

I, BEAST

BY CINDY RÆ



CHAPTER 1

HUNTING



Almost a week. She'd been missing for almost a week. Five days. Plus fourteen hours and some odd number of minutes. Longer, perhaps. Vincent knew he was losing track of time, somehow.

When it started, she'd been frightened, for a moment.

That was simply when he'd been aware of her distress.

Then, suddenly, he was aware of ... nothing, from her. Fear at first, and then ... blackness. Void. And ... nothing. The bond was gone. *Gone.*

He dropped to his knees, both from the horror of it and the sheer shock to his system. It was a punch to his gut and a tearing on his psyche. She'd been ripped away.

Gone. Gone, gone... She was gone. Dead? Instantly?

It was too sudden, too extreme, and his brain grappled with what his link to her was trying to tell him.

What..? How..? A car? A car on the street? Had she been hit? His mind scrambled as his body fought to get him back on his feet.

It felt like there was a black hole in his brain where she used to sit. A hole like the Abyss, and an emptiness in his heart to match it.

Gone... The word whispered frighteningly, in his sensitive mind.

Vincent flew to her apartment building, the last place he'd "felt" her. A chloroform rag lay on the ground near the elevator of her parking garage.

In some dark way, it was the only thing that had given him any hope at all.

Not hit. Not an accident. Kidnapped. Taken. Anyone intending to kill her might simply have done so, right there.

She'd been stolen from her normal life, from him. Removed from whatever it was she'd been trying to do before she'd been intercepted.

Not that he had any hope for a good outcome, not yet, but "taken" was not "killed." Tears he'd been afraid to shed remained banked as he'd raced to her home. He swallowed past the lump in his closing throat.

He would find her.

In the bleak hours that felt like eternities later, he realized that the District Attorney's Office would be no help to her. It was already in turmoil. There had been a bomb blast. Joe Maxwell was in the hospital. And something about a man who'd been killed by the bomb. A college friend of Joe's. One he'd not seen in many years. Information. Speculation. It meant nothing to Vincent. Nothing

other than Catherine had been caught up in all of this, whatever “all of this” was.

The TV and newspapers were full of bad tidings. Good people were either missing or dead, and other good people were worried. Greg Hughes sent his wife and children to stay with relatives, knowing distance kept them safer. He wasn't sure what any of the things they were finding out meant for any of the foot soldiers, involved in what had become an unexpected war.

Joe Maxwell in ICU. Catherine Chandler missing. A man Joe had gone to school with dead, not enough left of him to bury. War.

Several people working for the DA's office called in sick, out of fear. It was like watching the city collapse in on itself.

They all knew that Catherine was nowhere to be found. But they had no idea where to begin to find her. There was no ransom demand, no case she was working on that led to a prime suspect. There were no eye witnesses to her abduction. No body fitting her description, in the morgue. There was no... anything. She was just... gone. The word seemed to follow her like a hollow echo.

Vincent had run across rooftops the first night she'd been taken, blindly trying to sense her, trying to get any feeling of her, or at least of her direction. But the bond was somehow lost to him. It was a chasm of emptiness where “something” had been, in his mind.

His heart knew an abysmal fear, and the muscles in his stomach clenched, and stayed that way. His chest felt tight. His throat felt like it was closing. His body felt warm, adrenaline flowing into his system

in a constant stream. His mighty heart pounded, and sometimes the blood rush made his sensitive ears ring. Yet he couldn't find the inner "sound" he searched for. Could not find her.

He felt nothing of her. Nothing at all. And that terrified him a little more.

The second day passed in a haze of agony for him, one where he knew she did not wake up. Had they killed her after all? His heart refused to believe it.

The city spasmed as good men tried to find the source of the rot in their midst, and bad ones wore either helping smiles or serious, solemn expressions, hiding from detection.

Joe Maxwell's ICU stayed under armed guard, the guards picked by Greg Hughes, personally. John Moreno seemed in the office as much as out of it. The newspapers screamed updates and it was the lead story on every local news channel.

The Mayor wanted a task force assembled. The Governor wanted more. Senator Blair wanted arrests made within the next twenty-four hours or there would be hell to pay, come the next election cycle. Senator Callahan lobbied for more funding for more cops while State Representative Dailey said it was better technology and programs

spent on crime prevention that were needed, not more cops on the front line.

Politics. Same old song-and-dance.

Vincent was oblivious to all of it. Or at least, he was oblivious to much of it. Jacob did not like the look in his son's normally peaceful blue eyes.

And then he didn't even recognize it.

Soft blue turned to a kind of steely grey, and his stare seemed almost unblinking. And though Vincent spoke to him when Jacob pushed, the answers were increasingly monosyllabic, and sharp. Had he found her? No. Did he know where she might be? No. And that was the same as the first question, wasn't it? Vincent's temper grew shorter as his instincts began to grow sharper.

He stopped listening to newscasts or reading the papers. They became all so much unhelpful noise, now.

Offers of food to him were refused when they were even acknowledged, and sleep would not begin to come. He was desperate, and driven. And he was hunting.

Hunting. The word became a low mantra, in his head.

On the third day, that word isolated itself in his brain, and he began to operate on an entirely different level. The rag had held certain scents, besides the chemical one. Catherine had a scent, all her own, and it was there, along with some others.

He became aware of trying to track her that way, and cursed himself for not having tried to do so, sooner. A night near her apartment building gave him another scent, from a husky man in a tan coat.

Moreno. A man named John Moreno. He came back to the parking garage and looked around. Considering that he was Catherine's boss, that wouldn't have been suspicious in and of itself, but...

But Vincent caught his scent as he stood looking around the area where the rag had dropped. He also wiped down the elevator buttons, just to make sure he'd left no prints behind. If that action hadn't damned him enough, his smell would have. Crouched behind an SUV, Vincent was certain of something.

Moreno's scent had been there, the day Catherine had gone missing. And his hand had touched the rag. Even mixed with the garage smells of gas, leaking oil pans and car exhaust, Vincent was certain of it. Scent. Moreno's scent was on the rag, and it was all over Catherine's car and the area near the elevator, both three days ago and now. Others people had been there, too.

They had waited for her.

Vincent's steely eyes narrowed. *Prey. Track. Hunt. Where is she?*

Moreno drove a brown sedan, and he made his way to mid-town from Catherine's garage. Vincent was an inky shadow leaping over the buildings above the car, as he drove.

Vincent's ability to think in words began to fail him. But his ability to track and hunt, heightened in the extreme.

Moreno emerged from a parking garage and began to trek on foot, across town. He was in an alley just after moonrise, travelling to a destination only he knew.

Steely, unblinking eyes followed his progress from a fire escape ladder.

Vincent could tell which way pedestrian John Moreno turned down an alley just by following his spoor; could pick out the sound of his heavy walk over a dozen other men on a crowded nighttime street; could pin his trench-coated shape as he hustled from one office building to another, sometimes getting into a blue compact, sometimes walking down the street a ways, seeming to hand off a note to someone else.

He was having a busy evening.

Vincent watched him, low and high.

The instinctive creature Vincent was accessing inside himself couldn't follow both the man who had the note and Moreno, so he stuck with the one he knew had touched her, knowing he would kill John Moreno without mercy as soon as he had her back.

That had stopped becoming a question of "if," in his predator's mind.

Vincent knew his hunter's instincts had helped him thus far. Hunting had led him to what had once been a decent man named John Moreno.

A day later, it led him to what had perhaps never been a decent man, a man named Gabriel.

Vincent found the address of the first, having no idea about the address of the second. From the first, however, he had only to wait.

Guarded. John Moreno's house was guarded, and not by the NYPD. Vincent had confronted too many hired thugs not to recognize them for what they were.

The wild part of Vincent's brain was taking hold, and it wanted a confrontation. But the rational side which still held sway said to wait. To wait, and to watch.

Killing Moreno brought him no closer to recovering Catherine and simply threatening the man might not work. The well-armed guards were not simply there to insure Moreno's safety. They were there to insure his compliance. Vincent didn't know how he knew that. He just did.

Vincent felt his gentle side being subsumed by instinct and drive. He let it go. He knew poetry wasn't going to save Catherine. He knew what part of himself was needed, here.

The narrowed blue-grey eyes threw their pupils wide, taking in any and all available light. The deepest shadow became a dullish grey. Night vision brought every stirring of grass and leaf into his awareness. Every detail around him pulled sharply into hunting focus.

Vincent knew his animal was on the prowl.

The black, low, Lincoln Continental that pulled up to John Moreno's house seemed sinister and out of place even before it came to a squeaking halt. A driver got out to open the passenger side door. His coat couldn't disguise the bulge of a shoulder holster worn on the left.

Vincent was unsurprised when Moreno came out of his house and got in the car.

Vincent then knew his decision to stay with Moreno had been the right one. Even from a perch in a distant oak, Vincent could tell something: The driver of the car had also left scent on the rag, and near her car. The two of them had taken Catherine.

Prey. Track. Hunt.

Heavy traffic slowed the progress of the prey, and made following the large black luxury car easy. There were no red lights on rooftops, and Moreno clearly didn't want to stand out or be noticed.

Staying with him was almost effortless for the apex predator Vincent had become. A wide leap from building to building, one he normally wouldn't have chanced, felt eminently makeable, and was.

The driver looped around several blocks, making sure they weren't being followed. They weren't... by car. When the Lincoln crossed the bridge there was a dark-cloaked shadow in the scaffolding, nearly swinging from one steel beam to the next.

Prey.

Vincent's uncanny eyes followed the car's progress in the moonless night. His quarry was moving past the warehouse district, past the docks and into an industrial area far to the north of most of the buildings in the city.

Perhaps it (the prey had become "it" in Vincent's mind) would take him directly to Catherine.

Or perhaps he would simply rip out John Moreno's throat, if Moreno wouldn't tell him where they were holding her.

No. Patience. Patience, his mind bid him, but more in the instinct for that, than in the words. His throat felt too tight for speech, and he knew he could no longer talk, easily, though he could roar. It was all right. He had no use for words, right now.

It was the fourth day. Or at the very least, as midnight came, it was the fourth night.

Travelling by rooftop again, still pushing down the fact that he'd not been able to feel Catherine in the bond, he followed the car as it wound through increasingly empty streets. John Moreno had travelled a long way to a building disguised to look like an office complex, but obviously wasn't.

Not unless black-clad men with machine guns were now required to guard business executives.

The Lincoln slipped inside a set of heavily guarded, rolling gates. Vincent barely spared those an inconsequential thought. They didn't matter. Vincent knew he didn't need to get to Moreno. He'd just needed him to take him to Catherine. The hunter in him had a feeling he just had.

Nothing about the white, sterile building looked legitimate. It looked like a fortress, or a prison. There were even heavy spotlights sweeping the courtyard.

The predator in Vincent smiled, but it was an almost feral grin, full of long fangs and dark intentions. The scholar in Vincent would barely have recognized his own face.

The car disgorged the prey and a dark suited guard ushered Moreno inside.

Good. The prey is contained.

The look of the fortified building was how Vincent knew he'd found the right place. She was in there. She had to be.

It was close to dawn, and Vincent knew he didn't care about the sun coming up.



Morning inched across the ground below as it lightened the sky above. Sunrise's light came and tried to drive him down Below, but Vincent would have none of it. He sheltered on a distant roof, and drank the condensation off a rooftop air handler, for water. He knew

he needed the darkness. Not for himself. For her. He would need it to help conceal her from their guns.

He did not remember his last meal or the last time he'd slept. Neither mattered. He spent the day assessing the strength of his enemy, and learning the exits of the building. A helipad sat on the roof. Black vans occasionally came and went from the service entrance.

The sun was a pitiless ball in the sky, and Vincent moved around the rooftop unit for shade as much as he could, never taking his eyes off the distant building. He tried to sense her and found a blank wall, for his efforts. But she was there. His instinctive mind knew it. Or at least strongly sensed its possibility.

Eight exits and entrances, counting fire escapes and the roof. Steel drums full of... something that stood in a semi-circle, protecting the main entrance from being rammed by a vehicle. Guards at the doors with side arms, and at least two with machine guns slung over their shoulders. A sniper with a long scope, who should have been on the roof, but had taken an upper floor balcony instead. All of them wore black, with no insignias.

Vincent thought that was fitting. Black was a funeral color.

She was inside.

He had no way to know. But he did. Moreno left around noon, alone, then returned after three, again alone. Vincent did not even feel thirst, though he felt the heat, inside his cape and heavy clothing. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing but his mate, and he had begun to think of Catherine in those terms for the last two days or so.

His mate. She was his. And they were keeping her from him.

With a knowledge born of sheer intuition, Vincent knew "Gabriel" when he spotted him. The new prey emerged from the helicopter, a narrow, dark haired man, impeccably dressed and authoritative in his stance, even from a distance.

Vincent could not discern his features clearly, but again, the wind carried scent, and Vincent now "knew" his enemy. The smell was stored inside a place in his brain he rarely used and now knew he would never forget. If he crossed the scent again in fifty years, he knew he would now associate it with the person "Gabriel," automatically.

Gabriel did not have fifty years to live, however. He did not have fifty hours.

At one point, the new prey turned toward Vincent's direction, and but for the deepness of his concealment, Vincent knew he would have been spotted, even at this distance.

So, the prey had well-honed instincts, also? Interesting. Did it know it was being hunted? Did it know how close to death it was?

Vincent suspected it did, but in its hubris, it didn't care. The prey carried itself as if it were invincible.

In that moment, Vincent had an odd thought: *His beast is loose, too.*

It didn't matter. Vincent knew his was the stronger, cannier creature. Whatever dark god had made him, he'd made him for this purpose.

Protect the mate. Find her. Punish her captors unto their death, and take her from this evil place. Tonight.

Sunset was a long time in coming, but the muscles that had stayed tense for hours on the rooftop barely registered fatigue. Gabriel's guards changed shifts every eight hours. The last time had been at four pm. Fine.

By eleven, Vincent no longer recognized himself, except he did. The Other had been with him almost since the beginning, and was now burning calories Vincent hadn't even taken in, scenting the wind, feeling the trace breeze on his skin, gauging the pressure of the air and the distance across the courtyard below.

The crescent moon was a problematic bonus. It gave no light to his enemy, and he didn't need any, to see. The night was more than bright enough, thanks to his wilder self's night vision. And more.

The people had begun to give off heat signatures, to his sensitive eyes.

Vincent's Dark Half liked the hood down around his neck, not up, so he could feel the barest shift in direction of the wind on his blonde, furred cheek. And "half" was, by now, an incredible misnomer. He could feel every shift in the breeze. His skin was a barometer, testing for rain. There would be none.

He observed the sweep of the spotlights across the courtyard, timing the pattern. Calculating eyes narrowed.

Vincent crouched on the distant rooftop, weight balanced forward on his fists and the balls of his feet, mouth-breathing, to pull more air deep into his lungs. His skin was flushed, and slightly darker looking, every capillary in his body pushed wide open, carrying blood and oxygen. The iris of his eyes was nearly lost to the black of his pupils.

Had he a mirror, he would not have known himself. Had he a mirror, he would have smashed it.

Hunting. Blood sport. Now.

The teacher-poet-scholar in him was utterly insignificant to this task, so was no longer required in any way. This creature did not need Shakespeare. He needed strategy, cunning, strength, and no small amount of stealth.

Lowering himself from the building so he could put himself into the position he'd already settled upon, the Dark Being inside Vincent moved to reclaim his mate, and God help anyone who tried to stand in his way.

God, as it turned out, was not in a helping mood that night, for criminals. As the fifth day slid into the sixth, and still not a whisper of the mate through the bond, Vincent commenced a bloodbath a serial killer would have been proud to claim. He was incapable of speech, and didn't need it. Battle cries needed no translation. Doors were ripped opened and bodies dropped, not necessarily in that order. If they fled, he let them. Not all of them fled.

At one point, he'd been shot. But it was an insufficient wound to stop him, and it was insignificant in its slight damage. It tore a strip of muscle and skin from his tricep as the bullet whizzed by. He didn't feel it. He was aware of the danger in that. No matter what his injury, he knew he was an unstoppable force, at this point. They would have to kill him to keep him from moving toward her. Especially now.

He still had no bond connection with her. He didn't need it.

He'd scented her in the hall.

A nose that would normally have found such a faint trace of her undetectable now opened wide, taking her in. She was as easy to follow as a simmering roast dinner.

Dinner was served.

She was strapped to a table, draped in little more than a thin, hospital-style gown, unconscious and frighteningly pale. Monitors beeped, around her. An IV needle punctured her arm, and her soft, sandy hair was tangled and lusterless. A videotape of him savaging a man was playing on a television screen, mounted on the wall. Loudly.

There were four armed guards in the sterile room with her.

And then there were none.

At some insane point, the Gabriel-prey entered the white room, and even challenged him, babbling something about the Vikings or the Spartans. It was truly of no consequence.

Vincent could not find the ability to speak, so they were not about to have a dialogue. The prey said something about ruling the world from a jail cell, before it died under Vincent's claws. Vincent had occasion to wonder whatever made Gabriel think he was about to go to jail?

Nostrils wide from the need for oxygen, lungs pulling in air in great draughts, pupils blown open with adrenaline, Vincent freed her from the monitoring machines and IV, then tore through Catherine's restraints with a slicing claw. He scooped up the unconscious mate like the priceless treasure she was.

Sirens. There were sirens in the distance. Should he leave her somewhere for them to find? So they could take her to a hospital?

No. Of course not.

Of course not. She was *his* mate. *His*. She *belonged* to him in a way she would never, ever belong to anyone else.

Though his rational mind might have argued in favor of her being found by people, might have concluded they'd get an ambulance for her, his rational mind was not in control right now, and the part of his mind that *was* in control was in no mood for a debate.

She was breathing. She was alive. She was his. She was cold, though, and she stank of a chemical, antiseptic smell he didn't like. Her arm was bruised from the needle stick, and that offended him almost as much as the shabby hospital gown they'd covered her in. Thin slippers barely enclosed her feet and the stink of disinfectant - and the evil that was this place- clung to her skin like a miasma.

Something malevolent had touched her. It was all right. *Something malevolent was now dead*, Vincent thought with a satisfied snarl.

He took her out of the austere confinement they'd kept her in. There was no one and nothing on this floor left to stop him.

The building shook, hard. Explosion. Sounds of running, in the upper halls. They didn't know their mad king was dead, yet.

If any of them crossed him they could join their history-quoting master.

Vincent's instincts stayed sharply attuned as he moved. There were still enemies to quell, and his woman to save. He knew better than to get trapped in an elevator or stairwell, with her in his arms. He set her down, heaved a chair through a window, then took her out of it with a running jump, tucking his body around hers, in a protective leap.

Floodlights on the ground had been re-aimed, back toward the building, by him. Originally meant to help them find him, he'd simply killed their operators and pointed them back toward the concrete walls. The light blinded the occupants of the balconies and acted as a shield for anything that moved behind it. A gun was now useless, no matter what the scope's ability was. No one could see past the lights.

Vincent knew better than to stare at them, as he moved. Staring at bright light made it impossible to truly 'see' what lay beyond it. It was a trick used by Alexander the Great, with firelight. This side of Vincent couldn't appreciate how ironic that was, considering Gabriel's

predilection for quoting history, and battle tactics. He simply knew he'd blinded his enemies, with their own weapons.

Making the fence would be easy. The longer his foes looked at the incredibly bright light, the blinder they became.

Her slight weight was insignificant, as he made his way through the compound by stealth and speed. Bedlam reigned behind him, and the smell of fire hit his nose as one corner of the building became engulfed in flames. A second explosion went off.

He cleared an open space at a run, knowing he needed a way down, yet also knowing this area was on the wrong side of the river, and far from the nearest usable subway tunnel. Beneath his feet, he knew he was near the caves well past the labyrinth. Caverns and water-cut passages snaked below his boots, not tunnel paths.

He was on the city's outskirts, the trains a distant thing. Beneath him was the no-man's-land well past where Paracelsus had plied his evil trade. No pipes, but there were caverns, downward winding and rugged. It was shelter, if he could get down through a service shaft, or some other means.

Sirens again, and louder. And more. Many more.

He needed to get her Low. Needed to get her *down*. *Down*, where she wasn't exposed. *Down* where she was safe. Like "hunting" the word "down" felt instinct-driven.

He had no care that he was just as exposed as she was - if not more so, thanks to his appearance. He had no care for himself, at all. No wound he'd acquired was stopping him, so none was important.

He stopped once, to inspect her as well as he could. He pressed his ear to her heart. It was strong, but slow. Her white skin made the purple bruise on her arm more stark, and more infuriating.

Either she'd tried to struggle or they'd been clumsy. Either way, the mark made him see crimson. She'd been marred. The sight of the violet and indigo flesh made him want to kill Gabriel all over again. Vincent growled his displeasure, low in his throat.

He pressed his forehead to hers, searching for the bond, taking in her scent through his nose. He couldn't find his connection to her, not the one that always whispered in his brain just below the surface of his thinking.

Their bond, the thing that flowed between them, the gentling link not just to *her* but also to his calmer self, was simply... gone.

Vincent sheared the fence open with his claws, the claxon that caused no longer mattering, since it couldn't stop his progress and the guards on this side of the compound were already either dead, blind, or scattered.

He scooped her up again, not liking how light she seemed. Bondless still, the inside of his brain felt empty, even as his arms felt full. Gunfire still sounded behind him, but it was sporadic and ill-aimed. They were shooting at shadows and sometimes at each other. That was by design. His. Chaos reigned.

Clear of the fence line, the urge to go to ground became keen. *Run. Hit cover, then...Down. Find the way. Any way.*

He needed to take her underground. He knew the direction, and followed it like an instinct. Down was safety. Down was refuge. Down was home.

He was in an unfamiliar part of the city, cut off from the main tunnels by both the river and the natural “lay of the tunnel land” beneath his feet. He could not risk climbing the bridge scaffolding with her in his arms, and some of the jumps across the various rooftops would be unwise, either burdened or injured, both of which he was, with her. There was blood running down his arm and some on his leg. He had no idea why, for the latter. He felt no pain from any injury. Still.

Down. Get her down. Again, it was an instinct more than a word. A manhole cover loomed before him.

Finally.

He knew what to do. So he did it.

Shoving the heavy disc of metal aside, he took Catherine down, deep into the bowels of the waiting earth.

CHAPTER 2

SHE



A smell. Gunpowder. She could smell gunpowder. And her right arm was still manacled to the table. The first sensation was faint. The second was unmistakable.

Noise? It was quiet now, but there had been noise, loud noise, pounding all around her, before. Gunfire? An explosion? The sound of Vincent, roaring as he killed a man, endlessly? There was quiet, now. Was the VCR broken?

The room where they'd held her was a quiet one, too, sometimes. Sometimes frighteningly so. Unless "he" was speaking. Gabriel. Quiet, until the demented history lesson was over. Quiet until he'd begun playing the tape, the damn cassette tape that had been set to loop, over and over again.

A dying man's screams and Vincent's war cry could fade to ugly background music when the drugs kicked in. But ... gunfire? The rat-a-tat sound of a dozen bullets hitting a wall, all at once?

Had Gabriel changed the tape? Catherine had wondered, at one point. The sudden burst of noise had seemed so out of place... but blackness had pulled her back down, some of it self-willed, some of it forced. And enforced, by the drugs.

How long? How long out of it, this time? She felt hardness against her back. The table was steel, cold, and pitiless. She tried to struggle up, tried to remember what she only barely registered she'd heard. The gunfire echoed in her mind. The sharp retort of a service revolver, then heavier weapons. She knew the sounds, knew what they were, and then knew... nothing.

The coma-sleep they had induced was pervasive, and she could no more fight against it in the beginning, than she could now. The IV drip was a relentless foe she couldn't best and couldn't disconnect.

Catherine lay on her back, feeling heavy. She knew that in a moment, the dose of whatever they had been shoving through the IV would kick in, and the black, dreamless sleep would come again. He only made her stay awake to watch the tape, and it wasn't playing, now.



She waited for the smothering unconsciousness to claim her. Again.

But it didn't.

She continued wandering up toward some sort of grey lucidity. Hazy images played themselves across her closed eyelids. They'd questioned her strangely, not allowing her to become fully conscious again until yesterday, (was it yesterday?) then they'd simply knocked her out again. Gabriel. An archangel's name on a satanic form. Irony.

Catherine's awareness carried an odd, almost hypnotized sensation, one laden with drugs, persuasive words, and terror.

Vincent. Gabriel wanted Vincent.

She slammed down on her beloved's name, willed herself to not think of Vincent, not to call out to him, to not even acknowledge his name. Then she felt despair as she waited for the blackness to close over her again.

How many times had they questioned her both with the drugs and without? Two? Three? Seven?

The room they'd used was stark white and well lit. The steel table had felt industrially hard, beneath her back. *What day is it?* She had no idea. *Am I dreaming? I can't. I can't dream. Not about him.*

She willed it, and it was so.

Catherine knew that as further sensation returned, she'd have the impression of the hard table and the buzz of the rewinding tape, before she would see if either the unholy darkness reclaimed her or the unholy man would begin to question her, again.

Neither happened. And the table was no longer an even thing, beneath her back. Odd.

As greater awareness returned, Catherine very slowly became aware of a few things: One, though her right wrist was still manacled, her left one was not, nor were her feet strapped at the ankles, any longer.

Two, the brutally harsh examination lights were gone, and there was a soft, natural darkness behind her eyelids, and not the black of the drug-induced void, nor the piercing white of the overhead lights.

Three, the steel table was no longer beneath her shoulder blades. She was on something softer, but lumpy. And she had a headache.

She struggled to place the last thing she remembered and came up... blank. Then the smell of gunpowder came to her nose again. What was the last thing she remembered hearing, again? The sounds of gunfire?

Now the acrid smell made sense. *Vincent?! She screamed the name mentally, before she was aware she wasn't supposed to even think it. Was he dead?* Did she want to open her eyes, to confirm it? God, what would she see? Her muscles felt like lead. Her eyelids, weighted. *It was so hard...*

Forcing her weighted eyelids open, she realized she was no longer in the building held by Gabriel, though she was still dressed in the thin gown, and she was definitely being "held" by someone. Her wrist couldn't move. And a dark blanket was wrapped around her.

Not a blanket. A cape.

Awareness came by degrees.

She turned her head, even though that small gesture sent a spike of pain through her temples.

She was laying on the ground, on a shabby quilt that had seen better decades. Her “blanket” was his beloved patched cape. And the "manacled" sensation on her left wrist was Vincent's hand, which had her in a tight grip, as he laid beside her, sleeping.

And bleeding. His shirt sleeve was red, from near the elbow down.

God. He'd come. Into insanity, he'd come.

He'd rescued her. And managed to drag her to safety but... She struggled to sit up, her movements causing his eyes to open, instantly.

Oh, thank God. He wasn't dead. Neither one of them was dead—

And one of them wasn't even Vincent.

She had seen his expression any number of different ways: Tender, thoughtful, loving, concerned... She'd seen the blue of his eyes glint with soft humor, and warm with deep love. She'd seen them distraught with despair and uplifted with the grace of what he was. She'd even seen him enraged, bent on protecting her, the furious, commanding side of him on display for all to see. She'd seen him jealous. She'd seen him mourn.

But she'd never seen them look like this, ever.

Though his eye color had returned to blue, traces of the silvery grey remained. His eyes were intense, and tightly focused. Almost unblinking, and ... wild, was the only word she could think of, for it.

Not quite the savage look he often had when he was in a killing rage, but... untamed. Piercingly instinctive. Dominant.

His eyes looked like a sharpened sword.

"Vincent?" She whispered the name through a parched throat.

He gathered his feet under him so quickly, that it sounded like an oxymoron to say "he leapt into a crouch," but he did. He moved from a prone position on his belly to an immediately crouching one, as he looked at her. He tilted his head. But it was a jerk of a motion, and his head was at a deeper angle than he normally held it. He did not speak.



"Vincent, can you hear me?" she asked, half afraid that she already knew the answer to that. *Yes, he could hear her. But who was listening was another question, entirely.*

He said nothing, in reply. Nothing at all. But he released her hand as he scrambled over the rocky ground and pulled a bottle of water out

of a battered wooden box, and brought it to her. Gratefully, she took it.

When she was done taking long swallows of the welcome, tepid liquid, he finished what was left, holding it not against his lips, but above his mouth, simply letting the leftover water pour in. Some of it spilled down his soiled shirtfront. He let it.

The area she found herself in was a small cave. Some sort of... egress in the rocks. Where?

"Where? ... Where are we? Do you know?"

She wasn't certain if he could understand her or not, though he seemed to be following some part of her words, judging by the disconcerting flicker of his eyes. All she knew was that they were in some sort of rough-hewn room. That, and she was getting stomach cramps from drinking the water too fast.

His bloody left shirt sleeve clung to his arm. He seemed to notice that exactly when she stared at it. He ripped the seam with his nails and tugged, tossing the soiled cloth aside. His thermal undershirt was also stained, but the sleeve was shorter. He pushed it up past his elbow, revealing a long gash on his forearm.

Then he horrified her. He licked the wound.

She watched him as he tended the injury to his arm, first with his mouth, then with what little was left over from a second water bottle. He poured a little on the skin, then drank the remainder, much as he had done before.

She was beyond hesitant as she tried to talk to him.

"I... Vincent, we need to get out of here. Get back to the inhabited part of the tunnels." She prayed he could understand her. She did not even see a line of pipes here, near the roughhewn walls.

Were they that low down, or simply that distant from help? She had no idea which was more true, or if both were. With no sense of cardinal direction, she felt amazingly lost.

She tried to stand, but before she could see if that were even possible, he simply pulled her back down to the quilt, shaking his head "no."

"No? You don't want me to go?" He was capable of expressing himself that much, then.

He brought her another bottle of water, but she refused it. Uncapping it, he drank some more for himself, poured a little more on his arm, then set it aside. His clothes smelled of the gunpowder smell that had woken her up. That, and, sweat, blood, and something tinged with musk, all of the aromas confined inside the small space they now shared. Adrenaline and hormones had sweated through his hair-covered pores, and now clung to his fur, and clothing.

His movements were a scrambling type of locomotion, barely human, as he moved on all fours more than he walked. Though the ceiling here was low, it wasn't so low he couldn't stand, if he watched his head.

He simply chose not to.

From the soft aura of a turned-low lantern, she could see that the small cavern held only their equally small box of supplies. The air seemed moist. There was condensation on the walls, and some algae. *The river? Were they near the river?*

She had no idea. She didn't even know where Gabriel's building had been located. The chloroformed ride in the trunk had afforded her not even the vaguest sense of direction or location.

