

YESTERDAY'S SHADOWS

by Janet Kilbourne

Back there somewhere beyond the blueness of his eyes, the sudden horror reared up and turned the breath in his tightened throat to jagged ice and fire. Shadows of a dark, unknowable sadness reaching out for him, ancient as the rocks, dragging him down with a grief too great for tears, and he didn't know what to do any more. He only knew he shouldn't feel like this - like the earth was pouring in on him, suffocating....

Sometimes he could almost imagine he saw it, that beast who gnawed at his heart, making him what he was, who in his dreams held up a mirror to show him the reason why he could never know the sun, who mocked his bitter waking tears and told him - *'I am you....'*

Because he was what he was, and nothing could ever change. Not even a boy's longing.

The darkness shivered and writhed like the wings of death, a sudden draught catching at the candles and throwing looming shadows in distant corners. She stopped wonderingly, her eyes bright like stars fastened on his face and reflecting down into his soul. A winter's night in the Mirror Pool. Cassiopeia....

"Vincent? You okay?"

Numbed with strange misery, he wrapped his arms around his knees and didn't answer. She could never understand. She dreamed of becoming a dancer, bright lights, applause and fame, while he....

Had taught her to swim in that secret pool beyond the waterfalls, holding his breath in case that, too, turned out to be a dream. Sometimes he wondered if she knew how often he watched her, his heart yearning with something he couldn't name. Because she was all the wonderful, impossible imaginings he had ever had and there would never be anyone quite like her again.

But already it seemed she had forgotten her question, caught up in that inner music she'd taught him to hear when in return for the swimming lessons, she'd shown him a few clumsy waltz steps. As she whirled away he lost her in the shadows that were partly the great Hall, mostly the vastness of the wind that had opened up inside him - and there was no explanation. Except that he was a toy who looked like an animal and the realization of that swallowed him so deep, he knew he could never find his way back. Never leave the tunnels to play in the sun as all the others did....

'We're Tom and Huck on the Mississippi, little brother. You and me....'

"Come and dance, Vincent...."

Her words meant nothing. He couldn't hear beyond the echoes, couldn't force himself to move, the cold iron bars of his cage closing in even tighter and she was dancing just out of his reach, light and free, strangely out of place in the dimness.

'We built a raft. Me and Devin. Down the wild river under the sunlight, south of Oz and north of Shangri-La....'

Then her hands were through the bars, seizing his, her eyes whirling like jewels, drawing him back from the darkness and he found himself on his feet, stumbling out into the centre of the hall, leaving the beast sitting there in his cage of horror.

"Don't you hear it?" she asked, smiling up at him, and her bare arms slipped over his shoulder as naturally as if he hadn't been what he was. "Isn't it beautiful?"

'Like you,' he wanted to say, but dare not. Sometimes, the joy of being with her was so overwhelming he could forget everything else, even the beast-face he saw reflected back at him from the depths of her eyes. They were the same age but already he overstepped her by several inches, and the frailty of her slender body scared him.

"Tell me what's the matter," she urged, leaning into him. "You look so.... strange."

"It's nothing," he whispered hoarsely. "Truly it isn't, Lisa."

Then she smiled in a way that made his heart ache. "Listen to the music. Soaring and swooping.... soaring and swooping...."

'There was a shadow,' he thought. The shadow of another face, another voice saying the same words somewhere in his memory or in his dreams where he couldn't quite reach it. That mother-sister-lover woman who haunted his imaginings, touching deep places not even Father could touch.... And suddenly, he lowered his head, letting the wild, tangled amber mane fall over his face so she wouldn't see the pain.

"Don't be so sad," she begged, holding him close in terrible understanding. "Please don't...."

Desperately, he half turned from her, knowing there were no words to express what he could not understand, but she caught him by the arm and held him there questioningly. "Vincent, tell me...!"

"I.... can't," he gasped. "Please...."

"You scare me sometimes, you know that?" Her voice was gentle but the music had died - he could see it.

"You.... feel things no one else can. Tell me what you're feeling now, Vincent. Please."

The breath was suddenly hard in his throat as if he had run all the way from the Whispering Gallery, the magical place he loved beyond all other except the Crystal Cavern of the stories. Running from the misery of their triumphant laughter as they pulled him from his hiding place. *"The game's over, Vincent. We've found you again...."*

Helplessly, he shook his head. He just wanted to dance with her and never let the music stop - and that was part of the agony....

"You're sick," she said then, concerned. "Let me tell Father."

"No," he heard himself whisper. "It's not.... that."

Her eyes were suddenly soft, melting into his heart and trickling down into the very depths of his being.

"Okay, it's okay. If you don't want to."

He shuddered, suddenly, inexplicably, tightening his arms around her and burying his face in her hair. For a moment so brief he thought he had imagined it, he felt her tense, then a nervous little laugh rippled through her, and she playfully disengaged herself and slipped out of his grasp.

"Come on, dance with me. All this is our stage and out there everyone's watching us...."

Watching. With horrified eyes. Watching him like the little girl staring out the car window that first night he'd ever gone Above. Incredulous and so near he could have put out his hand and touched her. And then, even as they stared at each other, she'd burst into frightened tears and all the joy and wonder of the moonlit night had died in him as if it had never been. Not even Devin could heal the grief, because for the first time he'd seen himself as others saw him - ugly and monstrous, a freak who could never know the sun and the realization was too great to be borne. He'd run blindly back to their chamber and flung himself face down on the bed, vowing with all the passion of his six year old heart that he'd never go Above again. And then he'd sobbed himself to sleep.

But one month later he had gone back, drawn by the remembrance of that full moon, the night breeze in his

hair and sounds of a city he barely knew. He'd never seen that little girl again, but the pain became part of him, like the beast who snarled and laughed and bided his time....

Blindly, he reached out for her hands and let her pull him around, his feet automatically moving into her rhythm, but no matter how hard he tried he still couldn't hear her music. She seemed oblivious, moving dreamily around the spotlight of her imagination, a bright angel in his arms, making him feel what he was, boyishly awkward, humbling, strange - and desperately and forever her willing slave.

"So, what's the lesson today, Lisa?" asked the sudden voice from the top of the stairs, mocking and echoing into the vastness of the chamber. "You teaching him how to dance? Or how to be a.... man?"

For the briefest of moments the candlelight flickered in her eyes and Vincent clearly saw beneath the startled anger and confusion, a blushing recognition of guilt and shame before she abruptly pulled away from him and straightened her skirt.

"Mitch! I never heard you come in."

"Quiet as a cat, that's me." Mitch came slowly down the steps towards them, but the grin on his face didn't quite reach his eyes. "Not that I'd ever be as good as Vincent, of course." His gaze switched coolly to the younger boy, who hadn't moved. "Hey, don't let me interrupt. You go on - I'll sit here and watch."

Vincent didn't reply. He looked down, suddenly knowing that the brief dream was over and all that was left was the dark. Mitch was like that, a friend who could save his life one day and torment him unmercifully the next. But until now he'd never realized that the other boy could possibly be jealous, or that Lisa....

Was moving away from him almost imperceptibly, the flush slowly dying from her cheeks. She hadn't looked at him since Mitch came in, and Vincent felt a slow misery beginning to build up behind his throat, jagged flint, barbed wire, and glass tearing him to ribbons. He turned away, a chill red haze blurring his eyes, not even aware he'd clenched his fists, until the tight spots of pain in his palms grew unbearable.

"Come on, Mitch said, still grinning. "She's a good teacher, you know, Vincent. Everyone says so. You should learn a lot."

There was an awful tightness across Vincent's chest. Fear, anger, a deep abiding shame, twisting like claws in his heart. The maddened fury of the awakened beast lifting his lip in an ominous, menacing snarl....

"Stop it, Mitch!" Lisa suddenly whirled towards the steps, all mother-protective now, roused by a careless sense of justice. "Don't provoke him."

"Who? Me?" Mitch threw up his hands in innocence. "All I said was that you're a great dancer. Maybe Father'll let you two perform at the concert. That's if you don't mind being seen together in public, of course. You know how folks gossip."

"Leave us alone," Vincent whispered desperately, unaware that he was moving ominously towards the other boy. "Just leave us alone...."

The hazel eyes widened in amazement. "You want her all for yourself, man? All alone down here where no one can see you? You aren't even human...."

"Don't!" And suddenly, Lisa was there in front of him, her hands on his shoulders, warm and insistent and very near, and Vincent shuddered. "Don't! Please, Vincent, don't listen to him. He's only trying to spoil it."

He stared down at her, eyes glassy with misery. "Lisa...."

"It's our dance," she whispered. "You haven't forgotten, have you?"

But it was too late. He could see that clearly. Something missing in her smile....

He turned away, unable to bear the loss, knowing it had been a mistake to come here, a mistake to let them

see the anger inside him coiled like an animal, ready to spring out. He'd always tried so hard to keep it under control, because maybe then they'd forget he wasn't – completely - human, but somehow it always seemed to break free and betray him in the end. Maybe Mitch had known that all along.

Mitch smiled and leaned back nonchalantly against the wall. "You want me to go? Vincent? Why don't you try and make me?"

Vincent gasped, every muscle in his body tensed and quivering. The taunting contempt in the other boy's voice was burning, the darkness coming down like some giant freezing cloud leaving only helplessness, and he knew Lisa could see it too for she was staring at him in a sort of wordless humor as if only just noticing how different he really was.

"Come on then," Mitch whispered. "Come and get me. Let's see if she's made you enough of a man to fight like one. Huh, Vincent? You want to fight for a girl now?" Slowly, he stood up, came down the steps and walked towards the half human boy in a deliberate provocation. "First you dance and then you fight. That's how the world goes, my man."

Vincent stared into the hazel eyes gazing steadily back into his, knowing he didn't want to do this. Knowing that what was inside him wouldn't let him back away, ever. That Lisa....

"You're wrong," he heard himself say quietly after what seemed an age. "You're wrong, Mitch. About all of it."

"Am I?" There was a hardness in Mitch's face now. An old, long buried resentment that was more than just a game of taunting the alien. "What makes you think Lisa likes you hanging around? You may be one of us, Vincent, but you're still an animal. And that means you don't lay hands on her. Understood?"

Just for an instant, Vincent closed his eyes, watched the darkness whirl him down into the void.... and then opened them again to see that mocking smile burning through to his soul.

"What do you say, Lisa?" Mitch added softly, not taking his eyes from the younger boy's face. "Or are you kinky for fur and claws?"

Something snapped inside Vincent then. With a speed almost too fast to follow, he whirled and lashed out, slamming his tormentor around and down against the table with bone-breaking force, not even caring that Lisa was screaming, hanging onto his arm, trying horribly to hold him back. The darkness was all around him now and he was lost in it. Mitch could only cower helplessly, his mouth working but no sound coming out, stunned into terrified immobility. The other boy was snarling, advancing on him with cold white murder blazing in his blue eyes, some strange trick of the candlelight suddenly making him assume monstrous proportions, loom terrifyingly large against the chamber wall, his great shadow falling over everything.... And then it was just that hand, raising high for another punishing blow.... claws gleaming....

"No!" Mitch screamed and shut his eyes.

"Vincent, stop....!"

For a split second everything froze, only Mitch's whimpers breaking the stunned silence. Vincent hung over him, fangs bared menacingly, shuddering with the sudden effort of restraint, with rage and frustration and a slowly dawning horrified shame at what he had so nearly done.

"It's all right, little brother. Let him go now. It's all right."

And then someone was beside him, forcing his arm down with gentle, firm insistence, and there was nothing he could do any more, nothing he could say that would take away the truth of what he was. Gasping, he slumped weakly, watching hatred replace the fear in Mitch's face, watching Lisa standing there in her white dress, staring at him with a kind of horrified fascination, and a hard knot of grief rose up from

deep in his gut and lodged like a stone at the base of his throat. They'd seen the truth of the beast within him, and now they'd hate him forever. Blindly, he turned away, pressing anguished hands to his head as if pain was lancing through it.

"Devin...."

"I'm here, Vincent. It's okay."

"He nearly killed me!" Mitch whispered, plucking at the strips of rag hanging down from his shoulder. "Look at my jacket.... He's ruined it!"

But Lisa just stood there saying nothing, her eyes eloquent.

"You want to watch him, man!" Mitch yelled suddenly, starting forward as fury replaced the shock. "He's a frigging animal! He could've killed me!"

"But he didn't." Devin returned quietly, gazing at Vincent stumbling towards the steps. "And he's not an animal."

"Yeah? Well, we all know you're his keeper...."

Devin barely had time to see his brother suddenly jerk himself into an anguished run, taking the steps two at a time up to the door, before he found himself grabbing hold of Mitch and pulling him towards him until they were barely inches apart.

"One more word!" he snarled. "One more word and I'll kick your ass so hard you'll be wearing it for a hat. You got me?"

"Sure," Mitch returned coolly, unfazed by the aggression. "I never knew you cared so much, Dev."

"Vincent." Lisa was standing at the bottom of the stairway, gazing up sorrowfully at the boy as he heaved furiously at the heavy oaken door. "Vincent, don't go! Please! It doesn't matter what happened...."

But Vincent was too lost in his agony to hear her. With one final effort he got the door open and was gone, leaving her standing in the midst of an awkward silence. Turning slowly, she found that the others were looking at her questioningly.

"What happened here, Lisa?"

Devin's eyes were hard and suspicious and for a moment she found herself resenting the assumption of authority that came from being the eldest. Now it automatically put her on the defensive and she shrugged carelessly.

"Nothing."

"Nothing." He nodded tightly. "So, Vincent attacked, unprovoked, did he?"

"Hey," Mitch chipped in with the confidence of new-found support from an unexpected quarter. "All you've got to do is look at him, man. I tell Lisa - play with cats too often and you get scratched. He just came at me, is all."

Devin turned away in disgust, then paused and swung back. "I'm telling you, Mitch - no one hurts Vincent and gets away with it. You deserved what you got, and you'd better consider yourself lucky. If I'd been him, I'd have ripped your head off."

"Don't threaten me, Devin!"

"I'll do what it takes," he heard himself return quietly. "Whatever it takes. Remember that." And then, without another word, he got out of there, forcing his legs to keep a cool walk for as long as they watched him and only breaking into a breathtaking run when he reached the empty tunnel.

He finally found Vincent in the chamber they both shared, face down on his bed, his head in his arms and for one awful moment, as he stood and caught his breath. Devin wondered if the younger boy was crying. Awkwardly, he moved over to the bedside, then tentatively reached out to touch the trembling shoulder. But then, something inexplicably stopped him. He and Vincent had studied, worked, played and dreamed together ever since he could remember, and although he knew the sadness of the difference between them, he couldn't deny the horrified wonder he still felt when he lay awake at night and watched the other boy sleeping, tangled mane spread across the pillow, beast's face relaxed into unguarded vulnerability, those hands curled on the blanket....

Those hands....

He looked at them now, clenched fiercely against the pillow, candlelight gleaming in the soft golden fur, the sharp pointed claws. Would they ever know what had happened to make Vincent the way he was? So strange and incredible and sad, a miracle in a world that no longer believed in miracles? He himself had been four years old when they'd found that newborn baby, abandoned in an alleyway and left to freeze to death on the coldest night of the year. He barely remembered it, blurred as it was with dark, half-forgotten whispers about a woman who had died screaming and the frightening refusal of anyone in the community to answer his desperate questions about what had happened. The clearest memory he had was of Father holding Vincent in his arms looking down at him in a way Devin had never seen before, a feeling of hurt and angry rejection, knowing that a beast had come among them to steal Father's love.... He'd hated Vincent then, a hatred that eventually got mixed up with a kind of awful love, until he didn't know where one ended and the other began....

Abruptly, he seated himself on the edge of the bed, trying not to remember.

"Talk to me, Vincent."

But the other boy simply lay there unmoving, as if he were trying to shut out the world. *'There was a darkness about him,'* Devin thought. A thick rolling cloud that reached out tendrils even to where he sat, a suffocating sadness like the end of the world.

"Tell me what I can do...."

"Nothing." Vincent whispered; his voice muffled by his arm. "It's me, Devin. It's why I frighten people. When the anger comes...."

"Bull," he said. "Mitch likes to hurt you, and I...." He stopped. "I'm not going to let him. Remember that."

Vincent suddenly turned over onto his back and gazed up at him with those incredible, heart-stopping blue eyes.

"You said once that you'd never go away, that you'd never leave me."

"What...?" Devin stared, stricken. Wondering why Vincent was looking like that, why he'd suddenly returned to that day years ago when everyone went Above to spend a summer's afternoon in the park and left him behind....

He'd looked back over his shoulder to see Vincent standing forlornly by the grating, silently watching them go, but there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say that would alter what could not be altered. He spent all afternoon trying to forget that desolation in those eyes, but they haunted him in every happy face he saw, in every tree and blade of grass he passed and when he finally trailed back, sticky with ice cream and sunshine; it was to find his brother sitting at the table in their chamber with *'Treasure Island'* open in front of him, his head in his hands and tears pouring silently down his face.

'I swear, Vincent, I'll never leave you again. I never will. I didn't mean to hurt you....'

It was the reason why he'd taken him Above to see the full moon. A kind of apology they had both recognized for what it was. The beginning of a dream that somehow had never died.

He shuddered uncontrollably. "What is it?"

Those eyes looked up at him for a long moment and then drifted away again to gain vaguely around their chamber at all the little treasures and souvenirs that boys collect, at the comfortable tumble of discarded clothes, half-read books and strewn papers that made up home. *'No matter how you dress it up,'* Devin thought bitterly, *'it's still a hole in the ground, a hole Vincent'll have to stay in for the rest of his life.'*

"I don't know," Vincent said at last, and the older boy was struck yet again by the low, beautifully modulated voice that promised to sound even more wondrous when it finally deepened. *'Was it,'* he wondered, *'because of his fear of what lurked within that Vincent always seemed so gentle?'*

And what about his attack on Mitch...?

Helplessly, Devin reached out and closed his hand around his brother's furry one in a warm squeeze of reassurance. Something was happening to Vincent - he could feel it even as he touched him, a black bottomless void reaching out to drag him down as well, seeping through every pore in Vincent's body and eating into his own heart.... A deadly weight, dense as collapsing matter in the heart of a dying star. A black hole, pulling them both to destruction....

"Is it about Mitch?" he whispered at last. But he knew it wasn't. Knew it was something deeper - that he had to help Vincent through it, whatever it was....

For a long moment Vincent was silent, the old sadness rising inside him like a suffocating wave. A sense of oppression like a gathering darkness deep in his heart - and for a moment he wondered if Devin could see it. He knew one day Devin would leave the tunnels. There was a restlessness in him that was so tangible you could almost touch it. Devin could never stay Below when his spirit dreamed of beautiful, impossible things.

Suddenly he closed his eyes on a sting of helpless tears. Had there ever been a time when Devin hadn't dreamed such dreams - impossible because they always included him? It was as if, to Devin, he wasn't some strange half beast who could never see the sun, but a normal boy with a lifetime of hopes in front of him - and on those dark nights when they whispered together beneath the blankets, pretending to be asleep when Father came to bid them goodnight, he had allowed himself to believe in the dreams too. To imagine he was other than he was. Except that when he awoke the following morning reality laughed in his face and he knew it had all been shadows in the wind.

"Devin," he whispered. "Promise me you'll.... come back sometimes. That you won't forget."

"Don't," Devin said painfully. "Don't say that, Vincent. Please." Suddenly he couldn't bear the look in those blue eyes, the knowledge gazing back at him of the future that was still tangled up in his own mind. Vincent couldn't know - mustn't know. "You're upset about what happened back there. But you're my brother. How could I ever forget you, or this place?" He stopped and took a deep breath. "Tell you what - let's do something special tonight. Let's go Above, just you and me."

Vincent looked at him steadily for a long moment, and suddenly the awful sense of desperation receded, just a little.

"All right," he said softly, and suddenly a faint hint of a smile hovered on his lips. It was difficult to smile or laugh properly because of the way his face was constructed----but when he did it was attractive and unexpected. "What about Father?"

"We won't tell him." Relieved, Devin stood up, grinning. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him, will it?" He paused a moment, then added more seriously. "We'll find a way to go places together, Vincent. Somewhere in the world there's got to be a place where people can look at you and accept what you are."

"There isn't," Vincent returned simply. There was no hint of self-pity in his voice, just a calm acceptance of what Devin inwardly knew to be the truth. But the sadness was still there and he knew it would never die.

"I guess we'd better get going," he said at last, forcing briskness back into his voice. "You know what the old man's like if we aren't on time for class."

Vincent nodded and got to his feet, but for a moment he simply stood gazing out at the beautiful fan window that spilled its glow over the whole chamber. "Devin," he whispered suddenly.

"What is it, little brother?"

"Nothing," he said sadly. "Come on, we'll be late."

"God forbid," the other boy murmured wryly. "And it's *'The Ancient Mariner'* too."

Vincent recognized the teasing tone but this time he couldn't respond. He felt suddenly cast out, adrift on an ebbing tide, and all around him the vast and empty ocean stretched to a dark horizon, the weight of the albatross heavy on his heart....

Father paused a moment, gritting his teeth against the dull grinding ache in his hip. He seldom subjected himself to such long, strenuous journeys these days, and he didn't really know why he had done so now, but it had been so long since he'd ventured down to the lower levels that he'd almost forgotten how magical the greater part of this underground world could be. He'd missed the colours for so long.

Shifting his weight awkwardly, he raised the lamp higher and peered into the darkness. Peter had warned him that he'd spend the rest of his life pushing himself along with a cane, and he'd almost come to accept it, except for the times when the old dreams returned to haunt him of a younger, bright-haired man who'd looked to the future with such hope. Who'd sat before that hard-faced committee and heard them accuse him of such thing he hadn't even imagined could exist, wrecking his career, his marriage and brought him to the brink of despair.... And then came that blur before the world focused again, a world of grey rock and man-made light, of John and Anna and a little baby who had changed his life and given him a reason to go on living.... It had been nearly twelve years now. Twelve years since John had tried to kill him, since Anna had been murdered and people stopped calling him Jacob Wells in favour of Father. Since Vincent.

He knew the memory would never really fade. The scars had gone too deep and now, where he sat with the children telling them tales of how their world began, of the part their parents and grandparents had played in the shaping of this community, he still couldn't bring himself to tell them the whole truth. Not about Anna. Because if he did, he'd have to tell them of how she died and how he'd been unable to save her. He'd have to tell Vincent that the woman who so nearly became his mother had been so great of heart that she'd been prepared to give him up for love. And he couldn't do that. Not yet.

The thought of Vincent brought him back to the present with a jolt of unease. The boy had been unusually quiet during the lesson today, contributing nothing to the discussion of Coleridge's work. It was unlike him - Vincent loved literature and spent most of his free time in Father's chamber, devouring books on every topic under the sun, until at one time the Doctor had become concerned for his eyesight. But then, he smiled to himself, Vincent's eyes, like the rest of him, were extraordinary and not subjected to the weaknesses of the normal run of mankind.

'You'd be proud of him, Anna,' he thought with a sudden pang. *'He's growing up a wonderful, gifted and intelligent boy and he promises to become an even more incredible man. I wish you could see him - I wish I could tell him how nearly he had a wonderful mother who would give him the tenderness that I can't. He needs a woman's love, Anna. I do what I can - I try to be a good father, but sometimes....'* Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes wearily, fighting back the memories. Visions of her rising up before him unbidden,

standing there with that dirty, ragged bundle in her arms, saying *'Jacob.... don't be afraid. Please. He's just a baby....'* And he, *'Come now, Anna. I may not be a formal obstetrician, but I'm not afraid of babies....'*

Until she'd drawn back the rags and revealed that wonderful, horrifying, beautiful little face and nothing had ever been the same again.

Grimly, he forced himself forward, trying to listen to the far away, unsteady drip of leaking water and not her gentle voice, faint but insistent somewhere inside his head. She'd trusted him to look after Vincent, but even she hadn't known about Devin. No one did. Devin was another shadowed secret amongst all the others - another piece of monumental cowardice he couldn't admit to.

Down here the tunnel walls were smooth, plastered over, perfect for a painter, and over the years they had become filled with the magical colours that told the history of the world Below. Characters, some living, some dead, and the major events of the past twenty years as well as remembered landmarks from the city Above - all flowed out along the curving expanse of these special tunnels, and for a moment Father paused and raised his lantern, smiling gently in fond memory. The Statue of Liberty stood tall and welcoming at the entrance, beckoning to the poor, the huddled masses seeking refuge, and beyond her, a light filled drainage entrance up in the park that seemed to say that the true haven here was Below if one would but dare to believe in it. He walked forward wonderingly looking at the planes taking off from JFK, at the silver spill of waterfalls by the Mirror Pool, at himself and John standing shoulder to shoulder in the times before grief had torn their dream apart and turned John into Paracelsus.... And at Anna, as clear and bright as she had been twelve years ago, a dirty ragged bundle in her arms and her eyes looking out at him beseechingly.

He reached out gently and touched her gently on the shoulder, almost afraid the paint was still wet, that the years had melted away. But his fingers met solid rock and he knew that for all his imagination, she wasn't really there.

"I'm sorry, Anna," he whispered. "I'm so sorry...."

And then he sensed a presence at his shoulder, a familiar scent of turpentine and oils and knew that he wouldn't have to explain anything.

"Of all of us, Anna was the one with the most courage," the artist said quietly. "That was what I wanted to show most of all."

"And you succeeded," he returned, glancing round to see her looking, not at him, but the portrait on the wall, her normally twinkling eyes now somber. "You have a great gift, Elizabeth. You can bring the dead to life."

"Sometimes I wonder if it isn't better to let them lie." She stopped, then smiled quirkily. "So, what brings you to my lair after all this time? to reminisce, surely."

He almost laughed, turning away from the wall with a feeling of relief. Elizabeth rarely joined the rest of the community now, preferring to stay here with her paintings, accepting the gifts of oil and brushes sent down by a few choice Helpers and occasionally returning the favour with a special canvas. But the walls of these tunnels were her field and though she did not go Above, she gladly welcomed others from the community who came to see and admire her work. No one knew why or how she had chosen to live Below, but the vigour with which she worked told Father that some secret pain drove her on, that the light and colour of her painting filled a darkness deeper than the tunnels and chambers where she stayed. Recognizing and respecting her choice, he had never pressed her for the reason. He had too many secrets of his own to attempt to pry them out of others.

"I've neglected you too long," he heard himself say lightly after a moment. "And the children tell me you've started a new project that'll cover a hundred feet of tunnel, plus the ceiling. I'm a scientist, Elizabeth - curiosity's my stock in trade!"

"But not patience," she admonished, taking the brush from its familiar perch behind her ear and wagging it at him. "I wanted you to see it when it was done."

"Even the Sistine Chapel wasn't painted under wraps," he reminded her laughingly, then took a deep breath and eased around at the vistas covering the other wall. One particular tableau caught his eye and he slowly went across to examine it, their banter suddenly forgotten. "Was this.... his Naming ceremony?"

"Mmmmm." A gentleness entered her eyes then and she came up behind him almost diffidently. "That must've been one of the most wonderful days I can remember. You are standing there with Vincent in your arms and everyone knowing that, whatever happened, we had to keep the dream alive. For his sake." She stopped, then added quietly. "Call me damn foolish, but I know Anna was standing at your shoulder when you spoke those words."

"Perhaps she was." He looked awkward. "Elizabeth...."

"Come and satisfy your curiosity, Doctor," she cut in briskly, as if knowing what he was going to say. "And I can even offer you tea while you're at it. I want for nothing."

Smiling resignedly to himself, he followed her, not daring to argue.

The tunnel was actually a long narrow chamber, ablaze with candles and crammed with a rough wooden scaffolding that gave it the air of still being under construction. A long work table covered with rolls of thin planning paper took up much of the space that remained, but it was the far wall that caught Father's attention almost immediately. Caught it and held it suspended while all the world watched and waited and he himself felt as though he were moving into a dream.

It was Winterfest, but a Winterfest such as he had never seen, ablaze with the red, yellow and white candles behind which the faces of the whole community were alight with glory. The wall itself formed the top of the table, the sides of the chamber already stenciled with the outlines of other familiar figures of the family, like some giant rendering of Da Vinci's *'Last Supper'* with himself as the head and on his right and left; Vincent and Devin, their gaze fixed on him as he reached out to light the master candle. But it was the background beyond the candlelight that made his heart stand still, for in the shadows between himself and Vincent stood a dark, hooded presence like a guardian angel watching over the whole proceedings, separate and yet a part of them - and for the strangest reason he felt as if he should know who it was.

"Well?" Elizabeth asked quietly. "What do you think of it so far?"

"It's...." He raised his hands helplessly, knowing he couldn't find the words. "I've never seen anything like it! The light.... the faces...." He stopped abruptly. "Him." He looked round at her but could read nothing in her expression. "Who is he?"

She smiled. "You expect an artist to give away *'all'* her secrets? In every picture there's a mystery, Father. It's up to the beholder to find his own truth, and no clues given." She stopped for a moment and cocked her head to one side as if considering something. "Of course, there's always the possibility I stuck that there simply to fill up a space. But then you could say that of real people too, couldn't you?"

He thought about that, then decided not to comment. "So, you let the children come in here too?"

"They give me ideas." Her eyes gleamed mischievously, then she stuck the end of the brush between her teeth and chewed on it for a moment. "Especially Vincent. Tell me, have you noticed something about that boy just recently? Something different?"

"Should I?"

"You're his father." She moved forward and pretended to flick dust off the painted candelabra, but he was aware that her gaze was upon him, intent as a bird's. "I look at him and all I see is a darkness. Rather like

that one," with a brief gesture towards the hooded figure. "I gave them all a project last time they came to see me - draw whatever you feel, first thing that comes into your head. Don't think about it. You know what he drew? A black hole."

He stared at her, not quite comprehending. "A black.... hole?"

"A filled in zero. A tunnel with no end. I asked him why and he said that was what was in his head all the time." Suddenly, she was staring fixedly at the painting, the wooden paint brush splintering between her teeth. "You know something else? I looked into his eyes and I could see it too."

Father suddenly felt himself groping for a handhold on a reality that had suddenly slipped away from him and left him hanging. *Had he been missing something here, he wondered? something that was right in front of him all the time, so near he hadn't been able to see it? Had Vincent's silence in the lesson today been screaming out to him for understanding?*

"I didn't know," he heard himself whisper, knowing how feeble it sounded. "He's never said anything...."

She looked at him with a kind of affectionate exasperation. "He's twelve years old, Father. What do you expect him to say?"

He shook his head helplessly, looking around the cluttered chamber as if searching for something and eventually Elizabeth took pity on him. "Let me get you some tea. I see too little of you to waste a visit on telling you your job."

He nodded and perched himself on the edge of the trestle in order to take the weight off his aching hip. The cloaked figure on the wall seemed to be staring at him with invisible eyes and he found himself shivering, thinking of that black hole inside his adopted son. *'Why hadn't he noticed? Why hadn't Vincent come to him if there was something wrong?'*

But Elizabeth could fill a wall with possibilities. Artists were lucky in that - bringing imaginings to the hearts of others. They could see and feel where there seemed to be nothing and maybe that was why she had seen the darkness first, while he, who prided himself on his knowledge of humanity, remained blind. *Was that what she had meant after all by painting that shadow at his shoulder?* He looked at it again, trying to understand.

She returned with the tea almost before he was aware of it, wordlessly holding out a steaming cup, then turning to take her own in both hands and sip at it thoughtfully.

"Have I let him down, Elizabeth?" he asked quietly after a moment. "Have I missed something so fundamental...?"

"It's not your fault," she returned, and there was a touch of impatience in her voice now. "Besides, children don't sell their parents everything, and Vincent...." Then she stopped and took another sip. "He feels things deeper than most."

"I know," he heard himself whisper. "That's why it seems so cruel...."

She suddenly turned and started to walk slowly around the chamber, gazing at the mapped-out walls where her masterpiece would take shape. By the completed portion, she stopped and stared fixedly at the figures of himself and the two boys.

"An artist tries to paint hope, Father. Something that'll live forever. I've always seen the hope in Vincent. The love. Even on that day Anna showed him to us for the first time. But he's still a child, with a child's grief, and at the moment it's overwhelming him. There's nothing you can do about it."

"There should be."

She looked at him quickly, dark eyes shrewd and bright. "You think you can do everything for him, even carry

his pain. You can't."

Father didn't answer. He sipped at his tea and watched the painted candles leap and burn with a kind of wretched helplessness, wondering if what he saw on that leonine face was accusation.

"Don't worry," Elizabeth said after what seemed a long time. "As long as he has his dreams, he'll be stronger than any of us. I know." Then she became brisk as she so often did when the conversation got too deep.

"And he looks on you as his father. Be happy with that."

He smiled wryly. "You sure you weren't a psychologist in another life?"

"God forbid. I come from a long line of people who never knew how to make money." She paused, then added more somberly. "I'm glad you like the mural. I wanted it to be an expression of how close we all are - of how much we've healed in the past twelve years. And it's all been due to you."

"Not just me, Elizabeth. All of us."

She smiled then turned to pick up the paint brush. "Whatever. Now, are you going to let me get on with it... or do I have to chase you away as I have to do with the children?"

"I'm going, I'm going!" Raising his hands in mock surrender, Father eased himself off the trestle and hastily limped towards the entrance, but when he turned, she saw that the worried frown had smoothed away, and his eyes had lost their shadow. "You don't mind if I drop in occasionally - just to see how you're progressing?"

"Be my guest. Oh - and if Sam's going Above anytime soon, tell him I'm running out of yellow ochre. It's hard to come by and I'm going to need a lot more."

He nodded and took one last lingering look at his own face staring back at him from the wall, at the strange and ominous figure behind his shoulder, and wondered absently if such shadows came from pure imagining of from the darkness in the heart of a lonely boy.

Devin shoved the heavy, cast-iron manhole cover to one side, feeling the instant steady patter of drizzle strike cold on his face. A few feet below him Vincent waited expectantly, one foot already on the bottom rung of the ladder, and for a moment the older boy hesitated, conscious of those blue eyes fastened expectantly on his back. Aware that he couldn't do anything other than keep pretending the way he had always pretended, dreaming dreams, and living lies, not knowing if it was for Vincent's sake or his own.

And what made it worse was that somehow all the old feelings were mixing up inside him now - love and hate, resentment and regret, and the only one to be hurt would be the one he least wanted to hurt in the world.

"What is it?" Vincent said quietly.

'His brother was.... an animal. His brother was....'

"Nothing." Devin suddenly braced himself and hauled up and out of the manhole, trying not to think any more. He wanted to run through city streets in daylight, Vincent at his shoulder, laughing. He wanted to be gang leader, hero, explorer, and impresario, for them to be together and have dreams come true, to sail that raft down to New Orleans, camp out on Jackson's Island, Tom and Huck exploring America....

But not this. Sneaking to a junkyard in the night because of a world too ugly to see the beauty in his brother's face.

He turned back to help, but Vincent was already up, carefully and effortlessly replacing the cover, and as Devin watched he straightened, a young lion in the darkness, rain hanging in his mane like dewdrops, and

his eyes were like jewels as they met his own, full of joy and pain.

"Over there," Devin said through stiff lips, pointing to the high chain-linked fence almost directly in front of them. "Watch out for the dogs." He paused a moment, then heard himself add, "Last one over's a yellow belly."

Just for a split second he found himself drowning in that gaze, and then, as if at an unspoken signal, they both burst into action, racing across the road and flinging themselves at the fence as if the devil were at their heels, the wire links clinking and shivering wildly under the combined assault until Vincent, with his greater agility, swung over and down to land as lightly as a cat on the other side. Devin was left suspended, swinging wildly, unable to prevent a quiet smile as he saw the triumphant flash of Vincent's fangs in the dimness.

"One day, little brother," he heard himself promise breathlessly. "I swear - one day I'm gonna lick you good."

But Vincent only smiled and turned away to gaze at the rustling piles of junked cars and trucks looming higher than his head, dark against the night sky.

With an effort, Devin finally dropped down beside him.

"Come on," he whispered. "I found a special place - I want you to see."

Unhesitatingly, he started off at an easy, confident lope between the rows of delicately balanced hulks, illuminated by the pale spotlights which hung over the yard like ominous moons, and for a moment Vincent simply stood and watched him, breathing in the acrid stench of old oil, burnt tires and mouldering leather, the familiar odor of a rain-swept city at night. Then conscious of his vulnerability even here, he broke into a swift run to catch up, feeling the delightful freedom of doing the forbidden. He knew he was invisible - and he could have both laughed and cried with the joy of it. That was what Devin did for him. That....

Devin suddenly stopped, catching at his sleeve. "Wait. Can you hear anything?"

Vincent paused obediently, then shook his head. "Only the rain."

"You let me know if anyone's coming, okay?" Abruptly, Devin sprang up onto a row of old tires and began walking precariously along the stack, a triumphant general stalking the ramparts of his enemies. "Stand to arms, men! They'll attack at dawn just beyond those hills. Keep your powder dry and your shot in barrel! No one gets the best of the Tunnel Tigers!" He wobbled precariously, then fought back and regained his balance. "Are you with me or not?"

"Yes," Vincent whispered, gazing up at him wonderingly, the faint smile on his lips amused and adoring and yearning all at the same time. "Yes, I'm with you...."

Flinging his arms wide, Devin straddled a pile of rotting truck tires and let the rain wash over him. Wild and heroic, full of all those impossible daydreams. Holding high Excalibur, a prince of Albion come into his kingdom. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more...! Though Birnham Wood become to Dunsinane...." Then, arms flailing, he toppled spectacularly from the collapsing pile and fell right into a puddle, only barely managing to land on his feet.

Grinning and unabashed, he kicked water out of his boot.

"Come on, it's not far."

Squelching slightly, he led the way around another pile of mouldering tires and suddenly pointed. "There."

Wedge between a rusting flatback and indefinable engine parts was an ancient, battered Oldsmobile; its pink paint still discernible even through the dimness, and Devin turned triumphantly, wiping rain out of his eyes.

"Our big pink dream machine, little brother. Its got seats, steering wheel - its even still got one door. And tonight it's going to take us all across the great U.S. of A. to where even you want to go. Get in."

Vincent looked past him, suddenly hesitant. Sometimes he felt these secret night trips Above with Devin were the only things that kept him clinging on through the shadows, the only way he could still feel part of a life he knew he could never fully share or understand. But for some reason he held back now, watching as Devin climbed into the wreck and propped his feet on the dash, and knew he was looking at him as if through a misted curtain. Heavy with something he couldn't push away or even see....

Devin gestured to the filthy, slashed seat beside him. "Come on, buddy. The open road's ours, where do you want to head for first?"

Dreams of palaces and temples, mystic wonders far away....

"The mountains," he heard himself whisper - and suddenly found himself inside, staring through the shattered windshield at a world of possibilities, not really knowing how to get there....

"The mountains it is." Devin swung his feet down and reached for an imaginary ignition, pretending not to notice those furry hands were clenched in Vincent's lap. Instead, he gunned the engine and headed out on the interstate for Vermont, a hundred miles an hour, the old engine silent and sweet as a lily, desperate to leave behind the city and all it meant for both of them. "We're going to look for freedom, little brother. Just like the old pioneers, striking out into a brave new world and looking for a place where they could be accepted. No one's going to make you live in a hole again...."

The trees were yellow and gold with the fall of New England, jackrabbits and deer looked up from the roadside to watch them go by and he laughed because Vincent was laughing, because they were defying the world - and because he felt a strange half human sadness hovering over him like an unknowable cloud. They drove up through the mountain passes and smelled the tang of pinewoods then turned westward, out of the wild splendour and past the Great Lakes, striking down into the never-ending expanse of farm country in Iowa and Illinois until, when they reached Kansas, the highway became a yellow brick road and they followed a rainbow right to Munchkin land. Then Devin slid over and let Vincent drive while he himself leaned out into bronze sunlight and dust devils to whoop and holler as state lines rolled up and by, and no one they passed even turned their heads to stare at the boy with the face of a lion who sat beside him....

Deserts turned to orange groves, tipping down to fall off the edge of the world until finally they hit sand south of Santa Monica and parked right there on the beach, letting the Pacific wash the fender and the salt wind blow straight from Okinawa through their hair.

"Feel that spray!" Devin crooned, leaning forward to let the strong New York City rain whip through the broken windshield into his face. "Hoo, Californeeeaaa!"

But Vincent didn't answer. For a moment he simply sat, staring with misted eyes at a vision far beyond reality. Then, before Devin could even reach out to touch him, he pulled himself from the wreck and walked out into the rain. Throwing back his head, he suddenly opened his arms as if to embrace the world, the water streaming from his clothes, plastering his mind to his face and neck, dripping off his outflung hands like jewels - and for one stunned moment Devin couldn't be sure if the younger boy were laughing or crying.

"Vincent...."

But Vincent didn't hear him. Lashed by the storm, he simply stood there, slowly turning round and round as though he were being crucified on the darkness, and suddenly Devin felt his own eyes fill at the awful incredible sight of his brother's agony.

"Oh God, Vincent.... Don't...."

"I'm 'free'!" Vincent gasped, blinking desperately in an effort to keep his vision clear. "Look at me, Devin, I'm

'free'."

"Yes, little brother." Devin heard himself whisper through still lips. "Yes, I know. Come back now...."

But Vincent just looked down at him, his strange, beautiful face filled with exultation and a kind of desperate hunger.

"Don't let it end," he whispered aching. "Please don't, Devin. Let me stay here forever and ever...."

Angrily, the older boy wiped the rain from his face, wondering why it felt, not cold, but warm like tears. Anything's possible in California.... "Whatever you want," he replied softly. "No one's ever going to take your freedom away from you, Vincent. Never. You're always going to be right here - whenever you want to be."

For a long moment, Vincent continued to hang there, battered by the rain, then he slowly lowered his arms and became what he had been at the beginning - simply a boy playing at make-believe. Watching the ocean on a distant shore and wondering why it seemed as if he knew it, not with Devin but with some shadowy woman standing on the rocks with a hood about her face, disappearing into a welter of foam even as she turned to look at him....

"Devin," he whispered.

But the pain was burning in his eyes and Devin could see it, reaching out to mock the dream and take away the only happiness he could give.

"There's the sun and surf and sand," he heard himself say, his voice rough on desperation. "We could make it out here, Vincent. Girls and beach parties every night...."

