

I Had a Dream of Water

By Kay Starwell



Only in love are unity and duality not in conflict.

Rabindranath Tagore

Water was for abstinence.

And abstinence was hard.

Some days, as always, were worse than others. But the thing Vincent knew, the thing he was certain of and never said to anyone, was that abstinence was hard.

“Hard,” of course, was a word that had more than one meaning for an ascetic. As, for that matter, did the word “abstinence.” It wasn't just

from sex, though that was difficult enough. It was from almost any kind of close, intimate contact.

It had been easy, actually, for a while. Which was to say that the monkish life had not always been hard.

It had been blessedly easy, once. Easy, when the sight of Lisa's blood was still under his nails. Easy when, for months after, he swore he could still smell that blood, somewhere on his skin or claws. Even though he'd scrubbed both. Hard. There was that word again.

It had been easy, then, to deny he was male, almost. Demands of his body notwithstanding (and he was learning how to beat those into submission), he was an effective eunuch. He already denied he was a man. That too, was easy. He wasn't one.

Father, to be fair, had given no great speeches on the subject. Other than shouting "No, Vincent, no!" when he'd pulled Vincent off Lisa, then repeating, more softly, "just... just no," when Vincent had raised his arm to the old man. There had not been much more.

Subtle things, yes. All of it directing him one way. "That life... not for you, Vincent," Jacob had said once. He'd tried to say it with compassion. God bless him for that. He had tried.

Vincent, nude, stepped into the deeply chilled water. Because it was time.

This was not the thermally warmed water of the hot springs, nor the tepid to warm water of the bathing pools. It wasn't even the cool water near the falls. This water was beyond cold, close to ice.

This water was for abstinence.

For more years than he could comfortably count, this was one of the ways he kept his body from making demands.

This was the device he used when concentration no longer worked, and distraction no longer soothed. This. There was little else.

The frigid water came from an impossibly deep wellspring, and pooled in what was an essentially a grotto. It was frosty in high summer, and arctic in deep winter. Or at least he *thought* he sensed a change in its temperature. Perhaps he simply needed to convince himself that this was not so severe a punishment some times of the year more than others. In the world Above, August was waning. The water had been worse than this.

Or perhaps he just needed to feel like he had some choice, regarding how and when to beat his body into submission.

His toes were already aching cold, already feeling the grip of a glacier as it deftly climbed up his calves. His fur floated for a moment, and then clung, goose flesh already beginning on his arms. He hated this.

The pool was a natural depression in the rock, one that sloped slowly down from the sides. When he wanted the fast spike of pain rather than this slow torture, he dove in from a ledge that, if he jumped far enough out, let him hit near the deep center of the pool.

But that way, the icy drenching enclosed him completely, head and body, and he shivered for hours afterward, with a biting damp mane, and every inch of body fur a cold, wet mass. The hair on his chest was thick. It took a long time to dry, even in the cool of his chambers, much less the far chillier air down here. The frosty pool cooled the air

of the cavern far lower than the customary sixty degrees or so. So he did not dive, if he could help it.

This, however, this wading in, was a slow and merciless torture. If a dive was a spike, a walk was a slow knife, cutting off his circulation with every inch. His calf muscles screamed a warning of protest. His toes, always in the bitter bath the longest, would begin to cramp and tighten before long, as the abused muscles in them fought to hold on to his body's warmth.

He walked in further.

He'd been with her more often than usual, lately. And he'd been thinking of her both more frequently and with less restraint. Both were often the harbingers of a trip to the wintry water.

He'd never given this cavern a name, though he'd thought of several for it. It had been The Centering Pool when he was in his late teens and early twenties, from a practice he had picked up from a book. He mostly called it The Grotto, though it became The Punishment Pool as his twenties ripened a body whose urges became more predictable, if not more strident.

Now, after meeting Catherine, the names of this place were useless references. He tried to keep calling it the Centering Pool; although recently he'd thought even Punishment Pool was too mild a description. He'd recently begun thinking of it as The Torture Chamber. He tried not to think of it in those terms. He tried.

She did not understand when or why he left, from time to time, and why he was often gone as long as he was.

This was part of it, sometimes. Sometimes the mental disciplines were enough. Sometimes they weren't. Sometimes sleep gave no peace, and dreams gave no respite, neither here, nor above. Sometimes the distance gave no solace. Sometimes he couldn't count from one to ten without thinking about her. When that happened, there was nothing left but... this.

He had to be able to center himself again, or he could not be near her. It was as simple as that.

His knees trembled a little as the frigid water closed around their backs. God, it hurt. More today, it seemed, for some reason.

Not for the first time, he wondered where the source of the water was. He wondered why even the Nameless River didn't seem this jaggedly polar. Wondered where the water broke above ground someplace else, a thing it likely had to do, if he detected a change in its temperature, summer to winter.

Perhaps there wasn't one. Perhaps he was imagining it. Perhaps he needed to.

Thighs like tree trunks were going under water, and his step slowed, knowing that the closer the water came to his sex, the more it was going to hurt. He could stop, of course, and stand, avoiding. But that would only prolong the agony for his toes, feet and calves. One time he'd spent better than twenty minutes trying to massage a cramp in the arch of his foot away, after. Cold, wet, shivering... it had taken him a long time to begin the walk back home. His calves would wake him up as he slept, screaming from a charley horse that would not abate, later. He'd walk with a subtle limp tomorrow. Probably.

Legs too hirsute to belong to a normal man looked even larger in the water, as the spreading hair seemed to give his body more volume than it had, naturally. Each slow step toward center made the hair (*Fur. It was fur. Men had hair.*) sway with the movement of his walking. There was no current here. At least, none he could detect.

Nordic water was still, it seemed. This cold hell was an almost somnolent thing. It was quiet in here, save for the noise of his progress. He held his breath and then breathed shallowly almost from the moment his foot hit the water. The body's natural reaction to stress.

He was having a few of those.

His testicles gathered at the warning sign of cold. Vincent thought it insanely ironic that the only other time they did that, he was nearing orgasm - the kind brought on by wet dreams and, occasionally, waking ones. Self-gratification seemed ... undignified. But lack of it made the night dreams unavoidable.

This was not about that, however. At least, this was not about only that.

This was about wanting simply...more. Wanting her. Wishing there was a way, and knowing there wasn't. Wanting to be near her, and stay, sex or no. Wanting to have that right.

When the wishing became foolhardy, and the daydreams too tempting, and the night dreams began to make some strange kind of sense - he knew it was time for this place. Time to beat his reluctant form back into the submission he needed, so he could be near her again.

He'd been away for three days just to reach this grotto of icy reprimand. He'd be gone another four or five more on the slow trip back. Going "down" was always easier than climbing back up. At least he would feel more at peace on the way back. Hopefully.

Liquid more merciless than death climbed over the mid to high part of his thighs, now, and his toes already tingled a warning. Best to be done, soon, and no mistaking. One time, he'd taken much too long to make the final steps, and an agony of ice had raced up one leg, all but binding his Achilles tendon. He'd had to half limp, half swim his way out, soaking his torso in the bargain. It had been a miserable time.

No! His body screamed, as the inevitable moment approached. *Just, no.* Those were Father's words. Father's words to him. Now, it seemed as if his body was begging for a reprieve, begging for mercy. His sex had been unavoidably bothering him lately, partially nudging him toward her; it still was. Vincent knew this phase. Knew it was why the trip here was necessary. Catherine was in his blood, and like anybody possessed of something incurable, he needed either a remedy, an incision, or an exorcism.

A remedy wasn't possible. He was what he was. Whatever that was. He knew he was not like her. And he loved her in a way that was growing increasingly... hard. That, too, would not stop. An incision was not possible either.

The exorcism seemed kinder. Though make no mistake, there was about to be a cutting sensation on his privates. On his privates, if not on his entire psyche.

This was not about being “bad” or “evil.” He knew full well the demands a body made on itself. This was about being in control of those demands, so he could maintain the delicate balance he and Catherine had established.

He shivered with both dread and understanding, if not with cold. He mentally prepared himself to make the hard choice, the only comfort in knowing at least that it was “choice,” still.

Ice water was ice water, and there was no longer a gentle way to do this. With years of practice, he'd tried. He could now simply continue to walk in, or just flex his knees and drop, taking the water up to his lower abdomen, gasping.

His fingertips trailed the water, claws already in. It was time to face what was inevitable.

He stood for a moment, immersed just short of where the still-pendant weight bore his testicles down. The part of him that made the things that made babies. Children he would never have. Not with anyone; certainly not with her.

Catherine's beautiful face swam before his eyes, and he knew that it was for that reason he must do this. He was beginning to not just detect the differences in her normal scent but to *scent her*. To be able to tell what time of the month she was in; to be able to know when her pheromone's lure all but beckoned to him, and when it didn't. There was a siren's call in her body's cologne, had she but the understanding to realize it.

Her bond sang to him when he felt like this. A brushing, teasing tickle across his consciousness. Sometimes it was a thing he sensed far more

often than usual. Sometimes it was a thing he had to consciously block, so he wouldn't feel it every second of every day. Like now. The animal in him was calling to the animal in her, in a primal way. Or perhaps it was the other way around. It didn't matter in the long run. The result was the same.

He was too in love with her. And as much as that sentence didn't make sense to him, it did. Too in love with her. Becoming too obsessed. He had to tone it down, dim its burgeoning insistence, take it back to levels where he could manage it. He had to.

He could hurt her, if he didn't.

And then he'd lose her, forever.

A part of him still screamed in protest at what he was about to do. A part of him railed, and riled at it, and implored him not to, shouted at him to go to Catherine. Begged him to plead with her for understanding, as he told her all he felt, and all he wasn't, and all they couldn't be.

Fingers in the water, nearly to the palm. Not fingers. Claws. And it was always this unbearably, punishingly cold. Anything else was just a fairy tale he told himself to get himself this far. He knew it. This water had never seen the light of day.

It was a lot like every passion he had, that way.

You could touch her. Stroke her hair. Kiss her, just that, just kiss her. You don't have to do this. His mind tried to make a bargain with his body. This too, was common.

But he knew what kissing led to. Knew the subtle touches she'd been giving him as her body whispered its needs to him. He knew those whispers were hints, and prodding ones, at that.

Knew that, eventually, either he would want more, or she would. Hell. They both wanted more, now.

He looked down at his shriveled sex, still too impossibly large, even in its dread of imminent immersion. He inhaled, and held the breath.

Now.

Fists clenched, head up, bend the knees and... Scream. Long.

Hold himself down... stay... stay... stay... and wail the despair of decades at the uncaring stones and water. His abdomen tightened, hard, as the glacial water claimed it. The muscles in his thighs trembled a warning. He'd taken a long time to get in. Too long, perhaps.

The breathless agony of the water abated to something slightly more bearable, as he became as used to it as he was going to, and as the most sensitive part of his body, the one with a million screaming nerve endings, swore it would remind him he was male, no more.

He turned and stood, punishing himself just a little more for good measure with a slow exit. He would will his knees to continue to bend as he removed his form from the pool. He would.

Heat on his face then. Just a little.

Two hot tears of regret coursed down his cheeks.

I'm sorry, Catherine. I am so sorry. You have no idea how much.

His huge form was still to the point of unmoving statuary. Only the wind catching at the red and gold hair that stuck out from under the hood was moving, and only that, barely.

She would have missed him entirely, had she not been looking for him.

Fourteen days. No. Fifteen. Fifteen, because she remembered that the last night had been a Tuesday, and had been circled on her calendar for some weeks. A retirement party for a good friend of her Father's. An old judge who still remembered hearing Charles Chandler try one of his first cases, back when Charles still did that, more often than not.

Catherine had grown up knowing Bernard Prentiss and his wife, Emily. She'd spent a summer at camp with their daughter Michelle, and had ridden the Judge's prize Arabian, Temperance. He was leaving the bench and taking up golf and photography with his wife, "while I can still see to click the shutter," he'd joked.

Catherine had dressed for the occasion.

The special night had deserved a special gown, and Catherine knew she'd looked stunning in a midnight blue sheath with a halter-style top and a matching wrap trimmed in blue fringe. Caroline Chandler's pearls glimmered softly at her ears, and her upswept hair had made her neck look almost impossibly long and delicate. Heels had been a must for a gown with a long hem but a kick pleat in the back. Her evening clutch had been vintage, her makeup classic. The hairstyle had called for several curls to be pulled down, framing her face near her ear. It covered her scar, for the most part, though Catherine had long since learned she didn't care about that.

She'd wanted to look her loveliest for the occasion. She thought she'd succeeded.

Vincent had come to her balcony, just as she'd prepared to depart. He'd stared, openly, as the doorman downstairs had rung her apartment to tell her the cab she'd ordered had arrived, and was waiting. The look on his face had been... fathomless.

She'd smiled at him, softly, knowing she had no time to spare him much more than a loving touch. She brushed his cheek, gently, with manicured fingertips. It was all he would allow, so it was all she would offer. She drew the moment out as she applied perfume to her wrist, catching the warming in his eyes as she rubbed her wrists together, spreading the scent.

He held himself very still. He often did, when she looked her loveliest.

Knowing the cab was waiting, she bid him good night as she reluctantly rushed out the door. Her life beckoned; she did not want to be late. Not that staying longer would have made any difference, one way or the other, in what was to come next.

Somehow, she knew she wouldn't see him the next night. Or the next.

By the time three nights turned into five, she knew what this was. This was that thing he did, that "time apart" thing that he did, when he felt he needed it. No note, no message, and she knew even before she went Below to check, that he'd told them no more than he'd told her. He'd simply packed a hiking backpack, said he would be gone "for a while," and left.

Jacob, like Catherine, was becoming accustomed to these jaunts, though by the look on the old man's face, the senior Wells didn't like it much more than she did. Father, as always, was concerned for Vincent's welfare. If he travelled below the pipes, there would be no way to know if he was in trouble.

It would be the cruelest kind of irony if he came to harm in the very place that was supposed to keep him from it.

There was nothing she could do but go back Above, and wait.

So she had done just that.

Now the wait, it seemed, was over. Or was it? He hadn't knocked on the pane, hadn't called attention to himself in any way. Had she not happened to glance out the French doors – something she'd been doing off and on now for many nights – she might not have even noticed him standing there. She did not remember the last time she'd seen him look so... remote, though he stood right there.

She pushed the doors open. "Vincent? How long have you been out here?"

At first, she wasn't sure if he was even going to reply.

"Not long," he'd answered finally, his hungry blue eyes taking her in. He was starved for the sight of her. And dreading her censure.

"Did I do something to upset you?" she asked. "Or is that a useless question?" She tried hard to keep any note of accusation out of her voice.

"I don't even know how to answer that any more, Catherine."

She stopped her advance toward him. Every line in his long form looked beaten, looked... borne down by something.

He'd been gone nearly twice as long as he planned. He still felt off balance, and without peace. He did not know why. He just knew that it was.

Catherine didn't know what was wrong either, not specifically. But in general, she did. It was them. Something about them. Something about them was hurting him. No, not hurting. Wounding. Killing, even, if you went to the extreme.

"Can you tell me how to help?" she asked him, praying he had an answer.

"If I did... you know I would say it," was all he offered.

He stood only a moment longer, then disappeared.

She waited two more days, tempted to wait three, before she decided to go Below again. Whether it was two or three would make no difference, she knew. Whatever it was, the peace of the long journey had not helped him this time. Perhaps they were past the point where it could. She didn't know. She only knew that whatever it was, they wouldn't solve it by either avoiding each other, or by pretending nothing was wrong and that time apart would set things to rights. That, too, was a thing they were past, it seemed.

What was in front of them, however, was not quite so clear.

She went through her basement entrance after a late night at work. She didn't want to cut through the park in the night hours, but knew it now meant she had the longer walk around to reach him.

She wasn't sure if he even sensed her approach right now, given the tumultuous state of his emotions. The fact that he wasn't "there" to greet her meant he either hadn't sensed her coming, or didn't care that she was. She wondered if he was even now travelling down some dark passageway, headed for some hidden place, to avoid her.