She felt as lost as she knew she was.

"Vincent, I need to go. Need to go Above and find a phone, any phone. And you... you're hurt. We need to get help for you."

The arm bled afresh. The damage was deep, and the surrounding fur was either matted with blood or wet from the water. It was more than a cut. The furrow of injured skin was too wide for that.

A bullet? Had a bullet torn his skin as it cut a path across his arm? She had no idea, not for certain.

"Can I see?" She prayed he could understand that she meant him no harm. His pupils expanded. Dark eyes watched her, somewhat warily. He offered her the arm. Slowly.

He sat in the same crouch, panting, as she inspected the wound. Then he did something unexpected. Which was to say he did something more unexpected than the other things he'd done, so far.

He grabbed the back of her neck, and held it, keeping her forehead against his, for a moment.

Catherine squealed involuntarily and stopped her movements, struggling to understand what was happening. Part of her knew she was now in the room with his Darker Self; in the room with the shadow part of him that raged, and fought, and usually only came out when he was saving her life, or the lives of those in the tunnels. His Warrior persona, but also his violent, unpredictable one. The part of him that roared, but never spoke. The part that communicated with gestures of fang and claw, but little-to-nothing else, at least nothing she'd ever seen.

The part of him that should not be here, right now.

Unless they were still in danger?

Which they were, of course, but not that kind. Wherever this place was, it was safe, at least for the time being. And clearly, it was part of the cavern system, though it might be an isolated part. Manhattan was an island. If she was cut off from that, she would have to find a way to get them home, somehow.

If she survived the next few minutes, that is.

Catherine held herself rigidly still. Keeping pressure on her neck, he kept her immobile, while he panted. No. Not panting. Not quite. More like... breathing her in. Fangs that glinted when his mouth was open, disappeared as his mouth closed. He closed his mouth now and took her in, with his nose. He... scented her. It was the only word she could use.

She had to speak to him. She had to try.

"Please, Vincent. You're hurt. Please let me see."

Two beats. Three. He said nothing, but he let loose the pressure on her neck. Whatever the brief embrace had been about, he was done with it.

When she touched his arm again, a soft, low, growl, ensued. It was partly a warning against the touch, partly an indication that it hurt as her fingers drew close to the damaged skin. He was in pain. Considering that blood soaked the sleeve of what had once been a white shirt, she could well understand why. He tugged his arm from her grasp.

Her voice dropped to what she hoped was a calming, reassuring level. "Please. Vincent, please. Let me look at you." He made no move, one way or the other.

When in Rome, Catherine concluded, taking in his stark expression. She instinctively pulled his head to hers, the way he had done. It was an odd, almost crude sort of embrace, but she thought she understood it.

Mine. Mine to me. You are mine, and I will not hurt you. Let me see.

She said the words aloud, "You are mine, and you were hurt, rescuing me. I need to tend you." She gently pulled his injured arm forward, but dropped her eyes, some, as she said it, indicating subservience. This time, when her hand neared the wound on his arm, he stiffened, but allowed it without growling.

She inspected the harsh, wide line of damage. She pulled the lamp nearer and turned the wick up. He permitted it.

"We need to clean this some more, and bandage it. Is there more water?" She looked around for a bottle, and uncapped it, showing him with a gesture that she meant to pour it on his arm. He watched her unblinkingly, as she did so. The silvery stare was unnerving.

She poured the water as slowly as she could, trying to get the matted fur on either side of the gash as clean as half a bottle of drinking water could manage.

Unfortunately, the wet wound continued to bleed, afresh, though it was cleaner. It was a hard, deep gouge, on his arm. Wide. A projectile shot from a high caliber weapon, probably. A few inches to the left and the damage would have been infinitely worse.

"I need to get this shirt off you, get something clean for a bandage. We need to stop the bleeding, then wrap it so it doesn't get infected."

In the first indication he actually understood her fairly clearly, Vincent's Shadow self rose to his feet and began tugging at the leather buckles on his vest with his good hand. The bad arm was a hindrance, and he let it hang.

When she stood to help, he seemed content to let her, though his eyes never left her face. The relentless stare was increasingly disconcerting.

Gingerly, she helped him slide his vest down the injured arm. He let it drop to the floor, then reached back with his right hand and deftly pulled what was left of his loose top shirt over his head, needing to bend so his arm didn't bump the low-ceiling of the cave. That left him

with a ragged sleeved thermal shirt on, marked by his blood at the uneven hem.

He astonished her by reaching back for the neck of the shirt, and simply tugging it upward, with his good hand, keeping the injured arm held out, a little away from his body.

His altered self clearly had no particular compunction about being seen shirtless, and even though she was trying to help him, Catherine could not help but be astonished by his willingness to reveal his bare chest to her.

It was an intimidating view.

Muscle. Muscle as she knew there would be, but heavier, much heavier than she'd supposed, and more body hair than she'd previously guessed at. He was hirsute, to say the least, but more so in the center of his chest than anywhere else. The silky mix of auburn shaded hair was all over his torso and arms, with the exception being the top of his shoulders. The left one of those sported a bruise, as did his right hip just above the rise of his black cords.

Neither looked serious, though it was clear he'd taken damage to reach her. His body hair thinned across his ribs and abdomen, and the muscles there were incredibly well-defined.

He peeled the matted sleeve down his injured arm carefully, and when she saw him wince, it was then she remembered she was supposed to be helping.

"Let me?" she still wasn't sure how much he could understand, but he released his grip on the fabric to her, and stood still as she carefully tugged the cloth down over the raw wound.

The She was tending him.

Vincent's brain had remained working almost on pure instinct and as such, had only so much use for language and less for long sentences. Words were slow. Actions were quick. But he thought that much.

The She was tending him.

The difference between victory and defeat was often not just strength, and certainly not numbers. He had just proven that, in his defeat of Gabriel and his many men. The difference between defeat and victory was often speed. The blow that struck first often won the battle; and if the battles could be fought one at a time, Vincent had every confidence that he would win, that he could defeat any challenger.

But thinking in words was a slow thing, a thing men did, a thing his Teacher's self did. In this state, he had almost no use for them, had trouble even forming them, in his mind. He could understand them, yes, if he tried. At least most of them. But use them? No. Not like this.

He knew Catherine. But in this state of being, he identified her in much more basic terms. While in his Scholar's state she was "Catherine," or even "the woman he loved," now she was simply *She* or *The She. Mate. His*, in every possessive pronoun and sense of that word. *Woman*, but not counter to his man, since he knew very clearly

he wasn't one, especially not now. But she was definitely *Female* to his *Male*, and he understood her on that level. To encapsulate it all in the briefest word he used, she was simply "*She.*"

She was tending him, and the battle was over. He knew both simple things to be true.

He'd gotten bloodied for her sake, so she (She) was pouring water on his arm again, dabbing at the dried blood and bits of matted fur with his ruined top shirt. It was not a disabling injury as far as he was concerned, though as the shock of battle had worn off, it was starting to sting, badly. It felt raw, like a burn, but worse.

And She was tending him.

Her hands were on him, and Her scent was in his nose. All was good. She did not smell of blood, or at least, she smelled of no blood other than his, from handling him.

His thinking vocabulary was limited, in this state, as the part of him that rarely used language (but was galvanized almost instantly into any kind of action) simply forced itself to stand still, with no enemy to fight.

This was odd. The She usually tended his Other Self, his Scholar Self. She rarely tended him.

He looked almost dispassionately at the wound. The bullet had dug a wide strip of skin off his arm, and the sensation was still one of being scalded, more than anything else. He knew he would feel pain when she touched the cloth to it, and tried not to growl at her, but couldn't stop the low noise, in his throat.

Hurts. He had no other way to tell her, but that.

At his low growl, she lifted the cloth away, immediately, both trying to see the depth of the injury and ascertain whether or not he was about to strike her, or rebuff her in some other way. She was a little afraid of him. There were tears in her eyes.

Ridiculous fear. She was safer with him than any other being on earth. Or under it.

Her hair was dirty, and she (*She*, his mind whispered) still smelled like the alcohol-soaked room he'd saved her from. Like disinfectant and the drugs that were now sweating their way through her pores.

He was bloody, and shirtless. And something at the back of his leg stung almost more than his arm. She was dressed in a thin gown and his cape, and thinner shoes. They both looked beyond ragged. They were a fine pair.

But he knew this place, knew the exact location of it with an unerring sense of direction he possessed either in this consciousness or his other one. He'd carried her for an hour to bring her here, knowing this was the closest supply box.

If they dared risk exposure above the ground, it was a comparatively short series of leaps and climbs over the rooftops and a scaffolding laden travel across the bridge to reach the train tunnels.

He assessed her as she tore the cleanest looking of his shirt sleeves off the bodice and tied it on his arm to stop the bleeding. She was unsteady on her feet, and closer to needing to sit back down than she realized.

She did not look like she could negotiate scaffolding and rooftops, and he needed two hands for part of the former, so carrying her all the way was not an option – not that he was seriously considering that course of action, anyway.

The safety of Above was an unknown, right now. One he didn't trust. Not after what had happened.

Unknown people were not a thing he was willing to expose her to. Unknown people were who had taken her. The people who were supposed to uphold her laws and keep her safe were worse than useless as far as he was concerned, for John Moreno had been one of them.

His Warrior self trusted the strength of his arm far more than he trusted the strength of her laws. He knew few laws, and most of those were centered around the use of cunning, strength, and speed.

He knew one other. The She belonged to him. *Belonged.*

But if they stayed Below, as his instincts now told him they should, it was a hike of days, from way station to way station, until they reached what was for her, safety. They would have to take the passages that wound low enough to take them under the river, then past the labyrinth. From there, they'd have to hike back in past the maze, skirting far around, to avoid trouble from its wetter, less stable side. He'd been trapped in there once, with Jacob. He had no desire to repeat that experience.

Most of the paths they'd use were far from straight. The passageways wound the way the groundwater had cut them, a millennia ago.

Alone, he could make it in a day or two of steady travel. But hurt, and with her...

He was not certain she was in good enough shape to walk, for long. That meant he might have to carry her. He shrugged at the knowledge, simply accepting it as a fact he could not change. If he had to, he had to. The injured arm wouldn't stop him from doing that. Besides, she'd (She'd) bandaged it. It would heal.

"Vincent, I need to go Above. I need to call someone, let them know where I am," Catherine said.

No. He couldn't say it, and could barely understand the quick flow of her words, but "no." Above was dangerous for her, and he did not feel like saving her twice in one day.

Though he'd slept next to her on the quilt, - exhaustion making no other course possible - it was a veteran's light sleep. He still had not eaten, and had barely replaced the fluids he'd sweated out when he'd drunk. He was muscle-sore everywhere. The fingers of his hand hurt where he'd cut open the fence. His leg and the bruise on his shoulder (a blow from a rifle butt) pained him and the wounded forearm was beginning to throb.

None of it would knock him off his feet. But he was in no mood for foolishness.

Now that they were comparatively safe, the needs of his body, and of their situation, were making themselves known. His stomach was tight, and empty. He was dehydrated, though not badly. His She was

not dressed for the cooler cavern air. All were things that would have to be remedied.

Tugging his arm away from her (roughly if not rudely), he moved to the supply box, picking through its sparse contents: A small backpack stocked with lantern oil, for the light. Some trail bars. A small metal bowl to either wash up in or eat a meal out of. A thin blanket and a man's pullover sweater. Another bottle of water and a lighter for the lantern that now lit the space. A tiny medical kit that contained nothing more than aspirin, some adhesive bandages good for little more than blisters, and a little rubbing alcohol.

Camping supplies, and very basic ones at that. Emergency rations, and the medical kit that was all but useless to them, for what it didn't have.

It was the barest of provisions, meant for someone who was already travelling with at least some gear, and food. The cache boxes were a way to travel from spot to spot, when that was needed. He knew he'd find a similarly supplied chest or box in the other places along the route, if he could reach them, some better outfitted than this one. No one came here, normally. There was no reason to. That's why it was so lightly supplied.

He'd feed her and let her rest a little more, then they would go.

"Vincent. Your leg. Your leg is bleeding," she said.

He'd felt the sting of something each time he moved, near the back of his knee. But as with the other wounds of war, he'd paid only so much attention to it. There were the kind of injuries that took your

feet out from under you and meant you were probably about to die, and the kind that didn't. This was the latter kind, though he could tell something was wrong. He simply hadn't had the time to tend himself, after the battle. He'd been too busy just getting them here, then making sure she was all right.

Once they'd achieved this hideaway, he'd been overwhelmed by the effort and the fatigue of the past week. He'd simply dropped, beside her. Tending his injuries was usually something his other self did.

The Warrior inside him hadn't really expected to wake up still in control of his body. But he hadn't actually thought about it, either. When he was in his primal state, his ownership of his own form was usually brief.

Vincent's primal self shrugged at the turn of events. What was, was. He did not entertain philosophy or "what ifs." His thought processes were very direct, when his beast was conscious. He did not ask "why" his primal self was still in control of the situation. He simply accepted it as fact.

What was in front of him had to be dealt with. They needed to eat, then move, as there were no more supplies here to consume. If they sat here, they'd starve. Simple.

"Your leg," she repeated, sounding worried. "Please let me see."

He brought her back the trail mix bars, what little medicine they had, and another bottle of water. She was trying to inspect the back of his knee through his torn cords. The blood was mostly dried, making the patched fabric stiff. She was trying to see how bad it was.

There were no predators nearby, but he knew if there were, he'd have drawn them. On instinct, he did not like to be dirty. Especially not with the smell of blood.

"Vincent you're hurt. We need to get you to Father." The ribbed fabric was torn, and Catherine could see another deep gash, near the back of his knee. Bits of white ceramic tile were still embedded in the black fabric of his pants. Ricochet.

She remembered the white tile walls. One of the bullets must have shattered the tile on the wall, next to him.

Again, he ripped the fabric open a little more with his nails, and Catherine realized for the first time that he'd carried her a long way with an injured arm and leg. Some of the blood on his hands probably wasn't his, but the blood on his leg surely was. She had to help him.

Carefully, she went to the cache, and she immediately noticed the tightening of his muscles. If she tried to move toward the cave's doorway, she knew he would stop her.

There was no wood for a fire, but the lamp and oil were most welcome, both for light and what little heat they provided. The bowl likely meant for soup they hadn't brought with them was going to serve as a small wash basin.

Regretting the water she'd wasted by simply pouring it over his arm, she poured some onto another strip off his shirt and into the bowl. She doused her hands with the alcohol, then rinsed the leg with water until she could see the extent of the damage.

It didn't look as wide as the damage to his forearm, though a piece of shattered tile was still stuck to his skin. No wonder the leg was bloody. He'd hauled her over uneven ground on that.

"This is going to hurt. I promise I'm not trying to cause you pain."

The *instinct* for the words came through his mind to him, more than the words themselves. To his primitive mind the last sentence came across more like "*I.. not...you pain.*"

He understood its message. He dropped his head, indicating that he would submit himself to her care.

He gritted his fangs as She pulled the wedge of tile away, and its removal started the wound to bleeding afresh.

Still, it felt better to have it gone, and he knew now the injury would start to heal. Considering the firefight he knew he'd found himself in, he was lucky it wasn't worse. So was she, considering.

She washed the area as well as she could, given that his pants were still on, then dried it with what was left of his top shirt. She wrapped his knee with the clean sleeve of the thermal one. It was the best she could do.

The aspirin in the medical kit was expired. She tried to give him two, anyway. He refused. When she offered again, he pushed the pills away, firmly indicating the answer was "no."

Catherine wasn't sure if he was just being stubborn or if the medicine would do him no good. Father and Peter had both indicated Vincent's reaction to certain medications was unpredictable. She remembered

the inordinately long time he'd hallucinated under the drugs made by Paracelsus.

She took two of the pills herself, for the headache she still had, and tried to talk to him, since he seemed to understand at least some of what she said.

"Vincent, I don't know what's happening to you. I don't know why you're not yourself..." she fretted, as she dunked his hands in the bowl, and rubbed them with hers, trying to help him get cleaner. He approved of her care. It felt good.

"But I'm going to help you, and we're going to figure this out, okay?" She tried to give him a weak smile of encouragement.

He was enjoying her touch more than he was enjoying her words. He knew she thought he was not here, but found that conclusion absurd. Of course he was here. She was helping wash the dirt and blood from his hands.

The She was confused. It was all right.

He was here to keep her safe until they were in better circumstances. His inscrutable eyes never left her face, unless it was to watch her washing his hands.

She rubbed his hands past the wrist, rinsed, dumped the bowl, then rinsed a little more. He stopped the water bottle from tipping a third time. That was as much water as they dare waste on such things. He drank a little more, then made sure she did.

She nodded that she was done, and suddenly they both seemed tired, again. She bundled herself into the man's sweater, the thin gown they'd given her in That Place barely enough to cover her backside. She chafed her arms gratefully, as he put his vest back on, leaving what was left of his fouled and torn shirts on the ground.

He adjusted the vest over his bare torso, not liking the thought of the rank, blood-stiffened shirts against his skin. What was left of the cloth stank from his recent efforts, not to mention him having been in them for two straight days. It was easier to simply go without them. His warm body didn't feel cool, at the moment.

When he needed it, his cape would serve, for warmth. He'd offer it to her, but knew its length would only hinder her, for walking, especially over rough ground. If she twisted something before they got her to safety the results could be beyond serious.

He felt her staring at him as he tied the leather vest closed. She was taking in his form, taking in the breadth of his shoulders, the massive strength of his build. It was all right that she did. *Let her see.* She couldn't know what foes he could vanquish for her sake, unless she could admire his form, see the proof of his power. He flexed his left hand, testing the extent of the injury to his arm. It was an inconvenience. Nothing more.

The motion made the muscles in his arm ripple and bulge. She saw that, too.

His eyes checked hers, making sure she did.

This part of Vincent knew a certain amount of vanity about his physique. She dropped her eyes.

The She was tearing open a trail bar as he tested his weight on the leg. And she'd been staring at him since they both woke up. Fine.

She left one of the two remaining trail bars for him. When he shook his head and pushed it toward her, she shook hers back, and did the same.

Stubborn. The She was stubborn

He knew that, about her. There was a part of him that found that very attractive, even as he found it exasperating. He snarled his displeasure at her disobedience, aware by the startled look in her eyes that the sound had been unexpected. She didn't like it when he did that.

Fine. Eat. He pushed the food back at her.

She opened the package and he thought he'd won her compliance until she set the opened bar back down in front of him. He sighed. Very well. He couldn't make her chew and swallow.

He sat beside her and ate slowly, saving the last bit of the food for her. He held the morsel in front of her, and would not drop his hand until she took it from between his clawed fingers. His stomach ached from the reintroduction of solid food. So did hers. They would save the other bar to travel on.

"I'm tired again. Can we sleep here, a while?" She looked longingly at the quilt, part of which was stained red, thanks to him.

It would do no good to push her before she'd had more time to rest. Her pores still stank of the sedative they'd given her, and he knew she was fighting to clear their effects from her system.

He considered a moment, then nodded, and wrapped her in the thin blanket, settling her away from the fouled part of the quilt. He spread his cape wide over the both of them and slept with his back to hers. He would know if she moved by the shifting of the bedding. He knew he would not sleep deeply.

--

The lantern gave off enough heat to push the chill back in the small space. But it used the oil inside it, and when it began to sputter, Vincent knew they'd lain there for at least two hours. His knee was stiff, but serviceable. His left arm was abominably sore, but would still be good in a fight, if things came to fighting, again.

That was all he needed to know about himself when he was like this, so he was unconcerned about much else.

He still did not know why his Darker Self remained in command. Such ruminations were usually left to his other half, so he didn't bother with them. He only knew that the light sleep had not changed which one of them was conscious, and he simply accepted that as fact as his eyes opened fully, and took in her sleeping form.

Her eyes were shadowed, but she looked warm enough now, and uninjured. He knew she'd been fed. It was enough to know.

He rose ahead of her, took care of bathroom business, and began to stuff their meager supplies in the small backpack.

Such mundane chores were something he was unused to, and they felt strange, to his muscles. This was no fight. This was no battle, no war. This was... packing.

But the canny, assessing creature within him knew it needed to be done to insure their survival, so he did it.

The She needed him. That instinct was the utterly familiar one. And it dominated his thinking.

He always came to her when she was in need.

"Are you better?" Catherine asked, though she could tell by the way he crouched that he was still not "her Vincent." There was something in the way he carried his body that was simply "different" when his Warrior self was in control of him. She couldn't explain it any better than that.

He ignored the question and tossed her a small package of soup crackers he'd scrounged from the bottom of the box the look in his eyes telling her she'd better eat them. She split the package in half and complied, leaving him the rest. That was as good as he was going to get, for cooperation from her.

Stubborn. He tossed all three crackers in his mouth at the same time, chewing them collectively. The salt on them tasted good.

Catherine watched her love wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, and lick the salt off his fingers. He was completely unselfconscious.

Table manners are a refined thing, and he is not that, Catherine thought, knowing "her" Vincent would be embarrassed to be caught

eating in a way that showed his fangs. She shrugged, knowing there was nothing to be done for it, and indeed, nothing that needed doing.

"Can I see your arm? Your knee?"

He looked toward the former, at least indicating he yet understood her on some level. He still did not speak.

The bandage was blood spotted, but not as badly as it could have been. Having no gauze to re-wrap it, she let it be, testing the skin above and below the bandage for signs of heat, of infection. So far, there were none.

"I'm so sorry you were hurt, coming to get me," she told him. She still had so little idea what had happened. "My boss turned out to be an evil man. Working for an even more evil one. I hope Joe is all right."

Joe. Male. Another male. Vincent knew it, and growled at the name. This time, there was no mistaking the tone for anything other than what it was. He sounded jealous.

"He's my friend, Vincent. Nothing more." The growling continued, however, and Catherine understood this line of conversation was over.

She did not like the uncompromising look in his eyes, and well understood that though they'd tended each other, and he seemed hell-bent on keeping her safe, this was not "her Vincent." This being operated on a far more fundamental level. Also, a more reactive one.

She had a feeling he would be combative, if he were around other males, right now. At least other males in their prime.

Catherine remembered secretly wanting to growl a bit herself, when she'd met Lisa Campbell. Which was to say that some part of her understood.

She deftly changed the subject. "We have to leave here, don't we?" she asked, moving away from the subject of Joe Maxwell, John Moreno, or other males.

She looked inside the box and realized there was only one more bottle of water and a trail mix bar left. She took a careful sip, and replaced the cap. He did the same. Filling the lamp with the remaining oil, he left the soiled quilt behind but bid her to keep the thin blanket, tearing a hole through its center for her head to fit through. It would serve her as a coat of sorts, as they travelled.

He bundled his cape into the small pack, not needing it for warmth, considering the workout he was fixing to get. His body burned hotter when he was like this. It just did. The bowl, the empty water bottles and whatever minimal supplies they had left went into the pack as well, taking up all its remaining room. Hitching the light bundle over his shoulders, he indicated it was time to go, time to leave this place of shelter.

They began to walk.

She tried asking him several questions about where they were going and how long it might take to get there, but he had no gift for either conversation or playing some kind of "yes" or "no," game with her. After the third question, he simply growled at her, shortly.

His Warrior self was either not capable of conversation or not interested in it. *Probably both*, Catherine reasoned.

He walked ahead of her, showing her the easiest path, reaching his hand back for her any time the way grew too rough. With her feet clad only in the cheap slippers Gabriel's people had left her with, she could hardly negotiate sharp stones, or some of the steeper inclines, easily. Catherine began to realize that this was not like a stroll through the tunnels. This was cavern walking. Uneven ground, some of it damp. This was hiking, and over awkward terrain.

Concentrating on the path kept her occupied, but not so occupied she couldn't marvel at the differences between "this" Vincent and "her" Vincent.

He'd stripped to the waist for her, unselfconsciously. Not as a matter of seduction, but of expedience. His arm was injured. Taking off his shirts seemed the best way to deal with that. Catherine was probably lucky he hadn't elected to take his pants off, as well, considering the condition of his knee. He ate and drank differently. Held his head differently. Stared.

He walked differently as well, both with a longer stride, yet with nimble care. His weight was balanced "up," on the balls of his feet, rather than back on his heels. He held the lantern aloft, yet he canted his body at a slight angle, protecting her from the roughness of the path, when he could.

Several times on the trail he stopped, listened, scented the air, and then proceeded. He... sniffed as he took in smells, something she'd

never seen her Vincent do. She wondered if the Vincent she loved ever actually did that, but hid it so as to not seem too animalistic.

This being before her clearly had no particular compunctions regarding that.

She knew she was far better off in his company than she was as Gabriel's prisoner. More than that, she couldn't say, for sure. She was certain he was protective of her. But she knew she missed his ability to speak with her, to tell her what was on his mind. He communicated with growls, or grunts. He seemed irritated with her at times, like when she'd refused to eat the proffered food.

They'd walked for a good while, and made their way over a particularly pebble-strewn patch of ground when he paused, took an empty water bottle out of the pack, then proceeded forward a bit more rapidly. A few steps more and she heard it, too.

Water. Trickling water. They'd been walking for a couple of hours, and Catherine was miserably tired, her muscles weakened by the many days she'd spent in captivity.

A ribbon of water down the wall was a blessed salvation, and though the flow was slow, it allowed Vincent to uncap the empty bottles of water he'd stored in the backpack and refill them.

"Not enough for a shower, but it's very welcome," Catherine said, cupping her hands until they filled, so she could rinse her face and neck.

Vincent stood back as she performed what he considered a feminine ablution. She pushed up the makeshift serape and sleeves of the

man's sweater she wore and rinsed her arms, as well. They both saw the severe bruising on her arm, along with tape residue and the needle puncture.

"Looks like I went down fighting, at some point." She observed the mark. It was sore, but it would heal.

Vincent's eyes shifted at the words. *Yes. She had.*

The She was marred, had been handled roughly, had been injured. No one was allowed to do that. Even he was not allowed to do that, in either this form or his other one. Lisa Campbell's accidental injury was a lesson learned by both his Scholar and his Beastly selves. But Catherine was more to him than Lisa ever had been, or could ever hope to become.

Injuring the She was the closest thing to a sin that this Vincent knew.

He stepped closer and surprised her when he took her injured arm and held the damp skin out for his inspection. It was only a bad bruise. But it still made this deep part of him indignant.

Catherine watched his eyes go to flinty hardness as he studied the bruise, checking it for signs of healing. He held her arm back under the trickle of water and rubbed carefully at the tape residue, until at least that much was clean.

"I don't even know for sure what they wanted from me," Catherine said, struggling to remember. She did not like that he still would not talk, could not talk, to her. "I thought it was about a book, but then I think it was about you. He was insane, Vincent. Gabriel was."

"Gabriel," and the name caused his eyes to go from flint to steel. Too late Catherine remembered that he didn't like the sound of other male names, and he clearly hated this one. She felt pressure on her arm and he remembered to drop it before he squeezed too hard. His features took on a dark cast, and he was almost unrecognizable. The growl in his throat was there. Low, but there. Steady.

"Where are you?" Catherine whispered. "Why are you like this?" she asked, watching his golden cheeks flush copper. She was a little afraid, but more ... curious, than not, for lack of a better word. It was like meeting him for the first time, or at least meeting a part of himself he'd tried very, very hard to keep hidden.

There are dark places in all of us, she'd told him.

Was she seeing his, now?

"How long will you stay this way?" she asked, fearing the question was moot.

It was. All questions were useless questions, as far as Vincent was concerned right now, and some were even more useless than others. Like the ones for which he had no answer, even if he could speak. Like that one. He willed the satisfyingly threatening noise in his throat to stop.

He stepped away from her and tossed the newly-filled water bottles back inside the small pack, forcing himself to calm down from her mention of the name "Gabriel." Gabriel was enemy, Gabriel was the vanquished prey, and the memory of him caused a jolt of adrenaline to slam through Vincent's system.

Fight.

There was no enemy here.

Fight. Protect.

But there was still no enemy here, and it would not do to make her one, for lack of any other target. He snarled his anger, and stepped back from her.

Stop.

A memory, of her voice. Words from a not-too-long-ago time, between them.

No. Stop.

He'd been killing Micah, and her voice had called him back from it.

No. Stop.

He remembered the words as he took in her frightened eyes.

No. Stop. He breathed in, holding the oxygen for several long beats, before he exhaled.

There was no enemy here. It would not do to behave as if there was.

Yet he did not like to reign his instincts in. He liked to let them run. This felt counter to what he was, what he was made for. Like packing this morning, only worse.

A jerk of his head indicated they were through with their temporary pause, here. He needed to walk. Hard. He willed himself to shorten his stride so she could keep up, and that chafed, too.

They were a few minutes farther down the passageway, her about to call a halt so she could rub a cramp out of her foot when a certain smell reached his sensitive nose.

His body suddenly went rigid. There were enemies to vanquish here, after all.

He pressed her firmly against the rough wall and looked back down the way they'd come, clearly sensing something he didn't like. He extinguished the lantern that had been lighting their way and stared hard down into a passageway that was now so dark Catherine would have doubted its existence, except that her feet had been walking through it, moments before.



"Do you hear something?" she whispered. He gave her an unsubtle push with his body, indicating she was to be silent. She complied, but heard nothing. He, however, was a mass of tension.

Had they been followed? she wondered. *Some of Gabriel's men...?*

He moved his big body away from hers and slid the pack down his good arm, almost silently. She knew he was about to leave her, and she was afraid.

Before she could protest his decision, he was gone, no words of comfort to tell her he'd be back, no instructions to stay here and sit tight, or advice to move on, just... nothing.

The cool tunnel air hit her face, away from the warm shield of his body. One moment, he was solidly against her, his huge form as hard as the rocks at her back, his arms bare except for the makeshift bandage that rode just below his elbow. The next, he was a weightless, soundless shadow in the darkness, and then the darkness enveloped him.

Did he remember she hated the dark, especially this impenetrable kind? Did this Vincent even know that, about her?

Catherine's nerves were stretched rubber-band taut as she waited, each second ticking into another. Her own heartbeat sounded loud in her ears, and it interfered with her ability to hear his hoped-for return.

What will I do if he doesn't come back? She had no idea where she was, and she'd barely had a sense of what direction they travelled. They were clearly far away from the parts of the tunnels that she knew, and even those still had the power to get her turned around, at times.

They hadn't passed any manhole covers, ladders, or signs of civilization, at least not yet, and she definitely had the impression they were deep, rather than close to the surface.