"Devin...." Suddenly Vincent shuddered. The great crack along the beach was the San Andreas fault line, creaking and opening up before him in one great gaping maw, bottomless as the whirling Abyss - and a thousand miles melted into a broken speedo, the shattered fuel gauge registered zero as a cold metal junkyard rose up out of the sand....

"What's the matter?" Devin asked, frightened, and not knowing why.

"Nothing," he whispered. "I'm all right."

But it seemed as if it had reached Devin too, that creaking void of nothingness, and suddenly the older boy's eyes had turned up to his as if to ask the reason why. "Tell me, Vincent."

"I don't know," he said quietly. "I can't stop the dark."

Devin gripped the steering wheel in silence, listening to the pattering on the naked roof of the car. The New York junkyard leered greyly all around, raindrops tinkling against hollow metal and splashing into cindery slush, and all the colours had gone....

Sometimes he wondered if it were a cruelty or a kindness, these dreams he created for Vincent. It had never seemed to matter before, but now he desperately had to know - if making a utopia out of a back lot, a yellow brick road from a darkened tunnel, was as futile as he sometimes thought, or if it was the only necessary fantasy in a world that had no time for dreamers.

"I don't know what's happening, Vincent," he heard himself say through stiff lips. "The last few days - it's as if I'm feeling something I've never felt before. But I know it's you. You're.... doing something to me and I don't understand what."

"Like I did to Mitch?"

"You didn't do anything to Mitch." Angrily, he slammed his hand down on the dash, making the car creak and groan. "Why do you say that?"

Vincent was silent. He lowered his head, suddenly looking very lost and alone, and in exasperation Devin jerked himself from the car and out into the rain, seizing the younger boy by the shoulders and not caring if his fingers were digging in and hurting.

"Dammit, Vincent! You didn't do anything to Mitch! Don't you understand?"

Those blue eyes were brimming, but whether with rain or tears he couldn't tell.

"But he was right, wasn't he? I am an animal...."

All those nights he'd lain watching Vincent as he slept, knowing that beneath the homespun nightshirt his brother's body was covered with fur....

"You're magnificent," he whispered fiercely, suddenly pulling Vincent into a rough, awkward embrace. "You understand? Don't ever forget that!" And then he felt the shudder tear its way through that powerful frame and all he could do was hang on, knowing that this pain was something that went so deep into the heart of what Vincent was, that maybe nothing would ever erase it.

"Listen to me," he murmured after a moment. "I brought you out here tonight because I wanted to share a dream with you. Away from the tunnels. But it's not working, is it, Vincent? Not now. Because you understand...."

Very slowly, Vincent straightened and stepped back out of his brother's arms, and the darkness was total.

"Are you even listening?" Devin cried suddenly, all the love and frustrated anger boiling up inside him until it seemed impossible he could hold it any more. "We can dream and make believe but it's not worth a damn, Vincent! We're prisoners here. You and me. That's why we feel as we do. And what you are...." He paused and took a deep breath, deliberately forcing himself back under control. ".... is only part of it. Mitch was wrong. Let it go. Please."

For what seemed like a long time Vincent just looked at him, rain trickling down his face like tears, and when he finally did speak, his voice was so achingly soft it was as though the whole world staggered under the burden of its grief.

"I know it's all a dream, Devin. I know I'll never be truly free. You mustn't blame yourself. I am what I am." Suddenly, he lifted his head to the sky and took a deep, shuddering breath. "And you'll always be my brother. Even when you're no longer here."

"Vincent, please...."

But Vincent had turned away, shoulders bowed, and Devin knew that there was nothing more he could say.

"I'm sorry," he whispered helplessly.

The other boy shook his head. "It's so heavy...."

"What is, little brother?"

"The albatross," Vincent said, clutching at his chest as if the pain of the whole world were tearing him apart and, as he turned, his eyes were suddenly like black holes, whirling, dragging everything into darkness and destruction, and Devin stared back at him in horror, fighting the sudden urge to run, to wake up screaming from this nightmare....

And then the night split apart in a frenzy of barking and shouted curses, and he knew that - in one way - he was saved.

"Shit, they're on to us!" Wildly, he grabbed at the front of Vincent's waterlogged jerkin and yanked him forward. "Get out of here! Back to the fence! *'Move'!*"

For one awful moment he thought Vincent was just going to stand there and let them come, but after a split second's hesitation, the boy whirled and was off like the wind, his dripping mane flying about his shoulders. Devin at his heels. The barking grew more intense, spurred on by a man's voice yelling encouragement and.... *'Take care of him, Devin.'* Father said, looming sternly out of the darkness. *'Take care of him. He's your responsibility....'*

'Always and forever....'

Breath sobbing in his aching chest, Devin flung himself at the rocking fence. Vincent was already half over - something to be thankful for at any rate, that strength and agility greater than any other boy's - but suddenly he looked back, his head coming up warningly.... and something like a hot wind snapped past Devin's ear, the crack of a gunshot loud and incredible through the hissing rain. He ducked instinctively, wet hands slipping on the chain links, feeling himself falling - the dogs racing up, lips curled back to the gumline....

And then even his feet couldn't hold on any more and he knew he wasn't going to make it.

He didn't even realize he'd screamed. There was just the wire tearing at his hands, the rain. And - high above him - that wonderful, awful figure of his brother etched against the sky in the hard white spotlight, clear and incredible like nothing there had ever been.

"Hold on to me!" Vincent said, his voice calm and strong, cutting through the panic so commandingly that for all his four years seniority, Devin knew he would have trusted him with his soul. Gasping frantically, he strained upward to grasp the outstretched hand reaching down for him, the fur darkened and slicked flat with rain, clinging onto it as if it were the last lifeline before the slippery slopes to hell, dinging.... just like Vincent had done, four years old in the darkness of the Great Hall on his first Winterfest, before the candles were lit and everything turned to magic, holding Devin's hand, soft and warm and trusting....

"Come back here you little bastards!"

The guard stopped for a moment, now well within range, but one of the dogs leaped, snapping, for the heel of Devin's boot, its weight suddenly dragging him back, loosening Vincent's grasp, and for one horrifying moment Devin saw himself in the center of the howling pack, torn to pieces, blood running away into the rain.... And then, from somewhere above him, came a terrifying menacing snarl that seemed to stop everything, the dogs, his heart, even the rain, and he stared up to see his brother, fangs gleaming in the dimness, mane plastered to his face, wild and feral and totally inhuman.

'He's an animal,' Mitch said. *'He's a frigging animal....'*

Sobbing, Devin felt the pull on his boot cease so abruptly, he almost fell again as simultaneously, Vincent's hand tightened more securely around his wrist and pulled. The dogs had dropped back, whimpering a little at this unexpected challenge and with a final effort, Devin gathered the last of his strength to haul himself up, roll awkwardly over the top of the fence and drop weakly to the ground on the other side.

"Come on, little brother."

He could see the horrified guard raise his shaking gun, taking aim at the.... thing on the fence, a perfect target against the sky, still snarling, defiantly, and a scream built in his throat until he couldn't hold it any more.

"Jesus, Vincent, what're you doing....?"

And then the gun shot split the night and for one black moment Devin couldn't see anything except a wildly swinging force and the blur of something falling past him - then suddenly, wonderfully, Vincent was there beside him, no longer a snarling beast but a boy again.

"Run!" Vincent panted, grabbing at his arm and pulling him away. Devin didn't wait to argue. Breathless with fright and relief, he did as he was told, and they didn't stop running until they'd reached the threshold of their chamber where he at last allowed himself to stop, gasping and laughing all at the same time, feeling triumph replace horror.

"That was close! You okay?"

Vincent nodded, absently wiping his face with both hands. He didn't look as if he'd come within an inch of being killed, or that he'd run so far so fast, but Devin nevertheless felt a pang of familiar guilt at the effect that being seen had on his brother.

"I bet that guard won't be able to believe it happened, come morning," he added by way of justification. And then stopped, because Vincent had tensed abruptly and was looking at something over Devin's shoulder, his face suddenly shuttered, his eyes as guarded as the older boy had ever seen them.

Devin turned quickly, and a hiss of annoyed breath escaped his lips. "What're you doing here, Mitch?"

Mitch came forward slowly, adjusting the fingers of his gloves with careful deliberation. "Looking for you. Have been all evening. Father wants to see you both in his chamber right away." He paused, then flicked a glance in Vincent's direction. "He knows you've been Above."

Something cold and hard dropped into the pit of Devin's stomach, and he felt his chin jut defiantly. "So?"

Mitch shrugged. "So. You know what he says about going Above with Vincent. And right now he's fit to be tied." Grinning, he turned away. "Looks like it was some night. What happened?"

"None of your damn business!" Angrily, Devin stalked past him, knowing Vincent was trailing him unwillingly. "Come on, little brother. Let's...." *'Beard the lion in his den,'* he was going to say, then stopped himself just in time. No. He didn't fear the old man, though sometimes he got the impression that Vincent did. Well.... not feared exactly, more just reluctant to cause him any trouble. And if anything was guaranteed to cause trouble, it was these unsanctioned trips to the world Above. "Let's go see what he wants," he amended lamely.

Vincent didn't reply. All the pleasure of the evening had suddenly evaporated, the mocking smile on Mitch's face somehow making the loss worse, and for a brief moment he simply stared at the other boy, trying to understand the latter's obvious enjoyment of the situation. Then he abruptly turned and got out of there before the anger took hold of him again for good and all.

Father was on the upper level of his chamber, almost hidden behind the piles of books, leaning on his cane with one hand while the other carefully balanced a prized volume against the railing as he searched its pages for some reference. He didn't look up as the two boys entered, though he obviously knew they were there.

Devin shifted impatiently, aware that Vincent was standing quietly at his shoulder, head bowed, waiting for whatever would come and somehow that angered Devin even more.

"Father," he heard himself say at last. "Mitch said you wanted to see us."

Slowly, Father looked up over the rim of his spectacles. Then, with elaborate care, he closed the book, set it aside and removed the spectacles from his nose. Folding them gently, he paused a moment and peered over the edge of the balcony.

"I was looking for you all evening. Where've you been?"

Just for a moment, Devin contemplated a plausible alternative but the state of his and Vincent's clothes made the truth all too obvious.

"Above."

"Above. I see." There was an ominous calm to the Doctor's voice. "And just where.... Above.... did you go, hmmmm?"

'Damn you, old man. You don't really care where we went. You're just bothered about who saw us. Saw him.'

"The junkyard."

With measured steps, Father carefully made his way down the spiral stairs, until finally he was standing in front of them. Only now did he clearly see the condition they were both in, soaked to the skin, bedraggled and grimy, but it was when he looked into Devin's eyes and saw the defiant unrepentance that he finally lost his precarious hold on his temper.

"I've told you time and time again, Devin - you're not to take Vincent on these.... expeditions of yours. What if something happened and you got caught? Have you ever thought of that? Just look at you!" Snatching at the boy's sleeve, he held up his hand. "You're bleeding!"

"It's nothing." Sullenly, Devin closed his fingers over the lacerated palm. He hadn't even realized he'd been cut until he'd reached the safety of the tunnels, but now it was beginning to throb, adding to his irritation. "I don't know why you're so worried about - we're both fine! Nothing happened."

"I see," Father said again, non-committally. He glanced across at that bent, shaggy head and added more gently. "That's correct, is it, Vincent?"

There was a long-tormented silence, then the head lowered even further in what might have been a nod, but then again might not. Father expelled a gusty breath of annoyance and turned away.

"Do you have any idea of the worry you've caused? No one knew where you were. Anything could have happened - and from the look of it something did, in spite of your refusal to tell me!" Abruptly, he whirled on them as quickly as his hip would allow. "I can't believe that either of you could be so selfish. How many times must I tell you how imperative it is that the rules of this community be obeyed?"

He saw Vincent quiver, as if a lash had fallen across his shoulders, but the boy said nothing. He was never willfully disobedient like Devin, but there were still times when he needed to rebel, to discover the limits, to act foolishly like any other boy his age, and Father recognized that. It didn't make the restrictions he had to impose any easier.

"I'm not just talking of your safety," he went on, more quietly now. "A lot of good people depend on this place for many reasons. One slip could mean the end of our world - the end of us all. Think about that before you take such a foolish risk again."

Vincent didn't reply, but Father knew he understood. More than anyone Vincent knew how necessary this place was - it was Devin who couldn't quite seem to accept the need for a sense of responsibility. And that angered the Doctor. Angered and frightened him, because it spoke of things too deep to be even thought about, possibilities too hurtful he couldn't even bring himself to consider them. Vincent and Devin. Devin and Vincent. Where did his own responsibilities lie, to both boys? His love? Or could he truly admit that he favoured one above the other simply because he was...? *'NO.'* He couldn't even allow himself to think that. There would be time enough....

And then he looked at Devin's face and knew he was gazing at the shadows of hell. The anguish that was building up to detonation, all the fuses and wires snapping and shorting into overload, smoking out at his eyes, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"You don't think of the reasons why, do you, Father? You don't think for one moment that we want to get out of this prison and breath some fresh air. That Vincent...." Suddenly Devin stopped and glanced at the younger boy, and there was a softening in his voice that Father couldn't miss. A softening.... and something else, darker, and edged with steel. "Vincent can dream too."

From the corner of his eye, Father saw the tawny head come up in a blurred, ragged movement, but before Vincent could say a word, he heard himself retort fiercely.

"You're the one responsible, Devin. I know you understand the implications, but you've always tried to pretend you're not to blame, that there's always a better reason for going against my wishes. But you're his older brother. That makes you responsible!"

"Sure." Devin gritted furiously. "Sure. Don't worry - what are big brothers for anyway? Ever since I was four years old...."

"Stop it." Vincent whispered suddenly, his voice softer and more filled with pain than Father had ever heard before. "Please, stop it...."

But Devin didn't seem to hear him. It was as if he were lost in some madness now, the words tumbling from his unheedingly.

"You don't really care what either of us feels, do you, Father? You keep on about Vincent and his safety and how we should all take care of him, but deep down you don't give a damn about anything but your own power! Well, you're not going to make me his keeper. Not anymore. I'm sick and tired of listening to what I should and shouldn't do for him. I don't see you doing anything besides pushing books down his throat that don't amount to anything except more pain and more impossible dreams. At least I've tried to make a *'few'* of the dreams come true. I've never turned the key on him and left him in the dark!" Then he stopped, his chest heaving with anguished rage. "Nothing happened to us tonight. We've come back. Can't you be satisfied with that?"

Father felt his hand tighten on his cane until it seemed as if the wood groaned and creaked under the pressure. Until he nearly cried out with the pain flooding through his fingers. There was a mist in front of his eyes blocking off everything except the sight of Vincent, holding on to Devin's arm, and begging him, *'Please stop, Devin, please don't say anymore,'* and suddenly he started to feel helplessly lost - old and worn out with the gnawing grief that had been there, lurking beneath the joyous wonder, ever since the day Anna had brought that frozen, half-starved little baby into his life. To let Vincent be content with a poem for a sunset, an underground prison for a home.... That has never been his intention. Never. And yet what more could there be? How could he let the boy go Above and walk in the sun, knowing that the first person with a gun who saw him would kill him with no more thought than such a monstrosity must not live? Their underground world mattered more than almost anything else, but it was Vincent.... Always and only Vincent.

Suddenly, Devin tore himself away from the other boy's restraining grip, whirled and slammed his hands down on the tabletop, making the pens jump and roll, the papers rustle and drift. It was all boiling out of him now, all the love and anger and frustration, and for a brief moment Father saw old shadows in the dark eyes that made his heart turn over.

"Vincent wanted to go Above and I went with him," Devin said with a quietness born of passion, the words forced out from between clenched teeth. "We had a good time. We were just like all the kids up top.... playing games, dreaming dreams.... What hard does that do, Father? You tell me...."

"All the harm in the world!" Father fought to keep the tremor from his voice and just barely succeeded.

"And if you can't see that...." He stopped, not wanting to say any more, not in front of Vincent. Those blue eyes were fixed on him now, puzzled and hurt, not understanding. The boy was tall for his age, muscular and lithe, but he seemed suddenly vulnerable and helpless between his father and elder brother, in the face of an argument he could not comprehend. Almost tentatively, he reached out and touched Devin on the shoulder with a massive, gentle hand, trying to stop the pain before it could not be stopped.

"Devin, don't...."

"Just stay out of this, Vincent!" Abruptly, Devin rounded on him, eye blazing. "He's got to understand...."

"He does." Vincent returned simply, quietly, something inside him straightening and growing strong until somehow, he was no longer a twelve year old boy, but a man filled with ancient wisdom, a quiet, massive authority that was almost frightening. "Devin, it's *'Father.'* He does understand."

Just for an instant the other boy hung there, staring back at him as if unable to believe his ears, his eyes, whatever it was that made him realize that something had changed here.... And then the tension seemed to drain out of him and he felt himself slump.

"Vincent...."

"It was beautiful," the quiet, gentle voice said intently. "I'd do it all over again, Devin. With you. You know that. But Father's right to be afraid."

The mist swirled and almost spilled between the tenderness in those words, but somehow Father managed to blink it away before it betrayed him. Swallowing hard, he braced his shoulders firmly, still feeling that icy hand clutch his stomach at the recollection of what he had seen in Devin's eye.

'Forgive me,' he wanted to say. *'Forgive me, Devin, but you can survive wherever you go in the world - it's Vincent who has to stay here. Who needs my love. It's him....'*

"I see," Devin said, hoarse with bitterness. "Yeah. Of course. Here I am, defending our dreams, and all you can do is tell me he understands. Well, he's got a strange way of doing it, Vincent. And you've got a strange way of saying thank you." Slowly, wrenchingly, he started to back away towards the door, fists clenched, gasping as if his chest were being torn apart. "Still, I should've known, shouldn't I? Father always loved you best...."

"Devin, please...!" Father jerked forward, stung with the anguish behind those words, with the secret horror of an unspoken truth. But it was too late.

"No," the boy said in a strange, flat tone, shrugging carelessly. "It's all right. I understand. No problem. I can go Above and get killed, but as long as Vincent's okay...."

"It's not true," Vincent whispered, shocked. "You know it isn't." And then, almost desperately, he whirled to where the Doctor stood. "Father, tell him...."

But Father could only stand and stare helplessly, because Devin would know if he lied and Vincent was too great of heart to understand....

"You, see?" Devin smiled terribly. "But it's not your fault, Vincent. I finally persuaded myself of that. It's him. With all his rules and lectures and making believe he's doing it for our good - he's nothing but a frightened old man. Ask him why he needs you more than me, Vincent. Go on. Ask him."

But Vincent just stood there, as if the world had suddenly darkened, not knowing which way to turn. His face was expressionless with an anguish too great to be borne, and for a moment Devin felt all his bitterness drift away into unadulterated pity and horror because none of this was truly Vincent's fault - except simply for being what he was.

"Hey, don't worry, little brother," he heard himself say after an awkward moment. "If you don't want to dream again, I'll understand. If you want to stay in this prison...."

Tears suddenly filled those blue eyes, glistening in the golden candle's gleam. "No," came the choked whisper. "I want to see the world with you, Devin. The mountains and the ocean and everything in between. You're the only one who.... makes me feel a part of it. Don't...."

And then, quite clearly, Devin saw the void open up in Vincent's soul, a whirling vortex that sucked them both down until he knew they were lost forever.

"He needs you to protect this place." He heard himself say at last, as if from beyond the grave. "When you're a man and danger threatens, he'll send you out to kill and terrorize those who'd try to discover his world. Because you're perfect for it, Vincent. Your strength, your claws...." He stopped and something inside him shuddered. "That's why he doesn't want you to escape, little brother. Not even in dreams...."

Blindly, he looked up and saw that the tears were streaming down Vincent's face, and the sight twisted a knife in his gut until he nearly screamed.

"It's not what you were born to do," he whispered. "I know that...."

But there was no answer. The other boy suddenly lowered his head, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs, and Devin turned to find himself gazing into Father's contorted face, and for the first time felt a thrill of fear lurch through him.

"Well," Father grated at last, the bitterness raw and naked in his voice. "It's finally come out, has it, Devin? After all this time...." He stopped and drew a shaky breath. "I was beginning to wonder.

"You don't know anything," Devin returned quietly. "Nothing about the way I feel...."

"I know you care nothing about Vincent...."

"That's a lie! I love Vincent."

"Do you?" For a long moment the Doctor's eyes bored into his and he watched them slowly turn hard the way they often did to make Father understand. Not now. "Sometimes I think you say and do these things because you do care nothing about him. Because you want something to happen on these irresponsible trips Above."

Abruptly, Father turned to put a gentle, comforting hand on the younger boy's arm, but Vincent pulled away, wiping his face with the palm of his hand. The awful sadness was still there in his eyes, but he had himself under control now, only the tightness of his jaw betraying the effort it was costing him. "And if you think that Vincent is here solely for that abominable purpose...."

"Well, what else?" Devin yelled furiously. "What other use is he, after all? He's not even human...." And then, aghast, he stopped. Finally knowing that this time it was too late, even for apologies. That his anger had betrayed him and there was nothing he could do to unsay what he had never even allowed Father to think. Blindly, he stared at Father's shocked face, at Vincent's eyes, dark with an agony such as he'd never seen and never wanted to see again. '*Vincent....*'

"No," he heard himself whisper. "No, I didn't mean...."

"Blast you!" Father gritted, advancing on him almost unconsciously, the cane half raised. "You and your selfishness and your constant defiance...."

"Don't, Father." And suddenly Vincent was there between them, already unmoving, a rock of anguish in a sea of pain. "You've got to stop this. Now. Before you tear each other apart."

"I won't have it," the Doctor said savagely. "You heard him. What he said...."

"I heard," Vincent answered, and then he turned to look at Devin, the glory of a whole continent glowing in his eyes. Mountains and deserts and a wide Pacific shore.... "He was right. Just like Mitch was. I'm not.... fully.... human. You know that."

"Don't preach to me, Vincent!" But a little of the initial fury had died now, though he was still shaking. Devin was staring at him, white-faced, waiting for doom to fall, and after a moment of struggle, Father squared his shoulders and forced himself to contain his anger enough to address the boy. "I think you'd better go now, Devin. Before you say anything else we might all regret."

Dumb with misery, Devin nodded and edged towards the door. He couldn't bring himself to look at Vincent now, at that massive endurance and terrible understanding amidst the grief. He'd hurt Vincent - worse than Mitch had. He knew that, and there was nothing he could do to make it right again. Joy and pain.... He'd caused both so easily, without even having to think about it.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself whisper desperately. "I'm sorry...."

And then he turned and fled, banging through the doorway, bumping bruisingly into rocky walls, not knowing, or caring where he was going, only that he had to get away from them and the accusation in their eyes. Along torch-lit tunnels and up misty stairways, until finally he couldn't run any more. He slumped down in a deserted drainage channel, his chest torn with helpless, gasping sobs, the darkness crowding in all around him, shutting off all memory of that wild dream and Vincent, standing in the rain; *'I'm free, Devin. Look at me, I'm free,'* and there was nothing he could do to unsay the things he had said. Nothing at all. Because part of him was still four years old, looking into the crib and knowing he hated the beast inside with all his heart and soul.

It was late. His candles were burning low, guttering, and smoking slightly, filling the chamber with the throat-grabbing fog of scorching wicks. He knew he should trim them or extinguish a few, but somehow, he couldn't bring himself to move. He felt bone tired. Helpless. And guilty, because Devin had known, even if Vincent hadn't. Known that, in spite of his own reluctance to admit it to himself, he did indeed love Vincent more than anyone else. Loved him for his uniqueness, his gentle strength and understanding, for the tragedy of his fate and for the wonder he had brought to all their lives. There would never be anyone like Vincent again, and the gift of his very being was the most precious thing in the world. It was why he was so terrified every time he found out the boys had gone Above. So, bone-deep, gut-wrenchingly scared that one day something would happen, and Vincent wouldn't come back....

But it still didn't excuse the fact that every time he looked at Devin, he saw only his own failure.

He didn't want to think of that. All he could think of was how Vincent had put his arms around him in the long, screaming silence after Devin had gone. Held him with the fierceness of desperation until finally the trembling had stopped, until he could no longer feel the tension crawling like threads of electricity through the boy's body and all that remained were the echoes of an old grief, he could neither ease nor cure.

It seemed such a long time ago. Hours. Eons. And he must have been sitting here all that time, stunned and trying to comprehend. Hadn't even tried to stop Devin running out the door, or Vincent from slowly moving away out of that embrace, finally understanding that his brother wasn't coming back. Hadn't simply asked, *'dammit boy, how can I help you...?'* Instead, like a coward, he let them both go without a word, hoping to God there'd be some way to end this....

'He drew a black hole,' Elizabeth said. *'A filled in zero, a tunnel without an end, and when I looked into his eyes, I could see it too....'*

Helplessly, he covered his face with his hands and listened to the thudding of the blood in his ears. For some reason, all he could think of was Anna and the look on his face when she had brought that dying baby to him. For her sake, for Vincent's sake, there had to be an answer. There had to be.

Because if there wasn't, then pretty soon it would be too late. For everyone.

Lisa hesitated a moment before wrapping the shawl closer around her shoulders and stepping out onto the cliff edge. The sound of the waterfalls was a constant, soothing background - it was a place to think, to be alone when the weight of the world became too much and it was one of the first places she thought of to

look for him. She'd wanted to find him desperately, to say how sorry she was for what had happened the other day in the Great Hall, feel the strange comfort of his silent presence, but there was something wrong, because neither he nor Devin had been seen all day and Father was strangely somber and hadn't even commented on their absence from class. Idly, she wondered if he'd been here all the time.

He was sitting motionless as the rocks, his arms wrapped around his updrawn knees, staring vaguely into nothingness, the strange boy who horrified and attracted her, who gave her a feeling of condescending self-satisfaction, because she allowed him to follow her around, do things for her. She knew she was being kind, but the cruelty of it never entered her head. Vincent was her willing slave, her pet, to be indulged or ignored at her whim, and although Mitch was amazing and exciting to have around, it was Vincent she enjoyed showing off to the others.

"I thought you might be here," she said after a moment. He hadn't turned to face her, though she knew perfectly well that he'd heard her approach, because he always did. "Are you going to the concert this evening?"

He stirred slightly but didn't look at her, and for a moment she wondered if he was remembering what happened in the Great Hall and blamed her for it.

"I'll go with you if you're offering to take me," she said lightly, settling herself down comfortably at his side, careful not to touch him. The memory of his awkward embrace as they danced was still vivid and troubling, even though she'd tried to put it out of her mind.

His blue eyes did fix on her then, long and questioningly, and for a moment she felt herself blushing hotly.

"If you like."

The words were carefully neutral, neither eager nor disinterested, and after a moment he looked away again at the waterfalls, absently picking up a handful of pebbles and throwing them one by one into the pool.

Lisa watched the ripples for a long time, silent and thinking, then said quietly. "Vincent, I'm sorry about the other day. Mitch is a pest, you know that, but I really wanted you to stay and dance with me - you're the only kid who appreciates what I do. I like having you watch me." He said nothing, suddenly lowering his head so that she could no longer see his face, and on an impulse she added. "Tell you what - if you give me another swimming lesson, I'll promise to improve your waltz, okay?"

He nodded, juggling the remaining pebbles idly in the palm of his hand before suddenly throwing them all into the water at one go. Then he turned to look at her levelly.

"I'm sorry, too."

Just for an instant there was sympathy in her eyes, then she smiled and shrugged. "Mitch had it coming, I guess. Don't worry about it."

But he did, she could see that clearly, and before the resolve faded she got to her feet, hearing herself say briskly. "Well, are you coming? Or are you going to sit there moping all day?"

He looked up, astonished. "Now?"

"Now." She turned away deliberately, daring him to follow. "Before anyone else gets the same idea."

As if in a dream, Vincent obeyed. He had always obeyed her, torn with some sweet helplessness he could never understand, always somehow wordlessly grateful she allowed him to be with her in the first place. Because she wasn't like the other girls. She was full of grace and beauty and was unfailingly kind. She made him forget so much of his pain when they were together that sometimes he wondered if she cast a spell over him deliberately in order to hold him in thrall. And she always knew where to find him when he needed her.

He'd tried to tell himself that the scene in Father's chamber had been just another dream. That it meant nothing, because words spoken in anger were simply words after all and anger was only a symptom of a deeper pain. But he knew it had been more than that. When Devin had run out, when he had gone to Father and hugged him desperately because he could no longer bear the look on that dear face - then he thought he'd understood the reason why it all happened. There'd been the faintest glimpse of a possibility, as fleeting as morning mist, but it had gone before he'd even been able to reach out for it, and there'd been nothing he could do or say that would take away the hurt. He'd not seen Devin since. His brother hadn't returned to their chamber that night, and as for himself.... He'd lain awake, watching the candles flicker and burn, feeling the weight of the albatross slowly smothering him.

It wasn't far around the bluff to the quiet pool beyond the falls where all the children played and learned to swim, and when they reached the rocky shoreline, Lisa immediately and unselfconsciously began to strip off. The water was icy and no one, not even Vincent with his insulating covering of fur, could stay in long, but the patterns of light streaming down between the fissures in the rock made it seem magically inviting and it had become a great and dangerous dare to see how long it could be endured before numbness set in. Without waiting for him, Lisa went in up to her waist and stood shivering, her white shoulders hunched against the cold.

"You've got to teach me to dive, Vincent. Going in like this is hell."

They had swum together so many times, but now he suddenly felt shy and awkward in front of her, acutely aware of her smooth, young girl's body and his own strange furry one. His fingers became unaccountably awkward as they fumbled with the lacings on his tunic, but when he finally looked up she had her back to him and was bravely attempting to duck under and get used to the chill, oblivious to his hesitation. For a moment he paused at the water's edge, seeing in his mind's eye the rolling blue breakers on a Californian beach, then he took a deep breath and dived in, showering her with freezing spray and making her scream in shock.

"Dammit, Vincent...!"

But she was grinning, and even as he shook the water from his eyes, she scooped some in both hands and threw it at him.

He tried to tell himself that all this was a dream too. That if he pretended hard enough he'd stop remembering the savagery in Father's eyes and the fury of a frustrated lifetime behind Devin's hurting words. But he couldn't. It was all real, and the beast responsible for causing their pain was himself....

By the time they eventually got round to trying a few dives, Lisa was almost blue with cold, and even Vincent was shivering as he clambered out onto the rocky ledge to give her a demonstration. For a moment, as he stood there naked and golden in the jeweled light, Lisa felt something stirring deep down inside, a strange, delicious horror she couldn't put a name to. He was perfectly formed, he looked just like all the other naked boys who came to swim here, but it was that soft fur on his arms, legs and torso, the magnificent swathe of shaggy mane hanging over his already powerful shoulders, that made her shiver. She wanted to touch him - and dared not.

He cut the water cleanly and came up gasping.

"See? Keep your body straight as you go in. That way you won't make a splash and...."

He stopped, suddenly aware that she had moved towards him and was treading water only inches away. Her eyes were glowing strangely, seeming to wander over him in a way that suddenly made his throat go dry.

"Vincent," he heard her whisper. "I think I'm getting cramps in my leg."

Instinctively, he reached out to support her, surprised to find that instead of being chilled, her skin was

burning.

"I'll help you out...."

"Wait, I...." Her hands were on his shoulders now, a sudden eddy washing them together so that just for a moment she pressed fully against him, feeling that fur brush soft and warm against her skin, seeing his blue eyes widen as if in shock. And then, beyond the triumph of the discovery, some inner primeval fear took over and she thrust herself back away from him so violently, his fingers slipped from her arms. "I can manage, Vincent. Honestly."

He said nothing. All the way back to the rocky shoreline he watched her in puzzlement, allowing her to get out and sit, pretending to massage her calf muscle, before he too emerged and sat down a little way off, clutching his rough homespun shirt to his chest and trying not to shiver.

"Is it bad?"

"It'll be okay in a moment. Just the cold, I suppose." For some inexplicable reason she felt furious at herself for reacting as she had done - and at him, for being what he was.

"We stayed in too long," he said quietly at last, reaching for his jeans.

"No, we didn't. It's just a cramp, for God's sake...!" She stopped, biting her lip. "I'm sorry. Do you mind awfully if I return the teaching favour some other time? I don't think...."

"Of course," he said quickly. Too quickly.

"Vincent.... Thank you for taking the trouble."

He lowered his head but he didn't reply, and after a moment, Lisa stopped pretending about her leg and they both finished dressing in silence. But when they finally straightened and looked at each other again, she could see his face was sad, and suddenly the question burst out of her before she was even aware of it.

"What does it feel like, Vincent? Having fur and claws and...." She stopped awkwardly. "Being you?"

He looked down, not answering, and she found herself rushing on. "Don't you ever wish you were.... different?"

He paused, then whispered. "I've accepted it."

"I don't think I could," she replied, unaware of how cruel that sounded. "Knowing I could never do all the things I wanted to do. I'd be afraid I'd hate all the normal people - or I'd kill myself."

He didn't reply to that, but somehow, she got the impression that it had hurt him, and she knew she had to say something else, something to take that shadowed despair out of his eyes.

"I enjoyed our swim, Vincent." She murmured suddenly, turning to put a hand on his arm. "Truly I did."

"We'll do it again whenever you want."

'Was it her imagination,' she wondered, 'or did he shiver at her touch?' A tensing almost like she had felt back there in the pool when.... She didn't want to think of that. She remembered how he had attacked Mitch, wondered what would have happened if Devin hadn't come in just then and stopped it....

And yet, looking at him now he seemed the gentlest, kindest boy in the world. The contradiction at once attracted and repelled her, and for a moment she thought how strange it was that they all accepted Vincent unquestioningly, yet at the same time never quite forgot how different he was. She couldn't imagine having to spend the rest of her life Below, as he would have to, not did she like to think about it - the thought was too ugly and Lisa didn't like ugliness in any of its forms. Better to dwell on imaginings of lights and audiences and applause, the soaring, ecstasy of the pirouette and the romance of the pas de deux....

"Don't forget about this evening, will you?" she reminded after a moment as they picked their way along the shore, back towards the cliff. "I'll wait for you in my chamber."

"I won't forget." But he didn't even look at her now, and she knew that whatever it was that had troubled him in the Great Hall was still there, eating at him from the inside out. Involuntarily, she shivered. Even in that, Vincent was different from anyone else.

"Lisa...." He stopped awkwardly, looking down at his boots so that his wet mane hung limply over his face. "About what happened with Mitch...."

She waited, something inside her tightening into a knot of Gordian proportions. His normally gentle voice was even lower now, almost a whisper.

"I never meant to frighten you," he continued after a moment. "I.... would never hurt you. Know that. It's just...." And then she saw he was looking at his hands, and the desolation in his eyes was almost unbearable. "I'm afraid of what I am. Of what I might do. That's all."

Lisa felt a sudden lump rise into her throat, and before she could even think about it, she'd put a hand on his arm. The softest, most feather-light of touches, full of a young girl's sudden compassion.

"I understand," she murmured softly. But she didn't. Not really. Whatever it was in Vincent that made him what he was so savage and gentle, strong, and vulnerable, was strangely exciting in a fearful sort of way, and the fascination of him drew her almost against her will. The unpredictability.... The thought of all that animal power leashed in one boy.... It was horrifying. And delicious. "Everyone's allowed to get angry sometimes," she went on after an awkward moment. "And you get angry with Mitch. It's no big deal."

"With me it is," he said, still not willing to face her. "And.... I saw your face, Lisa. You were afraid...."

"No, I wasn't!" She kicked at the stones fiercely. "Why do you keep insisting on making something out of it, for heaven's sake? Others have fought with Mitch - you're just the only one who's ever got the best of him, that's all."

But he had abruptly sunk into another of his monumental silences, and she knew he didn't believe her.

"I don't care what guilt trip you're on, Vincent," she found herself yelling suddenly. "I still want you to take me to the concert tonight, okay? You're my best friend and nothing you do or say is going to alter that. Just have a little faith in yourself, huh? Please?"

He nodded dumbly, head still down, and in exasperation, Lisa forged away up the rocky slope, not stopping until she reached the top of the cliff and a little of her excess frustration had been spent. Then, panting slightly, she turned back to look at him. He'd stopped in a patch of filtered brightness to watch her progress, his face suddenly very still, the glint of wet gold and amber in his mane making her squint, and she felt something catch hold of her breath because in that split second, she no longer saw the beast in him. She saw the beauty too - and it tore at her heart.

There was nothing she could think of to say to him. Furious with herself, she abruptly turned and broke into a sudden stumbling run, feeling his eyes on her every inch of the way. Those wonderful, sad, heart-wrenching blue eyes that took from her every ounce of resolve she had ever had....

'Why,' a little voice inside her whimpered, 'did it seem as if a terrible, suffocating weight hung around her neck all of a sudden? Something dark and dead that nevertheless flapped its wings in a dreadful spasm until she could hardly breathe? Like a horrible giant bird....'

Reb's shop front was the basement of a crumbling brownstone that housed the stubborn remnants of a once close-knit community, and like a handful of others, the old man had been a recognized Helper for

years. Devin had often visited him, because his shop sold trinkets and curios to those who know what to look for, and he found a use for all sorts of throwaways the children of the neighborhood brought to him, in return for nickels and dimes. Browsing down here was almost as good and browsing through Father's library.

Turning up his collar against the chill wind, Devin dropped the black plastic trash bag at his feet and stood for a moment, gathering his resolve. The angry bitterness still gnawed somewhere deep in his gut, a big black dog grinding at a bone, keeping him alone and apart from everyone ever since that traumatic night. He hadn't even been able to force himself to face Vincent. Especially Vincent. Because he could still feel that strange kind of carrier-wave burn vibrating between them and turning his own restlessness into an all-consuming ache. *'Maybe we are brothers after all,'* he found himself thinking vaguely. *'It's as if I can sense him hurting inside me....'*

A sudden blaze of anger flared, the dog looking up from his bone and snarling warningly. *'What right had Vincent, Father, any of them, to put this on his shoulders and expect him to carry it for the rest of his life? For as long as he stayed Below....?'*

'I've got to get out, I've got to. They can't make me responsible for everything, he is....'

Stepping off the sidewalk, he suddenly found himself passing over a ventilation grid in the road, feeling the violent upward blast of warm, stuffy air, fancying just for a moment that he could hear the faraway rush and rattle of the subway, the distant comforting tapping on the pipes. All the things that spoke of home. Because he'd been born down there, his mother had died in the dark giving him birth - and Father hadn't been able to save her. A Doctor.... and he couldn't even do that. *'If I were a Doctor, I'd have performed a Caesarean. At least she may have had a chance. I'd have tried. He didn't even do that....'*

"Bit late for you to be in this neck of the woods, boy," Reb greeted laconically, looking up from his sweeping, as Devin maneuvered himself awkwardly through the narrow doorway, lugging the clinking, rattling black plastic trash bag behind him. "Should be the other way round - me bringing you somethin'."

"I need money," Devin returned shortly. "What'll you give me for this lot? I got cans, bottles...."

"Money?" The old man's eyebrows shot upwards, his Georgia drawl suddenly more pronounced than ever. "Ah thought y'all got by without that kinda stuff."

"Not this time." The boy dumped the bag on the floor and in spite of himself gazed around wonderingly, still never failing to be amazed at the interior of the dimly lit Aladdin's Cave that was Reb's emporium. The faded and tattered Stars and Bars over the counter was supposed to have led Jackson's brigade at Shiloh, taken a direct hit from a shell in that Sharpsburg cornfield, wrapped the body of its bearer amongst the rocks in Devil's Den.... all brilliant and heroic impossibilities that could have been and were not. *'How many times had he and Vincent played out the great battles, pretending to be Lee and Grant, Jackson and Meade, Forrest and Sherman, but never, ever reluctant McClellan....?'*

"I need a good hunting knife, Reb."

The modern-day Confederate scratched his head and smiled knowingly. "Why do Ah git the feelin' this ain't somethin' Father'd agree to?"

"He doesn't have to agree to everything."

"Uh-huh." Leaning on his broom, Reb surveyed him for a moment, old grey eyes suddenly as keen as a bird's. "The rats down there musta get mighty large and fierce to warrant huntin' 'em all of a sudden."

Devin abruptly thrust his hands into his pockets and looked away scowling. "If you don't want the trash, just say so. There's other places."

"Ah reckon." Reb straightened slowly and turned to prop the broom against the counter. Then he paused

calculating. "Ah got an antique brass kettle would do real nice for Ellen. Came in yesterday. Ah was goin' to bring it on down...." His words suddenly trailed away as Devin abruptly moved past him. There was a strange hard expression on the boy's face, an emptiness about his eyes that Reb had never seen before, and something in the way he idly strolled along the line of shelves made the old man hold his breath, waiting....

But in the end Devin simply stopped, staring up at the tattered old flag as if he had suddenly forgotten why he was there, and Reb felt the breath he was holding slowly escape from between his lips in almost silent relief. "Devin? You want to tell me about it?"

"About what?"

"About why you want the knife. What's troubling you." He knew better than to approach the boy with unwanted sympathy, but there was obviously something desperately wrong. "Is it Father?"

A sudden bitter smile twisted the youngster's lips. "I guess he's part of it."

"And the other part."

Devin suddenly lowered his head, torn with inner anguish. he trusted Reb more than any other topsider but how could he tell him this? *'How could he expect him to understand...?'*

"I don't know what to do," he whispered at last. "I don't know why I feel like this. So... mixed up. As if I don't belong any more. The tunnels are my home, but they're beginning to feel like a prison and I don't know where to go or what to be, what to believe...."

"Hell," Reb said gently. "That's just a part of growing up, boy. Everyone goes through that."

Devin shook his head. "No. This is me. It's like.... like an albatross around my neck...."

'Why did I say that?' He wondered suddenly. Vincent, standing in the rain, tossed on a running tide, and he....

"I love him," he heard himself whisper after a long moment. "I love him.... but sometimes I hate him too, and that scares me. He's more than my brother, Reb. All our lives...."

"Yeah," Reb said slowly, understanding now. "Ah know."

A sudden violent shudder seized Devin and he watched his hands clench on the counter, almost as if they didn't belong to him anymore. Unreal. Like the dreams. "What am I going to do?" He whispered helplessly. "I hurt him. I never meant to, but I did. I hurt Vincent...."

