

# **WHEN MAN MEETS BEAST**

## **PART ONE**

**by Inez Paskal**

**(from PHOENIX Two & Three)**

*Note: This isn't a love story. It's an account of a catastrophic psychological breakdown ...and riveting storytelling. This is the story of Vincent's collapse.*

It was always with the best intentions that loved ones try to help.

It was no different for Vincent, and those who loved him, when Catherine died. The adults Below would place a hand on his shoulder and ask, "How are you doing today?" The children would stare silently, shrink away into the corners, and very carefully not mention Catherine. If the truth be known, nobody is comfortable living with someone in mourning.

There was much relief when Vincent returned Below with his son, Jacob; he seemed happy, in control, and he had a new friend, Diana. As long as there was no trace of Catherine left, no one had to face a brooding Vincent.

Jamie had found the pouch with the rose and crystal on Vincent's table in the exile chamber, from which he'd gone to confront Gabriel. She brought them to Mouse, who did such a good job of hiding them, that even he forgot where he'd put them. Just one more thing that wouldn't remind Vincent of Catherine.

Oh, he missed his keepsakes when he returned from his captivity. He spent an entire day tearing his chamber apart, searching.

After a week, when no one admitted seeing them, Vincent convinced himself that in his preoccupation, he'd worn them, and they'd been lost or taken at Gabriel's prison.

Sensing the uneasiness around him, Vincent forced himself to pick up his life once more, to be loving son, wise advisor, learned teacher, strong helper and watchful protector - all things to all people.

Jacob took a great deal of Vincent's time, but there were many people willing to help - Mary,

Rebecca, Olivia, Lena. Lena, in particular, seemed particularly anxious to make herself available.

Then there was Diana; Vincent had to admit he was fascinated by her. She was lovely, strong; her paranormal gifts were intriguing. He certainly wasn't on his best behavior, when first they met, as he'd been with Catherine; yet she accepted him. Bruised and battered, she accepted him; beastly and bitter, she accepted him. For this, he was overwhelmed and grateful. However, with all his soul-searching, all he could offer Diana in return was his gratitude.

It's difficult to find the exact moment when a broken heart and spirit starts to crumble; there is no one event, word, or look.

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Bath time over, Vincent rocked Jacob to sleep. He was the consummate Father: reluctant to share his son's care with anyone, conscientious to a fault - as if his doting could make up for the loss of Jacob's mother. These precious moments gave Vincent a sense of peace and contentment. Often, it was difficult to guess who'd fall asleep first.

On that particular night, they were both dozing when Diana came into the chamber, realizing only afterward that Vincent had been sleeping.

"Vincent! Oh, I didn't mean to disturb you."

"It's all right. Let me put Jacob in his cradle. Come in. Here, sit down."

Sitting across the table from Diana, Vincent seemed a bit uneasy. She reached out to touch him, but he pulled back a bit. Not giving up, she firmly took his hand in hers.

"You haven't been to see me in weeks, and I have something to give you," Diana started.

"I'm sorry. I've been very occupied with trying to resume my life ..."

"I know, it's all right. I just wanted to make sure you were well," Diana continued. "I've been hanging onto these things, and I don't know what else to do with them."

She slid a box across the table. Opening it cautiously, Vincent gasped and pulled back: lying on top were a white rose and a red rose. Tears filled his eyes as trembling fingers lovingly reached for them.

"How?" was all he could manage to say.

"Catherine's rose bush is blooming again. I thought you'd find comfort in knowing that. These other things, I took from her apartment when I first started investigating her death."

Reaching into the box, Diana pulled out a book, but Vincent grabbed her hand.

"I can't deal with this right now, Diana. Just leave it - please! I'll go through everything later."

Setting the book on the table, she closed the box. "Later will be just fine," she commented mildly. She gave him a parting hug, deciding to leave him with his grief.

Leaning his head against the back of the chair, Vincent closed his eyes as he clutched the roses to his heart. He wondered how long he could go on, how long this pain would last. It had been five months. Yet quiet moments alone remained aching chasms of pain.

He took a deep breath, gathering his strength as he resolved to be stoic. Everyone had to be tired of seeing him in tears. He had to stop it! Placing the roses on the table, he grabbed the covered box and set it in his trunk with the other memories. He knelt there, pushing things aside, searching for something.

"I know it's here, it's been years, but I didn't throw it away," he muttered as his search finally took him to the bookshelf behind his bed. "Here you are."

He held up a leaded, cut crystal vase long ago discarded above because of a crack and chips. Little did the owner know that it brought a part of the sky, a rainbow, to a lonely young man. His hands still trembling, Vincent poured water from his pitcher into the vase while he held it over the ladle; the vase didn't leak. It had waited many years to cradle something as precious as Catherine's roses.

Despite all his good intentions, tears once again began to flow. Vincent threw himself on the bed, wondering at his lack of control. He slept for only a brief time, waking to the sight of the roses and the memory of the evening when Catherine planted the bush.

"Why didn't I kiss you? Why didn't I take you in my arms and never let you go? I did so little for you. Oh, Catherine, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," cried Vincent. "So sorry."

The regret and guilt weighed so heavily that Vincent was suffocating. He gasped and jumped up, clutching his chest.

Pacing for a time helped. When his labored breathing slowed, he listlessly threw himself in a chair, absently fingering the book Diana had left. It was a day book; Catherine's day book. Her handwriting seared through him as he read her notations - appointments, birthday and anniversary reminders for the coming year. There were addresses and telephone numbers, as well as gift suggestions and sizes.

Vincent felt suddenly calm. This he could do: he could continue this for Catherine. He could take on her obligations, continue her thoughtfulness throughout the year.

In that instant, in that determination, Vincent started to live Catherine's life as well as his own.

He also took on an air of desperate intensity.

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March 13 stared up at Jenny as she turned the page of her appointment calendar.

"Another birthday," she grumbled.

There was something depressing about a year that hadn't made a positive change in her life. Stopping a moment to think, she had to admit that the depression she felt had lingered since Cathy's funeral seven months ago. It had been a hard year.

It didn't help that nothing seemed to be going right that morning. Just small things - pens ran out of ink, an author changed an appointment, the computer went down. Frustration upon frustration. By lunch time, Jenny just wanted to shut out the world. Closing the drapes, she laid her head in her arms. Tears came too easily, as they had in the past months.

"Excuse me, miss. Do you want lunch? I got sandwiches, coffee, tea, salad. Anything?"

Without lifting her head, Jenny waved the lunch peddler away. The last thing she wanted was food. The ringing of the telephone eventually intruded: one of the secretaries reminding her of a two o'clock meeting.

"Okay, Jenny, get yourself together," she said as she headed for the washroom. Splashing water on her face, she determined to concentrate on work, to make up for the morning's unproductive fiasco.

Marching into her office, she opened the drapes and turned to face the pile of work. Jenny gasped, not believing her eyes, a beautiful red rose lay on the edge of her desk.

She turned it over in her hand until the card flipped face up. Disbelief started Jenny shaking as she read, '*Friends Are Forever. Happy Birthday. Love, Catherine*'. The letters were formed carefully in a strong, calligraphic handwriting.

Thinking that she was seeing things, Jenny closed her eyes, but found, when she reopened them, that the message remained the same. Her next emotion was anger - who could play such a cruel trick? Her first coherent thought was that there was a hoax in the making. Almost immediately, she reached for the phone.

"Joe? Jenny. You'll never believe what's happened!"

"Hi, Jen. Haven't heard from you in a while. What's up?"

"Joe, I got a birthday rose from Cathy."

"Cathy who? *Our* Cathy?"

"Since college, every year, we'd start our birthday celebrations with a red rose. We used to say, if we never got one from anyone else, at least, we'd get one from each other. We've been doing this for ten years." Jenny started to cry and couldn't say any more.

"Hmmmmm, listen! I'll pick you up there at five-thirty, we'll have some supper and you can show me the rose," Joe suggested. "Jenny, are you there?"

"Yeah, okay," she responded, feeling somewhat better, knowing that she could discuss this with Joe Maxwell.

"By the way, Happy Birthday and I'll see you later."

"Thanks, Joe. Bye." Jenny hung up with mixed feelings.

She'd been dreading being alone tonight and now she was having dinner with an attractive man. Maybe the rose *was* from Cathy.

Joe showed up a little late, but Jenny was waiting at her desk. She handed him the rose. He looked it over thoroughly. A sudden intake of air, when he read the card, was the only inclination that he was affected.

"You didn't see who left it?" he asked.

"No, it was just there, at the edge of the desk," replied Jenny.

"It didn't just appear - somebody had to leave it. Was anyone here?"

"I don't know. I was in the bathroom." Jenny was trying to remember, but she'd been a bit preoccupied at the time.

"Okay, don't worry about it. Let's get out of here - it *is* your birthday. We've got some celebrating to do!"

It turned out to be a lovely evening. They puzzled over the mysterious rose, and Jenny promised Joe that if there was the slightest hint of a follow-up, she'd let him know immediately. He brought her home and even gave her a birthday kiss.

"You'll let me know if anything else turns up," Joe reminded her. "Keep in touch."

"I promise. Good night, Joe."

Letting herself into her apartment, she turned on the light and kicked off her shoes. Next she put the rose in water, placed it on the coffee table and sat, staring at it.

However, her gaze wandered from the rose to her overturned shoe. It was lying on a piece of paper, an envelope. As she got up, she recognized the calligraphy - the same as on the card. It simply read, '*Jenny*'.

"Oh, my God," she said as she picked it up. After several moments, she opened it and read:

*Dear Jenny,*

*This note is an apology and an explanation.*

*These days I seem to be doing everything impulsively. It was only after I sent the rose that I realized what a shock it may have been for you. I apologize for any pain I may have caused.*

*I also vowed not to reveal myself, but as you see, I am once again being impulsive. I seem to decide one thing and then do another.*

*Catherine was very special to me. She was my life. I somehow feel that I must clothe myself in her, do what she would have done.*

*I found her day book in my possession and it seemed natural to follow her notations as though I was meant to do their bidding. Through me, she lives on.*

*Also, I had the need to be in touch with someone else who loved her, if only symbolically.*

*My name is Vincent. We will never meet, yet we touch as we pass, kindred spirits, through her memory, her beauty, her love.*

*In Catherine's name*

*Vincent*

Once again, Jenny was in tears. She knew, her heart knew, that this was Cathy's special someone - the mysterious presence that had made her friend's face glow.

In that moment, Jenny decided to hold Vincent as silently as Cathy had; she wouldn't tell Joe about this note.

It didn't take Vincent long to realize that he might have made a terrible mistake. Of what could he have been thinking? To write a note was one thing, to tell Jenny of his relationship with Catherine, and his name, was quite another. However, he seemed helpless to stop himself. Something inside him was screaming that someone Above had to know of their love. In his desperation to preserve that love, he'd become careless ... reckless. It seemed he could do nothing right, and there was no Catherine to ease his guilt.

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Morning brought hope of a new day, a busy day. It may have been only Vincent's imagination, but it seemed everyone was in a conspiracy to keep him busy, from Jacob's first squeal to Father's last chess move. The distractions were more than welcome, as Vincent's hunger to start living a normal life, to push back the pain, became his ultimate determination.

Although he was exhausted after bidding Father good night, Vincent needed to feel the fresh air. He needed to run, to stretch his spirit as well as his body. He had spent very little time Above in the last six months. He was beginning to feel confined.

Stopping outside Lena's chamber, Vincent called, "Lena? May I enter?"

"Oh, yes, Vincent. Come in!" Lena answered, flushing with pleasure as she rose to meet him.

"You have been very kind these past months. I wish to thank you and at the same time, ask a favor of you."

Lena smiled and brushed the hair from Vincent's brow. "I've told you. I'd do anything for you," she responded lightly.

"Since little Cathy now has her own bed, yet you've kept her cradle in that corner, I wondered if i might bring Jacob here on the nights I need to go Above?"

"Oh, I'd be happy to have him here. I think you could use a change of scene," said Lena, rubbing the back of her hand along Vincent's cheek.

"Thank you, I'll bring him in."

Stepping out of the culvert, Vincent found it was a beautiful spring night, and late enough that few people lingered in Central Park. With determined steps, he walked past the path that led to Catherine's apartment building. However, as his steps fell harder, they also increased in speed until Vincent was racing blindly through the trees - farther and farther away from his pain.

When he finally stopped against a stone wall, he realized he wasn't far from Diana's loft. To Vincent's fevered brain, Diana seemed the only cool voice of reason.

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It has been many nights since Diana heard a tap on her skylight. She'd almost given up hope of a visit from Vincent and worried that, by giving him the box of Catherine's possessions, she might have sent him in a downward spiral of grief. However, she also knew that the only way to cope with a trauma was to start moving through the pain. If the truth be known, she didn't approve of the insulated coddling he was being given by the community Below. He didn't need

protecting - he needed to be permitted to feel and express his sorrow.

*Tap, tap ...*

Diana jumped up and ran to open the rooftop door.

"Oh, Vincent, I'm so happy to see you!" She gave him a hearty hug. "Come in!"

For an instant, he allowed himself to think of all the nights spent on Catherine's balcony; another thing denied her, another regret, another guilt. By this time, however, Vincent's mind also sheltered him, and the fleeting thought joined the other regrets in his subconscious. There was only a moment's hesitation before he strode comfortably into Diana's living room.

"Can I get you anything?" asked Diana. "Some tea?" The only response was a shake of the head. "I know," continued Diana. "I decided to indulge myself a little today; like to try a truffle?"

"A mushroom?" asked Vincent, a little amused.

"No! Chocolate - imported from Spain, if you please!" With an appropriately grand gesture, Diana spilled a large mound of chocolate out of a gold bag.

"Oh, *those* truffles! I've heard of them. From Spain: then I must try one," conceded Vincent.

The truffle's powdery chocolate coating dusted his upper lip and chin, making Diana chuckle, but this was nothing compared with his expression of delight when the creamy filling awakened his taste buds.

"You like it," deduced Diana dryly.

"It's so creamy ... and the flavor isn't too sweet. Mmmm, just wonderful," Vincent exclaimed, reaching for another.

Diana was so happy to see Vincent finally allowing some pleasure in his life that she didn't mind that, by the end of the evening, he'd finished the bag single-handedly. Once he got started, he couldn't stop.

Wiping the brown powder off of Vincent's chin, Diana smiled and shook her head.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You're just so different from the last time I saw you. That little smile is so good to see. What have you been up to?"

Vincent thought awhile. "Well, I've had to catch up the lessons I teach. There are two new families waiting for living quarters; some of the work had to be delayed because I wasn't available. And - this, I'm rather excited about - Father interviewed a woman with a newborn. The council has approved, and they'll be moving Below permanently soon. The baby was born

deaf, so I suggested that I start a signing class for the mother now. Afterward, we'll work together to teach her child to communicate. Others from Below also wish to join the class."

"That sounds exciting, Vincent. But more importantly, your life is getting back on track. Did you go through the box I brought?"

"And, of course, Jacob is becoming very active. I can no longer keep him in his cradle. He is still a miracle to me, and each passing day fulfills another dream," said Vincent, as he headed for the door.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Yes. It's been pleasant, but Lena is watching Jacob. Good night, Diana. Thank you for the treat."

"Good night, Vincent." She gave him what she meant as a parting hug. He, however, clung to her for several moments, then turned quickly and disappeared over the rooftop.

"You never answered my question about Catherine's things," Diana whispered, watching him go.

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Although Vincent had intended to return Below, for some reason he started wandering. He paced streets that had been his nightly territory since adolescence. He had no particular destination in mind - doing something so familiar merely gave him a sense of well-being.

Suddenly ... gunshots!

Vincent raced to the corner of the alley. As he watched, a man backed out of a store and fired his gun, hitting the man running after him. Police sirens and flashing lights assured Vincent the authorities were on their way, but not fast enough. Stepping out of the alley into the criminal's path was all Vincent needed to do to turn the thief back into the arms of the officers. Swiftly, climbing a fire-escape to a vantage point on a roof, Vincent watched as the crime scene became alive with squad cars, an ambulance, lights, detectives, and reporters. He had to admit that it felt good to once more be part of the justice system.

He continued to patrol his territory until first light colored the sky - dawn, his signal to retreat.

Deciding it was much too late or too early to disturb Lena, Vincent went to his own chamber. He could get two hours' sleep before everyone started to wake. Surprisingly, rising after so little sleep, he was alert and felt anxious to start the day.

Lena brought Jacob to the dining hall for breakfast and graciously accepted Vincent's apology for not collecting his son.

"He slept through the entire night, Vincent. I was happy to have him, and you can bring him anytime, especially if a few hours on your own will help you look this good." Lena rubbed Vincent's arm and then impulsively kissed his cheek.

Father didn't miss the little scene and felt he had to say something to Vincent at the first opportunity, in Father's study.

"Need I remind you that she is still infatuated with you?"

"Father, why must you always see dire consequences? She and I are friends. She has offered help, I have accepted. It's that simple!" snapped Vincent.

"No, *you* see it as simple; *she* sees it as an opportunity," warned the older man.

"Even if that's true, what of it? You're always so quick to declare things impossible ... even when they may not be!"

"What are you saying? That you and Lena ...?"

"*NO!*" shouted Vincent. "No, I am not saying that. But what would be so wrong with it?"

"Vincent, what on *earth* has gotten into you? Have you forgotten that Lena has led a very different life from you?"

"Maybe she can teach me something," Vincent retorted, furiously whirling and stalking away.

Father was alarmed. For over six months, he'd watched his son's moods swing from despair to joy. But lately, Father had noticed cracks in the control that had always governed Vincent's life. Vincent lost his temper so easily now - especially with Father. In the past, this irritability represented a warning that the dark side of Vincent was struggling to surface - but this wasn't the same. This was Vincent himself, not that other creature; Father worried that there was now the possibility of a three-way split: the kind, noble Vincent; this short-tempered rebel; and the beast.

Concerned and uneasy, Father still hoped Vincent's settling back into a normal schedule of working and teaching might provide a steadying influence, helping Vincent be more like himself.

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Time did pass, busy time. One night in late June, Vincent found himself drawn down a tunnel by music, wonderful music. Stopping a moment, he realized that an orchestra was playing *Scheherazade*: the concerts in the park had started. He smiled and continued on to the chamber under the lawn by the orchestral shell.

Allowing the music to penetrate his soul, Vincent didn't realize that he's started trembling. For just a moment, the protective shell opened enough to release the horrible pain he's been suppressing. It was as a knife to his heart. The only relief was to run away, run from that which had once given him great pleasure. It surprised and shocked him that the wound was so fresh. He needed to rid himself of this, lose this pain, lose himself.

The streets - he could always lose himself in the streets.

After an hour of wandering, Vincent once more found himself at Diana's loft and rapping on her skylight.

Responding to his summons, Diana asked, "What is it?" instantly concerned as she settled down beside him.

"For the first time, I went somewhere Catherine and I shared. A place for us to enjoy the concerts in the park. I didn't plan it or think about it - I heard the music and went. It wasn't until I had settled down and started listening that it hit me. I actually reached for her; I could feel her beside me, Diana. I loved that place; now the thought of it ..." He drew a difficult, gasping breath. "What am I going to do?"

"Maybe it's time to try new pleasures, not try to recapture the old ones. Ever think of that?" proposed Diana.

"I try," whispered Vincent, fighting back tears.

"I know," Diana responded gently. "It's like taking one step forward and two steps back, right?" Diana took him in her arms. As a mother would kiss away the pain, she started kissing Vincent's forehead and, softly, his cheeks. Soon her love for him could no longer be controlled. Her mind was telling her to be reasonable, that he came to her in his pain; but her emotions were overriding reason.

Their lips met; and to Diana's surprise, Vincent responded. Diana had wondered a lot how his lips would feel. They didn't disappoint. For months, her imagination had created its own passion. Now that passion flared in her, intensifying their kisses.

When they finally separated, Vincent once again reached hungrily for her. Only then did Diana realize his eyes were glazed; she also realized that she had to learn to control these moments, give them meaning beyond passion - for she wanted more than his need.

"Vincent! Vincent ..."

Leaning back, he held his forehead in his hand and breathed deeply.

"Don't say it," added Diana sharply. "Don't you *dare* say you're sorry. Sometimes things happen because they're supposed to. Because they're right. Because it's time. Let this show you that life does go on ... and can have meaning."

"Diana, I ... I really don't know what happened. How could I impose ..."

"Some things are meant to be felt, enjoyed, not questioned. You have the right to enjoy a mutual kiss. There's nothing wrong in that."

About to respond, Vincent's attention was caught by a sheet of newspaper the wind had carried onto the roof. He stopped, distracted, his eyes locked to the headline. "What's this! *There won't be a conviction in this killing?*"

He was nearly shouting. Diana found the shift in his mood extremely disconcerting and turned the paper - today's edition - to find out what had set him off.

"I don't know," she responded, scanning the article. "It says they're looking for a witness. The defendant claims he didn't do the shooting, and they couldn't find a gun."

"But he did it. I saw it!"

"Sure, the District Attorney's office could use help, but a witness would have to testify ..."

"And I can't!" interrupted Vincent angrily.

Before Diana realized it, he was on his feet and gone.

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Pacing the streets in long strides, Vincent was boiling over with anger too intense for the cause. Suddenly, he stopped in front of a familiar shop, a music shop.

Vincent pounded on the back door. "Eli! Eli, are you in there?"

Opening the door a crack, Eli was surprised to see Vincent. Never had he heard that voice shouting - especially out on the street.

"What's wrong? Get in here and quiet down!" Eli reached out and pulled Vincent in by the thongs of his vest.

"Can I use your phone?"

"Vincent, have you ever used a phone? What's gotten into you? Who do you need to call?" asked Eli, trying to reconcile this furious visitor with the Vincent he'd known for so long.

"I need to use your phone," repeated Vincent, emphasizing every word.

"Sure, in there. Pick up the receiver, wait for the dialtone and push the little buttons with the numbers."

Leading Vincent into the shop, Eli pointed to the phone on the counter, then went back to his kitchen, shaking his head.

"Is this Joe Maxwell?"

Joe had been asleep and the male voice at the other end of the line spoke in a husky whisper. Foggily thinking, *If this is an obscene call, has he got the wrong number!*

Joe demanded sharply, "Yeah, and what do you want? Who is this?"

"I just read that you need a witness for a robbery and shooting."

"Wait a minute." Immediately all business, Joe rolled over to grab pencil and pad from his bedside table. "Okay - now, what's your name? Where can we reach you? Are you willing to come forward and testify?"

"I cannot, but I can tell you that there was only one thief, and he did shoot the shopkeeper."

"Well, we figured that, but we need you to tell the court."

"I cannot."

"Then what *is* this? If you won't give me your name and you won't come forward, what are you wasting my time for at ... three in the morning?"

"Wait - there is more. There were other witnesses."

"Listen, bud, why should I believe you? I get all sorts of crank calls ... Hey, how did you get my home phone number? Who are you?" Joe demanded.

"I was a friend ... of Catherine Chandler. In the past, when I had information, I would tell her ... and she, you. I found your number in her things. I need to do this for her ... and because I know what I saw."

"Cathy? You knew Cathy? God, I miss her," Joe whispered.

"You aren't the only one," admitted the caller's voice, softer and even more husky.

"Are you the reason she seemed to do the impossible, her outside contact?" Joe asked.

"You ... could say that."

"So, you said there were other witnesses: where? who?"

"On the fire-escape of the building across the street, third floor, center, a man and a woman in nightclothes."

"We questioned the tenants in that building. No luck."

"Then question them again - they *did* see the shooting."

Joe asked intently, "I don't suppose you saw what happened to the gun?"

"No - I didn't know it was missing."

"Are you the mysterious Vincent? Hello? Hello!"

There was no answer: Vincent was already on his way to the scene of the crime.

Standing in the alley, Vincent closed his eyes and visualized the crime. He once again saw the thief backing out of the store, the other man coming after him. He heard the gunshots, then saw the thief turn and run toward him. The shopkeeper had fallen on the sidewalk, by the time Vincent stepped from the shadows, startling the thief, who screamed and tried to turn down the alley. Stepping out as the thief came around the corner, Vincent had shoved him into the wall, but the man doubled like a rabbit and ran back toward the scene of the crime.

Vincent thought for awhile. Then he went to the spot where he and the thief had made contact. Looking around, Vincent noticed a drainpipe which would have connected to the sewer if a section hadn't been missing. Reaching into the opening, he felt something hard and cold.

The gun: he'd found the gun!

Vincent had a feeling of great elation - Catherine would have been very proud of him! He made his way back to his world, his chamber, the pain he'd felt at the beginning of the evening all but forgotten.

But that didn't stop the nightmares.

He was on the witness stand. As hard as he tried to get an important point across, the prosecutor could only accuse him of being a monster. He had to be punished: he'd kissed Diana. They came to take him away, but the only thing that mattered to him was that Catherine was sitting alone in a dark corner, weeping.

"I would have given anything for just one kiss," she cried, as he passed by.

Vincent sat bolt upright, then slowly sagged back and turned his face against his pillow.

"How do I make it up to you, my love?"

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The next morning, Joe Maxwell burst into his office with renewed vigor. He sent an investigator back to the building opposite the scene of the shooting, and by eleven o'clock, they had two witnesses. The questioning lasted well into the afternoon, so Joe told the lunch vendor to leave a sandwich for him on his desk. When Joe returned to his office, he found not only a sandwich but a small, bulky parcel wrapped in cloth. Inside was a gun. If the prints proved out, they were home free.

Joe smiled and nodded his head. "Thanks, Vincent. This might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

At the same moment, in Vincent's chamber, members of the first signing class were assembling. Roberto, now six months old, was held by Teresa, his mother, in a sitting position facing Vincent, as she's been instructed. Soon, Jamie, Rebecca, Mary, Samantha, and Mouse arrived. Jacob was sitting in a corner surrounded by pillows, which Vincent had hoped would keep him from crawling over everyone. Although Jacob had his favorite toys with him, he preferred watching his father.

"I'm very happy to see so many of you joining us," Vincent began. "What we are attempting to do here has a two-fold purpose. One purpose is to teach you to sign; the other and much more difficult purpose, is to teach Roberto to communicate. All our help will be needed. The most difficult part won't be learning to sign. It will be trying to make Roberto understand what we are doing is meant for him, to let him convey to us his thoughts and feelings, and share ours in return. Until that moment of dawning, he will just be observing hand motions. It may take years for this dawning, but he will learn, and once the process starts for him, he will be as eager to 'speak' and 'listen' as any child."

Standing directly in Roberto's line of vision, Vincent started to finger-spell the alphabet, saying each letter as he motioned. "I am starting with the alphabet; right now it is for your benefit more than his. It is to get you to start using your fingers on something familiar. Always speak while signing - Roberto will eventually learn that the two, hand motions and lip reading, can go together."

Rebecca already knew how to sign, so she held Roberto while his mother and the others tried signing the alphabet. It was more difficult than it looked, and they realized that they had to learn a new language as well as develop manual dexterity.

The first class was short: what they could do until their hands and brains coordinated to send messages, was limited.

"Teresa, I've made up a chart of the finger symbols for the alphabet. You can take it to the shelter with you and practice until the next lesson. Rebecca or I can help the rest of you," Vincent suggested.

By the time everyone left, Vincent realized it was time for Jacob's nap. But it's seldom easy to persuade any young child that he needs a nap. Play was a good preliminary. Lifting his son high, Vincent laughed as Jacob squealed in delight.

"Enough play for one afternoon. Time for rest." Caught by a yawn, Vincent found he was feeling the effects of having stayed out all night once again. "How would you like to curl up with Daddy?"

It was a precious picture: large Vincent sleeping with his small Jacob molded to his chest.

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The dreams always started innocently enough, but somehow they turned into nightmares. Vincent hadn't had a good night's sleep in two months; now the quick naps he tried to take during the day were becoming so disturbing.

He had started dreaming of his dark side, but it was often difficult to tell which of them was good, which evil. He ended up destroying himself and everyone he loved, no matter which one manifested itself. And the voice - there was always a voice warning him. Catherine's voice: and there was no way to get away from it.

Jumping from his bed, Vincent put Jacob in the crib and went into the passage. He could hear Father talking in a disturbed manner. As he drew nearer to Father's study, he also recognized Eli's voice.

"So, you *couldn't wait* to tell of last night's incident!" Vincent accused hotly, charging down the study stairs.

"Vincent! Is that any way to treat a guest?" admonished Father. "Eli is merely concerned about you - as we all are. You have been displaying some very uncharacteristic behavior lately."

"I'm sorry, Vincent," put in Eli. "It's just that you weren't yourself last night, and I thought Father should know. Stop by and see me anytime. I have to get back."

As Eli made a prudent exit, Father glared up from his desk. "For God's sake, Vincent - a telephone? Why on earth did you have to use a telephone? We've always been able to reach our helpers by our own methods. Who could you possibly have called?"

"*IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, OLD MAN!*" shouted Vincent, using Devin's phrase in a flash of rage.

"Now, Vincent - we're concerned, and I think Eli was right to come and tell me. After all, if you do anything to reveal yourself, it could jeopardize all of us. Surely you're aware of that," said

Father, aggressively reasonable.

Looking Father in the eye, Vincent responded flatly, "I'm sorry, Father. For a time I forgot that the welfare of all of us is more important than my distorted reasoning."

"Vincent!" Father called, but his son was charging down the tunnels toward the Whispering Gallery.

Sitting on the bridge, Vincent felt himself being pulled down into the abyss. How wonderful it would be if he could just disappear into that comforting void. Leaning forward, he almost tumbled, but grabbed the ropes, just as he was about to tip.

Something pulled him up straight: Jacob was in trouble. He could feel his son's panic. Racing back to his chamber, Vincent found Jacob struggling to free himself from the blankets. Jacob had managed to get his head stuck under the tightly-tucked covers at the foot of the crib, and was gasping and thrashing as Vincent yanked the covers free. Carefully picking up his son, Vincent started to cry, realizing how close he'd come to losing him.

Holding Jacob close, Vincent vowed to be more vigilant. "I'll protect you, I promise. I have to stop thinking of myself. There's too much at stake here. Too many lives depend on me, and you make me realize that."

Once more, Vincent was full of resolve. But the responsibility weighed heavy. It exhausted him.

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Diana had promised a surprise! She'd been mysterious, yet her instructions were very clear. Vincent was to meet her in the thicket where a drainage gully angled across the park. In mid-August, the sun set late, but Vincent, impatient, chanced leaving the tunnels before full dark had fallen. Dusk provided it own shadows, shadows easy for him to slip in and out of.

Leaning against a tree by the gully, Vincent thought back to the last time he'd visited Diana. Had it really been six weeks? It didn't seem fair to him that he only sought her company when he was distraught - when Catherine's memory looked before him in such proportions that solace could be found only in this friend who'd allow him to speak of it. She was also wise, suggesting he try new experiences; and she'd kissed him.

Yes, he was looking forward to seeing Diana. He didn't have to pretend with her.

"Vincent, I'm glad you're early - it'll give us a chance to get settled," said Diana, coming toward him down the slope. "Follow me!"

Amused and very curious, Vincent took her hand and stayed close. They walked along the gully for a few yards, then up stone steps to a path. The area was deserted but there were enough trees to hide among, if need be. The path led to the back door of a gray stone structure, not large, whose turret roof marked it as one of the park's original buildings.

Brandishing a key the size of a fork, Diana unlocked the door and led the way into a large room. "This was once a precinct house for the park patrol," she explained. "They checked in and out here. A sergeant kept track of shifts and arrests, and there's even a holding cell downstairs. I talked an old-timer into lending me the key."

"Yes, I've seen this building, of course, and wondered about it."

Diana lit a candle and led the way to a door, opening it to reveal a circular stone stairway. After a light climb, they emerged on the roof. Vincent shook his head and smiled down at her, for spread before them on the floor of the turret were a blanket, a picnic hamper, and a bottle of wine.

"You did all of this for me?" Vincent asked, happy and shy.

"Sure enough - and this isn't all of it."

With that, Diana sat with her back against the wall and motioned for Vincent to do the same. He gasped as he looked through one of the turret openings. In the brightly-lit concert shell, only a hundred yards distant, the orchestra was ready. The conductor gave the downbeat at that precise moment.

"Now," Diana whispered, "you'll not only hear them, you'll see them!"

"How wonderful!" Having listened to the unfamiliar opening measures, Vincent whispered, "What are they playing this evening?"

"Something special: '*An Evening with Andrew Lloyd Webber*'." When Vincent shook his head, not recognizing the composer, Diana went on, "The first half is pieces from various musicals. The second half is readings and music from *The Phantom of the Opera* with Michael Crawford doing the reading - he originated the role. I couldn't have you miss this!"

Entranced, Vincent was first fascinated by the bright spotlights gleaming on the brasses, the conductor's crisp gestures, the seated musicians all in formal suits and dark gowns. Then the music itself carried him away to wonderful places and he and Diana fell silent.

During intermission, they ate the supper and sipped the wine.

Vincent wasn't so sure about the wine at first. "I'd better not, Diana," he cautioned.

"Vincent, it's only white wine. Why not?"

"My control ... was very poor that last time I saw you. Since then, the only peace I have is

when I am in total control of my emotions. I must maintain my control every moment - so many people depend on me."

"Sure, okay - but not tonight. This is your time - time to relax. You need to enjoy yourself - remember? New experiences? This is a new experience, a new memory for you, with me. All you have to do is enjoy it."

Vincent hesitantly held out his hand, but once he accepted the glass and took a sip, he did enjoy, he did relax.

"So, what have you been up to these six weeks?" asked Diana.

That was the only opening Vincent needed. He talked non-stop of his classes; the new families; Teresa, Roberto and the signing lessons. He spoke of fitting himself back into society Below and of his resolve to get along with Father.

Diana gave him a sidewise glance. "Seems to me I've heard of something else you've been doing ... Joe Maxwell is very interested in this 'Vincent' person. You've been feeding him information on things you've seen on the streets at night, haven't you?"

"It all started that last time I saw you. I merely report what I see. It directs their investigation. But I never told him who I was," said Vincent uncomfortably.

Diana sipped wine. "I think the penny dropped anyhow: he called and asked me if I ever found this Vincent guy we'd been looking for. I said no."

After a short silence, Vincent said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you involved."

"It's okay, I can handle myself," reminded Diana casually.

Just then, an organ played a horrible discordant chord and downward arpeggio. Vincent's head snapped up. From that moment on, he was lost in the Phantom, in more ways than one.

Their similarities spoke to him, making them kindred; like Eric, the Phantom, Vincent had never understood why his differences should set him so apart. "*The Music of the Night*" filled his soul until it became his as only he and the Phantom could understand. The Phantom had created a world for what little pleasure was afforded him - he took what he wanted!

As the last note faded, Vincent threw Diana to the floor and crushed against her mouth a kiss so passionate, so uncontrolled, that for a moment she wondered if she could, in fact, take care of herself. But she found, by responding with her own passion, Vincent's moment of abandon was satisfied. He laid his head on her breast, panting; but she wouldn't let the moment pass. Lifting his face to hers, she kissed him again, letting him know that this was permissible.

Sitting up, Vincent reached for the bottle of wine. Lifting it to his mouth, he drained it, then lifted it as if in a toast.

"Here's to new experiences," he whispered almost cynically.

He liked the way the wine made him feel - as though he were shedding all the demons oppressing him.

Diana had remained lying on the blanket, looking very inviting. She hadn't been repulsed by his boldness. Vincent stroked her head and kissed her - gently, this time. They fondled and kissed one another until Vincent felt sexual passion rise in him.

This he would not allow. This demon he must control.

"Diana, no! We must not!" He pulled away from her and sat, shuddering.

A shiver went through Diana's entire body. She felt cheated. But she could tell by his tone that Vincent was pleading for both of them.

After a tense, silent minute, he began clearing away the food and dishes - a clear indication that the evening was over.

They stood outside the door by the path and said good night. Diana pressed the key into Vincent's hand and kissed him, lightly, one last time. "Here - come whenever you want ... and think of me," she whispered.

Gaily swinging the picnic basket, she turned and headed down the path. Vincent could only shake his head as he watched her leave.

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"For God's sake, Vincent, what are you doing at this time of night?"

A grumpy Father had just been awakened by the sound of someone rifling through the bookshelves.

"Looking for a book."

"Well, maybe I can help - then we can all get some sleep!" grumbled the older man as he got out of bed. "What are you looking for?"

*"The Phantom of the Opera."*

"Heavy reading for so late," Father commented as he wearily joined Vincent by the packed, high shelves. Reaching past his son for a volume, Father turned sharply, astonished.

"Vincent! Have you been drinking? What have you been doing? You, if anyone, should know the danger!"

Taken aback, Vincent stammered, "It was only ... some white wine, Father. I've, I've had wine at Winterfest - there's been no problem."

"That's different. A token glass, once a year, is one matter. But to start drinking on your own, without anyone nearby to watch for effects, that's quite another. How could you be so irresponsible?"

Vincent grabbed the book out of Father's hand and walked away. He felt like a teenager who'd been caught and, out of respect, could not defend himself. Why couldn't he shout back that he was now an adult male who needs ... who needs.

Throwing the book on his bed, Vincent grabbed his pitcher and headed to the storeroom. By the time he got there, the rage was almost blinding. Making his way to one of the barrels lining the wall, He turned the tap, letting the maturing Winterfest wine flow into the pitcher.

"What right does anyone have," he muttered, "telling me what I like and what I don't like, what I should have and what I shouldn't have?"

It was a strange combination, wine and *The Phantom of the Opera*, producing the wildest of nightmares, but Vincent was too exhausted to care. However, the Phantom had a definite impact on his dreams. The Phantom joined the monsters, but Vincent was one with him, and therefore something to be admired. The disturbing part of the dreams was that Catherine always ended up being Christine; he could capture her, but he always had to let her go. A pitcher of wine by the side of his bed helped to ease the pain.

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As the first anniversary of Catherine's death approached, Vincent was continually awakened by nightmares; his emotions seemed to be imploding.

It wasn't anything conscious. In fact, he tried very hard not to think of Catherine, knowing, as well as anyone, how painful remembrance could be. But he was falling headlong into a void. He had no control, helpless either to stop the process, or stand aside and see it objectively.

Visiting Diana helped some. Keeping busy helped. Reminding himself to stay focused helped, and Jacob ... Here, he faltered - Vincent knew that he'd forever be celebrating with joy his son's birthday and, the same occasion, his Catherine's death. There was no avoiding either ... or the linkage. There was nothing he could tell himself to ease the pain, no way he could forget her death. The day was indelibly marked.

A first birthday party was being planned for Jacob. He was now walking, talking, and a very

important part of the community Below. As he grew, he looked more and more like Catherine, especially when he smiled.

"DADDY, DADDY!" shouted Jacob, climbing up on Vincent's bed. "Birfday, me birfday!"

The day Vincent had been dreading. Slowly, he turned over, but a sturdy little boy started jumping up and down on his daddy, leaving no room for any other thought.

"It is, is it? Well, we'll just have to do something about that," said Vincent, and started tickling Jacob until they were both laughing uncontrollably.

Jacob had done his part, and so did everyone else. It was a lovely day, and at its end, Vincent spent a few quiet moments in remembrance and gratitude. He thought, considering his anticipated dread, he'd done quite well.

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Some weeks later, Mary muttered to herself in annoyance as she busied herself decorating a cake for Father's birthday. She'd been sure she could get Father to admit his exact age. After all, how could she make a proper birthday cake without writing on the proper number of years?

It would just have to do as it was. That man could be so stubborn.

A lovely dinner was planned for this special occasion, but before the festivities began, all were in for a pleasant surprise: Devin showed up. He looked like Santa Claus with a bag of goodies, making the grand gesture as always.

"You didn't think I'd miss this, did you? And it seems that my only nephew had a birthday, too, that I couldn't make," Devin commented, as he lifted Jacob high in the air, producing the desired squeals of delight. Handing the little boy a bag filled with boxes, Devin looked on with great pleasure as paper went flying in all directions. He was then introduced to those who didn't know him, including Diana. Holding on to her hand, a little longer than necessary, proved that Devin had not lost his eye for a pretty lady.

After dinner, presents and cake, Devin volunteered to take her home. Since Vincent appeared totally engrossed in playing with Jacob's new toys, she accepted. They walked down the passage in silence for a while, but both felt there was much to be said.

Diana was the first to speak. "We're just good friends."

"That's okay, you don't have to explain anything to me," responded Devin.

"Oh, I know, but I wanted you to understand. He thinks the world of you, Devin." She shrugged. "I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea."

"Wrong how? Wrong by him? Or by you?"

Again, Diana shrugged, smiling unwillingly at Devin's acuteness. "Me. I guess."

"He's shy," Devin commented, as though "shy" wasn't the word he wanted, but figured it would be.

"I'm not fooling myself," Diana said abruptly. "I know exactly what's going on. I'm not planning any farther than the next tap on my door. If and when it comes, I'll be happy to see Vincent, but I can't live my life waiting for it. I've been here for him as much as I could. As much as he'll let me."

"And I wasn't. So thanks," whispered Devin.

"Quite frankly, I don't know how he's survived. I don't know that he will," said Diana ominously.

"Really? He seemed to be doing okay tonight, and I thought maybe I'd picked up some kind of wrong message from his letters. One of the reasons I came was because I thought he could use some help about now," Devin admitted.

They'd come to the threshold nearest her loft. Stopping there, Diana burst out, "It's all a show, a front he puts on. He's been living his life so long for others, that he can't even begin to give priority to his own needs. I don't think he even knows what it is he's feeling. He needs to talk. He needs to get out some of the pain and, Lord knows, he hasn't been able to do that Below! Their way to handle this situation is not to mention Catherine, or their relationship, as if it isn't in his every fiber, his every breath, his every thought.

"I try to help him," Diana said, with a quick, random gesture, "but I got no reference - I don't know what he was like before. I can't imagine what pain he had, just trying to grow up and accept himself. You knew him before. Look and you'll see the differences, maybe know what to do, what to say, better than I can."

She turned to him, fiercely appealing.