It was a testament to how insecure they were becoming that she thought that a possibility.

The tunnel that led to his chamber loomed, to her left.

He was sprawled across his bed on his stomach, arms folded, his great leonine head resting on them. His loose tunic of a sleep shirt had ridden up near his waist.

He was motionless, and at first Catherine thought he was asleep. But he moved slightly at her entrance into the room, though he did not rise to greet her.

"What? Can you tell me?" she asked, as if this were just the next day after the party, or at least the next night after the balcony.

He shrugged a little, and turned his head. When he began to speak, he kept his voice low. "At first... when we were new... Love felt... different than this."

She could see him searching his memories, remembering their beginning.

"There was a wondrousness to it; a lightness. It ... made me both happy and unsure at the same time."

"It doesn't do that anymore?" she asked him.

"I'm not sure what it does. I know I need it like breathing. Need you like air. But..." The pause was a short one.

"Why me, Catherine? Why, of all God's creatures, am I forbid... everything?"

She could see the look of despair in his eyes. The look he'd been trying to spare her from, as he stayed down here.

He hated self-pity. If he had a virtue, it was that he refused to indulge in it. Now it seemed like he was swamped with it. "The future torments me. The past gives me no comfort. And the present is..." He shook his head. *The present is intolerable. Hard.*

She knelt near the bed.

His voice was as woeful as his expression. Whatever this trip below had brought him, it had not brought him solace. He kept his voice low.

"I leave because I think of reaching for you. No, that isn't true. I leave because reaching for you is the only thing I can think of." He closed his eyes tightly. When he re-opened them, blue eyes full of loss met hers.

"I know what it is to love you." They were the words he had given her when Michael had crashed into their lives. "But it is ... more, now. It rings truer in so many ways. It feels like something both deeper and broader than it used to be, and I don't even know how to explain that. Especially considering it has every limit that it ever had."

"You deserve a life with no limits."

"There is no life without limits!"

Well, that was true, at least. Limits. They'd discussed those, too, when Michael's kiss had happened. Or at least they'd acknowledged them.

"Vincent." Her voice caressed his name. "Whatever this is, whatever this ... sadness is that has hold of you, please don't let it be because of me. And if it is... please don't try to bear it all alone." She grasped his large, hair-covered hands in hers and squeezed.

He shut his eyes against the wonderful feeling of physical contact with her. "You do not know all the things I would give to be a man for you, Catherine."

She drew his hands around so he turned, facing her slightly. She kissed his hands and chose her next words very carefully.

"And if I said I wanted you to give up nothing? Change nothing? If I said I ... think of us... just the way you are?"

"Catherine..."

She settled on her knees near the bed, still keeping hold of him. She moved one hand near his shoulder, just so she could touch his arm.

"This despair you feel. Is it because you see no future for us? Or see it limited, as it is right now?"

He nodded his head subtly.

She laid her head on the mattress, keeping near his.

"If I said... I do see a future for us. That when I look at my future, you are always there. That we are always there. If I tell you I already make choices based on that. That my dreams are there... Does it help at all? Or does it hurt?" she asked. She rarely spoke of the dreams she had for them. It seemed kinder that way, sometimes.

"What choices?"

Her shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "Another job offer came my way a few weeks ago. Not like Providence. I wouldn't have to move. Setting up a division. Working with women who've been attacked or victimized. Joe thought I would be interested, considering my history." She shook her head. "It would have meant working mostly at night, rather than the day, since that's when that sort of thing tends to happen, and for women who work, evening is when they're available for services."

Her thumb rubbed against the back of his furred hand. "I turned it down. It would have meant we saw much less of each other. Night is the only time you can come to the balcony. And while I could have come down below more, I suppose, that's riskier in daylight. There were other reasons to turn it down, and pass it on to the woman who eventually took it. But those were my main ones."

She hadn't mentioned it. She'd simply... rejected a choice she might have taken, had he not been in her life.

"I seem to not be the only one of us who is making decisions alone," he told her without reproach.

"I know." She loved being near him, and that they were talking, quietly. "My point is, I did it because I see a different future for us.

I'm not sure I know all of the particulars. Sometimes I'm not sure if I know any of them, other than you and I are together."

"I didn't used to ... want you... like this. It's like it's growing intolerable, Catherine," he said, with an embarrassing dose of honesty. If she wanted them to share their problems, well, there were his. "It's not that I expect you to do anything about it," he hastened to add.

"Just that I am having a hard time... finding my balance again."

Balance. The delicate thing he seemed to live by. Balance between the world Above and the one Below. Between all he couldn't have, and the little he could. Balance between the demands of his father and the wants of his love. Balance between the scholar and the warrior that screamed in his breast. Balance.

He'd felt without it lately. And it was wearing on him. Clearly.

"Vincent, if I asked you to tell me how you felt when you were away in just one or two words, could you?"

"Frustrated." That was easy.

"And now that you're back?"

The ice of the pool had done its job, for the most part. But in its place was an empty feeling. Not peace. Sorrow.

"Bereft. But I do not know what it is I have lost, Catherine."

Didn't he? Wasn't this constant beating of himself by himself taking a predictable toll?

She slipped away from him, carefully. He let her go. More bereft, now.

"Vincent, I want to do something, to... just touch you. If you don't want it, if it frightens you, if it annoys you or makes you unhappy, I will take my hand away. I won't touch you anyplace... odd. I just ... Will you let me?"

He already missed the sensation of her hand in his. He nodded slowly as she turned him back the way he'd been laying when she'd walked in.

He was lying on in his stomach. His back was available to her. She had often slipped her arm around his waist when they stood on the balcony together. She did so again, for a moment, simply placing her arm around his broad back.

Then, she placed her palm where the fabric had ridden up, slightly, on one side.

"Mmmmm." He groaned it into his arm, then shushed himself.

She could feel the heated flush of his skin's reaction, beneath her palm. Moving it beneath the loose fabric, she kept her hand against his side.

"Don't stop." He surprised both of them by saying it. "Just a few moments ..."

"Shhhhhhhh," she soothed, running her palm under more of the shirt fabric until it rested at the center of the small of his back. The loose white muslin was easy to maneuver under. "Shhhhhh. I've got you," she whispered, placing her other hand against his broad back. The waistband of his sleep pants defended his modesty, while her hands

simply roamed across the strip of flesh on the small of his back, and his sides.

Touch. Just that.

"I can feel you against my skin," he sighed, letting a ton of tension flow into the mattress, and out of him. Catherine realized how rarely they actually touched skin to skin. He often offered her his arm, when they walked, or clasped her shoulder. They both wore gloves, regularly.

His back was less hirsute than his front. And while there was hair there, it was easier for her palms to reach the more bare section of his torso. She smoothed the lay of the sparse hair there back and forth.

"Does it bother you when I do that?" she asked him.

He wasn't quite sure what she meant by "bother." This felt divine.

"I like anything that gets you closer to my skin," was all he told her, turning his head back to the stained glass wall, as she simply maintained the rhythm she'd been using.

He sighed again, and she felt his great weight sink further.

"Don't stop." She swore she heard the catch of tears in his voice.

"You don't have to... do anything, just... don't stop."

Catherine realized she had probably located the one part of his body he found the least objectionable. Either because he couldn't see it, or because he could feel that he was less hirsute there, he seemed utterly content with where her hands were.

She knew he'd spent a loving childhood below. That between Father, Mary, Devin, and a cadre of loving adults and children, he'd been hugged, held, talked to, sung to, read to, and loved. It was obvious in his own loving nature, his ability to give love to those around him.

But she also knew his one attempt at a more physical and romantic kind of love had ended in complete disaster. And though he embraced her often, and warmly, that their touches did not go further than that.

Touch was necessary for human happiness. Study after study had shown it, linking its absence to everything from aggression to depression to high blood pressure to just plain sadness.

Was part of what he was going through now the simple fact that his abstinence was having an almost predictable effect?

"When I had a bad dream, my mother used to come in my room and rub my back," she told him, making small circles.

He spread out the arms he'd been resting his head on, just slightly, and relaxed his head into the pillow. He was not craving a mother's touch from her. But it would do. He banished images of the cold grotto. Whatever happened, he knew he was done subjecting his body to that kind of punishment. This was bliss. If it was all he could ever have, then so be it.

"Feels good," he mumbled, just letting the strain of the previous weeks go as she moved her hands up, a little, to touch more skin. Even then, the soft shirt stayed down, decently covering him. Her hands felt like a balm to something inside him that had been battered, yet unnamed. She was here. She was touching him. It was enough.

And then, immediately and suddenly, it was over.

"Vincent," Pascal's voice came through the door a moment before his slight body did. "Cullen says there's a--"

But none of them ever found out what Cullen said.

Tightly coiled tension returning to his frame immediately, Vincent all but leapt up from the bed, snarling (snarling!) his displeasure at the unwelcome intrusion. Catherine snatched her hands away on reflex. Pascal got the odd eyeful of that, and backed out toward the doorway.

"Sorry! Sorry, I'm so sorry! The drape wasn't down!" He hurried back down the hallway the way he'd come, his retreating footsteps making a quick tattoo on the stones.

No, the drape hadn't been down. And Vincent realized it probably wouldn't have mattered, if it had been.

He was furious. And bereft, again, as much for the interruption as the fact that Catherine's hands were no longer on him. He wanted to swear. Ripely. He roared again instead, a man's scream inside the beast's protest.

"Put your boots on," Catherine told him, when he was done.

"Why?" He was still more than half angry as he glared at the doorway, ready to fight.

"Vincent, I need you. And I need you to trust me. We keep trying to snatch some sort of life with each other ten or fifteen minutes at a time. An hour or two, when we're lucky. Please. Just... put on your boots and follow me. We're not going to my place," she clarified.

Her eyes were steady, and worried.

He yanked on his boots. Stepped behind his wardrobe door and changed into shirts and a vest, as well. She gave him the privacy of her back. He saw her pluck a book of poetry off his shelf, then another, tucking them into her bag. He was still good and annoyed by the time he rounded the wardrobe doors and stood once again in front of her. She could see it. He was pumping adrenaline. It was something she could use.

She nabbed his cape for him. "Come with me," she told him, tugging his arm forward.

It was either follow her or yank his arm back. He followed. He wanted to. Wanted to think she had some kind of help for this. Doubted that she did.

They walked through one passage, then down another. Rapidly. The exercise gave Vincent time to burn off some of his anger, and regain his composure a bit.

"I should apologize to Pascal," he told her, after several minutes of walking. He took his cape from her hands, and donned it.

"Tap him a message on the pipes, then," Catherine said tersely. She did not slow her stride. A few minutes later, they reached the hub.

"Peter Alcott's house has tunnel access. Which way?" she asked him, losing her sense of direction this far underground.

Vincent indicated the path to her right, curious as to why she would want it.

Peter's home was a modest two-story brownstone several blocks off the park. It was expensive, renovated, and more importantly to Catherine, currently empty. She knew, because Peter's keys jangled in her purse as they walked.

"Why are we going to see Peter?" Vincent asked, as her uncharacteristically rapid stride seemed to match his longer one with no trouble.

"Peter's in Cincinnati. Medical conference."

Ah. So they were...

"Catherine?" He tried to slow her, tried to bring her under the control he was used to seeing from her.

"No." Her hand sliced the air, and he realized for the first time that she was as agitated as he was. "If we go to my apartment, we'll sit on the balcony, and then you'll leave when it starts to get too cold or too late. If we stay in your chamber, we'll be interrupted again."

They'd walked rapidly. The narrow passage led to an access tunnel which ended at a ladder. It did not look too dissimilar from the one that marked Catherine's own.

The tunnel access to Peter's basement waited, less than a hundred yards in front of them.

"Please, Vincent? Please? Just... we need someplace to be. Your chamber doesn't work. My place doesn't work. Can we try?"

He wasn't even sure what she was asking for, and yet he knew he couldn't deny her.

She closed the distance and climbed up, but needed Vincent to open the trap door enough to slide away the heavy chest that covered it.

In a few minutes, they were both inside Peter Alcott's basement.

"Living room. Wait here. I'll make sure the blinds are pulled."

Vincent stood down among Peter's cast-offs and his furnace, while Catherine did as she said she would.

After a moment, she motioned him up the narrow stairs.

They creaked, and his hand slid up a rail worn smooth by years of use. Climbing up. It seemed like he was always climbing up, to reach her.

She'd left the rooms mostly dark. A soft light over the sink in the kitchen and a low lamp in the living room lighted his way. He wondered if she did that to avoid detection or because she knew he was more comfortable in low light. It didn't matter. She was taking huge throw pillows off Peter's leather couch and tossing them on the floor. A wide plaid blanket from the couch's back was already there.

"You think Peter will not mind this?" he asked her.

"He gave me his keys," was all she offered by way of a reply. She indicated he was to lie down on the thickly carpeted floor. He felt his own hesitation. So did she.

"I just want us back where we were. But someplace where we won't be interrupted," she told him.

Vincent nodded. He knew this room, though he'd been in it only two or three times before. Certain rooms in helpers' homes were not unfamiliar to him. He removed his cape and spread out on the

blanket, pulling pillows that were nearly the size of the back of the couch under him. He'd missed the touch of her hands almost from the moment he'd snapped at Pascal.

"We could have gone to your apartment," he told her.

"You don't come in to my apartment. Not when you're feeling this way."

He realized how right she was.

He settled his head on his arms again, wondering if this was about to feel like something foolish. Perhaps the moment had been lost, between them.

It hadn't been.

The moment she placed her hands back where they'd been, Vincent released a breath he'd not been aware he'd been holding. Warm. Small. Her hands were beautiful, and well kept. He was starting to know their feel on the small of his back.

Wait. Shirts. He'd put on his clothes and vest, and the tightness of the outer garment would make it difficult to impossible to slide her hands back where they'd been. Without needing to be asked, he reached under his chest and opened the vest. He didn't need to remove it. Just to loosen it, so her hands could slide under. They did so, and he realized he missed the loose feeling of his sleep shirt. Oh, well. This, like everything else, could not be helped.

She resumed the slow circles she'd been making before, and let his body adjust to the feel again, let him relax. The floor was not as comfortable as his huge bed, but it was far better than nothing.

Besides, it wasn't the feel of the floor or the old mattress that had soothed him. It was the sensation of her hands on his skin.

"If I had some lotion, I would rub it on your back," she told him, not aware she'd been caught thinking out loud until she did so.

"That would be heavenly," Vincent told her, reaching down to lift the hems of his shirts up, just a little. He wanted his back bare. At least a small bit of it. He couldn't describe what he was feeling. Only that it felt good. Only that he never wanted her to stop. Only that he wanted her to keep touching him this way until he fell asleep, and even then, after.

"I want you to stay like this until I fall asleep. I want to feel it, during the night, just like this," He spoke the wish aloud, trading her confidence for confidence.

"If I wasn't afraid you would run for the hills, I would tell you Peter has a guest bedroom upstairs, and that I've stayed in it. It's just a nice room." Her hands were magic as they simply moved back and forth across the same narrow strip of skin. "We wouldn't have to... do anything. Just be like this," she whispered.

He was starving for something. They both were. If this was some sort of compromise, she would happily live with it.

He could feel the fatigue of her day on her, as well as his own. It had been a terrifically stressful few weeks for both of them. Why should they not lie in a bed? She would be more comfortable than she was on the hard floor, and he knew he would be.

He gently rolled away from her. "Upstairs?" was all he asked, and she knew they were about to make the trip. Misery made him open to any suggestion, apparently.

She was surprised when he picked her up off the floor, and simply held her close as he mounted the stairs. The upstairs floor plan was the usual kind, with a master bedroom that was obviously Peter's, and two others. One belonged to Barbara, and was shared with her new husband when they were in New York. The other was the guest room Catherine had mentioned. She nodded to the door at the end of the hall.

