eyes and not lift a hand to save it? Had that world grown so cold that it could continue to ignore the small voices crying from neglect?

Vincent rubbed his tired eyes as he shook off the thoughts tumbling through his mind. Ever since the night he had found Eric, lost and cold, sheltering an abandoned baby against his small chest, Vincent had known that he needed to do more; *had* to do more, somehow, to help the forgotten children. The need pulled at him, taunting him, making him that much more aware of how precious his son's presence was to his well-being and how close he had once come to losing him.

He turned to look at the two cribs that stood, side by side, across from the older children's beds. One was empty; its most recent occupant now newly-named and adopted by a young couple who did not yet have a baby of their own. She would be a child of the Tunnels, a child of the community, but she would also have two special people who loved her as their own.

Thinking of the joy Ellie would bring to their lives, Vincent smiled and looked at the baby boy now awake and watching him from the other crib. Hands clenched firmly around his stuffed cow, Jacob's wise, dark eyes followed Vincent's every movement as he walked toward the crib. Swirling patterns of intense emotion flared like small whirlwinds through Vincent's mind as his son's thoughts came to him. Jacob too, it seemed, had felt the need to be back in their chamber, back with the mother he was only just beginning to know.

"She misses you, also Jacob," Vincent whispered, lifting his young son into his arms. "Let's go home."



Catherine put the book she had been reading on the shelf behind the bed and leaned back against the pillows. The soft cotton of Vincent's shirt billowed around her and she smiled, inhaling the scents of homemade soap and candle wax that clung to the cloth.

Everything in the world Below seemed to carry a subtle scent and feel that Catherine had never known Above. The textures of the clothes she wore, the smell of burning candles, the coolness of the rock and earth around them, all awakened her senses to unbelievable heights.

She knew that part of that awareness came from the depth of the bond she now shared with Vincent. His senses *were* more highly evolved, and when their minds merged and intertwined on every level, even breathing seemed to become something they shared. They were truly *one*, together as she had never dared to dream.

Catherine smiled and looked around the chamber. Jacob's toys vied for space beside his father's crowded treasures. Diapers were neatly stacked upon newly-built shelves; the diaper pail sat beneath them, seeming less out of place to her now. And their son's crib; the covers neatly turned back and waiting. So many changes.

She sighed and brought her knees up, tucking the dress-length shirt under her bare feet. *So many changes.*

"And so much love."

Catherine turned toward the open chamber door and smiled. "And so much love," she agreed, sliding off the edge of the bed and lifting her arms to take Jacob. "Love enough to make miracles."

"And children."

His words were soft, and as gentle as the small arms that reached out to her. "Yes," Catherine said, gathering the warm and sleepy child against her breasts, "and children." She carried Jacob to the crib, letting her lips linger over the baby-sweet softness of his hair.

He would always be a symbol of sorts; a mingling of all that they were together - light and dark, gentleness and strength. They had created him, had merged in mind and body to create the new life who was so much a part of them both.

Catherine kissed Jacob's cheek and laid him on his stomach in the crib. She watched as he squirmed around getting comfortable, tucking his knees up and gathering his stuffed cow closer to his face. He snuggled against it and with a small sigh, closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

"He was waiting for me," Vincent said, wrapping his arms around her. Catherine leaned back against his chest, smiling as his arms tightened and he brushed his cheek lightly over the top of her head. *Sweet. So sweet.*

"Are you referring to me or to Jacob?" Catherine asked, letting him know that she had heard only the faintest edges of his thoughts.

Vincent looked down into her upturned face. Her eyes sparkled with dreams and love fulfilled. "Both of you," Vincent whispered. "Jacob has

your sweetness, Catherine," he told her. "Your sweetness and your laughter." He touched her cheek lightly with his lips as he inhaled the warm, woman-scent of her skin. He tightened his arms, bringing her closer as he looked past her to where their son lay sleeping.

"Are we doing the right thing, Catherine?" Vincent asked softly. "Do we dare to create another child?"

Catherine heard the trace of fear beyond the words and her hands stroked lightly over the arms that enfolded her. "You're worried that this time our child will look like you." It was not a question. His thoughts were deeply entwined with hers now, and she knew, for the first time, the disquiet she had not felt in him before.

"I would not condemn another to my fate, Catherine," Vincent said, rubbing his cheek across her hair. "The danger, the aloneness . . . it has sometimes been more than I could bear."

"Our child would not *be* alone, Vincent," Catherine told him, turning within the circle of his arms. "Our child would have you to guide him. He would know, beyond any doubt, that he was created in love by parents who cherish him for who and what he is. And he would know that someday, he too, could fall in love, have children." She reached up, framing Vincent's face between her hands. The short hair bristled familiarly against her palms and she smiled. "You are beautiful, Vincent," she reminded him, "And any child you give me will be beautiful as well. Don't you know that?"

Vincent met her steady, unhesitating gaze. He knew her heart, her mind, her soul. In the deepest part of her being, Catherine believed, truly believed what she had said. If she could be so confident, so sure, could he be less?

"I love you, Vincent," Catherine whispered. She didn't need to say it, for he felt her love in the arms she wrapped around his neck, and in the lips that teased his jaw. But it was through their ever-strengthening bond that he knew the absolute certainty of her heart. And that certainty scattered his doubts, replacing them with love, and need.

"You are my light," he told her, as he gathered her into his arms and carried her to their bed. "Through all the darkness, Catherine, your love has been the beacon that guided me safely home." He laid her amid the

quilts and pillows, and then straightened, his fingers slipping through the loosened ties of his vest. He slipped it over his head, removing the shirt beneath almost in the same motion.

Catherine stared unabashedly at her husband's naked chest. There weren't words to describe how beautiful he was, or how just the sight of him made her breath catch. And touching him . . . there was nothing to compare with the unique textures she longed to explore again, with her hands, with her mouth.

"Catherine . . . "

She looked up into Vincent's eyes, and saw her need for him reflected there. She sat up and knelt on the bed before him, and reached out to work open the clasp of his belt.

"Share my thoughts, Vincent," she whispered, sliding the leather through the loops on his pants. "See yourself as I see you." The zipper parted easily beneath her fingers and as she pushed the pants down past Vincent's hips, Catherine leaned forward, rubbing her cheek against the taut muscles of his stomach. "Let me show you how beautiful you are to me."

Vincent closed his eyes as he felt the softness of Catherine's cheek, the warmth of her breath against his skin. Tiny tremors of awareness pulsed through him as he stood, unable to move beneath the gentleness of her caress. He did as she asked, gliding his thoughts the final way past the normal barriers of her consciousness to become fully one with her.

He felt the softness of his own body hair beneath her lips, the heat that permeated his skin. Catherine's hands tightened on his hips and he felt the resilience of hardened muscle and the quivering that her questing fingers provoked. She knew that her every touch excited him and he shared with her the intoxicating feeling that knowledge created. Shared and responded.

Her lips moved with slow deliberation across his stomach, his chest, until the hardened flesh of his nipple lay beneath her tongue. Vincent gasped, experiencing both the roughness of his own flesh beneath her mouth and the exquisite pleasure her touch brought to him. He reached out, sliding his fingers into the silken strands of her hair, kneading her scalp as her tongue and teeth caressed him. Vincent moaned, and the sound

Catherine made as her hands stroked him from waist to thigh, echoed his passion.

Within their shared consciousness, there was no distinction between the one who gave and the one who received. Their love for each other, once so restricted and restrained, reveled in each touch, in each response. They were something that had never been, and they were beautiful.

"My love . . . my life."

Vincent slid his hands down to Catherine's shoulders and with gentle pressure urged her off the bed until she stood, trembling before him. For a moment he could only stare into her wide, dazed eyes. He saw himself reflected there and knew, beyond a doubt that what Catherine had said was true. He was beautiful. She had made him so.

With trembling hands, Vincent unbuttoned Catherine's shirt and pulled it quickly over her head. She smiled, and moved the small distance that separated them.

"Love me, Vincent," she whispered, clasping his shoulders as she moved against him. She stood on her toes, aligning her small body with his larger one, bringing velvet breasts against hardened muscle.

Vincent put his hands on Catherine's waist and lifted her into his arms. He kissed her neck, her cheek, the soft, sensitive skin beneath her ear. She trembled and Vincent caught her mouth with his, wanting to have all of her - all of her. He shifted his hands until they cupped the soft cheeks of her bottom, and he could feel the warmth of her waiting for him, needing him.

Slowly, he laid her back among the pillows, glad for the strength that allowed him to hold her close as he followed her down to the bed. Her legs parted and she welcomed him, enclosing him within her body. Home. He was home.

Thought became impossible. Reality narrowed. Vincent tangled his fingers in Catherine's hair, trying to control the need clutching at him. He moved within the unbelievable heat of her, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. He groaned, kissing her deeply, merging their mouths as he had merged their bodies.

Catherine's fingers dug into his shoulders as her hips lifted beneath him, pushing against him, telling him that now, now was the moment. He gasped for breath, poised at the very edge, every nerve in his body crying out for release. *Yes!*

They moved as one, sharing the shuddering fulfillment that overwhelmed them, until time and the night ceased to exist and they slept.



II

It was the pain that woke her. And as she lay on her side, secure and warm in her husband's arms, Catherine located the source of her pain. She smiled, wondering if reality wasn't just a bit too real. But it *was* reality. A reality that had always been a nuisance, something grumbled about with friends. Now, though, it provided her with an undeniable evidence of her own reality. Proof that the blood she felt rushing through her veins was real, that the body snuggled intimately against Vincent's was flesh and not fantasy. Proof, too, that her body was preparing itself for the child she and Vincent would conceive. For such a gift, she could put up with the cramps.

"Catherine?"

Catherine rolled over onto her back and smiled up into Vincent's beautiful eyes. "Did I wake you?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I didn't mean to." She slid her fingers along his nape, lingering at the places she knew brought him pleasure. Just looking at him made her forget the pain.

"Something is wrong," Vincent said, gently touching her cheek. "You are in pain. I can feel it."

Catherine's smile widened and she turned her face into his hand, placing a kiss on his palm. She looked back at the concern in his eyes. "Something is very right, Vincent," she assured him. "It's just nature's way of letting me know I'm going to be able to get pregnant." She twined her hands into his lush hair and pulled his face closer. "I've got cramps, Vincent," she said softly. "That's the pain you feel."

Catherine felt his thoughts collide with her own, his questioning mind reaching deeper in order to fully comprehend what she was telling him. "Cramps," he whispered, pulling slightly back as he drew the blankets down to the top of her thighs. "Menstrual cramps." Catherine felt the awe that filled him as he hesitantly stroked the exact spot where she hurt. In his

thoughts she saw the future; her body swollen with his child, and after the birth, the baby at her breast. It was the dream he had once spoken of. And it was going to come true. But not just yet.

"When, Catherine?" She smiled, feeling the excitement that blended with the reverence.

"If I remember my old health ed. classes," she told him, "I'd say the best time would be in about two weeks." She covered his hand with hers, realizing that the pain seemed to lessen when he touched her. But thinking of the pain brought another thought. A thought that Vincent heard.

"You were not prepared for this," he said, bringing the hand he held up to his lips. "You will need something." He smiled and Catherine knew that he had felt her discomfort at the situation. "Does this embarrass you?" he asked, rubbing his lips against her knuckles.

"No," she told him honestly, "I'm not embarrassed, just a little disconcerted." Catherine tightened her fingers around his hand. "So much is happening within me, Vincent;" she said softly, "first to my mind, my memories. Now, here's something new, something I didn't even think of."

Vincent smiled down at her and Catherine's heart filled with the enchantment of that smile. "Do you not know how wondrous this is to me, Catherine?" he asked. "Your body is preparing itself for our child, making ready the place that will nurture him." He lowered his head, brushing her lips lightly with his. "Let me share in this part of our miracle, Catherine," he said gently. "It is a natural part of life . . . and love. Our love. Our life."

Vincent kissed her again and Catherine reveled in the sweetness, remembering that their life now was a miracle. More of a miracle, she sometimes felt, than even her returning. She had been with him only nineteen days, but it seemed as though they had always been together, had always shared their love as completely as they did now. Her fading memories no longer bothered her, for she was making new memories every day - with Vincent, with their son.

"A son who will soon be waking," Vincent reminded her. "Perhaps you could borrow one of his diapers and some pins until you talk to Mary."

Catherine laughed. "You don't think Jacob will be offended, do you?" she teased. "That's a pretty personal thing to borrow."

Vincent smiled and shook his head. "Jacob loves you as much as I do, Catherine," he said softly. "There is nothing either of us possess that we would not gladly give to you."

Catherine brushed her lips against Vincent's jaw, placing tender kisses along his skin until she reached his ear. "I want your child, Vincent," she whispered. "Another child like Jacob." Her teeth caught his earlobe, biting very gently. "There isn't anything I want more than that."

Vincent wrapped her in his arms, holding her tightly against him. Every day he caught himself wondering if this was only a dream. And every day the reality of what they shared filled him with happiness. No empty corners lingered to torment him, no dark beast waited in the shadows, ready to possess his body and his mind. Catherine was with him, a part of him. Her light had filled the corners, illuminated the shadows. And now she asked only to share the greatest gift a woman could give; life.

"When you speak to Mary," he said, "ask her if two weeks is correct. We will make a journey to our wedding chamber." He felt Catherine's smile and the warmth of her lips against his neck before she raised her head. Her eyes gleamed, even in the faint light of Jacob's lamp.

"Have I told you yet today how much I love you?" she asked, in that low, husky voice he knew so well.

"Only as you do every morning, Catherine," Vincent answered. "Each day when I awake with you in my arms, I know how much I am loved. And I am awed by the enormity of it." He caressed her bare shoulder, then lingered over the delicate curve of her collarbone. "You have given me everything I had ever wished for," he told her. "And soon we will share in the creation of another new life." He looked beyond her to the child moving now in his crib.

"I will be here for you, Catherine," he said, holding her close again. "To watch over you, to care for you." Vincent knew his words were a vow, for as it had last night, a small tentacle of fear had woven its way into his soul. He had failed her once. It would not happen again.

Catherine felt his fear and this time she recognized the memories that gave rise to it. She pushed against his chest, raising herself onto her elbows so that Vincent would have to see her face. "I thought we settled all of that," she said, reaching out to capture his stubborn chin between her hands. "There wasn't anything more you could have done. Stop blaming yourself."

"I told you, Catherine," he reminded her softly, "nothing you can explain, nothing you can say to me will ever change the helplessness I felt then. I was adrift, cut off from you. There was no light to guide me, Catherine. There was only darkness."

"A darkness that is *gone* now," she insisted. "Jacob and I are part of you, bound to you." She took a deep breath, trying to calm the emotions sweeping through her, trying to sort through which were hers, which were his. "Do you truly believe that we've been given this miracle, this second chance, only to have it taken from us?" She stroked the short whiskers beneath her fingers, hoping to soothe him, hoping to soothe herself.

"We won't be parted again, Vincent," she told him. "Believe this if you believe nothing else. I *know* it." He started to speak and she covered his lips with her fingers. "I'll admit, there have been changes I wasn't prepared for. I'll even admit that Narcissa seems to know more about this than I do. But, there is one thing I *do* know with absolute certainty."

Catherine saw the lips beneath her fingers curve into a smile and realized that while Vincent's emotions had begun to calm, hers were now whirling at hurricane speed. "It won't work, you know," she told him, her voice coming back to its more gentle tones. "You can't hide it from me, Vincent, and I refuse to let you keep worrying about something that isn't going to happen." She bent forward, stroking his lips first with her fingers, and then with the tip of her tongue. "I'm with you forever, Vincent," she whispered. "We will never be apart again." She covered his lips with hers, sealing her words like a vow between them. And it was a vow; a vow as deep as their love, as binding as eternity. And this time, Catherine knew that he believed her.



"Vincent, I'm glad I found you."

Vincent looked up his son's oatmeal-covered face and nodded to Peter as his friend put down his teacup and pulled out the bench across from them. The dining hall was almost empty. Most of the community was trying to catch up on much-needed sleep, and even Father admitted that very little was ever accomplished the day after Winterfest.

"I did not expect to see you so early, Peter," Vincent said, spooning some more of the cereal into Jacob's greedy mouth. "It was very late when you left Winterfest."

Peter took a sip from his cup. "I didn't think you noticed," he said. "You and Catherine seemed pretty much oblivious to the rest of us by the time I left."

Vincent wiped Jacob's mouth, remembering the waltzes Rolle had played for them, and how they had danced, it seemed, for hours. "Yes," he answered softly, "it was a magical night."

"I think everyone had a good time," Peter agreed. "They all seemed to accept Catherine without any problem."

Vincent heard a subtle shift in Peter's tone and he looked more closely at the man across the table. Had he expected Catherine's return to create a disturbance? "Did you think she would *not* be accepted, Peter?" Vincent asked.

Peter sighed. "No," he said, "it's not that." He paused to take another long drink of his tea and Vincent understood that there was something Peter was not saying.

"What is it, Peter?" he asked. "What is troubling you so?"

"Where's Catherine?" Peter asked, abruptly changing the subject and answering Vincent's question with one of his own. "Did you take over with Jacob this morning so that she could sleep in?"

"Catherine had some things to talk over with Mary," Vincent said, "and she knows that I enjoy being with Jacob." He paused, smiling as Jacob reached for the spoon, impatient for his food. "It would not be appropriate for me to relinquish all of Jacob's care to Catherine simply because she is here now," he said, giving his son the last of the oatmeal. "Jacob needs both of us. And Catherine and I agree that parenting is a shared responsibility." He looked at Peter as he reached for the small bowl containing Jacob's applesauce. "To be perfectly honest," he said smiling, "I seem to have more experience."

Peter laughed and Vincent was glad to see the worry fade from his friend's face. "That's probably true," Peter agreed. "After Caroline died, I think Catherine gave up a lot of things to be with Charles. You know, teenage girl things, like babysitting, and slumber parties. Not that he asked her to, of course, but I think Catherine always knew that eventually she'd go off to college and have to leave him alone. I guess she wanted to be close to him while she had the chance."

"Catherine is a very loving woman," Vincent said softly, thinking of the way in which he had finally met Catherine's father. How difficult that time had been for her, for both of them. He knew that their secret had widened the gap between father and child. But could it have been any different? He looked again at Peter and caught the older man watching him. Was he, too, thinking of things which might have been?

"She only had a few close friends," Peter said. "Mostly girls she met in college, like Nancy and Jenny. Then, of course, there's my daughter Susan." He paused for a moment and Vincent watched as Peter stared into his cup. "Does Catherine miss them at all, Vincent?"

Vincent took a moment to feed Jacob some of the fruit before he answered. "I'm not certain that Catherine has had time to miss her friends. Above, Peter," he said honestly. "These past weeks have been difficult and full. Much has happened."

"Yes," Peter agreed. "Much *has* happened."

Vincent tolerated the silence for only a few minutes before he put down Jacob's spoon and turned to face his friend. "Something is troubling you, Peter," he said. "Something which concerns Catherine. Will you tell me what it is?"

Peter looked up and nodded. "You're right," he said, sighing. "I just didn't know how to begin, or whether I should talk to you first or to Catherine. It's been bothering me since yesterday morning, but I didn't think Winterfest was the time to spring it on you." He sighed again and wrapped his hands around his cup. "I got a phone call yesterday morning from Jenny Aronson," he said slowly. "Has Catherine ever mentioned her?"

"Yes, often," Vincent said, as he picked up the spoon and resumed feeding Jacob. "They were very close."

"Well," Peter continued, "Jenny's always been a little precognitive. I don't know if Catherine's ever told you about this, but Jenny has dreams. My daughter, Susan, told me about them years ago when the three of them were in college together. Anyway, she's been having those 'weird dreams' as she calls them, about Catherine."

Vincent continued to feed Jacob while he thought about Jenny Aronson and her dreams. She had been the first to warn Catherine of the danger from the unknown watcher. She had been the one who knew when the danger grew stronger. Had she had other dreams? Dreams during the months of Catherine's disappearance? Could he have found Catherine with Jenny's help?

His hold on the small spoon tightened, as the thought of what he *might* have done filled his mind. Suddenly, the aching pain of the past caught and held him, tightening around his heart like barbed wire, making him bleed inside. And as she had earlier, Catherine refused to let it continue. Vincent felt her all around him, loosening the bonds of his pain, soothing him with her love, her light.

"Vincent . . . let it go . . . let the pain go. It's over now."

He heard her in his mind, in his soul, and the pain eased. He took a shuddering breath, feeling her deep within his heart and mind. And words of comfort came to him; comforting them both.

"...you must not be frightened . . . if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall."

He felt a small hand against his, and looked down to see Jacob's fingers covering his where they still gripped the spoon. When he looked into his son's eyes he saw both the pain and the comfort reflected in their depths.

"Thank you," he told them silently. *"Your love . . . thank you . . . both."* He felt the essence of her, like gentle fingers brushing over his cheek and the innocence of Jacob's love, a soft-shimmer within her light.

"We are part of you, Vincent. We will not let you fall."

Vincent smiled, touching his son with his free hand while he answered his wife with his heart. *"I know, Catherine. I know."* He listened as her love surrounded him, reassured him, then he felt her move subtly into the outer fringes of his consciousness. He knew she remained nearby, sharing his emotions again, if not the totality of his thoughts. And her presence soothed and strengthened him.

"Vincent? What's wrong? What did I say?"

Vincent put down the spoon. He looked at Peter and then back to the small hand clasping his. "Lately," he began, "I have started to remember the dark time, the time of Catherine's disappearance, when she was taken from me." He drew in a deep breath, wanting to answer Peter but at the same time asking himself why these memories had suddenly begun to plague him.

"This time now . . . this miracle that has been given to us . . . is all the more precious to me because I know the agony of losing her." He looked up, unconcerned that Peter would see his tears. "So many times I have wondered: was there something I could have done differently, some small detail I overlooked?" Vincent looked down and bent to kiss the small hand still wrapped in his. Their son; the embodiment of their dreams, their love. And in that moment, Vincent knew it was the vision of Catherine carrying yet another child that had set loose his fear and trepidation. Had he, buried somewhere deep within him, the idea that if Catherine carried his child, he would lose her?

"Vincent?"

Vincent felt Peter's hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Peter," he said, sighing. "There are things . . . " He shook his head and met his friend's worried gaze. "When you mentioned Jenny's dreams . . . it awakened ideas, thoughts of things I might have done." He took a deep breath and reached for the small spoon. Jacob had been patient, but even the best of sons would not wait forever to be fed. He ran the spoon around the edge of the bowl, filling it with applesauce and wondering what Peter was thinking.

"It doesn't matter now what you *might* have done," Peter said. "You have to put that time behind you." He reached out, and Vincent was surprised by the strength in the fingers holding his forearm.

"Catherine is back with you," Peter continued, "She is your wife now, and she is here Below. You need to concentrate on the present, Vincent - not the past." He paused a moment, and Vincent knew that Peter was choosing his words carefully.

"Vincent," he said softly, "you've got more than your share to be thankful for. No matter how she got here, the fact that Catherine *is* with you can't be disputed." Peter paused, and Vincent saw him look at the small child who sat watching and listening beside him.

"You've got a remarkable son and a beautiful wife who loves you more than any of us can begin to comprehend," Peter told him, his voice almost hushed in the quiet of the room. "Don't let the past cloud the life you have *now*, Vincent. Live with them in the present. Let yourself have the happiness you deserve."

Vincent covered Peter's hand with his and marveled at the emotion in his friend's plea. In all the years he had known him, Peter had always seemed the most controlled, the most dispassionate of men. Something had changed him. Could it be that Catherine's return had awakened something deep inside of this man? Something that changed the way he now looked at the world and life?

"You are quite right, Peter," he said, feeling not only the strength of his friend's convictions, but the loving comfort of both his wife and child as they lingered within him. "Whatever happened before Catherine returned to me is in another time, another life. For both of us." He thought briefly of Elliot, living within the Tunnels now, and knew that some part of that other time would always linger to taunt him. It was inevitable.

Then he thought of the child yet to be, the child he and Catherine wanted so much to conceive. This child, along with Jacob, was part of their future. He could not let that fear, that connection his mind had somehow made, deprive him of the joy and wonder of today. The present, he admitted to himself, was where he needed and wanted to be.

"Catherine has also reminded me that the past is behind us," he told Peter. "'Portions and parcels of the dreadful past,' she said." He smiled, remembering that moment. "She comforts me with Tennyson and touches."

"'Happy the man, and happy he alone,'" Vincent began,
"He who can call today his own;
He who, secure within, can say,
Tomorrow, do thy worst, for I have lived today."

Peter laughed and Vincent felt the tension ease around them. "I might have known you'd find something to quote to me," Peter complained. "You're as bad as Jacob." He finished his tea and leaned his arms on the table.

"Father is an excellent teacher, Peter," Vincent reminded him. Little Jacob pushed at his hand and Vincent started to feed him again. His son's eyes reflected happiness now, instead of pain, and it made Vincent even more aware of just how tightly woven were the threads of their bond. Around them, sounds of the progressing day began to echo through the large room, and Vincent smiled as William's voice rose above the rest. Those who had slept late would know that William would have a nourishing lunch awaiting them. William's split pea soup and shepherd's bread were a day-after-Winterfest tradition.

"Sounds like things will be picking up in here soon," Peter observed. "And I really do need to talk to you about Jenny." Vincent watched as he surveyed the room. There were still only a few people sitting at the long tables around them.

"Jacob is almost finished with his breakfast," Vincent told him, "but William promised Catherine oat muffins this morning." He smiled, remembering how she had said that William's muffins were almost as good as his cookies. "When Catherine returns from seeing Mary," Vincent continued, "she is meeting us here for a late breakfast." He gave the last spoonful of applesauce to his son, then looked at his friend. "Please feel

free to continue with what you were saying, Peter," he told him. "I promise not to interrupt again. Catherine has told me that I have a tendency to brood. And as you may have noticed, she is correct. I am working on the problem," he added wryly.

Peter chuckled and patted Vincent's arm. "Wives have been trying to change one thing or another about their husbands since the beginning of time, Vincent. But in this case, I think Catherine has a point. I've seen you smile more in the last few weeks than I have in all the years I've known you."

"She brings me much joy, Peter," Vincent said simply. He turned and reached down to unbuckle the strap around Jacob's waist. The baby held out his arms and Vincent lifted him from the high chair, placing him against his shoulder. As always, Jacob snuggled into one of his favorite spots, his hand clasping and holding tightly to his father's hair. Vincent smiled, both Jacob and Catherine seemed to have a fascination with his hair. "Catherine is my light," he said, looking back at Peter.

"Yes," Peter agreed, "and you've been hers. She changed, you know, when the two of you met." He paused for a moment, looking around the room again. "But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, am I? Seeing the two of you together makes me proud, Vincent. And it makes me happy. Very happy."



III

Catherine rose from the overstuffed chair and stretched her arms above her head, working out the kinks. She had enjoyed her morning with Mary but was anxious to join Vincent and Jacob in the dining hall. Because of the urgency of her problem, there had been little time earlier for more than a hurried bath and the quick cup of canned apple juice she had found in the small kitchen they shared with Father.

Stretching a little more, she inhaled deeply and the mingled scents of violets and roses permeated her senses. In the short time she had been living Below, Catherine had noticed that almost every chamber had a unique scent and feel to it. Mary's chamber always smelled of roses and violets and made you think of crocheted afghans and warm hugs.

As she stretched, Catherine watched Mary search diligently through the shelf on the far wall for her jar of dried raspberry leaves. As midwife to the community, Mary kept a small supply of necessary herbals in her own chamber as well as in the hospital chamber.

"Here it is, Catherine," Mary said, turning away from the shelf she had been searching. "I thought I still had some." She shook her head as she looked at the small amount in the jar. "I'll have to get up to the hospital chamber later to replenish this." She moved to the table and Catherine joined her. "Hold onto the paper, Catherine," Mary directed, as she opened the jar and started to pour the herbs. "I'll give you what's left. There should be enough for at least a few cups of tea," she said. "And you can ask William to find you a tea ball."

Mary put down the jar and folded the small sheet of butcher paper around the pile of herbs. Catherine watched, amazed as usual by the deftness of the older woman's hands. It was obvious that she had done this

a thousand times. She finished the small package by tying it with a length of string and handed it to Catherine.

"There you go." Mary put the packet into Catherine's hands. "Now, you've got enough of the pads I gave you to last until you can make some of your own. And I've put enough material in the bag with them, to get you started. So that takes care of at least part of the problem." She dusted off her hands and turned back toward the bed.

Catherine smiled as Mary handed her the drawstring bag. In the past few hours she had gained a lot of respect for women who had lived before the "disposable" age, and even more for those who lived Below. "Thank you, Mary," Catherine said, giving the gentle woman a hug. "You've been wonderful."

"Nonsense," Mary said softly, returning the hug. "You're part of our family now," she added. "You're one of my children. And I take care of all my children."

Catherine held her close again, then kissed her cheek. "I'm very glad to be one of your children, Mary," she said. "I couldn't have asked for a better mother."

Mary blushed at the compliment and patted Catherine's hand. "Yes, well, I'm just happy that Vincent and the baby have you to take care of them now. They need you, Catherine."

"Yes," Catherine agreed, "and I need them."

"That's as it should be. Now, you stop by the hospital chamber on your way to the dining hall and have Faye give you some of that analgesic Peter brings us. It's the same sort of thing you'd probably take Above, but you drink the tea, too."

"I will," Catherine promised, squeezing Mary's hand in farewell.

"And you tell Vincent that in two weeks I expect to have little Jacob staying with me. Father's chamber is no place for a baby."



When Catherine entered the dining hall almost an hour later, she was more than ready to sit down with a cup of tea and something to eat. It was probably too late to find a muffin, but the smell of William's soup had filled the corridors around the dining hall, and it smelled wonderful.

She had stopped at the hospital chamber to find Faye busy tending twelve-year-old Oliver. He had all the symptoms of a nasty stomach flu, and Faye had had her hands full. After telling her where to find the analgesic, Faye had asked that Catherine find Father. She seemed to think that there was a good chance some of Oliver's playmates would soon be joining him.

Father, as usual, had been in his study, finalizing the plans for the chambers in the Eastern Sector. Catherine passed on Faye's words and then followed him out into the long hallway that divided his chamber from theirs. "If you see Peter," Father had told her, "ask him to stop by the hospital chamber."

"Peter's with Vincent," she had said. "I'll let him know."

After leaving Father, Catherine had stopped by their chamber to leave Mary's bag of necessities. She had removed the small packet of herbs from the bag, slipping them into her pocket as she headed toward the dining hall.

Now, as she scanned the room, she had no trouble picking out Vincent's golden hair among the scattered diners. He called her his "light", but in the soft glow of the lamps hanging all around, Catherine thought that it was Vincent who illuminated the room.

She walked towards him, feeling the gentle pull of his presence and his love as he called to her through the bond. It never lessened; this feeling of total and complete love that filled her when she was near him. It only grew stronger.

Vincent turned slightly on the long bench and Catherine smiled. Jacob had found his usual place to cuddle, and even asleep his little hand

clutched a handful of his father's hair. She understood completely, since she often fell asleep with her face buried between the softness of Vincent's hair and the warmth of his muscled shoulder.

"You and our son are much alike, Catherine."

Catherine touched Vincent's back and bent over his shoulder to kiss the top of their son's head. "Yes," she whispered in Vincent's ear, "we both know the best place to sleep and the best person to sleep with." She pressed her lips against his cheek then moved to sit beside him on the bench.

"Good morning, Catherine," Peter said, reaching across the table to give her hand a squeeze. "I wondered when you were going to join us."

"I had a little problem to take care of," she explained, smiling.

"Nothing serious, I hope."

Catherine shook her head. "Nothing Mary couldn't handle," she answered softly. For some reason, Catherine found herself reluctant to discuss the subject of another pregnancy with Peter. She turned to look at Vincent, knowing already that he agreed with her.

For years their relationship had been almost a community project; moments spent together Below had meant moments shared with the entire family. Even her return and their marriage had allowed them little privacy. It seemed that only married couples had doors to their chambers, and even those were rare. The community was more of a family than any Catherine had ever known, but even in one's family, there was sometimes a need for solitude, a need for private thoughts and private decisions.

Vincent knew that Catherine sometimes felt overwhelmed by the constant demands of living among his communal family. She had been alone so long. There were many adjustments still to be made; adjustments that might be easier if she agreed to face the past instead of ignoring it.

"Peter has something to discuss with you, Catherine," he said, reaching out with his free hand to gently caress her cheek. "Perhaps I should put Jacob down for a nap and return later." His fingers slid across her cheek and into the softness of her hair.

"If it has anything to do with the reaction I felt from you earlier," she said, catching his fingers in hers, "I'd rather have you with me." Her fingers tightened in his and Vincent knew she felt his apprehension. "We're stronger together, Vincent," Catherine told him. "You know that."

Yes, he knew. He knew that although she and Jacob were always a part of him; a part of his mind, his soul, when they touched physically, the bond intensified, and not even the deepest pain could reach them. He brought the hand he held to his lips. "Then I will stay," he said, turning toward Peter. "Tell her, Peter," he said softly. "The decision will be up to Catherine."

Peter sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Damn, I wish there were more chairs in here," he mumbled, turning his head in a slow half-circle. "I get kinks in my kinks sitting on these benches. I'm too damn old for picnics."

"William says that the benches are cheaper and easier, Peter," Catherine answered, waiting for him to get to the point. "There are so few chairs because they are always having to be fixed. We could find one for you, though, if you like."

"Well, my back may have to be fixed, too," he groaned. "But I can take it for a little while longer. Maybe I can find a chiropractor who's willing to relocate."

Catherine smiled, and a little of her apprehension faded. "I think Father's had about all he can take right now of new additions to the community, Peter. You'd be better off finding someone in your own office building."

Peter cleared his throat, and his gaze moved to Vincent before returning to her. "He just may have to make room for another Helper, though," he said softly. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Catherine. Jenny Aronson's been trying to find you."

Catherine tightened her grip on Vincent's hand, wondering if the tightness in her chest was pain or lack of breath. She shut her eyes for a moment, leaning unconsciously on his strength. When she opened her eyes, Peter was watching her anxiously.

"Why would Jenny be trying to find me after all this time, Peter?" she managed to ask. So many changes, so many things happening at once. No wonder Vincent was apprehensive.

"Jenny's been having those dreams of hers, honey," Peter said gently. "She's been seeing you and the baby. She says she sees you sitting on a bed in a strange-looking room and you're playing with a baby."

Catherine could easily see herself as Jenny had probably seen her; stretched out on their bed playing with Jacob's toes, tickling him with her hair. "Is that all she saw, Peter?" she asked.

Peter shook his head. "No," he told her. "She also said that she sees a tall man standing in the shadows near you. She can't see his face, but she told me she knows that you love him and that he's the father of the baby." He paused, and Catherine knew that this was not easy for him. "She knows you're happy, Cathy."

Catherine blinked at the tears behind her eyes and wondered what in the world she was supposed to do. Miracles weren't the easiest things to explain and not everyone believed in them. Among these people she had found acceptance, a home. But they were special people, people who loved Vincent enough to accept his happiness under any conditions. People who understood the possibilities of miracles.

But Jen, how could she explain all this to Jen? And should she even try? She had told Peter that she was a part of *this* world now, and it was the truth. She had been given the chance to have the happy life she had always dreamed of; a life with the man she loved, with their children. Could she jeopardize her new family, the community, just to see an old friend?

"Why now, Peter?" she asked. "I've been back for almost three weeks. If Jenny's been having those weird dreams of hers for all this time, why did she wait so long to tell you?" She took a deep breath, feeling Vincent's fingers tighten in hers. There was something else, something more that Peter wasn't telling her.

"At first," Peter began, "Jenny said she wasn't certain just *why* she would be having dreams about you after all this time. But the dreams kept coming, and they were always the same."

"Jen used to be terrified of her dreams," Catherine told him. "They were always too vague," she whispered, remembering other dreams, other times. "And most of them came true."

"Catherine, this dream of Jenny's is not one of pain or disaster. It is a dream that tells her of your happiness. It is a dream born of love."

Catherine looked up into Vincent's wise and beautiful eyes, taking as much comfort from their gentle light as from the hand she clutched so tightly. She took comfort too, from his words.

"Do you think I should contact Jenny?" she asked him. "Could it really be that simple?"

Vincent smiled, but Catherine saw the sadness it held. "Has anything ever been simple for us, Catherine?" he asked softly.

Catherine returned his smile, moving closer to press a gentle kiss against his mouth. "No," she whispered, "not simple. Love as deep as ours is never simple, Vincent." She watched the changing light in his eyes for a moment before turning back to Peter.

"Tell me about the complications, Peter," she said. "I assume by what you aren't saying that there are complications?"

Peter leaned his arms against the table, and Catherine noticed how tired he looked. "The problem is," he began, "that Jenny called someone else before she called me. At first, she tried to ignore the dreams. But as they became more vivid, more real, she decided that there was a chance you hadn't . . . well, that you had been put into some sort of witness protection program."

"And she called Joe."

The words were out of her mouth almost at the same moment she thought them. Of course. Joe would be the logical person to call. He would also be much more of a complication than almost anyone else in the entire city of New York. Jenny might be allowed to become a Helper. Peter knew her, trusted her. But Joe Maxwell? No wonder Vincent was apprehensive. The entire future of the community could be jeopardized. And then, there was Elliot. What in the world was she going to do?

"Catherine?"

She heard Peter's voice as if from a long distance. Her mind was too full of questions, too full of answers she couldn't give. Slowly, she forced herself to focus on the man sitting on the other side of the table.

"This isn't something that you can decide for yourself," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

She *did* know that, didn't she? Something that involved the entire community had to be decided by the Council. It wasn't her decision. There was too much at stake. "Yes," she managed to say, "I realize that." She looked down at the hand still deeply entwined with hers. She could feel his strength, his love, flowing through her, giving her his courage, his support. And something more. She could feel something more, something he wasn't going to tell her.

"What did Joe say, Peter?" Catherine asked softly, raising her gaze. "What was it Joe said that Vincent thinks is going to hurt me?"

Peter looked startled and Catherine thought that perhaps he had forgotten how deeply the bond connected them. "Well," he began slowly, "according to Jenny, Maxwell wasn't all that cooperative. In fact, she says he got angry that she would even suggest he'd lie to her about such a thing." Catherine saw the sadness in Peter's eyes as he finally met her gaze. "Jenny told me that he blames himself, Cathy. When she spoke to him it suddenly became clear to her that he had been in love with you and blames himself for what happened."

"No." Catherine heard the low moan and realized that it had come from her own lips. Why now? Wasn't it enough that *Vincent* blamed himself? She could fight that - *had* fought it. But Joe, too? It wasn't fair. He had been her friend, and now he suffered because of that friendship. But what could she possibly do about it?

She closed her eyes and leaned against Vincent's shoulder. Why couldn't life be uncomplicated, just this once?

"I count life just a stuff, to try the soul's strength on," Vincent quoted softly.

Catherine sighed, pulling her hand from his and turning around on the bench so that she could wrap her arms around his waist. She listened to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear, and through half-closed eyes saw Jacob staring at her. She smiled. Here they were, the two of them, sheltered against Vincent's strong chest; both of them finding peace and solace in his warmth, his love. Nothing seemed as bad, no problem insurmountable when she lay within the circle of his arm.

"If there is a solution to be found," Vincent told her, "we will find it, Catherine. I promise."



IV

Vincent put Jacob into the crib, covering him with his favorite blanket. After the baby's nap, they would join Catherine at the Mirror Pool. It was a good place to think, to sort out problems. Her thoughts were in such chaos and he knew that part of the blame lay with him. She had felt his pain, knew that he still considered himself responsible for much of what had happened to her. Now, knowing that her friend Joe Maxwell *also* considered himself responsible was almost more than she could bear. But what was the solution?

He sighed, and turned to sit in the large chair near the bed. How often had he sat here, thinking of her, dreaming of her, through years when even the simplest dream had been impossible to realize. How long ago it seemed.

And those darker times, when he could feel her presence just beyond the candlelight, keeping watch over him. Waiting. So many nights, sitting as he did now, looking at Kristopher's portrait, looking at Catherine, longing for her.

The days since her return had been so wondrous, so full of love and loving. He had almost forgotten the pain that had come before. Almost. He stared at the painting, at the tender look the artist had captured on Catherine's face; the gentleness, the beauty. And he looked at his own face, staring back at him from the large canvas. Was this truly how the world saw him? Or had Kristopher seen him with different eyes; eyes that saw beneath the unflinching gaze, the resolute pose, to the soul of the man holding love in his arms?

There were no mirrors in this chamber, no constant reminders of his differences. Yet he had hung the painting directly across from his bed; knowing that it would be the first thing he saw in the morning and the last

thing he saw each night. He smiled, thinking of the night Catherine had brought it to him, and how she had spoken of certainties.

Kristopher had captured those certainties; through pigment, light and shadow, he showed the irrefutable truth of their love, the knowledge that they were each half of one beautiful whole.

"Age to age, life to life; the past brings forth the present,
Eternity stretching before us like an endless road."

They journeyed that road together; he and Catherine. Through a miracle born of love they had yet another chance for the happiness that had been denied them. Each new day was a gift; a gift to be savored, a gift to be shared. Could he truly put aside his fears and believe with all that he was, in the certainty of the moment?

Vincent leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes. Peter's words echoed within him; "Live with them in the present," he had said. "Don't let the past cloud the life you have now." But could he do it? Was it really that simple?

The past had a way of catching up to you: Old dreams, old promises, memories both bright and dark. He could feel it intruding, pushing at them, forcing them to look behind as well as forward. First with Elliot, now with Jenny and Joe. So much pain, so many chances gone.

He opened his eyes, turning his head to focus long and hard on the child who lay sleeping within the crib. He was the dearest part of their past, their present and their future. Could that be the answer? Could it be that by *facing* the past and merging it with the present, they could finally put it to rest? Would Catherine be willing to do that? And could he ask it of her?



"Am I intruding?"

Catherine looked up from where she sat watching twilight creep across the surface of the mirror pool and smiled. "Not at all, Elliot. Come join me." She patted the loosely-packed sand next to her. "I love the pool at this time of the day," she said. "The sky fades into shades of pink and gold, and one by one the stars come out to set the whole pool ablaze with twinkling lights." She laughed softly, turning again toward the water as he sat down beside her. "Now I'm starting to sound like Vincent."

"Are you? You don't sound any different to me."

"I am, though," Catherine told him. "Very different." She turned to look at him, trying to reconcile all she thought she knew about Elliot Burch with the man sitting beside her. Their eyes met, and after a moment Catherine looked away. Had she brought nothing but pain to the men who loved her? For she knew Elliot *did* love her, in his way.

"We've both changed, Elliot," she said softly. "The Elliot Burch I used to know wouldn't be sitting down here in the dirt with me. He'd be up there; fighting his way to the top, fighting to put up his buildings."

"Is that really how you saw me?" he asked. "Was that all there was to Elliot Burch, Cathy? Just a man scrambling around to make a buck?"

Catherine turned toward him again, looking, she thought, for the man he had been. "I think Elliot Burch was a very complicated man," she answered. "Every time I thought I knew who and what you were, something would happen and I'd find out I was wrong again. You always managed to surprise me, Elliot. Always." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she continued, "maybe I was looking for the man I thought you *could* be."

He sighed, and in the stillness of the room it was a lonely sound. "You were the only person who cared enough to even look," he said, turning his face away from her.

Catherine looked back at the water. The stars stood out more brilliantly now in the darkening sky around them. She could hear the distant chatter on the pipes, the sounds of children's laughter far down the winding corridors. She reached down and picked up a handful of sand, watching as it fell slowly through her fingers. "To see the world in a grain of sand . . ." she whispered. If only life were that simple.

"Are you happy, Cathy?"

"If life were simple," she answered, voicing her thoughts, "I'd give you a simple answer to that question. But life isn't simple." She brushed the sand from her hands and looked up, meeting his gaze. "My life with Vincent and our baby makes me happier than I've ever been, Elliot," she told him. "I dreamed of a life with him for so many years, dreamed that one day we could truly be together. And now we *are* together. And that makes me happy.

"But there are people I left behind, people who don't know about the miracle that we've been given, people who blame themselves, people who are in pain. And knowing that makes me unhappy, Elliot. Knowing that makes me very unhappy." Catherine looked away, wishing she hadn't answered, wishing she had just said 'yes' and left it at that. Then she felt the tentative brush of his fingers against her hand.

"Can I help?" His words sounded so sincere, so thoughtful, and so unlike the Elliot she thought she knew. Maybe this place was changing him. Then again, maybe not.

"Yes, Elliot," Catherine said. "You can help by telling me that you don't feel guilty for what happened Above. You can help by saying that you're really here to get your life together. And you can help by believing that Vincent and I are your friends." She watched his eyes, looking for any hint that he was lying.

"I did everything I could, Cathy," he told her. "Everything humanly possible. It wasn't enough, but I *do* know that I tried, really tried to find you." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans, turning away from her. "No," he continued, "I don't blame myself for that. For what happened to Vincent? Yeah, I have to take the blame for almost getting him killed."

"You saved him in the end, Elliot," Catherine reminded him. "Everyone thought you had been killed."

"And I let them go on thinking it. Hell, there's no way I'm ever going to prove I didn't kill Moreno." He laughed, and Catherine could hear little humor in the sound. "Believe me, hanging out in Attica for the next twenty years or so really doesn't appeal to me."

"What about hanging out here for the next twenty years, Elliot?" Catherine asked him. "How does that sound?"

"Frightening."

The emptiness in his voice brought a chill to Catherine's skin. "Why?" she asked softly. Elliot shook his head, not answering.

She reached out her hand, touching him lightly on his uninjured shoulder. "The Tunnels are a beautiful and wondrous place, Elliot," Catherine said. "There's a peace here that you could never find in the City, in the world Above. Everyone is accepted here for what he or she *is*, not for who they know, or how much money they have."

"Maybe that's just it, Cathy," he answered finally. "Maybe I don't have the faintest idea who the hell I am."

"You're our friend, Elliot." Catherine looked up at the sound of Vincent's voice, smiling as he entered the room. "There is no need for you to be anything else."

Vincent watched as Elliot got slowly to his feet. He knew instinctively that any help he offered would be rejected. Elliot's pain went deeper than his injured shoulder.

"Well," Elliot said, looking down at Catherine, "I'd better be getting back. The madman of the pipes will be looking for me."

"You don't have to leave," Catherine told him.

Elliot put his hands back into his pockets. "Yeah," he said, finally meeting Vincent's gaze. "Yeah, I do." Vincent sighed, and moved away from the entrance toward Catherine. Elliot hurried past him without another word.

"He feels so lost."

Vincent sat behind her, drawing her back against his chest. "Yes," he agreed. The stars within the mirror pool shimmered in front of them, bright now, with the night. Vincent pressed his face against the softness of her

hair, moving slowly back and forth as he let it caress him. Her hair smelled of roses.

"Isn't there anything we can do, Vincent?"

He sighed and kissed the top of her head. "We are doing all we can, Catherine. It will be up to Elliot to find his place here." He held her quietly for a moment, enjoying the feeling of rightness that came when she was in his arms.

"I've spoken to Father," he told her. "There may be some problem with convening the Council right away."

"Has something happened?"

"Nothing unusual," he assured her. "There are some children who have become ill. It does not seem to be serious, but Mary and Father will be keeping a close eye on them."

"So who's keeping an eye on our son?"

Vincent smiled as Catherine's hands slid over his arms to hide beneath the leather sleeves of his vest. "Are you cold?" he asked, holding her closer. Catherine shook her head and her hair ticked at Vincent's chin. He smiled. "Rebecca is with him," he said. "She was going into dinner and asked if I wanted her to watch him while I came to find you."

"I hope she doesn't try to feed him any of the split pea soup from lunch," Catherine said, laughing. "She'll be wearing it if she does." She leaned her head on his shoulder, looking up at him with eyes that delighted his soul. "He's just like his daddy."

"I don't recall ever spitting soup at anyone, Catherine," he said smiling. "Not even pea soup."

Catherine laughed again and reached up to stroke his chin. "That's not what Mary says," she teased.

"Mary came to live Below when I was in my teens," he said, enjoying the way her fingers stroked at his whiskers. "She did not know me as a baby."

"No," Catherine agreed, "but Father did. And it seems they've shared quite a few stories about you over the past twenty years." Her soft touch drifted over his lips and Vincent closed his eyes with the pleasure of it.

"She moves as water moves, and comes to me," he whispered. "Stayed by what was, and pulled by what would be."

She shifted in his arms and he felt the gentle softness of her lips against his in the sweetest of kisses. It was little more than a butterfly's touch, a caress of fragile tenderness. When she moved her lips away, he opened his eyes.

"I know what will be, Vincent," she said, her fingers making gentle forays across his cheeks and brows. "There will be years of love, years of watching our children grow." She kissed him again, lingering this time at the corners of his mouth. He shivered, wanting more, but savoring the pleasure of her every touch. "We *will* have our life together, Vincent," she told him. "A life full of love and laughter."

Vincent slid his hands along Catherine's back until he felt the silk of her hair beneath his palms. He pulled her closer, opening her mouth beneath his, tasting the sweetness of her. If he lived forever he would never have enough of this; this touching of lips, sharing of breath. No writer had ever described fully enough the way it felt to truly blend yourself, mouth to mouth, with the one you loved.

Catherine leaned back against the strength of Vincent's hands. His fingers flexed in her hair, and she felt herself tremble. She loved the way he kissed; as though every part of his being was focused only on the merging of their mouths. It was as though having discovered the delights of kissing, he was determined to become a master of the craft.

Vincent's shoulders shook slightly beneath her hands and Catherine realized he had clearly heard her thought. She pulled back, taking a deep, gulping breath as she watched him smile down at her. "And will you tell me when I have mastered this particular craft?" he teased.

"Not if you intend to stop practicing," Catherine replied. His smile widened and she felt the overwhelming joy that filled his heart. She returned the smile and leaned her head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear.

"Never," he promised, stroking her hair.

The stillness of the room surrounded them. Catherine no longer heard the faint echoes of children's laughter, or the sound of evening chatter on the pipes. The day was ending, bringing with it the peace and solitude of the night. She burrowed deeper into the warmth of Vincent's arms, loving the familiar scents of leather and musk.

She had never thought of night as peaceful before coming Below. Night in the city had always been simply an extension of the day. It had its own rhythm, its own pulse, but never had there been any stillness, any peace. She sighed. Remembering the city brought memories of Jenny.

"Is she so alone, Catherine?" Vincent asked softly. "Has she no one Above to give her comfort?"

"Jenny's an only child," Catherine told him. "Her parents died while we were in college." She wrapped her fingers around the long strands of his hair beneath her cheek. "Jenny puts all of her energy into her job," she continued. "She told me once that she didn't have much time for a personal life." Catherine laughed softly. "Jenny said that the men she met in New York left her wondering if trying to find someone was even worth the effort."

"All men are not alike, Catherine," Vincent said.

Catherine lifted her head from his chest and looked into her husband's eyes. "No," she agreed. "Some are more wonderful and more beautiful than the rest." She kissed him softly. "Jenny doesn't have someone like you to hold her, Vincent," she said. "As far as I know, Jenny doesn't have anyone."

"Then we must convince the Council to let her come Below."

"I don't know how she'll react, Vincent," Catherine admitted. "Not everyone believes in the possibility of miracles." She lay her head back against the soft patchwork of his vest.

"If she loves you, Catherine," he told her, "she will believe. And she will be happy."

Catherine felt his love flow over her, through her, as he soothed her with more than just his words. Jenny's dreams had made Catherine aware of all the pain left unhealed; all the questions unanswered.

During her time Below, she had thought only of Vincent, only of their child. The fulfillment of their love had overshadowed everything else, everyone else.

"We waited a lifetime for our dream, Catherine," she heard Vincent whisper. "We have every right to savor each moment that is given to us. For who better can know the joy of loving, than those who have felt the anguish of its loss."

Catherine sighed, knowing he was right. There was nothing she could have done any sooner. Had Peter not been a Helper already, even he would not have known of her return. The decision of whether or not to tell Jenny would ultimately be made by the Council. They were her family now, her friends. She would have to rely on their wisdom. And she would have to believe in their love.



V

A week later, Catherine was still waiting for the Council to convene. The children's illness had spread through at least a quarter of the population. And though not life-threatening, it was certainly enough to keep Father, Mary, Faye, and anyone else who could help, very busy.

The on-going construction on the new Eastern Sector had kept Vincent and Pascal, as well as Nathaniel, Cullen, and the other men who helped with the chambers themselves, hard at work every day. William, too, had been occupied, as winter stores were inventoried and Helpers contacted.