Should she go on, down the path they'd been using? Go back, and find the way he'd brought her down, risk exposing herself again? Risk getting lost, either way? Could she do either, in the dark? Dare she light the lantern, knowing that danger was near? Indecision gnawed at her, and she hated the feeling.

She was lost underground, and lost inside the blackness of no light and deep uncertainty. A few silent tears born of fear fell, as she waited. Though she was wary of the beast in Vincent, he was her protector, and he was Vincent. Vincent, whom she loved.

A distant, muffled sound reached her ears. A popping sound.

A gun? Was that a gun? Catherine wasn't sure, and the twists of winding stone made her even more uncertain, as they carried the echoes of what seemed like a battle. She only knew she was more panicked than ever. She heard more echoes of fighting. Him roaring. More popping sounds. Then ... silence.

She took two steps toward the direction of the sound, banged her foot against a protruding rock in the floor and stopped, slipping on loose stones she couldn't see. She couldn't move without light, and she couldn't light the lantern without revealing herself.

Is he dead? Oh, God, Vincent, what do I do? She felt helpless and weak, and liked neither feeling as what felt like an eternity ticked off her internal clock.

He returned almost as silently as he'd left her, the dark shadow-shape of him passing literally right before her eyes before she realized he was back.

"Vincent!" She grabbed for his neck before he could even retrieve the lantern, and he had no choice but to wrap his arms around her and hold her. It was either that or stand there with them akimbo.

"Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?" she asked, still half frantic.

He pressed his hirsute finger to her lips to ask for quiet as he reached down for the lantern. When he lit it she realized his arm was bleeding again, as was his leg, though likely from using them both hard, not because he'd been newly injured. The blood was spotty.

He'd picked up a fresh injury, however. The skin around his left wrist was starting to bruise. Someone had tried to struggle with him, perhaps over a weapon. Someone had clearly lost. The smell of gas or some similar fuel clung to his arm. Some of the fur there looked... singed, was the only word she could think of for it. *Did someone try to burn him?*

He rinsed the arm as best he could with one of the newly filled water bottles.

He would answer no questions and he didn't seem inclined to rest. She felt his hand at the small of her back, clearly indicating she needed to move on, quickly. She did so, knowing it was the wisest course of action, but still missing the comfort she knew her Vincent would have given her, with words.

Where are you? Oh, where are you, in there, Vincent? she asked yet again, but silently, this time.

Vincent moved ahead of her and took the lead again, clearly wanting them out of this particular tunnel. She simply kept her head down and followed. She didn't even know if they were still in trouble from potential pursuers or not. He wasn't trying to run, she realized. Perhaps that was a good sign.

The ground shifted from hardscrabble stones to a mix of rock and sand, and she blessed it for being easier on her feet.

It did, however, create a problem. One she hadn't considered. They were leaving tracks.

At the next intersection they came to, he erased their footprints in the sandy part of the ground, and left false ones heading the wrong way. If someone was following them, Vincent clearly meant to use the terrain to send them off in the wrong direction.



He finished with his deception, then put her hand in his and tugged her onward.

Another hour's more of walking and Catherine felt every bit of her fatigue. The adrenaline that had given her strength was leaving her, and she knew it was leaving her flat.

Vincent got behind her and nudged her to walk on, knowing they needed to make safe camp for the night. He wanted distance, from the melee he'd left. Distance equaled safety.

Another half-mile or so, though, and it was clear that Catherine was beyond winded. No matter how fast or far he could walk, pain in his leg or no, he could tell his She was tiring, though She wasn't complaining about it. *Stubborn. Still.*

He eyed her struggling form. His She was determined to keep going, both for his sake as well as her own. She always had been, in her way.

Catherine's shorter legs took smaller steps, so she had to work harder to cover the same ground he did. That was a tactical fact, and he'd always been aware of it.

He let them stop long enough to give her a bottle of water, but dared not let either of them rest any longer than the time it took to drink it.

The two armed men he'd killed smelled of Gabriel's compound. One was named Snow. He'd offered Vincent a ring, in exchange for his life. It was a ridiculous offer. And an unaccepted one. They died in the fire they'd brought with them. Vincent mourned only that it meant he hadn't been able to scavenge any supplies off of them, though they'd only brought weapons.

He'd heard and smelled no others, but he didn't like that they'd been followed at all.

He wanted them to reach a few more junction spots before they truly rested. If he couldn't keep her on her feet he'd just have to carry her, but considering he was holding both their supplies and the lantern so she could have her arms free to balance, she'd be a problematic load, at best.

They would just have to keep on, for now. Either that or he'd stand guard while she slept, and risk losing the lead they had, if they were still being followed. That was a bad plan, he realized. He didn't want her in the middle of a fight, if things came to fighting, again.

When she began to stumble, he knew they had to stop. It was earlier than he would have liked, but there was no help for it. Running her into the ground would do them no good, and if there was a brawl in the offing, she at least needed the strength to run and save herself while he gave her cover - or gave his life for her, whichever way fate dealt those cards. If she snapped her ankle in a fall, or even gave it a good twist, she'd be far too easy a target.

He settled her on an outcropping of boulders, disdaining the cheap slippers that passed for footwear. The balls of her feet had bruised against the harder rocks, though the sand wasn't so tough on them.

Reaching for the blanket she wore, he began tearing strips off the bottom, shortening its length. Catherine was startled at the tearing sound, and jumped each time the "hem" of her covering got shorter.

"What are you doing?" she asked, as she realized it would be an unanswered question, just like most of the rest of those. He showed her, for an answer.

She watched as he wrapped the cloth around her foot and tied, it, then repeated the process with the other. The makeshift ensemble was not as good as a pair of shoes. But it was better than the ridiculously thin slippers she still wore.

"Were they Gabriel's men?" she asked. He still could not speak, but he could give her a short nod of assent. He did so.

Catherine felt the fatigue of the day. She had no idea how far they'd come, or how far they had left to go. Nothing down here was even vaguely familiar to her.

"You should go on without me. I'm only slowing you down. Send back help."

The look he gave her was so dark it would have frozen sunlight.

"Vincent, I'm too tired to keep going and they had me pumped full of drugs. I have no strength, and I..."

She didn't finish the sentence before he simply scooped her up from where she was, indicated she was to pick up the lantern, and he resumed walking with her in his arms.

"You're hurt. We can't go far like this." She put one arm around his neck as she argued. The sandy ground was better for walking in than the rock-strewn one, but if the terrain grew tough again, he'd need to either set her down or risk a fall.

"If the ground gets rocky again, or steep, you'll have to set me down," she said aloud what his instincts told him in impulses.

"Vincent, it makes more sense just to go on without me and... and find a pipe. Bang a message." Did he still remember tunnel code? She realized she had no idea if he did.

He grunted a response to her statement. It was as good as she was going to get.

The She was tired. And babbling something about him leaving her behind.

Never. That was never going to happen again. She'd been taken from him because his Lesser Self had not the sense or the will to keep her close. *He* knew better. The She was not leaving his sight until she was good and safe. And even then, something in him instinctively railed against separating himself from her.

This more primal part of his nature had no particular compunctions about letting her go so she could realize her life's full potential. Those were odd niceties which upset his Poet's side, not his Beast's.

He had saved her. *He* had rescued her. Not his Other self. *Him*.

She would stay with him, where She was safe. There would be no more partings until he said so. That was the end of it, as far as this Vincent was concerned.

His gaunt cheeks were flushed and coppery, and Catherine realized he mouth breathed, often, letting his fangs show, unavoidably. He was a

formidable presence, and Catherine wasn't certain she liked being this close to his exposed fangs.

"I wish I knew how to reach you," she said, knitting her brow.

He simply cut her an icy look, and continued on.

The passageway wound and narrowed as it threaded through several more intersections. Near as Catherine could tell, they were moving more southward than any other direction. They were still not near the trains. But they were growing closer to water. The walls grew more damp. She could almost smell the mustiness in the closed atmosphere.

"We're getting closer to the river? she asked.

He simply nodded, as the floor beneath his feet began to slope distinctly downward. The roof over her head dripped in spots, and she knew they were passing beneath what she assumed was the Hudson. Vincent's footing became precarious, and he snarled his displeasure as his bad leg slipped, before he righted himself. The ground was wet.

"I can walk. Vincent, put me down. I can walk."

He ignored her until she hit his shoulder, at which point he openly snarled his censure at her. She steadied her nerves at that, trying not to reveal to him that the sight of his openly bared fangs made her nervous.

He set her down, though he clearly didn't like doing so. She wasn't sure how close to being bitten she'd come, or if she'd come close at

all. He was clearly unhappy with her fist on his collar bone, even though she hadn't hit him hard.

The floor was damp, and the cloth strips he'd used to make "shoes" for her were wet within a few yards of walking.



There was no help for it. After a few more steps, the sodden cloth unwound from her feet and she left it behind. One section of the path was so wet it required wading in water just over her ankles.

Tactically, Vincent liked that the watery footpath covered their progress. Also that they were approaching one of the more labyrinthine areas of the tunnels, which should discourage any more pursuers. But he did not like her discomfort, and kept his clawed hand at her elbow to steady her. What stones there were, were algae slick, for both of them. A fall here could be a unilateral disaster.

At last, the ground began to rise again, subtly. The water grew shallower, then became simply a muddy puddle of silt. He climbed

some more, keeping her in front of him, lest she slip backward. She was panting. And she was determined. He loved her for it.

Finding dry, comparably level flooring at last, he urged them on, never seeming to tire in spite of his injuries. The knee bled more freely than the arm, and blood stiffened the corduroy pant leg, yet again, in spite of her makeshift bandage. He treated it as no more than an inconvenience.

Catherine realized he'd gone a long way on less food than he'd given her, and carried her for part of it, not to mention having fought to keep them safe. If they got to food again, she vowed to make sure he ate more than he had at their last stop.

The passageway opened up, to her left. Another pathway through the maze? No.

Not a pathway. A room.

The battered trunk, when she saw it, seemed like a welcome beacon. She blessed that they'd reached another cache of supplies, and hoped they could find rest, here.

Vincent pulled out a large quilt and spread it on the ground. She wanted to sink onto it, but inspected the food, first. More trail bars, and some cans of soup. Oil for the lantern, a tin of crackers that would be past stale, more bottles of water and some sterno for cooking, since there was no wood.

She handed him one of the trail mix bars, but he batted it away as he straightened their “bed.” She then opened the bar and crouched in front of him, insisting.

The challenge in his eyes did not bear arguing with, but then, neither did the challenge in hers.

"If you starve, they'll kill me anyway," she reasoned. He did not like her logic. But he accepted her offer of food. He ate it in two bites.

"I'm going to go take care of something," she said.

She'd taken a few steps away from him before she realized that was an unwise thing to do. With a leap and a warning snarl he was suddenly in front of her, blocking her progress. Whatever invisible tether he'd decided was between them, she'd just stepped past it.

"You didn't mind leaving me alone in the tunnels, earlier," she said pointedly, giving him a little temper back.

He jerked his head back toward the bedding, not allowing her to pass.

"I have to go pee, Vincent," she said inelegantly, her voice beyond irritated.

He looked over toward a stand of rocks that were hardly more than poor cover.

"You've got to be kidding."

But he wouldn't move, and her effort to step around him resulted in an absolutely feral growl. He was either about to hit her or pick her up and deposit her back on the quilt. She was willing to bet the latter

but couldn't discount the former. He was not "mock-growling" at her. He was really growling at her. Angrily.

She sighed and stepped near the rocks. He did not move away.

Giving up and no longer able to fight the call of nature, she simply squatted down as far out of sight as she could and answered the demands of a full bladder. He heard the sound and wrinkled his nose as the smell hit his nostrils.

"Next time, give me some privacy and the smell won't bother you," she snapped, adjusting the ridiculously agape hospital gown back down, and giving the sweater a tug. But for the ratty blanket that skimmed her thighs he'd have been ogling her backside for the entire trek.

Angry. The She was angry at him, and he didn't understand why.

Did she not know what this place was? Did she not understand that she should not wander far, without him?

The area they were in wound and branched, and it was easy to become lost. The wrong path led to water soaked areas where the ground gave way, easily.

He'd been trapped in such a place with Father a few years ago, and she had come to help them. He'd called out to her in the bond, and like a good mate, She'd come to help. That was as it should be.

And now she was angry with him?

He could follow only some of her words, but he could follow all of her tone. He was unaccustomed to her censure. That was usually for his Other Self to handle.

Near his bestial self, she was usually either frightened of her attackers or either accepting of or dismayed by him. Which reaction he got seemed to sometimes depend on what he'd had to do to keep her safe. Much seemed to rely on just what he was doing, and who he was doing that to, and how. To him, killing was killing, and there were no points for style, one way or the other. She seemed to make distinctions, with that. As she'd done with Micah.

But irritated with him? Never. Never, that he could recall.

He didn't understand the wide swing in her emotions, and he struggled to accept them. She was The She. Females were mercurial. He had no other choice but to accept her. She was his bondmate. Or she had been, before, when they'd shared a bond.

His stony silence gave her no one to argue with, so she returned to the quilt he'd laid out for them. The stiff gait of her walk told him she was still annoyed with him.

She sat on the blanket for a moment, toying with the idea of making the soup, since the adrenaline rush was giving her a little strength. She put the can back and pulled out another one of the trail bars. When she saw him looking at her, she gave him her back, a little.

He was hungry, and wanted hot food. "Cooking" was like "packing" had been, but he understood its necessity. He pulled the small, dented saucepan out of the bottom of the chest and opened the soup

can, dumping the contents inside the pan and adding some water from a bottle. He ripped the cover off the sterno and set it to heat, not knowing what to do with Her when She was displeased with him.

He had no words to explain the reasons as to why she shouldn't wander off. He'd never needed them before. Suddenly he was tired, monstrously tired, of being in control of the Body for so long, and wondered how his Other Self handled it, handled her. Her.

As the smell of heavily salted broth and pasta hit his sensitive nose, he realized how foul a thing canned soup was, how much like carrots and potatoes this did NOT smell like, and he wondered why she wanted it at all, and he wondered why he wondered.

Trying to think in words was tiring. He wanted to be away from her just as badly as she wanted to be away from him, apparently, and he didn't like the feeling.

Something in his distress must have communicated itself to her as he stirred the contents with a wooden spoon, because She put Her fingers on his hand as he stirred.

"I'm sorry." Her low voice was contrite. "It has been one long and miserable day, and you risked your life to save me. I'm just used to being able to talk to Vincent, that's all."

But he *was* Vincent. Not the part She preferred, perhaps, and not even the part his Scholar Self preferred, but if he had a name, it was Vincent. He had no other. He slowed the spoon down, but continued with the chore.

"I'm sorry I was ugly to you." Her voice was a soft thing, in his ear. "I just wanted a little privacy. Do you understand 'privacy?'"

He did not know the word, not really. It had nothing to do with what he was, so he didn't understand it. Words like "hunt" or "track" or "stay" or "go" or "stop" or "yes" or "no" he understood. Words from strategy, or words from battle. Much else was lost to him, though the vocabulary he used was effective, for what he was. Instincts like "food" or "water" were universal. Instincts like "She." "Privacy" was a bit too nebulous a word. It was not a thing he used, for himself.

She was his to protect. He realized how much he didn't like it when she was angry with him.

He gave over control of the spoon to her so he could finish unpacking their supplies. There was a fresh roll of gauze in this cache, along with another small medical kit. Not much more than was in the last one, but it would do to wrap his arm and knee, a bit. The burn stung, but it was an inconvenience, nothing more. A patch of hair on his wrist had taken the worst of it.

She crumbled the stale crackers in the pot to both stretch and thicken their meal, and he watched her as she worked. He lifted the pan off the sterno before she could scald it. She might not realize it yet, but there were no bowls other than the one they'd used to wash wounds in. They were going to have to share the pot. That was fine by him. He didn't plan on eating much of it.

She realized their lack of utensils as she looked around. "Oh. I guess I should have asked if you liked crackers before I just assumed," she

said, stirring the now sticky mess around a bit. She lifted the wooden spoon to blow on it.

For as unappetizing as the soup had seemed a few minutes ago, the addition of the saltines seemed to improve either the smell or Vincent's appetite. He ate more than he thought he would, still leaving most of it for her. She used the spoon. He, on the other hand, simply dug into the pot with two fingers, once it was cool enough.

Catherine tried not to be dismayed by the display, tried not to watch him licking soup and crackers off his hirsute fingers.

Stop this. Stop comparing them, her mind scolded. But it was difficult not to.



"You need to keep up your strength," she chided, offering him the last of the pot once she'd had several large bites. He shook his head.

"My stomach has shrunk. They fed me through the IV, I think. I'm gorged, I promise. And my stomach is probably going to cramp."

It was, and for that matter, so was his. Still, warm food felt like a welcome thing, and he watched her rinse the pot with water, being careful not to use too much.

"I'm exhausted. Will we get there tomorrow?" she asked, bedding down on the quilt. He shook his head. "The next day?" she asked. He lifted his shoulders in a kind of shrug.

"Maybe you'll be... more yourself, in the morning."

He said nothing to that but simply laid down near her, a little away from her exhausted form. He covered them both with his cape, as grateful as she was to be fed, relatively safe, and finally off his feet for the day. His head ached. His leg and arm ached. And somewhere inside him, his heart ached a little, as well. He wasn't sure why. But he was sure he was exhausted.

CHAPTER 3

REGRET



Catherine slept for hours. How many she didn't know. But when she awoke, the bag was packed, his wounds were freshly dressed, and he was pacing. She took care of bathroom business, noting by the smell that he'd preceded her.

He kept glancing back the way they'd come, and though he didn't seem as nervous as he had yesterday, he clearly wanted to put some distance between them and this place.

Bemoaning her lack of decent footwear, Catherine made ready for another day's trek.

Walking was easier today, Catherine noted, perhaps for no other reason than she was getting used to using her leg muscles again. Shaking her system clear of the drugs Gabriel had given her and sandier ground didn't hurt things, either.

Vincent stayed ahead of her, leading the way. He never spoke and regularly checked back on her progress. When she tired and called a halt, he stood as she sat, waited patiently for a time, then indicated with a jerk of his maned head that they should continue.

In an odd way, they were becoming used to each other.

She knew asking him "How much farther?" was to waste breath. It was as far as it was. She knew he was bringing her closer to tunnel civilization, by the general direction they followed.

The winding path beneath her feet was either level or it sloped upward, rather than down, for the most part. Though they were still traversing the 'cave and cavern' section of his home rather than true 'tunnels' she thought she once felt the rumble of a passing train through her thin-soled feet.

He felt it as well, and simply shrugged the vibration away. It was no threat. It was no aid. It was unimportant, therefore. They couldn't reach it through bedrock.

Vincent's instinctive mind stayed alert as he moved them through the caverns on the far side of the Labyrinth, knowing that a wrong turn here would likely get them killed. Becoming lost in this area would not be a temporary thing. The ground was too treacherous, and too directionless. Unstable in some spots, twisting back on itself in others, it was a no man's land of mazework. Intersections fed into each other, where groundwater had split the passageways, then reconnected, farther down. Other branching trails were unknown, in their destinations, if they had any of those at all.

He knew that if they were followed, it was fairly likely their pursuers would become hopelessly lost. He also knew the sandy ground was easier on her feet. He knew she could keep up with him for about forty five minutes before she needed to rest for about ten. It was information he needed, and stored. If they became separated for any reason, it told him how far away she could get in a certain length of time. Knowing that would help him track her.

The She was better, today, better able to travel, though quiet. She hadn't tried to talk to him as they moved, today, a thing he found he didn't like. Though he had no use for language, himself, (that was his Other Self's tool), he found he understood more of it as they'd gone along with each other.

He did not know how to ask her for what he couldn't have. But he'd discovered that he liked the sound of her voice, and missed its breathy quality. The urge to hear her speak felt unusual, in his fiery brain.

They ate the trail bars together as they walked, and lunch was the luxury of sitting down while they finished off the last of those. He longed for meat, and was tired of the taste of nuts packed with honey and cereal. But like so many other things, that didn't really matter. The high energy/high calorie food kept them on their feet. It was enough to know that much about it.

He also knew he smelled bad and so did she, and he couldn't tell her that the smell offended his sensitive nose. That didn't matter either. Stink wasn't a threat to them.

Her lack of decent footwear bothered his sense of protection far more. He'd retied more strips to her feet, but if she had to run she'd be hard pressed to do it. Also, damp ground was occasional, and still problematic. Keep her walking in wet footwear and they'd have more problems than they could handle.

The next cache might have something, the way the first one had contained the sweater she now wore.

He made sure she drank, and gave her the privacy of his turned back and a little distance when she needed to answer a call of nature. *Privacy*. For no reason he could name, the word now made sense to him.

His injured leg was making itself known, and he was aware that they'd need to stop soon, so he could look at it and re-wrap it. Perhaps he could get her to help with that. Perhaps he'd just do it himself.

There were too many unknowns, right now. His brain felt fatigued by that. He was accustomed to the hunt, and the kill. Those were

instinctive things, and often rapid ones. Straightforward. Linear, like a bullet. Or dodging those, if it came to that.

This prolonged travel was pedestrian, both by nature and definition. It required fairly mundane decisions, but constant ones. He wasn't used to making those. And he wasn't used to making them for so long.

He'd given up hoping that sleep would find his balance restored. He was grateful that the constant travel kept him moving, allowing at least some outlet for his naturally aggressive nature. But travel was slow, thanks to her. This was not the calorie-burning challenge of a hard run, or a leap across buildings. This was not racing to get to her or tracking prey. This was hiking, plain and simple. Careful walking. His nature both rebelled against it and accepted it, as he knew it was necessary to keep her safe. He kept listening for enemies, out of reflex.

But there was no enemy here. Nor was there any bond. He was becoming used to the former, as he silently mourned the loss of the latter.

The fresh water, when he finally smelled it, was a balm to his battered nose and his exhausted sense of self. Water, real water, and not just a trickle down the wall. Somewhere in his instinctive mind, he knew they'd been heading for it, all day. No matter how much strength was or wasn't left in them, he knew they were going to stop near it for the evening.

Not that "evening" had much meaning, down here.

Catherine could see the change in him, see the way his body came to a rather sudden and excited attention. He scented the air and lengthened his stride. It took her a hundred yards more before she smelled it too, but like him, her reaction was beyond positive.

"Water? Is that fresh water I smell?" she asked. He nodded, reaching his hand for hers, as they both moved forward. In a few more steps she could hear it as well as sense its humid quality, in the air around her.

The damp, heavy air was a welcome blessing to her dirt-streaked skin. The widened entrance of another cavern loomed before them. The sound of softly flowing water echoed off the far rocks.

It was a small stretch of stream that snaked down over a soft fall of stones to the bowl of a tiny pool, below. All of it was small. It was beyond a stretch of imagination to call it a 'falls' or even a pool. More like a shallow basin fed by down-flowing water. But the sound of water on granite was a welcome, trickling song, and the little ribbon of water that fed into the cave was clear enough to see the stones it washed over. There was a rocked off circle of a fire pit to warm the large area, and a few torches, for the walls.

The expected cache chest sat near the center of the room, this one larger than the one they'd used yesterday. Catherine hoped it contained more, by the way of supplies.

"Is it safe to drink?" Catherine asked of the water. In answer, Vincent scooped some up with his hands and drank from his palms, showing her the purity. He nodded toward it and uncapped one of the empty plastic drinking bottles from his pack. She followed his lead.

It was tepid, rather than warm like the hot springs or cold like the Nameless River, and she couldn't guess its source. Perhaps it fed the Hudson, eventually, or the East River. Perhaps it just emptied into the sea, at some point. Either way, it was beyond welcome, and after she drank, Catherine happily knelt on the ground next to the tinkling flow and splashed water on her face and hands.

Vincent was a good bit ahead of her.

By the time she'd finished drinking and rinsing, he'd removed his vest and let it drop to the ground with a loud thump. He'd opened the storage chest and had a thin towel already draped across one corner of the open lid. He tossed a bar of soap into the shallow basin, and was already starting to remove his boots as he prepared to wash days of grime from his skin and fur.

Catherine realized his intentions. His body was three quarters turned away from her when she saw his hands go to his belt.

Surely he wasn't about to...

He was.

Catherine caught a blinding flash of coppery skin as he dropped his belt and then he stripped out of his corduroy slacks, almost in one smooth motion. The tattered pants fell straight off his lean hips, and Catherine barely had time to turn away to protect what small amount was left of "her Vincent's" modesty.

Clearly this creature possessed little of that. Or none of that, to be more precise.

She heard him wade in, heard the masculine groan of pleasure as he reached what must have been the center of the pool. When she dared a peek she realized the basin must be no more than three and a half or so feet deep.

His back still to her, he was standing in water that barely covered his privates. He simply dropped his knees and dunked. And groaned, again. Pleasure. The sensual pleasure of making one's self clean, after a long time spent dirty.

Catherine watched him tip his head back, and wet it with his hands, then take his whole head under before he emerged again, arms raised to push back the hair as he stood.

Hair.

His back was covered with it. And it was glorious.

She realized how little she'd seen of him from this angle, and never wet.

In all of Catherine's most secret imaginings, his body hair was an admitted source of intrigue, for her. She'd seen the soft lay of hair on his forearms, and knew the springier variety of that peeked up from his shirts, sometimes, near the top of his chest. When he'd stripped to the waist so she could tend his arm, she'd seen mostly the front of his torso, but she'd been preoccupied with his injuries, not to mention more than a little worried about sharing space with his Other self. Also, his almost relentless stare had caused her to drop her gaze more than raise it.

Even the parts of him she already knew about looked different, now. Now that they were melded as part of a whole.

His clawed hands were hirsute, though that hair was straight, and lay along the length of his fingers. Now soaking wet, she saw how the fine, straight hair lay all down his arm, finer whorls of it curling around his deltoids, small marks of delineation on the musculature of his arms.

She'd always referred to the hair on his head as "the mane of his hair" but never realized just how accurate a description that was until he kept his nude back to her, busily applying soap to his front and the tops of his shoulders.

Gold. Dark gold. And some lighter shades as well. Gold with hints of red, deeper in color and more obvious, now that his hair lay wetly down his back. Hair that had never seen sunlight was riddled with highlights that looked sun drawn. Her love was golden. And her love had a mane that ran from the top of his head to clean down his spine. It thinned as it went, but kept its silk-spun texture, then began to flare again, just past his hips.

Of course, Catherine's mind took in the stunning picture he presented. *Of course he would have a mane down his back*. Now it was her turn to stare at him, unblinking.

Of course. Her mind repeated. *A mane. It made sense*. It went not only with the leonine aspect of his features but with the understanding that his body was more heavily haired than most. The hair that was thickest on his head tapered down and laid like a wet arrow on his vertebrae, an arrow that created a thinning line that

bisected his back as it lay protectively against it. She wondered if he'd had it in childhood, or if, like other male lions, the "mane" had appeared down his back as he reached sexual maturity. She couldn't discount the former, but bet on the latter.

The area across his ribs was lightly covered with the same shimmering down that seemed to compose his beard. The mane, longer and red streaked, stood out against his golden skin.

It's supposed to help him attract a mate, Catherine realized the sentence mentally as the instinct of it clutched at her vitals.

He raised one arm to soap under it, and the roll of his shoulder blade drew her amazed eye. He was huge, the power in his shoulders now obvious to see. This was the source of the strength he lifted with, the strength he climbed with. The muscles in his back were powerful. His arm bunched when he bent it. An 'echo' of his mane ran under his arms, she realized. The wet fur laid in a soft point, from elbow to wrist on the underside of his arm. The hair on his arms thinned as it reached his bare shoulders.

She turned her head quickly when he turned around. She didn't want to be caught staring.

The She was still by the stream.

Catherine had not changed her position, overmuch, and seemed content to keep her face turned toward the running water. Though he knew she was dirty and needed a bath, he knew she'd likely want privacy for that, too, so he'd gone in first. It would leave her longer to tend to her own bathing needs. There was no shampoo, but there

was plenty of soap for both of them. He finished soaping off his body, including his hair, and rinsed. Time to get out, so she could get in.

Cold. He was a little cold now. Now that he'd emerged from the basin, wet and dripping. *Stupid*. He should have started a fire, first. There was wood for it in the chest. He realized his error only after.

She seemed incapable of moving, incapable of doing anything but staying where she was. It was all right. He would take care of the fire.

Crouched naked on the stones, Vincent took out dry kindling from the cache and started a small fire. The ceiling of the cavern sloped upward, and would carry the smoke away. They could have a hot meal, later, and something warm to drink. She would like that. He left her the one towel. She could use it. He would let the air and his own hotter temperature dry him.

After a few moments spent crouching near the newly built fire, he realized she had something a little different in mind.

"Here," her voice was gentle, behind him. She covered his damp back with the towel. "Use this. It will make you more comfortable. And if you cover up with it, it will make me more comfortable, too."

Her words were wry but he was starting to recognize more of them. He gave a soft smile beneath his dripping hair as he felt the thin towel cover his bare back.

"If you promise not to turn around while I take a bath, I'll owe you forever," she said, stepping away from him. He wrapped the towel around his hips and settled his body in front of the small fire. He let her know by his unwillingness to turn that he was obeying her. At

least a little. He had little use for modesty of any particular sort. He understood the She was different, in this regard. He shrugged at her preference.

He heard her sigh as she pulled the ragged blanket over her head. He also heard the heavy sweater drop to the stones, but didn't realize she'd gone into the water with the ridiculous hospital gown still on her body until he dared to sneak a peek from beneath his wet bangs. Once she found the deepest part of the pool, higher on her than it had been on him by a good bit, she took off the gown and let it go, allowing herself the luxury of dipping nude into the tepid water.

She made a sound of contentment so similar to his that it made him smile. A groan. That groan of contentment, of feeling one's self coming clean. An animal's sighing reaction to comfort, no matter what kind of animal was involved. He liked her sound.

She reached for the soap and he knew he had to turn his face away from her lest she scold him. The barest hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. *His woman was pleased.*

And for a moment, he forgot to think of her in terms of capital letters.

He unpacked the contents of the cache while she bathed, and he warmed up a double portion of canned soup, and boiled a pan of water for tea.

He kept the towel around his middle, not wanting to put on the blood stiffened cords, again, not just yet. There was a man's shirt in the cache, too small for him, but welcome, for her. She could use it as a robe. Besides, he was wearing their only towel.