She flipped on an overhead light switch as he set her down, then softened the atmosphere with a frosted glass boudoir lamp as she turned the overhead off. It was a pretty room. A pastel-colored quilt in shades of soft blue and yellow covered a queen-sized bed stacked with four large pillows. There was a dresser, a bi-fold-door closet, and a small doorway to what Vincent could only guess was a bathroom. One of Mary's doilies adorned the end table, making it feel like home.

Vincent shook his head, amazed that he actually found something in here that he recognized. He remembered watching her make it for Peter, one Winterfest.

"This came from Mary," he said, fingering the soft fabric.

"Did it?" Catherine was surprised, as she took off her shoes. The tatted lace looked lovely beneath the lamp.

"I remember her saying she wanted yellow thread. Years ago. Now I know why." Funny how small memories never quite left and were not needed, until they were.

"I think that was on the table the last time I stayed here. Barbara and I stayed together several years ago, before she went off to Europe to meet Nils. I think it was my last year of law school." She hugged him from behind, and regarded the pretty scrap of lace with him for a moment.

"So you were sleeping next to something from my world. And you never knew," His voice was soft in the half-light. It seemed to give him comfort to know that.

"I must have been."

He felt her smile.

"Sometimes when I'm daydreaming, or just... sometimes. I wonder if I was ever close to you without knowing it. Before," she said.

"I like to imagine you were." He rolled the fantasy out with her.

"Perhaps when you were in the park, listening to a concert, or at some great event at the Met or Carnegie Hall. Perhaps just walking by somewhere. Maybe I was near."

She remained standing behind him. He reached back and wrapped her arms more securely around his front, and kept her near, holding her close as he felt her muscles relax.

"I'd like to think you were near. That we were close, sometimes. Before we actually met," his soft baritone rumbled.

Tired. They were both feeling the length of the day, and its stresses. He disengaged them and sat on the bed, kicking off his boots. He was comforted by the knowledge that they'd slept in the same bed before, the time she'd mourned her father. This was familiar ground, though

it was in an unfamiliar place. Mary's little scrap of lace seemed to help him with the “comfortable” feel of the room, and whatever this was they were doing.

"Can I rub your back again?" she asked.

"You must be tired of that," he answered.

"Not by half," was all she said as she shrugged out of her jacket for the first time that evening.

He took off his loose vest, knowing that was as comfortable as he was going to get. The shirts would stay on.

There was a crystal globe that held a heavy pillar candle. Rebecca. The tunnel women had touched this room. Catherine lit it with a nearby book of matches, and turned off the lamp as the room settled into a familiar glow. In a way, it was like being in one of the guest chambers in the tunnels.

"This place feels familiar to me, even though it isn't." Vincent echoed her thoughts.

How long before the feeling of her hands on him felt “familiar?” A few weeks? More? Less? He laid down on his side and she echoed his position, once again beginning the slow massage that had soothed him earlier.

"Why do I feel like this, Catherine?" he asked as he lay, not facing her.

She wasn't sure, and she told him as much. She had an idea, but maybe she was wrong. She knew he understood human sexuality to some degree, and knew he felt its whip. But she wasn't sure how

much of the word “human” he applied to himself, or if he was comfortable talking about it. She only knew the restlessness in him bespoke deeper needs. Needs that were not being met.

Much of their relationship had been a series of stolen moments. An hour was a stolen luxury. Two were a treasure. Often, they existed on a series of brief moments on her balcony for a week or two at a time, until the frustration of that became too much, and they both began seeking more.

But “more” led to his discomfort, and he went away after a while. It was a pattern they had fallen into, though not on purpose. At least, not on her part. Likely, not on his. He was unsure of what they could have. Whatever it was, it increasingly felt like they could not have much of it.

"I used to think you would leave," he confessed.

"You don't still feel that way, do you?" she asked, afraid his insecurities had kept him from even the comfort of knowing she would never part from him voluntarily. Her hands stilled on his back.

"Not like I used to, no." Her hands were caressing him again. It felt wonderful. "Then sometimes, yes, that fear comes back."

He pillowed his head on his arm, glad she could not see his face, as he admitted it. He did not understand how he could feel both more and less secure with her as time went on. It was like he had a battle to face, but the enemy was unseen, and the outcome was by no means assured.

Her voice was soft. "Sometimes I think we steal the minutes because we're afraid we won't have the years."

So it was her turn to confess a fear. He felt it as she said it. Yes. That was true. It was part of what had been bothering him, as well. He rolled onto his back, aware it would block her touch, but needing to see her face in the candle-lit semi-darkness.

"You are afraid, too?" he asked her.

"Sometimes," she answered, settling her head down on his now-offered shoulder.

He wrapped his arm around her.

She lay beside his warmth and turned on her back, speaking to the ceiling as she spoke to him.

"To have your love. It's such a gift. Such a great and lovely gift," her voice softened. "I swore if I could have that, I'd never ask for more. What we are right now has to be enough. Doesn't it?"

It did. And it wasn't. And he could not settle the chasm between those two differences.

"Being near you makes me want things I can't have. Touch. Time." He locked his hand with hers and raised it for a kiss. "All of it. And sometimes... sometimes I want something I don't think I can even define. It's like something is right in front of me, and it's missing at the same time."

She knew he was not just referring to sex. They both did. She returned the kiss to his fingertips, and he settled their joined hands between them.

"This is the best I've felt in days. Too many to count," he told her, settling them together.

"Me, too," she answered, trying to keep censure out of her voice for his staying away.

He kissed the top of her head. "You can sleep. I can hold you," he suggested to her in the soft night.

She didn't think she would. Until she did just that.

Hours passed. Three. Four. She eased out of his embrace, and they both slept, touching at least slightly, as the long minutes bled into each other. He would open his eyes, see her sleeping next to him, and close them again, and drift. Catherine was doing much the same. Neither were in their own bed, so their sleep was light. A bedside alarm clock warned him of the time, though he knew what time it was just by looking at the candle.

"Catherine..." His voice was soft. He could feel her rousing.

"No." her muffled voice came from his rumpled shirt, near his chest.

"It's after three," he said sadly. "You'll want to--"

"No. I said no." Her hand held his shirt more tightly, and he felt her tears.

She was not yet truly awake, not fully. She'd not yet marshalled the dozen and three defenses she would need to get through the day. She

was unhappy at the thought of parting. Miserable that the stolen time had somehow run out. Damn. Had this made things better or worse for them?

"I know," he said, commiserating. He rubbed her arm in sympathy. It would be all right. It had to be. His great heart thumped beneath her ear. She didn't want to give it up. But he was nudging her upward, just the same, the clock telling him he had to.

"God, Vincent. We keep stealing moments between two worlds." She was honest, and protesting. In a moment, she wouldn't be. In a moment, her own restraint and discipline would kick in, and she'd just accept it all. But not now. "You're in one world. I'm in the other. I know I said I wouldn't ask for more, but can't we just..."

Her voice faded, and her sigh was soul deep. No. They couldn't just. Her day sat waiting for her like an open trap. So did his, for him.

"No. Just no. I'm tired of this."

She hated to admit it, hated to tell him this wasn't enough, especially after a night of being allowed to sleep near him. But there it was, and it was the same thing that had been driving him all but insane, as well.

Was she going to leave him? At last? Were they finally going to admit the tiny drips of time were not enough? That nights like this last one were a fool's folly, and a brief snatch at a protest against all they couldn't have?

"Tell me." It was his constant instruction, and he feared it, now.

Whatever he thought she was about to say, it wasn't what she said.

"Now. Right now." She climbed out of bed, rounded it, and stopped in front of him. "Before we both have time to think about it or talk ourselves out of it. Peter has a van, the one he uses for the clinic. It's in the garage right now. Please." Her cheeks were tear-stained, and her voice was desperate.

"If we think about it, we'll talk ourselves out of it. If we go home to pack, something will come up to stop it. Please. Please, Vincent." She was tugging at his two hands with hers, not bothering to stop the tears.

They felt poised on the edge of a knife.

"Where?" he asked her.

"Connecticut. My Father's cabin. Days. Weeks, if we have to. The roads are so quiet right now. We could be there in just a few hours." She lifted her hand, still entwined with his, to wipe the tears. "We could just... be. No pressure for... sex." There, she said the word. "Or anything. Just... not having to leave each other, all the time."

"You have work," he told her.

"I'll call in sick. You're thinking about why we can't, already."

He realized he had been. He banished all other thought.

"Can I use the pipes to tell Pascal I am gone, with you?" He was trying to pierce through to what was "allowed" in her desperation. But at least he was thinking of going with her.

"Of course. Please, Vincent. Please?"

He nodded and brushed her tears away. She gave him a happy hug and a kiss so brief as to be an impulse.

"I know the van is already gassed up. I used it to take Peter to the airport." She was already climbing over the bed to reach her shoes, already in motion. "He had boxes of things he wanted to ship to the conference," she babbled, as if that were somehow important, now. It wasn't. She was thinking out loud as she moved. Quickly, in both cases.

She tugged on her jacket and kept talking, kept seeing her plan, and trying to cover at least some bases.

"Nils is big. Raid the dresser for some clothes. My dad had some things at the cabin. I'll grab some groceries from Peter. Ten minutes. I want us out the door in ten minutes." Then she was out the bedroom door, racing.

It took closer to twenty-five, but in that brief time, Vincent suddenly found himself party to something that felt halfway between a foolhardy adventure and a kidnapping.

It was astonishingly easy to get out of the city. The above-ground trip Vincent had feared all his life, the one that would have sent Jacob into spasms, was almost a non-event, as he sat in the back of the swaying white van.

A blanket served for padding. The van was a utilitarian thing, meant mostly for hauling medical supplies between the hospital and the clinic. Other than the driver's and passenger seats, it was not built for comfort.

Peter often carried cases of drugs, and needed to be able to do that unobtrusively, lest the vehicle become a target for thieves. The plain white metal was cold, inhospitable, and all but perfect for them.

Vincent kept his hood pulled low over his features, in spite of the dark glass of the vehicle. Just a feeling. Security. Just the urge for that, and no other reason.

Comfortable ride or no, New York spun away beneath the radials.

Vincent knew that each time lamplight shone inside, then moved off, he was passing farther and farther away from the tunnels, farther from his home, and from all he knew. If all his “safety” was there, so was all his “restraint.”

He was not just out, but Out. Both the nervousness of it and the excitement of it warred inside him. He kept the cape pulled close around his shoulders, and watched her drive, from the back.

She told him that once they cleared the city for the country roads, he could sit up in the front with her if he liked, as long as he kept his hood low, or simply bent down if a car approached in the other direction. He doubted if he would take her up on that. This seemed the safer way to travel.

After roughly forty minutes or so of sparse city traffic, he realized that the road around her must be changing. The tires sounded different, as they changed from city streets to highway, and then again from highway to state road. The hum of the wheels sang a different note at each change, and the suspension danced to a slightly different tune.

He felt the changing vibrations, knowing that each one meant he was farther from home, from Jacob, from safety and all that they knew.

He idly wondered how close the closest tunnel was now, even if he could reach it. It didn't matter. It really didn't. He was not sorry he'd given in to her impulse, even though he could feel her nervousness as she, too, had time to now regret at leisure what she'd decided in haste. That they should go. That they needed to, even.

"There are some breakfast bars in the box of food I stole from Peter," she told him, indicating the cardboard box she'd loaded. Vincent had no idea what a "breakfast bar" was. Ah. Like cereal, held together with oats and some honey. Like the trail bars William often made for travelling, or for a very long day punctuated by a good hike. Those. He offered her one, but she declined.

"You are nervous," he said, not sure if he should be speaking to her while she was driving. Was there some sort of rule about that?

"I am. Just until we pass through Hartford." He saw her face check the rear view mirror, and she tried to smile. "It's all but open country from there, punctuated by a couple of small towns, until we reach the property."

Vincent nodded at that, content to recline against the vibrating steel walls as she navigated in the dark. He was putting his life in her hands. There was no safer place for it. He'd had a dream that they might do this, once, and in that dream, he'd told her "No." Even though it was a thing they had never attempted, he'd regretted that decision ever since.

Time passed, and the unsubtle shift from paved road to hard pack was not lost on him. Neither was the acceleration, as her foot depressed the gas pedal. They were nearly there, and racing the dawn.

He carefully positioned himself so that he knelt with one arm braced against each of the seats, looking through the middle. The windshield scenery travelled by. Forest. Trees on either side, with the small spit of a road running through it.

For the first time in his life, he was looking at a state that was not New York.

"This is Connecticut?" he asked her.

"Better," she replied surely. "This is ours. Or it will be, as soon as we hit the fence line." She could not keep the smile out of her voice.

The deep night was greying, and he could see the subtle difference as the hour between five a.m. and six a.m. made itself known.

"Careful," he cautioned her about her acceleration. "If this forest is like the park, many of the animals are very active right before dawn."

She knew he was correct, and willed herself to slow down. A possum waddled out across her path, its small eyes catching the light. "You're right," she told him, easing back a little more. Still, she wanted to have him inside the cabin before the light changed too much. Just in case.

The "fence line" was punctuated by a gate that was padlocked. The words "Private Property" were stenciled on a sign.

She put the van in park, but left the engine idling. "I have one key. Peter has the other. I'll make you one," she told him, digging her set

out of her purse. She turned to him wrapping her arms around his neck. "Thank you for doing this," she told him, touching her forehead to his. "I know I'm asking you to be brave."

"Considering neither one of us quite knows what we are doing, I'd say we're both being a little brave," he told her, giving her cheek a loving stroke.

He did not know exactly what this was, or where it would lead. But he was having an adventure with her. Not one in his world, where he knew all the ways and she was a stranger, but in hers, where the opposite was true.

He discovered how liberating it was to let someone else make all the decisions, for a change.

"This feels good," he confided to her, letting her know he had not minded the rather uncomfortable ride.

"Our first vacation," she told him, smiling at the word. Was that what this was? A vacation? No, not quite. But it was the closest word that applied.

The gradually lightening sky prompted her to not to linger, and she took them through the gate with care, then re-locked it. Vincent thought the cabin would be in their immediate view once they rounded the next bend in the road. He was surprised to see that it wasn't.

"This all belonged to your Father?" he asked her, beginning to understand her wealth in a different light. The apartment was one thing. But this was land. Land like the park.

"It's because the lake isn't visible for a bit yet. There are a couple other cabins on the other side, so it's not like I can say we own the whole thing. But the one family doesn't even use theirs anymore. They're just very old. The other family is mostly here for Fourth of July and a couple weeks after, so, with any luck, it will be all ours."

She eased the van forward cautiously, the headlights cutting their way through the tree-lined path.

The small, red oak building he saw looked like something out of a storybook. It was lovely as well as sturdy looking. Wide-windowed with trim cream shutters, there was a picturesque ambience to it that spoke of wealth. A sturdy porch with a railing ran nearly all the way around it. Sheltering oaks shaded it. It looked like it was waiting to be used.

Peter Alcott, his daughter, and son-in-law had borrowed the cabin just a few weeks ago, for an August vacation before Nils had to be back in Stockholm, teaching. Barbara Alcott had put morning glories in the stone planters on either side of the wide front steps. Rainwater had tended them. Catherine blessed their beauty. When the cabin stood empty for long periods, there was usually some cleaning up to do. This way, there wouldn't be.

The hard-pack lane led to a gravel drive. The cabin held the high ground, just before it gradually sloped down to a dock, complete with a set of Adirondack chairs, a boathouse, and...

And the most beautiful lake Vincent had ever seen.

Rich man. Charles Chandler had been a rich man, Vincent's mind kept singing the words. He would have to have been one, to have afforded a view such as this.



The top curve of the sun was peeking over a distant shoreline. They were on the southern edge of a wide, flat body of water that was just now turning orange-tipped from the sunrise. A morning breeze ruffled the water, and it was chilly yet. A parade of ducks was blithely paddling through the near dark. He heard the plop of a fish, jumping somewhere close; heard the subtle sounds of lake water, lapping the shore.