"Well, I won't turn my back on his pain. I'll go back and see if I can get him to open up a bit." Devin frowned at the wall, then met her eyes again, remarking quietly, "You're a nice lady, Diana. I hope you don't get hurt."

"I won't deny I love him, but I know where I stand - behind Catherine, from where he's looking. In her shadow. He sees everything through her shadow. I truly hope you can help." Diana placed a kiss on Devin's scarred cheek.

"Was that for luck?" he asked sheepishly.

"Yes," whispered Diana, crossing the threshold.

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Finding Vincent's chamber dark, Devin was about to go back to Father's study.

"Come in. I'm here." Vincent's voice - but deeper and more somber than Devin had ever heard it. "No, don't light a candle! I need to sit in the dark for awhile."

As Devin's eyes adapted, he saw, by the dim light shining through the stained glass window, Vincent sitting at his table. Devin groped his way to a chair set against the cross-hatched steel support beam.

"I walked Diana home. She's quite a lady," Devin commented, to open conversation.

"Yes, she is. We've become very good friends."

"That's what she says."

"I don't know what I would have done without her," Vincent went on meditatively. "You have no idea what this time has been like for me. Until six months ago, the thought of killing myself was constant. Since then, the Abyss has been calling me."

Devin opened his mouth, then shut it. He wasn't prepared for this - Vincent was suicidal. Devin knew he had to make what he said count, but he felt so out of touch. What right did he have to tell Vincent anything? He hadn't been with him during his ordeal.

"Yeah, the Abyss," Devin hazarded finally, in what he hoped was a casual tone. "I can understand that. It draws. I've stood, staring into it, a good many times myself."

"But have you ever thought how wonderful it would be to stop the pain?" asked Vincent, so wistfully it made Devin feel his heart had turned over.

Devin cleared his throat, trying to banish the tightness. "On one or two occasions in my life," he admitted. "But there was always another adventure calling me on."

"There is nothing calling me, Devin. There is nowhere I can go. There is no one who would not be better off without me."

"You can't mean that! Everybody loves you!"

"I know that I am loved, needed ... but it's nothing that anyone else could not do," Vincent commented in a distant voice. "All my life, those close to me have had to put themselves out,

in some way, so that I could exist. Even now, everyone Below is ever vigilant: watching that I stay in control, that I don't allow ... the monster to escape."

"You're imagining things. They're just concerned for you. And what about Jacob - he needs his father," Devin argued.

"It is only that which has kept me going," Vincent allowed. "But I also know that he would be well cared for Below, if I were not here: and as he grows older, what kind of embarrassment would I be?"

"Look at it another way: growing up, he'll have questions only you can answer. You had nobody to tell you *why*: he'll have you. I remember what you went through. I mean, growing up is hard enough, but you had no examples to follow. For all that he looks like Catherine, he's your son, too."

"Yes. And the thought that he might have any of my traits alarms me. How can I help him when I can't help myself? What am I, Devin? Answer me that riddle!"

"I don't know. But you've always been bigger than life to me, even though you were 'little brother,' I think ... it was your courage, your ability to love and understand. When you were a kid, you always sided with the underdog. As chief underdog, I always admired that. I still do."

"That's just it - I identify through other people. How they see me, what they feel toward me, what I can do for them. I can't die because they would miss me - but what about *me*? I try to catch a glimpse of who I am ... and it is very frightening. I am a shell. It used to be hard, impenetrable. What was necessary for me to survive ... and for those around me to survive with me in their midst.

"And then Catherine came into my life ... and I became what she saw. What she wished me to be. I was beginning to feel comfortable with myself for the first time. Because she reflected me: because I was beginning to have a sense of self. Of course, I also saw more of the savage, the animal in me, and I had to work so hard to control it.

"Now, she is gone. And when I try to find myself, I see that hard, outer shell cracking. The interior is filled with a festering ooze of doubt, guilt, regrets, self-recrimination, a lifetime of covering one pain after another. Well, this is one pain I cannot cover. And in the attempt to push it into that ooze with the others, I have become uncontrolled and obsessive - leading to more regrets and guilt. A vicious circle leading nowhere."

"You're being way too hard on yourself, Vincent. You've never been the sort to be excessive in anything."

Vincent reached aside, then asked politely, "Would you like some wine?" Light from the window glinted off the curves of the pitcher he held out.

Deeply startled, Devin blurted, "You've been sitting here, drinking?" Forcing calm, he went on, "Well, welcome to the world. I can't claim it's right, but dull the senses it does. Yeah, I think I could use a sip."

His brain was scrambling: he'd had no idea that Vincent was in this much trouble! There were no easy answers, no quick cures ... and he was beginning to feel extremely inadequate. Yet where was Vincent to go for help? In so many ways, the world was not for Vincent - there was no help for a lost little brother who wasn't exactly human.

"No admonition, no lecture?" asked Vincent, as he handed Devin a glass of wine. There was a definite edge on his voice.

"I'm not your judge, just your brother who's wakened to his full share of hangovers himself." Devin took a few sips, then held the glass up to the light. "Here's to Catherine Chandler, my idea of the perfect woman. She was beautiful and gentle, warm and loving, courageous and understanding, and the toughest little hundred-and-five pounds I've ever come up against." He chuckled, remembering the time she'd flipped him in an elevator.

"She was discerning enough to mistrust you at once. I remember how concerned she was that you meant me harm."

A smile flickered on Vincent's face. Once he started remembering and talking about Catherine, Vincent couldn't stop.

Listening, Devin began to understand for the first time what was meant by true love, two beings becoming one, and he also wondered how, after becoming one, half a being could continue ... His tears came almost as readily as Vincent's, as he sympathized with his brother.

Sobbing now, Vincent continued, "She always thought of me first, my safety. She sacrificed so much so that we could survive. And I gave her so little in return. I could feel her love, her desire, her needs ... and I did not dare respond. Now, I find myself acting out these moments, and I become one aching need. I'm afraid of how I might satisfy this need. I have so little control left. I regret every little moment I pushed aside, every kiss I never gave her, every night I turned from her side."

He stopped, unable to go on. Convulsed with sobs, he managed a painful whisper. "Regret is the hardest of all. There is no resolution. There is no way to make it right."

"But you had to have made love to her - there's Jacob!"

"Yes, and look at the price we paid." Vincent lowered his head onto his arm.

Devin went around the table, knelt beside his brother's chair. Bending his head against Vincent's shoulder, he wept in compassion. When Vincent had quieted a bit, Devin suggested he get into bed. Devin thought he'd never seen anyone quite so weary.

After Vincent settled under the covers, Devin lit a candle and read from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, about the river boats. Then he related from personal experience what it was like to float on the river. They were transported back to another time, when they were boys and shared that chamber.

"Where does the time go?" asked Vincent hazily.

"I guess that's one thing we can't control. It just keeps marching on and we move on with it ... and it does heal, brother of mine."

"I remember ... how it was when you disappeared ..."

When he was sure Vincent was asleep, Devin laid the book silently aside.

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As much as he disliked betraying any of Vincent's confidences, Devin knew Father had to be made aware of the true state of Vincent's emotions - if nothing else, the fact that Vincent had been contemplating suicide.

Devin found Father sitting at his desk, writing in his journal. Looking up, Father remarked a bit sharply, "Well, here you are. I wondered if you were going to spend some time with your father."

"I was with Vincent; he needed to talk."

"He seems to be doing quite well, don't you think? I mean, there's been some bizarre behavior lately, and he certainly has asserted himself. But with what he's been through, I suppose it's only natural. In fact ..."

"I can't wait to find out," Devin interrupted tightly, "what you consider bizarre behavior."

Taken aback by the challenge, Father decided his glasses were in immediate need of cleaning. Having marshalled his thoughts while performing this ritual, Father said abruptly, "Well, for example, he came in here one night with the smell of liquor on his breath."

"And of course, you had to say something to him about it."

"Well, yes, of course," rejoined Father, puzzled. "I mean, he's never before caused that kind of worry."

"Oh, yes, of course. He broke one of your rules, so you had to say something. Did it ever occur to you to comfort him? To find out why he'd had a drink? It may have been perfectly innocent. But no - you had to jump to some evil conclusion, as though he'd committed some grand

crime!"

"Devin, please - it's much too late for us to start out this way. I will admit that perhaps I should be more understanding ... but Vincent is confusing us so! Up, down, from one day to the next, I can't ..."

"Let me see if I can guess. He goes along just fine for months and then does something totally out of character. Don't you see," demanded Devin earnestly, leaning over the desk, "he's trying so hard to please all of you. And what he's doing is losing himself, Father."

Suddenly somber, Devin added, "And the Abyss seems to him like the perfect way to do it. He simply wants to disappear."

They stared at each other, Father's face showing dawning shock, as Devin's implication sank in.

"No, I can't believe that," Father rejoined curtly.

"Believe it!"

Father bit his lip, frowning at the desktop. "Oh, dear God - I had no idea he was in that much pain. I had thought that by now ..."

"How long was it before my mother found you and brought you down here, after you lost Margaret?" asked Devin.

"A year."

"And how long after that did you get over the pain of losing Margaret?"

Father bent his head, taking a deep breath. "That was a low blow," he whispered.

"It's easier to hide your pain than to live with Vincent's, I guess. Be understanding, Father. I can't imagine what the next few years will bring. There's so damn much he needs to resolve. As deep as it can get. As deep as he goes."

"Have we been fooling ourselves?" Father speculated worriedly. "Have we been that naive?"

"You aren't the only ones; I think Vincent is fooling himself, too. He's still sliding, and it may take a long time yet before he reaches bottom. What I heard from him tonight ...."

Devin shook his head and cast himself into a chair.

"I have no idea how he's ever going to put all the pieces together. He tries to be everything you and everyone down here needs him to be - that's one level. Next, there's the obligation he feels to Catherine and those she left behind. Diana, she gives him some comfort, but to him, she's something else to be kept separate and apart. A responsibility. Jacob has to be cared for - another responsibility. And under all this, Father, is a person who's never been sure of what he is. Now, add to this the mourning process, and controlling the living daylight out of himself

to keep his dark side hidden, and you've got a grade A mess and somebody who doesn't really want to be here .... Doesn't want to *be* at all, anymore." Devin rubbed his eyes wearily.

"He never gave any indication, I had no idea!" exclaimed Father.

"I don't have the answers, Father. I don't know that anyone does. He may just have to figure this out for himself. All I knew was that you had to know."

"Thank you, Devin. Will you be staying long?"

"About a week."

"Good, good. Maybe you and I can .... Devin, can we find out way to some understanding, you and I? Can we find common ground in our concern for Vincent, be as understanding of each other as we wish to be of him?" asked a very tired Father.

"Get some sleep, old man. Tomorrow is another day." Rising, Devin bent to kiss Father's head before leaving the study.

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When Vincent awoke the next morning, he didn't know exactly how to face Devin. Somehow, he didn't have the courage to continue last night's raw honesty. It was much easier to pretend.

"Good morning, everyone. It was a splendid party," he said, entering the common dining room. He pulled up a chair to the table where Father, Devin, and several others were breakfasting. "Devin, I thought I might take some time off: we could camp by the underground river, as we used to."

"Sounds good, Vincent," agreed Devin.

Idle chatter went on around the breakfast table, until Jacob and Cathy got into a tussle. She was almost three years old and very much his bossy older "sister." Jacob didn't like being told what to do, and Cathy didn't like her authority being questioned. Lena tried to intervene, but oatmeal was being splattered in all directions by two angry children.

"Lena, please do something with your child!" admonished Father as he became the target for a well-placed spoonful of oatmeal.

"Your child should learn some manners," said Pascal, ducking.

"**JACOB!**" shouted Vincent as he tried to get around the table with all the adults jumping in his way. "Lena! Stop her, stop that child!"

"**HEY, YOU!**" yelled Devin while holding up one arm. "**YOU!** Doesn't the child have a name?"

What's her name?"

It was as though someone had pushed a stake into a cog. The machinery ground to a halt, except of course for the two naughty children. No one answered Devin's innocent question.

Vincent shoved away from the table so suddenly that everything on it rocked or fell over. *"For God's sake, someone say it – someone say the dreaded name! IT'S CATHERINE! HER NAME IS CATHERINE,"* he roared, as he ran from the room.

The children started screaming, but the adults held stunned poses, staring after Vincent.

"Well, what was that all about?" asked Father blankly.

"I'll go after him," said Devin, running after his brother.

It didn't take him long to find Vincent, sitting on the ledge in the Chamber of the Falls.

"Do you feel better now, after that display?" Devin asked acidly, leaning in the entrance.

"That's one of the most irritating things! They won't talk about Catherine," Vincent responded heatedly, without turning. "I don't feel comfortable talking about her with any of them. Last night was the first time in over a year that I actually had a chance to remember, to share the wonder of her, our delight, our love ... my grief."

"I guess they just wanted to shield you from the pain of her memory."

"Shield me, always protecting and cautioning me! When do I do what I want? How do I take care of what I need? Why must I always think about others? Devin, I'm so tired," Vincent burst out despairingly.

"Do you really know what you want, Vincent?"

"No. I can no longer have what I want," answered Vincent, with a terrible flatness.

Coming up behind, Devin stood over his brother and began rubbing his shoulders. Once again he felt helpless; he didn't know what to give.

"Maybe, that's the answer, Vincent: maybe you have to find yourself before you know what you need." Devin tried to be comforting.

"And it is of that, that I am most afraid."

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The two brothers spent the next week together, camping on the bank of the underground river. They even built a raft and explored secret caverns left by the river's intrusion into solid

rock. It was great fun, but more importantly, it was what they both needed. Vincent and Devin could now close that chapter of their childhood and forge a new relationship as adults. For this, Vincent was grateful, but it also made him reflect that perhaps he needed to look at many things in his life through an adult perspective. Not with Father's eyes, nor Mary's. With his own - with all the uniqueness of their particular vision.

The time finally came for Devin to say good-bye. He had stayed the week, and the small farm he'd rented was a two-man operation: it wouldn't be fair to Charles to stay longer.

Somehow, Devin felt changed by this visit. He felt lucky that he'd learned very early to be master of his life; now he also felt lucky to have this family to come home to. Devin contrasted his life with Vincent's, and for the first time knew he was the fortunate one. To see this paragon, this pillar, so vulnerable, crumbling from the inside out, made Devin realize that all of Vincent's life had been a struggle.

He himself could leave the tunnels and did, anytime he chose; Vincent couldn't - not for any extended time. Devin learned through experiencing the world; Vincent learned the world at one remove, through books, knowing all the while it could never be his. Devin tasted the many cultures of the world and forged relationships within those cultures. Vincent only had Below ... and, diverse as it was in personalities, that community's protecting and nurturing was suffocating him. Devin feared Vincent might end up burying himself in one of those secret caverns, never again required to mold himself to others' ideals.

The final afternoon, Devin persuaded Father to forgo a class and spend the time with him.

In this week, having a father also became precious to him. This was his biological father; watching, Devin could see so many similarities in their behavior - the way they both squared their shoulders, or hesitated a bit just before saying something of import, or waved a hand for emphasis. Even the tones of their voices were similar.

Devin couldn't ask enough questions about his father's past - where Jacob Wells had come from, his parents and family background. As the afternoon went on, Devin knew this was something he'd lacked, missed. But he was fortunate - he had a father to make all the connections. Deep inside, he wept for Vincent. How would Vincent ever begin to put all those inner pieces together, as Devin was doing? Vincent had nowhere to start, no one to explain to him the mysteries of the origin of his self.

Vincent was right - what was he? The eternal question ... which for Vincent could never be answered.

This time around, Devin found it hard to say good-bye. He held onto Father, a lingering embrace that conveyed many emotions.

"I do love you, old man. I have such admiration for everything you've done in your life. I'll try to be worthy of the legacy," said Devin, as he turned quickly and joined Vincent, who's been waiting, with Devin's pack, outside Father's study.

They walked in silence for some distance. It was Vincent who first spoke: "What you just said will sustain Father for a long time. I fear he will need all of his strength."

Devin shot him a sharp glance. "That's a weird thing to say. Do you foresee trouble?"

"I know," Vincent responded somberly, "that I am in a lot more trouble than I or anyone else will admit. I am being pulled, uncontrolled, into myself ... and the journey is unknown and frightening. I don't know what I will do or say. Father has always been my confidante, my counselor. I have nowhere else to turn. Yet, I somehow know he cannot help me this time. This time, I cannot be what he thinks I should be. This time ... I must be what I am."

"Vincent, I have to ask - do you mean the dark side of your nature? The beast?"

"Perhaps ... No - I haven't even begun to delve into that aspect. No, I'm questioning *me*. What would I be without the ethic I've been so carefully taught? What would I be without this community? What do I believe in? I believed in Catherine."

"And now?"

"Nothing," replied Vincent.

They continued along to the next junction. Then Devin said, "I know about that. I've had to answer those questions, too - not just once and for all, but over and over. Would I choose to live by Father's rules, Father's values? Once, the answer was easy: no. Now ... I'd have to say, at least sometimes."

Vincent went on, "It put such constraints on my relationship with Catherine. The pain it caused both of us ... and in the end, it took my dark side to bring us to our point of passion. And it was that dark moment of betrayal of ethic that has brought me my only consolation, Jacob. Was our oneness, Catherine's and mine, meant to be, all along?"

"Don't ask me - only you can say what's right for you. But just because I don't have the answers doesn't mean I won't be thinking about the question. And about you. And what you're going through. Like always, I seem to leave you in an awful mess."

They'd come to the gate. As Vincent pushed it open, Devin placed his hand on Vincent's shoulder and took a moment to stare into those troubled blue eyes. He and Vincent shared an embrace, then Devin walked out into the park. Turning, he shouted, "Your little boy is one beautiful kid. Somehow, I think he may be your answer."

Vincent watched until Devin was out of sight, swallowing the feeling of abandonment that still

lingered after all this time.

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The time with Devin, taking a week off, revitalized Vincent.

There was very little stress in his life. He tried to keep it that way, promising himself that he wouldn't ignore his problems. He only hoped that they would manifest themselves one at a time, so he could work through and try to understand each emotion.

Lena became even more of a help with Jacob. It became more and more difficult for Vincent to keep his son with him while going about the daily tasks. That precocious little boy had to be into everything. Jacob was tall for his age and had unusually good coordination and dexterity, making him as dangerous at building sites as he was in the classroom. So it was decided that Lena would take Jacob during the day as well as during the nights when Vincent wished to go Above.

This arrangement worked well, giving Cathy a playmate and making Lena feel they were part of Vincent's family.

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Catherine's day book lay open on Vincent's table. March 13 - Jenny's birthday. Had a whole year passed? Vincent wondered. "We do manage to survive, don't we?" he muttered as he ran his finger over the page.

Making the arrangements for her traditional rose to be sent made him feel close to her, and therefore close to Catherine. He hoped the gift wouldn't be such a shock for Jenny this year and determined not to write another note. He had to agree with Father on that: it could be dangerous for all of them.

This birthday started out with better promise for Jenny.

For one thing, Joe had remembered and actually asked her for dinner to celebrate. She made plans for lunch, taking her secretary to the diner; she wasn't going to fall into self-pity, as she had the year before.

As they returned to the office, they noticed the door to the inner office was ajar. Jenny smiled and restrained her secretary from rushing in ahead of her. She thought she knew the reason.

She wasn't disappointed: the red rose was lying across the center of her desk.

"Thank you, Vincent," Jenny whispered. "Mystery man!"

Much later that night, Vincent paced his chamber. It was almost as though he could feel Jenny - as though the rose connected them for that one day, the special time Jenny was immersed in her devotion to Catherine.

It drew him; despite all his good intentions, it drew him.

He made his way to Diana's apartment, prompted only by the vague thought that a visit Above would make him feel better. Finding the loft empty, however, Vincent let himself in and began pacing her living room. What harm could one phone call do? How wonderful to hear the voice of someone who also loved Catherine!

Almost as in a dream, Vincent touched the numbers on the telephone.

"Hello! Hello, who is this?" asked Jenny.

"You received the rose - I can tell," said Vincent.

A shock went through Jenny. She had never heard such a voice. But, more than that, she'd never felt such love and pain.

"Vincent? Yes, thank you," she replied softly.

"I must go. I should never have called."

"No, wait. I want to tell you that I know you were that special someone in Cathy's life, and that you made her very happy."

"She told you of me?" Vincent's surprise was plain in his voice.

"She didn't have to: she radiated with you. Will we ever meet, Vincent?"

"I don't think that would be possible. Good-bye, Jenny."

Jenny stared at the still receiver, feeling somehow honored by that short contact with Vincent.

He, on the other hand, couldn't believe he'd been so bold. He had actually talked to Jenny ... and intruded, uninvited, into Diana's apartment to do it. With a shaking hand, he scrawled a note.

*Dear Diana,*

*I came, but you were not here. I used your telephone.*

*Vincent*

For some reason, he needed to confess his indiscretion.

Taking his time, walking slowly through the streets, Vincent had to admit that even though he should be sorry for what he'd done, it make him feel good. He couldn't deny that it was what he needed to do.

He stood against a tree in the park, staring up toward the balcony that once belonged to Catherine. What a time that had been! But at least now, he could look back and remember. *What a hollow word, "remember,"* thought Vincent with bitterness.

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The next six months went by in relative peace. The signing classes were going well, and Lena had started bringing Cathy and Jacob because they enjoyed playing with Roberto, who evidently thought all the hand motions were a wonderful game. Vincent was pleased at everyone's effort.

He was feeling good, really good, and enjoying the time he spent with Jacob.

Playing mind games to avoid confrontation with Father, trying to be the best father for Jacob, nurturing and protecting his family, Lena, Jacob, and Cathy, wandering the streets nightly, being drawn to Diana, and crime-fighting, all began colliding in Vincent's life. There was no time for Vincent: his mind still kept him from admitting he was in trouble.

He judged he'd become very adept in juggling all these components of his life - until Jacob's second birthday.

Lena was all too anxious and willing to plan Jacob's party, with Vincent's approval on everything.

She noticed how haggard he was looking, and how difficult he found it to pay steady attention to anything for more than a minute or two.

"Do you like the idea of a teddy bear cake, Vincent? Vincent!"

"Oh, yes. Wonderful. And have William write, Happy Birthday, Two Years ..." Before Vincent could finish the sentence, a chill came over him. They'd been sitting on opposite sides at the table in his chamber. He quietly slumped forward and began to sob. Rising to stand behind him, Lena started to rub his shoulders, but found herself leaning against his back, hugging him and kissing the back of his neck.

"I understand, sweetheart. It's still so hard for you. I'll be here. I can help." She stroked his head.

Suddenly, Vincent turned and pulled Lena against him, kissing her deeply. His mind saw Catherine; his hands fondled Lena. She unbuttoned the front of her dress and offered him her breast, which he tenderly kissed.

Nearby voices brought them to their senses. Quickly tidying herself, Lena whispered, "Later. I'll come to you later."

Father and William entered to arrange the final preparations for the party that evening.

"We were just doing that, Father," admitted Lena. "Here are the plans for the cake. Is that okay?" Lena handed a sketch to William.

"No problem! The children are very anxious to get this started. They've been making presents for Jacob for a month, lucky little boy!" remarked William good-naturedly.

"Thank you all very much for all you have done for us," Vincent commented. "I know that, at times, it seems that I don't appreciate it, but I do."

"Are you well?" asked Father, struck by what seemed to him an odd finality to his son's statement. The older man hadn't forgotten that this was also the anniversary of Catherine's death, and Devin's warning of suicide still loomed.

Father needn't have worried about physical suicide; it was the suicide of Vincent's psyche which was imminent.

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Jacob had a wonderful time at his party, tearing open the presents, squealing with delight as he, too, sang *Happy Birthday*, blowing out the candles and eating his cake with messy enthusiasm. Everyone, including Diana, joined in, but at the same time kept an eye on a very quiet Vincent, who seemed quite detached. He was going through the motions, but his eyes were sad and his mood was distant.

Diana arranged to have Mouse walk her to the tunnel entrance after the celebration, feeling that Vincent needed to be by himself. The festivities over, everyone quietly left Father's study as they gave a backward glance to a staring Vincent, clutching Jacob tightly. It wasn't long after, Vincent's tears began to flow.

"Daddy, don't cry," comforted Jacob as he reached for a napkin and stood in his father's lap. Wiping the wet cheeks, he repeated, "Don't cry - Jacob loves you."

Vincent leaned his head against Jacob's chest and sobbed, "I love you, too, precious child. Come - it's time for us to go to bed."

"Daddy tired?"

"Yes. Daddy is very tired. All I want is just one good night's sleep."

Jacob was excited and bounced on Vincent for awhile, but soon the full day had its effect and both father and son fell asleep. Vincent woke after an hour and put his son in his crib, returning to his bed. But he couldn't get back to sleep. That awful weight was crushing him again. The more he tried not to think of Catherine, the more he was oppressed by a sense of her presence. Although he tried to hold back the tears, he needed to cry.

Finally giving in, he wept for what seemed like hours; curled up in his bed, he wept.

"It's all right, I'm here now." A cool, soothing voice came out of the dark. A soft hand glided across his brow. Silk tantalized his back as a warm body molded itself to him. "I'll make the pain go away. I know how to do that."

A supple arm reached over him, holding and rocking gently. Then the soft hand began exploring under his nightshirt, the fingertips making swirling motions over the curls on his chest. Vincent heaved a deep breath as an electric current seemed to go through him. An instant of hesitation, one glimmer of the former Vincent, made him wince. But his emotional neediness and his evident passion, erect and strong, caused him to forget all else but that willing body beside him, burning with its own desire.

A steady, even pressure on his shoulder turned Vincent on his back as an experienced hand lowered his sweat pants. A small hand covered his and moved it to the single tie across her bosom. Taking his finger and thumb, she untied the silken cord, allowing her breasts to bloom forth.

He lifted his head and tenderly kissed their softness, simultaneously aware that she was opening over him and settling down on him, her heat closing around his, deeply impaled upon him - an indescribable sensation. His last lucid thought was *This is better than wine!*

Lena was very much the teacher, gently guiding her lover to the brink of their lingering climax. It was honest sexual fulfillment for both of them: but with different meanings for each.

Lena stayed by his side only until his breathing became quiet and regular. Vincent was still struggling to become lucid, as his glazed eyes focused at last on Lena as she left his chamber. The blood was racing through his veins, causing heat to rise from his chest and neck. His thighs quivered. Throwing back the quilt, he stood, trembling.

The sensations were tumbling through him, overlapping. What was he to feel? What did he feel? He felt drained - every thought, every memory, every ethic had left him. He felt shamed ... and intensely *alive*.

"What have I done?" he moaned, dropping to his knees as if beseeching some unseen god. His

experience with Lena was something he'd always fought against, convinced it could never be for him. Never *right* for him - because he was different. This belief had been ingrained into his moral fiber. The collapse of that certainty took all other certainties with it.

Vincent cried out and ran from his chamber.

Perhaps the voices of the Whispering Gallery could still the voices in his head. Vincent stared down into the Abyss, trying to assuage his guilt.

"It was wonderful, Vincent. I have waited so long for those sweet sensations!"

Vincent's head snapped up. Catherine was standing on the other side of the bridge, beckoning to him. He started for her - slowly, then hurrying, exclaiming, "Yes, you're right. I never felt anything like that. It numbed all the pain and created its own joy."

"Don't be afraid to want it, Vincent. Just reach for me, I'm here."

Suddenly, from the other side of the bridge came another voice ... the same, yet harder, colder. As Vincent whirled in mid-span, the second voice declared, "That's what I had been trying to tell you. Do you know how many times you left me with a desire so deep it was painful? I would have given you all of that, all of it, if you had only allowed me into your bed or come into mine."

"Catherine, please - don't."

"But no, I was understanding. I trusted in you, the things that were important to you. Your integrity was sterling. I envied it. I learned from it. You were the paragon upon which I based my life. I wanted you night after night and you turned from me, so I died in bitterness. You betrayed me!" this other Catherine accused.

"No! You betrayed me! You left me! You left me so alone. What right do you have to come here now, after all this time, and invade my mind, my dreams, my conscience? Leave me! Let me have some peace. Have I no right to some peace, some pleasure?" sobbed Vincent.

"It was supposed to be *my* pleasure. To die in regret is to wander for eternity. You did this to me!" the spectre charged.

Vincent shouted, "*Get out of my life! I HATE you for what I have become!*" Racing toward the spectre, he lashed out - but it evaporated before the blow and was gone. He ran on through the place it had been. But there was no escape - not even when he'd reached the park. Every time he stopped for a moment or dared to look back, Catherine would point an accusing finger. He had to rid himself of her; she had no right interfering. She had abandoned him and their child. She'd never know the burden he had to bear - aloneness!

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The next morning as Diana sat, engrossed, at her computer, the phone rang.

"Bennett."

"Diana, I've asked you this before and I can kind of understand your denial, but can you reach this Vincent guy?"

"Joe? What are you talking about? Vincent who?"

"Okay, we're going to play this old record again," came Joe's unimpressed reply. "He's gone too far this time. Just a good thing nobody was home."

"Home where? Slow down and tell me what this is all about," suggested Diana cautiously, huddling the receiver against her shoulder with a sinking feeling.

"Last night, both sets of French doors to the balcony of Cathy Chandler's old apartment were completely smashed. Torn off their hinges. The couple who live there now were away, got home this morning - good thing, huh? How do you explain damage like that on a calm spring evening to property in a high-rise?"

Diana took a deep breath, wondering what could have happened to Vincent after she left the party. "Gee, I don't know."

"Doesn't this seem the least little bit familiar to you? Like, how did Cathy's body get up seventeen floors with nobody seeing anything ...? Well, guess what? No one saw anything last night, either."

Joe's heavy sarcasm sounded almost cheerful, not giving a nickel's credit to Diana's dumb act.

"Why did you zero in on this Vincent?" asked Diana.

"Aw, come on! I'm not as stupid as you think I am. I've even talked to him. Well, he didn't come right out and admit that it was him, but I know it was Vincent. We're getting to be real pals."

"Oh, I see," Diana responded blankly.

"Just tell him to stay clear. Because there are charges waiting to fall on somebody. The owners of that apartment are really pissed."

"Do you know what yesterday was, Joe?" asked Diana slowly.

"Yeah, I know," whispered Joe. "A bad day for all of us who loved her."

"Well, maybe it was just her spirit asserting herself. Like a poltergeist?"

"Now, that sounds like some of your Ouija board mumbo-jumbo. Listen, I know we'll never solve this mystery either, but it's damn frustrating to know the answer and not be able to do anything about it, know what I mean?"

"I sure do. Bye, Joe." Diana hung up the phone with a sense of foreboding.

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Father didn't know what to expect from Vincent that morning; he was prepared for almost anything. Hearing Vincent's cries, the night before, Father had rushed to the Whispering Gallery, but he was too late. He couldn't keep up as his son rushed out into the park Above.

After a worried night, Father's relief was evident when Vincent showed up for the communal breakfast with Jacob riding on his shoulders.

Good morning, everyone! If we didn't thank you last night, I wish to do so now. A very wonderful party.

"Jacob," Vincent prompted, and waited.

"Sank you for wonnerful party! Wee!" the little boy exclaimed, as he started bouncing on his father's shoulders.

Vincent was more than gracious throughout the entire meal, engaging Father in conversation on a number of subjects. When the dining hall emptied and the two men were left alone, Father looked his son directly in the eyes, trying to judge this new shift in attitude.

"I know, I know - you're wondering about the change in me," stated Vincent, before Father had actually said anything.

Continuing to regard his son searchingly, Father commented, "Well, I mean, it is rather amazing."

"I can't explain it. All I know is that I woke up this morning ... and I was happy, for the first time in two years. I'm happy. I think I've actually turned some kind of corner, Father. Perhaps it's time for me to start living again. And I intend to do a very good job of it."

"Vincent ... did you have a nightmare last night?" Father inquired carefully, recalling Vincent's cries.

"I don't remember." First offering the plate to Father, Vincent took the last piece of toast, adding with cheerful indifference, "I may have. But who cares, if you can't remember!"

"I'm glad to see you ..."

Father didn't get a chance to continue as Vincent called to William, who was clearing a nearby table.

"Here, I'll finish those muffins. I'm starved, and they're delicious!" Collecting muffins from the tray William slid within his reach, Vincent commented, "I'll take them with me: I want to catch up with Lena and Teresa."

With this, Vincent was out of the dining room, stuffing muffins into his pockets as he went. Collecting the tray, William threw Father a dubious glance. "Was that Vincent who just left here?"

"Yes, I know - it's rather hard to believe," said Father, shaking his head.

"A tad too flamboyant to suit me," William muttered.

"What didn't you care for?" Father asked dryly, trying not to smile. "The red satin shirt or the purple suede vest?"

"Looked like he raided a clown's closet," grumbled William.

"I don't know - I think the combination was, was ... interesting. We can't always be choosy, you know."

"Don't have to be *blind*," William muttered, trudging back to his stove, which at least didn't burst into rainbow colors or acquire spots.

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Hurrying along, Vincent picked up the tapped message that Diana was on her way down. He changed his direction and went to meet her. Approaching, he noticed she was disturbed.

"Diana, what is it? What's wrong?"

"You went out last night?"

"I don't think so. I was very tired and went directly to bed. I had a good night's sleep for a change."

"Are you sure? Vincent, Catherine's old place was vandalized last night. The balcony doors were ripped off, but not a mark on the front door."

"But Diana, it was all a dream!"

"There's an awful lot of physical evidence for a dream." Diana responded tightly, folding her arms. "Joe called me this morning, wanted to know if I could get in touch with you. This is very

important, Vincent. You can't have any more contact with him. He'd have no choice but to try to investigate you. He knows as well as I do, it had to be you."

"I understand," whispered a subdued Vincent. "I always seem to be getting you in trouble. I'm sorry. I won't contact Joe again."

As he turned away, Diana called hastily, urgently, "But, please, come and see me. We have to at least talk about this."

But Vincent was already on his way back down to his chamber.

If that much was real, he thought, then so was everything else - everything.

Catherine had come to him and they'd made love ... or was it, Lena? They blurred pleasantly into remembered sensations. Just thinking about it made him smile. It still felt good. He couldn't imagine why he didn't feel guilty about it anymore. Rather, he now felt it was his right. After denying himself, all these years, it was his right. And Lena was a willing partner.

He had to see her, had to see if she still felt that way. Later: now, he had to teach the signing class.

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As the classmembers gathered in Vincent's chamber, he noticed that Jacob had followed Lena and settled alertly in front of his father.

"Jacob, what are you doing here? I thought we had decided that you were going to try to stay with Mary today," Vincent began sternly.

Rebecca caught Vincent's eye, then drew him aside. "Did you know that Jacob knows how to sign? It's very limited at his age, of course, but he loves it. I caught him practicing, and we've been doing it ever since. When we pass in the tunnels, we sign messages to each other. He's a very bright little boy, Vincent. You should be very proud of him."

Another revelation - the morning was full of them.

Vincent looked down at his son's smiling little face and shook his head. Had Jacob grown and developed so much without Vincent's noticing? Where had he been for two years? Life was going to be different.

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Vincent threw himself into enjoyment, much to Lena's delight. They spent the night locked in each other's arms, making love, except for the nights he went Above - more often than Lena liked.

Winterfest was approaching, with all of the exciting preparations. The celebration always held promise of renewal and this year, Father hoped it would serve to renew Vincent's faith in all of his blessings.

Everyone had been taking turns watching Vincent, trying not to be conspicuous, but Vincent had not given any indication that he was contemplating suicide, as Devin had warned. Perhaps it had been an impulse, a moment of desperation that, once spoken, no longer held any attraction. Or at least, that was what Father hoped.

In checking the food supplies, William made a discovery; someone had been tapping the wine kegs.

"Father, just look at these. Every one's been opened and some wine taken out, to keep anybody from noticing."

"Who could have done such a thing? We've never had this problem before," Father replied, frowning. "Is a great deal missing?"

"All in all, when you measure the total amount, yeah - somebody's been drinking a awful lot of wine," confirmed William.

"There will be enough, won't there?"

"Oh, sure. I always have enough." William assured him.

"Well, let's be glad of that, for now. I don't want to dampen the celebration. We'll keep an eye out for the culprit after Winterfest," Father decided.

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The celebration was splendid, as usual. As usual, the helpers filled the Great Hall, enjoying the hospitality of all Below. A strange interaction was beginning to happen, however. Lena had begun to feel jealous of Diana; after all, Vincent and Jacob were part of *her* family. Lena stuck close by his elbow, making both Diana and Vincent a bit uncomfortable. And when they left together, for Vincent to escort Diana home, Lena glared after them.

Diana had seemed unusually quiet all evening, and Vincent took this as a cue that she'd prefer to be alone, or perhaps was preoccupied with a difficult case. As he prepared to leave her in the alley behind her building, Diana tugged on his sleeve. Turning, Vincent was surprised to

see her with her arms outstretched.

"I need a hug tonight, Vincent." Diana wasn't timid about asking for what she wanted.

Holding her close, Vincent felt the familiar pang of another's fear. "What is it, Diana? Is it a case you're working on? What's frightening you?"

"Do you have to hurry back?" Diana asked quietly, looking into his face.

"No," Vincent admitted, deciding.

By the time she opened the roof door, Vincent was waiting outside it. Letting him in, Diana led him to her desk, pointing to the corkboard wall. Carefully studying each picture posted there, he gave Diana an inquiring look.

"Thirteen," she said. "There have been thirteen women, prostitutes, murdered in the past six months. Shot, at close range. At first it seemed like just a few isolated cases. Now we suspect a serial killer. The D.A.'s office doesn't want to call it that, but the newspapers have already begun to pick up on the number and similarity of the cases. I've been working on this one two months, at Joe's request. I must be getting very close - yesterday, I found this stuck in my mailbox. No envelope." Diana handed Vincent a typed note.

*Dear Lady Cop,*

*One bitch is like another to me. If I decide to do you, I do you.*

"Diana! He knows you; this is very real danger!" exclaimed Vincent.

"The worst part is, I have no idea who he is. I've just been investigating the same as always - I get a feeling and I move on it. If I've stumbled across this pervert, I didn't realize it," Diana commented.

"Has Joe seen this?"

"Sure, and he wanted to put a twenty-four hour guard on me. But besides driving me nuts and ruining my social life, a full-time babysitter would only scare this joker away. I think our only chance of getting him is to keep the pressure on him and lure him here to get me."

"No!" shouted Vincent. "There has to be a better way. What did Joe say?"

"The same thing - no. They've been out on the streets cautioning the hookers, asking questions, trying to get a lead on anybody weirder than average. The police department has doubled patrols, but they can't be everywhere all the time." Diana shrugged, spreading her hands as if displaying the problem.

"But so obvious an investigation merely sends the killer to another place," Vincent protested.

"Well, we've put out plainclothes decoys, if you can call that kind of outfit *plain* ... And nothing. Zip."

"Diana, you need some rest. I'll stay here tonight," offered Vincent.

"Thanks. You're right. I can use the sleep." Diana stepped into Vincent's arms, feeling safe and reassured. She then pulled down his tawny head and kissed him - not a kiss of gratitude, but a kiss of passion. "I'd feel even safer if you were close. My bed sleeps two," Diana hinted, with the glint of a smile.

"The offer is duly noted, and I may collect on it some day, but for tonight, I think I'd serve you best out here, on guard."

Diana tugged at his fingers, pleading with her eyes. "There's service ... and then there's *service*."

Vincent only lowered his eyes, shaking his head. Embarrassed, he whispered, "Someday," much to his surprise.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Diana warned over her shoulder, disappearing into the bedroom.

Waiting until all was quiet, Vincent made a telephone call. "Is this Joe Maxwell?"

Joe sat up in bed, instantly recognizing the voice. He thought he'd never hear from this mysterious caller again, considering the warning he'd given. Maybe Diana didn't know him, after all - or hadn't passed the warning along. He decided to play it cool and see what information he could get.

"Yeah, I want to thank you for the ... uh ... evidence you dug up last time. Just what we needed. What can I do for you?"

"I understand there is concern a serial killer may be preying on women. If I were to leave the person on your doorstep, could you prosecute?" asked Vincent.

Diana's case: a linkage. She *had* to know this guy! Joe couldn't figure - had his warning been passed on, and simply ignored?

"Uh, listen, we can't have a vigilante running around, either. What I need is solid evidence. I need a case that'll stand up in court. We want to nail this guy for good, not scare him for a night. Understand?"

"Completely."

"Vincent?" Joe took a chance on using this name, but all that won him was a dead receiver.

"Here we go again!" exclaimed Joe as he hung up. Where could this possibly lead?

Returning to the corkboard, Vincent once again studied the pictures, sad for the young lives cruelly cut short. Finally, his attention shifted to a map stuck with colored pins. A code in the margin identified red pins for where the woman was last seen; blue pins marked where their bodies were found. Connecting one with the other, case by case, revealed some distance between.

"He has a vehicle," Vincent murmured, thinking aloud. "He knows Diana. He's either been here or had someone deliver the note. She's been to all of these places, questioned friends of the victims, gone to their favorite corners ... these women worked corners." Years of observing had taught him prostitutes' routines of soliciting customers. "Yes, a vehicle."

He went up to Diana's roof. Looking down, he noticed two parked cars and a pick-up truck. He scanned all the adjoining streets, making a circle of the rooftop, but at this time of night there was very little activity - a taxi: two more cars passing; another parked on a side street. This car caught Vincent's attention: the driver, a man, had his window rolled down and was leaning out, looking toward the building's upper floors.

Vincent kept vigil until the car pulled away, after about half an hour, noting that it turned to head downtown. Every instinct told Vincent to follow, but he'd promised Diana to keep watch, and he couldn't be sure the man in that car was the killer. But he memorized the color and make of the car and its license number.

When he returned Below, before dawn, Vincent put the information on the pipes, asking for the helpers' assistance. If this car was on the streets, they'd find it.

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Much to Lena's despair, Vincent returned every night to Diana's apartment, without so much as an explanation for leaving Jacob so often. Besides feeling jealous, she felt he was taking advantage of her.