Peter had long ago returned home, saying that his patients would only tolerate him being gone for so long, and promising to call Jenny. It had been decided between the three of them, that he would tell her he was checking her idea out with friends and would get back to her. It was, after all, the truth. And Catherine hadn't wanted him to lie.

Now, as she sat cross-legged on the bed folding diapers and watching Jacob play in his jumpseat, Catherine wondered if things were ever going to settle down. Hadn't she told Elliot that the Tunnels were peaceful? Somehow she didn't think he was going to believe her if things kept up the way they were.

"What do you think, Babyface?" she asked Jacob. "Has life gotten hectic around here or is it my imagination?"

Jacob laughed and gnawed on the foot of his stuffed cow. His thoughts whirled like brightly-colored cyclones just at the edge of Catherine's mind. She closed her eyes, letting his thoughts weave themselves more closely with hers, and patterns emerged; vivid pictures of life seen through the eyes of their child. Her hands stilled on the diapers as

she watched the shifting kaleidoscope; entranced by the difference in the way Jacob perceived the world around him.

"Catherine?"

The colors of Jacob's thoughts changed, and with them Catherine knew which of her son's favorite people had just entered the room. She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Hello, Mouse," she said, pulling her way gently back from Jacob's mind until only a wispy thread connected them. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Mouse nodded, then turned away from her. She was not surprised when he sat down on the rug in front of Jacob's chair to say 'hello.' Her baby was one person Mouse obviously felt absolutely comfortable with. There was never any hesitation when Jacob reached for him. And since Jacob liked to be cuddled almost as much as he enjoyed eating, Mouse had often been the recipient of warm, baby hugs. It not only didn't seem to bother him, but Catherine suspected that he enjoyed it as much as Jacob.

"Hold Jacob?"

He always asked though, she noticed. Just to be certain. "Of course, Mouse," Catherine said. "You know Jacob loves to have you hold him."

Catherine watched as Mouse picked Jacob up carefully from his chair and held him against his shoulder. The baby wrapped his arms around his friend, smacking a kiss against the young man's cheek. Yes, Mouse was definitely one of Jacob's favorite people.

"What was it you needed, Mouse?" Catherine asked, as she picked up one of the diapers in front of her. She had gained a great deal of respect for the women living Below during the past few weeks, and diapers had played a large part.

"Looking," Mouse said. "Looking for Elliot."

Catherine put down the diaper and focused her attention on the young man currently having his hair pulled by her son. "Is he lost?" she

asked, wondering if Elliot had somehow taken a wrong turn somewhere within the many tunnels they called home.

"Maybe," he said, tickling Jacob's tummy. The baby laughed and let go of Mouse's hair. "Doubt it," Mouse told her. "Learns fast. Knows the tunnels."

"But you *are* looking for him?" she asked, confused now by what Mouse had told her. "Are you and Elliot working on something? Is that why you need to find him?"

Catherine hadn't spoken to Elliot much since their talk at the Mirror Pool. And although she knew he wasn't working with Vincent or the men in the Eastern Sector, she hadn't considered the possibility that he would be roaming around the Tunnels with Mouse.

"We hang out," Mouse said, giving Jacob a quick kiss on his forehead as he placed him back into the jumpseat. He stood up, turning towards Catherine and smiled. "Pipe Chamber's too noisy. Lots of banging. Elliot's like Mouse: likes quiet. Likes Arthur, too."

"He does?" Catherine couldn't quite picture Elliot with a pet racoon. It was too difficult to imagine.

Mouse shifted his feet, looking around the large room, and Catherine sighed. Patience had never seemed to be a part of Mouse's nature. "I don't know where Elliot is, Mouse," she told him. "I could ask Vincent, if you like? Maybe he knows."

Mouse shook his head. "Already asked. Hasn't seen him."

"Elliot usually goes to the dining hall at dinner," Catherine reminded him. "You might find him there."

"Could do that," Mouse said, nodding. "Dinner soon." He smiled and turned, hurrying from the room.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. Mouse often behaved like a small whirlwind; stirring up everything in his path with his kinetic energy. It could be very draining at times. She looked down at the pile of diapers still to be folded. This was definitely one of those times.

She picked up another diaper and looked over at the child watching quietly from his jumpseat. "Wears you out, too, does he?" she asked, hurrying with her task. The small mountain of diapers began to shrink.

"Daddy's going to be home soon," she said, smiling at her happy son. "I need to get this finished or you won't be ready."

Working on the new chambers was heavy and dirty work, and Vincent liked to take a bath before they went to dinner. Since Jacob enjoyed bathing with his father, Catherine had started getting the baby ready early, so that father and son would have more time to spend together.

"Of course, I could save us all time and join you," she teased. Jacob threw one of his toys into the air and Catherine laughed, watching as it bounced almost to the floor. All of his toys were attached by elastic to the jumpseat's tray so that they were easily retrieved.

"Spitting cereal at me again, Jacob?" she asked, taking the folded diapers to the shelves on the far wall. "I know you don't like to have me in the tub with you and Daddy," she told him. "That's private time for just you men, isn't it?" Jacob laughed and held out his arms. Catherine smiled, knowing that they understood each other completely.

"Come on, Babyface," she said, lifting him from his seat. "Let's get you out of these clothes and ready for your bath." Jacob snuggled against her shoulder and Catherine kissed the top of his silky head. "Daddy's almost here."



"It's your move, Father," Vincent said, leaning back in the chair. He watched silently as the man across the chessboard shifted his gaze back to the game. It was obvious that something was troubling him. And from the long looks he had been giving Catherine and Jacob, Vincent thought it likely that the problem was the up-coming Council meeting about Catherine's friend Jenny.

Vincent could hear Catherine's voice, soft and low, as she read to Jacob from one of the many children's books Father kept in his study. She sat with Jacob in her lap. And in the large, stuffed chair, she looked almost like a child herself. The chair had been a gift, of sorts, from Father, who had asked Vincent to bring it from one of the storerooms. It was the perfect place for Catherine and Jacob to sit while Father and Vincent shared a game of chess.

"The grief that does not speak," Vincent quoted softly, "Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break."

Father looked up from the board and sighed. He pulled off his glasses and leaned back in his chair. "Am I that transparent?"

Vincent smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "Only to one who loves you," he told him. "Your mind is not on the game, Father," he continued, looking at his wife and child. "I believe your interest lies elsewhere tonight." He turned back to the board and picked up the white queen, studying the small piece for a moment before returning it to its place. "You have been very quiet since dinner," he said. "Is it the Council meeting which concerns you, Father?"

Father placed his glasses on the chess table and rubbed his eyes. "Our isolation has been our protection, Vincent," he began. "For a third of a century we have endeavored to create a community inviolate and secure from the degradation and brutality of the world Above. This place is our sanctuary, our home. I fear that by continuing to allow that world to intrude, we open ourselves to the very things we are trying to escape."

"That sanctuary has been violated before, Father," Vincent reminded him. "And the community has endured, we have survived."

"Yes," Father said, "but at what cost? Can we, in all good conscience, ask this community to allow yet another unknown factor into the equation which holds us together?"

"Jenny is not an unknown factor, Father," Catherine said softly from her chair nearby. "We've known each other for years. She was my closest friend. She won't betray us."

"It is not your friend Jenny who concerns me, Catherine," Father said, turning towards her. "It is Mr. Maxwell."

"Joe?" Catherine put the book down and shifted Jacob in her arms. Vincent could feel her sudden tension. "How does Joe fit into this?" She rose, coming toward him until she stood beside his chair. "We're asking that Jenny be allowed to become a Helper, Father, not Joe."

Vincent now understood his father's concern. Catherine had forgotten one very important fact about her friend, Joe Maxwell. "Jenny has spoken to Joe about you, Catherine," he said softly, looking at his father for confirmation. "I think Father believes that it will, in some way, make Mr. Maxwell even more determined to resolve his unanswered questions." He pushed back the chair and held out his arms.

Catherine took the invitation and she and Jacob settled onto his lap. "Do you really believe, Vincent," she asked, "that Joe is somehow still working on that case after all this time?"

"I've met your Mr. Maxwell, Catherine," Father added, acknowledging Vincent's summation of the problem. "He's a very strong-minded individual. If he feels there is justification to look further, there is every chance that eventually he will find his way Below."

Catherine shuddered, holding Jacob closer to her breast. She couldn't let that happen. These people were her friends, her family. They depended upon this place for security. It was their home. It was Vincent's home, her home.

"Then we'll just forget the whole thing," she said. "Eventually, Jenny will stop dreaming about me. She'll get over her pain." She met Father's gaze. "I won't jeopardize the safety of the community for my own personal concerns," she told him firmly. "I won't endanger Vincent's life ever again."



"Vincent, I told you. I don't want to discuss it." Catherine pulled the nightshirt out from beneath her pillow, adding it to the small pile of items she would be taking to the bathing chamber.

"We *must* discuss this, Catherine," Vincent said, placing their restless son in his jumpseat. With his mother's thoughts in such chaos, Vincent knew that it would be impossible for the baby to sleep.

She had been moving constantly since they returned from Father's study; getting Jacob ready for bed, finding the things for her bath. And she had utterly refused to discuss the decision she had made in Father's study. Even his gentle proddings through their bond had met with no success.

"Will you please stop for just one moment and listen to me?" Vincent asked, watching as Catherine picked up her brush from the bureau and tossed it at the pile on the bed. "Jenny is your friend," he began, lowering his voice as he looked within himself for a bit of composure. Watching her move around the room like a frantic cyclone was making him nervous.

"And your constant demands are making *me* nervous," Catherine said, obviously hearing him whether she wanted to or not. "I'm not going to change my mind, Vincent. Just leave it be. Case closed." She gathered up her things from the bed and stormed out of the chamber.

Vincent sat wearily on the edge of the bed, staring at the empty doorway. He had never known Catherine to be so stubborn. He sighed. No, to be perfectly honest with himself he *did* know how resolute she could be, how set in her purpose. She had been just this stubborn when she had decided to marry Elliot in order to save the community from destruction. When those she loved were in peril, Catherine's resolution knew no bounds. And she considered him to be in peril.

"What am I going to do, Jacob?" Vincent asked, turning to gaze at his silent son. "Your mother is an intelligent and determined woman," he said, rising from the bed. "It will not be easy to change her mind."

Jacob held out his arms and smiled as Vincent squatted on the rug in front of him. His son's thoughts were only vaguely colored by his mother's anger. "You know she is not angry with you," Vincent said, "but at herself." He picked Jacob up, snuggling his pajama-clad body against his chest. The

baby grabbed handfuls of his hair, laughing as he hid his face from his father behind the long strands.

"You are a sensualist, Jacob," Vincent told him, "just like your mother." He carried the baby to his crib, kissing him and settling him beneath the blankets. "If she will not hear me," Vincent mused aloud, "perhaps I should appeal to her other senses." He stroked Jacob's hair, thinking how like Catherine's it was.

She could turn away from his words, and perhaps, even from the thoughts they shared. They were, after all, separate individuals, no matter how connected their hearts and minds might be. But with a touch, his touch, their bond reached far deeper than their minds or their hearts. With touch, the bond connected their souls. If he could hold her close enough, reach deeply enough, it might be possible for him to eliminate her fear. Hadn't he read once that fear stemmed from uncertainty? If Catherine was truly certain that they would always be together, then what was there to fear?



Catherine rubbed the liquid soap into her hair, basking in the sweet scent of roses. *Damn!* She didn't want to think of roses, or of a certain furry chest, or nights when she had buried her face against him and been intoxicated by the mingled scents of sex and roses.

She wanted to stay angry at herself. She wanted to work off her anxiety and fear in a good old-fashioned mad. She certainly couldn't do much damage if she picked this room to throw things in. Rock walls, shelves carved into the stone, the roughhewn bench. Even the crude commode couldn't be damaged if she decided to have a tantrum here. She shrugged out of her shirt and stepped into the pool, ducking her head beneath the water to rinse out the soap. Maybe that was what she needed: a great, gigantic, absolutely frenzied temper tantrum.

Catherine was almost smiling when she raised her head from the water. Then she felt the presence of the tall man standing just inside the doorway. *Damn!* She rubbed the water out of her eyes and opened them, prepared to yell, if necessary, to get a little privacy. But what she saw stopped any and all thought.

He was naked. Gloriously, magnificently, and absolutely naked. "Damn," she whispered softly. "Oh, damn."

She couldn't stop staring. Yes, she had seen him naked before, but she didn't remember ever having seen quite that look on his face. That is, when she actually looked at his face. There was simply so much more to see. "Oh, damn," she repeated, looking back at his face.

Vincent smiled and walked slowly toward the pool. Catherine found herself mesmerized by the movement of his muscular thighs as he came toward her. Men weren't supposed to have beautiful legs. Most men's legs were skinny, underdeveloped, or pale. Vincent's were none of those things. They were long, well-proportioned, and covered with long, velvety hair the color of cinnamon-toast. They made her mouth water.

He stepped into the pool and Catherine knew that her plans for a temper tantrum were going to be put on hold; indefinitely. Then again . . . She sat up suddenly and pounded at the water with both hands, splashing both of them until rivers of water ran from his soaked hair and his face looked as though he had been dunked.

"Feel better now?" he asked softly, not bothering to wipe at the water dripping from his eyelashes. His eyes were sparkling beneath the golden lashes and Catherine felt a spark of something slip through her defenses.

"No," she said, stubbornly, refusing to admit that just having him with her like this was channeling her angry energy into different patterns.

"You will," he told her.

Vincent moved quickly, pulling Catherine into his arms before she could utter another sound. The water had done nothing to cool either his passion or his determination. He wrapped one hand beneath her hair, holding her soft nape, drawing Catherine's mouth closer. His other arm

circled her small frame, bringing their hips together at the same moment he merged their mouths.

Her lips opened under his, allowing him to taste the sweetness he knew so well. His hand tightened on her neck as the kiss deepened, lengthened, until their shared breath became their only sustenance. Vincent felt Catherine's hands in his hair, holding him, pulling him closer. He widened his stance and Catherine shifted, putting one leg between his. She rubbed against him, and Vincent felt her anger dissolve beneath their passion.

He lifted her with one arm, moving backward until he felt the rock ledge beneath his hand. Without breaking the kiss he set her on the edge, spreading her legs with his until he knew she was open for him, waiting. He heard a low groan emerge from the back of Catherine's throat, and her fingers slid to his shoulders, then to his hips; pressing him toward the welcoming heat of her, beckoning him, urging him forward.

Vincent flexed his hips, entering the hot, humid folds of her body. She surrounded him, became him. He moved deeper, needing more, and she followed in counterpoint, needing just as much. Vincent gasped, tearing his lips from hers as his throat arched in a spasm of pleasure. Her mouth slid down his neck and he felt her teeth at the tender junction of his shoulder. He cried out and she answered; the sound almost an echo.

Two voices from one string, two minds merging, two bodies blending to become one, moving ever faster toward completion. Higher they climbed, until both of them were shaking, shuddering, pulsating with a release so great that the world seemed to dissolve around them. There was only unending pleasure, and the thunderous pounding of their hearts.



"That was totally unfair, you know," Catherine murmured, long moments later when breathing no longer took concentrated effort.

Senses she had thought permanently shattered were slowly coming back to her. She could feel the cold stone floor beneath her back and the heavy weight of her husband on top of her. His face was buried against her neck and Catherine could feel the warmth of his breath against her skin. She had absolutely no desire to move, even if she had been able to come up with the energy. And Catherine doubted such a thing was possible. No, she could stay like this; Vincent's warm body above her, in her, forever. It wouldn't bother her at all.

The warmth above her shifted and she felt a soft kiss against her ear. "No," Vincent whispered, sharing her thoughts, "as it would not bother me." He paused, kissing her again. "Being one with you, Catherine, being a part of your body, a part of your soul, is certainly the greatest gift life will ever offer. I have no fear of death, for you have given me more in this life than I ever dreamed possible. And you have promised me eternity, Catherine. I could not fear an eternity spent with you."

Catherine turned her head. His face was barely an inch away, his eyes blue beacons of love in the diminishing candlelight. She moved her face the tiny distance that divided them, kissing him gently with all the love she held in her heart. He routed her anger with passion, overpowered her fear with truth. The one certainty Catherine carried with her through all the tangled and faded memories of the past, was that she would never leave him - never. The world around them could do nothing to change that; nor Time destroy it.

"This I do vow, and this shall ever be,
I will be true, despite thy scythe and thee."



VI

Vincent took his place next to Catherine and waited for the meeting to begin. It had taken three more days for Peter to re-arrange his schedule, and Vincent knew the others in the room were curious. Although everyone in the community knew the Council meeting concerned a prospective Helper, the details of Jenny's dreams and her connection to the District Attorney had not been made public. Father had kept his doubts and his concerns to himself.

"Pascal, Peter, and Nathaniel will be arriving at any moment," Father said, "and then we will begin."

"Where are they, Father?" Mary asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Been trying to find that Elliot fellow," William muttered. "Haven't seen much of him or Mouse lately. Makes me nervous."

"I don't think Elliot would let Mouse do anything dangerous, William," Catherine said softly. "There shouldn't be any reason to worry." She smiled up at Vincent and he squeezed her hand, urging her to tell William about her conversation with Mouse. "Mouse told me that he and Elliot are, well, 'hanging out.' He said that Elliot liked the silence with him better than the noise of the Pipe Chamber."

"Yeah? Well, how's he feel about racoons?"

Catherine laughed. "Actually, William," she said, "Mouse tells me that Elliot and Arthur get along pretty well."

"It figures."

"Oh, William, please," Mary said. "Mouse isn't a bad child, and he *is* keeping Elliot away from your kitchen. Who knows, perhaps Elliot will be able to channel some of Mouse's talents into something very productive for all of us." She reached across the arm of her chair and patted William's shoulder. "Give the man a chance," she told him. "He's Vincent and Catherine's friend. We said we would give him a chance and we should. He's only been with us for a short time. Everyone takes a little time to adjust."

"Even a child is known by his doings," William grumbled.

"Yes," Mary admitted, "and so far Elliot has done nothing to harm any of us. He's hurt and he's sad. We all know how that feels, William. Even you."

Mary's quiet words brought silence to the room. And Vincent felt a oneness in that silence. Yes, all of them knew how it felt to be sad, to be in pain. Their community had been formed by those who had needed shelter from the sadness, taken refuge from the pain. They had turned away from the world Above and its trials, finding shelter and ease Below. Those without family became part of the whole, those with hope saw it now in the eyes and dreams of the children. They were all a part of one another. Even if now and then one of them forgot.

"Jacob? Is everyone else here? Sorry we're so late."

Peter's voice broke the stillness as he and the other men entered the room. They sat down in the empty chairs set around Father's desk and Vincent saw that none of them looked happy.

"You found no sign of them?" He asked, knowing that Pascal and Father were interested in what Elliot might be doing with Mouse. Peter's concern was for Elliot to begin physical therapy for his shoulder. It would not give him total mobility, Peter had said, but it would eventually help to ease some of the pain. Each had his own reasons for wanting Elliot found, Vincent knew, but the goal remained the same. "Had none of the sentries seen them?"

"Not for hours," Pascal said, his hands clenched around the twin pipes he held. "We tracked down every sound I could pick up that didn't fit."

Wherever they are, they're doing a good job of being silent." He looked at Father. "Do you want us to put together a search party?"

Father shook his head. "No," he sighed, removing his glasses. "Mouse knows tunnels and chambers Below that most of us will never see. They could be anywhere." He rubbed his eyes and looked at Catherine. "You say Mouse *told* you that he and Elliot were working on something?"

"No," she replied, "just that Elliot enjoyed spending time in the lower, more quiet chambers." She looked at Pascal and shrugged. "I think all the clanging in the Pipe Chamber was making Elliot a little stir-crazy."

"Well," Pascal admitted, "I guess it might be unsettling to someone who wasn't used to it. We put his things in that small guest chamber down the corridor. I didn't think to ask if the noise was going to bother him."

"It just takes some getting used to," Nathaniel said, running his fingers through his dark hair. "After a while he won't even hear it."

"That 'noise' is sweet music to you, Pascal," Vincent added softly, smiling at his friend. "We all know that."

"Yes, well, we have other things which concern this Council," Father said, bringing them back to the reason for the meeting. "We will simply have to rely on Mouse's knowledge of the tunnels and Elliot's own intelligence to keep them safe and out of trouble."

"Safe, maybe," William grumbled, "but out of trouble? Father, we're talking about Mouse. He can find trouble in an empty room."

"Be that as it may, William, we have another problem which demands our attention." Father cleared his throat, obviously not knowing where to begin. "Peter," he said finally, "would you care to explain to everyone?"

Peter looked around the room, his gaze resting on Catherine for a moment before he sat forward in his chair and began to speak. "I'm not a member of the Council," he said, "but you all know me, and you know I've been with you since the beginning." He folded his hands in front of him on the table, looking down for a moment. "And while that makes me a friend, a Helper, it doesn't give me the right to tell you how to live your lives or

whom you should allow into the community. That's a decision for the Council. And you, excluding Catherine, of course, *are* the Council."

"You don't have to justify yourself to us, Peter," Mary said. "You've always been here when we needed you. Why, we wouldn't have survived that horrible plague if you hadn't brought all those sulfa drugs and vaccine."

"What's this all about, Peter?" William asked. "Why are you beating around the bush?"

"Maybe it's because what Peter has to say concerns me," Catherine interrupted, glancing at those around the desk before she let her gaze settle on Father. "The last time the Council met it was because a friend of mine from Above needed a place to heal, a place to rest."

"Elliot had become my friend, also, Catherine," Vincent added, squeezing her hand. "He sacrificed everything to help me."

"Yes," she whispered, "I know that." She closed her eyes for a moment, drawing on his strength. They had made their own decision about Jenny and Joe. Catherine only hoped she was strong enough to follow Vincent; to follow her heart.

"Why don't you explain it to us, Catherine?" Mary asked.

Catherine opened her eyes, looking directly at Father. They had been getting along so well, growing to know each other. She could only hope that in time he would understand their decision.

"By all means, Catherine," Father said, "why don't you tell everyone the situation?"

Catherine held tightly to Vincent's hand. "My friend Jenny called Peter the morning of Winterfest," she began. "She's been having dreams about me; dreams about my life here with Vincent and the baby."

"Is she some sort of psychic?" Nathaniel asked. "Is she like Narcissa? Just how detailed are these dreams? Did she actually see Vincent?"

Catherine shook her head. "No, Jenny's not a psychic, she's an editor for a publishing house in the city. And she's not at all like Narcissa. Jenny

just sees things sometimes; in her dreams. Peter tells me that the dreams are vague, but that she sees me sitting on a bed playing with a baby. And there's a tall man beside me." She paused, waiting for someone to comment. When no one did, she took a deep breath and continued.

"Jenny and I have been friends since college," she told them. "I guess you could call us best friends. And since neither of us had any brothers or sisters, we sort of adopted each other. Jenny's parents are dead. They have been for years." She looked down at Vincent, remembering how he had spoken to her father, how he had brought her his comfort and his love.

"Jenny has no one in the world Above," Catherine continued, looking now, at each of the people in the room. "Except for a few distant friends and the people she works with, Jenny is alone. She called Peter about the dreams because she knows that Peter and I were very good friends. And she knows that if Peter knew anything - anything at all about me - he would tell her."

"And has Peter told her about you, Catherine?" Mary asked softly, looking at the man beside her. "I can't believe that Peter would do such a thing." Peter remained silent, but he patted Mary's hand.

"No, Mary," Catherine told her, "Peter didn't tell Jenny anything. He came straight to us the morning after Winterfest."

"Then what's the problem?" William asked. "She's your friend, Catherine," he said. "Just like all of us at this table are your friends. Old Nathaniel here wouldn't be a happily married man if you hadn't brought Lena to live with us."

"The issue, William," Father interrupted, "is not whether we are Catherine's friends." He moved forward in his chair, and Vincent could see that his hard stare was directed only at the woman by his side. "Catherine *knows* we are her family, her friends. At least, I hope that she does." Catherine managed a small smile and he turned his gaze toward the others in the room.

"Then what is the issue, Father?"

"Before Catherine's friend called Peter, she made one other very important telephone call. She called Joe Maxwell, the District Attorney; the

same man who, for over a year, did little else but search for Catherine and for Vincent."

"But if Catherine's friend didn't know about us when she called him," Nathaniel said, "what harm could it have done? She couldn't have mentioned us. Why get so concerned?"

"I am concerned, Nathaniel," Father said, "because by telling Joe Maxwell about her dreams, her belief that Catherine is alive and living with her child, she may have piqued Mr. Maxwell's interest enough to make him start digging around again." He folded his hands on the desk in front of him and sighed. "Diana Bennett told Joe Maxwell about the tunnels she found beneath the City. There is always the possibility that he will remember this information and start looking."

"You mean looking for Catherine? Or looking for Vincent?" Nathaniel asked. Vincent saw a mixture of concern and excitement on the face of the Council's newest member. And he remembered Nathaniel as a boy; always full of questions.

"If he finds one, Nathaniel," Vincent told him, "he will find both. And if he finds the Tunnels, he will find the entire community." Vincent squeezed Catherine's hand. They had discussed this between themselves, but now was the time to tell Father and the Council of their decision.

"Catherine and I have spoken about this at great length during the past few days. We hope that the Council will decide to allow Jenny into the community as a Helper and as a friend. It is our hope that by explaining both Catherine's return and the necessity for our secrecy, we will be able to convince her to talk to Maxwell."

"But what would that accomplish, Vincent?" Father asked.

"Catherine and I have agreed that Jenny is the only one who might be able to persuade Mr. Maxwell that her dreams were only that; dreams. If she is convincing enough, perhaps that will be an end to it. If not . . ." he took a long breath, looking at his father. "Catherine and I have agreed that we should meet with Mr. Maxwell ourselves."

"Have the two of you gone completely mad?" Father shouted, getting out of his chair. "You can't possibly be serious!"

"We're very serious," Catherine said softly. She trembled and held Vincent's hand tighter. "Jenny and Joe are in pain, Father," she explained. "And Vincent and I understand that pain. We have known it. We believe that both of them would be able to heal, to relinquish that pain, if they knew that I had returned, that I had a life with the man I love."

"But why should it be necessary for Vincent to reveal himself?" Father argued. He turned toward his son. "Tell Jenny if you must. Convince her to speak to Mr. Maxwell, by all means. But for the love of Heaven, don't risk your life and the lives of everyone Below by presenting yourself to this man!"

Vincent listened to the arguments going on around him. He understood everyone's concern. It was a concern that both he and Catherine shared. They knew the risks. If Joe Maxwell was any less than Catherine believed him to be, their entire future would be in peril.

He leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and his ears to the cacophony of voices. Catherine's hand was still firmly clasped in his. They were together in this. Both of them believed in the certainty that Catherine would never leave him again. Did it not then stand to reason that he would never leave *her*? He only wished it were possible to convey that certainty to the others who loved him.

"I think we're forgetting one very important thing, Father."

Unlike those who had gone before, Pascal's voice held none of the fear, none of the disapproval Vincent had heard from around the room. He opened his eyes, turning toward the man he considered his closest friend.

"It seems to me that Vincent and Catherine have given this situation a lot of thought," Pascal told them. "And from the grip Catherine's had on Vincent's hand ever since they sat down, it's also pretty obvious that they knew what kind of a reaction they'd be getting when they told us about it."

Vincent felt Catherine smile as all eyes turned to their tightly clasped hands. "They've made up their minds," Pascal continued. "And while I don't think they'd go against the Council in this, I think they *have* decided that their solution is the best chance we have of preventing an invasion by Joe Maxwell and the N.Y.P.D.. Maybe we should just trust their judgment."

Father sat back down in his chair, running his hands wearily across his face. "What can we reason but from what we know?" he sighed. "You are quite correct, Pascal. My son's stubbornness is well known to me."

For a moment there was only silence as Vincent watched his father try to come to terms with their decision. Father's gaze moved to Catherine, searching, Vincent thought, for any sign of hesitancy. "Are you very sure of this, Catherine?" Father asked her softly. "Are you absolutely certain that this man would not betray you?"

"Joe is a good man," Catherine said. "He cared about me as a friend." She hesitated for a moment. "Jenny thinks he might have been in love with me," she continued. "And I guess that's possible, although he never let me know."

"And you think that his caring, his . . . love for you, will somehow give him the courage to go against everything his position stands for?"

"Love is all we have," she told him. "The only way that each can help the other." Her words fell into the silence; a reminder and a balm for them all.

"You once told me that it was Shakespeare who knew everything, Catherine," Father said, "not Euripides."

"We give each writer his due, Father," Vincent said, smiling. He could feel the tension easing. Father might not be thoroughly convinced, but he would accept their evaluation of Joe Maxwell until proven wrong.

"So," Father began, "we know what Vincent and Catherine want to do; about her friend Jenny, and about Mr. Maxwell should the need arise. We've listened to ourselves argue for the better part of an hour and heard the voice of reason from Pascal. Have we reached any kind of a decision?" He looked at each of them in turn. "Are we of one accord?" he asked. "Do we let Vincent and Catherine handle this their way?"

Vincent saw Mary nod and allowed himself to relax a little. Pascal and Nathaniel followed her lead. There was only William now, to disagree.

"William?" Catherine's voice was soft as she spoke his name. "Do you agree?"

William regarded her with unblinking eyes. He had been unusually quiet during the meeting. Did he trust Catherine to know the man who could be the greatest threat to them? Vincent could not discern either agreement or discord in his friend's stare.

"When Catherine returned to Vincent," William said gruffly, "there were some people who didn't want to believe. They didn't want to think about miracles. Miracles take faith, and most people don't have that kind of faith." He paused, wiping a hand across his eyes before he went on. "My mother believed in miracles," he continued. "And she taught me to believe in them." He drew in a deep breath, his pain discernible to everyone in the room. "God makes miracles, people," he said. "And I've got enough faith to think He knows what He's doin'."

William rose from his chair and without another word, left the room. Within the silence of the study, Vincent sensed that each person there had felt that faith reach out to them. There was nothing more to say.



VII

"Are you disappointed that Jenny will be in San Francisco until next week?" Vincent asked, as he and Catherine neared the end of their journey.

They had walked in silence most of the way, hand-in-hand when the tunnels permitted, enjoying the pleasure of simply being alone together. He had felt Catherine's enjoyment in retracing the path they had taken once before, on the day of their wedding. He had sensed no disquiet in her, only anticipation, but he wondered, nonetheless.

"No," Catherine answered quietly, looking up at him. "I got used to all of Jenny's conferences and business trips years ago." She smiled, and in the faint light of the lantern he carried, Vincent saw her happiness shine upon him like a benediction. "I'll be pregnant with our child," she told him. "That will be a wonderful thing to share with Jenny. It will make our reunion even better." Vincent squeezed her hand and they entered the room that would be their temporary home.

The crystals sparkled within the stone, just as Catherine remembered. Several extra sconces had been added to the walls, and as Vincent lit the additional candles, the chamber seemed to glow around them.

"You've made some changes," she said softly, hanging her traveling cloak on the brass hook next to the entrance. She smiled as he lit the candles in the ornate holder behind the bed.

The four days since the Council meeting had passed quickly. Vincent had been needed to help complete the work in the Eastern Sector and Mary had insisted that the chamber would need a thorough cleaning before they arrived. Since Mary was the only person privy to the reason for the journey, neither Vincent nor Catherine had argued when Mary had taken it upon herself to elicit Jamie and Rebecca's help.

Now, as Catherine looked around the enchanted room, she could see the love and care both of the young women had taken with their task. The comforters Peter had given them as a wedding present had been washed and aired, as undoubtedly had the sheets and pillowcases. New candles were in every sconce, and Catherine recognized the ornate candle holder as one she had seen in Mary's chamber.

The braided rug still covered part of the floor, only now it had been moved to the side of the room, and the low wooden table placed squarely in the middle of it. Vincent had put their provisions on top of the table, and Catherine had no trouble picturing the two of them, seated on the rug in front of the table, sharing a quiet meal.

She remembered the last time they had been here and she smiled.

"We were barely inside the room before I started making love to you," Vincent said softly, coming toward her. Catherine watched him move, noticing as she always did, the power and grace of his body. Vincent had always fascinated her, but now . . . now that she *knew* what it was like to make love to him, to *be* a part of him . . . she found that her every thought, her every breath seemed to be connected with his.

"If I remember correctly," Catherine said, looking up into the sparkling blue light of his eyes, "it was a mutual decision." She touched his face, stroking the backs of her fingers across his whiskered cheek. "Of course," she murmured, sliding her hand into his hair, "we could always go to the hot springs first this time. Just to be different."

Vincent bent to her, watching as her eyes closed and her lips parted for the kiss she knew would come. He took her mouth gently, teasing her lips with his tongue. Her hand tightened in his hair and he answered her silent plea by gathering up the warm sweetness of her mouth and making it his. The taste of her intoxicated him.

"This time is special," he whispered, when he finally lifted his lips from hers. "There is more to our time together here than merely learning of each other, loving each other." He cupped her beautiful face between his hands. "Our loving now will create a child, Catherine; a new person will be brought into our world because we have loved here. In this time, in this place."

Vincent studied the woman he held beneath his roughened palms. His clawed fingers slipped gently across her cheeks, tracing the delicacy of her cheekbones, the wondrous beauty of her eyes. Serenity shone from their green depths like the flames of a candle, settling a special kind of peace within his heart. Her courage, her love, had enabled him to put aside his doubts. She was his freedom, his strength.

"Would you like a daughter this time, Vincent?" she asked softly.

He smiled. "A little girl with her mother's smile?" He traced her full lips with his finger. "Perhaps her dimple?"

"If you like."

"I would," he told her, brushing his lips against hers. "Very much." He sucked gently on her lower lip, feeling her tremble. "But we both know, Catherine . . . there is a chance, however small, that the child may look like me."

"Yes," Catherine said, her breath a sweet caress against his mouth. "And it won't matter, Vincent. Believe that."

"I do." When their mouths merged this time, it was an affirmation of all that they were, all that they could be. For them, all things *were* possible.

When Vincent finally raised his head, Catherine knew that this night would be beyond anything that had gone before. She smiled, watching the play of candlelight in his eyes.

"This time *is* special," she said softly. "It's a time only for us. A time to remember always." She raised up on her toes and pressed a light kiss against his chin. "Even Mary understood how special," she told him. "She gave me a gown, Vincent. A beautifully simple, wonderfully sensual gown." She stroked her fingers across the laces of his vest. "I want to change into that gown," she said, feeling the strength of the muscular chest beneath her hand. "I want to come to you wrapped only in ivory silk."

"Like a present," he whispered.

"Yes."

Vincent caught her hand and brought it to his lips. In his eyes Catherine saw both his understanding and his joy. In the caress of his tongue between her fingers, she felt his anticipation and his need.

"I will set out our dinner while you change," he told her, sucking just the tip of her index finger into his warm mouth. Catherine shivered, watching his eyes darken with her reaction. "William must have sensed the specialness of this time as well," he said, flicking his tongue against her skin. "He has provided us with an interesting array of provisions."

He pulled slowly away from her, turning towards the box on the small table. Catherine took a deep, shaky breath. They were so attuned; in body, in mind. *"One voice from two strings."*

Catherine heard his thought and smiled. Yes. That described them perfectly. She found the small backpack she had worn during the journey and set it on the bed. She had rolled the gown carefully within the material of her heavy, corduroy skirt. And as she unfolded it, she couldn't help the small sigh of appreciation that escaped her.

She had always loved the feel of silk against her skin. It was such a sensuous pleasure, like the feel of Vincent's body when he pressed against her from breasts to toes. She closed her eyes, letting the silk slide between her fingers. She smiled, knowing that Vincent would also find pleasure in the gliding softness of the gown against *his* skin.

She let the gown fall from her fingers, reaching up to unbutton her mid-calf traveling dress. The clothes she wore now were simple, warm, and usually put together by one of the many talented seamstresses within the community. The fashion here was one of comfort. Parts of the Tunnels could become very cold at times, and everyone dressed in layers, using their basic ingenuity to keep warm. She felt herself smiling. She and Vincent preferred to use body heat to keep them warm. Snuggling up to her husband's naked, hair-covered body, was better than any electric blanket she had ever owned.

Vincent chuckled, catching faint glimpses of Catherine's thoughts through their connection. Even when he was not trying, if she was nearby, he could usually discern her feelings if not the general substance of what she was thinking. He agreed with her completely. There was nothing to compare to body heat for keeping warm.

"Well," Catherine said softly from behind him, "I'm certainly glad I won't have to rely on this nightgown. "Vincent stood up and turned slowly toward his wife.

In his dreams long ago, he had often thought of her like this; a vision of beauty, always near, but just beyond his reach. The diaphanous silk flowed like water over her body, showing clearly the curves of her breasts, and the gentle line of her hips and legs. The neckline was open, barely covering her shoulders. Only the small sleeves and the thrust of Catherine's breasts seemed to hold the gown in place. For a moment, he forgot to breathe.

"There are no words, Catherine," he whispered. "I have no words to describe how beautiful you are."

Catherine walked toward him, the gown moving with her in a soft, swish of sound. She stopped with only inches between them. "You need no words, Vincent," she said, taking his hand and holding it lightly against her breast. "I can feel your words . . . here," she told him. Her heart was pounding beneath his fingers. "I love your words because they come from you, and because I love the sound of your voice. But there are really no words necessary between us." She smiled as he moved his fingers gently across her silk-covered breast. "No words necessary at all."

Vincent returned her smile. The silk was cool beneath his hand; very much in contrast to the warming flesh beneath it. He felt her nipple grow hard as the gown and his fingers slid across her skin.

"You make me want to postpone our dinner indefinitely," he told her, covering both of her breasts now, with his hands.

"I wouldn't object," Catherine whispered, beginning to untie the laces of his vest. "We'll get around to it eventually."

Reluctantly, Vincent lifted his hands from her breasts and stopped her busy fingers. "No," he sighed, "we would not." He bent and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "You and I are going to be one tonight. All night." He kissed her eyelids as they fluttered shut. "I don't believe there will be time later for dinner, Catherine," he continued, his lips trailing across her brows. "There will be time only for love."

Catherine took a shaky breath as the vision Vincent sent through the bond, materialized in her mind. "Then we had better eat," she managed to say, "so that we can keep up our strength."

Vincent knew that he would never think of food in quite the same way again. Food was what you ate to give you strength, to warm you on cold mornings. Why had he not realized that food could also be a prelude to lovemaking?

Everything William had packed in the bag marked "dinner tonight" was to be eaten with their fingers. Vincent saw Catherine smile as she looked at the sliced French bread and cheese, the oranges, and the dark, rich-looking chocolate cupcakes on the table before them.

"Oh, William," she murmured, meeting Vincent's gaze with sparkling eyes. "What a romantic you are."

Their meal became a game played with their senses. The sharp taste of the cheese blended with the yeasty smell of freshly baked bread as they made small sandwiches and fed each other. Vincent peeled and sectioned one of the oranges, then watched hungrily as Catherine bit into the section he held to her mouth, and dripped juice onto her lips.

Without hesitation he leaned across the table, licking the clinging drops with his tongue. He heard the inhalation of Catherine's breath and then she clutched his outstretched wrist. With deliberate slowness, she brought his fingers toward her, chewing the small bit of fruit. When she swallowed, it was Vincent's turn to catch his breath, as her tongue darted out of her mouth, cleaning off the sticky juice that clung to his fingers.

The orange sections passed from hand to hand, fingers from mouth to mouth, and the temperature within the small room seemed to rise by several degrees. Vincent felt confined and overly heated under his shirt and vest. So when Catherine suggested he take them off, it took him only a moment to be rid of the restrictive clothing.

The cool air of the chamber felt wonderful against his heated skin, but did little to quell the aching need that had been building throughout the meal. Catherine was watching him, her hands folded demurely under her chin. Her smile, however, and the thoughts racing through her mind, were anything *but* demure.

"I think we should save the cupcakes for breakfast," Catherine said, her gaze as warm as the skin she was looking at. "I couldn't eat another bite . . . of food."

Vincent rose from the rug in one fluid motion, going around the table to gather her into his arms before Catherine could even think to stand. The silk of her gown stroked his arm as he lifted her against his heated body. He cradled her head in his hand, bringing her closer. She looped her arm around his neck, holding him just as tight. Her breasts were taut, hard, as they caressed him through the silk. She moaned, and the sound tore through him, her breath hot against his neck. His hand slid to her bottom, pressing gently, easing her into the cradle of his thighs.

For a long moment, Vincent forgot how to breathe. He closed his eyes, senses filled to overflowing as Catherine melted into him, stroking him with gentle movements of her body. She was everything to him; all his dreams, all his hopes.

"Love me, Vincent," she pleaded, holding him tighter. "Give me your child."

Catherine's words washed over him like a sweet, spring rain, bringing with it the promise of renewal, of the new life they would create together. Vincent slid his arm beneath her knees and carried her to the bed.

There was a reverence in his eyes that Catherine had never seen before. And as he laid her gently on top of the comforters, she could sense that this loving would be infinitely gentle, infinitely sweet. She watched silently as he sat beside her, removing the rest of his clothes. She smiled, knowing that he felt her watching, knowing that his slow movements were meant to tantalize, to prolong her anticipation.

When Vincent stood to take off his pants, he turned toward her, his gaze burning into hers as the last piece of clothing was gone. Catherine reached out her hand, trailing her fingers down the soft, golden fur of his belly, until she touched the part of him that pulsed with every thunderous beat of his heart. Velvet softness covering steel; blazing heat scorching her fingers.

Vincent groaned and sank slowly onto the bed, stretching out beside her. He buried his face in the curve of her neck, inhaling the warm scent of

her skin. All along his body, the cool silk of Catherine's gown caressed him, sliding over his heated skin with every movement. He sank his hands into her hair, running his tongue up her throat and over her jaw to her parted, waiting lips.

She tasted of oranges and passion. He heard the soft moan Catherine made at the back of her throat and deepened the kiss further, urging her tongue to follow his, teasing her, tasting her. She matched him, touch for touch, taste for taste. He felt her hands at his waist, drawing him closer as her body arched against him.

Vincent groaned, pulling away from her lips as he slid slowly down her body. The silk beneath him was no longer cool, but damp with their heat. He kissed the taut peaks of her breasts as he passed them, taking both the cloth and her nipple into his mouth. The taste of the silk was foreign in his mouth and he moved lower.

He gathered the hem of the gown in his hands, pushing it up over Catherine's knees as he parted them and settled between her legs. She raised one knee and he kissed it, watching as the silk fell back, pooling between her thighs. The ivory cloth barely covered her dark curls. He saw them, and the scent of her, the warmth of her called to him.

The light rasp of his tongue on the inside of her thigh made Catherine's breath catch. Vincent's hand pushed the silk away and she instinctively raised her hips, allowing him to bare her from the waist. His hand settled over her, cupping her, urging her to open to him.

Catherine felt herself waiting, hardly daring to breathe. She could give him this; this intimacy of deepest love, deepest trust. Her eyes were closed but she knew he was looking at her, she could feel the heat of his gaze. Gentle fingers parted her soft folds, baring her totally, and she gasped, waiting for his touch.

It came in the gentle stroke of his tongue, and the warmth of his breath. She felt her body answering his touch, melting inside from the exquisite pleasure he gave her. He went deeper, finding all the places that made her moan, each sensitive nerve that shot sparks like electricity along her body.

Catherine writhed in an agony of pleasure, feeling Vincent move closer and closer to the center of her need. Then he was there; stroking the tight knot of nerves with his tongue, caressing her with his mouth, until her entire body was shaking, screaming for release. She arched her hips, reaching for that one final touch. Vincent gave it. And Catherine's hands clenched in his hair, her body convulsing uncontrollably as every muscle, every bone in her tightened, shattered, and dissolved beneath the shock wave of pleasure sweeping through her.

Vincent lost himself in Catherine's response, in the shattering sensations that shook her. To know that he could draw such raw power from her body gave him a feeling of unbelievable joy. He loved knowing that he could give her such pleasure.

When Catherine's shudders began to subside and her hands fell loosely onto the comforter beside his head, Vincent moved with slow deliberation up her body. He pulled the silk gown over her head and tossed it aside. He framed her flushed face between his hands, resting his weight on his elbows as he waited for her to catch her breath.

Her eyes fluttered open slowly. And when she looked at him, she smiled, love shining in dazzling brightness from her gaze. Vincent smiled back, bending forward to kiss her forehead, her cheeks, her chin.

"You are so beautiful, Catherine," he whispered, sliding his fingers into the damp hair clinging to her cheeks. "Your entire body flushes with your pleasure." He pressed a soft kiss against her lips. "It is like nothing I have ever seen."

Catherine felt the lethargy of her body begin to subside although tiny tremors still ran through her. She twined her arms around Vincent's neck, her fingers stroking gently through his hair.

"I like my body when it is with your body," she quoted softly. "It is so quite new a thing." Vincent smiled down at her and Catherine saw a hint of laughter in his eyes.

"And possibly I like the thrill," he replied, "of under me you so quite new."

Catherine laughed and pulled his head down for a tender kiss. "I wouldn't have thought that poem would be on Father's list of recommended reading," she teased.

"The poet," Vincent told her, "if not the poem." He nuzzled her neck, trailing kisses down across her collarbone, licking at the fine mist of passion that covered her skin.

"I learned that one during my hormonal adolescence," Catherine confided, knowing that she would never again think of it in the same way. "I'm glad that I remembered it," she said softly. "We are so quite new, aren't we?"

Vincent moved back up Catherine's body, tangling his fingers deeper into her hair, rubbing gently against her scalp. "We are something that has never been, Catherine," he reminded her, watching the changing light in her eyes as the candles flickered around them. "In the time since you returned, there have been so many changes for me . . . within me. I *am* a man, Catherine," he told her. "Finally - I *feel* like a man. I *love* like a man. You have given me such peace. In my heart I no longer fear the darkness." He bent his head, kissing the corners of her mouth. Her lips parted for him, and he merged their mouths together in a kiss as tender as his words.

When he finally raised his head, Vincent knew that he would see tears in Catherine's eyes. He brushed them away with his thumbs. "Happy tears," he murmured, shaking his head slightly. "Such a contradiction." He kissed the corners of her eyes, tasting her happiness for him with his lips.

"This is a time for giving, Catherine," he said, gliding his mouth across her cheek. "For sharing everything we are, everything we can be." He whispered the words across her lips, smiling as her tongue crept out to moisten them. "I have shared your passion," he whispered, teasing her bottom lip. "Now, share mine. Let me give you a child."

Catherine's legs shifted beneath him and Vincent felt the warm, damp, cradle of her thighs open in welcome. He watched her eyes, filled with love and hope, as he slowly began to make them one. In tiny increments he entered her, the strength and hardness of him moving deeper within her softness. She surrounded him, enclosed him, until they were no longer two bodies, but one.

Vincent arched his neck, letting his eyes close as the sensation of being enveloped fully within her, flowed through him. Every time - every time was like the first; an unimaginable feeling of homecoming, of finding himself at last. He felt Catherine's hands as they traveled across his shoulders and down his back. Her hips shifted, and slender thighs tightened around his hips, pulling him even deeper within her. He groaned and began to move.

Gently, slowly, Vincent measured himself against the infinite softness of her, stroking nerve endings already sensitized beyond belief. Catherine pulled at his back, bringing him down until the hardened nipples of her breasts caressed his chest. He opened his eyes, seeing Catherine's glazed eyes watching him, her cheeks flushed and damp as her passion rose with his. He bent and kissed her, letting his tongue follow the slow rhythm of his body.

Catherine moaned into his mouth, and Vincent felt her hands moving, clenching his shoulders, his sweat-dampened hair. Then suddenly her body arched, pulling her mouth from his, as the rhythmic convulsions of her climax overwhelmed her. Vincent moved with them, drawn even deeper, as her muscles contracted around him, clutching him, capturing him, embracing him until the convulsions, the rhythm became his, and every nerve within him, exploded in release.



VIII

"I hope you aren't seriously considering moving for the next week or so," Catherine said, trying to make her unwilling muscles cooperate. She managed just enough energy to prop her arms on Vincent's chest. His eyes were closed and his face serene. She was sprawled over his out-stretched body, absolutely satiated and utterly exhausted from their night of loving.

Vincent had not been teasing when he said they would not leave the bed during the night. He had made love to her endlessly, bringing her time and again to shuddering, gasping, completion. If she wasn't pregnant, it was certainly not from lack of trying.

She felt the chest beneath her move as Vincent chuckled. "Think of it as a singular sense of purpose," he told her. "And as for moving," he cupped the back of her head, pulling her down for a kiss. "I would not think of it." His words washed over her mouth and Catherine melted against him, giving herself to the soft ministrations of his lips.

After a moment he ended the kiss and Catherine rested her chin on her hands. She loved looking at him like this, with his hair a wild tangle on the pillows and his face a study in tranquility. It was a wonderful contrast.

"What were you like as a child, Vincent?" she asked, trying to see the boy he had been in the man she loved. "I've heard things, of course, from Father and Devin. But how did *you* see yourself? Were you always quiet and studious as Father says?"

Vincent smoothed the snarled hair beneath his fingers, trying to remember, trying to form words to tell her. "Yes," he said finally, "I suppose that most of the time studious and quiet would have described me. I felt at odds with most things, Catherine. There was so much the other children could do that was forbidden to me." He thought back to the carousel, to

the park he had only seen in the moonlight. "After lessons, Devin and the others could go Above. They could wander the streets unnoticed, see what that life had to offer. I could only imagine, Catherine," he sighed. "And dream."

"That sounds so lonely," Catherine whispered.

"Perhaps," Vincent said, "but in books I could be anywhere, do anything. In books, Catherine, I was not confined to these tunnels. I had the whole world, even other universes to explore."

"Where did you go in those dreams, Vincent?"

His hand stilled for a moment, then he resumed stroking her hair, smiling as his fingers encountered more of the tangles their loving had made. "Everywhere," he told her. "I traveled to India with Kipling, to sea with Sabatini, to Arthur's Camelot, and Robin's Sherwood. There were so many adventures, Catherine, so many places to go. Devin and I wanted to float a raft down Twain's Mississippi." He paused, remembering dreams once lost only to be found again. "South of Oz and north of Shangri-La," he murmured. "We wanted to do it all."

"But Devin went alone."

"Yes."

Catherine moved her hands over his chest, kissing the spot her head had been resting on. "Maybe our childhoods weren't so different after all, Vincent," she told him softly. "When my mother died I spent most of my time with Dad. Oh, we'd go to the park, and I had friends at school. But when we were home together, just the two of us, I remember how we'd sit together in his den. He'd be reading something; usually having to do with his law practice, I guess, and I'd have my book." She looked at him and smiled. "I don't think I read as much until I got to law school."

Vincent answered her smile, brushing her tangled hair from her cheek with his fingers. "What did you read, Catherine?" he asked, enjoying the warm softness of her skin. "What books do ten-year-old girls like to read?"

"I don't know about all ten-year-old girls, but I read just about anything I could get my hands on." Vincent felt her sudden sadness and he

cupped her chin, tilting her head up so that she would meet his eyes. "What?" he asked, knowing she would understand.

It was a moment before she spoke. "I just realized," Catherine began, "that I didn't want to read about families. Not if I could help it." She sighed. "I guess I didn't want to think about how my family had changed. For the longest time," she continued, "I would only read mythology. Norse, Greek, Roman, it didn't matter. I was hooked on mythology." She smiled, the sweet smile that was his alone. "You'd make a wonderful Thor," she teased. "All that blond hair and muscle. The god of thunder, of strength. You'd be perfect."

"Thor was also a god of war, Catherine," Vincent reminded her, "and I have found that I am more than content with peace." He stroked her chin, letting his fingers slide down the satin softness of her throat. "Am I not better suited to be Pluto? For surely my Persephone dwells with me now in my underworld kingdom."

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "But unlike Persephone, I won't be spending half of my time in the world Above." She turned her head and kissed his fingers. "Persephone loved Pluto, you know," she told him. "It was only for her mother that she agreed to spend half her time away from him."

"I thought it had something to do with pomegranate seeds."

Catherine laughed softly, nibbling at his fingers while he stroked her lips. "I used to make up different endings," she confessed. "I always liked a happy ending."

"So do I." Vincent pushed her gently onto her back and rolled off the bed, turning quickly to catch her up in his arms.

Catherine yelped and looped her arms around his neck. "I thought you promised we wouldn't move," she laughed, as he carried her through the chamber entrance toward the hot springs. "Ah, off to the baths. How very Greek of you. Or is it Roman?"

"Both, I believe."