Insect sounds punctuated the cool, moving air. A few spots near the shore had been cleared for the cabins or outbuildings, but mostly it

was deep forest. Everywhere. The trees looked black yet, But he knew that was about to change.

He took a step forward, entranced, then stopped. Shouldn't he be searching for cover? He was standing out in the open, not remembering how he got there. He did not recall climbing out of the van; he only knew he had.

He smelled water and woods and fowl, and more. Animal scents. Tree smells. Pine and spruce and maple and oak. Some of the scents were familiar. Some were not. All wild, in this all but hallowed place.

He heard the van door slam behind him, but he couldn't turn. He felt transfixed, as he stared.

More light, as the half circle of the rising sun began to claim the sky. Colors. Gradient shades of peach and then pink over his head, light finally hitting the landscape. More color. Green and blue and grey and orange, beginning to creep, and gather, across the land.

"Oh, Catherine." He whispered the words so softly she wasn't sure if she heard them, and he wasn't sure he'd even said them, or just thought them loudly. "How can you ever bear to leave this place?"

She slipped her hand in his as they both stood, simply watching. She knew he had a tear for it, but didn't want to blink.

"I think my Father used to ask himself that every time we packed up to go back to the city," she answered him, her reply the only thing that confirmed for him that he had indeed spoken aloud.

He could understand why Charles felt that way. It seemed like the rest of the world did not even exist. He kept taking a few steps forward,

then stopping, mesmerized. The lake didn't need a Lorelei to draw him. It was enough that it was a lake.

He'd seen water from the New York docks, and of course, from the top of the bridges and some of the buildings. His own home was full of it, sometimes to an even frustrating degree. But not like this. Not tree-ringed and fresh, and full of cat tails and the sounds of frogs, and a dozen or more birds, most of which he couldn't name. A soft spit of sand served as a beach, to one side of the dock. Dragonflies buzzed in the rushes, near the shore as more light came forth.

A heron went for a morning stroll. The ungainly call of geese passed over his head. Songbirds welcomed the morning.



Squirrels skittered in and out of a stand of oak. A fat raccoon, not afraid of anything, apparently, ambled out of a cluster of pines, and just stared at him for a full minute, unblinking, seeming to ask how the hunting was going. Vincent watched it waddle back the way it came.

The wind stilled, and a mosquito buzzed near his ears.

"When there's no breeze, the mosquitoes will eat you alive this time of day," she said ruefully. "Sorry if that interrupts." She meant it.

Vincent chuckled. Paradise, it seemed, had mosquitoes. Oh, well. It was always something.

"We'd best get unloaded, and get in then," he told her, returning to the van and helping her heft whatever she'd hastily packed.

She unlocked the front door and they shouldered their way in. It was lovely, well used, and overstuffed, for the most part. A pair of mismatched chairs sat facing a fireplace framed by irregular stones, mostly in colors of blue and grey. She opened the flue and set a match to the kindling that had been left for them, letting the comforting blaze warm the space as he carried in their few belongings.



It was a beautiful room, he realized, and more of Charles Chandler's wealth was apparent. Warm, oil-rubbed wood lined the walls and the beamed ceiling. A red and blue patterned rug owned the floor. A tartan throw rested on the back of a pulled-back sofa. Bookshelves

lined with books, pictures, mementos and a small stereo filled the space. There was no television.

There was a framed puzzle of Big Ben on one wall, its thousands of tiny pieces likely put together by Chandler hands. A wide oak table sat under a picture window, scratched from use and gleaming with age and care. A serviceable kitchen dominated one corner. Catherine started unloading supplies there.

The refrigerator was still on, but contained little besides a case of water. Catherine's stomach growled an instant before Vincent's did.

"We don't have a big selection, but I can make us some oatmeal, if you like," Catherine offered gamely. Her eyes looked a little nervous again. She wanted him to like this place, and be comfortable here. Very much.

"That would be wonderful. Where should I put your clothes?"

She'd brought some things from Peter's.

"Mine is the room on the left." She nodded to a connecting door. Sleeping arrangements. Ah. Time to discuss those.

"The master bedroom is on the right, and the sofa in front of the fireplace pulls out to a big bed. Wherever you're most comfortable." She left it at that, and continued unpacking some of Peter's produce, giving Vincent her back.

He inclined his head, and carried her small bag of things to her room, and set the one containing his borrowed clothing near the sofa. He could move it, or not, later, as they decided. They were both feeling

their way here. They would sleep wherever she wanted them to. But they would dress and undress apart, still. That seemed right.

The smell of butter and oats filled the cozy kitchen, and Vincent sensed through the bond that she was still tense, now that she'd had time to concoct absolutely everything that could go wrong. What if they were seen? Could he find his way back to New York from here, if something happened to her? The litany of possible disasters was all but making an unshakable melody, in her head.

"Thank you for this," he told her, coming up behind her to hug her while she stirred oatmeal in the pot.

"It's just oatmeal," she replied, tossing in some cinnamon.

"You know what I mean," he chided, gently.

She did.

The spoon slowed. "It just... felt like we needed something," she said, trying not to analyze everything too closely.

Go with it. Whatever it is, just go with it. He felt her let at least some of her concerns go.

But not all of them.

"I have to call Joe," she admitted reluctantly. "I'm due in at work in an hour. The nearest phone is that gas station we passed."

Real life reared its ugly head.

"Will you be all right while I make the call?" she asked him.

"I do not think the raccoon will take me prisoner," he told her, wishing he could banish the look of worry in her eyes. He hated being a liability for her.

"Good." She spooned oatmeal into bowls. "Some of the weasels can be sneaky." She tried to joke. "Stay on your guard."

He helped her set the table with their hastily made meal.

"One expects such things, from weasels," he tried to tease her back as she set down the spoons. He wasn't sure if it was a successful jibe.

She began eating, stirring her food more than it needed. She was anticipating trouble with her employer.

Vincent tried not to sigh, so he ate. It was good. His stomach appreciated a meal taken in while he was not moving.

He would have to spend some time while she was gone acquainting himself with the contents of her kitchen drawers and cabinets. He didn't know where anything was. He did not like the feeling.

She ate with him in a thoughtful silence.

"This will cause you trouble with Joe. Won't it?" he asked. He understood her mood. She was dreading the phone call.

"Probably," she allowed. "But it doesn't matter." She was about to be the selfish dilettante Joe Maxwell had clearly thought she was three years ago. And she couldn't explain why. Oh, well.

But it did matter. Three hours into their decision to run away, the ramifications of that were coming home. She was about to infuriate her boss and friend by dumping her workload on others. Vincent

could tell she felt a stab of guilt at that. Similar to the one he was feeling, over much the same thing. Others would have to take over his classes. Or the children would fall behind, or worse, run amuck.

"I should get going," she told him, rising and putting her bowl in the sink. "The sooner I get this part over with, the better."

"Catherine... If we need to go back..."

"No. Don't even think it. No, Vincent. I'm not looking forward to the argument I'm probably fixing to have. That doesn't mean I think this was the wrong thing to do."

She looked both too young and too old to him, in that moment. Too young to have to bear all the responsibilities she had. And aged by all those cares past her years, at the same time.

"It's just... I love you." He finished it lamely, wishing he could help. Wishing he wasn't the source of why they were always hurting.

"I love you, too. Back in about an hour. Will you be okay?" she asked, again.

"We've already discussed the weasels. I will be fine, Catherine. I shall unpack the clothes I stole from your friend's husband." He tried to keep his voice light.

"You can walk, if you like. It should be all right. Or maybe not." She was suddenly unsure of that. Perhaps she should check things out first? Of course she should.

"I am actually very capable of avoiding being seen," he chided her, as if she couldn't recall he'd spent most of his life doing just that.

She shook her head at her own silliness. "Of course you are. I'm being ridiculous. And paranoid."

"No, you are not. We are both out of our element here, a little." Him more than her. "It will take us some time to get used to it." He brushed her forehead with a grateful kiss.

"Yes. We are." She was worried. Her eyes gave it away. She had all but yanked him away from his life, his responsibilities, and more importantly, his safety and security. "Did I do the right thing, Vincent?" she asked.

He wasn't going to do it, then he did. He brushed her mouth with a soft chaste kiss, similar to the few others they'd exchanged.

"I think so," he whispered in her ear. "If you didn't, we wouldn't have been able to just do that."

They wouldn't have. They wouldn't even have spent the night together, more than likely. The demands of her day would have her off facing the push of the morning commute if they'd stayed in the city. And he'd be checking with Kanin and Father over the work details for the day, and planning his lessons.

She yawned involuntarily, a reminder that she hadn't had much sleep last night, and that she'd had to do all the driving to get them here. Not a very romantic reaction to being kissed. But a predictable one, considering her lack of sleep. She blushed, embarrassed by her fatigue.

"When you come back, we will take a nap, if you like," he told her, loving the image that presented.

So did she.

"That will be lovely," she answered, digging out her keys and heading for the door.

He explored the house while she was gone. A master bedroom last occupied by Peter Alcott sat looking both masculine and comfortable. A heavy blue comforter dominated the large bed. A framed picture of a much younger Catherine sat on the dark cherry wood dresser. Graduation. From high school, not college. She looked so young then. Her hair a bit wavier, her face devoid of the scar she now carried by choice. The picture was over ten years old. He wondered if she felt like a lifetime had passed, since then.

Another photograph near a matching nightstand. This one he knew without ever having met her. Catherine's likeness smiled back up at him, but it was not Catherine. Caroline Chandler beamed at the person taking the picture, probably her husband. A glittering diamond wedding set adorned the hand that gripped a tennis racket. She had a tan. She'd written "I "love" you!" on the photograph, obviously making a joke about the score "love," and tennis. She looked a little older than Catherine was now.

"You have a beautiful daughter," he told the image, as he softly closed the door to the room.

Catherine's room was a space of both her girlhood and her adulthood, as a beautiful white quilt edged in Battenberg lace draped softly off a feather bed topper. Here, too, were pictures from both childhood and after. She and a younger Jenny Aaronson as they backpacked across

Europe. She and Nancy Tucker, on Nancy's wedding day. Pictures of Catherine as a child, holding the first fish she ever caught, a sun hat mostly obscuring her features. A photograph of a horse. He had no idea why. Books on her shelves. Law and mysteries and poetry and suspense. Stephen King sat cheek by jowl with Robert Ludlum, Agatha Christie and the New York civil code. A worn copy of The Velveteen Rabbit leaned to one side. A trinket box made of clay sat by her bedside. A chest of drawers that wouldn't quite shut completely held casual clothes. It was a comfortable room. She clearly felt at home, here.

There was a pretty bathroom in natural stone tile that looked like it might have come out of the lake, given its neutral colors. Like the fireplace, Charles Chandler had clearly wanted something that did not look out of place here. Vincent set some of the toiletries she'd grabbed from Peter's house on the sink basin, and tugged the door closed. A huge robe hung on the back of the door hook. He had no idea who it belonged to.

There was a small room off the kitchen with a washer/dryer combo and a chest freezer full of staples. Thawed milk and bread were not preferable to fresh, but they were preferable to nothing. He took both out and set them in the sink to thaw.

The living room couch looked wide and inviting. He wondered if he was supposed to sleep on the fold-out mattress, or if they were both supposed to sleep together in her bed. They hadn't sorted out those particulars. Like much of this, they hadn't discussed anything. They had both just given in to the urge to run.

He set his borrowed bag of clothes atop the sofa, shaking out the two pairs of jeans and pullover shirts he thought might fit. There was a set of fleece that surely would. The jeans would be short, but that wouldn't matter if he tucked them into his boots. Shirt sleeves always rode up on him unless Mary patched an extension on, or just made him one from scratch. It was all right. Nils Masterson was a big man. Vincent was grateful just to have something clean to wear.

He finished putting away the kitchen items, and inspected the drawers for their contents. The urge to go outside was unmistakable, and he resisted it as much as he could. When he explored the property, he wanted it to be with Catherine.

He checked the outside wood box near the back door for fireplace fodder. Peter and company had left it well stocked, nearly three quarters full. Good.

The day outside the windows became brighter, and Vincent watched the amazing play of light that a bright sunrise bestowed on a forest. The tops of the trees changed color first, then the light and color inched down as the sun rose higher. Some of the denser stands of pine remained unrepentantly dark; many of the sugar maples revealed that they were already starting to turn. Something skittered across the roof. Probably a squirrel.

He did not have a watch to check, to see what time she would be back, and had forgotten to look at the kitchen clock built in to the microwave oven. There were no other timepieces in sight. Charles seemed to send a gentle message. Time was irrelevant here.

Schedules were for the city. This was a different place. Relax. It didn't matter what time it was.

Vincent realized how accustomed he was to reading the day candles, and how ubiquitous the sound of tapping on the pipes was. Sentries commonly tapped the hour, and sometimes the half hour, when something was scheduled to happen. It was quiet inside the house, and slightly raucous outside of it. A new place. A different place, for him.

He heard the sound of the van coming back.

Catherine entered the room, her smile looking forced. She and Joe Maxwell had argued, and she clearly didn't want to discuss it. She was also trying to hide her feelings, knowing he could sense them in the bond. He let her have her privacy. It did little to assuage his guilt, but nothing much was going to do that anyway.

"Sleep will make things seem better," he told her, not sure it was true, but wanting to say it.

"Don't you want to go for a walk? There's a whole forest out there, and the sun is up now."

"The forest will still be there in a few hours," he said, curbing his enthusiasm for it. "I'd rather have you in my arms again. The way I did last night."

He tugged her hand toward her bedroom, letting her drop her cares where she would. He found he did want the feeling of lying next to her again. It was as if saying it had made it so.

She kicked off her shoes and climbed on to what was, for her, a familiar quilt. He wondered how many years she'd dreamed dreams on it, or under it.

He settled near her on wide, down pillows, and thought to ask the question. Before he could frame it, they were both asleep.

--

He dreamed of water. It took him a moment to realize he was on the Nameless River, and he was lost. At first, he wasn't worried. He thought he could find his way. It was a river, after all. It only went in two directions, and only had so many branches. He should easily be able to find his way, either by simply poling back up it, or following it down until the landscape looked familiar.

But he found the longer he tried, the more lost he became. That, too, did not seem important, until he realized that Catherine was the thing he was most separated from.

He tried to wake from the dream, but it shifted. Hiking. He was in a dry passage, and hiking again. That should have been comforting in and of itself, but it wasn't. He knew this path. He was heading back to The Grotto.

The dream shifted again. Something about Mouse, and not being able to find Arthur, until he did. It was benign. Catherine stirred beside him, too tired to dream.

It was midafternoon by the time they awoke, discombobulated at having lost much of the day, but refreshed from sleep, for the most

part. Catherine raided Peter's stolen produce, and tossed a salad for a late lunch. Vincent ate quickly, clearly wanting to explore.

"Shall we take a walk, now?" she asked him, offering her hand, knowing he had no desire to eat.

"Please," he answered, tugging her out the screen door. Paths through her property laid before them.

The splendor of the afternoon was a balm, and Vincent knew that whatever unpleasantness had passed between Catherine and Joe, it no longer upset her. This, like every other problem, was a thing she would deal with when she had to.

They wound through what was for Vincent, a sylvan wonderland. Deep, sweet smelling, and now touched by light. Vincent swore he'd never seen so many shades of green, from near black to almost yellow.

They watched a pair of chipmunks chittering across the branches of a grandfather oak, arguing over an acorn while thousands of them lay at their feet. Catherine smiled, and he was relieved to see it. It was the first smile he'd seen from her in... lord, could he really not remember when, or need to think that far back? No. This morning. When he told her he would go with her. Then she had smiled. And again, in the van. Thank god. Things were not *that* bad, then.

Catherine folded her arms and kept looking up, watching the animals continue disagreeing.

"They're like Zach and Kipper," Vincent opined, "Or Geoffrey and Eric. Arguing for the sake of arguing."

“Did you and Devin do that?” Catherine asked, wanting to hear of his childhood. They were standing in part of hers.