It was Christmas time and she wanted to involve Vincent in preparations, especially for Jacob. So a week after he'd started guarding Diana, Lena showed up in his chamber. It was about ten o'clock in the morning but Vincent had slept late after his nightlong vigil. Lena stood over him, hungrily taking in every curve, every muscle. Taking a deep breath to subdue her passion, Lena gently touched his shoulder.

"Vincent, I'd like to talk to you."

Turning over, he looked up into Lena's eyes. "What is it?" he asked, then suddenly sat up. "Jacob - is Jacob all right?"

"Yes," Lena assured him, amused by the sight of Vincent in sweat pants and night shirt, his hair all tousled ... "Don't worry, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you about things we should be doing for the holidays. I thought maybe we'd have a picnic lunch. That way, you can spend some time with Jacob and we can discuss some things ... He misses you, Vincent."

"You shouldn't go to all that trouble ..."

"It's no trouble. I have it all planned. Everything's ready, as soon as you are."

Vincent could see how anxious Lena was to please him; he couldn't refuse.

"All right. Where?"

"We'll meet you at the ledge of the Chamber of the Falls," replied Lena, strolling out, well pleased.

Vincent sat at the edge of his bed, turning his head from side to side to stretch his stiff neck muscles. His vigil had tired him, but he felt it had been worthwhile, in more ways than keeping Diana from immediate harm. In the six nights he'd been watching, Vincent had narrowed down the suspect vehicles to four. They'd come back repeatedly and parked without anyone getting out. The helpers had found and identified two - unmarked police cars, plainly detailed to Diana's protection. He was waiting for news on the other two, especially the one he'd seen the first night of his vigil. It had been back several times and each time, parked in a different place. Who was watching whom, Vincent wondered.

Absorbed in his thoughts as he dressed and started for the Chamber of the Falls, he was startled when Father called to him as he passed the study.

"Vincent, I've been trying to talk to you all week. We have a serious problem and something must be done."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Father. I've been busy," explained Vincent, standing at the head of the stairs.

"Yes, I know. Involved with Diana, it seems," said Father, almost accusing.

"Let's not get started, Father," Vincent snapped ... then caught himself up short, held his temper, and changed his tone and the subject. "What is this pressing problem?"

"Well, I mean, I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Someone is getting into the wine kegs in the storeroom," announced Father, highly indignant.

Feeling again like a teenager on the spot, Vincent took a deep, steadying breath. Was Father asking if he knew anything about it?

"Really," he responded, all seriousness.

Father continued, "I assigned extra sentries to keep a special watch on the storeroom, as well as the intersection, hoping to identify the culprit. But it's a matter of security: your responsibility. And whether or not you're ... *busy*, Vincent, you must start spending more of your time here. We are in need of you."

"Oh, I think you've taken care of the problem," said Vincent, avoiding a discussion and returning to the passage, before Father could mount any further arguments.

He felt almost giddy. He couldn't believe he hadn't blurted out a confession of his nightly tipling. What was happening to him? This was the sort of sly escapade one might have expected of the young Mitch Denton, or even of Devin. But Vincent had always tried to be honest; it had always been expected that Vincent would tell the truth.

His twinge of conscience was overcome by a feeling of power and freedom. He'd evaded Father's rules ... and gotten away with it! An additional benefit suddenly occurred to him; the more people occupied with sentry duty, the fewer would be available to guard him.

He'd been very much aware of those following him, deflecting him from paths that led to the Abyss, giving him covert, assessing glances. More and more, he'd had the sense of being spied on, mistrusted. Their solicitude, however well-meant, had come to constitute to Vincent a continual and irritating nuisance.

Having neatly skirted the issue of the missing wine, Vincent continued toward the appointed ledge.

"DADDY, DADDY!" shouted Jacob happily, as Vincent emerged onto the ledge that projected from the immense cavern. Pulling at his father's hand, Jacob demanded, "Come here!"

Lena had wisely delegated Jacob to start the picnic. He sat Vincent down and put a napkin under his chin, then stuck a piece of cheese in his father's large furry hand. Then Jacob turned silly, sitting down hard and falling over backwards, chortling.

"Eat, Daddy - picnic!" he exclaimed as he looked at Vincent through his lifted legs.

"He's showing off for you, Vincent," Lena observed. "You definitely should spend more time with him."

"I know. I feel it too," Vincent agreed.

"Here, Caffy," Jacob said, offering the little girl a piece of cheese. Turning, Jacob happily held out another piece. "Here, Mommy."

"I ... I ... Oh, please, Vincent. It's all right," stammered Lena, as she tried to interpret the look of pain and confusion on Vincent's face.

He grabbed Jacob and held him close, too close - startling and frightening the little boy, who began screaming and squirming to free himself.

Struggling to regain control, Vincent breathed deeply and finally found his voice. "It's all right," he told Jacob soothingly. "It's all right. How could you know the difference?"

Lena put in anxiously. "It's what he hears Cathy call me. He thinks it's my name. That's all it means to him."

"Yes, of course." Vincent carefully set down the angry child. "When did my baby turn into a little boy?" Vincent mused, confronted by a sturdy Jacob facing him with clenched fists.

"Vincent, he's smarter, taller, and quicker than any child his age. He understands more than you think, and I'm sure he's wondering how we all fit together in his life," said Lena. "And he told me you were coming, he knew you were nearby. I had all I could do to keep him from dashing out to meet you."

More and more, Vincent was becoming aware that Jacob possessed some of his traits. What else would manifest itself? To what did this poor child have to look forward? The thought struck him with profound melancholy.

Seeming to sense Vincent's mood, Lena added, "Oh, but he's wonderful. I love him. He's an absolute joy."

"I promise you and Jacob that I'll spend more time Below. Soon. But right now, it's important that I go Above. I've ... become aware that prostitutes are being killed. That must be stopped." Vincent told Lena gravely, knowing she'd understand, as no one else could, and hoping she'd therefore accept the necessity of his absence.

"Every day I become more grateful that I am here," she whispered, sitting closer and putting her head on Vincent's shoulder. "Why don't we keep on having lunch here, like this? It would mean you'll spend more time every day with Jacob."

Vincent agreed. The meal was spread out and eaten uneventually. However, as he watched his son nap, Vincent couldn't help reflecting on the time since Jacob's birth. It seemed a shadowy jumble. He felt incapable of answering the questions his precocious child was bound to ask, eventually. He simply wanted to avoid the pain he'd felt when Jacob innocently called Lena "Mommy."

Avoid - wasn't that what he'd been doing with everything lately? By avoiding the issue, he didn't have to deal with it.

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As Vincent was making his way out of the tunnels that night, Pascal stopped him to report, "News about that tan car. It hasn't been out in a couple of nights. But the driver came out of this building." Pascal handed Vincent a scribbled address. "And the driver of the pick-up truck has a girl-friend in the building he parks in front of, so he has a strong reason to be hanging around. Pretty good work, huh?"

"Thank you. And thank the helpers for me. This may help."

Waiting for Vincent, Diana was pacing, visibly agitated. As soon as he entered her living room, she burst out, "We've found another body, and I got another note. Just now. Taped to the wall of the elevator. He's playing goddamn games with me!"

"Diana, I have some questions. Please sit down." Vincent directed, and waited until he'd been irritably obeyed. Sitting on the edge of a chair, ready to spring. Diana looked up intently as Vincent began. "Do you know how long the latest victim has been dead?"

"Quite awhile; about a week"

"So this killing happened about the same time you told me about the case?"

"Yes."

"When you were out investigating," Vincent asked, "did you go near Thirty-second and Ninth?"

Diana lunged to her desk and rifled through her notes. "Yeah, a friend of one of the victims lives in that area. How did you know?"

"733 Ninth Street?"

"Yeah. Vincent, what's going on here?"

Vincent responded deliberately, "A tan Nova, license number IKY-692, has frequently been parked in streets adjoining your building this past week. The driver, a man, remains in the car. He's been careful to park out of view of the police cars on watch. This tan car wasn't there either last night, or the night before. But it's on the streets again tonight. The driver lives at that address, on Ninth Street."

"He could have seen me there. And I got the note tonight." Diana frowned, considering. "It's worth looking into." She spun to punch phone buttons and then report the observations Vincent had made ... but without naming the source.

Returning after the call, she looked at him steadily, asking, "Are you staying again, tonight?"

"Until you are safe," he replied, putting his arms around her. But he had the strangest sensation that he was reliving a previous experience.

He was holding Catherine, standing on the roof of her building, struggling with her fear and his

inability to keep her safe. How could he keep her safe?

Feeling his grip tighten, Diana looked up ... into unseeing eyes. She called to him, trying to bring him back to her, but he was in that other time and place with his Catherine.

Managing to get Vincent to sit on the couch, Diana sat in a chair opposite, watching as he seemed caught up in some kind of terror.

Nothing she did seemed to help.

Suddenly, he jumped up, took the roof stairs in a couple of bounds. Whirling on the dark roof, he started tearing apart something unseen, snarling and growling. Then he gently lifted an imaginary object and held it close.

"Catherine, Catherine," he whispered ... and collapsed onto the roof.

"Oh, dear God, just when he seemed so much better!" exclaimed Diana. "Come inside, Vincent." She said, kneeling by him and getting him, groggily, to his feet.

Helping him to her bed, she spent the night cradling him against her while he slept.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind," she admitted to herself with a sardonic chuckle before drifting off to sleep.

She was awakened abruptly by the ringing of her telephone. As Vincent turned over and gave her a disoriented, puzzled look, she leaned to grab the receiver.

"Bennett." After listening awhile, Diana said, "Thanks, Greg. That's a relief. Yeah, too bad."

"What was that about?" asked Vincent.

"They got him! You were right. Unfortunately, they didn't catch up with him until he got one last victim. But they followed the car - caught him in the act of dumping the body. It's a good bust." Diana thumped the pillow, wearily exultant.

"And Joe will have a good case? He'll be able to prosecute without any trouble?"

"I think so."

Fully awake now, Vincent looked around him uneasily. "Have I been here all night? In ... your bed? I don't know how ..."

"You were ... reminiscing. Then you fell asleep, that's all."

"Somehow, I think it was more than that. I meant to guard you. I failed."

Diana shook her head. "No, it wasn't like that at all. You told me what we needed to know, I passed ..."

"What, precisely, *was* it like?" Vincent persisted, folding his arms.

He pressed the issue until Diana told him what had happened. "... I knew you were seeing Catherine, saving her from some danger," Diana finished.

"I'm not surprised. Her memory haunts me. Especially of late," said Vincent broodingly, and didn't explain.

Glancing toward the windows, Diana commented reluctantly. "You've got to go - it's almost light." Sending him away was against her inclination to keep him with her. But she knew the time still wasn't right.

Seeing him off on the rooftop, she took his arm. "Vincent, take care of yourself. What I saw last night was very intense. And you didn't pull free of it - it caught you up, then it dropped you. It could happen again. You need to understand that."

Making no answer, Vincent disappeared over the edge of the roof.

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The days followed one another as days go. Vincent was occupied with holiday preparations and gift-making; a new series of classes to plan; Jacob's incessant questions; finding something for Jacob to wear - he was growing so quickly! - the winter woes of pipe leaks, colds, and rearranging schedules to adjust for the absences.

The afternoon picnics continued. They were wonderful, restful; sometimes other children were invited, and played happily around the adults. Vincent was getting very used to Lena's soothing voice and loving touch.

The nights, however, became a different matter. That first flashback in Diana's apartment brought others. Catherine had always been a part of his dreams; now, he never knew when these enactments would come upon him. The tone of the dreams changed. Somehow, she had become his conscience - scolding, warning as a mother might. Sometimes she took the role of his mother ... to punish him.

When that happened, he'd bolt out of the tunnels to patrol the nightscape of New York City. He needed to make Catherine approve of him ... or was it his mother who must approve?

The District Attorney's office was the beneficiary of Vincent's nightly prowls. Despite Diana's warning, Vincent got into the habit of calling Joe at all hours: "*Joe Maxwell, I've been following a gang of youths who have been attacking people in the park. I know where they live,*" or, "*The gun was thrown in the East River near Thirtieth Street,*" or "*The suspect did not act alone. There were three more, two white, one black,*" and detailed descriptions followed.

These phone calls were not all business, however, as Joe tried to snatch more information about his informant. Although Joe had learned from previous calls not to use the name "Vincent," he knew well enough that was who it had to be. He couldn't believe the calls were continuing.

One evening, Joe told his caller, "The first time you called me, you said you were a friend of Cathy Chandler. That's one of the things I'm really proud of, that she considered me a friend. Top-notch lady!"

"Yes," whispered Vincent.

"Did you know her a long time? I mean, from college or law school?"

"I did not attend college or law school," Vincent replied quietly.

"Well, for a civilian, you do a great job of gathering evidence!"

"Thank you."

Joe would never know when the conversation would end - always abruptly, with a dial tone - but with each call, he gathered a little more insight into Cathy's mysterious friend.

Vincent tried to find peace, but all he was doing was running away, running from the community Below he felt constantly hovering around him; from his dreams full of Catherine's accusations and admonitions; from himself and uncontrollable urges to satisfy his needs.

He could no longer visit the guarded storeroom for wine to dull his pain. Lena's touch made him ignite with passion, and Diana's straightforward manner had its own charm. In the past, he would have avoided each temptations. Now he sought them.

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Although she didn't know the reason, Diana found this new aspect of Vincent's character intriguing, and his unaccustomed cheerfulness very appealing. When he suggested attending another concert from the vantage point of the old park patrol headquarters, complete with wine, she was thrilled.

They met at the little stone building and made their way to the roof. This time, Vincent had prepared the setting with quilts and pillows. He also brought the food; Diana supplied the wine.

The music was wonderful, but only served as background for their own fantasy. It didn't take Vincent long to pull Diana close to him, as they lay side by side. She was quickening in

harmony to his every movement; intuitively, she knew that this was going to be the night for which she had waited.

The first half of the concert had been spent in such sweet kissing and tender fondling, that it brought tears to Diana's eyes. She had forgotten the exquisite joy of simple love. During the intermission, they ate and drank wine, and then drank more wine. Diana was more than a little giddy, and Vincent felt a bit light-headed himself. As the music started again, they shushed each other loudly, laughing so hard Diana's side hurt.

Diana lay back, too weak to do anything but enjoy the kisses Vincent was stringing down her neck to the top of her cleavage, as his lips followed his fingers which were deftly opening buttons. A charge went through Diana as she lifted her breasts to his waiting lips. Never, never had she felt as Vincent made her feel. He was gentle, yet masterful as they consummated their bodies' demands.

"Finally, my love," whispered Diana as she clung to his side, eyes closed.

However, Vincent was staring at the corner of the roof where Catherine was huddled, tears flowing down her cheeks. He simply shut his eyes against the vision, turned away and kissed the top of Diana's head.

Not wanting to part, they stayed long after the concert was over. They didn't talk much; words weren't needed. However, as they were packing up to leave, Diana became serious.

"Vincent, you've been contacting Joe again, haven't you?"

"I haven't phoned him," answered Vincent.

"Who are you kidding? Not me! And not Joe. You *have* phoned him, and he's been getting notes. Notes are appearing on his desk or the desk of someone in his office ..."

Exasperated, amused, worried, Diana sighed and handed him the picnic basket, requesting, "Please be careful, love."

"I can't just let the criminals get the upper hand when I can do something to stop it," responded Vincent, a little too intensely.

"That's *our* job; leave it to the professionals, please."

His answer was a kiss, which was no answer, but ended their conversation.

Before parting, they again kissed passionately. Bemused, Vincent watched as Diana entered her building. He couldn't believe it: he had two lovers, each so different. It occurred to him that he could indulge himself every night - perhaps several times. The thought excited him; he rushed home to Lena.

She was waiting for him, sure he'd been with Diana, but she did everything she could to make

him forget her rival.

Diana, on the other hand, had no idea of the role Lena had come to play in Vincent's life.

Could life be any better for Vincent? He was becoming assertive - well, actually, aggressive; demanding; a trial to all around him.

Father was patient, for the most part. But as time passed, he became concerned. The fear had always been that Vincent's dark side would emerge; but Father began to realize that this strange behavior was no alien upsurge, but Vincent himself.

Everybody had noticed it - the unusual, showy manner of his dress, for instance. And Vincent seemed to have somehow acquired a large and varied wardrobe. Perhaps the most conspicuous change was that Vincent had begun wearing extremely snug jeans and shirts open to his belt.

The poor patriarch had to say something.

Encountering Vincent in a passage, Father began moderately, "Now, Vincent, it's been gratifying to see you taking more interest in your appearance, but I think you've gone beyond the boundaries of good taste. Good God, how can you breathe in those pants?"

"They're fashionable, Father: 501s. I saw them in the window of a department store on Fifth Avenue," Vincent informed him gravely.

"So how did you get them?" asked Father, afraid of the answer.

"Diana bought them for me, when I told her I liked them. She thinks they fit just fine."

"I dare say," said Father, shaking his head. He had a feeling he shouldn't pursue that line of conversation. "By the way, you haven't been helping much with the construction lately. You seem to be more interested in sleeping late, lolling, preening, and staying out all night. And you hardly see anything of your son at all."

"Father, I can't help it if you don't like it. This is what my life is now. And you've been badly informed: Lena makes sure I spend time with Jacob. We have wonderful times together. That duty, I would never shirk," said Vincent rather harshly.

"Well, 'never' seems to be coming around quite often these days. I don't even know what you're interested in anymore, Vincent."

"Sex," Vincent threw over his shoulder, as he left a stunned Father staring after him.

This confrontation couldn't be left at that; there were many things which had to be discussed ... not the least of which was Roberto.

Now a toddler, the boy was becoming more and more difficult to control. So far, he hadn't

learned how to communicate, and his frustration was wearing on everyone. But Vincent's behavior temporarily drove this from Father's mind.

What could Vincent have meant - sex?!

Making his way to Vincent's chamber, Father was not surprised to find it empty. If anyone had suggested Vincent would develop a pattern of avoiding issues, Father would have thought that person crazy. Now, those Below seemed to expect it. Father felt old and discouraged as he lifted a pile of clothes from a chair so he could sit, shaking his head in disbelief. Vincent's chamber was a mess - piles of clothing strewn everywhere. Where did all of this come from?

"Oh, Vincent, I hardly recognize you," murmured Father, lowering his head.

As he cleared off the table by throwing the clothing on the unmade bed, a book buried in the pile fell on the floor. It most certainly was something Vincent hadn't looked at for a long time: he couldn't have found it!

Collecting the book, Father started leafing through it. Catherine's day book! He started weeping as he looked through the final year of her life.

"Oh, my dear child, I had never thought of losing you. I did love you - did I ever get the chance to tell you so?"

As he fingered the book, Father was amazed to find the pain still so fresh. And he reflected, "If it is this for me, what must it be for you, Vincent?"

Father closed his eyes and dreamt of pleasant memories.

That March thirteenth, Jenny Aronson had not received her birthday rose. She also was left with her memories.

Vincent's harsh voice roused Father from his doze: "So, you were determined to wait for me."

"Yes, I hadn't realized things had gotten this bad -" Father gestured at the chamber.

"I'm not tidy: what of it?" responded Vincent lightly.

"Don't you see? This is only a symptom of things that go much deeper. Just as you keep piling up all of this, you've been piling one pain on top of the other. Believe me, I understand," said Father, truly sympathetic.

*"Why don't you leave me alone!"*

"Please, Vincent, I want to know what you're going through. I want to know what's happening to you. Sit down, talk to me," Father pleaded ... but with the feeling it was too late: he should have done this years ago. Meeting Vincent's stony eyes, Father tried to find another approach: "You mentioned something about Lena. Tell me about her."

"Well, she takes care of Jacob when I'm not here, and we all have lunch together. And she comforts me in the night," replied Vincent straightforwardly.

"I ... see. Do you love her, Vincent?"

"No, but there are times when I need her. I've become accustomed to being satisfied."

Father winced: this most certainly was not Vincent! Father knew that he had to maintain a sympathetic tone, if he wanted Vincent to confide in him, but he felt he must admonish his son.

"You know Lena loves you and would do anything for you. Don't you think it's unfair to her?"

"It was her idea."

Suppressing another wince, Father again turned to another subject rather than pursue the present one.

"Something else is going on here which, quite frankly, I am surprised you've allowed."

"What?"

"Surely you must be aware that Jacob calls Lena 'Mommy'."

Vincent shrugged, shoving aside the clothes on the bed to clear a space to sit. "Of course. That's what he hears Cathy call her."

"And you've done nothing to correct him?"

"What's the point? He's entitled to a mother. Shouldn't we all have mothers?" asked Vincent bitterly.

Father rubbed his mouth, trying to hold in words he knew would be unwise. "Good God, Vincent!" he burst out, after a moment. "Don't you think this is a potentially dangerous situation? Can't you see that you're enacting separate fantasies? Living in a dream, a delusion? You're all getting gratification out of something that is ... fundamentally unreal!"

Father's tone had sharpened. So did Vincent's, replying, "You can't judge: you're not there with us!"

"No, but I've noticed Lena becoming extremely possessive of you and Jacob. This could end painfully for her, especially since Diana is also in your life," Father pointed out bluntly.

"Leave Diana out of this!" Vincent shot back, glaring.

"But don't you see, if Lena finds out ..."

"She already knows that on the nights I'm not sleeping with her, I'm sleeping with Diana," Vincent interrupted.

Father rubbed his eyes. He didn't want to hear this. It seemed to him that Vincent got some perverted enjoyment out of shocking him - *wanted* to rouse his outrage. And was doing so, quite successfully.

Father wanted to shake his son, but instead enforced calm on himself, knowing he might never get another opportunity to speak so openly with Vincent.

"May I assume that you are also limiting your involvement with our council and your remaining perfunctory duties here Below?" asked Father, quite sincerely. It was a thing he had a right to ask and know.

"I do what I can! It's too bad if that's not enough for you."

"I know, but it's unfair to keep all the rest of us wondering if you're going to show up or not. For heaven's sake - you've missed the last four meetings, and Mouse is beginning to think you no longer live here. He needs to know if you intend to work on the new chambers or help with repairs. If not, he'll need to make other plans. Can he rely on you? Can anyone? We all accept certain responsibilities. What we're asking is not unreasonable." Father had started out in an understanding manner, but as he spoke, his voice betrayed his indignation.

*"Why don't you all leave me alone? I'm sick to death of all of you staring and following me. What are you all waiting for - for me to be off my guard?"*

"Vincent, this isn't a war! We are merely concerned about you," replied Father, changing his tone. He reflected that Vincent's last statement sounded a bit paranoid: When did it get to be *them* and *him*? When had Vincent begun to consider himself no longer part of the community?

"You've stifled me," Vincent accused. "You've always tried to keep me in my place, told me what I was supposed to be. No more, do you hear me? *No more!*" Vincent growled and showed just enough fang to be threatening.

Now Father couldn't be sure which side of Vincent was present, or if they had merged.

"Yes, Vincent! I understand," he answered in a pacifying tone. "You may be what you want to be."

"I will be what I need to be," retorted Vincent.

"Might that still include acting as Roberto's instructor? I know you've been faithful to that duty, at least - enlisting Rebecca to take your class when you're not available. However, we have been wondering if it may not be time for individual instruction for Roberto, and if you'd be willing to take the time for such intensive tutoring. The boy is becoming increasingly frustrated."

"Aren't we all," answered Vincent hollowly, his attention wandering to the strewn clothing.

"Well, Vincent, what are we to do about it? *For God's sake, put down that shirt and listen to me!*" shouted Father, losing all patience. "This is important! A child's development is at stake!"

"You're right, Father. I'll be more attentive," said Vincent absently, holding a shirt against his chest.

"*Vincent, do you even CARE anymore?* What could be so fascinating about that shirt? Lord knows there are enough of them here. Where did they all come from? This looks like a year's donation from the helpers."

"It is."

"What?"

"When I picked up the clothing bundles, I've brought them down here and taken what I wanted. The rest is still there ... and there," said Vincent, motioning around his chamber.

Father pushed out of the chair: both arms braced on the table, which shook.

"This is too much! Here, you've gone too far. We all need these clothes. We stay warm with these clothes. Have you no concern for others? Is it only what you need and want that matters? Good God, Vincent, where is your conscience?"

Vincent stared coldly into Father's eyes. "I sent her away. She no longer has a place in my life, not after she deserted me."

The true picture of his son's illness was becoming apparent: Vincent was losing touch with reality.

Father had never been so frightened. He could find very little of his beloved son in this person carelessly sprawled on the bed. How vulnerable Vincent would be now if the dark side decided to take over! He'd be lost forever.

Abandoning any hope of carrying on a rational discussion, Father asked mildly, "Vincent, would it be all right if I sent Mary, Jamie, and Mouse in here to collect the clothing you don't want?"

"If you like," Vincent replied indifferently, setting one shirt aside and considering another as though the choice were a matter of immense import.

Father couldn't stand to watch anymore - not without either losing his temper altogether ... or breaking down in tears. He slowly returned to his study and sat at his desk, staring rigidly at nothing.

Father was learning. He realized just how much they'd all taken Vincent for granted, always

expecting him to be there for them. Now it would be prudent to ask, rather than assume. Father didn't know where to turn for help. Everyone Below had been strained beyond reason, keeping an eye on Vincent for the past two and a half years, with the hope that time would be all that was necessary to bring him back to normal.

*Normal.* Whatever that might be.

In Vincent's formative years, Father had often wondered what would be normal, natural, for that unusual child. He had nothing to use as a guideline; he could only do for Vincent what he'd done for the other children ...

No - that was not quite true.

Remembering, Father knew that Vincent had been given special treatment from the very beginning. He'd been so very sick and frail when he first came to them. But as he'd grown, he'd grown strong. It had soon become evident that he could be dangerous. And so Father had decided that the best way to deal with anticipated injury to others, was to control Vincent.

When other children, aged two, had tantrums - kicking, scratching, and biting through their frustrations and thereby learning to work through the problem - Vincent was held down and quieted, or told to sit alone in his chamber. When other children rough-housed and tussled, learning to assert their rights, Vincent was immediately pulled away from an opponent and sent to think about the danger of fighting. When other children went Above to play in the park, Vincent went off by himself, creating imaginary playmates. When the other young men and women started walking hand-in-hand, feeling their way through adolescent love, Vincent was told it was not for him. When they needed affirmation of their gender, of their essence, they had the adults Below to emulate; but no one Below could be a true exemplar for Vincent. He could imitate, but he could never be one of them. Never be ... normal. Never be other than he was: different. And for Vincent, now, a semblance of conformity, mere imitation, was no longer enough.

"Oh, Vincent, all I did was control you and teach you how to control yourself. You never learned how to work through the traumas of life. It was either accept or control. I somehow couldn't understand your needs as only you could see them," cried Father. "So what do we do now? What do we do with this monumental rebellion?"

Finally, Father realized that although Catherine's death had been a catalyst, Vincent's psychosis was very deeply rooted, dating from the moment of his abandonment. How much rejection, ridicule, yearning, and pain, physical and emotional, could one person endure?

Vincent had always been such a good little boy, trying harder than all the others to be loved. Such an irony: he was filled with love, and understood its meaning as no one else, yet his life

was always so limited.

"God bless you, Catherine. Your love was so unconditional - it matched his." whispered Father as he wept.

"Not like mine!"

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Roberto was indeed becoming a problem. Even Vincent could see that.

Roberto's mother, Teresa, tried to spend more time with Vincent, trying to understand the learning process for a deaf child. However, Vincent was not always available. So she suggested that she and Roberto join him and Lena during the afternoon meal, pointing out that the children got along so well. Although Lena balked a bit, she had to admit that something needed to be done.

Cathy, the oldest and the only girl, tried to dominate play. Most of the time, she was the mommy or the teacher. But Jacob was every bit her match in size and intellect. This would lead to situations where the "pupil" would outwit or defy the "teacher." Treble shouts of "Did not!" and "Did too!" would result. Very often, neither Cathy nor Jacob would back down, and their parents would have to step in and settle the matter.

With two-year-old Roberto added to this dynamic, however, Jacob took on the role of exemplar. Cathy would start the play, but Roberto identified with Jacob and so followed him closely.

Vincent chose quiet, secluded spots for the afternoon meal and signing sessions, hoping for fewer distractions for Roberto. It was getting increasingly difficult to hold his attention, to try to make him understand that there was a way to ask for food, not just grab it. Eating being a basic need, and hunger demanding to be satisfied, this might be the perfect situation to make Roberto connect a symbol with something tangible that he wanted. However, withholding food only led to a screaming child, which usually led to everyone eventually giving up.

One afternoon, the children decided to have their own picnic. Cathy felt very grown up as she spread a quilt on the ground and set the places for lunch. Jacob took his seat and so did Cathy. Roberto walked around for awhile, then decided to sit next to Jacob. With understanding far beyond his age, Jacob knew that it was important to sign when Roberto was present.

As soon as Roberto sat down, Jacob began asking for food to be passed and signing as he spoke; he also demanded that Cathy imitate his hand gestures as he spoke. She rather enjoyed

it and they made it a game, laughing as she tried to get her fingers around some of the signs. For the first time, Roberto pointed to what he wanted instead of grabbing. He wanted to be part of the game, and more importantly, he wanted to copy Jacob. However, when Roberto wanted a second doughnut, Jacob put his thumb to his fingertips and touched the tips of both hands together, indicating "More."

Roberto couldn't do the sign but he did imitate by putting his fingertips together: he was trying. Jacob gave him another doughnut, then repeated the process when Roberto wanted more milk. Cathy had to get into the act, so they made up the game of asking for more. The children had no idea how important this step was; and it went unnoticed by the adults, who were on the other side of a rock formation.

Within two days, Cathy had thought of other games to play, like moving stones out of a pile by asking for more. But the big breakthrough came after a week of Roberto's imitating Jacob, and understanding and participating in the games.

Vincent began to realize that Roberto acted differently when the children were playing, then when the parents were also trying to interact, so he suggested that they let the children spend the lunch time together every day while the adults observed.

Obviously, the children were relating. Roberto was learning to eat in a decent manner - unless, that is, Jacob decided that a food war was fitting - and somehow, he understood enough to join in their games.

Teresa sat in tears as they observed Roberto attempting to sign for another cookie. It was only one gesture, and they couldn't be sure that he fully understood that he was communicating a thought, but it was the beginning. However, what happened next was that unexplained wonder that sometimes occurs when least expected.

Cathy decided that she wanted to play. "Pebble, pebble, which hand has the pebble?" This was a favorite game of hers because she got to stand up in front of the others and hold out her hands. Going first, Jacob chose the wrong hand, signing "no." He took another turn and this time chose the correct hand, whereupon he signed "yes." They did this several times. As Roberto watched, he began to realize that when Cathy's hand was empty, there was one sign, and when the pebble was in it, there was another. Before long, he was using the correct sign as she opened her hand. Then Jacob said it was his own turn to hide the pebble.

He stood before Roberto and held out his hands. At first Roberto seemed confused because he didn't have Jacob to imitate, but it only took him a moment to decide which hand to choose. He picked Jacob's right hand and signed "yes" as the hand opened to reveal the pebble.

Vincent gasped and Teresa cried, as they both realized that this was the beginning of this child's communicating. At last it had begun.

It became increasingly obvious that Jacob was the key.

His signing skills, limited as they were, proved to be exceptional. Rebecca had told Vincent that Jacob had learned to sign, but the shrewdness with which he used the signs he knew, no one could have anticipated.

Vincent's emotional state had been all-consuming and egocentric, so that his relationships had become one-sided - how they affected him. As he looked closely at Jacob, Vincent realized that his beautiful little son now had his own life and his own friends, and was developing his own insights. Vincent seemed to be drawing farther and farther away from everyone, even his own son. Soon, even his son would no longer need him; Jacob had already given up his baby ways and taken his place with his peers.

As thrilling as Roberto's breakthrough was, in Vincent's mind it came down to how it affected him and his view of Jacob. It seemed to eat at him. He was in awe of his little boy and felt unworthy to be his father. For a moment there was a twinge of conscience. Vincent felt worthless, useless, and shamed. But the more guilt he piled on himself, the more detached he became.

Vincent's abdication as teacher required Rebecca to take over the sessions with Roberto. She was able to play the games which were so important, getting down to the children's level.

Often taking her cue from Jacob, she kept him as the central figure for Roberto to imitate. Knowing this would be the pattern for the future, Rebecca also worked with Jacob, improving his signing skills and at times, taking him Above to visit Laura to observe real fluency in action. They all enjoyed these visits and it soon became evident that Jacob possessed another gift: he was empathic.

One day, returned home after a visit with Laura, Rebecca asked Jacob why he didn't speak while they were at Laura's apartment.

"Jacob, you know we've always spoken while signing, but you don't talk even to me. Why?"

The little boy said, "Laura can't hear me talk. She feels bad. I don't want her to feel bad that I can hear and talk, and she can't."

"How can you tell she feels bad?"

Jacob looked up at her dubiously as though the answer was so obvious he wasn't certain she really meant the question. Then held a clenched fist against his chest, "It squeezed," he explained simply.

So: not just observation of Laura's expression. Not merely insight. Empathy.

"Do you know what 'exceptional' means, Jacob?" Rebecca asked, in tears.

"No. Is it good?" asked Jacob.

"The best," answered Rebecca, as she picked up Jacob and swung him around until he giggled.

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Vincent became compulsive to the point of obsession. If Diana was his focus, he was at her apartment for weeks on end, sometimes not leaving at dawn. He was charming and loving, careful not to be intrusive. But there were times when he became a bit demanding, especially after a lovely dinner, wine, and good music. Diana couldn't figure out if Vincent was finally beginning to live his own life, or if he was acting out of a desperate need. One minute, he'd be strong and charming, the next, brooding and despondent. But for all of that, she was pleased he was there with her. It seemed at times that he had moved in.

Of course, this meant that he was spending less time Below.

He didn't need to be reminded of his failures. Every time he saw Father shake his head, or looked into Lena's reproachful eyes, he knew he'd failed to measure up to someone's expectations.

However, the worst effect was on Jacob, because he knew his Daddy hurt. He could feel his pain.

"Daddy, your head aches?" asked Jacob as he crawled into his father's lap. Then he hugged Vincent and whispered in his ear, "member, Jacob loves you."

"Why must you look at me like that? You look so much like her and I've failed both of you," said Vincent, crushed by his sense of helplessness.

At least Diana made him feel good about himself, as she discussed her cases with him. He was attentive and helpful, but left in the middle of the night to do his own investigating.

Her cases began to take on bizarre twists: one suspect gave himself up; another disappeared.

The night belonged to Vincent and he took complete possession. It became obvious that a vigilante was at work, and although Diana had to admit Vincent was the most likely candidate, she couldn't credit that the sweet, gentle person who was giving her so much attention could also be the disturbed vigilante prowling the streets.

Late in November, Diana received her invitation to attend Winterfest. She really didn't know what to expect because Vincent hadn't brought the candle, as he had before.

She wanted to go, because she was going to miss the holidays with him on a temporary

reassignment. But he seemed indifferent to the coming celebration and expressed no interest in attending. Since she certainly didn't want to go unescorted, she persuaded Vincent to agree to accompany her, after all. Perhaps it helped that Diana bought him a new pair of boots and a beautiful suede jacket, just a shade darker than his hair.

Strutting a bit in the new outfit, he made her heart skip a beat or two. She did love him. They made a handsome couple, as they entered Father's study to await the procession down to the Great Hall.

"Daddy! Daddy!" exclaimed Jacob as he attached himself to his father's legs.

Vincent lifted his son and held him tenderly. That pain was back. His feeling of total inadequacy sent chills through him.

Watching the mood-weather change so quickly, from bright to stormy in Vincent's face, Father was apprehensive, having realized long ago that Vincent could be volatile - unpredictable, at the least; destructive, at worst. Not knowing where to turn in his concern, Father had confided in Peter Alcott, his longtime friend. Now he was glad he had: they could both watch for signs of trouble. The situation was ripe for some kind of altercation. In the past month, Lena had been scorned, Jacob all but abandoned, the community Below alienated, and Father rendered helpless.

But Vincent seemed like his old self, helpful and sociable, welcoming helpers, offering food and drink. He offered toasts, and when it was time for the Ceremony of Light, he proudly took his place, his voice faltering only once during his speech. He was attentive to Lena and played with Jacob, until it was time for the younger children to go to the nursery for the night.

Incensed by Diana's presence, Lena asserted her proprietary rights by clinging to Vincent's arm. Not to be outdone, Diana took the other arm and joined him, one on each side, at the table. But for the most part, it was quite civilized. However, Peter noticed that Vincent was never without a flagon of wine. Concerned, Peter mentioned it to Father, who also began to take notice. It was William who finally said something to Vincent.

"Must have drunk a whole keg yourself, Vincent! Think you should take it easy?" he suggested as he tried to hold back the ornate drinking cup. Vincent grabbed it away and William knew that there would be no way to physically stop him.

Peter was the next to approach Vincent.

"The Winterfest brew is especially good this year, don't you think, Vincent?" he asked.

"Yes, and I'm enjoying it very much," admitted Vincent, with just a bit of a bow.

"I've noticed. I've also noticed that you seem to be getting a bit disoriented. Perhaps you've had enough." Peter closed his hand around the cup on the table.

"Perhaps *you've* had enough," echoed Vincent, crushing the mug in Peter's hand, causing the liquid to splash everywhere, to everyone's alarm. Vincent thought it very funny.

"I have a feeling this is getting out of hand," muttered Father to Diana, seated to his left. "I don't know how to apologize for his behavior."

"Don't! I just don't think he knows how to relate to all of you, after his behavior recently. I think he'd be rebelling. At this point in his life, he'd move away from home, if he could. He doesn't know what his place is, anymore."

Father hesitated to say anything to Vincent, for fear of making the situation worse. He didn't need to have his son out of control. There were those words again, but that was the situation. Things quickly degenerated, and Lena didn't help.

She'd practically molded herself to Vincent's side and, when she thought no one was watching, she'd run her hand over his hip and between his legs. Lena wanted to make sure he come to *her* that night. Finally, Vincent pressed her against a wall and started kissing her passionately.

Diana turned away, knowing that this wasn't her Vincent.

She was right - this was Lena's Vincent. Father had to stop him. This was neither the time nor the place for such behavior.

"Lena, it's your turn to go to the nursery. Mary should be relieved," he ordered.

Lena tried to slide away from Vincent and finally managed to escape with a promise of a later tryst.

"**OLD MAN, STAY OUT OF MY LIFE!**" shouted a furious Vincent as he crashed his way out of the Great Hall.

There was total silence as everyone watched in horror, it became evident that their beloved friend was in deep trouble.

What had happened to Vincent? It was Peter who broke the silence.

"Dear friends, Vincent is not used to imbibing. I know his behavior seems a bit strange, but haven't we all had our moments of embarrassment due to Dan Rum? I wouldn't want to be him tomorrow morning."

There was a quiet chuckling and nodding of heads from the guests, and Father signaled for the music to start up once again.

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Peter took Diana home and spent an hour at her loft discussing the Vincent she knew. It was becoming evident to him that Vincent was taking on different characteristics, according to his relationship to a given person. He tried to convince Diana that Vincent was very sick, but she had seen such strength and improvement in him, that she was sure Peter was wrong.

"Diana, he's just mirroring what you think he is. He's empathic! At this point, he has no defined personality of his own; he doesn't know what or who he is. So he responds according to what you expect of him. We saw that happening before our eyes this evening with Lena. He became what she wanted him to be," explained Peter. "He no longer chooses - he merely reacts to a situation."

"Yeah, maybe," Diana responded thoughtfully. "It's relatively peaceful here, I don't make demands, and we talk about everything ... so he responds as a respectful, intelligent person. Lena gropes him, and ... he behaves a different way." Diana scowled, flushing.

"That's about it! I really think all of this began long ago, when he was so desperate to be accepted. From what Father's told me, until now, Vincent's been able to keep this single-tracked - one person, one response; but if it keeps on, it may progress to where the behaviors merge. Then, there'll be no predicting how he'll react. Vincent always has the potential to be dangerous; I hope we can help him before he gets to that point."

Peter left Diana with much to think about ... but uppermost in her mind was the mysterious vigilante the police force was beginning to hunt.

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After Winterfest, Vincent stayed by himself for quite awhile. Mouse brought him food and water, as he had during Vincent's period of self-imposed exile after Catherine's death. When Vincent at last returned to his chamber, the first thing he did was to go to each person and apologize for his behavior. It was rather a general apology, because he couldn't remember details; but he knew by his enormous guilt he'd caused a great deal of trouble at Winterfest.

The scarlet satin shirts disappeared into the general clothing supply. So did the embarrassingly tight pants, which Father abstracted from Vincent's chamber and donated to Zach, whom they fit nicely. Vincent seemed not to notice, dressing in whatever he found at hand.

When Christmas came, Vincent couldn't rouse much enthusiasm for the festivities. As far as he could remember, he was polite and attended without incident. There were many presents from Vincent to Jacob, but Vincent had no idea where they'd come from. This really frightened him; these lapses of memory were devastating.

By this time, his life had become one continuous nightmare. It made no difference if he was awake or asleep. It seemed to him that everyone was trying to hurt him, or cage him, or kill him. He had begun seeing Catherine again in the shadows, and she was always weeping. And to make matters worse, Diana was unaccountably gone. Her loft was always empty and dark. He had trouble remembering the circumstances of her going, as he did so many things. Had Diana told him she was leaving, or had she just left, deserting him? Anger filled him when he thought of being deserted, of being abandoned.

He would dream of having terrible fights out on the streets, or was that real? What happened to the man he left on the police station steps, or was that a dream? And all the time he had to pretend, be good ... or Father would lock him up in restraints.

Father tried to talk to Vincent, tried to act as a confidante or counselor, but it was evident that Vincent thought of him as the enemy. And although the older man tried to be understanding, he finally had to make the decision to take Jacob away from his father. When Vincent could no longer sleep and started hallucinating, chasing imaginary adversaries through the tunnels, Father knew that Jacob was no longer safe in his own bed.