He set the long tailed shirt near the edge of the water, his eyes meeting hers over the calm of the pool. She kept her knees bent, and was submerged to her shoulders. She had done as he had, washed her hair with the bar of soap.

Her eyes looked huge, and vulnerable as she stared up at him. She'd been scared. They had scared her. And she'd been living through the last few days or so a moment at a time, with him.

Now she was naked in a pool of water while a towel clad behemoth stood before her with a shirt in his hand. He knew he was making her nervous, with his proximity. He just wasn't sure what kind of "nervous" it was.

He dropped the shirt on the stones near the edge and went back to preparing their first hot meal of the day.

He was aware of her on a sensual level, but as with any other instinct, he was aware that there was both a time and a place for that. Mating was a thing one attempted when a female was either likely to conceive, or when she'd been made to feel comfortable, and safe. That was an instinct, not a plan. He'd never held control of the body long enough to consider either circumstance.

He knew by her scent that she wasn't the former, and by their situation that she wasn't the latter. He had no urge to rape her. He was her protector, not her tormentor. One of the things Vincent feared about his darker side would never come to pass.

When she emerged, he heard the rush and splatter of the water, and his imagination ran amuck at the thought of her standing behind him,

naked and wet. But after a moment, he knew she was dressed. He heard her voice over his shoulder as she came nearer the fire.

"Vincent, your leg. Your leg is bleeding. The back of your knee is bleeding, Vincent." She repeated it as if he were a simple child. If there was one word with which he was well acquainted, it was "bleeding."

"Something must be wrong," she said. "That should have stopped by now."

Was something wrong with the leg? He'd thought the wet sensation just the water, even as he realized it wasn't. He couldn't see the wound very well, though he could feel its effects. The tepid soak in the water had helped with his discomfort, but now he was sore again. More sore than he should be.

"Will you let me see?" she asked gently, half-afraid to touch him but more afraid not to. She'd watched his walk as he'd begun to favor the leg. It was more than a mere cut. Had he been hit by gunfire? Had he walked with her all this way with a bullet in his leg? That sounded wrong. There had been no entry wound, for a bullet.

He turned to take her in, fascinated by the sight of her wet form wearing a man's shirt. The roundness of her breasts made a damp pattern on the cloth as the tails skimmed her thighs. Her brow was a line of worry. Clearly, she could see the injury better than he could. He knew it hurt like hell when he rose from a sitting position, and felt better when he kept it straight. He knew it shouldn't still be prone to bleeding. Not like it was.

He stood, still towel clad, and turned for her inspection. Standing now only made it bleed more.

"Lie down. Will you lie down for me, please?"

He'd walk across hot coals if she asked him to. "Lie down" seemed like a simple enough request.

He stretched himself out along the stones near the fire. The towel kept the modesty he no longer possessed intact. Her small, cool, fingertips against his calf muscle felt like a blessing.

She knew the minute she looked at it that as incongruous as it sounded, she should have asked him to take his pants off, sooner.

The cut was a long, jagged rip through the skin at the back of his knee, much of it right at the crease. His corduroy pants had been no match for the shards that had torn them, nor the soft hair that encased his legs. His leg hair was thinner at the knees and ankles. Even bloody, she could see small bits of white porcelain still buried in the wound. It was probably starting to fester. She marveled that he'd travelled on it this far, then remembered that this side of Vincent didn't seem to feel pain as much. He was bred for battle. Pain could get in the way of that.

"Vincent you still have shards of tile in the cut. It can't heal unless you get them out." She wasn't sure how much he understood. But she knew she wasn't wrong. If they kept up like this another day, he'd start courting an infection, or come up lame. The skin around the wound was a little warmer, already.

"Will you let me...?" she let the sentence trail off and he felt the pinch as she removed the larger of the two shards of tile still embedded in his leg.

The second one was deeper, and though smaller, it was a knife point near his Achilles tendon. It was not a sharp pinch. It was a sear of blinding pain and he knew she had to stop what she was doing. He turned on her faster than she'd ever seen him move, and both snarled and screamed in reaction.



His eyes were wild, and his fangs were bared. And she suddenly felt far too close to those.

"Stop! Stop it!" She was frightened, and threw herself away from him, her fingers still red from his bloody leg. She dropped the second shard from her hand and scooted back away from him across the stones, bare legs scrambling.

Fear. There was fear in Her eyes. Real fear. She wasn't just wary about him, she was terrified.

He remembered that fear, remembered seeing it from her. He'd seen it before now, seen it the day she'd thrown the old headlamp at his head. And the memory of it stung as badly as the back of his knee did, now.

He *knew* that look. Knew it too well. He'd seen it in his victims, right before the last, sometimes.

And now he saw it from her. *Again. Again, like before.* And for much the same reason. She had glimpsed the fury of his savage self. Seen it the way she'd seen it the first time she'd ever seen his face in the metal of a makeshift mirror she'd been using to see her own reflection.

She'd thrown the headlamp at him and he'd snarled his displeasure at her then, too.

At least this time she had no weapon to heave his way, he realized. There was rue in the understanding.

The first time, this had been about their mutual reflection. About how his was just as misshapen as hers had become, and twice as savage.

This time... he couldn't begin to explain it to her.

Catherine kept herself moving backwards over the stones until she simply fell, and had to look at up him, still terrified.

This is not Vincent, and he is not some pet you can have, Catherine's inner voice scolded her soundly as she scrambled in fear. He could eviscerate you with a swipe of his claws.

She'd seen him do it, to others. It was now at least a little likely that he was about to do it to her. She'd hurt him, and like any animal, he was about to turn on her.

"No! Vincent, no!"

Fangs still bared, Vincent fought the waves of pain as he fought her sudden terror of him. *Fool! Didn't she know? Didn't she understand? Clip his hamstring and he would be utterly lame, unable to take her the rest of the way, or any way at all!*

What would she do if he was disabled, down here with her? She was hopelessly lost and weaponless, and barely decent in a fight. She'd never be able to hold off what had hunted her into that white place, if it came at her again. She hadn't been able to hold it off the first time. If he couldn't move, she'd get lost down here and die. It was as simple as that.

Still, he saw her fear. That remembered fear, that horror at what he was... and it struck him, bitterly, now, just as it had the first moment she'd ever looked at him that way. He'd forgotten what this felt had felt like. Until he could remember nothing else.

I never regretted what I was, until now. It was the Scholar who had said it, but it was him who had thought it, that first time. He had come out and snarled at her then, too. And then he'd thought it. /

never regretted what I was, until now. The words repeated in his brain. They were still true.

And he thought it now, as he realized what had just happened between them. She was terrified of him. Again. He curled away from her, mourning. He hadn't meant to frighten her. Only to insist that she stop. Immediately.

Sorry. I'm so sorry. But his throat was still closed and tight against speech, and he didn't have the words. Didn't begin to have them, with the throbbing ache of the leg wound thrumming up the back of his thigh and the image of her terrified face, before him.

No. Just no. Remember Father's words?

He did. He had to. It was why the Teacher kept him locked away from Her. Away from all the 'hers' in the world.

Away from everybody... unless they all wanted something killed.

Catherine took in his damp form, knees bent and body curled up, even though the posture likely hurt his bleeding leg. He was weeping, almost silently, and half naked on the stones. Weeping because he had snapped at her, and because she had snapped back at him. Weeping because she'd been terrified, in her ignorance.

I'm sorry. Every line in his body said it.

Tentatively, and with no small amount of worry, she moved very carefully back near to him.

Sorry. So sorry. He was curled in on himself, and the muffled sound of chasm-deep sorrow reached her ears. He was the picture of abject

misery. He couldn't help what he was, could never help what he was, yet seemed destined to suffer for it. It was in every curve of his contrite, self-abased form.

I'm so sorry. He might as well be shouting it.

"No, I'm sorry," Catherine's voice barely came to him over the sound of his own muffled sobs. "Vincent, I'm so sorry."

Her hand reached out to push back the heavy, damp fall of mane that obscured his features. She was afraid, and felt that fear hovering between them, as it had before, the first time he'd ever snarled his displeasure at her.

Before, it was a different kind of hood that had covered his face, and she'd pushed it back.

She realized she'd injured him this time, just as badly. And that this creature, this part of Vincent, wore his emotions far more on the outside than on the inside.

"Vincent, I'm so sorry," she repeated. "Please forgive me." She brought her hand down slowly and gently, letting it lay on the long locks of hair that lay against his cheek a moment, before she tried to push it back, some more.

He went still at her touch, just as he'd done that first time.

The She was touching him. It must be allowed. It was what She willed. She could beat him if She wanted to. Again.

Because lord knew, this felt like a beating.

He opened his damp eyes to her, and they were naked with sorrow. He'd displeased her and he knew it. He'd displeased the woman in his life, but not just the woman, the Goddess.

Something in how he beheld her, even in his brutishness, made her understand. He thought her holy. A thing that must be protected at the expense of all else.

If she'd been ashamed of her reaction to him the first time she'd injured his sense of self, she was despairing of it, now. She'd wounded him. Deeply. Again.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. At least I got it out?" she ended the last as a question and tried to smile, weakly. He said nothing. Of course.

"I don't know where you are, or even if you understand everything I'm saying. But I'm sorry I hurt you, and I didn't mean to... to be afraid of you, that way. You just... surprised me, that's all. Did it hurt? Does it still?"

He couldn't explain what it felt like so he didn't try. Couldn't tell her that yes, she'd removed the shard but had cut him a little deeper, as she'd done so, both emotionally and physically. Couldn't tell her he remembered that she'd bloodied him both the first time and this one.

It would have been no consequence back in the main tunnels. But here, at least a day and a half's hard trek from where help would come, it might be important.

He couldn't tell her that if things came to fighting again, that she should just run, that he would hold her stalkers off as long as he

could, kill them if he could, and track her after. Couldn't tell her that the saddest moment in his life had been the times she had feared him, or despaired of him because of what he was.

The time with the headlamp still stung, as did the time he'd sensed fear crawling through her, when she'd been after Jason Walker, and been afraid of him, by extension. And the time she'd had to tell him to stop killing Micah, the leader of the Outsiders. No. Stop.

Nightmare visions had plagued her not just when she'd thought he was the Subway Slasher, but again when Alexander Ross had drugged her. And they plagued her still, in a way.

His Warrior self loved her but despaired of them. When she looked at him, at what he was, she always saw a monster, eventually. No matter what, it seemed he always ended up terrifying her, somehow, if they waited long enough.

No wonder the Teacher-Poet in him refused to charm her into bed. He couldn't say he blamed his Other Self. There was no sense pretending he wasn't what he was. There was no sense pretending that part of her wasn't terrified of him, and always had been, since the start.

Vincent closed his eyes and straightened out his leg, aware that with the shards gone, at least some sort of healing could now begin. If only he could stay off it for a day or two. That would help. Vain hope.

He felt her applying a wet cloth to the wound, wiping away the worst of the blood, then drying it with something.

"There's a roll of gauze in the chest, and some alcohol. I won't use the last one if you don't want me to."

She kept her head down, in shame. Shame, from her? Why? He was confused by the teardrops that clung to her lashes. He was a Beast, and often a terrifying one. There was no sense pretending otherwise. He didn't blame her for her reaction. He simply mourned it.

He desperately wished his Other Self would simply come. Come and deal with all of it.

She didn't understand that it wasn't just the surprise of pain that had sent him to snarling at her. It was the proximity to his hamstring and the danger that meant for her, that had done it. He'd had to get her to stop. The only way he could.

But he couldn't explain, and now both of them were miserable. He laid down, quiescent. When she brought over the bottle of alcohol, he uncapped it for her, and handed it over, indicating she was to use it.

He flinched when she poured it across the raw looking wound, but didn't growl. She knew it had to sting, abominably.

Drying the area again, she told him to sit up, then bandaged the area gently in gauze, wrapping it softly around and around his leg as she spoke.

"You know, I'm a hideous nurse. I think I went into law because I knew I'd be bad at this," she said, gently unwinding the roll. "Come to think of it, I was pretty terrible at law school, too, there, for a while,"

she admitted, reaching for a small pair of scissors. "Nancy said they thought I'd get my degree in fashion law."

Being upset seemed to make her want to talk, to obviate her nervousness. Or perhaps that was just the adrenaline rush, finding a way out.

"Hm. Bad at law. Bad at dating. You should have seen the winners I dragged in the door before you. Oh, you did. Tom Gunther and Stephen Bass. I'm not even sure if those were the worst ones. And now look what I'm doing to you," she said, snipping the gauze vertically so that it tore into pieces she could tie. She kept her eyes focused on her chore.

He was so worn down he forgot to be jealous at the mention of her other lovers.

He listened to her speak and watched her soft fingers tie the gauze firmly to his knee. Her head remained bent.

"I keep saying this but I'm so sorry, Vincent. It was my fault you were hurt in the first place." He couldn't see her eyes for the soft fall of her damp hair, which was drying in the cool tunnel air.

"There was a book Joe had," she continued. "But the man who was holding me seemed to want you more. I think I was ... bait. Part of me was terrified you would come to get me," she said. "And part of me was terrified you wouldn't," she confessed, unable to lift her eyes to meet him with this honesty.

He put his finger under her chin and lifted her gaze to his. There were tears of regret in her jade eyes.

Don't. Don't cry. Not for me.

"What kind of love is this where every time I'm in trouble, I know that as long as we have the bond, you'll come to rescue me? That you'll risk yourself to do it? That I'll risk you to do it?"

It's the only kind we have.

"How could I do that to you?" Her eyes, so full of regret, met his.

I love you. It doesn't matter.

He wished he could say it, but knew he couldn't, even if he had the gift of speech, which he still lacked. So he tugged her forward a little, and let her rest her forehead on his shoulder. His naked shoulder.

She wept a little at the irony of their intimate-seeming embrace, and at the sorrow she was carrying. He calmed her by keeping a hand on her back, and staying very still, while she let the tension of the past several days pour out of her.

He smelled the bottom of the pan as it started to burn. They'd let the water for tea boil away.

"Great, I'm just as much a success at helping in the kitchen as I am at everything else," she lamented with a touch of gallows humor, blaming herself for the pan even though she hadn't been the one to set it to boil.

She wiped her eyes on her shirt sleeve as he went to fetch the pan. They both moved closer to the fire and continued preparing the meal and rummaging through the trunk. It was something to keep them occupied so they didn't have to deal with all that lay between them.

Avoidance. In one form or other, Catherine knew it was important to them, sometimes.

While he set out a sleeping bag and the thin blanket they'd been using, she took his wrecked pants down to the basin for a scrubbing. The bar of soap might not take them all the way clean, but it would deal with the worst of it. He blessed her, silently, for her care.

He could feel the leg muscle getting stiff, as they ate. If they were near the hot springs he could remedy that. As it was, there was only so much he could do. The water here was tepid. It would make the abused muscle clench more, not open. He kept their thin blanket over the leg, as they ate. Sleep would help with the healing. It was the best he could do.

With a metal wire and two poles, someone had set up a crude drying line in the room, for clothes when needed, or for the cookware, when it wasn't. It was small, like the rest of the space, but it would serve to help dry their things.

The chest held two pair of ragged men's jeans they both could wear, a small one that was too long for her, and a larger pair that was too short for him, but the waist fit, and he blessed the comfort of being in clean clothes.

She already had the smaller shirt. That left him nothing but the larger one, a dark blue thermal which he kept to the side until his body hair dried, something Catherine realized would take a while to do.

He sat near the fire, tugging at his damp chest hair, spreading it wide between his clawed fingers, some, letting the warmer air near the fire dry it.

Catherine realized that this was likely something he did only in private, that it was one of his differences, and one he never spoke of. It took him longer to dry himself, after a bath. Especially in the cool tunnel air. She'd never realized. She'd never even thought it about it before. She thought about it now, and what that meant for him.

In the cooler air, things dried slower, and his body hair would be no exception. Unable to change into dry clothes when he was damp, he'd have to take a much longer time to bathe and dress.

His body hair was thick in places, and silky almost everywhere, and where it grew long, like on his head, it would make things that much worse. Not to mention that she now knew just how far it extended down his back, underneath his shirt. No wonder he often came to her balcony so late, yet clean. He'd taken time to bathe for her, especially after a long day of manual labor in the tunnels.

In a relationship that sometimes counted itself in minutes, she hadn't understood, fully, the reason why he often came to her balcony quite so late in the evening. Even the first night he'd come to her balcony, it had been late. She'd come in from having spent the evening with Tom. And he'd come over the wall, bearing Great Expectations. It had been far from early.

What are the things you have to do because you're you, that I'm not even aware of? She wondered. And... how could she help him now?

The thin towel was beyond damp, and no aid to making him either more dry or more comfortable. But as it turned out, his warmer body temperature was drying what tunnel air wasn't much help with. He shouldered into the shirt, at last.

There was a pocket comb in the cache, and Catherine silently thanked whoever had left it there. It was small, but it would do. She used it on herself as he dried. She was about to simply hand it to him when she changed her mind.

"Vincent? Would you like it if I ... Would you let me..." She cursed herself for her stammering reticence. "Would it be alright if I helped you comb your hair?"



Helped him? He wasn't sure what she meant by that. People did not generally "help him." His other self, yes. But him? Yet, it sounded wonderful. He processed her request slowly, and then nodded, inclining his head in her direction.

He'd finger combed through some of it, but it was still snarled, and in some spots, matted. Catherine was undaunted. She and Jenny Aaronson had been playing with each other's hair since they were teenagers. Jenny's hair was thick, like Vincent's, and with a very stubborn curl. Catherine knew what to do.

She set a bowl of water nearby for those places that needed re-wetting so she could pick the tangles out, and she set about repairing the golden mess before her.

She realized how thick the hair was at the back of his neck, how his "mane" must be fuller there than it was elsewhere, as it arrowed down his spine. He had a large snarl at the nape, one he was likely accustomed to dealing with on his own.

"Everything is so hard for you sometimes, isn't it?" she asked, as she picked out the knot. "And none of us know." It was yielding to her gentle fingers. "And you never complain," she tacked on.

Yes. It was a silent assent, as he dropped his head lower.

"I wish you'd tell me. I wish I understood why you can't, now."

So did he, but there was no way he could say it.

The She was touching him, had been touching him for several long minutes. He was tired, and sore, and more muscles than just the leg ached. He still wanted a long soak in the hot springs, not the shallow dip in the tepid basin. And he wanted a long night in his own soft bed, not the stone floor he was about to have.

But he wouldn't have traded the satisfaction of any of his wants for the sensation of her running a comb through his tangled hair. She was carefully combing it to silk. Wild silk.

"You know, if you tied this back in a ponytail, it wouldn't get so bad, near your neck." The look in his eyes told her just what he thought of that suggestion.

"No, huh?" She actually smiled at his refusal. He adored the look of gentle humor on her face. It was the first time he'd seen it.

"All right then. But when we have to do this again tomorrow, don't say I didn't warn you." She studiously returned to her task, and he felt his shoulders begin to relax. She liked what she was doing. So did he.

When she was done, they ate in a companionable silence and he eventually shouldered into his vest while she put on the sweater again. Before too much longer, it was time to bed down for the night.

He gave her the sleeping bag and took the thin blanket. A couple more nights on the hard ground wasn't going to make him feel either much better or much worse, and he knew they both needed the sleep. He was suddenly exhausted. More even than she was.

"No you don't," she said, unzipping the sleeping bag completely so it could open as wide as it could get. Army surplus. She spread its camouflage pattern out on the ground.

"I am not sleeping in the comfortable bed, while you get the lumpy couch in the den," she said. He had no idea what that meant, exactly, but she did.

She was wearing her borrowed sweater overtop of the now-dry shirt, and the slightly baggy jeans with the legs cuffed, twice.

"Bring the blanket over. We'll both lay on the sleeping bag, and share the blanket," she offered, smoothing the space beside her. Part of her wasn't sure this was a good idea. The other part of her told that part of her to shut up. She'd already hurt him once, today. She wondered if "her Vincent" would remember any of this, when he "woke up."

As she rolled so that her back was turned to him, she felt his weight settle beside her. She heard his heartfelt groan of contentment at being allowed to lay on the bag. It was an animal's grunting sigh. And so... so "un-Vincent-like" a sound, she wondered also if she would ever see her Vincent again.

With hands clasped in a prayerful pose, cradling her cheek, she drifted off to sleep, the worry of that keen in her mind.

CHAPTER 4

BONDLESS



It wasn't until she cut her hand making breakfast that she realized he'd lost his bond to her, and that it hadn't been restored.

It was a simple accident, and nothing too dramatic. He was apart from her, a little, filling the water bottles from a spot in the stream near where it went over the rocks. He caught the flow as she opened a can of sardines, getting ready to serve it with what was left of the saltine crackers.

The metal ring tab broke off in her hand as the lid came part way open. She'd tried to force it open the rest of the way, and...

Gasp.

She saw the slicing ribbon of red bisect her palm before she felt the sting, but when it came, it came with a sharp (and too late) warning that she'd done something stupid.

Damn it, Catherine thought. I can't even open a can. No wonder he's worried about --

But as she looked up, she realized he wasn't worried about her. Not at that moment.

She stared, half-expecting to see him bounding the short distance to her side, asking with a gesture to see the cut.

But he wasn't. He just wasn't.

She was so stunned to see him still crouched near the river's flow, his back to her, filling another water bottle, she forgot to feel the pain in her hand, for a moment.

Pain. She was in pain, and he hadn't moved an inch.

She looked at the deep cut, knowing it was just a cut, but also knowing that it stung like the devil, and she looked back up at her love.

The bond is gone.

It was the first moment she'd realized it.

Now she remembered how they'd slept the first night, with his hand clamped around her wrist, how he constantly had seemed to need to check back for her, visually, as they'd travelled, especially yesterday, when she hadn't talked much.

"Oh, no." Even though she'd said it out loud, he hadn't heard her. She'd said it under her breath, and the flow of the water was loudest near where he still stooped, capping the last bottle.

"Vincent?" She said it louder, and this time he did raise his head. Either the look on her face or the smell of fresh blood or the ribbon of red that was now dripping from her closed palm to the stones, alerted him. Or it was all three.

He was to her before she could even think of another word, his palm open, demanding to see her wound.

"I... cut it on the can. Stupid. I... Vincent, you can't feel me, can you?"

Her mind scrambled and she realized that as hard as she searched, she also couldn't find or feel that faint trace of the incredibly thin, tensile line that had always run between them. For Catherine, the bond had always been an incredible, though distant thing. A thing

she'd only felt a few times, in all their years together. When he was desperate, she felt the brush of it. Sometimes.

He'd had a much stronger sense of it, always. She realized as he studied her palm that she couldn't "sense" him any better than he could sense her. See him, yes. "Feel" him, no.

And apparently he couldn't feel her, either.

Was it because he was not himself, right now? But... how much sense did that make? This creature before her seemed to be the more intuitive one, the one who often found her when she was in trouble. How could he not have the bond?

No wonder he'd overreacted when she'd made bids for privacy. He wasn't trying to chain her. He was trying to protect her. He could no longer feel what she was feeling, could no longer locate her if she got lost, or hurt.

He busied himself with tending her hand, unable to look up to answer her question. She'd cut herself. It was long, but not deep. He doused it with some of the alcohol and wrapped it in what was left of the gauze.

"Vincent?" she asked him. He met her emerald eyes.



The She was both confused and coming to understanding about how the link between them that was gone. Good. She had to understand how vulnerable she was now. Now that he didn't have it.

"Can you sense our bond? At all?" She searched his eyes and he dropped them and shook his head, reluctantly, for an answer.

The answer rocked her, and she stepped back, a moment. Put the fingers of her good hand through her now clean hair, hair he'd spent with his nose as close to as he dared, last night.

"My God... I guess... I guess I just thought it would always be here. Always be... part of us." Her mind wrestled with her questions, again.

Was that why he remained Beast-like? Catherine wondered. Was that part of why he couldn't speak? Did it have something to do with the loss of their bond?

She didn't know. But that answer made little sense. If anything, the mysterious bond between them was at its most heightened when he was like this. He was his more primal self when he had to make his way to her, had to find her, had to save her. Had to fight.

Now he seemed all but trapped this way, and there was no longer a bond between them.

But... Catherine knew she hadn't tried to withhold the bond from him since the moment she'd woken up with him on the stone floor of the cavern.

Before that... withholding their bond was a conscious choice. One she'd made when Paracelsus had held her, once, and then ... Gabriel.

"Did they... inject you with something? While you fought?" her mind was scrambling for a solution.

He shook his head, watching her struggle, hating that she was doing that.

"Did you even... did you even have the bond when you found me?" Her green eyes grew huge, with amazement. Now the odd length of time she'd been held made more sense. Even in her drugged state she could tell that time had passed. Two days? Three? Five? She wasn't sure. She thought she'd... slipped somehow. That she'd dreamed of him or that Gabriel's manipulation of her had been successful in bringing Vincent to her. He must have used the bond to rescue her. How else could he have found her?

He kept his head lowered, and shook it in the negative, again.

"Dear Lord, how did you ever find me in that place, without the bond?" She was amazed and still frightened at the same time.

He couldn't answer for an answer. Couldn't explain that he'd cleared his mind of every other sensation, of food, of sleep, of want, of need or comfort, but for the thought of her. That he'd inhaled the chemical soaked rag until he'd found information from it, even though the chloroform had made his empty stomach pitch. That it had left him feeling sick, and temporarily dulled his senses.

So much of that required words. Words he didn't have. His throat was still impossibly tight. His narrow tongue wouldn't work, that way.

He simply shrugged and gave her a steady look. A hard, steady look.

In his shining eyes, she saw him. Him. Not the Vincent who brought her poetry or the one who taught children, or even the one who sometimes beat Father at chess. That Vincent was there, yes. But this one was cannier, more cunning, and that quality showed.

The apex predator stared back at her. The effective taker of lives. The Vincent she'd always used and sometimes forgiven but never loved. His blue gaze held a ghostly kind of steel and she saw the determination in it, and the fire. The will to slay enemies. Her enemies first, and his, second.

She saw the drive that had pushed him non-stop to her side, the galvanizing force that had helped him slaughter armed men to reach the room where they'd held her. Will. A hard will, and an unrelenting one. It shone in eyes that were diamond hard.

That was how he had found her. That was why she was safe, now. That was why she was standing barefoot in borrowed clothes with a cut on her hand and a healing bruise on her arm rather than strapped to a table while they pumped drugs into her with a needle and a madman stood over her, gloating.

"Vincent." All she could do was whisper his name.

"I... I didn't know." It was a weak reply. A horrible and weak reply and it covered so much. She *hadn't* known. Hadn't known (or perhaps just been unable to face) the depth of his skill as an almost perfect hunting machine. The depth of his love for her. The fact that bond or no bond, that love tied him to her, and meant he would always be by her side, no matter what. He loved her. He would slay half of New York for her, if she asked him to. Or if he thought it was necessary, to keep her safe.

He was dangerous in his capabilities. Because he loved her.

He dropped his gaze and looked off to the side, letting his intensity cool, drawing the stalking beast in him back in, a bit. There was no need to hunt, not now. The She was here, and She was safe. And She was uncomfortable when She had to face that part of him. They both knew it. His Other Self knew it, too.

He knew they had another long walk ahead of them, today. It would not do to make her afraid of him. He just wanted to make her aware. Aware of what he was, and what lengths he would, and could - go to for her.

They ate the fish in near silence and he finished putting away the things they'd leave behind. He kept the soap with them. They might want to wash up, their hands at least, on the road. The cookware he returned. Having no wood, it would do them little good. He didn't want to carry too much. It would only slow them down.

He tucked the remaining alcohol next to the water bottles and a rag they'd used as a dish towel. There was some unexpired aspirin in the small medical kit, useless for him, but perhaps good for her. He offered her the aspirin bottle for the sting in her hand. She shook her head.

"No. Save them for if we really need them," she told him, aware that their survival depended on being able to make it from way station to way station, that they had passed no manhole covers or manmade tunnels yet.

It still disconcerted her to know that she was deep inside the bowels of the earth with only a vague sense of the direction and an uncommunicative Vincent to guide her. The little stream was no guide. Like most of the water down here, it came up through the rocks then went back down, as it would.

He repacked his backpack, this time taking the blanket and the sleeping bag rolled together. Whatever else had passed between them, he was grateful that she'd allowed him to sleep near, and on the thicker padding of the bag. It helped with the stiffness of his muscles. Even his knee felt better, this morning.

"Is it bad?" she asked, trying to see the back of his leg. So far, she saw no telltale spots of blood through the soft denim he now wore. He

shook his head. That might change as he walked on it, but there was no help for it. He had made strips out of the towel and dried them, last night. They could use that for bandaging to keep him on his feet, if they needed to.

There was a thick pair of socks at the bottom of the chest. He gave it to her, wishing it was a pair of shoes, or even moccasins, instead. It would help, at least. Give her some cushion for her feet inside the ridiculously thin slippers she'd been wearing, which were now showing holes.

She sat on the stones and gratefully accepted the socks, aware that they were dividing what little they could scrounge between them. He shouldered into his vest and handed her the light bedroll as he adjusted the heavier pack over his shoulder. They had plenty of water and a can of sardines left to split for lunch. She decided that when the time came, she'd let him open it.

"Please let us get closer to civilization," she murmured, accepting his offered hand. She had no idea if he agreed with her prayer or not.

--

Trains. The rumbling vibration of those. Still distant, but more often, now, and one even close enough to almost hear as the vibration built and dropped, through her thin-soled feet. The sound that was barely there cheered Catherine. "We're getting close to the North edge of the rail line, aren't we? I think I can hear a train."

He nodded his head as he accepted as small a portion of their shared meal as he dared. She should have saved the other can so they could

each have one, rather than opening it for breakfast, but he hadn't the heart to chide her (to growl at her?) for her wastefulness. It was all right. If the meals they'd taken in hadn't been generous, they'd been steady.

Evening would see them at a far more comfortable campsite, one better supplied, thanks to its proximity to his people. They would have a decent dinner and pass the night with a good fire and a generous amount of food, one their stomachs would probably rebel at, considering how much those had shrunk.

"I guess I should have heated the last can of soup for breakfast and saved the sardines," she realized as they ate. They'd had fire near the basin, and at least enough wood left for that. They'd finished off the last of the tea for breakfast.

He nodded at her realization of her error.

"Vincent, you should have told me... Growled at me, or something."

But of course he couldn't. For one thing, he'd been taking care of making sure they'd had water while she was indulging her appetite. For another... She watched him drop his head, and shake it. He did not want to growl at her, again. For any reason, not after yesterday. And he couldn't speak.