“Constantly,” he answered her, strolling forward. “Though I don’t think it was about acorns.”

“What was it about?” she asked him, relaxing as the soft crunch of pine needles under her feet helped all her tensions bleed away. This had always been such a beautiful spot. “Do you even remember?”

“I believe one was over who was better, Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn.” He paused, watching a bee make its way back to a nearby hive.

“The book or the character?” she asked.

“Both,” he replied.

“Do you remember which one you picked?”

He shook his head. “I have no memory of it whatsoever. And we argued for three days, until Father put us both on kitchen duty.”

Laughter. There it was. There she was. He joined her.

“William made us clean out the stove. It was after Winterfest, and it was filthy, he...”

“Shhh.” She turned her head. “I thought I heard something,” she whispered. “We’re getting close to the stream.” She started to tread softly, hoping their laughter hadn’t frightened away any of the animals.

Keeping low, she led him to a deep copse of gorse bushes, and bid him crouch down.

In front of them was a rocky stream, afternoon sunlight glinting off its surface. Smooth stones worn flat by years of running water punctuated its shine. It was clearly one of the streams that fed into the lake from the mountain runoff. In spring, it would be swollen and wider, sometimes. But summer's toll had narrowed it, some, so it was now little more than a meandering brook, in spots.



She raised a finger to her lips, and just crouched, waiting. Insects buzzed all around them, but she seemed unbothered. After several long minutes, they heard a rustling in the brush.

There she was. The deer Catherine had told him about, in a dream she didn't realize he'd had. A doe, and a lactating one at that, judging by her teats. She stepped from the trees timidly, as does will, her great brown eyes taking in the familiar forest around her. There was little wind. And they were down from her.

A long minute more, and she stepped farther forward, keeping her nimble legs cautious as she made her way toward the stream.

Scenting the air one last time, she bent her graceful neck to lap at the water.

Vincent watched the doe, and took even greater pleasure in watching Catherine watch the doe. Her green eyes looked as fair as the forest. He saw those eyes scanning the brush, but what she was looking for, he didn't know.

Then he did. Of course. Lactating. There would be a fawn.

A few moments after the doe started to drink, a spindly-legged youngster clambered clumsily out of the brush. He stood in the green grass on a hilly slope. A late spring arrival, he was all long legs and greedy intentions, as he stumbled over to her side and began to nurse. The doe continued to drink, just letting him (her?) have its way. The fawn's tan coat was dappled with spots.

Vincent realized the folly of lying down and hoping they would walk up to him or Catherine. They smelled wrong. Utterly. The doe and her babe were meant for this wild place. He and Catherine were polite interlopers.



The beautiful mother drank a moment more, and then just stood there while the fawn took its fill. Then she turned so that her young stepped into the water, something the babe didn't like. The youngster shook its floppy ears in protest, and picked its feet up, annoyed. After a moment more, the fawn followed the doe back into the forest.

Vincent crouched, watching them go until the bracken and bushes simply swallowed them whole. Aside from the sparse tracks, there was no sign they had been there, a moment before.

"Thank you for that," his deep voice conveyed his gratitude. "I seem to keep saying that to you, today." He reached out his hand for hers, and felt it slip in, softly.

"You're welcome. The stream always attracts them. Dad and I used to come out here and take pictures of them, but the sound of the shutter frightens them away sometimes. They have wonderful hearing."

He remembered the long, slender ears. Of course they would. "Does anything hunt them?" he asked.

"Not here. The land is private, and Dad never liked guns. No one around here does. The fines for poaching are so huge, it's generally considered not worth it to take the chance."

"No predators?"

"Sometimes they say a coyote or something comes through, but I've never seen or heard one, not really."

"They should be safe, then." For some reason, that seemed to comfort Vincent very much.

He walked back with her slowly, then finally had to ask it.

“Catherine... near here. Is there a meadow you used to lie down in, when you were a girl?”

“Yes.” She smiled at him, with memory and a little confusion. Had she ever told him about that? “There’s a small field with a bunch of blueberry bushes on the other side of the cabin. I used to lie down there to see if I could get the deer to come to me. Close enough to touch.”

“Did one?” he asked her.

“Almost. A fawn with no sense. But Dad came and told me that I shouldn’t do that. That my smell might offend his parents. And that bucks could be very temperamental.”

He filed that knowledge, letting it settle with the long-ago dream he’d had of her inviting him to this place.

“Perhaps tomorrow we can go picking blueberries,” he told her simply, tucking her arm in his as they walked back down the path. The day was beginning to wane, all around them.

Night held a simple dinner of canned beef stew that they both agreed was nowhere near as good as William’s, but still tasted all right, thanks to the ease of the meal and the length of the day. There was an icebox cake for dessert, so that took the sting out of the dinner.

She selected music for the stereo. Vivaldi. Then she pulled out a blue mat rolled up to conceal a puzzle that had been started. He looked at the picture on the box. A waterfall. A million white pieces, which all

looked identical, except for the million blue pieces that did the same. Well, not a million. Two thousand five hundred, to be exact.

“You must have the patience of a saint,” he told her, as she rolled out the puzzle on the dining room table.

“The one of Big Ben took all of us three years, well, three summers to get done. My mom, my dad, me, even Peter and Barbara. Heck, Jenny even had her hand on that one. Three years! By the time we were done, my dad declared it was going to get painted with puzzle saver and framed, and it was the only clock he ever wanted in that room,” she said, indicating the living area.

Her brow furrowed in concentration, as she settled down to the table, with it. She hadn’t even gotten the outside edge together. It was round.

“Cullen likes these.” He sat across from her trying to divine if there was a secret to this, rather than trial and error. There didn’t seem to be. “He will do one even when he knows there is a piece missing.”

“Oh, my Mom was a demon about that. This was her hobby. She always had one sitting on the table at home. My dad had one of hers framed in his office. It’s supposed to be a statue of Temperance.”

Temperance. The word rang a bell.

“Isn’t that the name of the horse on your bedroom wall?” he asked her.

So, he had gone through the house a little, while she’d been gone. Good.

“Yes. It’s an Arabian thoroughbred, and the first horse I ever showed. We took third place, and I realized I was not much of an equestrienne even though I loved horses.”

“I’m sure you did your best,” he told her, trying to fit a piece into the outside rim. Nope.

“A better rider probably could have gotten as high as first. Definitely second. She belonged to Judge Prentiss. His was the party I went to a few weeks a—” She stopped her chatter and dropped her head.

It took him a second to realize what had just happened.

Judge Prentiss was why she had been dressed to beyond beautiful in a gown that had made his teeth ache with wanting and frustration. It had been the last night he’d seen her before he’d... left her. Left for the deep places. Left for the Centering Pool. Or the temple of self-abuse. Whatever.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

Her head was down, and tears threatened. They actually did. She shook her head.

“You can call me a fool if you like,” he offered softly, hating that she had shut down at the mere mention of a name, thanks to him.

“I don’t want to call you a fool,” she answered, not lifting her head. She was fighting for her composure, and he wasn’t helping.

He stood from the table, giving her some space. From puzzles to summers spent joyfully doing those, to Big Ben, to a favorite memory of her mother, to Temperance, to horses, to a judge, to him. It was

like the stream of consciousness always led back to him failing her, failing them, somehow.

“Today, I told your mother’s picture that she had a beautiful daughter. She does. It isn’t you, Catherine. You know it isn’t. It’s me.”

She raised her head, trying to hold his gaze without becoming more upset.

“Vincent, how can that be? Isn’t it, ultimately, neither you nor me, but what we make, together?”

Right now the only thing they were making was “her cry.”

“I think we just haven’t had time, that’s all,” she told him.

They’d had three years. Parts of them transcendent. Parts of them miserable.

“We keep snatching parts and pieces here and there.” She looked down at the obvious metaphor in front of her. “Like a jigsaw puzzle, but we don’t even know what it’s supposed to look like in the end.”

He nodded, touching her shoulder. “We do seem to be trying this in ten and fifteen minute increments sometimes, don’t we?” he asked her, trying to both soothe and to see. Was that what was wrong? Was that at least part of it?

She nodded at his statement. “It’s part of why I... why I reacted so strongly about leaving you last night.”

“Was Joe angry?” he asked her finally. They were going to have to face that. Not just her. Them. As much as “they” could. They would also have to face Father, once he got home.

“He’s probably still on the ceiling in the office somewhere, so yes,” she confessed. “It’s understandable. I just dumped my caseload on everybody else, with no real explanation other than I needed time off and didn’t know how much. I might not have a job when I get back.”

She was honest, at least. “Or he might have had time to cool off, and I do. We’ll see. It just doesn’t matter right now, Vincent. We needed to be together more. Someplace where my life and your life aren’t constantly pulling us in different directions.”

Different directions. Yes. They did that. She went according to the demands of the world Above, and he moved according to the needs and demands of the world Below. Then they ‘handled’ their problems separately, as well, for the most part. They had to.

They did their dead level best to meet in the middle, as much as possible. Sometimes, that was rare. And it had never felt like enough, for either of them.

Until the little that there was felt like too much, and then he left her.

He took in a deep breath and released it slowly. They had put themselves in a difficult place, somehow. Vincent was not sure what the solution was.

“I am not sure where our answers lie, my Catherine. But I know I am happier, right now, here, with you, than I would have been were I back at home, in my chambers...” He squeezed her shoulder. “Hmm, look...” He picked up a blue curved edge. “Here’s a piece.”

He matched it to the edge of the puzzle, and tapped it in place with a long, clawed fingertip. There. Sometimes, you just had to look. And then look again.

“You found one!” She smiled, letting the tension pass. “Now you’re part of it, too. When we hang it, you’ll know you had a hand in it.”

Very well then. He was part of it, too.

--

The next few days they spent contentedly enough. She took him blueberry picking in her meadow, though the offerings were slim. The animals had already claimed most of the bounty, though a family of rabbits was enjoying some of the lower lying berries.

In the warm afternoons, she liked to sit in the Adirondack chairs that graced her wide dock. There seemed to be an art to just watching the world go by. Time seemed to slow for them.



On the third lazy day, she sat on the dock with him and he tried to show her how to skip stones, a talent he had perfected with Devin. She was terrible at it. At her tenth loud plop into the lake, she declared she was fit for nothing more than scaring the fish.

She took him back inside for a fish dinner, courtesy of Peter Alcott's last catch, in the freezer. They had to air out the cabin from the smell, so they ate on the porch until the mosquitoes drove them inside.

A half-moon lit the forest for them, and on one other night, he'd seen the doe and her fawn again, by the stream.

They slept either in her bed or on the sofa bed, but never the one that had belonged to her Father. Catherine did not mind going in there to fish something out, or fetch him a clean pair of sweat pants. But she would not sleep in her parents' bed. It was like a holy place for her. She didn't mind if others did, and knew Peter Alcott had. But not her. He respected the wishes she couldn't articulate.

He pulled the cherry wood side table into the living room one day, and polished it with lemon oil until it gleamed.

She smiled when she saw it, and blessed him for his care.

Both knew moments of boredom away from their usual lives, and Vincent was very aware that the demands of his life were stacking up on him as they stayed here. So were hers. But he also could not shake the idea that there was something he was supposed to do here, besides simply spend time with her. Was it to try to find his way clear to making love with her? Or to realize they would never be and just admit that? Something else, that he could not yet fathom?

One day when she went to get some more fresh fruit and vegetables from a stand, he walked the lake's perimeter as far as he dared, watching the geese as they bisected the water in smooth rows.

The abundance of wild life here still staggered him. Catherine had told him this was a busy time for the water birds, as the migratory ones came down from the north, and stayed on the lake a while, before the weather turned. It was where the yearling birds would get their last chance at strength, before the long flight, and the old veterans would feel the pull of the earth, as they took their families to safer climes.

Was that what he was looking for? Safer climes?

He loved his home, but increasingly, it had felt like a stone prison. His refuge, and his sanctuary, it also contained the physical limitations of where he could go, and increasingly, what he could be, to her. Elliot Burch built skyscrapers. Vincent lived in a section of caves. The difference was not lost on him. It never had been.

Was he supposed to offer her that? Here? The dichotomy of that was so staggering a thing as to be untenable. He shook his head as he made his way down to her beach.

She was being understanding. Like Father, somewhat, she was being compassionate, and trying to help. She had always been that, with him.

She'd respected his limitations from the first. She'd never made demands on him. Hell, she'd barely made requests. She loved his company, and treasured it. She loved him.

Shouldn't this place, then, be making them happy? Didn't they both correctly decide they needed more time in each other's company, away from the pressures of their respective days?

They had that. He'd sat with her, reading, talking about her childhood and his, looking through old photo albums. The faces of people she'd loved and lost, and loved and still had, stared back at her, at them.

There were friends and family surrounding each of them, though with Charles and Caroline Chandler both gone, he, surprisingly, could lay claim to at least one more "parent" than she could.

She had not asked to live with him Below, again. Like the other limits in his life, she was respecting that one.

They were not quarrelling, or bickering. Other than to be worried for him, she did not seem unhappy. In New York, they gave each other all the time, all the care that they could.

Why then, did he feel so ... lost?

Why had The Grotto, which did effectively curb his libido to ensure a rein was kept on his body's urges, bring him no peace, this time?

Vincent tried to understand what it was that warred, in his heart.

Was this how breakups happened? Was this how it began? With one party or both simply saying to another, "There is something wrong, here?" Or, "I don't know what this is, but I know if we don't see each other anymore, it will go away?" What if that was right? What if it was wrong?

He'd already told her it was him, and he was certain that was correct. But Vincent had no experience with “breakups” or “down times” as a couple. Unless one counted the time he intentionally kept them apart, as he re-established an even keel for his emotions, that was.

If the madness was a time of his darkest wants and needs running wild, and running rough shod over, him, this felt like its opposite. He no longer was sure of anything he wanted. He was just fairly sure he couldn't have it, no matter what it was.

He was feeling closed off. Mostly from her, but from other things, as well. He realized teaching had not been as fulfilling as it once was, and a day's work no longer brought him a deep sense of accomplishment. Labor, neither manual or academic, creative or constructive, was fulfilling, to him, the way it had once been.

What did he want, from his life? Did he even know, now?

It had been a riotous year. Bloody, in places. But those trials were done. Blessedly, John Pater's death meant there had been few other extreme difficulties to take their place.

Why was there no peace, in this peace?

She knew he could not live in her world. She accepted that, with grace, as did he. She knew she was a welcome visitor, in his, as he was in hers. She knew he expected little of a physical relationship between them, but loved her, deeply. They each knew that “time” was a measured thing, between them, and that their contact with each other was, for the most part, emotionally satisfying.

Satisfying.

He remembered a time when it had been joyous. And knew he was struggling to find that feeling, again.

Not for the first time, he wondered if this trip would mark the beginning of their end, even though he couldn't see why it would. If he regretted all he could not give her, he seemed to be the only one doing that.

He tossed a stone toward the lake, giving it a good spin, but watching it plop flat into the water, just the same. He was becoming just as bad at this as she was. He remembered that it was Devin who taught him how to skip stones, near the falls. They'd sat with a pile of rocks between them for successive afternoons until the clawed hands finally learned. Muscles had memory.

He picked up another stone, and discarded it. There was a subtle art to selecting the right kind. Flat ones worked better. There was one.

He gave it a heave, and this time the results were a little better. He felt the muscles in his fingers recall just the "right" time to let go. There. Muscles had memory.

He made his way back to the cabin, praying the memories he was making with her here, were good ones. Or at least that they were the ones he was supposed to make.

--

He liked both the early morning and late evening hours, both for their changes in color, and the activity of the natives. A fat bullfrog sat low in the water near a section of lily pads, and just stared at him. If it had

any answers, he didn't know what they were. But he knew he liked watching it. It had been there, since the first day he came.



He stuck his hand in the water. Cool, but not cold. The wind and moon gave the lake what little 'tide' it had. Mostly the soft push of waves against the dock or the sandspit beach. He could picture Charles and Peter on the lake, fishing. He could picture a young Catherine with them, or wandering through her woods. This was a good place.