He walked into the small, steamy room, not stopping until he was standing in the water, still holding her in his arms. He sat down on the

bottom, settling Catherine on his lap. The water was wonderfully hot and every tired muscle in his body thanked him. Catherine relaxed completely; as sprawled in the pool as she had been on the bed.

"I think my bones are melting," she murmured. "And my muscles . . . wonderful. I may never move again."

Vincent smiled, and kissed her shoulder. "Never say never," he whispered.



"What will Peter tell Jenny?" Catherine's soft question broke through the tranquil peace and silence of the room.

They sat among the pillows, one of the comforters wrapped warmly around them, watching the shadows from the flickering candles play on the chamber wall. Catherine had no idea of the time. Time had little meaning for them here. They had eaten, loved, bathed, and slept to no particular timetable. This place, for them, had been a moment out of time, a moment with no thought of yesterdays or tomorrows. But tomorrow always came.

"He will tell her first about the community," Vincent said, his arms tightening around her. "He will explain how it came to be, how it grew, and how it is governed. And he will tell her most of all about our need for secrecy, our need to be separate and apart from the world Above. This is always the way with new Helpers."

"Will he tell her about you and me?"

"No," Vincent told her softly. "Father has asked if he might be the one to speak to Jenny about our meeting, our bond." He rubbed his chin against her hair and Catherine sighed, turning her face toward the warmth of his neck.

"Do you know what he's planning to say, Vincent?"

"I imagine he will try to prepare her in some way."

Catherine pulled back a little and looked up into his eyes. "Prepare her for you?" she asked. "Or for me?"

Vincent kissed her forehead and smiled. "Only for me, Catherine," he answered. "Father has said that you will need to do your own explaining."

Catherine sighed and settled back into Vincent's warm arms again. "I could always cop out and tell her this was my idea of a witness protection program," she told him. There was no answer from the man who held her, only the warm richness of his presence within the bond that connected them. He knew she wouldn't lie to Jenny. "It's not going to be easy," Catherine whispered. "Jenny's had so much to deal with."

"Then knowing you are here, Catherine, knowing you have a husband and son who love you, that will certainly ease Jenny's burden."

"In some ways," Catherine agreed. "But in other ways it only increases that burden." Her hands clenched in her lap. "She'll have to carry our secret, Vincent," she reminded him. "And that isn't always an easy secret to carry."

"No," he agreed. "It is not."

The room grew silent again as Catherine tried to picture what her meeting with Jenny would be like. It was difficult. She just couldn't picture Jenny here Below. What would she think of it all? What would she think of Vincent? Would she be hurt that Catherine had never confided in her? The answer to that question was easy. The answer to that question was yes.

"In time, Jenny will understand," Vincent assured her. "You kept our secret from *all* of those who loved you in the world Above, Catherine. Even your father. You had a secret you could not share, a secret that many people relied on you to keep. Surely Jenny will not fault you for your loyalty to us."

Catherine wasn't too sure. Jenny had been her friend for years. Hadn't she owed loyalty also, to her?

"You are truly concerned about this," Vincent said, covering her cold, clenched hands with his. "I thought we had decided this was the best course to follow?"

Catherine twined her fingers with his, gathering strength and warmth from his touch. "We did," she said softly. "It's just that it all of a sudden occurred to me how difficult all of this is going to be for Jenny." She lifted his fingers to her lips. "I have you to help me, Vincent," she continued. "I have you to hold me in the night, to comfort me and keep me safe." She placed a gentle kiss on each knuckle. "I don't think Jenny has anyone like that."

Vincent rubbed his chin over her hair, and cuddled her closer to him. Catherine closed her eyes, giving in to the seductive peace that surrounded her. "One day, Catherine," he told her, "If she truly wants to, Jenny will find someone to hold and keep her safe."

Without letting her go, Vincent turned and slowly stretched out on the bed. Still clasping his hands, Catherine snuggled back until she felt Vincent's knees curl up behind hers, settling them like spoons beneath the comforter.

"Sleep, now," she heard Vincent whisper. "Sleep and let me hold you in the night."

Catherine closed her eyes, floating easily into that place where waking and sleeping melted together. Here, there was only love, only Vincent and Jacob. Here, there was only the dream.



"Will we come here again sometime?" Catherine asked, looking back at their wedding chamber once more. Vincent adjusted her pack, making certain the straps would not cut into her shoulders. The sheets and pillows she carried were not heavy, but they made the pack bulky and awkward,

especially when worn over the heavy sweater and jacket he had insisted she wear. Although some of these corridors were naturally heated by the hot springs beneath them, most of the tunnels they would be traveling through today were not.

When the pack was straight, he kissed her hair, having understood the wistfulness in her voice. "On each anniversary of our wedding," he promised, touching her cheek and turning her face toward him. "But only if you are not in the last trimester of a pregnancy at the time."

Catherine's smile seemed to light up the tunnel. "Does that mean this won't be my only pregnancy?"

Vincent smiled back, stroking his fingers across her velvet skin. "That will depend upon you, Catherine," he said softly. "There is love enough in you for many children. But I find it difficult to see you devoting yourself solely to the raising of a family."

Catherine's smile dimmed. "Have I missed something?" she asked quietly. "We already have one child, Vincent. And if I'm right, in nine months we'll have another. You know me. You know my heart. You can't honestly believe that anything is more important to me than you and our children."

She was right. He *did* know her heart. He knew that her heart cried out for all the children who needed help: children like the abandoned baby, Ellie, children cast off and forgotten by a world devoid of dreams. Vincent knew that Catherine would have continued her work Above, had she been given that chance. That time was gone. But the work itself *could* continue. Only from Below.

"You are a wonderful mother, Catherine," Vincent told her, sliding his fingers into her hair. "And no man has ever had a more loving wife. But there are other children; children who have no advocate, children who have no hope. You could help these children, Catherine. We could help these children."

Vincent felt the deeper touch of her mind, and he opened himself to the blending. Their connection still amazed her slightly, and Vincent knew that she never trespassed, never went further than necessary because she wanted to allow him some modicum of privacy. Only in moments of great

emotional upheaval had she merged with him fully, totally. He smiled, feeling how careful she was, how delicately she entwined her thoughts with his.

"You've been thinking about this for a while, haven't you?" she asked, touching his face. "But you haven't gotten it all worked out yet." He watched as she absorbed her new knowledge and was pleased to see her finally smile.

"Just let me know if I can be of help in the planning stages, Vincent," she told him. "And you didn't have to worry." She leaned forward and stood on her toes, kissing him softly on the lips. "I think it's a wonderful idea."

They walked through the lower tunnels in a peacefully shared silence. Where the corridors permitted, Vincent took Catherine's hand, savoring the feeling of having her there beside him. He had often journeyed alone through these dark passageways. They were familiar to him, had nothing new to teach him.

But each step he took with Catherine made Vincent aware of how very different the same journey became when shared with the one you loved. He saw the tunnels with her senses; the faint glistening of the stone in the light of his lantern, the rich smell of the earth around them, the faint rush of water and steam from somewhere nearby, hidden beneath passageways yet undiscovered. Except, perhaps, by Mouse. Vincent smiled and felt Catherine squeeze his hand.

"Do you think Elliot and Mouse have wandered back to the Home Chambers by now?" she asked softly.

"I don't know, Catherine," he told her. "But Mouse seldom leaves for more than a day or so without some sort of word to Mary or Jamie. He understands that Mary worries about all her children. He simply doesn't believe that anything can happen to him if he is careful."

"And is he careful?"

Vincent shrugged. "The world does not work in the same way for Mouse as it does for the rest of us, Catherine," he explained. "Mouse's conception of those things around him is based on how he is affected by

those things. Time, for instance. He once told us that telling time was easy. Early, he said, comes before Mouse; late, comes after."

Catherine chuckled. "That certainly sounds like him."

"He is remarkable. There is nothing he cannot conceive mechanically. And if he can conceive it, visualize it in his mind, then he believes there must be a way to do it."

"And is he usually right?"

"More times than not, I believe."

Vincent lapsed into silence, remembering a time when Mouse and Catherine had combined their efforts to save his life and the life of his father. Elliot, too, had contributed to the rescue, although he had little knowledge of the actual events.

"Are you worried about him, Vincent?"

"Elliot?" he asked. Catherine nodded. "Yes. Elliot has lost his purpose, Catherine," he said softly. "He is looking for peace, looking for the man he has lost. But I don't believe he will be able to find that man until he finds some purpose to his life."

"He feels guilty for betraying you, Vincent," Catherine said. She stopped walking, and turned to look at him. "He feels that the loss of his arm is in some way a penance for that betrayal." She raised her other arm and touched his chest. "You're right when you say Elliot has lost his purpose, his focus on life. He once told me that he hated to sleep because it was such a waste of precious time. How can a man like that exist in limbo?"

Vincent knew of Catherine's pain for her friend, for it was a pain he shared with her. But he shared something with Elliot, also. Their love for Catherine. For if business and building had been the purpose of Elliot's life Above in the beginning; Catherine had been the focus of that same life Above at its end. He only hoped that Elliot could find in his life Below, another purpose and focus to take the place of those he had lost.

Catherine sensed Vincent's sadness and she slid her hand up his chest until she touched his lips. "Maybe Mouse can teach Elliot how to find a new purpose, Vincent," she said softly. "Maybe Elliot needs to forget all his preconceived ideas about the world and start seeing it through Mouse's eyes." She leaned up on tiptoe and lightly kissed him. "You must admit," she added, "it would make for an interesting vantage point."

Vincent chuckled and the two of them continued on their journey home. The tunnels around them eventually lost the glistening sheen of the water embedded in the rock, and the distant echo of the pipes called to them. They were still very far from the Home Chambers, and Vincent could think of only a few others who would venture out this far.

As they came to the junction of corridors, Mouse turned the corner, almost walking straight into Catherine.

"Catherine!" Mouse exclaimed. "And Vincent!"

Catherine smiled, stopping in the middle of the tunnel next to her husband. "We were just talking about you, Mouse," she said. "Peter and Father were trying to find Elliot the other day. Have you seen him?" She felt Vincent squeeze her hand and looked up. Elliot had just come around the corner.

He didn't look as haggard as when Catherine had seen him last. Though he and his clothes were covered with dirt and mud, he looked almost happy. Catherine smiled. He looked a little like a boy who had been playing at making mudpies most of the day.

"Hell-o, Elliot," Catherine said, letting her smile widen. "It looks like you and Mouse have been exploring." Elliot remained silent, but Mouse spoke for him.

"Lots of tunnels, lots of chambers," Mouse said. "Lots of mud, too." He held up his ingeniously designed miner's cap. Each of the flashlights was caked with mud. Catherine glanced back at Elliot and saw that he, too, was holding one of Mouse's caps. She couldn't for the life of her imagine him wearing it.

"Peter was looking for you the other day, Elliot," Vincent said, when Elliot still did not speak. "He wanted to discuss physical therapy treatment

for your arm. We could not reach you over the pipes and Pascal and Nathaniel could not find you."

"Off with Mouse," Mouse explained. "Past the pipes, deeper than deep."

Catherine was still watching Elliot, trying to find a reason for his silence. She saw him look at Vincent and then back at her and the packs they carried.

"Been on a trip?" he asked finally, swinging the headgear absently against his leg.

"Yes," Catherine told him softly. "We have a special place."

"Near Mouse's Rainbow," Mouse said, turning to Elliot. "Great place. Have to take you." He looked back at Vincent and shook his head. "Stupid place for a bed, though," he continued.

Catherine felt her face growing warm and knew that Elliot would be seeing a bright blush creeping over her. Tact was something Mouse had obviously not yet discovered. Vincent tightened his hold on her fingers.

"Peter will be coming back down in a week or so," Vincent said, changing the subject. "You should try to be near the Home Chambers, Elliot; so the two of you can talk."

Elliot smiled crookedly. "I'll try to be around," he said, turning his gaze toward Vincent. "Some things are easier if you don't look at them all the time."

"Yes." Vincent said. Catherine could feel the unspoken exchange in the silence that followed.

"Gotta go," Mouse said, shifting his feet.

Catherine smiled. Mouse had an uncanny knack for knowing when to break the tension. "Take care of yourselves," she said softly. "Be careful."

Elliot looked back at her briefly before following Mouse down the dark tunnel behind them. Catherine sighed and leaned her head on Vincent's shoulder. "Will it get better, do you think?"

"Such things take time, Catherine," he told her. "I shall remember while the light lives yet, And in the night-time I shall not forget."

He wrapped his free arm around her waist and Catherine felt his lips against her hair. "You are still in Elliot's heart," he said softly. "Until he finds some other light to guide him, I fear his way will be difficult."

Catherine sighed. "I hope it's soon, Vincent," she murmured. "It will be harder still when everyone knows that I'm pregnant."

Vincent's hand slid from her waist to the place where even now, his seed may have taken root. Catherine covered his hand with hers, and for a long time her only thought was of dreams fulfilled.



IX

Vincent watched as Catherine paced around the room for the third time. In the two weeks since they had returned from their journey to the wedding chamber, he had seen her anxiety over the coming meeting with Jenny steadily grow. She had no explanation for her uneasiness, and Vincent thought that perhaps the uncertainty about her pregnancy accounted for most of it.

Now, with the preliminary discussions by Peter at an end, and Jenny's first visit to the community arranged for this afternoon, he had felt Catherine's sense of foreboding escalate.

Vincent sighed and moved away from the chamber door. "Your pacing is making Jacob nervous, Catherine," he said softly, going to her side.

Catherine stopped and turned, looking down at the quiet child watching her solemnly from his jumpseat. "I'm sorry, babyface," she said softly.

Vincent put his hands on her shoulders and rubbed gently. "Peter told you that Jenny understood," he reminded her. "She understood why you had not told her about our community and your involvement with us as a Helper." He lowered his hands, wrapping his arms around her as he brought her back against him. "'Good Deeds Anonymous,' wasn't that what he said she called you?"

"Yes," Catherine answered softly. "She used to tease me sometimes with that name when we were at college."

"Because you never let your good works be known."

Vincent had heard the story Jenny had related to Peter, and he had not been surprised to hear that Catherine had done many charitable things without wanting any recognition or acknowledgement. They were just little things, Jenny had said, but Vincent believed those little things had eventually led to Catherine's dissatisfaction with her life Above.

"Catherine," Vincent began, resting his chin on the rose-scented softness of her hair, "is it Jenny's reaction to me that worries you so? Do you think she will be appalled?"

"I don't know, Vincent," Catherine said raggedly. "I don't know if it's me or you or what it is that's making me so crazy." She covered his arms with her hands, rubbing up and down on the sleeves of his shirt. "Maybe it's just a combination of everything."

She tilted her head back to look up at him and smiled. It wasn't the brightest smile he had seen, but it was an improvement. "Maybe it's just wondering if I'm really pregnant," she said, "and worrying about how Jenny's going to take everything, and if she'll help us with Joe, and Father's concern about Elliot and Mouse." She sighed and closed her eyes. Vincent pressed soft kisses on her hair and held her tighter.

"As you reminded me just the other night, Catherine," Vincent said, "if you are not pregnant it is certainly not from a lack of diligence on my part to get you that way. As for Jenny, Father is with her now. We can only hope that he will be able to explain about your relationship with me, and about Jacob in a manner that helps her to understand us." He gave her a squeeze. "Father does have a wonderful bedside manner when he wants to use it," he continued softly. "Whether she helps us with Joe is something over which we have little, if any, control. And as for Elliot and Mouse, we have even less control over them."

He turned her in his arms, not speaking until she had met his gaze. "I love you, Catherine," he told her. "You are my life, my heart. Everything that I am. That will never change." He cupped her chin and kissed her gently on the mouth. "Our son loves you as well. Whether or not we have another child, whether Jenny can accept what is now the reality of our life together. . . no matter. Jacob and I will always be a part of you. Remember that, Catherine. Let it give you strength. Let *us* give you strength."



Catherine stood in the corridor outside Father's study. She could feel her heart beating furiously. She needed Jenny to believe. She needed Jenny to understand; about Vincent and about the miracle of their love. They had decided it would be best for Catherine to speak to Jenny alone first, and Vincent and the baby would join them later.

Vincent had gone ahead and taken Jacob with him to discuss the new chambers with Nathaniel. Father was supposed to bring Jenny down to their chamber when their discussion was finished. But Catherine hadn't been able to wait. So, she stood, nervously wringing her hands, eavesdropping on her best friend and her father-in-law.

"And you won't tell me how Cathy came to be living here with your son?" Catherine heard the frustration in Jenny's voice and wondered if she shouldn't just barge in on them.

"I have told you what I can of Vincent and Catherine's relationship. You know how they met, how their love . . . their connection grew. How she came to be with us now, and her subsequent marriage to my son, is something that Catherine will explain to you."

"But when? It's been a week since Peter called me back and started telling me about this secret community below the City. Now you've been going on for almost an hour about your son and Cathy, and why she never told me about him. The hell with all of this. When do I get to see Cathy?"

"How about right now, Jen?"

Catherine stepped down into Father's study, watching her friend with anxious eyes. Jenny had risen at the sound of her voice, almost spilling two cups of tea in the process. Catherine saw Father steadying the cups as Jenny hurled herself into Catherine's outstretched arms.

"Cathy? Oh, God, Cathy . . . is it you? Is it really you?"

Catherine held on, crying along with her friend. It was so good to see her again, to touch her. Now, if she could only make her understand. "Yes, it's me, Jen," she said softly, smiling as Jenny backed away and held her at arm's length, looking at the changes Catherine knew were apparent.

Her clothes were plainer than those she had worn Above; their colors pale and muted. Jenny, on the other hand, was very much as Catherine remembered her; all bright colors and bangles. No one loved jewelry more than Jenny.

"Oh, God, Cathy," Jenny murmured. "It's you, it's really you. But you look so different, too. Are you all right? God, what am I saying? Of course, you're all right. You're here. Oh, God, you're really here." She pulled Catherine back for another hug. "I can't believe it."

Catherine looked at Father from over Jenny's shoulder. He made a small, dismissive gesture with his hand and Catherine smiled. "Let's go to my chamber, Jenny," she said. "We can talk there and leave Father in peace."

Jenny backed away, not letting go of Catherine's hand. She turned to Father and Catherine felt her squeeze her fingers. "Thank you . . . Father," Jenny said, with only a slight hesitation. "Um, I'm sorry if, well, if I got a little angry. It's just . . ."

"That's quite all right, Jenny," Father said. "I understand your impatience." He picked up his tea and took a sip, nodding to Catherine. "I shall expect to see both of you at dinner," he said.

Catherine smiled. "Of course, Father," she said. "Vincent and Jacob will be joining us in a while. And you know that grandson of yours never misses dinner." She turned toward Jenny and pulled her by the hand. "Come on, Jen," she said. "I've got so much to tell you."

After they had walked a little way down the corridor, Jenny stopped and whispered in Catherine's ear. "Why did I feel like curtsying back there?" she asked, softly. "Is he *really* your father-in-law? He reminded me of that king in the play we did in college."

"Prospero?" Catherine laughed. "Oh, he'd love that." She gave Jenny another hug and put her arm around her waist. "Come on. We've got a lot to talk about."

When they entered the chamber, Catherine quickly sat Jenny down in the chair near the end of the bed, giving her no time to look around. She had moved it so that Jenny would not be able to see the painting hanging on the far wall. That would come later. She sat down across from her on the foot of the bed and took both her hands.

"Oh, Jen," she said. "It's so good to see you."

And it was good, but Jenny looked so tired and thin, as though she hadn't had a decent meal in the past year. Catherine knew that Jenny must have thrown herself into her work, putting in 18-hour days and rarely taking time for sleep or meals. They had been friends too long for Catherine not to know how Jenny reacted to stress.

"Cath, I don't understand any of this," Jenny said, meeting her eyes. "Peter and, uh, Father, well, they wouldn't tell me how you got here. Why no one knows . . . well, no, I can guess why no one knows; this place is incredible. I'd never have believed a place like this could exist. Or that you'd be in it."

"It's beautiful here, Jenny," Catherine said softly, "You can't imagine how beautiful. Vincent and I will show you around later, if you like." She smiled. "You'll love the dining hall. William is a marvelous cook."

"Wait a minute," Jenny said smiling, "you mean you don't have to cook?"

Catherine returned her smile. "Jen, you know I can't cook. I burn toast, for heaven's sake. If it hadn't been for Vincent, I wouldn't even know how to make the baby's cereal."

"I don't believe it," Jenny murmured. "You mean you don't *have* to cook?" Catherine shook her head. "Oh, that's rotten," she laughed. "I thought when you finally got married you'd wind up just like Nancy; bottles, babies, and melon ballers."

Catherine laughed with her, remembering Nancy's party for Rebecca and the intricacies of making melon balls. "Well, I've got the bottles and the babies," she told her, as she thought of the baby she might be carrying at this very moment.

"Cath, you still haven't told me," Jenny said, her voice suddenly very soft. "How? What happened? Why did you let everyone think you had died?"

Catherine took a deep breath, knowing there was only thing she could say. "Because I did, Jenny."

The look that passed over Jenny's face made Catherine suddenly want to take it all back; to lie and tell her that it had all been faked so that she could come and live with Vincent. Maybe that would have been better. Maybe they were wrong to tell Jenny the truth. There were all kinds of truth, all shades of truth. Maybe another truth would have been kinder.

"Don't joke like that, Cathy. It isn't funny."

"I'm not joking, Jen. You know I wouldn't do that to you." Catherine leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees as she held tightly to Jenny's hands. "It's hard to explain, and even harder to believe, I know. But it all came about because Vincent and I are connected. We've been together through lifetimes of love, Jenny."

When Jenny remained silent, her eyes intent and dark, Catherine sighed and continued. "Father told you how Vincent found me in the park, how I healed here with him after the attack?" Jenny nodded. "We recognized each other, Jen. Somehow we knew that we were destined to be together - always. We fell in love again. And because of our connection, our bond, that love became stronger than any love that had ever been."

"That still doesn't explain . . ."

"But it does," Catherine told her. "I was given a second chance, Jen. Because of the love we shared, a love that had grown over lifetimes, I was allowed to come back and live a life with Vincent and our son."

"Then I'm talking to a ghost?"

"Do I look like a ghost, Jen? I'm real. As real as you are."

"How do you know?" Jenny said wryly. "This may all be one of those weird dreams of mine. And I've just dreamed you back into existence."

Catherine smiled. "Maybe you could dream me up, Jen," she said softly, "but never in a million years could you dream up Vincent."

"That's what you think," Jenny said. "Working with all those existentialist writers might have made me able to come up with just about anything."

"Do you remember Kristopher Gentian?" Catherine asked.

"You mean that painter? The one you had the show for?"

"Yes," Catherine said. "Well, stop looking at me for a minute and look at the painting on the far wall." She turned, keeping hold of Jenny's hand. "Over there, Jen."

Jenny turned in her chair and Catherine saw her jaw drop as she looked at Kristopher's painting. She pulled her hands from Catherine's and walked toward the painting until she was standing only about three feet away.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat, "he definitely caught the elusive Cathy Chandler. You didn't tell me you posed for a period piece."

"I didn't," Catherine said, as she watched Jenny examine the painting. "Kristopher only sketched me once; in a little place where we went for cappuccino." She paused, knowing that this was the time. "He painted Vincent from memory."

Jenny turned around. "Excuse me?"

"That's Vincent, Jenny," Catherine told her. "The man holding me so lovingly in that painting is my husband."

Jenny frowned and turned back around. "But why did Kristopher paint him so stylized?" she asked. "I'll give him credit for imagination,

although some of his other work was pretty strange, too, if I remember correctly. But why didn't he just paint him like he is?"

"That *is* how Vincent is, Jenny."

Jenny looked at her and shook her head, moving away from the painting and taking a seat in Vincent's favorite chair. "You've finally lost it, right? This whole thing . . . " She folded her hands together on the small table in front of her and Catherine could see how tightly her fingers were locked. "Look, I'll grant you that he's a lot better looking than most of the men I've met in Manhattan in the last five years, but Cathy - he *can't* be real."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Jenny's voice rose slightly with every word. "Why not? Okay, why not . . . um, how about because he's not . . . well, he's not quite . . . "

"Not quite what, Jen?"

"Not quite . . . ," Jenny looked at Catherine and then back at the painting. "Well, not quite human, I guess."

"Jenny, Vincent is the most human being I've ever met. He *does* exist. I love him. He's my husband, the father of my son."

"That's another thing," Jenny interrupted. "You never even told me you were pregnant. How am I supposed to believe all this when as your best friend you didn't even tell me you were pregnant?"

Catherine smiled shyly. "Can I make it up to you now by telling you I'm probably pregnant again? Right now?"

"Oh, my God. Does, uh, does your husband know?"

"I should hope so," Catherine said, smiling in a way that left very little to the imagination. "He and I tried our damndest to get me this way."

Jenny burst into a fit of the giggles, and covered her mouth with shaking hands. "I'm getting hysterical, you know," she said, through her

fingers. "I can only take so much, Cath. God, how does your husband feel about hysterical women?"

Catherine smiled, knowing Jenny was about to find out. She could feel Vincent and Jacob enter the room behind her as she watched Jenny's hands fall from her paling face. Her eyes had grown almost as wide as her open mouth.

"Jenny," Catherine said softly, "I'd like you to meet my husband, Vincent, and our son, Jacob."



X

Vincent could see that Catherine's friend was having more than a little trouble believing her eyes. He sighed and sat down in the chair opposite Catherine, letting Jacob rest against his shoulder. With a smile to his wife, he turned back to the silent, shaking woman.

"Catherine has told me much about you, Jenny," he said, noticing how pale she had become.

"I really am getting hysterical here, Cath," Jenny said, her voice as shaky as her hands. Vincent noticed that she never quite met his eyes. "Do you have many hysterical women around here?"

"Not as a rule." Vincent answered. "Most new Helpers and those new to our community learn of me gradually over a period of time."

"I'm the exception, huh?"

Jenny's voice *did* carry a note of hysteria in it and Vincent turned, watching as Catherine got up and went to kneel beside Jenny's chair.

"You're the exception because you're my friend, Jenny," Catherine said softly, covering Jenny's hands with hers. "Is believing Vincent is real any harder than believing *I'm* real?"

Jenny laughed and clasped Catherine's hands. "What makes you think I believe you're real?" she said shakily. "I told you, this is probably one of those weird dreams of mine." Her gaze lifted and Vincent caught her taking a quick look at him. "Maybe I made all of this up."

"Jenny . . . "

Vincent stood up slowly, carrying a sleepy Jacob to his crib. As he put the baby down for a short nap and covered him with his blanket, Vincent was very aware of Jenny's gaze following his every movement. He rubbed the baby's back for a moment, then looked up, meeting her eyes.

To Vincent's surprise Jenny did not look away. She stared, directly, as though she were hypnotized. Vincent returned her stare, not moving, staying absolutely still beside the crib, his hand resting on Jacob's back. He had never been looked at in quite that way, and he wondered what Jenny was feeling. He sensed no real hostility in her, only a great deal of confusion. After a few minutes of silence, Jenny finally spoke.

"I'm not really dreaming, am I?"

"No, Jenny," Vincent answered softly. "You're not."

He saw the tension leave her body and she seemed to melt back against the chair. Catherine had been right to be concerned. Jenny did not look well. He looked at Catherine and nodded, knowing she had sensed his thoughts.

"Jenny," Catherine began, "I'm sorry we sprang this on you like we did. But when Peter told me about your phone call and the dreams . . . I couldn't let you go on grieving. Vincent and I decided that you needed to know, Jenny. You needed to know everything so that you could begin to heal." Catherine gently rubbed Jenny's limp hands. "You don't look like you've been taking very good care of yourself," she added softly.

Jenny's smile looked as limp as her hands. "You know how it is, Cathy," she said. "Editing isn't an eight-to-five job, but it's great when you, well, when you don't want to seriously think about anything. Know what I mean?"

"Yes." Catherine nodded. "You mean that you've been working 18 hour days, not eating, and getting very little sleep."

"Yeah," Jenny confessed, "that's just what I mean."

"Well, you're here with us now," Catherine said, looking up at Vincent, "and we're going to see to it that you start taking better care of yourself."

"You are, huh?"

Jenny still did not seem certain of her surroundings, although Vincent thought she looked more relaxed now, than when he had first entered the room. "Why don't I bring in the oatmeal cookies and herbal tea from the kitchen, Catherine?" he offered, smiling down at them. "And you can tell her all about the baby."

Catherine laughed. "Sounds like a wonderful idea." Vincent felt her laughter curl around his heart. How he loved the sound of it.

He looked at her, sitting on her heels on the floor beside the chair, her skirt billowing around her. Catherine was so petite, so delicately built. How would she look in the months to come as their child grew within her, changing her?

"I'll probably look like I swallowed a taxi," she said, her eyes sparkling up at him. "Go get the cookies, Vincent," she teased. "You can daydream about my tummy later."

Vincent reached down and smoothed his hand across the top of her head. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jenny following the path of his hand. He had almost forgotten how different his hands were, how frightening, how dangerous. He curled his clawed nails into his palm.

Those are my hands, Vincent. They are beautiful. Please, don't be ashamed of them.

Slowly, he let his hand relax again. It was just his hand. Different, yes, but his, and nothing to be ashamed of. He squatted down beside his wife and caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I will only be a moment," he told her. He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss against her temple. "Thank you, love," he whispered, knowing only she could hear.

Catherine sighed as she watched Vincent leave the room. He was so careful of her, so gentle. She, too, had forgotten how fierce he might look to someone who didn't know him.

"My God, Cath," Jenny murmured, "the way he looks at you. I know some editors over in romance who would kill for a cover model with those eyes."

Catherine laughed softly and turned to look back at her friend. "He's the gentlest man I've ever known, Jenny," she said, sighing. "And sometimes, I think . . . the saddest. He's been through so much because of me. I want to make that up to him. I want to make him happy."

"Does he make you happy, Cath?"

"Yes, Jen," Catherine said without hesitation. "He makes me very happy."



Dinner had long passed before Jenny reminded them that she had to work the next morning and would need to get home. Vincent watched as she and Catherine hugged and cried their goodbyes. Jenny seemed more comfortable with him now, and Catherine had quietly suggested that he guide Jenny up while she got Jacob ready for bed.

The corridors throughout the Home Chambers had quieted with the night, and as Vincent and Jenny walked, only occasional pipe chatter and a rattling subway high above them broke the silence. It was a comfortable silence, however, and Vincent smiled. Catherine's friend was not at all what he had thought she would be.

"Thank you."

Vincent looked down at the dark-haired woman walking beside him. She and Catherine were so different, yet so alike. "For what?" he asked. He had slowed his stride, much as he did for Catherine, so their walk through the tunnels was almost leisurely.

"For loving Cathy so much," Jenny answered. "For making her really happy."

"It is very easy to love Catherine," Vincent told her. "And her happiness has always been very important to me."

"It, uh, must have been hard for you," Jenny said. "When she was living in the City. I guess you didn't get to see each other much."

Vincent smiled. "No," he agreed, "not as often as we would have liked."

They walked in silence for a while before Jenny spoke again. "We didn't get to see each other very much, either," she said. "Between my job and hers, well, neither one of us seemed to be able to leave the office at the office." She looked up at him. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes." He stopped and leaned against the cold stone of the corridor wall. "The work Catherine did Above was very important to her," he said quietly. "And she was very good at that work. I sometimes feel there is a part of Catherine that wishes she were still doing that work, still helping, still battling against the evil in the world."

Jenny had paused and Vincent saw her dark eyes narrow as she looked up at him in the torchlight. "That evil destroyed her, Vincent," she said angrily. "Yes, Cathy was good at her work. Too good." She came closer, putting her hand on his arm. "I didn't know how really dangerous her job was for a long time," she told him. "She didn't tell me about most of the places she went, the things she did for that department. She got too involved, Vincent. She cared too much."

"For Catherine," Vincent said softly, meeting her gaze, "there is no such thing as caring too much."

"God, don't I know it." Jenny shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. The bracelets on her wrist jingled. "Cathy is safe here, isn't she, Vincent? I mean, there isn't any chance of her being hurt again, is there?"

Vincent sighed and looked up, watching the torchlight shadows flicker like fighting warriors against the darkness. "Catherine has said that she will never leave me," he answered finally. "She remembers nothing specific now about her time 'away', as she calls it. But she is positive in that one thing: that we have been given a second chance to live our life together." He

looked back down at her. "Catherine is safe with us, Jenny," he promised. "I will let nothing harm her."

Jenny smiled and Vincent felt her fingers tighten momentarily on his arm before she dropped her hand. "You're a good man, Vincent," she said softly.

Vincent returned her smile. "There was a time when I would not have believed that, Jenny," he said.

"And now?"

"Now? Now, I will simply accept your words and say thank you."

Vincent pushed himself away from the wall and gestured down the dark corridor. Jenny smiled and they started walking again. Vincent felt he knew this woman a little better now, and hoped that they would in time, become friends. He also hoped that they could convince her to speak to Joe Maxwell, but it was far too soon yet.

"May I ask you a very personal question?" Jenny said as they walked.

"You may ask," Vincent told her, "but I may decide not to answer."

"Fair enough." She paused for a moment, then continued. "Was it your idea to have another baby, or Cathy's?"

For a long time there was only the sound of their footsteps as Vincent decided whether he should answer. "Initially, the idea was Catherine's," he said. "But it is something that both of us want very much."

"Yeah, that's what Cath said. She also told me that I wasn't supposed to mention anything about it at dinner. And as you may have noticed, I was the soul of discretion. Is there some reason you're keeping quiet about it? Besides, the obvious, of course, that she's still not sure she *is* pregnant."

"Catherine and I are uncertain about how Father will take the news, Jenny," he confessed. "Neither he nor Peter are too anxious to see Catherine become pregnant again."

"Why? Do they think there will be complications?"

"Jenny," he said, pausing to touch her arm. "I know that you are Catherine's friend, and that you have accepted me with remarkable calm. But, look at me Jenny. Surely you can see why Father and Peter are concerned?"

Vincent saw her eyes widen as his words were understood. "Oh," was all she said.

They started walking again, turning into the next corridor, listening as the sounds from the pipes grew fainter, and feeling the air grow more chill. Spring had not yet come to the city above them, and in the higher tunnels the sound of the late winter wind keened through the halls.

When he arrived at the designated meeting place, Vincent stopped. "This is where you go up," he said. He smiled, remembering the first time he had said those same words to Catherine.

"Why the smile?" Jenny asked.

"I was remembering the first time I walked Catherine home," he answered softly. "'Go from me,'" he quoted, closing his eyes and seeing the first time he had held her. "'Yet I feel that I shall stand henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore alone upon the threshold of my door.'"

"That's beautiful," Jenny said. Vincent opened his eyes and saw her watching him. "It's too bad you can't narrate talking books for us," she said, smiling. "The house would make a fortune."

Vincent returned her smile. "Catherine has said much the same thing," he told her. "She has always enjoyed having me read to her."

"Who wouldn't?" Jenny asked. "Your voice is very soothing."

Vincent shook his head. "You are much like Catherine," he said. "Yet I sense that you are very different in some ways."

"Maybe. We've been friends a long time. They say you start to resemble your friends after a while." She looked at the metal door set into the brickwork next to where he was standing. "This doesn't look like the same entrance Peter and I used this afternoon," she said. "Where exactly are we?"

"Catherine gave me your address, Jenny," Vincent told her. "We have a Helper who lives down the street from you. This is her building. We have sent word to Maddy and she will be waiting for you in the basement."

"You have a Helper who just happens to live on Horatio Street in the Village?" Vincent nodded and turned to unlatch the lock on the heavy door. "I don't believe this," she murmured. "And I thought New York was a big, impersonal city."

"It can be," Vincent agreed. "But there are many people Above who have come to know us and help us over the years. Without their light our world would be dark. We do what we can for each other. That is our way."

Vincent watched as Jenny ran her fingers nervously through her hair. Her eyes, when they met his, were dark and full of misgivings. "I hope I don't turn out to be a disappointment to you and Cathy," she said quietly. "Peter told me all about what Helpers do, how they help your world survive. I'm not sure I fit the profile, Vincent. I'm not sure I'll know how to help."

"You are Catherine's dearest friend," Vincent said. "You have already helped both of us."

"How?"

"By accepting Catherine, accepting me. Your friendship means a great deal to her, Jenny. As does your well-being. Catherine will be happier knowing you are no longer in pain."

Jenny looked at the ground, and Vincent saw her take a deep breath. "Well," she murmured, "the hysteria was touch and go there for a little while, you know."

"Yes."

She raised her head, smiling slightly. "But you're pretty hard to ignore, and Cathy's right - I never could have dreamed you up. As for the other . . .," she sighed and there was a deep weariness in the sound.

"Denial is a wonderful thing, Vincent," Jenny said. "It helps people to cope with reality. If we can deny something exists, well, then we don't have to deal with it, do we? I can't deny what I saw, Vincent, or what my other

senses tell me is real. Cathy is here. She's living with you and with your son in a world beneath the City. And she's happy. There's no denying that." Jenny reached out and Vincent was startled when she took his hand.

"Thank you, Vincent," she said softly. He could see that her eyes were filled with tears. "Thank you for loving her enough to bring her back to us."

Vincent squeezed her fingers. Jenny had hugged Catherine goodbye endlessly, but he was uncertain if she would accept such an embrace from him. He was, after all, little more than a stranger. So he stood, uncertain, watching her.

"Would you, uh, would you mind very much," she asked very softly, "uh, if I sort of asked for a hug?"

He drew her into his arms, holding her as a friend, comforting her as a friend. And in the back of his mind he felt Catherine smile. "The children are giving a concert next month, Jenny," he said, as she sniffled and backed away. "Catherine and I would like you to be there, perhaps stay the night. There are many things Below that Catherine wishes to show you."

Jenny brushed aside her tears. "I'd like that," she said. "Should I get in touch with Peter if I want to visit before then?"

"Either Peter or Maddy," Vincent told her. "Both of them would be able to get a message to us so that we can send someone to guide you down. These tunnels are almost endless, Jenny. Catherine would not want you to get lost." He turned and pulled on the heavy door, opening it enough so that Jenny could get through.

"Don't worry. I'm not that adventurous." She peered through the opening, then turned back to Vincent. "Where did you say Maddy was meeting me?"

"Go through this storage room to the steps at the far end. Then take the stairs. The door at the top leads into the basement. Maddy will be there waiting for you."

"What if she's not?"

"She will be," Vincent said smiling. "We got confirmation through the pipes just after dinner." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Asking you to share our secret puts a great burden on you," he added softly. "Both Catherine and I know this. Talk to Maddy. She can be a good friend to you, Jenny. She can help you to understand."

"I will," she answered. "And Vincent . . . thank you for trusting me."



XI

Jenny visited the community several times before the concert. And through the weeks that passed, Vincent watched as she lost her initial hesitancy and truly began to learn about the people Catherine called her Family. Her natural friendliness endeared her to everyone. Even Father had conceded that perhaps introducing Jenny into their world had not been a mistake, and it had certainly made Catherine very happy.

Vincent smiled as he sat back in his chair with Jacob on his lap and watched his wife getting ready for the concert. Jenny's continued visits Below and her acceptance by everyone had certainly made Catherine happy. But Vincent knew it was Catherine's pregnancy which had given her an aura of contentment and made her even more beautiful.

They had waited impatiently for some sign that she had truly conceived, and Vincent remembered how excited Catherine had been when she could positively inform him that she had missed her menses altogether. When her breasts had become more sensitive to his touch, they had both agreed that diligence had been rewarded.

"We are going to have to tell him tonight, Catherine," Vincent said, as she started to brush her hair. "If he hears the news from someone else he will be hurt."

"No one else knows, Vincent," Catherine said, bending at the waist to brush the long strands from underneath. "Only you and I and Jenny know for certain. We haven't told anyone else."

"Catherine," Vincent sighed, "it is only a matter of time. I am fairly certain that Mary guessed the reason for our journey. After all, you had asked her about conception. Don't you think she's wondering, speculating on whether or not you conceived?"

Catherine looked at him through the curtain of her hair. Even upside-down and sideways he was beautiful. She waved to Jacob and he laughed, waving back at her. She straightened and walked slowly toward her two special men. She set the brush on the table and picked up Jacob, settling him onto her shoulder before she sat down on Vincent's knee. He wrapped his arms loosely around her waist.

"We could tell him after the concert," Catherine suggested, meeting his eyes. "He'll be relaxed and less likely to throw a fit."

Vincent chuckled, and reached out to touch her cheek. "Father would be shocked to think that he had ever done anything so crude as throwing a fit, Catherine," he teased softly. "And you said you once spoke to him of having another child. Perhaps, like Mary, Father is only waiting for his suspicions to be confirmed?"

Catherine shifted Jacob in her arms so that she could hold him closer and kiss the top of his head. "He wasn't exactly overjoyed about the idea, Vincent," she said, rubbing her cheek against her son's silky hair. "I'm so happy about the new baby," she whispered. "I just don't want anyone to spoil that."

One of Vincent's hands slipped slowly from her waist, covering the spot that sheltered their unborn child. "At one time," he began, "I would have been horrified to think of you carrying my child. It would have brought me no joy, Catherine. I would have seen no happiness in his future, or in ours."

Catherine raised her head, meeting his gaze. "But you want this child as much as I do, Vincent," she whispered. "I know that. I can feel it."

"Yes," he said, both the touch of his hand and the warm, loving look in his eyes promising that what she felt was true. "I love you, Catherine. And I know now that any child born to us will be beautiful, as you are beautiful, as you have made me feel beautiful."

Vincent looked down at the hand that caressed her. "It was not so long ago that to even think of touching you, loving you as I do each night, would have been only a dream; a dream I never dared to see fulfilled." He raised his head, and Catherine saw the tears, like sparkling drops of rain, waiting to fall.

"You have changed the way I see myself, Catherine," Vincent whispered, "You have changed the way I look at life and love. This child who is growing now within your womb is another symbol of our love, as Jacob is. And this child will know that he is wanted, that he is loved, even as Jacob is. It may take time, but I truly believe that Father will come to realize this, Catherine. And when he does, he will rejoice, as we do."

Catherine smiled through tears at the man who loved her enough to finally accept the beauty within himself. And she realized that nothing could really mar their happiness. There were just some things that transcended everything else.

"In small proportions we just beauties see;" she whispered, "And in short measures life may perfect be."



Vincent smiled as he watched Catherine introducing Jenny to the people in Father's study. They made quite a contrast; Catherine in the grey sweater and long grey skirt, her only jewelry her crystal necklace and wedding ring; and Jenny in a vivid dress of peacock blue with a large paisley scarf draped across her shoulders. As before, her arms were bedecked with bracelets. This time, though, the bracelets looked to be made of brightly-colored wood. Jacob seemed to find them fascinating, moving them up and down Jenny's arm as she sat by Catherine's side on the bottom step of the wrought-iron stairway.

"Who's that with Cathy, uh, Catherine?"

Vincent was not surprised to hear Elliott's voice. What did surprise him was that Elliott did not know Jenny. "Have you never met her?" he asked, turning slightly to look at the man beside him. "She is a friend of Catherine's from Above."

Elliot shook his head. "I never met any of Catherine's friends," he said softly. "Well, none except Joe Maxwell. And he and I didn't exactly get along." Vincent saw him look again toward the two women. "So, that's the Jenny Jamie's been telling Mouse about. Funny," he murmured, "I wouldn't have figured her for a Helper."

"Jenny just recently became a Helper," Vincent told him. "She has no one Above and Catherine meant a great deal to her. The Council agreed that she should be told." He paused, wondering how much he should say. "Both Jenny and Peter will be staying the night," Vincent said. "We hope you will join us for breakfast in the morning. Peter still wants to discuss the idea of physical therapy with you."

Elliot slipped his hands into his pockets. "Sure," he said. "I can hang around for a while in the morning. Mouse and I won't be taking off again until afternoon sometime."

"Good."

Elliot chuckled. "That's it?" he said wryly. "You're not going to ask what we're up to?"

Vincent shook his head. "You will tell us in your own time, Elliot," he answered softly. "And we have enough faith in your own survival instincts to think that you will somehow keep Mouse from blowing us all to kingdom come."

"You're right about that," Elliot replied, grinning. "That kid's incredible. He would have driven Jack crazy."

"Jack?"

"Just somebody who used to work for me," Elliot murmured.

The room was fast filling with people and Vincent heard Catherine's silent wish that he come and sit with them before he could no longer maneuver around the waiting audience. He smiled and nodded to her, then turned back to Elliot. "Come," he said, "I will introduce you to Jenny. She may recognize you, of course. Would that upset you?"

"It doesn't matter," Elliott replied. "She can't tell anyone where I am without giving all of you away. If she's Cathy's friend, she wouldn't do that."

Vincent started making his way slowly through the crowd, knowing Elliot was following. It comforted him to know that Elliot understood the loyalty of Catherine's friends. It would perhaps help him when and if they were pushed into contacting Joe Maxwell. Joe had also been Catherine's friend. And they had to believe that his friendship with Catherine, his love for her, would take precedence over his loyalty to his job.

Catherine smiled as she and Jenny made room for Vincent and Elliot to claim the stair behind them. "Jenny," Vincent said, when they were all seated and Jacob was once again settled in his mother's lap, "this is our friend, Elliot."

Jenny smiled and held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Jenny." Vincent watched silently as Elliot took Jenny's outstretched hand. He didn't shake it, as he might have Above, but held it, just for a moment. Then he let it go, returning her smile with a slow one of his own.

"It's good to finally meet you. Jamie's been telling us all about your visits lately."

"She has?" She gave Catherine a puzzled look, then looked back up at Elliot. "Oh, uh, what has she been saying? I haven't done anything I shouldn't have? Have I?"

Catherine chuckled and shook her head. "Don't worry about it, Jen," she said softly. "Jamie keeps Mouse informed on everything he misses when he's away. And Elliot and Mouse have been working together for the past month or so." She looked up at Elliot, but he just smiled, remaining silent.

"Oh," Jenny said, "maybe that's why I hadn't seen you before." She paused, and a small frown appeared. "Why is it I think I should know you?" she asked quietly. "Have you lived here very long?" She suddenly became flustered. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly. "Peter told me, uh, well, that is I'm not supposed to ask questions like that, am I? Just forget I asked."

"That's all right, Jenny," Elliot told her. "I'm new at this, too. Don't worry about it." He smiled at her again, and Vincent watched a blush cover her face before she turned her attention to the baby beside her.

Jacob grabbed at her bracelet and squirmed out of his mother's lap and into Jenny's. She laughed and picked him up, nuzzling his neck. Vincent felt the sudden tension in the man beside him at the sound of Jenny's laughter, and he found it interesting that it seemed to have the same effect on Elliot that Catherine's laughter had on him.

Interesting speculation, my love. But if he hurts her - he's history.

Vincent smiled as he heard Catherine's unspoken words and put his hands on her shoulders. He gave them a quick squeeze as the musicians began to tune their instruments, turning their attention to the front of the room.

The small concert society had grown since its first recital. Other children from the music classes had joined Oliver, the group's concert master and cellist, and his two flutists, and there were now six children performing.

As he listened, Vincent thought of the last time they had heard this group play. It had been at their wedding; the exchange of vows before the entire community. He felt Catherine's soft touch as she turned her head to rub her cheek against his fingers.

"I hardly heard the music that day," she whispered. "All I could think of was you."

"I thought you had never been as beautiful," Vincent replied, bending down to whisper softly in her ear, "but you are even lovelier now."

Catherine smiled up at him, her eyes shining in the light of the many candles set around the room. "I'll remind you of that several months from now," she told him.

"There will be no need, Catherine," he said, kissing her upturned face. "For you will only have grown more beautiful."

Catherine lost herself for a moment in the deep, blue depths of Vincent's eyes. The musicians, the concert, Jacob, and their friends; all faded as she felt herself merging with him, into his mind, into his heart.

"Moosic, Mama."

Jacob's words and his fingers pulling softly at her hair, brought Catherine's mind back to Father's study and the people all around her. She laughed softly and turned, catching Jacob's hand in hers.

"Yes, babyface," she said, rubbing noses with her son, "Mama forgot all about the music." She smiled at Jenny as Jacob climbed back into his mother's lap, snuggling into her shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her neck.

As the musicians began to play, Jenny leaned toward her; whispering in her ear. "I've got to admit, Cath, if a man looked at me like that I wouldn't hear the music either."



Vincent looked down at the sleeping face of his son. Nestled against his mother's shoulder, his hand entwined in her hair, he had slept peacefully throughout most of the concert. The children had performed beautifully, putting everything they had into their music. Now, as applause filled the study, Vincent saw Jacob stir, awakened by the noise. He blinked his eyes, rubbing them with his fist, as he looked around. His gaze met that of his father and the baby smiled.

Jacob's smile caught Vincent and held him, much as he knew his gaze had held Catherine earlier. This child, this life, had been created through Catherine's love for him. This unique and small person smiling at him so lovingly was here only because Catherine had truly believed, regardless of his doubts and darkness, that their love had had no limits. Jacob had been her gift to him in a time darker than any other.

Then Vincent thought of the child Catherine carried within her now. This child was *his* gift to her; his acknowledgement of the miracle of their love. This child told Catherine, not only of his love and his belief in her, but also of his acceptance and faith in himself as a man. And in years to come,

these children would carry their light; through their children, and through their children's children, the light of their love would shine forever.

Vincent reached for Jacob's hand, and his son caught his fingers, pulling at them until both their hands were entwined with the silken strands of Catherine's hair. Jacob and Vincent smiled.

Catherine closed her eyes, savoring the warmth and love of Vincent's thoughts as they reached out to her through the bond. Interwoven with them was the silver thread that was their son; strengthening his father's voice, echoing his love.

"Looks like they've got you, Cathy."

Catherine opened her eyes, startled to see Jenny watching her. She had been so immersed in the bond again that she had hardly been aware of her surroundings at all. Was her pregnancy making it even stronger? She gazed around the room, finally noticing that the concert was over and people were slowly leaving the study.

"Cath? Are you okay?"

Catherine smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Jen," she said softly, "but I guess I was daydreaming a bit."

"Just a bit?" Jenny pointed to the fingers, both large and small that were tangled in Catherine's hair. "This child of yours has managed to get a hammerlock on most of your hair. I'd call that just a bit *more* than daydreaming." She looked up at Vincent. "Need any help there?" she asked.

Vincent smiled. "I think I can manage, Jenny," he told her softly. Silently, he admonished their son, who only laughed and burrowed his face against his mother's neck.

"Don't worry," Catherine said, hugging Jacob to her. "He knows it's almost bedtime and he's starting to get snugly."

"Snugly?" Jenny laughed and Catherine found herself looking up at Elliot. He was watching Jenny, and there was a very enigmatic look on his

face. She wondered what he was thinking and then decided she might not want to know.

"What's wrong with 'snugly'?" She asked Jenny. "It's a perfectly good word."

"So is melon baller," Jenny answered, getting up from the stair. Catherine laughed.

"Is this conversation supposed to be making sense?"

Catherine turned back to Elliot as she, too, rose from the stairway. "Not really," she told him. "It's sort of a private joke."

"I'll tell you about it later, Elliot," Jenny said, as Elliot and Vincent followed them to the lower level of Father's study.

Catherine looked first at Jenny and then at Elliot. "Later?"

Jenny smiled and Catherine could swear she was blushing. "Uh, Elliot is uh, going to show me something called the Mirror Pool," she said. "We sort of discussed it while, uh, you were daydreaming. I guess you didn't hear."

"No," Catherine murmured, "I guess I didn't."

"We'll see you later." Elliot smiled at her and put his hand on Jenny's shoulder, leading her gently from the room. Catherine watched them leave, wondering if her mouth was hanging open.

"Yes, it is."

Catherine turned toward Vincent. "Did you know that was going on?" she asked softly.

Vincent shrugged. "Elliot and Jenny were exchanging looks throughout the entire concert, Catherine," he told her. "Perhaps it is a sign that Elliot has learned to accept our relationship."

"I hope so," Catherine said. "If he does anything to hurt her . . ."

"Do you think he would?"

"I don't know, Vincent," Catherine said honestly. "Elliot's been so different lately. He does seem happier, though. Doesn't he?"

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "He does."

"Let me see that grandson of mine, Catherine." Catherine turned and smiled as Father came toward them. "He was particularly good during the concert, wasn't he?"

"He was asleep during most of the concert, Father," Catherine teased, handing him the sleepy child.

Father laughed softly and took Jacob into his arms. "Yes, well, he was still remarkably good." He looked up at Vincent. "He has inherited his father's love for music. Perhaps he will become a musician."