"Can you understand me? Everything I say?"

He shook his head "no," but how to tell her differently? That it was better now, now that they'd been travelling for days, that he could pick up on the nuances in her voice, that he understood much of what

she said, though not everything, that he too, was changing, thanks to being trapped this way for so long?

How to tell her that he was still more than half wild, had been following his nose since they'd left the last campsite, that the idea of being near other people repelled him utterly, that thanks to having to deal with her for the stretch of time he had, he was different than the being she usually met, the one who was savage with bloodlust and pumped full of adrenaline?

"Do you understand most of it?" she asked.

He nodded an affirmative. Barely.

She knew even at his wildest, he often understood her words. Simple commands..."No," or "Stop," or "I'm here." Uncomplicated commands, or instructions meant to garner an immediate result. But before, those simple instructions seemed to be held inside his wild eyes. In the moment before he came back to her, in the moment before he became "her Vincent" again.

"Vincent, do you know why you can't come back to yourself?" she asked. He both shook his head and shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that to him, the answer either didn't matter or he didn't care.

"I miss you, you know," she said it gently, but the look he gave her let her know he was insulted.

How could she miss him? Was he not right here? His look told her as much.

"I'm sorry, again." She regretted her *faux pas* the minute he stood from his meager meal and stepped away from her. "You've done nothing but save my life and I think all I've done is insult you." She rose and tried to step closer but he clearly didn't want her to do that.

"Not just today. All the other ones, as well," she realized. "You're not two different people. But this part of you. This... wild part of you. This is the part that saved my life that first time, isn't it? Is this the part of you that first found me, in the park?"

Yes. Yes it had been. Though there had been no fight, he'd smelled the blood. Subconsciously he immediately had accessed his more primal self, to track her. There had been a deep mist, that night. The damp air made tracking more difficult, and fog made it impossible to see. He'd heard the van but not seen exactly where she'd rolled, down the hill. She'd not been the easiest thing to find, in the tall damp grass near the road. A road he'd dared not stay near. He'd had to locate her quickly.

He nodded, but kept his head low, and simply stalked away from her, impatiently. He clearly wanted some distance, some space. She let him go, even to the point where he was out of sight around a corner, and she returned to where they'd settled on a pair of boulders and sat down.

What a mess I've made of things. Was still making of things.

Sometimes, in her secret longings, she'd wished for the bond to be gone. It was inconvenient, and intrusive at times, and when she was feeling bitchy or put out, it felt like he could invade her privacy any time he wished.

She'd schooled her brain to remain calm, for the most part, to deflect petty feelings like hate, or envy. She knew he would feel them if she did, and she knew they were unworthy things, to send him.

And sex wasn't even a subject on the table, between them. A thing she was both grateful for and in a quandary over. She'd never felt very much, with her previous partners. And he seemed determined to keep her near him with a very chaste, very courtly kind of love, keeping whatever he felt on a very tight rein.

She'd pushed aside intimate thought, in the night, realizing that such musings would be felt by him as well. She loved him. But she felt spied on by him, to some degree, though she couldn't say it to him. What would the point have been? He couldn't turn off the bond, not completely.

Except it looked like something had.

Now she wondered if she'd ever feel that sweet, comforting, constant presence thrumming just under her own awareness, again.

She looked down the path he'd disappeared to. She'd upset him. She didn't need the bond to understand that.

Cleaning up their mess she shouldered her lighter share of their gear and went off in search of him, in the general direction he had taken.

--

She found him some fifteen minutes later, farther down the trail, perched on top of rock in a large, open chamber that had maybe been water-cut a millennia ago, but was dry, now. He looked like a sphinx,

he was so inscrutable. She set down their belongings. The barest flicker of an eyelash acknowledged her presence. He'd clearly wanted to be left alone.

She knew better than to accuse him of sulking. But wondered if he wasn't doing just that.

"I used to wish the bond was gone, sometimes," she confessed, gamely. "I know that sounds horrible, but I used to wish it. We even argued about it one time, when Stephen came back into my life. Remember?"

He did. He remembered Stephen Bass. He remembered gutting him, or at least he remembered the instinct to, before she'd stopped him. Stephen Bass had touched her. He'd even made love to her, back when they were both young. If there was ever a man Vincent had longed to kill, it was that one. Bringing up his name was not a good idea. Not when Vincent was in this mood. The harsh expression didn't change.

"You told me to be careful, but you couldn't tell me why. I asked 'how could you say that, give me so little, then expect me to go back up into my world and live with it?'" Her face was drawn, with memory. His was tight with it. "I wanted the bond gone, then. Other times, too, sometimes," she confessed

Yes. Yes he knew those other times. Knew the feel of Elliot Burch's kiss, in her mind, more than once. Tom Gunther had kissed her goodnight and wanted more, one night, his mouth trying to ignite a fire over hers.

She hadn't known about the bond, then, but he had. Some... some other man, some date she had when they were new with each other, had kissed her cheek almost perfunctorily. He'd tried for more, but she'd brushed him away. *No chemistry*, the impression had come to his very impressionable mind.

And then there was Michael. Michael's betrayal of a kiss had stung Vincent's primitive mind most of all, had roused his primal self almost immediately.

That had been a day. He'd wanted to run, and exact no small bit of vengeance for the transgression. His Teacher self had kept reigning him in, kept telling him "no," had to keep holding him down, while he, the inner Vincent, had wanted to come roaring out and go get a pound of flesh.

He and Catherine had nearly fought with each other that day, in a way they'd hardly struggled, since.

He'd resented all of them, all the men who'd touched her that way, that way he never would. He'd even resented her a little, at first, for letting them touch her. This was not Vincent's 'reasonable' side, and he had no will for such niceties. His thinking was far more direct.

Where were *they* when her life was in the balance? Where was Elliot Burch when she was fighting for her life, other than responsible for her danger, often? Where was the man who built the skyscrapers he, Vincent scaled, or the brilliant young student Michael, or the insipid Mr. Bass, or the no-chemistry Greg when a lunatic held a knife to her eye, or a man with a gun threatened? Where were all of them, then?

Gone. They were all gone. And then there was only him, fit for the kill. She'd be dead without him, even though it was the others she'd loved, or the others who'd got to touch her. It was so damn unfair.

"I used to think it was the most amazing thing that you knew what I was feeling." Her soft voice continued overtop of his inner resentment. "And even when I thought it was a little invasive, I couldn't get over the miracle of it." She climbed up and sat beside him. He let her come. She was She.

"It took me a while to come to the strange conclusion that we were meant to be, but I guess I thought the bond was trying to point me in that direction, and I was just being stubborn." He let Her talk. She knew he couldn't answer.

"It felt so right. Even when it was hard, that felt like the right choice. I told you it was worth everything, that night I came back from Nancy's. But you never told me what you thought, then. Not really." She shook her head. "Maybe now you never will." Her demeanor grew quiet, grew sad.

"Are we still us, without the bond?" she asked. He had no answer for her and no idea what the question was. It was far too philosophical a one for his instinctive mind, the mind that operated better with verbs like "Go," or "get" or "climb" or "jump." Or "stop."

He pushed himself away from the rock and shouldered the pack she'd hefted down the corridor. Whatever her question was, the answer didn't matter, not to him. She was the She. She was still that, and he would still die for her, bond or no. It was most of what he knew. And all he felt he needed to.

She followed him out of the cavern, quietly. *Please let this be over, soon*, she prayed, silently.

Catherine realized how much she missed her wristwatch down here, how much even the glow of candlelight told her what a flashlight or a lantern wouldn't. How much time had passed?

They'd walked a long time, and not stopped again. She knew that if past experience was any help, that the next cache would be by water, since the previous one had been, and that made some sense. It was easier to fill empty water bottles in a place that already had a supply of fresh water nearby than it was to lug the heavy bottles all that way, yourself.

She wondered who had the job of re-supplying the caches, and how many there were. Then she dismissed the thought as her big toe stubbed itself over a large stone, not the first time that had happened, today.

"Ow! *Damn* it! How long have we been walking?" she demanded, leaning against the wall while she nursed the sore toe. He turned, several yards in front of her, and simply waited. To say "they hadn't said much to each other" since they'd left the cavern was ridiculous, considering he didn't talk, but even then, she could feel silence coming off him in waves at her.

They Were Not Speaking. Because He Was Annoyed With Her. It was just that simple.

And he had no answer for her question, which irritated her even more.

"This is just like you, you know. You always do this," she accused, rubbing her foot a little before setting it down. "You always shut me out when you're mad. Or... whatever. Maybe I just get tired of going through the hoops, Vincent."

Vincent eyed her with an interested gaze which fully informed her he thought she was crazy. "He" had never done anything with her. Aside from save her life. And have to put up with her for days now, in the tunnels. That should have been The Other's job. Not his. But he was stuck with it.

"You close up and you go off just like you did back there. You go past where anybody can reach, and you pout, or sulk, or think or whatever it is you do. And you're back for days before you ever come to the balcony, and I always end up feeling like..." she caught her tongue and let the ache in her foot subside. She was yelling at Vincent. For being annoyed with her. Problem was she was bringing up past history with his other self, and as far as she knew, he had no knowledge of it. Certainly no responsibility for it.

"Oh, hell, never mind," she said, vastly frustrated. "I've just been bumping my toe all day and it feels like we've been walking forever and I'm starting to think we're never going to get there and now you're angry with me. Seems no matter which one of you is here I manage to annoy you."

He couldn't catch all of the words but he caught her meaning, clearly enough. Sometimes, he realized that was likely true. She did annoy him. Both sides of him.

The one leading her through the tunnels remembered a day when he'd wanted to throttle her for coming down to those same tunnels to try and arm Jacob with a gun, when there were half a dozen armed maniacs on the loose. It had been a bloodbath that day. His Other self had sent her away, when all he wanted was to sleep at her feet.

Try *that* for never getting what you wanted. Annoyed? No. He was furious. Annoyance was a delicate thing, an "Other" thing. He'd been wanting to snarl his displeasure with her since the cavern. Before, truth be known.

"You and Jacob. The studied art of avoidance." She set her foot down and tested its weight. "I swear there are times when I think you two are cut from the same cloth, that one day you'll both just..."

His roar split the tunnel and stopped her mid-diatribes. He might not have language, but that didn't mean he had no communication skills. He'd put up with her all he was about to. He'd been hefting a heavier pack most of the afternoon thanks to her tender feet and he'd be damned if he'd continue to do it just to feed her lousy disposition.

Tossing it down beside her he strode off in the general direction they'd been going in, temporarily not giving a damn if she picked up the gear and came after him or not.

Three hundred or so yards down the tunnel, he stopped and leaned against the wall, panting his disgust. *Women*. No wonder his other

self was so tied in knots. They were difficult and they whined. Expected too much and spoke too much and understood too little. He was keeping the two of them alive. It was what he'd been born to do. She was alive, wasn't she? How much more was he expected to do?

He was tired, and not physically. He wanted to sleep. For a long time. He was not used to being "awake" this long. He had no idea how his other self did it. It was exhausting.

He waited for her to catch up. After a while, he realized she wasn't coming, and went back for her.

She was sitting where he'd left her, the pack at her feet. Silent tears were streaking down her face. He'd not heard her sobbing.

This strange, silent kind of crying had the power to frighten him.

"I thought I was dead." She didn't even look up as she said it. "I thought 'this time, this was it.'" Her stormy green eyes held an almost impenetrably hopeless kind of memory.

"It was John Moreno, my boss. And no way was he going to let me live, after I'd seen his face. It was so fast and the rag was over my face and I knew you couldn't get there in time, and I thought "Well, this is it. The job finally got you killed, Cathy." She shook her head.

"I didn't even have time to fight. To scream. The elevator doors opened, and..." Her green eyes held her pain. The pain of one who knows she's just been betrayed. "They just... grabbed me, and it all went so black..." He had no idea why she was rehashing her abduction. Except that part of him did.

"Then I woke up at Gabriel's and I found out that there were worse things than being dead." Her tone was frighteningly bleak. "He knew about you. Kept playing a video tape of you in a rage. Over, and over. He was so fascinated, so... evil. He pumped me full of drugs and asked me questions. I think I was supposed to tell him how to find you, how to find your world." She shook her head.

"I don't know why I didn't tell him. I just kept... I don't know. Screaming, inside, but not to you. I wanted you to come and get me and I wanted you to stay away, and be safe, and I couldn't want both. I..." She hesitated, both trying to remember and trying not to.

"Then I'd just... black out, and when I woke up it would start all over again."

She wiped her cheek with the heel of her palm, like a small child. She picked up the pack and shouldered it, which made him feel like a heel, himself. When she walked by him he felt the extreme distance of her.

It was the first time he ever realized that he missed the bond as much as she did.

--

CHAPTER 5

STILL US



He let her walk ahead, knowing they weren't far from where they'd stop for the night. She couldn't get lost, not here. They'd cleared the labyrinth. There was only one way to go, either down the passageway or back the way they'd come. Catherine stayed quiet, on the path, as did he. They made good time, once he'd gently tugged the heavier pack off of her shoulders. She'd let him. It was all right.

The path became much less rock strewn, and far more toward sand and soft pebbles. Easy walking. They'd reach rest, soon, and he knew it was a welcome one. He blessed the opening in the wall, once it came into view.

She preceded him into the large space, a decent sized warm spring, before them. It was full of minerals, and not good for drinking, but the water was much warmer than the tepid basin of yesterday, and the big steamer trunk held bottled water for them, aside from what they'd carried.

The smell of magnesium and salt hung in the air, with a faint tinge of sulfur. The smell was not pleasant, but it was not overpowering. And the temperature was divine.

"God. I am going to soak my feet for the next ten hours. Call me when they're prunes," she instructed, peeling out of her slippers and socks. The former now sported multiple holes. The latter was looking dodgy, on her left big toe.

She cuffed her borrowed jeans and he watched her dangle her legs off the stone ledge and into the water. It was an oblong basin, not so much bigger than a good sized hot tub. But it was deep enough to

submerge in easily, and there were bench seats carved in the stone at the walls, thanks to Kanin Evans.

He dropped his vest and took off his boots while she sat. This time, when he dropped his pants, she just looked away, a little. He unwound the bandage on his knee. The injury had been ignorable when they'd started out that morning, but had been making itself known, for the past hour. He inspected it as best he could. The gash was healing, but jagged, and it held a touch of fever. The salt in the water would do him good, though it would sting.

There were no steps in. It was very much a hole in the ground, one that had been rocked off, some, around part of the edge. Vincent sat and let his legs dangle, then simply slid in, submerging himself, and to get the water up over the back of his knee. It felt heavenly, even as it did indeed sting, a little. He felt the location of every cut and bruise, for a moment, and then... bliss. The temperature felt marvelous, as the murky water seemed to cure all ills.

"HMMMMMMMM" it was a sound between a purr and a soft growl, as he settled himself down on a low bench seat opposite of where she still sat on the rim. He checked her position then simply closed his eyes, keeping his still bandaged arm clear of the water. He spread his arms out, bracing them on the edge as he simply leaned back his head and relaxed.

She was staring, a little. That was alright. Let her. Everything she saw belonged to her, anyway.

Catherine soaked her feet a while, then made her way over to the big steamer chest, curious as to its contents.

The Spartan provisions of the other caches were minimalist, compared to this one. Tins of beef, and more sardines. Tins of crackers and sea biscuits. Cooking supplies, and a few dishes and cutlery. Peanut butter in one jar, grape jelly in another. A can of peaches. A jar of applesauce. A box of oatmeal. A box of salt. A jar of honey. A decent medical kit with fresh gauze and disinfectant. Several candles. More oil and another lantern. A small bag of toiletries and a change of clothing for him. This area was clearly used for pleasure hiking, not just the usual kind. Some extra clothing lined the bottom. There was a pair of books tucked into one corner, near another army surplus sleeping bag. There was even a small pillow.

"People come here to camp, don't they? To soak in the mineral bath and stay overnight?" She asked almost rhetorically as she sorted through the foodstuffs and began to prepare something for them to eat.

Mindful of her accident with the sardine can, she judiciously opened the tins of beef and set them in a pan to warm over some sterno. She seemed to require no answer to her question, and was just babbling to hear herself speak out loud. Vincent approved. He liked to listen to the sound of her voice.

"I wonder if Kanin ever brought Olivia here. Remember their anniversary chamber?" Her runaway non-conversation made her cheeks pink, once she considered her words. "I guess you do. Or maybe you don't. I don't know, anymore."

He caught the change in her expression before she turned her head to dig something else out of the chest. He didn't need the bond to hear

her breathing catch. Awareness. Something almost... sexual in the change in her awareness. He replayed her words, mentally. Kanin and Olivia. Their Anniversary Chamber.

Kanin Evans had made a trysting place, for him and his mate. Vincent didn't remember the particulars, at the moment, but he understood the impression. Trysting place. The place a male offered a female. A place of beauty or safety or both. A place of privacy. A feathered nest.

He unwrapped the bandage on his arm, and checked the progress of the healing. The scabbed skin looked like it was healing, and like he could soak it in the mineral bath. He'd likely carry a scar from it, though the hair on his arm would cover it, more than likely.

He lowered the arm and stretched out in the water some more, watching her move around in the loose-fitting men's jeans and the borrowed clothes. It was warm in here, thanks to the temperature of the mineral springs. After a few moments, she tugged the bulky sweater up over her head and cuffed the sleeves on the man's shirt she wore underneath. Whatever their fight earlier had been about, she seemed done with it, and not the kind to bear a grudge.

The beef began to simmer and the smell of it drew his nose like a lure. She stirred it a little and set out the crackers. He watched her from his position in the water.

"Some of William's bread would go wonderful with this," Catherine commented, spooning it onto plates where it could cool. She opened the jar of applesauce.

Vincent felt a low growl at the name "William." William was an unattached male. He didn't like it when she flattered those, even if they were portly and too old for her. He discarded the instinct to complain. William was not here. And if he was, Vincent would show him which one of them was dominant. It had been a difficult day, and Vincent knew all his emotions were bubbling near the surface. Perhaps too near.

He watched her setting out the food for them, content to be observing her, silently.

Her hands. She had beautiful hands. They were always a part of her he'd loved, and he enjoyed watching them now as they set out bottles of water. She kept her nails short and manicured, and though a couple of the nails on her right hand would definitely need fixing, the sheen of clear polish still softly glimmered on most of her fingers. Fingers that were elegantly tapered. He liked her hands. He always had. It was as simple as that.

He stirred lazily from the mineral bath, aware that it was time to eat. She gave him her back, purposely, while he dried off with a towel and slid into a pair of old sweatpants that felt like heaven. The ragged cuffs gripped his calf muscles, since they were too short, but the soft fabric felt like a godsend. It was absorbent enough to take on the dampness of his thighs. He left his chest bare, so the hair there could dry.

"I may be getting better at this," she said, testing a piece of warm beef. It was not bad. She added some salt to her plate and offered some to him.

He took it and settled near her, dividing the crackers between them. It would be a brief meal, but a good one.

"I'm sorry about before," she said. It felt like she was always apologizing to him. "Now and then, a little of the spoiled brat I used to be creeps in."

Her face, long free of makeup, looked young and vulnerable. He had no idea what she was apologizing for, but he dropped his head in acceptance of her words, and took another plateful of the beef to show her he approved of her efforts. It was good. His body had been craving meat, and finally felt satisfied.

"Good."

It took him a moment to realize he was the one who had said it.

Speech felt... odd. His vocal chords did not want to tame themselves into making a sound that was not a roar or a growl. But almost by not thinking of how to do it, he'd done it. The part of his brain responsible for speech struggled to connect itself to his more impulsive, more instinctive mind.

"You can talk." She set down her plate and stared at him, wide eyed.

No. He shook his head "no" at that, but both of them knew he'd just done it. He looked at her, and worked the muscles in his throat for a moment. No sound came forth. After a few minutes, he gave up trying.

She let the quiet spin out, between them. Then: "It's going to be beyond all irony that the first word you said was a compliment about

my cooking," she smiled, trying to see if he would say more. He didn't, but Catherine could see he was processing that he had.

The instincts that ruled Vincent's Warrior self required focus, and only a very specific but highly strengthened skillset. He could see better in the dark, when he was like this, his sense of smell became highly acute, his stamina increased, and the surface of his skin became aware of the slightest change in wind or air pressure. He was a hunting animal, and a fighting one. He did not speak because he had little use for language. He could roar, because that was an advantage, in a battle. It intimidated one's enemies. All were things he knew about himself, no matter which side of him was charge.

The parts of his brain that were not used were kept quiescent so that the parts that were needed could come to the fore. While he could read the labels on the cans, that was more by recognition of the words or pictures than by actual literacy. He did not have the focus to read a book. But he had the stamina to run and follow a trail all night, if he needed to.

She sat back, not wanting to push. He massaged his temple. He was getting a headache, from trying to speak. Or maybe he was just getting one, anyway.

"It's been a very hard few days for you," she said sympathetically. It had been.

"Well. You spoke a word and we've got peaches for dessert. One way or another I'd say this day is getting better." She eased away from him, giving him room he didn't want. Suddenly he wanted her close. Fortunately, she didn't have to move far for the can.

Her slender fingers fumbled a moment with the hand held can opener, but she got it after the third try and twisted the mechanism to open the lid. The smell of sugar and peach juice hit his nose, and he found that even though his stomach was full, it felt like growling, with want.

She dumped their dessert into a bowl and handed him a fork out of habit. One he didn't really want to use, but he held it.

He really wanted to upend the bowl and drink the nectar more than he wanted to eat the fruit. Still, he held back the instinct, and let her spear a golden slice, first. The She always ate first. It was Law.

They shared the treat, Catherine aware that something in Vincent was enjoying the peaches inordinately. She begged off eating more, while he dove in, eventually abandoning the fork to use his fingers, after a minute. It was a primitive display, and again, one she feared would have deeply embarrassed "her" Vincent.

Her Vincent. She wondered where he was, if he was aware of all that had occurred in the last few days. Was he miserable? Asleep? Watching, like through a window? Her mind wouldn't even contemplate the proposition that he was permanently gone.

I miss you. She thought it but didn't say it. She did. She missed his conversation and the gentleness that always seemed to hover near him when she was close. She missed the sound of his voice and the sensation of being read to.

She cleaned up the plates while he finished off the last of the peaches. For whatever reason, she was feeling extremely domestic.

"I'm not giving up until we fix this," was all she told him.

Fix this. Fix. Again, as if he were a broken thing, something that required repair. Something Mouse might fidget with, until Vincent did something they all wanted. Did he not already do something they all wanted? Did he not fight, sometimes kill, even, to keep them all safe?

Vincent shrugged at her words. He was not broken. But if the sentence she'd just uttered gave her any comfort, he would let her have it. It was useless to keep fighting about it.

She moved back toward the mineral pool and cuffed her pants again, letting her legs dangle in the water and her feet soak. She seemed to have no urge to go in, as he had done, but was content to wash her face and hands, then simply... dangle.

He sauntered over, shirtless and clad only in the sweatpants, belly full and muscles relaxed. His arm felt much better. The leg was coming along. The water had done wonders, for both.

They sat near each other, and she stirred the water with her legs. He wished she would strip and go in to bathe, but somehow knew she wouldn't. It was all right. Whatever She wanted.

"Camping with you near a warm mineral springs with a book of Byron nearby and a can of peaches. There are days when I'd have given half what I have in checking for this scenario," she told him idly, watching her foot draw circles in the cloudy water. She sighed.

"It's been so hard, lately," she confessed. He wasn't sure if she was actually talking to him, or speaking as if he wasn't there. Was this the sort of thing she would have said to his Other Self? He wasn't sure.

She got up and towed off her legs, then spread the sleeping bag out and propped up the pillow near a rock. She tried to read for a minute, but clearly had no more patience for the words than he'd would have. She kept flipping the pages, restlessly.

He came over and sat near, but not too near. She closed the cover of the book and set the old volume down. He used the towel for his calves, as she had done.

"The Outsiders, the frat boys. Now Joe and some kind of book. It's like we keep taking hits. Like I keep wondering if we even know what we're doing, anymore."

Did they know what they were doing? He had no idea. But he didn't like the notion that they, like he, needed some sort of "fixing."

He struggled to get the words past his closed-feeling throat.

"Love....you... All I ... know."

She looked up at him, but didn't move, and didn't prompt him, this time.

"Every...thing ... I know," he added.

Her expression was incredibly tender. "Yes, you love me. But it's been so hard, Vincent. So hard for us to find our love."

He shook his head and she almost anticipated his words before he gave them.

"Not... for ... me.... I just... love you." He dropped his head from the effort of speaking. His temple throbbed, and his throat felt like he'd forced broken glass up it. It hurt to speak. But he wanted to do it.

"Feel it...here." he put his fist to his chest and then relaxed, letting the strain of it go. It was a thing he had to tell her. He just had to.

"Then I'm the one who's made it hard. Is that what you're saying? That I made things hard on myself?" He shook his head in denial, owning whatever part he played in their troubles. But then he shrugged, as well, giving her whatever part she bore in it.

"Loving you. Easy. The rest... hard." He sounded a bit like Mouse, and just about as erudite. This part of him disliked words. They still seemed useless to him, on some level. But she seemed to need them, so he gave her what he could.

Loving her was easy. The rest of it was hard. Catherine turned over his words and took them into herself. Yes. That she could see, and that she could understand. Jacob's resistance to the idea of "them" and sometimes hers, then sometime his. Her life and his, and how they often didn't mesh. The risks she sometimes took, just to prove she'd been worth saving. The risks he took because of the ones she did.

"I treated you badly, sometimes," she confessed.

He shook his head. She thought it was denial, but the words were soft.

"You treated me...love. And... nothing."

The sentence shocked her. She'd treated him with love? Yes, yes she had. And there were times when she was guilty of some vanity or petty sin, but ... she treated him like nothing?

Then she realized. Him. This Vincent. This odd being trapped before her. Him, she'd treated like nothing. She'd adored the scholar in him and treasured the erudite teacher, and the gentle side of the savior in him. But him? This? The Beast/Warrior who screamed in his brain, who fired it, who came to get her every time she put herself too far over the line? This Vincent?

Yes, this Vincent she'd treated like "nothing." Because her Vincent couldn't bear to speak of him and she hadn't wanted to ask. Had never asked. They'd both ignored him, in their way.

"You don't know me," he'd once told her.

"I don't think any of us realize what a delicate balance Vincent is," Jacob's words came back to haunt her.

No, they hadn't. And it maybe didn't even matter if they did. None of them wanted to face this part of him, sit at a table with this being. Vincent didn't want them to, either.

"Don't hate him," Catherine said, realization of all they'd done - and not done- hitting her hard. "Don't hate the gentler side of yourself because of how it's been. It's my fault, not his."

"Don't...hate him...Don't ... hate ... you."

"And don't hate yourself. You're the...the one who saved me. I was terrified, and you came. I'm always at least a little afraid and then I'm so afraid to admit it to you." She cupped his cheek, and kept his amazing eyes focused on her.

"I'm afraid you'll think less of me if you know how often I'm afraid. You once told me I had strength, the strength to change my life. But I don't have courage, Vincent. Or at least I don't have enough, sometimes. I knew you were there. And I ignored you. You." He knew she was speaking to his wild self, now, not to her "Other" Vincent.

He covered her hand, and held it to his cheek, closing his eyes against the blessing of the sensation. Him. She was finally talking to just him.

What did she need courage for? Did she not have him, for that? One person could not be everything, and she was brave enough in her own right.

"You ...have... courage." The words were a ground whisper. It was still hard for him to speak.

Now it was she who shook her head in the negative. "Vincent, I used to be so afraid of the dark I had to go to bed with a rose clutched in my hand. It was the first thing I looked for when I got up in the morning. I'd put it on my dresser so I could find it again before I went to bed that night. I even lied to my father once. He asked me if I'd outgrown needing it and I said "Yes." Then I had to put it back in exactly the same place every morning, so he wouldn't think I'd moved it."

"Child," he said.

"Yes. I was a child. But sometimes I think I haven't been much braver since. Especially with you."

"Strong... In here." He indicated his heart. "Love. Me."

He took a deep breath and the small sentence came in a rush.

"Don't try to fight so much, Catherine."

The words exhausted him, and he dropped his head.

"Because I shouldn't do it, or because I have you for that?" she asked softly.

In answer, he just kept his head down but put his hand on the back of her neck to pull her to him, in a soft embrace. No more words. He just wanted the gesture to show her all he meant.

I am here, She. Always here.

He kept their heads next to each other, breathing softly into her neck as she breathed softly into his. His shoulders felt the tickle from it. It felt divine.

You have me, his touch said. You will always have me.

"I love you." She whispered the words to his shoulder, and kissed the warm skin there. She felt his hand tighten, his body sigh, at the words. The Words. The Words the She gave to others, and to his Other Self, but never to him.

"I love you," she repeated, kissing him again, on the hard ridge of his shoulder. He turned her body so she was lying against him comfortably, using his chest as her pillow. *Sleep, She. Sleep so I can be happy that you're mine. Rest. Tomorrow will be long enough.*

She raised her head and wiped her eye. Tears. From her, for him? He could not fathom it.

"I think I know what we are without the bond, now," she whispered, looking at him with such deep love it stopped his breathing.

"We're still us," she answered, feeling the strength, all the strength and the comfort of that knowledge. Strength. The thing he swore he sensed in her from the beginning. Perhaps she'd been confusing that with courage so long, she forgot to give it its due.

"We're strong together, Vincent. If you think you don't have enough, let me be your strength for you. Let me be the care that lights our way. You be the courage. I'll be the care. Okay?"

Go with courage. Go with care. For a long time she'd taken his words to mean that they both must have those things in equal measure. It had taken her a very long time to realize that she didn't. She didn't have to be as brave as he was, or as selfless as Mary or as protective as Jacob or as creative as Mouse. Those were all amazing people in his world, and they all embodied those things. But they did not embody them equally.

There is strength inside you. I feel it.

The strength to love his Beast. The thing he'd sensed from the beginning, and prayed for, inside. So far inside he didn't even know who the prayer belonged to more, the Scholar or the Warrior.

Catherine closed her eyes with realization, and kissed his gentle, unresisting mouth. "I love you." The kiss was firmer, the second time.

Yes. Yesssssssssss. The word was a sibilant sound inside his brain and the joy of her touch was a river of warmth. She was kissing him. The

She was kissing. Him. His mouth opened under hers, a mountain of willing beneath it. He'd never thought himself "unworthy" of her. Worth was the strength of his arm or the speed of his swing. He had those. He'd only understood himself to be barely acknowledged by her.