They'd kissed, several times. And several of those had been warmer than the usual peck on the cheek variety. As always, he'd told her of his fears of injuring her, and she'd demurred, aware that there was no way she could force the issue. She was enjoying herself here. She clearly loved the uninterrupted time, with him.

Was that what they were supposed to take from this place? A picnic lunch and a crossword puzzle later, he still wasn't sure.

If all they had when they went back to New York was a newfound sense of contentment, then that was a damn sight better than what they'd had when they came out here, all but ready to fly apart from some internal pressure Vincent couldn't even name. He did feel better. He was just not certain how long that feeling would last, once they went back.

He had students who counted on him, and a community that needed and valued him. She was supposed to have clients she was looking out for. Many of those people were victims. They needed her.

Both Vincent and Catherine were aware that, in some way, even in a place almost devoid of clocks, time was running out.

--

The succeeding days had a certain rhythm he was growing accustomed to. Awake before dawn, he often made them tea and toast or oatmeal for breakfast, then he went for a morning walk long before Catherine was awake. The food could be re-warmed, and he discovered the wonders of being in her forest at different times of day.

In a way, he mused, it was like being in the thickets of the Park. The small animals skittered and chased, the night birds changed shifts with the day birds, who sang at the rising sun. In a way, he'd done these things before, he realized.

And in a way, he hadn't.

There were no people here, save the two of them. He didn't need to be on his guard against detection, or discovery. This wood was infinitely deeper than the one in Central Park, and more wild. A young

badger crossed his path one morning, and so did a very casual skunk, both of whom he knew well to avoid, for different reasons. There was no asphalt here, no distant sounds of traffic, no towering skyline beyond the line of trees.

He thought he would be tense, so far away from the safety of the tunnels, and at first he was. But as three days bled into five, he realized the safety of this place. That "no sidewalks" meant no people walking on them. That the mid-September days meant something singular to this space.

"Still having trouble being comfortable?" Catherine asked one afternoon, as they strolled down a winding path just for the pleasure of it. It was one they'd wandered before, but they were following it farther, this time, just for something to do.

"Not like I was. Did it show?"

Catherine smiled at him. "You were fascinated. But justifiably wary of it. It's very 'open' in its way." She squeezed his hand. "It's okay. I was, too, for you."

"It is beautiful here, Catherine. No matter what else happens, you've given me something amazing, and rare. Days in the sun. Days with you." He held back a low hanging maple branch so she could continue to walk without being scratched.

"I had a dream once where we were walking outside," she confided. So had he. A dozen of them. More. "But it wasn't in the forest. We were walking on a beach," she said.

"A beach?" she'd never told him of this, before. So he wasn't the only one with vivid dreams.

"A big one, next to the ocean. Like the kind I saw that time I had to fly to Los Angeles. You still wore your cape..." He was wearing it now. Just in case. "... and I had some gauzy white dress on, I think."

"What were we doing?" he asked.

"Just walking. Enjoying the sun. I didn't want to swim, but I think I wanted to wade in the surf, a little. Mostly I just wanted to be with you. I got to see the sunshine caught in your hair..." the sound was wistful, and bespoke of much.

He stopped in the path and touched her soft locks. "It is one of the pleasures of this trip that I get to see it in yours," he said, moving the hair away from her ear with his fingers. He let it trail through them. She caught his hand in hers and planted a kiss in the middle of his palm.

"I know I keep saying this, but thank you for doing this with me," she said.

He looked around. "I think of the two of us, it is I who should be thanking you, Catherine."

"Not too bored?" she asked. He smiled at that.

"Not very. It must be the company I'm keeping."

She smiled at his compliment and kept his hand in hers as they walked. "My dad tapped a maple tree near here, I think. I should have thought to bring a bucket."

"Tapped?"

"Put a pipe and faucet fixture into the tree. In spring we get maple syrup out of it. My mom picked out the spot, and every spring when we came up here, they used to go off and get what they could." She smiled at the memory. "I never could figure out why they picked a tree so far from the cabin," she shook her blonde head. "I don't know how old I was before I thought back on it and realized they were probably gone a while because they were, well, getting more than maple syrup." She blushed a little at the intimation that her parents had been making love in the beautiful landscape.

Vincent caught her meaning, and then he saw her rather embarrassed pleasure at the memory turn to something more pensive. He even felt it inside the bond. She'd raised the issue of a couple making love around him. It was territory they hadn't ventured into, and among every other thing that stood between them, that was one they'd often sidestepped.

Surprisingly, it was she who spoke up about it, settling it.

"When you were sick... when you collapsed... I said if I could have you back, I'd never ask for anything more."

Ah. He thought as much. She'd not been distant, at all. But they hadn't kissed with unrestrained passion since... since he was flat on his back in the cave, and she was weeping with sorrow. He'd come back to her. Disoriented, confused... even a little amnesiac. But he'd come back.

"When I was sick, I think I swore the same thing," he told her, remembering the time when he'd struggled to contain his Shadow self

and all it wanted. It had seemed to all but overwhelm him. If he could find a way to maintain the balance in his life - if he could find a way to be near her and not be a danger to her, he would ask for nothing more. So they'd reached the same conclusion, then.

"I love you." They said it together. It was a little wistful. But it was still very true.

The sun was starting to slip lower. If they didn't turn back toward the cabin now, they'd be a feast for the mosquitoes when the evening came. Catherine knew it, too, and they started back.

Vincent couldn't help but wonder how far they were from the spot where Charles Chandler had probably made love to his wife. How... different that couple must have looked from them, as they made their way back "home" down the path.

The puzzle got a little more done, maybe thirty or so pieces in all, not a great deal for a picture with over two thousand fractional portions in it waiting to be assembled. But it was something. They'd managed to piece together a rock that perched in the water just before that water went over the falls. Promontory rock. Vincent knew those well. It would sit near the center of the picture, if they ever got the rest of it together.

By Saturday, he was restless, though not from boredom. He walked nearly half way around the circumference of the lake, just meandering. It still seemed like there was something he was supposed to see or do here. And he had no clear idea what.

He loved the sunsets in this paradise, and realized why Charles' view was the superior one. From the southern edge, he could enjoy both the sunrise and sunset on the lake. His two distant neighbors, neither of whom were there anyway, had only one of those views from their porches.

Not that you could really see their cabins clearly from the lake. The architects had deftly hidden the houses back in the trees a bit, to avoid the obvious interruption of shoreline. It was the docks and the boathouses that mostly gave the position of the other cabins away.

At sunset, the wildlife seemed to explode near the lakefront. Geese seemed to all but crisscross the evening sky, ducks paddled back and forth in a mad kind of race, rabbits hopped shyly out of the underbrush, and dragonflies hovered expectantly, near water, waiting for an easy meal. Frogs did the same, and water bugs danced concentric rings into the flat surface of the lake when there was no wind. Sometimes, the noise was all but deafening. The huge body of water was a gathering place. It defined what everything else was. Above all else, this was a lakefront.

There was a boat in the boathouse, of course. But he had no urge to take it out. Neither, it seemed, did Catherine. Boating was for fishing, a thing she associated with Peter Alcott and her Father, but not with him, and not for herself. She seemed content to go through the stores of Peter's bounty, and occasionally buy something at the gas station for a treat. She gathered fat pinecones for the children, and some of the early turning sugar maple leaves. He accompanied her, and they read under a grandfather oak, watching the squirrels play chase while Thoreau kept them company on Walden Pond.

Peter would be gone until next month, between the conference and visiting his sisters for an extended time. Catherine hoped the plants she was supposed to be watering were faring well. She'd have some explaining to do when she got back.

Catherine hoped that she and Vincent were faring well. Sometimes, she wasn't sure.

As ironic as it sounded, considering that sex both was and wasn't the topic that was both on and off the table in the room, it kept Catherine in a state of off-balanced insecurity. Balance. There was that word again. The thing Vincent seemed determined to get, and keep, for himself, somehow. Were there topics she was supposed to be raising? She wasn't sure, quite honestly. Weren't they already in the best place they could be, with each other?

She loved, desperately loved, being with him. But she knew that this was indeed like a "vacation." And those were temporary. Once they were back in the city, things would likely resume more or less as they had once been.

Perhaps she would sleep over more, in the tunnels, sometimes. Probably in the guest chambers. At best, she might be able to pull off doing that with him, or even having him (gasp) stay with her, in her bedroom.

But come three or four a.m., she knew they would face what they'd slammed into the night Pascal's interruption had sent them scrambling for Peter Alcott's. They'd have to part company in the middle of the night and go about their separate lives.

Limits they'd not originally been aware of loomed large, to join the limits they were aware of.

Sunday was clear and bright, as higher temperatures baked a cloudless sky. It was the third day in a row for that. Catherine knew the city was sweltering, and was glad for the breeze from the lake. Summer's last kiss. They would have to talk about returning home. Not tonight. But a few days from now. Whatever it was they were trying to accomplish here, either they'd done it, or they hadn't. "Real life" beckoned. There was little sense pretending they each didn't have one of those.

They sat on the dock, using a pair of towels for padding. He read to her from Wordsworth while she sunned a little. She was getting a bit of a tan. The highlights in her sandy hair were shining with touches of platinum. Joe would miss neither change, when the time came for her to speak with him, again.

Dinner was a frozen lasagna, and big glasses of iced tea. Cleanup was growing routine between them. She washed as he dried. It was a pattern they'd set up, and one neither minded. He definitely knew where all the kitchen items went, by now.

"Catherine...", he watched the faucet running for a moment, then turned it off so she could hear without him having to compete with the sound of the water, "did you expect something... more from this place, for us?"

It was an honest question, and it deserved an honest answer.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I guess I figured perhaps we’d thrown caution to the winds this far...” She looked at him, but then shook her head. “But I understand. We said this was a trip about our just being together, about having time for each other. We’ve done that. It’s been good.”

It had been good. Hadn’t it?

“You’ve seen every picture in every photo album.” She set the sponge to dry as she talked. “We collected leaves and pinecones for the children. We’ve spent almost every minute in each other’s company; I think we haven’t spent this much time together since I was attacked, to be honest with you.”

They hadn’t. Why, then, did this feel so much like a ... failure?

“This last year... parts of it had been so...hard, for us.” That word. That word which just refused to go away. “It seemed like when we were in the middle of that, if we could just get clear of it.”

The Outsiders. Bernie Spirko. The college kids bent on homicide, for the fun of it. John Pater, and an illness that burned through Vincent like wildfire, levelling his sense of control. Yes. A “hard,” year. And they’d survived it.

Why then, did he not feel better, about ... anything?

He hung up the dishtowel. He needed a walk. Alone, perhaps.

He told her as much as he took his cape down off the coat tree near the door. She simply nodded, understanding.

The night forest reminded him a lot of the park. Its sounds were a good bit louder, but familiar. He did feel more at peace from having come here. He did feel more centered. Surely, they hadn't ... *failed* here. They'd just reached the limit of what this place was, for them. He wondered a little, at that.

There would be a full moon tonight. Perhaps that meant something. Perhaps that meant that tomorrow they would go home. It was hard to believe New York was only a little more than two hours away. It felt like a different world, from here.

He walked the familiar path to the rippling stream, now even more slender, thanks to three straight days of full sun. In a month, the leaf change would own the colors of the forest. In another, winter would cover this place in an icy blanket. When it thawed, the stream would be full again.

For now, there was still plenty for the animals who needed it, and if it dried, there was always the lake. He'd already spotted a fox near it, prowling in the brush. It was a young vixen. He could tell by her scent.

He sat in the usual place, and waited for the doe and her fawn. He was not disappointed.

Better watch out, he thought to the fawn as the youngling drank a little from the stream, but mostly from his mother. The wobbly legs seemed stronger, even after just the few days Vincent had been watching the pair. *There's a fox in the woods, and she might be hungry.*

But foxes rarely hunted game that size. They were more closely associated with thinning out the rabbit population, or the water fowl. It was unlikely that the vixen would bother the—

And then Vincent knew just exactly why the vixen would never, ever bother with the fawn.

A gorgeous stag stepped over to the brook, his full rack of antlers glistening as the moon rose. Harvest moon. It would start making shadows as it cleared the trees.

The fawn's father was long, and lithe, and powerful, and he didn't drink, as his family did. Just stood, feet on either side of the stream as it trickled under his belly and watched over his charges. He snorted a little when the wind shifted, and Vincent got the feeling he might have been scented. Then the wind shifted back, and the beautiful father of at least one (and probably more), wasn't sure.

He still didn't drink, as his mate and child did. Just kept his head up, scenting the air, twitching his ears back and forth, listening. He whickered to his wife, and stamped an impatient foot. That was enough of this place. He wanted them back under cover of the trees, where they were safer. Where he could keep them that way.

The doe followed his implied order, and ambled back toward the deep copse of trees where she always seemed to emerge. She sheltered between the trees and the lake. Vincent bet he never saw the stag before because he didn't drink from there. The big prince just watched while they did. He must drink from the lake, after his wife and child were tucked safely in the dense undergrowth. Or perhaps he

just came back here much later. No. Vincent knew he didn't. He'd never seen the buck's tracks before.

The animal turned and seemed to stare right at him, as Vincent stayed crouched in what had become his customary hiding place. The wind hadn't shifted. And Vincent hadn't moved. But somehow, he felt fairly sure the stag now knew he was there.

I Protect Them, it seemed to assure him. It gave him a half-defiant glare before it sauntered gracefully back into cover. The stag was the top of the food chain here, and he knew it.

"Yes. You do," Vincent whispered to the moonlit dark. He knew the family of deer would not be back this way for many days. Until his scent utterly faded or memory completely failed the stag's instinctive mind.

The walk back was slow, as a full moon climbed the sky.

--

Catherine was propped in the sofa bed with a book by the time he'd re-entered the room. She turned out the lamp, but a small fire in the grate burned low, and she'd left lit a large pillar candle she'd scrounged from the hurricane supply box in the laundry room. That was for him, mostly. They had been steadily burning through those candles, just to please him, and make this place seem more "homey." Catherine knew she would replace them the next time she came up, unless Peter came up first, which was likely.

Vincent saw her put away her book and settle down on the far side of the bed, under the covers.

“Did you have a good walk?”

He nodded, but didn’t elaborate. She slid down under the covers to get ready for sleep. He knew they would return to New York soon. There was no sense in not doing so. As beautiful as this place was, and though it had helped, it had not been a cure-all for whatever it was that had ailed them. Ailed him. That didn’t mean it hadn’t been a wonderful and special time, however.

Vincent felt like he could breathe deeply, at least. He’d walked in the sun. He’d explored this part of her world. That was something. Something wonderful.

He changed into his sleep clothes in the bathroom, washed up and watched the water run, again. He’d dreamed of her waterfall puzzle, last night. Of finding more pieces. He was a part of it.

Would she think of him, years from now, when it hung framed on some wall?

Perhaps when they got back to New York, they would try something else. Perhaps they could discuss the possibility of her spending more time below. Perhaps he’d gotten her fired from her job, for no particularly good reason, and she no longer had one of those, so was free to come and go as she wished. Perhaps she would take that freedom and move somewhere else, like near her friend Nancy Tucker and her family. Perhaps this was the beginning of that process. Perhaps a lot of things. Perhaps nothing. It had been that kind of trip.

He settled into the wide bed a little uncomfortably, even though this too, was all but routine, between them. She would scoot over and he would hold her for a while, then one of them would get too warm, and

move away just a little. She'd stick her toes out from under the covers. He'd lie on his side until she turned to be near him and set her hand either on his arm or waist. Then he would settle, finally, and drift off to...

Dream. At first, he was watching her faucet in the sink run, the evening chore of "dishes" now being something that bound them. But he knew it was a dream. He just did.

It surprised him that he had fallen asleep so quickly. In his night vision, he left the kitchen and walked, again, just as he had done that night. Also, as he had done earlier, he saw the stag. This time, it drank deeply from the lake, as he supposed it did. The male protector surveyed his nighttime realm, as his baby lay in a sheltering thicket, and his wife stood close by, too shy to break the cover of the trees for the open of the beach.