"Perhaps," Vincent said softly, putting his arm around Catherine. "If not, then perhaps his brother or sister will."

Without a word, Father turned and walked with Jacob to his chair. He settled into it with the baby against his shoulder, then looked up at them. Catherine was surprised to see that he was smiling.

"I had been wondering how long it would take you to tell me," he said quietly, patting Jacob's back.

"You know?" Catherine looked up at her husband. He, too, seemed a little startled by Father's reaction.

Father sighed. "Catherine," he began, "you have been spending considerable time with Lena, asking endless questions, no doubt; you drink that ghastly raspberry leaf tea by the pot, and," he added, smiling, "you look radiant - even lovelier than you did as a bride. What other conclusion was I to reach?"

Catherine leaned her head against Vincent's shoulder and smiled. "I was so worried that you would be angry," she said softly. "I know that we spoke of my having another child, but you never really said what you thought of the idea."

Father's smile dimmed a little before he spoke. "I cannot say that I have no reservations, Catherine," he told them. "You and Vincent know that there are risks. There are risks with every pregnancy. I only ask that you take special care of yourself, that you take extra precautions."

He looked at Catherine for a moment and then at Vincent. And when his gaze settled on her again, Catherine could see the love he had for both of them in his eyes. "My son would not survive losing you again, Catherine," he said solemnly. "You are the dearest part of him. I know that now. And I also understand why having this child is so important to you, to both of you."

He sighed and Catherine watched his fingers caress the back of Jacob's head. "Our children reaffirm our lives," he said. "They let us know that a part of us will continue; long after we are gone. I never really thought about that, Catherine, until Vincent brought Jacob home."

Vincent's arm tightened around her and Catherine remembered that he had been thinking almost the same thing earlier. "I'm not worried, Father," Catherine said softly.

"Be that as it may, you listen to Peter, young lady. Has he examined you yet?"

"Well, no, Father," Catherine said. "We haven't told anyone else, except Jenny. I thought maybe you and Mary would be handling things. I mean, I'm living here now, not Above. You are my doctor, aren't you?"

"I'm also your father-in-law, Catherine," he said, looking anywhere, it seemed, but directly at her. "A physician should not treat his own family," he added. "It can be rather embarrassing; for both the patient and the physician."

"Oh," Catherine murmured. She couldn't believe that she had given absolutely no thought to what sort of examinations would be necessary during her pregnancy. She felt a blush creep over her and knew Father saw it.

"Yes, well," Father said, after a moment, "Peter wants you and Vincent to bring Jenny to my study after breakfast tomorrow. It seems he has been

contacted again by Mr. Maxwell. We need to speak to her, Catherine. It is time."

"We will be there, Father," Vincent told him. "And do not be concerned. All will be well."

Father sighed and kissed Jacob's hair. "For the sake of the children, Vincent, let us pray that you are right."



XII

"You're very quiet this morning, Jenny," Catherine remarked, as she helped Jacob take a drink of milk from his small cup. "Anything the matter?"

"No," Jenny sighed, "nothing's the matter."

Catherine watched as her friend continued to absently pick apart the dried apple muffin on the plate in front of her. Jenny had been unusually subdued all during breakfast and Catherine was afraid that Elliot had something to do with it. She'd strangle him. She really would!

"Where's Elliot this morning, Vincent?" Father said from his place at the head of the table. "I thought he was joining us."

"He and Mouse decided to get an early start," Peter told him, taking a drink of his tea. "He stopped by the guest chamber this morning to discuss the physical therapy regime I want him to begin. Couldn't have been much after dawn." Peter shook his head. "Doesn't that man ever sleep?"

"Elliot once told me that he hated sleeping," Catherine said softly. "He said that it was a waste of precious time."

"Well, that man better learn to waste time," Peter said, leaning back in the chair Vincent had moved to their table especially for him. "He's not up top running his damn companies anymore, he's down here, now. He's supposed to be healing. That shoulder isn't going to get any better if he continues to abuse it."

Catherine heard Jenny's gasp as Peter mentioned Elliot's work Above. Obviously, Jenny had not recognized Elliot last night and he had not enlightened her.

"Uh, Cathy?" Jenny began softly. "Is the Elliot I met last night, uh, well, is he, uh, was he - Elliot Burch?"

Catherine looked into Jenny's hurt eyes and nodded. Down the table she heard Peter's softly muttered "damn," as he realized what he had done.

"I thought you knew, Jenny," Peter said. "I'm sorry. I must be getting old to slip up like that."

"No, that's okay, Peter," Jenny told him. "Really. I mean, what difference does it make? It's just, well, all the newspapers said that he was presumed dead in some explosion." She looked at Catherine. "Uh, he's not, um, I mean, well, he's not"

"No, Jenny," Catherine said softly, knowing what her friend had been trying to say. "Elliot was terribly hurt in the explosion. That's all."

"Oh."

"Jenny?" Vincent said softly from his place beside Catherine. "Elliot lost everything in his attempt to help me find Jacob. He has come here to heal, to find himself. This is his home. We are his friends."

Catherine saw Jenny's puzzled frown and understood her confusion. They had had a few discussions about Elliot Burch when Catherine had first met him. Jenny probably couldn't understand how Vincent could claim to be his friend. Of course, Catherine mused, Jenny didn't know about the cave-in, about Mouse, about the bullet he had taken for Vincent. Their relationship with Elliot had never been simple.

"Uh, isn't that a little awkward?" she asked, her gaze moving from Catherine to Vincent and back again.

Vincent smiled. "It has had its moments," he confessed. "But I sensed something in Elliot last night, while he was with you, Jenny, that I have not felt from him before."

"Oh? What's that?" The muffin on Jenny's plate had been turned into a pile of crumbs while she had been talking, and now Catherine watched as she stared at the remains of her breakfast.

"Hope," Vincent told her softly. "I sensed hope in Elliot last night, Jenny. And I do not think it was the music."

Jenny raised her eyes. "You're very sweet, Vincent," she said, smiling shyly. "It's easy to see why Cathy loves you so much. But it's okay, really."

"Are you certain, Jenny?" Catherine asked, as she fed Jacob the last of his cereal.

"Hey, don't get all maudlin, Cath. I had a nice time last night with a quiet guy named Elliot. Just because he turns out to be Jekyll and Hyde in the morning, well, that's nothing new."

"I don't know if I'd go quite that far, Jenny," Catherine said, handing Jacob one of William's homemade bagels. "Elliot *has* changed since he's been Below. And Vincent is usually an excellent judge of people, Jen."

"Speaking of which," Father interrupted, "Peter needs to talk to us about that other friend of yours, Catherine." He turned to Jenny. "We need to ask something very important of you, Jenny" he said softly. "Would you accompany Catherine and Vincent to my study later? Say in about an hour?"

"Of course."

Father nodded and rose slowly from his chair. Peter got up with him. "Good," Father said. "Then we shall see you all a bit later. Enjoy your breakfast."

Catherine watched the two older men take their empty plates and cups into the kitchen. Father's limp seemed more pronounced this morning and Peter had not looked well. She sighed and felt Vincent's hand caress the back of her neck. If Joe had been in contact with Peter, then the entire future of the community could be in jeopardy. Not only that, but she had a deep-seated urge to knock some sense into Elliot. If he hurt Jenny . . .

"Enjoy your breakfast?" she muttered, turning to look at her son. "Is he kidding?"



Vincent stepped down into Father's study, looking at the people seated around the large desk. He had left Jacob with Olivia and then stopped by the kitchen for a pot of peppermint tea and a small bag of soda crackers. William had slapped him on the back heartily, and provided him with both, telling him to be certain to give Catherine his love. It seemed that William was very much aware of the needs of newly pregnant women.

"Ah, Vincent," Father said, "there you are. Come and sit down. We've been waiting. What is that you have with you?"

"Something for Catherine," Vincent told him, putting the pot of tea on the table and handing the crackers to his wife. She smiled wryly, and he took the seat next to her. He took a cup from the tray in the middle of the desk and poured a cup of the strong-smelling brew; setting it in front of her. "Mary tells me that this will help," he said softly. "Sip it slowly and try to eat a little of the crackers."

"Thanks." Her face was pale and Vincent knew that she was struggling to keep him from feeling most of the nausea plaguing her.

I do not mind sharing this with you, Catherine. Don't fight it on my account. It will only make it worse.

I don't want you to lose your breakfast, too. It isn't really very pleasant.

I will survive. Now, please. Concentrate on yourself.

Vincent watched as Catherine closed her eyes and let go of her control. A wave of nausea passed through him, shaking him. He took a deep breath and reached for another cup. He noticed as he poured, that his hands were shaking.

"Catherine? Vincent? Are you ill?"

Vincent took a sip of the tea and let Father answer for them. "Catherine is pregnant, Peter," Father said softly. "From the peppermint tea being passed around, I gather that she is experiencing a bit of morning sickness."

Catherine held out the bag of crackers and Vincent took one, managing to smile his thanks. He wished, for just a moment, that Father could experience this 'bit of morning sickness' for himself. He doubted that it would be taken quite so lightly if he could. Beside him, Catherine started to chuckle. Vincent could not help but smile.

"Priceless," she murmured, taking another sip of her tea. "You're absolutely priceless."

"Personally," Jenny said from her chair on the other side of Catherine, "I think you two are losing your grip. Since when is tossing your cookies something to laugh about?"

"I'll explain it to you later, Jenny," Catherine said, taking a bit of the soda cracker in her hand. "Trust me."

"Did you know about this, Jacob?" Peter asked. Vincent looked up, surprised by the hint of anger in Peter's voice.

"Yes," Father admitted. "I have had my suspicions, and they were confirmed last night. Catherine tells me she is approximately six weeks along."

"And you don't object?"

Father sighed. "Peter, you may have noticed that both Vincent and Catherine have minds of their own. I knew that Catherine wanted another child. We had discussed it some time ago. I also knew that if they felt this was the right thing to do, nothing I could say would influence them." He reached out to pat Peter's arm. "It's too late to worry, old friend," he said. "We must simply see to it that Catherine takes good care of herself and that you and I do everything we can to see that she has a healthy baby."

"Vincent?" Catherine said softly. "Do you ever get the feeling that you're invisible?"

"Often." He put down his cup and looked up at the older men. "We did not come here to discuss Catherine's pregnancy," Vincent told them. "Yes, we found that it was possible for Catherine to conceive, and yes, we decided to have another child. These were our decisions to make and we made them." He sighed and lifted the cup again, taking another sip of tea before going on. "As for our sudden need for tea and crackers, Catherine and I share a physical bond, Peter. She was trying to spare me and I asked her not to." He looked at Father. "For your information," he said softly, "there is nothing 'little' about morning sickness."

Catherine couldn't help it. She started to laugh and soon the others at the table were laughing with her. It wasn't very nice, she knew, because Vincent was being so damned noble, but his admonishment of Father was wonderful.

When the laughter had settled, Father cleared his throat and began to speak. "Jenny," he said, "you are the only one unaware of the necessity for this meeting. We asked you to stay because Peter has been contacted by Joe Maxwell again."

"Again?"

"Mr. Maxwell contacted me right after I returned from Europe, Jenny," Peter told her. "Just about the same time you told me about, well, about everything that had happened."

He paused, and Catherine knew that he must be thinking of what Vincent now called the 'dark time.' Yes, that described it - for everything that had happened then was dark to her now; gone. Erased as though it had never been.

"What did Joe want?" Jenny asked. Catherine felt Vincent's arm go around her shoulders.

"The first time he just had routine questions," Peter said. "This time, however, Mr. Maxwell accused me of holding back information. He said that I knew something I wasn't telling him. He mentioned your dreams, Jenny."

"Oh hell," Jenny muttered, looking around the table. "I forgot all about calling Joe." Her gaze caught Catherine's and she bit her lip. "I'm

sorry, Cathy," she said softly. "I just didn't think. You know, a witness protection program seemed like the likely answer. God, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Jenny," Catherine said, happy for the warmth of Vincent's arm. "You had no way of knowing. What we need now, is for you to convince Joe that the dreams are gone. And that they were only that - dreams."

Jenny ran her fingers through her hair. Catherine knew how difficult lying was for her. She had never been a very good liar. Their gazes met and Catherine shrugged.

"God, Cathy," Jenny began, "you know I'm a terrible liar. All my authors say so." She tapped her fingers against the desktop, obviously trying to think of an alternative. "Damn," she said finally. "I'm really no good at it."

"Jenny," Vincent said, "perhaps you don't have to actually lie to Mr. Maxwell. If you could tell him that you are all right now, that you were overwrought and that the dreams have stopped; perhaps that will be enough to make him believe that pursuing his investigation would be futile."

"Vincent," Jenny sighed, "I got to know Joe Maxwell pretty well through, well, through some very rough times. He's not the type to give up easily. And he doesn't let go of an idea once he's convinced he's onto something. I don't know how much good I can do."

"We simply ask that you try, Jenny," Father said. "Peter, did Mr. Maxwell say anything specific about re-opening the investigation?"

Peter leaned forward in his chair, resting his folded hands on the desk in front of him, before he looked at the people around him. "Maxwell told me that it was lucky for me he was going to be tied up in court for a couple of months. He said that it gave me time to see if I wanted to come up with the information he knew I was hiding."

He turned to look at Vincent and Catherine saw the fear for them in his eyes. "I don't really know how much good Jenny can do, Vincent," he added. "The man is obsessed." His gaze moved to Catherine. "I think Jenny was right, honey," he said. "Joe Maxwell is acting like a man who's carrying around an enormous amount of guilt."



By the end of the day, Catherine was almost glad to see Peter and Jenny leave. She loved them both dearly, but they had each done their best to make her crazy.

Peter had hounded her with questions about her pregnancy and demanded that she go to his office for tests. Catherine had quietly pointed out to Peter that she certainly couldn't go traipsing into his office without giving his receptionist and his nurses heart attacks. They had known her, for heaven's sake. And besides, she didn't need tests to confirm what she already knew. She was pregnant. Period. What she needed was peace and quiet and an end to his harassment. Peter had finally taken her none-too-subtle hints and gone to play a game of chess with Father.

Jenny, on the other hand, had been terribly apologetic about Joe, and singularly silent on the subject of Elliot. Catherine had tried to explain to Jenny that she certainly wasn't responsible for Joe's guilt or the fact that he seemed determined to locate Vincent at any cost. She couldn't have known that Joe would want to start up the whole investigation again just because she had told him about her dream. It just wasn't logical. And although Joe had at times gotten a little obsessive, he had always been completely logical in his thought processes. There just had to be something else going on.

Any questions about Elliot were either ignored or tossed aside. Jenny didn't want to talk about Elliot or about what, if anything, had happened at the Mirror Pool the night before. Catherine had been left to wonder whether she should just talk to Elliot, or follow her first instinct and strangle him. Something had happened, she was sure of it. Or Jenny wouldn't have been so upset.

Now, with Peter and Jenny both being escorted home, Catherine found a moment of quiet while she sat on the bed with Jacob, getting him ready for bed.

"Isn't this wonderful, Jacob?" she said softly, as she unlaced his moccasins. "No questions, no apologies, nobody but my babyface and me." She leaned down and rubbed noses with her son, loving the sound of his giggle.

"There's Jacob's nose," she said, pointing to his little button nose. "And here are Jacob's toes." Catherine took off her baby's socks and held his foot up, wiggling each of his tiny toes.

"Toz, Momma," Jacob said, grabbing a foot with each hand.

Catherine laughed and kissed each little foot. "Yep," she said. "Those are Jacob's toes."

She continued to undress him, naming each part of his body as she came to them. Mary had told her that this sort of repetition was very good for teaching new words, and Catherine knew Jacob had a strong need to be able to verbalize the things he saw in the world around him. His connection with both her and Vincent had given him an understanding that far surpassed his age. And his frustration sometimes matched it.

"But our son, unlike his mother, has yet to throw a temper tantrum in the bath."

Catherine looked up and grinned as Vincent entered the room. "Right," Catherine agreed softly. "He spits cereal instead." She looked back down at the baby, who had turned onto his stomach and was trying to slide off the bed to get to his daddy. Catherine went to grab him but Vincent's hands were there first.

"That boy is going to land on his head one of these days," Catherine said, watching as Vincent lifted the laughing child above his head. "He doesn't have a cautious bone in his body."

Vincent smiled at her while Jacob stood balanced on his shoulders, clinging to his father's hands. "I believe it is more a matter of Jacob trying to get his body to do what his mind knows is possible."

"Maybe," she agreed softly, "but it wouldn't surprise me if he grew up to be an Astronaut or a Firefighter or something."

Vincent lowered Jacob slowly and put him down on the bed next to his mother. He had heard the wistfulness in Catherine's voice, and knew that her fear was mostly that of a mother concerned for the future of her child.

"You believe Jacob will want to live Above." It wasn't a question. He knew her mind too well to have to ask.

"Yes," she told him. "Don't you?"

Vincent sat down next to her, watching as she changed Jacob's diaper and put him into his warm, flannel pajamas. The pajamas had socks sewn onto the bottoms and as Catherine buttoned them, Jacob kicked up his feet.

"Toz, Momma," he said, pulling at the socks. "Toz."

Catherine smiled. "Mamma hid your toes, babyface," she said softly. "Got to keep them warm." She held both of his feet in her hands. "You kick off the covers," she told him.

Jacob grabbed at her hands and Catherine let him pull himself to his feet. He balanced precariously on the thick quilt before laughing and launching himself at his father.

"Time to calm down, Jacob," Vincent said, holding the baby against his chest and rubbing his back gently.

Catherine got up to put the wet diaper and washcloth in the diaper pail, and took a clean bath towel from the shelf. "Is Father finished with his bath?" she asked, returning to the bed for her nightshirt. "If tomorrow is anything like today," she said, "I don't think I'm going to be in any shape to bathe in the morning."

"Father was heading for his chamber when I came in," Vincent said, still rubbing Jacob's back. "I thought he might have come in to say 'goodnight.'"

Catherine smiled. "He probably knew I wasn't in a very good mood," she told him. "It's been a long day."

"Yes," he agreed quietly. "Why don't you go ahead. I'll put Jacob down and join you in a little while."

"I'd like that."



Catherine leaned her head against her arms and sighed as Vincent's fingers massaged the back of her neck and the tight muscles between her shoulders. She had pinned her hair up out of the way and she could feel each individual muscle in her neck loosening under his strong hands. The water in the pool was tepid, as usual, but Vincent's hands were wonderfully warm. Just like the rest of him.

"That's wonderful," she murmured. "You know exactly where it hurts."

"Because I can feel it," Vincent told her. He laughed softly. "I truly believed I was going to be sick in Father's study this morning," he said. "I have never experienced anything quite like it before. How long did Mary say the morning sickness would continue?"

"She says that it usually doesn't last past the third month, but that not everyone is the same." She paused for a moment. "Some women have it all through their pregnancy," she told him.

"I sincerely hope that you will not be one of them."

Catherine groaned in agreement and closed her eyes. It was so wonderful to finally relax; to do nothing but feel Vincent's strong hands on her body, the soft touch of the water against her breasts. She didn't want to think anymore today, she didn't want to answer any more questions. Catherine just wanted to rest on the edge of the bathing pool and let Vincent do marvelous things to her body.

She heard his soft chuckle and knew he had heard her thoughts. Well, what of it? He was doing marvelous things to her body.

"I can think of things that are even more marvelous," he whispered in her ear.

"So can I," Catherine said, "but I haven't the energy to accomplish any of them."

Vincent's hands stilled on her shoulders and he leaned forward. Catherine felt the erotic touch of his fur-covered body as he aligned himself against her. His warm breath whispered across the sensitive skin beneath her ear.

"Let me give you pleasure, Catherine," he said softly. "Let me love you and make your body sing."

Catherine turned and looked up into Vincent's eyes. Even in the faint glow of the candles, she could see the desire darkening his pupils. But it was a desire laced with need; the need to show her how much he loved her, to give her solace and joy at the end of a weary day. She smiled and lifted her arms.

Vincent carried her to the bench and wrapped the large towel around her. Taking only a moment to dry himself, he slipped into his drawstring pants and picked Catherine up. She twined her arms around his neck and leaned against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart as he walked from the bathing chamber to their room.

He put her between the sheets, removing the towel as she nestled down beneath the quilt. Catherine smiled. The bed covers had been pulled back and waiting. She watched silently as he closed the chamber door and came to stand beside the bed once again. Without a word, he untied his pants and slipped them off. Catherine lifted the edge of the quilt, and this time the smile was his.

Vincent joined her in the bed, pulling the quilt back so that he could look at her. Catherine's skin was flushed and still damp from the bath. He stretched out beside her, moving his body against her moist skin. He went to her slowly, kissing her neck first and then her cheek. He cupped her

head in his hands, moving his lips across her face until his mouth found hers, open and waiting.

How he loved the taste of her - the sweet warmth of her tongue. He wanted to be closer, to touch every part of her silken body. He slid one of his legs between hers, moving slowly against her soft thigh, teasing both of them with the erotic glide of his heated flesh across her skin.

Catherine thought his kiss would go on forever. She moved with him; with his mouth, his tongue. His fingers slid across her skin, leaving her nerve endings tingling. He cupped her breast, teasing her nipple until it pushed hard against his palm, aching for his touch. Catherine gasped and Vincent lifted his head, smiling down at her, his eyes almost black with passion.

He slipped further down on the bed, and Catherine felt the warmth of his mouth against the sensitive fullness of her breasts, the softness of his body hair against her belly and thighs. She twined her hands in his hair, gasping as his lips caressed her nipples, pulling at them gently, rhythmically.

His lower body moved in tempo with his mouth and Catherine groaned, opening her legs to him, rubbing against the hard evidence of his desire. One of his hands stroked down her side and across the trembling muscles of her stomach. Just above her dark curls, his hand paused, stopping to touch reverently, the place that housed their growing child. Then his fingers slid lower, finding their way through the curls, seeking the softer warmth of her. Catherine arched her back, pressing against his hand as he caressed her. She felt her body begin to tremble.

Vincent moved up her body, and suddenly he was kissing her, devouring her open mouth, as he entered her; slowly, completely. The sense of fullness was overwhelming. Catherine twined her legs around his hips and felt him move even deeper. Slowly, so slowly, he moved again; stroking her gently, taking her so softly that when the moment came, Catherine could only ride with him along the pulsating waves that shook them again and again. There was no beginning, no end. Only their bodies singing a silent song to the night.



XIII

"Peter," Catherine said, as she finished making up Jacob's bed, "if you mention amniocentesis to me one more time, I am going to lose what little calm I've managed to hold onto and scream at you. Loudly." She tucked the dirty linen under her arm and carried it to the half-full laundry basket in the middle of the room.

"You're entering your fourth month, Catherine," Peter said, "this is just the right time."

"There *is* no right time, Peter," Catherine told him. "I'm not going to do it and that's that." She tossed the linen into the basket and looked around the room, wondering if she had forgotten anything. "Haven't you got anything better to do than following me around pestering me? I'm a little busy here, Peter."

Catherine remembered the towels in the bathing chamber and left the room, hoping Peter would not follow. He did. Catherine sighed and picked up the towels from the bench.

"Would you please drop it, Peter," she asked softly, sitting down on the bench and looking up at him. "I don't want the amniocentesis and I'm not going to have it."

Peter frowned and leaned against the stone wall. "You keep saying that, Cathy," he told her, "but you don't give me a reason. What does Vincent say about it?"

"My reasons are my own, Peter," she said, "And Vincent agrees with my decision."

"That's totally irresponsible and you know it," Peter said, his voice growing louder. "Amniocentesis could tell us if this pregnancy is normal, if the baby is normal!"

Catherine closed her eyes and let the sound of the slow moving water soothe her. She knew his reasons and his concerns. They stemmed from love. But so did hers. And in this, her love took precedence.

"Do you know how much I loathe that word, Peter?" she asked softly, looking at him again. "I looked it up once. Ages ago, it seems. 'Conforming to or consisting of a pattern, process, or standard regarded as usual or typical.'"

She ran her hand across the nubby texture of the towels, looking at the much washed fabric, at the fading colors in her hands. "I don't want to know if our baby is 'typical,' Peter. I don't believe in the standard the world regards as 'usual.' And I won't have my baby judged by those standards before he's even born."

"Nobody's going to judge him."

"Oh, is that so?" Catherine said, twisting the towel between her fingers. "Then tell me, Peter, what happens if your test shows something different, something not 'normal?' What do you do then, Peter? Do you tell me not to have this child? Do you recommend an abortion?" Her voice was icy with control. "I'd hit you, Peter," she told him. "I'd slap your face as hard as I could and never speak to you again."

For a long time Peter said nothing. And Catherine knew that in some part of his mind, somewhere deep inside, the physician and not the friend had once considered that alternative. She wanted to cry.

"Cathy," Peter said, sighing. "I just want to be certain that everything is all right. You're too large to be only in your fourth month, honey."

It took her a moment to speak and Catherine wondered if she would ever be able to forgive him. "Vincent is a large man, Peter," she said finally. "It stands to reason that his children would be large, too."

"Then that's all the more reason to have the test, Cathy."

"Amniocentesis doesn't tell you how large the baby is, Peter," she told him. "And don't try to tell me that it does. Vincent and I have been through most of Father's books and some of them are the relatively new medical journals that you brought him."

"Then you and Vincent *are* concerned!"

Catherine stood up, holding tightly to the towels. "Of course, we're concerned," she shouted. "I'm pregnant for heaven's sake. I may not be a doctor, Peter, but even I can see that I'm bigger at four months than Lena was at six. I know I'm a small woman. Don't you think we've worried about my having trouble delivering a large baby? Vincent and I want this baby, Peter. And we don't want anything to happen to him." She started to cry and sat back down on the bench. "Damn," she murmured, wiping her eyes on the towel. "Just go away, Peter. Will you? Just please go away and leave me in peace."

"Do as she says, Peter," Vincent said, from the doorway. "You have upset her enough for one day." He took several deep breaths, calming his anger before he dared to step into the room. He was holding tightly to his control, but it would not last long.

"Leave us," he said, backing away as Peter came toward him. "And for your own sake, Peter - stay Above for a few days."

Peter left the room without another word and when he was gone, Vincent unclenched his fists and took another deep breath. Catherine was still sitting on the bench, crying softly. With a muttered curse, Vincent moved quickly and picked her up in his arms. She clung to him, weeping harder.

"I'm sorry," she murmured against his chest as he carried her from the room. "It's just that he made me so angry. How could he even think . . ."

"Shhhh. Hush now." Vincent kissed her hair and held her closer. He carried her into their chamber and kicked the door shut behind him. The falling of the latch made a satisfyingly loud sound.

"Y-you're supposed to b-be with Pascal," Catherine whispered brokenly. "W-what are y-you doing b-back so soon?"

Vincent sat down on the bed with Catherine in his arms. She curled herself into his lap, still holding him tightly, and he smoothed her hair with his hand. "Pascal will finish up without me, Catherine," he said softly. "I am not indispensable to the project. It is almost complete." He cupped her head, rubbing his fingers against her scalp, trying to soothe her. "You are the most important part of my life," he told her. "I could not ignore what was happening to you. I love you."

Catherine sniffed and Vincent felt her bury her face against his neck. "It's just hormones," she whispered. "It's just screwed up hormones."

"Is it?" he asked softly.

"No," she murmured, "not really." She sighed and Vincent felt the warmth of her breath against his skin. "Not all of it. Some of it was Peter and his damned tests. He's making me crazy, Vincent. Or the hormones are making me crazy. Or something is making me crazy. I don't know."

Vincent kissed her hair, resting his cheek against the top of her head. "I will speak to Father," he said. "Perhaps he can suggest a compromise."

Catherine sighed. "It would be so easy if we could feel this baby's mind; if we were connected to him like we are to Jacob."

"My connection with Jacob did not start until he was being born, Catherine," Vincent reminded her. "I do not think that it would be wise to wait that long."

"No," she murmured. "I guess not." She moved her fingers gently across the back of his neck and snuggled closer. "We keep saying 'he' all the time," Catherine said. "but this baby could be a girl, you know. Maybe she's messing with my hormones because she's tired of being called 'he.'"

Vincent smiled. "Then we shall use the feminine pronoun and see if you improve." He loosened his arms and turned her so that he could lift the bottom of her loose shirt. "Let me see this baby girl who is making you feel so miserable," he said.

Catherine pulled down the elastic waist of her pants and panties while Vincent raised her shirt, exposing her rounded stomach. Gently, Vincent

stroked the taut skin, marveling at the treasure sleeping beneath it. This was a part of him, a part of the woman he loved. How wondrous it was.

"She's moving around," Catherine whispered. "Do you feel it?"

His hand stilled and Vincent closed his eyes, concentrating on the small life beneath his fingers. "Like the flutter of a butterfly's wings," he murmured. He looked up and Catherine smiled at him, her eyes bright with tears. He lowered his head, placing a gentle kiss where his son or daughter slept. "Be well, my child," Vincent whispered. "And do try to be a little kinder to your mother. For she loves you very much."



The rest of the day had been quiet and uneventful, but Vincent still had found himself reluctant to leave Catherine's side. For the first time she had not wanted to eat in the main dining hall, but had asked if they could have their meal in the small kitchen they shared with Father. Vincent had brought a small tureen of vegetable soup and some of William's fresh, warm bread from the main kitchen; and he and Catherine and Jacob had eaten their meal alone.

After dinner, they had spent the evening in their chamber; the door closed against their friends and family. Vincent had tucked both Catherine and Jacob beneath the quilts and blankets of his large bed, then he had sat back against the pillows, and read to them of knightly deeds and Camelot.

"And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
Were all one will, and thro' that strength the King
Drew in the petty pryncedoms under him,
Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reign'd."

Vincent put down the book and looked at the two people he loved most in all the world. Jacob slept within his mother's arms, his little body

snuggled against her breasts, his fingers clutching the soft folds of the shirt she wore. Catherine, too, was fast asleep. The lines of tension had eased from her face and her breath against the pillow was even and deep. If she dreamed, the dreams were kind to her, for he sensed no restlessness within her now.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on," Vincent sighed, "and our little life is rounded out with a sleep."

Vincent knew that dreams and sleep would elude him this night. His mind was too filled with disquiet to allow him the escape his dreams might offer. No, he needed movement, not rest. He needed space to walk and time in which to think.

He rose slowly from the bed, taking care not to awaken Jacob and Catherine. The new door was well oiled and made not a sound as he opened it and went out into the corridor, closing it silently behind him.

Vincent strolled slowly through the corridors surrounding the Home Chambers. The pipes had long ago quieted and only an occasional tapping could be heard as sentries reported and watches were changed. Everything around him was still. But within him, Vincent felt the tumult of all Catherine had experienced. So many changes, so many unanswered questions. He knew she was worried, but she tried so hard to hide it from him; just as she had tried to hide the morning sickness that had plagued her during the first months.

Mary had seen them through that time, and she was helping now; with her teas and her kindness. But Catherine needed more than kindness; she needed the certain knowledge that the baby was healthy. And she absolutely refused to let Peter run any tests.

She had allowed him to examine her - months before when he had first been told that she was pregnant. Vincent remembered waiting outside their chamber, listening to Peter's questions, to Catherine's answers, to the requests Peter made of Mary as she helped him with the examination.

Then suddenly, Catherine had screamed and yelled at Peter to get away from her. Vincent remembered the moment vividly, for he had run into the chamber even before she had screamed; caught up in the wild burst

of Catherine's fear. She had been huddled at the far corner of the bed, her eyes wide and her knuckles white where they clung to the blanket.

Vincent sighed and stopped walking. He leaned against the corridor wall, pressing his head back on the cold stone, looking up at the ceiling as the torchlight flickered above him. What more could he do to help her? What more could he say?

"Vincent?"

Startled, Vincent turned toward the sound of Father's voice and realized that he had been standing in front of the upper hall entrance to Father's chamber.

"I'm sorry, Father," he said softly. "I did not mean to wake you."

Father tightened the sash of his robe and moved slowly toward him. In the dim light, Vincent could see the concern in Father's eyes. He looked tired, as though he, too, had been awake long into the night.

"Come inside, Vincent," Father said. "Come inside and sit down." Father took his arm and Vincent walked with him into the chamber. There was a small chair by the bed and Vincent felt himself pushed gently into it before Father sat nearby on the edge of his mattress. "This cannot continue," Father told him. "You know that what I say is true. Neither you nor Catherine can continue in this way. Something must be done."

"Then tell me what it is, Father," Vincent said wearily. "Catherine will not allow Peter to touch her. You know that. It has been over two months since he first examined her."

"Do you know the underlying cause of her distress, Vincent? Is it the baby? Or is it something else?"

"I don't know," Vincent confessed. "It is all so confusing. We are still deeply connected. Our bond has not changed in that way. But her emotions are in such turmoil, Father." He closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the chair. "Catherine wants this child. She wants to do what is best for it." He thought of all the ways in which she showed her love for their unborn child.

"Catherine faithfully takes the vitamins Peter gave her," he told Father. "And although she has come to loathe the taste, she still insists on drinking the raspberry leaf tea at least twice a day."

"I'm glad to hear that," Father said. "Even Pliny the Elder wrote of the benefits of raspberry leaf, Vincent," Father told him, "in his *Historia Naturalis*. It is beneficial in helping to prevent miscarriage." Vincent heard his long sigh. "It does seem as though Catherine's distress has been caused by something other than the child itself."

"Yes," Vincent replied softly. The pregnancy would account for the hormonal changes Catherine was experiencing, as well as the anxiety over how rapidly the baby seemed to be growing. But it would not explain her fear of Peter or her absolute refusal to let him touch her.

"Even the thought of letting Peter examine her is terrifying to her, Father," Vincent continued, opening his eyes and looking at the concerned man beside him. "I can feel that terror. It is real."

"But what could have caused such a reaction, Vincent? Peter has always been Catherine's friend. Is there anything specific that might have triggered this fear?"

Vincent remembered vividly the moment he had run into the chamber. He saw Catherine huddled on the bed, her face pale and covered with a fine mist of perspiration. And he saw Peter and Mary, standing dumbfounded and confused in the middle of the room. He had hurried to Catherine's side, holding her as she wept against his chest. He had thought only of Catherine; there had been only her fear and her need. He had asked Peter and Mary to leave, and in time, Catherine had calmed.

"I spoke to both Mary and Peter later that day, Father," Vincent said. "Neither of them had any idea of what might have caused such a reaction. They were both very concerned for her."

"And could Catherine offer no explanation?"

"None," Vincent said sadly. "She said only that she could not bear to have Peter touch her like that again."

"Then it was the . . . physical examination which distressed her?"

Vincent turned his mind back to the exact moment he had run into the chamber. "No," Vincent said, playing the scene over and over in his mind, "I don't believe so. Peter and Mary were standing in the middle of the room. The physical part of the examination seemed to be over."

"Then what was Peter *doing*, Vincent?" Father asked.

"He was holding a syringe." Vincent gripped the chair until his knuckles lost all color. "The syringe," he said softly. "Peter was going to take a blood sample. He had asked Mary to get him a syringe. That was when I heard Catherine scream."

Father put his hand on Vincent's arm. "Catherine once told me that she remembered nothing of what happened to her after Jacob was conceived."

"Yes."

"She also said that the memories she shared with you, the memories of her time 'away' - were also fading."

"Yes," Vincent whispered. "She says they are gone now. As if they never were."

"Is it possible, Vincent," Father began softly, "is it possible that there is one memory - one deeper and stronger than the rest; a memory so terrifying that something of it has remained with her? Could it be this memory which has her so frightened of any tests involving needles or injections, and therefore of Peter?"

Vincent covered his face with his hands. In his mind he saw himself - caged, trapped, caught by the demons of Gabriel's cameras. He would always remember that voice; that softly deceitful voice, urging him to kill, prodding at him, like a child with a stick. 'Of course, it was the doctor who killed her'

Vincent wanted to scream. He needed to scream. He needed to take all the anger, all the pain he knew Catherine had suffered and let it out. But he couldn't scream. Not here, not now. Catherine had fallen into an exhausted sleep only a few hours ago. He could not allow this to overwhelm

him. He had to stay in control of both his mind and his body long enough to decide what to do.

"Vincent?"

Father's worried voice and the hand shaking his shoulder, helped him to focus his concentration. He opened his eyes, knowing that he had to tell Father what it was that Catherine could not forget.

"She is remembering the way she died, Father," Vincent said, his voice soft and his control tight. "Gabriel told me. 'It was the doctor who killed her,' he said. And the doctor confirmed it. I remember him crying, screaming that it had been Gabriel who had ordered it. An injection. Oh, God, Father. What am I going to do? How can I tell Catherine that this is the memory she has not been able to forget?"

"Dear God."

Vincent covered Father's hand with his, holding it tightly, needing the older man's strength. In the months since Catherine's return, he had come to truly believe that the past could be put behind them. Her return had been a miracle wrought of love, a miracle that had given them a second chance. He had truly thought that they could have their happy life together, that their days and nights of pain were over.

But so many pieces of that past were intruding now on their happiness. So much of the pain refused to simply stay gone and forgotten, but rose, like a ghostly phoenix, from the ashes of what had once been. It covered their new life with cinders of darkness and despair and refused to let the winds of change blow it away.

"What am I going to do, Father?" Vincent asked again.

"Vincent," Father began softly, "when Catherine first returned to you, I worried that in some way, her being with you . . . your physical relationship with her, would bring back the dark illness that had almost taken you from me. I worried that you would finally, completely, lose yourself forever. Do you remember?"

"Of course, Father," Vincent said, feeling the older man's fingers tighten in his. "And I told you that you need not be afraid, that the

darkness was controlled. I told you that I could no longer lose myself, that Jacob and Catherine were with me, connected to me always."

"Perhaps it was not you I should have been concerned for, Vincent, but Catherine."

"But why, Father? Why should you have been concerned?"

Father sighed. "You have faced your demons, Vincent," Father explained. "You fought them both mentally and physically for many months. And in the end, you triumphed over them."

"I did not do it alone, Father," Vincent told him. "It was Catherine's love and the love of our child which ultimately allowed me to turn away from the darkness."

"Then you and Jacob must do the same for Catherine," Father said. "You must make Catherine face her demons, Vincent. You must give her all your love, all your strength, and you must help her to face this fear. God has given her a second chance," Father continued softly. "But in order to find happiness in *this* life, Catherine must completely face the terror which remains from the past."

Vincent shook his head. "No," he whispered. "No." How could he make Catherine face such fear? How could he make her remember the terror of her own death? "I cannot do it, Father," Vincent cried. "I cannot."

"You must."



XIV

Throughout the night, Vincent wandered the dark tunnels, hoping to find the strength to help Catherine. What Father asked of him was too painful. How could he put the woman he loved through such agony? But how could he continue to let her suffer with her unrecognized terror? What Father said was true: Catherine needed to face her demons, just as he had once faced his. She had helped him, had loved him enough to face those demons with him. Could he do less for her?

Around him, Vincent heard the shrieking of the winds as they whipped their way through the primordial Chamber of the Winds. He had not consciously sought this place; this vast cavern where the elements met and converged in howling displays of rage. But he had often come here as a child, seeking solace from his aloneness. Then, the winds had healed him, blowing away his sadness, bringing him peace.

There was no peace now in the winds that screamed at him. They tore at his hair and stung his eyes. And Vincent found no comfort; only the angry rage of the wind, roaring through the cavern.

It would soon be dawn and in the early hours of morning, Catherine would be waking. Vincent turned homeward, knowing that only love could bring him comfort; only love could help him find the strength to see Catherine through her pain.

Vincent hurried through the corridors and across the Whispering Gallery. As he neared the Home Chambers he heard the sounds of people waking to the new day. He slowed his steps, taking deep, calming breaths. Catherine was still asleep. He would know when she awoke. He would feel her, the essence of her, awakening within his mind.

He reached their chamber and quietly opened the door, slipping inside and closing it behind him. He saw Jacob, awake and silent, watching him from the middle of the big bed. Vincent found the denim diaper bag and began to fill it with the things Jacob would need for the day. He took a quick look at his son, then added the stuffed cow from Jacob's crib and his favorite blanket. Jacob smiled.

Vincent went to the bed and carefully picked up the waiting child. With the bag over his shoulder and Jacob clinging to his neck, Vincent left the chamber as quietly as he had entered it. He would take Jacob to Father. He only hoped that when he and Catherine confronted her fears, their connection with Jacob would not force him to endure that fear with them. He would explain to Father, and ask him to watch the baby carefully. He prayed that no harm would come to him.



Catherine pulled herself back from the faintly disturbing visions that flittered across her closed eyelids. They were only shadows, forms without substance, yet she feared them. She opened her eyes, banishing them to the darkness.

The chamber was brightly lit. Light from the Tiffany-style lamps filled the room and the smell of burning candles scented the air. The pipes were noisy with morning chatter and Catherine wondered why Jacob had not awakened her. She turned slightly on the pillow to look at the baby's crib. It was empty.

"Jacob is with Father."

Catherine turned onto her back and looked up at the sound of Vincent's voice. He was seated at the other end of the bed, leaning back against the wall, his arms resting on his raised knee. It looked as if he had been there for some time, quietly sitting on the bed watching her sleep.

"Why is Jacob with Father?" she asked, yawning and stretching her hands above her head. "And why are all the lights on? You're going to put a nasty drain on the system. Con Ed is not going to be happy."

She saw Vincent smile, but there was a sadness to the smile that troubled her. "Have you been sitting there watching me all night?" she asked. There was a stillness in the room, like the heaviness of the air before a sudden, violent storm.

"No," Vincent answered, "not all night." He paused, and Catherine heard him sigh. "Did you sleep well?"

"Wonderfully," Catherine said, smiling. "The last thing I remember is listing to *Idylls of The King*. No one reads as beautifully as you, Vincent."

"That must be why you always fall asleep," he said softly.

Catherine didn't answer. There was something wrong, something he wasn't saying. "What's wrong, Vincent?" she asked, throwing aside the blankets. "Why are you looking at me with such sadness in your eyes?"

"Am I?"

Catherine nodded and she heard Vincent sigh. "It is rather complicated," he told her.

"Never let it be said that I loved a simple man," she whispered, sliding her bare feet over his sock-covered ones. If he was going to insist on sitting on the other side of the bed, at least they were going to be touching.

"As long as you love me, Catherine," he murmured. "That is all that matters."

"What?" she asked, wondering if she had heard him right. "Of course I love you," she told him. "I can't even imagine why you might doubt it."

"Perhaps," he said, "because I need to know that you will love me even if I do something that will cause you great pain."

Catherine's foot stilled. "You would never hurt me, Vincent," she said.

Vincent bent forward and captured her bare feet in his hands. "I do not wish to," he whispered, gently rubbing her insteps. His hands were soothing, warm. "But I think it may be necessary."

"Why?" Catherine held her breath, wondering what was going on. She searched through her mind, looking for the richness, the intense resonance that colored Vincent's thoughts, his presence within her. She could find no trace of him. Somehow, for some reason unknown to her, he had put up a barrier; a wall that shut off his thoughts and his feelings. "Why?" she asked again.

Vincent didn't answer, instead Catherine felt a gentle tug on her ankles, and slowly, very slowly, she was pulled across the sheet toward him. As Catherine moved down, her shirt moved up, exposing first her thighs and then her rounded stomach, and finally the fullness of her enlarged breasts.

She tried to hold the shirt in place, laughing softly. "You could have asked me to take it off," Catherine said, feeling the soft material gather beneath her shoulders. "I would have, you know."

"Yes."

He looked down at her legs and Catherine felt his fingers move slowly up her calves, his thumbs caressing the muscles in back. "I always said you had wonderful hands," Catherine murmured. His hands moved across her knees and onward up the inside of her thighs.

"Yes."

When his hands reached the round, taut, skin of her belly, they stopped; hovering ever so close, yet not touching. "Vincent?" He lifted his gaze and Catherine's breath caught. There were tears in his eyes. "Vincent?"

He lowered his hands, smoothing them across her skin. His hands were trembling. She waited; watching his hands, his eyes. Then he bent his head, resting his cheek lightly against her. She felt the moisture of his tears.

"Life is so precious," she heard him whisper.

"Life stands on the verge of a single breath," Catherine told him.

She felt his lips move softly over her, paying reverent homage to the life she carried.

"And in a single breath, life ends," he said.

The air in the chamber seemed to quiver with the sound of Vincent's words. Catherine could not help the shiver that ran through her body. She was cold; terribly, terribly cold. 'And in a single breath, life ends.'

"What are you trying to tell me, Vincent?" she asked softly, covering her arms with damp, icy palms. "Is there something wrong with the baby? Is that why you've sealed your mind off from me? Because you know there's something wrong with the baby and you don't want me to know? Tell me, Vincent!" she demanded. "Damn it. You're scaring me."

Vincent moved quickly up the bed and leaning back against the pillows, gathered Catherine into his arms. He held her tightly, his hands smoothing over her back as he tried to soothe her. He was making a mess of this. He did not know how to tell her.

"There is nothing wrong with our child, Catherine," he said, his voice filled with the assurance that what he said was true. "Please believe me. Our child is safe."

He felt her take a deep, shaky breath, and he bent forward, laying his cheek against her hair. "I love you, Catherine," he whispered. "I love you more than I ever thought to love anyone. In this life or any other." He brought one hand to her cheek, cupping it, lifting her face so that he could see her eyes. "Do you believe that?" he asked softly.

Catherine looked up and he saw that her eyes, too, were filled with tears. "Of course, I believe you," she said, touching his face. "You've never lied to me, Vincent."

How could he look at her? He had not lied, but he was keeping a secret now; a secret he had no words to tell. He could only start at the beginning and pray that he was doing the right thing. "Catherine," he began, stroking the silkiness of her cheek as he held her gaze, "can you tell me why Peter frightens you?"

"I don't know, Vincent. I've told you. I don't know why I'm frightened of Peter. I just am."

"You *do* know, Catherine," he said, seeing the anxiety on her face and in her eyes. "The memory is there. But it is hidden, locked away within your mind. You must remember it, love, so that it can no longer hurt you."

Catherine felt a small icy knot of fear forming between her breasts. No, she didn't know why Peter frightened her. And she didn't want to know. It was hormones. That's all it was: hormones.

"Catherine?"

"No," she said. "I *don't* know. You're wrong, Vincent." She struggled out of his grasp and slipped off the bed onto the floor. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, looking up at him with tear-filled eyes. "Why are you hurting me like this?"

Her tears cut into Vincent's heart with the sharpness of a thousand knives. "You have to remember, Catherine," he told her. "You must. Or it will destroy you."

Catherine took a deep breath and pushed herself up from the floor. As she stood before him, Vincent could see her legs wobbling, and he wanted to go to her; to ask her to forgive him, to tell her to forget. He closed his eyes, trying not to give in. He *had* to do this: for her sake, for his.

"I told you I don't remember," Catherine argued, her breath coming in quick gasps. "Let it be, Vincent. Let that be enough for you."

"I cannot, Catherine," he said, feeling the pain that shivered through her. "This memory is eating at your heart. You must force it from you or it will devour you."

"But I don't remember," she cried. "I don't. I don't. I don't." She beat at her thighs with clenched fists and Vincent could stand it no longer. He leaped from the bed and took her in his arms, holding her tightly against his chest. He could feel the rapid beating of her heart and the gulping sobs that shook her.

"No, no, no, no, no," she repeated again and again.

Vincent picked her up and sat back down on the bed, stroking her hair, trying to soothe her with his touch. He held her close, wishing now, that he had not forced this from her. Nothing could be worth the anguish she was suffering.

"Catherine . . .," he began softly.

Catherine shook her head. The room around her looked blurry, out of focus. "No," she whispered. "No."

"It's all right," he told her. "It's all right."

"No," she whispered again, not hearing him. "No."

Catherine closed her eyes, but the fragmented shadows she had glimpsed when she awakened were there, waiting for her. She quickly opened her eyes again, trying desperately to focus on Vincent's face. As long as Vincent was with her, nothing could hurt her, nothing would harm her.

"What are you seeing, Catherine?"

She heard his voice, but she couldn't see his face. The lights - why were the lights so bright? "The lights, Vincent," Catherine whispered, "they hurt my eyes."

"What do you see, Catherine?" Why did he keep asking her that? Why couldn't she see him?

Light. The awful light. She closed her eyes but the light remained; harsh, cold light, illuminating the stark, barren room. "A room," she whispered. "I see a room."

Vincent, help me. I'm so tired. I can't fight them. They're taking our baby . . . Oh, God, please. The shadows came together and Catherine saw a man. A doctor. He was a doctor. And he was holding a syringe up to the light.

"No . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . " She was so tired. She had to move; she had to fight him. "What is that?" she heard herself say.

The man moved closer, holding her arm. She felt the prick of the needle as it entered her vein. "You won't suffer. I promise," he said.

No! Oh, God, please, no! It can't end like this! Vincent! "Vincent."

"I'm here, Catherine."

"No," she whispered. "I have to find you. I can't let it end like this. You have to know about the baby. They took the baby, Vincent."

"I know, Catherine."

"Yes," she sighed, holding him, feeling the warmth of him beneath her hands. "I found you. I fought the drug. I found you." His face was blurred, but he was real. She could see his tears.

She touched his cheek. "Vincent . . . we loved," she told him. "There is a child." She felt his tears beneath her fingers. Catherine blinked her eyes, realizing that the room was still bright. No, it had been dark. They had been on the roof of a building, and it had been dark. Was this real? Was this memory? "There is a child," she said again. She remembered saying the words.

"I know," he said softly, covering her hand with his. "He is beautiful, Catherine."

How did he know that? Had she told him? "He is beautiful," she agreed. "I didn't get to hold him. They wouldn't let me hold him, Vincent."

"Oh, God, Catherine."

She remembered the doctor and the needle. "Am I going to die, Vincent?" she asked softly. "He gave me an injection."

She felt the room spin as Vincent crushed her to him. They were falling, but it didn't hurt. She lay across his body, and he was hard and real beneath her. She felt his hand at the back of her neck, pulling her mouth down to his.

"No," he gasped against her parted lips. "Not this time." He kissed her deeply and Catherine felt the lethargy fading from her body. His mouth was hungry, his other hand roaming across her naked thighs beneath the shirt she was wearing.

Vincent almost cried out with the need that exploded through him. Memories both old and new collided, as he realized that Catherine was not the only one who had needed to remember. He had lost her once. He had been too late. Now, in this purging of their souls, he understood all that they had been given.

His hands roamed over her, finding all the textures of her skin, and his lips followed; drinking in her scent, her taste. He felt the shivering that went through her and his hold tightened. Catherine was here in his arms, and nothing would ever part them again.

Sensation rocked her, plunging her from one reality into another. Lines that were already blurred, severed. The darkened rooftop faded and Catherine saw the blankets and quilts of their bed, and the beautiful stained glass shining in the lamplight. She wasn't dying in his arms, she was living. Her fingers were in his hair; her tongue touching him, tasting him, sharing his breath. His hands held her tighter, and he answered each touch, each taste, each caress.

She needed to be closer, to reaffirm her life and her love. She pulled at the ties of his shirt blindly, loath to give up his kiss. But she wanted to feel his warm body against her. He could warm her; and she had been so cold.

With a deep groan, Vincent wrenched his mouth away from Catherine's. He reached down, helping her loosen the ties of his shirt. She sat back, straddling his hips and he pulled the shirt up and over his head. She smiled, feeling the subtle richness of his mind as the final barrier dropped and they were once again completely connected.

"Don't ever leave me like that again," Catherine said softly, taking off her shirt in the same way. She watched Vincent's eyes darken as they roamed over her nude, pregnant body. His hands stroked her thighs, her hips, finally settling on the round protrusion beneath her breasts.

"Never." He made the word a vow, and she believed him. "This child will be born in love, Catherine," he told her. "Here in this bed. In this room with all its memories."

"Not all of the memories are happy, Vincent," she reminded him.

"But we have accepted them, Catherine," he said. "We have accepted the memories, both light and dark. They can no longer hurt us."

Catherine reached down and covered his hands with hers. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for having the strength to make me face that terror, Vincent." She looked at his eyes, at the beauty of all that he was, all he would be to her forever.

"Love me now," she told him. "We have accepted the darkness, Vincent. Love me now in the light."



XV

Catherine smiled at the man watching her from across the small table. "I really am all right now, Father," she told him. "You don't have to worry." She ate another spoonful of her soup, wondering why chicken soup was supposed to be good for whatever ailed you.

She heard Father sigh as he put down his tea cup. "I must tell you, Catherine, both Vincent and I were very concerned."

"I know." She put down her spoon and leaned back in the chair. It had been a week since Vincent had forced her to confront the real reason for her fear of Peter. And even though she had recovered fully from what Father now termed her 'free-floating anxiety', Catherine still tired very easily.