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Diana had been on loan to the FBI for four months. The assignment took her to Baltimore. After Winterfest and her discussion with Peter, she felt it might be a bad time to be away, but the temporary reassignment had been set for months. She'd had no option and no real reason to refuse.

Staying wouldn't keep Vincent away from Lena ... or visa versa. Not that Diana would have tried. Trust, faithfulness, could only be volunteered, not demanded. All the same, a large apology - or even a note while she'd been gone - would have helped how she felt about that situation...

She's been checking messages left on her answering machine remotely, but hadn't done so in the process of packing up for the trip back. So her first chore, upon returning home, was to check her messages. There was just one message, repeated several times.

"Diana, I know you're due back today. Call me! It's urgent!" Joe Maxwell - and he sounded really annoyed.

When she uneasily returned his call, Joe demanded she come to his office - *now*. So she kicked aside her still-packed suitcases and went, sitting and feeling like a teenager called into the principal's office, watching Joe rifle through his desk, pulling out bits and pieces of paper.

"You knew about these, the first ones, but the notes haven't stopped, and they're getting screwier," Joe commented grimly, pushing one of the scraps towards her across the desk.

Leaning, Diana read: *I've all but put him in your hands, I won't be responsible if you don't lock him behind bars.* She bit her lip: she knew that large, looping script.

"This was a tricky case," Joe went on. "We felt we didn't have enough to take it to court, but our friend here had other ideas. He found us a witness." He shoved another note toward her.

This note read, *I'll give you your case.*

"We'd been investigating someone our friend of the notes, here, suggested was involved. But we didn't move fast enough to suit him. This one's a winner!" Joe handed Diana a third note.

"*Watch where you step!*" Diana read aloud. "What's that mean?"

"The night watchman actually tripped over this guy tied to the radiator out there in the hallway. He looked like he'd gone a few rounds with a riding mower and said he couldn't recall how he got here. But he was real eager to testify - I'll give him that. Against my instinct, we took the case to court, and of course, the testimony of a witness who claimed he'd been roused by a bear in the Bowery didn't go down too well. The case was thrown out." Joe made a great business of smoothing the folds out of a further scrap. "I got this last night," he commented, passing it over. Arms folded, he watched for her reaction.

*You failed. There is the judicial system and then there is JUSTICE.*

A chill ran up Diana's spine as she re-read this last note.

"Now, I know that I haven't gotten anywhere with this before," Joe commented steadily, "so I won't even mention his name. But Diana, for the past year I've felt like a character in *The Phantom of the Opera*. I have more notes here than ... than - How does he *get* them here? We've had the place watched, outside and in!" Joe set both hands on the desk, leaning forward to stare Diana straight in the eyes.

"I don't care how you do it, I don't even want to know, but it has to stop! We don't need a vigilante, especially one who's gone amok. I don't like the sound of that threat. So far, it's been just notes and threats. But this one, here, sounds serious."

Unwillingly, silently, Diana nodded. It sounded serious to her, too. A lot more serious than whatever was maybe going on with Lena; she'd back-burner that for another time.

She dreaded confronting Vincent about this but knew she'd have to. If she didn't, Joe might. Or try to, anyway. And none of them really wanted to risk that.

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Knowing she'd be followed, Diana took her time walking through the park, stopping for a hot dog and making a great show of enjoying a breezy March walk through the Ramble. Dodging behind a tree, she waited until her tail passed, then doubled back to the gate in the drainage culvert.

As soon as she entered the tunnels, Diana could feel tension that only added to her apprehension. She didn't know what kind of reception she'd get, but when she reached Vincent's chamber, he seemed genuinely pleased to see her, giving her a big hug. Trying to ease into the subject, she asked what he'd been doing since Winterfest and got the fullscale News of the Tunnels - period. Sounded harmless enough. If it hadn't been for the handwriting on the notes, she'd have been sure it was all a mistake. Finally, she had no choice: she had to bring up Joe and the notes.

Before her eyes, he went into a flashback. She was asking him questions about vigilante tactics, and he was answering someone else from another time. As he played out the scene, Diana realized he was seeing Catherine, assuring her he wasn't the vigilante, as she had thought. As frightening as that was to watch, what was worse was that it didn't help the present situation.

Steering him into a chair, Diana stayed calm until he recovered the present moment and could talk to her.

"They come so often now, I can't tell what is real any more," he said weakly.

"Vincent, I have to get some work done, so I have to leave. But you're in serious trouble Above. We have to find a way to talk about it," warned Diana.

"I'll come to you later," he answered.

"No, not later. I have to get the report done for the FBI. It covers four months of work and it's due tomorrow, absolutely. No way around it, I have to work tonight. I'll come again tomorrow, okay?"

Vincent nodded but she couldn't be sure that he understood.

That night as she worked at her computer, she thought she heard a noise near the rooftop door but, deep in her notes, she ignored it. Consequently, she jumped when a fur-covered hand touched her shoulder.

"Oh, Vincent - you scared me! I didn't expect you; I told you I had to work."

Vincent didn't say a word, just rubbed the back of her neck, caressing her cheeks, stroking her arms. Her heart started to pound, but as much as she needed him, she couldn't spare the time. Trying to remember the details in notes four months old, she needed to relive the scenes - it was all-consuming.

Brushing his hand away, then ducking when it returned, Diana insisted, "Please, Vincent - I told you, I just can't, tonight!"

But he lifted her to her feet and turned her to face him. His grip was like steel bands. Terror struck her. Not since that first night after finding him, when she'd slept with her gun, had she been frightened of Vincent.

He kissed her passionately, then savagely.

"Please, not like this." She started pleading, but knew it was no use as he tore her blouse with his teeth, never letting go of her.

"I take what I want," was all that Vincent said in a strange, coarse voice. It was then that she realized there was no way she could stop him, and she was being offered no choice. Fighting would only infuriate him; giving in might soothe him.

He easily picked her up and carried her to the bed. Looking up into his eyes, she realized that it was as though another being had taken over Vincent's body. For an instant, the thought crossed her mind that she hoped she'd come out of this alive.

He was fully aroused and entered her quickly. Only when he'd finished did Vincent become gentle and loving. Diana took advantage of his relaxed embrace to roll off the bed and sidle, tense and controlled, out the bedroom door.

"Where are you going?" he asked, quite innocently.

"I told you," she threw back, astonished how normal her voice sounded. "I have to get this report done. I'm going back to work."

She heard the bed creak; he was following her. She sat down and started whacking the keyboard, pretty much at random. She heard him stop behind her. Not daring to turn, her heart going like a jackhammer, she kept punching keys.

"Are you upset with me, Diana?" Incredibly, he sounded perplexed.

Trembling, trying to look casual, she reached into a drawer ... and her hand closed around her gun. She whirled the chair around with the gun clenched in both hands ... and aimed it at him, from a distance of inches.

*"I want you out of here, now! And I don't want you to come back unless you're invited. That's the closest I've ever come to being raped, and I will not allow it! I'm my own woman! I'm nobody's victim, not even yours. Get out of here and leave me alone!"*

Rising from the swivel chair, she backed Vincent away, a step at a time, to the door.

Vincent didn't resist. The horror on his face said it all. He hadn't been aware of his behavior, and it sickened him to see the red welts and scratches on Diana's arms.

He didn't know how he made it back to the tunnels, but a sentry found him where he'd collapsed.

Vincent's worst nightmare had come true. He'd become that dark monster and hurt someone he cared for. He withdrew completely, unreachable and unaware: it was a week before his guilt and shame allowed him to surface. Even afterward, Vincent would seldom speak to anyone and seemed physically ill; Father knew the symptoms all too well. Who could save Vincent this time?

But as the weeks passed, it became obvious that even the dark side of Vincent was afflicted by this mental illness.

It was much too quiet and always dark in his chamber, which he left only when everyone was asleep, to get food. However, he ate very little and seemed indifferent to being clean, wearing fresh clothes, or brushing his matted hair. When asked how he was, he might mumble something about a headache and turn over in his bed. Indeed, this abyss in which he was trapped was every bit as dangerous as the true Abyss.

Father called a meeting, thinking it best to inform everyone about this latest turn of events.

"Vincent is in a very deep, classic depression; he's finally gone into his own world. For years now, we've seen him struggling to keep in touch with reality. For the moment, at least, that struggle has been lost," Father stated gravely.

"What can we do to help?" asked Mary.

"Just be patient. Sometimes the depression just goes away with rest and quiet," replied Father.

"Yeah, and sometimes it gets worse," offered William.

"Well, yes - sometimes it gets worse," Father acknowledged steadily, surveying all the concerned faces. "There are now anti-depressive drugs, but Vincent's reaction to drugs is completely unpredictable - I don't dare chance using any. As likely as not, they'd only make matters worse. We'll just have to ride this out with him and hope for the best."

"Isn't electric shock therapy sometimes used for depression?" asked Cullen.

Mouse piped up, "Maybe Mouse can make an electric shock thing, hook it up, zap!"

"I don't think so, Mouse. That might be as dangerous as drugs. We'll just have to wait and see," said Father.

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There are all kinds of shock therapy.

Of course, everyone volunteered to take turns keeping watch outside Vincent's chamber, but all remained quiet. The only thing that made a slight impression on Vincent were Jacob's visits. The little boy would climb on the bed and snuggle next to his father. Sometimes he'd rub Vincent's head.

Before he left, he'd always whisper in Vincent's ear, "Remember, I love you."

Once Vincent roused enough to rub his finger along Jacob's cheek and say, "How like your mother."

Father could see that these visits were good for Vincent, but he worried about what effect they were having on Jacob. Already this exceptional child had been burdened beyond reason - especially because he also had great understanding. Father made a point of involving Jacob in classes normally for older children, hoping new interests would give Jacob something other than Vincent's misery to concentrate on. Jacob had already started to read, teaching himself for the most part; and his penchant for prowling and exploring was well-established. Confident and self-reliant, Jacob reveled in his independence.

Mary loved teaching the little ones, and she always included a very special lesson, one especially meaningful for children who'd grown up in the tunnel community. It was the renewal of life that springtime brought. To witness the change, she'd take her group up to the park once a week, in good weather, to observe the greening grass, the shrubs leafing out, the slower waking of the trees, and finally the explosion of dandelions on the long lawns. The children loved these outings because they got to run and play in the sun for a full morning. Mary knew this was a special opportunity for them.

After one such excursion, Cathy tearfully stood before Mary, as the children gathered in the tunnel for the walk back to the Home Chambers.

"What is it, child? Why the tears?" asked Mary.

"I lost him," came the reply.

"Who did you lose?"

"Jacob. You told me to always make sure I could see him, but Hillary and I started playing tag and he wasn't there anymore," cried Cathy.

"Children, did Jacob come in with any of you?" asked Mary, thinking that the impulsive child might have run on ahead. Heads shook but there was no answer.

Sending a message for Father, Mary took the troubled children back to their dormitory, where Father soon arrived.

"Well, Mary, what could be so important that I had to come ..." Father stopped in mid-sentence as he saw the disturbed little faces looking up at him.

"I thought you should hear it from the children themselves," offered Mary. Taking a deep breath, she continued, "Jacob is missing."

"WHAT! WHERE? HOW?" bellowed Father.

Cathy wailed. "*I lost him!*" and two smaller children began sobbing.

"All right, children, settle down," soothed Mary, trying not to show her own panic. "Father, I think a little control is in order, if you want the children to think clearly."

"Yes, of course. Now, let's start from the beginning. Jacob had breakfast with me, so I know that he was here this morning. What happened next?"

Cathy, still sobbing, answered, "I met him outside your study and we walked to class together."

"That's right," said Mary. "They both arrived for class and waited patiently until everyone came. Then we prepared to go Above, as we always do at this time of year. Father, I always pair up the children, so they can watch out for each other. I reminded them to keep away from topside strangers, I ..."

"I told Jacob that this was meant for him," Cathy interrupted, sniffing, "because of his daddy. I said they would kill his daddy if they ever found him, and that he wasn't to ever tell anyone who he was or where he lived."

Father nodded. "I see. Then you all went Above to the park, correct?"

"Yes, but ..." Mary paused to collect her thoughts. "Mark, why was Jacob crying? I remember seeing him from a distance - standing against a tree, watching you boys. What happened?"

Mark, seven, was the oldest, biggest boy in the group. Although Father had judged Jacob ready, both physically and intellectually, to begin formal classes, Jacob was much too young for some of the group's older boys to accept. Vincent had had the same problem, and it seemed Jacob was reenacting his father's experience.

"He wanted to play with us," Mark said sullenly. "We were playing leap-frog, and he was too small to jump over me, so I told him he couldn't play."

Joshua contradicted, "Not true! He could jump over you, and you got mad 'cause he could do everything you could and he was smaller."

"Did *not* get mad," snapped Mark, glowering.

"Did *too*," insisted Joshua, as the two boys stood toe to toe.

"All right, I get the picture," said Father pacifically. "Then what happened?"

Joshua spoke up. "Then he started to cry and kick dirt around. We told him to stop and get away, go back to the tunnels."

Mark confirmed, "Yeah, he was a real pain, and when we finished playing, he'd gone back to the tunnels."

"Are you sure that's where he went?" Mary asked. "Did you see him return to the threshold?"

"Yes, I saw him going that way," said Joshua. "I felt kinda bad 'cause he was crying, so I watched him walk away."

"Has anyone searched the tunnels?" Father asked.

"No. I just found out about this and sent for you," Mary replied.

A distress signal went out on the pipes. Everyone responded. Even Vincent tried to get out of bed, but as he sat on the edge, he quickly convinced himself he'd only be more trouble than his help would be worth.

A search of the tunnels was very quickly organized, and Pascal had to do very little talking to persuade Father that the helpers had better start searching Above, as well. Vincent drowsed peacefully, dreaming about Jacob playing in the park with helpers, as Pascal sent the urgent message on the pipes.

When Jacob hadn't turned up by the next morning, Father decided that outside help was needed.

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Walking along Seventh Avenue, Diana noticed that a cab had pulled up beside her, keeping pace.

Stopping abruptly, she turned and challenged, "What's your problem?"

"Thought you might want to get in this cab, lady," answered the driver.

Belatedly recognizing him as a helper, Diana leaned to blurt through the open window, "What's wrong? Has something happened to Vincent?"

"Need a cab ride or not?"

"Sure, yeah." Diana got into the taxi, which sped away, not stopping until it swerved into an alley.

The driver opened the door and escorted Diana into a building.

Father stood in the shadows. "Diana, it's good to see you. It's been some time. Have you been well?"

"You didn't ask me here to ask how I was. What's wrong?"

Straightening, leaning on his cane, Father said simply, "Jacob is missing."

"What?"

"He's been missing since yesterday morning."

"Twenty-four hours? He's been missing twenty-four hours and you wait until *now* to tell me?"

"I simply couldn't believe he wasn't in the tunnels somewhere, or that a helper wouldn't find him sleeping in the park. So far, we've been able to turn up nothing. That's not to say he may not be hiding somewhere Below, but ... prudence dictates that we broaden the search."

"You want me to go through police records to see if any report has been filed on an abandoned child," Diana deduced.

"And any other way you can help would be appreciated," Father confirmed.

Carefully, neither of them mentioned hospitals ... or morgues. But Diana's nod covered them all.

"How's Vincent taking this?"

Father paused, clearly debating how to continue. "He's been very ill. We haven't told him yet. We need not burden him if Jacob can be found."

"You mean to tell me Vincent's so sick he can't sense that his son's in trouble?"

"It would appear so. Assuming that Jacob *is* in trouble ... And not only that - Vincent apparently has taken no notice of the messages on the pipes concerning Jacob's disappearance. When I looked in on him, this morning, he was in a deep, although fitful, sleep. I don't think he can tell, any longer, whether he's awake or dreaming."

"Oh, Vincent!" Diana remembered the look of horror on his face, the last time she'd seen him.

"I'll see what I can find out. Get back to you by tonight."

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Assured of Diana's help, Father was satisfied that all possibilities were being covered - even the unthinkable ones. The search of the tunnels and the park would continue. Everything that

could be done was being done. But he wasn't prepared for the sight that faced him when he returned to his study.

"Vincent! What are you doing here?"

Vincent was slumped in a chair at Father's desk, his head cradled in his arms. It appeared he'd tried to get dressed - he wore his boots and jeans - and his loose nightshirt.

"Father!" When Vincent lifted his head, Father saw that his son's face was flushed and slick with perspiration.

"What's happening? Is it Jacob? Did I hear ...?"

It seemed he was struggling to put one coherent thought in line to follow another; his voice was weak and his breathing quick and shallow.

For a moment, Father couldn't decide whether Vincent should be told. What effect might this have on him? First Catherine disappeared without a trace; now, Jacob had vanished. Both times, Vincent seemed disconnected from them; both times, his illness separated them. Finally, Father decided if Vincent could do anything to lead them to Jacob, the risk must be taken.

"Vincent, Jacob is missing," Father said, being as calm and matter-of-fact as possible. At first there was no reaction, so Father repeated the statement. After a second or two, Vincent struggled to straighten. Sitting back, he stared at a very worried old man.

"What? Did you say that Catherine was missing?" he managed to say.

"No, dear boy - this time, it's Jacob who is missing."

"This is the worst, most ironic nightmare yet!" exclaimed Vincent, struggling with each word.

"If only it were just a nightmare! Vincent, I'm afraid neither of us is dreaming."

Propping his chin with both fists, Vincent tried to focus his swollen eyes; it was obvious that his headache was intense. He breathed deeply, shaking as he centered all his strength on trying to focus on the present crisis.

"It's true? You're saying that Jacob is really missing?" Vincent whispered.

"Yes, it's true." Suddenly, Vincent's head fell back and his eyes rolled up. Father shouted, "*For God's sake, Vincent, stay with me, stay with me!*" Holding his son, he rocked and soothed. As he'd feared, this had been enough to send Vincent over the edge. But after a few minutes, Vincent roused enough to lean against Father's shoulder, weeping with convulsive, anguished sobs.

He had very little physical strength - he hadn't eaten properly in months. The energy it took to

cry so deeply, so long, completely exhausted him. Father gently leaned Vincent forward, pillowing Vincent's head again on folded arms. Putting a blanket around his sleeping son, Father wondered grimly what the next hour would bring.

When Vincent woke, he simply sat back, shaking his head, and stared into space.

Sitting at the table, Father asked quietly, "How are you feeling, Vincent?"

Slowly, Vincent responded, "Tell me again, Father; the messages I've been hearing on the pipes are true?"

"Yes, they're true. We've been asking the helpers to search for Jacob," Father confirmed.

"And there's been no news?"

"No. Nothing yet."

"How long has it been?"

"Almost thirty hours," said Father.

Vincent tried to get up, but found it beyond his strength; he sagged back into the chair.

"What's the matter with me? What has been going on? How could you have let this go on so long without telling me? Why didn't you tell me at once?"

"First of all, you've been very sick. Secondly, I wasn't sure you would understand even if I did come and tell you."

After a silence, Vincent asked, "I've been that sick?"

"Yes, but I think now is the time for all of us to work together, to help however we can. And I think you should start by eating something," Father said, uncovering a bowl and carrying it to the desk. "Here's some strong beef broth William made for you." Setting down the bowl, he patted Vincent's shoulder. "First, you eat. Then we'll talk."

Vincent started protesting, but the soup did smell good, and he realized that he was hungry. Starting to perspire again as his stomach contracted in cramps after the first swallows of broth, Vincent wiped his forehead and forced himself to continue eating. He knew Father was right - to help Jacob, he first had to make himself well.

Half the bowl was as much as he could manage. Setting down the spoon, Vincent told Father, "I'd like to get cleaned up now."

"I really don't think you're up to it right now. Later, I'll get William and Mouse to take you to the bathing pool. You need to rest, gather your strength, and finish that soup. If you fainted in the water, no one could hold you up," Father pointed out - all of it reasonable.

So Vincent took the rest of the afternoon to eat and drink some tea, between naps. Finally,

true to his word, Father allowed him to go to the hot springs, accompanied by Mouse and William.

The warm water was relaxing as well as cleansing. Soon, Vincent's headache began to subside. It took the efforts of all three of them to get him dressed and back to Father's study.

Relieved to find Vincent still lucid, Father proceeded to bring him up to date.

Remembering bits and pieces of the past weeks made Vincent worry about all he couldn't remember. "Father, was it ... the other me?"

"Perhaps ... Not totally and not always," Father replied.

"And my poor little boy has gone through this with me?"

"He's stronger than you think, and more understanding than all of us put together. He never wavered, he always loved you."

"Yes ... 'remember love'," quoted Vincent. "When he ... disappeared, the day he ... Was he upset with me, or angry or ... frightened? Did I do anything to ...?"

"No. Not at all. Quite frankly, he seemed to adjust to your illness," Father assured him, adding, "He could feel your pain, you know."

"Poor baby!" Vincent turned his head away, struck by a pang of sorrow and guilt.

"He hasn't been a baby for a long time, Vincent. If there was any problem at all, it was with the older boys, who are more than a little jealous that one so young is their equal. I'm sure you remember that frustration," reminded Father.

"Oh, yes! Never quite being accepted."

Father then gave Vincent all the details leading up to Jacob's disappearance. He concluded, "What is so puzzling is that the boy seems to have a homing instinct. No matter how deeply he wandered in the tunnels, he's always managed to make it back for meals. Again, just like another little boy I remember."

"So you don't think he's lost, but rather that this could be deliberate or that ..." Vincent hesitated, unable to say the word "kidnapped."

"Dear God, please - don't even say it!" exclaimed Father. "What do you feel, Vincent? Do you have any sense that Jacob is in distress? Is he calling for you?"

Vincent sat quietly for several moments, then shook his head. "No, I have no sense that he's afraid. I ... can't feel him at all," he reported dully.

"Well, from past experience that could mean one of two things; either that he's well and safe, or that he's put up a shield so you cannot feel him," offered Father.

"Would he know enough to do that?"

"It's possible. The last lecture he got was from Cathy, who impressed upon him that you would be killed if those Above saw you. He could be protecting you."

"Catherine used to do that," Vincent reflected.

"Yes, and Jacob is a true mix of you both."

Just then, Diana entered the study. Vincent jumped up, bumping into things as he blundered around the chamber. Panic electrified him: he only knew he had to escape. Finally, he dragged himself up the circular stair and vanished through the entry on the upper level.

Father stood at the foot of the stair, totally alarmed by Vincent's reaction. He called Vincent's name, but got no response.

Turning, Father said, "Diana, once again I must apologize for my son's behavior. What news have you brought us?"

"No need to apologize. We didn't part on the best of terms, either," Diana replied, tight-lipped, head tilted to look at the balcony exit. Recollecting herself, she said briskly, "No news, which I hope maybe is good news. I've checked the abandoned children files. Nine reports yesterday. Two children were much too old. Three found wandering, lost, and returned home: scratch them, they're accounted for. The other four were referred to Child Protective Services and put in shelters or foster homes. Two were girls; and neither of the two boys matches Jacob's description. So far today, four children have been brought in - again, no match. I've checked ... everywhere else, too. Nothing."

That moment, in the tunnel outside the balcony, Vincent was experiencing another vivid flashback. This time, he and Catherine were searching for Father. In a strange counterpoint to Diana's voice, Catherine was telling him that she was searching for Jacob Wells.

"... wherever he's gotten himself to, there's nothing in city records," Vincent heard as he struggled to bring himself back to the present situation. Diana continued, "I'll keep checking and be in touch every day. By the same token, let me know if you turn up any clue, no matter how small."

"Thank you, my dear," Father responded, and walked with her out into the passage. "I can't tell you how much we appreciate your help," he added, then glanced over his shoulder and whispered, "Vincent seems to be trying to help, at least. He was quite coherent just before you arrived. I just don't know ..."

"A personal thing. I'm glad if he's better," said Diana rather aloofly, walking away from the still puzzled older man.

Entering his study, Father was once again surprised to see Vincent sitting at the top of the spiral stair, his head in his hands.

"What happened?" Father asked. "Why did you run from Diana?"

*"I don't know! I can't explain it!"* Unsteadily, Vincent rose and worked his way down the stair, continuing, "All I know is that I felt total panic. I had to get away from her. I'm ... terribly ashamed, and I don't know why. What could I have done?" Vincent knew from his remorse that something terrible had happened between him and Diana.

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Two more days passed with no fresh developments. Vincent used these days to gather strength and concentration, and to pace. Finally, against Father's wishes, he once again went out nightly, searching the streets, having constant flashbacks of another time, until it sometimes became impossible for him to know exactly for whom he was searching. He had to keep foremost in his mind that now, in the present, he was searching for his beloved son.

Where could Jacob be? After two weeks, even Father was giving up hope of finding a small child missing for so long. However, after returning from his night-long search, Vincent jumped up from the breakfast table shouting, *"Jacob!"*

"I feel him. He's crying, he's crying for me," answered Vincent.

"Can you tell where he is?" asked Mary.

"He's not here. He's far away - don't know where. I must find him."

"Vincent, surely you can't ..."

But Father never got the chance to finish his sentence. Vincent dashed for his chamber. Father did, however, follow his son, chiding, "What can you possibly be thinking, Vincent? You can't go anywhere. You're not well enough, for one thing. And if you were to collapse, Above ... you could both be lost!"

"I'm going."

"Listen to me. You've just told me that Jacob is quite a distance away. Do you have any idea how you're going to travel without being seen? They won't be understanding if they catch you up there. Consider what you're doing! It's unthinkable!"

"I'm going," repeated Vincent loudly, this time glaring at Father with such intensity that the older man backed up ... and then withdrew, to avoid a full confrontation with his distraught

son.

As Vincent was throwing together a few things to take on his journey, Jamie and Pascal showed up in the entrance to his chamber. Once before, they'd convinced him not to leave. Perhaps they could again exert the same pressure. However, what they didn't know was that the incident with Father had triggered, in Vincent, a flashback to that same event when he and Catherine had planned a trip together. He was just coming out of it when they appeared; he turned to them, growling,

*"I failed Catherine. I WILL NOT FAIL JACOB!"*

## PART TWO

The staff of the Emmett B. Strong Hearing and Speech Center of Manhattan had been scrambling all year to make an efficient move to their new building. Everything had been packed and the trucks had already picked up the furniture. However, the construction schedule was not going to allow a smooth transition. Hurriedly, a temporary site had to be found to house the Center for at least half a year. By this time it was almost May and a new cycle was about to start for the children who were clients.

The pre-school sessions enrolled children ages three and four years old who were either hearing impaired or had speech impediments. Although a new building was found and the evaluations had been completed, the biggest problem was squeezing parent orientation into an already compressed timeframe. Marilyn, the coordinator of the Center, hoped she had the answer.

Calling the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she was relieved that their cafeteria could be made available for breakfast two mornings a week. Because there was no time left for the usual six-session orientation course for the parents. Marilyn sent letters inviting them to a breakfast and lecture intended to serve the same purpose.

The museum had long been a stop for school buses, including the transportation for the Center. Combining the orientation with breakfast and the bussing was convenient for everyone. The turnout was exceptional, and Marilyn noted that all but one child's parents attended the first lecture.

On the following Wednesday, she once more checked the attendance list and realized that neither had Johnny Heller attended classes yet, nor had his mother attended the orientation. She scribbled a note on the bottom of the paper, reminding herself to look into this when she returned to the Center.

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It was a pleasant morning. The children played on the museum's rear portico, adjacent to Central Park. Two aides played with them as they waited for the bus to arrive and deliver them to the Center. Despite a warning, two little boys started tossing a ball and of course it rolled off of the portico, across the road, and into the bushes.

One of the aides stood over the startled boys and motioned for them to find the ball while the other aide stood in the road to stop traffic, if any should happen by. The dejected children marched into the bushes and started the search. Two crossed the road, but three little boys darted back to the portico to continue the game. There was a lot of laughing as though a great joke was taking place, and the plot passed very quickly through the children as they smiled and nodded at the new "student." He played and signed with them, feeling very much at home. The other children accepted him immediately.

When the bus arrived, an aide counted heads, coming up with one more child than she'd had on the previous morning. Counting the names on her list, she found as many names as children. She checked off names as each child entered the bus and ended up with one boy and one name. She signed, "What is your name?"

With gleaming blue eyes and proud grin, he responded by holding out his little finger and forming a hook, a J, in mid-air alongside his long blond curls. This was the particular sign for his name. It was Rebecca who'd decided that the letter J, in combination with an indication to his beautiful hair, would be a sign that truly meant *Jacob*.

The aide once again looked at her list. Sure enough, Johnny Heller: J for Johnny.

"We have a full class today, Audry. Make sure you let them know at the Center that Johnny Heller finally put in an appearance after three days," she said to the bus aide as they both pushed the hesitant boy in the bus.

Jacob was just a little scared, but it didn't take him long to decide this could be an excellent adventure. He was going to ride in the big orange bus! He'd often watched them go by, on the road nearest the Park entrance to the tunnels, and wondered what wonderful things those children did all day. This was his opportunity to find out. So Jacob sat quietly in his seat and pretended to be deaf. He set the tip of his tongue on the roof of his mouth, as he had done with Laura, so he couldn't speak, and decided to be Johnny Heller for a day.

It was great fun riding in the bus, watching all the buildings go by, and all the people hurrying to work. Jacob took mental note of everything, so he could tell the other children Below just what it was like to go to a real school in the morning. Maybe he could even tell his father, if he was up to it; his daddy had been very sick.

Jacob followed the other children off the bus, but was taken to the office so he could be brought to the proper room. Marilyn had not yet returned, so Joyce, her secretary, brought him to the session Johnny Heller was scheduled to attend.

"Mary Jane, one of the missing has been found. Johnny finally decided to show up for class," said Joyce.

"Thanks," responded Mary Jane as she pulled the file on Johnny. His evaluation was a bit scant, but all that was necessary for the first week or two of therapy. He had a sixty percent hearing deficiency in one ear and fifty percent in the other, had not as of yet been fitted for hearing aids, and had minimal signing skills. Mary Jane was a speech pathologist, specializing in the psychology of communication.

After Mary Jane made sure Johnny was comfortable and felt at ease with the other children, the games began. Much of the morning was spent in recognition and naming exercises which took the guise of fun.

Mary Jane checked Johnny's file once more: this little boy got along almost too well. He seemed to be a paradox, at first not answering when she called him by name, later turning immediately, seeming to pick up the sound of her voice as she called. The evaluation showed his hearing loss was severe but not total, but hearing loss didn't simply come and go!

Around eleven o'clock, a half hour before dismissal - this was a morning session - Marilyn called Mary Jane with a specific request.

"I've been trying to reach Johnny's mother all morning but haven't had any luck. She needs to come in for orientation, or we can't continue to accept Johnny for therapy. Would you please pin a note to his jacket telling her this?"

"Oh, I agree," answered Mary Jane. "He's such a bright little boy, yet his evaluation was marginal. We need to get him in the right program."

Jacob was having a wonderful time, making new friends and learning all sorts of new games to take Below. Although it seemed to him that the fun ended all too soon, he was anxious to get on the bus for the ride back to the park. What he didn't know was that although the morning pick-up was at the park, the children were taken back to their homes after school.

The bus pulled up to a building on East 44th Street while the aide stood over Jacob. He looked up at her and understood all too well that this was where *Johnny* lived. However, he was waiting for the bus to stop at the park, so he just sat there. The aide went to the door and rang the doorbell for the Heller apartment, but there was no answer.

"We'll come back later," she signed, and then told the bus driver to continue on their route.

All the children were delivered; still the bus didn't return to the park. In fact, they were quite a distance from the park. In the course of the designated route, the driver had tried the Heller apartment two more times, still no answer. The driver and the aide had no choice but to bring this little boy back to the bus company until someone could be reached at his apartment.

After two attempts to phone Johnny's mother, the dispatcher at the bus company called the Center. He asked Marilyn if they had another address on Johnny, or any information about

where his mother worked. Once again Mary Jane went to her files.

"Marilyn, all we have is his paternal grandmother's phone number," she stated.

So Marilyn reached Johnny's grandmother, only to find out that it was her son, Johnny's father, now divorced, who had brought him in for his evaluations. However, since then, Johnny's mother's six months custody had started, the grandmother didn't know where her former daughter-in-law worked. In fact, the grandmother was under the impression that the mother and grandson had moved out of town. Marilyn reported back to the bus company.

If Johnny was supposed to be out of town, who was this little boy? The aide had left to go out on another bus and there was no one there who could sign. Jacob was glad because he remembered what Lena's daughter Cathy had told him: he mustn't ever tell anyone who he was or where he came from. If he did, bad people would come and kill his father.

The big man with a cigar, who was talking very loudly on the phone, didn't go near the frightened little boy. However, a nice lady gave him a sandwich and a brown, bubbly drink. She then brought him into her office and gave him some paper and colored pencils. Drawing was a familiar activity; it made him feel better.

Around two o'clock, Mary Jane got another call from Marilyn, designating her liaison with the Child Protective Services. Marilyn immediately transferred the call to Jim, phoning from Albany.

"How may I help you, Jim?" asked Mary Jane.

"I've been on the phone with a very upset gentleman down there in the City. He had a little boy from your center sitting at the bus company with the name Johnny Heller on a note pinned to his jacket, and they can't find anybody at home at his address. CPS from down there referred the case to us; they have absolutely no foster care available for a hearing-impaired child. What can you tell us about this kid?"

"Not much. There isn't even a decent description of him in his folder. Other than his grandmother's phone number and his father's name, there aren't any personal details. His mother was supposed to come in and give us medical data and developmental information but we haven't seen her yet," replied Mary Jane. "But Jim, at this point we aren't even sure it *is* Johnny."

"Well, whoever he is, he can't stay at the bus station. In going through our statewide foster care possibilities, I have several choices for placing him. We'll choose somewhere close to the City so that his mother can pick him up. If she contacts you, give her our number. It's in our hands now," stated Jim.

"Will he be all right?" asked Mary Jane.

"Don't worry! We'll take very good care of him. He'll even go to a home where sign is used. Thanks for your help," said Jim, then hung up.

Looking all the way up to the face of the policeman standing over him, Jacob swallowed hard: the uniformed man was almost as tall as Jacob's father! Now he'd done it! If Jacob didn't keep his secret very carefully, if he said even one word, he knew that the police would lock everybody up Below - the secret place nobody else must ever learn about. And, yes, the policeman had a gun hanging at his side to shoot Jacob's daddy.

"Come on, little fellow, we're taking you downtown for awhile. Don't worry, they'll find you some place nice if your mommy doesn't show up by five o'clock," said the policeman.

Now Jacob knew all was lost. He didn't have a real mommy to get him. He sat with his head down, trying not to cry, but his little body was shaking all over as he stifled sobs.

"It's okay, honey," said the nice lady who'd fed him. "This is a real nice cop." She thought that he probably couldn't hear her, but she had to try to reassure him.

Jacob appreciated the kindness and decided to take his punishment like a man. They could lock him up, but they would never find out where everyone else lived. They would never find Below because of him. Very slowly, Jacob lifted his hand and slipped it into the outstretched hand of the policeman. Sliding off the chair, he marched with head held high out to the waiting squad car.

For a few minutes during the ride, Jacob forgot all his fears. Again, this was a great adventure, and his eyes were wide as the policeman turn on the siren to get through congested streets. They stopped in an alley behind a tall building, and Jacob was filled with excitement as they went up - *way up!* - in an elevator. He was brought to a room with pretty, soft furniture and given a couple of candy bars. He had only tasted two before in his life - one Laura had given him, and the other when Diana brought him a treat. Oh, yes, he'd forgotten: Uncle Devin once brought him a bagful, but Grandpa didn't like that and had to take them away.

After finishing one bar, Jacob put the other one in his pocket. Never know when you're going to need a candy bar! That's when the window caught his attention. He climbed up on the sill and looked out in wonder. So many buildings! They were all so tall! And he was up very high; oh, oh, better get down!

It was then that he saw the park - Central Park. Home. Tears started to stream down his face as he pressed his cheek to the window. A gentle hand touched his shoulder, causing him to swing around and lose his balance. Strong arms caught him, holding him safely.

A man sat him in a chair and sat next to him.

"Hi, I'm Randy. I've come to take you to my home until we can find your mommy," signed the

man. "Do you understand?" he added as Jacob shook his head a little. "We have a little girl at home who's deaf, and my wife is losing her hearing, so we know what you're going through. It will be okay, Johnny."

Jacob wanted to scream that he could hear and that he didn't mean to play tricks on everybody, but he knew he had to keep quiet. If he spoke, they'd want to know where he lived. He didn't live anywhere anymore: in his mind, he'd given up the right to go back Below. He had done the unthinkable - endangered everyone he loved. *Daddy, I love you*, he thought as he pressed his lips tightly together and once again sobbed.

Randy lifted the pathetic little boy to him and held him close. "We'll be fine, just fine," he told the social worker as he carried Jacob to the elevator.

Randy and his wife Elisabeth had been on the foster care roster for five years and had never been called before. There was a special home, full of love and understanding. Elisabeth had been born with Usher's Syndrome, losing fifty percent of her hearing by age fifteen; within two years, she'd become totally deaf. Their beautiful daughter, Rose, had been born deaf six years ago. It was then that they decided to enter the foster care program. Although Randy worked in New York City, they lived in Suffern, a small town forty-five minutes to the northwest.

And so it was that at six p.m. on a warm Wednesday evening in the first week of May, young Jacob Wells found himself traveling by automobile through stop and go traffic on his way to a new home. The ride was exciting! The gorgeous scenery made him blink. The setting sun frightened him a bit, as the sky turned to fire.

Elisabeth and Rose were waiting as they drove into the driveway. Randy had contacted Elisabeth on the TDD before agreeing to bring Jacob home. It had been quite a day, and Jacob would have closed his tired eyes, but he was waiting to see if the trees on the mountains would catch fire from the sky. He did notice, however, that there was an awful lot of space, every direction he looked. Why, he couldn't even see another house - just hills and trees.

Randy carried Jacob into the house and stood him in the middle of a large room with more soft furniture like the kind at the office they'd left. Laura had a room like that, though less crowded. He noticed a television set in the corner. He loved to watch television at Laura's apartment. This reminded him that he had to wait for the closed captions before reacting.

Showing him to his bedroom, Rose signed that she hoped he would be comfortable there and then told him he could wash, showing him the bathroom. He'd never used the bathroom at Laura's. *Now* what was he supposed to do? Where was the pitcher with the water and the basin?

Curiosity getting the better of him, Jacob started pulling and pushing, turning and twisting the shiny knobs on all the white things in the room. Soon there was water running from

everywhere, not to mention the toilet flushing several times. Randy ran in to see what the child could be up to and had to laugh to see the small boy trying to duck all the splashing water from faucet and shower turned on all the way.

"You're supposed to take your clothes off if you want to take a shower," signed Randy as he turned off the water and wrapped Jacob in a large, soft towel. And, oh, it smelled so good!

Leading Jacob to the dining room, Randy motioned to a chair and all sat down to dinner. There was a variety of food that Jacob had only seen at special occasions - salad, potatoes, meat, vegetables, bread, dessert and a big glass of milk. Everything tasted delicious to the very hungry little boy, but he felt rather guilty eating all that at one time. It would have been three meals Below.

Even as he was finishing his dessert, Jacob started nodding off to sleep. He wanted to stay on his guard, but after all, he was only an almost-four-year-old boy, no matter how precocious, Elisabeth led him to his room, helped him put on pajamas, and tucked him into bed.

"I'm very happy you're with us," she signed. "We'll get to know each other tomorrow. We'll start the day with a bubble bath, I think." She then pulled the covers under his chin and brushed the hair away from his brow. Leaning close, she kissed his cheek and smiled, signing, "Good night."

Jacob wondered if this pretty lady was going to be his mother now. He would like that; she was nice.

Something very strange woke Jacob. It was bright and felt warm as he watched it creep over his bed. It was light, and he'd certainly seen sunlight before; but he'd never seen it move like that. Finally, the whole room was full of the brightness and he could no longer contain himself. Running to the window, Jacob lifted his face to the sun, feeling the warmth. This was wonderful! Then he reminded himself that he should be quiet, so he crawled back under the covers and waited until someone came for him.

By the time Elisabeth shook him, Rose and Randy had left the house. Jacob was alone with the pretty lady and felt very shy. She led him to the bathroom and stood him before the big white basin, now full of something white. Scooping up a handful of the white stuff, Elisabeth blew it around and finally rubbed some on Jacob's nose. He sneezed; she laughed.

She signed *bubbles*, but Jacob didn't understand. It would take him awhile to get used to some of their signs for things. Then Elisabeth lifted one large bubble and once again made the sign. Jacob imitated her and this time understood it as her sign for bubble.

Suddenly, the most unexpected thing happened! She started to undress him! Jacob tried to hide behind the shower curtain, and once again Elisabeth laughed.

"All right. You get undressed and get into the tub, I'll come in after you're under the bubbles," she signed, leaving him alone.

Testing the white foam, Jacob first ran his hand over the top and then tried poking at it. Finally, he plunged his hand all the way to the bottom, finding lovely warm water. Next he put in one foot and then the other, stood for a moment and then splashed a great white wave as he sat with gusto.

True to her promise, Elisabeth came in and gently bathed Jacob. She washed his neck and ears, face and shoulders, she rubbed his back and then felt in the water for toes, feet and legs. It was at last time to wash his hair. Elisabeth almost looked at a loss, she had never seen such thick, curly hair on one so young. It was a good thing she'd just bought a bottle of no-tangle shampoo for Rose.

Coaxing Jacob to a standing position only after he found that he was covered with bubbles, Elisabeth stood him with his back to the shower and slowly turned on the water. As warm water trickled over his head and down his back, Jacob felt as though he were standing under the waterfall. He knew how to wash his hair like that, so he took the shampoo Elisabeth was preparing to pour and rubbed some into his hair. She took this to mean that he could finish the bath himself.

Flipping the lever to let the water run out of the tub so it wouldn't overflow, Elisabeth left Jacob with a large towel and clean clothes. He had watched Randy turn everything off the night before, so Jacob did very well getting the shower to stop.