A floorboard creaked into the silence, as the old man slowly moved towards him until he was standing only a few inches away and Devin could see the battered old sneakers, the frowsy cuffs of brown corduroys and knew he daren't look up any further.

"And what does Vincent say about all this?"

The laces on the right sneaker were broken off short, the bow tight and economical. *'Why hadn't I noticed before? Even the younger kids can make a few laces....'* "I don't know. I haven't spoken to him."

"Don't y'all think you should?" There was a pause, then the Southern drawl softened just slightly. "That boy worships you, Devin. He sure as hell wouldn't let a few words come between you both."

"I know that." And then suddenly the anger came back, hard, and hot and inexplicable. "I know! But what am I supposed to do, Reb? Stay with him all my life? I look after him, I take him Above and give him dreams to cling to.... I feel sorry for him - but I'm not his keeper! And I can't stay Below, not even for Vincent! One day I'm going to have to hurt him again, and that's not what I want. And I don't want this guilt loaded on me all the time either." Abruptly, he flung himself away, finding himself blinking back tears of anger and frustration. "I hate him for making me feel this way! I hate him! And I love him too...."

Reb was silent for what seemed a long time, chewing his lip thoughtfully. At last, he slowly walked around behind the counter, ducked into an alcove, and produced two bottles of Coke from the ancient fridge he kept there for emergencies. Snapping off the tops, he set one down in front of Devin and took a long pull from the other himself.

Devin stared at the bottle dully. Condensation frosted the glass in opaque beads, the bubbles inside rising and popping at the surface in a never-ending stream, and the sight was so incredible, so unexpected, that it took all of his willpower to even reach out and touch the ice cold surface with one finger.

"Drink up, boy," Reb grunted, gesturing with his own bottle. "It won't bite you."

Slowly, carefully, Devin picked it up, feeling his hand go deliciously numb, then drank deeply. Fiercely. And when he at last looked up, it was to see Reb surveying him with a steady understanding that went to his soul.

"Ah can't give you any answer, boy," the old man said quietly at last. "Questions like these.... they can only be answered by yourself, or they ain't answered. You understand? It's a big world out there and one day you got to make your way in it. That's only natural. But you and Vincent.... y'all are somethin' special and you can't ever let that go."

"I don't want to," Devin whispered. "But we all know he's going to stay Below for the rest of his life except for stolen moments at night, sneaking in back alleys, always looking over his shoulder. I can't live like that, Reb. I've given him dreams.... I can't do any more. Not now. Besides, he's got Father and he always will. After a while they won't even notice I've gone."

Something in the way he said that made Reb see clearly what that '*other part*' of the trouble was. He stared down into the dark depths of his drink and pursed his lips, suddenly not knowing what to say. He knew Father too well to imagine he really would have favourites, but there was that angry pain in Devin's eyes that spoke too clearly of hurt.

"So, what y'all goin' to do, boy? Get a knife to prove you're a man then run off and leave them all without even saying goodbye? What that goin' to prove? To you or to Father?" He stopped then adding gently. "It's what you're goin' to do, ain't it?"

But Devin refused to meet his eyes. The starkness of the conclusion made him shudder, but it was where the path was leading him right enough and he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it.

"Dammit, Devin, you got family down there! You can't just up and do that to them, not even for the best reason in the world."

"Don't push it, Reb!" he cried suddenly, furious with himself and this old man for a reason he couldn't explain. "You left Georgia when you weren't much older than I am, so don't preach to me about quitting! And what's the big deal about a knife anyway? Didn't you ever carve your name on a wall just because it was there!" Slamming the bottle down on the counter unfinished, he turned away, kicking at the bulging trash bag. "I'll go somewhere else."

Reb straightened up resignedly. "Now don't y'all go runnin' off like a stuck hog, boy. Ah didn't say Ah wouldn't take it. But you came in here for more'n just fifty cents, and Ah'm tellin' you like it is so you can see a shade further than the end of your own nose." He moved slowly over to the old till, produced two quarters, and handed them over with deliberation. "But you looky here, don't go punishing Father for somethin' that's just human nature. He ain't perfect, but he sure as hell got something not many folks have in this world - a dream that's saved a helluva lot of pain. You think it's been easy for him? It took a blame sight more courage than you or Ah'll ever have to give up everything and found a new world, and you should be proud of him for that. Where would y'all be now if there wasn't a Below? Where would Vincent be?" He paused and took a deep breath, grey eyes softening a little. "He loves you all, chuckie-head, and

that means totin' a whole load of fear around day after day. Especially for Vincent. It doesn't mean he loves you any the less. But when push comes to shove, the only one who really needs him and his world is that boy, y'all understand?"

Dumbly Devin nodded. He did understand, but somehow it didn't make the pain any easier. Nor the guilt. All he could see was Vincent's blue eyes gazing at him trustingly....

"I guess there's nothing more to be said," he got out at last, and then he paused, fingering the coins in his pocket. "I just wanted something of my own, Reb. Just once. If Father does love me, he can't deny me that."

"Not if you talk to him," the old confederate said quietly. "But you and he never could hold a conversation more'n ten seconds together without it turning into a catfight." Then he suddenly reached down behind the counter and emerged with something in his hands that Devin didn't immediately identify. "Remembered y'all told me once that you were trying to explain to Vincent about the carousel in the park. Some guy bought this in the other week - an exact workin' replica. Even plays the same tunes." He turned the key underneath the brightly painted model, set it down and watched proudly as the miniature horses turned slowly in time to the tinkling music. "Maybe if you gave this to him, y'all could face him easier. Huh? You want to try?"

Devin stared, speechless, a sudden hard knot of grief wedging itself somewhere in his throat. The anger dying as if it had never been. It was perfect. Magical. Something he knew Vincent would treasure.

"Take it." Reb said gruffly, thrusting it into his hands. "And git outta here."

'What's a carousel, Devin? Can we ride on it at night?

'It's all locked up at night, little brother. Maybe one day....' But he put the promise by, and Vincent had never asked again, accepting it as one more restriction about which he could do nothing. He delighted over pictures in story books, but they could never convey the true magic of a real merry-go-round to him. But this....

Reverently Devin cradled it, then looked up into those gently smiling eyes. "He'll love it, Reb. Honest."

"Right," Reb said, turning away. "So, what y'all waiting for?"

Biting his lip, the boy stared down at the toy, his heart torn. Sometimes he had brought Vincent ice cream, racing down the tunnels in anxious triumph with a laden cone, terrified it would melt before it got there. But what use was it after all? The thing Vincent wanted above anything in the world was freedom, and that he would never have. Even convicted criminals lived with the expectations of parole sometime, but he....

Wordlessly, Devin turned and made slowly for the door. Then he looked back to find the old man watching expectantly.

"Thanks," he whispered.

And then he ran.

Vincent wasn't in their chamber when he finally got back, and for a moment Devin hesitated, suddenly remembering the concert. He didn't want to walk in on his brother and Father in full view of everyone else, but equally he didn't want to wait before presenting his peace-offering. Because if he did, he knew his courage would fail him and everything Reb had said would be for nothing.

He found almost the entire community gathered in Father's chamber for the concert, crammed into every available space, leaning over the balcony, draped over the spiral staircase, the atmosphere warm, smoky golden and homely. On the makeshift podium the young quartet played with the intent seriousness of the truly determined. Mozart and flowers, their teacher, Isabel, discreetly encouraging from her place in the front row, and Devin stood for a long moment, suddenly remembering all the other concerts he had

attended here, perched on the staircase, or propped against one of the rickety bookcases, Vincent at his side. This, he guessed, was what Father had struggled to achieve all those years, what Reb had meant by talking of his courage. Mozart in a tunnel. Art and literature in a hole in the ground. More courage than he possessed, that was for sure.

He glanced round, seeking Vincent out amongst the huddle of youngsters on the iron steps. He sat on the edge of the topmost stair, his arms crossed before him on the handrail and his legs dangling into the void, gazing fixedly down at the scene below him - and at his side sat Lisa, white and ethereal, gently beating time with playful fingers on the broadness of Vincent's leather-clad shoulder. Devin scowled. For some reason, he didn't like that girl always hanging around his brother, nor was he happy with the fact that Vincent himself seemed captivated by her. She was too caught up in what was good for Lisa, with no thought of what that might mean for the boy at her side.

As for Father....

He sat, as usual, in his big chair, eyes closed and head nodding occasionally at a particularly pleasing passage. *'The patriarch of his community,'* Devin thought with a faint touch of bitterness. *'Confident and secure in his position, loved by all. What a joke.'*

"So, the prodigal returns," a quiet, familiar voice murmured suddenly at his elbow. "You been gone a long time, Dev. How do you like the concert?"

"Leave me alone, Mitch."

"Hey, we're one big happy community here," Mitch protested, leaning against the rocky wall, and grinning meaningfully. "We take all kinds." His eyes flickered towards the spiral staircase in unmistakable emphasis. "You saved my life the other day. I haven't told Father - but I could. If you get my drift." Shifting slightly, he added, "What's with you and Vincent anyhow?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't want to tell me, that's okay." Mitch grinned again. "I can read the signs, good buddy." He paused for a moment. "Like I said, he's unpredictable. You are sure you've got him under control?"

If he was expecting to get another rise from Devin, he was disappointed. The older boy was still holding the toy carousel behind his back and because of that, because of Vincent, he was forcing himself to an unnatural calm.

"You talk too much," he got out at last. "I warned you last time...."

"Sure," Mitch returned coolly. "I remember what happened last time, Devin. Vincent's still got a reckoning coming for that. He don't mess with me and get away with it." He paused a moment as the music finally came to an end and the audience rose, applauding long and hard, then his mouth twisted sourly. "Pretty, isn't it? Everyone gathering round to watch kids pretending to be musicians...."

In spite of his resolve, Devin felt his hold on his temper slipping. "What's with you, Mitch?" He found himself hissing furiously. "If you don't like it down here, why the hell don't you just go? Leave us all in peace."

Something hard entered Mitch's eyes then. Hard and blank and indescribable. "You think I wanted to come to this hole? My dad left me here, remember? There wasn't any more room for me up top and this was the only place he could think of to put me. But don't worry. I don't intend to stay here any longer than I can help." He stopped, then lowered his voice slightly. "You're the only one who was born in the tunnels, Devin. Not even Vincent can lay claim to that distinction. You're the only one who really belongs here."

Devin stared at him wordlessly for a moment then abruptly turned away. *Belong here? He couldn't belong here. Not like Vincent did. Never.* And then he found himself wondering why Mitch had said that, why he

was looking at him so strangely, almost as if he knew....

"And another things," that quiet voice went on cautiously. "You tell Vincent to keep his paws off Lisa, okay? No more dancing or skinny-dipping alone together. It isn't natural - him being what he is and all."

"What the hell business is it of yours?" he retorted, careful to keep his voice down. "He can do what he likes....

"I'm warning you, Devin. Just keep him away from her, understand?" With a careless deliberation, Mitch pushed himself away from the wall and half turned to go. "I mean - I got some sense of decency even if you haven't."

"You bastard!"

The answering grin was mocking, as if that answer was all that he'd been waiting for. Then, nonchalantly, he put his hands in his pockets and sauntered back up the tunnel, leaving Devin staring after him breathless with numb anger, hardly noticing that the audience had now broken up and were slowly starting to trickle out into the passageway where he stood. Vincent and Lisa, together on the staircase....

Sometimes, it was true he found himself wondering what his brother saw in the dancing girl, who seemed too caught up in herself, too uncaring of the things that mattered to really be the friend Vincent needed. He'd seen the condescending, thoughtless way she sometimes treated him, and it made Devin inwardly seethe with vicarious resentment. But he'd said nothing to Vincent because he'd seen the look on Vincent's face when he was with her. A shy, quiet happiness that was almost painful - as if, when they were together, he thought of himself not as a deformed freak but as a handsome prince who could do and be anything as long as she was at his side.

And that was something Devin would never want to discuss. Not even at the risk of other pain.

He quickly pressed himself back against the wall to let the throng pass, waited until he was sure they had all come out, then slowly moved over to the threshold of the chamber, and stood there irresolutely, wanting to enter, and yet somehow not daring to. When Father and Vincent were alone together, there was an atmosphere of such love and togetherness about them that it made him feel awkward, alone and - on occasion - bitterly resentful that he could not share in it too. He knew it would be like that now. The anger would be gone and instead there's be that special bond between father and son that he knew would never be his. He could see it now, as Father....

.... Looked up hopefully at the boy who was still seated thoughtfully on the iron steps, gazing into the emptiness where the players had stood. For a moment the Doctor said nothing, noting the distant sadness in his son's blue eyes, then abruptly he pulled himself to his feet, reached over for the familiar black box with its embossed white rose on the lid and waggled it suggestively.

"How about a game to round off the evening, Vincent?"

That steady gaze swung down to fasten gravely on his face. "Are you certain, Father?"

"And just what do you mean by that, young man?" There was a sort of pretended injury in Father's voice now, but he was smiling nevertheless. Relieved. "There's plenty of cunning in the old dog yet."

What may have been the shadow of a smile passed across Vincent's face at that. He got to his feet and came down the steps with a beautiful, lithe movement that nevertheless had in it a kind of resigned patience, and putting a commiserating arm around Father's shoulders, he bent down and whispered.

"I'm glad you still think there's hope."

"You," Father retorted, pointing a stern finger, "will find yourself across my knee if you're not careful!" He grinned fondly up at the boy, because they both knew it was an empty threat. He'd never raised his hand to

any of them and never would, but this gentle teasing about the state of his play was something that had developed almost as soon as Vincent had learned how to beat him, and he felt sure the boy sometimes pushed it just to see how much he would take.

"They played well, don't you think?" he asked after a moment, setting out the pieces as Vincent seated himself opposite and watched. "Isabel's worked wonders in only three months. You ought to try, Vincent. You have a good appreciation of music."

"But hardly the physical gifts that would enable me to play with any skill, Father." For an instant the blue eyes flicked down at his hands, clasped on his lap beneath the tabletop and Father knew that the topic was effectively closed.

"Hmmm," he grunted, not knowing what else to say. Finishing off the row of black pawns, he leaned back and gestured expansively. "You're white."

Devin knew he should go in now, before things really got serious, but something kept him rooted to the spot like someone listening at a keyhole, wondering if he'd hear anything said about him. *'They're family,'* Reb had told him. *'You can't just up and leave....'*

'Trouble is, I can't figure out who's the outsider here - me or Vincent. We've both being dragged down and there's nothing we can do about it. Nothing that'll stop this agony, either for him or me. Why do I love and hate him so much...?'

"Is there.... anything you wish to tell me?" Father asked quietly after a moment. "You haven't seemed yourself over the last few days, Vincent. I wondered...." He stopped awkwardly. "I wondered if there was anything I could do."

'Tell him, Vincent. Tell him about the albatross....'

The shaggy head lowered as it often did when confronted with a difficult decision, and the silence grew massive. Father waited, hardly aware that he was holding his breath, suddenly realizing that Elizabeth had been right after all - there was something here, something he'd been missing for a long time that Vincent couldn't tell him even now....

For a long moment the boy remained motionless as if struggling inwardly with the decision - and then he looked up heartrendingly, all trace of levity gone.

"Father....," he whispered, then suddenly his eyes slid past Father's shoulder, widening with such surprise, delight, and apprehension that the Doctor momentarily froze. Turning, he saw Devin standing in the doorway and suddenly everything stopped with a jolt that almost made him gasp.

"Devin...?"

Devin said nothing. He looked as if any moment he would turn and fly, as if he didn't really know why he had come, and suddenly Father's relief at seeing him was tempered with the usual flash of irritation.

"Where on earth have you been?" he found himself demanding sharply. More sharply than he intended. "We thought you'd got lost. Vincent and the others have been searching...."

The reproach seemed to act as a spur. Face set, Devin suddenly marched up to the table, withdrew something from behind his back and thrust it abruptly into Vincent's astonished hands.

"I got you this," he muttered. "I wanted to say I'm sorry."

'Don't look at me like that, Vincent. Please don't....'

For what seemed an incredulous age, those blue eyes just stared at him with such love and wonderment it was almost unbearable.

"What?" Father began, and then Devin knew he had to get out of there. With a sudden pain-filled gasp he whirled - only to find his arm held in a grip of iron as Father half rose and caught him by the wrist, forcing him back and around.... "Devin, please...!"

"Let me go!" he yelled, tearing himself free with a furious burst of strength. "I shouldn't have come! I only wanted to give it to Vincent...." Then he stopped because his brother had suddenly gone very still, staring at the toy in his hands as if it were something incredible and precious.

"The carousel...," they heard him whisper brokenly, and then he was silent.

"It works too," Devin said awkwardly after a moment, forgetting his bruised wrist. "Look, I'll show you." And gently taking it back, he wound the key and set it down right in the middle of the chessboard, not caring if he knocked over any of the pieces, wanting only to see the look in Vincent's eyes as he watched the model horses go around and around, the music tinkling, almost lost, in the vastness of the chamber. There was nothing else to be said, not excuses, nor explanations.... The answer was right there in front of him in the awed, stricken way Vincent sat and watched, savouring every last wondrous moment.

"It's a.... marvelous piece of workmanship," Father said finally, with careful neutrality. "Where did you get it, Devin?"

"From Reb."

He felt Father's eyes fix on him with unnerving steadiness, but he didn't return the look. None of it mattered but that Vincent should understand how sorry he was, how much he truly meant to him.

"Why don't you...." Father paused, suddenly swallowing hard, the effort almost visible. "Why don't you join us, Devin? Vincent's of the opinion he'll beat me shortly anyway. We can...."

"No," Devin returned quickly. "No.... Thanks. I've got some things to catch up on, so...." He faltered awkwardly, watching the carousel slowly revolving in the middle of the board. "I'd better be going. I'm glad you like it, Vincent."

The younger boy suddenly looked up at him, his eyes lost in the mist that swirled between them like a maddened cloud roiling up from the void, and all the promises of the past echoed hauntingly in Devin's ears. There was no need for words now. He understood Vincent, understood that look, and with a surge of joy, knew he was forgiven.

"Devin." Father let him almost reach the door before suddenly appearing at his elbow. "Next time, tell us where you're going, all right?"

"Yeah, right," he managed, ramming his hands in his pockets almost in self-defense. "Don't worry. I won't try to escape."

"I do worry." The Doctor paused, then lowered his voice and snatched a quick glance over his shoulder. "About both of you. What's been happening just recently?"

Devin paused. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Father took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "All right. Nothing. But I still think that was a nice gesture anyway. Even if it was nothing."

The boy glowered down at the toes of his boots. "It's just another futile dream, that's all. He'll never get to ride on the real thing."

"I suppose not." There was a strange wistfulness in Father's eyes now and Devin suddenly felt awkward and ashamed, an intruder in a place that could never be his. He was grateful Father hadn't pursued the question of what had been happening over the past weeks, mainly because he had no answer for it himself. But now, looking at Vincent leaning his elbows on the tabletop, in order to watch the carousel more closely, Devin

knew there were other reasons too - reasons he couldn't even begin to allow himself to contemplate. Suddenly, he wanted to tell Father about the albatross himself, about the beach, about Mitch and Lisa and how much Vincent yearned to be free - and maybe that wanting showed in his eyes, because it was as if the old shuttering came down between them and Father moved back slightly, out of his reach.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow." Father said quietly, quickly, as if he hadn't noticed. "Goodnight, Devin."

Just for a moment the boy hesitated. Then, abruptly, he nodded, turned, and was gone.

It took Father some time before he could resume his seat and watch his adopted son. The carousel was slowing, the tune grinding to a halt, and suddenly the sadness of it all overwhelmed him. Reaching out, he covered Vincent's hand with his own, trying to squeeze into it all the reassurance and comfort he didn't feel.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," he whispered.

Almost immediately the boy's blue eyes fastened on his face in gentle puzzlement, the shaggy head tilting questioningly to one side.

"For this." Father said slowly gesturing towards the toy. "That you can't see the real thing. That Devin can only give you shadows. That I.... sometimes don't seem to understand. But I do, Vincent. It's why I get so afraid when you go Above. Devin has something wild inside him, and when he leads you into danger...."

"I know," Vincent said softly. His furry fingers caressed the carousel gently. "But he wants to do so many things, Father. He sees so much beauty everywhere and it saddens him that I...." He stopped abruptly as if he had said too much, then added very low. "He knows my heart more than anyone except you."

Father couldn't think of anything to say to that. Sometimes it was as if Vincent wasn't a child at all, but a wise and knowing man who sometimes saw things so deeply. With a sudden surge of affection, he laid his hand against the boy's cheek, feeling the soft stubble of golden fur warm against his palm.

"You're very special to all of us," he whispered. "Remember that, Vincent. We love you so much...."

For a long time there was an almost painful silence, then Vincent said very low. "Tell me something, Father."

"Anything. You know that."

And those blue eyes were fastened on his with a terrible intensity, a desperation that almost took his breath away. "How could you leave the world Above, with all its light and life and warmth to come and live down here in the dark? You've told me it's so beautiful up there - the colours, the sight of sunlight on water, the birds singing.... yet you gave it all up and you've never been back. Not even once. Why, Father? How could you do that to yourself?"

'No,' Father thought painfully. *'Oh no. Not just yet. Not now....'*

Because he knew that once he started on that story, all the old angry hurt and bitterness would come flooding out, even after all this time, and he didn't want Vincent to hear it. Didn't want to fill the boy with the same anger, teach him to hate and distrust, when he'd tried so hard to raise him with love. The world Above tainted everything it touched. It destroyed the eternal spark in nearly everyone born into it. But he wouldn't let that happen to Vincent. His son was the most precious gift there had ever been, and he couldn't....

"Father?" The voice was so gentle, so unlike any other boy's. Full of compassion. Pain.

"Sometimes," he heard himself say at last, "the only thing left for someone to do is to turn their back on the past and begin again. A rebirth if you like. And once the decision is made, it's up to the individual to say whether or not it's right for them to look back once in a while. Maybe, some day in the future, I may venture up to see the sun again, but not yet. Do you understand that, Vincent?"

He paused and leaned forward intently. "What is it? Tell me."

Vincent shook his head, not in negation but in a sort of frustrated helplessness. "I'll never have the chance to know what it's like - to see the sun or watch the ocean - or just to walk the city streets in daylight...." He stopped suddenly and for a heartbreaking second or two covered his face with his hands. "Why, Father? Why are they so afraid of me?"

"I don't know," Father whispered aching. "But as long as people are as they are...." He broke off blinking back hot tears. As long as people were as the world made them, Vincent would be forever condemned to a life in darkness, never to know what everyone else took for granted. The unfairness of it all was like a knife in the gut - the knowledge that this gentle, loving boy would be shot down like a wild animal all because of ignorant fear and an incapability of seeing beauty in all its forms.

"Maybe it'd be better if he died." Peter had said all those years ago. "Maybe it'd be better...."

"Why am I like this, Father?" Vincent whispered after a long moment. "What happened to me? What did I do...?"

"Nothing!" Father choked furiously, his fingers tightening cruelly in that tangled mane, not knowing if what he said would make a difference any more. "You didn't do anything! You understand? No one knows how.... this.... happened and maybe we never will. But whatever else you believe, Vincent, always believe that we love you! You hear me! We love you...."

Vincent didn't answer. His eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. Almost without thinking, Father suddenly got to his feet, and came around the table and took the boy into his arms with the fierceness of anguished sorrow. Only once before could he ever recall Vincent asking him why he was different, but then it had been with the distracted interest of a four-year-old, to whom the future didn't matter all that much. Now....

"I'm sorry," he murmured brokenly. "I'm so sorry...." And felt his son's arms suddenly go around him in a desperate, answering hug that had in it all the misery and loneliness of every uncomprehending child in the world.

"Devin wanted those dreams for me," the boy gasped. "He always did...."

What in the name of God can I do to ease your pain, Vincent? I'm a doctor, but there's nothing I can give you for this. I can't even pretend I understand. I only want you to know that whatever happens, whatever comes, I'll be here for you....

"Listen to me," he heard himself say softly at last. "Dreams are beautiful things, but they are just dreams - insubstantial shadows that fade away when we wake up. Sometimes it takes great courage to dream, but the greatest courage is to face life in all its cruel reality. If you can do that.... if you can accept the shadows without losing yourself in them, then you can face whatever the world may do.... with a stronger heart and a braver spirit."

Suddenly he put the boy from him a little and brushed his hair back with a gentle hand. "You have that courage, Vincent. I know you do."

Vincent gazed at him for the space of perhaps two breaths, then his eyes dropped and suddenly a tear escaped and trickled slowly down his furry cheek.

"Sometimes.... I feel as if it's crushing me, Father...."

"I know," he whispered, his own eyes blurring at the pain in the boy's voice. "But you'll come through it, and even though they may never come true, you must go on dreaming those dreams occasionally, in spite of everything. Because somehow, someday, there has to be more for you than just.... this." He involuntarily

looked around him and grimaced. "You deserve all the world has to offer, and whatever's in my power to give, I'll give you. Always know that, Vincent."

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment then opened them and looked down at his hands, at his strange, frightening monstrous hands that mocked whatever dreams he'd had.

"I know," he whispered. Then bracing himself, he abruptly got to his feet and picked up the now silent carousel with gentle care. "I don't want to burden you with this, Father. I'm sorry if I.... spoiled your evening."

"Well, you didn't," Father said with a wry smile. "And we can still finish the game - if Devin hasn't knocked over all the pieces, of course."

Vincent slowly and deliberately reached out and hugged him lovingly, then kissed him on the brow. "Perhaps tomorrow."

"Pity. You never know. I might have been able to beat you this time." For a moment he looked up at his son, finding himself gazing into those blue eyes and seeing in them the recognition of all that had been lost and would never be known. Of a sadness that went beyond grief into patient, bitter acceptance. And he saw, too, the reflection of his own helplessness in the face of what fate had done to this boy.

But as quickly as it came the moment passed, and the ghost of a smile played fleetingly about those leonine lips.

"I wouldn't deny you the dream, Father." Vincent returned solemnly, and then, before the Doctor could think of a suitable retort, slowly turned, and walked deliberately from the chamber, taking the carousel with him. But somehow a little of his usual lithe grace was missing.

He moved, Father thought with a sudden tired sadness, as if the weight of the whole world was hanging from his shoulders. Or maybe it was just the albatross....

He returned to his chamber feeling strangely weary - worn out with an excess of grief and a kind of wordless yearning he couldn't understand. He wanted to lie on his bed and watch the carousel go round and round. He wanted to lose himself in dreams....

Devin was seated at the table in a blaze of candlelight, chin in hand, idly sorting through what looked to be a collection of coins ranged before him. He looked up when Vincent came in and for a long moment there was a silence. Then the younger boy dropped his eyes awkwardly.

"Devin...."

"Don't say it, little brother." As if the words had broken the spell, Devin turned back once more to his hoard, stirring it restlessly with one finger. "Your timing was lousy."

"Your timing was.... perfect." Carefully, Vincent set the toy down beside his bed and moved forward diffidently. "It's late. I thought you'd be asleep."

There was a sudden snort of mirthless laughter. "I'm counting my riches. All one dollar seventy-five of it. That's enough to keep anyone awake."

Something in the way he said it made Vincent hesitate. "Why?" he asked quietly at last with such straightforward simplicity that for a moment Devin seemed to be at a loss.

"Why? Because I want to buy something. Something of my own. I'm going to work and earn money to buy it, then it'll be mine." He took a deep breath and expelled it gently. "If you must know, I'm going to get me a knife."

Vincent didn't answer. He sat down heavily at the other side of the table and just gazed at his brother,

suddenly feeling an awful sense of foreboding creep over him. Something about Devin frightened him now and he didn't know why.

"Well?" the other boy demanded defiantly. "Aren't you going to ask me what I want it for?"

"Only if you want to tell me," Vincent whispered sadly.

But Devin didn't. Angrily, he swept up the coins and pocketed them then got up with a jerk, moving towards his bed where he stood for a moment, head bent, watching his fingers clench and unclench as if he'd never seen them before.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "It's not your fault. I wanted to give you something and...." He stopped, shrugging. "Everything's going wrong somehow. I say things I don't mean - or they don't come out right and people get angry. Hurt." He sneaked a quick glance at Vincent, then away again. "You understand?"

Dumbly, Vincent nodded. He understood all too well. It was as though he were walking on quicksand, as if something threatening was looming over him - that he should be doing something to stop it, except that it couldn't be stopped....

"Maybe," Devin went on quietly at last. "Maybe it'll come out right in the end. It's got to. We'll find our freedom, you and me, little brother. I promise you."

He was sitting in the edge of the Abyss, gazing down into the ghostly depths and being pushed slowly forwards by the shadow at his shoulder. The beast who wanted to destroy....

"You and Father are so close," Devin whispered suddenly into the silence. "I look at you both and wonder how...." Then he stopped, biting his lips. "I guess it was partly true, what I said about him loving you the best. He looks at me and all he sees is his failure. But you...." Suddenly, his eyes were very bright in the candle's gleam, filled with stars. "You give him a purpose, Vincent. You give them all a purpose. Doesn't that make everything all right?"

Slowly Vincent looked up. The stars were like fires and they were burning through to his soul. For it was Devin, caught in their midst, who was being consumed, and there was nothing he could do to help him.

"I'm going to get a knife," Devin said. "I'm going to carve our names on the tunnel walls and make us live forever. Maybe then they'll listen and see the truth about you...."

"I don't regret what I am," Vincent whispered with sudden intensity, wanting him to know that. "Only that there are some things I'll never do, places I'll never see - but I don't regret me, Devin. Can you understand that?"

Furiously, Devin whirled on him. "No, I can't! I've seen you hurting too much, little brother. And I know you're afraid of.... of this beast you say you have inside you.... That you'll never know who or what you are - or anything about your parents...." Suddenly, he looked down, his voice softening like pouring dark. "Sometimes you cry out.... in your sleep."

Just for a moment Vincent stared at him, then abruptly he turned away, his whole-body tensing, not wanting to hear any more. Not wanting to know....

"You cry out for your mother." Devin reached out awkwardly, then slowly let his hand drop to his side before it had even half completed the gesture. "I'm sorry, Vincent. We're both orphans, I guess. Both never knowing who...."

"No!" The word was a snarl, and for a brief moment Vincent quivered on the edge of control, fighting back the anger, the anguish, the guilt that came rushing in upon him in one great foaming tide. "We're not the same! We never can be! You know what your parents were - they were both human! I don't even know that...." Shuddering, he clenched his hands until the claws bit deep into his palms and the pain brought him

back again. "I'll never know, Devin. Never."

"I'm sorry," Devin said again, helplessly. "I shouldn't have...." Then suddenly he flung himself down on his bed, his arms wrapped around his body as if to hold it all together, and turned his face to the wall despairingly. "Seems like every time I open my mouth, I hurt you...."

A sudden draught caught the candles, making them dance, and Vincent watched them for a moment before finally forcing himself to answer. "No," he murmured, and now his voice was gentle again, black velvet soft against a wound. "Not you, Devin. It's me. I'm the one who causes the pain."

But Devin didn't speak again, not even to acknowledge him, and finally Vincent knew there was nothing left for him to say. Quietly, sadly, he prepared for bed, extinguishing all but one candle, then he lay down and gazed through the dimness at the carousel. In his mind's eye, he could see it slowly revolving, its lights flashing brightly, the music filling the whole chamber until at last it seemed that it grew larger and larger, its painted horses pawing the air, neighing in triumph....

And on one of theirs, smiling and beautiful, was the woman from his dreams, calling to him and holding out her arms in welcome.

Elizabeth stepped back, slotted the paintbrush behind her ear and examined the spreading mural critically. What painter, writer or musician was ever truly satisfied with their work when - to hell with the critics - they were their own worst critic, knowing that there was always that little bit more, that final touch that would make a great work a masterpiece and a masterpiece a breathtaking dream of perfection? Maybe that was the vanity of being a creator....

'I am God and this is my universe.'

"Where am I going to be, Elizabeth?" Mandy's voice was curious and querulous at the same time, thin against the echoing vault of the Painted chamber, and the artist turned, smiling as the little girl came forward out of the group of admiring children. Flaxen curls and big blue eyes, a quick and ready grin.... hard to think that someone could be so callous as to beat and abuse her almost from birth then turn her out to fend for herself like some wild animal. She'd been found wandering the streets, dirty and starving, an old woman looks in a little girl's face, a seven year old whose childhood was already over - until after six months Below, she learned to trust again. It had taken her that long to even learn how to smile.

"Why, you're going to be right here, child. Next to Winslow and Cally. See? I've plotted your outline already."

Mandy giggled proudly. "Have you shown Father?"

"He did insist on it." Elizabeth's lips thinned suddenly in quick severity. "And when I find out who told him...."

A handful of protesting voices rose in unison until she finally raised her hands in surrender.

"All right, all right. He has his ways of finding out. I know that. Otherwise, he wouldn't be Father." The twinkle returned to her eyes and she drew herself up in a way that was meant to remind them they weren't here just to admire. "Right. Who's got some work to show me?"

Shyly, eagerly, a sudden flurry of drawings were thrust under her nose - *and who'd ever have thought fifteen years ago that I'd be teaching anyone when all they ever said was that the gallery was lucky to recoup its losses? Blaming me.... I was an artist! What the hell did I know about art world finance? All that ever mattered to me was a bare canvas, plenty of oils and imagination.*

But they killed me for it. No one ever bought a painting again.

The children were clamoring for an instant verdict on their pictures, but she took her time deliberately,

refusing to be rushed. Her drawing class was an extra, informal addition to the curriculum for those who expressed a desire to learn, but it was not something either she or they had set out to achieve. It had simply grown out of their irregular visits to her domain, and stayed.

They had crowded around her now, the mural forgotten, the intensity of their eagerness more than making up for those hollow years when nothing had been right and the art world had ignored her. Down here, everyone's gifts were appreciated. Down here, she could be free to do just as she pleased, whenever she liked. The world Above was the prison, not those rocky walls.

What made her look up then she didn't know. But suddenly, over the huddle of bent heads, the torches' flickering gleam flared for a moment to reveal him standing silent and alone under the arch of the entrance way, the tawny mane highlighted in gold around his shoulders, the planes, and hollows of his remarkable face bright and shadowed in the moving light. But it was his eyes, their blueness darkened almost to midnight black, that held her. The endless tunnel staring helplessly out from those tormented depths, the dulled pain pleading for relief....

"Can I give it to Father?" TP asked anxiously. "Will he like it?"

"Of course he will, child." The answer was automatic - she hardly even glanced down at the stick-like figure in robes that the little boy was holding out to her. But there was no movement, no acknowledgement from Vincent, and before she could call out to him to come in, her attention was distracted again and this time there was no escape, until all the budding young artists had been satisfied and their efforts fairly judged.

"The secret of being a good artist is knowing how to look at a thing," she finished. "Observation! How many flat-headed people have you ever seen?"

There was a concert of giggles and laughter as they reluctantly began to disperse, realizing that the lesson was over. Elizabeth was always pleased to see them, but she rarely let any of them stay for very long. Time was precious, and they didn't mind, because it meant that soon there would be a new painting to admire, a new wonder to delight at.

"Hi, Vincent!" some of them chorused, as they passed the familiar figure standing in the entrance, but if he made any answer, Elizabeth didn't hear it.

At last, when they had all trooped out, she stood and smiled at him, instinctively knowing that if she moved at all, he'd be gone, like a wild colt.

"Come in, child. Why didn't you join in with the others?"

He didn't answer. He seemed to be trembling, and his eyes were still dark, darker than she'd ever seen them, but at last he managed to push himself away from the wall and come forward as she bade. Puzzled, Elizabeth watched as he moved slowly past her and went over to the mural, where he stood silent and still for what seemed a long time, gazing at it as though trying to see something deep inside the picture.

"What is it, Vincent? Can't you tell me?"

"You see him too," he whispered suddenly, his voice hoarse with realization, and a shiver ran through him.

"See who?"

"The beast. The darkness that's always at my shoulder...." And she realized with horror that he was looking at the hooded figure hovering between the painted images of himself and Father. "Why else would you paint him, Elizabeth? If you can't see him?"

She found herself biting her lip, trying desperately to find an answer, remembering how she had warned Father of this. A child's grief, she'd told him, but it was something more than that. Vincent had always been a quiet boy - not withdrawn exactly, but constantly surrounded by a loneliness that only those who are

different can understand, and with a sudden rush of unaccustomed motherliness, Elizabeth gently put an arm around his shoulders.

"Listen," she said softly. "You're troubled because you think you're the only one who has that shadow beside him. But you're not. I have my own shadow and so does Father and everyone else I know. It's not something to be afraid of, Vincent. It's part of you. You have to learn to accept it."

"How?" There was a desperation in his voice now. Something lost, and for a moment she looked sideways at him, thoughtful.

"By accepting yourself."

He suddenly tensed, and she knew she'd struck a raw nerve. *Was that the real root of the problem, she wondered? At twelve years old, was Vincent only now coming to realize just what his differences meant?* Placing her hands on his shoulders, she turned him deliberately so that he was facing her, and found herself hit full on by the depth of anguish in his eyes.

"If I asked you to draw something for me right now, what would it be?" she demanded roughly. "No thinking - just tell me."

He seemed prepared for any question but that, and for a moment, the blue blaze of those eyes dropped awkwardly.

"A beach."

Well, that's an improvement over a black hole at any rate, she thought wryly. Then an idea struck her. Guiding him over to the trestle, she picked up her pallet, mixed some blue paint then peered at him from under her brows.

"Now look, I'm going to show you something, child. Remember I told you about building colours? What I do if I run out of certain shades?"

"You mix...," he began. And then stopped, staring.

"I mix," she agreed greatly. "Like if I have no green, what do I do?"

"Add yellow to blue."

Solemnly, Elizabeth did so. "Makes rather a good green, though I say it myself. But you have to remember it all depends on how much of one you mix with the other. Too much of either and you don't get what you want, but if you get the balance just right...." She paused and looked at him steadily. "You understand what I'm saying, child? You're an artist's pallet and the two sides of you, the human and.... and the other are the yellow and blue, mixing to make a wonderful boy called Vincent. It's a delicate balance, I know. Just like mixing paints. But you've got it just right. You've no cause to feel ashamed or awkward - the green only comes into being because it's made up of two totally different colours, and to favour one over the other would be to destroy the result." For a moment she stopped, but he kept his gaze fixed on the pallet and didn't look up. "Vincent, we're all such a complex mix. Sometimes I think we're rainbows inside. Shine a bright white light on us and we come out all the colours of the prism. But that's what makes us who we are."

"But there's no one else like me in the whole world," he whispered, not proudly, but with a desolation that wrung her heart. "The colours must have come out wrong!"

"No colour is ever wrong!" Abruptly, she tilted his chin so that he was forced to look up at her. "There's a beauty in everything in nature, if only we knew how to look at it, child. And you're beautiful too. Don't ever believe otherwise."

But he didn't answer her. Instead, he turned away, head bowed, and went back to the wall and the painting

of the hooded figure standing at his shoulder. Elizabeth watched him for a few moments, knowing there was no way she could go to him now. Wondering why, of all people, he had chosen to come to her with his anguish.

"Then where do the shadows come from?" she heard him say softly after a while.

Elizabeth looked down. "Sometimes from our imaginings. Our own fears. But sometimes, if we're lucky, they can become our strengths, too. You've got nothing to be afraid of, child. Not while you have love surrounding you - and that you'll always have. You understand me?"

He nodded, but somehow, she knew he wasn't convinced.

"Tell me," she asked lightly. "Why do you like being on your own?"

Suddenly, he went very still. "I can hear my heart."

Elizabeth smiled, very tenderly. "Then go and listen to your heart, child. You'll find it'll tell you the truth if you listen hard enough."

He looked at her wonderingly, and suddenly she could see that his eyes were calmer, that the lost emptiness had faded a little, and she found herself swallowing hard on the pity that rose helplessly into her throat at the sight of him.

"Run along and leave me to my work, Vincent. You don't need a recluse like me to tell you what you already know."

For a long time, he said nothing, only cocked his head slightly as if considering her words. Then he whispered very low. "I'll remember. I promise."

"Vincent.... come back and see me again soon."

The boy paused in the act of moving towards the door, and turned back. He didn't answer, but the look in his eye told her all she wished to know and, smiling, she picked up her brush once more and stirred vigorously at the splat of newly mixed green paint on the pallet. Only when she knew he had gone did she allow the tears to finally prevent her from doing even that.

He didn't really need the torch, because his night-sighted eyes could see quite clearly in even the darkest tunnels, but he carried one nevertheless. Down here in the lower levels, the only sounds were the dripping of water and the soft, almost inaudible padding of the booted feet, the only smells those of damp rock and earth and incalculable age, the only sense that of comfortable aloneness, as he merged into the deep places of a domain where no one but he ever ventured. At times like this, his only relief was in solitude, prowling the tunnels and caverns and the echoing ways, where he could listen to his heart in silence and find a kind of peace.

Maybe it had been the magic of the carousel. Or maybe it had been his growing inner darkness that had driven him to seek out Elizabeth and her wonderful chamber of colours. Because Elizabeth always seemed to understand his grief, even when he couldn't explain it in words, and simply to stand in the Painted Gallery, gazing at the pictures of a bright world he could never share, was like a balm to his soul and filled him with wonder. But somehow, the sight of the new mural, of that hooded, shadowy figure standing at his shoulder like the angel of death, had struck him with horror. It wasn't just the recognition that caught at his heart, but as he looked at it, Vincent was suddenly assailed by the realization of how truly different he was.

How dark and dangerous the beast within could be if he ever let it go.

He had come so close to killing Mitch that day in the Great Hall, that even the memory made him feel sick. He still couldn't really believe it had been him. It had been some evil thing he couldn't control, something that had brought down the red veil over everything and turned him into....

An animal.

Some blind, primitive, killing animal....

He didn't want to kill anyone. He didn't. He wanted to be an ordinary boy, to play in the sun and ride the carousel....

Then he looked down at his hands and knew that whatever else he was, he could never be an ordinary boy. Something had happened to make him what he was, and because of that he would never be able to do what everyone else did, or be free to live his life outside of these rock walls.

He could never have a woman's love.

Not even that of his parent's, seemingly.