That She would say She loved him, would kiss him...

He forced his hands down to his sides lest he grab her. Under pain of self-mutilation would he injure the She. She could do what she wanted with him. Stake him to an ant hill. Send him into a battle against armies. Beat him, spurn him, reject him, just...

Don't stop. For five minutes. Don't stop kissing me, please, oh please...Just a moment. Just another moment. Just one more...

Catherine felt him tremble beneath her, felt the pent-up inner reaction he fought to keep contained. His arms had snapped to his sides with a rigid sort of discipline, and she could feel the muscle of his arm bunching and flexing as he clenched his hand into a fist, then relaxed it.

She stopped the kiss to look down at his hands, clenched at his sides, to make sure he wasn't doing damage to himself. He wasn't. Either the skin was so tough it would bear a certain amount of pressure from his nails or he knew how to close his hand into a fist without injuring himself.

"Don't hurt yourself," she said softly against his parted lips before she took them with her own, again.

Don't hurt himself? He was dying. Dying, right here against a bedrock wall, shirtless and propped up by stones, being kissed by...*Her*. His right hand came up unbidden, and tangled in her hair when she needed to gasp in a breath. He begged her head back to his, her lips back to his, pushing gently, with his hand.

Please. Oh, Please.

The part of Vincent that usually measured conscious existence in minutes and seconds feasted for what felt like hours.



Her mouth left a trail of liquid fire across his, and he carefully set his other hand on her denim clad knee and tugged her overtop him. She came so fluidly, so gracefully, that for a moment he was afraid he'd moved a dream image to straddle him.

Her weight was an inconsequential pressure, with just enough "push" behind it to elicit a satisfied moan that was almost a snarl when she

settled. It was a noise of approval, and encouragement, as was the lifting gesture of his hips.

"Love you," she whispered, nuzzling the skin of his jaw. Both his clawed hands trailed down her back to her thighs, then remained at her knees until he could simply bear it no more.

An immediate erection they both felt and neither would deny hardened itself against the ridge of her jeans. When her hips thrust almost involuntarily back against him, he saw stars. He knew he'd lost the ability to speak, again. Not to mention the ability to breathe evenly.

Yessssssssssssss.

The word whispered in his brain one more time, before the word became simply instinct, and the instinct became need.

Her weight. Just her gentle, feathery weight against him. She whimpered into his neck, and he knew she was caught between the desire to continue and the desire to stop, her own needs slamming through her tiny system. He trailed his clawed hands up her legs, again, resting them at her thighs a moment, encouraging her to rock her sweet, lithe body against his.

"Vincent..." her voice held a warning. So did his answering growl. There was no Vincent, here, or at least there was not the one she was used to being with, the one who quoted poetry or taught children to write.

He leaned his head back against the stones, trying not to frighten her, and trying not to coerce. He wanted to lift his hips again, so badly,

but he simply sat beneath her and trembled, massaging her legs, making her core move against his erection, just enough. She began to rock, just a little, and he nudged her with his hands, subtly, keeping the sweet, abandoning pressure between them.

He could smell her approaching climax before she could even feel it, and he wanted her to bury her head near his neck, wanted to encourage her to mark him, with her teeth. Animal instinct. *I belong to you. Mark me so that others know.*

Catherine moaned and he drank the sound.

No matter. When it happened, she would claim him. She wouldn't be able to avoid it. He nearly smiled as his breath began coming in short, soft pants, small noises of satisfaction stuttering in his throat, matching hers.

"This isn't fair." She was speaking about his Different self. His Teacher Self. Maybe. He didn't care.

It didn't matter. Whoever this betrayed, her, him, or his other self, he didn't care. This was bliss and she was so very close to...

"Ah!"

It was a short, feminine sound. She was surprised and fighting it, at the same time. He made the next decision for her.

His arms wrapped around her waist and he bore her down, bringing her hard against the steel of his desire, across the tip, then down. A lover's suggestion of entrance, a bid to please.

She screamed her pleasure into the small cave, and grabbed the bare skin of his shoulders, leaving a scoring mark with her right hand. As he predicted, she pitched forward and buried her mouth at the right side of his neck, nipping as she shuddered against his steel. He let his hips thrust upward against her to heighten her pleasure. Another tremor shook her and this time the nip was more like the bite he'd craved, a plea not to let her go, not to stop. She mewed into his neck, her left fist making fluttering, ineffectual blows against his shoulder. He gave a low snarl of approval as she rode, as she finished.

A long moment passed. Two.

"You... you have to. Your turn." she said weakly, feeling his restraint.

If she said they were done, right now, they were done. Something in her knew it. And would never be so cruel. He was still hard, against her stomach.

"Shhhhh," she encouraged, sparing his tufted ear with a soft kiss. "Please, Vincent? With me?" Her hips undulated in a motion so sexual he nearly came right then. It took only a few more thrusts of her feminine hips to cause his scrotum to tighten, in warning. He was sensitive near the head. It only took her a moment to discern it.

He returned his hands to the width of her hips, not daring to hope she was allowing what she was allowing. *Him, too?*

Him, too.

He didn't force her weight down, terrified that he would grab as he thrust. In the end, he didn't have to. She simply locked her hands behind his neck and... pushed.

His end was as cataclysmic as hers had been, and he shook as he growled his climax. Head thrown back, eyes shut tight in ecstasy, she rode his completion with the same shuddering joy with which she'd ridden her own. Her body echoed his, and shook once more, a tiny spasm of completion, before all was quiet, between them.

He felt her weight settle bonelessly, against his chest. Her arms were limp, as his were cradling.

There, She. I have you.

Lethargy. The sweet, warm feeling of being unable to move, after sex. His arms wrapped loosely around her back, and she settled her head against his massive, hair covered chest. If she wanted to say something, he had no idea "what." He knew the moment she began to drift, sleepily.

After an indeterminate amount of time, he simply shifted her, and settled them both on the open sleeping bag.

It didn't even interrupt a hazy dream she'd been having, one where they were both eating ice cream.

CHAPTER 6

PARTING



Hours later, a time Catherine had simply decided to name "morning," she awoke to sounds of him preparing them breakfast. He was stirring oatmeal in a pot, sweetening it with honey.

For a moment, she wondered if "her" Vincent had returned to her, but something in the way he moved, the way he rested one hand on the ground, crouching with his weight perfectly balanced on his haunches and one knuckle on the stones told her "no." This was still the wild side of his nature.

What did I expect? That he'd wake up with a kiss?

At first, she wasn't even sure if she'd kissed him, and felt ridiculous for having to search her memory for it. Yes. Yes, she had. Much to his astonished pleasure. And then later, hers.

If self-recriminations for what had happened between them were on the way, they felt distant, at the moment. She knew it was a thing "her" Vincent would never have indulged in, with her. She also knew that three days of being scared to death after almost a week spent in terror had taken their toll. She'd wanted the comfort of being near him. She hadn't expected things to go where they had, but it was far too late to put any genies back into any bottles. Whatever the aftermath of last night would be, she would deal with it. As it was...

She felt good. Wonderfully good. When she stretched, her body had the kind of warm languor that came from feeling well loved, even though she hadn't removed so much as a stitch.

She watched him through half closed eyes as he scooped breakfast into bowls, and set it aside to cool.

"Hey," she said from her position on the floor, wanting him to know she was awake. He must have been up for some time. He'd changed clothes and already packed their bags.

"Mm." he "Mm'ed," coming over to crouch near her, brushing back a lock of her hair with his finger.

"I see you made breakfast," she commented, rising slowly. "Thank you." On impulse she slid her hand under his hair to grasp his neck, bringing his head down for a brief morning kiss. He nuzzled her, affectionately, clearly enjoying her nearness. She felt him bat down morning arousal as he simply kissed her cheek, breathed her in, and went back to bring her a bowl.

He sat cross legged with her on the sleeping bag, both of them stirring the hot mix, to get it to cool.

"You have a sweet tooth," she commented, noting the amount of honey he'd put in the mix. It wasn't that she minded. It smelled wonderful. It was that she didn't know how it was she didn't know such a thing about him, after nearly three years together.

He said nothing to her comment, and simply blew on his food.

"We're getting close to home. We'll reach the pipes by some time today, won't we? Reach help."

He nodded at that, confirming her expectation that they were about to rejoin the land with other people in it. What did that mean, for him?

"Vincent, whatever this is, I promise you I'm not going to leave you," she said.

Perhaps. But was he about to leave her? About to retreat to the uninhabited areas of the tunnels and live as a wild being? This part of him knew that was a possibility.

He began to eat, ditching the spoon almost immediately in favor of scooping up the meal with two fingers. It tasted good. He was aware that she was watching him, but could do nothing to ease her disquiet. The trickle of adrenaline he always endured when his wild self held sway made silverware untenable. His hand shook, at times, with no outlet for the adrenaline and he had no patience for niceties.

Besides, she was right. Today was the day he returned her to The World. To the land Above, a land which was for him, a dangerous place. A place that was supposed to be safer for her than being with him was.

Ridiculous a supposition as that was, he knew it was time. The cache that had fed them so well last night and this morning was well supplied thanks to its proximity to people. This was likely the last meal he'd share with her.

He eyed her form with a glancing inspection, as he ate. There was not a mark on her, from their loving. He could feel the tender bruise on his neck, from her teeth, and her scoring marks on his shoulder. She loved rougher than he did. He was pleased at that, pleased that the strength in his form allowed her to take such liberties.

He'd considered waking her with kisses rather than food, but knew they needed to get going. There was no sense in delaying the trip and he felt an imperative to return her. Or perhaps his natural sense of empathy, though not the bond, was communicating her anxiety for that, to him.

"I don't know what's been happening, Above." She blew on her food. "Joe was hurt. I don't know what I'm walking back into, Vincent. Either for myself, or for you."

He shrugged. Her enemies were dead. He'd seen to that. If any were left, he would simply dispatch them, too.

"Can you speak, at all, this morning?"

She waited, and watched him swallow, trying to prepare his throat for speech. For some reason, it was closed off again, but he made a second effort. His voice, when it came, sounded gravelly and harsh.

"I...kill for... you."

What?

Did he mean he would kill anyone who threatened her, when she returned? Or did he mean that "killing for her" was his purpose, in life? Either way, it was stark breakfast conversation.

Catherine touched his wrist. "Yes. You do. You kill for me. Me, and to protect the other people you love. What a terrible price we all demand of you, Vincent."

He set down the bowl, and initially shook his head in the negative.

"No," he added the word. Then, after a moment, a reluctant realization: "Yes."

Yes. Yes he did. He killed for them, for her, because there was no other way for them all to be safe. The world Below existed on the slimmest of threads, sometimes, as did she.

Sometimes, the perils they all faced could not be avoided. The Tunnel World's confrontation with the Outsiders, and for that matter, the Tong, would have happened whether Vincent lived Below or not.

But often, like with the scientists who had captured him, it was what he was that put him in danger. But sometimes, it was his family. Or her.

"Vincent, is that why you're still here? Still your wild self? Because the danger has been so great, lately?"

He considered her words, and had no answer. Her question implied that this was a conscious choice, somehow, something he'd decided. He hadn't. He only knew what he knew. That he was here. That he had one overriding function.

"I... protect." He said it with difficulty, but the words were clear.

She set her forgotten meal aside and went on her knees, before him.

"Yes. Yes, you protect. You protect them, you protect me. Always. Always you protect us. Take care of us. And I swear all these people protect you. Some of them would die for you. I would die for you."

The fire in his eyes was immediate and harsh. "No!" It was a barked word punctuated with a growl, and his hand was tugging her forward

before she could even protest. The kiss he gave her was full of warning, and full of need.

"No," he repeated, tracing his mouth across her forehead, across her closed eyelids. He held her with strength, and was unrelenting in covering the skin of her face with his mouth. On her scar, he lingered, tracing the previously torn skin with his lower lip. He nuzzled her neck, protectively.

Catherine suddenly realized the impact her going missing had had on him.

"Vincent... you're here to protect me. Aren't you?" It was more of a statement than a question, but he nodded his reassurance, slightly.

"You don't think you can do that any other way but to be... this. Is that it?"

She pulled his head back from her neck, literally needing to tug on his hair to get him to lift his head. The look he gave her was both unyielding and unanswering. The unblinking stare was back, full force.

I protect.

And of course, she'd needed protection like never before, maybe even more than at any other time since she'd met him. Gabriel was insane, and she was his prisoner. The law was no help, since John Moreno was the law. Joe Maxwell was in intensive care, and she...

"You can't leave, can you? Can't give up control. Vincent, it's all right, now. We've been in the tunnels for days."

"Not... tunnels. Passageways. You ... lost."

Yes, that was true. She would get lost down here, without him. Near as she could tell, they'd come around, partly through, and maybe even under the area of the labyrinth, unable to pass easily from one side to the other thanks to the rock fall that had trapped him and Jacob years ago. The way to this place was achieved with great care, in no small part due to the ruggedness of the terrain and the instability of the ground. They'd spent most of the trek in the caverns that had been used by ancient peoples, and while near water, still not near the pipes.

Today would change that.

He lifted the lid on the big chest and tossed her a fresh pair of socks and a thin pair of moccasins. They were not much. But they were worlds better than what she had, for footwear.

They were also too big, but one more pair of socks helped with that.

It was time to leave. There was no reason to stay.

--

The pipe was low-hanging and ancient. And clearly a sign of home. There was even a metal bar near it, openly indicating that it could be struck and used for communication, that the line might even run clean into the pipe chamber.

Catherine picked up the bar, intending to use it to let everyone know where they were, that they were fine. Help would be with them, soon.

Then she turned to look at Vincent and realized what that would mean, for him.



Even wearing the borrowed clothes couldn't change the understanding that he was still bestial. His shirt was pushed up at the sleeves, to accommodate the bandage on his arm. A twin swatch of gauze cradled his knee. The vest he'd worn since the beginning was becoming increasingly ragged, at the hem, and he liked to wear it open, rather than fastened, since this Vincent seemed to run a higher temperature.

But it wasn't his clothing that made him appear so different or even the cape of his mane which persisted in tangling near the neck. It was the rest of him.

His skin was flushed, and even when he was calm, it's slightly darker shade not only gave him away as not being his usual self, it highlighted the lighter color of his eyes. His expression was stark, and focused, the rarely blinking eyes of a predator. His narrow nostrils tended to flare, taking in oxygen. He continued to tilt his head at a sharper angle, and he was comfortable with either scrambling across the ground or standing upright, shoulders held in a subtle curve.

This was a hunting animal, not a thoughtful one. He couldn't speak, unless pushed, and showed no real desire to. He growled his responses, and had a temper that showed bared fangs. He viewed other males as competition, as challengers.

He could live, with their help. But he couldn't live with them.

"They're going to come. And if they do, you're going to disappear, aren't you?" she asked.

His voice was still gravel. "You. Safe."

"Yes. Yes, I'm safe. But you're ... you're nowhere. You can't live like this, with them. You'll have to change back. If you even can."

She realized their predicament. If he could not regain his gentler self, he'd live in exile, on the perimeter of the people he used to call his family. But if he could regain himself, she knew Vincent would banish his darker form to the dim places inside himself, and be disgusted with both of them. All three of them, considering.

"You loved me," she said, looking at him. She dropped the bar into the dirt.

"You. Loved me." He forced the sound out, and a clawed hand went to his throat, as if it hurt. He clearly did not favor speech.

She reached for him. "I don't want to do this. Don't want to lose you. You held me. You took care of me. You... you scared me sometimes, I admit, but you... you let me touch you, Vincent. You let us touch each other."

Vincent had no answer for her other than to stare at her where she stood.

The She was upset. He was not sure why. But she'd also dropped the summoning bar into the sand, and that would not do. She needed people. She was one. They were a communal bunch. And he wasn't one of them, no matter which part of him was in charge of his body.

"Vincent?"

Questions. So many questions, in her green eyes. And this creature had answers for none of them.

He nudged her aside and picked up the bar. Before she could even protest, he began striking the pipe with it, sending the message of where they were. He might not be able to speak, but he could use enough tunnel code to summon help. And he could hit. Hard.

"No! No, I... I'm not ready, yet!" She grabbed his arm and he nearly snarled at her, showing her a warning lift of his lip, revealing his fangs.



Not a pet. This is not a pet you can keep, Catherine. Astonishingly, they both thought very much the same thing at the same time, though both were unaware of it.

"I... I can't. Don't tell them, don't... Not until I can think, Vincent."

But he didn't listen. He finished striking out the message, then tossed the metal bar back into the dirt.

Her eyes were growing bright with unshed tears. "I hope no one heard. I don't want them to come. I want to go away with you and never --"

But an answering staccato tap of notes was coming back, already. *Message received. Help on the way.*

"No. Vincent, no." She shook her head in denial. "Will you stay with me? Come in with me?" She grabbed his hand. "These are your people. You know they won't hurt you."

But would he hurt them? Given how he felt about even the mention of other males by Catherine, would he tolerate those near her, without an accident?

Vincent knew he wouldn't. And Catherine suspected as much.

"I'm tired and my feet are still sore. And I swear if you ask me to just ... go back into the caves and hide with you, I will."

Her gaze was frank. Had what they had which passed for sex meant so much to her? Vincent could barely understand her distress, even as the primal part of himself understood it too well.

It didn't matter what was causing her reaction. There was not enough food back the way they'd come, and she still needed things like a sturdy pair of shoes and a serviceable jacket, a pair of pants that fit and a decent meal. Bedrest. All the rest of it. Some of it he could steal for her, but the rest...

Vincent closed his eyes, blessing her for what she was offering. She needed to go back. Not just to his people, but to her own. The life Above which he could never be a part of. The life Below he could barely claim, other than to be what he, a beast, was in both places. A necessary evil. A killer.

He shook his head, but brushed her forehead with the gentlest of kisses, in thanks. For whatever reason, it caused her to burst into tears.

"I want time. Time with you..." Her tears were running fast and hot. "Time to talk with you, both sides of you. I'm so afraid that if you go ... I'll never see either of you, again."

She looked into the staring eyes of her savior. *We must confront our fears and move through them. How great is our sacrifice?*

Words from when her father had died echoed in her ears.

"Stay with me. Stay." She clutched at his vest as he gently held her hands there. She was aware that she sounded like she was giving commands to a dog. Also aware that this particular animal was not going to obey her.

"No. No, Vincent, no," she begged, as he gently but firmly disentangled her fingers from the fabric of his clothing. "Stay. Stay with me," she pleaded, tears streaking down her pale cheeks. She was white, with high patches of color on her cheekbones. He heard the sound of running footsteps coming down the hallway long before she did.

She felt him push her hands farther away, holding them back from his form for a moment. He held her wrists. She knew he was going to leave her.

"Please don't. Please... I love you."

He kept hold of her wrists as he took her parted lips in a kiss full of passion and sorrow. She tasted it in his mouth, and in her own. When he broke the kiss, she heard the approaching footsteps, too. She turned toward their source as he dropped her hands.

When she turned back, he was gone.

CHAPTER 7

EIGHTEEN



Eighteen. Eighteen counts of money laundering, drug running, weapons dealing and embezzlement, not counting the murder charges, which were separate. The maniac known as Gabriel went to his grave unlamented, as did the traitor known as John Moreno.

Catherine mourned neither of them. In a way, she also felt she knew neither of them, though she'd worked for the latter for almost three years.

Eighteen. Eighteen hours from the time Vincent had left her to when she finally got in to intensive care to see Joe Maxwell. He had pulled through the surgery, but was listed in "guarded" condition. Considering the number of uniforms outside his door, "guarded" was a worthwhile description.

Everyone near him was being overseen by Greg Hughes, who had barely slept. It took eighteen stitches to close the wound on Joe's shoulder. He'd carry a scar there, forever. Maybe they all would, considering. His office was in a state of turmoil. Ted was handling things, as was Rita Escobar. Both had been assigned 'round the clock police protection, after Catherine's disappearance.

Eighteen was close to the number of frantic phone calls left on her answering machine by Jenny, Nancy, Edie, Kay, and a few of her other friends. Even Elliot had threatened her machine with destruction if she didn't answer, twice. He was flying in from Europe. The events in New York had made global news.

Eighteen had not been the number of straight hours she had slept, with Peter Alcott standing (or at least sitting) guard on her sofa. That number had been closer to twelve. And it might have been easier and safer for both of them if they'd just agreed to go back to Peter's, or at least check her in to the hospital, but Catherine wanted none of it. She wanted to be home. She wanted to be where Vincent might come to get her, Vincent in any incarnation whatsoever.

Eighteen numbers in a Swiss bank account worth millions, millions Gabriel would never spend and the State Department was in a bit of a throwdown over.

The US wouldn't win that one. Switzerland made its living off, well, money. It was enough that the money could be traced there, to get a posthumous indictment against John Moreno, and bring down four others tied to what he'd done. No more were in the DA's office, thank goodness, but that didn't stop a captain in the NYPD and one appellate judge from getting hit with the "corruption" brush.

Both were found dead around the same time Catherine had been setting up camp with Vincent at the mineral springs. Gabriel's death and the evidence that had come to light in a certain black book had carried long echoes.

Eighteen pages of cyphers, more or less, in that certain black book, all hand written by Gabriel, all in code. A bank name. Shipping times. Phone numbers. Addresses and shipment sizes. Bills of lading, numbers and customs officials paid to look the other way. Serial numbers on guns. Vehicle ID numbers on cars. Any of it. All of it. More. The name "Moreno." The word "Snow," capitalized.

The tentacles of the corrupt monster seemed to stretch everywhere. Greg Hughes sat with Catherine in his office and ran video tape of a criminal empire, imploding. The lieutenants were running or turning each other over to the police in exchange for a plea deal. The hired thugs were either disappearing into the woodwork or shooting each other.

In Gabriel's empire, the criminals were eating their own. In some strange way, Catherine felt numb to all the news. It was as if it was all simply too much to take in.

Eighteen, astonishingly, was also the number of video cassette tapes that had self-destructed once the police had breached the perimeter of Gabriel's building. The burned-out case fragments declared their number.

A failsafe meant to erase the activities of the guilty had likely saved Vincent from detection. The tape Gabriel had loved, the one with Vincent in a killing rage, was one of the ones to go, not to mention any film of him rescuing her.

Catherine simply told Greg that she'd managed to flee the building when some sort of chaos had ensued, and she'd heard shots fired. She said she'd passed out for an indeterminate number of hours,

eventually fought off the drugs, then hidden herself as she managed to get herself to safety.

Considering the level of mayhem at Gabriel's compound, there was no one to refute her story and no one who even wanted to. Greg Hughes was just glad she was still alive. So, for that matter, was everyone else, including Catherine.

They'd removed half a dozen listening devices and secret cameras from Catherine's building, all tied to Gabriel. Catherine was too exhausted to even sort out what it all meant. She only knew she missed Vincent, in a hard, empty place inside her chest. Missed their bond and missed her love. Their hasty intimacy came back to haunt her in the long, lonely hours in the middle of the endless night. What if he didn't return? What if he... hated her? Despised what had happened between them?

Eighteen. Eighteen floors up. Eighteen huge stones on her terrace, set two by nine. Were there eighteen petals in one of her roses? Maybe. She had no idea. She was not a believer in numerology. That was more something Edie would be inclined toward.

Where are you, Vincent? Where?

She knew she needed him, and was terrified that she would never see him again. In a way, the feeling reminded her of being back at Gabriel's compound: Her deepest regret, there, too, was that she would never see Vincent again.

Four days passed, each one aging Catherine what she swore was another year. The World Below had not seen Vincent, and he was not

using any of the other caches, as far as they could tell. It was as if he'd vanished.

Joe, meanwhile, was improving, and had been moved to a regular room. Senator Blair was giving press conferences and orders, and making it clear that she was not to be contradicted. She publicly declared that the day Joe Maxwell set foot back in the District Attorney's Office it was his to command, if he wanted the job. Joe wasn't sure that he did, but Cathy had the feeling that he would take it, anyway. Eventually.

She saw him in the hospital, again, and both of them had simply held on to each other for a long time. Joe latched on to her with his good arm while the other one remained in a cast and sling. He was scarred, bruised, and was still being treated for burns from the bomb blast. And they were friends. They would always be friends. And they trusted each other implicitly. If neither knew anything else after this whole debacle, they knew that.

"You don't look so good, kiddo," Joe told her through torn lips.

"That is the pot calling the kettle lousy-looking," Catherine had tried to tease, but feared the joke might fall flat. Joe let it slide.

"Nah. I get away from this hospital food I'll be as handsome as I ever was. You get some sleep, okay?" He brushed a thumb across her cheek in a tender caress meant to let her know he cared about the dark circles under her lovely eyes.

"I will. You too, Joe,"

"It's all they let me do in here, Radcliffe. Tell Greg Hughes I want to talk to him on your way out, okay?"

"I will, but you know your doctor will have a fit."

"Let him fuss. I want to know what's going on."

Catherine shook her head and did as Joe bid her as she left for home.

Catherine wished something, anything, made her daylight hours go faster. Or the nighttime ones.

Ohhhh. Ow. For a moment, everything seemed to hurt, then the aches became localized. His head ached, abominably, and his throat was sore, his tongue, desert dry. He'd either had no water or spent time roaring loudly, or both. His mouth felt like cotton. His back felt like he'd slept on rough, uneven stones, a thing he realized was absolutely true.



Vincent sat up slowly, assessing his damages. He felt hung over, for lack of a better description. Felt achy and miserable. Like thinking was impossible and movement was unwise. He checked the decrepit strip of gauze that still held on to his leg, by some seeming-miracle. The deep cut to the back of his knee was healing, though the knee itself was stiff. He must have been running on it, or climbing or... something. His pant legs below the knee were in tatters, and his shirt, one he didn't remember putting on, was filthy.

Odd he should be thirsty so near water, he thought, hearing the sound of rushing water like a white-noise anvil, in his brain. Then the smell came to him. This was effluent, not fresh.

He was near the industrial district, near where one of the textile factories operated. The water smelled. So, for that matter, did he.

The emptied cardboard box was the only thing that indicated to him how long he'd been here. Empty plastic water bottles littered the ground and canned goods lay strewn in haphazard chaos. Three or four day's worth, no more. One can looked like he'd simply ripped it open with his claws. Another looked crushed. Two others clearly looked as if they'd been thrown hard against a wall, and left where they'd dropped, some of their contents spilling on the ground.

The smell of rotting carrots out of the can permeated the space. He had little memory of coming in here, and less of staying. Other memories were fresher. *Catherine*.

Vincent stood on shaky legs, knowing it would be a very long walk to wherever he was going. He downed the remains of an overturned water bottle and pointed himself in the direction he needed to go. At

least there were pipes in the walls as a kind of marker, and he wasn't lost.

The feeling of being without her, without the bond, burned a hole in his chest.

At least he could still walk, and knew where he was.

It was the best he could hope for, considering.

--

"Please. Pleeease...." Catherine prayed both aloud and inside her head, sitting on the stones of her terrace, watching evening slip into night.

It was eighteen minutes after dusk when he slipped, silent as a shadow, onto the stones of her balcony.

She saw him standing there. Just standing, arms covered by the folds of his cape, face covered by the shadow of the hood, which he lowered. For an uncanny moment, she wasn't sure "which Vincent" was standing on the terrace, facing her. Had his wild self decided to come and see her, especially after she'd seen Joe, today? Or was this "her" Vincent? Then Catherine confused herself by not clearly understanding which one of them that was.



"Catherine?" The voice was clear, her name the sonorously ringing bell it always was, when he said it.

"Vincent?" She exploded toward him, coming across the wide stones like a woman shot out of a canon. He met her nearly halfway across the narrow space, wrapping his huge arms around her as she frantically grabbed for him.

"You're all right, you're all right, you're all right. I have been so afraid. So eaten alive with it," she confessed, looking up at him.

"As was I, for you. You are certain you are well? The papers will only say that you were found. I... I cannot find out bond, Catherine. I have spent days trying, even as I tried to reach you."

"Where were you? I was frantic!" She let him see her tears.

"I ... woke up as myself only this morning, miles from the hub. I came as fast as I could."

She kept ahold of him so tightly and for so long, it was clear she wasn't going to release her grip on him. Vincent closed his eyes in gratitude.

He remembered all of it, remembered everything. But it was the type of memory one associates with a vivid dream, rather than a reality. She was pressing frantic little kisses to the side of his neck, and tightening her grip on him as she did so.

"Are you furious with me?" She knew she had to ask. Had to see if he remembered. "Is that why you stayed away?"

She felt the shake of his head. "I woke up miles from here, filthy and ... feeling hung over, for lack of a better word."

"How much do you remember?" It was a fearful question.

"Too much of some of it." His eyes were blue again. "Every blessed second, of others." She felt his arms tighten, around her. "You have no idea the gift you gave me. None."

Since she wouldn't disengage from him, he simply lifted her scant weight and moved through the gauzy curtains to her living room. Finding the couch too narrow for both of them, he settled with her on her floor, in front of the unlit fireplace. She kept herself pressed to him, fiercely determined to not allow an inch of space between them.

"Is he... gone? Please don't say he's gone, Vincent." Her green eyes were full of worry.

Vincent knew full well who she meant. And that no, his other self was not "gone," and never would be. It was only quiescent, again.

"Not gone," he replied. He looked away from her for a moment, but then held her green eyes with both love and candor. "You have no idea how much I bless you for finding the courage to love that part of me, Catherine. A part of myself... I could never love, but always had to accept."

She brushed at his ragged hair, a ton of fear and worry in her eyes.

"He was you. Wild you. He took care of me. You took care of me."

"And nearly took your head off when you pulled the piece of tile out of the back of my leg. I remember, Catherine." His eyes were very serious and his tone brooked no argument.

"You were surprised. And hurt. And on my account."

"Considering that it was Paracelsus who arranged much of what led pictures of me to fall into the hands of a madman, I'd say you could bear only so much blame..." He brushed his thumb under her worried eyes in a gesture that was nearly identical to the one Joe Maxwell had used. "You haven't been well. You haven't been sleeping."

"Compared to what you must have been going through, I'd say a few sleepless nights were minor."

What he'd been going through? He wondered if she could even begin to understand what that was.

"What is it you think I have been through, Catherine?"

She dropped her head. "I know he is you. But I also know that's a part of yourself that you don't like to claim," she struggled with what to say, how to help him understand that she had loved the wild part of him, without repelling him.

Vincent took a deep breath. "I think you have no idea how... free being in that skin feels to me, when I am away from everyone else... And how much I ... dread others seeing me that way," he answered.