Something smelled really good as he opened the door and ran into the hallway. His stomach started grumbling, and his nose led him to the kitchen.

Elisabeth checked to make sure that Jacob had his clothes on right and was quite impressed by his ability, especially when she went to the bathroom and found the towel folded neatly and his pajamas on his bed.

"Sit," she signed as she pulled out a chair. Then Jacob got a big hug and was told he was a good boy. A plate of food seemed to appear in front of him. He recognized the scrambled eggs, but he'd only had bacon once before in his life and couldn't be sure about it. It was delicious.

The morning passed with Jacob playing on the swings while Elisabeth hung out clothes. Then he got to help her in the garden. She was very kind, by mid-afternoon, Jacob was developing his first crush.

Walking hand in hand to the road, Jacob and Elisabeth met Rose as she left the school bus. When they got back to the house, Rose took out her books and started to do homework. Jacob sat very close to her so he could see the words in her reader. Rose started signing the story by

soon Jacob was joining her. *How unusual this boy is*, thought Elisabeth.

After homework was over, the children were allowed to watch television. The cartoons were funny, but one was about a man who wore a cape and spent a lot of time in a cave and wore a mask to hide his face and helped people when he went out of the cave. It made Jacob sad; he thought of his daddy and missed him.

That night, when everyone was sleeping, Jacob went to the big window by the dining room table. He became almost entranced thinking about his father. However, the thought that Vincent might know where he was, and come for him, frightened him more than his melancholy. He had once more to strengthen his resolve never to think of home. This was now his home, with a new father and sister and his very own mother. He felt all warm when he thought of Elisabeth; she was so pretty!

Having made that decision, Jacob went back to his room and flicked the light switch on and off several times. What was it that made the light go on? Flick, on - flick, off. There weren't any candles or lanterns, only these funny looking balls that shone with light. Thus engrossed, Jacob broke off the bond connecting him with his father.

The next morning wasn't as pleasant as the previous one; a man came to see him. By this time, the Child Protective Services had found out that he was not Johnny Heller. Indeed, Johnny and his mother were in Florida, and the man wanted to know whom they had placed in that home in Suffern.

Jacob made it as difficult as possible for the man, making no indication that he understood any of his signed questions. Finally, Elisabeth came to his rescue, holding him and wiping his tears.

"Can you tell us your name?" she signed. "Please."

Not wanting to lie to Elisabeth, Jacob hesitantly signed J-A-C-O-B.

"Now we're getting somewhere," said the man. Then he signed, "How did you get to the Center?"

"B-U-S."

"We know that. How did you get on the bus?"

"Playing in the P-A-R-K."

"Do you live in one of the buildings near the park?"

Jacob shook his head.

"Did someone bring you to the park?"

Again he shook his head.

"How did you get there?"

"Walked."

"Do you have a last name?"

The blond head once more indicated no.

"You have to know your name!"

"Just J-A-C-O-B."

"Do you have a mommy?"

"No."

"How about a daddy?"

Jacob hesitated a bit before shaking his head.

"Well, you didn't just appear out of the ground! You had to come from somewhere."

At this, Jacob turned his head into Elisabeth's shoulder and started to cry.

"I think you should leave now," she signed rather strongly to the man.

Jacob was very grateful that the man left and the questions ended. What little information he'd divulged was entered into this file in Albany. Jacob was now a charge of New York State.

To make Jacob feel better, Elisabeth took him shopping. There were end of winter sales at the malls. Jacob held tightly to Elisabeth's hand but his heart turned from side to side as he gaped at the shops.

"I want to get you some underwear and maybe a heavy jacket for when the nights turn cool," signed Elisabeth.

Jacob didn't feel right accepting new clothing and so shook his head.

"Well, Rose's hand-me-downs are just fine, when they're jeans and tops, but you need your own underwear. And her pink jacket from last year just won't do. You're too much a boy!"

Laughing, Elisabeth gave Jacob a reassuring hug to let him know that it would be all right.

Once he got the hang of window shopping and browsing, Jacob dawdled over everything. He'd never seen so many clothes in one place, not to mention the toys, and all those books.

Elisabeth lost him one as he wandered into a bookstore and sat on the floor surrounded by children's publications.

*What a strange little boy! You'd rather be with the books than toys,* thought Elisabeth, regaining her composure when she finally found him. She bought him the book he had started reading and made a great ceremony in presenting it to him.

Jacob was awestruck. A brand new book of his very own! He ran his fingers over it, smelled the new binding, and then hugged it close. He caught himself just in time as he started to say *thank you*, which he did finally sign.

They made it home just before Rose's bus arrived, Jacob clutching the new purchases. He had new socks, underwear, and a thick, shiny, two-tone blue jacket with a hood and a zipper that worked. Oh, and of course, his book. There were pictures of the Headless Horseman in it, and Rip Van Winkle. Elisabeth pointed to the mountains and told Jacob that was where these people had lived. Again, wonderment thrilled through him, as he realized it was an actual place.

Each day brought something new for Jacob, but perhaps the best of all was curling up in Elisabeth's lap every night as she sat in her rocking chair. Having finished his bath and dried his hair, Jacob would find Elisabeth waiting for him. She held him close and rocked; sometimes he would even fall asleep. If he couldn't be in the tunnels with his father, then this was the next best place.

The social worker from Child Protective Services returned after two weeks, asking more of the same questions. Jacob found the man particularly threatening, especially because he'd started dreaming about his father; sick and wandering the streets, looking for him.

When the man signed that they'd find his parents no matter how long it took, Jacob slid off of Elisabeth's lap and ran behind a chair. He huddled there, shaking, which was interpreted to mean that he was afraid of his parents.

The man softened a bit, signing, "Don't worry, we won't let anybody hurt you." Turning to Elisabeth, he continued, "I guess we can figure he either ran away or was abandoned. There hasn't been a missing child report filed for a four-year-old deaf boy down in the City. It's been two weeks. You'd think somebody would miss him."

That night, Elisabeth tucked a sleeping Jacob into bed. He'd seemed a bit restless and feverish after the social worker left. She and Randy decided that this little boy, of whom they had become very fond, was terribly frightened of someone or something.

As he slept, Jacob knew he was being followed. He could never go back near the park and yet no matter how he tried to turn away from it, that was the path he was taking. Although he cried and pulled in the other direction, his feet continued toward the park. The shadows behind him were large and seemed to engulf him. He couldn't hide or run fast enough to get away from them. Suddenly, a terrible roar came from the trees, and his father appeared between him and the shadows. Blazing flashes of several guns blinded Jacob as bullets cut through his father. Vincent lay dead at Jacob's feet.

Screaming awake, Jacob sat up, listening to the echo of his anguish. Then, turning his head into

his pillow, he cried and cried for his daddy. Randy came in to check on Jacob, but he pretended to be asleep. There was no way he could tell of his dream.

As happy as the days were, the nights became dreadful for Jacob. The nightmares came every night, and so he began prowling through the house or out in the yard to ease his terror. While he sat quietly, looking at the moon, Jacob rocked himself, not knowing what to do. He couldn't stop the dreams, and he knew that his fright would bring his father to him - the very thing of which he was most afraid. Yet there was nothing he could do about it. He knew that the real nightmare had already started, his father would find him, and they would find and kill his father.

Jacob was too tired to keep this up much longer, and oh, how he missed his father! More than anything, he wanted to be once again in his daddy's arms, safe, not having to pretend any more, not lying to Elisabeth ... He would really miss Elisabeth; she had become his surrogate mother. All of these emotions were churning and colliding, too much for a little boy to handle; after all, he would be all of four years old in four months.

Sure as the day, Jacob knew Vincent was on his way. He could feel him coming, drawn by the terrors of the night. The only plan he could think of was to be ready when his father came. That way, they could leave right away and maybe get ahead of "them." He put his plan into action. First he needed to use Rose's reader so he could copy words. His little fingers still had difficulty printing letters.

Borrowing a piece of paper and a pencil from Rose, Jacob wrote a note. *"My daddy came for me. We have to leave before they find him. Thank you. I will always remember you and love you. Love, Jacob."*

He put the note away until it would be needed and then moved on to step two. He took his new jacket and pulled the sleeves inside, then buttoned the collar and zipped it up. He put his new socks, tops, underwear, and of course his two new books. Randy had brought home a wonderful animal book for Jacob. Then Jacob tied the string on the bottom of the jacket, forming a neat little bundle.

Every night for a week he sat out on the deck until first light, waiting and feeling very sad about leaving his new family. Randy had been very kind and Rose made him feel like her little brother - something like Cathy. But it was when he thought about Elisabeth that he started to cry. He knew he had to write one more note.

*"Dear Mother,"* Jacob hesitated when he wrote that word but that was how he felt. Besides, he couldn't spell *Elisabeth*. *"I don't have a real mother, so is it okay if I call you Mother? I never had one so I didn't know how it felt to be touched and rocked and held by someone you love. It was warm and wiggly inside. Thank you for taking care of me. I have to go now. I will leave a*

*part of me."*

Then Jacob drew a big heart and wrote love all around it. He put that note with the other to leave when his father came. He was ready as he sat waiting.

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The pounding in Vincent's head made it difficult to think, much less coordinate trembling fingers. All he knew was that he needed to find Jacob. After two weeks, there had finally been some contact through the bond between father and son. To say Vincent was not thinking clearly was putting it mildly. However, he'd taken this time to at least pack some clothing.

The bond and instinct told him that Jacob was not in New York City. There was some distance between them, and this fact worried everyone. Vincent had been very ill, still showing signs of depression and emotional distress, but he would neither heed the suggestion that he was not ready for such a trip nor accept William's offer of company.

This he had to do alone. What was he worth to himself or anyone if he couldn't make his way to Jacob? Four years before, when Catherine was missing, he had lost his connection with her. No matter how he searched, he couldn't find her. But now there was no excuse: the bond to Jacob was open.

As he passed Father's study, Vincent couldn't help notice the gathering and was drawn in by the worry on all those faces. He felt he must say something.

"I have heard all your arguments and your warnings. *I'm sick to death of those warnings - I've heard them all my life.* I know they're made out of concern for me. Now I want all of you to listen and understand when I say that if I, myself, cannot do this, if I cannot find Jacob and bring him home, then I don't want to be here either. There is much I must learn about myself, and this is just the first step. If I cannot live out there, with myself and by myself, then I cannot live anywhere. If you must, think of this as a pilgrimage, a quest, and I am the knight errant, the chosen one. Only if and when I succeed, shall I return."

"My God, Vincent, you aren't making this any easier for us," exclaimed Father.

"No, I'm not. But I am being honest. Please know that I feel strongly about this. I need to find my life. It's very difficult to go on living when the soul has been taken out of you."

Jamie pleaded, "Then please be careful."

"*Gotta* come back. Home here," interjected Mouse.

Pascal put in soberly, "We've been friends for a long time. Just remember that when you're all

alone."

"And we all love you," sniffed Mary.

"I know," said Vincent as he gently clasped Mary in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "I just came to say good-bye."

"Well, then, if you're determined, we had better say our farewells," replied Father, holding out his arms.

Vincent hugged each and every one, feeling that the separation had already begun. As he walked along the tunnels, he was concentrating on Jacob, trying to get a bearing.

"Glad I caught up with you," exclaimed William as they almost collided at an intersection.

"Now, William, I told you there was no need for you to come with me," replied Vincent.

"Oh, that. I know. I understand. No, I just came to bring you some things. The state you were in, I didn't think you'd be thinking too straight. After all, you may think you can survive on nothing, but you're going to be bringing home that precious little boy. Here's some blankets and camping stuff. I put in a sack of flour, a bag of beans, a canteen of water and some snacks. You can't stop in a restaurant, you know, and you're going to have to stick to the trees."

"Thank you, William. I do appreciate this. You're right - I didn't think about bringing Jacob back," Vincent admitted, shouldering the sack.

"Do you know what direction you're headed?" asked William.

"North."

"Hmmm. There's a lot of city to the north. Good thing the tunnels go up for quite a distance. The subway goes just so far, North Bronx, maybe. The train tracks head up north but then travel through the towns, a lot of populated area. The tracks run right along the Hudson River, it's the most direct ... but as I said, right through the most people. There are several highways, but again, the traffic is constant. All I can tell you is to be careful until you get out of Yonkers. You're going to have to stick to shadows and back alleys. Once you get past there, it's open country and highways but if you get high enough, there are a lot of trees for cover. Do you have any idea how far north?"

"Not yet. I just know that is the way to Jacob."

"Please be careful, friend. You'll be just fine if you keep your wits about you and listen to your instincts," assured William.

Vincent knew there was more to that statement than just concern. He certainly had all he could do to stay focused, to keep his mind on the mission of deliberate action. He gave William a hug before moving on. Taking the tunnel to the right, Vincent was on his way. The only thing

he could be sure of was that Jacob was waiting at the end of his journey.

Stopping for a moment in the tunnel near the entrance to Catherine's building, Vincent prayed that she would be with him. It was the first time he'd invoked her since that terrible night when he had told her to get out of his life. Perhaps that had been a vision, an imagining, a dream .... he often wasn't sure anymore of the boundaries of reality. He only knew how it had felt to dismiss her. That, at least, had been real ...

Moving quickly, taking the most direct routes, Vincent continued straight up the western edge of Central Park and through Harlem toward Washington Heights. At last the tunnel ended at the Harlem River.

Throughout the years, Vincent had taken this trek many times. He could take his time and stretch it into a two-day journey and then be very mysterious about his whereabouts. On this day, however, there was nothing leisurely about Vincent's pace. Reaching the last connection to the subway, he slid on his stomach through a narrow passage. Sliding a manhole cover aside, he was in another tunnel only about four feet high - a connection for electrical conduits, with cables everywhere.

Stooping low, Vincent stepped very carefully until he reached the door at the far end. Once through the door, he was on a concrete dock with a half-wall as protection from the passing train. There were controls on the wall next to the door. A weak electric lightbulb cast just enough light to show a master switch behind a locked screen.

From this point, the subway tunnel made its way up a gradual incline until the tracks were along a bridge over the river. Once on the other side of the river, the train continued above ground for only four stops, ending at the terminal in Van Cortland Park. It was in this park that Vincent occasionally spent a night watching couples walk hand-in-hand, or ball teams play. He could do the same in Central Park, but there was always something added to the experience in Van Cortland Park simply because it wasn't home.

Taking a minute to plan out his journey, Vincent realized that it would still be light when the train crossed the river and reached the park. The weather was warm and pleasant. That meant many lovers and ballplayers would be out, not to mention children running in every direction.

Sitting in the corner of the dock, Vincent tried to connect with Jacob. The bond wasn't open. He could only assume that when happy and occupied, Jacob could keep from thinking about home. In one way, this thought reassured Vincent. It could mean that, for the past two weeks, Jacob had been well-cared for and happy. On the other hand, it also filled Vincent with apprehension. What could possibly have happened to his little boy that morning to cause such fear and pain?

As he wrapped his cloak around him, Vincent suddenly felt weak with exhaustion. He had been

out all night, searching, and hadn't taken time to eat or rest before charging headlong into this journey. Why was he being so unreasonable? He had lashed out at everyone who'd tried to make him prepare properly for a prolonged search. His words were harsh, and the sound of his growls still echoed in his head.

"What has happened to me? What have I become? Maybe the question is, what is left?" whispered Vincent.

His driving force was the bond which had finally opened. His focus was all-consuming, obsessive. Shaking his head, he had to admit that this is how he had done everything in the years that had followed Catherine's death - hell-bent and headlong. As tired as he was, Vincent still had to quiet the agitation he felt, because he had to wait. He couldn't hop a subway train and be on his way. He was one raw nerve-ending, and his impatience and anxiety tied knots in his stomach. Mercifully, exhaustion gave way to sleep, as Vincent had his head on the blanket roll and stretched out next to the wall.

Not even the rumbling or vibration of constantly passing trains disturbed Vincent's dreams. They were full of a happier time, his youth, when Devin taught him how to glide onto a moving car. Abruptly, he sat up, panic gripping him. Jacob was calling out to him. His son was frightened, almost devastated.

Surely it was dark by now ... But somehow, that no longer mattered. There was no way Vincent could wait once he'd experienced Jacob's nightmare. A rumbling from far down the track warned him that a train was approaching.

Waiting for the first car to pass, Vincent jumped on the ledge of the half-wall, judged the train's speed, and effortlessly glided to the top of the fourth car, grabbing for the front edge to stop his momentum. This was it - the last place of safety and seclusion. From this point, he would travel Above.

When the train left the tunnel and began rocking along on an elevated track, Vincent was relieved to find it a dark night and later than he'd thought: the stations were almost deserted. When the train started to slow before entering the terminal at Van Cortland Park, Vincent slid to the platform and crouched in the shadows until all the cars had passed. It would be only a matter of moments before the train reversed and started the trip back to Manhattan.

Although Vincent was familiar with the park, he needed a moment to get his bearings and decide on the best route. A very busy highway crossed under the track and cut through the park - too risky, too many automobiles, too well-lit. A smaller two-lane road skirted the park. On this, there were fewer lights, and it seemed to head directly north. Vincent decided on the less-traveled road and followed it, under cover of the park, for as long as he could.

Suddenly, he was in a populated area, but he noticed that past this road to the east were a

series of hills. To the west, the land dropped off to the Hudson River. There were many homes and docks with boats and small marinas on that side of the road. Climbing to the top of the hill, Vincent looked down on the road and over the river. The wind was blowing through his hair, and the breeze heightened his senses. He could only imagine what it would look like in the daylight.

Turning to the east, he viewed the city. This had to be Yonkers. Ahead, on the ridge of the hill, Vincent could see the lights from several homes, beautiful homes with beautiful views. Catherine should have lived in one of these homes, should have lived this life - a happy life. He allowed the thought to grip him for only a moment, and then returned to the task of reconnoitering.

As he studied the area, Vincent understood what William was trying to tell him. There may have been houses below the road on the river and houses on top of the hills, but there was a wooded stretch of hillside that went directly up from the road. He didn't know how far it went, but he felt lucky to have such good cover.

It didn't take Vincent long to find out, however, that several roads cut up from the river to the city. He had to be careful; the trees would sometimes suddenly give way to a clearing and a road. Once, he was caught in the glare of headlights as a car came around a bend; another time he was stopped, hiding behind a tree, as a group of teenagers got out of a car not twenty feet ahead of him. It was then he realized that the leaves and underbrush had not fully grown, leaving bare spots. It was still early in the season.

At that pace, it took Vincent all night to go eleven miles. He was frustrated, weary and hungry. To make matters worse, the road now deserted the hills and went directly through a town. Plainly, he could go no further until dark. Always the same story!

As he settled himself between two large trees, Vincent took time to concentrate and take stock. He was tired, hungry, and Jacob seemed at peace once again. Opening the pack which William had given him, Vincent was glad to see several packages of breadsticks, as only William could bake them; a hunk of cheese and an apple finished his meal. He didn't open the box of raisins, knowing that William had packed them for Jacob as a special treat.

Vincent collected some old leaves and branches to cover himself, finally settling down to rest. An unexplained calm came over him. It was as though a burden had been lifted. He questioned this just before falling asleep. He awakened with the answer.

His sleep had been too restful, his mind too clear. He couldn't ever remember this sensation. It was a freedom beyond the physical - he no longer carried the burden of the emotions of those around him. In his crazed emotional state, he had become incapable of shielding himself - something necessary for the stable survival of an empath. It had become a forgotten ability as

his life became aggressive and less controlled. And so he had fallen prey to all the anxiety around him.

"I was truly going mad," he murmured. "I certainly had my own pain, but I was not only trying to cope with that, I was also dealing with the pain of others." He did have to admit, however, that he was most probably the cause of a good deal of their worry.

It was dusk - still too early to move freely. Instead, Vincent started an upward climb, once more to the top of the hills. They were getting higher. '*If you get high enough ...*' William had said.

From this vantage point, looking down on both sides, Vincent could see nothing but highways, hills, and trees. The towns were all clustered in little valleys away from the main roads. He could continue along on this tree-covered ridge. Who would have thought that so much uninhabited natural land existed so close to New York City!

By his experiences of the past months, Vincent should have expected the high elation he'd felt upon awakening, to collapse into a deep depression. Yet for some reason, the downswing caught him unprepared. He'd almost convinced himself that his illness was attributable, in part, to others as their emotions made their imprint on his empathic being. In other words, that it wasn't his fault. He found that a comforting thought.

He had been walking for a couple of hours when the setting sun caught his eye through the trees. Rushing to a clearing, Vincent lay in the tall grass, while he chewed on a breadstick, watching the sky change colors. It was too beautiful, so beautiful that he started to cry. A yearning deep within him stirred. His soul screamed to share this awesome kaleidoscope with his Catherine. He drew up his legs, hoping to ease the pain. As he lay there, feeling very alone, the tall grass began to ripple.

"Lie very still." The voice came from within him. "Look, you can almost reach out and touch him."

Vincent closed his eyes. It had gotten so that he could no longer bear the nothingness.

"Look!" the voice insisted.

A beautiful young deer nibbling on the top of the grass came into view as Vincent opened his eyes.

"I told you, you'd love this."

"I'm so happy I came. We are finally free to enjoy - enjoy everything," whispered Vincent, as he turned his head to find that Catherine was lying beside him.

The deer in the tall grass had triggered the flashback, but this was the first time he had

projected it to the present. The hallucination had become his reality - a reality which he very much preferred. To him, she had form, she had substance, their life was continuing.

Catherine brushed his brow with her fingertips, saying, "Poor darling, it wasn't my choice to leave you."

Vincent gazed at her, feeding his hungry soul, so close to starvation; healing his broken heart. Stroking her head gave him courage; he gently kissed her beautiful lips.

There was so much to say to each other; so much to resolve. She knew about Jacob and reassured Vincent that their son was safe. The hours went by as darkness fell. Finally, she carefully unlaced his shirt and laid her head on his chest. He held her tightly as another flashback added complete reality to their passion.

Suddenly she screamed; and Vincent felt a pang of fear. Jacob was having another nightmare! A flash of lightning lit the little clearing, showing Vincent that he was quite alone. The angry rain pelted him as his anguished body slowly struggled to its feet. The thunder crashed and the lightning strobed to reveal a bare-chested Vincent with arms raised to the heavens. Rivulets of rain ran into his mouth as he screamed.

*"No, no! Catherine!"* echoed throughout the hilltops.

Morning found Vincent in a heap on that very spot. He was still wet and chilled. Going to the trees where he'd left his things, he was glad that the underbrush had afforded them some protection; his cape was reasonably dry. He wrapped himself in it, trying to sort out the perplexity of the night before. He truly believed that Catherine had been there.

He knew that he had been granted a miracle. They'd been given one more night to fulfill the promise of their lives. All the regrets were gone. He did make it up to her. And now he totally remembered the first time they loved, every nuance, every breathless moment, every thrilling sensation. Indeed, in his mind, Catherine had been with him last night. As always, she'd given him all he needed. Until the end of his days, neither time nor reason would convince him otherwise.

He'd lost a whole night's travel, but the urgency was also gone. Catherine had reassured him that Jacob was safe. After changing to a clean shirt and eating, Vincent re-rolled the pack, strapped it across his back, and started, in the daylight, on his way. Another revelation presented itself that morning; the bond between Vincent and Jacob was open! Jacob was thinking of his father, and he was worrying.

The terrain was becoming rocky and steeper. Clumps of trees grew only where the rocks allowed. The three highways Vincent had been observing seemed to be converging to a single point. He was still high above all the activity, but still he was cautious, for he could see signs of

heavier population. Perhaps another city. Suddenly, the trees gave way to barren rock. Vincent stopped short in amazement. The Hudson River was once more in view and a magnificent bridge spanned the water.

Vincent didn't know exactly how to proceed. He stood on a cliff overlooking the highway. The river and bridge were on one side; the city was on the other. Waiting until nightfall seemed the best course.

As Vincent rested, one thing became very evident: Jacob was somewhere on the other side of that river. *Rest and wait*, he had to keep telling himself. He finally managed to relax by concentrating on the bond: for Jacob was having a good day. His enjoyment was spilling over onto his father.

Waiting an hour after total darkness, Vincent made his way to the edge of the cliff. He certainly didn't expect to see the spectacle he found before him. The bridge was totally lighted. He had seen bridges at night before; but this looked like a crown of jewels. He estimated the total span to be at least five miles long. Cars with glaring headlights streamed across, and other headlights stretched a mile in either direction. There were toll booths and much activity at the entrances to the bridge, not to mention a huge sign with lighted electric bulbs. "*TAPPAN ZEE.*"

All Vincent had to do was make it down sheer slippery rocks to a congested highway with waiting cars, and cross a bridge, brighter than daylight, that spanned the Hudson River at its widest point.

*'Keep your wits about you and follow your instincts.'* Again, Williams's words served to settle impending panic.

"The old Vincent wuld have been able to instantly assess and act," he said to himself. "Let the old Vincent take over." Calming himself into a black void, he knew instinctively that he had to backtrack back to where he could get down, unseen, to the highway leading to the bridge.

Instead of going back the way he'd come, Vincent followed the multi-laned road to where the traffic wasn't as heavy. In that area, rocks jutted out of the hillside, but there were still enough trees to give him cover. Carefully, Vincent stole from tree to tree, downward to the gully bordering the road. He could move stealthily in the young trees and underbrush, following the automobiles to the bridge.

This covering became sparse about a hundred yards from the toll booths. The danger that someone in a waiting automobile might spot him made Vincent decide to abandon the road and follow the bank down to the river. Once down there, he made his way to the foot of the nearest supporting bridge girder. The height of this support was immense, but other supports farther along were ever higher. The underside girders formed a crosshatch pattern arched to

the point of suspension.

Vincent sat at the base of the girder, his back against a boulder. He could hear each automobile as it crossed overhead. And so he found himself once again waiting, waiting for when the click of the wheels lengthened in rhythm. Fewer automobiles, fewer people. Less chance of being seen.

Somewhere around 2 a.m, Vincent decided to make his move. He'd been studying the underside of the bridge and thought he could see a mesh catwalk. Keeping to the shadows under the bridge, Vincent made his way to the spot where it left land. At that point, a pile of boulders rose from the riverbank to the bridge support.

This was an easy climb for Vincent, but it took him all the way back to the toll booths. However, this was much safer than climbing the girder at the water's edge. He groped his way, hand over hand, to the middle of the bridge and was relieved to find a narrow walkway used for inspections.

Swinging his weight up, Vincent caught the edge of the walkway with his feet and carefully followed through with the rest of his body. He lay still for a moment, grateful he didn't have to negotiate the full length of the Tappan Zee hand-over-hand in the shadows. Not that this was going to be easy. The catwalk was cramped; Vincent was either scraping his head, losing his footing, or crawling on all fours. However, it didn't take him long to realize that the vibration of the bridge segments almost pitched him into the Hudson every time an automobile passed overhead.

"Five miles of this! Take it slow and stay calm!"

By four in the morning, traffic had virtually stopped. Gratefully, Vincent was able to make up some time. He had also learned to anticipate an oncoming vehicle, making the ordeal less dangerous as he clung to the edges of the catwalk.

It took all of the precious darkness to make it to the western bank of the Hudson River. Finally, descending the final girder, he sat for a moment, hoping he could continue on his way, when he realized that with the first light of dawn, the onslaught of automobiles were once more attacking the bridge. *Commuters*, thought Vincent. He didn't dare come out from the cover of the Tappan Zee Bridge.

Snuggling into a notch between two boulders, Vincent slept - a much deserved rest. The steady click-clack of wheels turning overhead merged into his slumber, keeping him attuned to the traffic even in his sleep, a restless sleep. As he was drawing closer to Jacob, Vincent was becoming more anxious. The self-control he needed to exert was something he hadn't called upon in a long time. But Vincent knew he must not make any mistakes. He couldn't rush headlong into that pull, his bond with Jacob.

Waking as the increasing traffic signalled that commuters were returning home, Vincent felt ready to conquer the world. Again, his mood had swung, displaying a certain bravado. This only served to make Vincent feel he could start out once again, despite the constant stream of cars.

However, perhaps it wasn't all bravado. Perhaps some of the old instincts were at work. The setting sun bathed the eastern cliffs in red and purple, but the western crags were cast in deep shadows.

Carefully, Vincent inched his way out from under the bridge and crept to the foot of the palisades. He moved between the rocks until he could no longer be seen from the bridge. It was only then that he began his ascent to the upper edge.

Again the strong bond moved him in the right direction, straight and true. It became an overpowering force. Not since all those times he had rushed to rescue Catherine, had Vincent felt so compelled. He moved forward with remembered self-assurance and conviction. However, this was different; he was on unfamiliar ground, and Jacob wasn't in danger. He could take the time that was needed to skirt the many small villages and sprawling farms.

The ground continued to rise before him until finally the rounded tops of mountains came into view. Vincent was totally mesmerized by their grandeur. He could only imagine, through his reading or the tales of others, the power they commanded. For the first time in his life, Vincent felt small and insignificant by comparison. However, he also felt the need to become a part of that power. He didn't know how or why - he only knew that they were calling to him.

A thin spring rain began just before dawn. Vincent knew that Jacob was somewhere in the small town ahead of him. It nestled itself between a highway and the mountains. As he skirted the shopping center and houses, Vincent allowed the bond to draw him out of the more populated areas to a small house on a dirt road. It had a large lawn and back yard with a garden and swings.

Running to the cover of trees surrounding this lovely parcel, Vincent watched as lights began to show in the windows of the house. The day was beginning for whoever lived there; he'd have to wait in the trees for nightfall before he could reclaim his son.

It was, perhaps, the longest day of his life. Vincent tried to rest from the ordeal of his trip thus far. He was frustrated by his lack of stamina and fully realized the toll his illness had taken. He dreamt of a peaceful place where he could be left alone, where serenity could enter his soul. It had been so long that he'd forgotten what it was to be at peace with himself. Now, he not only needed it - he longed for it.

Rousing from a nap, Vincent realized that what had wakened him were children at play. He watched as Jacob and an older girl played a game of tag and then ran for the swings. Soon a

man came from the house and began tossing a ball to the children. It amazed Vincent to realize that this was a signing family and that Jacob fit in comfortably. When a woman came out and Vincent witnessed how his son ran to her as she held out her arms, his heart nearly broke.

As he watched, he began to recognize familiar feelings, the same feelings that surfaced every time Catherine had made another sacrifice, so they could be together. Was he now being fair to Jacob? Would his son be better left here with this complete family, where he could run in the sunshine and be loved by a father who could play ball with him and a mother who could hold him? Yet, as painful as this was to watch, Vincent sat riveted in the spot. Suddenly, his little boy stopped in his tracks and turned toward the woods, looking directly at the spot where Vincent sat.

In that moment Vincent knew it was too late. He no longer had the option to leave without Jacob, for the bond had connected them. Jacob knew he was there.

Not only did they have to wait until dark, but also until everyone was asleep. Vincent had decided to wait an hour after all the lights had gone out in the house, before he approached. He hoped Jacob would be ready and waiting for him.

When all was quiet and dark inside the house, Jacob placed his painstakingly written notes on the kitchen table. He was very proud of those notes, his first try at writing down his feelings. As difficult as it was for him to laboriously copy all the letters, the notes did convey how he felt. His grandpa had said that he should always thank people and that thank you notes were important. Jacob always wondered what thank-you notes were. Now he knew. He then took his little bundle and quietly slipped out the back door, heading straight for the woods.

Vincent had been pacing for three hours. Suddenly his head snapped up and his eyes filled with tears as he realized that a staunch little figure was marching straight for him. He ran out of the cover of the trees into the clearing, gathering his son to his breast.

"Oh, Jacob! I thought you'd been lost to me too. I love you. Know that I will always love you," cried Vincent as he carried his son into the trees.

"Daddy, Daddy! I knew you'd find me! They didn't hurt you?" asked Jacob, still concerned for his father's safety.

"No, I'm just fine. In fact, I haven't been this well in a long time."

"Okay, let's go home now," said Jacob as he started bouncing in Vincent's arms. It was clear he had no idea of the ordeal the trip had been for Vincent, or the distance. After all, he had made the trip in two hours by car. (39.8 miles Central Park to Suffern, NY)

A sudden panic gripped Vincent. The thought of returning to the turmoil his life had become

was terrifying. He knew that everyone Below would be worrying about him and Jacob, but he also felt suffocated by all that love and concern, as well as by the dark caverns he called home. For the first time, he could understand and sympathize with the young Devin.

"Daddy, let's go!"

It seemed that there was a rope tied around Vincent's waist, keeping him from moving in the direction of the house. He simply couldn't get his legs to start the journey. Suddenly, without thinking, he turned to the rising slope behind them. Digging his feet into the muddy rise, Vincent climbed at breakneck speed until he dropped to the ground far above the little town of Suffern.

"Jacob, how would you like to go on an adventure with Daddy?" asked Vincent after catching his breath.

"Yes, oh, yes! Where are we going?"

"There." Pointing up to the summit, Vincent indicated the mountain range which was the foothills of the Catskills.

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Jacob slept in his father's arms as Vincent continued the climb, finally reaching a spot where the trees were large and grew thickly. A little stream created just enough bank to provide room to stretch out. With every step into the wild, Vincent seemed to be shedding an outer shell. He felt cleansed, as one would feel when taking a shower after a particularly dirty task.

The ground was still damp, so Vincent wrapped Jacob in his cape before putting him down.

"What a beautiful child you are! How can you be? Your existence is such a mystery to me." Vincent closed his cape tightly around Jacob and brushed his brow, noticing the mud clinging to the fur on his hands.

Turning to the stream, Vincent submerged his hands and watched as the mud flowed downstream. Suddenly, the clear water reflected his countenance, and he gasped. That image always startled him. Somewhere deep inside of him that creature existed, he knew that. But for the most part, his heart felt like Jacob looked. He could remember, as a growing child, he'd hoped his appearance would change, would more reflect the love he had in his heart for everything and everybody. Instead, he only grew more and more fierce until he could no longer bear to look in the reflecting pool.

"How can my son be so beautiful, so human, *and I.....God, what am I?*" Vincent shouted.

*What am I, what am I* echoed throughout the quiet of the mountains and came back at him a hundredfold until Vincent held his ears and rolled to the ground beside Jacob. That's where the little boy found his father, as he awoke to the first rays of sun and the chirping of the birds.

Not wanting to wake Vincent, Jacob wandered to the edge of the stream, splashed in the water, took a drink, and then started to collect pretty stones. He piled them high, then threw a rock at the pile: his own version of bowling. He laughed loudly each time the stones flew in all directions. This game kept him occupied for several minutes. Then he was on to exploring. He got about three paces away, then:

"Young man, where do you think you're going?" asked Vincent.

"Daddy, you're awake!"

"Yes. I've been watching you play. It was a good game."

"And fun."

"Oh, yes! I could see you were having fun." Vincent, as he slowly rose to his knees. Two hours' sleep wasn't nearly enough after such an arduous climb. It occurred to him that he'd have to learn to rise early in the morning and go to sleep earlier at night. He couldn't have Jacob wandering around alone in these mountains. He had to learn to live in the daylight.

Suddenly Jacob sat down in front of Vincent, looking belligerent.

"Well, what's that for? What's wrong?" asked Vincent.

"I'm hungry. No food!"

"Oh, yes, there is. You don't think William would let us go hungry, do you?"

"Where?"

"Here." Vincent indicated the blanket roll still strapped to his back. Jacob started pawing at it as his father unbuckled the pack. "Wait a minute, be patient! Give me a chance to get it off!"

Until now, Vincent hadn't undone the entire roll. He'd only gotten as far as the breadsticks. Therefore, both he and Jacob were amazed when things kept popping out of it as if by magic: breadsticks, cheese, raisins, flour and beans; a compact camping kit, canteen, fork-spoon devices, cups, handles for the two metal dishes which turned them into cooking pots; a small hatchet and knife in a leather scabbard; wooden matches in a metal case; and the two blankets which had formed the outside roll.

Handing Jacob a breadstick, Vincent examined each item, knowing full well that all would be very useful. He also realized that, while the food would have been enough to get them back to the tunnels, it certainly wasn't meant to sustain them for this extended trip. Looking around him, Vincent knew he would have to provide for them - food and some kind of shelter. He was

totally out of his element. Even Jacob had more experience in the great outdoors than he. But he never considered turning back; it was a challenge he embraced.

Could he hunt and deliberately kill an animal? The thought revolted him. But if it meant food for Jacob, he knew he'd have to do it. Which of the growing things were edible? Did he dare take a chance? This was not only *his* survival - it was Jacob's survival. The little boy didn't seem the least bit worried; humming to himself, he was enjoying a handful of raisins. He had complete confidence in his father.

Vincent strapped the hatchet and knife to his belt, filled the canteen with fresh water, and repacked the rest. "Ready to move on?" he asked Jacob.

"Yes!"

"We'll continue upstream for awhile to see where it takes us. I think we had better stay near the water."

They walked up to where the small stream joined a larger, fast-moving creek that fell over jutting boulders. At this point, there was quite a large clearing with tall sweet grass and spring flowers in bloom. *A perfect place to set up camp*, thought Vincent.

In fact, Vincent thought he had never seen anything quite so perfect: the sun was shining, the air smelled sweet and fresh, and a light spray from the splashing water made everything glisten. He spent the rest of the afternoon watching Jacob chase butterflies as the descending sun created a rainbow over the creek. Consciously, he was idelibly printing these beautiful pictures on his brain, for the time when he was no longer in the sunshine.

By sunset a harsh wind started to blow. Clouds gathered on the horizon. There was nowhere to run for shelter as the storm blew into the clearing. The rain was cold, stinging, carried by a wind bowling down from the mountain tops. Jacob held his hands over his head, bending over, crying. Vincent scooped him up and ran for the trees but lightning was licking at the top branches. He wasn't sure it would be safe if fiery limbs came crashing down.

Grabbing several fallen limbs as he hurried back to the clearing, Vincent worked very quickly. He broke two limbs into equal pieces about eighteen inches long and, with his incredible strength, drove them into the ground about four feet apart. He then threw his cape over the branches, flaring out the ends.

"Get me some rocks, Jacob," he had shouted. The little boy scurried about, dumping rocks around the cape, having anticipated his father's intention.

Vincent literally threw Jacob, head first, under the cape as he pulled it out and anchored it with the rocks, forming a low tent. He then went in himself and curled up his legs as he put rocks into the hood to keep it from flapping. Rolling out one blanket, he placed it under Jacob

and himself and then brought it over them. The other one, he used to cover them both completely, except for his feet, which stuck, uncovered, out of the opening.

Jacob clung to Vincent, as the thunder and lightning crashed and crackled about them. The crude little tent wasn't exactly waterproof but it did offer some shelter against the storm. When the wind subsided a bit, Vincent managed to get to the food, plying Jacob with raisins to soothe him. Finally, they drifted off to sleep. However, Vincent stirred every time the clearing lighted or the rolling thunder echoed from the mountainsides. He was very much aware that he was Jacob's protector. By the next morning, he was also aware that he was Jacob's provider.

During the previous night they had nibbled their way through the remaining breadsticks and raisins so that for breakfast all that was left was a small piece of cheese. Jacob insisted on sharing it with his father even though Vincent gave it all to him.

"For you," he said as he broke off a corner of the chunk in his hand. Vincent started to shake his head, but Jacob turned his father's hand over and placed the cheese in it.

Looking about him, Vincent could see no evidence of anything edible. They walked through the woods for a little distance, but soon returned to their little tent. It was a very cool spring day; the storm had brought a cold front. Vincent untied Jacob's jacket and was surprised as the clothes and books fell out. They sat with their backs to the tent. Vincent wrapped a blanket around them both even though Jacob was snug in his warm jacket. They finally settled to the task at hand, leafing through the books.

"They lived here," said Jacob.

"Who?"

"Them," answered Jacob as he flipped pages in his book, stopping at the picture of the Headless Horseman and Rip Van Winkle.

"Yes, you're right! How do you know that?"

"She told me."

"Who told you, Jacob?"

"The mother." Jacob formed the letter *E* and rubbed his cheek. He looked at his father a bit apprehensively, not knowing what to expect.

"Oh, I see. Tell me about her, Jacob."

Jacob thought for awhile and then a tear rolled down his cheek. "She was very nice. She rocked me and gave me a bath and put me to bed every night. She couldn't hear very well and Rose is deaf, so they all sign."

"Who is Rose?"

"Her little girl."

"Jacob, how did you get there? What happened?" And so started the story of Jacob's adventure.

"Yes. There was no way you could tell anyone where you came from," commented Vincent, when Jacob was through.

"Oh, no! The policeman had a big gun, and he would kill you."

"We felt that you were protecting me. What a burden for one so young!" exclaimed Vincent.

"Burden? What is a burden, Daddy?"

"Something very heavy to carry."

"But, Daddy, I love you," cried Jacob, clasping his father in a fierce hug.

Vincent lay back into the tent comforting Jacob as they both wept. He stroked the child's back until Jacob fell asleep.

The mind is a truly wonderful thing. It shuts out what is too painful when it needs to protect, and it finds a tool when it needs to heal. When Vincent had endured the flashback with Catherine on that lonely storm-swept hilltop, his mind realized that all he needed to heal himself was within him. All he needed to do was remember. The thoughts, the solutions, the words were his; he had said them all to Catherine. However, there was no one to say them to Vincent.

As he kissed the top of Jacob's head, Vincent murmured, "You have endured so much," which immediately threw him back to a time when he had rescued Catherine from Paracelsus.

They were in the boat and she was looking up at him. "The truth beyond knowledge is love," she said, and then the vision pulled away and Vincent was watching it. It was an enjoyable experience, not at all like those frightening flashbacks he'd been caught up within. He filled with joy as he experienced how much he had been loved.

Opening his eyes, Vincent couldn't be sure if he'd been asleep, but it didn't matter; once again, he had that feeling of well-being.

"Yes, Catherine, I remember now. The truth beyond knowledge is love. And this child is that love."

Vincent sat cross-legged at the opening of the tent in a protective manner, wondering if he had the right to expose his son to untamed nature. His need was so overpowering that he hadn't considered the danger. However, even now, Vincent felt that somehow nature's

unleashed power was what he needed to replenish himself. He would find a way to survive; now, he was sure that the question was basic survival.