He so desperately wanted to know how it had all happened. Who - or what - his real mother and father had been. Why they had abandoned him to die when the tunnel community could accept and love him so easily. Sometimes, in his dreams, he fancied he could hear his mother's voice, calling to him very softly, very kindly, but when he moved towards the voice, it always faded away into the mists, and when he woke up his cheeks were wet with tears. Devin and most of the others didn't have parents either, but at least they knew who they were, where they came from. He didn't even have that comfort.

Vincent paused a moment, swallowing hard. What has prompted him to ask Father about it, now of all times? It had only made Father uncomfortable and sad - he had felt it, and the feeling had added to his own burden of guilt. Because in some strange way he knew it was his fault. The way he looked, the fact that his parents didn't want him.... And who, after all, would want a boy who looked like an animal? Who growled and snarled and allowed his friends to provoke him into attacking in a killing rage? He was a monster, and the proof was there if he cared to look.

Except he never did. Father had been very careful to ensure that there was never a mirror in their chamber, no reflective surfaces in which he could see his beast-like face. Only on the wall of the Painted Gallery, where Elizabeth had portrayed the various members of the community, could he see what others told him was part of his difference.

He raised the sputtering torch, noting how the tunnel narrowed, twisting, and turning sharply into the darkness beyond. Yes. This was his place. Deep beneath the earth, out of sight of men. Shadowed and alone.... Logic told him it was a foolish dream even to think about it. Father had loved him enough to take him in, raise him, give him everything he'd ever had, and he loved the Doctor desperately. But it still didn't stop the dreams. Not of the gentle, sweet-voiced woman who called him from the darkness....

At first, when he'd been very small, he'd secretly thought that maybe Elizabeth or Ellen, or one of the other women, might be the one he sought. Later, when he started to go Above with Devin, he watched eagerly in the vain hope that perhaps he'd see her walking along a lighted street, looking for him. He'd never dared tell Devin, and though the hope had soon faded, there was still, even now, some secret little part of him that kept on wishing and believing it would come true.

He knew he would recognize her if he ever saw her. He had no clear idea of what she looked like, only that she would be very beautiful and she would smile at him without any fear or horror, would take him into her arms, hold him close and kiss his monstrous face and tell him she loved him. And that they would never, ever be apart again....

Suddenly, he found himself leaning hard against the damp wall, the pain in his chest almost unbearable. What was the matter with him? Why had these feelings, this yearning sadness, come upon him during these past weeks, looming over him and over all that he did? He had frightened Lisa, he had frightened Devin and made Father sad. He caused so much pain to those he loved....

Before he could stop himself, Vincent threw back his head and roared in anguish - a helpless, primeval wound, full of savage fury, terrible and unbearable in its intensity. An animal at the end of its endurance.... It released a little of the agony, but it made him feel no better. Deep inside lurked the beast, laughing and jeering at him, and he knew that he would never be free of it. It was the reason why they were all afraid of him, why his mother hadn't wanted him. The reason why he could never know what it was to have a woman's love....

Furiously, he straightened and forced his legs to move, but they felt weak and wobbly, almost as if he'd been running for miles uphill, and couldn't run any more. He'd needed to get away - to find new places, distant caverns and unknown tunnels, where no one else ever came, a sort of deep longing he couldn't comprehend but had to satisfy. Deeper than the Chamber of the Winds, he sensed that he was beyond the river, further than the outer reaches of the normal patrol routes and well out of pipe range. He was totally alone. Nothing but orcs and dragons to see his shame and hear his monster roar....

And somewhere far away, magical carousel horses went round and round.

His innate time sense told him he was staying out longer than he had intended, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to turn back just yet. Something was driving him inexorably onwards, through narrow fissures he could barely squeeze through, along passageways so low they forced him to crawl on his belly, sometimes for several hundred yards. He was in one now, a sandy tunnel whose roof was barely six inches above him, even prone as he was, but suddenly he paused, lifting his head to scent the air. A cool breeze was brushing his face, bringing with it the tang of running water, and for a moment he tensed, straining to hear the direction from whence it came. He'd spent hour pouring over old maps and charts in Father's chamber, but there was nothing he could remember that alluded to this area. Resting his head in his hands in order to give himself time to think, Vincent lay for a moment, breathing heavy. Then, making up his mind, he resolutely crawled forward, his hair rippled by the ever-strengthening breeze.

The ledge almost took him by surprise. He had long ago extinguished the torch, though he still carried it with him, looped through his belt, but though his eyes were more suited to the darkness that had prevailed ever since, the abrupt falling away of the tunnel floor still left him groping wildly for a moment or two. Gathering himself, he peered into the void, blinking in the sudden rush of cold air, the sound of running water now much cleared and louder than before.

In the shades of grey that were his night vision, he could see a stream rushing through a rift in the rocks perhaps twenty feet below. It had the new strength of sudden freedom, and looking around at the walls of the canyon, Vincent had the feeling that it was indeed a recent outpouring from a deeper, hidden source. He lay and watched it for a long time, chin in hands, realizing that he had come to the end of his trail. The rift was too wide to jump, and as far as he could tell by leaning carefully outwards, the cliff was sheer, but he would have liked to follow the stream and see where it led.

He had almost forgotten the painful thoughts that had driven him to seek out Elizabeth. Action had always been a panacea for his troubles, because the need to keep one's wits sharp when travelling Below was of prime importance. You couldn't afford to be thinking of other things when taking note of the twists and turns, or when watching out for loose rock, crumbling pathways or the thousand and one hazards that could happen so suddenly.

At last, by dint of careful maneuvering, he managed to twist around and begin the long crawl back along the low tunnel. He knew he would easily be able to find this place again if necessary, and no doubt Father would be glad to have one of the gaps in his charts filled in.

But at one of the junction ways he paused, listening intently as if to the heartbeat of the earth. Dim and far away, he could still hear the trickle of water deep in the rock and he frowned, trying to picture its trail. *Maybe it came out at the Mirror Pool. Or perhaps the underground river which fed the falls, and which had*

never been fully charted, had an unexpected tributary.... For a moment he considered the problem. Very few of the other children shared the same desire to explore as he did, and already his knowledge of the intricate tunnel system beneath greater New York was almost complete. Ventilation shafts, sewer access ways, heating ducts.... he knew them as a child from Above would know the gateway of his own back yard. He took a quiet pleasure from the skill, but always there was that little voice inside him whispering insidiously that it was because he was what he was, that he never got lost and always found the right way home. Animal instinct. Sixth sense. Something that had been planted in him by....'

He stopped the thought instantly.

'Always believe that we love you,' Father had said. 'Always believe that....'

Grimly, he found himself wondering *'if Father - if any of them - could bear to hear how the beast inside him jeered at that knowledge.'*

The route back led past one of the numerous entrances to the vast and shadowy area known as the Maze, and suddenly Vincent found himself pausing. Father had constantly impressed on them all how dangerous the Maze was, but no one really paid any attention. It was wet and consequently muddy, if you didn't watch your step, but the possibilities for make-believe were endless, with the caves and hollows, stalagmites and stalactites, drippings, echoing and mysterious swirling dark mists providing glorious opportunities for play and feats of daring. Cocking his head to one side, Vincent warred with himself. *Perhaps they wouldn't follow him here, those ghosts of his pain, the awful memories of joy and regret - Father and Devin, Lisa.... And far away, the echoes of a snarling beast and a shadowy woman who held out her arms to him in love....'*

The horses went round and round, the tinkling music filling his head until it shut off even the sound of the distant rushing stream.

Just for a moment, Mitch stood and grinned to himself, watching; watching as Lisa moved hesitantly forward between the boulders. She hadn't wanted to come here - she didn't like the dark, mysterious places, preferring to stay in the lighted, inhabited tunnels where she could be sure of herself, but he had finally managed to persuade her in spite of all objections, and he was determined to make the most of it.

"See? Nothing to be afraid of. Everyone comes here some time or another. Even Vincent," he added calculatingly, watching for her reaction, but she was too caught up in looking where she was going and trying to keep her skirt out of the wet to make any reply.

"This is the deepest part of the Maze, with all the best caves and hidey-holes. Look up there." He raised the candle higher so that the shadows fled back to reveal the rugged cliff face, pocketed with darkened alcoves. "You climb up there and there's no one can get to you. Great for playing cops and robbers. Cally once climbed to that top one and stayed there for ages - said he was looking at the view, but I reckon he was too chicken to climb back down." He grinned. "Had to come eventually, though. We threatened to tell Father where he was."

She flicked him a disgusted glance. "It's a horrid place. Why couldn't you have taken me to the Whispering Gallery or something?"

"Because I wanted it to be a place you'd remember." Suddenly, he moved closer, the candle flame dancing in his eyes. "Somewhere you've never been, not even with Vincent."

"I don't go everywhere with Vincent!"

"But you go skinny-dipping with him, don't you?"

Suddenly, she stared at him, her chin jutting defiantly. "And what if I do? There's no law against it. He taught

me to swim."

Mitch shook his head sadly. "And I thought cats didn't like water."

Something in the way he said it brought a rush of coldness to the pit of her stomach. Part of Mitch's attraction was that he was so unpredictable, but now she found herself wishing only for Vincent's steadiness and utter dependability. Especially in this dark, spooky place, with its dripping water and air of threatening oppression.

"I want to go now, Mitch," she said firmly, determined not to give way this time to his jeers about Vincent. "Take me back."

"But we only just got here." He glanced round innocently, swinging the candle so that the shadows jumped and loomed. "Don't you like it? Stay her long enough and you'll grow to love it, I swear you will."

"I don't want to!" Angry now, Lisa strode towards him. "Come on, I'm not joking. Take me back."

He shrugged. "Okay. If that's what you want." Then he suddenly thrust the candle almost into her face. "You want to hold it, scare-baby?"

For a split second she blinked and drew back, dazzled, raising a protective hand to shield her eyes. Then with shocking abruptness the candle went out and all that was left was the smoking dark.

"Mitch! What happened?" Blindly, she groped in front of her, but her hands touched only empty air. "Mitch! Where are you? For God's sake, stop fooling around! It isn't funny...."

There was no answer. No sound at all except the eternal drip and trickle of moisture down the walls, and in spite of herself Lisa felt panic start to twist at her throat. The blackness around her was total, deepened maybe by the sudden extinguishing of what had been the only source of light, and she began to gasp furiously in a desperate effort to stop the instinctive scream. He'd deliberately blown it out to frighten her - a prank the children often played, though usually only in tunnels and chambers where there was no possibility of becoming really lost or, perhaps, injured. But Mitch had done it here, in the very place she didn't now and hated instantly....

"Mitch, please...!"

Nothing. She tried standing still, straining to listen for the slightest rustle of footfall that would betray his presence but all she could hear was the pounding of blood in her ears, the thundering of her heart shaking her whole body. She had no candle or matches of her own - he had carried them all. A small whimper escaped her. The stunning disorientation of utter darkness had instantly taken all her sense of balance and direction. She'd never be able to find the entrance and hadn't he told her that this was the deepest part of the Maze? There were stories of people getting lost in here and never finding their way out - gone so completely that not even search parties had been able to find the bodies. Poor doomed souls, wandering blindly until they starved, or maybe fell down hidden crevasses deep in the heart of the earth....

Helplessly, she reached out with both hands, shuffling awkwardly forward as if approaching the edge of a cliff. And for all she knew that was exactly what she was doing. The rocky ground no longer felt comfortably firm but soft and yielding like quicksand, ready to give way at any moment and send her screaming down into the void.... Were there pockets of quicksand Below? She'd never heard of any, but that didn't mean there weren't. Anything was possible in this hellish blackness.

She crashed into something hard and slippery, and an involuntary scream ripped its way through dry lips, but it was only a boulder or a stalagmite, smooth and slick beneath her wildly pawing fingers. Almost sobbing, she pushed herself upright again and cautiously edged her way around it. She had absolutely no idea where she was or where the entrance lay.

"Don't leave me!" Her voice echoed mockingly back from the vaulted shadows. "Please, don't leave me...."

But she might have been the only person in the whole of creation, blind and helpless and now thoroughly panic-stricken. She had forgotten how utterly dark most of the caverns were, without even a rudimentary candle or lamp to see by - no one Above ever experienced blackness this profound, not even on the most starless of nights, and only Vincent of all the tunnel dwellers could see well enough without lamps and candles to light his way.

There was a sudden scurry over to her left and she whirled. "Mitch...?"

But it stopped almost instantly, and she knew it hadn't been anything human. Visions of rats or beetles or some other nameless thing of the deep places rose up before her, and this time she screamed in earnest.

She must have gotten turned around - she couldn't tell. She only knew she had to get out of here somehow. Run.

Stumbling against the scatter of rock and boulders littering the ground, bruising her shins, and skinning her ankles, Lisa rushed madly through the darkness. Tripped, fell, scrambled up again, hardly registering the pain or the sudden warm trickle down her leg, feeling as if she were ramming her head against an iron door that was the black eternal night pressing down, swallowing and suffocating.

And ran straight into something - someone - soft and strong and warm, with arms that instantly caught around her like some monster of the depths.... She screamed again, struggling and fighting with all her might, knowing it was Mitch, that this time she was going to put her mark on him for doing this to her and....

"Lisa!" said a voice calmly, urgently. "It's all right. It's me.... Vincent. It's all right...."

Her struggles ceased abruptly, as though someone had flipped a switch. She still couldn't see anything, but that gentle voice was unmistakable, as was the touch of him, strong and real in the darkness.

"Vincent?"

"You're safe," he whispered soothingly. "You're safe now...."

And then her arms were around him, her face pressed against his shoulder, the warm softness of his silky mane against her cheek, and she could smell the wool and leather of his clothes, the musky, smoky, boy/man scent of him all mixed up with her own fear and gratitude, and she sobbed helplessly, unable to stop herself.

"Oh, Vincent.... He left me and I couldn't find my way.... couldn't see...."

He didn't answer, simply held her awkwardly, feeling her body shivering and wrenched with sobs, trembling hard against his.

"You saved my life...."

"Don't you have a light?" he asked quietly at last, easing his hold on her. But her own grip suddenly tightened, as if she were suddenly afraid that he would leave her alone again.

"Mitch had it. He brought me down here and he had the candle.... Then he blew it out and he left me, Vincent! He left me here to die...!" One hand tentatively reached out and touched his long hair, seeking reassurance. "I was so scared...."

Vincent swallowed, suddenly glad that she couldn't see him.

"I'll take you back to your chamber," he said after a pause. "Stand still a moment and I'll light my own torch." Fumbling with the matches, he could feel that her hand never left his arm until the torch was finally alight and revealed them staring into each other's eyes.

Lisa gasped for one shaky breath then released it. Vincent. Vincent with his night-adapted vision.... He had never looked so wonderful, standing there in the wavering golden light, his strange, animal face as calm and gentle, as if they stood together in the Great Hall waiting for the music to begin....

"You're beautiful," she heard herself whisper unashamedly.

His eyes suddenly lowered, and she knew it had been the wrong thing to say.

"Vincent...."

"You're bleeding," he said quietly, and without another word he handed her the torch, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and knelt to dip it in a puddle of clear water at the base of the cliff.

Lisa could find nothing to say. She forced herself to stand stock still while he gently wiped away the blood that had trickled down her leg from the gash on her knee, feeling a quiver run through her as his hand touched her suddenly icy flesh. *'He felt warm,'* she thought. Warm and gentle....

Keeping her gaze fixed on his bent head, she was hardly aware he had finished, until he suddenly looked up and deep into her eyes.

"Come," he said softly, and got slowly to his feet, taking the torch back. "I'll guide you out. The Maze is a dangerous place - it's why Father doesn't like us coming here. Mitch should never have...." Then he stopped.

Lisa stepped carefully around a boulder. The leg felt better already. "So, why are you here?"

For a long time, she thought he wasn't going to answer that. Then, at last, he seemed to sigh.

"I've been exploring. I found a stream at the bottom of a canyon that I think might come out by the falls. If not...." He paused and cocked his head as if considering. Or listening. "It could even be near here, could even be the reason for the seepage that created the Maze in the first place."

Lisa wasn't much interested in geology, or the existence of deeper caverns that only meant more darkness. The frantic thudding of her heart was thankfully slowing now, but she still kept a grip on his arm, unwilling to let him go.

"Let's just get out of here, okay?"

He nodded and began to pick his way carefully over the stony ground, careful to take only the smoothness route for her. Neither of them spoke again until they were finally in the haven of the well-lit tunnels leading to the main chambers. Then she abruptly turned and put one hand lightly on his arm.

"Are you going to tell Father?"

He looked at her steadily. "Are you?"

She smiled with a strange coquettishness. "You could always just growl at Mitch instead. Frighten him - like he frightened me."

Suddenly, it was as if his blue eyes were sheeted over with ice, and he pulled away almost in horror.

"Go on, Vincent," she urged, ignoring his reaction, feeling herself fired with a desire for vengeance now that her first fright was over. "Just like you did in the Great Hall, remember? He deserves it - he's jealous of you anyway...."

"Jealous? Of me?" He stared at her incredulously. "Why?"

For a moment, Lisa fought back another smile, one of tenderness this time. "Because of me. Why else?" Then she stopped, absently fingering his sleeve. "Go on, Vincent. I want you to. Growl and threaten him like you did before. You don't have to hurt him. Just.... pretend to. Huh? Please? For me?"

She heard the gasp catch in his throat even as he turned away.

"Do you think I like doing that?" he whispered painfully, so low she hardly heard him. "Is that all I am to you, Lisa? An animal who scares people?"

"Topsiders would be scared just looking at you," she returned with hurtful candor. "Of, come on, Vincent - it's no big deal. Mitch is a bully and he's a coward. And he also thinks he can tell me what to do. Well, he's wrong, and if you'd only have a little confidence in yourself you'd show him." For a moment, she gazed up into that incredible cat-face and moved a little closer. "Look at you! You can see in the dark, you can hear things we can't, you're far stronger than any other boy and you've got those wonderfully wicked claws... You may not like all that, Vincent, but you could turn them to your advantage. I know I would!"

He didn't answer her. His head was down in that old familiar way he had, and she couldn't see those iced-over eyes any more. But she could see his hands, knotted into massive fists of anguish at his sides, and she felt herself quiver....

"Okay," she whispered at last into the painful silence. "Okay, if that's how you feel. You brought me out of the Maze, but you won't defend my honour. It's okay, Vincent. I understand." She waited for a moment, but he didn't look up, and she heard herself adding coolly. "What's the use of being you if you don't take advantage of it? You're no good for anything else, after all."

Even as the words left her mouth, the full realization of the cruel words hit her like a savage blow in to gut. He'd saved her life and now here she was, taunting him with those very qualities that had made her rescue possible. Unthinkingly, she reached out for him, knowing only that she had to make it right again, that she had to tell him how sorry she was....

"Vincent, please...!"

But he had already turned away, anger and pain radiating from him in a white heat so intense that she couldn't even get near him.

"I'm sorry!" she cried desperately. "Don't go! I didn't mean it. Truly, I didn't...!"

For an instant, she thought he wouldn't listen, that he'd simply walk away as he so often did when a quarrel presented itself. But instead, he stopped, and slowly turned to face her, the anguish in his eyes almost unbearable.

"I am sorry," she repeated, biting back tears. "You're the gentlest boy I've ever known, Vincent - I know you don't like doing things like that. I was just.... so angry at him for doing what he did to me. You understand?"

"Yes," he whispered with a strange sort of helplessness.

"Then you do forgive me?"

He lowered his head again. "Of course, I do."

She knew she ought to be content with that, but she wasn't. Sometimes it was so hard to know what Vincent was thinking or feeling - his face gave little away and he never raised his voice in anger, at least not that she had heard. But he escorted her back to her chamber in silence and when she finally turned to thank him again, there was something about him that made her throat ache.

"I don't know what I'd have done if you'd not been there," she murmured awkwardly after a moment.

"Lisa...." He stopped and looked down, now almost inaudible. "You've seen me when I lose control - you know what I can do. So please.... Don't ever ask me to do that for no reason." A deep shuddering breath trembled in his throat. "I wish I could make you understand what it is that's.... inside me. Only I can't, and maybe I never will. Because I don't understand it myself. I only know.... that I can't let it win."

"No need," she smiled bravely. "My fault, anyway. I shouldn't have asked."

He looked at her long and steadily, knowing there was nothing else to say, then quietly turned and left her standing there, her hands twisting in the folds of her skirt.

Once out of sight, he broke into a stumbling run, keeping on until he was far enough away from her chamber for him to be neither seen nor heard. Only then did his monumental control finally break. Collapsing against the tunnel wall, he threw his head back in anguish, a gut-wrenching whimper forcing its way from his lips. There was no escape from the reality - none at all. Devin and Lisa, Mitch.... they all knew him for what he was, an animal whose only purpose was to injure and terrify others. For the rest of his unnatural life....

Through a mist of burning tears, Vincent held up his hands and stared at them until they blurred beyond recognition. Then he closed his eyes in despair and sought refuge in the spinning darkness.

Reb often kept his shop open well into the evening - not because it did a brisk trade, but because he liked to feel in touch with the city beyond the dingy door. He'd learned to love the concrete and steel and cracked sidewalks almost as much as the lonely remembered memories of the early years on his father's farm, and the nature of his business enabled him to meet so many different kinds of people who wanted to buy or sell, or simply to find out about years past. And it was in the evening he preferred to carry out his dealings with the tunnel community. The sub-basement beneath his shop had a hidden access route to the upper levels, though like most Helpers he didn't venture beyond it in case he lost his way. A summons on the pipes always brought one of the children or a sentry. And at the yearly Winterfest celebrations, when Helpers were invited Below, a guide was sent to escort them down to the Great Hall. He'd always had a good nose for direction, but he didn't trust himself to wander the clanging dimness without one of them to take him.

'Getting old, old man. Time was you'd a risked it anyhow, just for the adventure. Restless blood, like the boy. Now....'

Sighing, he moved over to the door, turned the **'Open'** sign around so that it read **'Closed,'** then hesitated. *'What the hell....'* Shrugging, he opened up again and stepped outside to sniff the evening air, just like he used to do when it was fragrant with new mown grass and peach blossoms, and warm with stabled horses. He'd never be able to recommend car exhaust, smog and garbage cans over those memories, but for over forty years they'd had to do.

He never saw them come out of the shadows. Didn't even have time to draw breath before he was slammed back against the door frame so hard he barely managed to keep his feet.... and then they were past him and into the shop like he was nothing and nobody. Two punks....

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, where y'all goin'."

"How much you got, grandpa?" one of them snarled, juggling with hyped up nervousness. "You got some bread for me and my buddy here? Or we going to have us a little party?"

'No more'n sixteen,' Rob thought absently, bracing himself and wishing he was behind the counter, in reach of his gun. *'Young punks....'*

"Ah ain't got nothin' you want," he retorted, watching warily as they prowled around the dimness, sizing it up. The leader had a gun and the other was holding up a Bowie knife deliberately so that it caught the gleam of the street light outside. *'Well, we was most always outnumbered and it never made no odds, not even when old Sherman was marching to the sea....'*

The youth who had spoken glanced over his shoulder. "See what he's got, man."

His companion grinned and wandered nonchalantly along the shelves. "Sure is some junk here."

"Ah'm warning you punks - clear out or you'll have more trouble than ya know what to do with."

"Hey." The leader suddenly whipped up the gun, pressing the barrel hard against Reb's cheek. "You just keep your mouth shut, Grandpa! Less you want me to feed this to you piece by piece."

Reb froze, hearing the crash emptying shelves behind him as the other youth swiped everything off onto the floor by way of wordless emphasis. Trouble was with these types, they were unpredictable - y'all never knew what they were going to do next. Or even if they'd be content when they got what they came for....

The boy's eyes burned feverishly as he leaned closer, caressing the gun lightly across the old man's face.

"That's right, Grandpa. You stay real quiet."

"I can't get into this frigging thing!" His companion growled suddenly, slamming at the till in frustration.

"Get him to open it, man, or we'll be here all night."

The eyes smiled lazily. "You heard him, Grandpa. Let's go."

For a moment, Reb contemplated making a dive for the door and getting the hell out of there. But the gun never wavered from him by an inch, and he knew he'd be dead before he'd barely got those old muscles moving. Slowly, he came around to the till and rang it open - and was instantly pushed aside by the youth with the knife who made a grab for a handful of bills and held them up incredulously.

"'Twenty-three dollars?' That all you got? 'Twenty-three lousy frigging dollars?'"

"Where's the rest?" the other demanded menacingly, and Reb suddenly heard the gun cocking, hard and clear into the silence. "Come on, old man - you got more than this. Where is it?"

"Ah ain't got no more," he returned defiantly. "What you think this is, Macy's? That's all Ah got."

"You're a liar, old man. You got some stashed away. You just bring it out or you're gonna be real damn sorry."

"You deaf or just plain stupid, boy?" From the corner of his eye, Reb could see his own weapon, lying on a shelf under the counter, nice and handily for these kinds of emergencies. "Whoever it was told you ah'm rich is a no good lyin' Yankee."

"Don't mess with me, old man...."

'Nice and easy, Reb. Just take it slow and....'

"He's got a gun!" the one with the knife yelled. "Goddamn...."

Just for a split second it was like everything slowed right down, down to the fraction of time it took for the hammer to go back, the flash to illuminate the darkness and dazzle him, and then he was standing there, feeling the bullet tearing through and exploding his chest, the sense of utter incredulity keeping him hanging there long after all feeling went from his legs....

Somehow, he found himself lying at the far end of the counter, wedged between his stool and a broken shelf, a scatter of nameless junk around and beneath him. There was no pain, just a strange sensation of something breaking and giving way deep inside, the taste of warm liquid metal filling his mouth.

'My God, the bastards must've shot me,' he thought vaguely, irritated at the notion. *'You gotta move faster'n that, Reb. Can't let some Yankee punk sneak up and....'*

'Pa and Ah went hunting. Didn't have no mountain lion in Georgia, but we had fine times, out all day and a six-pack round the campfire came evening, listening to the sounds of the night. Pa always told tall tales and Ah fancied they was all out there, the wolves and lions, just waitin'.... God, it's near now. Ah can hear the roar like it was right here with me. Mountain lion....'

Human screams. The soft, unmistakable sound of flesh parting. *'Surely it ain't me.... spilling out all over.'*

Funny. You can hear the cannon roar -- or maybe it's just that lion came down outta the north and....'

There was a face.... bending over, blurring. "Reb. Reb. What happened? Don't die. Reb...."

'And beyond that the Bonnie Blue Flag, flying in the breeze, running down over Chancellorsville the day-old Stonewall got his....'

Tried to speak, but somehow nothing would come, nothing except that warm, metallic saltiness, filling his mouth. A familiar face, fast receding into the darkness. *'You gotta listen to me, boy. You gotta listen....'*

'Hell, Ah ran out of time long ago. Nothing left but watch the curtain come down. What's that you said, Stonewall?'

'Let's cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees....'

Devin slumped back against the counter and simply sat there, too stunned to even register the debris around him. The silence now that those other sounds had stopped. Nothing but Reb's sprawled body and the slowly congealing blood....

Too late. They'd been too damned late....

"No," he whispered aching. "No, you can't. I won't let you...."

But the old man didn't answer and there was nothing he could do any more.

With an effort he pulled himself to his feet, almost falling again as his legs refused to obey him. The street lamp outside cast a dim glow, but it was bright enough.

"Vincent...?"

He could see him, standing by the wall, half hidden in the shadows, frozen to immobility. Could hear him, too, the sobbing breaths tearing their way from him as if drawn with red hot pincers and, shuddering, Devin hesitated, trying not to see the body at Vincent's feet, the blood that has splashed over the floor. The gun still lay near the outflung hand but he didn't even think to pick it up. He wanted to go to Vincent and tell him that it didn't matter, that if he hadn't done what he did then perhaps they would both be lying alongside Reb - but he knew he couldn't. Because he, too, realized that now nothing would ever be the same again.

'He's a frigging animal,' Mitch said....

"We've got to get out of here, Vincent."

"I.... didn't mean to," Vincent whispered in horror, his eyes never leaving the dead boy at his feet. "I didn't...."

Devin put his hand on his arm but it was torn out of his grasp with a violent fury.

"Leave me alone!"

"Okay, okay." Only then, backing off in a careful surrender, did Devin see that the fur on both Vincent's hands were soaked and matted with blood, and suddenly he felt bile rise into his throat. His brother had done this. The beast had ripped apart another human being and he....

"Reb's dead, Vincent. There's nothing more we can do. Let's go before the cops come."

He turned away, back towards the door leading to the rear of the shop and the access hatch to Below, not even bothering to check if Vincent was following. He had to get out of here before he disgraced himself and throw up.

"No," Vincent whispered, his voice taut and harsh and stranger than Devin had ever heard it. "No."

"Dammit, you got to come! Right now, or...." And then he turned, terror suddenly seizing him. "Vincent, no!"

Not that way! Not out there!"

But it was way too late. He saw that, even as he opened his mouth. Abruptly snapping out of his stupor, Vincent whirled for the door and ripped it open so that the threatening night poured in, illuminating the bodies, glinting on black blood seeping into the floorboards, and then, to Devin's horror, he plunged into the darkness and was gone.

Just for a moment, Devin hung there, stunned into disbelief. Then a wave of sheer icy terror drove him forward too, out the door and up the short flight of steps to sidewalk level, screaming his brother's name.... And was suddenly brought up short, dazzled. Whirling red and blue lights, the screech of tires, the sudden filling up of an empty world battering in on his senses.... He stopped, frantic. There was no sign of Vincent or the second youth who had seized his opportunity to flee, only cops pouring out of the cars, the scattered knot of onlookers who always magically appeared at times such as these. There was nowhere to go, nothing he could do except maybe get caught himself if he stayed, and with an inarticulate sob of helplessness, he turned and fled back into the shop, to the haven of the hidden underground access at the rear.

In the dimness of Below, he stood breathing deeply, listening to the muffled sounds of search and discovery going on above him. Boots on a wooden floor. The sudden clatter and crunch as another of Reb's trinkets fell off a ruined shelf and was stepped on. Exclamations and curt orders.... Squeezing his eyes shut over welling tears, Devin clung to the iron ladder and fought against the horror surging inside him. Vincent had killed. For just an instant his kind, gentle younger brother had turned into a snarling, mauling beast and had killed as easily and as speedily as....

He didn't want to remember, but there was no forgetting. Not the gunshot or the sight of fountaining blood or the horror of Vincent's bared fangs and madly savage eyes as he lunged forward upon the killer. Or Reb, crumbled behind the counter, a great hole blasted through his chest....

'What am I going to do? What am I going to tell Father? Vincent's gone Above and I don't know where to find him....'

The more he ran, the easier it became until soon he was racing full tilt, careening around corners, sliding down ladders without using the rungs, crashing into walls and staggering off them again until his whole body was a mass of thudding bruises he couldn't even feel. Once he almost knocked someone down, but he didn't stay to see who it was. He was blind and deaf, one great seething mass of anguish way out of control.

Until he finally exploded into Father's chamber, pouring sweat and tears, his entire chest one blazing mass of agony, gasping....

"Dear God, Devin! What's the matter?" And then suddenly Father was on his feet, his face grey and pinched as Devin had ever seen it. "What's happened?"

"Vincent...!" He managed to sob. "He's Above. And Reb's dead...."

"Reb?" For an instant confusion unfocused Father's eye----and then he started shaking. "Devin, for God's sake, tell me! Are you all right? Where's Vincent?"

Fighting for breath, the boy wiped his face with the cuff of his sweater, gulping out the words incoherently.

"Someone shot Reb.... just as we got to his shop. Vincent...." He stopped, shuddering. "Vincent...."

"What?" Father's voice was hoarse with dread.

"Vincent killed the man who did it...." And then he hung there, trying not to see the expression on the Doctor's face, the disbelief, and the recognition of something that should have been forgotten long ago. He felt a tear trickle helplessly down his cheek but somehow couldn't summon up the will to wipe it away.

"Father...."

"No," Father whispered, suddenly staggering, his cane limp and useless in a weakened hand. "It can't be...."

"There's a boy lying up there with his throat ripped out," Devin cried furiously. "I watched Vincent do it. Just one blow - that's all it took. His claws...."

"But where is he?" The anguish in Father's voice was terrible. "Surely you didn't leave him...."

Anger surged through Devin before he even had time to recognize it.

"He ran out as the cops came. I couldn't stop him. Don't you think I tried? The cops were all over the place and if I'd stayed any longer, they'd have arrested me! There wasn't a thing I could do, Father! He'd lost himself - looked at me as if he didn't even know who I was! I swear to you I'd have stopped him if I could! Don't you believe that?"

"I don't know!" The Doctor retorted wildly, running his hand through his hair, and limping around his chamber like one pounced. "After what you said the other night.... Going Above with him after I told you...." He stopped abruptly, glaring. "Why were you both in Reb's shop?"

Devin looked down suddenly, pride warring with defiance and grief overwhelming all.

"We were taking him some shoelaces. His old ones were broken and...." Horrified, he felt his eyes fill and overflow before he could stop them. "He was an old man, and he was poor. I wanted to give him something for letting me have the carousel for Vincent and now he's dead...."

"Oh God," Father whispered. "Oh, Devin. I'm sorry." Helplessly, he reached out to put his arm around the boy, but Devin moved just fractionally out of range, his head down.

"He was my friend. He was always so proud of coming from the South - used to talk about Lee and Jackson and stated rights like the Civil War was only yesterday...." His face suddenly crumpled and he didn't look defiant any more, only like any other boy confronted with the burden of life and death for the first time.

"They didn't have to shoot him, Father. Reb never hurt anybody. They didn't have to do that.... And now Vincent's gone and...."

"He'll have enough sense to take the nearest access drain or something." Father murmured vaguely, but his words comforted neither of them. "I'll have an alert put out on the pipes for all the sentries to keep watch for when he comes...." Then he stopped and bit his lip. "He'll come home, Devin. There's nowhere else for him to go."

"But what if they've found him already? If some cup with a gun...."

"Don't say it!" The Doctor's voice was fierce, anguished, more frightened than Devin had ever heard it.

"Don't even think it, Devin! He'll come. He must." Clenching his hand in his hair, he turned away. "Of course, Vincent's bigger and stronger than any boy his age, but I didn't think it could happen so soon. Not like this...."

"What?" Devin heard himself demand savagely, incredulously, as the muttered words faded into the silence. "You didn't think that the beast inside him he's so afraid of would come out and do something like this? It's what he's been trying to tell you - tell all of us - for so long, Father! Because no matter how much you want to believe in his humanity, he's still part animal - and tonight I saw him kill like one!" He shuddered, his eyes glazing. "He never even bothered about the gun. Just went right in, ripping...."

"Don't," Father whispered painfully. "Don't, Devin. Please."

"His hands were covered in blood...."

The Doctor turned away, closing his eyes.

"He attacked Mitch the other day." Devin whispered after a long moment. "I didn't want to tell you. He...."

He stopped, looking away. "Mitch provoked him and he just lashed out. If I hadn't come in...." Then suddenly his eyes were fixed on Father's face in a strange kind of desperation. "I was the only one who could stop him. And afterwards it was like something had happened to him deep inside. He's withdrawing from me, Father. Or something, I don't know. But he keeps talking about the darkness in his heart. And the albatross...."

"The albatross...?" Father stared numbly. "Dear God...." Then, automatically, "Was Mitch hurt?"

Devin shook his head. "His jacket was torn, that's all. He and Lisa...." Miserably, he looked down. "I keep trying to remember Vincent's nearly thirteen - that he's younger than me, that he's just another kid. But he isn't, is he, Father? Just another kid, I mean. He's scared of what's inside him because he knows what it can do. And he could've killed Mitch - he was going to, except that I stopped him in time. But I couldn't stop him tonight, Father. That boy shot Reb and Vincent just...." He shuddered as if remembering his own worst nightmare. "I don't know him anymore. I only know that beast up there wasn't my brother."

Weakly, Father groped for his chair and sank into it as if all the strength had gone from his legs. He felt numb, unreal, as if the whole world were unravelling around him, all except for that hard knot of fear in his gut. Elizabeth had been right all along, and he'd been so blind. So damn blind...."

"Father...." Devin suddenly moved closer, his jaw set, eyes hard. "If I work for the money, can I have a knife?"

For a moment he blinked, not sure if he'd heard right, if his mind were playing strange tricks of non sequitur. "A.... knife?" he echoed faintly. "What...? Why?"

"Because it'd be useful!" the boy howled suddenly, losing control. "Because maybe if I'd had one up there, I could've stopped those punks - and it would've meant Vincent needn't have.... done what he did. Rather me than him, after all."

"Devin...."

"And besides, can't I have one just because I want to? Something of my own?"

Distractedly Father tightened his hand in his hair until the pain brought tears to his eyes.

"Having a weapon wouldn't have helped Vincent. It would only have got you killed!"

"Can I have one?" Devin repeated stonily as it hadn't heard.

"Of course you can't! Knives are dangerous weapons and you're too young to handle one responsibly."

"Up top kids my age have them!"

"Well, it may have escaped your notice, Devin, but down here we try and live our lives a little differently from those Above. Besides," and Father took a deep breath, trying to steady himself and bring his jangling nerves under control, "you want it because of what happened tonight and that's no reason. Having Vincent kill is bad enough...." And then he stopped, shaken. He hadn't meant to say that. Vincent wasn't a killer. Vincent was....

Something not human....

"Reb said if I talked to you...." Devin began, and then something hard passed over his face, and his eyes went angry. "But I can't talk to you, can I? Never could. I don't know why I bothered. You always see the worst side of anything I say."

"That's not true...." Father began. Then he swallowed hard. "But I won't allow a boy of this community to carry a knife just because he thinks it'd be useful! If anything should happen...."

"It already has!" Devin cried furiously. "But I suppose claws don't count, do they?"

'He's unpredictable,' said Mitch grinning, 'you sure you got him under control.... '?'

"I'm sorry, Father. I'm sorry...."

"Sorry doesn't even begin to cover it, Devin." Wearily, the Doctor covered his face with his hands and took a deep shuddering breath. "On my part, not yours. Oh God, if anything's happened to him."

"I'll go Above and search."

"It's too risky. And he'll come back. He will."

"What if he doesn't?" Almost before he realized it, the boy moved closer and reached out one hand, a feather-light touch on the bowed shoulder. "Maybe he's too scared to come back."

Father looked up suddenly, and with a shock, Devin saw that his eyes were wet.

"Why should he be scared? We're his family! He knows we love him!"

Devin said nothing, only stirred awkwardly, wishing there was something he could do to recall the past couple of hours, and knowing there wasn't. In the silence that followed, he found his feet dragging over to the door and then Father roused abruptly, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Devin - I expect you to heed me about the knife."

For a moment the boy paused and looked back at him stonily. Then, without a word, he turned and was gone, leaving Father sitting there staring after him as if the whole world had suddenly come to a standstill.

'Vincent. My son. All I want is for you to come back safe to me. For you to understand that you can't struggle against your nature forever. You are what you are, Vincent. There's no one else who can be blamed for that. And I love you so much, my son. Be well. Be safe. Please be safe....'

The swift, staccato clanging and tapping filled the Pipe chamber, the junctions and relays vibrating with myriad messages passing to and fro between the denizens of the tunnel world. It was a vast, subterranean communications centre, a mad scientist's laboratory, packed with twists and loops of cast iron, copper and aluminum piping, most of it older than anyone could remember - water, gas and electrical conduits that had served long forgotten systems, hotels, and apartments of the world Above. In the midst of it, standing on one of the higher platforms, stood a small young man, his sharp, intent face frowning thoughtfully as he listened, head cocked, to the messages echoing around him. Some he would have to re-route himself, some he would have to aid simply because the '*quick-tap*' code was not fully understood by the newer members of the community. He planned to refine some of the older codes himself, codes that were variants of Morse and had been installed by one of the founders of this world, John Pater, whom they now called Paracelsus. A genius in his way - but he, Pascal, had been brought up with the pipes, had learned to love them until they had become his life, and he served them like an acolyte, unable to bear being away from them for long. He loved nothing better than to stand as he was doing now, wrench in hand, poised and listening to the music of the tubes....

He rarely had visitors. That didn't trouble Pascal, because this was all the company he craved - his chamber was right next door just in case of emergencies, and he missed none of the gossip that filtered through the system. But neither was he a recluse like Elizabeth or Narcissa, or even like his own father - who had stayed down here and rarely came to the upper levels, even for Winterfest. Pascal mixed with the others, but given the choice he was happier here, one of Father's old stethoscopes in his ears, listening, tapping and planning his improvements.

He didn't hear footsteps behind him until someone tugged hesitantly at his sleeve. When he turned round he found himself staring into wide hazel eyes, and had to grope for a moment in his memory for her name.

"You're a stranger down here, Lisa."

'A delicate-looking child', he thought idly, force of habit keeping his ear cocked to the thick lead conduit snaking off into the upper reaches of the chamber. Made all the more frail by her white face and wide eyes fixed hopefully upon his.

"Have you heard any news of him, Pascal?"

He shook his head sadly, knowing who she meant. "Not a word. He hasn't tried to come back Below or one of the sentries would have spotted him. There's been nothing. Not even from any of the Helpers." His shoulders slumped in defeat as if somehow the lack was his fault, the fault of the system. "Almost two days. I'm starting to fear the worst."

"Don't say it!" The words came out with the fierceness of a spitting wildcat. "Don't dare say it! Vincent'll come back. I know he will!"

Pascal shrugged and turned away, not knowing what else to say. News of Vincent's disappearance Above had spread through the community like wildfire, the tense hush and taut faces betraying the general fear and concern everyone felt for the unique boy, who had become a symbol of their hope and togetherness. Everyone loved Vincent.

He thought of last night, of how Father had come to the Pipe chamber and stayed for hours, restless and despairing, unable to sleep. Father hadn't eaten or slept at all since Devin had brought the awful news, and though he'd not said much, Pascal had been able to see how frantic with worry he was, could feel it vibrating through him just as he felt the vibration in the pipes.

"I keep listening," she was whispering sadly. "To all the messages. Just in case...."

"I'll put out a special all-call," he promised gravely. "As soon as I hear anything, I promise."

She nodded dumbly, then stood for a moment, twisting her hands together, her face a picture of misery and indecision.

"He'll be all right," Pascal said after an awkward pause. "You know Vincent---he won't let any topsider get the better of him."