Both Vincent and Father had suggested that she begin eating breakfast and lunch in the small kitchen they shared, instead of walking back and forth to the dining hall three times a day. Father had assured her that once her hormonal levels evened themselves out, she would more than likely regain most of her energy. He was still concerned with the size of the child, however, and now that she had resolved her anxiety about Peter, Father had insisted that she have Peter perform the much-overdue examination. Vincent had gone to escort Peter down this morning, taking Jacob with him.

"Vincent did not want to hurt you, Catherine," Father said. "He truly had no choice but to bring your fear to the surface. You *do* understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied, sliding her fingers across the smooth edge of the table. "I really thought I had forgotten everything from that time," she told

him. "Even now, what I do remember doesn't seem real to me. It's more like fragments of a nightmare than reality."

"And what is reality?" Father asked softly. "I once believed that reality consisted of a laboratory and what one could prove by scientific method and theorem. It was a gross error on my part."

"Look around you, Catherine," he told her. "How many people in that city above us would believe in what you see? How many people would look at Vincent and see the man you love?" He held out his hand and Catherine entwined her fingers with his.

"I have learned not to question the whys and wherefores of this miracle, Catherine," Father said. "You have been given back to us, to Vincent. And for that, there are no words of gratitude worthy enough."

Catherine squeezed his fingers. She and Father had been through a lot together. And not all of it had been pleasant. But in the months since the wedding, each of them had tried to understand the other and Catherine had grown to love him dearly.

"Father? Oh, Catherine, hi. I didn't know you were here. Aren't you supposed to be resting?"

Catherine smiled at the young woman in the doorway. "Yes, Jamie," she said, very used to her friend's concern, "I'm supposed to be resting." She gestured with her free hand at the small table and the soup and biscuits set out before her. "But William and Father decided that I needed to eat before I took my nap, so I'm in here having lunch." She turned around to look at Father, squeezing his hand again, before she looked back at Jamie. "I swear, you'd think no one else Below has ever had a baby. Lena's almost due and I bet she doesn't get half the nagging I get."

Jamie laughed and came into the room, snagging a biscuit from the table. "That's not true," she said, looking at the jars of honey and homemade preserves near Catherine's arm. "Nathaniel is a terrible nag. And Mary and Samantha have been following Lena around practically every time she leaves her chamber." She laughed again and reached out for the honey.

Catherine handed her a small butter knife and watched as Jamie opened the biscuit, covering it with the sweet, dark honey. "I guess if Mary and Samantha are busy watching Lena, that leaves you and William and Father to keep an eye on me, right?"

Jamie took a bite of the biscuit, obviously taking a moment to enjoy the taste. Catherine smiled. Jamie was growing into a beautiful young woman, but there were times, like now, when the tomboy in her popped unexpectedly to the surface.

"Well," Jamie said, licking a drop of honey from her finger, "Mouse is so busy with Elliot's project that I hardly see him anymore. I have to have something to do, don't I?"

Father cleared his throat. "Exactly what *is* this project of Elliot's, Jamie?" he asked. "I've attempted to ask Mouse, but he is particularly vague on the subject."

Jamie looked a little uncomfortable and Catherine realized that Mouse was probably being more vague than usual for a reason. "Did Elliot ask Mouse not to say anything about the project, Jamie?" she asked.

"Well, yeah," Jamie answered. "I think so."

"Is there some danger involved with this project of Elliot's, Jamie?" Father asked. His tone told Catherine that he was asking as head of the Council now, and not as the confidant and friend Catherine had been talking to earlier.

It was obviously a tone of voice that Jamie also recognized. "I don't think it's dangerous, Father," she told him. "It's just that Elliot isn't certain that his idea is feasible. He told Mouse not to say anything until he could prove to you and to the Council that what he wants to do will work."

"And do you know what this project is, Jamie?"

"Uh, not exactly."

"Not exactly," Father repeated. "What is it that you *do* know, exactly?"

Jamie crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the wall. "Well, Jamie began, "I know that it's a heck of a long way from here. It takes Mouse and Elliot more than two days journey to haul some of the stuff down there."

"What 'stuff', Jamie?" Father asked.

"Just stuff, Father," Jamie told him. "I don't know what all of it is. Mouse and Elliot don't let me help all that often"

Father looked at Catherine. "Do you know anything about this, Catherine?" he asked softly. "Has Elliot mentioned anything to you about his project?"

"No, Father," Catherine said. "I haven't seen Elliot all that often lately. He and Mouse have been keeping pretty much to themselves."

Father sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I will have to ask Vincent to check on this, Catherine," he said. "Mouse is very susceptible. If Elliot is putting him in danger of any kind . . . "

"I understand," Catherine told him. "I'll have Vincent find you later this afternoon after the examination."

"Thank you, Catherine," Father said. He looked at Jamie. "I will expect you to tell me if you learn anything more about this project," he said. "I do not wish you to spy on your friends, Jamie. I would not ask it of you. But Elliot is not used to working within a structure such as our community. He may forge ahead with something that will cause fundamental harm to our way of life. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"Very well." He picked up his teacup and took a swallow of the tea. He grimaced and put the cup back down. "Was there something you needed, Jamie?" he asked. "Besides the biscuit, that is."

"Darn it. I totally forgot. William wanted me to ask you if you could come by the kitchen later. He wouldn't tell me why, just asked if I'd let you know he needed to see you."

"Thank you, Jamie," Father said, pouring fresh tea into his cup. "I will take care of it."

"Okay." Jamie looked at Catherine and smiled. "Don't forget your nap," she reminded her. "Oh, and I saw Peter with Vincent and Jacob a little while ago. They were on their way to your chamber."

"Thanks, Jamie." Catherine sighed and rose slowly from the table. Her pregnancy was apparent even under the loose jumper she wore. "I guess that means it's about time for me to get back," she said softly. "Thank you for lunch, Father." She went around the table and kissed her father-in-law on the cheek. "I'll tell Vincent to come by the study later."

"Please," Father said, returning the kiss. "I shall want to know what Peter says."

Catherine smiled wearily. "You and everyone else around here."



Catherine was as comfortable as she was going to get. She knew it. Even with Vincent sitting on the bed by her side, holding her hand and stroking her hair, she was never going to feel at ease. There was something vastly invasive about lying with your legs wide open while someone you weren't in love with and didn't sleep with checked out your most private parts. God, how antiquated that sounded, even in her own mind. Private parts.

She heard Vincent chuckle as he bent down to whisper in her ear. "It seems most appropriate to me, Catherine," he told her. "Some parts are just naturally more private than others." Catherine turned her face and kissed him softly, ignoring Peter as best she could.

"That's it," she heard Peter say. "You're finally relaxing. Makes this a whole lot easier."

It wasn't that Peter didn't try to be gentle. He did. But even with the fear of him gone, Catherine still worried about the baby and about how rapidly he seemed to be developing. Until she knew that he was all right, she was going to be tense.

"She," Vincent reminded her softly. "Remember?"

Catherine smiled. "Yes."

"Well," Peter said, "the hard part is over. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Catherine heard the snap of the disposable gloves as he pulled them off. "You can go ahead and relax. I'm just going to do a little listening." He dropped the gloves into a plastic bag he had brought along for refuse and sealed it. He took a strange looking instrument from his bag and Catherine realized it was some sort of stethoscope. Peter hooked it around his forehead and moved toward her again. Catherine felt the cold metal touch her skin. She waited, barely breathing, for Peter to say something.

"Hhhmmmm," Peter finally murmured, "that's interesting."

Catherine tried to peer over the sheet that covered her raised knees. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What? Oh, just a moment. Be quiet and let me listen."

Catherine leaned back against the pillows and Vincent's arm. "Who's having this baby, anyway?" she muttered.

"Shhhh."

The cold metal of Peter's special stethoscope moved in a seemingly random pattern over Catherine's stomach. Whatever he was hearing had his total attention. She tried to concentrate on something else, like the afternoon chatter on the pipes or the warmth of Vincent's breath against her temple. But her mind was centered on their child, on whether or not the child was well.

"I haven't been able to find your medical records yet," Peter said softly, as he raised his head, removing the awkward device from around his forehead, "so you're going to have to help me out here, Cathy. Is there a history of twins in your family?"

Catherine's lungs suddenly refused to work, and she found herself holding her breath. Oh, God. Twins. Not one baby, but two!

"Cathy?"

She gasped, taking a deep breath and nodded. "Yes," she told Peter. "Yes. My grandmother was a twin."

"Well," Peter said calmly, "that explains it then."

"Are you saying that Catherine is having twins, Peter?" The steadiness of Vincent's voice was a direct contrast to the whirling thoughts Catherine could feel coming from his mind.

"No," Peter told them. "I'm not going to say that just yet. I want to bring down a portable sonogram and get a good picture before I can be that certain. I *will* say, however, that there's a damn good *chance* that Catherine is having twins."

"Why?" Catherine whispered. "Why do you think there's a good chance?"

Peter smiled. "I said a *damn* good chance, young lady." He took the bulky stethoscope from around his neck and handed it to Vincent. "Have a listen, Vincent," he said. "You tell me. You'll hear Catherine's heartbeat the loudest," Peter told him, "and you'll have to concentrate to differentiate between all the other sounds, but I think you'll hear what I did. Jacob is always telling me about those amplified senses of yours. Now's the time to put one of them to good use."

Vincent looked at the instrument in Peter's hand and then down at Catherine's face. She looked so happy now, as if nothing in the world had ever been wrong.

"Go ahead," she whispered, squeezing his hand. "Listen."

Vincent got up slowly from the bed and took the stethoscope in his hand. This wasn't the same device Pascal used for listening to his pipes. This instrument had a headband and a rod connected to the metal receiving device which Peter had told them conducted the sound through the bones in the forehead. It still had the familiar tubing that linked the receiver to the

listener's ears, but Peter had said that this design was much more sensitive. That was the reason he had brought it with him.

Vincent fastened the device to his forehead and put the ends in his ears. As he bent forward toward his wife's stomach, Vincent realized that what he would hear would be so much more than anything he had heard before. These sounds would be the heartbeat of his child; his children - if Peter was correct.

He raised his head for a moment, looking into Catherine's eyes. They were glazed with tears. He looked down at her rounded stomach. "Where?" he asked Peter softly.

Peter showed him where to place the instrument and Vincent pressed the metal gently against Catherine's skin, closing his eyes. He felt as though he had stumbled into another world. The 'lub dub' of Catherine's heartbeat was the primary sound. But there was so much more. He mentally put aside the beat of her heart and listened with all of his being.

There was a gentle whooshing all around him, as though he were traveling through some vast channel. It was a soothing sound, comforting somehow, and Vincent wondered if this was what the baby heard all around him, day after day, as it grew within Catherine's womb. He listened harder, sorting and separating each individual sound as he heard it. There! Fainter than he had thought they would be, but there - the 'lub dub' of another heart. No! There were two distinct patterns; both faster than Catherine's but each recognizable as a separate entity. Twins.

Vincent allowed himself the pleasure of listening to the quick and steady beat of his children's hearts. No composer had ever written more beautiful music.

Can you hear them, Catherine? Can you hear our children's song?

Catherine had already merged her mind deeply with his, and she was there, listening to the hearts of their children through Vincent's ears. Two. She was having two of Vincent's children. She didn't think that speech was possible for her at this moment; not even through their bond, so she didn't try. Besides, there were no words.

Vincent lifted his head slowly, and Catherine saw the tears that matched the ones she felt sliding down her own cheeks. This was the reason she was so much larger than Lena had been, this was the reason her hormones were playing havoc with her system. There was nothing wrong with the baby. There were just two of them.

"Now," Peter said, as Vincent handed him the stethoscope. "I hope the two of you are ready for this."

Vincent turned to Peter, but not before Catherine saw the worry in his eyes. "What do you mean?" he asked softly.

"Well," Peter began, "this means that Catherine will probably go into labor early. Twins rarely make it to full term. And she's already rather large, even for twins. These babies aren't going to be small. I want you to watch for any edema and I want Jacob to monitor your blood pressure. You can eat what you want, within reason, but watch the salt," he said sternly. "You don't need to retain fluids."

"I won't do anything to endanger the babies, Peter," Catherine promised. "I'll do everything you say."

"You do that," he said. "In the meantime, I want to bring down a portable sonogram. It's not invasive, Catherine, so you don't have to worry. But it *will* give us a good look at just where those babies are, and how fully they've developed. I also want to take a urine sample back with me. Don't worry, I'll run the tests myself. But I want to be certain nothing else is happening. The sample will let me know if there's anything to worry about. In the meantime, you keep off your feet as much as possible if you have any, and I mean this, *any* swelling in your legs or feet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Peter," Catherine said softly.

"Good. Your hormone levels should be leveling in a few weeks, so you should be feeling less tired. If that doesn't happen, you get a message to me. Right now it looks like you're carrying those babies pretty high, but I won't know until we do the sonogram. You'll probably have a few backaches, more when the babies drop." He smiled. "Gives Vincent a chance to learn all there is about massage."

"Now, I'll need to check with Jacob about having the wiring set up for the portable sonogram. Guess we'll have to find Mouse. God knows how he's got most of these chambers hooked up to the distribution line. I don't want to blow everything and have the guys from Con Ed looking into it."

"I'll find Mouse for you, Peter," Vincent said. "And I will check the diagrams of the circuitry to see if we can provide what you need."

"Thanks. Now, I think I'll leave you two and go have a cup of tea with Jacob. He expects a full report, you know. Do you want me to go ahead and tell him the good news?"

"Why don't you, Peter," Catherine said, as Vincent helped her to sit up. She really hadn't had much trouble getting in and out of chairs yet, but the bed was something else again. It never wanted to let her up. She pulled the sleep shirt down below her knees and sat on the edge of the mattress, leaning on Vincent's shoulder.

"I had planned to stay the night anyway, just in case something was wrong. Now, I'll just stay and give into Jacob's masochistic urges for a game of chess." He smiled and put the stethoscope into his bag, taking out a small, plastic container. "I want you to take that urine sample first thing tomorrow morning," he said, putting the container on the table. "Bring it by the guest chamber and I'll take it up with me when I leave after breakfast."

"I will see that it gets to you, Peter," Vincent told him.

"Good." Peter closed the bag and looked down at Catherine. "Don't worry, Cathy," he said. "Those babies are going to be just fine."

Catherine got up from the edge of the bed and went to stand in front of him. She put her hand on his cheek and smiled. "Thank you, Peter," she said. "I'm sorry about the last couple of months. You've always been a good friend. I should have remembered that, too."

Peter put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Vincent explained everything to me, honey," he said. "Given what happened . . .," he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "You take care," he whispered.

"I will, Peter," Catherine said. "And, thank you."

Peter turned and walked toward the door. "You just make certain I'm around when those babies are born," he said. "I wouldn't want Jacob to steal all my glory." He opened the door, then turned back to them. "Take care of her, Vincent," he said, softly. "I'll see you at dinner."

Catherine watched silently as Peter left the room, closing the door behind him. She sighed. He cared so much, and she had treated him so badly.

"Peter understands, Catherine," Vincent said, as his arms wrapped around her from behind. She leaned back against him, glad for his warmth and his strength.

"I know," she said, covering his hands with hers. "But I hurt him terribly." She rubbed her palms down the backs of his hands, loving the feel of the soft hair beneath her skin. He was her talisman. As long as she could touch him, nothing bad could happen to her.

She felt Vincent's chuckle against her neck as he leaned forward. "I am rather large for a rabbit's foot, Catherine," he said, kissing the sensitive skin beneath her ear. "But you may touch me anytime you feel the need. I will always be here for you."

Catherine tilted her head, savoring the feel of his warm lips as they traveled down her neck. His touch sent shivers of delight down her body and she trembled. Catherine had thought that pregnancy might lessen her desire for Vincent; instead, it seemed to have heightened her awareness and her response: Something she hadn't thought possible.

She wanted him now, and let him know it as she turned in his arms. Catherine pressed herself against the rigid evidence of Vincent's own desire and smiled. "It's time for my nap," she whispered. "Care to join me?"

Vincent returned her smile and kissed her softly on the lips. "If I join you, Catherine," he said, stroking her hair, "you will not get any sleep."

"Sure I will," Catherine said, returning his gentle kiss. Vincent's arm slipped beneath her knees as he lifted her, carrying her to their bed. "Eventually."



XVI

Vincent stepped quietly down into the study. He took a quick look at the chess game going on at the small table. Father was not winning.

"Vincent," Peter said, ignoring Father's frown of concentration, "have a seat. This shouldn't take too much longer."

"I would not want to interrupt your game," Vincent said, taking a chair near Father's desk.

"That is quite all right, Vincent," Father said, leaning back in his chair. "I don't know why I bother. I haven't won a game from Peter in years."

Peter reached out and patted his friend's arm. "That's quite all right, Jacob," he said. "Catherine and Vincent are giving you a whole new generation of pupils. Surely you'll be able to beat at least one of them."

"While they're babies, perhaps," Father agreed, shaking his head. "But when they're older? I sincerely doubt that they will be any less obliged to let an old man win than their father has been."

"You are the one who taught me to win at chess, Father," Vincent said smiling. "I cannot believe that you would want me to *let you win*."

"He'd be furious," Peter said, laughing. "So, Jacob, do you concede the game?"

"Gladly." Father leaned back in his chair. The worried look that Vincent was used to seeing on Father's face was still present. But when their gazes met, Vincent knew Peter had told Father about the twins.

"Peter has told you our news?" Vincent asked, wanting to hear Father's reaction. He had thought that Father would be pleased.

"Yes," Father replied, removing his glasses, "he has. He also told me that he has cautioned both you and Catherine about the additional risks attached to multiple births."

Vincent looked at Peter and then back at his father. "Peter mentioned that Catherine would probably not carry the babies to full term," he said. "And he wants to run a few additional tests as well as have you monitor her blood pressure. Other than watching for certain signs and limiting her intake of salt, Peter said nothing specific. Is there more Peter should have told us?"

"No, there isn't," Peter interrupted, before Father could speak. Vincent did not miss the harsh frown he gave his old friend. "For some reason your father has decided that I don't know what I'm doing."

"I never said that, Peter," Father told him, shaking his head. "You misinterpreted my concern."

"Then explain it to me, Jacob," Peter replied. "You're worrying about diabetes, eclampsia . . . good God, I've never seen you like this. Weren't you the one who told me Catherine and Vincent knew what they were doing?"

"Hell, Jacob, I was the one who was so involved with my own reaction that I didn't see what it was doing to Cathy." He paused and looked at Vincent. "I'm really sorry about that, Vincent," he said. "Tell Catherine she had nothing to apologize for." Vincent nodded.

Father folded the frames of his glasses and laid them on the table before him. "If I am overreacting it is because I care deeply for Catherine. I do not want anything to happen to her, or to the children." He looked up and Vincent understood that something deeper was troubling him.

"Nothing will happen to her, Father," Vincent assured him, "or to the children she carries. You must remember William's words, Father," he added softly. "There is reason, even in miracles. Trust in this."

"You truly believe that, Vincent?" Father asked.

"Yes, Father," Vincent told him. "I do. And so does Catherine."

A silence descended over the room, and Vincent watched as Father wrestled with his doubts. Perhaps there were unknown demons in Father's past which he was only now having to face. It seemed to Vincent that Catherine's return was testing all of them; in one way or another.

"You know, Jacob," Peter said quietly. "When I was in Germany I read something called *Witness to the Truth*. It was just a little book. I found it in one of the waiting rooms I sat in so often when Susan and David were in that accident." He took a deep breath, obviously remembering a very difficult time. "There was one part," he continued, "I'll never forget it. It said 'Faith is not belief. Belief is passive. Faith is active. It is vision which passes inevitably into action.' You might want to think about that, Jacob."

Father sighed. "I shall do that, Peter," he said. "Thank you."

"Well," Peter said, looking at Vincent, "maybe we should get on with the other reason I'm down here today. I really need to know what you want me to say to Mr. Maxwell. He's getting obnoxious."

"Is he harassing you, Peter?" Vincent asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"I don't know that I'd call it harassment, really. Not yet. But he's making a damned nuisance of himself. Everything was calm while he was tied up with that big murder case. God, that was nasty. The papers were full of it for months. Made me realize how much I'd like to just give it all up and move Below."

"Susan relies on you much more now, Peter," Father said softly. "How is she?"

"Better," Peter told him. "It was hit and miss there for awhile, but they're doing a lot better. The accident was difficult for both of them." He shook his head.

"You know, that's what I don't understand about Maxwell," Peter told him. "He *knows* that I was in Germany the whole time Catherine was missing. Susan and David were in really bad shape. I practically lived at

the hospital in Wiesbaden. Hell, I didn't get back until three months after, well, after they found her. Why would he think I'm withholding information?"

"Did he question you this closely when he first contacted you, Peter?" Vincent asked.

"No," Peter replied, turning toward Vincent. "And that's another thing I don't understand. When I got back from Germany I knew Maxwell wanted to see me. Sure, he had questions. He questioned everyone who knew Catherine. But it was just general information. He didn't ask anything specific.

"Now there's been a definite change. Jenny telephoned me right before Winterfest. By the time we were able to convene the Council and Jenny came Below, it was March. If Maxwell were going to contact me again, I would have thought he would have done it sooner. It was April before I got the first phone call."

"That was when he said you were withholding information," Father confirmed.

"Yes, that's right. Now he's asking specifically about you, Vincent; about your relationship to Cathy. He even asked if, as Catherine's physician, I had known about her pregnancy. That's probably the reason I can't find her medical records. He probably subpoenaed them while I was in Germany, and God knows where they've been stored. It's as if he *knows* about you." He slumped back in his chair. "Damn! Wasn't Jenny supposed to call him, to try to put him off somehow?"

Vincent sighed. "Yes, Peter," he said softly. "We received a note from Jenny a few weeks ago. This is a very busy time for her, so she was not able to come Below, but the message she sent through Maddy told us that she *had* contacted Mr. Maxwell."

"I take it she wasn't very successful," Peter mused.

"Not very," Vincent told him. "Jenny told him that the dreams were gone and that she had been to see a doctor and was feeling much better about everything." He smiled wryly at Peter. "Jenny says that she is a terrible liar. She wanted to stay as close to the truth as possible. After all,

Peter, you are a doctor, if not the type Maxwell would assume she had seen."

"Smart girl," Peter said. "But Maxwell didn't buy it?"

"He was very quiet, Jenny said. She wrote that he stared at her for quite a while without saying anything, just stirring his coffee. It had been Jenny's idea for them to meet somewhere for coffee after work, instead of at his office. She told us she thought she'd feel less intimidated. But obviously his silence made her very uncomfortable."

"Why would he do that?" Peter asked. "If he really knew something, wouldn't he tell her?"

"Catherine says that Maxwell knows how to make a witness nervous. From what she has told me, he was treating Jenny much as he would someone he wanted to cross-examine. In other words, he did not believe Jenny was telling him everything. After a few minutes of his glaring silence, he told her so."

"What did Jenny do?"

"She politely informed him that she was telling him the truth and that if he did not want to believe her that was certainly his prerogative. He could think whatever he liked. But she hoped he would just get on with his life as she was doing. She wrote that she left right afterward."

Father sighed and took off his glasses. "Obviously Mr. Maxwell has decided otherwise," he said. He looked at Vincent. "You and Catherine still believe that Maxwell can be made to accept her life Below and your relationship?"

Vincent got up from the chair and went to stand beside Father, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Joe Maxwell was in love with Catherine," he explained softly. "Jenny believes it, I believe it, and even Catherine has finally accepted it as fact."

"But they were also friends. She stood by him during a very difficult time in his life. He will not have forgotten. Catherine truly believes that given the choice between her happiness and upholding the law as he sees it, his love for her would prevail."

"And if it does not?"

"It will, Father," Vincent said, squeezing his shoulder. "Have a little of Peter's faith."

"It is not Peter's faith which concerns me, Vincent," Father said softly. "It is Joe Maxwell's."



By the time Catherine, Vincent and Jacob arrived at the main dining hall for dinner, word of the twins had spread throughout the community. Pascal's pipes had again proven themselves to be more efficient than New York Telephone.

Catherine smiled, watching as Vincent got Jacob settled in his high chair with the cup of milk and small plate they had picked up from the kitchen. The cup had a large rubber band around it, enabling Jacob to hold it easily without slipping.

"You'll need to begin those Lamaze exercises sooner, Catherine," Mary said, as they sat down.

"I've been practicing already," Catherine told her. "Lena's been showing me. Is it different with twins?"

"Not different," Mary explained, "but longer. There are two babies being born, Catherine. It can be very exhausting."

"Then I'll just have to try to be as rested and ready as possible." Catherine smiled and turned toward her husband. "Vincent sees to it that I take my naps, Mary," she added sweetly, thinking about how well she had slept after their gentle loving earlier. "With his help I should be in wonderful shape by the time the babies are due."

She saw Vincent try not to smile as he served them from the large casserole in the middle of the table. He put some of the macaroni and cheese on Jacob's plate, too, adding some of the honeyed carrots from another dish.

As he placed some of the carrots on the plate in front of Catherine, he leaned forward, kissing her temple and whispering in her ear. "I find your shape to be wonderful already, Catherine," he told her, before he leaned back to place the dish of carrots back on the table.

Catherine felt the blush travel from her hair down the entire length of her body. Teasing might be relatively new to him, but he was getting awfully good at it.

"You look flushed, Catherine," she heard Father say. "Are you feeling well?"

Catherine smiled as she passed the bread basket to her husband. "I'm fine, Father," she said, meeting the laughter in Vincent's sparkling eyes. "Your son just likes to see me blush."

Vincent took the basket from her hand and helped himself to a slice of the warm bread. "You do it so beautifully," he said softly, passing the bread down the table toward Peter. As he did, Mouse and Elliot joined them.

"Okay, good," Mouse said, sitting down on the bench across from them. "Everybody's here."

"Did you need to talk to us, Mouse?" Catherine asked, watching as Elliot sat down silently beside him.

Mouse shook his head. "Not me," he said, filling his plate. "Elliot."

Catherine saw Elliot smile wryly as he helped himself to dinner. "One of these days, Mouse," he said softly. "I'm going to teach you the word tact."

"Don't know that one," Mouse said, frowning.

"So I noticed." He sighed and Catherine watched as he put down his fork, leaving his food untouched.

"What is it, Elliot?" she asked. "Is there something we can help you with?"

"Yeah," he said softly. "But it's nothing I want to talk about right now. Could I come to your chamber later?" He looked at Vincent and Catherine wondered what was going through his mind. "I'd like to talk to both of you."

"Certainly, Elliot," Vincent answered for them. "Since Father has already been beaten at chess once today, I doubt that he will be in the mood for another game this evening. You are welcome any time."

Elliot nodded and picked up his fork. "Thanks," he said. He began eating and Catherine shrugged, turning to see why Jacob was being so quiet.

"Oh, good grief," she muttered, looking at her disreputable son. He had obviously enjoyed the macaroni and cheese more than usual. He was wearing quite a bit of it. "How in the world did you get it in your hair?" she asked, picking pieces of cooked macaroni from within the brown strands. "You're supposed to eat it, Jacob." The baby laughed and picked up a piece of carrot. He mashed it against his mouth, managing to get most of it where it belonged.

"Better make it an hour or two after dinner, Elliot," Catherine said, laughing as Jacob smiled at her through a mouth full of carrot. "It will take me a while to clean this boy up."

"He's not even close to being as messy as he's gonna be, Catherine."

Catherine looked up to see William standing beside the table smiling down at her. In his hands was a small, chocolate cake. It was decorated with white icing and held a single birthday candle. Catherine turned to look at Vincent, the question she wanted to ask plainly in her eyes as well as her mind.

Vincent shook his head. "I believe it was Father and William who planned this, Catherine," he said softly, reaching out to touch her cheek. "They were reluctant to bring up the subject of Jacob's birthday because it was such a dark time for us. We have faced that, Catherine," he said, stroking the back of his fingers across her cheek. "There is only life and love ahead of us now."

Catherine covered Vincent's hand with hers and smiled. "Then we'd better light the candle and sing 'happy birthday'," she said, holding his fingers tightly. Only life and love - forever.



"Come in, Elliot," Vincent said, as Elliot approached the open chamber door. From his place on the bed beside Jacob, Vincent had heard the quiet shuffle of Elliot's feet as he slowly approached the room. Elliot had not visited them in their chamber before, and Vincent knew this errand must be very important to make him come here now. He had known it would be difficult for Elliot to see their chamber, the bed they shared. He knew that if he were in Elliot's place, the pain would be unbearable. Perhaps Elliot had also begun to heal.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" He entered the room slowly, taking time to look around. Vincent knew the instant he saw the portrait, for Elliot's eyes widened and his step became firmer. He came further into the room, stopping near Vincent but still looking at the painting on the wall.

"This is incredible," he said softly. "Was it painted by someone down here?"

Vincent smiled as he finished buttoning Jacob's pajamas. "Not exactly," he told Elliot. "The artist was someone we met."

"Together?"

"It's a bit complicated to explain, Elliot," Vincent told him. He picked up the baby and settled him onto his lap. Jacob grabbed at his father's vest and pulled himself to his feet.

"Up, Dada," he said, planting a kiss on Vincent's chin. "Jake up."

"Yes, you are," Vincent agreed. He looked across Jacob's head to find Elliot watching them. "Why don't you sit down, Elliot," Vincent said, gesturing to the chair beside the bed. "Catherine went to say goodnight to Father. She should be back in a moment."

Elliot nodded and sat down slowly in the large chair. "He's a smart kid," he said, looking at Jacob again.

Vincent felt the curiosity in Jacob's mind as he watched Elliot with the same degree of intensity that Elliot seemed to be focusing on the baby. He knew that in the months since Elliot had come Below, he had not seen Jacob except at dinner, and at Winterfest. And for the past few months, Elliot had been away so much of the time that he had seen Jacob hardly at all.

"He's grown," Elliot said, confirming Vincent's thoughts.

"You've been very busy," Vincent pointed out, kissing his son's fingers when they touched his lips.

Jacob turned to look at Elliot again. "Jake up," he said, smiling. "Jake up." He waited, looking at Elliot expectantly, and Vincent sensed what was going on.

"He's introducing himself to you, Elliot," Vincent explained. "Jake up is his way of saying Jacob."

"Introducing himself?"

"Hmmm."

"I don't know much about kids, Vincent," Elliot said haltingly, "but isn't that a little odd?"

Vincent shook his head. "Not to Jacob." He smiled. "Our son's curiosity is unequaled. Go ahead, Elliot," he told him. "Tell him your name."

Elliot rubbed the back of his neck and leaned forward in the chair. "Hi," he said awkwardly, "I'm Elliot."

Jacob frowned and Vincent could feel him forming the word in his mind. Trying to get his mouth to make the sound proved to be more difficult. "El lit," he finally said.

"That's good, Jacob," Catherine said from the doorway. "You've made an impression, Elliot," she added as she walked into the room. "Jacob only introduces himself to people he thinks are interesting."

"El lit, Momma," Jacob said proudly, holding out his arms to her.

As Catherine came closer to the bed, Vincent noticed that Elliot's attention had shifted to the rounded curves of her stomach. The soft wool of her jumper moved with her, clinging to the distinct protrusion. Vincent realized that it had also been a long time since Elliot had seen Catherine except when she was sitting behind the table at dinner. Even tonight, he had arrived after them and left as soon as he had finished his meal. He had not seen Catherine standing, nor had he heard the congratulations that came later.

His gaze shifted, and Vincent saw that he was looking at everything in the room except Catherine. He was obviously very uncomfortable.

"It's not catching, Elliot," Catherine said smiling. She sat down on the bed beside him and took Jacob into her arms. "Hasn't anyone told you? I'm having twins."

"Twins?" Elliot's gaze turned quickly back to her, going from her rounded stomach to her face. Catherine wished she knew what he was thinking.

"Personally," Catherine said softly, feeling the baby snuggle against her neck, "I'm thrilled. I thought there was something wrong with the baby because I was getting so big so fast."

"Uh, you're okay though?"

"I'm fine," Catherine told him. She paused, wondering if he would be even more embarrassed by what she was about to say. "Elliot," she began quietly, "do you remember our discussion by the Mirror Pool? It was a few days after you came Below? Do you remember?"

Elliot nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

"You asked me if I was happy, Elliot," she reminded him. "And I was, except that I was very worried about Jenny, and about Joe."

"Maxwell?"

Catherine saw that she had all of his attention now. It showed in the taut lines on his face and the way his hands clenched together in his lap. Catherine nodded. "Yes," she said simply.

"Then it's true," he murmured, his gaze swinging to Vincent. "What Mouse told me: It's true. You're thinking of contacting Joe Maxwell." He stood up, rubbing the back of his neck with his right hand as he began to pace the room. "Are you both crazy?"

Catherine watched Elliot's agitated walk around the chamber. It looked vaguely familiar. She smiled, recognizing the similarity.

"Elliot," Catherine said, "we don't intend to tell Joe that you're here," she explained. "But we need to make him understand - about me, about Vincent."

Elliot stopped pacing and stared at her. "Just like that?" he said harshly. "You think Joe Maxwell is going to take one look at you and accept everything that's happened?"

"You did," she said.

Elliot's laugh was abrupt. "No," he murmured, shaking his head. "No, I didn't." He met her eyes for a moment then turned away, walking back to the chair. "It's taken me months to accept all this," Elliot told her, sitting back down. "One hundred and thirty-two days," he said softly, not looking at her. "That's how long I've been here." He paused and leaned his head back on the top of the chair. Catherine saw him wince. Then he shifted, putting less weight on his left shoulder and sighed. "Don't expect it of him, Cathy," he said. "It's a lot harder than you think."

Catherine watched him as silence punctuated his words. Was she a fool to think that those who loved her would be able and willing to accept

so much on faith alone? She heard the clatter of a subway as it made its way across the city. It was an empty, lonely sound.

"Joe Maxwell has the means and the knowledge to come looking for us, Elliot," Vincent said, putting his arm around Catherine's shoulder. "Diana Bennett told Father that at the beginning of her investigation she mentioned the miles of tunnels under the city to Joe. She did not know us then, so nothing she told him was specific. But it is enough if he decides to take his investigation further."

"Diana Bennett?" Elliot murmured, looking at Vincent. "*She* knew about the tunnels, about you?"

Vincent nodded. "Eventually," he said simply. "It is a long and complicated story, Elliot," he continued. "And has little to do with the problem we are facing now." He paused, watching the changing lights in the other man's eyes. "Did Jenny talk to you about her dreams?" he asked. Elliot's eyes darkened.

"Yes," he replied, "she told me. We had a long talk about how both of us got down here."

"Did Jenny also tell you that she telephoned Joe Maxwell?" Vincent asked.

"No. She left that part out."

"Elliot," Catherine interrupted, "Jenny thought that I was in some sort of witness protection program. She called Joe because she hoped it was true and he would have been the logical person to ask."

Vincent watched as Elliot smiled wryly and looked around the chamber. "Not exactly your average witness protection program," he mused. He looked back at them. "I guess Maxwell wasn't very helpful."

"No," Vincent told him. "But he left it alone. Until recently."

"Joe has been calling Peter," Catherine added. "He keeps asking him what he knows about Vincent and about my other pregnancy." She sighed and leaned against Vincent's shoulder.

"Something has changed," Vincent said, tightening his arm around his wife and son. "Between the time Jenny contacted him and now, Joe Maxwell has learned something. And we have no idea what it might be."

"No idea at all?"

Elliot's voice was soft, and Vincent began to believe that Elliot might at last be understanding the situation the entire community faced. This was not simply a matter of easing the conscience of one of Catherine's friends. It was a matter of survival. Not just for Vincent or Catherine, but for their children, their friends, for everyone they loved.

"Catherine and I believe that the only way this man might be convinced to give up his questions and his search is for us to confront him. If he sees Catherine, knows that she is alive and well, then we think he can be made to understand."

"You *think*?" Elliot said, leaning toward them. "You *believe*?" His voice was raised now. His anger evident. "Damn it, Vincent! How can you risk the lives of everyone down here on what you think and what you believe? That's suicidal!"

"We don't feel that we have any choice, Elliot," Vincent said calmly. "What is to stop this man from beginning a search? If he looks hard enough, Elliot, he *will* find us."

"Damn." Elliot leaned forward, his shoulders hunched as he clasped his hands between his knees. He stared down at the floor for a long time before he raised his head. Vincent met his gaze. "The tide's coming in again, Vincent," he said softly. "Think the castle's strong enough this time?"

Vincent smiled and reached out, covering Elliot's clenched fists with his hand. "Our castle is strong, Elliot," he assured him. "The foundation is made of love, not sand. We will survive this tide together."



XVII

"Good grief, Cath," Jenny exclaimed, as she entered Catherine's chamber, "look at you."

Catherine laughed and turned slowly in a circle so that her friend could get the complete effect. "This is what happens when you're having twins," she said. "Go on, tell me I'm beginning to look like a baby whale. I can take it."

Jenny smiled and gave her a warm hug. "You look wonderful," she said softly. "Being pregnant agrees with you."

Catherine held Jenny close, glad to finally see her again. There was so much to tell her, so much they needed to ask of her. Catherine sighed and held Jenny at arms' length. She looked tired, but better than when she had first come Below.

"I'm glad you were able to get away, Jen," Catherine said. "Vincent and I really need to talk to you."

Jenny looked around the room, holding onto one of Catherine's hands. "Where's Vincent?" she asked. "I expected him to be the one to escort me down. Do you know how complicated all those tunnels are?"

Catherine nodded. "I haven't explored them all yet," she admitted. "But I take walks everyday; either with Vincent or someone else who knows how not to get lost. I still can't find my way around completely. Who brought you?"

Jenny blushed. "Elliot," she answered smiling. "Can you believe it? I go down Maddy's basement stairs and there he is, big as life, waiting for me."

"I didn't know that Elliot knew the tunnels that well," Catherine told her. "He must be doing more exploring than I gave him credit for."

"He still doesn't sleep," Jenny said, moving away. She stood in front of the portrait but Catherine didn't think she was really seeing it. There was something on her mind, but it wasn't artwork.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Catherine asked softly. She watched as Jenny looked down at the floor then back up at the painting.

"I don't know, Cath," Jenny said. "Life gets complicated sometimes, you know?" She turned around and Catherine saw the sadness of her smile. "That's a stupid thing to say, isn't it?" She shrugged. "Uh, maybe later," she said. "We'll talk about it later. Okay?"

"Sure, Jen," Catherine said, letting the subject drop. "Why don't we go find Vincent. He's teaching one of the literature classes this morning. Maybe you'd like to sit in."

Jenny nodded. "Where's Jacob?" she asked. "Don't tell me he's teaching a literature class, too?"

Catherine laughed and grabbed Jenny's hand. "Not yet," she said, "give him a few years. Jacob is with his grandfather. They're probably raiding William's cookie jar." She shook her head in mock dismay as she led Jenny from the chamber. "Father has absolutely no control where that child is concerned."

The corridors of the Home Chambers were busy with the everyday concerns of life Below. Children made their way to the various classes; dodging grownups and laughing with the freedom of children who are securely loved. Catherine savored the sounds of their laughter as she savored everything else about her new home. If life was a little harder Below, a little less convenient, there were certainly advantages that far outweighed the amenities of the modern city above them.

She smiled. The most wonderful thing about living Below was in truly becoming a part of Vincent's life. Of being able to see him whenever she wanted; to be able to talk to him, touch him. She could and would put up with just about anything for that.

"We're here," Catherine told Jenny, stopping at the entrance to the older children's literature class. She heard Vincent's voice as he sensed her presence and excused himself from the class for a moment.

"Your timing is impeccable, Catherine," he said, bending to press a soft kiss against her cheek. "You have saved me from an enormously embarrassing situation."

Catherine looked up, not understanding. She and Jenny were just there to listen. Vincent shook his head and smiled. "Come," he said, putting his hand on her waist. "It is time to begin."

"Begin what?" Catherine asked. She looked back at Jenny but her friend just smiled and shrugged. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Oh good, Catherine's here."

Catherine turned toward the class, watching as Brooke walked toward her. She handed her a book and Catherine took it, wondering what was going on.

Brooke looked up at Vincent. "Catherine can read the passage with you, can't she, Vincent?" Brooke asked softly. "It makes much more sense that way."

"What passage?"

Brooke smiled. "Well, it was my assignment," she said. "But I've already explained why I chose it, and mine was the last one to be read. We were just going to start reading. Vincent was going to read it with me, but now, the two of you can read it together." She sighed. "It should be read by two people who really love each other." Her smile was so sweet and sincere that Catherine found it hard to argue.

She looked up at her husband as the young woman returned to a chair at one of the tables scattered about the room. "Do I get a say in this?" she asked him softly.

"Of course, you do." Vincent turned toward Jenny. "Please make yourself comfortable, Jenny," he said. "Catherine and I will be back in a moment." He took her hand and Catherine followed him into the hall.

"Mary tells me it is a stage she is going through," Vincent began. "The passage she chose is from *Romeo and Juliet*."

Catherine smiled. "And you're about the most romantic man she knows."

Vincent shrugged. "Except for Michael," he reminded her. "I like to believe that I was only a stand-in for Michael."

Catherine reached up and touched his cheek. "I don't see how you could possibly be a stand-in for anyone, Vincent," she murmured. "But if you really want me to read with you, I will."

"You don't know which passage she chose, Catherine," he whispered. "I would have found myself hard-pressed to read it. I doubt that I am that good an actor."

Catherine touched his lips. "I hear the words in your mind, Vincent," she said sweetly. "And you're right. These words belong to me."

Vincent smiled and kissed her fingers, then led her back into the classroom. He had been giving this assignment for years without mishap: find a dialogue you enjoyed between two Shakespearean characters. Learn the lines with a friend and act them out for the class. Explain *why* you choose that particular dialogue. He sighed, picking up his copy of the play from the desk. Perhaps he should change the curriculum.

"Are you ready, Catherine?" he asked, as they stood before the class.

She smiled, then put the book down on the desk at the front of the room. She knew the lines. They were very familiar to her. "All ready," she told him.

Vincent looked at her and returned her smile, placing his book beside hers. He, too, was more than familiar with the play and this piece of dialogue.

"If I profane with my unworthiest hand," Vincent began, taking one of Catherine's hands in his, "this holy shrine, the gentle fine is this; My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss." He bent and softly kissed the hand he held.

"Good pilgrim," Catherine said, "you do wrong your hand too much, which mannerly devotion shows in this;" She pulled her fingers from his and smiled. "For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch," she continued, holding up her palm. "And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."

Vincent returned her smile and held his large palm against her small one. "Have not saints lips," he asked, "and holy palmers too?"

"Ay, pilgrim," Catherine told him, "lips that they must use in prayer."

"O, then, dear saint," Vincent said, moving closer, "let lips do what hands do;" He slipped his fingers between hers, clasping her hand. "They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair."

"Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake."

"Then move not," Vincent said softly, "while my prayer's effect I take. Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged." He leaned forward as Catherine raised up, and their lips met in a sweet, gentle kiss.

Catherine moved back and looked at him smiling. "Then have my lips the sin that they have took," she told him.

"Sin from thy lips?" Vincent replied, tilting her chin toward his with the slightest pressure of his hand. "O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again." He bent to her, and wrapped his arm around her waist, gathering her against him. And got kicked by one of his unborn children.

Vincent felt his heart stop beating for a moment as he realized what had just happened. He held Catherine away from him, looking first at her rounded stomach and then into her laughing eyes.

"You don't suppose they're critics, do you?" she asked, tightening her hold on his hand. "I didn't think we were *that* bad."

"You were wonderful," Jenny said, interrupting as she came up beside them. "I've never really liked Shakespeare until today. You have a gift."

Vincent shook his head, finally hearing the gentle applause all around them instead of the thunderous beating of his heart. Through his bond with Catherine he had felt the slight fluttering that had first signaled movement.

But this was the first time either of their children had made their presence so strongly known. It amazed him. He wanted to explore it, to sit Catherine down and put his hands on her; to know his children as they moved within the woman he loved.

"Later," she promised, holding their clasped hands against her stomach. "Right now, I think it might be best to take our bows and dismiss the class."

Vincent smiled, still unable to look away from her. "Class dismissed," he said, watching only the wondrous light of her eyes. "And Jenny," he added softly, "It is Catherine who is the gift."



"Jenny," Father said, from his chair at the center of the table, "the people in this room make up what is known as our Council. You have no doubt heard that the initial decision to allow you to come Below was made by this Council. We are the governing body for this community. And as such, it is our duty to oversee situations which directly affect the continued survival of our world here below the city."

Catherine held firmly to Vincent's hand as she listened to Father speak. What they were going to ask of Jenny would not be easy. But it was crucial to everything they held dear. Catherine knew that Joe would not give up without good reason. She must be that reason.

"It has become obvious to us that Mr. Maxwell has some information which will, in time, lead him to us. We cannot take that chance. As you are no doubt aware, our community is not merely a place of safe refuge for those who no longer want to live in the world Above. For my son, it is the *only* world in which he can live safely." Father glanced at Vincent before going on. "There are those Above who would see Vincent caged, studied like an animal. And they would destroy what we have created here. We cannot allow this to happen."

"How can I help?" Jenny asked, nervously looking at the people around the room.

Catherine turned to Father and he nodded. "We want you to contact Joe for us," Catherine told her. "Tell him you need to talk to him; that there's something you haven't told him."

"There's a lot I haven't told him," Jenny said. "And I don't think I *want* to tell him."

"Perhaps not, Jenny," Vincent said. "But we do."

Jenny's gasp was audible in the silence that followed Vincent's words. "That's crazy," she said, her gaze moving between them. "That's absolutely crazy. Cathy, tell them. My God, what do you plan to do? Just walk up and introduce yourself?"

"We were hoping that you would introduce us, Jenny," Vincent said softly.

"Oh my God," Jenny muttered, "you're serious."

"Very serious."

"But why me, Vincent? Why not have Peter introduce you? Or Maddy? Why me?"

Catherine put her hand on Jenny's shoulder and squeezed. "Jen," she began, looking into her friend's troubled eyes, "Joe knows you. He trusts you."

Jenny shook her head. "Maybe . . . maybe he did once, Cath. But after that fiasco in the coffee shop . . . no, I don't think Joe trusts me anymore."

"You told him the truth, Jenny," Catherine reminded her.

"Yeah, but you should have seen him. Sitting there, just staring at me. Like he could see right through me. Just stirring that damned coffee and looking a hole through me." Jenny turned away, but not before Catherine had seen the hurt in her eyes.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea, Father," Nathaniel said. "If Maxwell doesn't trust her any more . . . "

"Nathaniel," Mary interrupted, getting out of her chair and going to Jenny, "the poor child is upset." She handed Jenny a handkerchief from her pocket and bent down to put her arm around her shoulder. "Did you ever think that perhaps Mr. Maxwell behaved the way he did because he's unhappy?" She kissed the top of Jenny's head. "You've found your friend again, Jenny," Mary told her. "You've found a family, here with us. What has Mr. Maxwell found?"

Vincent could have answered that question for her, but he remained silent. If Joe Maxwell loved Catherine, he was fighting his guilt, and himself. It was one of many things they had in common. Their love - their guilt.

That's why he needs us, Vincent. That's why we can't turn away from this.

"Jenny," Vincent said softly, "You must remember that it is not only pain which drives Joe Maxwell. It is guilt. I know this guilt, Jenny," Vincent continued. "I understand what Joe is feeling; the frustration, the knowledge that perhaps he could have done more. And he is alone in this. No one has told him that there is no more cause for his frustration, no more cause for his guilt. We need to do that, Jenny. For his sake as well as for ours."

Vincent watched as Jenny wiped her eyes and straightened in the chair. She smiled at Mary. "Thank you," she said to the older woman. "You've been wonderful. And you're right, Mary. I *have* sort of found a family here. If, well, if you'll have me."

"Of course we'll have you," Mary said, giving her a hug. "You're part of us now, Jenny. Anytime you need us we'll be here for you. Always."

"I'd like that," Jenny told her. Mary kissed Jenny's cheek and returned to her chair. Jenny took a deep breath and turned her gaze toward Vincent. "I really do want to help," she said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"There is an old, abandoned building in the Lower East Side," Vincent said. "It's was once a private club called the Beaumont. This is where we want you to bring Joe."

"Our access to that part of the city is limited, and the two entrances to our world rarely used," Father continued. "If necessary, we could completely block the few tunnels which do exist. Mr. Maxwell would be no closer to us than he is now. We do not think this will be necessary, but the Council has decided that the utmost precautions must be taken."

"Joe Maxwell has met Father," Vincent added. "He helped him during the investigation and has no reason to distrust him."

"Therefore," Father said to Jenny and the Council at large, "I have decided to accompany Catherine and Vincent to their meeting with Mr. Maxwell."

"But Father," Mary said, "why take such an unnecessary risk?"

"She's right," Nathaniel argued. "What if something were to happen? We'd not only lose Vincent and Catherine, but you as well. You can't do this, Father."

"Nathaniel's right, Father," Pascal said calmly. "It doesn't make sense. If something happens to Vincent and Catherine we will need you to help formulate a rescue. We can't risk all of you."

"We decided at the last meeting of this Council that we would abide by Vincent and Catherine's decision, by their faith in Mr. Maxwell," Father told them. "And we are taking precautions that will ensure protection, at least for a while, from any direct investigation resulting in Mr. Maxwell knowing the location of that one entrance." He paused, fiddling with the glasses he held in his hand. "Am I now to believe that this Council has lost its faith in our decision? That you no longer trust Vincent and Catherine to know what they are doing?"

Vincent saw Father's troubled gaze turn toward William. He had been very still, listening from his chair between Nathaniel and Pascal. "William," Father said softly, "do *you* still believe in the decision we made?"

William crossed his arms over his barrel chest and looked around the room. "I already said everything I had to say," he answered. "You all heard me then. Nothin's changed."

Father nodded and took a deep breath. "As William has said, nothing has changed. The decision of the Council stands. I intend to be with my son," he glanced at Catherine, "and my daughter-in-law. I want to do this in order to help insure that this meeting between Vincent and Joe Maxwell goes smoothly." He looked at each of them in turn. "And," he added, "I don't believe I could stand staying behind. My blood pressure would not survive the tension. I would much rather be there, watching the meeting, than to be here wondering about it. So please, all of you, try to understand and support me in this."

Vincent watched the faces of the people around him. He understood their concerns, but he also understood Father's decision. This meeting was pivotal to the survival of the community. Everything - everything they had built, everything they loved, hung in the balance. And the eyes of Justice were known to be blind.



XVIII

Vincent looked down at the woman sleeping so soundly in his bed. She slept on her side, one hand tucked under her cheek, and the other folded protectively around her stomach. Her knees were slightly bent and her feet were bare. He smiled, thinking that she still looked adorable.

After the Council meeting he had escorted Catherine back to their chamber so that she could take her nap. He had kissed her, promising to look in on her later, and escorted Jenny to the Mirror Pool. Elliot, it seemed, had asked to meet her there. Vincent had then gone to pick up Jacob from Olivia. Lena had been visiting with her daughter and both women had bombarded him with questions about Catherine's pregnancy and the twins that were expected.

Now, as he stood watching the woman he loved, Vincent felt a sense of peace come over him. This was how it would be; a lifetime of sharing quiet moments, of knowing that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, Catherine would always be near.

"Jake up down, Dada," his son said, struggling in his arms. "Jake up down."

Vincent smiled and placed his son on the floor close to the bed. Jacob immediately grabbed the blankets and pulled himself to his feet so that he could have a closer look at his mother's sleeping face.

"Momma seep," he whispered. His thoughts of Catherine were clear and bright; love in every color of the rainbow.

"Yes," Vincent agreed softly, as he sat on the floor by his son's side. "Mamma is asleep." He felt her gentle presence blossom in his mind as Catherine began to awaken from her nap.

"Mamma was asleep," she murmured, yawning as she struggled up into wakefulness. The edges of her mind were blurry, and it took a moment for things to come into focus. She opened her eyes, meeting a set of younger, darker ones peering at her from just below the edge of the bed. "Hi, babyface," she said, smiling.

"Hi, Momma," Jacob answered. He smiled and turned his gaze to her stomach. "Baby," he said distinctly. "Momma's baby."

Catherine looked across Jacob to the beautiful man sitting behind him. "He's certainly learned that word," she said. "Let me guess - Lena was visiting Olivia?"

Vincent smiled and nodded. "Jacob was watching Catherine and Luke wrestle for a teddy bear when I arrived," he told her. "Lena asked about you. She said that she can't imagine giving birth to twins and that you are to be commended for your bravery."