She studied his noble features. The planes of his face were more stark. He'd lost weight. "But you couldn't find your way back." Her

tone conveyed the worry she'd carried while she was with him. "It was days, and you were still... wild."

It was almost a relief to see his head tilt at the familiar angle. "Perhaps I knew the part of me that was needed at the time was the part that was with you." He stood and gave her some space. She rose as well.

He held out his hands, in a beseeching gesture. "Catherine... I know that I am... inhuman when I am like that, and there are some things I barely remember. I know I ate with my fingers. I know I frightened you, sometimes." He did. The look in her eyes when he'd growled one of his several warnings was going to stay with him a long time.

"I beg you to tell me that there is still a ... a chance for us, now that you have seen me that way."

She was stunned that he felt he had to ask such a thing.

"Vincent... you have no idea how... I can't even explain what you meant to me, what you mean to me, now." She moved away and put a little more distance between them, crossing her arms at the elbows. Defensive posture. Whatever she was about to say, she was afraid he wouldn't like it.

"I don't hate him. I love him, Vincent. I only wish you could."

The memory of their parting moments thrummed in his head. "You were willing to go with me. Forfeit all safety and go with me into the tunnels, into the caverns. I think of all the things that happened in the last few days, that is the thing I cannot ignore, cannot forget."

She crossed to him and took his hand, tugging him back down to the carpet. He came down, obediently. "I don't think I want to forget. I don't think I ever... understood more about you than I did the last few days. Everything about you was instinct. I'd have died, without you."

He adjusted how they sat, turning his back to her, a little. "Don't face me. I don't know if I can say all I have to if you face me."

He settled them so they were essentially sitting back to back on her living room floor.

"My shoulder is sore. You have no idea how good that feels." His soft voice confided.

What? His shoulder was... Oh. From where she'd... when they had...

"Do you mean... from where I... scratched you?" She felt his hair move, as he nodded.

"Where you scratched me. Why you scratched me. I wish it wouldn't heal, Catherine." She felt him press his huge hand to his shoulder, through his shirt.

She blushed with recollection.

"I was afraid you'd be furious with me for that. That it was why you'd stayed away, or part of it."

He shook his head, and she felt the motion she couldn't see. "It wasn't. And I could never be angry with you for being so... " He searched for the word, a moment, then dropped it low. "...perfect."

Perfect? Catherine smiled at his choice of words. "I think I bruised your neck, too," she confided, realizing what the small bruise where his neck met his shoulder was.

"Did you? I can't see it." He realized he could feel it, however, and his fingertips reached unerringly for the spot.

It was... it was when I..." Now it was she who fumbled to complete a sentence. She heard him chuckle, softly.

"I know when it was. Do you have any idea the gift you gave me in that moment?" He'd used that expression, before.

Now it was her turn to simply shake her head, and be quiet.

"I remember every second of that time," he continued, softly. "I wanted your mouth on my neck. When I felt your hand start to dig into my shoulder, all I could think was ... 'yes.' That it belonged there, just like that. You could have done twice the damage and I wouldn't have minded."

Catherine chuckled a little. "That makes us sound like we're into pain."

"Not pain," he corrected. "Claiming. You were fierce, and beautiful, and you had so much... strength in you, for it. The strength I told you I sensed in you all along."

He had. It was the first quality he'd ever mentioned that he sensed, within her.

"There is strength in you. I feel it."

"What about the strength in you?" she asked.

"I think we both discovered that as wild as it is, it's there for a purpose. There for you. I willed my arms down to my sides so I wouldn't hurt you. Forbid my claws to break your skin."

"But I didn't forbid mine," she marveled, looking at her nails and realizing just which one of them had lost control, that night.

"You didn't need to. Even after I'd growled at you, you knew you could mar my shoulder and it didn't matter. I still wish it wouldn't heal," he repeated.

"We can do it again, if you like," she was only half-teasing.

He turned toward her both aware that it was a jibe and aware that it wasn't. His eyes held a kind of forthrightness she'd never seen in them, and she'd always thought him an honest man.

"You accepted that part of me. That terrifying part. You even... loved it. Him. Me." He shook his head at the multiple pronouns. "It's a different side of me, Catherine, but it's not a different being. It *is* me."

It was. Ruled by instinct more than reason, perhaps, but it was him. Just as the being who sat before her now was ruled by reason more than instinct, yet still possessed both, in abundance.

"And you were always afraid of what my reaction would be to that." She nodded with him as the light of understanding dawned some more. She'd been with his Shadow-self for days. Not terrified. Not disgusted. Not entirely at ease, perhaps, but definitely... definitely in love.

Vincent kept his voice soft. "Before...I kept telling you that you didn't know me. Now... you do."

With a clawed fingertip, he pushed her hair back from her scar. It reminded her of something his Beast had done.

"You're fascinated by my scar. Or he is."

"I am. We both are. The darker part of me views it as a sign of victory, in a battle you survived, and eventually won. The rest of me... it reminds me what a precious gift life is, and how amazingly fortunate I am that you are part of mine... that we ever met at all. But we did. And under the worst of circumstances."

She eyed the bruise at his neck. Even several days later, it was still there.

"I shouldn't have... bitten you so hard. Father will give you fits, if he notices it. I'm sorry if it brings you any... embarrassment." She knew how private a person he was. She realized it must have been quite the love bite if this was the result after four days of healing.

"I'm not." He shook his head and his smile was a subtle one. "There is a beast in you, Catherine. And it would be beyond tragic if I never got to meet that woman, again."

They both laughed a little at that, Catherine realizing how neatly the tables had been turned.

"Right back at you," she answered.

"I know. I know you feel that way. I know it, now." He shook his head at the wonder of it. His hair was beautiful, but tangled. She wanted to comb it smooth, again.

Catherine brushed at his bangs with her fingers again, moving them a little away from his beautiful eyes. The bangs were getting long. He'd need a trim. "I don't want anything between us to be contrived, or something you feel you have to force, just... If our beasts are ever in a room together, it's nice to know the building will be standing, afterwards, and no one will require stitches."

She put her forehead together with his, and he closed his eyes, breathing in contentment. Her mantle clock chimed.

"I need to call the hospital," she said, eying the clock. "I promised Joe. Can you stay a while?" she asked.

He shook his head, regretfully.

"I need to go Below. You are polite to not mention that I still smell, and Father hasn't seen me now for over a week. I tapped him a message that I was fine when I was on my way to you. But he must be beside himself."

"Let him take care of you. Let us all do that, some, Vincent. For all the times you take care of us."

"I hope your friend is better," he said, rising.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" she asked. It surprised her how nervous she felt, still.

"Better the next day," he answered. "Father's patience will be sorely tested and William will insist on fussing over me, some. I have no idea how much I've missed, at council." She nodded at that. He had obligations. In a way, far more than she had. It seemed so odd to realize that his old life was still there, after how ... intense the week had been.

"I have to go give another deposition tomorrow. They're still figuring out what Gabriel was into."

"You will be well?" he asked.

"I'll be fine. Greg Hughes would put me in a Kevlar vest, if he could, and he makes sure we're all escorted to our cars. Oh, and Elliot is flying in from Europe."

"Elliot Burch?"

"Looks like we made headlines across the pond. Interpol wants to know what Greg has found out. It's going to be quite a meeting."

"Who knew that Paracelsus would blaze a trail to such a madman?" Vincent sighed the words.

"Birds of a feather. From what I gather, Gabriel was hugely connected to the drug trade. Perhaps they knew each other that way. Or perhaps it was all just chance and bad luck."

He kissed her forehead.

"Perhaps. But I do not like that I cannot feel you, Catherine."

"The bond hasn't returned?" she asked. He shook his head.

"I have no more empathy for you than I do for anyone. I suppose it is at least some comfort that I have no less," he answered.

Her feminine hand brushed his angular cheek. "What about you? Are you sure you're all right?"

"I have a headache that comes and goes, and a stomach that has been empty for a while. I am well, Catherine. Of the two of us, I wasn't held hostage by a lunatic."

She gave him a soft smile. "Oh, I don't know about that," was the teasing remark she left him with, as he turned to depart.

He smiled as he carried the comment with him. She was teasing him about his dark side being in control. *Teasing. Laughing about it, with him.*

What an amazing week it had been.

CHAPTER 8

DARK WATER



He became her lover in all the ways there were for that to happen. If the strength of his gentleness surprised him, the strength of his ardor did not. There was a graciousness to it that left him stunned, and a drifting peacefulness to it that left him nearly paralyzed, with languor.

It was as if the awkwardly passionate moment between them in the cavern had given him all the knowledge, all the permission he needed to cross her threshold again, and to do that in more ways than one.

She was a low ache in his midsection, at times. And for all the nights she was gently perfumed seduction, there were other times that were more raw, more passionate, between them. He was learning himself as he learned her, awestruck by the knowledge.

But the bond had not returned.

For whatever reason, he'd thought it would, once they'd become lovers. When it didn't, he chided himself for his own naiveté. How should he, of all people, know what lovemaking wrought? From where did he get the incredibly innocent notion that sharing his body with her (until a fine sheen of perspiration enveloped both of them) would cause their psychic link to be re-forged?

If Catherine thought the same thing, she never spoke of it.

Was it gone then? Was it truly, truly gone? He worried the sentence over in his mind more often than he cared to admit.

She was often still incredibly busy with depositions, reviewing evidence, police statements and the all-important black book that seemed to indict everyone from the deceased John Moreno to the still quite living head of the third precinct, two bankers, a scattered number of longshoremen and three customs officials.

Elliot Burch came and went, twice, leaning hard on the men he knew who worked the docks, for information. The inestimable Mr. Burch was, it was rumored, willing to pay well for information that led to any dock connections to Catherine's kidnapping, even though as far as Cathy knew, there were none.

It was also rumored that any name that came across his desk would rather endure an IRS audit and time in front of a grand jury, rather than spend so much as ten minutes in a room with Elliot. Cleon Manning and more foot soldiers than Greg Hughes had ever seen set to work. Elliot was pulling out the rot that was Gabriel with his own hands, or at the very least his own wallet. He was clearly a man not to be crossed. Senator Marjorie Blair was considering giving him some sort of citizenship medal. The Governor was now on his speed dial.

Within a month, everyone who had so much as loaded a crate bound for Gabriel's warehouse was either looking at jail time, retirement, or a new career far away from New York City.

The day he left for London, Elliot sent Catherine a decent bottle of Chardonnay and a note that promised he'd have a glass of it with her some time in the future, as his business dealings allowed. She tucked

the bottle on a high shelf in her kitchen, with the note still attached to it. It was nice to have friends.

Her other friend was enduring a slow recovery.

Joe Maxwell's previously collapsed lung became prone to troublesome infections, and the burns on his body were slated for a round of cosmetic surgeries which Joe insisted he didn't need and the governor of the state insisted he did. The job was still waiting for him. Cathy and company would hold down the fort while he endured rounds of skin grafts, operations, and bandages. Cathy could relate. She told him as much.

And the bond still did not return.

Whatever this was, neither time nor passion seemed to restore a thing Vincent rapidly came to realize he could not stop thinking about.

To be a part of Catherine's intimate physical life and have that not feel like "enough" was not lost on him.

One night when they sat together, peacefully listening to music, she asked him, with a smile, how he was feeling.

He leaned even closer to her than they already were, wrapped his arms around a little more tightly and simply answered, "Blessed." It was a deeply felt truth. He did.

But Catherine's admonitions that perhaps the bond being gone meant something else wonderful may be on the horizon for him fell on deaf, fur-traced, ears.

He was her lover. *How in God's sweet, merciful name could he ask for more?*

Yet he did, and as one month slid into two, he thought he knew why.

--

"The bond. I need you to give it back to me, Catherine. I need it restored. We need it restored."

They were in her bedroom. They'd just spent the last hour doing what it was they now often did, there.

Her eyes looked left and right.

"But... I don't have it, Vincent. You said it was gone."

"I said I no longer felt you. It is like before, like when Paracelsus held you. You are keeping yourself away from me."

She rose and brushed off her backside as she walked away from him. She snatched a white silk robe off the back of a chair.

"After what just happened, I'd say that's ridiculous," she stated.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and prayed he was right. He turned his head, watching her.

"Is it? Catherine..." He watched her pull on the robe, anger in her movements. "We both know there has only ever been one way I am unable to sense you."

"No."

"Catherine... whatever it is. It's all right. Or it will be."

"I said 'no.' Stop it." She yanked the sash of her belt tight. It made her waist look impossibly small.

"You'll take me to your bed, but you won't take me to your heart." His voice was deceptively steady.

Her green eyes flared at the accusation. Now she was angry, and they both knew it.

"That is so unfair."

"Catherine, I know. I know it is. You should not have to bear this," his voice was gentle, on purpose.

Well, he isn't going to get his way with that voice, this time, she thought.

"I love you. You can't doubt that." Her voice was full of her conviction.

"I have never doubted it. Not from the first moment you said it. The first time you said you felt our bond as I did."

"Not as you do. Never like that." She shook her fair head.

"No. Never like that." He eyed the rumpled sheets, giving her a moment to calm herself. "There is no reason for you to," he continued. "It is I who protect you, not..."

"Oh. So it's 'I protect,' and I'm supposed to just accept that, am I? Well, no. Just... no." Her tone rang with finality.

"You're holding it from me to protect me?" His blue eyes were sharp.

"I didn't say that. I didn't even admit I had it." She was too experienced a lawyer to be bested in a word game.

"Catherine..."

"Vincent," her tone became almost plaintive. "How many more bullets do you think we can dodge? It's all right. We can do this. We can be this. Look at how far we've come since you brought me back." She gestured to the messy bedclothes, and he stood and slipped into his patched cords, not wanting to have this conversation naked while she was fully covered.

"I went half mad, searching for you. I had to track you by scent." He swept the room with his arm, to indicate the distance, the difficulty involved.

"You shouldn't have done that." Tears came to her eyes. "It was dangerous."

He crossed the room to where she stood, both of them struggling with something, internally.

"You were frightened. You are frightened, still."

"No. No. No I'm not frightened. I can't be frightened. You... you feel it when I'm frightened."

What? Is that what this was about? He realized that as much time as they'd spent together, they'd spent precious little of it talking about her captivity. Either because they'd become lovers or because her work life had consumed her, they'd spent nearly every possible moment in each other's arms, either naked or clothed, since her

rescue. They'd traded "I love you's" too numerous to count, both in passion and in companionship. But they'd not traded this.

"So you pushed it all away from you, pushed it all down. Like you did before."

"You said I was strong." She was trembling, and he felt the hurricane, within her.

"You are strong. You are the strongest woman I have ever met." He needed her to believe it.

"I..." she looked at his blue eyes, searching for purchase. "I wanted you to come and get me. I was so... scared." She bit back the word, as if admitting it was a sin. "But it was so dangerous. Vincent, that place... There were cameras everywhere, and ... I'd never seen so many guards. They all wore black and carried machine guns. They wore vests, to stop the bullets..." She was remembering the horror of the place, and the fear it inspired.

"I do not use bullets. And you were afraid I'd come. That I'd die, trying to reach you." He was trying to guide her through whatever this was.

"He played the tape of you killing a man. He wanted you." Vincent didn't need to ask who 'he' was.

"I just... kept seeing it, over and over. There was a wall full of TV screens. Everything the cameras saw. The nurses, the guards... There was a helicopter on the roof and all the doors had alarms..." Her eyes saw the past, and her voice trailed off. For the first time he realized

not just how terrified she'd been, but the flavor of that terror. He could see her trying to swallow bile. Could almost taste it, himself.

Tell me, Catherine. Say it. He thought it, but let his silence prompt her.

Her eyes looked to a different moment, and he saw her replay her betrayal. "John Moreno was dirty. I couldn't believe I didn't see it, but I didn't."

She shook her head, slightly, remembering the terrible moment she realized how trapped she was. "The police weren't coming. They just weren't. It would be hours before they even knew I was missing. And you..." she looked at him as if she just noticed he was standing there, holding her elbows. "I couldn't... couldn't risk you."

He released her. Quickly and a little too hard.

"*Damn* you, then. You have to *believe in us*, Catherine. I could have reached you *days* earlier. *Saved* you at least some of that torment."

"No," she whispered the word so softly he barely heard it, though he could read her lips. Then, louder, "They were talking about wiring some of the doors with explosives. A trap. It was all supposed to be a trap, for you."

Her face was gaunt, with memory. His tone was firm.

"Catherine. No force in the world was going to keep me from finding you. I had to track John Moreno by the smell on the rag, and you." He realized that just as she'd not told him many details about that

week, he hadn't, either. Her green eyes stared at him, barely daring to blink.

"When I found the building I had to sit in the sun hiding behind an air handler on the roof near the compound. I couldn't even... *think* by then, couldn't even speak." She shook her head in such a tiny denial he barely saw it. "I was pure instinct, and I *knew* I was going to get to you. I saw Gabriel get out of that helicopter, once. He wasn't even a man to me, by then. He was prey."

She put her fingertips to her pale lips, then ran a trembling hand across her face.

"God, Vincent, he should have killed you. You should be dead. We both should be." She believed it. She'd believed it for a long time. Too long.

"We came away with nothing more than a few cuts and bruises. I promise you they didn't fare as well. Believe in us, Catherine. You lived with the savage in me for days. Believe in him, if you believe in nothing else."

Her voice was a terrified whisper. "There were cameras. Everywhere."

"Break them as you go by and they can no longer see." It was a blunt assessment.

"The men had guns. Kevlar vests. They were well trained. Well armed."

"An arm is an easy thing to break, no matter what the man is wearing. I don't use a gun, so all a bulletproof vest means to me is that you must lift a man's shirt before you rake his stomach. Or simply snap his neck. You *know* this about me, Catherine." His voice remained firm. "You've seen me do that. Seen me *be* that. You *know* what I can do to a human being. He forced you to watch me do it, often enough." The deep voice had a bitter edge, at the last comment.

"Vincent, there just wasn't a way..." Even though they were standing here with each other, safe and sound he could still feel her decision to cut herself off from him.

"Yet here we both stand. Don't make me describe it for you, Catherine. It was carnage. Stealth and cunning, and strength, and... carnage."

She blinked at him.

"I was supposed to be brave."

"No. I am supposed to be brave. You are supposed to feel your fear, so I can find you."

"But you said..."

"I said you were strong. And God, you are. You faced a more vicious beast than the one that was holding you, and you... loved it. Loved me."

"You would never hurt me."

He was exasperated by her claim. "You didn't *know* that. You've *never* known that." His hand sliced the air as he said it. "You've just..."

trusted it. Needed it to be true, so you made it true. Do you know what kind of *strength* that takes? What kind of ... foolhardy, irresponsible, God-sent *strength*?"

"I didn't feel strong." She didn't. Her face looked... stricken.

"No. No, you felt terrified. And so was I. Catherine, the instant you lost consciousness, the minute you took away our bond... I thought you had died, for a moment. I... it brought me to my knees." His eyes looked to the left with remembered pain. "You must never... *never* do that again."

"I needed to protect you."

His tone remained adamant. "No. You need to be strong for me. You need to show me that no matter what I am, I don't disgust you. Do you have any idea what a treasure it is, you give to me?"

"I could have gotten you killed."

"*I* could have gotten *you* killed. Gabriel knew of me through Paracelsus. This was as much my disaster as it was yours, Catherine."

"John Moreno was my boss." Moreno's betrayal of her still had the power to wound.

"And Joe Maxwell is a good man, and he is your friend." Vincent felt compelled to remind her that there were still good people in her world. People she could count on. "And we were all caught in an ugly web we had no knowledge of, until it nearly killed all of us. It did kill Moreno."

"Did you do that?" She'd never asked that.

"No. Gabriel did. But that doesn't make me innocent. I killed many people that night, to reach you. I would have killed many more, if I had to."

Catherine shook her head. "It is by sheer chance that there isn't footage of you in police headquarters, right now."

He lifted his bare shoulders in a shrug. "It doesn't matter. We've no need to borrow trouble we don't have. Let it go, Catherine."

She didn't move. She couldn't.

"It is *our* bond," he pressed. "Let me share it with you." His honeyed voice was firmer than she ever remembered it being.

"You're going to get killed, because of me." She let the tears fall unchecked, down her cheeks.

"You've been afraid of that, before. Since the first time Paracelsus took you." He realized it was true.

"Before that. Since the Silks," she admitted.

Vincent scanned his memories and realized she was right. She'd been afraid that her choices that night had killed him, and to be fair, they nearly had. But no one had forced him to stay behind and try to save Shake. That had been his choice.

"We have to move through our fears. We said that to each other. Remember?" His voice was so gentle it was as if he were coaxing a child.

"Go with courage. Go with care," she whispered.

"Catherine, I need this." He had to make her see that. "I need to be able to find you, be able to come to you. More, I need to know you believe in us, that you believe in me. That you know I will come for you, if need be. That I am your ... mate." He used the most primitive word he could think of, because it fit.

She dropped her head. "The Beast needs a mate. You don't."

He leaned very close to her, his words bedrocked on the surety of his position. "Every beast needs a mate. And I have found mine," his voice was a seduction all its own. "But I need you to believe in me, Catherine. You already believe I won't hurt you, no matter what. That's an idea even I don't have the faith in it that you do. But you are teaching me. You are teaching me through your faith. Through your strength. Through your belief in us."

"I'll always believe in you." Her eyes begged him to understand that she was telling him the absolute truth about that.

"Then believe in me enough to know I will find my way to you. Whether you make it easy or hard, I will come, Catherine."

She shook her head. "There are times when you shouldn't," she said.

"Then there are times I will be more cunning and less refined," he answered. "But I *will* come. You made it hard for me. So hard I needed my Other Self to track you. But I found you. I will always find you."

"Though lovers be lost..."

"Love shall not be lost. And death shall have no dominion." He said it with a gentle firmness.

"You aren't immortal, Vincent."

"None of us are that. But I swear I will always love you like I am. Like we both are. And if there is any grace in that, I will take it, and love you after death. But I will not live divided from you. I can't. It's the source of my courage, Catherine. That I can feel not just all you feel, but all you *are*, inside our bond."

Her gaze clouded. She took a step back from him. "I'm afraid," she admitted.

"I know. I will help you through it."

"If anything happens to you because of me..."

"Something has already happened to me because of you. Something... miraculous. Let it be, Catherine. Let it flow through both of us and give us strength. Share with me, again." He stepped closer.

"Vincent, please. I'm so... terrified. For you. For us. I can't... live if anything happens to you. I don't even want to."

"I know," he repeated, tugging her near. "Feel my strength. Feel your own." His arms were like bands of iron. "Together, we are strong. So strong, Catherine. We make ... something impossible, together."

"Something that has never been," she sighed, resting her head against his broad chest.

"Something that has never been," he answered.

She reached up for his shoulders, and clung.

"Don't leave me," she sobbed the sentence.

"Never. I will never leave you." It was a foolish promise, the kind all lovers make. The kind she needed, right now. It had been a year marked by loss, for Catherine. Losing him was the one thing she knew she couldn't bear.

"I couldn't stand it. I really don't think I could," she said, brokenly.

"I remember the feeling of you... ripping away from me." He shook his tangled mane of a head. "I do not want to be on this earth so much as a day after you leave it. If there is a force that grants wishes in this universe, it will grant me that one." He needed to tell her he understood. Because he did.

"Oh, Vincent."

"It will be all right, Catherine. Let us *be*. Let us be who we *are*. You've already accepted so much of that. So much more than I ever thought to have. Let us have this. It's all right. It's all right, Catherine."

She wrapped her arms around him, and felt the trembling resistance inside herself, the pervasive fear Gabriel had put there, which she had suppressed.

"He was going to put you in a cage. Gabriel was."

Of all the things she feared, he knew she feared that one the most. Almost more than his dying, she feared his... dehumanization. That he would be treated like an animal. By an animal.

"Shhhhh. We are here. And I am loving you." His hands stroked her back through her robe.

"The bars were steel. And it was painted white. Everything was painted white."

Let her talk. Let her get it out.

"He showed you this cage?"

"On the television screen. There were manacles. Chains bolted to the floor. A thin slot to pass food through. Nothing, for a bed."

"I never spent so much as an hour in it."

Her next sentence was tentative.

"I think... I think I did. I think I was in there, for both of us."

He kissed her forehead and felt the memory, the fear of it all, wash through her. *There. There it was. Fear.* She was finally making herself relive it, and remember it. Remembering it so she could let it go.

"I think you were," he answered.

"He wanted to... breed you." She shut her eyes tight. "I think I just remembered him saying that, just now. He wanted a son." She didn't want to think about the particulars of how that would happen, how much it might dehumanize both of them. He felt her trembling body. She was a leaf on a tree.

"I wanted to call out for you." The guilt of that tore at her.

"I wish you had."

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I couldn't, Vincent."

He knew he would do no different if their positions were reversed.

"So you forced yourself to... not feel."

"I had to shut away our bond."

"I know. I know, Catherine. You were protecting me." She tugged his great head down.

"I will always protect you. I protect."

She nuzzled her head against his, feeling the communion of thought, between them.

"Love you," she said, brushing her forehead against his.

"And I love you. So much. So much, Catherine."

"Take me to bed?" she asked.

He scooped up her slight form, as an answer. She was a feather, in his arms, and she was suddenly both exhausted, and aroused, at the same time.

He loved her with slow patience, adoring the curve of her hip, lingering between the valley between her breasts. Her climax was barely there, yet pervasive. A whisper on a breeze, which enfolded her.

She fell asleep clutching his hand in hers, the bond still not restored, between them.

When she woke up, dawn was licking its way through her curtains, and he was gone.

--

She drove to the building where she'd been held, and saw the ruin of it. Though it was still standing, it had been cordoned off, not just by police tape but by demolition equipment and a hastily erected barricade, around some of it.

Fire had damaged the bottom floors, and white stone was smudged with black. Catherine wasn't sure if anything could burn in the white, sterile rooms where she'd been kept. But everything electrical no longer worked. Elevators, cameras, lighting, and all. It was destroyed.

Climbing stairs wasn't an option at the moment, either. The east corner had taken the brunt of a bomb blast, and was shattered. Certain rooms and entrances had indeed been wired with explosives. She had no idea how the one that had been detonated had happened. An accident? People fleeing, in panic? Maybe.

The steel drums in the courtyard were mostly intact but now empty of whatever they'd once contained. But some of those had exploded as well, though how and why Catherine could only guess.

The bomb squad had its hands full trying to help the special investigators gain access to certain areas. The whole thing would come down, eventually.

Good. Catherine thought, eying the wreckage. John Moreno's ex-wife had come to collect his body for burial, but no one had come for

Gabriel's. Whatever. Perhaps there really was no one to miss the psychopath.

Catherine eyed the destruction, feeling numb, inside. It was a prison. It was a lab. It was a fortress and a tomb. White and blank on the outside. Blank on the inside, like the terrifying man who'd owned it.

Catherine drove away from it, knowing she'd never go back to see it, ever again.

She made it almost to the bridge before she simply pulled the car off to the side of the road, and crossed her arms over the steering wheel, and wept into them. Reaction. Aftershocks. The horror of being thrown in the trunk, then waking up, somewhere else. Barely. Barely waking up. The sensation of time lost, of life lost. Of not knowing what was happening, of knowing Vincent was in even more danger than she was, if that was possible.

I protect. I will always come for you.

When she'd first realized his peril, she'd clamped down on the bond with a vengeance and a will. He couldn't walk into this. Not into this. They'd kill him. They'd cage him and kill him. Or maybe worse. Maybe force him to live.

So she'd pulled the bond down, and buried it inside herself.

At first, that had felt so strange. She'd felt it almost like a life force, trying to beat its fragile wings against a cage, in her heart. It had thrown itself against the bars, at first. At first, when she'd been fighting her own terror, and longed to cry out for Vincent.

But the sedatives they'd numbed her with had numbed everything, and they'd helped to quiet her panicked mind. By the third time she'd come to, Gabriel had realized his error, and stopped sedating her as heavily. Especially when he was in a mood to gloat.

Dark, malevolent eyes had bored into hers. "He'll come for you. He's magnificent, isn't he?"

Don't. Don't feel anything. And whatever you do, don't feel afraid.

"What a terror he is. What a marvelous and magnificent terror. It's a pity you're not pregnant. How I would have loved to have a son. Maybe I'll still have one."

The cassette tape played on a loop, of Vincent savaging a man. Spirko. And Catherine knew a numb kind of scream, inside.

Call him. Scream for him. Gabriel's fathomless, pitiless eyes willed her to do it.

No. No!!!!!!

And she'd torn herself away from Vincent, severed their link, and known she was very likely going to die, because of it. Both because Vincent would never find her and because this madman would never let her live, once he realized she was useless, as bait.

Strapped to a table, a dying man's screams in her ears, Vincent's roar, from the tape... it all seemed so *unfair*, somehow, so *unfair*. They'd had so little time together, really, she and Vincent. So little of everything, and yet so much. She had the comfort of knowing she wouldn't get him killed. And in despair, she realized that was pretty

much all she had. She didn't even dare think to him "I love you." She didn't dare think anything.

Then the black slumber would come again, as Gabriel went off to do something else.

Catherine raised her head from the wheel of the car, and wiped her eyes. Were there other Gabriels out there? Probably. There always seemed to be more evil, out there.

You have to trust us, Catherine.

The horrible thing about most of this was that she couldn't figure out anything she'd have done differently. Joe had given her the book, and Paracelsus had sold the tape to Gabriel. She was in a madman's crosshairs before she even knew it, and under his control before she could even blink. The law that was supposed to protect her turned out to be part of his empire. She wondered how long John Moreno had fooled them all, wondered how long he'd been dirty. From the first day she'd met him? After?

She opened the door to the car and stood up a moment, letting the breeze from the river caress her face.



They'd walked under that dark water. Her and Vincent. Or her and his Beast, to be more precise. Under that river, in a dripping passageway, the weight of the water over their heads, the weight of all their choices, and some they'd never made at all, bringing them to this point. She'd been nearly barefoot, and dirty. And he'd been... someone else.

Without their bond, he'd elected to remain bestial, to save her. His other self had dressed her in borrowed clothes, fed her out of cans and packages, walked her for miles through a labyrinth of tunnels she couldn't begin to negotiate and... loved her. His Beast had loved her. As much as he could love, and that seemed to be quite a bit, though it had a different flavor than Vincent's own.

They'd been in danger. Vulnerable. Exposed. Both of them. And she'd learned to accept that exposed part of him.

What if I can't restore the bond?