"You don't understand," she murmured very low. "It's all my fault. All of it...."

Pascal looked at her steadily. She was serious, he could see that, and for a moment, he didn't know what to say to her. But in the end, she spared him having to think of a reply because she simply smiled warily then turned and made her way carefully down the steps, leaving him gazing thoughtfully after her, tapping himself on the chin with his wrench, his mind already half fixed on the messages crossing and relaying through the junctions. Whenever that particular message came, he, Pascal would be ready and waiting for it. That he promised himself.

But if it never came, if Vincent never returned home, then.... Pascal shuddered. He didn't even want to think about it. The consequences were too awful to contemplate.

It was late. The silence of the tunnels - unbroken except for the occasional tap on the pipes - made his limping footsteps seem extraordinarily loud and echoing. But it was the emptiness in his heart that suffocated him. The void where the warm comfort of his son used to be. Now fear had emptied all that, deep-rooted and all-pervading, the hard knot in his stomach growing like a cancer with every passing hour. The very thought of food made him retch, and as for trying to sleep....

For a moment Father paused and fought for breath. It felt as if the malignancy was reaching up to crush his chest, a cold, unrelenting vice whispering nightmares in his ear, turning his hair grey....

Vincent....

It felt like he had been wandering for hours. His hip ached savagely and there was a hard spot of pain in his palm from clutching his cane too hard. Holding on to his control for all their sakes. And that was perhaps the worst of all, having to see the anxious, sympathetic faces, hear the softly murmured expressions of hope, knowing that they could sense his fear. Because, dear as Vincent was to everyone, he was dearest of all to the one who was his father.

He found himself on the threshold of the boys' chamber and for a moment he hesitated. Devin would be asleep, and he didn't want to have to see the other empty bed and thereby drive the knife even deeper.

Devin had asked for a knife....

Quietly, Father entered the dim chamber and looked around. It was empty, even Devin's bed hadn't been slept in, and an instant shock of renewed fear slammed into his throat because he knew where Devin was, what he was doing. His brother's keeper. *'I'll go Above and search....'* But what could a boy do, up there in the lonely streets? What could any of them do?

'He ripped his throat out....'

Anguished, Father closed his eyes then opened them again. On the night stand by Vincent's bed stood the gaily-coloured carousel, silent now, its model horses frozen in mid-gallop. A simply toy - and Reb had known how much it would mean to a boy who could never see the real thing. Now Reb was dead and Vincent wasn't a child any more.

'Dear God, I'd almost forgotten - tomorrow is his birthday....'

The pain of the thought almost made him double over. Thirteen years ago, on the coldest night of the year, Anna had found that dying baby and now, almost to the day, Vincent was gone again. Gone Above, into a world of which he knew nothing. Alone with his anguish - with the beast, who for a moment, had robbed him of his gentleness and his humanity....

It had been a long time since Father had really looked around this chamber. He'd forgotten what a difference the fan window made - the light it shed even when no candles were lit and in the golden glow, he could see the spill of books and papers over the table all the indefinable trinkets and stashed away objects with which between them, Devin and Vincent had littered their home. Everything spoke of easy comfort and boyish content, of make believe and dreams, and the sight saddened him even more. Without them everything was so incredibly lonely and he himself cast adrift, not knowing where to go or what to do.

He idly turned over a book that was lying half hidden amongst the patched woolen blankets and quilts of Vincent's bed, already knowing what it would be. *'The Ancient Mariner'* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "And the albatross...." Father weighed the book in his hand, trying to remember something, anything, that Vincent had told him that evening over the aborted chess game. But all he could see were all those tear-filled blue eyes as Vincent asked desperately. "Why am I different...?"

"The albatross about my neck was hung...."

Very gently, Father laid the book back on the bed, idly smoothing the coloured covers, arranging the pillows and cushions as if, at any moment, Vincent would come in and fling himself down in a boyishly untidy sprawl of arms and legs, his long tawny mane tousled over his shoulders.

'How many times,' Father thought aching, *'he had stood quietly in the doorway and watched Vincent lie like that, sometimes asleep, sometimes simply buried there with his loneliness?'* Even now, Vincent was promising to be big, muscular and powerful - and with his speed, he would have been more than a match for an ordinary sixteen-year-old, even one with a grin.

"Father...." The voice behind him made him start and he jerked around guiltily. But the compassion in the tired grey eyes gazing into his, suddenly released the tightly held breath he wasn't even aware had been caught up inside him.

"You're a long way from home," he heard himself croak at last.

"So is he," Elizabeth smiled sadly, coming forward with outstretched arms to take him in a sisterly hug. "Did you think I wouldn't come when I heard?"

He shook his head helplessly into her shoulder, then braced himself with a monumental effort and stepped back. "Maybe I should have listened to you earlier."

"You couldn't have stopped it. And....," she paused fractionally, "it's something we've been waiting for a long time, Father. Vincent isn't a normal boy, no matter how much we try to believe it. You know that.

"I just didn't think it would be so soon. Before he'd even had the time to come to terms with.... what he is."

"But you did know." There was understanding in her eyes now. Pity. *'After all,'* he thought vaguely, *'what artist didn't see into the human soul? Skills of the trade....'*

"I hoped I was wrong."

Elizabeth gazed around the chamber for a moment and then back at him.

"We're all going to have to accept it, Doctor, Vincent included. In some cultures, he'd be a man now, and he'll kill to protect those he loves. There's nothing you can do about it."

Helplessly, Father shook his head. "I wouldn't be human if I didn't think that somewhere along the line, I'd failed him."

"But you haven't! All you can do is be there when he needs you! It's the role of every parent down the ages. Vincent.... Vincent knows that."

"He told you?"

"He came to see me, yes. Confused and hurt and scared.... but I think he understood. In the end." Suddenly, Elizabeth took his hand and held it strongly, her eyes glowing. "He's a unique boy in more ways than one - but he will survive. Never doubt that, Father."

For just a moment, it seemed that the words were caught up somewhere in his throat and he had to swallow them back down and try again. When he finally did manage it, he found he couldn't even meet her gaze any more.

"Elizabeth.... if he never comes home, I don't know how I'm going to go on...."

"Rubbish!" she retorted briskly. "He'll be back. Maybe he's been down here all along, somewhere deep where he can be alone. You know how he likes to do solitary patrols of the far tunnels - maybe that's what he's doing. Maybe he's gone to see Narcissa."

But he shook his head with the despair of conviction. There was a nightmare rising up before him out of the horror of his imaginings, a vision of Vincent lying bleeding from a hundred bullet wounds in some dark and noisome alley while his killers slowly gathered around his body to prod and stare, before they flung it into the back of a pickup like a butchered steer and drove it through the streets, charging a dollar a head for folks to come and gawk....

With a groan of anguish, Father turned away, bile rising into his throat. All it took was for one trigger-happy citizen to catch a glimpse....

"You're not listening to me!" Elizabeth snapped. "Dammit, you accuse me of being the psychologist around

here and you're not even pretending to get your money's worth. I'm doing my best...." Then she stopped and smiled ruefully in a way that got him smiling too, in spite of the resolve. "I'm sorry, Father. I'm worried about him too."

"Yes," he whispered. "I know." Tiredly, he put an arm around her shoulders and gently steered her out of the chamber and back into the tunnel. "All we can do now is pray for him, Elizabeth. Just pray...."

The warmth of her loving, wordless comfort remained with him for the rest of the night, even when he got back to his own chamber and lay down in a futile bid to rest.

All they could do was pray....

A few light snowflakes had started to drift down the windy canyons between the tower blocks, and pedestrians tucked their heads a little lower against the blast, increasing their pace in an effort to beat the thermometer and the coming storm. None of it affected the dark-haired boy in the bulky sheepskin jacket and scuffed boots which seemed several sizes too large for him. Like a dog following a scent he strode purposefully, his eyes darting down every alley, into every shaded doorway as if he were looking for something. Even when he stopped once to purchase a cup of coffee from a corner stand he barely lingered to receive his change. Hardly anyone spared him a glance, but if they had, they would have seen the pale tightness of his face, the haunted strain in his eyes, and wondered.

Devin had long ago lost all sense of time. He'd sneaked out from his chamber that night and ever since had haunted the streets and alleys in a desperate attempt to find his brother. But he didn't want to find him, not in a street, not in daylight, because that would mean he'd be too late, that Vincent would be dead....

He didn't want to consider that possibility. On occasion he had slipped into the subway and the access tunnels and listened for the messages on the pipes, but nothing had come through about the missing boy. That could only mean Vincent was either still Above, or so far Below that he wasn't answering, or....
'No. Not that. Never that.'

His grief over Reb had settled into a dull ache somewhere in the background, acknowledged and accepted. But there was no time to mourn properly, not now. Not in the face of what had happened with Vincent, the snarling beast of his nightmare, of those horrid fantasies of a fur-covered body, and hands that ended in rending claws....

'Was this what all that love and hate had come to?' he wondered blindly. 'Was this what Vincent really was?'

For he knew he couldn't accept that. He'd seen Vincent's eyes that night they went to the junkyard, filled with rage and tears, and had known there would never be a simple answer for Vincent, ever. Neither beast nor boy, but something incredible in between....

His eyes suddenly caught glaring headlines on a news stand, and he found himself back-tracking in order to read them properly.

'Mugger mauled in victim's store,' the paper said. *'Mugger. Why didn't it say murderer? Reb had been murdered, and justice had been served on the one who had done it. Vincent had....'*

'Mauled.'

'Vincent was a beast. He'd ripped the throat out of a boy no older than Devin himself.'

Shuddering, Devin hugged his arms around his chest and stomped numbed feet on the slowly whitening sidewalk. The temperature was plummeting fast, and his breath hung in clouds before his face. He hoped to God Vincent wasn't out in this, that he'd found shelter, that he was somewhere deep Below. Safe from hate

and harm....

'Dammit, Vincent, where are you? What's happened to us? Suddenly it all seems to be falling apart and I don't know what to do any more....'

'Police are searching for whoever or whatever did this to....' And then the line ran out over the fold of the paper, and he couldn't read any further.

'The police are searching. I'm searching. They don't know who they're looking for, but I'm looking for my brother. For Vincent. My brother who killed a mugger.'

'And what happens when I find him? Maybe he really has turned into a beast and will kill me too, like he tried to kill Mitch. Only it doesn't matter because Father will forgive him anything - not like me. He won't even let me have a knife....'

Helplessly he looked up and down the street, watching the yellow cabs slide from lane to lane, horns blaring. He felt grey and light-headed through hunger and lack of sleep, but there was no way he could stop searching. To go back Below to that empty chamber, to see Father's eyes....

Evening was falling early along with the snow. He tried to remember if there was a special place where Vincent would hide out Above, but how could there be, when he didn't even know as much of the city as the other children did? There was no one he knew besides Helpers, and if he'd gone to one of them, they would have instantly sent a message to Father.

Miserably, Devin hunched his shoulders and took refuge in the shelter of a nearby doorway. *'What if Vincent didn't want to be found? People sometimes came to a city in order to lose themselves, and there was any number of places to hide out, to creep away and....'*

He shuddered. It was Vincent's thirteenth birthday and he was alone in this alien place with a darkness filling his heart and blood covering his hands, cold and hungry and cast out....

Devin suddenly jerked up, his breath tightening in his chest. *'Maybe it was just a wild stab in the dark. Maybe his vivid imagination was working overtime and then some, but could it even be possible that his brother could....'*

'Only one way to find out, after all.' Pulling himself abruptly out of the doorway, he began to run for all he was worth, dodging in and out of the crowds on the sidewalk, hugging the sides of the buildings when he could, where the crowds weren't so thick. It wasn't just the cold that was jogging his chest raw. He knew that. It was the hope, the desperate need to get there and at least satisfy himself that Vincent would not, could not possibly....

It seemed like miles and maybe it was, his legs taking him automatically because his eyes were half-blinded by the snow which was now whirling thick and fast, covering the front of his jacket and clinging to his hair, melting and dripping against the heat of his gasping body.

'Please let him be all right. Please don't let him die....'

Heedless of blaring horns and yelled curses, he raced across the road against a blinking **'DON'T WALK'** sign, and on through an aching slow-moving crowd on the opposite sidewalk. *'If I had money to spare, I'd take a cab.... A speedy yellow New York cab whose driver would ask friendly questions and point out the city sights even if he didn't want to see them. How long would it take by cab?'* And then, looking at the snarled-up traffic he found himself thinking--*'maybe I'm better off like this....'*

Bursting out of a side-street, Devin suddenly staggered to a gasping halt, pressing his hand to the incredible agony of what seemed like a whole seam of stitches in his side. The building was huge and forbidding, and though he'd seen it many times before, it had always held a particular repellent fascination for him. When

they were both much younger, he had regaled Vincent with creepy tales of the horrors that went on there, tales he found himself only half disbelieving for any number of reasons. Now he stared at it with a kind of shuddering hope, knowing that if this failed, then he had too. Failed Vincent, failed Father, failed himself and all the community. Wrapping his arms around himself, Devin stepped out into the road and limped towards the starkness that was St. Vincent's Hospital.

Peter Alcott liked to think of himself as one of the last of a dying breed - certainly in a city like New York. A family Doctor who could deal with anything from obstetrics to osteopathy and be completely trusted by his patients simply because he had known many of them all their lives - had indeed brought not a few of them into the world with his own hands. It made for a satisfying sense of completeness as a Doctor and he wouldn't have swapped it for anything, not even a high-powered practice exclusively for the rich for which many of his colleagues had opted. There had only been a few out of his class in med school who had not taken that route - a couple who had gone out to Korea and not returned. Jacob, who had turned to research, and himself, content to be a good old country Doctor.

He had never regretted it, especially since Jacob had joined the world Below and relied on him for medical supplies and facilities denied the tunnel community. In fact, Peter had been one of the first Helpers, along with an itinerant English magician called Sebastian, and Lou, a barber from the Lower East Side. Theirs was a totally different world to that of the friend who now sat opposite in one of his prized leather armchairs, balancing a brandy glass carefully on one crossed knee. As the successful head of one of the best corporate law firms in the city, Charles Chandler could - and very often did - have almost anything he wanted, including his pick of Doctors. That he insisted on returning to Peter, even after the tragedy of last year, spoke volumes for his loyalty and sense of commitment.

"It's been an enjoyable evening, Peter," he said softly, idly turning the snifter round and round between his fingers. "Society functions come with the territory, but a quiet dinner with friends makes you realize it's the simple things that matter most."

"I'm only sorry Deborah couldn't be here to act as hostess." Peter leaned back, thinking of his own wife, in her white intern's coat, putting on yet another shift at the hospital. Trouble with marrying Doctors - you hardly ever saw each other, yet somehow they had managed to overcome the stresses of both their jobs. So far.

Charles, on the other hand, had lost his wife forever...

Lowering his voice, he glanced over his shoulder and added. "Cathy seems to have recovered well."

"Resilience of youth," Charles said wistfully. "We support each other. I make her laugh and she goes climb trees in the park to let me know how tough she is." He smiled and followed Peter's gaze to the window where his eleven-year-old daughter sat watching the snow falling through the night. "You know she wants to go into corporate law?"

"What else?" Peter turned away and stared into the flames of the open fire, the ache of his own childless marriage suddenly welling up within him. "She'll turn out to be as good as her father and with the two of you practicing, Wall Street had better watch out." He flicked his friend a keen glance, noting the added flecks of grey, the lines pulled tight around his mouth and nose. Rose's death had devastated Charles - not just the actual death which, in the end, had turned out to be a mercy - but the months of watching her slowly fade into the stupor of pain and drugs as the Doctors fought to keep her alive far beyond all expectation. But Lymphatic Cancer was perhaps the cruelest of all, its spread throughout the body as filthily insidious a way to go as could be devised. Rose had been beautiful and brave, but even she had no defense against what her own body was doing to her.

They'd tried to shield Catherine from the worst of it, but a ten-year-old only wanted her mother and couldn't understand that this enforced separation was something that had to be. And after Rose died, it was Catherine who had somehow kept Charles going, given him a reason to continue.

Peter still felt illogically guilty, even though he knew there was nothing more he could have done. His had been the first diagnosis, he had arranged treatments, the chemotherapy, all the thousand and one things that a Doctor who is also a friend could do. He had counselled Rose himself and she had been grateful. But it didn't stop the age-old feeling, peculiar to healers, that there should have been something more. The entire Chandler family had been his patients for so long - he'd looked after Rose's pregnancy, delivered Catherine, and supervised Charles' low cholesterol diet, knowing that the latter was an uphill battle. Successful corporate lawyers had to wine and dine and took too little exercise, and he'd ruefully warned Charles that if he didn't take care, a stroke or a heart attack could slow him down permanently. But his friend only laughed, shrugged, and continued to grumble about skimmed milk, no steaks and minuscule portions.

Peter suddenly roused himself again and leaned out around the wing of his own armchair.

"Another fruit juice, Cathy?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Peter." Slipping off the window seat, she came toward them and perched on the arm of her father's chair. "It's snowing hard, Daddy."

"And no doubt you'll want to be out snowballing in it tomorrow," he agreed indulgently, patting her knee.

"You know, Peter, I've got quite a tomboy here. She can hold her own with the best of them."

"An advantage every lawyer should have," the Doctor nodded, toasting her silently with his glass. "A well-aimed snowball is as good a preparation for a closing argument as I know of." He grinned as she blushed prettily, then added. "You sure you won't think of medicine as a career? I can think of several top specialists not so very far from here who would benefit greatly from a face full of slush."

Catherine giggled, yet nevertheless managed to maintain her poise, as a well-brought up young lady ought.

"No. It's going to be corporate law till the day I die."

"Ah, the rash promises of the young!" Charles sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes ceiling-ward. "You may find it's not quite the excitement you think, my dear. Especially after a year or two of working for me."

"Daddy, you know I'll love working for you!"

Charles exchanged a long fond look with Peter over the top of his daughter's head, in which the Doctor could read pure pride and love for such an unconditional declaration. "*That's my Cathy*," he seemed to be saying, and Peter suddenly found himself lowering his eyes awkwardly and taking a hasty sip of his brandy.

The insistent chime of the doorbell broke the moment, startling them all.

"Surely you don't have patients at this hour," Charles kidded, recovering quickly, and setting down his glass.

"Not unless it's an emergency. Don't get up, Charles. I won't be long."

Affecting a calm, he didn't feel, Peter went out into the vestibule. It was unusual, and for some strange reason he found himself wondering if there was trouble with someone from Below - perhaps more than Jacob could handle - perhaps even Jacob himself....

"Devin!"

The recoil was instantaneous. The boy was scarcely recognizable as he leaned helplessly against the doorpost, soaked in snow, his face drawn and streaked with tears, his clothes in such a disarray, that he seemed more like a scarecrow than anything else. Frantic harsh gasps tore at his throat, making impossible

for him to speak for a few moments, but when he did, his voice was barely audible.

"Doctor Alcott.... please.... come...."

An icy fist of fear rammed into Peter's gut. "What's happened? Is it Jacob?" Then. "For God's sake, boy, come in! You'll freeze to death out there."

"No!" The exclamation held terror, anger, and sheer desperation. "No. There's no time! It's Vincent! I've found him.... Above...." Fighting for breath, he pushed himself upright. "I can't manage him alone. You've got to come!"

"My God!" For an instant Peter actually felt the blood drain from his face, then he whirled. "I'll get my coat and bag. Where is he?"

But Devin was looking past him, towards the lighted living room, the sound of voices.

"Someone's here?"

"A friend and his daughter. Don't worry - I'll tell them an emergency's come up. They'll understand."

'Some emergency!' He thought with rueful horror. 'Vincent.... Above! Had he been injured? Had some scared redneck taken a gun and....?'

He stopped the thought violently.

"Charles, I'm dreadfully sorry, but I've got to leave you." He forced himself to pause just inside the doorway while he dragged on his coat with one hand and held on to his medical bag with the other. "I don't know how long I'll be, but you can make yourselves at home and...."

"Don't worry about it. We ought to be going anyway - way past Cathy's bedtime." Charles heaved himself out of the armchair and smiled reassuringly. "A Doctor's work is never done. I realize that. I just hope it isn't something that'll keep you out all night, especially in this weather."

Peter shrugged. "You know how it is - can't tell until I get there." He inched his way out to the vestibule again. "I really am sorry."

"Oh, get along with you, Aesculapius!(*Greek healer*)" Charles growled fondly. "Cathy and I will see ourselves out. So, scoot!"

Peter nodded with a last lingering look at the little girl he sometimes found himself considering to be his surrogate daughter, then fled for his car, Devin at his heels.

Thankfully, the engine burst into life at the first turn of the key, but it was only when he'd turned out of the driveway that he made himself glance across at the silent, still gasping boy riding beside him.

"Devin! What happened? Where are we going?"

"St. Vincent's Hospital."

"St. Vinc...!" Peter bit off the exclamation and brought the violent swerve under control. "You mean he's...."

"Can't you go any faster?" Devin demanded suddenly, cutting him off. "It isn't far."

So, the Doctor thought. *'No answers yet. Just like last time,'* and Jacob saying nothing until finally he, Peter, had done what he could for that tiny, incredible baby, still clinging stubbornly to life. Only then, when their eyes met over the crib, had he been able to bring himself to ask what could not be answered. Come to think of it, there never had been an answer for Vincent. Not then, not ever....

He drove as fast as he dared, windshield wipers batting furiously at the ever thickening snow, concentrating on the road so that he wouldn't have to imagine horrible possibilities and start asking more questions to which Devin didn't seem to want to give the answers. The journey seemed interminable until finally he

approached the entrance to the hospital and slowed down, looking queringly across at the boy.

"Round the back," Devin said suddenly, leaning forward. "In the alley."

Heart thumping, Peter did as he bade, slowly easing the car between trash cans and indefinable piles of garbage until he could go no further. But Devin didn't wait, already half out of the door before the car could never come to a full halt, racing over to where several cans stood together in a kind of protective wall against the wind. Then he dropped to his knees beside a dark huddle.

"Let me get to him, Devin." Gasping slightly in the biting cold, Peter hunkered down beside him and gently reached out to move back the sheet of black plastic.... and then the whole world seemed suddenly to stand still.

Vincent was hunched against the wall, his knees drawn tightly to his chest, his whole body shuddering uncontrollably with cold. His mane hung in matted tangles over his shoulders and his clothes were filthy, but it was the blank expressionless stare, which made something twist with icy venom somewhere deep in Peter's gut. A terrible vacancy, which told him this wasn't going to be a simple rescue and treatment for hypothermia he had first imagined. This was something deep and traumatic which possibly went to the very root of why Vincent was here in the first place.

"It's Peter Alcott, Vincent," he murmured softly, running his hands over the boy's body in a swift examination for any signs of physical injury. He didn't want to linger more than he had to, but he paused a moment over the hands, noting that the fur was blackened and spiky with what looked like dried blood which seemed to have splashed up even over the cuffs of his sweater. However, there were no cuts or lacerations to account for it and he eventually directed Devin back to his car to fetch the rug from the back seat. Vincent hadn't answered his introduction, hadn't even indicated he was aware of his presence, and Peter found himself gently smoothing back a lock of thick, snow-wet hair from the boy's vacant face, hoping vaguely that the touch would bring him back from wherever he'd gone.

"Everything's going to be all right," he whispered. "Whatever happened, it's over now - you're safe. I'm taking you home, Vincent. You're going to be just fine...."

But there was no response, not even a flicker in those hazy blue eyes.

Devin raced up behind him, panting more in distress than with exertion, and Peter silently took the proffered rug, wrapping it securely around Vincent's shoulders.

"How is he?" asked Devin faintly. "He isn't going to die, is he?"

"He won't die." Peter returned grimly. "But he needs warmth and food.... and loving understanding. Which is the safest entrance to the tunnels, Devin? Where I can bring the car and we won't be seen."

"Central Park, I guess." The boy looked up uncertainly, absently tucking a stray fold of the rug closer around his brother's shivering body. "I didn't know if you'd be at home, Doctor. I didn't know what else to do."

"You did the right thing." Peter indicated the huddled figure before him. "Help me get him to the car. I don't want to linger here longer than we have to."

Wordlessly, Devin bent and put a shoulder under Vincent's arm as the Doctor assisted from the other side, and between them, they got the catatonic boy to his feet. Only then did Peter add carefully.

"What made you look for him here?"

Devin kept his head lowered. "Today's his birthday. It was the only place...." Then he stopped, biting back tears. "Somehow, I knew he'd come back to the place where he was found. Especially after...." But he didn't go on, and Peter was forced to ask anyway.

"After what? What happened, Devin? Surely he wouldn't run away Above...."

"Don't ask me anymore!" Savagely, the boy yanked open the car door and flung himself inside to forestall further questions. Then, abruptly, he turned and reached out for his brother. "Please.... just take us home, Doctor! Please...."

For a moment, Peter simply concentrated on getting Vincent settled into the back seat beside Devin, but then he stepped back and stared at them for a moment.

"There's blood on his hands, and as far as I can tell, it isn't his."

"I know." The dark head suddenly bent low. "But he's half-animal, Doctor. Didn't you realize that?"

A little voice inside Peter began to scream; *'Don't ask any more, don't even think because if this is an answer to one of the unanswerable questions then....'*

The tires spun against the slush, but he drove into Central Park as though the devil and all the fiends of hell were glaring through his rearview mirror instead of the blurring headlights of other cars. Turning off the road and across the grass towards the drainage tunnel, bumping and banging down the dips like some rally driver, aware that his two passengers were being thrown around in the back like rag dolls. But his normal Doctor's fear for Vincent was being compounded with some strange horror he couldn't name, as if the years had suddenly rolled back and he was once more being presented with that sick baby Jacob had unaccountably called him in to see. A baby with the face of a lion cub....

And then some insane abstract thought struck him, that in his friend Charles Chandler's comfortable world, there could never be anything like this.

He parked alongside the tunnel entrance, allowing Devin to precede him and open the gate while he himself supported his unresisting silent patient, hugging him close in an effort to pressure the warmth of his own body into him and stop that terrible shuddering. The boy walked unsteadily wherever he was led, but it was the obedience of an automaton, and Peter knew he had to get him back home, to the place where he was loved, before there could be any hope in hell of pulling him out of this fugue.

Father was sitting at his desk when they arrived, his head in his hands. *'He looked'*, his old friend thought, *'as though he hadn't slept in a week - his clothes were rumpled like they had been thrown on anyhow,'* and when he slowly raised his head to stare up at them, it took several seconds for his glazed eyes to focus, for the slumped shoulders to straighten. Just for a moment Peter felt himself hesitate, wondering if the shock of their sudden appearance would do more harm than good.

"Father...." Devin said behind him, and then stopped, hanging there on the top step like an old man himself, worn out with anguish and happiness.

Father stared at him dazedly. "What...." he began, and then a deep shudder seized him, the effort of pulling himself to his unsteady feet cruelly visible. "Dear God.... Vincent?"

"He's all right, Jacob. Exposure and mild hypothermia, but he's all right." Peter paused, tightening his arm just fractionally around the boy's shoulders. "Physically, that is."

The older man's eyes widened in shocked understanding as they took in Vincent's vacant stare and unmoving stance, then they filled with a sudden shimmer of tears.

"Where did you find him?"

"Devin found him. In an alleyway behind St. Vincent's." Peter's voice lowered achingly, trying to offer a reassurance for something he himself could not understand, but Father only quivered and reached out one trembling hand to smooth the tangle of wet mane from his son's pale face.

"He ought to be in his own chamber. If you don't mind...?"

"Of course."

Slowly, carefully, they guided Vincent along the tunnel to his own chamber and sat him down on the edge of his bed amidst the tumble of bright patchwork quilts and furs. He neither looked at them nor uttered a sound, and worriedly Peter tucked one corner of the rug closer around the bowed shoulders then bent to apply his stethoscope with a frowning look of concentration on his face.

After a while, he straightened stiffly, and folded the instrument away.

"Nothing more I can do, Jacob. He just needs warmth, food, and care now. Devin found him in time, thank God...."

"I'm.... grateful," Father whispered, sitting down awkwardly beside his adopted son as if his legs wouldn't hold him up any more. "To both of you. You don't know...." His fading voice finally broke, and Peter impulsively leaned across and squeezed his hand, blinking away the sting in his own eyes.

"The boy's hurting, Jacob. I don't know what's happened, but I do know something terrible must have made him stay Above like this. You've got to bring him out of this withdrawal soon - and gently. Otherwise...." He stopped, shrugging helplessly.

"Yes," said Father, and suddenly his jaw was tight, a muscle twitching spasmodically beneath his already greying beard. "I know. But for now all that matters is that he's home."

Quietly, Peter nodded. Part of him wanted to stay, but deep inside he knew there was no longer any need, that no one - not Vincent or Devin or Jacob - required his presence now. He'd done what he could, been there when needed. Acted the part of the true Helper. Whatever it was had to be sorted out between the three of them now.

"Don't forget to send me a message if you need anything," he murmured after a moment. "There's no sign of injury or concussion, but he's suffering from exposure and there may be indications of shock. Any time of the day or night, Jacob. You know that."

"Yes," Father said again, and then he looked up and smiled bravely, one old friend to another. "I've no words, Peter. Except that you're our lifeline, and I don't know what we'd do without you."

"Well, as one old country Doctor to another, you're not such a bad medic yourself," Peter smiled back. Then he turned to place one hand on Devin's shoulder. "Just get him well. And look after this young man too. Without him, Vincent would still be out there."

Father nodded wordlessly, watching as his friend made a deftly unobtrusive exit then, his face softening, he turned to Devin. The boy was looking at him, too exhausted for wariness, but it was there in his eyes all the same and suddenly Father didn't know what to say any more. He forced his attention back to Vincent, to the glazed, misted eyes staring out at nothing, and instinctively reached out to put a hand on his arm.

"Vincent?" he whispered gently. "Can you hear me? Can you remember what happened?"

There was no reply, no movement. It was as though the boy were an image carved from granite.

"He hasn't spoken since I found him," Devin said awkwardly from somewhere in the background. "It's like he's.... not here somehow. Switched off. Something."

Father shot him a quick glance. "It happens sometimes. When the memories are too hard to bear. Shock numbs the mind...." He stopped, then added quietly. "All we can do is be patient, Devin. And be here for him." His eyes suddenly fell upon the furry, blood-caked hands and he fought to repress a shudder. "I pray that's all it is.... But at any rate, we can start by cleaning him up. If you could fetch some hot water and towels...."

"Right away." Devin whirled and was off like a hare, as if he wasn't tired at all, his running feet loud in the sudden silence. He left Father gazing sadly into his adopted son's vacant face, the emotion of seeing him

once more back where he belonged so overwhelming that suddenly the Doctor found himself taking the unresisting boy into his arms and hugging him so hard it hurt. Vincent was safe. He was alive, and the vision of that body in the pickup truck was just a nightmare....

"Oh God, I love you so much," he heard himself whisper fiercely into the matted tangle of mane. "So very much. Why can't you understand that, Vincent? Why did you run away, as if you were afraid we'd condemn you? Don't you know by now that you're the centre of our world?" Anguished, he tightened his hold, feeling Vincent's heart pounding against him in a frantic thundering rhythm that seemed to be tearing him apart. "You're my son, and no matter what happens, I'll always be here for you. Always. I love you...."

There was no reply, no reaction, not even the welcoming strength of strong arms around him in an answering hug, and when Father at last sat back and met the empty stare of those blue eyes, all he could see were the vacant shadows of a horror too great to be borne.

"You are what you are, my boy," he murmured painfully. "Nothing can change that. Not wishes or dreams or anything you or I can do. It's not your fault, Vincent. Some things are meant to be."

'And there's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. Dear God, look at his hands...?'

At that moment, Devin returned with the water and Father forced himself to concentrate, soaking the caked blood from under Vincent's claws, teasing the matted tangle it had made of the fur. Throughout the entire operation, the boy never so much as glanced down at him, not even when it was finally over and Father began to tentatively unlace his thickly padded jerkin and undershirt. They felt damp, smelling of dark alleyways, cold nights, and loneliness, and he stripped them away in disgust, not wanting to think of how Vincent had existed there amongst the garbage cans for two days and two nights. If that was where he had been for all that time. The hospital. The only place where the answers to the questions of his birth might have been found....

Casting a grateful look in Devin's direction as the boy wordlessly knelt to pull off his brother's boots, Father finally managed to get Vincent undressed, sponged down and clad in a clean, warm nightshirt before easing him back amongst the piled pillows and drawing the woolen blankets up around his shoulders. Only then did he finally allow himself to really look at Devin, at the ragged, lost air of exhaustion that had returned to hang about him now that all the activity was over and the reaction was setting in.

"You too," he ordered with a wry, hurting smile. "Let's get you into bed and I'll bring you some hot broth. You can tell me all about it tomorrow." Then, more quietly. "Dear God, Devin, you frightened me so...."

For a long moment Devin just stood there, his eyes fixed hungrily on his brother's face.

"Nothing else I could do," he whispered. "I couldn't have come back without him." Then he looked up and met Father's eyes with steady anguish. "Everything's going to be different now, isn't it? With Vincent, I mean. Before, it was simply his own fear, the thought of what the beast inside him could do. Now.... He's always going to be apart from us. Different. Just like he always said."

"In that case, we'll all have to try harder to let him know how much we love him." Father suddenly touched Devin's head almost in blessing. "I'm proud of you," he murmured.

Devin smiled wearily. "I'll take care of him, Father. I promise."

No thought now of that bitter outburst about his responsibility as an older brother. All that seemed so pale in comparison to this. To the ultimate terror of almost losing Vincent altogether. Both of them recognized, in a silent, unspoken understanding, that no matter what had passed before, this was the only way they could hope to survive together.

Later, much later, after Father had made sure he was safely in bed and had returned to his own chamber, Devin lay in the semi-darkness watching the unmoving figure of his brother, a gnawing anxiety churning

inside him. He couldn't tell if Vincent was asleep, or simply staring at the ceiling. But the sense of loss was as strong as if Vincent were still Above, lost and alone behind the garbage cans outside the hospital.

'This was the final darkness,' he thought vaguely, clutching his pillow. The darkness he had seen in Vincent's eyes there in the junkyard and in their chamber. The fear. The realization that whatever happened there was nothing and no one who could hold back the beast forever. All the dreams, shattered instantly by one moment of bloody animal anger....

He must have drifted off. He hadn't meant to, but the sudden anguished roar brought him bolt upright, gasping frantically in disoriented fear. Vincent had started up violently, his hands clutching at his head, his whole body heaving with terrified sobs for breath. He didn't seem to be able to recognize where he was, and in the dim half-light of the candles Devin could see his eyes, wide and glittering, suddenly cast about in pure, unmitigated horror.

"Vincent! You're okay, little brother.... It's just a dream. You're back home...."

Trying to force his hammering heart back under control, Devin got out of bed and slowly approached the younger boy, careful not to startle him with any abrupt movement. Instantly, Vincent whirled towards him and shrank back against his pillows, his top lip lifting in a ferocious snarl of warning.

'Christ,' Devin thought, an icy fist of fear closing around his gut. *'He doesn't know me. He's going to attack, just like he did with Mitch, with that dead.... mugger....'*

"Hey, it's me," he whispered urgently. "Devin. Don't be afraid, Vincent. I'm not going to hurt you. Don't you know who I am?"

Vincent snarled again, and there was an instant when Devin saw quite clearly the fear and disorientation turn to animal fury in his eyes. To the beast who knew nothing of human understanding.

"Please, Vincent.... don't do this. I swear you're safe. You're in our chamber, remember? I found you outside the hospital and brought you home...."

The blue eyes blazed back at him, feral and deadly and yet so frighteningly empty, that suddenly all Devin's fear evaporated into pity, and he moved over until he stood unflinchingly beside Vincent's bed. Then his gaze fell upon the toy carousel on the nightstand.

"Here, look. Don't you remember this? I brought it for you, little brother." Gently, he picked it up and held it out towards the quivering boy, but Vincent didn't even glance down. His breathing was still ragged and harsh, but at least he was no longer snarling. He simply huddled against the pillows, bewildered and unspeaking.

"You still with me, buddy?" Devin hefted the carousel for a moment, and then a thought struck him. "Maybe you'll remember if you hear it, huh? Listen...." Quickly he wound the key then set it down, a sudden pang of remembrances seizing him, as the familiar tinkling notes filled the chamber and the horses moved round and round. Reb....

Vincent's breathing seemed to steady, but otherwise, to Devin's chagrin, there was no reaction from him.

"Devin?" The soft tap of Father's cane on the rocky floor stopped abruptly as he entered the chamber.

"What is it? I heard Vincent...." Then he paused, taking in the sight before him. "What happened?"

"He had a nightmare," Devin muttered reluctantly, turning away as if unwilling to say more.

It went beyond that, Father could see, but he merely limped forward and sat down on the edge of Vincent's bed, trying not to notice the tension quivering in the youngster's body, the blank terror in those blue eyes.

"Vincent?" he whispered soothingly. "It's Father. Tell me what frightened you. Please, my boy, let me help...."

But Vincent just stared at him and for a long moment Father could only gaze helplessly, knowing he was powerless to cure what could not be cured. The candles were flickering low, and suddenly a great weariness descended on him like a suffocating blanket. *"How much longer would the anguish continue? How many more crises would they all have to go through before this tormented boy could find a measure of peace?"*

"I don't understand," he heard Devin whisper at last, from somewhere out in the shadows. "I don't understand how he can be so gentle and yet so violent...."

'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio....'

'Dear God, I can't let this defeat him. I can't. And I refuse to believe that a beast is all he is. Because I've seen the glory of all that he can be, and it's that he's the most.... human.... being I've ever known....'

He turned slightly and watched the slowly revolving carousel tinkling out its last few bars of fairground music, aware that Vincent was - had to be - listening to it too. Such a simple thing, representing all that the boy would never be able to do, could never be, no matter how hard he dreamed....

And then he looked back into the incredible face, not even registering for a moment that shimmering tears were suddenly filling his son's blue eyes, brimming over and spilling helplessly down the furry cheeks in a terrible silent steam.

"No." Father whispered in agony. "Oh no...." He felt himself reach out and pull Vincent to him in a rough yet tender embrace, barely aware that his own heart was splitting into a million pieces and there was nothing he could do to save it. There was only Vincent, his whole body wracked with soundless weeping, clinging to him as if he would never let go, the final release so overwhelming, so utterly goddamned awful that Father knew it would either cure the boy - or send him mad. That a child - any child - could suffer so....

"It's all right," he soothed softly, stroking the tumbled tawny hair. "It's all right. I'm here. Hold onto me and I'll never let you go. Never in the world, Vincent. You hear me? I'll always be here...."

He heard a muffled sob behind him, an inarticulate exclamation of pain. And before he could even call out or beg him to stay, Devin had whirled and was gone, unable to witness his brother's final agony.

Father let him go. There was nothing he could do for Devin now. Nothing he could do for Vincent either, except hold him and love him and let the tears soak into the front of his gown, hot and bitter with a grief no one else could possibly hope to understand. He could feel those clawed hands clench tight against his back, tight and then tighter still in terrible desperation, and he couldn't remember a time, even as a little boy, when Vincent had given way so completely. But then nothing like this had ever happened before either.

"Let it come, Vincent," he found himself whispering. "Let it come...."

Vincent's body shuddered as if he'd struck him. "Father...."

Just one barely audible word, but it seemed such a long time since he had heard the boy say anything at all, that it sent joy singing through Father's veins. Tenderly, he put Vincent from him a little and smiled mistily at the half-hidden, tear-stained face.

"You're so precious to me," he murmured. "So very precious. And if anything had happened to you...."

"It should have," Vincent sobbed, trying desperately to hide his face, to escape from the love and forgiveness in the other's eyes. "It should have.... been me lying there.... not him. Mitch was.... right. I'm.... an animal. And now...."

"Listen to me." Father said sternly, placing his hands on either side of the boy's head and forcing him to look up. "You can't deny what you are, Vincent. You can't. You fought to protect a good man, and the fact that you couldn't save him isn't your fault. As for that boy.... you can't take responsibility for him either. Can't you see that?"

Suddenly furious with grief and horror, Vincent tore himself from the gentle hold, heedless of the tears still pouring down his cheeks. Now that his silence had been broken, the words came tumbling from him like a bitter, overwhelming tide.

"You don't understand! I.... killed! Violated every rule.... every principle we live by. I don't belong here anymore...." He paused a moment, gasping, and something in his swimming eyes turned to despair. "Why don't you exile me, Father? Impose the Silence on me for the rest of my life? Don't I disgust you?"

"No," Father returned steadily. "You don't disgust me, because I understand what you are, Vincent. Part of you is.... something we can't comprehend. But part of you is a human boy with a terrible burden to carry." He paused, caressing the broad shoulder almost wonderingly. "I never told you before - never wanted you to suspect. But somehow, I always knew it would happen one day. Maybe not like this, not so soon, but I knew it would happen."

For what seemed a long time Vincent simply stared at him, involuntarily ragged little sobs still tearing at his throat. Suddenly, he looked terribly lost and alone.

"Tell me something, Father," he whispered at last. "If I'm.... an animal, do I have a soul?"

A dull aching pain began to gnaw at what remained of Father's heart. He was a Doctor, not an expert in metaphysics, but maybe he should have known that that question above all would lie at the centre of Vincent's crisis of identity. If a human has a soul, and an animal does not....

"Then I'm doubly damned," the boy groaned helplessly into the awkward silence. "Nothing but blood and death and darkness.... forever...."

"No!" Father got out at last, cursing himself for not answering immediately. "No, Vincent! No, no....!"

"I'm lost...." And then, for an instant, anger flashed out savagely. "Better I had died where I began than come back to cause you all so much pain...."

"Don't say that! You hear me? Don't you ever say that...!"

"Look at me!" Vincent snarled, spreading his hands before Father's contorted face so that the fingers shook with tension, the tendons standing out even through the golden fur. "Look at these! They killed a boy no older than Devin! So don't stand there and tell me I'm the same as anyone else, Father! I'm a monster! I always was! I just allowed myself to dream otherwise."

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the rage dissolved and he slumped, burying his face in those same awful hands as a sob shook him. "To the day.... I die.... I'll see him. Feel him."

Father bit his lip helplessly, shaken by the depth of his son's torment.