"Lena said that?"

"Words to that effect," Vincent admitted. "Both she and Olivia offered to take Jacob for us whenever we practice our Lamaze exercises."

Catherine chuckled. "I don't suppose you told them that we practice them in bed before we go to sleep every night?"

"I thought I would keep that our secret."

"Smart man," she murmured. "It wouldn't be very nice to let everyone know that your wife was already too big to get down on the rug to do the darn things."

"I would never be so indiscreet."

"Wats, Momma," Jacob said, drawing Catherine's attention back to her son. She had become accustomed to the way he listened to the conversations going on around him. It was sometimes very difficult to remember how really young he was. Physically, at least. "Wats Momma," he repeated.

The baby turned, holding on tightly to the blankets beneath Catherine. When he stood facing his father, he took a breath, smiled, and let go of the blankets. For a moment he balanced precariously, and Catherine almost reached out for him. But then he held his arms out, balancing himself like a tightrope walker, and took his first independent steps.

Catherine felt her eyes fill as she watched their son walk into his father's arms. It wasn't a long walk. But it was Jacob's first. And it filled her with pride. She could feel it, too, in Vincent. She looked up into his eyes. They were just as wet as hers and just as proud as he opened his arms and welcomed his son home.

Vincent held Jacob tightly against his chest. He had felt the determination in him, the fierce need to accomplish this feat of balance and skill. Within his son's mind there was an insatiable need to experience everything the world around him had to offer. And Catherine was right. One day, Jacob would yearn for worlds beyond these tunnels. Vincent only hoped that when the time came, he would be strong enough to let him go.



"Vincent? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Vincent finished relighting the torch, then hung it in the sconce on the wall. He had relieved Nathaniel from sentry duty an hour before and had not expected to meet anyone so close to the perimeter. He should have known that Elliot, like Mouse, wandered wherever his senses and his restlessness took him.

"Friends should always be able to talk to one another, Elliot," Vincent said, leaning against the cold stone of the tunnel wall. "If you do not mind walking this end of the perimeter with me, I shall be glad of the company."

"No," Elliot said, "I don't mind. I'd like that."

Vincent nodded and pushed away from the wall. He walked unhurriedly down the corridor; not because of Elliot's injury, but because the silence and the smell of the rich earth around them demanded a slower pace.

He still thought of himself in relation to the Frost poem he had once read to Father. He was acquainted with the night. It was as much a part of him as his love of literature and music. He was accustomed to the dimmer light, to the blurry soft-edged flame of a candle. The brilliance of the sun was not for him.

Only the nights were different now. They held more than solitary walks through darkened tunnels and moonless skies. They held love; and warm arms holding him in the darkness. He glanced at the man walking beside him. There was a separateness about Elliot that Vincent had long ago recognized. And it was this separateness which still held Elliot apart from the community; leaving him to seek out the quieter caverns and a puckish boy whose interest in all things mechanical far outweighed his interest in people.

"Peter tells me that you are progressing with your physical therapy," Vincent said, breaking the silence.

Elliot sighed. "Progress is relative, Vincent," he said wearily. "Every day I work with that damn pulley system he and Mouse put together for me. And every day I expect to see more."

"Peter told you that your recovery would take time, Elliot," Vincent reminded him. "And he also said that it would be your drive to succeed which would make the difference. Many people could not force themselves to endure such painful therapy."

"Yeah, it hurts all right," Elliot agreed. "But I expected that. When Peter said I would have to tear through the scar tissue, well, I knew it wasn't going to be a picnic."

"But you are doing it."

"Yeah, I'm doing it." Elliot stopped and turned so that Vincent could watch as he raised his left arm in a forty-five degree angle from his body.

The movement was slow and obviously painful, but there was a fierce determination on Elliot's face that reminded Vincent of Jacob earlier.

"That is wonderful progress, Elliot," Vincent said smiling. "Peter is right." His smile widened and he shook his head.

"What is it?" Elliot asked.

"You reminded me very much of Jacob," he explained. "He walked alone for the first time this afternoon. He too, is determined to succeed."

Elliot smiled as they started down the tunnel. "You and Catherine must be very proud."

"Yes," Vincent said. "Although we worry about the future, about the risks he will face in the world Above."

"You'd let him go up top?" Elliot asked, holding Vincent's arm. "I didn't think - you mean that everyone doesn't *stay*? I thought, well, I thought that once you were here, it was just sort of assumed that this was where you'd always live."

Vincent shook his head. "We have many children who eventually want a life Above, Elliot," he said softly. "Our world is enough for some, but others . . . no, some children seek greater dreams."

"And you think Jacob is one of them? But he's only a year old."

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "And the world is a very big place."

They walked together in silence for a while, stopping occasionally to relight a torch, or to check on one of Mouse's many traps. The quiet surrounded them and in the companionable darkness, Vincent felt them grow closer.

"You never said why you wanted to speak to me," Vincent observed, as they neared the designated spot where he would wait for Simon to relieve him.

Elliot stopped and leaned against the wall. Vincent watched silently as Elliot studied the flickering shadows above their heads. "It's about

Jenny," he said finally. "She's a lot like Cathy," he said, still looking at the ceiling. "No," he sighed and closed his eyes, "she's really a lot different." Elliot rubbed the back of his neck with his good hand. "And she scares me."

"What are you trying to say, Elliot?" Vincent asked softly.

"I'm trying to do things differently this time," Elliot explained. "We're getting to be friends." He opened his eyes and smiled wryly. "Cathy and I never really got to be friends, Vincent. We started out being . . . something, hell, I don't know what. And then we were almost enemies.

"I made a lot of mistakes, Vincent. Some that I'm not at all proud of. But in the end Cathy stood by me. *You* stood by me. Even after I betrayed you. God, even after that." He paused and Vincent could see the pain of his memories in his eyes.

"Friendships are woven with complicated threads, Elliot," Vincent told him. "Light and dark, good and bad; we weave what we are given. If we weave it well enough, the cloth will keep us warm."

"Yeah? Well, that might be the *only* thing keeping me warm if Joe Maxwell finds out I'm here. There's a warrant for my arrest out there somewhere, Vincent. Hell, the night the boat blew I hadn't even been arraigned. Some poor bail bondsman lost a lot of money when I didn't show."

"I intend to explain that night at the carousel," Vincent said, putting his hand on Elliot's shoulder. "Moreno's death is on my hands. Only I can be held responsible for it."

"That's not true, Vincent," Elliot said, his voice suddenly cold and tight. "Moreno's death was Gabriel's fault. All those deaths . . . God, you can't imagine. He destroyed my largest hotel, Vincent. Burned it to the ground. Just as a warning." He shook his head. "No, Moreno's death isn't on your hands."

Vincent patted his shoulder, wondering how deeply Elliot's demons were buried. As he had once told Catherine, there were many layers to this man. "Whatever the outcome of our meeting with Joe, you *will* be cleared of that murder, Elliot. I promise you."

"I'd like to think that we'll all get out of this somehow," Elliot said. "This is a special place. You have a lot of special people here. I'd hate to see it destroyed."

"Our world will continue, Elliot," Vincent assured him. "One way or another our strength will enable us to endure."

"Joe Maxwell is a straight-shooter," Elliot said. "He puts the law above everything else in his life. It's gonna take one hell of a lot for him to overlook what happened."

"He does not need to overlook it," Vincent said softly. "He only needs to understand. The rest will come."



"So," Catherine began, watching as Jacob investigated the chamber from his new upright position, "I thought you were going back Above tonight." Jenny had come knocking at the door, only a few minutes before. She had been carrying a pot of tea and some cookies from the kitchen, asking if Catherine would like some company.

Jenny sighed and Catherine glanced at her. This wasn't the vivacious friend Catherine was accustomed to seeing. Either the meeting had been more stressful than she thought, or there was someone besides Joe Maxwell making Jenny nervous.

"Do you want to tell me about it now?" Catherine asked, checking again on Jacob. She heard Jenny shift in her chair.

"Uh, tell you about what?"

"Come on, Jen. Talk to me," Catherine said. "You weren't this upset when you and Jason broke up. And you were practically engaged to him. What gives?"

Jenny picked up her cup, then put it back on the saucer. "This is so stupid," she muttered, "I only met the man a couple of months ago." She ran her fingers through her hair, catching some of the curly strands on one of her bracelets.

"You're going to make yourself bald," Catherine teased, watching as Jenny muttered unladylike curses under her breath and untangled her hair from the braided silver bracelet. "Why don't you calm down and tell me what's going on?"

Jenny grimaced as she tugged the last strand of hair free. "It's stupid, Cath," she said again. "There's nothing to tell."

"Talk to me, Jenny Aronson," Catherine threatened, "or I'll have Jacob use those hoops in your ears for teething rings."

Jenny laughed and held onto the large gold hoops dangling from each ear. "You wouldn't?"

"Try me."

Jenny sighed and leaned back in her chair. "He's quite a handful, your Elliot," she said, closing her eyes.

"He's not *my* Elliot," Catherine told her, smiling as Jacob toddled over to her chair. "He never was my Elliot."

"Well, uh, maybe not. But you were *his* Cathy."

"Only in Elliot's mind, Jen."

"Well, maybe. But I still think he's hung up on you."

Catherine leaned over to brush her hand over her son's soft curls. He looked up at her and grinned. "Go, Momma," Jacob said. "Jake up go."

"Not right now," Catherine said. "It's almost bedtime. Daddy will be here soon."

"Dada go," he said, turning to look at the closed door. "Jake up go."

"Jacob stays."

The baby pursed his lips, and Catherine could feel him weighing his options. She sighed, watching and waiting while he made up his mind. After a moment he plopped down on the rug, looking up at his mother with a resigned smile. "Jake up stay," he told her.

She ruffled his hair. "Jacob is a good boy." Catherine turned her head and looked at the woman sitting quietly beside her. "Elliot was and is a complicated man," she said. "I never knew much about his private life. In fact, he didn't seem to have one. He even admitted to me once that somewhere along the way friends had become inconvenient." She put her hand on Jenny's arm. "I was as close to a friend as Elliot had, Jenny. Even when I thought I hated him, even when I wasn't certain of his motives or his honesty; I was the only one he had. But I wasn't in love with him."

"Well, he sure was in love with you," Jenny said. "Is it true that he proposed once and you accepted?" Her eyes opened and Catherine saw shadows where none had existed before.

"Yes," Catherine answered honestly. "Remind me to have Vincent show you the Painted Tunnels sometime. They tell the story better than I ever could. Elliot was building that tower, Jenny. You know, the one that was taller and larger than anything New York had ever seen? And while he was building it, he was destroying this world; Vincent's world."

"What do you mean? How was he destroying it?"

"The excavations, the blasting they were doing for the foundation of that building went deeper and further than anything that had come before. Mouse tried to stop it. He got caught. I couldn't let him go to jail, Jenny. You've seen Mouse. Can you picture him in the Tombs?" Catherine ran her finger around the rim of her cup, seeing Elliot's face when he had proposed, and later, when she had accepted.

"I went to Elliot and asked him to release Mouse. And he did, Jenny. Without any questions, without my giving him any answers. He let him go. Later that night Elliot came to my apartment." She dipped her finger in the lukewarm tea, watching the drop that fell from her finger. "That was when he proposed." She looked at Jenny. "He told me to sleep on it. I remember that I told him sleep wouldn't change anything." She laughed,

dryly. "Well, sleep didn't change anything, but Vincent did. Vincent told me how close the construction crews were getting, how any day the entire community could be lost. So I went to Elliot, and I accepted his proposal."

"But why? What would that change?"

"Nothing, as it turned out," Catherine said. "I told him that I'd marry him if he stopped building the tower. If he just stopped and never started again." She met Jenny's eyes. "And I would have done it, Jenny. I would have done it for Vincent, for these people."

"But the tower *was* stopped, Cath," Jenny reminded her. "I know I've usually got my nose in a manuscript instead of the dailies, but I do remember that. The tower *was* stopped. It was never built."

Catherine nodded. "But it wasn't Elliot's choice, Jenny," she said simply. "I asked Elliot to choose and he chose his tower. When I left his office, I really thought that there was nothing left to do."

"So what happened?"

"I thought you said you *read* the dailies?" Catherine replied. "We got an injunction. It was pretty complicated, but the bottom line is that Elliot used some pretty underhanded tactics and we stopped him. He never got it started again."

"Didn't he hold a grudge?"

Catherine shook her head. "Not that I ever noticed. I don't know, Jen, I've told you; Elliot is a very complicated man. I never knew what to expect from him."

"And now?"

"And now, what?" Catherine asked, watching as Jenny's gaze darted away.

"Well, and now what do you expect from him?"

"Don't you think you'd be better off asking that question of yourself, Jen?" she said softly. "After all, you're the one he's making crazy this time, not me."

"So, maybe I should think it over?"

"So, maybe you should."



"You look exhausted."

Vincent knelt in front of the chair, watching as his wife's eyes slowly opened. She smiled and reached up to touch his cheek.

"And you look wonderful," she said softly.

Vincent caught her hand and carried it to his mouth. "Was it Jenny or Jacob?" he asked. "You should have been in bed hours ago."

"I wanted to wait up for you," Catherine said, as she ran her fingers across his lips. "After Jenny left, Jacob and I took a bath and then I put him to bed."

Vincent frowned. "You should have waited, Catherine," he said. "I would have given Jacob his bath in the morning. It is becoming too difficult for you."

"I can still give Jacob a bath, Vincent," she said stubbornly. "Baby whales do very well in water, I'm told."

Vincent looked down at her rounded stomach, and covered it with his hands. Even with her gown between them, he could feel the tautness of her skin beneath his fingers. "Are they moving around much?" he asked, smiling as he remembered the kick he had felt during class this morning.

"If they kick me," Catherine told him, "you'll be the first to know - well, the second anyway."

Vincent smiled and laid his cheek where his hands had been. "Perhaps they will talk to me," he whispered.

"More likely they'll kick you in the head," Catherine teased.

"My children would never be so rude."

Catherine laughed and laid her hand on his head. "These children will probably be a lot like your other child," she told him. "Independent, determined, curious, loving, and smart enough to know what he wants." She smiled as her fingers slipped through the rough silk strands of his hair. They were coarser than Jacob's but just as familiar to her touch.

"Now that he is walking," Vincent said softly, "it will be even more difficult for you to keep up with him."

"I'll manage," Catherine told him. "I'm not the only woman Below to ever have a baby, Vincent."

Vincent turned his face into her lap, and Catherine tightened her hands in his hair. She felt his arms go around her waist as he held her close. "If I am overly protective of you, Catherine," Vincent whispered, "know that it is because I love you, because I love the children you carry within you."

He pressed a fervent kiss against her rounded stomach. "Allow me this, Catherine," he asked. "Allow me to be here for you, to care for you." He lifted his head and she saw the shadows of the past in his eyes. "Share with me each minute," he whispered, "for they are doubly precious to me."

Catherine touched his cheek, meeting his sad shadows with a tender smile. "Then spoil me all you like," she told him. "But don't think about the past while you're doing it. All right? We have the present and the future, Vincent. And that's all that matters."

Vincent smiled and leaned forward, kissing her softly on the mouth. "Then let me give you love in the present and the future, Catherine," he whispered. "As you give your love to me."

"Always," she promised.



XIX

"I'm sorry, Catherine," Peter said, "but you have to drink all of it. The sonogram won't come out right unless your bladder is full."

"Full?" Catherine muttered, "It's bursting now. How can you do this to me, Peter?"

"Drink it."

Catherine frowned and looked again at the large glass of water in Peter's hand. She sighed and accepted the glass. Taking a deep breath she drank it down without a pause, knowing that if she stopped she would not be able to force herself to start again. When she had finished she thumped the glass down on the table.

"That's it, Peter," she told him. "No more. I won't be responsible for what happens if I drink even another drop."

Catherine saw Peter smile before he turned toward Vincent. It had taken Peter two weeks to arrange getting the portable sonogram down to the tunnels, but with the impending meeting with Joe and Jacob's newly acquired walking skills, Catherine had had little time to think about it.

"Is she always this crabby?" Peter asked, ignoring her. Vincent lifted his head from the work he was doing adapting the old-fashioned wiring to accept a grounded plug and smiled.

"Some days it is better than others," he said, smiling. "This week has been particularly difficult," he explained. "Jacob has learned to walk since you last visited, Peter, Catherine spends a great deal of her time chasing him through the corridors. It has not been easy."

Peter glanced at the heavy door, closed now because of the examination soon to be made. "Why don't you just shut the door?" he asked.

Catherine met Vincent's eyes. He shrugged and she made a rude noise. "Jacob *opens* the door, Peter," she told him. "He also learned *that* last week."

"Good heavens."

"Well put." Catherine sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, wondering just how long her bladder was supposed to hold out. She looked down, trying to see her feet. They weren't there. All she saw was a beachball-sized stomach stretched to its limit under her nightgown. She sighed. At this rate she'd be twice her size by the time she delivered; and that was over three months away. She'd never make it.

"Yes, you will."

Catherine looked up into the warmth of Vincent's eyes. No matter how tired she got or how crabby, he was always there for her. She touched his lips and smiled. "Yes, I will," she agreed, tracing the fullness of his bottom lip. "I have you to help me."

"Always," he promised, kissing her fingers.

"Is it ready, Vincent?"

"I believe so, Peter."

Catherine smiled, brushing her hand across her husband's cheek. "I guess this is it," she said. She turned toward Peter. "Do I just stretch out on the bed?" she asked.

"Yes," Peter told her. "Just make yourself comfortable. Oh, and either take off the gown or pull it up and out of the way. This gel has to go directly on your skin. No modesty allowed."

Catherine chuckled. "The first time you saw me I was naked, Peter," she reminded him, as Vincent helped her remove her gown. "And you've already examined me about as intimately as possible. It's not going to

matter if I lay here in only these little panties while you put the babies on television, is it?"

"Not in the least."

Catherine stretched out on the bed with her head on a pillow in Vincent's lap. Peter had placed the screen of the sonogram so that it would be visible to all of them and Catherine could feel Vincent's anticipation as well as her own as Peter spread the cold gel across her taut skin.

"All right," Peter said, "let's see where those babies are."

Catherine stared at the wavering images on the small black and white screen, hardly aware of the pressure on her stomach as Peter pressed the scanning device against her.

Vincent watched the images moving on the screen before them. This wasn't like the television pictures he had seen while visiting with Helpers. These images were blurred, black and white shadows that only now and then coalesced into some recognizable pattern.

"You have to really look hard," Peter explained, moving the scanner in tiny increments until the image became sharper. "There! Look at that."

Vincent felt Catherine grab his hand as they stared at the screen, hardly breathing. Light and shadow formed in front of their eyes, and Vincent could see what Peter must have seen; the small movement of a tiny hand, a hand that belonged to his unborn child.

"My God, Catherine," Vincent murmured. "Look at him."

"Sharp eyes, Vincent," Peter chuckled. "That one is definitely a he."

"You can tell already?" Catherine asked.

"Take a better look, Cathy," Peter told her. "Damn, I wish I could make out the baby's facial features," he muttered. "But," he said smiling, "it's not too difficult to see that this one is a boy."

Vincent smiled and whispered in her ear, pointing out the definite sexuality of their child. "Good grief," Catherine said, laughing. "I didn't know babies, uh, did that."

Peter smiled, as he took some measurements and made notes. "It's not unusual for unborn baby boys to have erections, Cathy," he said. "It's perfectly natural and simply a physiological response. Now, let's see if we can get a picture of the other one."

"So, you're definitely saying there are two now?"

"Has to be," Peter said. "This fetus is approximately 19 weeks, Catherine. He's not big enough to be taking up all of that room."

"But if there are twins," Vincent said, "would they not be together?"

Peter moved the scanner slowly down Catherine's stomach, his brow furrowed as he concentrated. "Only if they were identical twins, Vincent," he replied. "These two don't look to be sharing this placenta. No, I'd say you're having fraternal twins." He paused, smiling as he moved the device to the left. "How'd you like one of each?" He asked.

Vincent caught his breath as he saw the other baby's head come into view. As the tiny body was revealed, he could feel Catherine's hand trembling in his. Was it possible? Could they be having a boy *and* a girl?

"Can you tell, Peter?" Catherine asked softly.

"Hush," Peter whispered. "Don't talk for a minute or two, Cathy. It messes up the image."

Vincent raised Catherine's hand to his mouth, rubbing her soft fingers across his lips. He could not tear his eyes away from the screen that flickered like a strange, otherworldly beacon in the chamber.

"Sorry," Peter told them a few moments later. "I'm not going to be able to give you the sex on this one. See, how it's turned around? We were lucky with the other one. He gave us a perfect side view. This baby is more stubborn."

Vincent smiled and looked down at his wife. "Then it must be a girl," he said softly. "For she already has her mother's temperament."

Catherine returned his smile. "We were trying for my dimple, remember?"

Vincent leaned over and kissed her upturned lips. "I have no doubt that if this child *is* a girl," he whispered, "that she not only has your stubbornness, but your dimple as well. She would not want to disappoint her father."

Catherine reached out to touch his chin. "You know, don't you," she whispered, "that it doesn't matter who the babies look like." Vincent saw the love and the fierce pride burning in Catherine's eyes as she looked at him. There was no doubt in his mind that she meant what she said. "They will be loved for who they are."

"Even as I am."

"Yes."

"Then they could ask for nothing more."



"Vincent, Catherine, have you heard? Lena's in labor."

Catherine looked up from feeding Jacob his dinner as Jamie rushed into the dining hall. "Is Father with her?" she asked.

Jamie nodded breathlessly then looked at Peter. "Father wants you to come with me, Peter," she told him. "He says he may need your help."

Peter wiped his mouth with his napkin and got up from the table. "Well, duty calls," he said. "We'll need to stop by the guest chamber to pick up my bag," he told Jamie.

"No problem," she said. "It's on the way."

Peter waved a hasty goodbye and he and Jamie left the room. Catherine turned toward Vincent. "Do you think there's something wrong?" she asked softly. "I thought Mary and Father always delivered the children themselves."

Vincent sighed and smoothed his hand over her hair. "Father has been uneasy with small children ever since Ellie died, Catherine," he said. "Have you not noticed? I fear he has never gotten over losing her."

"But that's unreasonable, Vincent," she replied. "Father did everything he could for Ellie."

"Yes," Vincent said, "but it was not enough." His hand slowed on her hair as he looked into her loving eyes. "He deals with it as he can, Catherine," he told her. "Perhaps one day he will come to terms with it."

"I hope so," Catherine said. "For his sake."

"Eat, Momma," Jacob said loudly, reaching out to take the spoon from her hand. "Jake up eat."

Catherine turned and looked down at her son. Whether it was a phase or just a period of adjustment he was going through, she didn't know. But during the past week he had been obstinate and argumentive, refusing to listen to her or to behave. Both she and Vincent had tried making him understand through their bond, but he stubbornly refused to listen or to comprehend. It was maddening, and it was wearing her out.

"Let me take over, Catherine," Vincent said. He rose from the table and picked up Jacob and his highchair, moving them to his other side, away from Catherine. After he sat down again, Vincent began feeding Jacob his dinner, and Catherine caught the silent rebuke he sent to their child. Jacob didn't spit cereal this time; he spit soup. And his aim was perfect.

Catherine had never heard such silence at their dinner table. It was as thick as the bread they passed around during meals. But far less palatable.

Vincent slowly picked up his napkin and without taking his eyes from his son, wiped the soup from his face. Enough was enough. This behavior could no longer be tolerated.

He stood up and removed the tray from Jacob's seat, unbuckling the belt from around his son's waist. Then he picked Jacob up, and without another word, left the dining hall.

"Jacob's in trouble."

"Well put, Mouse," Elliot observed, helping himself to another bowl of vegetable soup. "Something tells me that Jacob is in for a rude awakening."

"What do you mean?" Catherine asked.

Elliot sighed and put down his spoon. "It might have escaped your notice, Cath," he began, "but I've been keeping close to home this last week."

"Sure you have," Catherine said, "Jenny's been here a lot going over the plans for the meeting with Father and Vincent."

"Yeah, that, too," he murmured, looking at the woman sitting beside him. He smiled and turned back toward Catherine. "Anyway," he continued, "don't change the subject. I've been noticing something. Ever since he started to walk, that little boy of yours has been running you ragged. Talk about going full steam - hell, I bet he sleeps less than I do."

Catherine sighed. "Close," she told him, leaning back in her chair. "Probably very close."

"Did you know that he got into the nursery yesterday about dawn and woke the boys up so they would play with him?"

"What? No. He couldn't have. Vincent would have told me. I would have known."

"Catherine," Elliot said slowly, "you're a very pregnant lady with a lot on her mind. Do you really think that Vincent is going to give you one more thing to worry about? Come on, you're married to the man. Think about it for a minute."

Catherine looked at Elliot and then shifted her gaze to her silent friend beside him. Jenny was doing her best to look extremely interested in her food. "Don't you have anything to say, Jen?" Catherine asked.

Jenny frowned over her soup then put down the spoon and met Catherine's eyes. "Elliot's right, Cath," she said. "We didn't want to worry you, but Jacob's been a holy terror around here for the past few days. He doesn't seem to like anybody anymore. Not even Mouse."

"Is that true, Mouse?" Catherine asked. Mouse nodded but continued to eat his soup. He looked up momentarily to get a piece of bread, then went back to eating. "What did Jacob do, Mouse?"

"He scared the hell out of Arthur," Elliot answered for him. "Didn't do much for our nerves either."

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

"I'd rather not."

Catherine covered her face with her hands. "God," she moaned, "what am I going to do with him?" She took a deep breath, then felt someone touch her arm. She lowered her hands and met Jenny's eyes.

"I don't think you're going to have to do anything," Jenny said. "I think that Vincent is probably taking care of it."

Catherine searched her mind, looking for the thread that connected them. She felt Vincent with her, knew that they were connected, but the connection seemed far away, separate somehow. And she felt Jacob hardly at all. Jenny was right. Vincent was taking care of it. She sighed and picked up her spoon, going back to her dinner. It was cold, of course, but William's soup was good even when it wasn't hot.

"You're not going to jump right up and head after them?"

Catherine shook her head. "No reason to, Jen," she said. "If anyone can figure out why Jacob is behaving like this, it's Vincent. He's a very patient man. I guess he just finally ran out of patience." She thought about having another slice of bread, but the babies kicked, reminding her why she really didn't want it. She sighed. "By the way," Catherine said, changing the subject. "How are the plans for the meeting going? Did you and Pascal check out the Beaumont, Elliot?"

"Yeah," he told her. "That place is boarded up tight. There's only the one entrance Below, and one place where Jenny and Joe can get in. Not even transients are sleeping there. I was surprised."

"You shouldn't have been," Catherine explained. "That's not the greatest neighborhood. Even the street people know to stay clear of it. There are a lot safer places to sleep."

"Yet that's where you're planning to send Jenny and Joe," he pointed out.

"We can hardly invite Joe down here, Elliot," she reminded him. "And it will be the safest place for the meeting. Vincent and I have a feeling that Joe will do the right thing, but it's only a feeling, Elliot."

"You've been right so far," he said softly.

Catherine looked up at Elliot's gently spoken words. He and Jenny had been seeing quite a lot of each other, and they seemed to have worked out whatever problems had been worrying Jenny. Catherine even thought they might be holding hands beneath the table. She smiled and watched as Jenny blushed.

"Yes, I have, haven't I?" she replied, looking right into Elliot's eyes. When *he* blushed, she chuckled, knowing that at last he was dreaming new dreams.



"So," Catherine said to the quiet child sitting next to her on the bed, "you and daddy reached an understanding, did you?" By the time Catherine joined them in their chamber, Vincent had given Jacob his bath and changed him into his pajamas. He had also had a discussion with Jacob on a fundamental level that Catherine knew was related to the intensity of their shared bond. Vincent's communication with Jacob far exceeded hers, even now.

"Dada go," Jacob said, watching her with his clear, dark eyes. Catherine no longer sensed the tumultuous emotions that had run rampant through her small son for the past week. She felt as though she had gotten her true son back; but where he had gone, and why, she didn't quite know.

"Yes," she agreed, reaching out to stroke his wavy, brown hair, "Daddy had to take Nathaniel's place on watch," she told him. "Nathaniel and Lena have a new baby boy."

Jacob tilted his head slightly and frowned. He looked down at her stomach, staring for a moment before his gaze returned. Catherine sensed a deep curiosity and something more that she couldn't define. "Book, Momma," Jacob said, pointing to the book of poetry sitting on the shelf behind the bed.

Catherine smiled, knowing that her son wanted her to read to him. This had always been one of his favorite pastimes. Vincent's bookshelf had undergone many changes over the months. Mementos of his childhood vied now with those of his son, and as Catherine took the book down, she grinned at the clown who sat so happily among poetry books and choo-choo trains.

"Okay," she said, turning to plump up the pillows behind her head. "Do you want to come snuggle, or are you happy sitting there by Mamma's chubby tummy." She settled back against the pillows, waiting for Jacob to make up his mind.

"Suggle, Momma," he said, scooting into her arms. "Jake up suggle."

Catherine held him close, loving the warmth of his small body as he snuggled against her. She had missed the closeness between them during the past week and hoped that they would not lose it again.

"Book, Momma," Jacob reminded her, wrapping his arm around her thickened waist.

Catherine opened the book and began to read. The book was a diverse one, filled with everything from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare and Blake. Jacob seemed to love the words. Whether or not he understood them, Catherine knew that he loved the sound of them. And so she read:

"In winter, when the fields are white,
I sing this song for your delight -

In spring, when woods are getting green,
I'll try and tell you what I mean.

In summer, when the days are long,
Perhaps you'll understand the song:

In autumn, when the leaves are brown,
Take pen and ink, and write it down . . . "

Catherine read poems by Lewis Carroll, and Edward Lear, then moved to William Blake and Browning. Jacob was insatiable as usual, and listened quietly with his head on her shoulder while she read.

"Aren't you even the tiniest bit sleepy?" she asked after the sixth or seventh poem.

Jacob sat up and touched her face. "Seepy, Momma?" he asked.

Catherine smiled and moved some of the pillows until she was no longer looking down at him. "Yes," she admitted softly, touching his hand. "Mamma is sleepy. The babies make Mamma sleepy," she explained, as she stretched out beside him. The candlelight flickered across the ceiling and she watched the dancing shadows, like two people waltzing around the room. She smiled, thinking of the fantasies of pregnant women.

She felt Jacob scoot down on the bed until he was sitting beside her stomach again. He seemed very interested in the babies. "Baby, Momma," he said, pointing to where her belly was prominently displayed beneath the cotton gown.

"Yes," she said. "That's where Mamma's babies are sleeping."

"Baby seep?" He asked, tilting his head in a gesture she recognized as her own.

"Yes," Catherine told him, smiling. "The babies are sleeping in there." She covered her stomach with her left hand. "Right in there," she repeated. "Mamma has two babies sleeping in her tummy."

"Jake up see baby?"

Catherine shook her head. "No, Jacob can't see the babies," she said softly. "And Mamma can't see the babies either. Not yet. But you can *hear* the babies. Do you want to hear the babies, Jacob?"

Jacob nodded.

"Okay," Catherine said, "just put your ear on Mamma's tummy and listen really hard. Can you do that?"

Jacob nodded again and moved closer, until she felt his feet against her hip. Then he bent down slowly and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as he pressed his small ear against her rounded stomach. She looked down at him and smiled. She didn't look quite so large when she was flat on her back. Maybe she should try to stay this way for another three months.

Catherine sighed and looked back at the ceiling. In the flickering shadows she saw children at play. The dancers had gone, only to be replaced by the family she knew they would have. Laughter and tears, growing up and growing old; everything that life had to offer danced upon the ceiling of the chamber, making Catherine smile.

"You've seen Daddy do this a hundred times at least," she whispered, more to herself than to Jacob. "I can't imagine why you haven't wanted to listen before."

"Jacob was jealous, Catherine," she heard Vincent say. "And frightened that when the babies came, we would no longer love him."

Catherine turned her head as Vincent entered the room, closing the door behind him. "Jacob was jealous?" she asked, stroking her hand down Jacob's back as he sat up. His eyes were on his father and Catherine had never seen him so still.

Vincent sat down on the floor beside the bed and reached out to put his hand on where Jacob's head had rested. "Jacob knows that we love these babies, Catherine," he explained. "And he was confused by the emotions he felt directed toward them." He continued to look at Jacob as he stroked her. The soft cotton slid gently across her skin.

"But he's not jealous now?"

Vincent shook his head. "No," he said softly. "Jacob understands now. Don't you, Jacob?"

Jacob covered his father's hand with his own. "Jake up Momma's baby," he said, as he turned toward her.

Catherine smiled and put her hand over his. "Yes," she told him, "Jacob is Mamma's baby. And Jacob is Daddy's baby, too. We love you, Jacob," she added softly, "very, very much."

Jacob smiled and scooted up the bed until he was wrapped in his mother's arms. "Suggle, Momma," he said, burrowing his head beneath her chin.

Catherine laughed and looked up at Vincent. "Snuggle, Daddy," she said. She watched as Vincent went to the dresser, taking his drawstring pants from the drawer. On his way back to the bed he blew out several of the candles, until the room was bathed in soft light. Then, as she watched, he undressed slowly, putting the loose garment over his nude body. He tied the strings and smiled.

"Do you really think there's room?" he asked softly.

"Always," Catherine told him.

And there was; but just barely.



XX

Six days later, Vincent pushed open the heavy door and ushered Catherine and Father into the sub-basement of the abandoned Beaumont building. Pascal, Cullen, and Elliot had thoroughly searched the area earlier that morning, reporting that everything was still quiet. They had found a round, marble table on the first floor of the once opulent club, and had looked through the other rooms until five unbroken chairs had been located. Elliot had arranged them around the table, remarking to Pascal that if King Arthur could do it, so could Vincent.

Vincent smiled at the memory, tightening his hold on Catherine's hand. Elliot and Pascal had told the story over breakfast, hoping to lighten the mood that had fallen over them since Jenny had announced the date for the meeting. Everyone understood the price of failure.

They walked quietly together through the litter-strewn darkness, and Vincent realized how the very air around them reeked of disappointment and lost dreams. Vincent remembered these rooms; the smell of decay, the stench of blood as he was followed and hunted like an animal. But this time he could see them, for he wasn't blinded by his injuries or running for his life. They had nothing to show him.

"There is a small stairway ahead," he said, turning them toward the storage rooms. "Pascal and Elliot have cleared the way of debris, but you must step carefully." He put his hand beneath Catherine's elbow and turned to assure himself that Father was all right. "There is a larger staircase ahead of us, Father," he said. "It will be quite a climb. Are you certain that you are up to it?"

"Pascal has already told me of the stairway, Vincent," Father said. "If you want to worry, worry about Catherine. It will be much more difficult for her."

Vincent shook his head. "Catherine is not going to climb the stairway," he said, helping her up the steep wooden steps that led to the higher levels. "I intend to carry her."

Catherine allowed herself a small smile. Vincent had told her his decision last night, expecting her to stubbornly argue that she could get herself up and down several flights of stairs. She hadn't. For she knew that he was right. The babies were much more important than her stubborn independence.

"Don't worry, Father," Catherine said as they stepped onto the landing. "I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the babies. I may be stubborn, but I'm not stupid."

Vincent stood beside her, waiting for Father to join them on the landing. Despite the nervousness he felt within her, Catherine looked serene and cool. She had dressed in a loose, flowing caftan of a dress; one made of cotton instead of wool. Peter had told them that the last few days had been stifling for those Above, and he had warned her to dress as comfortably as possible. He didn't want Father to have to treat her for heat prostration during the meeting.

"I'm fine, Vincent," Catherine whispered as Father joined them. "You have enough to worry about." She turned to the older man beside them. "Father and I will look out for one another. Won't we, Father?"

Father nodded. "Catherine and I will be fine," he replied. "We all know how we want to approach this meeting, and what our parts will be in it," he reminded them. "You will be the one to bear the brunt of Mr. Maxwell's anger, Vincent. So please, do not concern yourself about us. We will manage."

"Whatever the outcome, Father," Vincent said softly, "our journey home will be made together."

Vincent turned and led them through the storage rooms to the wide staircase. He scooped Catherine into his arms and, with Father following carefully behind him, climbed the stairs to the main level of the building.

Catherine remembered the room only vaguely. She had been too preoccupied with finding and rescuing Vincent to pay any attention to her

surroundings. Now, with the afternoon sun shining in bright streaks through the boarded up windows, the marble pillars and the peeling wallpaper caught her eye; a contrast of decayed wealth and abandoned dreams.

"Everything's ready, Father."

Catherine jumped at the sound of Pascal's voice, and she took a deep breath, trying to calm her quickened heartbeat.

"Sorry, Catherine," Pascal said, obviously seeing her distress. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"That's all right," Catherine told him. "I didn't think anyone was here."

Pascal smiled. "Well, Mr. Maxwell's not here, if that's what you mean. But Elliot and I thought it would be a good idea for one of us to stand watch until the three of you arrived. This whole thing is tricky enough without taking any unnecessary chances."

"That was very wise of you, Pascal," Father said. "I assume that this is the meeting table?" He gestured to the round, marble table near the center of the room.

"Yes," Pascal told them, "that's it. Not exactly Camelot," he said, "but it should serve the purpose."

Father sighed. "I certainly hope so, Pascal." He turned toward Vincent as he made himself comfortable in one of the chairs. "Jenny and Mr. Maxwell should be arriving momentarily, Vincent," he said. "Why don't you and Catherine wait in that anteroom off the main hallway. It will be close enough for you to hear everything without being seen too soon."

Vincent nodded, tightening his arm around Catherine's waist. "I'd like Catherine to have a chair, Father," he said. "Is there another one available, Pascal?"

"Oh, sure," he said, "I'll get it." He looked at Vincent and then at Father. "Do you want me to stay while you wait?" he asked.

"That won't be necessary, Pascal," Father said. "We are taking enough of a risk as it is. You will be needed if something untoward happens. But, thank you."

"You're welcome, Father," he said. "I'll go get that chair."

Vincent watched as his friend hurried from the room. He sighed and went to his father, putting his hand on the older man's shoulder. "All will be well, Father," he assured him. "We must have faith."

Father covered Vincent's hand with his. "Faith is all we *do* have, Vincent," he replied. "Let us hope that it is enough."

"It will be."

Vincent waited, watching as Catherine kissed Father's cheek, then he and his wife walked to the small anteroom where Pascal had placed an old, but sturdy-looking wooden chair.

"It was all I could find," he said. "I hope it's not too uncomfortable." He tested the seat and checked the screws holding it together. "Looks pretty sturdy, though," he told them. "Should be okay."

Catherine smiled. "Thank you, Pascal," she said. "It will be fine."

"You had better leave now, my friend," Vincent said. "It is almost time."

Pascal nodded and held out his hand. Vincent took it, grasping it firmly. "Be well, Vincent," Pascal said, holding Vincent's forearm with his other hand. "We'll be waiting to welcome you home."

"Thank you."

Pascal turned to Catherine and smiled faintly. "You're a part of us now, Catherine," he said. "We don't intend to lose you."

"You won't," she promised.

Pascal nodded and slowly left the room. Vincent settled his wife into the chair, putting his arm around her shoulder. "You could still change your mind," he said softly.

"No, I couldn't," Catherine told him. "Joe needs to see me, Vincent. He won't believe unless he does. And we need him to believe."

Vincent bent to kiss her hair, inhaling the warm, womanly scent that he now associated with home. She was his home, his anchor, his beacon guiding him through the dark night.

"Always," she promised.

Vincent stood in silence beside his wife's chair, listening to every sound within the large building. There were mice here, somewhere. He could hear them scurrying through the walls. And outside, in the sunshine he had never enjoyed, he heard an occasional car as it passed quickly away. One, however, did not pass away. He heard the engine cut off, and the opening and closing of two doors. The time had come.

"Now I know why you picked me up in that old wreck," Vincent heard a man's voice say. "If you'd have parked a good car on this street it would've been picked clean in ten minutes. Come on, Jenny, when are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"In a minute, Joe," Jenny replied. Vincent could hear the tap of her shoes against the sidewalk as she walked around the side of the building, looking for the entrance Elliot and Pascal had marked for her. "Here," she said. "Help me open this, Joe."

"This is breaking and entering, Jenny," Joe warned her. Vincent heard the creak of the unoiled hinges as they managed to get the old door open. "What the hell is so important that you can't tell me about it at my apartment?" The door thudded shut behind them.

"I've seen your apartment, Joe," Jenny said, coming closer. "It's a mess."

"So, what is this? The Taj Mahal?"

"Nothing quite that pretentious, Mr. Maxwell," Vincent heard Father say. He held his breath, waiting for Joe Maxwell's reaction.

"Welles, right?" Joe said softly. "Now, why am I not surprised. You keep popping up, old man." He paused and Vincent could imagine the look he was giving Jenny. "You want to tell me what's goin' on?"

"Joe," Jenny said, "this is Jacob Welles, Cathy's father-in-law."

For a minute Vincent heard nothing but the soft sound of Catherine breathing beside him. Then Vincent heard the scrape of a chair against the floor.

"Sit down, Jenny," Joe finally said. "You look like you're about to fall over." He paused again, and Vincent did not hear him take a chair for himself. "Cathy wasn't married," he said a moment later.

"No," Father told him. "At the time you knew Catherine, she and my son were involved, but they had not yet married."

"You're losin' me here, old man."

"What he's trying to say, Joe, is that they're married now."

When Joe pulled out a chair this time, Vincent heard a distinct crack as the legs hit the stone floor. Beside him, Catherine stood up, knowing she would be needed soon. He held her close, resting his cheek against her hair.

"You wanna run that by me again, Jenny?" They heard Joe say.

"Mr. Maxwell," Father began, "we realize how difficult this is for you. We know how close you were to Catherine."

"Who's 'we'," Joe asked, interrupting. "I met you, what? Twice? How does that qualify you as an expert on Joe Maxwell?"

"Father didn't say that he was an expert, Joe," Catherine said softly, as she walked slowly into the room. "He just said that he knew we were close."

Catherine watched as Joe silently looked her over. He didn't seem all that surprised; except when he looked at her very rounded stomach. There was no disguising her pregnancy.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, shaking his head. "She was telling the truth."

Catherine looked at Jenny in confusion, but Jenny looked as perplexed as Catherine felt. "Who was telling the truth, Joe?" she asked.

"Diana Bennett."

For a moment she forgot to breathe. Diana Bennett had told Joe that she was alive? But that didn't make sense. Diana Bennett hadn't believed in her.

"Catherine," she heard Father say as he took her arm, "please, sit down. You look faint." Catherine blinked her eyes, focusing on the people in the room with her.

"Thank you, Father," she said, as she took the chair he offered. "I seem to be a little disoriented."

"Join the crowd, Radcliffe."

Catherine turned and looked at the man she had called her friend. It was Saturday, so Joe had dressed casually. His shirt was short-sleeved and he had tucked it into well-worn jeans. Except for the muscle twitching in his jaw, she might have thought that he looked relaxed. But there was no mistaking his tension.

"Diana told you I was alive?" Catherine asked softly, still holding Father's hand as he sat down in the chair beside her.

"Yeah," he said, "after I badgered her for a couple of months."

"Why'd you do that, Joe?"

Joe turned to look at Jenny. "Because somebody told me about these weird dreams she was having," he explained. "Practically accused me of putting you in a witness protection program and letting her think you were

dead." He sighed and looked back at Catherine. "I'm not gonna ask, you know," he said softly. "I've been hearing about St. Anthony of Padua and miracles from my mom since I was a little kid, Cathy. But even *she* would have trouble with this one."

Catherine allowed herself a small smile. "So, you're just going to take it on faith."

Joe smiled back. "Hey, I've got eyes, don't I?" His gaze wandered lower, then returned to meet hers. "You've changed a little, though, Radcliffe," he said. "Sorta lost that girlish figure."

Catherine's smile broadened and she leaned back in the chair, covering her stomach with her free hand. "Yes," she said softly. "I'm having twins, Joe," she told him. "In October."

"Twins," Joe repeated slowly. "That's great, Cath. Uh, what does your husband think of that?"

Catherine looked at Father. He squeezed her hand and turned toward Joe. "My son is very pleased," he answered for her. "Catherine has given him more than he ever dreamed possible."

Joe rubbed the cleft in his chin, his gaze alternating between her and Father. "Your son's name wouldn't be Vincent, would it?" he asked.

"Yes," Father admitted. "It is."

Joe folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "I've got a lot of questions for a guy named Vincent," he said softly.

"Then ask me," Catherine heard Vincent say. "I will see if I can find your answers."

Vincent had been very aware of Joe's singular lack of curiosity throughout the man's discussion with Catherine and Father. If Diana had told him of Catherine, was it not also possible that she had told Joe Maxwell about him?

He waited, standing silently behind Catherine's chair. His hands rested on both her shoulders and Vincent could feel the tension as they waited for Joe to speak. He rubbed gently.

I feel no fear from him. No sense of surprise. Just resignation. There is something we do not know, Catherine.

Joe continued to stare at him, as though he was comparing him with someone or something else he had seen. Even when his gaze shifted to Vincent's hands, there was no sense of astonishment. Joe had expected him to be exactly what he was.

"You do not seem surprised, Mr. Maxwell," Vincent said softly. "I must admit that this confuses me. We had not expected you to be so calm."

Joe laughed. "Vincent," he said, "I haven't been calm since I got Diana's letter. And that was in March."

Catherine reached up and took Vincent's hand. "Sit down, Vincent," she told him. "I think Joe needs to explain why he's been harassing Peter and Jenny when there wasn't any reason."

Vincent pulled out the chair directly across from Joe Maxwell and sat down. "Perhaps Mr. Maxwell was hoping to learn something Diana failed to tell him."

Joe smiled. "You're quick," he said, "But then, I knew that."

"How did you know?" Catherine asked. "What did Diana tell you? You haven't told anyone else, have you?"

"Time out, Radcliffe," Joe said, holding up his hand. "Don't you think it's about time I got to ask *my* questions?" He looked at Vincent. "Yeah, I wanted to know something," he confessed. "I wanted to know how someone like you could exist without my knowing about it. I wanted to know how long Cathy had known you. I wanted to know how you landed in that cage of Gabriel's and if you managed to take your son with you when you escaped. Hell, Vincent," Joe said, "there's no end to all the things I wanted to know."

Catherine gasped and Vincent realized that much of what Joe wanted to know were memories Catherine no longer shared with him. They were memories of terror and darkness and he wanted to protect her from them.

"Jenny," Vincent asked softly, "could you take Catherine into the other room for a few moments? I do not believe she needs to hear this."

"Vincent," Catherine began, "it's all right. I'm strong enough to hear it."

Vincent reached out and caressed her cheek, looking deeply into her beautiful, loving eyes. "I know you are, Catherine," he said. "But it is not necessary. Let your memories stay forgotten. It is best that way." He slid his fingers down to her lips, stopping the protest he sensed was coming. "Please, love," he asked. "Give me this."

Catherine nodded, holding his fingers and pressing a soft kiss against them. She got up slowly from the chair. "Where?" she asked softly.

Vincent smiled. "There is a room on the other side of the anteroom. Pascal is waiting there." He shrugged. "He did not leave. He would have worried."

Vincent watched as Catherine and Jenny left the room. Perhaps it was unfair of him to ask her to leave. But she had already faced her own terror. She did not need to face his as well.

"Which question would you like me to answer first, Mr. Maxwell?" Vincent asked, turning back to the man across the table.

"How long have you known Cathy?"

"Catherine and I met when her face was slashed and she was left to die in Central Park," Vincent told him.

"Did you see the guys who did it?"

"No," Vincent said, "I saw only Catherine, lying on the ground, bleeding."

"So, when she disappeared . . ."

"She was with us." Vincent put his hand on Father's shoulder. "My father is a physician," he said. "He sutured Catherine's wounds and I cared for her while she healed."

Joe nodded, as if this confirmed his own theory. "So, where is this place you say you took care of her?"

Vincent squeezed Father's shoulder. "I cannot tell you that, Mr. Maxwell," he said softly. "A lot of good people depend upon that place. I cannot violate their trust until I know that you will not betray us."

Joe was silent for a minute, and Vincent did not flinch from his piercing gaze. This, then, was the look that had so disconcerted Jenny at the coffee shop. Vincent could see how it might be useful in court.

"Okay," Joe sighed, "I can live with that. You don't have any reason to trust me." He smiled, and Vincent found it much more threatening than his stare. "How about the cage? Can you tell me how you landed in that cage?"

"Yes," Vincent said. "Gabriel had taken our son. He allowed Catherine to give birth to him, then took him away; leaving Catherine to be killed."

Joe cursed, and Vincent saw all the rage, all the hatred that had been festering like an unhealed wound inside of him. It was familiar; a mirror of the rage he, himself, had once felt.

"Go on," Joe said finally, his face showing the strain of his control.

"My son and I are connected," Vincent explained. "It is a bond of the mind as well as of the body. He was lost without Catherine, without me. Jacob could not survive. I could feel him, here, in my heart. I knew he was dying. Gabriel knew it, also. He kidnapped Diana Bennett and had her get word to me. Let myself be captured, or see my son die. There was no choice to be made."

"So, you just went willingly into that cage?"

"They shot me with tranquilizer darts. When I awoke, I was chained and in that cage."

"Vincent," Father said, touching his arm. "You never told me."

"There was no need, Father. What had been done was done. Jacob and I came home. There was no need for you to share in that pain."

Father turned to Joe Maxwell. "You have asked your questions, Mr. Maxwell," he said. "And my son has answered them. May I ask a question of you?"

"Sure," Joe said. "Why not."

"How is it that you know so much, Mr. Maxwell?" Father asked. "How is it that you already knew what my son looked like before he even entered this room?"

Joe's gaze narrowed at Father's belligerent tone, then he looked at Vincent. "Ever ask yourself what happened to all those videotapes, Vincent?" he asked softly. "Or did you just think Diana would handle it?"

"I did not think of them at all," Vincent answered honestly. "Gabriel was about to smother my son when I stopped him. All I thought of was taking my son home."

Joe shook his head. "No," he said, "that's not *all* you thought of. I saw Gabriel's face, Vincent. I saw the slashes. You thought of a lot more than your son when you went into that room."

"Yes," Vincent admitted softly, "I wanted to kill him. For the first time in my life I believe that I would have taken great pleasure in killing a man."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"No," Vincent sighed. "My son was crying, calling out for me. Gabriel was lying against the wall, he was not going to stop me. And Diana was there. She said that Father was waiting for me. I trusted her to do what was right. I took Jacob from the crib and left."

"Did you know she was going to kill him?"

"No. I did not find out that she had until much later."

"And did Diana do what was right, Vincent?" Joe asked softly.

"Are you asking as Joe Maxwell, District Attorney, or as Joe Maxwell, Catherine's friend?"

"Same man," Joe told him.

"No," Vincent said, shaking his head. "And if you truly believe that, you are deluding yourself. The man who was Catherine's friend also loved her. He would want to avenge her, as I wanted to avenge her. The District Attorney would demand justice."

"Justice is blind," Joe said calmly.

"Yes, she is."

Joe stared at him for a long time before he spoke again. "Do you know what I found when I finally got to that house on Staten Island? I found a bunch of dead guys littering up the hallways, a fire in a room full of surveillance equipment, and Diana Bennett standing there telling me she put a bullet in this Gabriel character. Hell, there were sprinklers going off everywhere, the S.W.A.T. team is running all over the place, we find this empty cage torn apart, doors torn apart, and Diana's standing in a room with an empty crib telling me she shot the bad guy in self-defense while they were struggling for the gun. Both their fingerprints were all over it, but it didn't make sense. And it made for a hell of a messy case, Vincent."

"And she never told you what happened?" Father asked.

"Not a damn word," Joe replied. "She's in the middle of it, *has* to know something, and you know what she tells me? Zip. Zero. Even at the internal affairs hearing she won't say a word. Not one damn word in her own defense. I have to believe she's protecting someone. Someone she can't talk about."

"Diana was protecting me," Vincent said.

"Yeah, I finally figured that out." Joe shook his head. "You know, I went to talk to her, after she was suspended, after she resigned and decided to move to Chicago. I thought she'd finally tell me what the hell had gone on."

"Did she?"

"No. Not even after all of that."

"Then how was it you learned about my son, Mr. Maxwell?" Father asked.

Vincent sat silently as Joe reached into the back pocket of his jeans. "I had a feeling I might want this today," he said, unfolding the worn piece of paper. "You know, when Jenny first phoned me in January I was pretty pissed off. Then I got to thinking, maybe Jenny's dreams were tied up in some way with what Diana was holding back. So I called her, put a little more pressure on her. Must have said something that clicked, 'cause a month or so later I get this little package in the mail. It's a videotape, or part of one, anyway. And there's this letter from Diana with it." He unfolded the much-read letter, spreading it out with his fingers on the marble table.