The stag drank his fill, turned, and splashed the water a little before he confidently headed back into the woods. He seemed to give Vincent another look, then they both looked at the full moon on the water. If a deer could shrug, he did so, and returned to the pleasures of his wife.

The moon painted a white path down the water. Water that now looked black with mysteries, and warm from the unseasonably hot sun. The moon path led practically out of the water and to the doorstep of the cabin in his dream.

-

He was on the dock. No. He was near the falls, with Devin.

"Keep your shoulder back," Devin's voice instructed. "It's not a baseball. "It's all in the wrist, little brother."

Vincent remembered being frustrated at the instruction. He did not understand what "all in the wrist," meant.

Until the first time he skipped a stone successfully; then he did. The falls shimmered, in his memory, and his boyhood whispered. Vincent remembered laughing, with the older brother he'd idolized, as rock after rock went skipping across the surface of the water. There was a small pool half-full of stones, by the time the day was over, and his heart was flush with success.

"I thought I couldn't do it. That my hands weren't right," Vincent had confided.

"If I can teach Pascal and Danny to do it, I can teach you. You just have to forget the limits, sometimes, little brother."

Forget the limits. But how? His were a part of him.

No.

They were a part of them.

Accidentally, perhaps, but surely, just the same, he'd given "them" every limit he had. Until *they* became the limits they had.

And she'd accepted them.

That was the problem with "accepting" a limit. You got to keep it.

Suddenly, he knew that this trip wasn't just about their inability to spend "time" together. It was about every limit they'd ever accepted, for each other's sake. Accepted, and ultimately, kept.

She had money. Quite a lot of it. Even more, since Charles' passing.

He was going to have to learn to get used to that, and stop hating it for all the choices it afforded her. Stop seeing her wealth as a reason they could not be together, since they would never be equals.

She could walk in the sun, and go anywhere, anywhere in the world.

He was going to have to focus on being happy for her, in that, and not allowing it to define what they could or could not be, to each other. They had spent the last week in the sunlight and darkness together. The light did not define them. It simply defined what they chose to do, from one moment to the next. Fair enough.

He had claws. And fangs, and a mass of body hair, and a face that looked like it belonged on a totem. He was either going to have to accept that that was not a reason to keep them apart, or he was going to have to let it doom them.

He had responsibilities to those people who were important to him. So did she. They were either going to have to adjust those to include each other more, or they were going to have to admit that all they would ever be, all their lives, was "just friends." Dearer than most, perhaps, but "friends," just the same, as they let their respective obligations rule them more than their desires for anything different, or anything more.

The urges of his body either required a beating or a form of expression. Years of choosing the former had blinded him to the choices of the latter.

"Keep trying," Devin's voice whispered. "The water is more solid than it looks."

Water. Water for centering, and water for pleasure. Water for the utilitarian purpose of washing up and the aesthetic purpose of giving the sun and sky a palette on which to paint their reflections.

Reflections of the sky, the sun...

The moon.

The lake was a huge mirror. He had always avoided those, mindful of his differences. Mindful of his limits.

It was the middle of the night. The dead middle of the night. And suddenly, he knew... he knew what he hadn't done. Finally. He sat bolt upright.

"Catherine. Wake up."

"Hmmm?" she asked him, slowly rolling over. She was warm from having slept close to him.

"Wake up. I need to do something. We need to do something." He tugged the thermal shirt down over his abdomen where it had ridden up, in sleep.

"What?" she asked, looking around the darkness. He was re-tying the sweat pants tighter around his waist. What was this? "What do we need to do?" she asked.

Go to the lake. Banish every limit they ever had, in the water's abundance.

"Go swimming," he told her, scooping her up off the folding bed.

She looked around, confused. Apparently, "swimming" did not require a swimsuit. Or much else. She was grateful it didn't require shoes, considering neither of them was wearing any. Not to mention considering so little of this made sense.

"I couldn't figure out what was bothering me all this time, then I dreamed about the water."

He adjusted her as he walked, so that she was straddling the high part of his waist as he supported her weight. Apparently, he was not going to set her down. He walked down the moonlit path to the spit of sand that was her beach.

She was still waking up, and processing, and realizing she was about to get wet. They both were.

"None of the dreams seemed connected, seemed to make sense. I should have known it all along. The Nameless River, the Falls. Skipping stones with Devin, doing the dishes with you, even your puzzle and your dream about the beach ... I've been dreaming of water since the day we came. I should have known," he repeated.

What should he have known? Catherine felt his sure step in the darkness. Harvest moon. It was bright as twilight outside. In the clearing, the trees laid down thick shadows.

Vincent kept walking. All this had begun, it seemed to him, with a dip in the water of the Grotto. Well, it could damn sure end with one.

The lake. The thing he'd walked around, skipped stones across, sat near, eaten fish out of, stuck his hand into and been entranced by, from almost the moment he didn't remember getting out of the van. There it was, every day, just waiting for him. For them. He hefted her higher, and held her close.

Water. The soft wind-pushed sound of it greeted their ears. It would have been pitch black, but for the full moon that sat low in the sky, making a moon glade on the dark water. Ohhh.

He still did not set her down. He simply began walking straight in. Right up the path of light.

"It will be cold," she warned him, not trying to dissuade him, just letting him know.

"It's had the sun on it all day. It's warm. Like bath water," he disagreed, feeling the soft muck of the lake's edge squish between his toes. Warm. It felt warm. After the torture of the Grotto anything did. At first, his calf muscles clenched. Muscles had memory.

Time to teach his some new ones. The fleece of his pant legs was getting soaked. Her shorter ones were going to meet that same fate.

It was not like bath water. Catherine knew that the September sun was still warm, but that the shortening of the days was having an effect on the lake's temperature. Barbara Alcott refused to go in after August, and Peter, who loved to fish but did not love to swim, rarely went in after July, even. Catherine had braved late September once, and had chattering teeth to show for it, after a hard rain.

But that was a week or two away yet, and there had been no rain to chill the dark panorama in front of them. She heard the sounds of his wading in, and sensed something... urgent in his mood. The water rippled white around them, and as her toes began to drag in the water, she felt the temperature. It had indeed been warmed by the sun all day. It was not “warm,” as he said, and it certainly wasn’t “bath water.” But it was tolerable.

Why are we doing this? She wanted to ask, but wasn't sure if she should. She could sense either through the bond or intuition that this was something he needed. That he was either banishing something or moving toward something, and he wanted her in a tight embrace, in the lake water, as he did it.

He remembered the punishment of The Grotto. It was a million miles away. The moon pulled tides, pulled water, all over the world. This moon was pregnantly full, and glorious. Something inside him had been waiting for it to grow big, and lay itself out along the lake. Maybe.

Maybe not. Maybe this was just luck, that it was full when he wanted it to be. They could use some good luck, considering all the “bad” they’d had to face down.

Still dressed, he felt the cloying drag of wet clothing against his skin. Catherine's slight, sweet body cradled against him in a way that would have been entirely sexual, had she been a few inches lower down. Patience. There was a memory of torment he had to exorcise here first. There was a limit he needed to shatter. More than one.

He kept going deeper. When the water was past his waist and soaking her bottom, he stopped, and held her to him. The moon was painting the gold of his mane with silver. He raised a wet hand to push back the hair on her scarred cheek, dampening her, and baring her marred skin to the moonlight.

"I love you," he told her, firmly.

"I know you do," she answered.

"Trust me?" he asked.

"With my life," she replied, trying hard to fathom what this was.

He could feel it. Both her confusion and her trust.

"Good. Hold your breath."

"We're going under?"

"Hold your breath, Catherine. Just..."

"Okay," she agreed quickly, not asking. "Say 'when.'"

He bobbed a moment, wetting her further, wetting them both. She locked her arms around his powerful neck.

"Now," he told her, rising up high, covering her head with a protective hand, and taking in a deep breath. He made sure she had one before he bent both his knees and pushed them forward and down into deeper water.



Down. Down into the moon-swept lake water they both dropped, air bubbles racing to the surface as buoyancy fought to keep them atop the water for a moment, before equilibrium let them stay below. Catherine felt her shirt drenching, and felt Vincent's arms around her.

Buoyancy, weightlessness, and a sense of being together. No matter what this was, she was with him. It wasn't something he had to do alone.

The moon path was a white road of shimmer over her head, and she saw his beautiful mane floating in it. He released her head and loosened his grip a little, so she would not feel as if he were dragging her under. She settled herself on his bent knee, and simply waited.

He could see under water as well as he could see in the dark, and her beautiful face was open-eyed as she stared up at the moon glade, and then back at him. Beautiful. She was as beautiful a dream as he had

ever had, and he loved her. Water caressed her lovely form, fanning her hair and making her loose white sleep shirt opaque. He was going to make love to her. He was going to lick every drop of water off her skin, or rub her dry for her comfort, and make love to her.

She blew more bubbles, her lung capacity not being nearly what his was. She was going to force herself to stay down, with him. Just because. No other reason. Just because. Just because she was inextricably joined to him, and they both knew it.

He'd made her wait nearly three years for his touch. He was not going to make her wait a second longer to breathe. Lifting her up with him, he pushed them both upward, to the white, shining surface.

He burst up out of the water, taking in air. *Breathe. It felt good to just breathe. Finally.* Howling a thanks to the moon, and a blessing for her, he held her close. Night water slicked back his mane and he let her take another blessed breath before he simply threaded his clawed hands inside her own damp “mane” of hair, and kissed her. Really kissed her.

Warm. Her mouth was warm, so much warmer than the water they were standing in. He nudged her mouth open on instinct, and began an immediate game of “chase” with her tongue. Drinking. Feasting. This felt like both. He tasted the clean, fresh water on her lips. He worried those lips, with his. He had a right to this. They both did.

He pulled her back against him, giving her a moment to get her bearings before he settled her lower on his hips than she was when he'd brought her in.

"Take off my shirt. I hate it, and it's wet. Take it off, Catherine," he told her, whispering in the ear that framed the beloved scar. He gave her scar a tracing kiss as her fingers obeyed him. Feeling the ridged flesh of her scar beneath his bottom lip, he caressed it with his mouth, in the moonlight. Her scar tasted like victory. He would never forget it.

She tugged the cloying fabric upwards, and he released her for a moment so he could draw his arms up as she tugged the thermal shirt over his head. It was sodden, and heavy. She clutched it as it half-floated in the water. The magnificent chest she'd longed to see was now utterly soaked and silvered in the moonlight.

"Should we do mine?" she asked almost shyly, still not a hundred percent sure that this was going where she prayed it was.

"Only if you want me back on my knees, in the water," he growled in her ear, brushing the line of her throat with his mouth until he hit the collar of her sleep shirt. It might as well have been gone. Its thin, soaked fabric outlined her breasts and revealed her peaking nipples perfectly.

"Ohhh." He lifted her high and settled one soft button into his mouth, through the fabric. There she was. There was his Catherine.

The sensation of his warm mouth through the wet fabric and on her water-cooled breast caused her to tremble, and she moaned as she held his head to her.

He nuzzled her neck as he began to walk back, letting her feel the obvious evidence of his desire for her as he did so. He was not going to be embarrassed about what his body told him about her. Not ever

again. She was beautiful, and strong, and his body was telling her that he recognized all of that, and more, with its desire. Of course it was. What else could it do but say that?

"I am tired of being apart from you." He meant that every way it could possibly be interpreted.

"Then don't be. Don't be apart from me," she told him, as he took them both back out of the water.

Water streamed across the ground as he walked. Catherine thought she felt heavy, the natural effect of buoyancy on a body.

He pulled her tee shirt up and simply tossed it somewhere, revealing her breasts to the night, and to his gaze. He was strong. Didn't she know he would bear her up, still, out of the water? She thought she was heavy. Silly love. Sometimes she forgot his great strength; forgot he was no more fragile than she was.

Keeping her against him, he feasted on the same breast he'd previously visited, tasting and feeling the difference.

Darker now. The pebbled flesh tasted darker, free of the cloth. The turgid nipple hit the cleft of his upper lip, and he had to stop walking or risk truly going down on his knees.

She felt his erection jump between them, and smiled with awareness. Ah. *We will have to explore that.* Her love had just given himself a taste of his own medicine. How magnificent.

He staggered a moment, then righted his own ship, feeling his sweatpants ride low, trailing lake water. The towels on the porch rail. He reached for them as they achieved the house.

She took one and began rubbing him with it, across his back and hair, as he did her. It was not a cure-all. They were both still wet, and wearing soaked pants. But it helped.

His pants were still up by virtue of the drawstring and an erection neither one of them was trying to pretend didn't exist. He wanted the sodden slacks gone, wanted the now cool, wet, heavy fabric away from his sex. Her own sleep pants slid off with a nudge of his hand, as the waistband couldn't fight the weight of the water, and once clear of her curving hips, found no purchase. She was undressed while they were still on the porch. He was nude only a moment after, inside the door.

Arms full of towels and each other, he made a game out of drying her skin, then wetting it again with his mouth. He held her to him and made slow circles on her backside and flanks, both with the towel and with his bare hands. She did the same across his shoulder blades.

"I swear I could drink you," he said to her trembling form. Except for the hair on her head, she was mostly dry now. He wouldn't be for some minutes yet, his body hair holding the water still, while her skin had dried. His body temperature ran hotter. He would dry naturally, in a few minutes.

A few minutes of exploration.

His body hair was a "difference," between them, now, but it was not a limit. He had thought of those two things as one and the same for so long, he was almost startled to realize they no longer had the same definition.

As good as his word, he lifted her again, and settled her on the bed, letting his exploring mouth make lines down her skin. Arms, neck, breasts, belly... he drank from her navel, and surprised her by reaching far down and lifting her foot so he could bend her leg and bestow a kiss on her left ankle. He trailed the kiss up until he caught the tender back of her knee. She jumped a little as his hands and mouth told him where her skin was sensitive, where it was ticklish, and what made her sigh.

While he lay sprawled between her legs, she kept trying to nudge him back upward.

But he knew he was still too damp, yet, to lie on her, and he wanted more time. His body hair was one of the differences of which he'd always been conscious of. And while it astonished him that he was treating it as a simple inconvenience rather than a major impediment, he was still aware that if he laid atop of her, she would feel the damp coolness of the lake water on her now dry... well, nearly dry, skin.

It was all right that they had to delay. The scent of her arousal was drawing his mouth like a siren's invitation to dine. He began to purposely slow his pace, tracing the inside of her thighs lovingly, telegraphing his intentions.

She writhed with the anticipation of it. Vincent could taste her skin's pleasure as a flavor in his mouth, thanks to their bond. She was excited. Panting. With the pads of his fingers, he ran his hand slowly up the inside of the thigh he had just kissed, and ... pain.

Pain.

It was sharp, and sure, and it belonged to her, and he felt it immediately. He yanked his hand back and threw himself away from her, scalded.

A dozen hideous images slammed through his brain at once. Blood. Where was the blood? He knew he'd just hurt her, just felt it happen. He expected to see a deep scratch where his nails had raked her tender skin. *Stupid, stupid, stupid... don't you know you can't touch a woman? No. Just, no. Remember?*

He was confused. There was no mark on her, but the sensation had definitely been there, and had been hers. The bond always told him when she was in pain. From across the city it told him. He *knew* that sensation. He hadn't imagined it.

Her head thrashed a moment, riding the wave of pleasure that had been owning her. She knew the moment he stopped touching her, then felt his complete withdrawal. What? She was a fraction of a second behind, passion fogging her reflexes.

From the crouched position near the bed, she heard the regret. The soul-rending regret.

"I hurt you. Where?! I'm so sorry." He began to turn away, both confused and concerned. He looked at his hands. Why were they free of blood? Shouldn't there be blood, here? He scanned her legs, kneeling.

"Vincent, no." She sat up, understanding. "It wasn't you. It wasn't you, Vincent."