She hadn't been lying to Vincent when she'd told him she didn't have it. She didn't. Or at least, she couldn't feel any trace of it any longer. Not that she had ever felt it in the way he had, to begin with.

Perhaps she'd buried it so deep it was simply gone. Perhaps she'd simply flung it away from herself, and destroyed it.

And then he'd found her and rescued her, anyway.

The river looked so... heavy. So huge and full of ... weight. So dark grey and unforgiving. No wonder the maze was dangerous. No wonder the groundwater sometimes seeped in, and took rock walls and ceilings with it. Dark water. Rippled and jagged looking, on top. A perilous path, beneath it.

And he'd walked her under it, by the safest route. Because taking her across a bridge was ridiculous, and letting her simply walk above ground was a surefire recipe for getting her killed. It was not lost on her that after her escape, they'd been followed.

At first, in her dimness, she hadn't even realized that he'd remained bestial because she'd severed their connection. At first, she hadn't even realized that the bond was still gone. She was awake. Un-drugged. She "felt" rescued. Before that was all it took.

But this was not like before, with Paracelsus, when she'd commanded herself not to feel her fear, then simply felt the bond return, once she was safe. It just wasn't.

How much was her shoving the bond away a part of why he'd stayed bestial? Did he think that since he could no longer "sense" her that he must remain his Warrior Self to protect her? Though safer, they

had not been in a safe place. He'd told her as much. And she was not yet rid of her enemies.

Could he not return to himself because of what she'd done? Did he finally do so simply because his beast could hold control of him no longer? Because once she'd been returned to her world, he could no longer sense her safety or lack of it one way or the other, without the bond? So he'd had to return to the being who saw her, Above?

And did any of that matter, now?

She didn't know. She might never know.

And now she might never be able to restore them. And she wasn't even sure she should. The grim, grey panorama before her didn't help clarify her thinking.

Like Vincent, she'd first thought that simply waking and sleeping would lead to his restoration, and to the bond's. The bond had originally come from him, hadn't it? *Couldn't he restore it, now? Just reach in, somehow and...*

But no. She knew he couldn't. If he could have, he'd have done so when she'd been taken by Paracelsus, much less Gabriel.

The dark water moved by. *You couldn't step in the same river twice, they said. You could never go back to the person you were.*

Could they go back? He wanted them to. And she...

She had no wish to keep them apart, after all... did she? Especially now that they'd become lovers?

Or did that make this even worse? Was she now determined above all else that no action on her part should endanger him?

She looked wryly at the moving river. *I've become Jacob Wells, after all*, she thought, ironically. Aware of how much, how very much she could cost Vincent. He'd lost his way back to himself, thanks to her. And he'd taken far too huge a risk, to save her.

And if he hadn't, she'd probably be dead, right now. Or still strapped to a table, wishing she was.

Catherine leaned her arm on the roof of the car. They were so complicated. If she turned the car around, picked any direction other than "back into the city" she knew she could step off the map and save his life, perhaps. She could spend her fortune as a recluse. Get on a plane and never return. She could save him.

But only if she were willing to break both of them, to do it.

Perhaps it was a moot point. Perhaps she'd killed their bond, this time. Perhaps that could be done. She had no idea. But she also had no idea how she was going to restore it, not really.

Or even if that was the right thing to do for them.

She got back in the car, turned the keys in the ignition, and put it in gear. Then drove back to Manhattan, over the dark water Vincent had walked her under, unsure of what other direction she should take.

CHAPTER 9

UNBOUND



The rest of the day she held the stark pictures of the blown out building in her mind. She'd even pulled copies of the photographs from her work. The back side of the building looked no better than the front.

That evening, when he entered through her balcony doors she began talking almost without preamble. The photographs were still in her hand.

"I'm going to get you killed, Vincent."

There. Just that blunt. No "maybe" or "I might" or "I'm afraid that..." about it.

Fine. If they were going to start the evening by arguing, he wasn't going to back down an inch.

"You make me alive, Catherine. There is no reality for me, other than that." She set down the pictures, and he saw them, as they scattered. It looked worse by day than it had by night, he realized.

She left them where they were and stood from the small table. "I was afraid of you. In the tunnel, when you ... snapped at me."

Snarled, you mean, he thought.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Only a fool wouldn't have been," he stated.

"But you've never been afraid of me. And you should be. You *should* be, Vincent." Her expression was lawyer-adamant. And her tension level was off the charts.

"Not afraid?" his expression seemed confused, to her, as he crossed further into the room. He bent down to unexpectedly kiss the corners of her eyes.

"How can you say that? I've been afraid since almost the moment I met you." He realized it was true the moment he confessed it.

He felt it, *let* himself feel it, let himself acknowledge it, for the first time. Fear. The fear that she'd leave. The "always fear" that never quite left him, back in their beginning. Catherine's green eyes searched his blue ones.

"Will she find another?" he asked, posing the question as if it was rhetorical. "Will her life call her down a path I can't follow? Will she leave for Providence, or Boston, or God forbid, London or Paris or someplace I can never go?" He brushed her hair back with a hard-nailed finger. "Will she love me, as I love her? Will she tire of the limits I always, *always* place on us? Will she want a man who is a ... man?" He ran the laundry list of his fears.

"Will she get me killed?" Catherine felt the need to add.

Vincent took a deep breath. "That, of all things, is not something I ever worried about, one way or the other. My fears have far more to do with the things I have no control over, than the things I do. There are enough of those, believe me."

"Your fears may need... broadening, then," she said ruefully, stepping a little away from him.

"Why? Why, when I have so many, now? Especially now." She knew he was speaking about the loss of the bond.

"Afraid I'd never feel you again. Afraid you'd die, before I could even save you." He recounted his new fear, the one that Gabriel had introduced him to. He closed the distance between them, simply not liking it.

Taking her by the elbows, he drew her forward and kissed her forehead, at the center, as he continued to list that which he most dreaded.

"Afraid your old life would call you back to it, that there really could never be a place for me in it. That the dreams I had would drive me mad, that wishing to be a part of you..." he pushed the early fear away, the one that had finally become so poignantly terrifying, it had driven him to her balcony, bearing a copy of Dickens. He let the sentence hang.

"Then there was Elliot, and a new fear. A fear that you ...loved someone. And I knew you did, and even as I thought I knew that it had to be... I couldn't... face it, Catherine. Couldn't live with it, but I had to."

His fears reached back a long way. And he wasn't blaming her. He was telling her.

Let him say it, her mind whispered.

"When Elliot turned out to be ... less...a petty place in me rejoiced. Your heart closed to him, and all I could do was send you the sonnet, to tell you. I was still here. I was still... impossible, but still ... here." He set his forehead against hers. "Maybe if I have no other virtue, it's just that. I can't not... be here, Catherine." His hands rubbed her arms. They were cold.

His voice did not damn her, but it did explain. "Stephen didn't hold your heart, but he held your past. When he hurt you..." his voice trailed. "The part of me you spent days walking through the caverns with wanted to kill him." Now it was he who stepped away from her.

Then he amended his sentence. "No. That isn't true. The part of me you spent days with didn't care whether he lived or died. I just wanted you to acknowledge me. That I was the better..." He couldn't say the last word.

"That you were the better man." Catherine finished for him.

His blue eyes pierced her. "But that's just it. I am not a man. I'm never going to be a man. Not against Elliot, or Stephen or Tom or Michael, or... anyone. They will all... beat me, that way, Catherine. They will all best me."



"That isn't true. It isn't a competition." She shook her head in denial.

"Of course it is. And perhaps it shouldn't be. But it was. It was, and you know it was. It was always going to be. Until... until you did what you did."

"What?" she asked. She was puzzled. Her expression showed it.

"You made it not matter. Because you... fell in love with *me*. *All* of me. With that... inhuman part of me. The part that hunts, and kills, and can't speak, or barely can. You loved that part. I can't believe you did that, still."

"I did. I do. I do love you, Vincent." She wanted to make sure he understood that, if he understood nothing else. This was not about how she felt about him; about how much she loved him.

"I know," he replied simply.

She wrapped her arms across her torso, in a protective gesture. "I could leave my job. I've thought about it."

He shook his head in immediate denial. "No, you can't. I don't want you to. You do great good there, Catherine. It has given you a sense

of purpose like nothing else has. Do not let a psychopath dictate our fate.” He gripped her shoulders, loosely.

“Your job needs you. Joe Maxwell and the people you help need you. Your job saved Ellie and Eric, saved Jacob. Lena, and her baby. Saved Charles and so many others, because of where you work. If you choose a different path one day, that is all well and good. But do it because you wish to, not because you’re afraid for me.”

“How can you be so sure that’s the way we should handle this?” she asked, her expression still one of confusion. It was a thing she’d struggled with all day.

He stepped closer. “I only know that choices made by fear are seldom the right ones. And that once you begin doing that, it is very hard to stop. Then your fear defines you. Not your love.”

More than anyone else, he would know. The entire world was both a source of fascination and peril for him. If he’d listened to his fears, listened to Jacob’s, he’d never have emerged from the tunnels to begin with.

And she’d likely have died, three years ago.

We must face our fears, and move through them. Didn’t he live his life by that motto?

He put his arms loosely around her small frame, and held her for a long time, in the deepening dark. A distant lamp provided the room’s only illumination.

There are storms within you. His sense of empathy could tell him what the bond couldn't. She was struggling. And clinging to him. At least that much was as it should be. When she faced her life's troubles, he wanted to be what she reached for. Always.

"Are you ready to give it back to me?" He whispered it, in the shadowy room.

Tears sprang to her green eyes.

"I'm afraid I destroyed it. I'm afraid I can't."

He nuzzled her cheek. "You had to lock yourself very far away from me."

"Yes."

"You thought of leaving. Even today."

How could he know that, without the bond? She thought it and the question came into her startled eyes as it left her mouth.

"How did you...?"

"Because I know you. I don't need to be able to feel what you're feeling to know you, Catherine. Shhhhhh. It's just your fear, talking."

Her voice shook a little. "We were forged in fear. Sometimes I can't help but think that," she confessed.

He shook his maned head. Blonde hair moved like rippling silk, across his vest. "No. We are forged in the will to overcome that fear. Not the fear itself."

She leaned her head against his chest. "I'm so tired of being afraid. Afraid for us." She was. He could feel her exhaustion.

"I know. Shhhhh. Let me share it. Share every burden, with you."

She lifted her head. Her green eyes were too huge, in her delicate face. "Vincent, I'm so afraid that what I am... it's going to end up killing you, somehow."

"I believe that is my fear. And now you've made it yours," he replied.

He pulled her closer. "Be more afraid that losing you will do that, Catherine. Not having you."

"I'm a weakness, for you. A way to hurt you. Paracelsus knew it. Gabriel knew it."

Again, he shook his head, this time, gently. "You are not my weakness. You are my strength. You are strength."

There is strength inside you. I can feel it.

"Together, we are mighty." The conviction in his voice sounded ... unshakeable.

She leaned her cheek against his huge, patient chest. A chest she'd spent hours exploring with her hands and mouth. His heart was a steady drum, under her ear.

"You came for me. I shut away our bond and you came for me." Tears coursed down her cheeks.

"The only way I could. Did you think I would give up?"

Her eyes closed with remembered fear. "He was... malevolently insane. Gabriel. I thought at least if he'd kill me he wouldn't be able to kill you. It was all I had left."

He drew back from her. "You never think that." His voice became hard, and he punctuated the sentence with a growl. "You never think such a black, such an empty thing."

Her trembling hand cupped his cheek. "Because you'll always be there, no matter what? With all that you are?" Her green eyes tracked his blue ones, and she saw a glint silvery fire in the azure. His Beast was near the surface.

"No force can contain it. / can't even contain it. And neither can you. But you can ... love it, Catherine," he whispered, his voice a little rougher.

"I can't find what you're asking me for. I don't know where it is," she confessed.

"Then it doesn't mean anything. And we'll live without it." He reached down to pull her firmly against him. He began to rock his hips against hers.

"You don't mean that. You don't think that," she chided.

The widening of his pupils was changing the blue of his eyes to steel. "The only thing I think right now is that you are wearing too many clothes, and I haven't made love to you in what feels like weeks." The last word was punctuated with a soft growl of impatience.

She shook her head at his bad memory. Why, only last night they'd--

He dropped his head and exhaled, deeply, his eyes closed. She could feel something gathering, inside him. When he looked back up, she could see the change.

Silver fire. Fire and glaciers, and she knew who was coming into the room with her a moment before he did.

His next growl was soft, but low. Lower in pitch, and in tone. She peeled out of her sweater as she heard it, and recognized its call. She pushed his vest off his shoulders as he hooked an index claw into the front of her bra.

Tear it. They both thought it. She could feel the war, rising inside him.

"Do it." she whispered in his softly furred ear. "We both know you aren't going to hurt me. Or at least, you're not going to hurt me any more than I hurt you."

He cut the wisp of elastic with his claw, not leaving so much as a stray mark on her skin. If anything, the pink band of skin where the elastic had gripped her flesh beneath her breasts seemed to offend him. He lifted the soft right globe, and laved the area under it with his tongue. She gathered up his shirts, in bunches, and tugged them over his head.

He stopped long enough to let the conjoined fabric clear his head, then latched back onto the skin of her breasts, moaning in a lover's pain as he stopped to suckle. One hand splayed at her back, the other pulled her hand down to an erection that was killing him. He was asking. Openly. Vulnerably.

She gave him the pressure he wanted and he tore his mouth away, moaning his response. His hips moved, reflexively, and his hands fumbled at his belt as hers explored the simple flap and tie that held the front of his pants closed. When the belt dropped, he simply leaned his head back and fought for balance, as she opened his pants and touched him gorgeously, bringing him forth.

He was sensitive, here, and his need was raw. She massaged him to hard readiness, and he kept his head back, reveling in her touch. He mourned the necessity of her hands leaving him, as she pushed down his patched cords, and tugged off his boots and socks. His manhood wept a seeping droplet of expectation when she unzipped her skirt and simply let it drop to the floor, pushing her underthings with it.

She pressed herself against him, deftly. "I missed you," she whispered into his left ear as her hands moved up his chest, and around his neck. She moved her hips in a way that made him tremble with want. Sensually. Suggestively, and with a Lorelei's abandon. The invitation of Eve, and of instinct. He reached for the small of her back and pushed her hard against him, reveling in the pressure.

The warm, sudden contact made her tremble, and arch. It did that for him, too.

He lifted her up and snarled a little, impatient and none too willing to remain unsheathed. Her legs went around his back, as she held herself aloft, bringing his mouth to hers for an impatient kiss. He held her up with one arm, and caressed her thigh with his clawed hand, a back-and-forth motion that simulated sex while his tongue in her mouth did the same.

She felt his frustration build as he coaxed and caressed. He wouldn't reach between them to make them one. Either because of his claw tips or because he felt that was her right, and not his. Catherine remembered his Beast's reticence to join them. It was probably the only reason he hadn't lost his virginity to her in the cave.

They were One when She said they were. They were done when he could no longer hold back his orgasm. The dance had rules for him, rules even his Beast respected.

"You're too far away," she said, as she reached between them.

"No."... You are." His speech was rough, and he startled her with it. She smiled a lover's smile into his neck, and took him firmly in her hand.

"We can fix that," she promised.

It was an awkward joining, at first, as need caused a fumbling lack of coordination and the movement of his huge body threw them off balance, a little, the first time he thrust. She squealed her delight as the up thrust of his hips lifted her up on his body, making her need to clutch his neck all the tighter. She grabbed her wrist in a locking embrace and felt the joy of his deep penetration, as he threw back his head. A long, low rumbling sound in his chest indicated his satisfaction at being inside her warmth. His hands cupped her buttocks. He let her down only to bring her back up again. And again.

She was barely able to start a rhythm before he interrupted it, simply lifting her body once more, then settling it in a deep, impaling

embrace. She pressed her torso against his, shaking from the eroticism, dampening the skin between them both.

He began to walk. In the haze of her passion, she thought they were going to the bedroom. They weren't.

He was simply taking her toward the closest wall.

"Who ... comes for ... you?" Speech was becoming more difficult. In the mist of their shared ardor, Catherine thought he was talking about sex, for a moment.

"You. You do," she answered, nipping his neck a bit playfully.

"No." His hands were at her back and she felt him move them, felt him brace his feet under himself while he lifted her higher, still keeping them joined.

Catherine had no choice but to tighten her legs around his strong hips as he simply walked her backwards. They stopped when she banged into the wall just hard enough to set the pictures to rattling.

"Who *comes* ... for *you*?" He repeated the words with the added emphasis, and Catherine opened her eyes to see silvery light ring his pupils. This was not sex. Or at least, it was not just sex.

"You." She whispered it and she knew she was pinned, all but unable to move. She also knew who was doing the pinning. "You do." They were the same words she'd given him a moment ago, but with a different tone. His Beast. She was speaking to his Beast, to that side of him that had saved her, would always save her.

He was satisfied that she'd answered him as he ran his hands along her arms, disentangling them from his great neck and chaining them over her head.

The deep baritone was ragged, but firm. "Who will always... come for you?" It was growling speech but it was speech. He was both his man and his beast at the moment, and Catherine would have been hard pressed to say if he was one more than the other. Almost as hard pressed figuratively as she was literally, now.

"You. You will." Her pupils were huge, but not from fear. And so far, he hadn't moved, again, inside her. His mouth traced her left ear, the one near her scar. He gave it a subtle brush, with his tongue.

"I need something." His hands kept hers chained. "Give it back." It was both a request and a command.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I tried. I can't. I... I don't think I have it, anymore."

The chuckle was low, and soft.

"Here." He kissed left side of her face, from her temple to the lowest part of her scar. "Where you always ... felt it."

Had she? She struggled to think, and realized he was right. Whether it was by coincidence or not, she'd always felt a small, tingling sensation of awareness in her in her temples when she'd sensed him.

He nuzzled the spot near her scar, warming it, and coaxing.

"Give it back," he whispered, starting to move, inside her.

"Vincent..."

"Who ... comes for you? ... Always?" He was setting a demanding rhythm. One that brooked no naysaying. Serving her did not mean being her slave.

"Let it go, Catherine."

"Vincent... I'm still afraid. Afraid I'm going to get you killed." A tear tracked down her pale cheek.

"Fear is for our enemies," He growled it, but it seemed easier to speak. Perhaps speech, like everything else, was something his wild self could learn. Or perhaps, as Vincent had said, he and the beast truly were one being, more now than they'd ever been.

He gave his hips a hard snap, forcing her to feel his strength, and just a little of his rage. "For our enemies. Not for ussss," the 's' was a sibilant hiss in her ear. "Give it back, Catherine."

"No." She shook her head, aware she was refusing, and aware she couldn't win.

"I'll find you, anyway." The strokes were sure, and deeply strong. So was the claim.

"You ... can't." She gasped her desire, feeling it build. Fast.

A low sound. A near chuckle? Almost? He stopped moving, again. "Tell it to the men who took you."

It was a cruel thing to say, and she realized that even though Vincent had no cruelty in him, he definitely had confidence. A confidence he felt, but rarely articulated when he was his Scholar's self.

She tightened her legs around his hips. He let her arms come down.

"There are evil men out there. More than just the ones we've faced." Her expression was one of hopelessness, against the tide. Against all the tides.

He lifted her up the wall, a little more. "Then they better pray. To whatever dark god they worship, they better pray, Catherine." He began to move again. His rhythm became harder. The pictures began to rattle, again.

"Pray... for what?" This was hard loving, and both satisfying and openly about power, more than sex.

"That they *never*... meet... *us*." The last word was met with a deep thrust, as he pulled her away from the wall just far enough to send her back hard, against it. He lifted her thighs and bent his knees, keeping her pinned, but making it so his penetration was more rapid, more claiming.

Catherine squealed with the pleasure of it as she moved her hands to his titan's shoulders. He felt her fingers begin dig into the skin there, and he reveled in the sensation. *His woman was pleased. His woman was claiming.*

The silver blue in his eyes was nearly subsumed by the deep black of his pupils. The Beast she'd woken up with in the tunnels was here, his skin flushed dark, his eyes, uncompromising. He growled his pleasure into her neck before he simply stood back from her, letting her see his glory. He looked down between them to where their bodies joined, and then tilted his head up and back, glorying in the feel of her, the feel of him, penetrating her with a broken pace, and sometimes a rapid one. One designed to please, for sex's sake alone.

His abdomen tightened, and the slap of his thighs against hers was a lascivious tattoo of carnal sound.

Her graduation picture fell of the wall and thumped to the carpet. Her law school diploma tilted, and threatened to do the same.

"Don't stop. Please don't stop." She knew he couldn't answer. Not now.

He hitched her up the wall, again, changing the angle a little so that he was more beneath her, loving the feeling of being inside. When her wetness began to trail down his legs, he smiled a very masculine smile. She was close. He nuzzled the side of her face, dragging his bottom lip along the ridge of her scar. His breath was hot, and primal, in her ear.

"Help me," she grabbed around his neck and held his mouth in place. "Help me. Find me. Find me, again."

Find her again. Of course. It was what he did, what this part of him did. What he always did.

Her brain was passion drowned, and his sex ached for release. She was tiring thanks to his lovemaking and she was... lost. He could feel it more than see it. Had she not been in the room with him he'd have thought her far distant. Had she not been literally impaled upon him, he'd have thought her gone, again.

Lost. Lost in his lovemaking. Lost as she searched for something she couldn't find.

"I can't reach it. I've tried." There were tears in her eyes as she said it, and he knew she wasn't lying.

"I thought I'd feel it again when I came, but... no."

When she came? With his Poet's self? Silly love. Did she not know she needed a Warrior, a Tracker, a Hunter, for this?

Hunting.

He kissed her right temple, then the left. Then kept his mouth near her scar, nuzzling the skin there, both over her ear and just under it.

Find me. Help me. Her thoughts were almost loud enough to hear.

Of course. Of course he would. She had but to ask. He was pressing kisses over the area of skin he insisted had something to do with their bond. His tongue touched a spot near her temple and she began to tremble, began to feel something there. Vibration. A faint fluttering of wings.

A growling noise issued from his throat. Short. Sharp sound. He felt it, too. Or he was helping her to feel it. She had no idea which one was more true.

His rhythm inside her became something slow, something slow which barely built in steady earnest, a heartbeat's cadence and a sweat soaked effort. *This time. This time when she came she would...*

"Nooooo." She breathed out the long vowel. Softly. So softly no one but him could have heard it. Her last effort at resistance.

He slapped the wall with his open palm, displeasure plain in both the sound and the grimace on his face. He would not come until she did, though he desperately wanted to.

Fluttering, pulsing, tapping against a white mental cage, the bond Catherine had consigned to the depths of an imaginary hell moved against her temples. The scar itched, and tingled.

"Take it," Catherine said, resigning. He was the stronger of the two of them. Surely he could.

He shook his head and the blonde hair flew. *No. He couldn't. He never could. If he could have, he would have. Back when she was being held by Paracelsus, and by Gabriel. Back when hunting for her had unleashed...him. Him.*

He couldn't speak. He could only try to think to her. *No. No, She. It is in you. You must give. Yours is the strength.* But he couldn't say it. Couldn't say anything, now.

He stopped laboring and simply stood there, panting. She was lax, with him inside her, unable to concentrate on the two separate feelings so distant from each other, the one in her core and the one near her ear. An image penetrated her consciousness.

The bond was in a white cage. A white cage? Why were the bars white?

But of course she knew.

There is strength in you, She. Strength enough to return our gift. And strength enough to keep it to yourself, forever. Chained up. Bound. Bond.

Vincent whimpered against her neck, begging.

Catherine's mind screamed, from every effort she was making.

Fear is for our enemies. She remembered his words.

"Fear is for our enemies." She said it into his damp ear, and felt him nod.

She strained against him, rising, lengthening her body, stretching her torso so that she was poised above him, inside.

"I want a child," she said, aware that of all the fears Gabriel had implanted inside her, this was the one that needed banishing. He'd made her afraid. Afraid to love him, afraid to be a part of his life. But mostly, he'd made her terrified of how vulnerable a child would make Vincent, make her. She didn't even know if it was possible. Except a part of her did.

Child! Vincent froze, and her arms stayed locked around his neck, forbidding him to withdraw.

"I want a child," she repeated. "Your child."

She would want...SHE would want? ... from a Beast?

There is strength in you!! His brain shouted it as his mouth longed to. *She. She. Mother to his children. Oh, She. Oh, holy, holy she!*

He screamed as he drove, fists full of hair and body tense with need, every muscle distended, every vein raised and channeling blood. She wanted a child? He would give her two. Five. Ten. Whatever she wanted, and as many as she wanted. Because she had the strength to believe what he'd never believed, and the strength to live those beliefs, when he was not even sure that he could hold them as dreams.

"Give me a son," she cooed, picturing a blanket in her mind's eye. The blanket was blue. So were the eyes that stared up at her, from its folds. She tried hard to send him the image.

The image of his child. Their child.

Her womb clenched as the white cage door was obliterated. The freed bond slammed into his awareness just as her climax engulfed them both. His answering completion tore its way through his body and into hers. *A son. A son. Yes. Yessssss. He needed to make a son. She commanded it.*

He saw the blanket as he saw her cradling an infant. Eyes like his and skin like hers. Male. Beautiful. His.

His cry of climactic joy trailed away to nothing as he held her with his body weight against the wall, his pelvis thrust forward, head back, eyes closed, holding the vision, and the sensation. Her feminine ejaculate was running between his legs as his amazed tears made twin tracks into the blonde hair at his temples.

Bond. Bond. Bond. The word rocked him mentally as it caused him to rock, physically. He swayed on his feet, and then steadied.

The bond engulfed and enfolded him as it surged free from her, and settled, between them.

She felt tired, and triumphant at the same time. She had used his courage to beat back her fears, and she was a limp treasure in his arms. She'd scored his shoulder again, in a wound he didn't remember her inflicting as she came, and her left leg was about to cramp from their awkward position, and he knew it all, felt it all, loved it all.

Home. Home. Home. She was home. Finally.

He'd brought her home.

From a journey that had begun for her with a terrible kidnapping, and ended here, in her home, the balcony view a few feet away.

From the cruel hands of evil men, to the claws of a sublime Beast, she'd travelled.

The Beast had brought her home. Finally.

She was about to whimper and try to shift her leg when he simply slid down the wall, bearing her gently as feathers, to the floor. He reached for his cape and tugged it over them as a blanket. She curled against him right where she'd dropped on the carpeted floor, unprotesting.

She slept with her arms tight around him, not allowing a millimeter of space between them.

--

She wasn't sure how long they slept. Hours, it felt like. At one point during the night she thought she heard her mantle clock chime, but she wasn't sure. And she was far too tired to lift her head to look. For whatever reason, her floor felt like the most comfortable place in the world.

Warm.

Tickle.

Warm. Just warm, again. Then the soft, tickling sensation again. His mouth. Then his hair. His silky, flaxen hair, moving across her abdomen.

He was kissing her stomach, brushing gentle, breathless kisses back and forth, in the soft plain of skin between her navel and her curls. Left... right. Left... right.

"Love you. Love you." He said to her skin, planting kiss after kiss across her belly.

She was too replete to rouse, she thought, but still felt herself waking.

"Vincent?" She whispered the word. Either he didn't hear or he did, and he was busy.

"She is amazing." He kissed the skin left and right again. "Your mother is. Amazing. Strong. So strong. Sometimes when my strength falters... when I forget to believe... hers is where I go." He was speaking to the soft swell beneath her navel, laying between her legs a bit awkwardly, making love to the skin, there.

"Vincent?" She said it louder this time, louder so this time he had to hear.

"It's happening. Right now," he whispered, kissing her low, and a little to the left.

"It is?" her green eyes were wide.

"It woke me up. You... called to me."

Had she? No. She had no knowledge of... but something had called to him. Something. Someone. She was astonished.

"You can feel it?" she asked. She almost didn't dare move. She should stay still, yes? She had no idea.

Vincent's voice was full of reverence. "I feel what you are feeling. Perhaps even when you're not aware you're feeling it." He brushed the white skin with his palm, in wonder, and planted another kiss there.

Catherine concentrated, aware that she could feel no change inside, could sense no difference, in her body.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"A son. Or a daughter. I can't be sure which one," he admitted, hoping she would forgive him if he fathered daughters first. He wanted one. Wanted to spoil it, so badly.

"But you're sure?" she asked, sitting up slowly, putting a protective hand to her abdomen, overtop of his.

"Just a few minutes ago. The bond. It began ... singing to me."

"Singing?" It was a whispered word of amazement.

"A beautiful song. Angel song. So soft, so quiet... just... barely there. But strong. Strong like you."

"I wish I could hear it!" Tears sprang to her green eyes. His hand lifted away then pressed hers over her own skin, where his palm had been warming it. She'd conceived on her left side.

"There. Right... there," he whispered, overcome. "Put your head against mine," he told her, keeping his hand over top of hers.

She did, and the embrace was similar to the one they'd shared in the cave.

"It's the sound angel wings make, when they're free," he whispered. "A fluttering sound, but there's music in it. Like ... like when the strains of Schubert faded away, when it started to rain."

Schubert. Catherine held her hand to her womb and remembered the sound of raindrops hitting the crosshatched grate over her head the night Vincent had taken her to the Music Chamber to hear the Unfinished Symphony. They'd barely made it past the introduction when the musicians in the front had stopped, shortly followed by the drier contingent in the back.

Catherine strained her internal ears and listened...

And there it was. A soft flutter of life, just as he'd said. Barely there, yet... indomitable. Unfinished.

"He's so... strong!" She smiled her pleasure as she felt herself become pregnant with their child.

"Like his mother," Vincent said, aware they'd both just used the masculine pronoun.

It took her a moment to even register that while she'd loved her Beast, she'd woken up with her Vincent. Her Vincent. She would always think of him that way.

"My Vincent," she breathed, exhaling joy.

"You are not afraid?" he asked.

The look she gave him was beatific.

"I think with the two of you beside me, I can do ... anything," she said with a mix of both elation and solemnity.

"I think you dare to dream dreams I don't even think are possible for me," he answered, awestruck once again by her incredible strength.

"I think that's maybe my purpose for us," she answered, loving it when he squeezed her hand over their unborn child.

"And I think I'm going to keep doing that." She kept her head near his. "And when this little one comes, he or she will have dreams all their own, and will teach us both. And we can share those dreams, all together. As a family."

The look he gave her was one of pure love.

"Dreams together. As a family," he repeated. *What an amazing thing to have.*

And they did.

--fin--

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love ~
Cindy