Suddenly Vincent's head snapped up. The hackles on the back of his neck stood on end. He heard something crashing through the trees on the other side of the creek. Grabbing Jacob, he ran into the woods, clapping his hand over the startled little boy's mouth to keep him from screaming. They both were amazed as a large lumbering black bear came into the clearing. She stood for a moment and sniffed the air, then proceeded to the edge of the water. Turning back toward the trees, she waited until two cubs joined her.

Vincent indicated that Jacob should be very quiet, but this wasn't necessary. Jacob was spellbound. As they watched, the bear reached into the water with unexpected swiftness and threw a fish onto the bank. The cubs frolicked for awhile and then tore into their meal. Soon another fish flapped at them, and then another. The she-bear settled herself and sat two of the fish quickly, batting her cubs aside as they tried to get more to eat. She needed the nourishment to nurse them; that came first. At that tender age, the cubs were merely playing with the fish. When she was finished, the bear patted the back-ends of each of the cubs and they scurried into the woods ahead of her. She followed them, but not before she once more sniffed the air.

Vincent relaxed once they disappeared but waited awhile before returning to the clearing.

"Daddy, Daddy, she was so big! The cubs were so cute," chattered Jacob as he ran circles around Vincent.

"You're never to go near them," Vincent warned. "The most dangerous animal is a female protecting her young, and the bear is deadly. Do you understand?"

Jacob nodded his head seriously. "I'm hungry," he said, changing the subject. "My tummy hurts."

Going to the water's edge, Vincent stared into the clear water. "Well, if she can do it, so can I." He wasn't sure if it was an animal instinct or just a matter of good coordination. Maybe it was both.

He stared, fixing his gaze onto the area within his reach. He hadn't noticed the fish when he'd looked into the water that morning, but now he could see them as they swam below the surface. Waiting, waiting - suddenly, he took a swipe into the water with his large clawed hand. Vincent's first attempt was not successful, but it did serve to help him judge his speed. With the next swipe, a fish flew out of the water. Jacob squealed in delight and clapped encouragement for his father.

Smiling at Jacob's reaction, Vincent needed to once more concentrate. Soon two more fish

joined the first. "That should be enough, even for a hungry little boy."

Once again, Vincent made a mental note to thank William as he opened the camping utensils and broke into the sack of flour. After starting a fire, he made a flat dough cake and pan-fried the fish. It was a warm, wonderful meal, especially because it proved to Vincent that he could indeed do this.

As they settled under the tent for the night, Vincent decided to stay as long as they could. He might never get another chance. If nothing else, they could eat fish.

"Tomorrow morning we'll look for a better place to stay, Jacob. This is too open, too unprotected."

"Where?"

"Up. We'll keep going up."

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Indeed, up they went, up to the top, where they looked upon a gentle slope to a lovely little lake. To Vincent, this was paradise, in actuality, he had inadvertently walked into an undisturbed animal preserve.

"The first thing we need to do is find someplace to set up a permanent home," said Vincent.

"Someplace dry, Daddy?"

"I hope so!"

They walked down the slope almost to the lake until Vincent spotted a rocky area. He'd noticed how rock formations jutted out of the mountainsides. Sure enough, they found a ledge which projected about four feet over head. The wall under it curved inward - not quite a cave, but it showed potential. It would, at least, hide their things while they explored the area. Putting some branches over their meager packs, Vincent and Jacob started out to gather what they could.

With the natural rock formation as a start, Vincent started designing a simple shelter. This was something he knew about, how to build with rock and timber. What they needed was building supplies. He set Jacob to the task of gathering stones once more. While the child was busy, Vincent climbed to the lower branches of a pine tree, chopping at four limbs. He could get more if he needed them, but he felt he could not waste any of this beauty.

Dragging the limbs back to the ledge, Vincent chopped away all the branches and bark, leaving

bare timber. He then dug a trench on each side under the overhang, about eighteen inches from its edges. Setting two timbers into the trenches, he leaned them against the overhang.

"Jacob, fill in the trench here and there put the stones all around these logs." said Vincent.

"What's a trench?"

"Take that dirt and fill in the holes, here and here."

"Okay."

Next, Vincent trimmed the supple pine boughs from the branches and wove them between the timbers, tying them securely with strips of bark. This created sturdy thatched walls for their little home. The tips of the boughs were all pushed against the stone wall, and Vincent pulled them to the inside through the opening between the timbers and the wall. This served to fill in the space until the finishing touches were added.

"I think that's enough for today, Jacob. What do you think?"

Jacob went into the shelter, inspecting the walls and walking back into the little ark. Sitting, he proudly said, "It's good! We did good, Daddy. Is it time to eat?"

"It's most definitely time to eat," laughed Vincent. "First, though, we have to find some dry old wood. It's called kindling. Come on, let's go!"

Jacob was a bit downcast as he realized there was more work ahead. He stomped his feet as he followed after his father.

"I don't wanna."

Vincent turned; kneeling, he took hold of Jacob's arms. "Jacob, I want you to pay attention to what I am about to say. I ask you to do things that are very important and that I am sure you can do. I need your help. Do you understand?"

Jacob nodded his head. Vincent continued, "Besides, do you want to stay up there all by yourself?"

Jacob hadn't thought of that, and he got wide-eyed as he shook his head. Then he threw himself at Vincent, clinging just a bit.

Once Jacob knew what to look for, he became almost compulsive in his search. He kept picking up sticks and running back to the pile until it was almost as tall as he was. Suddenly, he realized that his daddy wasn't close by, and he panicked a little, until he saw Vincent coming up from the lake with some water.

*"You left me ALONE!"* Jacob wailed.

"I could see you at all times. You weren't alone. I think there's a lot we're going to have to get

used to."

That night's supper was just the pancakes. But Vincent had found some sweet sap oozing from an old split maple tree and cut a cupful away. After heating, it became a sweet flavoring to make the tasteless cakes a bit more appetizing.

"I think we'd better both get to sleep early tonight. Tomorrow, we have to explore this place," said Vincent as he wrapped a blanket under and over Jacob. They had decided that Jacob would sleep in the arc of the wall and Vincent would sleep stretched across the opening of the shelter. However, as the nocturnal prowlers came to investigate this new presence, Vincent got very little sleep. He could see pairs of eyes staring at him from the darkness, and he could hear soft footsteps as animals circled in front of the shelter. Some very bold little creature even sneaked passed Vincent's foot and tried to get at their meager provisions. There was certainly more nighttime activity than there was in the daylight. That was very familiar to him.

"I have been one acquainted with the night." Vincent thought of the comfort he'd always found in the night. He wondered what these animals would do if they knew that he could see them in the darkness, that the night was not a shield for them. He didn't fear them and hoped they would accept his intrusion. Was he really one of them? Was this why he was drawn here to start his search for self?

The next morning proved more eventful than Vincent would have wanted. The morning started well enough: a pancake breakfast, and setting some beans to soak. Again, William had a surprise waiting for Vincent. Opening the sack of beans, Vincent found a package of salt and some dried bacon. He would have to ration this precious cache carefully.

Vincent headed for the lake, Jacob riding on his shoulders. They no sooner got there when something told Vincent to go back to the shelter. He put Jacob on the shore, telling him not to move a muscle, and dashed back up the slope. He was just in time to see a raccoon dip into the open pot of beans and another about to tear into the four. It quickly occurred to Vincent that nothing would be safe with these bandits around. He rolled everything back in a blanket and once more strapped it to his back. He then hung the little pot by the wire handle high on a branch. Hoping it would be safer there, he turned to head back to the lake. He took a few steps, then whipped around, growling loudly; he'd caught sight of a raccoon standing tall, trying to reach the hanging pot. The creature scurried away quickly, frightened, as the roar rippled throughout the valley.

"Of course, this they understand," muttered Vincent.

He had kept Jacob in his line of vision all the while until he growled. He'd turned away only a moment, but as he headed back to the spot where he left Jacob, he realized that his son was gone.

"Jacob! Jacob!" Vincent scanned the shoreline and he finally saw Jacob coming toward him with red all over his face. What could have happened to him? Panic struck Vincent's heart. His son was hurt! Had an animal attacked him? However, as Jacob came closer, he didn't appear to be in pain.

Vincent ran to him, sweeping him in his arms. "What has happened? Where are you hurt?"

"Berries," answered Jacob smugly.

"Berries!" growled Vincent.

Jacob didn't like it when his father growled. It meant that he was really mad. Burying his head in Vincent's shoulder, he pointed up the slope and offered a muffled, "Up there."

"You ate the berries?"

Jacob nodded.

"How do you feel? Are you all right?"

"Uhuh! They're real good."

Settling himself and calming down, Vincent realized this could be a good food source. He checked around, didn't see anything, and determined it was safe for Jacob to pick the berries.

"I'm going to see if there is a way I can get some fish out of this lake. You can go pick some berries for lunch, all right? Don't go up too far, and always make sure you can see me. I'll call to you, and you call back so we'll know we're always in earshot. Understand? And if I tell you to come back, I want you to come immediately." Vincent then gave Jacob a pan and watched as the little boy made his way a short distance up the slope. It really wasn't that far, and Vincent felt secure that he could make it to Jacob's side in about ten strides. They called to each other, and finally Vincent decided it was safe to turn his attention to the lake.

He didn't see any fish swimming close to the shoreline and guess they preferred the shade of the reeds or deeper water. Removing his boots and socks and rolling up his jeans, Vincent ventured into the water. It was cold but felt good. In fact, he would have liked nothing better than to strip and submerge completely. He waded thigh deep and planted his feet, standing still and waiting for the fish to get used to his form. He became intrigued as many kinds of fish began to circle his legs.

Suddenly, he became aware of a whimpering sound. At the same moment he sensed Jacob's fear and knew his son was in danger. He started to race to Jacob's aid, but the sight before him froze him in his tracks.

Lumbering towards Jacob at a rather quick pace was the she-bear with her cubs at her heels. Before Vincent could move a muscle, she was standing over Jacob, flailing her clawed paws

and growling loudly. This berry patch was part of her territory and a big part of her diet.

Every animal instinct in Vincent wanted to charge at her, every bit of human intelligence told him not to anger her further. He knew he would be no match for her. There had to be another way. As Vincent's brain raced, Jacob reacted intuitively, instinctively.

He immediately went down to the ground, covering his head with his arms, forming a little human ball. He was too scared to do anything else, but this was exactly the right thing to do. He no longer posed a threat to the bear or her cubs. She relaxed a bit and sniffed the air around her. Then she gently pawed at this strange cub at her feet. She batted his behind but he didn't respond. She patted a little harder until he rolled into a prone position and started to cry, covering his head once again as she loomed ponderously over him. This cub is in distress; with remarkably human-like strokes, she scratched at his shoulder. He was very stupid - he didn't scamper away when she gave him the chance. Perhaps he was hurt. She rolled him over in the dirt and then pushed him to his feet.

By this time, Jacob was beginning to feel that she no longer meant to harm him. She could have killed him with one swipe of those claws if she had meant to do anything but frighten him. He managed to look into her eyes, but she growled softly, so he once again put his head down.

From somewhere behind this scene, a frightening growl echoed, turning the she-bear on her heels.

"Run, Jacob! Run!"

Jacob ran, but not before grabbing his pan of berries. He headed for his father who was at that moment staring down the bear. However, as Jacob reached Vincent and they both started to leave the area, she backed down. To her, this strange cub belonged to the even stranger parent who was acting in a protective manner. As long as they were leaving her territory, she would allow it.

They didn't stop or look back until they got to the shelter. Sitting quietly for several minutes, Vincent and Jacob were deep in their own prayers of gratitude. Finally, Vincent held out his arms and Jacob crawled into their safety.

"I'm all right, Daddy. I'm all right," whispered Jacob, trying to assure his father who was just crying and shaking his head. This time, Vincent didn't need a flashback or daydream - Jacob's little face was so much like his mother's as he staunchly put aside his own fear to comfort him.

Vincent cupped Jacob's face in his hands and smiled.

"I think we both have a lot to learn if we're going to stay here, Jacob."

"I don't think she was going to hurt me, Daddy. I just think she didn't know what I was."

"I think you should try to take a nap, Jacob," said Vincent, and tucked his son safely into the little niche. He then set about starting a fire on the ground outside of the shelter. Trying to decide whether to leave his sleeping son to go to the lake to get some fish, or whether he should stand guard, Vincent began to pace.

Again, a familiar feeling - the feeling of helplessness. How could he keep Catherine safe as she went about her daily work Above, or from Paracelsus, or that horrible watcher or Gabriel? Vincent began perspiring as he visualized Catherine's balcony. He was pacing, waiting.

Catherine ran into his arms and he told her that he knew she had been in danger. "I couldn't save you," he heard himself say.

"But you did. I heard you cry out. You called to me. You saved me," she answered.

"Our bond is that strong!" he wondered in awe.

"Yes, that strong," she replied.

"I was with you always. I tried, I tried to keep you safe ... until ... until the end." Vincent started crying, as the end presented itself all too clearly. He wasn't in a flashback or in denial: this was the present and he finally had the opportunity to put all those painful pieces together.

Keeping his hands busy, Vincent tied bundles of kindling with bark as he stared into the fire. Their bond had been their strength, but he finally realized that it also had been their downfall. They had come to rely on it. They'd become careless in its security, taking chances, attempting the impossible, tempting fate. Catherine had never failed him, and he'd never failed Catherine. It was the bond that failed. When that happened, they didn't know how to adjust. They had not been given enough time to learn how to live without it.

"I did everything humanly possible to find you, Catherine. There simply was no trace of you." Vincent chuckled ironically at his use of the word *humanly*. But that was the case. He had been reduced to human abilities. In these past few days, he certainly felt very human compared to the animals around him.

"I did try, Catherine. There are some things that are just beyond our meager attempts," Vincent cried. There was no one to tell him he had been mourning too long, or warn him to put some control in his life, or shake their heads. He cried as he put more wood on the fire, and as he walked to the lake, and as he caught two fish and returned to the shelter. He cried as he readied lunch and as he woke Jacob.

"Why are you crying, Daddy?"

Hesitating for only a moment, Vincent answered, "I'm crying because I miss your mother." It was the first time he didn't try to cover up the tears, the emotion.

"It's okay. You can cry if you're sad." Jacob ate, trying not to stare at his father. Finally, the tears also started to fall from his eyes, and he snuggled against Vincent's shoulder. "I miss her, too," he cried.

Vincent tightened his grip. It had never occurred to him that Jacob would miss someone he'd never known. He had been terribly remiss in not telling Jacob of his mother. He would try to do that soon.

"You do? You miss her, too?"

"Everyone's supposed to have a mother. But we don't have a mother, do we, Daddy?"

Vincent really didn't know what Jacob meant by that and didn't have the emotional strength to go into it, so he simply answered, "No, sweet one, we don't." There were so many things for which to mourn!

Vincent wept all afternoon. It truly felt good to cry in this uncontrolled manner. And he knew why he was crying. He was in pain. He missed Catherine, and he was in pain. It was as simple as that. How wonderful it was to bring it out in the open and admit it. It was the beginning of learning to live with Catherine, instead of denying her a rightful place in his heart. He was beginning to once more make her a part of his life; he was beginning to fill up that empty half.

Both father and son were quiet for the rest of the day, deep in their own thoughts. Jacob kept busy playing his bowling game, as Vincent prepared the meals and secured the area. That night they both slept behind the fire; safe from the prowling animals.

Just before dawn, Vincent started dreaming of the rooftop of Catherine's building. She was standing before him, looking determined. "I won't let him fo this to us," she was saying. "Fear, I can live with ..."

"Daddy, Daddy, the fire is going out."

Vincent jumped up, taking a moment to figure out where he was. "Oh, thank you, Jacob. It's all right," he assured his son. Putting another log on, he stoked the fire to ready it for breakfast.

"Today, we're going to do some more exploring."

"The bear?"

"We mustn't be afraid. We must be careful and watchful, but we can't be afraid that we won't be able to enjoy all this beauty around us. Yesterday's experience is behind us, but we can learn from it."

"Daddy, she wouldn't have hurt me."

"So you keep saying. Come, let's get this place cleaned up and get started."

"Besides, the berries were deee-licious."

"Never mind the berries!"

"But it's our food, too. I won't let her keep me away from it."

"You're so much like your mother."

"I am? Really?"

"Yes, really."

They did learn to be watchful and careful and were rewarded in the most startling ways. Realizing that they needed to stand downwind of the animals and be very still, they could watch as the does came to the water with their fawns, or a herd of mountain goats ran up to the summit, or a fox chased a rabbit across their path. It was a great opportunity for Jacob to take out his book on animals and compare the pictures with the real thing. He would read to his father, and Vincent felt satisfaction that Jacob was learning some traditional lessons as well as untraditional ones.

The weeks passed. As the weather warmed, flowers filled the valley and the young animals began emerging from their mothers' protection. The she-bear and her cubs roamed the slopes, picking the berry bushes clean, but once in a while Jacob would beat her to it. He became very sly and seemed to pick up some kind of indication when she was in the area. But as he was watching her, she was watching him.

It was not natural that a cub be cared for by a male bear. Her maternal instinct told her that this was a dangerous situation for a cub so unable to take care of himself. Male bears would often try to kill the cubs, especially if they wished to mate and the female was still caring for her twins. She and Jacob had several encounters, as she taught him to lower his head and be submissive.

Finally, she felt he could be trusted. She allowed her cubs to go to him as she stood aside. Jacob was elated as they chased him down the slope, and then he chased them up the slope. They would paw at him, and he pawed back. Vincent watched from a distance but knew that by allowing this play, the she-bear had accepted Jacob.

The play ended when the bears waddled up the slope, or Vincent growled and called to Jacob. He needed to growl to assert himself, but he had the feeling the she-bear was appraising him. One afternoon, quite unexpectedly, she stood aside and let her cubs and Jacob go to Vincent. He felt overjoyed. He'd been accepted. He'd become part of the incredible chain of nature.

From that point on, they coexisted in the valley. The she-bear would come into the late to fish even if Vincent was there or, more importantly, allow him in if she happened to be there first. Jacob had to fight the cubs for berries, but he managed to bring home a potful every day. Vincent even began doing his own chores while Jacob played with the bears - chopping

firewood, or plastering the walls of the shelter with a clay-mud mixture. He knew that the she-bear would protect Jacob, as she would protect her own cubs.

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Even though the lake was fed from the mountain streams, the sun managed to warm it, Jacob had been begging to go swimming but Vincent felt the water was much too cold. Finally, Jacob got tired of wading and decided the water was warm enough. He took off his clothes, all of them, and marched into the lake.

"Come in, Daddy. Take off your clothes and come in." Vincent had been taking nightly swims for awhile, but suddenly he felt shy. In front of his own son, he was hesitant to remove his clothing. Again old ingrained feelings of shame roused with memories of humiliation when he was called names as a child, when he first became desperate for some kind of answer. He stared into the water as a memory took shape. He was only as old as Jacob, and Mitch and Devin had thrown him into the swimming hole. They had stripped him and thrown him in. Everyone was laughing and enjoying the spectacle of a little boy scrambling to cover himself. He even remembered the taunts.

*Fur from head to toe,  
What makes Vincent so,  
He's not human, no,  
He's just a weirdo.  
Weirdo, Weirdo,  
Not human, weirdo*

Splashing the water, Vincent cried out, "It hurts, stop it. it hurts."

"Daddy, what hurts?"

He was about to say *nothing* but stopped himself. If he couldn't be honest with Jacob, if he couldn't be honest out here where that fur-covered body wouldn't elicit a second glance, then he would have to go back to covering up the pain.

"I was just remembering when I went swimming as a child and the other children made fun of me."

"Why would they do that?"

"You'll see," answered Vincent as he began to strip. But Jacob couldn't care less, busy swimming after a turtle unfortunate enough to cross his path. The afternoon was hot and the water felt wonderful. Father and son frolicked for hours, but finally it was time to get out and let the sun dry them off.

They lay in the grass side by side. Suddenly, Jacob sat up and leaned an elbow on Vincent's chest, studying his father's face. Then he laid his head on that expansive chest and began to play with red-gold curls.

"Will I look like you when I grow up?" Jacob finally blurted out.

"Good heavens, I hope not!"

"I won't?"

"Don't sound so disappointed! Why would you want to?"

"Because you're beautiful."

This took Vincent completely off-guard. Catherine would say he was beautiful, but he felt she was deluded by love. But this child was so sincere, so open in his admiration, that Vincent didn't know how to react.

"Jacob, it hasn't been easy growing up, looking like this. You wouldn't want to go through the same things I've had to endure."

"You mean I won't have all this soft curly hair all over?"

"I don't think so." Vincent had been so happy that Jacob looked totally human, that he had not given much thought to what could be in store for Jacob as he grew. Or rather, he had avoided the subject, just as he had avoided everything in the past months.

"But it's so soft," said Jacob as he rubbed his cheek along Vincent's chest.

"Well, no, let's see. You have my eyes, the same color, and that tangled mess on top of your head can only be called a mane."

"And what else?"

"Other than all the male parts, that's about it. When I was your age, I already had a fine covering of fur all over my body. That's why all the other children used to tease me."

"And I don't have that now."

"No. But all men have more hair as they grow older. When you become a teenager, there is a possibility that you will have a little more hair on your body than most boys your age."

"What else, what else? Will my nails grow sharp and pointy?" asked an excited Jacob as he touched Vincent's claws.

Vincent really didn't know how to accept this. He'd never in his life known anyone so totally enthralled by his body. It rather embarrassed him and he would have rushed for his cape, except for the pure adulation in his son's face.

"Daddy, what about the rest of me? Why do I look different from you?"

"Because you look just like your mother." Vincent said that very naturally. There was no regret, no pain, only the joy of looking into that sweet face. "Do you want to know what she looked like?"

Jacob nodded. Vincent carried him to the water's edge and told him to look into the reflection.

"Oh!" was all the child could say. Then he looked at the reflection of his father. "You look. You look at that," he said, pointing to the other reflection. "I look nice, but so do you."

Again, Vincent was taken aback, as this child forced him to look at himself, full-length and naked. He stared for quite awhile, until he felt very detached. He finally had to admit that in these natural surroundings, with mountains reflected in the background, the wind teasing his hair, the image was quite startling and - magnificent. It was the image of a powerful, mythical being; and it was good.

"I am what I am," whispered Vincent.

"My daddy," squealed Jacob, as he hugged his father's leg.

"And that should be enough for anybody," laughed Vincent, as he scooped up his son.

They went back to their spot in the sun. Vincent closed his eyes to enjoy the heat on his face and to create the memory for all the days to come without sunlight. Once again Catherine filled his dream. She was pleading with him this time. "*Don't be afraid to live life. Don't be afraid to want it, if only for yourself.*"

"Daddy, is that my mother?"

Again Vincent was caught off guard by this precocious boy. "What are you talking about? Where?"

"Up there," answered Jacob as he pointed into the sun.

At first Vincent didn't know what Jacob was pointing to. But as he stared up, a form seemed to be coming out of the heavens. "I can't tell what it is yet."

As they watched, a majestic bird soared overhead.

"Jacob, do you know what that is? That's an eagle!" It was difficult to say who was more excited. "I never in my life thought I would see an eagle!"

"But it's not my mommy."

"What would make you think that?"

"Grandpa said that my mother went up to heaven. I thought she was coming back."

"I'm sure she is in heaven, dear; but she died. She'll never be coming back." A sword pierced Vincent's heart as he said this. It was another fact he had avoided putting to rest. His hallucinations had kept her with him.

"Oh. How?"

"How, what?" asked Vincent.

"How did she die?"

At last the moment of truth. There was no way Vincent could avoid this one. It was time, whether he was ready or not, to tell his son about his mother.

"You see, once upon a time in the city of New York, where we live, a very beautiful lady met some bad men who beat her and cut her face. Then they left her in the park to die."

"But you found her, Daddy, didn't you? And you saved her, didn't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because you're a hero, Daddy."

Vincent continued telling the story with many interruptions.

"A rose, she gave you a rose?"

"Yes, and I gave her a crystal from the crystal cavern."

"Can we go? Will you take me to the crystal cavern?"

"Yes." Vincent was surprised how easily the story told.

"She was very brave, too, wasn't she, Daddy?"

"Yes, she saved my life because she loved me and wasn't afraid of me when I was sick." It was difficult for Vincent to continue from that point, but he struggled through it. "The bad man she was trying to find took her and kept her locked up."

"You couldn't find her, Daddy?"

"No, I couldn't find her."

"You'd have gone for her like you came for me, if you could have found her, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes! But do you know how I finally found her? You were born, and I found you. But it was too late. The bad man wanted you, and not her anymore, so they put her to sleep with too much medicine. She never woke up." Vincent couldn't go on, his voice was choking in his

throat.

"It's okay, Daddy. I'm crying for her now, too." They lay together with Jacob's head on Vincent's chest. Finally, he lifted his head and kissed his father's cheek. "She loved you an awful lot, didn't she?"

"Yes, and I loved her more than I thought possible."

Jacob heaved a great sigh as though he had finally become whole.

That night as Vincent sat staring into the fire, he thought of all that he had shared with Jacob. He felt as though a whole new world had opened up for him. Here was someone who had the right to the same feelings he had carried for so long. Not just the love and loss of Catherine, but also his lifetime of experience. Vincent, for the first time in his life, felt that he was not alone, not an *only*. Jacob was a part of him as only he could be. Not even Catherine was that close.

With the joy of the knowledge of Jacob's existence, had come the fear that he would carry Vincent's traits. With the determination to care for Jacob, and keep him safe, had come the determination to push Jacob away from him, separate and apart, so Jacob could live a life different from Vincent's. But now, now, he knew what it was like to totally open up and share his essence with someone. It was no longer important that he didn't know what that was. By sharing himself, holding himself up as a mirror for Jacob, they were both learning. Not even Catherine understood as Jacob did.

"What am I?" The question no longer taunted him. Rather, several answers came to mind. "I'm Catherine's lover, I'm Jacob's father. I'm a human being, or Jacob could not have been conceived. I'm not a mutation." These were the facts. "Beyond that, only speculation. What was it I told Catherine? *I was born and I survived*. Then I must believe that I survived for a reason." A smile crossed his face. "I survived so that Jacob could exist." He knew there was more to it than that, but that was the first thing that came into his head.

He survived because people loved him, and cared for him, and wouldn't let him die. He survived because he was hungry for knowledge, and the quest for knowledge kept him going. He survived because he knew that somewhere, life was beautiful. He survived because that somewhere was deep inside of him. It was where he knew that life was a gift. He survived because he realized that his life was a gift, and even as it was, his life was beautiful.

"It seemed so simple. I always thought I didn't have a right to live. I somehow felt that I existed only through the good graces of others and only because they allowed it. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I never had the chance to live a life of my own choosing. This is the first time in my life that I actually made the decision to find my own way. These past months have been just for me. What was it Catherine said? '*Don't be afraid to want it, if only for yourself.*'"

This is for me! I'm not groveling to be accepted, or turning myself inside out to please everyone. It's just me!

"Me ... and I'm doing all right. No, I'm doing better than merely all right. We are doing better than surviving. We are enjoying every experience that comes."

Vincent was suddenly filled with the overwhelming urge to run, to feel the wind race through his hair. He took off down the hill, feeling the cool night air against his hot cheeks. He stopped at the lake and then ran back to the top of the summit above the shelter.

His chest was heaving and his lungs ached. As he gasped, it occurred to him how like birth that was, the first breath. Then he heard himself shout. *"I want to live. I want to live for myself, to be myself."*

*Want to live, live, live; be myself, myself, self.* The echo seemed to confirm his oath and strengthen his resolve. Little did Vincent realize that whether it be birth or rebirth, that first breath is only the beginning.

It was now the first of August, although Vincent had lost all track of time. There were only sunrise and sunset and all that could be accomplished in between. He had counted three full moons, so he had some idea of how many months he'd been away from the tunnels, but he had not given a thought to returning.

Observing the changes in the animal world became the major preoccupation for Vincent and Jacob. As the months progressed, the young became bolder, some striking out on their own. Many more deer and elk gathered around the lake for water. The differences between the male and female fawns were becoming evident as the males started sprouting antlers and challenging each other to pseudo-fights.

One day Jacob ran to Vincent, breathless as he pointed to the lake. A big dark-brown animal with a huge head stood on a small strip of land which jutted into the water.

"It's a moose, Jacob!" exclaimed Vincent. As they watched, a second moose, a female, joined him. Indeed something was happening in their valley - the cycle of life was beginning.

There seemed to be activity everywhere. Herds were on the move. Stags pranced about and charged the trees, sharpening their antlers. Vincent felt that it was no longer safe for Jacob to wander as freely in the daylight as he once had. A few times Vincent had to growl and bare his fangs as they met a pawing stag on a trail. It amazed him how large these animals were. He estimated a full-grown elk weighed about four hundred pounds and a full rack of antlers could have as many as twelve points.

The atmosphere in the valley changed from peaceful and nourishing to charged and apprehensive. The animals, all species, were becoming bold, showing themselves. Vincent

could only guess that mating season wasn't far off and the males were marking their territories. The energy heightened. He could feel the intensity. The she-bear also changed her attitude. She once again watched Vincent closely, until one day she would not let him near her cubs. She was agitated and on her guard, and he respected her wishes. From then on, if Vincent had to be away from Jacob, he made sure his son was secure behind the closure he'd built for their shelter. More and more he was leaving Jacob there as he went to get food or wood. There were times when even he felt threatened and he didn't want to have to confront an animal to protect Jacob.

It was getting harder to catch fish, also. All the activity around the lake set them darting and flashing. They no longer swam through Vincent's legs in a leisurely manner. One day, it was taking a particularly long time for Vincent to catch the four fish he needed for the day's meals. It was still early in the morning, but he'd gotten into the habit of going to the lake only once a day.

He had been away from Jacob longer than he had wanted, but the fish were not cooperating. Suddenly, he knew something was wrong with Jacob. He started out of the water and then heard blood-curdling screams. The screams stopped as suddenly as they had started. All that could be heard were terrifying growls and much snarling.

*"Jacob, JACOB!"* Vincent screamed as he raced up the slope. Their little home was in shambles, torn apart like match sticks. Rolling and tussling on the mountainside were two bears. It was one of the most frightening spectacles Vincent had ever witnessed. He didn't know what to do first. Jacob was nowhere in sight. He started searching. But a yowl of pain emitted from one of the bears caused him to look up. It was then that he realized it was the she-bear who had just been wounded.

This did not stop her. It only served to craze her, turn her to vicious rage. She inflicted several wounds, and received several more, until Vincent could no longer just stand by. He worked his way behind the larger, strange bear and growled loudly. The bear whirled around, confused by this other onslaught. He could not fight two opponents. Turning tail, he ran up and over the summit. Vincent followed for a short distance and then turned just in time to see a cub shimmy down a tree and scamper after its brother and mother.

Vincent started searching for Jacob as he made his way back to the rubble that had been their home. He half-expected to find his son's broken body tossed aside somewhere.

Standing on the once-threshold, Vincent called out, "Jacob, where are you?" He had never felt so helpless or hopeless in his whole life. "Jacob!"

"I'm here, Daddy." The voice seemed far away and very small.

"Where?"

"Up here. Here in the tree."

Vincent ran to the tree which the cub had descended. Jacob was up so high, Vincent could hardly see him in the branches. "Can you get down?" asked Vincent as he prepared to climb up to him.

"It's okay, Daddy. It's beautiful up here. Can I stay for awhile?"

"Jacob, I have never been so frightened in my whole life, and you're talking about beautiful trees."

"Don't worry, Daddy. I won't fall."

In his agitation, it took Vincent a moment to realize what his son had just said. When it struck him that these were the exact words that Catherine used to say to her father, it just seemed very bizarre, and he succumbed to hysteria, laughing and crying at the same time.

"You're always closer than I think. You made sure I would never be without you," whispered Vincent as he slid down the trunk of the tree to sit on the ground.

His mind was filled with the vivid memory of Catherine coming to him when he was recuperating and in such a state because they had lost their bond.

"There were gifts waiting for me, she said. Gifts I had never imagined. She knew then that she was pregnant, and she couldn't tell me. I was so worried about myself. How self-centered I am, always worrying about what I am, how I affect others, if I'm accepted, brooding about one thing or another."

Vincent had to admit that, at the moment, none of that mattered a bit. As wonderful as these past months had been, he had come too close to losing Jacob too many times. He, indeed, had to have a powerful guardian angel watching over him. It was time to think about going back to the safety of the tunnels.

The thought terrified him. Vincent was caught between two terrors, staying in the valley and going home!

"I'm coming down now," announced Jacob as he nimbly scurried from branch to branch.

"Careful," warned Vincent as he held out his arms.

Jacob jumped the last few feet and clung to his father's neck. He was still trembling a bit, the residue of his fear.

"Are you hurt? What happened?" asked Vincent.

"It was awful. The big, bad bear came crashing through everything. I screamed and screamed and the mother bear came and pushed me up the tree. I knew I had better climb fast because

the cubs were coming up after me. Then she started fighting. She was hurt - do you think she'll be all right?"

"She'll be fine," assured Vincent. "She knows how to heal herself."

Vincent certainly hoped this was true. He thought of her almost as a friend. He'd certainly come to respect her. The cubs still needed her. They'd need at least another winter of hibernation before they could start to fend for themselves.

"Well, fellow, what do you think: is it time to go home?"

"No!"

"I think it's going to become more dangerous from now on. And we'll have to rebuild."

Jacob looked at the mess around him. "We can fix it." He hesitated, then asked, "Why is it more dangerous?"

"I think mating season is about to begin," Vincent said without much thought, then held his breath. He knew what the next question would be.

"What's mating season?"

Vincent wondered if he really wanted Jacob to witness this. But then he wondered if it wasn't the problem he had with his own sexuality which he was projecting into this situation. He certainly didn't want Jacob to grow into manhood as inhibited and confused as he himself was. On the other hand, he didn't want him terrified by the violence he might witness. It might be a different story if Vincent could correlate what might happen here to human sexual behavior, but he couldn't. He still wasn't sure what that was all about.

"Daddy, what's mating season?"

No avoiding it. "Well, it's kind of the answer to how all of these animals got here."

"They walked over the mountains like we did."

"Right." Jacob wasn't going to make this easy. "Some of them did. Some of them were born here."

"Oh. Did they come out of their mommies like the baby that is going to come out of Olivia's tummy? She let me feel the baby. He moved around, and it tickled."

Vincent should have learned by now not to underestimate Jacob. "Well, yes, Jacob. That's how we all got here." The thought flashed through Vincent's mind that his mother could have been a test tube and chuckled to himself. He actually thought that was funny. What was happening to him?

"Was I in my mommy's tummy?"

"Of course."

"How did I get there?"

"Well, um," stammered Vincent. "That's kind of what mating season is all about. How the babies get into their mother's tummy."

"Oh."

Vincent quickly started picking up cracked timbers and scattered twigs, asking Jacob to help. He could not believe how embarrassed and inadequate he felt to answer these questions. Why did he ever bring up the subject? He also knew that Jacob was not done asking his questions.

Vincent managed to set support timbers and then pile the rubble on them for a makeshift shelter. He knew that they would not be spending too much longer here. Once again he built the nighttime fire high, for there was very real danger: the male bears had started to prowl the mountains, looking for mates. It was probably safer here, behind that fire, until mating season was over.

Soon the clash of antlers echoed through the valley. At first, it just seemed like games, jousts. But it soon turned serious - some battles were to the death. Indeed, Jacob was alarmed but also fascinated. The does seemed to ignore this. They weren't involved yet in this ritual. Not only were the deer and elk acting strangely - smaller animals were, too. There was much preening and strutting, almost dancing, as the males tried to impress the females who, for the most part, ignored them. The time was not yet right for them. Vincent was careful to explain all of this, and Jacob's book was of some help.

The concept of survival of the fittest became evident as the strongest stags continued to win the battles, narrowing the field of contenders. "That's so that the strongest of the stags can put their seeds into the females so that the fawns to be born will be the strongest and can survive."

Just when it seemed that the clashing and fighting would never end, the valley once again became calm and peaceful.

"Daddy, Daddy, is that stag putting his seed into the doe?"

Indeed, mating had begun and it was all around them. Jacob seemed to accept it as he had accepted everything that was natural and beautiful around him. Vincent, on the other hand, was in a panic. Why was it that he still had so much difficulty with this?

As all of this was happening, Vincent became aware of another phenomenon. The mountainsides were becoming a blaze of color. The night air was frigid and, as the wind blew, tiny crystals sparkled in the light of the campfire. Though the days were still warm and the sun brilliant, they were getting shorter. There was no putting it off. Vincent had to come to terms

with going home.

He knew it was his guilt that was standing in the way. He had treated very badly those he loved and who had loved him. Father, Mary, Lena ... oh, poor Lena! He would never forget the pain on her face as they would meet in the tunnels. And Diana! He still couldn't remember what happened with Diana, but the panic was still there.

The valley was now quiet. Some of the animals had already moved to other places in the mountains. still Vincent lingered. The spectacle of changing leaves was another memory he needed to store. Jacob seemed as restless as he, and his sleep seemed to be interrupted by disturbing dreams.

One night he cried out in his sleep. He called out, "Mommy!" Then he woke up and looked stangely at Vincent.

"What's the matter, Jacob. It was just a bad dream."

"Daddy?"

Vincent didn't like the sound of that *Daddy*. "What is it? Why are you so serious?"

"Sometimes when the mating was happening, it looked like the females were being hurt."

Vincent couldn't imagine what Jacob was getting at. "Well, sometimes they are."

"Oh." There was that *oh* again. "Did you hurt my mommy when you were mating with her?"

Vincent could hardly breathe. There it was again, his old fear, his old guilt. He smiled and answered, "No, Jacob, I didn't hurt your mother. I could never hurt her. I loved her. She always knew that."

"Don't animals love each other?"

"No. They only feel that mating is necessary so that more animals can be born."

"Oh. Is it the love that makes it different?"

There it was. It sounded so simple when Jacob said it. This was truth, and the truth beyond knowledge is love. Everything fell into place for Vincent.

"Yes, Jacob. It is love that makes it beautiful."

"Oh. Mommy loved you and you loved Mommy and it was beautiful. Good." He then curled up and went back to sleep.

Vincent stared into the fire for many hours, forcing himself to look back on the years since Catherine's death. One thing was certain: he'd felt that everyone around him was taking advantage of him in some way. They all expected something out of him that he wasn't ready to give. He'd felt he was existing on constantly moving ground. He'd had so much to resolve,

and no one had understood.

Father expected him to pick up his life, even wanted him to take Father's place in the community when Father decided to take up a life with Jessica. And Vincent was understanding.

Lena took advantage of him at the very lowest point in his life. She used that to get close to him, to introduce him to the physical pleasure of sex. Here, Vincent faltered. He had to admit that these were the feelings that plagued him in the later months. Now he had to admit that they had been taking advantage of each other. He used her as surely as any of her clients. He knew from her background that she would have done anything to be loved and accepted. This was why he was so wrong - more, he was cruel. He of all people should have known what it was like to look for that one bit of approval. He should have protected her. Instead, he'd used her.

"Oh, Lena, I can see that now. I'm so sorry. And to make it worse, I knew you loved me."

Then the outline of Diana appeared in the flames. What did he really feel for Diana? He knew that he had been motivated mostly by gratitude. He could talk to her. She made him feel better, and as he became more depraved, he struggled more to prove he was human. She represented Above - the world, Catherine's world. Somehow he was hell-bent to prove he could exist in Catherine's world. To him, Diana gave him that opportunity right down to the morals and sexual ethics of that particular segment. Does that mean that he also used Diana? This was different than with Lena. What was the term? Consenting adults? Again, he tried so hard to be accepted that he didn't know what was right for him.

What *was* right for him was what he felt with Catherine. Love was what made the difference. Especially for him; without it, he felt that he could easily be reduced to animal mating ritual, with all of its primeval urges and drives - little more than rape. Vincent was sickened. Suddenly, in a flash, he remembered the night that the beast unleashed his sexual power on Diana. What could he ever do to make this up to her? How could he ever face her again? He knew he must, if only to apologize.

For some reason, Vincent's thoughts wandered back to Father. He loved that man and now could truly understand the panic when a son is in danger. Simply a matter of not wanting a child to be hurt. Somehow they had to find their way to mutual understanding.

"It might be easier now that I feel more secure about myself and yet totally understand your fears. Now, I not only need to go back, I *want* to go back."

As he was falling asleep, he marveled at Jacob and was grateful for this time alone with him, to know him. There would be no way anyone could say that child wasn't human; yet he was Vincent's child. A human is part animal, the highest order of mammal. Intellect and emotions

make the difference. In watching Jacob over that summer, it occurred to Vincent that his child was blessed with more than the average amount of what it means to be human ...

Sleep finally put his mind to rest. He embraced it as Catherine smiled in his dream. She kissed his cheek and said, "You're the best of what it means to be human."

When Jacob awoke, he found his father getting ready to leave their valley. Vincent had been smoking fish for a week to provide something to eat on the trip. He was wrapping the dried fish in broad leaves he'd collected.

"Leaving now?" asked Jacob.

"As soon as we get everything packed."

Vincent had become aware that timing was important. They needed to make it to the creek by nightfall so they could set up camp. Trudging up to the summit, they stared back at their valley glistening with the autumnal glow. Overcome with emotion, Vincent knelt for a moment.

He had addressed his need to change his life. He'd found this beautiful valley, made the decision to face dangers, protect Jacob, confront his own beast and subdue it, not with control but with understanding. He also understood that there were times when the beast was very necessary. It had saved them more than once. He hadn't realized it, but he'd set a challenge before himself, and he was victorious. He could now take what he'd learned and use it to rise above whatever tried to hold him down.

Vincent didn't know his lessons weren't over. There was one terrifying experience he had yet to face.