"I hurt you." He began to withdraw from the area.

"No!" She grabbed his shoulder and held, fingers sliding down until they simply held onto the fur of his upper arm. "I hurt me. Look."

She let go of his arm, and showed him her wrist. On it, right where her arm began, was a perfectly round mark. A bite mark. Hers. It was red, and it would bruise.

"What...?" he cupped her hand, confounded. She had bitten herself?

"I'm so sorry." She shook her head and realized his confusion. "I just..."

She looked down and blushed. Actually blushed. God bless her, his love was embarrassed by something. Or something like embarrassed. Vincent was utterly bewildered.

"I was about to... cry out. So, I... covered my mouth with my arm... I didn't mean to bite so hard. I'm sorry. I didn't know you would feel it, I didn't think. You didn't hurt me." The words were falling over each other.

He still held the offended flesh, confused, but realizing. Now it was him who was a beat behind.

She blushed a deeper red, and gave him the simple explanation.

"Ladies don't make noise." A lifetime of genteel habits and passionless lovers had taught her as much. Stephen had been fastidious in more ways than one.

"You were about to..."

"What you were doing... it felt ... amazing." The last word was spoken like a whispered secret.

Whoof. He moved over top of her so that his shoulder sent her toppling backwards into the sheets. Give him a few moments to get them back to where they had been, and he would show her “amazing.”

"You hold back no sound from me." The baritone honey of his voice had a whispered edge. The effect was all the more telling. It was an order, not a request. Her green eyes were blowing wide from passion.

"I have loved every sigh, every moan caught in the back of your throat." he touched that throat with his clawed hand. "*Loved it.*"

Her pulse jumped.

"It's a song your body is singing to mine, and I can't even *hope* to make you understand how much I want it. How much I thought never to have it." He stroked down the center of her body, then picked up her injured arm and kissed the hurt there.

"Please, Catherine. Please. Don't hold things away from me. If you are meant to cry out, cry out. I swear I would be the last being on earth to think it... unattractive."

Had someone done this to her? Or had her upbringing, like his, done this to her? Had *her* life, too, given her certain pre-conceived ideas, certain limits, which might just be ... wrong?

Either way, it didn't matter. This was *him and her*. The thing that had never been. This was *them* now. If she wanted to moan, or thrash, or scream with pleasure, he wanted it, too. Forcing herself to be quiet was a limit. He was through with those.

"You felt me get hurt," she said softly, holding her arm where they could both see.

"Of course I did. It's why I stopped," he said, nuzzling the bruising flesh. Instinctively, he set his tongue to it, briefly. The urge to taste her skin was growing keenly again, inside him.

"Vincent. You stopped because you felt me get hurt. Think about that, for a moment." The fingers of her other hand locked in his mane as he kept his still-damp body hovering above hers.

He had stopped. With a burgeoning erection and an intention to provoke, he had nonetheless felt her discomfort the second it happened, and stopped.

"I won't hurt you." He realized it a step behind her.

"I never thought you would," she told him, brushing her fingertips back and forth across his sculpted cheekbones.

He stretched out along her body, letting her feel his weight for the first time, damp fur be damned.

"Where are our limits now, Catherine?" he asked her, staring hard into the green eyes that owned his soul. "Do you know?"

She shook her head slightly, mesmerized by his electric blue gaze.

"I have no idea," she responded.

And there it was. The limitless future, rolling itself out before him. The thing he had lost, and could not, for all his searching, find. Not in the Grotto, or in his chambers, or even on her balcony, where

everything used to seem possible. That had become a place to leave when he wanted to stay. Everyplace had, lately.

He'd been hitting their limits so often, and so hard, he'd exhausted himself from it.

Now, with a full moon baptism in her lake, the limitless future shimmered out again; it was like a moon glade on the water.

Vincent held her eyes a moment longer as he settled his weight between her thighs, loving the sensual rush of nestling against her, intimately, for a few brief seconds.

No. Not yet. Not while there was so much more to discover about her.

"Will you do the same with me?" she asked, as he slid back down low, between her legs. "Don't hold back letting me know if something pleases you? Or something doesn't?"

"I swear." He said it, then turned his head to plant a deep kiss on the inside of her thigh. Left, then right. He felt her abdomen tighten again, as he trailed the kisses upward. He felt her fingers tangle in the hair at the top of his head, urging it upward.

He lifted his head and looked. Lord, the vision of her. She was alabaster lines and candlelight-licked skin. Her hand was twining in the fall of hair near his temple, and her eyes were luminous.

"You don't have to do that," she told him, abbreviating what for him was about to be a most intimate kiss.

He could feel the tension in her small frame. Tell the way her body tightened with anticipation when he drew near her there. Could tell from the bond that it was not revulsion she felt, or fear. If anything, she was close to abusing her lip the same way she'd abused her wrist a moment ago.

"Since I started kissing your mouth, I have wanted to taste every inch of your skin," he told her, his blue eyes turning molten as they stared up at her. He removed her hand from his hair, and planted small kisses along her fingertips. Then began to set his tongue against where his lips had been.

"You keep interrupting me, beautiful Catherine."

"Vincent, I'm... slow, sometimes." She finished the sentence lamely, trying to explain.

It took him a beat or two to divine her meaning. Slow? She was... slow. Oh. *That* kind of slow. Slow to...

Oh, this was going to be glorious.

His blue eyes took on a gleam so predatory that all she could do was stare.

"So am I," his deepening baritone promised. "Oh, so am I, Catherine."

One arm planted firmly across her belly to hold her down, the other hand rubbed down in a circle, until it covered her sex. With his arm blocking her view clearly, she only saw his head dip.

Then she screamed. And it was not in pain.

The body that always burned a few degrees hotter than hers had a warmer mouth. The leonine mouth held a slightly leonine tongue, narrower than hers, with both a slightly raised, yet silky texture at the tip. All of which were brought to bear on her most sensitive flesh.

She cried out again as he explored. He felt her writhe, both trying to draw closer, and trying to “escape” in the same motion. He let her movement guide him to what and where she wanted.

This was delight. His woman was in a place of passion, and it was he, Vincent, who was taking her there. Keeping her there.

He felt her hands grab palmfuls of sheet and pull. She was exquisite. And she was his.

Scent exploded off her, and taste as well. He drew both into himself with every sense he had, tasting sex on his tongue for the first time, as it numbed the tip. Her moans were caught between loud and soft, mewling whimpers punctuated by deep surprise.

"Don't stop," her ragged whisper implored. "Please don't stop."

As if he would, ever.

There seemed to be no particular rhythm to this that she needed, no particular way. Just the constancy of touch, and warmth. There was an almost continuous tension in her thighs now, as he realized she was about to strain. Her calves were taut, her arms rigid lines of grasping need, as she held the bedclothes. He began a steady tempo of assault against the engorged knot of nerve endings every anatomy book insisted a woman had, until she...

It was not a scream, at the end. More of a gasp of surprise and delight as her chin pointed upward, and her body bore down and began to shake.

Vincent closed his eyes and felt it all, chased it all, as she climaxed. Salt. His love tasted like a sweet and bitter sea. Like tears mixed with the smell of earth, just before it rains. Flavors on his tongue and textures to lock in his brain. Tears like the ones he knew were coming from the corners of her eyelids, now.

This could not be happening.

He could sense her disbelief as he felt her completion. She was... astonished, at him?

He turned his head and smiled a very male smile into her thigh. No. This was not "him." This was "them." And oh, what they just might make, together.

Morning found them exhausted. He was sated beyond belief, and his body hummed with his completions. He was a generous lover. He had not known that before. It took *being* a lover, to know that, not just imagining it. He had not known. Nor realized what it prompted, in her. She gave selflessly, and with a sweetness that left him staggered.

Though tired, he couldn't sleep for long, as he lay next to her. Something in him wanted to go back to find the doe near the stream. He wanted to thank her just for being a doe, and he didn't know why. She was protected. Of course she was. With that as a given, he knew he wouldn't find her. Not for a while, at least.

He wanted to go back and dip his hand in the running water of the stream, just to feel it make its path down to the lake. Water moved. Water was still. It gave life and carved mountains, and punished, and cleansed and renewed. It just was.

She slept amid the destroyed bedding as he carefully got up and slid into jeans and a long-sleeved pullover shirt. Dawn was coming again, and he knew he didn't want to miss it; he wanted to see the lake again, and see if it looked any different.

It did, and it didn't, he realized, as he let the screen door drop, quietly. The water was blue-grey again, not the black and moon-swept white of last night. It looked like it held secrets. Good ones, like the secret of embracing them under the water as he let the lessons from the Grotto go. He liked that the water kept their secret. He liked that she would always look at it, now, and remember.

Part of the lake was still at his feet, caught in the wet clothing they'd discarded.

Her sleep pants lay sopping near the doorway. As he approached the railing, he saw that his thermal shirt lay wadded on the gravel near the steps, not far from where he'd tossed her top. He scooped all of it up and set it across the porch railing to drip.

He remembered the sight of her breasts beneath the shirt, then the sight of them bared, by moonlight then candlelight. He remembered her soft curves as she'd straddled him, settling his back against the sofa, taking him inside of her, their second time. Her third time, his mind amended. His second. She gave pleasure, and took it, and he was rapidly discovering the pleasure of wringing her completions from

her. It was a humbling thing, and at the same time, an empowering one.

Suddenly, he understood. Understood all of them, the men in his world. He understood Kanin, and why it all but destroyed him to be apart from Olivia for the months he had. Understood that the sensations he'd just had, the glory of hearing Catherine's cries, the feeling of her in her passion, that it had been *him* to bring her all of that... he understood. He understood why Henry had been willing to risk all for Lin, understood that this gift had been Jacob's too, once. That it had been had, and lost, when Margaret had turned from him.

How had Father ever survived it?

And how had Vincent ever survived, not knowing this bliss, for so long?

He now understood manhood, and its resulting implications, in a completely different way. Understood the stag's haughty stance. Understood why, prior to last night, he could not know what it was to be a woman's lover. This woman's lover. It wasn't just the act. Not the lovemaking itself. That was simple biology, in its way.

It was her. But not *just* her, or even just her and him. It was her *with* him, and the distinctions that created. The almost indefinable Union that caused, the power to give and receive pleasure from it. The right to be her mate. The responsibility that entailed. And the love it engendered.

It was now both his job and his joy to understand what her sounds meant, what her actions indicated, when they made love. The tension in her body had a meaning. The sounds she made did, too. So, he realized, did his. They had a right to this.

The making of Them.

Other men knew of this, with their women. He had barely suspected, and even in his sparsest understanding of it, never thought to find this gift his.

He was not a different man because he'd made love to a woman. He was a different man because he had given himself over to the pleasure of another, and found that pleasure possible, and returned, and multiplied. And uniting. And... limitless?

Where are our limits now, Catherine?

I have no idea.

Even near dawn, as he laid with her, he could still see the small indentations of her teeth on her wrist. The wrist she had abused until he'd all but ordered her to stop. He closed his eyes, recalling the sound of her orgasm. It was there. But he was astonished to find it was becoming a shifting, almost cloud-like memory, amid all the other memories of pleasing her.

It was all right. Clouds were water, too. There were some of those turning pink over her water now. Memories turned as the sky's colors did.

Her thigh had tensed under his palm when he stroked either up or down it, but especially up. Anything that brought the implication that he would touch her sex made her body tense with want.

He pulled that knowledge deep inside him, satisfied. He wanted to test that theory again. Soon. Wanted to find more places on her skin where sensation made her jump. Wanted to see what touches made

her green eyes go unfocussed with want. Wanted to... He shifted his stance, realizing he was about to stir himself to arousal again. No. She was exhausted. She needed sleep.

And he needed to hold her through the soft morning, watching her breathe, keeping his hand clasped in proprietary fashion on her somewhere. Her wrist, her hand, across her abdomen. Somewhere, anywhere he could touch.

He was about to go back in when he heard her soft footfalls. She brought out his sodden sweatpants and the towels to join with the other clothing on the rail. He'd forgotten about them. No, that wasn't true, exactly. He'd stepped right over them on his way to see if the lake looked different.

"You look... thoughtful," she said, wrapped in a robe. She embraced him gently, from behind, as he watched the lake, still.

"I was feeling a kinship with Kanin, and Henry. And with Jacob." Jacob. Not "Father." Not for this.

"A kinship?" she asked him, curious.

"They... they know what this is, too. Don't they, Catherine? Not just... I don't know. Not just 'love,' though it sounds so strange to say that. Certainly not just sex, or something simple, or light. This. The way it was with us. This ... deeper way."

He was trying to frame a question of which he was uncertain.

"I suppose they do. Or did." The latter applied to Jacob. She kissed his back between the shoulder blades, loving him. She already missed the sight of his bare torso.

His deep voice continued. "I know it's impossible to think of him as someone who once loved a woman so deeply, but... I think I understand him better now."

The lake whispered to him, as a breeze tossed the waves a little. "Or at least, I *think* I understand him. It. All of it. Why he was so opposed, in the beginning. Why it frightened him to think I might ... I don't know, approach this, then have it taken away." He placed his clawed hands over her entwined arms, across his belly.

"I understand now why the days he had with her at the end were enough. I thought I understood before, but now I really do. He just needed enough time to say good-bye. To thank her for all she'd given him." Vincent shook his head. "An hour would have been enough. Less. So he counted every hour after that as a blessing, and held them as such." Vincent shook his head again, amazed.

"I will have to find a way to tell him I understand, when we return. And Kanin. I ... understand so much better now about him. About all of it. Do you think he loves Olivia the way I love you?" he asked.

Catherine pulled his arm up and tucked herself under it and into his embrace. "If he does, I'd say she's a lucky woman. What do you think?"

"I think I never felt this ... kinship before, with other men. Never felt... included, that way. I thought it was because of the way I looked, of course, and it was, but... Now I know it's about this. The thing that binds all men, at least all blessed men, together. This. What we shared in there."

Dawn kissed her blushing skin. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

"I was surprised to find you gone. Thought perhaps you might be having morning-after regrets."

She confessed an insecurity he was surprised she still had.

"I'm relieved to see you aren't," she confided, holding his large arm firmly around her.

It was all right. He now had all the time he needed to banish the insecurities for her. They had all the time. One by one, their limits were about to fall. He would see to it.

"I had to leave or I would have ... awoken you from sleep before you were ready," he explained, drawing her a little in front of his body so she could stand before him and watch the sunrise. She seemed happier just to watch him.

She smiled, and kissed his arm. "I'm not sure whether or not I'm a morning person," she answered back. "But with you, I'm certainly willing to make every exception."

He wrapped his huge arm across her front, clasping her shoulder. "Do we have to go back?" he asked her. He knew they did. She knew they did. Later. Much later. They both knew. But in a way, it was like they had only just arrived.

"Mmmm, not for days." Her voice sounded dreamy. "Not for forever, if I just quit. We can live on my money, and never come out of this cabin." She smiled at the ridiculous invitation. Ridiculous and utterly tempting. A silly fantasy they were making. Together.

"Do you think fifty years will be long enough?" he asked her, watching the sun clear the bottom of the water. She held his arm lightly with her hands. The pose was almost identical to the one painted of them by Kristopher Gentian.

"Give it a hundred," she answered. "Two hundred. Just in case."

He squeezed her tightly to him, loving her.

"Do you think the tunnels will still be there? That we'll be able to find our way back down?" It was idle fantasy.

"I think those tunnels were probably there two hundred years ago, so I can't see why they wouldn't be there two hundred years from now. We'll just tap on the pipes until one of Pascal's great-grandchildren comes to find us."

The image was fanciful. He could feel her smiling.

"And I will take you to the Music Chamber. And to the Great Hall, for Winterfest."

"The tapestries will still be there." Her voice painted a memory.

"And I will dance with you. To the music only we can hear."

"And the Great Falls? Will you take me there? Take me swimming again?" She looked up from beneath his chin, as he looked back down at her.

"Every time you want to. And then again, every time I dream of water."

---Fin---