"What can I say?" he asked softly at last. "You're my life - I want to help you...."

"No one can help me!" The words were growled, dragged out on pain, but there was no self-pity in them. Just a plain statement of fact, all the more terrible for it being accepted. "Devin should have left me where I was.... where I began. Now.... I have to face you all, knowing you think of me as a murderous beast. I have to see the fear in your eyes every time you look at me. Like Lisa...." With a wrenching gasp for breath, he half-turned away. "Did they tell you I nearly killed Mitch?"

"Vincent, please...."

"Lock me away!" the boy cried suddenly, anguished. "Exile me to the depths of our world, Father.... before I hurt someone I love."

Furiously, Father seized him and hugged him close, holding on in spite of Vincent's initial, half-hearted struggle to break free, keeping him there until finally, after what seemed an age, he could feel the terrible

tension slowly seep from his son's body, to be replaced only with the trembling that came from weakness and cold.

"I don't want to hear any more of this," he heard himself say firmly at last. "You're still far from well, Vincent, and you must rest. Do you understand?" Then, as there was no answer, he softly added. "You're so dear to me. So very, very dear. And I promise you.... someday you're going to look back on this as a bad dream. I swear it."

There was no reply, and after a moment he gently eased the boy back down upon the bed and drew the covers up about his shoulders. Instantly, Vincent turned his head away to stare fixedly at the golden fan window as if his anguished outburst had never been uttered. It was a gesture of such finality that Father felt his heart miss a beat and he hesitated, unwilling to even think of leaving even though his own exhaustion was prodigious. The strange, furred face had suddenly taken on a pinched haggard look, and in spite of his oblivious chill a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead in the flickering light of the worn out, guttering candles. It would nearly be dawn Above, Father thought vaguely - a dawn Vincent might never have lived to see had Devin not found him. The thought sent a trembling through his limbs. My dearly beloved son.... My precious, unique gift of light in a world of darkness. Thank God you came back to me....

But Vincent didn't speak again and there was nothing more Father could do for him except to pile more blankets on his bed, in an effort to stop his shivering. At last, when the boy had finally closed his eyes in pretend sleep, Father forced himself to steal softly out of the chamber. It was almost as if he believed the deception - the way he had done all those countless nights when two little boys tried to stifle the giggles and make believe to be asleep, when all the time beneath the bedclothes, he knew yet another storybook was just waiting until he was gone.

His mind wandering, he almost fell over the hunched figure of Devin sitting on the floor a few yards away down the tunnel.

"Father....?"

It looked as if Devin had been crying too, he thought, but the expression in the boy's eyes now was only of suppressed fear, as if he dreaded being told the answer to his unspoken question.

"Father...?"

"Go back to bed," Father told him softly. "We all need to sleep now, Devin. You most of all."

"How's Vincent?"

Just for a moment, Father grew his gown closer about him, hunching his shoulders as if to ward off the blast.

"He'll be all right."

"I do love him, Father. I swear I do."

"Yes," Father said hoarsely, and abruptly turned back up the tunnel. But he didn't move away entirely, rather stood hesitantly as if unable to make up his mind whether to speak or not. "Devin...."

Devin said nothing.

"Why the hospital?"

"Why not?" The boy looked up, expressionless now, something hard edging into his eyes. "Where else could he go, after all?"

Father nodded seriously, as if thinking about that, then finally making up his mind, slowly dragged away without another word, leaving Devin to sit there and silently curse whatever goddamned stroke of fate had done this to them all.

He let the anger grow deliberately, grow and swell until he could hold it in no longer, then pushed himself to his feet and stumbled up to the entrance into the Central Park drainage tunnel where not so many hours ago he and Peter Alcott had brought Vincent home. For what seemed a long time he simply stood there, staring at the iron-barred gateway and the sliding hatch beyond, then slowly reached down into his neck and pulled something out. Shiny, brand new and smelling of newly tooled leather and clear stainless steel.

And then, with calm deliberation, he turned to the smooth wall of the tunnel and began to carve.

Deep in the Pipe chamber, Pascal stood before the main relay junction, a huge grin spreading across his face. He had already sent the message so many times his arm ached, but that hardly mattered. Vincent was home and the family was one again. That was worth any amount of tiredness and discomfort.

He thought of the slender, wide-eyed girl who had stood with him on this very platform, her distress so achingly obvious. Dancing Lisa. Yes. He had made her a promise but now he could go one better. Skipping down the steps and sprinting along the broad catwalk, Pascal stopped at a pipe that led directly past her chamber and raised his wrench for one last important effort. *'Now you can sleep, Lisa,'* he thought smilingly. *'He's home.'*

Winslow jabbed a stubby finger at the map spread on the table before him.

"It's a hell of a narrow crawl space. We'd have to widen it if a work gang needed to get through, and I'm not so sure the walls on the other side would even stand it anyway. Right, Mark?"

"Sure enough," the miner confirmed, pushing up his pit helmet and scratching the blond stubble beneath. A short, stocky Pole, he'd come out of the Pennsylvania coalfields with a love and understanding of the ways of bedrock and strata, proving invaluable to the community in excavating more tunnels and chambers, in understanding the workings of everything Below. "But we got to find out just where that seepage is coming from and plug it, or we could get a whole heap of trouble later." He twirled the map around and pointed firmly. "From the look of it, it could even be the start of a watercourse - a stream or even a river. It's near enough the falls after all." He stopped and shrugged expressively. "Judging from the geological tilt we could be lucky, and it'd simply find its own level back down to the pools. If not, that whole section could collapse eventually. The limestone's porous as hell."

Father shifted uneasily. "Can't we just shore it up?"

"You want to risk something like that festering beneath you?" Mark grimaced slightly. "There's the Maze to think about too. Any more pressure in this area and we could lose the whole lot."

Winslow grunted. "Kids go in the Maze all the time. This crawlway's one of the access points."

"I thought access to the Maze was on the next level down!" Father frowned concernedly. "And besides, I've always told them to keep out of there."

"You and who else?" Winslow returned ruefully. "I remember playing there myself when I was their age. The danger's half the attraction." He paused then added more soberly. "It's leaky as a sieve - always has been. Water eats into the rock at an incredible rate, and it must be coming from somewhere. Maybe it's found itself a new outlet into the lower chambers."

"The point is," Mark added forcefully. "The erosion in the Maze isn't fatal - providing you can enforce the ban. But if pressure builds up for the future, we're going to lose a lot more than the Maze. We've simply got to find out where that seepage is coming from."

"And once they know you've forbidden them to go there," Winslow added drily. "The kids might now be so

keen to let on."

Father glanced at him. At twenty-seven, Winslow was already as stubborn and direct as his father had been - the community's blacksmith, happiest when he was doing something physical rather than simply talking or thinking about it. He would willingly have bored through every rock wall between them and the source of the leak, except that his bulk made it too risky.

"Isn't there any way it can be done other than sending one of the children....?"

Mark shook his head. "None that I can see. We need to know what's happening through there. And according to this map, that crawlway is at most fifty yards."

Father blew gustily down his nose. "Well, surely there are other entrances to the Maze that are more accessible to people of... our size?"

They all automatically bent to the map again, but Mark was shaking his head almost at once.

"You don't just walk into the Maze through a tunnel. Not even on the next level down. It's why it's not always shown on the old charts. Kid-sized crawlways don't count when you're plotting escape routes for an entire community." Straightening, he grimaced. "It's a dangerous place, but right now, I'm more concerned for the lower chambers."

Tapping his thumbnail against his front teeth, Father pondered. Reports of water seepage in the new excavations called for instant action - there were many places Below which could be considered dangerous, and those who lived there accepted the risks and for the most part didn't go out of their way to court them. Likewise, regular patrols and inspections kept the Council apprised of any changes or potential hazards that could arise, but if this was as bad as Mark seemed to think....

"Vincent mentioned something about a stream he'd discovered the other week," he murmured absently, without thinking. "On the other side of the East River, probably coming out somewhere near the falls...." And then he stopped, biting his lip hard. Since his physical recovery from the trauma of that awful night, there had been subtle changes in his son, a deliberate, almost visible effort to retain a measure of calm. Or control. Or something. His voice was as soft as ever, there was still the same innate gentleness about him, but Father could sense a kind of spiritual withdrawal - and the sadness that had become so much a part of the boy over the past weeks had deepened and intensified, until it seemed impossible he could stand any more. In a desperate effort to reach him, Father had tried talking, offering games of chess, reading aloud or simply just sitting with him in the hope that the silence might encourage Vincent to come out of himself, but all to no avail. Vincent simply refused to talk about it anymore.

The one thing he did continue to do was to go on his old familiar solitary patrols deep into the heart of their world, and while Father secretly fretted and worried about it, he knew there was nothing he could do.

If anyone could tell them something about this seepage and its possible cause, then Vincent could.

He could sense Winslow's dark eyes fastened on his face with sympathy and.... something he couldn't immediately identify.

"How is he, Father?"

"Oh.... he's fine," the doctor lied quickly. "Fine. I'll ask him about this just as soon as he's finished his evening chores."

"And what about work on it?" asked Mark, rolling up the map with a deft flick of the wrist. "The way that water's coming in, it's not something we can just plug and forget about. There's some force behind it. It's icy too."

"It'll be seen to." Winslow put in abruptly, his eyes still fixed unnervingly on Father's averted face. "I don't

want to sound like I'm against this, Father, but can we trust Vincent's judgement? After what happened, I mean, it ain't as if he's.... quite back to normal, is it?"

"Oh, come on, man! Vincent's okay...."

"No," Father interrupted flatly, brushing Mark's protest aside with one raised hand, as if it were some annoying insect. "Winslow has the right to ask. The only trouble is...." and he took a deep, steadying breath. "I don't really know the answer. What happened was.... traumatic - to Vincent and to all of us and right now I can't honestly say what the consequences will be. But I do know that as far as this community is concerned, Vincent will always know that he can help us. Does that answer your question, Winslow?"

"Partly. The big black man shifted uncomfortably, though with a slight air of defiance. "But while we're on the subject, I got to tell you that it ain't just me who's asking. There's some who's wondering why you haven't called a Council meeting to discuss the whole issue. Vincent killed someone. Word is he nearly killed Mitch a little while ago. Folks are asking just what have we got ourselves here? If he's lost control or something...."

"He hasn't!" Furiously, Father slammed his hand down on the table, making them all jump. "He just needs time, that's all."

"Time for what?" Suddenly, Winslow took a grip on himself and lowered his voice. "I'm sorry, Father. I've got nothing against the boy, but I just think it's about time you knew what's being said about him. And if you think he can tell us something about this leak, then I guess I'm ready to listen."

"He still patrols, doesn't he?" Mark asked quietly. "That alone makes him one of the most valuable people we have. Whatever he has to say about this seepage is a damn sight more important than some folks' fear of him."

"What fear?" demanded Winslow, bristling.

"The fear you've been talking about, man. The fear that's supposed to have been settled thirteen years ago when Vincent first came to us."

"Enough!" Father raised his hands quellingly. "This meeting is not about Vincent or what others are saying about him. It's about a danger that's threatening all of us, that we've got to deal with before it's too late. Now, Mark's told us about the possibilities with regard to the nature of the rock in that area - what remains is to carry out a survey and find the location of this water. Isn't that so?"

The miner nodded. "I've examined the excavations and there's nothing more we can do there. I've got to have some idea of just where, how far and from what direction we've got to tackle it. And I've got to speak to Vincent tonight, Father."

Father nodded. "I'll tell him."

Winslow turned away heavily. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Father couldn't bring himself to reply. Slowly, he moved to the other side of his desk and lowered himself awkwardly and tiredly into the chair. He'd heard the whispers about Vincent, but had tried to ignore them, not wanting to deal with them immediately. But how could he tell?

He looked up at the two other men who were watching him curiously, and forced a grim smile.

"Don't worry," he murmured. "We'll get to the bottom of it, and of.... the other problem as well. No one need be afraid."

But somehow, he found himself wondering if they believed him.

All around him, filling this wondrous chamber, soft whisperings of invisible voices from Above rose and fell, interspersed with snatches of music and other, indefinable sounds of a bustling city. It was his favourite place, this Whispering Gallery, a place where he could come and dream and imagine he was up there too, amongst all that light and life. But now he barely heard the magic sounds. He felt empty, like a wind-blown husk. Unreal. A shadow of the boy he had been, and something inside him wept for that loss.

He sat on the edge of the wooden bridge, as he always did, his feet dangling out into the void, defying the danger. It had been two days now and occasionally he still found himself shivering uncomfortably, but the physical effects of his ordeal were almost gone and though Father still hovered solicitously, there was nothing more a doctor could do. Doctors had no cure for wounds of the soul.

Vincent closed his eyes and tried to force himself to concentrate on the whispered floating all around him. Much of that terrible night was a blur now. But he could still remember the gun firing. Reb crashing down behind the counter in a spray of blood.... Maybe, he thought, it had been the blood which had made the raging mist come down over everything, propelling him forward before he even had time to think, hand up and back, lashing out at the youth who had done that to his friend, and finally the soft, wet, yielding resistance of flesh beneath his claws, the sudden savage joy of killing....

"No....," he whispered in agony. "No....!"

Things after that were, mercifully, too hazy for clear recall.

'He'll send you out to kill,' Devin said among the whispers. 'When you're a man and danger threatens, he'll....'

But he was still a boy and already his hands knew blood. Already it was too late for salvation.

After a long while he got stiffly to his feet and slowly left the Whispering Gallery and its strange secrets. Worse than any sense of loss, was the shame and utter self-loathing which seemed to numb and blind him to everyone and everything, even the remembrance of how he had gotten here, standing on the threshold of her chamber, awkward and hesitant, knowing that he'd made a terrible mistake. That he should never have come, except that he couldn't help himself, couldn't stop needing her, even now....

"Lisa....," he whispered.

She was seated before an antique bureau, brushing her long hair in a tiny scrap of mirror, and instinctively Vincent froze. He'd never had a mirror, never really dared to study those animal features that so set him apart....

"Vincent!"

In an instant, she was on her feet and running to him, and before he could stop her, she'd flung herself into his arms, hugging him with abandon. "Oh, Vincent...!"

He didn't know what else to do so he held her, awkwardly at first and then with sudden desperation, unable to believe it. He could smell scented soap on her skin, the warm fragrance of newly washed hair, and as he pressed her closer he could feel the soft swell of small breasts against his jerkin, scalding through to his very heart.

Soft gentleness of a girl/woman's love....

"I thought you'd hate me forever," she gasped into his shoulder. "I thought you'd run away because of what I said and that I'd never see you again."

He closed his eyes momentarily. Of them all, he'd wanted and dreaded Lisa's reaction. Perhaps it was simply because they had quarreled last time they met. Perhaps it was because, deep down, he fancied that if he could still keep the affection of someone as beautiful and graceful and kind as Lisa, there would be some

hope, some possibility that he did indeed have an immortal soul that could be saved by love....

But he didn't really believe it.

"Why?" she whispered, looking up at him with wide and wondering eyes. "If anyone had seen you...."

"It didn't matter," he groaned helplessly. "Not then."

Angrily, she turned away from him, a faint hint of exasperation entering her voice.

"Vincent, when will you ever learn to stop pounding yourself for what you are? Don't you know how much you mean to us? To me? My God, you're like my brother - more than my brother! Surely you knew I could never hate you for what you did?"

He looked down. "I knew you'd fear me. That's worse."

She had the grace not to deny it, he noted, but it broke his heart all the same. It still didn't stop him wanting for a mad instant to take that frail white softness back into his arms and never let her go.

Sister-mother-lover....

"I'm sorry," he added softly, after a long moment. "I'll leave."

A strange light entered her eyes then. A kind of hungry fascination that left him lost for words.

"No. It doesn't matter, Vincent. You're home and here I am and no one, not even Mitch, will ever dare to bother you again."

The pain inside him cried out once more, then subsided into a long, low whimper. He watched his horrible, monstrous hands clench into tight fists, trying not to pay it any attention, but she suddenly moved up until she was standing right in front of him, so close her breaths warmed his cheek and he felt himself go dizzy.

"You're so wonderful," she said, and touched his long hair with fingers soft as rose petals. "So wonderful...."

He shuddered, wondering why she was doing it, why he suddenly, desperately wanted to hold her again, hard against his body. And then horrified that he should be even thinking such things.

"You never did finish that dance," she murmured, all soft and enticing, reaching for his hand without a single trace of hesitation, and he quivered as her fingers closed around his. "Come...."

"Please....," he heard himself whisper helplessly. "Please...."

But she was humming now, her eyes lost in the ethereal glare of her make-believe, and he found that his arm was somehow around her waist, that he was moving slowly and surely against her in their special waltz and that the darkness in his heart was suddenly melting before the blaze of brightness that was her. Or his longing. He didn't know which.

"You're so strong," she was whispering almost crooningly. "Stronger than any boy here. You'd protect me, wouldn't you, Vincent? We'll always be together...."

He said nothing. Maybe soon he'd wake up and find it was just another dream like all the others.

Strong enough to kill....

After a long, unbelievable time, they drifted to a halt and she looked up at him glowingly, making no effort to move back out of his embrace.

"My birthday present to you," she said, smiling. "I hadn't forgotten."

He looked down without answering.

"Vincent...."

Before he could even think to pull back or stop her or even enjoy it, she leaned up and planted a soft careful kiss on his cheek.

"You did what you had to. I'm sorry Reb was killed."

Vincent stared at her, dumbstruck. The place where her lips had touched him burning like a brand....

It shouldn't be like this, a little voice inside him screamed silently. Not like this. All love and hurt and strange wonderment in her eyes.... And he found himself shaking his head bitterly.

"Why?"

Lisa smiled. "Because you're wonderful. Because you're still the Vincent I know and love." She smoothed a thoughtful hand down the front of her jerkin, then abruptly laughed and glided out of his arms. "My hero."

He shuddered. He couldn't understand why she could say that when he felt so dirty. So full of regret. So.... damned. And from the depths of his disbelief came a sudden unaccountable surge of anger at her blindness. Father would forgive him anything because he loved him, but Lisa's acceptance was something else entirely, because visions of her pulling away from him as they swam together in the pool still lingered, the remembrance of that swift guilt in her eyes as Mitch caught them together in the Great Hall.

"You don't understand," he grated after a moment. "Who - what I am.... You still don't understand, Lisa. But I'll show you. I'll show you right now...."

He grabbed for her hand and almost instantly felt a thrust of vindicated satisfaction as he felt her stiffen, her eyes widening in dismay.

"Vincent? What're you doing? Where are you taking me?"

He said nothing, pulling her roughly out of her chamber and along the tunnel, knowing there was no way she could resist him. Even now, she had to run and skip to keep up with his long strides, and a sudden savage bitterness burned molten through his heart. They all knew now what he was capable of. Why then was she acting so surprised? She wanted the beast - provoked it until....

'I love you, Lisa. Why can't you love me the same way? Why must everything be a game to you....?'

'Well.... no more.'

"Vincent, please.... You're hurting me!"

But he didn't even look at her. The anger, the grief, the bitterness of the past days and weeks was suddenly rising up and crushing him, boiling into red madness, and he was sick of all their pity and forgiveness, love and horror. He was a killer beast and she had kissed him....

He dragged her down the Winding Stair, through narrow twists and turns, ignoring her soft, whimpering gasps, hardly registering the fact that she had given up the struggle to tear herself free and was concentrating only on keeping up with him. At last they burst into the long chamber and he whirled her around savagely so that she was facing the wall. Facing that....

"Look there!" he snarled. "Look there and tell me Elizabeth doesn't see it too! That's what I am, Lisa. A menacing shadow over you all. The thing inside me who wants only to destroy...."

Wide-eyed, she stared at the mural, at the hooded figure, the dark, faceless shape that seemed to threaten the entire happy Winterfest scene, and Vincent felt her shiver as the realization hit, a deep, abiding shudder that spread from her to him like a black contagion. He had not been wrong. It was the beast, and it was himself....

"Well!" he growled softly. "Do you still want to dance with me, Lisa? You still want to hold my bloody hands and pretend like I'm just another boy? Because I'm not."

"I don't care!" Whirling, she tore herself from his grip, deliberately turning her back on the mural and breaking the brief spell. The sudden fury caught him off-balance and he involuntarily flinched before the blaze in her eyes, the wild determination tensing in every line of her body.

"I love you, Vincent, and you're just using what happened as an excuse not to face it. You're scared! You've been told so often that you're different in every way, that you've come to believe it. Just once, why can't you accept that a girl can find you attractive in deep, exciting ways you've never dreamed of? And not just that.... You're kind and gentle and good, and what you did to that boy was no more than what anyone with a sense of justice would have done."

"Then you're blind!" he snarled, flinging away from her, furiously. "You wouldn't see the truth if it was staring you in the face. You say you.... like.... me...." He couldn't bring himself to say 'love'. "And yet all I see is the fear in your eyes. So you tell me what I should believe, Lisa. Tell me what it means...."

"It means you've still got to come to terms with the shadow," a quiet voice behind them said suddenly, and he whirled to see a universe of understanding in the tired eyes of the artist. "Lisa's right, child. Let your fear go. It's crippling you and it always will unless you face it."

"Elizabeth...." For a moment Vincent found himself looking down awkwardly, stricken with shame that she had witnessed his outburst. "I'm sorry. We disturbed you...."

"You didn't disturb me, child." Smiling in the flickering light, she came forward and put a mittened hand on both their shoulders. "I've been expecting you."

Suddenly, she seemed very pixie-like, knowing of ancient secrets, able to see everything, even the heart of a confused boy. "How do I know? It happens. I'm getting too like Narcissa in my old age. Father would say it's because I live alone too much."

Softly, she stroked Lisa's long hair with the air of one who truly appreciates beauty and sees too little of it. "And you, child, remember Vincent's been through an ordeal you and I can only pray we shall never face. Be gentle with him. Gentle and strong."

Lisa didn't reply to that. Instead she turned back to the painted shadow on the wall and gazed at it for several moments. "Why did you do it, Elizabeth?" she asked softly at last. "Winterfest is supposed to be a happy celebration. That's almost menacing...."

"I only paint what is, child. Real or imagined." For a moment Elizabeth glanced across at the wall and then back at Vincent, at the suddenly haunted blue eyes, and realized that she couldn't imagine this. The agony the boy had suffered and was still suffering. "Vincent? What is it?"

But Vincent only shook his head furiously, the tawny mane falling over his face.

"You brought Lisa here to show her the painting?"

"To show her what I am!" he returned suddenly, his voice so low and husky it sounded like a growl in his throat.

"And what are you?"

As if goaded beyond endurance, he turned on her, fangs glinting in the half-light. "You ask that? You painted him for everyone to see...."

"Painted a cloaked figure," she answered calmly, untroubled by his anger. "I've not identified him - not even to Father when he asked. It's all been your inspiration, Vincent. Your pain. As for the rest of us - we see only a shadow, and when we look at you, we see the boy we've loved all these years."

Suddenly, she took his face between her hands and held him there, so that the flickering light fell golden upon his cheeks and knew, softening in the short fur of his nose and shining in the blueness of his all too

human eyes. "Listen to your heart, child. I mean really listen. And then you'll see all the colours of the rainbow - just as I told you."

He didn't answer for what seemed an age, and she felt him suddenly tremble.

"Nothing can ever be the same anymore," he whispered at last. "It's all finished." Then he abruptly broke away from her and went to stand by the wall, breathing in short, unsteady gasps as if he'd been running violently. "It's all my fault, I know that. I never meant to cause anyone pain...." And then suddenly he flung up his head in defiant resolution. "I accept.... all of it. I am me and this is my fate. As for the dreams...." Involuntarily, it seemed, his eyes strayed to the mural then away again. "They have no place now. I'm sorry if I hurt you, Lisa."

"You didn't," she said, equally quiet, stunned by the depth of emotion emanating from him. "Truly you didn't."

For a moment, it seemed that he almost smiled and then he suddenly turned and without another word walked quickly from the chamber. There was nothing else he could say - so many things he couldn't understand. He wanted to love her and could not. He wanted so much that was impossible, but the shadow was at his shoulder now, closing in on him and blotting out all the light there had ever been. The utter darkness in the heart of a black hole, swallowing up even the magical sound of the carousel horses inside his head....

'I'm myself alone.... Yes. Always and forever. Shakespeare did indeed know everything....'

He stumbled back to his chamber not really knowing how he got there, so lost in his dark thoughts that he never sensed Devin waiting for him just inside the doorway. Involuntarily, he pulled back with a start of surprise as the older boy stepped out to meet him, and then he hesitated because there was such a quiet and determined sort of secret satisfaction about Devin that, in spite of his own preoccupation, Vincent stared at him wonderingly.

"Come on, little brother. I've got something to show you."

"What is it?" he asked quietly, in spite of his resolve. He really wanted to lie down on his bed and lose himself in a book, so that he wouldn't have to think any more, wouldn't have to see the expression in others' eyes as they looked at him, but there was something about Devin that could not help but arouse his curiosity even now.

"Come and see." Unaccountably, Devin took his hand as if he'd been four years old again, and without any further explanation, led him along the tunnel and up the Winding Stair. Vincent said nothing, allowing himself to be taken. He kept remembering Lisa, the touch of her hands, the feel of her in his arms as they danced, and above all the sweet and aching fire of her lips against his cheek. How could she - How could Devin - bear to touch those killer hands without feeling soiled and contaminated by the nightmare that was himself?

"Here," said Devin at last, stopping at the iron-barred gateway of the Central Park exit and fumbling with something in one of his deep pockets.... "I told you I'd do it. Now it's your turn, little brother." And he smoothed one hand lovingly over the wall where, in the dimness, Vincent could see the deeply etched fresh gouges of his brother's name neatly carved into the rock. "Your name'll live forever alongside mine. Right here. What do you think? I chose the right spot?"

"You got your knife," Vincent said softly, wonderingly.

"Yeah, and Father doesn't know, so you're not going to tell him." Just for a moment, Devin's voice sounded hard against the low roof. "You promise?"

For the space of perhaps two breaths, Vincent merely looked at him, his blue eyes deep with a strange,

careful emptiness.

"I won't tell," he said flatly at last.

Almost as if he were suddenly ashamed for asking, Devin quickly thrust his new knife into his brother's hands.

"Here. Do it."

It came to Vincent, as he stood there in that section of tunnel gouging his name into the rock in wanton vandalism, that maybe Devin had a purpose for all this. There was no logical reason for it - it was simply something that boys did, and the deep satisfaction he couldn't help feeling. Watching his effort take shape under the shining blade told him that Devin must have understood that too. Because only boys had the primitive urge to put their mark on bare walls. Only boys could get such joy from this kind of defiance - and he did feel that joy. Deep and slow, running like a great river welling from somewhere inside him and soothing that aching hurt. Painted shadows on a wall, the secret fascination of a girl who danced and swam and kissed his cheek.... Maybe Elizabeth had been right. Maybe it had all been in his imagination and the beast of his nightmares was only part of what he was. An ancient fear he could put by for a little, even if he could never forget. Suddenly, something in his heart secretly smiled. The old magic was working again, the miracle his brother effortlessly and endlessly performed - that of making him believe, even if just for a moment, he was no different from anyone else.

Maybe it was that moment, he would think later, looking back on it, that the great wound on his soul slowly began to heal a little.

Devin suddenly giggled into the scratchy silence.

"Maybe someone years from now will find our names here and wonder who we were. Why we did it. But it'll be our secret, Vincent. For all time." He stared at the carvings, suddenly serious. "We can do so much with this knife. Go hunting, fight off marauding bandits, sculpt great works of art.... Keep muggers away." And then he stopped, as if suddenly afraid to say any more.

Vincent paused in his efforts and cocked his head sideways at him. There was so much he wanted to say to Devin and could not. So much to thank him for and not the right words to express it all.

"I know," he said simply at last.

But Devin kept his eyes fixed on the wall and was silent.

"And just what do you think you two think you're doing?"

Even as he turned, tensing with suddenly guilty shock, Vincent knew he should have anticipated it - should have heard the approaching footsteps, the familiar tap of a cane on the rocky ground long before this. Somehow, it bothered him that he had not, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Devin had already snatched the knife from his hand and slipped it up his own sleeve.

"Uh.... nothing," the older boy managed swiftly with feigned nonchalance.

"Nothing." Father repeated grimly, brushing past him, and indicating the fresh carving on the wall. "That's nothing done with a feather, I presume."

Vincent glanced at him nervously, then dropped his eyes before the lashing sarcasm. He could sense Father's anger like a white heat radiating out at them, the tight economy of his words clipped even shorter than the formal British accent usually allowed. He knew Devin sensed it too, because his brother was drawn as tense as piano wire, quivering to breaking point, waiting for whatever came....

But Vincent suddenly thought with quiet, rebellious happiness, at least he'd finished his carving. At least now Devin and Vincent were etched into the rock for all time. Together.

"Devin." Even that one word was ominous, full of growling thunder and crackling lightning. "I've tried to be patient with you - God knows you've defied me often enough. But this time you've gone too far. After I expressly forbade you...."

There was a repressed fury in Father's voice, and he suddenly grabbed for the front of Devin's coat and dragged the boy to him. "You've got a knife, haven't you? I ordered you to put the idea out of your head, but you still went ahead and disobeyed me. Deliberately disobeyed me! I won't have it, Devin! You'll take that knife and throw it into the Abyss, right now!"

"And what if I don't?" Devin returned coolly; his eyes suddenly fixed on Father's other hand which was tightening convulsively on his cane. "What'll you'll do? Whip me?"

"Don't tempt me, boy!"

For a moment, so great was Father's anger, it seemed he might actually do it, and instinctively Devin's head came up and his shoulders stiffened, as he braced himself in readiness. But then, as if only just realizing what he had said, the doctor caught himself with a visible effort and relaxed his grip.

"Give it to me."

"It's mine!" Devin retorted furiously, straightening his jacket with virtuous correctness. "I worked for the money - I saved every cent and it's mine!"

"Not anymore. You broke the rules, and you'll abide by the consequences. Give it to me."

For what seemed an age no one moved. Then very slowly Devin took the knife from his sleeve and held it out, his face an expressionless mask of non-emotion.

Father looked down at the weapon for a long time, but made no attempt to take it. He simply nodded.

"Take it to the Abyss and throw it down."

As if from far away, Vincent watched his brother's fingers tighten over the hilt until his knuckles gleamed white and his whole hand shook. Something deep inside his own gut suddenly wanted to growl, snarl, roar his protest at the injustice of it all, at the shattering of the distant dream Devin had brought him here to share. A dream which had shown him that beyond the savage beast he was just a boy, a boy who, like so many others, had to pretend in order to hide his pain.

He desperately wanted to say something, anything, to stop the awful anger all around him from building up to a detonation that would destroy them all. But there was no way he could pull Devin and Father back from the brink on which they stood, no way he could make everything as it was, and for an instant, a terrible fury seared behind his eyes, for that and for his own helplessness.

"Devin....," Father said warningly.

Just for a moment, Vincent thought achingly, I don't even exist for them....

But before he could do or say anything, Devin had suddenly whirled and was running back up the tunnel as if the hounds of hell were at his heels. Even when he was out of sight, Vincent could still hear his footfalls, feel the vibrations of his anger through the walls, and he forced himself to keep his own eyes fixed on the carvings in the rock before him, knowing that if Father turned to him now, there would be no answers that would even come close to explaining....

He could sense Father hesitate and look at him keenly, trying to understand. Maybe even waiting for an explanation. But Vincent kept on staring at the proud contours of his name on the tunnel wall, refusing to meet his eyes. A strange deep sense of loss welled up within him. For the doomed knife. For Devin. For them all. And behind the loss the dumb anger he could barely contain instinctive and unreasoning.

Father stood there for a moment longer, then simply turned and walked away without a word, his cane tapping hollowly on the rocky ground.

Vincent suddenly wanted to howl, rage, batter at the walls until somehow, someone made it all right again. But instead, he simply stood there until his eyes blurred with the intensity of his gaze, alone with the silence and the frantic thundering of his heart in his ears. Trying to understand why it was he felt so angry.

It had been a long time, Father thought wearily, staring into the candle flame. But it hadn't been just a childish altercation, to be dealt with and forgotten. Devin hated him now. He was sure of that, even if he hadn't been before. As for Vincent....

The candle wavered in the draught, and in the flickering haze, he suddenly saw the boy standing silently in the doorway, misty like a dream appearing out of an idle moment. It was late, though somehow the doctor knew he shouldn't be so surprised that his son had come. But he was - and even more so when Vincent slowly came forward, put a contrite arm around his neck and wordlessly hugged him - a strong, desperate embrace that left Father gasping and smiling with surprise and pleasure.

"Vincent...."

The boy straightened and gazed down at him seriously.

"How are you?" Father asked quietly, taking the furry hand in his own and simply holding it, wanting to feel his warmth and strength. Wanting to drive away the anguish he should still see in the depths of those blue eyes and not knowing how.

"Well, Father."

"Well," the doctor repeated quietly, almost to himself. "Well." He took a deep satisfied breath and gestured for the boy to sit, but for a long moment he couldn't bring himself to go on. He found himself taking off his glasses, folding them, opening them again and then carefully, finally, laying them down before him on the table, all the while aware that those incredible eyes were watching him steadily. Warily.

"We need your help," he said at last. "Mark and Winslow - there's a leak in the new excavations and...." He stopped and impulsively reached out to lay a hand on his son's arm. "Vincent - I'm not blaming you for what happened with Devin. He disobeyed me and he knew the consequences."

"But you were hard on him, Father. That knife meant so much."

"To him?" Father suddenly leaned back in his chair and studied the boy from under his brow. "Or you?"

Vincent didn't reply.

"It's not the.... the graffiti I'm bothered about." Father went on after a moment. "And maybe I shouldn't expect boys to understand all the reasons for why our rules must be obeyed. But I'm trying to protect this world in every way I can - for all our sakes, but especially for yours. Sometimes I think Devin forgets that."

Vincent looked down abruptly. "You were still wrong to make him get rid of it."

"Was I?" For a moment Father considered the possibility then brushed it aside. "Maybe I was. Vincent.... you've been on your own so much since.... since you came back. Are you still fighting this thing? Can't you let it rest and find some peace now?"

The blue eyes suddenly turned bleak and empty. "I know what I am, Father. Everything else is a dream I can never hope to attain, and I've accepted that. Don't concern yourself."

"But I do." Father bit his lip. "And I know how much Devin has been part of that dream. Please...."

Suddenly, the boy reached over and took Father's hand into his own, squeezing it so tightly the doctor almost cried out.

"I do accept it, Father," he whispered, his voice a curious blend of iron and silk torn from his gut, his heart, whatever it was that made him uniquely Vincent. "This is my fate and I can't question it any more. This is me! And maybe one day the pain won't hurt so much - but not yet."

He paused, and something in his eyes smiled wanly. "Devin still dreams for me, you know."

Father shuddered. He'd stood there in that tunnel for what seemed a long time, watching the two of them together, dark head against tawny gold, both delighting in their boyish defiance - and something had struck at his heart. Vincent had been smiling, his anguish forgotten for the moment, and then he had marched in and....

"It's over," Vincent murmured, and it was as if a shutter had come down over that part of his soul. Then, with an effort, he added. "You said something about Mark and Winslow...."

Father gazed at him for a long moment, trying to see beyond that outer defense to the hurt beneath, the strange secret pain that he somehow knew would be forever a part of his son now.

And then, briefly, he told him about the threat to the lower chambers, all the time wishing it didn't sound like they were having to depend on him to save them all, especially after what had happened.

"Mark would like to talk to you about it first," he finished quietly. "It may be that he'll want to see this stream for himself in which case...."

"I'll do what must be done, Father." Vincent returned, a gentleness in his tone that the doctor hadn't heard for someone. That and a quiet strength which suddenly made him seem very much a man. "Don't worry. I'll speak to Mark immediately."

"Vincent...." Father stopped, trying to hide the tremor in that one word. "Be careful, won't you? Don't do anything rash."

In answer, the boy reached out again and touched his hand reassuringly, then got to his feet, lithe and beautiful. And suddenly, Father knew he had to tell his son - tell him exactly what it meant to have him here....

"Some things we could never do without you, Vincent," he said softly, with an intensity that surprised even himself. "I know I've been afraid when you've gone off on your patrols, so far out of touch and communication. But because of what you are, I've always known that you'd find your way back somehow. We need your skill. We need you. Understand?"

"Yes," Vincent whispered and Father could see that he did. "And I'll do what I can. I promise." Just for a moment he hovered, looking down awkwardly. "I never apologized for the worry I caused you."

"Well," the doctor smiled wryly. "I admit I've had a few moments over the years - but nothing compared to the joy. You do know that don't you?"

The boy didn't reply, the expression on his face suddenly enigmatic.

"Come back to me soon," Father said suddenly, his smile fading.

Vincent looked at him, and there was a knowing gentleness in his words now that softened them in a way that made his former defensiveness seem like a bad memory.

"You worry too much, Father. There's no danger."

"There's always danger. Especially when you least expect it." He braced his shoulders and found himself picking up his glasses again with restless fingers. "Besides, there's another reason for wanting you back quickly. I've discovered a new gambit I want to try out - one I know is going to work!"

There was a twinkle in the blue eyes, as they involuntarily flicked to the waiting chess board. "Oh?"

"Yes, 'oh'." Father nodded with rather touching emphasis. "So, you'd better prepare yourself, Vincent. Because as soon as you come back from this jaunt, I'm going to thrash you."

"That," Vincent murmured, bending to hug him again. "Should prove interesting, Father."

The doctor grunted and jammed the spectacles back on his nose with pretend severity. He knew Vincent had seen through his reason for the change of subject, knew too that there were other things unspoken between them, that were understood and accepted simply because they were father and son. Maybe one day, he thought vaguely, he'd have the courage to tell Vincent - and Devin - what it was he'd held back all these years. But for now, all he could do was accept their differences and realize that, in many ways, it was Vincent who was already a man. A man who, because of his griefs, had had to grow up too soon.

It was early the following morning, almost six-thirty by the reckoning of the world Above, and Vincent knew he'd shortly have to go. Mark and Winslow would be waiting for him Below, and Winslow, for sure, would be getting impatient at the delay. But he'd promised Devin to meet him here on the steps leading to the Chamber of the Winds, in order to say goodbye as they always did when setting off on some expedition without each other. Devin, however, was late and if he didn't come soon....

For a moment Vincent remembered last night. How, when they were both in bed, his brother had quietly and triumphantly produced the forbidden knife from between his mattress and the bed frame and sworn him to deathly secrecy, never to tell Father. Obediently, he'd laid his hand on the smooth hilt and made his vow, thrilled with astonishment, and horrified delight at the mutual defiance, the steel blade winking and shining in the muted candlelight like some magical weapon of great power from ancient legend. Never in all his life had he deliberately disobeyed a direct order from Father, and the resulting pangs of conscience had kept him awake long after Devin had drifted contentedly off to sleep.

But it was a wonderful knife. To have to throw it down the Abyss was....

Thoughts of his own interview with Father earlier that evening made Vincent resolutely put the remembrance from him. Instead, he raised his head and let the strong underground wind whip his long hair from his face and tug at his clothes, listening to the soft insistent whine as it howled through the nooks and crannies from the void Below. Sometimes, it rose almost to gale force, especially in front of the doors to the Great Hall, and the Helpers who came down here for Winterfest always hugged the wall as they descended the stairway, as if afraid the updraught would suck them off and down to destruction.

But Vincent loved it. Sometimes he would sit on these stairs and close his eyes and imagine he was an explorer in the wild tundra, or driving up the Alps with Hannibal and his elephants, or forcing his way through an arctic blizzard with doomed Scott and his party. Down here there could never be a substitute for the seasons of the world Above, but with a waterfall's spray for rain, a subterranean wind for a western breeze, he could almost - almost - accept that, for him, there would never be the warmth of a midday sun.

He took a deep breath and felt it sear right down to his lungs. There'd been no mistaking the question in Father's eyes, the *'How are you coping? Are you going to be all right?'* that greeted his attempt at calm normality and light-hearted banter. It was almost as if the episode with Devin had been forgotten, like some bad dream. But even now, Vincent could still feel anger over his brother's treatment. Dismay. Incomprehension, because it was unlike Father to condemn so violently - except that where Devin was concerned, he seemed to be of a different mind entirely. As for Vincent himself....

He closed his eyes momentarily and strove for the hurting acceptance that had to be his now. He had caused too many people so much pain, and it had to end. Even if it meant he must bury his own pain so deep it became a part of his very being. Pretend for their sakes that he was happy and content, and never, ever, let that dark shadow, that beast, rule him again.

His eyes snapped open sharply as he sensed the presence Below, and for a moment he allowed himself an instant of sympathetic recognition.

"Devin."

Then he stopped, tensing. Devin's eyes were like sheeted ice, and he moved with the jerky, uncontrolled steps of a robot, driven by something beyond its own volition.

"What is it?"

His brother put one foot on the bottom step and stared up at him. "You," he whispered, and even his voice was different, harsh, and choked with something Vincent knew all too well - grief and anger. "You betrayed me. You sneaking little bastard...."

The void wasn't down there, Vincent thought vaguely. It was here in his heart, in his gut, emptying him to the winds and throwing him away.

"What do you mean?"

"The knife," Devin said through clenched teeth as if the words hurt him. "Don't try to deny it. You told Father I hadn't thrown it away. You snitched on me, little brother. Went crawling to him...."

"I didn't!" The words were out even before Vincent had thought them. "You know I didn't, Devin! I would never...."

"Wouldn't you?" Slowly, purposefully, the older boy was mounting the steps towards him, hand clenching into tight fists of fury. "No wonder he loves you best - his spy, his pet freak who hears everything and tells all! I trusted you, Vincent! I even let you use it, and this is how you repay me!"

There wasn't just horror churning in him now. There was desperation, the sensation of everything that had ever mattered slowly slipping through his fingers to be lost forever. All the secrets and dreams, the warmth of brotherhood and the knowledge of belonging....

"I didn't," he whispered desperately. "Truly, I didn't...."

"Liar!" The word was spat with all the force of hatred. "There wasn't anyone else who knew about it. You went to Father early this morning and now...." Devin stopped, swallowing hard. "Now you've got your wish. The knife's at the bottom of the Abyss, Vincent, and if you want to put your name on any more walls, you can damn well do it yourself! You hear me?"