"Will you read the letter to us, Mr. Maxwell?" Vincent asked, feeling a kinship with this man that he had not expected to feel.

Joe nodded and began to read.

This isn't easy for me, Joe. I thought it would be easier here, away from New York, away from what happened. I don't blame you for what happened at the hearing. I wouldn't talk. I couldn't explain what happened; the fire, the bodies. All I could explain was Gabriel's death - and that wasn't enough.

So, I'm sending you this, Joe. It's something I didn't have time to burn. I want you to look at it, to listen to it. You'll understand if you do. You'll understand why I couldn't betray him.

You denied once that you loved Cathy Chandler. I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now. Cathy Chandler is alive and living with her husband. I can't begin to explain it - I didn't even want to believe it myself. I only know that they're together and they're happy. And maybe, if you know that, you can go on with your life like I'm going on with mine.

I once told you that you couldn't trust anyone. Well, Vincent trusted me and I'm trusting you. Maybe that's what it's all about. Take care of yourself, Joe.

Diana.

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. Her letter explained so much, so many things she had not been able to say. He hoped that the life she found in Chicago would be good to her.

"And what was on the videotape, Mr. Maxwell?" Father asked. Vincent opened his eyes and found Joe watching him.

"You should have asked me that the first time I saw it," Joe sighed. "There I was, with this piece of evidence. Hell, I knew where that damned tape had come from, even though it was obviously just a piece of the original. There was only part of a conversation. A very interesting conversation, between some lion guy in a cage and a nutcase named Gabriel."

"Gabriel had cameras everywhere," Vincent told him, wondering which of the many pieces of film had survived. "What exactly did you see?"

"I saw you, Vincent," he said, "standing in a cage, talking to the man behind the cameras. You said that you could feel his eyes on you. The guy must have really been nuts," Joe continued. "The mikes picked up everything you said and everything he said."

"And what was it I said?"

"You told him that you could feel your son - that your bond was growing stronger. Gabriel said that there was only one bond that counted and that he had given the kid life."

"And I told him that Catherine had given him life," Vincent interrupted, remembering the conversation.

"Yeah," Joe said, his fingers spreading tightly over the paper in his hand. "And that's when the guy talked about keeping her alive for months." Joe's voice broke and Vincent knew he was reliving the time of helplessness that Vincent, too, had suffered. "He said, he said that he was there when the kid was born. That the kid was his."

"And I told him that he would never be his," Vincent continued for him. "That our bond was growing, hour by hour, minute by minute, and that nothing he could do would stop it."

"And that was when he threatened to kill you."

"Death shall have no dominion," Vincent quoted.

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "That's what you said."

"It's from a poem," Vincent told him softly. "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."

Vincent heard the soft footsteps behind him and knew that Catherine had come back into the room. He turned and got up from the chair, holding out his arms for her. She filled them, holding him tightly as they remembered the darkness together. After a moment, their children moved, reminding them both of the brightness contained in the life ahead of them. Vincent kissed her cheek and settled her comfortably in her chair before sitting beside her. He held tightly to her small hand.

"So what do you intend to do with the tape, Joe?" Catherine asked.

Joe smiled and looked at Vincent. "She hasn't changed much inside, has she?" he said. "Still the champion of the hopeless cause."

"Is it hopeless, Joe?" she asked.

"Nah," he said, shaking his head. "I've been a lot of things, Radcliffe, but I never thought I was hopeless." He reached out his hand, then pulled it back, looking down at the table. "I burned it," he told them. "I set fire to the damned thing." He sighed and met Vincent's eyes again. "Hell, Vincent," he said, "no one would have believed it anyway. I've been reading this letter and watching that tape for months and I had trouble believing it. Hell, I'm sitting here right *now*, and I barely believe it." He shrugged and turned his gaze on Catherine. "It wasn't easy, finding out that I'm not Joe Maxwell, crime fighter. I always figured that the law was all there was. But I couldn't do anything to hurt you, Cathy. It took me a long time to admit it, but I guess I do, did love you."

"You'll always be my friend, Joe," Catherine said, touching the hand that had reached for her. His fingers wrapped around hers and she smiled. "You once said that if I needed a lawyer or a friend, that you'd be there. Thanks for meaning it, Joe."



XXI

"There is one more thing which needs to be discussed," Vincent said. He was rather certain that there was no longer a danger to him from Joe Maxwell, but there was still Elliot to consider. As long as he was wanted for the murder of John Moreno, Elliot could never hope to have a life Above.

"Is this something I'm gonna want to hear, Vincent?" Joe asked, still holding Catherine's hand.

"Probably not," Catherine answered, "but you're going to hear it anyway. It's about Elliot Burch."

"Ah, come on, Cathy," Joe muttered, dragging his hand from hers. "Haven't I had enough excitement for one day? Why drag that guy into this?"

"Because Elliot Burch is not dead, Joe."

Joe sat back in his chair, watching Vincent with narrowed eyes. He folded Diana's letter slowly and slipped it back into his pocket. "You wanna explain how you know that?" His gaze moved to Father. "Didn't you tell me that Elliot Burch was on the Compass Rose when it blew?"

"He was," Vincent said, regaining his attention. "He was with me."

Joe sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Damn," he said softly. "You're going to really make my day, aren't you? Let me guess . . . you were at the carousel with Moreno, too? Right?"

"I was meeting with Elliot," Vincent told him. "He was trying to help me find my son. While we were talking two men entered the carousel.

They tried to kill Elliot, and when I went to help him, they tried to kill me. I was shot, but I escaped."

"Vincent was quite ill," Father said. "We barely found him in time."

"Shit! Moreno and Kates. You killed them."

"Yes," Vincent said calmly. "I killed them."

"Damn it, Vincent," Joe said. "You shouldn't be telling me this!"

"What will you do, Joe?" Vincent asked simply. "Arrest me? Take me to trial? Put me in prison? You would do that to Catherine?"

Joe sighed, slumping back in his chair. "You know damn well I won't do anything to hurt Cathy."

"Yes," Vincent said. "I do."

"But Vincent," Joe complained, "you can't be some damned vigilante. Oh hell, that wasn't you, was it? A few years ago? Right after Cathy came to work for me?"

"No," Vincent replied, "that was a man named Jace. He came after me, after Catherine. He died in a fall. We could not retrieve his body."

"God, Vincent," Joe muttered. "Do me a favor and don't tell me anything else, okay? I'm having enough trouble here. Damn."

"It was necessary that you know," Vincent said. "Elliot may some day wish to return to his life Above. If this is to happen, he must be cleared of John Moreno's death."

"Hell, Vincent," Joe said, "I dropped that warrant on Burch months ago. When those bodies showed up in that drug lab . . ." Joe stopped speaking, his eyes narrowly focused on Vincent as he made the connection. "Don't say it," he said tightly. "Just don't say it." He rubbed his face with an unsteady hand, sighing as he turned his gaze on Catherine.

"If I looked," he asked her softly, "really looked; I'd find a pattern, wouldn't I? It's just like Diana said: Every time I put you in danger, ol'

Vincent here comes to the rescue." He leaned his head against the hard wood edge of the chair, staring at the chipped stucco ceiling. "What was the drug lab for, Vincent?" he asked, still not looking at them. "How did that connect with Cathy?"

"It was owned by Gabriel," Vincent told him. "It was part of his kingdom of death and shadows. Children were being poisoned, dying." Vincent paused, wondering how to explain that time to this man. Would Joe understand the rage that had filled him? Catherine was gone, lost to him - his son, was lost to him. Where was the hope, the light, without them?

"Catherine was my light, Joe," he continued, his voice barely a whisper in the stillness of the room. "And Gabriel had torn that light from me; left me in the darkness without hope, without love. What I did that night had little to do with Catherine. It was my rage, Joe, my rage at Gabriel for what he had taken, for what he was still taking from others. His poison was stealing men's souls, children's souls.

"There is no justification for that night in your laws, Joe. I know that. Even now, there is a dark part of my soul which does not want to remember what I did in my blind rage at Gabriel. Until that night I had killed only to protect the lives of those I love. There can be no other reason for taking another man's life." He felt Catherine's hand on his arm, her love reaching out to him. He covered her hand with his, glad for her light, her strength.

Vincent became aware of the sounds gradually, knowing that they must have been there, at the very edge of his consciousness while he fought back angry specters of the past. But there had been no threat in the sounds, for they were familiar to him, as familiar as the sounds of home, which they represented. He felt Catherine's hand tighten under his, and her spirit soar through their bond.

"What the hell?" Joe started in his chair, almost overturning it as he stared, wide-eyed over Vincent's shoulder.

Vincent turned slowly in his chair, knowing what he would see, and trying to reconcile himself to it. Why had they done this? Why had they taken such a risk?

Because they love you, Vincent.

It looked as though almost everyone had come. Pascal and William walked into the room first, leading the way. Behind them, Sarah, Samantha, Jamie, Mouse, Elliot and Jenny crowded around them. The children came next; Jeffrey, Kipper, Samantha, Zach, Eric, and with them were Faye and Cullen. Mary followed closely behind with Jacob in her arms. They stared, quietly and calmly at the people around the marble table. But there were more. The families came next; fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, young and old and in-between. All found a place around the marble pillars and cracked walls. His family, the people he loved.

William and Pascal, it seemed, were their spokesmen. They walked forward, approaching the table with sure and even steps. Two men of such outward contrasts, such strong and loving hearts.

"It didn't seem right, Vincent," William said, "that you and Catherine should take all the risk." He looked at the floor for a minute, his hands on his hips as he took a deep breath. "We've let you do that too often," he said, meeting Vincent's eyes. "You've always been there for us, always protected us." He glanced at Pascal before going on. "Pascal and I, well, we thought it was time we returned the favor."

"We're your friends, Vincent," Pascal said, "your family. What threatens you threatens all of us."

Vincent had no words. He could only hold tightly to Catherine's hand and look at the faces before him. They had come to give their strength, their support; to show him that the words 'one family,' 'one community,' were not only words; they were a truth beyond measure.

"Hey, Radcliffe," Vincent heard Joe say, "if I'da known you wanted this big a family, I'da had my mom adopt you. We Irish Italians have relatives up the wazoo."

"I'm not Italian or Irish, Joe," Catherine answered.

"So, we'd make allowances," he told her. "Nobody's perfect."

Vincent smiled at Joe's simple words. No, no one was perfect. No *society* was perfect. More's Utopia existed only in the pages of his book. But with their gesture of unity, his family, his community, had strengthened

Vincent's belief that love was more powerful than ideals for holding people together. Or in helping people to understand.

"It would seem, Mr. Maxwell," Father said, "that the members of our community have decided to trust you with a secret we have been keeping for over a third of a century. I hope, for their sakes, that your loyalty to Catherine includes her family." Vincent saw the reproving look he gave Pascal and William. "No matter how large or foolish," he added.

"I don't think you have to worry, Father," Catherine said, smiling as she got up slowly from her chair. "We'll just have to adopt him. Won't we, Vincent?"

Vincent rose with her, supporting her with his arm. He watched as she turned toward her friend and held out her hand. "I can't promise lasagna as good as your mother's, Joe," she said softly, "but you won't have to go all the way to Astoria to get it."

Joe chuckled and came around the table, taking her outstretched hand. "Don't tell me you finally learned how to cook, Radcliffe," he teased. "I won't believe it."

Catherine laughed with him. "No, I'm lucky to make Jacob's breakfast," she said. "Let me introduce you to William." She pulled him with her toward the crowd of people. Vincent followed silently behind, smiling as she eased Joe into their lives.

"Just what I've always wanted," he heard Father mutter behind him, "another attorney in the family."



"Looks like I wasn't all that wrong about you, Radcliffe," Joe said softly. They were sitting in chairs on the balcony above Father's study, watching while the children in the concert society readied themselves for an impromptu performance. Father had said that if they were going to show Mr. Maxwell everything, they should show him that their community lacked nothing in the way of fine cultural entertainment. Catherine smiled as she watched Vincent set up music stands and help calm the nervous instrumentalists.

"In what way, Joe?" Catherine asked. She had been very aware during the hours Joe had been Below, that for every look he gave the world around him, he gave at least two to her.

"I always said you went for those culture types," he said. "Hell, look at you, Cathy. We're sittin' so far underground that the subways are above us. There are books everywhere you look in this place, and a bunch of kids are tuning their flutes and violins to give us a concert. Now, was I right or was I right?"

Catherine laughed. "You were right," she said, still watching her husband. "You should hear Vincent read sometime, Joe: Shakespeare, Browning, Wordsworth. It's better than music."

When Joe didn't answer, Catherine turned to look at him. His face was pensive, his smile a little lost. "You really love the guy, don't you, Cath?"

Catherine touched his shoulder. "I wish I had words to tell you how much," she said softly. "There isn't a part of Vincent that I'm not connected to, Joe. Our minds, our hearts, our bodies; everything we are, we are together. He completes me. He makes me whole."

She watched as Joe glanced down at the scene below them. Then, he looked back at her. "Well," he sighed, "I never did think you'd fall for an average kind of guy." He covered the small hand on his shoulder with his and Catherine felt his fingers trembling. "I'd have tried harder, you know?"

"Yes," Catherine whispered, "I know." Catherine leaned over and kissed Joe's cheek. "I hope you and Vincent can be friends," she told him. "I think he'd like to be friends with a solid, down-to-earth kind of guy like you."

Joe pulled away slowly and Catherine sat back in her chair, still looking at him. She could have sworn that he was blushing. "You remembered that, huh?" he said awkwardly. "I guess I wasn't very subtle."

"I'd call you a lot of things, Joe," Catherine said smiling, "but subtle isn't one of them."

"Okay," he said, returning her smile, "I can live with that." He looked down over the balcony railing. "So tell me," he began softly, "how long's this thing with Burch and Jenny been goin' on?"

"Real subtle, Maxwell," Catherine murmured.

"Hey, you said it. So, you gonna tell me?"

Catherine sighed and followed his gaze. Jenny and Elliot were sitting in two chairs that had been set in a corner, away from everyone else. They were talking, their heads very close together. And they were holding hands.

"Elliot's been living Below since late January," Catherine told him. "Jenny's been coming down to visit for about four months."

"And they just naturally hit it off, right?"

"I don't think it was quite that simple, Joe," she said softly, watching the two people below them.

"It never is, Radcliffe," he murmured. "It never is."

"Moosic, moosic, moosic, Momma."

Jacob hurried toward her, dodging chairs and adults in his quest to reach Catherine's chair. Behind him, his father followed at a much more sedate pace. Catherine laughed as their whirlwind son barrelled into her legs.

"Slow down, Jacob," she said, ruffling his hair. "You know you're not allowed to run in Grandfather's study." She heard Vincent chuckle and looked up.

"I believe Father is having a difficult time reconciling himself to becoming 'grandfather' instead of simply Father, Catherine," he said. "Every time he hears you use the term I see him wince."

"That's silly," Catherine said. "He *is* Jacob's grandfather. He's never said anything to me. Are you certain?"

Vincent nodded, making room for himself on the floor beside her chair. Jacob immediately climbed onto his daddy's lap and settled in to listen to the concert. "He does not seem to mind the term when it is used in regards to Jacob or the twins, Catherine," he told her. "It is only when it applies to other things that the term seems to disturb him."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said, leaning toward him. Her chair was low enough so that she could rest her cheek against his hair.

"When you say 'Grandfather's study' or 'Grandfather's books' to Jacob, it is almost as if Father's entire place within our world is changing. Everyone here thinks of this as 'Father's study,'" he explained, "and these are 'Father's books.' That is his identity here, Catherine. He *is* Father."

"Well," Catherine said, kissing his hair as she raised her head, "he's also Grandfather. If he doesn't want Jacob to call him that he had better let me know soon." She sighed. "It won't be long before there are three children Below calling him Grandfather."

"And three calling me Daddy," Vincent added.

"You know, Radcliffe," Joe said, reminding Catherine that he was still there listening, "I never thought I'd see you give it all up for diapers and baby bottles."

"I didn't exactly give it all up, Joe," she said softly. "And I intend to breast feed my babies."

"Jeez, Cathy," Joe complained. "What a thing to say."

Catherine smiled at his obvious embarrassment. "It's the truth," she told him.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to tell me about it, do you?"

"You were the one who mentioned it," she teased. "Are you blushing, Joe?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "I think I am."

Vincent smiled as he listened to the exchange between them. It was easy to see why Catherine had never known that Joe loved her. She treated him like an older sister might, with just a hint of teasing in her affection.

"Moosic, Dada," Jacob said, bringing Vincent's thoughts back to the child sitting comfortably in his lap. Jacob loved music in all its forms and was always eager to listen to a concert, no matter what the occasion.

Vincent smiled, remembering something Jenny had told him earlier. "Jenny tells me that they are playing Schumann's Unfinished Symphony in the park next week, Catherine," he said, looking at the beautiful woman beside him. "It is a piece Jacob has not yet heard. Would you like to go?"

Catherine's smile carried messages that Vincent knew only he could see. "I'd love it," she whispered. "Even if it doesn't rain." She bent over the arm of the low chair as Vincent lifted his face, and he felt the velvet of her lips caress his in a sweet kiss of remembrance while the children in the concert society began to play.



Vincent blew out all but the large night candle and climbed into bed beside his wife. He smiled as Catherine scooted into his embrace, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her. Her protruding tummy rested against his hip and he waited for the kick he knew would eventually come.

When it came he smiled, and rubbed the taut skin with his hand, massaging gently. "They already love your touch," Catherine said, her breath a soft whisper against his naked chest.

"Just like their mother," Vincent said, kissing her hair. It was still damp from the bath and as he rubbed his cheek against her he inhaled the familiar scent of roses.

"Yes," Catherine agreed softly, "just like their mother."

He felt her hand move caressingly over his chest, her fingers gliding smoothly across his hair-covered skin. "We must accept the fact that our children are likely to be just as sensorial as their parents, Catherine," he told her. "It is evident that Jacob has inherited my visual acuity as well as my constitution."

"Oh, it's evident, all right," Catherine interrupted. "All anyone has to do is chase him around for one day. You're the only one who can keep up with him."

Vincent chuckled as he continued to rub her stomach. "And that is why I try to take him with me as often as possible," he reminded her. "Jacob's mind is like a sponge, Catherine. It is wonderful to watch. He absorbs everything he sees, everything he hears, everything he touches."

"Everything he eats," Catherine added.

"Yes," Vincent agreed, "he does have a voracious appetite. But that is because he is burning so much energy."

"If we could harness that energy, Mouse wouldn't have to steal power from Con Ed," Catherine told him.

"We take very little, Catherine," Vincent reminded her. "But you are right. If we could somehow convert Jacob's energy we could power William's kitchen and the laundry for years to come."

Catherine chuckled. "Somehow I can't imagine our son as a power plant, Vincent," she said. "A perpetual motion machine, now *that* seems to fit."

Vincent was quiet for a moment; savoring the warmth of Catherine's body against him, the sweetness of her hair, and the movement of their children beneath his hand. "Have you also observed," he said softly, "that Jacob savors the warmth, the touch of other people?" He felt her smile.

"I'd say he inherited that from both of us, Vincent." Her hand moved in a wider pattern over his chest and she teased one of the nipples hidden beneath his hair. "I've always loved to touch you," she whispered. "Haven't you noticed?"

"There have been a few times," he teased, "when you seemed to enjoy petting me."

"I've *always* enjoyed petting you," she said, snuggling as close as her stomach would allow. "I used to wait for any excuse to touch you," she admitted, turning her face up to him. "You would hug me," she whispered, "and I'd stoke your hair. It was the only part of you that I could touch without frightening you."

"You knew that?"

"Always."

Vincent looked down into her loving gaze and bent his head, letting her feel the warmth of his lips as they brushed across her mouth. "You aroused so many emotions in me, Catherine," he said softly. "So many unawakened dreams and desires. I thought that if I touched you, if I allowed you to touch me in the way I felt you wanted, that I would hurt you, frighten you. I could not take that chance."

"But you knew that I wanted you?"

Vincent sighed, letting his lips linger this time on hers. "Oh yes," he whispered. "I knew your desire." He moistened her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue and her lips parted, open and welcoming. "It was the reason I never allowed you to kiss me," he continued. "I knew that once I tasted your mouth, I would want to know everything - every part of you." Her lips were a breath away, her tongue a warm invitation.

"And now you know," Catherine whispered, moving closer.

"And still I want," he answered.

They had loved often during her pregnancy, finding that Catherine's pleasure was heightened by the changes in her body. Vincent had loved her gently, teasing both Catherine and himself until they could stand no more.

Then he had made them one, bringing them both incredible pleasure. And he wanted that now; to give her pleasure, to lose himself and find himself within her body.

Vincent accepted her invitation; taking her mouth, tasting the warmth and sweetness of Catherine's tongue as it played against his. He wanted to devour her, to bury himself in the softness, the gentleness of her. He wanted to make up for all the times he hadn't allowed himself to touch, to kiss. Years, ages, could not assuage his need for this woman. She was a fire deep inside him, a burning need that would never be extinguished.

He felt her hand move into his hair, holding him, caressing him, and he moaned, moving with her fingers. He moved his hips, feeling himself growing hard and hot against her. He pulled his lips away, gasping for breath.

Catherine opened her eyes, looking at Vincent's face in the candlelight. She loved seeing him like this; his eyes bright, his hair disheveled and wild where her fingers had tangled it. She heard the deep rasps of his breath near her ear. Even his breath was hot against her skin.

She drew her hand down his chest, gently exploring the tight muscles beneath his ribs, feeling each muscle tense as her fingers stroked ever lower. When she felt the heat of him beneath her hand, she heard his indrawn hiss of breath and pressed her lips against his neck. She explored the contours of his hardened flesh, the velvet softness of this special place, the moisture he could not control when she touched him, just so.

Vincent groaned and pushed gently against Catherine's shoulder until she was lying on her back beside him. Her eyes were opened and she was watching him with a small smile playing on her lips. Her fingers caressed him again, measuring him, surrounding him, encasing him with gentle, loving strokes. He groaned again, bending to her mouth, taking her smile with his lips and his tongue.

His own hand moved gently down over the swell of her stomach and into the soft curls below. Her legs fell open for him, and he felt the satin heat of her beneath his stroking fingers as he parted her, touching every hot, wet petal that called out for his touch.

Catherine arched her head against the pillows, pushing herself into his hand, bringing his touch deeper. He knew just where to touch, every place that made her tremble. "Roll to your side, Catherine," she heard him whisper, as she felt his hand move lower. "No," he corrected softly, "towards the glass, away from me." Catherine moved with his hand, snuggling back against his chest, feeling his breath on her shoulder, his arm cradling her.

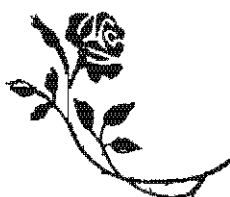
His hand slid down between her thighs, parting them, sliding one of his legs between hers, bringing him against the warmth of her. Catherine moved her hips, caressing him, letting him know how much she wanted him. She was surrounded by him, enclosed by his warmth, his love. And she wanted to take him within her, to know the sense of completion only he could give her.

"Vincent," she moaned, feeling his lips move across her neck, the touch of his tongue as he tasted her skin. His hand moved, too; opening her, petting her, readying her as he brought himself closer.

He entered her gently, slowly, until Catherine could focus on nothing except the sensation of fullness, the incredible penetration of his body into hers. There was only Vincent, only the blending of their bodies as he made them one. Then he began to move.

Her breath came in shallow pants as she felt herself caressed from the inside out. Every stroke, every movement of his hardened body within her, sent her senses soaring. She felt him grow even harder, even hotter within her and wondered if she would survive such pleasure. Then his hand moved over her, finding the tight bud of nerves he had called from her. His fingers moved in rhythm with his body; once, twice, and then there was only the cataclysmic burst of pleasure as every nerve ending in her body screamed in release.

Vincent felt Catherine's body clutch at him as the pulsating waves of her release stroked him, taking him with her. He arched his back, pushing deeper, sharing with her that moment when nothing existed but the two of them, riding the shuddering, shattering pleasure of their love.



XXII

The month of August came with a blaze of heat that caught the city above them unawares. Many of the Helpers found excuses to come Below, either to bring necessary items, or just to visit. Jenny came often, sharing news of her friendship with Maddy. Jenny had discovered that Maddy was an editor, too, although her specialty was college textbooks, and she worked for another publishing house.

Catherine had enjoyed seeing Jenny and hearing that she and Maddy were becoming friends, but she thought that Elliot was the real reason behind Jenny's frequent visits. The heatwave, however, did make a wonderful excuse to spend time Below. The layers of rock and earth provided a natural insulation that kept the world Below constantly cool. The driving heat that sweltered through the city above them, never penetrated as deep as the Home Chambers. But it did make it warm enough to get the children thinking about swimming. And each afternoon found them pleading with Vincent or Mary to let them go to the Chamber of The Falls. No one loved swimming more than Jacob, and Catherine would have loved to have gone with them. There was only one problem. Peter had forbidden it.

"It is not forever, Catherine," Vincent said, as he stood with her in the small bathing pool.

Peter had been down to examine her the day before and to attend the naming ceremony for Lena's little boy, David. After the examination he had forbidden her to sit in the water, saying that with the loss her cervical plug, there was always the possibility of infection. Catherine remembered the choice words she had had for a man who could tell a heavily pregnant woman, in the middle of a heat wave, that she wouldn't even be allowed to cool off in a bath. Peter had reminded her that the heat wave certainly wasn't going to bother her Below, that she shouldn't even *think* about

walking all the way to the Chamber of the Falls, and that she could always go to the Mirror Pool and dangle her feet in the water. She was not amused. Even the prospect of having Vincent bathe her hadn't helped.

"So," Vincent said, listening to her thoughts, "bathing with me no longer holds the appeal it once had."

Catherine smiled and put her hand on his chest. "I love bathing with you," she told him, "when I actually get to bathe. I don't consider standing here while you pour water over me as bathing."

Vincent chuckled, reaching down to fill the plastic cup he had taken from the kitchen. "But I enjoy pouring water over you," he said, doing just that. He held his hand over her forehead, trying not to let the water get into her eyes as he rinsed her soapy hair.

"So I noticed," she sputtered. "I still think it might have been easier to have Mouse rig up some kind of shower."

Vincent refilled the cup and poured again, this time managing to keep most of the water off her face. "Easier perhaps," Vincent said, "but not half as much fun." He bent, kissing the tip of her wet nose. "And too, whatever he and Elliot are doing below the stone circle is taking up much of his time. We see them only at dinner."

"Or when Jenny decides to visit."

Vincent smiled. "True."

"Has Father found out what exactly it is they're doing?" Catherine asked, wringing out her hair as she watched Vincent retrieve a towel from the bench. "Mary still hasn't recovered from the scare they gave her when that cable spool fell down the steps the other night. Has Elliot explained why he and Mouse were running that cable through the Stone Circle?"

"Not exactly," Vincent told her. "It was however, the final straw for Father and he has demanded that Elliot and Mouse meet with the Council to tell everyone the details of this project of theirs." He handed her the towel and she wrapped it turban-style around her head, tucking the ends in to hold it in place. Catherine looked up at him when she was finished and

he smiled. "Lovely," he said softly, his hands covering her ever-growing stomach.

"I'm going to start worrying about your eyesight," Catherine teased as she watched his adoring eyes. "I can't find my feet, I practically waddle when I walk, getting in and out of bed is a major endeavor, and you say I'm lovely."

"Beautiful," he said this time, kissing her gently on the lips. "If Brigit O'Donnell were ever to write a story about the festival of Beltane, you would be the perfect symbol."

Catherine returned his kiss, cupping his face with her palms. "Is that some sort of Irish fertility rite?" she asked, skimming her fingers across his cheeks. "If it is," she teased, "I'm not certain I like the idea."

She looked down at the place where her feet should have been and sighed. "Still," she said, "I guess I do fit the image." She smiled up at him, letting her fingers drift over his lips. "But it's only temporary," Catherine reminded him. "Just like the heat wave, and Peter's orders that I don't take a bath."

"Or make love," he added softly.

"That, too." Catherine agreed. "I guess Daddy's going to have to be content with snuggles, just like Jacob."

Vincent smiled and wrapped his arms around her. "Not just like Jacob," he said, "since you sleep in my arms each night and rarely wear a nightgown."

He unwrapped the towel from around her head and tossed it onto the floor. "Making love to you surpasses anything I ever dreamed of, Catherine," he said, sipping the moisture from her temple. "But I shall be content to remain celibate until after the children are born and you are healed."

"Peter said that *I* couldn't have an orgasm, Vincent," Catherine reminded him, "that you couldn't make love to *me*. He didn't say that I couldn't make love to you."

Vincent shook his head as he cupped the back of Catherine's head in his hands. "No," he told her softly, watching her eyes in the dim light. "The pleasure of our love-making is a shared pleasure, Catherine. I want it to always be that way."

"But I *do* get pleasure, Vincent," she assured him. "Just touching you, watching you, makes me feel wonderful. Sometimes I'm so deeply connected to you that I can't tell whose orgasm I'm experiencing."

"Which is even more reason for both of us to abstain, Catherine," he said. "Please. When the babies are born and you are healed. Then I promise to let you kiss me and caress me until I my cries shatter the glass behind our bed."

Catherine smiled and rested her head on his chest. "Whatever will Father say?"

"As little as possible, I would think."



"Jenny and Elliot didn't need to go up to the park," Catherine said, leaning back against Vincent's shoulder. "If they really wanted to attend a concert in the middle of a heat wave, they could have listened to it from here."

Vincent wrapped his arms around her, enjoying the feel of her skin beneath his hands. The night air was thick and moist, refusing to let go of the heat of the day, and her arms were bare where he held them. He had cut the sleeves from one of his old shirts and she wore it like a smock with the bottom of her two-piece bathing suit. He, too, had made concessions to the heat and wore only a loose, white shirt tucked into his pants.

Now, as she leaned back in his arms, Vincent could see the beads of moisture that covered her neck. Her hair was pulled up into a ponytail on

the top of her head and escaping tendrils stuck to her skin. He blew gently, letting his breath cool her.

"I believe Elliot *needed* to go Above tonight, Catherine," he said softly, only faintly aware of that the orchestra overhead had begun to tune their instruments. "And that he needed to be alone with Jenny." He kissed her neck, drinking in the scent and taste of her. "Elliot is not yet ready to go back into that world forever," Vincent continued. "He is still struggling to find his way. He is still seeking a new dream. Perhaps Jenny can help him to find it."

"Perhaps," Catherine agreed, smiling. This was, after all, their special place. It might be better to keep it to themselves for a while longer.

"We have shared it with Jacob many times, Catherine," Vincent reminded her.

Catherine laughed softly. "I'll never forget how confused he was during the Schumann," she said. "He kept looking up at the sky, waiting for it to rain. I think he was a little disappointed when nothing happened but the music."

"Our memories were very vivid, Catherine. And he is connected deeply to both of us. But he enjoyed the music, even without the rain. Children are remarkably adaptable."

"Yes."

Vincent heard the wistfulness in her tone and he tightened his arms. She had done so much in the world Above to help the children; the ones whom no one wanted, the ones without a voice in the uncaring world around them. Even now, in their own world, he had watched her give herself to the little ones who sought her out. Eric, Kipper, Melissa, all of those who were children of the community; loved by all, special to all, knew that Catherine could always be counted upon for an extra hug, a quiet talk. Like Mary, she had become surrogate mother to many; beloved by all.

"Maybe it's because I lost my mother so young, Vincent," he heard her whisper. "I see the child I once was in their eyes, and I want to be there for them."

"They know that, Catherine," he said. He smiled as a sudden thought crossed his mind. "Some day they may begin to call you Mother instead of Catherine," he whispered. "Then what shall we do?"

"Ask Father to abdicate?" she teasingly answered.

"I don't think I quite fit the part," Vincent said softly.

No," she agreed. "Father is Father and you're Vincent. That's just the way it is." He heard her soft sigh. "As for me becoming everyone's mother, I don't know if I see that happening," Catherine said. "But it wouldn't bother me." She gently stroked the rounded place where her hands had been resting. "It certainly does fit.

"You know, Vincent," she continued, "it's hard to believe that in a couple of months I'll actually be the mother of three children. I always wanted children." She tilted her neck, looking back at him and he saw all her love for him reflected in her eyes. "And I always wanted them to be yours."

Vincent could not resist the soft lips that beckoned him. He put his hand beneath her chin, holding her lightly as he kissed her. "And I always wanted to give them to you," he told her.

Catherine closed her eyes, accepting his kiss, the soft exploration of her mouth. She felt cherished, protected, and infinitely loved. When the kiss ended, she sighed and rested her head in the crook of his shoulder.

Above them the concert had begun, and the deep, intoxicating strains of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" drifted down to them. Catherine felt herself floating with them as the orchestra, along with the violin soloist carried the audience away to sail the seas with Sinbad. The music sounded like the waves; swelling then breaking with the roll of the ship. Catherine saw it in her mind; the billowing sails, the long, sleek lines of the ancient ships, and she smiled, feeling Vincent there with her, seeing it through her eyes. They let the music take them; a wondrous journey through "A Thousand and One Nights."

As Vincent listened to the music, his thoughts went back to the children; those Below, and those he knew needed help in the world Above. There was still so much that could be done; so much Catherine could still

accomplish if she wanted to. He thought of the position she had almost taken; the job in Rhode Island that had threatened to take her away from him so long ago. What if there had been no Professor Hughes? What if Catherine had taken that position? What would life have been for him? For Catherine?

"Empty."

Vincent heard the soft whisper and knew that Catherine had heard his thoughts. He leaned his cheek against her hair. Yes, life would have been empty. He rubbed his hands gently across her stomach, conscious always of their children growing within her.

"You once told me that loving someone wouldn't necessarily make life simpler, Vincent," Catherine said softly. "And you were right. Life and death are never simple. But even after all we've been through - I wouldn't change anything if it meant that I wouldn't have today. If everything that happened brought me to this moment, then I can't be sorry or look back and say I should have done something different. My life now, with you and our children, is everything I ever wanted, ever dreamed of. I wouldn't change a thing."

Vincent tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. In the light of the full moon he could see that she had made peace at last with the past. She had come to terms with all of it. It was there, in the tranquility he saw in her eyes, the calm he felt in her heart.

"I never want you to regret anything, Catherine," Vincent told her. "There is still so much that you could do to help the children Above. There are still so many children crying out in need."

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "And we can help them, you and I; as our Helpers do, as Mary and Father do." She sighed. "I know that you think I need more, that perhaps I could try to do the work I did Above somehow, from here. And someday that may happen. But now is not the time, Vincent."

She turned more fully toward him, bracing her hand on his thigh to help her balance. Vincent smiled and helped her to sit up. "What I'm doing now *is* important to me, Vincent," she told him, touching his cheek. "Look into my heart and see how important. Because of our love I was

given a second chance. How could I not be happy with what I've been given?"

She moved her fingers gently, and Vincent felt the love of her touch all through him. "We'll never know if these are the choices we would have made, Vincent," she whispered. "We'll never know if you would have been happy about my having Jacob. We'll never know if I would have made the conscious decision to come Below. But don't you see? It doesn't matter." She leaned forward, threading her fingers into his hair as she covered his mouth with hers, making a vow of her words.

The music drifted down to them through the humid night, filling the air with magic as Vincent felt filled with Catherine's love. She spoke to him with touches; sweet and gently given. And with her words.

"You know my heart, Vincent," she told him, as she spread delicate kisses across his chin. "You know my mind. Listen to them. Trust them. I am content. I am happy." She took his hands, pressing them against the place where their children slept, safe and loved. "What could be more wonderful than to give the gift of life, Vincent?" Catherine asked softly. "You and I will watch these children grow. We'll be there for them, to love them, to teach them."

Vincent heard Catherine's words and felt her touches. But it was the words that floated to him, not on air, but on the connection between their souls that brought him peace.

*"Nor is the soul more worthy, or more fit
For love than this, as infinite it is."*



"This was a wonderful idea, Vincent," Catherine said as she sat at the edge of the Mirror Pool dangling her feet in the water. "It's so much more peaceful here with just the three of us." She smiled, enjoying the pleasure

of watching Vincent and Jacob swim in the clear water. Jacob swam like a polliwog, all legs and arms, thrashing with little grace. Vincent, on the other hand, moved as gracefully in water as he did on land. As Catherine watched, he dove beneath the surface, coming up a few feet away to scoop their laughing son into his arms. It was obvious to her that Vincent loved the water just as much as Jacob did.

Almost everyone else in the community had taken the children for a day at the Chamber of the Falls. Michael had come Below to spend the last week of summer vacation with them, and had asked Father to declare a holiday, suggesting a picnic at the falls for everyone. Because of her advanced pregnancy, which Michael had commented on at length the night before during dinner, Catherine had had to decline. So Vincent had suggested that they have their own picnic at the Mirror Pool.

Catherine loved the quiet beauty of the pool. It had a magic and serenity that she had found intrinsic to most of the world Below. Yes, some days could be hectic; for there were always things that needed doing, children who needed tending. Still, life moved at a slower pace here. A pace that Catherine thought brought the more important things of life into greater focus.

She looked down at the water, watching as the images of the sky above the city made their way across the pool. But unlike the faint reflection of clouds she saw moving across the rippling water, Catherine saw life Below as richer, and fuller than in the world Above. It was a richness that renewed her daily. A richness surpassed only by her love for the man walking toward her, holding a wiggling, laughing child beneath his arm.

"Sim, Momma," Jacob called to her. "Sim."

Catherine scooted back from the water and smiled as Vincent sat on the sand beside her, plopping their son down beside her on the towel. "Mamma can't swim right now, Jacob," she told him. "Mamma can't swim until she has the babies."

Jacob laughed and pushed himself to his feet. He had become accustomed to moving in a upright position and seldom crawled when he could walk. He tottered the few inches necessary to burrow against his mother's arms, and Catherine held him close, rubbing her cheek over his wet hair.

"Baby sim," Jacob insisted, patting his mother's tummy. "Baby sim Jake up."

Catherine shook her head. "Not this summer, Jacob," she told him. "Next summer. Next summer you and Daddy can teach the babies to swim. Okay?"

Vincent smiled as he actually tried to picture himself as the father of three small children. Evidence of Jacob's place in their life had already overtaken most of the shelves and bookcases in their chamber. He would soon outgrow his crib, and even Catherine had noticed that Jacob's delight in finding new things to play with was only surpassed by the speed at which he took those things apart. The little wheelbarrow Vincent had found in one of the old storage rooms was Jacob's pride and joy, and he pushed it everywhere, carrying his treasures around to show off to family members and visiting friends.

"I believe it is time to give thought to a chamber for Jacob," Vincent said, watching as their son searched through his mother's drawstring bag. He withdrew the little container of dried fruit Catherine had brought and held it out to his father to open.

"Is that possible?" Catherine asked. Jacob plopped down beside her, with the opened plastic box, helping himself to a slice of dried apple. "I didn't know there were any extra chambers around us," Catherine said.

"Remember the small chamber behind Father's study?" Vincent asked. "Father has suggested that we make use of it until we can make additions to ours. He has been using it for storage, but with a thorough cleaning and the addition of Jacob's furniture, I believe it will be quite suitable."

Catherine frowned. "Jacob just got over his jealousy about the twins," she reminded him. "Do you really think that moving him out of our chamber is a good idea right now?"

Vincent reached out to ruffle his son's hair. Jacob looked up and gave him a toothy grin. "I believe Jacob would be happy with his own room, Catherine," he said softly. "He knows that we love him. And he knows that we will be close by."

He moved his hand from his son's hair to his wife's chin, smiling at the resemblance he saw between them. "We are not abandoning him, Catherine," Vincent said. "Jacob will still be spending most of his time in our chamber. But he has been climbing from the crib for the past month and is ready for his own bed. Father has found a small trundle bed and has asked Cullen to check that it is in good condition. And the twins will need the crib."

Catherine sighed. "That's true," she said, looking down at their small son. "It just seems strange to think of him sleeping somewhere else. Are you certain Father knows what he's getting into?"

Vincent smiled and leaned to press a soft kiss against her cheek. "Yes," he assured her, "Father is fully aware of Jacob's nocturnal habits, Catherine. Our son knows what he is and is not allowed to do. I believe that we can trust him to remain in his chamber during the night. You will admit that even when he gets up in the early hours of the morning, he seldom wakens us."

"Not since he learned to pull off his wet diapers," Catherine laughed. "I don't think any mother ever had a son who just about potty-trained himself before."

"It might be argued that pulling off wet diapers and putting on training pants is not exactly potty-training, Catherine," Vincent teased. "But I will admit that Jacob is learning quickly that there are certain things he can control if he puts his mind to it."

Vincent looked down at his small son, smiling as he watched Jacob try to put the lid back on the fruit container. He was always intrigued by anything with parts; trying to reduce them to their basic components. His hands were too small for this task, however, and Vincent could feel his frustration growing.

Vincent held out his hand and Jacob put the lid into it. He watched solemnly as Vincent tightened it down. Had the container been empty, Vincent knew that Jacob would have lost no time in trying to decipher how to remove the lid once again. As it was, Jacob merely sighed and moved closer to his mother's hip. Taking hold of the slight cover-up she wore over her two-piece bathing suit, he stretched out beside her and snuggled close for a nap.

"My son has an excellent idea," Vincent murmured, getting up to move to her other side. Using the drawstring bag as a pillow, he lay back on the sand, holding out his arm for her.

Catherine smiled and laid back against his shoulder, careful not to dislodge Jacob's hold. Vincent felt her body relax as he held her near, feeling the soft whisper of her breath across his skin. He kissed her temple and closed his eyes. The world around him was quiet, serene and still, and he let it carry him into sleep, dreaming of children, and love which knew no boundaries.



XXIII

"Is this going to get Elliot in trouble, Cathy?"

Catherine piled another of Jacob's blocks on top of his already high tower, smiling as her son considered whether to make it higher still, or give it a good shove. She glanced up at Jenny from her place beside him on the floor and smiled.

"It's taken a month to convene the Council, Jenny," Catherine told her. "If Elliot was really in trouble, Father would have seen to it that the Council met sooner. They *are* interested in all the work he and Mouse seem to be doing, though. Neither one of them has really told anyone what they're up to. Father doesn't much like secrets. He likes to be kept informed." She watched as Jacob added another block to the tower, squealing in delight when it all came tumbling down around them. For Jacob, it was almost as good as actually taking something apart.

From the corner of her eye, Catherine saw Jenny pacing the chamber. She had just come Below to see Elliot and been informed by Catherine that he and Mouse were attending a Council meeting.

"So, how come you're not at this meeting?" Jenny asked, settling onto the rug across from her.

Catherine helped Jacob gather up the blocks and they began to build the tower once again. "Because this time it doesn't concern me," Catherine said. "And I'm not a member of the Council." She didn't tell Jenny how glad she was to sit this one out. Between Elliot's coming Below, Jenny's dreams, and Joe; Catherine felt that she had intruded into the Council quite enough for awhile. She handed Jenny a few blocks and pointed to Jacob's tower. "Help us out here, Jen," she said. "Jacob likes to see how high they can get before they fall over."

"Watch out, Cath," Jenny said softly. "Sounds a lot like Elliot."

Catherine watched quietly for a few minutes while Jacob's tower grew. It wasn't exactly the Burch Tower, but it did remind Catherine that Elliot had once wanted his tower more than anything else in the world.

"What's going on with you and Elliot, Jen?" Catherine asked. "You've been down here quite a lot in the last few months. I didn't get to see you this often when I lived Above."

She saw Jenny smile as she added a block to the pile. "You had a job that had worse hours than mine," Jenny told her. "Just getting you to meet me for dinner was a major accomplishment. I always felt like your work came before anything else in your life."

"It did for awhile," Catherine admitted. "I loved the challenge of what I was doing," she explained. "And when everything came together, it really gave me a sense that I had achieved something."

"Don't you miss it?"

Catherine smiled and shook her head. "Not at all," she said honestly. "Trust me, Jen, raising Jacob is a challenge. There isn't anything this boy doesn't want to see or do." She paused as Jacob laughed and took a swat at the base of the tower. Blocks scattered and Jacob clapped his hands in triumph. "In a little over a month, Peter tells me, I'll have two more children to raise," Catherine continued, watching Jacob pick up the scattered blocks. He piled a few into Jenny's lap, giggling when she kissed him on the nose. "I really think that helping these little people grow is going to be all the challenge I'll need for quite some time." She picked up another block but held it in her hand, looking at the fading colors so typical of the world Below.

"Life is good here, Jen," Catherine said softly. "There's a peace here that I would never have been able to find up there. Haven't you felt it?"

Jenny lifted Jacob into her arms and Catherine heard her sigh as he snuggled against her neck. "Yeah," Jenny said, stroking Jacob's hair, "I've felt it. Maybe that's why I've, uh been down here so much." She grinned, shrugging slightly. "Well, Elliot had something to do with it, too, I guess."

"That thought did occur to me."

Jenny laughed. "Okay, so I'm uh, not the subtle type."

"You *could* say that," Catherine teasingly agreed. "But you still haven't answered my question. What's going on with you and Elliot? The last time we talked about it, you were all concerned about it being nothing more than a rebound reaction on his part. That's not what I've been seeing these past months."

"No," Jenny sighed, "it isn't." Catherine watched as Jacob snuggled closer and gave Jenny one of his special people kisses.

"Do you want to talk about it, Jen?"

"I don't know, Cath," Jenny said. "I used to be a fairly stable person, didn't I?"

Catherine smiled. "Yes, I'd call you fairly stable."

"Okay, so why is it that, uh, when that man looks at me a certain way I just sort of start melting like, well, like an ice cream cone that's been dropped on the sidewalk?"

"Gee, Jen," Catherine said, "I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

Jenny laughed. "Boy, I don't know why I bother. You're a big help."

Catherine put her hand on Jenny's arm. "You want me to be serious," she said, "then I'll be serious. Elliot can be very charming when he wants to be, Jenny," Catherine told her. "And there were times when I haven't always trusted him. But Vincent seems to think that he really cares for you; that you can help Elliot to find the best part of himself."

"Vincent said that?"

Catherine nodded. "We've talked about you," she admitted. "You're both our friends and we want you to be happy."

"As much as I like visiting you down here, Cathy," Jenny said softly. "This isn't where I want to spend my life."

"Of course not," Catherine replied. "I can't imagine you giving up your place in the Village, or your art exhibits or your job. You love the City, Jen. Probably as much as Elliot does."

"Elliot says he doesn't love it," Jenny confessed. "He keeps telling me that it's okay to visit, but uh, it's not where he wants to live anymore."

"And you believe him?"

"If you'd have heard him, Cath, you'd believe him, too."

Catherine sighed and leaned back against the bed. She had found that it made a wonderful backrest when she sat on the floor playing with Jacob. "Maybe Elliot feels that way now, Jen," she said, "because of all that happened. But Vincent and I believe that eventually he'll want to go back to the City to live."

"That might take years."

"Yes, that's always possible," Catherine said.

"So what do I do in the meantime?"

"What do you *want* to do, Jenny?"

Jenny shrugged and Jacob wiggled out of her arms. "Enjoy him?" Jenny suggested, smiling.

Catherine returned her smile and helped her sleepy son climb up onto his father's bed. "I guess you could do that," she said, turning to watch as Jacob made himself comfortable among the pillows. She looked back at Jenny. "The two of you seem to get along pretty well," she said. "I haven't noticed that you had trouble making conversation."

"I love talking to him, Cathy," Jenny said breathlessly. "He knows so much about art, about jazz. Did you know that he has a friend who plays sax? You *know* what an alto sax does to me."

Catherine laughed. "I seem to remember what a certain saxophone *player* used to do to you," she said, glad to see that Jenny was still her

happy, buoyant self. "Does this mean that you're not going to turn maudlin and serious on me?"

"Nah," Jenny said, "it's really not my style." She ran her fingers through her hair, laughing softly when only one of her bracelets caught on her curls. "I'm going to have to do something about this," she sighed.

"You've been saying that for all the years I've known you," Catherine told her. "I don't see it happening anytime soon."

"No, probably not." She untangled her hair and took off the silver bracelet, twirling it around her fingers. "I think I'll keep it sort of light with Elliot for a while and see what happens," she said. "Not that I'm going to give up our long talks, or uh, our midnight swims."

"Midnight swims?"

"Shhh," Jenny whispered. "You're not supposed to know. Elliot's been working hard with his physical therapy. Have you seen that pulley system he and Mouse rigged up? He's been doing what Peter told him to do and he's gotten back a lot of his, what's that called? When you can move your arm?"

"Range of motion?" Catherine suggested.

"That's it. Range of motion. Anyway, Peter told him that when he gets all of that back, he can start with weights to build up his strength."

"And you've been helping him?"

"Well, not exactly. I just sort of go along when he wants to exercise in the water, or uh, when his arm hurts and he needs to soak it, uh, in the, uh, well, in that spa thing."

"What, 'spa thing'?" Catherine asked, wondering just how many nights Jenny had spent Below without being anywhere near the guest chamber.

"Uh, well, it's sort of far, you know? Down near this really spectacular crystal room."

"Is that where you and Elliot have been staying?" she asked softly.

"Oh no," Jenny said, smiling. "I know whose special place *that* is," she teased. "Elliot found another chamber on the other side of the spa. It's not as large, but it's big enough for a double air mattress and sleeping bag and a few necessities."

Catherine closed her eyes, trying to decide whether or not she really wanted to hear this. "A few necessities?"

"Sure," Jenny told her. "You know. Like a bottle of champagne and two or three pastramis on rye from the deli."



Vincent watched as Father took off his glasses and dropped them onto the desk in front of him. "Let me see if I have this correctly," Father said, his gaze directed toward the two people standing in the middle of the room. "You are attempting to construct some sort of power plant to generate electricity. And you expect to eventually bring that electricity from the underground river Mouse discovered, to our Home Chambers. Is that basically correct?"

"Yes," Elliot said. "That's correct."

Vincent wondered what Catherine would think of the Elliot who stood before them at this Council meeting. He suspected that she would recognize him much better than anyone else in the room. The Elliot standing beside Mouse was not the lost and defeated man that Vincent had escorted to the Tunnels almost nine months ago. This Elliot knew about yielding power, about making decisions and bringing other men over to his side.

The power plant was an interesting feat of engineering, combining old-world ideas with cast-off remnants of the automated city above them. If

Elliot's proposal was accepted, it could mean that within a few years the people who lived within the community would have a regular source of heat and light.

"And how many man hours is it going to take to construct this plant?"

"Mouse and I have already done the preliminary survey work," Elliot told them, "as well as checking into the availability of the generators and batteries that will be needed. We've managed to find a good source for the cable, and the gear boxes and shafts are already in the design stages. Mouse is working on those."

"Great idea," Mouse said. "Simple. Should have thought of it myself."

"Is this going to be dangerous in any way, Elliot?" Mary asked. Vincent understood Mary's concern. If bringing more electricity into the Home Chambers would pose a threat, they would rather do without the lights and heat.

"I don't believe so, Mary," Elliot replied. "We will take every precaution to string the cable in a way that eliminates any danger to either the children or anyone else who might come in contact with it."

"Then it *will* be exposed," Pascal said. "That's got to be dangerous. The wiring we have now is limited, but at least it's set up so that very little of it is exposed."

"The wiring part of the project is the last thing to be done," Elliot explained. "Before we even get to that stage all the other work will need to be completed."

"But we won't need to do the work if we can't agree on how the wiring is to be done," Pascal argued.

"Pascal's right," William said, leaning forward in his chair. "We have to be sure there's no danger to the children. How do we know that this whole thing won't just blow up in our faces?"

Vincent heard Elliot's small sigh. "You've seen the plans," Elliot said slowly, his voice controlled and calm. "The plant itself is miles below the

Home Chambers. The original generation of electricity will be powered by the water wheel we're building on the river. Water wheels do not explode."

"But what's to stop all those generators and batteries from exploding?" William demanded. "You're gonna have all sorts of mechanical gadgets that are liable to cause problems."

"The cavern where we intend to build the water wheel and place the power plant itself is very well ventilated, William," Elliot said. "Even if the batteries gave off twice the hydrogen gas and sulfuric acid fumes that they normally do, there wouldn't be enough of a concentration to cause any kind of explosion. Besides, there isn't any sort of ignition source at that location."

"What about the light you'll need to work by?" William replied. "Won't the torches be enough of an ignition source for you?"