As they arrived at the clearing next to the creek, Jacob started looking around for kindling. By this time, readying a fire had become habit. Vincent was kneeling, setting up a tent with one of the blankets, as Jacob dumped an armful of twigs. It was just about sunset, and Vincent knew the light wouldn't last much longer.

Suddenly, he stood, looking around to find the source of the sound of thundering hooves. He put Jacob behind him as a movement in the trees charged out at them. It was a large elk, a full twelve-point stag.

"Run!" shouted Vincent to Jacob. *"Head for a tree and climb."*

Vincent followed his son, keeping the stag in sight. Just before he reached the safety of the tree, he felt a searing pain as an antler caught him in the ribs. Vincent turned to face his attacker with claws ready to strike. He growled in pain, but the stag did not back down. Pawing the ground, it charged again. Vincent barely avoided the deadly antlers but they went through his cape, pinning him to a tree. The pressure of the large head against his body knocked the breath out of him. He started gasping as he felt the rage of the beast rising in him.

A terrifying growl escaped his throat as his claws slashed the lowered head.

Pulling away, the stag raised his head to face Vincent. It was at that moment that true terror struck. The elk's eyes were wild, crazed. They seemed to glow red as unleashed rage drove an antler into Vincent's side. It was the first time Vincent had seen, had actually faced, the unbridled rage of a wild beast. The feeling of hopelessness, knowing there was no way to escape, no way to appease the rage, made Vincent realize that the only way out was to fight to the death - his or the stag's.

Somewhere in the distance, through the muddle of his burning brain, Vincent heard Jacob screaming. The elk's head kept ramming and Vincent kept slashing, but neither seemed to be losing momentum. And Jacob's screams were still echoing in Vincent's ears.

"Daddy, an arrow. Daddy, there's an arrow in his head."

Shaking his head to clear it, trying to understand that now he needed to be both beast and man, Vincent struggled to concentrate on Jacob's words. *An arrow in his head?*

As that head charged, Vincent managed to move aside just enough to see the arrow protruding from the spot where the spine joins the brain. It was deeply imbedded but hadn't been fatal. Leaning against the tree to brace himself, Vincent used all the strength of his own beast and his sure coordination to grab and push down on the arrow as the stag made his last pass. As the stag fell, Vincent dropped to his knees in pain and exhaustion.

Jacob scampered down the tree and helped his father to the tent. The fire was burning brightly enough to show the blood oozing from Vincent's side. He collapsed just as they reached the tent, leaving Jacob in tears.

Vincent's delirium was his torture. The faces of all the men he had cut down made an ever-repeating collage. The terror and helplessness in their eyes burned through his soul as his own countenance faced the crazed eyes of the stag. He had been on the other side. He'd felt the utter capitulation to an inevitable slaughter.

That whole night Vincent lay where he'd fallen. Jacob moved the tent over his father and covered him with the cloak, but not before he wet a shirt with cool water and pressed it under his father's sweater. He then lay beside him with the blanket to keep them warm. Jacob only moved to put wood on the fire, and get water.

When Vincent finally regained consciousness, the first thing he saw was that little head pop up.

"Daddy."

"Are you all right?" whispered Vincent.

"Yes. Do you want some water?" asked Jacob, not knowing how to help.

"That would be good."

Jacob tried to get his father to drink, but Vincent once more lost consciousness.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

Vincent roused once more. "Put the water on a cloth."

Jacob pulled another shirt out of his pack, wet it, and placed it against Vincent's mouth. The whole night was spent in this manner.

It was morning before Vincent could get to his feet, but he finally struggled upright, driven by the compulsion to return to the tunnels. The pace was slow, the destination, home.

It occurred to Vincent that the climb up to the clearing and creek from the little stream had been so easy for him. The climb back down was much more difficult, riddled with pain. That one day's journey made Vincent realize that he had some hard decisions to make.

As he lay by the side of the stream, Vincent rolled up his sweater to assess, for the first time, the damage which the crazed stag had inflicted. The little shirt which Jacob had applied to the wound was blood-soaked and stuck not only to the wound but also the fur which surrounded it. Vincent didn't want to alarm Jacob further, but needed his help. If they were going to make it back to New York City, Vincent had to be honest with Jacob. He had to tell him exactly what to expect.

"Jacob, we need to take off this bandage. I need your help. Do we have anything else we can use?" Jacob went into his things and pulled out a pair of new underwear still in the package.

"I was saving these to show Joshua. Good thing!"

"Good, now the knife. I'm going to try to cut this away. Do you think you can pull it off as I cut?" asked Vincent as he started to pull on the improvised bandage. Jacob nodded, even though he was a bit squeamish. This wasn't an easy task, especially when they tried to pull the bandage off the wound. They had to heat water and soak the fabric off. Finally, the deep, gaping wound was exposed.

Jacob started to cry at the sight; he also felt his father's pain.

"Jacob, you must get used to this; you're the only one who can help me. Now, we must cut a strip off this blanket." Jacob held the blanket taut as Vincent cut.

The exertion further weakened Vincent. He slumped back, hoping to remain conscious. Just as he was about to slip into darkness, pain brought him back. Jacob was cleaning the wound with a piece of blanket and hot water.

"Grandpa always said that a cut had to be clean," offered Jacob as he noticed his father's eyes open. "I know this hurts, but it has to be done," he continued in a voice which imitated his grandfather.

"Now, help me sit up. I'll hold the bandage in place, and you wrap the blanket around my ribs. Good, now take the strap and put it around to hold everything in place."

Between the two of them, they managed to get the bandage changed and Vincent's ribs strapped. Lying back once more, Vincent assessed his injuries: the wound, of course, and broken ribs. Each breath was excruciating, he was also spitting up blood so he deduced there were internal injuries.

Sure that his condition would worsen as time passed, Vincent only hoped he had enough time left to get Jacob back to New York City.

"Jacob, from here on, we travel only at night. We'll sleep a little now and get started when it is safe. We're too close to the town: put out the fire. Let's get some sleep." Vincent held open his cape for Jacob.

When they awoke, Vincent felt feverish and had difficulty eating the fish which Jacob insisted on giving him. Cold water seemed to be the only thing he desired. Realizing that Jacob had to carry their supplies, they left most of the camping utensils and extra clothing behind. Jacob offered to leave his books but they were much too precious to both father and son.

Looking down on Suffern, Vincent noticed that two roads crossed just west of the town.

"Jacob, when you came here, did you cross a big bridge?" asked Vincent.

"Yes."

"That river was the Hudson, the same river that flows by New York City. We are not going back that way. It would take us too long, and I could not make it across that bridge. Instead, we'll head straight for the Hudson in a line toward home, stay on this side of the river, and cross at the George Washington Bridge. The distance will be shorter and, more important, take less time. Do you see those roads? One head towards the bridge, the other southeast; we'll take that one. We'll stay in the gullies at the side of the road. It's easier - less climbing, more direct. I can't move very quickly, and I may have to stop and rest."

"Are you all right for us to go now?" asked Jacob, obvious concern in his voice.

"Yes. Did you fill the canteen?"

"Yes. We're ready."

Jacob led the way down the mountainside to the road heading southeast, straight for home. Mercifully, the traffice was light. After Vincent rested, they managed to start the trek along

the road through trees and over rivers.

As Vincent struggled to breathe, little growling gasps punctuated the stillness of the night. He was feverish and the exertion of movement caused dizziness. His footing was no longer sure as he stumbled along the gravel ditches. Finally, when he could not rise after taking a rest, Vincent decided he needed to lean on something for support.

"Jacob," he whispered, "see if you can find two sticks I can use to help me walk."

"Like Grandpa's cane?"

"Yes." Even speaking was getting difficult, and Vincent hoped much of his intent could be passed through their bond.

Indeed, Jacob came back with two pole-like branches and, with the hatchet, chopped off the leaves. With the help of these staffs and Jacob, Vincent managed to get to his feet. Often during that night he had to stop, but Jacob led on as Vincent growled insistence. It was as though Vincent was now moving purely by instinct. Vincent knew they had to cover so many miles that first night.

Finally, they could see the first brightening of dawn in the eastern sky. Watching the sunrise had become habit for father and son, so they struggled up a slight incline, away from the road, to gaze at the fingers of light reaching into the darkness.

"Here," was all Vincent managed to say; but Jacob knew that this was as far they were to go. He made sure the area was secluded, with some cover, because the traffic had gotten heavier as the sky became lighter. The area had pine trees of various height, some quite small, to be shelter from daylight.

Vincent only wanted to take a drink before sleeping and had to trust that Jacob had enough experience by this time to keep out of trouble. Trying to lie down proved futile, for this seemed to cut off the air as Vincent struggles to breathe. So he sat against a pine tree and gratefully fell asleep.

Jacob ate a little and drained the canteen. They needed water; he started exploring, continuing up the hillside. From this vantage point, he could get a good idea what lay before them.

There was a city ahead, on the highway they had been traveling the night before. They couldn't continue that way, but there was another, smaller road heading directly for the rising sun. It seemed to go by a lot of big houses with a lot of land around them. Jacob bet the people in the houses couldn't even see the road. It would be safe for them to go that way.

There was water everywhere, streams and creeks with little falls, and Jacob could even see a lake in the distance. This was indeed a good place to stop. Even sick, his daddy was right; his

daddy was always right.

As exhausted as Vincent was, his sleep was not restful. His dreams were no longer of Catherine but instead of the Beast. Over and over, all those times it manifested itself appeared. At first he tried to wake, to stop the shame, but as he lost the battle, he began to calm down, relax. Finally, the scene when he turned Catherine away after he had killed the outsiders enveloped him. This time, in his dream, it was not Catherine's words he heard, but his own. *I feed on it. I feed on it.*

Then he knew that this was what would give him sustenance. Deep down, inside of him, he must feed on the Beast.

He woke to chills and wracking coughs that stabbed through his chest. However, he noticed that he had somehow become detached from the pain - as though a shadow of himself was going through the experience. He felt it, and yet he didn't; or rather, he no longer cared about the pain. One obsessive thought filled him - home.

Pulling his cape closer, Vincent surveyed the area. Jacob was not there. However, it wasn't long before the little boy trudged into camp.

"Got some cold, clean water for you, Daddy." Vincent grabbed the canteen as if to gulp all the water down, but the panting which had replaced rhythmic breathing prevented this. He finally looked up and gruffly said, "Face."

Jacob puzzled for a minute and then cut away another piece of blanket, soaked it in the cool water, placing it on his father's face. Vincent put his head back against the tree as Jacob wiped the perspiration from his brow and down his cheeks.

"I'll fill the canteen again and then we'll be ready to leave," Jacob finally said. When Jacob returned, he showed Vincent the two roads, and Vincent had to agree that the smaller road was the wiser choice. It was, for the most part, deserted, making it possible to walk along the shoulder. When a car did approach, Vincent and Jacob moved down to the gully. This made traveling much easier for Vincent. All the pain and dizziness was still there; he walked through the night in a trance, mechanically.

Dawn found them at the Palisade Parkway, overlooking the Hudson River. The sight was spectacular as the light revealed tiers of trees in bursts of color. Carefully, painfully, Vincent bent to lie down for the day's rest. He lost consciousness without thought, without dreaming.

It didn't take Jacob long to find out that they were in a park. Luckily, the underbrush was thick, and Vincent had managed to prop himself between two boulders before drifting off. Finding water was easy - there were faucets in picnic areas.

However, as the day progressed, the park became a bustle of activity. People in buses and cars

stopped to see the autumn foliage. Jacob covered Vincent with leaves and hoped no one felt adventurous and decided to explore. Needless to say, Jacob didn't sleep much that day. He stayed on guard.

When the park finally emptied, after dark, Jacob had trouble rousing Vincent. He had to once more swab his father's face before Vincent opened his eyes. At first, Vincent couldn't speak. A gurgling sound was all he could produce. Managing to sit upright, Vincent knew he had to somehow find the strength to speak with Jacob. He lurched forward on the poles, struggling to his feet.

"Jacob," he managed weakly, "look ahead. See the lights reflected in the sky?"

"Ahuh!" Jacob looked up at his father in alarm when rasping breath was the only sound that followed.

From somewhere, Vincent once more found his voice, deeper, surer. "That's home. It's about five miles to the bridge. I want you to listen to me and then repeat what I say. When we get to the bridge, if I can't make it across, you must leave me."

"No! I'll never leave you!"

"You must! You have to get to the tunnels. Cross the bridge and walk straight till you get to Amsterdam Avenue. Repeat it!"

"Walk straight to Amsterdam Avenue."

"Turn right. You'll be able to see the Empire State Building. Walk straight till you get to Cathedral Parkway. Repeat it!"

"Walk toward the Empire State Building to Cathedral Parkway," said Jacob between sobs.

"Good. Left on Cathedral to the Park-----pump house-----down to tunnels. Repeat it!"

"Now left to Park and in pump house."

"Picture it!"

"I see it, Daddy." Jacob was crying but followed instructions.

"Good. You can get ... home." This was the last thing Vincent could say. The concentration he exerted was exhausting, but he knew Jacob had to understand that he might be making the last part of this journey alone.

Gasping and growling, shuffling and stumbling, Vincent slid one foot in front of the other. Jacob stayed at his side, looking up into his father's face more than to the road ahead. Vincent no longer sat when he needed to rest, but rather leaned against a tree, no longer sure that he could lift his weight.

It was almost morning by the time the George Washington Bridge loomed before them. Jacob broke away and ran to the nearest lane that headed across. He looked in both directions. The toll booths were to the right and only the far booth was open. There was no traffic, not even one car. They could do it! They could make it across and be home by dawn.

Skipping with excitement, Jacob bounced back to where he had left Vincent. He wasn't there.

"Daddy?"

"Here." Jacob couldn't be sure of the word but went to the sound. Vincent was sitting under a bridge abutment.

"It's all clear. We can go."

Vincent tried to speak but shallow coughing only produced blood. Finally, in a hoarse whisper, he managed to say, "Tell me ... how you'll get home."

"Daddy?"

"Tell me!"

"Over the bridge, straight to Amsterdam Avenue, turn toward the Empire State Building, walk to Cathedral Parkway, turn left and straight to pump house in the Park."

"Good boy! Now, go!"

"Da-----"

"Go!"

Jacob looked very small as Vincent watched him stomp away. "I'm so close," thought Vincent. "Now that I want to live, now that I can see the lights of my city ...." He tried to follow Jacob but fell back against the abutment. "Catherine, I wanted to live our new life ..." Vincent finally gave into the black void.

Sobbing, Jacob made his way halfway across the bridge. It was so quiet he could hear the lapping of the water. Grotesque shadows of burned-out buildings seemed to slither toward him as he got nearer and nearer the city. As much as he had been through, and as brave as he had been, Jacob was, after all, only four years old, and his father had always been with him. He got just so far, then ran back to where Vincent lay.

All was silent. Jacob cautiously approached his father. He didn't want to anger him further, but the little boy simply couldn't get his legs to take him across the bridge. Maybe if they rested all day, they'd both be able to go over. Kneeling beside Vincent's still form, Jacob laid his hand on his father's chest.

"Daddy! Daddy!" he cried. "I couldn't go ... Daddy ... wake up. Daddy!"

When Vincent didn't respond, Jacob panicked and screamed. "*No!*" echoed throughout the Palisades. "I won't go without you! I can't go without you!" The child's tears washed over Vincent's face as Jacob shook his shoulders.

In that place where souls float free, Vincent heard a soothing, encouraging voice. "It's time to go."

"I can't go. I don't have the strength," he answered.

"Yes, you do. You have the strength."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know you. Inside, you have the strength. It will take all of you, every part of you, but you can do it." Catherine's smiling face faded into clouds as Vincent resolved to return. Slowly, his swollen eyelids lifted. A wild spark seemed to flash in the center of the dullness.

"Get up. We have got to go across the bridge," cried Jacob as he pulled on Vincent's cape.

Bracing his back on the abutment, Vincent pushed up and reached for the poles which Jacob held out for him. Without a word, like a robot, he followed Jacob onto the bridge.

"A car is coming! Turn toward the lamp post," warned Jacob. Vincent stopped and turned.

"Okay, we can go now." Vincent shuffled behind his son.

When they finally stepped into New York City, Jacob looked up; his father had been too quiet.

"Straight ahead, Daddy?" Jacob started out again when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder as a pole rolled at his feet. A thumb pressure turned Jacob toward a building.

He gasped as he looked up at charred bricks and gaping, paneless windows. A push on his shoulder shoved him forward until he was standing in front of a timber-barred doorway. Jacob tugged and pulled but couldn't budge a board.

From somewhere behind him an ear-splitting roar shattered the silence. Fur-covered hands reached around his head and with one yank freed the doorway. Jacob screamed and turned toward his father.

A painful yowl accompanied rumbling in Vincent's chest. As Jacob looked up, he saw his father's face contorted with pain. Reaching up, he tried to catch Vincent as he lurched forward into the charred hallway. On his hands and knees, Vincent crawled down the stairs and through a beam-cluttered basement. Jacob followed, shaking with fright at the horrible shadows.

A huge boiler stopped them. Wedging himself between the wall and the boiler, Vincent sat with his head rolled back.

"Daddy, where are we?"

The only reply was the gurgling in Vincent's throat. Jacob knew that if Vincent brought him down there, it meant there was an entrance to the tunnels. For awhile, he was too scared to move. However, it didn't take long for him to realize that the only important issue was to get help for his father. He had tried very hard not to think about how sick Vincent was.

As Jacob sat in the basement, he even admitted that he'd thought his father was dead when he went back under the bridge. It was so quiet in that cellar, and he was so alone. Alone! He was alone; he didn't feel his father. He had to get help!

The wall in front of Jacob seemed solid except for an old coal bin. He gathered his courage and cautiously crawled into that gaping doorway. It veered to the right and back under a stairway overhead, further and further into blackness. He had found the entrance to the tunnels!

A fur-covered hand reached around the floor until it found a brick. With great effort, it used the brick to tap out a message against the boiler - JACOB---JACOB---V. Vincent waited and then once more tapped. Finally he heard a message, received confirmation, and the brick fell from his hand.

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Pascal wasn't sure what the message meant, but he was almost sure it was from Vincent. They all had given up hope of seeing Jacob and Vincent again. Surely, after all this time, disaster had struck father and son.

Before running to Father, Pascal sent a message to Nathan, a helper who lived close to the origin of that cryptic message. He could be there in a matter of minutes and perhaps send more information.

After waking Father, Pascal followed the orders to all for a gathering.

"So what do we know?" asked William.

"Nothing more than the message, the word JACOB tapped out, and that probably Vincent sent it," replied Father.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Shouldn't we be heading uptown?" retorted William.

"Nathan is investigating. Then we'll know what we will be dealing with," stated Father.

At that, Pascal ran out into the tunnel and pressed his ear to the pipes.

"Did you hear that? It's a miracle!" exclaimed Pascal as he ran back into the study.

"We didn't get it all."

"Nathan found Jacob in the tunnel, he's heading this way. Vincent needs help. He's injured and couldn't make it past the 178th Street entrance."

"Do we know the extent of his injuries?" asked Father.

Pascal sent the question and returned with the answer.

"Vincent has a hole in his side and he can't breathe."

"Let's go! There may not be much time. If Vincent let Jacob come home alone, he's very, very ill," said Father, jumping to his feet. "Mouse, stay here and bring my medical bag when Mary readies it." Father then made sure Mary understood what he needed.

Several tunnel dwellers had already started toward Nathan and Jacob.

Nathan had entered the tunnel under his building and heard Jacob before he saw him - a pitiful whimpering that rose and faded with each step. As Nathan held out the flashlight, a pathetic little figure cowered against the wall.

"Jacob, I'm Nathan, a helper. Pascal sent me to find you."

Running into Nathan's outstretched arms, Jacob couldn't get his words out fast enough. Between sobs, he was trying to explain that Vincent needed help. Soon Jason, another helper, showed up and went back to the basement to be with Vincent. Only then did Jacob continue on with Nathan.

Geoffrey was the first to reach them. Taking Jacob, he soothed his little friend. "Thank you, Nathan. I'll take him home." It wasn't long before the group including Father met them.

Father stopped in his tracks when he first saw Jacob. His arms, which were shaking, finally managed to embrace his beloved grandson. "Mary is waiting for you," he said, in tears.

"Daddy needs you."

"I know. I'm on my way. Geoffrey, here - he needs a bath and some food. I'm so happy you're home." Finally breaking down completely, he held Jacob tightly, crying into his tousled head. "I love you. I've missed you so."

By the time Jacob was placed in Mary's arms, Jacob was sleeping soundly.

The 178th Street entrance was a long walk for Father, and the time it took to cover the distance seemed interminable. By the time he reached the entrance, Mouse and Jamie had caught up with his bag and an armful of sheets, blankets, and pillows.

Several members of the community who'd gotten there ahead of him were standing around the entrance, averting their eyes from his gaze. Lena was crying, and Nathan was shaking his

head. Father only knew that he had to get to Vincent. Several lanterns lit the way.

All of his years of experience could not have prepared him for the sight of his son wedged next to that boiler. There was no motion. Vincent didn't respond to his name.

Father reached for Vincent's pulse, but through the fur he couldn't be sure if the flutter was real or imagined. Pulling the stethoscope out of his bag, he stretched in a kneeling position until he could reach Vincent's chest. He listened to several spots, then muttered quietly, "Oh, my God!"

"Let's get him out of there," urged William.

"No! He can't be moved. His lungs are full of fluid. He's drowning, and his heart is in distress."

"What can we do?" asked Mouse.

"Well, he's basically in the right position. I think he sat himself there so he wouldn't fall over. His instinctive nature has always been a marvelous mystery! Jamie, you're the smallest, do you think you can get in there and cut away the layers covering his chest?"

"I'll try, Father."

"No, wait! First, Mouse, put one of those sheets over the boiler. Another needs to somehow be attached to the wall. I want a sterile area, or as close as we can get. I had thought I might have to do a tracheotomy - but this ...."

After the sheets were hung, Jamie carefully cut each layer away, laying them aside to expose an infected wound in the blood-matted fur on Vincent's right side. However, it wasn't this site which concerned Father. Putting on rubber gloves, he poured alcohol over the left rib cage just under Vincent's heart and proceeded to examine the area.

"Nathan, can you get a gallon milk jug filled with water from your apartment?"

"Sure, Father. I'll be right back."

Father then checked the instruments wrapped in gauze. He didn't dare take them out of his bag until they were needed.

"Jamie, do you think you can help me? Don't look, if you feel faint, but I need you to unwrap what I need when I indicate it. Vincent had several broken ribs, one penetrated the left pleura, exuding fluid into the pleural cavity, it also punctured the lung, causing it to collapse. As primitive as this is, I have no choice but to try to drain off some of that fluid to ease his heart trauma."

Jamie washed her hands in alcohol and waited for Father's directions. Soon Nathan returned with the jug and the operation was about to commence. William held a flashlight over the boiler as Father made a deep straight incision between two ribs and held gauze pads in place

while Jamie unwrapped a package of long plastic tubing.

"Jamie, we must insert the tube and then pack it tightly so it will be as airtight as possible. How do you feel - do you think you can work with me?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Good girl. Now, take two pads and hold open the incision while I insert the tube. Good. Now, we pack around the tube with cotton and gauze and tape it securely."

When this is done, Father emptied half the water in the jug, started a siphoning action through the tube, and plunged it quickly into the water. Placing the jug lower than the incision, physics took over; the fluid flowed to the lowest point.

"My God, Vincent, what happened to you?" exclaimed Father, as he finally took the time to take note of Vincent's condition, the bloodied improvised bandage and blanket. "He cannot be moved until his heart has stopped laboring. Hopefully, enough fluid will drain so that will start happening soon. I'll stay with him. There's no need for all of you to be here."

But a vigil was kept in the tunnel, with someone always at Father's side. Cullen and Mouse used this time to construct a litter. Throughout the next hour, Father fussed and checked heart rate and respiration; he could be heard muttering something about blood gases. Once, Vincent's eyes shot open wide with the look of a caged animal as his lip curled.

As the fluid increased in the container, Vincent's breathing could at last be detected, shallow as it was.

Finally, Father said, "Now or never. Place the pillows on the litter so that the incline will be generally the way he is laying. It's important to keep the airway open so as much oxygen as possible can pass through into his lungs. Good, good! Now comes the hard part. How do we get him out of here?"

"Mouse'll do it. Jamie, hold my feet," he said as he scrambled over the top of the boiler.

"William, pull his feet - Mouse'll push his shoulders."

"Gently," reminded Father, carefully keeping the jug below the incision, moving every step with Vincent, while many pairs of hands reached out to grab and support as Vincent was slid from between the wall and the boiler. They had all been waiting to carry Vincent home.

Peter Alcott was waiting in the hospital chamber. He had rushed there after receiving Mary's note and spent his time readying an operating theater. From the message Father had sent ahead, they knew there was no time to waste.

The many helpers and people from Below ran the litter quickly. They arrived long before Father. It was necessary to cut and pull the rest of the clothing off to expose Vincent's upper

torso. Peter started an extensive examination, as Mary worked at cleaning and making the area sterile. An operation would be necessary to realign the errant rib and insert a proper drain. As for the wound, Peter wanted to know what gored his friend. The story could only come from one person.

"Mary, I'm afraid we'll have to wake Jacob," said Peter.

"But the child has been through so much."

"Please, Mary. He is the only one who knows what happened to Vincent."

Just then Father arrived and they both waited for Mary to bring Jacob. He stumbled into Father's study, eyes only half-open, long yellow hair going every which way, and deeply tanned skin. He looked more like a wild creature than a little boy. Father had to smile and shake his head at the sight.

"Where Daddy? Where's my Daddy?"

"He's in the hospital chamber, he's here," comforted Father.

"Jacob, this is very important. Do you know what happened to your father?" asked Peter.

"Ahuh."

"Can you tell us?"

"He had a fight with a big stag that had an arrow in his head. I was in a tree. The stag pushed Daddy into the tree. It was awful! I was scared."

"Thank you, Jacob. We needed to know what hurt your daddy."

The two doctors went to work as everyone else waited. They worked quickly, aligning and wiring the rib, inserting the drain, and cleaning the wound. If any other treatment was necessary, it would have to wait until Vincent had regained some strength. As it was, his recovery would be touch and go, there was now the very real possibility that pneumonia would set in.

"He survived the operation," Father told his waiting friends, "but his condition is very serious. Jacob, how many days ago did your father get hurt?"

"Let me see. The night it happened, the next night we walked until we got to the hill, then the night we walked to the parkway. That brings us to tonight, when we crossed the bridge."

"He has been like this for four nights? How did he survive?" marveled Father. "What is it that kept him going?"

Peter left to acquire supplies and oxygen, trying to anticipate Vincent's needs. The next week was going to be crucial.

Lena volunteered to take shifts in the hospital chamber. She could not believe how still Vincent lay. All the pain she had suffered by his behavior disappeared, as her love for him became overwhelming. "Please, God, I'll do anything. Please, let him live," she prayed at his bedside.

Pneumonia and infection are difficult to battle, even with the help of antibiotics. But when, as in Vincent's case, even antibiotics must be used sparingly, it's touch and go all the way. All that could be done for him was done. The week that followed was filled with constant bedside watches and prayers.

Father didn't know what had kept Vincent moving, what had brought him home. He certainly couldn't account for the inner strength which kept him alive. He sat for hours, marveling at this complex being stretched out before him.

As much as Mary and Father tried to involve Jacob in the daily life Below, he took up residence in the hospital chamber. One little corner, near his father, became his. He stood fast against all attempts to have him join the other children in the nursery. Father found it alarming, amazing, and amusing, that he could not control Jacob. Like some little animals, the boy remained in his corner, totally consumed with loyalty to his father. On second thought, Father had to admit, that was exactly what his mother would have done.

It had been one week from the time Vincent was brought home. Jacob was sleeping soundly on his cot; Lena was taking her bedside watch. There had been some signs of improvement, and Lena remained alert for stronger heartbeats. Finally, she laid her head on Vincent's chest and caressed his shoulders and down his arms.

She kissed the soft curled fur which covered his heart and whispered, "I love you. You're mine. I won't let anything happen to you."

*No, please, we can't start this again. I don't have the strength.*

Suddenly, with one growling lurch, Vincent sat up, grabbing Lena's wrists as he pushed her away from him. "No!" he growled. "No!"

Lena couldn't have been more frightened if a terrifying monster had suddenly sprung up before her. In reality, that is exactly what happened. She couldn't escape his grip, and the angry growls reduced her to quivering sobs.

*Still letting me do your dirty work. So, all right - you can go back to sleep! I took care of her. Although, really, Vincent, I was just beginning to enjoy it.*

Everyone Below heard the growls and came running. But Jacob had things well in hand by the time they arrived.

"It's all right, Daddy. You're home; we made it," he soothed.

Vincent turned toward Jacob, quieted, released Lena as suddenly as he had grasped her, and fell back into unconsciousness.

Lena was still shaking as Father put his arm around her and led her from the hospital chamber.

"Father, what just happened?" she asked.

"It seems that you just met the other side of Vincent, child. There must be a terrible struggle going on inside of him. We can only hope *our* Vincent will emerge."

*Not if I have anything to do about it. He owes me - big time. I don't think you're going to get your way on this one ... Father.*

From that point on, only the men kept watch and from a distance. Father was greatly encouraged that Vincent's vital signs continued to improve, but only growling and wild thrashing accompanied the improvement.

One morning, as Father slept at Vincent's bedside, he heard a strange voice, hoarse and coarse.

*"So, you're still standing guard. Afraid I'll escape? You were always afraid I'd escape. Poor Father, what will you do with me?"*

The old man startled awake to find Vincent sitting up with arms folded. The sneer around his mouth and the steely glint of his eye made Vincent look dangerous.

"Oh Vincent! Thank God! You've come out of it." Father moved toward his son but recoiled as he was repulsed.

*"Don't come near me! Don't touch me!"* Vincent growled loudly. The deep growling produced severe coughing which was actually beneficial to his condition but frightening to witness.

*Senile old man. Don't try to be so nice. You're not fooling me. I know what you really want, and I'm not about to give it to you.*

Jacob sprang to his father's aid. **"GET AWAY! GET AWAY! HE DOESN'T WANT YOU HERE NOW"** he screamed as he stood between his grandfather and his father.

The racking coughs and growls continued to echo throughout the tunnels, but even Father hesitated to go near. Only Jacob remained to get Vincent the water he requested. In one particularly violent moment, Vincent tore out all the tubes and the IV. From that time on, he would have to eat and drink on his own, for no one dared go near him, let alone try to reinsert the medical paraphernalia.

With each passing hour it became obvious that Vincent was gaining strength. And with each passing hour, Father realized that his longtime fear was materializing - the Beast was among them!

A council meeting was called, but just as everyone voiced their concern, no one knew what to do.

"Father, leaving Jacob in there with him is like leaving a child in a lion's den," said Mary.

"I know, Mary. I'm concerned for the boy, too, but I doubt any one of us would have any influence over either one of them. Jacob won't leave, and Vincent guards him ferociously."

"Guess he's the Beast's son, too," exclaimed Mouse.

"Of course! Of course he is! And maybe that is our one means of getting through to Vincent - through Jacob," replied Father.

"Just how dangerous is he?" asked Olivia, thinking of her children.

"I don't know. I really don't know with what we're dealing. He's never lived in our midst before," Father had to admit.

"Do you mean to say you've never seen the Beast before?" demanded Cullen.

"Well, no, not to this extent. Vincent has always managed to keep him under control, or exile himself."

"I'll tell you something, Father - I don't think he's going away this time," commented William bleakly. "We're going to have to find a way to deal with him."

"I think we'll just have to do whatever he wants for awhile," suggested Pascal. "When we were kids together, sometimes he'd get stubborn and ornery, we'd just give in - nothing else to do - and pretty soon he'd be back to his old self, even apologize."

"Well, as Pascal so astutely put it, there is nothing else to do. We will have to appease him and perhaps Vincent will once again emerge. We'll take our cue from him and from Jacob," said Father.

Mary volunteered to bring food and water to the hospital chamber. Surely, Father couldn't do it, he seemed to anger the Beast, as did Lena.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Father.

"Well, I'm hardly threatening. If nothing else, I may be able to get Jacob to come to me."

"I think she's the one to try," said William. Others agreed.

Mary had second thoughts every step of the way. She carried a bundle of clean clothes, for Jacob, as well as Vincent, a pail of water, and a sack of bread and fruit.

"Vincent! Jacob! May I come in?"

Vincent responded with a growl, then gentled to a warm smile. "*Mary, it's you. Jacob, help her*"

*with those things. What do you have there?"*

"Clean clothes and food for you."

*"As I remember, you were always kind."*

"Vincent, your dressing needs changing, and then I'd like to help you into a clean nightshirt and make up the bed. May I?"

*"Of course. You always did take good care of us,"* answered Vincent.

"Jacob, would you like to help me?" asked Mary.

He ran to Mary's side and carefully followed instructions. Between the two of them and intermittent growls, they managed to get Vincent cleaned up. Mary then changes sheets and, after Vincent settled back in bed, presented him with a light lunch.

*"We're getting well, aren't we, Mary?"* asked Vincent almost innocently.

"Yes, dear. We have all been so worried."

*"I don't know about the others, but you have always been kind. It's good to finally thank you for that,"* replied Vincent in a staccato rhythm.

"That's a strange thing to say."

*"I seem to still be here. He gave up long ago, you know. But I wanted you to know that even I appreciate all your years of concern."*

Mary drew back, staring into blue eyes that blazed with intensity.

"You're the other!" she exclaimed.

*"Don't be afraid. I only experienced respect and concern from you; I can only respond with trust. I could no more hurt you than I could hurt Catherine."*

"And Jacob?" asked Mary.

*"He is my – our - embodiment. We – I - live through him. Are you asking if I could harm him? He is part of me, I would die for him."*

"I think I knew that," Mary responded. "Just as you could never hurt his mother."

"His mother ... She was beautiful, wasn't she, Mary?"

Mary looked up at the sound of the soft, husky voice and knew that her Vincent was present.

"Vincent?"

"I'm very tired, Mary. I think I'll take a nap." He instantly fell into a deep sleep.

*Well, it's about time you woke up. Nice lady. I can see why you like her. Oops, nodded off*

*again. At least you could start moving around a little. I'm getting restless.*

Everyone was anxiously waiting for Mary to return to Father's study, including Diana, who had arrived for an update on Vincent's condition.

"Well, Mary?" asked Father.

"It was a very strange experience. He was quite civil, and it took me a while before I realized that I was talking to that other creature. He said that Vincent gave up long ago, that was why he was still here. He said I was always kind to him, so he trusted me."

"What about Jacob?"

"I feel strongly that he is quite safe," Mary responded. "It was when we began speaking of Jacob that he began referring to two people, and by the time I brought up Jacob's mother, Vincent seemed to surface - but only for a few moments before he fell asleep."

"Mary, are you telling me you spoke to both of them?" asked Father. Mary nodded her head.

"Sounds like a split personality to me," Diana interjected.

"I don't think it is quite that simple, Diana. You see, this other character is a true wild creature. He has broken my shoulder on one occasion and thoroughly trashed Catherine's apartment on another. Not until you've looked into those eyes can you truly understand," explained Father.

"I think I have," said Diana under her breath. "A nightstand. A punched-out door ..." Then, aloud, she commented, "You should see some of the multiple personality deviants I've come up against. The violence their anger perpetuates is frightening, not to mention criminal."

"Well somehow, Vincent has always been able to keep this other creature in check. We have always maintained an atmosphere of calm and balance for him, negating his anger. His struggle has been monumental, but Vincent has always managed to come back to us. We have loved and supported him," replied Father.

"Sure, as long as he hid his claws and played chess!" exclaimed Diana.

"Why, of course! That is who he is. That is Vincent!"

"Is it? Have it your way. I'm happy to hear he's getting stronger, but somehow I think this will be a long recovery. I have to leave. Tell him I was asking about him, if you can," said Diana as she was about to leave. "Oh, by the way, did you ever find out what happened to Jacob? How did he slip through our fingers?"

"We haven't gotten that story yet. In fact, we know very little about where they have been all of this time," commented Father.

"I'll be back. Maybe I can visit him next time," said Diana as she turned on the steps. Lena was

standing in the entrance with her arms folded, glaring at Diana as she brushed by. The tension between the two could be felt by all, but there were more important things to deal with.

Father thought long and hard about all that had been said. He sat at his desk far into the night. How could he keep his community safe from the Beast if Vincent did not return? Was it possible to contain the Beast? Would it finally be necessary to cage him or banish him to some isolated cave, as Vincent himself would do? How would this affect Jacob? Almost as in a dream, Father found himself drawn to the hospital chamber. Maybe, if it was Vincent who went to sleep, it would be Vincent who woke up.

The tired old man stood for many minutes at the entrance to the chamber. Both Jacob and his father were sleeping. Everything seemed so peaceful that he ventured in to stand by their beds. Tears ran down his cheeks, mingling with his beard. His heart was heavy, his burden unbearable.

*"Father."*

Hopeful joy sprang in the old man's heart. "Yes, Vincent. Oh, yes, my son."

*"Since when have you acknowledged me as your son?"* came the gruff voiced question as the Beast suddenly shot up from his bed.

A startled Father teetered in alarm and would have lost his balance if a clawed hand did not reach out and grab his arm with a steel grip.

"Oh, please," was all Father could say as he tried to free his arm.

*"Well, now, Father - and I use the word correctly - you shouldn't be afraid of me. I am truly your son. After all, I am the creature of your making."*

"What are you talking about?"

*"That's right. You found him, but you created me."*

"How?"

*"You were always, from the very beginning, afraid of his potential for violence. Even when he was a very young child, you referred to his anger as another being. His actions were no different than those of any other child - perhaps not as bad, because of his bleeding heart. But because he had claws and fangs, you couldn't judge his intentions. Every time, you soothed his anger and told him you wanted your Vincent back, I became stronger, until I became pure suppressed anger."*

Father tried to turn away as he remembered all the times he and Vincent would discuss the behavior of the other creature as a third party. Vincent's remorse was real but even that was not understood as it became easier to place blame on the Beast.

"I didn't know what else to do. The safety of everyone was at stake. How else could you live among us?"

*"Once Vincent told you, 'you educated the man, taught the man to love, but the other ... you know nothing of. FATHER, YOU NEVER TAUGHT ME TO LOVE!"* roared the Beast in anguish. *"I was relegated to rage and violence. When we loved Catherine, I didn't know what to do with that emotion, because then I was also given the burden of passion. But you know, I did learn to love, painfully. I learned to love Catherine. It made it possible to now love our son. It created him.*

*"Why did you have to give me your fear, your bitterness, your inability to trust the world Above? I even became your fighting machine. You turned him into a paragon of virtue and me into a beast."*

"Oh, dear God, did I really do that?"

*"He called on me to save him, he needed my strength to get him home. For the first time, he needed to give in to me, to let me take over. To save him was to save myself. Just as to save Catherine was to save myself, to save Jacob is to save myself. There is no difference."*

Father thought that the Beast seemed to be rambling - not making any sense - and once again tried to free himself.

"I think this has been a strain for you. Perhaps you had better rest."

*"Again, you're trying to get rid of me instead of understanding me. No matter. Vincent and I now have an understanding. You had better get used to me because our only hope is for us to become one - one with each other - one with Catherine - one with the universe ..."*

The Beast finally relaxed his grip, as Vincent once more went to sleep. Father was too shaken to move. He sat on one of the beds and wept. What were they going to do?

*Did you have to be so hard on him?*

*Well, what do you know? Are you going to stay with me for awhile? We've got some things to discuss. I'm getting pretty tired of hanging around this bed.*

*You can't just prowl around without me.*

*So what do you think you could do to stop me? You can't even stay awake. Too bad. I'm in the mood for a good fight. The old man always brings out the worst in me.*

*I didn't know there was a better side.*

*Very good! You're getting better. Let's see, when was the last time we had an out-and-out brawl? Ah, yes, the night you found the crystal in our little love cave. Where is the crystal, anyway?*

*I don't know. I couldn't find it. I may have lost it when I was taken prisoner.*

*No, you didn't have it there.*

*I didn't think so. I wonder what could have happened to it.*

*And the rose?*

*Gone, too.*

*What? That was a present from Catherine! How could you let it slip away from you? Did you even try to find them?*

*Yes. Don't you think I've missed them?*

*Aw, too bad. Well, I want them back, and I want them back now.*

His nighttime scavenging over, Mouse poked his head into the hospital chamber.

"Father? You all right?"

"Not really, Mouse. Come in. He seems to be resting."

"Bad, huh? Can Mouse help?"

"I don't know if anyone can help."

Suddenly growling and roaring ripped through the chamber, as the Beast once more sat up. He was groping at his neck, tearing his nightshirt, ripping up the sheets in search for something.

*"Where are they? Where is my pouch? I can't find it. Who took it? Did you take it?"* hissed the Beast as he sneered into Mouse's face. He proceeded to thrash through supplies and slash at the other cots. Jacob woke up and tried to quiet his father but even that proved futile.

*"JACOB, YOU HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE. COME WITH US,"* shouted Father as he grabbed the frightened little boy. They left the Beast, as he thoroughly demolished the hospital chamber in search of his pouch. Just as suddenly, all was quiet as he collapsed on the cold floor.

Lena tip-toed in and placed a blanket over him as she ever so lightly ran her hand over his matted mane.

The next morning, Jamie was almost run down by Mouse as he charged at her.

"Won't be safe till he has it. Gotta find it. Gotta help me," said Mouse as he pulled her down a tunnel.

"What in the world are you talking about? Slow down!"

"Last night - terrible. He wants the leather pouch. Tore everything apart. Made a mess."

"Vincent?" asked Jamie.

"Yes. Woke up - started tearing at things ..."

"I get the picture. Let's go!"

Mary ventured to bring breakfast into the hospital chamber. The destruction lay all around her, but her concern was for Vincent. He was sitting up in bed, staring into space, not making a sound. She offered him the tray but he showed no interest. Righting the table next to the bed, Mary left the breakfast, as she went about the business of trying to tidy up.