Almost involuntarily, Vincent moved down a step towards him, holding out one hand in a helpless gesture of pleading and friendship.

"Don't say that, Devin. Please.... You're wrong."

"Like hell I am! I hate you! It was the only thing I ever wanted, and you told Father...."

"I did not!" There was more than pain in Vincent's denial now. There was anger, and his own hands were clenching, trembling at the unfairness of the accusation. "It wasn't me...!"

Devin was only one step below him now, breathing hard, his eyes glittering with fury and unshed tears of betrayal. He didn't seem to hear Vincent's protest - or didn't want to.

"Liar!" he yelled again. "Who else would it be? You were the only one who knew...." And suddenly his fist lashed out, catching Vincent full across the face, and slamming him back against the rocky wall with bone-jarring force.

For one long incredulous moment they both simply stared at each other, stunned into silence. The violence had caught them by surprise and with a sudden lurch of fear, Devin knew he had never meant for the

quarrel to go this far, never meant to hurt Vincent, never meant for it all to come to an end in this way.

Vincent was slowly pushing himself away from the wall, his hand to his face in a dazed reflex of pain. Almost in slow motion, Devin watched the hand come away from a bloody nose, watched Vincent stare at his slicked fingers in a kind of numbed disbelief that, even as Devin looked, began to slide away into the same blanket terrible animal fury he had seen the night in Reb's shop just before.... *'Please, God, please. Vincent, don't kill me, don't!'*

And then, somehow, he was lying at the bottom of the stairs, his whole face a flaming mass of agony. He didn't want to touch it, was terrified in case he'd feel the wholesale destruction that had been the other boy's throat, but somehow his hand wouldn't obey his brain and crawled up to his ravaged flesh anyway. The blood and his own numbed horror made it difficult to access exactly, but it felt bad. It felt horrible. And halfway down the steps Vincent stood and watched, his hand lowering, an expression in his blue eyes that Devin never wanted to see again.

Neither of them said a word. Perhaps it had only been in his imagination, Devin thought vaguely, that he'd heard his brother growl at him, but he knew it wasn't. This was truly an animal's anger, and it hurt like hell....

With a muffled sound somewhere between a snarl and a sob, Vincent suddenly leaped down the remaining steps and in an instant was off, running blindly in the direction of the Chamber of the Winds. He had to get away, had to shut out the sight of Devin lying there, staring up at him with horror and fear in his eyes.

Once again, the feel of parting flesh beneath his claws....

Blood was trickling into his mouth, and he savagely wiped it away with the back of his hand, hardly noticing where he was going. He'd struck Devin. After all his resolutions, all his slow and careful knitting together of the broken threads of control, he'd still struck Devin. His brother.... Who hated him for something he hadn't even done....

Gasping, Vincent pressed one hand to his aching heart and ran on. The thought that Devin could believe it of him hurt worse than the throbbing of his face. He'd sworn on the knife itself that he'd never betray the secret to anyone, so how could Devin accuse him of such treachery? And how had Father even known?

That wonderful knife which had carved his name in rock for all time, at the bottom of the Abyss... It couldn't be true. It couldn't...

Blind with tears of rage and pain, he stumbled on, banging into the rocky walls and not even feeling the bruises, finally finding Mary and Winslow already waiting for him, the big black man impatiently pacing up and down in an effort to work off his frustration. But they both turned and stared as he ran in and dragged to a gasping halt.

"Where've you been, boy? We've been waiting..."

"Vincent...?" Mark interrupted, more quietly. "What is it? You all right?"

He nodded, hoping his nose had stopped bleeding. "I'm sorry. I'm ready now."

Winslow grunted, shouldering his pack. "Then let's go."

As he numbly fell in beside them, Vincent was aware that Mark was gazing at him curiously, but there was nothing he could say. The outraged blaze of anger had died into a bitter sense of grief now. A loneliness beyond anything he had ever known. Because he'd lost Devin. Lost everything except maybe the memories and two names, carved into the rock at the entrance to Central Park.

The last thing on earth Devin wanted to do right now was to go to Father's chamber. But he knew he had to.

Blood was spattering down the front of his jerkin, his face stiffening into a numbed mask, and even the thought of what the treatment might entail couldn't prevent the realization that it was far too serious for him to surreptitiously treat himself. But he was damned if he was going to tell Father what had happened. His own rage at his brother's perfidy still burned white hot, and to compound the treason with tattle-telling on his own behalf would accomplish nothing. Even if Father believed him, which he doubted.

He didn't want to think of Vincent. Not now. Because Vincent wasn't his brother anymore and that part of his life was over.

To his surprise, Father wasn't alone. Mitch was standing in front of the great desk, half turning away in preparation to leave, and as Devin paused at the top of the short flight of iron steps, his hand pressed to his wounded face, there was a split second when he thought he saw the other boy's eyes light up knowingly at the sight of him - then it passed so quickly he thought he must have imagined it.

"Hey, Dev, what happened to you?"

But Devin was looking as the instinctive flash of annoyance on Father's face snapped into an expression of horror.

"Devin! Dear God..." Instantly, he was on his feet, reaching for the black bag which was never far out of reach. "Sit down and let me see..."

'Okay, Father. Okay. Just don't ask me...'

But there was no need for Father to even open his mouth. Devin saw the realization hit the moment he reluctantly lowered his hand from his cheek - saw those keen grey eyes go dark and still.

"Looks like someone clawed you, man..."

"Thank you, Mitch," the doctor interrupted hastily. Imperceptibly moving in front of Devin so that he was blocking the other boy's view. "I think you'd better leave us now while I see to Devin's... injury."

"Looks like you'll have scars there," Mitch observed happily, turning away with his hands in his pockets. "Three deep ones, too. Must have been some fight, Dev."

Sick at heart, Devin didn't answer him, neither did he utter a sound as Father cleaned the wounds and gave him a pad of gauze to staunch the blood while he rummaged in his bag for needle and sutures.

"Well?" He asked at last into the silence. "You want to tell...?"

"No," said Devin quickly, averting his eyes as the needle was deftly threaded and the doctor moved purposefully towards him.

"Devin... he attacked you."

"I started it," he interjected flatly. "I... forgot he's an animal."

Father didn't reply to that, but Devin saw his lips tighten involuntarily and braced himself for what was to come. Medical supplies were low - always were. Things like local anesthetics were usually reserved only for the worst cases or the younger children, and he'd often had a vague feeling that deep down Father believed a little suffering was good for the soul...

At last, with a final snip, the doctor moved back and gazed at him steadily, giving him that much time to gather himself again, to blink the tears of pain from his eyes.

Then he murmured quietly, "I'll speak to him when he returns."

Devin shook his head, wincing. "Don't bother. I guess I came off lightly anyway." He looked down, then added evenly. "And he didn't exactly come away unmarked either."

He heard the medical bag snap shut, the awkward shuffle of Father's bad leg as he moved towards him---- and then silence. *'If I were Vincent,'* he thought savagely, *'he'd put his arm around me and there'd be none of the stiffness, no remembrance of past sins and disagreements. But I'm not and never can be. I lost that chance thirteen years ago...'*

"As Mitch said," Father remarked quietly at last. "It must have been scene fight, Devin."

"Yeah."

"Am I to infer, then, that after all this time the two of you couldn't resolve your differences any other way then... this?"

The boy looked down sullenly, refusing to answer. Watching dispassionately as his hands clenched and unclenched stiffly in his lap. The knuckles felt bruised and sore from their contact with Vincent's face, and he suddenly found himself hoping vindictively that Vincent was feeling worse than he did right now.

"Just what's gotten into you, Devin? He's your brother..."

"He's not my brother!" Suddenly starting up with a furious jerk, Devin felt all his control suddenly evaporate in the face of that age-old argument. "Why can't you understand that? He could never be my brother! You've just got to look at him...."

Father quivered visibly, drawing the folds of his mantle closer about him as if a chill had overcome him.

"Not so long ago you made a great point of telling me how much you cared for him. Was that a lie, too?"

Dumb with a grieving anger, Devin didn't even afford the question the dignity of a reply.

"I see," said Father, although he didn't. "Well, I think we'd better settle this properly when Vincent returns, don't you? Perhaps then we can get to the bottom of what's been between you all this time."

Grimacing with a kind of sullen disgust, Devin hauled himself to his feet and turned away. But Father hadn't finished.

"Devin.... if this has anything at all to do with that knife...."

For a moment the boy tensed, then thought better of it. He knew it went deeper than that. Knew that maybe it went right to the very heart's core of what he had never allowed himself to acknowledge about Vincent - from the first moment he had looked over the edge of that crib. Anger and jealousy were powerful emotions, even in the heart of a four-year-old. *'I love him, and I hate him....'*

'Jesus, God, Reb, why did you die....?'

"Come to me this evening to have those dressings changed." Father said, as if recognizing the topic was effectively closed.

Devin nodded and made for the steps, feeling those eyes boring into his back like gimlets. *'What the hell would you know about it, Father? Never once has Vincent done wrong in your eyes.'*

'But me....'

'You made me throw my knife down the Abyss. I watched it all the way, getting smaller and smaller until it was lost in the mists. The only thing I ever wanted....'

Too sick with anger to speak again, he stepped out into the tunnel and suddenly leaned back against the wall, biting back a whimper with a monumental effort that brought tears to his eyes. His face throbbed, his one cherished possession was gone for good and now even Vincent had turned against him. What was he even doing here? There was a whole wide world Above, just waiting - a world in which he could do what he wanted, go where he pleased and be answerable to no one but himself. A world where he could be free....

'Don't leave me, Devin,' Vincent said softly, his blue eyes soft and pleading in the dimness of the Central Park tunnel. *'Take me too....'*

'I can't take you, little brother. You know that. Hey, I'll bring you ice cream, how about that....?'

Not even ice cream couldn't cure the hurt of a six-year-old who had to be left behind in the dark.

"Damn you," Devin whispered tearfully. "Damn you for making me always feel so guilty...."

Stumbling, he took the long route back to his chamber, wanting to do nothing except hide away and nurse his grievances alone. On the way he had to pass some of the other kids' chambers, and for a brief moment was glad that it was the time when everyone was out of the way, engaged on pre-school time chores. He didn't want to meet any of them, especially if it meant having to face questions about the interesting pad on his cheek.

But outside Mitch's chamber he paused hesitantly, surprised to hear a low murmur of voices within. One belonged to Mitch, the other to Mitch's close friend, Cally, and in spite of himself, Devin stopped to listen.

"I tell ya," Mitch was drawling in a satisfied fashion. "You just got to have patience. Opportunities always come up sooner or later, and if you can get two birds with one stone, then all the better."

"I'd like to have seen it," Cally said, a shade enviously. "And the fight. He was bleeding bad?"

"Pouring," came the relished answer. "You ask me, he's lucky to be alive. You know what happened to that kid who killed Reb...."

Something quivered in Devin's gut, and he inched nearer to the chamber entrance in order to hear better. There was a sort of deadly fascination in eavesdropping, and though some little voice inside him prodded him to get the hell out of there, an even more vociferous one compelled him to stay where he was.

"Yeah," came Mitch's voice after a moment. "It all worked out pretty well. And not only that, some folks are asking why Father doesn't bring it out at a Council meeting - about Vincent, I mean. After all, he went for me, he even slashed Devin real good. Who knows what he'll do next?"

"Come on, Mitch. Vincent wouldn't...."

"Maybe not. But I sure paid him back for that attack now, didn't I?"

There was a creak of bedsprings, as if someone had shifted position, then Mitch added. "Funny, huh? Him and his keeper busting up...."

Out in the tunnel, Devin suddenly found himself gasping for breath, not even registering the dull pain of his clenched knuckles. The hatred had been there in Mitch's eyes for all to see, that day in the Great Hall. He should have remembered....

"Anyway," Cally was saying. "How come you knew about the knife if he kept it so secret?"

"The only way to get useful information is to keep your eyes and ears open, man. Remember that. Other people talk - and I sneaked around a bit. Everyone knows Father's got a down on any sort of weapon, and Devin ain't the sort of kid to take no for an answer. I just hung out a little, just until I was sure. And then last night.... there it was."

'No!' shrieked that little voice suddenly. *'Please, God, no....'*

They were both laughing quietly. Laughing. While he and Vincent.... Screwing his eyes tight shut, Devin leaned his head against the rocky wall, pressing harder and harder until it seemed that either the wall or his skull would give way. For a long, lingering, bittersweet moment he dreamed of bursting in there and finishing off what his brother had started - of smashing that grinning face to a pulp, screaming his anguish and remorse so loud Vincent would hear it even in the distant tunnels where he had gone. But he couldn't.

"So, Dev thinks Vincent sneaked on him, and Vincent got so mad he damn near killed him...." Cally chortled. "Some payback, Mitch, old buddy!"

Devin couldn't hear any reply to that, but he didn't have to. He could imagine the expression on the other boy's face, the same look that had been there when he'd asked Devin if he'd got the beast under control....

'Oh, Jesus, Vincent.... What have I done?'

'Mangled all I ever touched....'

Nausea rose in his throat, vile and choking. Terror, for Vincent and for himself, because Vincent was far away, and he couldn't tell him....

Somehow, he managed to get far enough away to a secluded alcove where no one would see or hear him before collapsing against the wall, gasping and heaving - all the bile and fury and horror spewing forth in a violent spasm until his stomach hurt with retching and there was nothing left inside him to come up.

Nothing but the dark.

Afterwards, he somehow made it back to his chamber and collapsed helplessly on his bed, the shame and anger and shadow of that eternal guilt pressing on him until he could hardly breathe. Mitch had been in Father's chamber, not even surprised to see him. Mitch had been the one who....

Bitterly, Devin pressed his fingers into the gauze pad in a sort of self-punishment. But he'd hurt Vincent worse than that, worse than even a bloody nose - he'd provoked him into an animal fury. Just when he was struggling to come to terms with what he'd done to that mugger.

'Well, I'll probably carry the scars for the rest of my life, and it'll be justice on me, won't it, little brother. Every time I look in a mirror, I'll have to remember you. No matter where I go.'

'So, I'll never really escape....'

Helplessly, he buried his face in the pillow and sobbed quietly in frustration and self-pity. Nothing could ever be the same again between Vincent and himself. Never. Because behind the love would always be the hate.

The low crawlway had almost been Winslow's undoing, but finally they had all made it out onto the narrow ledge above the chasm through which the river rushed and bubbled. Vincent leaned over into the updraught, remembering the last time he had come here. Wondering if something as simple as a wind could blow away anger and hurt....

"So there's no way down," Mark observed beside him, peering down and picking out the silver flash of water in the beam of his miner's lamp.

"No. I returned the same way, but at the last junction, I could hear the sound of water deep in the wall." Vincent hoisted himself back on his elbows and added diffidently; "Then I went into the Maze to see if I could find it there."

Alongside him, Winslow grunted. "For which you ought to have had your ass tanned, boy. You know the orders about the Maze. Still," and he reached out to tousle the shaggy hair in rough affection. "Sometimes the rules are there to be bent, I guess.

"Especially if it means we can find the source of the leak." Mark added, somewhat reproving of the big man's directness. "Well, there isn't a lot we can do from up here. We'd better go back to this junction of yours, Vincent, and see if we can't follow it up from there."

They inched their way awkwardly back along the low tunnel in silence. Mark wondered about the boy - Vincent was never chatty but ever since they had started out he had been positively tongue-tied and had

spoken only when spoken to. There was also a suspicion of a bruise on his cheek, a smudge of blood around his nose, and if Mark hadn't known better, he would have thought Vincent had been in a fight. Pity the other party if he had, he couldn't help thinking ruefully.

The main path branched off into a single-file crevasse between slanting rock-faces, and Mark instinctively grimaced when he saw it.

"Any idea where it leads, Vincent?"

The boy shook his head. "It isn't marked on Father's map."

"No wonder," Winslow growled. "A rat's about the only thing could get through them. You sure this is where you heard it?"

"Listen." Vincent stopped, his head tilted slightly. "Can't you hear?"

The two men strained, and from far away came the echoing rush of a hidden torrent deep within the rock.

"Sounds mighty powerful," Mark muttered worriedly. "If this is the source of the trouble, then no wonder we're getting leak-through" He paused a moment, then added. "I want to have a look at the Maze, too, but we ought to check this out first. You think you can make it, Winslow?"

"Aw, hell." The blacksmith grumbled. "I didn't come all this way to wait around while you two enjoy yourselves. But don't worry - I think I'm in trouble, I'll sure holler!"

Acknowledging that with a nod, Mark turned and led the way into the narrow passage.

Vincent followed wordlessly. His anger at Devin had settled into a burning ache somewhere deep inside him, an ache which, if he had let it, would have risen to block off all other thought. But for the sake of his two friends who were depending on him, for Father, he had to put it by, swallowing it down and concentrate on the job at hand. He told himself that and yet it still gnawed at him. Because he and Devin had quarreled before, had even wrestled together in tests of strength and resolve - but never had Devin deliberately struck out intending to hurt. Never before had he himself retaliated so.... instinctively, lost in red fury....

Was it, he wondered in bleary misery, because he was growing up that it was all happening so suddenly? Was it simply part of what he was, what he would become? And could he bear to live with that, knowing what it might mean for those he loved....?

Behind him, Winslow occasionally struggled and cursed an unexpected outcropping of rock suddenly narrowed the passageway even more, but he was still making it through nevertheless. The sound of rushing water was getting louder now, echoing and hissing through the bedrock like a wild thing, and when Vincent raised his head to sniff the air, he could smell it, cold and clear and powerful, even over the usual chill dampness of the tunnels.

"Holy....!" Mark whispered from up ahead, stopping so abruptly Vincent nearly cannoned into him.

"What is it?" asked Winslow grumpily. "You come to the end of this rat hole or what?"

The miner didn't answer. Moving forward with difficulty, he suddenly stepped out into a vast, dripping cavern glinting in the light of his lamp, and stared around him in awe.

'Sandstone,' Vincent thought. And.... other deposits, shiny with oozing water that seemed to be coming in everywhere, through the walls; the vast and vaulted ceiling. The whole place echoed as though a mighty river was roaring just the other side of the wall; all around them and ready to burst through at any second.

"Damn," Winslow whispered, wiping his forehead with his coat cuff. "Geology ain't exactly my department, Mark, but to me this looks like one great pressure cooker ready to go off. I mean.... sandstone for Chrissakes! This place is like a beach castle ready to be washed off at the next tide."

'I've seen it,' Vincent thought. 'A wide Californian beach and the sun setting....'

"Maybe," Mark muttered, only half to himself. "Maybe it'll be a question of what we can afford to lose. Water can't run uphill, after all."

"What?"

"If we bleed off some of its power - divert the flow. If this is heading for the Maze...." He looked at them grimly. "But there's no way we can be sure."

"I'm sure," said Vincent quietly, suddenly. And he was. He didn't know how but he was. "The water here and there is the same."

Winslow rounded on him brusquely. "You can tell that?"

"It's the same!" the boy returned almost desperately. "The smell. The taste...." He touched the wall then licked his wet finger. "The same."

He could sense the two men exchanging glances, though he didn't look at them. "And.... on my way back to the Maze, I could hear it, going the same way."

Mark expelled a shaky breath and began to prowls restlessly around the cavern in a careful examination that covered his uncertainty, knowing that he had to make a decision. A crucial one. He trusted Vincent when it came to gut instinct, but even so.... One wrong move and everyone would be buried so effectively they'd only be discovered as fossils in the bedrock.

Animal instinct....

'Dammit,' he'd have to do something. The thought of a sandstone cavern being the only thing between them, and a raging torrent would disturb his dreams for as long as it remained.

He splashed through a deep puddle, thankful for the helmet which kept the drips out of his eyes, trying to visualize the flooding lower chambers. Water didn't run uphill....

"Give me that map!" he exclaimed suddenly.

Winslow unslung the cylinder at his waist and handed him the roll of paper without a word. A man of action and little strategy, Winslow itched to take a pick axe to that wall, ease the pressure, build a dam - anything just so long as they were doing something and didn't have to rely on the instinct of a.... a boy who said it smelt the same.

"Look here." Mark was saying intently, spreading the map over his knees. "There are the flooded chambers, here's the falls and this," with a sudden jab of his finger, "is where Vincent plotted that gorge last time he came. That makes us roughly here," with another jab. "You see what I'm getting at?"

"No," Winslow returned abruptly. "I see where the Maze is, though."

Mark pushed up his helmet with an impatient hand. "We're not ever going to stop seepage into the Maze. Father'll simply have to put his foot down about any kids goin' in there. No. Here. See? A work crew opens this cavern up, diverts the flow down that access tunnel and brings it out at the falls. It'll ease the pressure behind the Maze seepage and it's the only way we're going to deal with the kind of force we've got here."

"You crazy? It'll take a hell of a time to divert a river, and that's not considering the danger...."

"Winslow, we've got to ease it, both there and here. You said it yourself, this cavern's a pressure cooker. That wall could burst at any time, then it'd be silt we'd be working with."

"If we're still here to do any work," the big man grunted.

Mark glanced around. "Vincent? You know these tunnels as well as anyone Below. I've taught you the basic

rules of geology.... What do you think?"

Vincent looked up suddenly, his eyes glowing a strange gold in the dim, sparkling light. He looked more like a lion than ever, and Mark was abruptly reminded of Winslow's comment in Father's chamber. Could any of them be sure of the boy?

"It'll make the falls more powerful," he said at last, so quietly they almost had to strain to hear him. "Or create more spills. And.... it's the only way." He looked around with a strange vagueness. "This cavern's crumbling already."

"Tell me about it." Winslow slapped the wall defiantly, his hand coming away muddied. "Gives me the creeps just to hear that stuff so close."

The miner rolled up the map with a deft flick of the wrists.

"Then let's get back and work out what's to be done. You might as well take us by way of the falls, Vincent. I'll plot the course of the river as we go." Then he stopped suddenly, staring. Vincent had tensed, his head upraised as if he were testing the air, every line of his body taut and quivering.

"Vincent?"

Mark had never seen it before, but he saw it now. The top lip lifted back from glittering fangs in a soundless snarl that was pure animal, pure instinctive menace, and before he could stop it, the thought of what he had heard about the incident in Reb's shop flashed unbidden into his mind. It had seemed like a fairy tale before, because Vincent was a boy - deformed maybe, certainly not normal - but still a boy. But this....

He could see, in the wide glint of dark eyes, that Winslow was thinking the same thing.

"What is it?" he asked gently, hoping his voice wasn't trembling.

Vincent exhaled in a deep rumbling growl. "Get out of here."

"Now wait just one goddamned minute!" Winslow had started forwards almost instinctively, hands clenched, but he abruptly halted as Vincent threw back his head and uttered a chilling roar as if defying the whole earth.

"The wall!" Mark whispered, and suddenly shuddered. "Jesus, God, Winslow. Look at it....!"

Winslow looked. "Get out! Now!" Barreling into action, the big blacksmith caught hold of Vincent's collar and yanked him almost off his feet, propelling him towards the tunnel entrance. "Don't snarl at me, boy! Move!"

The vision of that sudden dribble of sand pushing out and down in a liquid tumble behind him was enough to override any surprised horror at Vincent's behaviour. The wall might not be choosing that particular moment to give way, but he sure as hell wasn't going to stick around to find out.

"Back to the junction!" Mark gasped behind them. "If we can find our way through to the upper level...."

"And what about the chambers?" Winslow panted, squeezing his bulk into the narrow passage which somehow seemed to be an even tighter fit than it had been on the way here. "What happens if....?" But he stopped, not really wanting to find out.

"Good job you saw it in time, Vincent."

"I heard it," Vincent said simply. Then, "I can hear it now. Stronger."

"You mean, it's breaking through."

It wasn't a question, but nevertheless his silence gave assent, and he felt a thrill of terror surge through the two men. An ancient terror, not just of the possibility of horrid death, but of something coming up behind.

Of being the hunted....

"We're like rats in a trap!" Winslow murmured, sweating.

Vincent could feel nothing except a strange kind of detachment. A remoteness even from his own self. Unreality ebbing and flowing.... Sand and sea and sun and over all the oddly soothing jangle of a fairground carousel. A woman with grey-green eyes holding him in her arms and smiling....

Gritting his teeth, he wriggled through the last couple of feet of passageway then turned to listen. There was no mistaking it now. That huge cavern amplified the sound, throwing it back along the tunnel until even Mark and Winslow must have heard it - the dribble turning into a torrent, the fissure widening in a tumble of soft rock and silt. Without a word he led them on, wondering even as he did so if it would make any difference now.

"What....?" began Winslow, and then he stopped, the sudden roar behind them taking away all need for explanation. "Shit! It's gone!"

All three of them abruptly broke into a run, plunging blindly towards familiarity and home, feet pounding on the rocky ground. There was no need for further talk. The possibility had become real, and just for a moment Mark was back in that old Pennsylvania pit, props splintering and giving way all around him, the sudden scream from the face-man as the wagon ran over his legs, severing them both at the knee before darkness came down and....

'We aren't going to make it,' the little voice of cold experience whispered in his ear. 'You can't outrun a flood. We aren't going to make it.'

Far above, by the Central Park drainage tunnel, Devin lifted the lamp and stared dumbly at the two carvings at the side of the gateway. *'Devin'* and *'Vincent.'* The marks white and fresh in the darkness that was old rock and brick. *'Devin'* and *'Vincent.'*

Softly, he reached out and traced the outlines as if reading them by touch alone.

'It's no good, little brother. I can't go on like this. Loving and hating and not knowing which is which. It'll never be the same between us. The dreams are over. There's only one more thing I can do for you, to tell you that I'm sorry....'

The water hit their ankles with shocking force, icy and savage, promising to get worse, and Mark involuntarily staggered, feeling Winslow grab his belt and keep him standing.

"We got to get outta the main flow!" the big man yelled above the roar. "Preferably up!"

"Vincent! You know of anywhere....?"

"There's a narrow accessway, comes up from the Maze and out to the cliff by the falls." The blue eyes fastened on his for a moment, calm and unafraid. "Too far away, though."

"Goddamn it, we got to try."

Vincent didn't answer that, concentrating on sloshing through the swirling sandy water as quickly as he could. It was strange - he had never felt so calm in his life, so.... accepting of what must be. Death had never entered the equation before, except as one logical answer to his struggle, but he remembered telling Father how much better it would have been if he'd not come back from Above - spared them all the pain. Now, with Mark and Winslow at his side, he knew it wasn't even that much of an alternative. He had them to think of now. The water was hurtling around their knees, and just for a moment he thought of Lisa in the icy

pool, learning how to swim, beautiful in the jewelled light....

"Where the hell is it?" Winslow howled, suddenly getting dashed against the wall by the furious flow. "We stick around here much longer, it's gonna be up to our necks!"

Mark said nothing, but Vincent could feel his eyes fastened pleadingly on the back of his head, and he forged ahead grimly, desperately wondering if there was some way to break through to the other tunnel which, as far as he could remember, started paralleling this one right about here....

"There's an access route," he said suddenly at last, groping for the memory. "We'd have to crawl, but...."

Winslow's groan was audible even above the rushing of the water, but the barrage was now creeping up past his thighs and all at once the prospect of even a narrow crawlway didn't seem too bad.

"Should be a turning off to the right...."

There was, filling up fast, and Winslow didn't have to go in very far before he pulled up short with a fluent curse.

"It's a dead end, boy! Boulders and scree.... we can't get through that!"

Vincent came up behind him and stopped, staring. From far away the sound of the carousel horses filled his head, grinding down to a stop.

"The whole damn area's unstable!" Winslow automatically turned to the miner, eyes glowing large in the wavering light of the helmet lamp. "So, what now? We've run into the bottle and now the cork's been put on."

Mark said nothing for a long moment, staring at the blockage as if willing it to magically disappear. There was nothing he could suggest. No blasting equipment, even if they had the time, which they didn't. No miracle.

"Good try, Vincent," he said at last, not even attempting to make his voice heard above the rushing of the water, but somehow, he knew the boy had heard him anyway, even though he didn't turn his head to acknowledge it. "Only thing to do is go on somehow and hope we come to something - a high ledge or a ladder or...."

"Bullshit!" Winslow cut in roughly. "Face it, Mark. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. You said that wall could go at any time - it chose to do it while we were standing there. And Vincent can't find us a way out."

Vincent barely heard him. There was something burning at the back of his mind, niggling and growing like a grain of sand in an oyster shell. It seemed so incredible that, after all that had happened, it should come to this, twice defeated by fate. He stared at the blockage, thought of the steep upward slope behind it that could carry them out behind the falls, and suddenly everything misted over like red drizzle, pouring out and twisting the knot deep in his gut, feeding the fire in his brain....

Roaring, he lunged forward. The sound was deafening in the confined space, even above the noise of the flood, but he gave no thought to that, flinging himself at the tumbled mass with a force not even Winslow could have stopped, ramming his hands against the sandstone, concentrating all his energy and will power on what lay behind. Escape....

From far away, he could hear the two men screaming at him, but their cries were lost in his own maddened roars. He didn't even know how wide the blockage was, didn't know if what he was doing would even have any effect other than make him look foolish, but they weren't going to be defeated, even if he died in trying. And if these boulders had been granite or limestone, he knew there'd be no chance at all.

With a renewed, savage growling, he flung his entire body weight and more against it, tearing and pushing with blood instinct, aroused by a primitive rage he didn't even pretend to understand. To tear, smash, kill, to save those he loved....

Reb. went down even as he himself had lunged forward out of the back room; slow motion, bits of shirt and flesh and spraying blood everywhere, and the redness stayed burning behind his eyes, twisting that boy's face into a skewed mask of sudden terror.... stayed glassily fixed even as his throat disappeared into a wet mess, claws ripping deep, punishing instinctively, no thought of someone because that came later. After the beast had gone and the human came crawling back from wherever he'd been those few minutes....

To protect, to save, to give and not to count the cost....

"Jeezus....!" Winslow pleaded from somewhere out of the shadows, as the whole damned edifice suddenly crumbled and burst inwards, sand and pebbles and disintegrating boulders splashing into the waist-high swirling water and taking Vincent with them.

But the blast of chill air was in their faces and the way was free.

"Vincent!" Mark yelled, lunging forward, grabbing the first thing that came to hand, a fistful of tawny hair. Pulling up and feeling more than the dead weight of a boy. Something dark and dense, heavy as a neutron star, the sadness of a whole universe suddenly giving way at last.... "Vincent!"

They couldn't wait for a response. Gasping and hauling, the two men between them pulled themselves and Vincent up and over the remaining pile already washing to mud beneath the water, went with the flood in a mad scramble through the tunnel he'd promised them was there and suddenly, unbelievable, burst out into filtered, jewelled light that shone and blinded like Aladdin's cave. A high cliff, the top of the falls, the water rushing calmly by and down over the edge, falling and glinting harmlessly to the icy pool below....

"I see it," Winslow whispered after a strangled moment. "I see it, but I don't believe it."

"We've created another fall," Mark gasped "Taken the edge off the flow back there.... Maybe later we can divert the rest of it properly and bring it out here but...."

"But for the time being, I'm just mighty thankful I'm alive." Turning to Vincent standing dazedly between them, Winslow suddenly lowered his voice in awe. "That was some performance there, boy? You okay?"

Vincent heard him, but somehow the words had no meaning. His legs felt weak and trembled and when he glanced down at his hands, he was vaguely surprised to see that the skin was torn and bloody. They didn't hurt. They didn't even feel a part of him anymore.

"I think," Mark said quietly, putting an arm around the boy's bowed shoulders. "We're going to be all right as long as we have Vincent with us. Don't you?"

There was no response, but the meaning in his words hung in the air, the unspoken recognition of what Vincent had done. That he had saved their lives as no one else could ever do. That he wasn't simply a strange boy who looked like an animal, and who was capable of killing with his bare hands, but someone on whom they could all depend to protect them because he was what he was....

Involuntarily it seemed, Vincent shuddered then straightened, his wet, muddied clothes clinging to his body, his mane a tangled mess around his drawn face. He stood for a long time gazing blindly at the falls, a dazed and indefinable expression in his blue eyes that was like an awakening from a nightmare, then without a word, he slowly turned and moved away towards the narrow rocky path that led down and through to the tunnels. He moved, Mark thought sympathetically, as if every muscle, every bone in his body hurt with an exquisite pain beyond all comprehension.

He and Winslow exchanged glances and followed at a discreet distance. They must, he knew, look as bad as

Vincent did, wet and filthy and exhausted with that particular exhaustion that only comes from fighting for one's life, but he had seen with his own eyes the real essence of what Vincent was and it was frightening. Not just the growling and roaring - everyone in the community knew that from babyhood the boy could produce such sounds - but the awesome strength and anger that could tear its way through an obstruction as if it wasn't there. The plain truth of the matter was that he and Winslow would probably have drowned there in the flooded tunnels if Vincent hadn't been with them, hadn't been able to batter a way through. A boy, only just turned thirteen....

What the hell would he be able to do when he was a man?

Father stared at the rolls of parchment on the desk in front of him until his eyes watered. They'd come so close to disaster. They all had. He.... He buried the thought, six foot deep and then some. There would have been no way he could have forgiven himself if the worst had happened, knowing his had been the final order. No way at all.

He sighed, looking up to see his son sitting on one step of the spiral iron staircase that led to the upper level of the chamber, a biography of Joseph Merrick balanced on his knee. *'Why that one in particular?'* he wondered. And then - *'I know why....'*

He bit his lip. Vincent had withdrawn into himself even more since his return from the expedition, and for some reason had spent most of the day here, reading or simply lost in silent thought as if he didn't want to return to his own chamber until he absolutely had to. Whether it was simple reluctance to face Devin after their fight or something deeper Father didn't know - but it troubled him more than he cared to admit. There was a darkness about the boy, a feeling that he was slowly slipping away out of reach, and in sudden terror the doctor straightened awkwardly in his chair.

"I keep thinking what would have happened if you hadn't...." he began, then stopped, aware of the blue eyes suddenly watching him, gentleness and sad understanding focusing through the candlelight. "Vincent....?"

There must have been something in his voice, something that made Vincent slowly close the book, stand up and come down the steps towards him. But all he was aware of was the beauty of that movement, a more than human grace that grabbed at his heart.

"It's over now." Vincent said, his voice soft black velvet in the shadows, and for a moment his furry hand rested on Father's shoulder. Warm. Massive. Light with affection.

Father swallowed, an acknowledging nod all he could manage right now. Then. "What about you?"

There was a pause and he felt the boy look down as if wondering how to answer that.

"I'm all right, Father."

"And Devin....? Vincent, you've not even seen him since you got back."

"Words won't heal the scars I gave him." This time there was a kind of soft bitterness in the gently spoken words and the hand fell away from his shoulder, leaving him feeling strangely cold and bereft. The sudden silence grew monstrous. "Did he tell you what happened?"

"I could see what happened, Vincent. He just didn't want to tell me why." Father watched him a moment, concern rising and forming a tightening knot in his gut. "Do you?"

Slowly, the boy shook his head. "It's something he and I must sort out between us."

"I only wish you could have sorted it out before resorting to blows." And somehow, Father thought, that came out sharper than he intended. He watched Vincent lower his head even further in acceptance of the

rebuke and added quickly. "Well, what's done is done. I know he must have provoked you."

"That's still no excuse for what I did."

Just for a moment a familiar platitude almost sprang to Father's lips, but he bit it back, hard. That wasn't what Vincent wanted now. He didn't want absolution. He wanted....

Recognition.

Both for what he was and for what he was capable of doing. Clawing another person in anger and bursting through a wall. Maybe it was what he had wanted all along, Father thought suddenly with a pang of guilt of his own. Not forgiveness but understanding.

"Vincent," he whispered. "It isn't only you who has to come to terms with your nature. So do the rest of us. I...." He cleared his throat and swallowed hard, watching his hands clasp together on the table top in front of him almost as if he wasn't responsible for their actions. "I didn't want to have to tell you this now, but I must."

"Tell me what, Father?"

That voice was so gentle, so calm and so innocent, it broke his heart.

"Ever since Reb's death," he forced himself to say hoarsely. "There's been a few who have.... queried your action. Your state of mind. They're afraid...."

Something almost like a spasm of real pain passed across Vincent's face then. "They're afraid of me," he whispered. "Like the people Above would be if they saw...."

"I think," Father agreed with difficulty. "They haven't fully understood, that's all. They just need time to.... accept that what you struggle with day after day, is something that has never been, and never will be again. And that sort of uniqueness is terrifying to a lot of people, you know."

Involuntarily, he reached out and took the boy's hand in his own. "There's nothing you can do about it, Vincent. They'll come to realize that whatever it is.... inside you, it can be used for great good. After all, you did save Mark and Winslow - and yourself. That would never have been possible if you were.... like any other boy."

There was silence for a long moment, then Vincent sighed. "I know that, Father," he said quietly at last. "I think I'm only just beginning to know it. I felt their fear and helplessness when the flood came - I knew there was no other possibility, except to try what I did." He looked down at their clasped hands, then added almost inaudibly. "And all the while I was thinking of Reb, of the boy who killed him. The rage came so easily, then."

"Listen to me." Father whispered intently, leaning forward across the desk, knowing he had to make his son understand this above all. "It's the instinct of every man to protect those he loves. A mother whose children are threatened will fight and kill to save them from harm. It's a natural thing, Vincent. It's not the consequence of having a.... terrible beast inside you. You tried to save Reb, and you did save Mark and Winslow. I'm proud of you for that. We all should be proud."

The blue eyes were suddenly fastened on his face with a kind of desperate hope flaring in their depths like a hunger. A need to believe.

"You understand me?" he went on gently. "I'm saying I recognize what it is within you, that I know why you feel as you do. But there's no need for your anguish, Vincent. You have a soul - a beautiful, gentle, compassionate soul. And sometimes," he hesitated, then continued firmly. "Sometimes, I think you're far too hard on yourself. No one is perfect. We all feel rage, jealousy, envy, hatred.... It's what makes us what we are. And you...."

He stopped, forcing a wan smile, and reached out with one mittened hand to softly stroke the long tumble of tawny hair. "You feel things so deeply that sometimes I.... I'm scared for you. I don't want you to be hurt, my boy. It's why I feel so helpless now, seeing you suffering like this and knowing I can do nothing to help...."

Vincent gazed at him silently, a steady, direct look that went right to his heart, then he suddenly reached up and captured Father's hand in his, holding it pressed so hard against his chest that they could both feel his heart beating, wild and hard like that of a young lion.

"Can you really understand?" He whispered, so low Father had to strain to hear him. "People I've known and loved all my life are afraid of me. I've killed. I've attacked a friend and scarred my brother for life. All of that, Father. Things that are against every principle you've ever taught me. And is that what you're telling me I am?"

"I'm telling you not to be afraid of your feelings," Father answered softly. "Even the bad ones. Maybe especially the bad ones - because they're still part of you and no one can live up to their dreams, Vincent. No one."

"Then what's the point of it all?" came the sudden anguished plea. "If that's what we are, why strive for anything more?"

"Because that, too, is part of our nature. Hope. The ability to dream. A determination to make things better than they are." For a moment Father paused, wondering if what he was saying could make his son's unique spiritual agony any easier. If he even had the right to be saying it in the first place, because how could he even pretend to know what they boy must endure....?

And then Vincent slowly leaned forward and put his arms around him, not with the sudden eagerness of a boy, but with the gentle deliberation of a grown man, and it seemed to Father as if he were being enveloped in a warm, massive strength he had never even known was there before. The long, flowing mane soft against his cheek, the dulled pressure of claws through his layers of clothing, the exciting, subliminal awareness of all that violence and power leashed into this gentle embrace.... this was truly a miracle, he thought in awe, closing his eyes and tightening his own arms around Vincent's back. That tiny, dying baby of thirteen years ago really was turning into someone truly magnificent....

"Promise me something," he heard himself whisper at last into Vincent's shoulder. "Promise me you'll never go so far from me that I can't reach you any more...."

"I promise," Vincent murmured after a moment. "I promise...." But he was staring at the golden candle-lit flame, and his eyes were filled with tears.

Devin slowly dragged himself back to his chamber after a day of routine chores, school work and restless idleness. Vincent and the others had come back hours ago and he knew he couldn't put the confrontation off much longer. He'd have to face his brother, try and make him understand, somehow get back to where they were before....

But when he arrived he stopped abruptly, just under the overhang of the doorway. Vincent was sitting at the table with his back to him, his head propped up by one arm, staring fixedly at the carousel softly playing and revolving before him. He didn't stir or look around and that, more than anything, told Devin how abstracted he was, because Vincent always sensed when someone was near. Always.

For a moment Devin was tempted to go in and finish what he had started, but something stopped him. Something about the way Vincent sat there, alone and engrossed in the action of a mechanical toy, was so utterly heart-rending, that it was all Devin could do to prevent tears welling into his eyes. His brother didn't look like the animal who had lashed out and gouged him anymore, he simply looked like a lonely boy trying

to come to terms with some enormity only he could hope to understand.

Devin continued to watch until the carousel had almost run down, then very softly he turned and slipped away. He knew what he had to do now. The one thing he could do to make it all right again. The last dream he could give....

She knew it was late by the low guttering of the candles. It didn't matter. Not even the blurring of her tired eyes could entirely diminish the quiet triumph of work completed, a vision made real.

'If those financiers could see me now. See this....'

Slotting the brush behind her ear, she moved back to the center of the chamber and slowly turned so that the entire splendour of the Winterfest painting revolved like a cyclorama around her. Candles and mystery. Father and Winslow, Sam, Ellen, Mark, Vincent.... The empty chair where John had once sat. The shadowed guardian. Vincent....

'Did I even reach him with my talk of colours and imaginations?'

'Tomorrow I'll send for Father and indulge his scientific curiosity. Sometimes men are such little boys....'

'NO ONE SHALL WORK FOR MONEY AND NO ONE SHALL WORK FOR FAME. BUT EACH FOR THE JOY OF THE WORKING, AND EACH IN HIS SEPARATE STAR, SHALL DRAW THE THING AS HE SEES IT, FOR THE GOD OF THINGS AS THEY ARE.'

She smiled softly as Kipling's familiar words rose up unbidden into her mind. God, but he understood the heart of an artist! And when one masterpiece was finished----

'THE MASTER OF ALL GOOD WORKMEN SHALL PUT US TO WORK ANEW.'