Vincent shook his head and looked at William. "Elliot's plans call for the use of battery powered lanterns only, William," he explained. "There will be no open fires around any of the components."

"Battery powered lanterns cost money," Pascal said softly. "Our helpers don't have those kinds of resources."

Elliot shoved his hands into his pockets, and his lips thinned into a grim line. "You don't need the Helper's money," he told them. "I'm using my own." He shrugged. "There isn't a lot. Joe told me that my lawyers went through with the corporate bankruptcy. But he checked, and there's enough left in my personal accounts to take care of everything we'll need."

The silence that followed Elliot's words was total. Even Vincent had not known about this part of Elliot's plan.

"I know you don't trust me yet," Elliot continued softly. "And I can't say that I blame you. I haven't exactly been overly friendly." He looked at each of them in turn. "When I first came to you it was because I literally had no where else to go. I thought I was wanted for murder. And there was no way I was going to prove I didn't do it without exposing Vincent and everyone here Below."

His gaze moved to Vincent and he smiled. "Vincent gave me a chance to regain my self-respect, to find out if Elliot Burch still existed. He

took a chance. He trusted me. And you trusted him. I want to repay that trust. I want to help bring heat to these chambers, to make life a little easier for everyone who lives here. It won't be much at first," he told them. "I haven't worked out any plans for an alternating current system yet, so it's 120 volt direct current. But if it means that some of the older people aren't so cold at night, and that they can see a little better, well, I think it'll be worth it in the long run."

"Does this mean that if one of the kids got hold of a stereo or something that we'd be listening to that noise day in and day out?" Nathaniel asked.

Elliot shook his head. "No," he promised. "It's direct current so it isn't going to run anything like that. It'll run lights and portable heaters. The power needed for things such as stereos needs to be very steady alternating current. Ours isn't going to be."

"Thank God for small favors," Vincent heard Father mutter under his breath. "Well," he said aloud, "I believe Elliot and Mouse have outlined the plan as they see it, and given us enough information for a preliminary investigation. Vincent, I want you and Pascal to inspect the site of this proposed power plant, and check into any dangers that Elliot and Mouse may have missed." He looked directly at Elliot. "It is not that we don't trust you, Elliot," he said, "but Pascal and Vincent know these chambers. They have been involved with both the communications and the electrical systems all of their adult lives."

He then directed his gaze to Mouse. "I will expect you to help them, Mouse," he added softly. "This has great possibilities. The plan you and Elliot have conceived may help the entire community. I hope that eventually the Council will be able to back you fully."

"You will," Mouse said confidently. "Won't need stupid Con Ed," he added. "Gonna have Mouse Ed now."



XXIV

Vincent and Pascal were set to leave two days later.

"If you need anything," Vincent told Catherine, "just ask Father or Mary." He held her close, stroking her hair. "I could postpone this journey," he said. "I don't believe that another month or so is crucial."

Catherine shook her head. "No," she said, "I'll need you even more after the babies are born." She drew his hand down to her stomach. "While they're still in here," she told him, "I think Jacob and I can manage just fine."

"And you'll have Father give Jacob his baths," Vincent reminded her.

Catherine smiled. "Yes," she promised, "I'll have Father give Jacob his baths. I just hope he's in shape for it."

"I have warned him," Vincent said, rubbing his hands across her stomach and around to her back as he held her against him. "I don't want to leave you," he whispered, kissing her gently on the lips. "The days will be endless, and the nights empty."

Catherine wrapped her arms around him. "You'll be close, Vincent," she said. "You'll be here in my heart and in my mind. We'll be together."

They left in the morning, and throughout the long afternoon that followed Catherine stayed busy folding and putting away the clothes Vincent had brought from the laundry the night before. It was mindless work, but it kept her hands busy while she watched Jacob play in their chamber. Catherine thought that their son was very solemn with his father gone, as though he knew that he was looking after her. It was evident that he took

the task very seriously. He seldom went very far and he talked to her while he played. It wasn't until he went to sleep that Catherine really felt lonely.

With only a few candles lit around the room, the soft shadows danced lightly across the ceiling. Catherine lay in bed, staring up at the apparitions. She could feel the richness of Vincent's presence within her mind, and she knew that he was well. But for some reason the quiet chamber made her restless. Even the babies refused to sleep. They were more active than usual, taking turns letting her know they were awake; stretching and kicking it seemed, in every direction.

After trying without success to fall asleep, Catherine got up carefully from the bed and put on Vincent's robe over her nightshirt. It was much too big for her, but it carried his distinct scent, and she felt surrounded by him; safe and secure. She tied the sash, bringing it high above her protruding stomach and slipped into the comfortable moccasins Vincent had made for her. If she could get a cup of camomile tea, perhaps she could sleep. She checked Jacob and left the chamber, making her way quietly to the dining hall kitchen.

The sounds of night Below were soft sounds, sounds without malice, without the screeching of tires or honking of horns that instilled the night Above with the restlessness of its people. Here; there was only the occasional tapping of sentries as they called in the watch and the gentle murmur of mothers singing their children to sleep.

As Catherine drew closer to the kitchen, she heard another sound. This was William's time; the time, he had told her, when he felt closest to everything he had left behind. She heard the gentle slap of dough being kneaded against a bread board and she smiled.

"There's a pot of tea made for you, Catherine," she heard William say as she entered the room. Her smile widened. Of course William had known that she wouldn't be able to sleep. Didn't he always?

"Thank you, William," she said, walking toward him. The chair she usually used in the dining room had been moved into the kitchen for her, and he had placed it where she would be able to sit comfortably and talk to him. Two cups and saucers had also been set out on the countertop, and she took one now, filling it with the fragrant tea. "You're spoiling me, you know," she told him, making herself comfortable in the chair. Vincent's

robe covered her like a blanket and she sipped the tea, letting it warm her on the inside too.

"What good are friends if they can't spoil you a little?" William replied, dividing the large mound of bread dough into loaf-size portions.

Catherine had watched him do this often, but she never tired of it. With his large hands, he turned everyday ingredients into something that was healthy and tasted wonderful. He did so much for everyone; quietly, without fanfare, without recompense. This was his vocation, his place within the community.

"Worried about Vincent?" William asked.

Catherine shook her head, inhaling the steam from the teacup she held between both hands. "No," she told him. "I'm just restless." She smiled up at him. "Didn't you tell me that pregnant women always seem to get restless when their time is getting near?"

William nodded and continued to knead the dough. "My mother always did," he said softly. "I remember her working on a remembrance quilt, or putting up applesauce. She always had so much to do." His voice trailed off and Catherine looked back down into her teacup.

"It must have been difficult," she said, "taking care of all those children."

"She was raised to it," he replied. "That's what marriage is to the Plain People. Marriages are made on mutual respect and the desire for children, Catherine," he told her. "They don't believe that love is all that necessary. Children; children are what's necessary. Children to raise strong in the faith."

Catherine took another sip of tea, listening for a moment to the steady plop of the dough against the wood. "It must make you sad, sometimes," she said, "knowing that your family is back there, wondering what's become of you."

William sighed and Catherine saw him put down the dough and wipe his hands on his apron. "That all happened a long time ago," he said. "Even before I left, I wasn't a part of them anymore." He poured himself a

cup of tea and came around the counter. "Has Vincent told you about the Silence?" he asked, leaning against the wood.

"Not really," she admitted. "I remember Mouse being in some trouble once though, when Vincent and Father were buried in the Maze. Wasn't he under something called the Silence?"

William nodded. "Yeah," he sighed. "That's about the only thing about this place that I can't stand. The Silence." He drank some of his tea, and Catherine knew he was thinking of something other than the Tunnels. "Mennonites have what's called the *Meidung*," he told her. "It's like the Silence, only worse. We would say 'the Shunning.' It's the worst thing that can happen to you if you're Amish. Once you're shunned, you're cut off from everything you know, everything you love."

"And you were shunned?"

William's smile was grim. "Have you ever noticed my temper, Catherine?" he asked her. "Yeah, I thought so. Well, I let it go once. Ought to have known better, but I wasn't doin' much thinkin' at the time."

"What happened?"

"It's not important," he said. "Not here, not now. But the bishops and the elders thought it was enough. I can remember them, sitting around my mother's kitchen table." He shook his head and took another swallow of tea. "God that hurt," he whispered. "Not the elders; I didn't much care about what they had to say by then. It was my mother. I'll never forget the look on her face. I could see the tears." He straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath.

"Did you stay?" Catherine asked. "After the shunning?"

"I tried," William said, "but it was no use. No one would speak to me, I had to eat my meals alone after everybody else was done. Fourteen other people in that house, Catherine, and not one of them could look at me, or talk to me, or even sit at the table with me. It's like being a non-person. You just stop existing. You're nobody."

Catherine stood up, touching William on the shoulder. "You're somebody here," she reminded him. "I'm sorry, William. I shouldn't have asked. I didn't mean to stir up all these unhappy memories."

"You didn't stir them up, Catherine," he said. "It's this project of Elliot's. That's what's really got me thinking about the past. Not you." He patted the hand she had laid on his shoulder and smiled. "You're supposed to be off your feet," he said. "You sit yourself down in that chair and finish your tea. And maybe I might just find a cookie or two to go along with it."

Catherine laughed softly. "You're terrible; bribing a pregnant woman with cookies."

She sat down, though, and watched as William went behind the counter again, taking two large oatmeal cookies from the bear-shaped cookie jar. William handed her one and she bit into it gladly, knowing how delicious it was going to be. "Would you mind if I ask what it is about Elliot's project that upsets you?" she asked.

"Nope. I don't mind," he said, pausing for a minute to take a bite of the cookie he had in his hand. "It's just the project itself," he began. "Life here is simple; a lot like it was when I was a kid. And we've done pretty well so far without a lot of fancy gadgets and power plants. I don't want to see our way of life change."

"And you think it will?"

"Depends, I guess," William said. "Oh, I know Vincent and Pascal are checking everything out, making certain the whole thing isn't going to blow up in our faces, but that doesn't mean that things won't eventually change. I've seen a lot of changes, Catherine. Change doesn't always mean better."

"That's certainly true," Catherine agreed. "But it doesn't necessarily mean worse, either."

"Is that you, Catherine? My heavens, what are you doing up at this hour?"

Catherine turned toward the doorway and smiled. "I'm having cookies and camomile tea with William, Mary," she said. "I got restless and couldn't sleep. I hope we didn't wake you."

"No," Mary said, coming into the room, "you didn't wake me. One of the children has a touch of stomachache," she explained. "I thought I'd fix him some peppermint tea."

"Well, you know where everything is, Mary," William said, going back to the bread dough he had set out to rise. "I've been talking Catherine's head off. Guess I'd better get back to my bread or there won't be any fresh for tomorrow."

"You know I love our talks, William," Catherine told him, as she watched him shape the dough into loaves. "It makes me really feel like I'm finally a part of everything here. I never got to really know everyone before. My time Below was always measured in such small amounts . . ."

"And you wanted to spend it all with Vincent," Mary commented. "We understood that." Catherine felt Mary squeeze her shoulder as she passed by her chair. "I'm just thankful that you're with us now, Catherine," she said softly. "Vincent is happier than I've ever seen him."

Catherine watched as Mary went to the cupboard. She was wearing a long, quilted robe that buttoned all the way up to her chin. It was a wonderful patchwork of muted greys and browns, and Catherine realized that she had never seen Mary in any other colors. But there was something different. Her hair was down and hung halfway down her back. Catherine couldn't remember ever seeing Mary with her hair down before.

"The child's stomachache," Catherine asked, knowing that the sick child must have gotten Mary from her bed. "it's not serious, is it?"

"No, no," Mary said, taking a canister from the cupboard. "Robert just ate too much dinner. He does that sometimes." She shook her head as she put the peppermint leaves into a tea ball. "I think it's because he had so very little to eat before he came to us," she told them. "Every now and then he forgets that there will still be food to eat tomorrow. Those kinds of lessons are hard to forget." She took a cup down from the shelf and put the tea ball into it, then added hot water from the kettle.

"How old was Robert when he came Below?" Catherine asked. She had only met Robert a few times. He was about seven, she thought, and in the younger children's classes. He had always been very quiet and shy, saying little.

"Oh, Robert's about eight, we think," Mary told her. "He's small for his age, but then malnutrition will do that." Catherine heard her sigh. "It's so hard for the children - that world up there. Robert's been here for, let's see, for two years, I think. Yes. Two years."

"How did he get here, Mary? Did one of the Helpers bring him?"

"That's how children usually find their way here, Catherine," Mary said, lifting the tea ball to check the tea. "One of our helpers hears about a child, or knows of a child who needs us, and they bring them Below. Only very small children, of course," Mary added. "Most of the older children refuse to let our friends help them. They have so much hostility, so much fear. It's hard to break through it all."

"Vincent thinks that I might be able to find a better way to bring more children Below, Mary," Catherine said. "He thinks that between what I already know of the system, our Helpers, and with a little assistance from Joe and Jenny, we might be able to rescue more children who are in need."

"And what do you think?" William asked.

"I think that I might consider it in a few years," Catherine told them. "But not now." She smoothed the fabric of Vincent's robe over her protruding stomach. "It's a wonderful idea," she said. "But I'm realistic enough to know that it would be a lot more complicated than Vincent believes. There would be all sorts of things to work out." She looked down at her cup and sighed. "Jacob's already a handful," she said, "and with two more . . . I think I'll be more than busy enough." She ran her finger around the rim of the cup. "It wouldn't hurt for me to talk to Jenny and Peter about it, I guess. But I think I need to concentrate on my own children for awhile." She looked up, wanting to see William and Mary's faces. "Does that sound selfish?" she asked softly.

Mary fiddled with the chain on the tea ball. "Vincent has always been touched by the children," she said. "Even when he was just a boy himself." She looked up from the cup and Catherine saw the glaze of tears in her

eyes. "Do you know how wonderful it is for me to see you giving Vincent what he wanted most in his life?" Mary asked. "I always thought he would make an extraordinary father. No," she added, "I don't think it's selfish. Thank you for giving him that chance, Catherine."

Catherine wiggled forward on the chair and pushed herself to her feet with her free hand. "I love Vincent, Mary," Catherine said, setting her teacup on the counter. "I want to give him everything."

"You have, Catherine," William said solemnly.

Catherine smiled. "Not yet, William," she told him. "But I'm working on it."

"You just take care of yourself, Catherine," Mary advised her. "You can never tell with twins. Anything can happen. It's not like giving birth to one child. Did Peter tell you what to watch for?"

Catherine rubbed her hand over her stomach. "He said that if anything happened, anything at all, I was supposed to get you or Father. And that someone would get word to him." She looked up at Mary and William's concerned faces. "He also said that I couldn't be in better hands."

"Well, I certainly think *that's* true," Mary replied. "Father and I have delivered hundreds of babies." She frowned and looked away.

"What is it, Mary?" Catherine asked.

"I was just thinking of Father," Mary sighed. "He still blames himself for Ellie. He doesn't let it show very often, but I see it. He's never forgiven himself for losing her."

Catherine reached out and took Mary's hand. "Maybe my having these babies will help," she said. "He's offered to let Jacob move into that small room next to his so that we can have room for the twins."

"How do you feel about that, Catherine?" Mary asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. "Vincent and I both feel better with Jacob near us. I know that sounds silly, considering our bond and

everything, but we came so close to losing him. He's very, very special to us."

"All children are special," Mary said, patting her hand. "But I know what you mean. It's hard for me, sometimes, watching the children grow, knowing that some of them, like Laura and Michael, will eventually leave us." She paused, and Catherine felt the gentle squeeze of her fingers. "You think that Jacob will be one of those; like Michael and Laura, don't you, Catherine?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"I always tell the children that this is our safe place, Catherine," Mary said. "That it will be here for them, always."

"No matter how far they roam?" Catherine asked, thinking of her son, and of the others who had chosen a different path.

"No matter how far. This is always their home."



Vincent leaned his head against the pack, using it as a pillow. The ground beneath him was hard, but he had slept on the ground before. He could do it again for a night or two. He smiled, wondering at how quickly he had gotten used to sleeping with Catherine. He had slept alone for over thirty years. Now, it seemed, he had trouble sleeping without her.

He turned his head, looking at the men lying on the ground nearby. Only Pascal seemed to be awake, reading by the light of a small candle. Had they been anywhere near the places where the few followers of Paracelsus remained, one or more of them would have been keeping watch. But those caverns were on the other side of the community, far away from the dark tunnels and rushing river where they had set up their camp.

"Can't you sleep, Vincent?" Pascal whispered, laying his book aside.

Vincent shook his head. "It seems I have become used to a certain small, rounded body curled up against mine," he told his friend. "My arms are empty and sleep eludes me."

"But your connection," Pascal said, "doesn't it work no matter how far apart you are?"

"We are always connected, Pascal," Vincent told him. "I feel her in my heart. But that is not the same as holding her in my arms."

"Oh." Pascal leaned back against the wall of the cavern and picked up the book again, turning it slowly in his hands. "It must be a wonderful feeling," he said softly.

Vincent sat up and turned towards him. "It is not only the sensuousness of the experience," he said softly, "but the comfort. To know that she is safe, held within the circle of my arms; it makes me feel as though nothing can ever happen to separate us again."

"Do you still worry about that?" Pascal asked.

"Perhaps," Vincent admitted, "somewhere deep in my heart. There was always the possibility that Joe Maxwell might not be as understanding as Catherine had believed. And what could we have done? It could have meant the end of our world." Vincent sighed. "I *have* no other world, Pascal."

"But in the end everything worked out," Pascal replied. "Maxwell seems happy just knowing that Catherine is safe and well. He must have loved her very much."

"She is very easy to love," Vincent told him, thinking of Elliot sleeping nearby. He saw Pascal glance at the other man.

"Elliot wasn't very happy when he came here, Vincent," Pascal observed.

"No," Vincent agreed, "he had many demons. This project he and Mouse have conceived, I believe it has been a great help in giving him back his self-esteem."

"Do you think it's only the project?" Pascal asked. "He's been a lot different lately. I thought maybe Catherine's friend might be the reason."

"Catherine says much the same thing," Vincent told him. "She and Jenny have spoken of it."

"He's a lucky man then," Pascal said. "Jenny seems to be a lot like Catherine."

"In a way," Vincent said. "Catherine is more serene. There is an energy about Jenny that Catherine does not have."

Pascal laughed softly. "I've noticed," he said. "Father says that you can always tell when Jenny is Below. He hears her bracelets jingling and the sound of her laughter."

"Having Jenny here has been good for Catherine. They have always been very close." Vincent sighed, shaking his head. "It is difficult sometimes," he said, "for me to believe that Catherine can be happy being a wife and mother here Below. There were parts of the world Above that she truly enjoyed."

"Has she said that she misses it?"

"No. But she has so much to offer the world Above, Pascal. There is so much good she could do in that world."

"You don't believe that Catherine would go back, do you?" Pascal asked, his eyes wide with alarm. "I can't believe that she'd ever do that."

"No, Pascal," Vincent said. "Catherine has no desire to go Above. She has made that very clear to me. Her life is here now, and this is where she intends to stay. It is I who have the doubts."

"But why? Catherine is a great mother. And she's about to have twins. I would think that you'd be happy about that. You are, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," Vincent said. "There is nothing I want more than to see our children born into this world, to see them nursing at her breasts." He sighed and shifted on the blanket, clasping his hands together in front of him. "It's just that I never want Catherine to regret what we have, Pascal,"

he continued. "Life here is sometimes very difficult. There are many things the world Above can offer that we simply cannot provide."

Pascal put down the book and shook his head. "I don't think you know Catherine as well as you think you do, Vincent," he said. "Even with your connection. It may be because I'm seeing things from another perspective, but I think Catherine's content with what she has here. I remember how it was when she lived Above. You were never quite settled within yourself. Do you know what I mean? And neither was Catherine. You both, well, you were both anxious all the time. As if any moment your time together would be snatched away from you."

"That is very much how we felt."

"Do you feel that way now?" Pascal asked.

"No," Vincent said. "She has promised me forever. I believe her, Pascal."

"Then believe her and stop worrying." He turned his head for a moment, looking away, then met Vincent's eyes once again. "I know I'm the last one who should be giving you advice," he said softly. "But you and Catherine have something that has transcended all the boundaries. None of us has ever seen anything like it. It's frightening, sometimes, to think about a love that strong. But it gives us hope, Vincent. It gives us hope in the continuity of life."

He picked up the book and handed it to Vincent. "Here," he said. "I told you once that you could always read the book again. Well, here it is. Read it, Vincent. Remind yourself that some things really *do* last forever."

Vincent took the book from him and smiled. They had begun their friendship with *Great Expectations*. It was fitting that they read it now, when they were about to bring new life to their world.

"Thank you, Pascal," Vincent said. "Catherine and I shall read it together and think of the friend who always believed."



XXV

"They've begun then," Father said, as he took off his glass and laid them on top of the blueprints. He smiled and shook his head. "Are they still referring to it as 'Mouse Ed?' he asked. "I confess, Vincent, when Mouse suggested it, I hardly thought everyone would take to it as they have."

Vincent smiled and leaned back in his chair. "The idea originated with Mouse," he said, "so Elliot thought the name appropriate. It does have a certain ring to it."

"That it does," Father mused. "It seems to have given Elliot a new sense of purpose. I only hope that he understood why the Council asked him to oversee all of the work. He *does* realize that Mouse can get quite carried away at times, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Father," Vincent said. "I believe Elliot understands Mouse better than any of us. There are great similarities between them."

"I would not have thought that," Father said, shaking his head.

"Nevertheless, it is true. They are very much alike in many ways."

Father sighed. "I'll take your word for it," he said. He put on his glasses and rolled up the blueprints. "How is Catherine? Did Peter tell her when he would be coming Below?"

"When Peter visited last week, he gave her a tentative delivery date of October 30. However, he will be coming to stay next week."

"Good. Good. I wouldn't want anything to happen. Twins are very unpredictable, Vincent," Father said. "One can't be too careful."

"Yes, Peter has said the same thing."

Father put a rubber band around the blueprints and set them on the desk. "How is Catherine feeling?" he asked. "Is she still worried about Jacob moving into the nursery?"

Vincent smiled. In the month since the Council had approved the power plant, Father and Cullen had been preparing the small room next to Father's for Jacob. Designated as Jacob's Nursery, the room was everything a small boy would want. Vincent had helped Catherine to bring Jacob's special toys and his mobile, and just today had moved a small chest of drawers into the room. They had transferred his clothes only a few hours ago. The trundle bed Father had found and had refinished was made up and waiting. And tonight would be Jacob's first night in his new room.

"She is resigned to it, Father," Vincent said. "But we are both going to miss him." Vincent sighed. "Last Winterfest, I found it difficult to even leave him in the boys' nursery for the night. The crib seemed so empty without him."

"It will not be empty long, Vincent," Father reminded him. "Very soon there will be two more children to fill it." Father reached out and covered one of Vincent's hands with his own. "Do you know how wondrous that is to me, Vincent?" Father asked. "To think that you are about to be the father of three children. It quite astounds me."

Vincent turned his hand over, clasping Father's fingers. "Catherine changed my life the moment I met her, Father," he said softly. "She has given me more than I ever dreamed possible." He closed his eyes, remembering a long, lost poem:

"What if we still ride on, we two
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity,-"

Vincent smiled, opening his eyes as he felt Catherine and Jacob enter the room. *You are so very beautiful. 'O Lyric Love, half angel and half bird, and all a wonder and a wild desire.'*

"Browning, isn't it?" Father asked."

"Yes it is, Father," Catherine said, smiling as she walked hand-in-hand with Jacob down the stairs into Father's study. "Vincent was reading it to me only yesterday. 'Teach me, only teach, Love! As I ought. I will speak thy speech, Love, Think thy thought -.' It seems Mr. Browning and Vincent have a lot in common."

Father turned toward the entrance and held out his arms. "Well, then," he said, "is it this young man's bedtime?" Jacob let go of Catherine's hand and ran into his grandfather's arms. She and Vincent might miss Jacob, but she doubted that he was going to miss them much. It seemed that moving into his own room was an adventure Jacob relished.

"He's been after me to bring him for the past hour, Father," Catherine told them, moving toward Vincent's chair. "He barely waited until he had his pajamas on. I only hope you know what you're getting into."

Vincent turned his chair away from the desk and held out his arms. Catherine gratefully sank down onto his lap. "Tired?" he asked softly.

Catherine nodded. Getting the rest of Jacob's things moved into his room had been a strange experience. She still wasn't certain that it was the right thing to do.

"It is," Vincent assured her, wrapping his arms around her protuberant stomach. "Jacob is much too active. He needs his own room where he can have his own things."

"But he's just a baby," Catherine whispered, watching their son charm his grandfather with his newly-learned words.

She felt Vincent's hands caress her stomach through the loose caftan she wore. "He may look like a baby, Catherine," Vincent told her, "but you and I know that Jacob is much older than he looks. He will be fine. He and Father will look out for one another." He brought one of his hands to her face, lifting her chin for a soft kiss. "These babies will need all of your

care, love," he whispered. "Jacob understands that. He is willing to share you for awhile."

Catherine smiled and covered Vincent's hands with hers. "Oh, he is, is he?" She looked over Vincent's shoulder and smiled at her small son. He had been lifted into Father's lap and was describing the new present Jamie had made for him.

"Jamie gabe me a box, Fader," Jacob said solemnly. "For my rocks, see said. You wanna see?" He scrambled off of his grandfather's lap and pulled at his pants leg. "Come see, Fader. Is in my room."

Father got up from his chair and took Jacob's hand, letting him lead him into the nursery. Catherine sighed and leaned her head back on Vincent's shoulder. "He doesn't need me anymore," she said softly. "He's growing up so fast."

Vincent kissed Catherine's hair. With her pregnancy her scent had changed subtly; as though the babies had brought with them an added warmth he had not sensed before. She still smelled of roses, but they were roses at their maturity; full and ripe with promise. He let his lips trail down to her temple. "Come," he murmured. "We will help Father tuck Jacob in for the night and then I shall take you to bed. The day has been too long and you have done too much."

Catherine wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him below his ear. "And will you rub my back?" she asked softly.

"As long as you like," he promised.

Catherine chuckled and kissed him again. "Trust me, Vincent," she said, "your fingers would fall off first. I think your children are sitting on my spinal column."

"Then I shall have to chase them away."

"Just tell them to hurry up and be born," she told him. "Their mother is anxious to see them."

"I shall do my best."



Catherine rolled over in the bed, trying without success to find a comfortable position. It seemed that when one of the twins was happy with the way she slept, the other was not. She sighed, and squirmed around again, finally finding a place within the circle of Vincent's arms.

"Can I help?"

Catherine smiled and looked up. In the dim glow from the candles his eyes looked incredibly soft, and infinitely loving. "These babies don't want to sleep," she told him. "You couldn't possibly sing them a lullaby, could you?"

"We have tried that before," he whispered. "Remember? It was not very effective."

"True," she sighed. She listened to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear. It was a reassuring sound, and she wondered if the babies she carried could hear her own heartbeat from within the womb.

"That is very likely, Catherine," Vincent said, caressing the taut skin of her stomach. "Father tells me that there have been studies done about it."

"Mmmm, that feels wonderful. Maybe someone should do a study about . . ." Catherine stopped in mid-sentence, as she felt something damp between her legs. She panicked for a moment, wondering if it could possibly be her water breaking. But that was impossible. That would be a gush, wouldn't it? This just sort of trickled.

"What is it, Catherine?"

Catherine heard her own panic in Vincent's voice. "Could you light the lamps, Vincent," she asked softly. "I think something is happening."

Vincent rose quickly from the bed, lighting every lamp and every candle that was close to the bed. He stood naked beside the bed, looking, Catherine thought, just as frightened as she felt.

"I think I'm bleeding," Catherine whispered, trying to sit up so that she could check. Vincent reached down and held her, pushing her gently back against the pillows. "Oh, Vincent," she said, clutching his arm, "I'm not supposed to be bleeding."

Vincent stroked her hair, trying not to let Catherine see or feel his panic. "Do you want me to check?" he asked softly. She nodded, closing her eyes. He kissed her cheek, then stood up and moved down the bed. It took every ounce of strength he had to slide the blankets down. He took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of the mattress, slipping his hand between her legs and parting them gently.

The stain was not large, but it was there; a pink, watery puddle against the light blue sheets. "I'm going to get Father," Vincent said, grabbing his drawstring pants. "Do not get up, Catherine," he said, slipping the pants on. "I shall be gone only a moment." He covered her with the blanket, leaning over to kiss away the tears that were slipping from her eyes. "There is no pain?"

Catherine shook her head. "No," she whispered. "No pain."

"Good." He kissed her gently on the mouth. "I'll be right back."

"Can you help me put on my nightshirt first?" she asked.

Vincent nodded and slipped the shirt out from beneath her pillow. As Catherine held out her arms, he put the shirt over her head, helping her into the sleeves and smoothing the soft cloth over her waist and hips. He picked her up gently, allowing the shirt to slip down to her thighs.

"Better?"

"Yes," Catherine whispered. "Thank you." He kissed her cheek and hurried from the room.

Vincent barely felt the rough stones beneath his feet as he ran barefoot down the corridor to Father's chamber. His heart was beating so

rapidly and hard, that he could hear the echo of it in his ears. Or was that Catherine's heartbeat he heard? He could not be certain. He took the iron stairs two at a time.

"Father," Vincent said, shaking the sleeping man's shoulder. "Wake up, Father. Something is happening. Catherine is bleeding."

He saw Father's eyes open at the sound of his frightened voice. Father was a physician, used to waking at a moments' notice, so Vincent was not surprised to see his quick understanding of the problem.

"Have you sent a message to Peter?" he asked, getting up from the bed.

"Not yet," Vincent told him. "I wanted to get you first. There is no pain, only a watery sort of blood."

"Good. Good," Father said, slipping into his robe. "I will awaken Mary and Faye. Get on the pipes to Pascal and have him get a message to Peter as soon as possible. It may be nothing, Vincent," Father assured him. "But Peter should be here."

"*You* are here, Father," Vincent said, putting his hand on Father's shoulder. "Catherine and I trust you above all others."

"Be that as it may, Vincent," Father said. "I do not wish to deliver these babies. It will take Peter time to get across the city. There is no entrance near his home." He put on his slippers and Vincent saw him look at his bare feet. "Go back to Catherine," Father said, shaking his head. "Try to keep her still and calm. Mary and Faye will bring the things Peter will need." He sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. "I will be there directly."

"Thank you, Father."

Vincent paused in the corridor to send an urgent message to the Pipe Chamber. He could feel Catherine's fear rising, but there was still no pain. He hurried back to their chamber, trying to calm his breathing before he entered the room. She was where he had left her; lying stiff and still beneath the blankets. Her cheeks were tear-streaked and pale.

"I have sent a message to Peter and Father is waking Mary and Faye," Vincent told her. He knelt beside the bed, reaching for her hand.

"No," Catherine said, "please. Sit up here with me. I need your arms, Vincent."

Vincent moved the pillows and sat at the head of the bed, letting Catherine rest her cheek against his thigh. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and stroked her hair. "Be calm, Catherine," he said softly. "You are far enough along to have these babies. If they have decided that now is the time to be born, then we shall have to help them into the world."

Catherine rubbed her face against the soft velour of his pants. He was trying so hard to be strong for her. She knew that. But she felt his fear even as he tried to hide it from her. "Vincent," she began, "when Jacob was born you said that you felt him, that you *knew* something was happening. Do you feel that now, with these babies?"

Vincent's fingers tightened in her hair. "No," he answered. "When Jacob was born I could hear something like a heartbeat, but it was louder, stronger. I think now that was your body, Catherine; your body in the act of birth. It was as though I *heard* each contraction." His fingers began moving again through her hair. "I feel nothing like that now."

Catherine sighed. Perhaps that was a good sign then. If Vincent could not sense an impending birth, didn't that mean that the babies weren't ready to be born yet?

"I do not know," Catherine heard Vincent whisper.

"Catherine? Vincent?"

Vincent turned his head and saw Mary and Faye rush into the chamber, their arms laden. He had heard Peter leaving orders for them to bring the items he had sent down last week at the first sign of labor. When Catherine had explained to him that she wanted to give birth here, in their chamber, Peter had consented only if she allowed him to bring down certain things that would ensure a sanitary and safe birth. He had wanted her in the hospital chamber, but had given his instructions to Mary and Faye, mumbling to Catherine about stubborn women.

"Vincent," Mary said, coming straight to the bed. "Would you pick Catherine up and move out of the way for a moment. Faye and I need to make up the bed."

"Is that absolutely necessary, Mary?" Vincent asked. "Father told me to keep Catherine still."

Mary sighed, glancing at Faye before she looked back at Vincent. "Peter said that if anything, anything at all happened, we were to assume that Catherine was going into labor," she told him. "Now, I know you're anxious, Vincent, but please let Faye and I do what needs to be done."

"It's all right, Vincent," Catherine said, "Just help me sit . . . "

Vincent felt the pain hit at the same instant that Catherine did. There was no way that she could have kept it from him. It was strong; stronger than the beginning pains Mary had told them about. And it didn't ebb and flow. It was constant and it was hard.

"Vincent!"

He moved over the pain, shoving it aside as he gathered Catherine up in his arms and sat down with her in the chair by the bed. He held her against his chest, paying little attention to what Mary and Faye were doing behind him.

"Give the pain to me, Catherine," he whispered. "Let me take it. Share it with me." He closed his eyes, merging their minds, forcing her to relinquish her panic and the pain. He felt her relax against him even though the pain still cut through her. She moaned; a low, anguished sound that tore his heart.

"This isn't right, Vincent," Catherine whispered, wrapping her arms tighter around his neck. She could feel the pulse beneath his skin beating swiftly against her cheek. She focused on it, trying to breathe with him, to feel only him. "It's too strong, isn't it?" she asked softly. "It's too soon."

"Vincent?"

Vincent opened his eyes and looked up. Mary was standing in front of him, her hand on his shoulder. Her eyes carried all the worry he refused to let himself feel.

"What are the pains like?" Mary asked him. "I know you're feeling them. Tell me."

"They are very strong, Mary," Vincent managed to say. "They are constant. There is not a gradual worsening, but one unremitting and ever-present pain." He took a deep breath, and heard Catherine breathe with him. He could do this for her. He could do this *with* her.

"Bring Catherine to the bed," Mary said, moving back so that he could get up. "If Peter were here I'd have her walk around, try to break her water. But Father doesn't want that. Lay her on the bed, Vincent."

Vincent kissed Catherine's cheek, then rose slowly from the chair. He carried her carefully, aware always, of the pain. He tried to take it from her, but he could not. He could only share it and offer what comfort he could.

"It's enough," he heard her whisper. "It helps, Vincent. Really. It helps."

He knelt on the edge of the plastic coated sheeting Peter had insisted on, and placed Catherine on the bed. He looked up at Mary. "I'm not leaving," he told her. "So do not ask."

Catherine held out her hand and he took it, folding her fingers protectively within his own. "Mary knows . . . you're not going anywhere, Vincent," she murmured. "I don't think . . . she was going to ask it of you."

Mary smiled and stroked Catherine's temple. "No," Mary said softly. "I simply wanted to give you this." She handed Vincent a damp washcloth and a tiny jar of cream. "Put a little of this on her lips if they start to get dry," Mary told him. "It will keep them from cracking. The cloth is for her face."

She looked toward the entrance of the chamber and shook her head. "Father should be here," she muttered. "I'll go see what's keeping him."

She turned to Faye who was standing silently and calmly beside the small table. "Why don't you check to see if she's starting to dilate?" Mary said, moving toward the door. "If Peter doesn't get here, and Father . . ." She sighed and shook her head. "Check her please, Faye," she said. "I'll be back directly."

Catherine felt the tears trickle down her cheeks as Faye moved toward the bed. "Not doing so good, huh?" Faye asked, pushing back the hem of Catherine's nightshirt. "Don't worry, Catherine. Mary and I have helped hundreds of babies be born." She put on a pair of thin, plastic gloves and gently parted Catherine's legs. "You've got to scoot down for me," she urged softly. "I need to see what's happening down there." She smiled and Catherine thought she might have managed to smile back. She felt Vincent lift her a little off the bed and place her closer to the edge.

Faye was as gentle as she could be, Catherine knew that. And she barely felt the additional discomfort of Faye's fingers as they examined her. The constant pain, however, was a reminder that whether she liked it or not, her babies had decided to be born. She gripped Vincent's hand, trying not to fight the pain but to flow with it, as he did.

"Breathe with me, Catherine," she heard him whisper against her cheek. "Focus on our shared breath. Like a kiss," he told her. Catherine smiled.

"Looks like you're about eight centimeters dilated already," Faye said, peeling off the gloves and moving away from the bed. "Father better make up his mind quickly about whether or not he wants to be a part of this. I don't think he's got a lot of time."

Catherine closed her eyes, feeling the sudden wetness that splashed between her legs. "Oohh."

"Whoops," Faye muttered. "We're on our way." Catherine was faintly aware of Faye's movements beneath her as she cleaned up the mess. "Lift her up again, Vincent," she said. "Help me get this nightshirt off. I've got a gown here . . . yes, that's it. Let me slide . . . that's right. Got it. Go ahead, put her down gently. Damn! Where is that man?"

"If you are referring to me, Faye," Catherine heard Father say. "I'm right here." Catherine opened her eyes and watched silently as he moved

slowly toward the bed. He had put on a surgical garment and Faye was handing him a pair of examination gloves.

"About time," Faye told him. "She was eight centimeters dilated and her water just broke. I'd say you're about to deliver your next grandchild." She moved back from the bed, giving him room.

"I know . . . you didn't . . . want to do this, Father," Catherine said, breathing in small, quick pants. "But I guess . . . the babies . . . have other plans."

She saw Father glance at Vincent before he met her gaze. "Nonsense," he said, his voice wavering only slightly. "I simply did not wish to steal Peter's thunder. Now, let's have a look at you."

Catherine closed her eyes again and leaned back against Vincent's arm. His muscles were rigid beneath her neck, like an iron bar. The pain was intensifying, growing even harder. She tried to continue panting but she was overwhelmed with the need to push. It hurt. It hurt so badly!

"Vincent!"

Her scream echoed around her, reverberating in her ears, and in her mind. There was only pain now; nothing else was real. It tore at her, clutching at her insides until she couldn't bear it anymore.

"Push, Catherine," she heard Father say. His voice seemed far away, separated from her by the relentless, agonizing pain.

Push, Catherine. Let the pain go. Push it from your body.

Catherine moaned and pushed with what little strength she had. The pain intensified, and she was being torn in two.

Push.

She listened to the voice inside her head, ignoring everyone and everything else. Vincent was with her, sharing the pain, sharing the fear. He would keep her safe. She took a deep breath and pushed, groaning with the effort.

"That's it, Catherine. I see the head. Once more. Push."

Our child is coming, Catherine. Push. Push one more time.

She heard him, even as she took another deep breath. She could do this. She *would* do this.

There was a rush of sensation; one final, huge explosion of pain.

"I've got her," she heard Father say. "It's a girl, Catherine. A beautiful, perfect little girl."

Catherine opened her eyes slowly, seeing a blurry tableau at the foot of the bed. Father and Mary were working frantically over a small, messy bundle that had to be her daughter. The bundle gave a long, high, cry. She smiled, watching as Father handed the baby to Mary and turned back to her. It was then that Catherine realized there was no more pain.

"It's gone, Father," she said softly. "The pain. It's gone. There's nothing. No contractions, no pain, nothing."

Father frowned and looked at Vincent. "Do you sense a heartbeat, Vincent?" he asked. "Are you connected to these children as you are to Jacob?"

"No," Vincent said without hesitation. "There is nothing similar to what I felt when Jacob was born."

"Catherine," Father said, getting her attention. "We must hurry to see this other child born. Once you have given birth, your body believes that everything is finished. You and I know differently. You must push, Catherine," he told her. "You must help your other child to be born. Now."

Vincent felt the first stirrings of Catherine's panic coming back and he quickly reassured her with his mind and with his voice. "Do this," he said. "It is almost over, Catherine. Come, breathe with me. Let us bring our son into the world."

Catherine had forgotten that it was their daughter whom Mary held now in her arms. Their son, Vincent's son, was stuck somehow between

birth and life. She needed to help him, to push him into this strange, new world.

She took hold of Vincent's hand, squeezing his fingers as she gathered her breath. She pushed, even though she felt nothing to push against. She pushed, watching Father, waiting for something to happen.

Father jumped back as the second bag of waters broke, splashing him and everything around him. "Good," he muttered. "Do it again. It should be easier now."

Catherine felt the pain return, but she was ready for it this time. Their son was waiting for her to help him. She rode with Vincent over the pain, arching her back and bearing down with all her strength.

"I see the head . . . let me turn him. Push, Catherine."

She *was* pushing. Didn't he know that? How could she push any harder? She had no strength, no breath.

"Again!"

Let me give you mine, Catherine. Take my strength. Take my breath.

Catherine shuddered, trying to do as Vincent asked. She knew the baby was close. She could feel him, his shoulders, broader than their daughter, trying to maneuver within the wet, slick passage of birth. *Come on*, she told her son. *You can do it. Help me.* She grunted, giving sound to her efforts, and she felt the baby move. *A little more. There!*

"I have him," Father whispered. "Oh God, Vincent. I have him."

Vincent heard the difference in Father's voice instantly and he looked up from Catherine's tear-streaked face. The baby was crying, not gently, but with the strength and vigor of one who has fought long and hard for his right to live. He felt Catherine lift her head beside him, wanting to see the child she had struggled to bring into the world.

"He's beautiful, Vincent," he heard her whisper. "He's beautiful."

Vincent tried to stop the tears that were flowing down his cheeks, but there was no use. They would not be stopped. He kissed Catherine's cheek and turned back to look at their son.

His hair was matted, bloody and wet from his hard fight. His hands waved around, batting at the cold air as Mary and Father cleaned him. Catherine had called him beautiful. This small, mirror image of himself. This child with the golden fur, and the small, clawed hands. She had called him beautiful.



XXVI

Catherine continued to hold onto Vincent's hand as Father delivered the afterbirth. It seemed little more than a cramp after what she had been through, and she told him so.

"The afterbirth fused, Catherine," Father explained. "It is not unusual. Personally, I am more thankful that there was no tearing. Had these children gone to term, there would have been."

Father moved away, and Catherine was lifted into Vincent's arms as the plastic sheeting was removed from the bed. She smiled and kissed his cheek, tasting the salt of his tears. "Happy tears?" she whispered, as he laid her back against the pillows.

Vincent smiled. "Very happy tears," he said.

"Let me apply this poultice," Faye said, gently pressing the soothing dressing against the inside of Catherine's thighs.

Catherine smiled. "Thank you, Faye," she said softly. "All of you have been wonderful."

Faye nodded and leaned forward to kiss Catherine's forehead. "Congratulations," she said. "You've got two beautiful babies." She looked at Vincent for a moment, then squeezed his shoulder. "Two beautiful babies," she repeated. She smiled shyly, and left the room, taking the basket of soiled linen with her.

"See, Vincent," Catherine whispered. "He *is* beautiful."

"I know, Catherine," Vincent answered. "I know."

They watched together as Mary and Father carefully tended the babies, cleaning them, and wrapping them in the small receiving blankets Rebecca and Samantha had made for them.

"When do I get to hold them, Mary?" Catherine asked, squeezing Vincent's hand.

"Right now," Mary said softly. "These babies need their mother." She brought their daughter to her. "Now, Vincent," Mary told them, "you need to watch me do this. You're going to have to help Catherine feed these children. Now, sit up a little more, Catherine. Yes, that's fine. All right, now, hold out your arm. Yes, like that. See, you fit the baby against your forearm . . . yes, that's the way. Like a football. You won't really get your milk in for a few days, but the babies will be just fine. Don't worry about it." She propped pillows underneath Catherine's arm, giving her support to hold the baby.

Catherine looked down at the tiny bundle lying on her arm. Their daughter's eyes were closed, her lips puckered. "Bring her head toward your breast. Now use your other hand and tickle the baby's mouth with your nipple. See? Oh, she knows just what to do." Catherine bit her lip. No one had told her that it was going to hurt.

"Catherine?"

She looked up into Vincent's concerned eyes. It was a pain, but such a sweet pain. "Ask Father to bring our son, Vincent?" she asked softly. "Please?"

Vincent swallowed and leaned over to kiss Catherine's cheek. At her breast, their daughter sucked vigorously. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak and turned to look at his father.

"He's perfect, Vincent," Father said, his voice rough with the emotions he was feeling. Vincent watched as he touched the tiny child's face with trembling hands. When Father looked up, Vincent saw only love in his gaze. If Father was upset by the child's differences, he gave no sign of it.

"Let me have him, Father," Catherine said.

Father smiled and handed the baby to Vincent instead. "Mary has said that you will need to help Catherine to feed these children," he began softly, "and that is correct. Hold out your arm, Catherine," he continued, waiting as Mary placed two more pillows beneath Catherine's arm. "Now, Vincent, place the baby on Catherine's arm. Yes, his head should be cupped in her hand. That's right." He moved back, giving Vincent room to maneuver on the bed. "I believe you can figure out the rest."

Vincent held Catherine's breast gently, doing as she had done, tickling the baby's mouth with her distended nipple. One small hand reached for the warm comfort of his mother's breast as the baby opened his mouth and accepted the nipple. Vincent could feel his heart contract at the sight. There were no words.

He stretched out his hand, stroking his son's tiny fingers, touching the soft fur that covered them. The baby opened his eyes, and Vincent found himself looking into fathomless, dark blue pools. At the edge of his consciousness, he felt a tiny presence. The baby's hand turned, and Vincent's fingers were clenched within a small fist.

"They *are* beautiful, aren't they, Vincent?"

Vincent leaned forward and gently kissed Catherine's lips. They tasted of the orange cream Mary had given him. "Yes," he told her, realizing suddenly that he truly meant it, truly believed what he was saying. "They are beautiful."

Catherine smiled, and Vincent felt himself trembling in reaction. All that had happened, all that they had been through together, had brought them to this time, this place. He closed his eyes as the fresh sting of tears welled up within him.

"We're alone, you know," he heard Catherine say. "I think that Father and Mary have gone to tell everyone the news."

Vincent opened his eyes, looking down with awe at the beautiful woman who loved him. Her face glowed with pleasure, and her cheeks were flushed from what had passed. Her hair was wet and matted from the exertion of the birth. And she had never been lovelier.

He reached out to touch her cheek, stroking gently across her warm skin. "I love you, Catherine," he said softly. "And I shall remember this day forever. You have given me so much . . . so much." His voice broke, the tears flowing freely, staying his words.

"It's you who have given to me, Vincent," Catherine told him. She smiled as the gentle tug on her nipple slackened. "I think they're supposed to nurse longer," she said.

Vincent returned her smile, and helped their son to find his mother's nipple. The baby latched on greedily and Catherine gasped. "He's as strong as his father," she said.

She looked down at the children in her arms. So different, yet so much the same. Their love had created them, her body had nurtured them. And together, they had brought them into the world. "I didn't have the strength to do it alone," she whispered. "Our son might have been lost to us if you hadn't helped me."

She watched as Vincent touched the small nose that was so like his own. He stroked his finger down to the tiny cleft. "I see him, Catherine," he said, "and I still cannot believe that he is real." He looked up at her and his smile was achingly tender and full of love. "His life will not be easy," he said. "There are still barriers that he will face, places that he dare not go."

"But he will make it, Vincent," Catherine assured him. "He is loved; for everything he is, and everything he can be."

"He will want much," Vincent whispered. "He will see his brother and sister reach for the world and he will want it too."

"Then we will help to guide his dreams," she said. "We will be an example to him of all that is possible. He *will* make it, Vincent," she said again. "He will."

"And our daughter," Vincent said softly. "what will she make of this world?" As if she knew her father was speaking of her, their daughter squirmed in her mother's arms, letting Catherine's nipple fall free from her mouth.

Catherine smiled as Vincent took the baby from her arm. She was so tiny and his hands were so large. "She will see that she is loved," Catherine said, "and that there will always be a safe place for her to call home." She watched as Vincent rose carefully from the bed and placed their daughter into the crib. He stood there for a very long time, just looking at her. And Catherine shared with him the wonder and amazement of creation.

"Caroline," he said softly, covering his tiny daughter with the larger blanket. "We should call her Caroline."

"After my mother," Catherine said breathlessly. "I'd like that." Love flowed sweetly through their bond, embracing her and surrounding her with tenderness. She heard him sigh as he turned around and came back to the bed.

"And Charles," he whispered, sitting carefully beside her. "After your father." He touched the baby's hand, and then looked up and touched her cheek. "We will teach him what it means to be a part of our world, Catherine," he told her. "We will teach him what you have taught me; that love knows no boundaries, no limits."

"Love, faithful love, recall'd thee to my mind" Catherine whispered.

"But how could I forget thee?" Vincent answered. He leaned forward and met her lips as she lifted her face to his. There would never be limits to how much he loved her. Catherine was his world; his reason for living.

He looked down at the small image of himself nestled against Catherine's breast and smiled. The baby's mouth was open, his mother's nipple resting lightly against his lips. "Let me take him," Vincent said, lifting the baby carefully from Catherine's arm.

He held his son in both his hands, watching each breath he took. He could feel it still, the tiny spark at the edge of his consciousness.

"He's not like Jacob, though," Catherine told him. "I don't feel the deep bond that we have with Jacob."

"No," Vincent murmured. "Charles is not connected to us. He will form his own bond," he told her, "find his own path."

"I think he has one already," Catherine said. "With his sister."

Vincent looked up at her and smiled. "Do you think so?" Catherine nodded. "He will keep her safe, then," he said. "If we cannot."

"Should we worry about them, Vincent?" she asked, reaching out to touch his face.

"All parents worry, Catherine," he said, meeting her eyes. "We will simply have to find our way." He felt her touch his lips with her fingers and he kissed them. "I think it is time for you to get some sleep," he whispered. "Let me put Charles into bed."

He rose, carrying his precious bundle to the crib. Vincent placed his son next to his sister, covering him with the same blanket. The baby reached out his hand, touching the small body next to him. Vincent heard a soft sigh as the baby settled into a deep sleep.

He turned from the crib and walked slowly around the room, turning off the lamps and blowing out all but a few of the candles. The door of the chamber was closed and he knew that no one would disturb them today. These hours were theirs; a time of bonding and of love.

He came back to the bed, watching as Catherine moved the pillows back where they belonged. She started to scoot up on the bed and he felt the sharp pain that made her wince. He scooped her up into his arms and placed her against the pillows.

"Don't forget our book," she said softly, reminding him of the book they had almost finished. "I want to remember how it ends."

Vincent smiled and picked up the book from the table before he climbed into bed beside her. He held out his arm, and Catherine nestled against his shoulder, her hand resting on his chest. He kissed her hair, feeling contentment flow through him, and began to read.

Everything he ever dreamed of had come to him. Years could pass, tides ebb and flow; the world Below would be safe. Life here would continue. For after him, there would be his children.

" . . . and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her."



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To My Readers:

With "*O Sweetest Song*" I end what I began so very long ago: my version of what happened after the episode "Invictus". This was the cruelest book of all, for it brought me face to face again, with the demons of the third season.

In "*...Shall Have No Dominion*" I began my tale by bringing Catherine back to her beloved Vincent. That was all I wanted to do. You, my readers, however, had other plans for me.

You kept asking me: "what happens next" so in *The Next Waltz* I asked this same question to the people of the Tunnels. Their acceptance of Catherine, her marriage to Vincent, and the beginning of their life together Below, began in this second book. As did the "becoming" spoken of by Narcissa.

In "*O Sweetest Song*" the time of "becoming" is past and the dream I first envisioned for Vincent and Catherine comes to fulfillment. With this book I try to give *everyone*, not just Vincent and Catherine, the "happy life" they certainly deserve. It was a difficult and sometimes very painful task, and the research sometimes got me down. For there is certainly nothing more depressing to someone who loves Vincent and Catherine than watching the third season again and again. But it was certainly necessary if I was to even try and resolve certain unanswered questions and repair the broken lives and hearts of these characters.

However, "*O Sweetest Song*" is the last book - the final book, of my *Beauty and The Beast* trilogy. I hope it fulfills your dreams and makes you happy. That's all a writer can hope for.

For those of you who are now considering throwing this book across the room (something suggested by one of the fans who truly loves my writing), I would like to suggest that instead you look for me in Waldenbooks or B. Dalton in the coming years. As all goes as planned, some of Vincent and Catherine's previous lives together (only you and I will know that, though) will be showing up as historical romance novels in your local bookstores. Please wish me well.

Carolyn Kleinsorge

Napa - 1992