"I think I'll just pick up some of this mess. You most certainly are regaining your strength, aren't you?" She worked for half an hour, all the while talking to herself. Absolute silence was her reward.

*Just look at the mess you made here last night. And poor Mary has to clean it up. What are you going to do, sit here brooding? Aren't you going to say anything to her? You should apologize.*

*Listen, if you're going to keep nagging me, I'm going to put you to sleep again. I'm not resting until we get back what's ours. You should have done it long ago. Always knew you had no guts.*

Next Mary tackled the job of trying to 'civilize' Jacob. He had matured so in the six months he'd been away and become very independent. There was no way he'd allow her to bathe him, and she was beginning to wonder who was more ferocious, father or son.

"I can do it myself," insisted the little boy.

"Well, do a good job. Diana is coming to see you later, and you want to be clean and have fresh clothes on." Mary waited in the tunnel for Jacob to reappear, and the sight of him made her realize a much larger task was at hand. She brought him to his chamber and watched as he finished dressing. Then she reached for a hair brush.

"Ouch! Ow! Ow!"

"It's no use, Jacob. There's no way to get through this head full of tangles."

"Let me try." But not even Jacob could get the brush through his hair. "Tough, huh?"

"Yes, tough. Oh dear, I don't want to do it, but I'm afraid there no other way," cried Mary.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm afraid we're going to have to cut it off, Jacob."

"**NO!**" he screamed as he covered his head and hid behind his bed. After all, this was his mane like his daddy's.

"Dear, there is no other way. It simply cannot stay like that."

It took all morning, with several people holding him down, to finally get the feat accomplished. A very angry, pouting young man with tear-streaked face swore he would never forgive any of

them. The very short haircut made his eyes look even larger, and his square jawline, so like his mother's, tilted to one side as he glared at everyone.

Entering the chamber, Father appraised his grandson. "Very nice! You look quite handsome. You have a visitor. Diana would like to see you."

Jacob stormed past everyone, shaking off Father's attempt to take his hand. Heading straight for the study, he had second thoughts; he wanted to run back to the hospital chamber. However, he didn't know what his father would think of his new fashion, and Jacob certainly didn't want to upset him. He tried not to cry, but a very subdued little boy, with head bowed and hands trying to cover his hair, finally stood before Diana.

"Well, let me see you! What have we here?" she asked, as she gently pulled Jacob's hands from his head. He was such a beautiful child that Diana almost gasped. She had forgotten just how lovely Catherine was.

"Is it too terrible?" whispered Jacob, not sure of her reaction.

"Not at all. You are the most handsome young man I have ever seen."

"Honest! Even Above?" She called him a young man. Could she tell he was no longer a baby?

"Oh, yes! Jacob, how is your father doing today?"

"Dunno, haven't seen him today. Awful mad last night, though."

"Why?"

"Dunno. He was growling a lot."

Diana sat Jacob in the chair across from her and asked if he wanted anything and if he was comfortable.

"Yes, I'm comfortable, and do you think I could have some hot chocolate?"

"I'll be right back," said Diana as she left to order his request. Jacob knew by now that when grown-ups were that concerned about his well-being, they wanted something. He was ready, he was sure, for a lot of questions.

"Jacob, I need to know what happened to you last spring when you disappeared. Where did you go, and how?" Two questions in one.

"I pretended to be deaf and went on the bus to the school with all the other kids," started Jacob.

"You pretended to be deaf? No wonder I couldn't find your records! Go on - what happened next?"

"They didn't bring me back to the park where I got on the bus, and I couldn't tell anyone who I

was or where I lived, because they would kill Daddy. So they sent me far away."

"So that's it. That's why I couldn't find a trace of you. I remember now, there was a deaf boy about five years old turned over to State Services. It never occurred to me that it could have been the very talkative little boy of three I'd been searching for. I suppose you were big enough to be taken for five. Um, talk about a mix-up. Then what happened?"

Jacob told Diana all about Randy, and Rose, and his mother, Elisabeth. "I really loved her, Diana. She was so soft. I was bad. I lied to her."

"Honey, I don't think you had a choice by that time. I'm glad you had a good foster-mother. Tell you what - maybe someday I can take you back up there and we can explain it to her. Would you like that?"

"Diana, how do we explain Daddy? I still couldn't tell her why I had to do it."

"Guess you're right. I'll see what I can do," comforted Diana. An official call from her, to give some kind of explanation for his disappearance, might be better. They spent the rest of the morning sipping hot chocolate and sharing Jacob's adventures in the mountains. Diana couldn't be sure that he wasn't exaggerating just a bit - after all, what little boy had bear cubs for playmates? On second thought, Jacob could be that little boy.

Meanwhile, Jamie rattled Mouse's memory a bit and they narrowed the search for the missing pouch to a small hidden alcove. Pulling at all the loose stones, Mouse finally found the opening that went back a full arm's length.

"There, back there," he said. "Your arm's smaller; see if you can reach it."

Jamie hoped there weren't spiders in the long opening, as she slowly slid her hand along the cold stone. Finally, at the end of her fingertips she felt the softness of suede. "Whew, am I glad we found this. And I'll tell you, I'll be glad when we give it back to Vincent. We never should have taken it from him, no matter what," she said.

They made their way to the hospital chamber, arguing who was going to go in and face Vincent. Mouse didn't want to get too close; he'd seen the Beast in action the night before.

"You go in," said Mouse, as he tried to give to pouch to Jamie.

"Why me? You!" They continued arguing until they got to the entrance of the hospital chamber. A horrifying continuous growling quieted them as they clung to the wall, one on each side of the entrance. Dangling the pouch by its string, they hoped to appease the Beast.

The clawed hand struck so quickly they didn't see it coming. Suddenly, the suede pouch was gone, and all was once more quiet.

"I don't think we should press our luck," suggested Jamie as they tip-toed away from the

chamber.

*There, I feel better now. Something about 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.'*

*Was that a literary quote?*

*Well, I am your alter-ego; I'm not stupid. So - open it, open it! It's been so long since I've seen them. Oh, I'd forgotten how beautiful they were!*

*First, a quote, and then, appreciation! You do surprise me.*

*And you surprise me. You haven't tried to get rid of me yet.*

*How can I? I am grateful to you for my life. And I'm intrigued; like getting to know the enemy and finding out you need him.*

*Let me tell you, as long as your life and well-being are at stake, I'm hanging around. I'm the only means you have to protect yourself. You can't get rid of me.*

*I don't want to.*

*Do I detect a change in attitude? Looks like we both have got some thinking to do.*

Vincent went back to his quiet meditation. With gentle, loving hands, he cradled his prize possessions. The rose and the crystal were once more in his hands. How he had missed them!

There was much he had to think about. There were so many pieces to put back together. All he wanted was quiet, peaceful solitude. He had been resting all morning. It startled him that, when he heard Mouse and Jamie arguing, he could change so quickly, so ferociously. Maybe what he needed was to go to his own chamber, be among his own things.

Diana stayed for lunch and enjoyed the retelling of Jacob's story, as he took center stage. There certainly was enough prompting from all sides, as some questions were finally answered. It seems the little boy forgot all about his haircut with all the attention he was getting.

"Father, I'd really like to see Vincent before I leave," said Diana. "Do you think it's all right? Jacob said there was another violent episode last night."

"I simply don't know how he will react to you, my dear. Mary has no trouble with him. I have been trying to find the key. I know he has pent-up resentments, he has been brutally frank. So tell me, Diana, how is your relationship with this other creature?"

"I only know Vincent," she replied.

"All I can tell you is to go with caution and be on your guard, if you insist on visiting him."

When Diana entered the tunnel, she was surprised to find Lena waiting for her. Diana tried to ignore her, walk by, but Lena caught up.

"He doesn't need to see you. He probably doesn't even know you," Lena warned.

"We'll just have to see about that, won't we?"

"It'll confuse him. He needs to be around people who love him, and who he loves," insisted Lena.

"And what makes you think I don't fit in that category?" retorted Diana, raising her voice a little.

"Listen, lady, we're the ones who are with him all the time. I live here, I take care of him and love him. Know what I mean? And he doesn't mind, either."

"Are you trying to tell me that, as sick as he's been ... I don't believe it," gasped Diana.

"You don't know what it's like till you've done it with all the beastly savageness."

"I'd expect nothing less from a street slut like you," sneered Diana, finally giving vent to her feelings of rejection.

*"WHO ARE YOU CALLING A SLUT? THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND ME IS THAT YOU AREN'T SMART ENOUGH TO GET PAID FOR IT!"* screamed Lena.

They heard the roar before the frightening figure of a slashing Beast suddenly appeared in the tunnel. He glared down on them, baring his fangs. Lena cowered to the floor, while Diana backed against the wall. She could only murmur, "Vincent," as he turned and ran from their sight.

"Well, you wanted to see him," said Lena. "Now you know."

"I think we'd better tell Father that he's left the hospital chamber. Are you all right?" asked Diana, as she offered Lena a hand.

"Yeah, thanks."

They walked to Father's study in total silence, each deep in her own thoughts, each with the feeling that they had lost the battle.

A search of the tunnels proved futile and all was quiet - too quiet. Vincent had managed to elude them. The rest of that day everyone Below looked over their shoulder as they moved about. Even Jacob was very docile, and agreed to sleep in the boys' dormitory. They had searched tunnels and caves, but no one had thought to give a second look in the darkened chamber. Vincent was finally home.

*Well, now, it's my turn to wonder if you had to be so rough on Lena and Diana*

*I just wanted to stop them arguing.*

*You certainly did that. And with such gusto! There may be hope for you yet. I really enjoyed it.*

*Of course you'd think it was pleasurable!*

*So, if you didn't enjoy it, why did you do it?*

*I just felt such ...*

*Such what?*

*Such rage.*

*Good! Good!*

*Stop dancing around! This isn't a celebration!*

*It sure is. You felt it and did something about it. On a scale of one to ten, I'd give you a six for that display of anger. I preferred the sensations when you had sex with them, but this wasn't bad.*

*So you were around for that, too.*

*Don't you get it yet? I'm your anger and passion, with a bit of lust thrown in. And right now, you're too weak to control me. I think it was pretty weak, anyway, to blame me for all of your indiscretions when you were right there enjoying it with me.*

*Must you bring it up? I'm not proud of that behavior.*

*I didn't say anything about being proud, I said I enjoyed the sensation.*

*I don't want to think about it.*

*Too late! We're thinking about it.*

*It wasn't right.*

*This has nothing to do with right or wrong. It has to do with how you feel. What's the matter? Why so quiet? FEEL, DAMN YOU. Admit to how you feel. Admit it felt good.*

*It felt good, but nothing like it was with Catherine.*

*Ah!*

*Why are you suddenly so quiet?*

*Because that was something I had never hoped to experience, sanctified union.*

*Yes, that is it! That's what made it so different!*

*She looked into my eyes. She stood in front of my rage and looked into my eyes with love.*

*You loved her! You antagonized me! You ridiculed the influence she had on me. You knew what I was going through, because she also affected you! Where are all the words now? Is it so different to admit that you are capable of love?*

*It quiets the anger.*

*Perhaps that is our common ground.*

*And we can't go on as we have in the past. We need a common ground. Is that what you're saying?*

*I think we have another common love.*

*Jacob.*

*Yes, and more and more, throughout the years, we will be joined in that love, whether we like it or not.*

*We are already one in that love, the clash of anger and love. Are you ready for that kind of struggle?*

*I stand with arms open, admitting to my anger, passion and pain. All you need to do is admit to your love.*

*This is not easy. I will become less.*

*Or more. It is possible that we can continue on together. Do you love Jacob?*

*I would die for him.*

*But do you love him?*

*I love him.*

A week went by without so much as a murmur, the chamber remained dark. Only in the dead of night, when all were asleep, did Jacob bring food and water to his father. He could feel Vincent's need to be left alone, so he went on with life Below, as did everyone else.

He became involved with the preparations for Halloween, as did all the children. It was a great time for imaginations to run wild, and when Father promised to tell the story of the Headless Horseman, Jacob couldn't control himself.

"I've got the story in a book, Grandpa. And I was there, I was there where it all happened."

"You were not," teased Mark.

"Was too. I was in the same mountains and I even crossed a wooden bridge over a river in the woods."

"Prove it."

Jacob ran to his room off Vincent's chamber and started searching for his book from Elisabeth. It wasn't there, so he took his lantern and started searching through the pile of things in his father's chest.

He giggled as he pulled out a miniature carousel and children's books. "Oh!" he exclaimed as he held up a doll and a white owl's mask. And then, looking closely at a photograph, he whispered, "*Mother*," as he kissed it.

"Jacob," a soft voice called.

Startled, he dropped the picture as though he'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Don't be frightened. Let's see what we have there." Vincent snuggled next to Jacob as they went through the box of Catherine's belongings, which Diana had brought so long ago. There were a few books, one with a dried red rose in it, some jewelry, more photographs, one of Catherine's father. That was when Jacob learned of his other grandfather, a prominent lawyer, now dead. But his favorite story was of the owl mask and the night when the wall grew thin and the worlds came together.

Jacob was full of questions which Vincent answered as honestly as possible. That night, the candles were once again lit in Vincent's chamber.

"Let me look at you!" exclaimed Vincent. "What have they done to you?"

"Don't be mad, Daddy," cried Jacob, for by this time he had forgotten all about his haircut.

But Vincent just shook his head and started to chuckle. "That's it. Now I know my decision was right."

"What do you mean, Daddy?"

"When is Halloween?"

"In two days. I was looking for my book, so I could show them the pictures of the Headless Horseman."

"How would you like to go Above on Halloween?" asked Vincent almost impishly.

"Can we, Daddy? Really, can we?"

"It's one of the things I promised myself to do again. Do you know the best part?"

"What?"

"I don't have to wear a costume." Jacob laughed and jumped on Vincent. It was good to have his Daddy back.

Father and Pascal arrived to see the cause of all the giggling. They could hardly believe their eyes.

"Vincent, where have you been? We have been worried to death about you," exclaimed the older man.

"No need to worry, Father. I have been right here."

"And the other ... the dark side? Have you returned to us, is it gone?"

"No, Father. He hasn't gone; I am right here."

"Now, what in the world does that mean?" asked Pascal.

"There is no other, there never has been. There is only me, good and bad, gentle and fierce. And I will not have it any other way," stated Vincent with conviction. "If you will excuse us now, my son and I have plans to make."

Father and Pascal felt hurt and confused to be summarily dismissed.

The next two days found Mary busy sewing costumes, but Mouse had a special mission. He gathered feathers and brought them to her. She hid them in her sewing basket. On Halloween, all the children paraded, by the gathering in Father's study. Last in line was Jacob and everyone oo'd and ah'd as the little white owl took his place. He showed off pictures in his beautiful book, as Father told the story of Ichabod Crane.

Quite unexpectedly, when the story was finished, Vincent left his place and stood before his white owl with hand outstretched. Jacob jumped up and gathered his white feather cape as Vincent threw his own cloak over his shoulders.

"Where in the world are you two going?" asked Father.

"Above." And they were gone without another word.

"What do you mean, Above? You shouldn't go out. You're not well enough. Vincent!" But Father's words echoed through deserted tunnels.

It was a clear autumn night, which brought many ghosts and goblins out to walk up Fifth Avenue. The smell of roasted chestnuts mingled with the aroma of lighted pumpkin jack-o-lanterns. Jacob dawdled and gaped at everything, but Vincent seemed to have a purpose.

"Shall we do some trick or treating?" he asked.

Jacob wasn't sure what that was, but it sounded like fun. Vincent produced a fabric sack and handed it to his son. Then chose a building, pushed a button on the elevator, and got off when it stopped.

"Ring the doorbell and say 'trick or treat' when they answer. Go ahead. Don't forget to say thank-you."

Jacob was surprised to find out how easy this was. He went to three apartments and got candy, an orange, and an apple. There was only one door left. He rang the doorbell and waited.

A young man with dark hair, dark eyes and a broad smile answered. "Well, look what we have here. Did you just fly in an open window?"

"No, sir. Trick or treat."

"Oh, I see. We're very serious about this," the man said with a grin as he looked up at Vincent.

"Very serious," said Vincent.

The young man hesitated a moment, at the sound of that voice. Then shook his head and got down to the business at hand, letting Jacob choose from a tray of candy bars.

"Thank you, sir," said Jacob.

"Yes, thank you, Joe," repeated Vincent as they disappeared into the elevator.

Running after the pair, Joe reached the elevator doors a second too late. "Vincent!" he exclaimed as he helplessly watched the indicator go down.

The next building Vincent chose was on Fifth Avenue across from Central Park. Again, he went to a specific floor and let Jacob ring doorbells. However, when they came to the last door on the floor, Vincent rang the bell.

"Hello, Jenny," he said as the door opened. Jenny startled a bit and then took a step backwards, for she would never forget the sound of that voice.

"Vincent?"

"Trick or treat!" interjected Jacob.

"Oh my God," gasped Jenny, looking down at the little boy holding out his sack. "Vincent, is that ... is that ...? Come in, please come in. Let me take your things. Please, sit down."

"Daddy, what's going on?" asked Jacob.

"I'd like you to meet Jenny. She was your mother's friend."

"Oh, let me look at you," cried Jenny as she knelt. "Will you let me take your mask off?"

Jacob looked very serious but nodded his head. Slowly Jenny removed the mask and ran her finger along his cheek. She finally gathered him in her arms and started crying. Realizing she might be frightening the little boy, she managed to control herself.

"I'm sorry, honey. It's just that I'm so happy to meet you. I really loved your mom."

"It's okay. I'm happy to meet you, too, Je ..."

"Oh, call me *Aunt* Jenny. That's what you would call me if she were still alive. Would you like some hot chocolate?"

"Yes, I love hot chocolate."

"Come here, sit at the table and I'll get you some cookies while I heat the milk." A few minutes later she returned with a place mat, napkin, and a china dish filled with cookies. Jacob had never seen anything quite so fine.

After she made sure Jacob was settled with his drink, Jenny brought tea in to Vincent. They sat sipping, watching Jacob.

Finally Vincent spoke. "Jenny, I know this may be presumptuous of me, but I have a favor to ask of you."

"What? What could be so ominous?"

"I want Jacob to know about his mother. Not just what I can tell him, but all the things that were a part of her life, her childhood, her education, her job, her friends. I want him to have a sense of heritage. I can't give him that. I live a very secluded life. It can be no other way for me. But I don't want him to wonder, fifteen years from now, who he is, or if he has a place in the world that his mother knew. I want him to be as comfortable here as he is in my world."

"You're telling me an awful lot about yourself without telling me anything, you know, Vincent." Jenny had not taken her eyes off of him since she sat beside him, appraising, sensing. "Would you let him spend next weekend with me?"

"Thank you, Jenny. We share so much, don't we?"

"Somehow, it makes it all easier just sitting here with you. Yes, It's wonderful to share her, isn't it?"

"I'm done," called Jacob as he emerged from the kitchen where he'd deposited the dirty dishes.

"Jacob, I want to show you something. Come on!" said Jenny, leading the way to a room. "This is my den and guest room." On one of the shelves over the desk was a large picture of two girls. "This is me and this is your mom. We were in college when this picture was taken." Then she turned to Vincent. "I had a snapshot blown up and framed after ..."

"You went to college with her?" asked Jacob.

"Yes. And that's not all. It was almost ten years ago now - time does have a way of going by, doesn't it? - Cathy needed to quickly move out of an apartment, at the same time she'd decided to go on a trip around the world. She asked me to store some of her things and never got around to taking them back. Here's an album," noted Jenny, sitting Jacob at the desk. "This is a picture of her mother and father."

"My grandfather and grandmother?"

"Yes." Seeing that Jacob was engrossed, Jenny offered an explanation. "Vincent, I took out all of

her things and set them on the shelves. I didn't do it to be maudlin, it's just that I felt very strongly, that for some reason I was the keeper of her flame. It all makes sense now. This was meant to be Jacob's room." Jenny suddenly drew her arms around her and shuddered every so slightly. "Can you feel her, Vincent?"

"Yes," he whispered, a tender smile crossing his lips.

"Tell you what, Jacob. You can come here and spend whatever time you need to go through all of these things. Would you like that?"

"Can I? Oh, can I, Daddy?"

"Of course. Thank you, Jenny. *Aunt Jenny*."

"The invitation goes for you, too, Vincent."

"Perhaps. Someday."

Jenny took his face in her hands and tilted it to catch the light. "And you don't have to wait for Halloween, either."

The night couldn't have been more perfect. With Jacob sleeping in his arms, Vincent leisurely made his way through the tunnels Below. He'd even gotten to see Joe, one person he would like to count as a friend. However, he decided that it wouldn't be fair to Joe to put him in the same position in which he'd placed Catherine and Diana - to choose between the ethics of a job and keeping his secret.

After putting Jacob to bed, Vincent went to the Waterfall Cavern to fill his pitcher and meditate a bit. He had been doing a lot of that lately. It didn't surprise him to find Lena staring into the mist. However, she cringed and let out a little cry as he approached.

"How fitting that it is here that we should meet," started Vincent. "Can you be as open to me now as you were on that first meeting?"

Lena relaxed a little. "Vincent?"

"I would like for us to start over, but first I must apologize, and you must understand," said Vincent cryptically.

"Well, you didn't really hurt me in the hospital chamber. I was scared more than anything else."

"I'm not speaking of any physical pain I may have caused you, although I am sorry about that also. Those days in the hospital chamber, I felt every past resentment, so strongly that I could only react with rage. In my weakened condition, I had no other tool; it was my only way to stop you from falling back into the pattern of appeasing me at any cost."

"A cost to me? What cost, Vincent?"

"You don't have a clue, do you? Lena, you are no longer a sex object to be sold."

"I know that. I pleased you because I love you, and wanted to comfort you."

"Thank you for that, Lena. Your loves means very much and is very precious. But it wasn't the same for me. I took your love for my pleasure. I betrayed your most precious gift to me, knowing how vulnerable you are, how much you need to belong. On the street, you offered your body for money. Here, you offered your love for my acceptance and comfort. You prostituted yourself for the chance to become part of my life. Can't you see that?"

"I only know that I love you."

"Oh, Lena! If I have learned anything in all of this time, it is that I was given a gift. I was allowed to love Catherine, and it was a miracle. I have studied the total experience and still marvel that it could have happened to me at all. The set of circumstances were so unique, that I can't deny the force of destiny. We became one in every way before our bodies ever joined.

"You once asked me, 'if she loves you, why isn't she here with you?' Lena, we were charting an entirely different course. I'm not sure we were even aware of it as it was happening, but the mingling of our bond, our minds, our spirit, our emotions was so ... intoxicating and, yes, fulfilling, that we reveled in it."

"Do you mean, you never thought of sex?"

"I didn't say that! But just the thought of sex also became titillating, because we also shared those thoughts. We excited each other with the thought of what it would be like, almost as though we held it at arm's length because we knew it would be heavenly perfection, and just a bit forbidden. It couldn't happen just because we wanted it, or needed it, or one of us felt the whim. It had to be saved for the time when we brought each other to perfect oneness."

"Oh, that's so beautiful," said Lena, in tears.

"Exactly. And that is the way it is meant to be. I betrayed that, too, because I experienced it and yet dismissed it, turned it into something common. I know now that only *that* kind of union is what is right for me. Lena, love between a man and a woman is meant to be shared. It's meant to make two people one." Vincent took Lena's face in his hands and stared directly into her soul. "It cannot be one-sided."

"But I do love you, Vincent."

"I don't doubt that, Lena. And I love you, but they are very different loves. Above all, I want you to understand that I also like you. I'm proud to have you for a friend. I admire how quickly you became a part of this community. I appreciate all that you are. You don't have to prove

anything to me or anyone else. You are a lovely young woman, Lena, with so much love to give. Please, don't ever betray it, tarnish it, or make it less than it is."

"And what about you? Will you ever find that again? Can you ever settle for anything less?" asked Lena.

"I really don't know - it fills me yet. But I'll know it if it ever comes my way again."

Lena stared after Vincent as he left the cavern, trying very hard to understand.

When he woke the next morning, Vincent decided to continue the task which he had unexpectedly started the night before. That night on the mountain, he'd known he would have to face all those he had hurt. He was grateful, once again, to fate for starting this mission with Lena. He truly dreaded what he must do next - face Diana. He purposefully kept Father for last, knowing those discussions would probably never end.

The day was spent pleasantly with Mouse, who didn't need much persuasion to play hooky from work. Sitting on the bridge of the Whispering Gallery, they brought each other up to date. Mouse was full of questions about the mountains and the animals, and the romance of adventure. Vincent, on the other hand, knew that Mouse was in on all the latest gossip of the tunnels. Finally, Mouse touched the pouch which hung from Vincent's neck.

"Glad I found it."

"Thank you, Mouse. How did I lose it?"

"Didn't."

"I didn't lose it?"

"No."

"Well, what happened to it?"

"Jamie found it where you left it, and I hid it."

"Why? Why didn't you just return it to me?"

"You angry?" asked Mouse warily.

"Yes, a little, and a little surprised at you and Jamie. Why didn't you give it back to me when you found it?"

"Too sad. It would hurt you too much."

"How?"

"Remind you of Catherine."

"Oh, I see. You thought you were protecting me. I guess I was pretty difficult to live with for a

while, but all of that protecting and avoiding didn't help, either. Do you know how I felt when you gave it back to me?"

"How, Vincent?"

"Whole. You see, it holds symbols of Catherine and me. Catherine was the rose, perfection traps sunlight, and it became a rose. I am a crystal, that hardness formed in darkness from below. When we exchanged our gifts, we were intertwining ourselves, symbolically, sunlight could exist Below, and darkness be transformed into beauty Above. They were the final pieces of the puzzle of my life which I have been trying so hard to fit together."

"A puzzle?"

"Yes. At first I thought the question was, what am I? But I soon found out, the only question worth answering is, what do I want to become? I very quickly learned that I certainly wasn't one of the animals. It was a very real struggle to survive. I almost didn't. I don't know what I am, and I was even less without Catherine. All those years we spent trying not to think of her, speak of her, all of us, only sent me down there," said Vincent, pointing to the Abyss.

"There?" asked Mouse.

"Not really, but that is how I felt. Just imagine tumbling in there, never landing, just falling, falling."

"Scary, huh?"

"Very scary."

"How did you get out? No way out of there."

"I finally realized that I had to learn to live with Catherine. You see, the problem was that she was already a part of me, and I insisted on trying to rid my heart of her, instead of letting her fill it. Denying her was denying myself. Everything became beautiful and exciting again, once I allowed her back."

"So now you think of her all the time, right?"

"No, that's the odd part. When I was trying so hard not to think of her, she was constantly there, but when she became part of me, I no longer had to dwell on it."

"Huh?"

"Let me see if I can explain it. It's like a habit, or learning something. When we had our first signing class, you struggled just to do the letter A. There was a lot of practice and worry until it became second nature. Now you can sign as easily as you can speak. You no longer have to think about it - it's no longer a burden for you, but a part of you. It finally all came together for you."

"Oh. You needed to have all the pieces come together for you. And giving you the rose and the crystal put everything back where it belonged."

"How very astute of you."

"What?"

"Never mind."

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He could no longer put it off. Now that Vincent had made up his mind to face Diana, he was anxious. Standing in the conduit in the park, he waited for dark. He hadn't been home long, but already he missed the freedom of the mountains.

The tap on the rooftop door was so light that Diana thought it was the breeze. The second tap got her attention, and for a second she froze in mid-step. Did she dare think about what could be on the other side of that door? She had never been faint of heart, but she no longer had a clear picture of Vincent. As hard as she tried, she could not forget the creature she faced that night six months ago - the same one she saw in the tunnels recently. Complexity on top of complexity.

Peering out as she opened the door a crack, Diana's breath caught in her throat. There was Vincent. He was leaning against the ledge in the farthest corner from the door. His hand lay open in his lap, and his head was bowed in submission. As Diana opened the door, he turned from her in shame.

"Vincent?"

"I have come to beg forgiveness for ..."

He couldn't say the words, the mere thought was repugnant to him, and Diana wasn't helping; she wanted him to say it. He started again.

"For so long, I couldn't even remember what happened, but I felt the shame, the panic, whenever I thought of you. My dear friend, you have always been here for me. I could tell you thinkgs I could tell no other, and by telling you, it was easier for me to sort out my pain. I don't think I ever said thank you. You deserved better than that."

*"BETTER THAN WHAT? SAY IT, VINCENT!"* yelled Diana.

There was a long pause as Vincent toyed with the idea of running. He had done enough of that, and he was through blaming the Beast.

"Better than having me ... force myself on you with such violence," he said haltingly, in tears.

"Well, you finally faced it. I thought sure you were going to tell me that crazed creature took over your sensibilities."

"No, I know now that I wasn't ready for that kind of relationship. I still harbored too many regrets. I tried to satisfy Catherine's unfulfilled needs through you. I tried to function in her world. I wanted to prove I could accept her world's moral standards, and so *you* became her surrogate. It was a terrible thing to do. And when I felt you had deserted me too, I took my anger and guilt out on you. Diana, I was the Beast!" growled Vincent.

"Stay back!" warned Diana, not sure if she was more afraid of the growl or the pain of what he was saying.

"I can feel your fear," he whispered. "More than that, I know your fear. I, too, have looked into the eyes of an enraged beast and felt the helplessness, the hopelessness. I know I will never forget it, and I don't expect you to."

"I have tried. I find it difficult to give in to fear. The other day, I was on my way to see you in the hospital chamber, determined to face my fear. Lena and I were arguing, and there you were again. Talk about coming face-to-face with a beast!"

"I wouldn't have hurt you. Your voices sliced through me like a hot sword, your words were venomous, and I was the cause. I needed to stop you, but I was still pure anger and rage. I don't know how to channel it. To say I am sorry for – everything - is so little," said Vincent.

"You realize that, Vincent?"

"Realize what?"

"You said that *you* were pure anger and rage - not another creature, but you."

"It certainly took me long enough. All my life. I did not allow myself to admit to anger, or the deepest of pain, every time I was ridiculed or rejected. It's very new for me to admit I was angry, or show the pain when I feel it. But when I do express it, I can be frightening. I know that, and I don't know what to do with it yet. For so long I fought that other creature, but in order to survive in the mountains, it was so natural for it to surface. It was then I began to realize that we were one, that we ... / ... admired and needed all of who I am. Does that make sense?"

Despite her own pain, Diana was listening intently, for she could feel truths revealing themselves to Vincent as he spoke.

"Yes, go on."

"To be one, to be whole. I would rescue Catherine without a rational thought to my own

safety. To rescue Catherine was to save myself, because there was no difference, we were one. To lose Catherine was to lose myself. I had already experienced that, and so when the other creature, the Beast in me, realized I was close to death, it produced the ultimate in strength because, if I were dead, he was dead. That is when I knew I had to find a way to become one with it, to become whole."

"Have you done that?"

"I think so."

"How?"

"By validating his existence, understanding his anger and admitting that it was really me, and my anger. By embracing him in gratitude for my life, and realizing that anger has its place. And that I needed to temper it with my boundless love, instead of keeping each emotion in its own little box."

"I'm impressed! That was no easy task," said Diana.

"He helped. I sat for days in darkness, wanting only peace, examining the Beast. He, in turn, bared my soul and made me face the truth. Once I had lived through him, I could not go on without him. It seems that I must learn the same lesson over and over. My insanity wasn't caused by Catherine's death - it was caused when I denied her place in my heart. The Beast didn't exist because of my anger, but because I denied its expression. And the anger doesn't arise from my pain but because I stifle it. Even love! Diana, do you know that, as much as I loved her, for so long I denied the pleasure of even admitting it to myself, and I couldn't even say the words.

"Over and over, circle upon circle, never ending. Love joined Catherine and me, truth joined the Beast and me. Suddenly, there was another dimension! I could feel the rocks around me and I allowed my thoughts to join with them, as they rose through the earth and reached for the sun. Once I was there, I was part of the universe, and all the conflict in me seemed to dissipate. When I was away, out in the open, I sat, staring up into the blackness of the sky, until I felt myself floating free. This is what I achieved, even in the bowels of the earth."

"Harmony. You became part of the wondrous harmony of the universe, and so put yourself in balance. People travel great distances and study for years to find harmony," commented Diana. "The path to inner peace."

"You understand! You know of these things?" exclaimed Vincent.

"Yes, I've studied Eastern philosophies. I even lived a year in Tibet. There is yet another side to all of this. Being empathic, you are already attuned to all around you. Don't fight it, Vincent - let it into your soul."

"Do you think we could talk about all of this again? Would you mind?" asked Vincent, not exactly sure what Diana wanted. He no longer felt her anxiety, but she still stood with her hand on the knob and her back pressed against the door.

"You've come a long way and done a great deal of work. Sure, we can discuss it ... when you come again."

"Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable coming Below, where there are always people about. I will never enter your apartment again. I promise you that," said Vincent, as he abruptly jumped to the roof below and disappeared. Diana was left standing there in bewilderment. This was not what she'd expected at all, and yet she was captivated and intrigued by Vincent, as always.

The next morning, Friday, Jacob washed till he was shining clean. He scrubbed extra hard, making sure his knees and elbows didn't have dirt smudges. It was hard to stay out of dirt in the tunnels. His best clothes were laid out for him, and Vincent was waiting to help with the finishing touches.

"I packed your nightshirt and a change of clothes for you. Don't forget your toothbrush and comb. Is there anything else you want to take with you?" asked Vincent.

"This," answered Jacob as he grabbed the stuffed lion from his pillow.

"Let me look at you. Good! I just have to comb your hair."

"Daddy, were you mad when you saw my haircut?"

"A little shocked at first, but I certainly understood why it had to be done. However, I had already decided that I wanted you to spend time Above, and when I saw you with that short hair, I knew I was right. You could easily fit in Above, and I couldn't deny you the opportunity."

"So you brought me to meet Aunt Jenny."

"Yes. And speaking of Aunt Jenny, she will be waiting for you. Are you ready?"

"Ahuh."

To say that Vincent had mixed feelings, as he brought Jacob to the surface, was putting it mildly. He watched from the conduit, as Jenny greeted Jacob at the bench where they were to meet. As they started to walk off together Jacob turned and waved.

"Jacob, it's almost lunch time, but there is one stop I want to make before we go to the restaurant," said Jenny, taking his hand and leading the way downtown. "This is the Criminal Justice Building. It's where your mother worked."

"Really? Can we go in?"

"That's why we're here. There's someone special I want you to meet."

On the way up, Jenny tried to explain what a District Attorney was, and how they worked for the people. She brought him to the corner desk at which Catherine worked, explaining to the man sitting there, who he was and why this was important for him. In wide-eyed amazement, Jacob took it all in.

Then Jenny tapped on a door.

"Yeah?"

"Joe, I want you to meet someone special."

"Jenny! How you doing? Come in! Gee, it's good to see you. Well, who have we here?"

"Joe, I'd like you to meet Jacob. He's Cathy's little boy."

"Cathy who?" asked a bewildered Joe.

"For heaven's sake, Joe, just look at him!"

"Oh, my God! The baby, her baby!" Joe took a couple of minutes to regain his composure. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Jacob," he continued, holding out his hand.

In a very polite, formal manner, Jacob shook his hand.

"I have some tickets to the junior hockey game in the park tomorrow afternoon. I wonder if you'd like to join us?" asked Jenny. Then aside, "I can explain this then."

"Sure, I'd love to."

"See you then," said Jenny, taking Jacob's hand and leaving the office.

However, Jacob ran back. "And thank you for the Halloween candy bar. It was delicious."

Joe stared after the little boy who was clutching a toy lion. Only this lion was different - it was wearing a black cape.

"Vincent! One of these days I'm going to get you!"

Feeling very alone, Vincent needed to share his pain, the pain of letting a child go. It could only be one person - he had finally worked his way back to Father. The older man had been preoccupied with the plans for the upcoming Winterfest, so he startled a bit when Vincent entered the study.

"May I come in, Father?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Let me look at you. How are you feeling? Is anything wrong? Have you been changing your dressing?"

"All that is fine, Father. You and Peter did a good job of keeping me alive. Thank you for that."

"I thought I saw you and Jacob pass by here not long ago."

"You did. I took him Above."

"You did what? Well, where is he?"

"He is staying with a friend of Catherine's for the weekend."

"Good God, Vincent! Have you lost your senses? To what purpose? What kind of burden must the child feel to keep our secret?"

An enraged growl pinned Father to the back of his chair. "*FATHER, I TRULY KNOW HOW DEVINN FEELS,*" shouted Vincent. Then, seeing the fear in Father's eyes, he quieted and continued, "I came here because I needed your comfort, I need my father. Perhaps we can start this again."

It was so difficult to ask for help, but if he was indeed going to succeed in finding inner peace, Father had to understand and help.

"Well, yes, of course. But must you be so forceful about it?"

"Apparently, I must. This is how I express my anger, now. I'm afraid we will have to live with it. Perhaps, eventually, words may be enough."

"I thought for sure that this time your dark side had prevailed. I can't tell you how relieved I was that you emerged once again."

"Father, the word isn't *emerged*, it is *merged*. I hope all of you can accept that."

"Are you telling me that I am sitting here with that other side of you, right now?" asked Father apprehensively.

"It is only I, Father."

"There is a difference in you, Vincent."

"Father, there are many differences in me. One of them is that I can growl my anger, without losing presence of mind. I learned to do that as I was defending our shelter in the mountains. I had to keep my wits about me at all times. Oh, Father, I experienced so much there."

"It took great courage to strike out on your own," commented Father.

"Actually, at the time I did it, I really had very little control over my actions. All I knew was that I wanted to be free."

"But what if someone saw you? What if you were caught?" interjected Father.

"But I wasn't. There were only the animals, the mountains, the sky, and the wind in the trees. A valley that was its own little world, and a wonder to behold. Father, it didn't take me long to

realize that I am more human than animal. Actually, if it weren't for a she-bear, I don't know what we would have done."

Vincent told the tale of his adventure.

"Do you mean, you let Jacob play with bear cubs?" asked Father.

"I actually had very little to do with it. They played and she allowed it. And when she accepted me, it was joyful for me. I dwelled on the feeling, and I realized that I was being included in the wonders of nature. Father, I am going to be saying things that might hurt you, but I want you to know that I truly understand your motives. I know what it is to want to keep a child safe, and the fear and pain when he is in danger."

"Are you telling me that I am in for it?" asked Father, rather sheepishly.

Vincent grinned and continued, "All of my life, I lived in an *exclusive* society."

"What are you talking about?" asked Father defensively. "We welcome all."

"Of course you do, if they are willing to abide by our rules. But for me this meant something entirely different. If I sinned, I could be excommunicated, banished. I had to keep everyone safe from me, or I could be exiled. And for me, for the child I was then, such exile would have meant death. I grew up knowing and fearing this. I even exiled myself when it became necessary. In that valley, it was an *inclusive* society. Once Jacob and I were sniffed, scrutinized, accepted, the local residents ignored us. They didn't look twice. I didn't have to explain. I could do what I wanted. They didn't care, as long as I didn't interfere with their foraging. It was the first time in my life that I didn't have to watch every step, control every emotion, think of every move."

"So you became part of another family?"

"Yes, and one that I desperately needed to learn from. I can't tell you how I respect the animal kingdom. That she-bear was as loving as she was fierce. She filled me with awe, as I witnessed her strength and savagery when she needed to protect her cubs. She was both tender and fierce, these things lived in her side by side, and it was natural. She didn't agonize over it; it was what she needed to be. What was right and proper for her. I think it was then that I began to realize that I had the same potential. What was wrong was trying to deny it. Father, you can't have it both ways! I can't be your fighting machine and protection one minute, and then banished because I can no longer control my rage. Living with constant control is merely existing. I am both, that is who I am."

"And how are we supposed to live with that?" asked Father.

"Are you thinking it would be easier to live without it, without me? Will it come to that, or will all of you be willing to work with me, accept me, and trust that my love will not allow me to

hurt anyone?"

Tears were filling Vincent's eyes, but he continued. "I think you can understand how frightened I was, when I first saw the bear standing over Jacob. I had ordered him not to go anywhere near the cubs again, but he kept insisting that she would not hurt him. He trusted her, he knew, and he was right. God, Father, she saved his life. With all of her wild savagery, she took time to save his life. She knew how to channel her strength appropriately. That is what I need to do. Can I count on your help? Please, Father, understand me, love all of me," cried Vincent.

Father reached out for his son, comforting him as Vincent wept. "May God help us. We will go through this together, step by step, but this time, you lead the way. You tell me what you need."

"Please know that I love you, and fully appreciate what you have gone through with me in your midst. I now know the pain and joy of what it means to be a father."

It had been a long time since these two sat head to head, lost in conversation. The hours slipped by until Father's head began to nod.

"I think I should be leaving," whispered Vincent.

"Yes, we'll have plenty of time to finish this discussion. Now, be careful, Vincent: you're still recuperating, you know. I wouldn't take any nighttime strolls in the park just yet: the air is too cool and damp."

Vincent turned in the entrance and, with an impish grin said, "I think on my next trip I'll visit Devin and Charles." This had its desired effect: it rendered Father speechless.

The thought of Jacob Above pulled Vincent out into the night. He paced in the park, looking up to a window in the building across the street.

"Good night. Be a good boy," he whispered.

Then he wandered back to the conduit, marveling at how familiar it felt, to have someone he loved in one of those buildings, falling back into old habits. He sat on the little mound, just to the right of the drainage ditch and rubbed his hand over the grass where he had first found Catherine.

"Well, my love, I have come full circle. I will once again live my life in both worlds. I cannot just leave him here, without watching over him as I always tried to watch over you. He will have a good life, a happy life, and be as much your son as mine. I will not have him plagued by the same questions which have besieged me. He will know who he is. My life has been one brooding agony after another, and I want to change that. You knew that I would eventually come to this, for you were not only my mirror, but the light by which I could see my reflection.

For so long I wouldn't believe that you could love what I saw there, my double image. But you made me believe; you were the only person who had the courage to face the Beast and love him. You proved that love over and over, until you led me to the brink of heavenly perfection. It was my beginning, and what a glorious beginning!"

**THE END**