'At least here I have that opportunity. Not like Above....'

Clasping her hands happily in front of her face, Elizabeth gazed at the crowded walls with a sense of peace and accomplishment. Except that something kept dragging her eyes back to the painted figures of Vincent, Devin and Father and the hooded shadow behind them, and she found herself biting her lip, troubled for a reason she couldn't explain.

It might have been a dream. Some beautiful, deep and vivid dream in which the days passed like minutes and all that he had ever wished for came true in one overwhelming moment of disbelief and joy. He couldn't even make himself go back to his chamber and will excited sleep to come and take him. No dream could be better than this one, the swelling pipe and whistle of a fairground organ no longer tinkling, toy-like, in imagination, but surging all around him, filling him, carrying him away on the back of a galloping wooden horse until reality and horror were left behind and he felt he would fall off the edge of the world into a void of soft starlight and wonder. Round and round....

In the dream, he heard himself laugh just as the others were laughing. Devin and Lisa. Cally. Mandy. TJ, Lincoln and all the rest who rode the carousel with him, stars in their eyes, watching him and delighting in his joy. In some hidden wondering corner of his heart, he recognized the enormity of what they were doing, the reason why a subdued and awkward Devin had come to him with a group of the other children and taken him Above as he had done that night seven years ago in an unspoken apology for everything words could not cover. Bringing him with them in a communal act of reassurance that said you're still one of us - and slowly he had felt the shadows of his grief melt away, because he was just a boy, riding on a carousel for the first time in his life.

"Great, huh, Vincent?" someone called through the swelling music, voice filled with that particular

satisfaction which comes only from seeing another so happy. But he couldn't answer. He laughed because if he didn't, he'd cry, knowing Devin's dark eyes were fixed on him, burning, the white patch on his cheek strobed red and blue and green by the whirling lights. So many bright lights.... Brighter than he'd ever seen, even at Winterfest....

Had she been a dream too? Standing there at the railing, smiling as he went round, her hair a mist of wonder around her head and her green eyes fixed only on him? Every time he passed where she stood, a surge of soft longing went through him, recognizing, as in a dream, who and what she was. A possibility that, until now, could never have existed.

That sister-mother-lover who would hold him in her arms and make everything all right....

Until the music started to slow, and he came around to find that suddenly she was gone like the dream he had somehow always known she was. A beautiful, wonderful dream he had lived all his life to experience, just like the carousel, warm with Reb's hands and Reb's generosity.

"Where is she?" he wanted to cry out, but he couldn't. He could only look down at himself and see the albatross, white around his neck, blood on its breast from a crossbow belt.

"What's it like, boy?" Reb asked from the next but one horse, smiling kindly. "Remember, you ain't beaten until you lie down. Ah taught you that. Don'tcha ever lie down...."

'I'm fine,' Vincent thought happily, clinging to the spiral pole. *'Even if it is just another dream, I can never be more free than I am right now.'* And suddenly, it was as if something snapped and the weight around his neck fell away into the darkest depths, the sails filled with wind and a becalmed sea ruffled with the running tide....

"You like the carousel, Vincent?"

It had been so beautiful. And Devin.... was his friend again.

He didn't know where the dream ended and the reality began, only that he was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at the silent toy abstractedly, the muted tappings on the pipes and the rush of the subway only half heard in that drifting half-reality through which his mind was moving. A dream, in which a mounted cop was yelling as he spurred his horse in pursuit. Running kids, all managing to get away ,except Devin, bowed in just beyond the little bridge and he.... was too far away to do anything but snarl furiously, giving his brother time to twist away and run as the horrified cop unholstered his weapon and aimed it right between his eyes just as Devin threw the rock, hard and true, knocking the gun away....

There were no more debts of life between them now, Vincent thought vaguely. A thrown rock for a snarl, a final, monumental piece of defiance as apology for a bloody nose and misunderstandings. Love, hate, dreams and ambitions - they were brothers, and Father....

Overreacted as always.

It was where Devin was now. Father's chamber, the sounds of their arguments drifting through the tunnels. He didn't want to listen, so he blocked it out and tried to remember the vision of that wonderful dream – a woman standing at the carousel watching him, just as Devin had described mothers doing with their children, afternoons in the sunshine, holding half-eaten ice cream cones, always patiently waiting until the ride was over....

But somehow even that path wasn't so sharp now. He had ridden the carousel with all his friends beside him and nothing could ever make that memory fade.

He lay back and watched the hours burn away on the candle, waiting for Devin to come back. The angry voices had faded away long ago, but his brother still hadn't returned, and for a moment, Vincent wondered

if he had gone to one of their secret places to be alone and work off his anger, as he sometimes did after one of his confrontations with Father. But no matter how long it took, he told himself firmly, he'd stay away until Devin did come back, because he had to tell him that he understood now. That Father and the others needed him because of what he was, that even if he could never share the life Above, Devin had taught him to dream, and he would be contend with that.

He had to let him know the albatross had finally gone....

But although he lay there in dumb patience until the final subway trains of the morning started their rattle overhead, Devin didn't come back.

And then, in spite of his resolve, perhaps Vincent finally did drift into hazy sleep after all. He didn't know. But suddenly nothing seemed real anymore and the harder he struggled to fight his way through the mists that has descended around him, the thicker they became. His chamber had vanished, along with everything against his chest. Only the grey emptiness that made him want to weep with the loneliness. Deserted alleyways of a nighttime city where he walked eternally seeking he knew not what.

Her....

Standing at the carousel, watching him go round and round - and he wanted to call out, *'please make it stop, please let me come to you....'* but no one would listen, and when he finally managed to tear his eyes away from her to look at Devin and all the others who rode with him, he found he was alone, the music playing faster and faster, the carousel spinning harder, dizzyingly, spinning him all into a black eternal night where there was no light, no warmth, no love forever and ever. And he screamed....

With a sudden cry, Vincent started up, gasping wildly. For a moment he couldn't even recognize where he was, the horror of his nightmare shuddering through him with a blind, numbing ache, opening up an icy road where once there had been....

Devin....!

He lunged out of bed and frantically dragged on his jeans and boots by the low light of early morning candles, the jagged terror tightening in his throat, making him almost physically sick. It wasn't a dream. Somehow, he knew it wasn't a dream because there had been that look in Devin's eyes as they rode the carousel and he should have known....

Barely pausing to snatch up his thick jerkin, he tore from the chamber.

'I'll never leave you, little brother. I promise.... one day we'll live our dreams together. You and me. I won't ever leave you again....'

But the abyss that had been gaping before him for so long was swallowing him down, and in the blackness, the echoes of a savage mocking laughter howled in his ears. He hadn't meant to sleep. Hadn't meant to let yesterday's shadows surround him with false hope, and now this was what he had dreaded all the years he could remember, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He ran until his chest ached, until his legs turned weak and rubbery with fear, finally dragging himself to a gasping halt in front of the iron door that led out into the Central Park drainage tunnel. Despair and angry incredulity were rising within him in one great onrushing tide, and for a brief moment, the temptation to give way to them almost overwhelmed him.

'You can't do this, Devin! You can't! Not now.... not when we'd make it all right again....'

He found himself staring blindly at the carved inscriptions on the wall. Reached out and touched them, touched Devin, with gentle, wondering fingers feeling that warm hand closing around his, leading him through the dark into his first Winterfest and the sudden blaze of lights.

Devin....

Gone....

He didn't know how he knew it, only that he did, and the misery was too great for tears, the enormity too incredible for comprehension. After all they had done together, all they had dreamed and spoken of, all the love and misunderstandings, his brother had finally slipped away and hadn't even said goodbye. He knew it, and yet he still turned vaguely, staring around him as though half expecting to see Devin standing there even now.

'I'll bring you ice cream, little brother. How about that?'

"No....," he whispered, watching through the shadows as the other boy turned and headed towards the strangely beckoning daylight at the far end of the tunnel, the other children following in his wake. "Don't leave me, Devin. Please don't...."

But Devin didn't look round again, only hunched his shoulders as if against a storm of shame, and led the others up to the park to play in the sun. Leaving Vincent standing there, bewildered and alone, fighting back tears....

Just for a moment, he wondered at the intensity of the pain that memory evoked. And then it didn't matter, because it suddenly got lost in the grief and anger that came out of the deepest parts of him, that flung him bodily against the heavy iron door with a howl of anguish, his hands battering against the metal until they were raw. Until his legs finally gave way and he slowly slid down to the rocky ground, his back against the cold, comforting hardness of the barrier, the blackness rising up to claim him for good and all.

For a long time, Father simply sat numbly while the first reports came in, from Ellen, then Winslow, then Pascal on the pipes, saying that nothing was known even by the furthest sentry. Then, as the terror built, he forced himself to organize the search parties, every available man, woman and child who knew anything of the tunnels. Because, since he had run from Father's chamber after their quarrel late last night, no one had seen or heard from Devin at all.

At first he had simply put it down to a boy's sullen anger that needed to be nursed in solitude, but as the hours wore on, he found himself realizing it was more than that. There was no way on God's earth he would ever know if what he had said to Devin had been responsible, but he knew, too, that what Devin had screamed at him in his fury was more horrifying than he could ever have imagined. It had signaled the end more effectively than a farewell note, and no matter what happened, Vincent must never find that out.

As for himself.... He had pushed and pushed until finally he had pushed too far and something inside Devin had snapped for good and all. The festering sore of jealousy, the love and hate of years, bursting forth in one awful declaration that, no matter how you tried to understand, meant only one thing....

'Yes,' the boy yelled furiously. 'I did want something to happen to Vincent! I hate him! He's a little freak and I hate him....!'

Blind with that frantic anger and grief, he could have run anywhere. Fallen, got trapped.... There was so many places Below where danger lurked.

"No....," Father whispered in agony, his eyes suddenly flooding with tears. "Oh no, Devin. Don't leave me like this. Not like this. Please, let it all be a mistake...."

But it wasn't. He'd made sure of that. He'd made the boy throw that knife down the Abyss, watched the hatred in his eyes grow so monstrous that what had been there before seemed only a shadow by comparison. Knew that, whatever had happened, Devin never intended to forgive him. And now....

He could do nothing more than keep on sending out search parties who continued to come back with nothing to report. Three days had passed now, and it was as if Devin had never existed, except in his chamber where his belongings remained as he had left them, untouched by anyone. Vincent had gone too, disappeared into the shadows of far tunnels, taking his own secret pain with him, and Father sat alone in his chamber growing gaunt and grey-faced, tormented by self-guilt and a particular grief he revealed to no one, the agony all the more keen because of the lack of any kind of concrete news. All knew he hardly slept, that his candles burned long into the night. Devin's disappearance, so soon after the trauma of Vincent's awful experience Above, seemed to have aged him ten years.

Peter Alcott surveyed his old friend and inwardly shook his head. Teenage boys were guaranteed to add grey to anyone's head but this....

"For God's sake, take a mild sedative and try to rest, Jacob!" he exclaimed, ramming his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat in an effort to keep them out of his way. "Any more of this will kill you, and you know that as well as I do!"

The look he got then was a mixture of exasperation and despair shot through with pure grief.

"I've had to officially record him as missing, Peter. No word, no sign, nothing to even let us know he's still alive.... It's not knowing that makes it so hard." The look was redirected to the desktop in an obvious effort to avoid the stares of not only Peter, but of Winslow, Mark, Elizabeth, Ellen and all the others who had gathered in a silent, concerned circle in his chamber. "And if only I could tell myself it wasn't because of me....!"

"That's a crock!" Winslow put in roughly, before Peter could open his mouth. "Devin's old enough to take responsibility for his own actions. He chose to do what he did, and whether he's Above or still somewhere Below makes no mind. But you're needed here, and we won't let you destroy yourself for something you can't do anything to change."

"Besides," Ellen added softly, practically. "There's still a chance he'll turn up, Father. We're still searching. No one believes he's...."

"After three days?" the doctor interrupted bitterly. "Time soon runs out, you know. Especially down here."

"Where's Vincent?" Peter asked quietly. He had come Below several hours past in order to see his old friend and offer what support and encouragement he could, but he had been struck immediately by the absence of the one person in particular he'd thought would be here at Jacob's side.

Father shrugged very slightly, but it was a shrug of weary resignation rather than carelessness. "Where he usually goes at times like these, I suppose - patrolling the furthest tunnels. Trying to come to terms with what's happened. I've hardly seen him since Devin...."

He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I just don't know what to do any more, Peter."

"Well, I do," the other returned lightly. "You take the tablets and let life go on until there's news. If Vincent's out there...." He paused, then added meaningfully. "If Vincent's looking for him, then you're already doing the best you can."

"If Vincent's looking for him," came a sudden voice from the crowd with shocking clarity. Father's head jerked up as if he'd been stung.

"What do you mean, Donovan?"

The lean tow-headed man shrugged jerkily, flexing his mittened fingers as if they pained him.

"What I say. The two of them had a fight and Devin got clawed. Now Vincent's gone off on his own and not

even tried to help in the search. Why isn't he here with us, looking? Because maybe he met up with Devin again and finished what he had started! Have you thought of that, Father?"

A shocked ripple of protest greeted his words, but Father merely stared at him in silence, his face suddenly white, and Peter found himself instinctively moving towards him, ready to forestall what he feared would follow.

"I'm just saying maybe we should consider the facts," Donovan retorted defensively, answering the crowd but keeping his eyes fixed on the seated man in front of him as if to persuade him to the reasonableness of the request. "Don't get me wrong, Father - I like Vincent, but he's killed, he's injured his friends Below and I'm simply saying it's about time it was all brought out into the open. That's all."

"That ain't all!" Winslow growled, his bulk suddenly threatening as he leaned forward into the older man's face. "You're trying to say Vincent's got something to do with Devin going missing, and that's just so much horse shit! He saved Mark's life and mine...."

"And his own!"

"Just what are you trying to say, Donovan?" The clipped toneless words cut through the rising babble in a cool attempt at control, but Peter could see that his friend's hands were clenched convulsively on the desktop, trying to hold back a storm of pain and anger.

This time Donovan moved forward with the surety of his convictions, with the confidence that somewhere in the crowd, others were thinking the same thoughts too.

"That you're protecting him, Father! That he knows what's happened to Devin! My God...." and he cast around almost desperately as if seeking to make that support known. "He can attack his own brother and you're saying the rest of us are safe? Our children are safe?"

"I won't listen to any more of this nonsense....!"

"Why not? Why can't you accept the truth? All you've got to do is remember what he did to Devin and Mitch and that topsider boy...." Turning, he suddenly addressed the others, deliberately forcing his tone to reasonableness. "We've all been talking about it. We can all see what he is. I'm not saying he's responsible - maybe it's simply instinctive. But I don't want any more of us going missing. Surely you can understand that?"

"You're out of line," said Mark quietly and unexpectedly from his position near the iron steps. "And who's to say what Vincent's doing right now? Maybe he's searching places we've never even thought of."

"Right," Winslow grunted. "We're all wasting time listening to this trash. Let's get on with the business, Father."

"You won't see it, will you?" Donovan cut in angrily, refusing to be put off. "Devin could've been killed So could Mitch. And you're just sitting there doing nothing!"

"What in God's name so you expect me to do?" Father exclaimed, his hands clenching so hard they shook as if with the ague. "Are you telling me there are those of you who want Vincent censured for something that's already caused him more than enough anguish? Is that it? Are you out for vengeance?"

A sort of stubbornness entered Donovan's eyes then. "You know what I mean," he muttered.

Father shook his head grimly. "Perhaps you should enlighten me."

But before anyone could speak again a frail, slender figure in rough, white homespun leapt to her feet on the spiral stairs, her voice cutting through the babble of arguments with the forcefulness of anguished desperation.

"You know nothing about Vincent. Nothing at all! He would never hurt Devin or anyone else...."

All of them, without exception, turned in astonishment to stare up at her.

"Lisa.... Child...."

"He and Devin were friends again!" she screamed, heedless of the gentle remonstrance, her whole body shaking with barely repressed fury. "It's why we all took him Above to the carousel. Devin said he wanted to do something to make up for accusing him...."

And then she stopped guiltily, as if only just aware that Father was listening. Taking a deep breath, she gripped the iron railing and added more quietly. "Vincent was so happy. We all saw it. He'd never do anything to hurt Devin. Not after that."

"No one asked your opinion, girl," grunted Winslow fiercely. "And it ain't your place to speak here."

She glared at him, two hectic punches of colour flaring into her cheeks. "I don't care! If he," with a pointing finger in Donovan's direction, "can make false accusations, then I can tell the truth. That's what you want, isn't it, Father?"

"Well.... yes," Father murmured, suddenly having to bite his lip hard. "And since this isn't a formal Council meeting...."

"You're going to *'listen'* to *'her'*?" Donovan was incredulous. And angry. "Everyone knows how close she and Vincent are...."

"Be quiet, Donovan!" The sharpness in Father's tone silenced them all. "The subject is closed. I think it's about time we returned to the matter at hand and get some more search parties organized."

"Yeah!" Winslow agreed heartily, obviously glad to have an excuse to do something, even if it wasn't beating Donovan to within an inch of his life. "Crazy conversation anyway."

Father ignored him, and instead kept his eyes fixed on Lisa, now fidgeting uncertainly above him. Her outspoken defense of Vincent had surprised him a little, and also made him somewhat uneasy for reasons he didn't want to examine too closely just at the moment.

"We've already wasted enough time," he said quietly, wondering if she could see behind his words to what he was really trying to tell her. "I want the search to continue.... to continue until we either find Devin or there's no other alternative but to accept that he's.... gone." Swallowing hard, he looked away and tried to brace himself.

"Afterwards.... Donovan, and others who think the same way, can present their case at a full Council meeting when Vincent is there to answer them." Then his eyes suddenly flashed meaningfully, and he drew himself up in a grim attempt at sternness. "But I would hope that before there's a chance of that happening, we can all remember just why we are here and what this would mean to us. How much we all need each other."

He stared into Donovan's angry yet sheepish eyes, until finally the other man had to look awkwardly away, his arms folded protectively across his chest, then, satisfied his point had been made, Father sank back into his chair and sat silent while the gathered community slowly turned and shuffled out of the chamber.

Peter remained behind, watching his old friend. Somehow, he could sense that this time Jacob needed something more than the support of the people Below. He needed him, someone detached and objective, with an awareness of what this all really meant as perhaps the rest of them never could.

"Jacob," he said softly. "You can't be responsible for them all. Even Devin...."

"I *'am'* responsible!" The answer was vehement, desperate. "If I'm not, who is? Especially for Devin." His

voice dropped even lower then. "We never seemed to be able to get along, he and I. He's never needed me, not like Vincent has. Never been able to reach out and let me get near him."

"Perhaps he was jealous."

Pain got into Father's eyes then. "Vincent needs me, Peter. He always has. What was I to do? Leave him to find his own way through his loneliness? You know how much he needs to be loved." Slumping slightly, he stared at his hands as if he'd never seen them before. "I wouldn't have thought Donovan could believe such things. I can't believe Devin would think...."

But he could believe it. Secretly, deep down, Devin must have been harbouring a kind of jealousy all these years and he, Father, hadn't been able to see it.

'He's a little freak and I hate him....'

Sighing, he leaned back in his chair and smiled up at his friend. "I must have been mad to think I'd escaped from the problems of the world by coming down here. Life is full of problems wherever you are. And then suddenly, you get someone like Lisa jumping up and restoring your faith in humanity."

Peter smiled. "You're Father to a whole community, Jacob - some people can't even handle fatherhood on a one-to-one basis. You've done a wonderful job, and your relationship with Vincent in particular is extraordinary."

Father raised one hand to stop him. "Vincent's different. And even now I sometimes wonder if I couldn't have done more for him.... done some things differently. Hard enough with a.... a normal boy like Devin, but...." He looked down. "How can any of us presume to say we understand, Peter? I look at Vincent and marvel - but these last few weeks it's as though he's been walking through the fires of hell. I can only pray he'll come out of them reforged, not scarred by the experience."

Suddenly, and for no reason, Peter thought of his friends Charles Chandler, of the love and pride in his eyes as he looked at young Cathy. In their life of wealth and privilege, the problems and struggles that beset Jacob and Vincent were almost unknown, yet the similarities were there as plain as daylight. The same closeness, the same love and pride in each other.... But while those Below could imagine a life Above, even one so far removed as that of an uptown corporate lawyer, there was no imagining Vincent by anyone who did not know him.

Just for a moment Peter found himself regretting that fact most of all.

"There's something else, isn't there?" he asked quietly at last, seeing the shadow still lurking in his friend's eyes.

Father nodded wearily. He seemed to be strangely at a loss for words, but after a while he murmured. "You build a world and try to infuse it with a certain philosophy - fill it with people who think the same way - raise children to believe in the idea too. As the years pass, you think you know them.... and then you find you don't."

He stared at the candle flame in front of him and the iron steadiness of his British reserve quivered just fractionally. "I always thought Devin and Vincent were so close. They did everything for each other - Devin looked after Vincent and Vincent worshipped him.... And then, in our last confrontation, Devin calls him a freak.... tells me he hates him...."

Peter winced.

"I've tried to tell myself he said it in anger." Father went on quietly as if he hadn't seen. "But I saw the expression in his eyes, Peter. They'd quarrelled - even struck each other, and I think Devin will carry the scars to his grave. That's why Donovan knew there was nothing I could say. Vincent could injure a friend - a

brother - and they all realize it. And they're beginning to realize he's growing up, he's going to be big and powerful, and he can literally kill with his bare hands. That's an awful lot to come to terms with."

Peter looked down at him, involuntarily hunching his shoulders deeper into his overcoat.

"I'm sorry, Jacob. But it was something we considered right from the beginning, hand-in-hand with the decision to fight for Vincent's life, no matter how hard that life would turn out to be. He and Devin were always together - maybe they're together now. In any case, Donovan was wrong."

Father merely nodded absently. Peter was such a friend. Always had been. The one man in a thousand who would stick more close than a brother....

"Get a message to me," Peter said meaningfully. "Any time of the day or night, Jacob. You know I'll come."

"Right." This time he managed a faint smile, which fluttered around his lips, uncertain of it should be there, then sat and watched impassively as his friend reluctantly turned to go. Not for the first time, he thought what a fine line Peter and all their Helpers trod in order to keep the secret of this place. The community depended on them so much, not only for the food and other valuable items they gave, but also for the very continuance of the world Below. Without the Helpers....

Wearily, he hauled himself to his feet, grimacing involuntarily as his hip twinged beneath him. He felt as though he had just come out of a long battle, exhausted, battered but unbowed, the shock only just now settling in. It wasn't even as if there was something concrete like hate or prejudice in Donovan - that he could get hold of and cope with. But it was the reasonable fear, the understandable suspicion against which all his armour of argument was useless.

Devin. His son.... Not even in the sense that Vincent was, but in every shade of reality the word implied. His son.

'Don't make me lose you, Devin. Not without an explanation and apology for all those years we could never be close. Come back to me and let us all be a family again....'

He looked up with a jerk to find that Elizabeth had come back to hover reluctantly in the doorway. Beyond the weariness and sorrow in her eyes, he could also see a kind of relief, and for a moment his heart gave a great bound as his own awful fear receded a little.

"Elizabeth....?"

"I didn't want to say anything in front of the others," she said diffidently. "Maybe I shouldn't now - not when you have this grief to bear."

"If it's something that'll relieve it a little, it will be welcome," he assured her sincerely. Then he stopped, realization breaking like the dawn. "You've finished the mural!"

"It can wait, Father. At least until we know...."

"We could wait forever, and I'm not prepared to do that. We'll make an event of it - let everyone come and see. That's if you want to," he added hastily, sensing reluctance. He knew he was gabbling, but somehow that didn't seem to matter. He only wanted to prevent her talking about Devin....

But she knew him too well, and the hand she put on his shoulder now was full of all those years of seeing behind the facade.

"Give it a little more time, Father," she whispered. "None of us are giving up on him and neither should you." Suddenly, there was an instant when her tired eyes seemed to see right into his very soul. "It's not the same as when we nearly lost Vincent, is it?"

Dumbly, he found himself shaking his head. "With Vincent all I had was fear. Not only for him but for us as

well, for the fragile safety of our world. But Devin...." He stopped and looked down awkwardly. "I think we've lost Devin for good. Not," he added quickly as she made an involuntary, horrified movement towards him, "Not like that. But I failed to see Vincent's pain in time and I've never been able to get near enough to Devin to see the warning signs. I should've listened when Vincent told me."

"It's not your fault!" This time he did see the anger in her, and it silenced him with an effectiveness that startled them both. "You try your best to bring up all the children as best you can, but you're not going to turn them into saints, doctor. You do what's humanly possible - the rest is up to fate and the children themselves. As for Devin and Vincent...." She shrugged. "I knew Devin was restless. We all did. And we knew Vincent could never really share those wild and wonderful dreams, no matter how hard they tried. That's a formula for pain in any case, Doctor, and not one to which you have an easy cure. If Devin really has.... gone, then we all have to be there for Vincent - but he will get over it. I promise you. Perhaps the Helpers might still hear something....?"

He shook his head in helpless frustration. "I don't know, Elizabeth. My prayers would be answered if I could at least know for sure Devin is Above and all right. But, dammit, this is just like him! Thoughtless and selfish, with never a consideration for others...."

"Or Vincent," she added softly, understanding. Then stopped. "How is he, Father? Ever since he returned to us he's been withdrawn - angry. He brought Lisa down to see the mural the other day, to see the dark shadow still preying on his mind, and I could sense an incredible fury in him. I think Lisa was a little afraid, though she didn't let it show too much. That's why when she stood up just now and defended him against Donovan, I must admit I.... was surprised." She bit her lip and glanced down at her hands as if they were something strange to her. "But Donovan speaks for himself, Father. I don't know of anyone else who seriously believes Vincent would really hurt anyone Below."

Father found himself swallowing hard. "Yes," he whispered. "I know. But all that remains is for Vincent to believe it too."

It was only when her eyes finally met his in stricken understanding that he realized just what that might mean. For all of them.

He waited another two days before admitting to himself that he was waiting in vain. Devin wasn't going to come back, and Vincent....

Vincent was, he was sure, desperately refusing to accept what they all now knew to be the truth. Grieving for a lost brother and the betrayal of all his dreams - and Father's heart ached for him even as he knew he could do nothing to help.

Elizabeth had wanted the boy to be present at the unveiling but since the formal announcement of Devin's loss and the abandoning of the search, there was now no real reason to put the occasion off any longer. In spite of Vincent's continuing absence, Father was insisting on it with a fervour that, deep down, Elizabeth understood. So she agreed, with an apprehension she had not felt since a gallery had first accepted her work. Never before had almost the entire community gathered in her chambers at one time, but from the moment Father lit the first lamps and candles to reveal the mural in all its glory, she knew it had been the right thing to do. The involuntary gasps, the awestruck silence that followed.... the recognition of a creation that went beyond anything they had ever seen....

"It's incredible, Elizabeth," Mark breathed, slowly turning around to take in the full panorama. "It's like we're all really here. A true Winterfest celebration."

There was a general echo of his sentiments, and suddenly she found herself gazing across at Father's mistily smiling face, knowing why both of them had needed this. Especially now. Involuntarily, she glanced back at that special section of wall where he sat at the head of the table, the two boys on each side of him and the

cloaked shadow behind. What had disturbed Vincent about that so, she wondered? And why had she even painted it in the first place if it hadn't been in her head as well, dark and looming over them all?

"It's true artistry," murmured a voice at her elbow, and she turned to see Lisa staring in rapt awe, not at the general vista but at that one particular place where her own attention was fixed. "It seems.... different since he showed it to me before. I wish he could see it now."

"Perhaps he will, child," Elizabeth answered quietly, putting her arm around the girl's shoulders and holding her close for a moment. "I'm glad Vincent has a friend like you. Especially now."

Lisa turned to look up at her knowingly. "There'll never be anyone like Vincent again, will there, Elizabeth?"

"No, child. I don't think so. Vincent's unique."

Lisa didn't say any more, but the expression in her eyes told the artist all she wanted to know, and for a moment her arm tightened around Lisa's shoulders in recognition of the fact.

In true opening-day style, she had arranged with the kitchen for some refreshments to be laid out on trestles down the centre of the chamber, but although the group's attention had now turned towards them it was with an air of absentmindedness that, in its way, was more of a compliment to her than she cared to admit. Everyone's attention was still drawn in wonderment to the painted walls and with a sudden surge of happiness, Elizabeth knew she had done something, not just for herself, but for them too. Something that in a way was all even closer together in mutual recognition of the miracle that was the community Below.

"Is the scientific curiosity satisfied now, Father?" she asked mischievously as he suddenly appeared at her shoulder, glass in hand. "And was it worth the waiting for?"

"Dear God, yes!" he gasped in mock fervour. "But you don't know what it did to my blood pressure." There was a twinkle in his eyes, she noticed, that had been absent for a long time, and though the pain was still there it was buried deep, dulled by acceptance.

"I wouldn't have your job," she whispered, in a sudden non-sequitur, knowing he understood.

He smiled wryly and silently toasted her with the glass. "No," he agreed. "but sometimes - like now - it can be everything I ever wanted. And," he looked around, partly at the milling crowd, partly at the glory on the walls, "I'm a great believer in each to his own."

"I'm glad it worked out so well." Elizabeth took a deep breath and then nearly lost it with shock. Grabbing for his arm, she nodded frantically in the direction of the door. "Father....!"

He followed her gaze, and she could feel the sudden tension jerk through him as though someone had abruptly tightened all the knobs at one go.

"Vincent...."

The word was only a whisper, but it had in it all the love and anger and pain she had ever heard.

"Dear God.... Vincent....!" Fumbling with his glass, Father barely managed to set it down safely, before he was across the chamber and hugging the boy to him with a fierceness that took no notice of the silent stares and astonished smiles spreading through the gathering.

"Where've you been? Are you all right?"

There was no reply except for the tightening of strong young arms around his back, and with a jolt of fear Father moved back a little and stared into his son's bloodshot blue eyes. Vincent looked somehow older, sadder, the shadows under his cheekbones deepened to a gauntness that told of a suffering borne and overcome, the crease between his brows hard with past pain. And yet his eyes were filled with a strange kind of peace and tranquility, that made Father suddenly stare in awe. All at once it seemed as if this was a

stranger who stood before him, a mysterious apparition who had come out of nowhere bearing a promise of understanding and love - a man filled with wisdom in place of a confused boy.

"Vincent....?"

"I'm all right, Father," that calm, gentle voice murmured, so low he barely heard it. "Everything's all right."

"You just left.... without a word...."

"I was searching for Devin." There was the faintest of pauses, then. "He's gone, Father. Perhaps forever."

"You can't know that...."

The great shaggy head lifted abruptly, as though in remembrance of past pain, and then something very like a smile seemed to tug at the corners of Vincent's mouth.

"When he took me on the carousel, he was saying goodbye. I understand that now. And.... there was no other way for him, Father. He could never be content Below, and Below is all I have."

"Vincent...." Elizabeth was hovering at his shoulder, and as he turned she, too, held out her arms to him.

"Welcome home, child."

He hugged her wordlessly, then, as if just realizing where he was, looked around in awe. For a moment, it seemed as if he hesitated, then, slowly and deliberately, he made his way over to that particular section of wall which had so disturbed him.

Father and Elizabeth exchanged glances, but there was no need for trepidation now. Vincent stood calmly studying his portrait and that of the dark figure at his shoulder, then turned back to look at them and as he did so they could both see the softening in his eyes that was understanding and acceptance.

"He's my secret promise of the future, isn't he?" he whispered. "What I can become - guardian, protector... of you all. My destiny in my world." He stopped, his eyes sweeping over the silent crowd before him, and something about him seemed to brace itself in resolve. "I know there are.... those of you who have questioned my control. Who may have feared me and.... what I can do...."

There was a suddenly uncomfortable stirring. Donovan, Father thought. And.... Mitch. Dear God....

Vincent was silent for a moment then simply spread his hands in a kind of surrender that had in it no hint of apology.

"I am what I am. You are all my family, and I would never knowingly hurt any of you. You've given me.... so much. So all I can do in return is to.... defend you and my home, even at the cost of my life. I can do no more than that."

It seemed, as if for an instant, his eyes fixed themselves almost involuntarily on Lisa, on her pale, intent face and luminous eyes that devoured every inch of him, then he added softly, almost to himself. "Devin showed me that everything is possible. I.... have to believe that."

From somewhere in the crowd, a woman's involuntary sob broke the stunned silence following the boy's words, and it was only after some moments that Father, too, found tears were coursing down his own face. Stumbling forward, he put his arm around Vincent's neck and just held him for as long as it took to get himself under control. His quiet, gentle boy, who had spoken with the dignity and directness of a grown man to cut right to the heart of their fear.... Then, angrily wiping the tears away with the cuff of his gown, he turned to face the gathered community.

"Devin.... seemingly chose to leave us, and in a way that has caused all of us anguish. Vincent.... Vincent has returned, and though there will always be a gap in our hearts, he has filled it already with a love and greatness of spirit far beyond his years. I hope.... those of you who voiced your fears about him can....

accept, with the same generosity, his words to you right now."

They all knew what he meant. He could see that. Tightening his arms involuntarily around the boy's shoulders, he smiled tremulously, in an effort to reassure them and himself because there were no words now. None that would have any meaning anyway.

"Then you're saying Devin's somewhere Above, Father?"

"I'm saying I won't believe he's dead," he answered, gazing steadily into Donovan's eyes, as if willing him to believe it too. "And in the absence of any proof to the contrary, that will be my comfort."

Then, before the other man could speak again, added almost desperately. "We've searched everywhere, Donovan. For over a week now, and there's no trace. Vincent's searched the far tunnels, and even 'he' can't find him! So maybe we'll never know for sure - all I know is that I can't.... I won't stop hoping that one day he'll find it in him to come back to us."

For a moment, he looked around at all of them, the realization of what he had said only just then beginning to hit home. Suddenly, he knew he had to get out of there. Away from their eyes, their sympathy and their incomprehension, and before anyone had a chance to stop him he turned and plunged towards the doorway, out into the tunnel beyond. He didn't even know where he was heading, only that he had to get away before he broke down completely.

Sobbing, cursing his bad hip for slowing him down, he was only dimly aware that someone was suddenly calling his name, that he was being followed at a careful but persistent distance, and furiously he pushed himself along even faster, almost falling over his cane in his desperation to get away. Why couldn't they leave him alone just this once? Why couldn't they understand that sometimes grief was too deep to be comforted, too massive to be comprehend except after a long passage of time?

Devin was gone....

He felt his legs go from under him, and with a sobbing gasp put out his hand to try and save himself. Gritty rock tore the skin from his palm and knees, the sudden pain taking his breath from an already aching chest, and for a moment there was nothing but the hammering of blood in his ears, drowning even the hissing splash of the water that told him he was in the Chamber of the Falls. Then a hand abruptly closed over his upper arm and eased him upright.

"Father...."

Of all people, why did it have to be Vincent? he wondered vaguely. *And who else would it have been after all? His only son now....*

Remembrance of that overwhelmed even the physical hurt, and suddenly Father found himself clinging to the boy with the fierceness of desperation, his body wracked with the harsh, unwilling sobs of a man who hadn't allowed himself to cry for nearly twenty years. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do to explain the reason why.

Even shame didn't matter now. Nothing except the reassuring warmth and nearness of this gentle, understanding son, he would always love beyond anything else in life. Vincent said nothing until the silent storm had abated, then as Father slowly straightened and wiped away the last traces of his tears, he gazed at him quizzically, the bright blue blaze of his eyes muted in the jewelled light from the falls.

"I'm sorry," Father gasped at last, burdened by the abrupt change in their roles. "I didn't mean...."

Vincent tilted his head just a fraction. "You love him," he said simply, as if that explained everything.

"So do you." Father suddenly stated. "Vincent, why....?"

The boy turned away to gaze over the water, and for a long moment he was silent as if considering his

answer carefully.

"When I was.... six years old, he brought ice cream and told me he'd.... never leave me again. But even then I.... think I always knew...." And then he looked back, something lost and haunted fighting to gain mastery over the calmness in his eyes. "He didn't even say goodbye, Father. He didn't even do that...."

"I know." For a moment Father clung desperately to the remnants of old anger, trying not to think of the possibilities. "He and I quarreled again. But he wouldn't leave you, Vincent. Not you."

The boy shook his head. "There was never anything for him down here - all his dreams were if the world Above.... and it made him feel guilty because I couldn't share them with him."

For a long time Father could think of nothing to say to the bitter truth of that. Instead, he raised his head and listened to the soothing roar of the falls but somehow all he could think of was the Maze, the slippery steps of the Abyss, the floods and rockfalls and the thousand hazards that could befall someone Below.

Blinking back another sudden rush of tears, he stared down into the icy depths before him. No. He wouldn't think of that. Couldn't. For all their sakes he had to cling to hope as long as he could.

"I wish I could have understood why," he said softly at last. "To leave like that, without even an explanation."

Vincent didn't answer and something took hold of Father deep down, making him tremble. There was a taste of blood in his mouth, the salty tang almost making him gag as his teeth relaxed their grip on the inside of his cheek, and he found himself slumping back against a rocky outcropping, as if all the strength had left him at one stroke. He knew they had reached a crossroads, that whatever happened now would be as a consequence of these past days.

"I'm sorry I wasn't at your side," Vincent murmured after a while, and Father looked at him, wanting to ask and suddenly not daring to. There was something in that strange animal face that spoke of an anguish still too great for words, but an anguish reined in and conquered now. He, Father, had lost a son in Devin, but Vincent had lost much more - a brother, a friend, his dreams, his very childhood, and nothing could ever replace that. For an instant Father was tempted yet again to tell the boy the truth about Devin, but somehow his throat had seized up and his lips wouldn't form the words. Instead, he sat in silent sorrow and considered the new cascade that Vincent, Mark and Winslow had created in their near-brush with death.

'I couldn't have borne to lose them both. Not both....'

And they were dimly aware of the boy taking his skinned hand and turning it palm uppermost to survey the damage.

"This should be treated, Father. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"Only in my pride," he managed ruefully, then closed his fingers over those furry ones and held them tight. "All your life I've wanted to protect you. To shield you from the disappointments and betrayals of this world. I never thought the greatest hurt would come from here Below."

For an instant Vincent lowered his head, then almost at once raised it again. "Did you think you could protect me from what it is to be.... human, Father?" he whispered softly.

The doctor met that steady gaze unshrinkingly, but something deep down had seized him and squeezed until the whole damned edifice was creaking and groaning under a threat he was powerless to avert.

"You're going to have so much to bear in your life," he returned at last, praying the quiver in his voice wasn't too noticeable. "I wouldn't be a father if I didn't want to take away as much of that pain as I can."

"It's my fate. I accept that."

"Do you?" For an instant the injustice of it all burned in Father's heart like a brand, but Vincent's face

remained unreadable. "Do you really?"

"What else is there for me, Father? Do I accept what Donovan says I am, in spite of everything?"

"They all understand what you said back there. Donovan too. There's nothing more they can say."

"No." A brief half-smile quirked the corners of Vincent's mouth and then was gone before Father could register it. But before he could think of a reply the boy had gently pressed a light kiss into his palm, as if in contrition. "But I didn't come here to talk about me, Father. And if I do still feel.... anger against Devin, it's for the pain he's causing you."

Those blue eyes were suddenly gazing into his, deep and soft and bottomless. "You should have to be strong for us. But I'm here now, Father, and I'll never leave you again."

Tears again suddenly threatened to blind the doctor and he blinked them back furiously.

"It's just that.... I know the pain of friends turning their backs on you. The sense of loss...." He stopped.... afraid to say any more about that. "Vincent, what's happened to you during these last few days? You seem.... so much more at peace. I thought the pain of losing Devin would...."

Vincent considered that then, after what seemed an age, he whispered. "When I realized he'd gone, I.... felt so lost. I didn't know what to do except run. Into distant tunnels.... places I never knew existed. Anywhere, just so long as I wouldn't have to go back to our chamber, knowing it would be empty." He paused a moment, considering. "Elizabeth once told me to listen to my heart. The deep and secret places allow you to do that, Father. And if.... they haven't cured the pain completely, at least they've eased it a little." A softening seemed to pass over his face then. "That's why I can't face her painting now. I understand what it means."

"I'm glad," Father said, and smiled. "I'm glad you don't draw black holes any more."

A small spark of surprise flared in those blue eyes for a second then died into the quiet, gentle aura of amusement that was uniquely Vincent's.

"She told you, then."

"She was concerned about you." Father gazed blindly out across the water, but he didn't really see it. "Can I still hope for him, Vincent? If he's still alive?"

"There's always hope, Father. And.... I think perhaps I'd know if.... anything had happened."

And with that, Father thought sadly, he would have to be content. Perhaps forever. He'd still have to wake up nights and lie there holding his breath, listening to the silence and wondering of Devin's returning footsteps would suddenly break it. He would never be able to know for sure....

The creeping weariness of realization was filling him full, keeping him sitting there, back pressed against the rock, even though he knew he should be getting back. But he valued Vincent's company above all others and they had had too little time together just recently.

"Tell me something," he heard himself say at last. "About Lisa...."

Suddenly, the boy looked away, hugging his knees.

"She's.... very fond of you, Vincent. But I got the feeling there's more than that. You and Mitch...."

"She's nothing to Mitch."

"But she is to you." It wasn't a question, but somehow Father was left feeling like an interrogator. "Vincent, Lisa very often doesn't think of the consequences of her actions - rather like Devin in some ways. You've been hurt by someone you love - don't let it happen again."

He suddenly wished he could see his son's face but it was hidden from him by the hanging mane.

"You understand me?"

Why was it, he thought idly, that those silences of Vincent's were so eloquent?

"I'm sorry," he whispered finally, when it became obvious that the boy wasn't going to answer after all. "I've seen how the two of you are together - and I don't want either of you to make more out of this involvement than there is already. You know it's not possible, Vincent. Not how you are...."

Suddenly, Vincent laid his head on his updrawn knees, but he made no other response.

"I shouldn't have brought it up," Father muttered, wondering why he had. "It's just that I've got you back and...."

"I can never know love," the boy whispered almost to himself. "I understand that."

Put so boldly, it made Father shudder, but he couldn't deny it. "I'm sorry," he said again."

Vincent did look at him then, long and steadily, his eyes deep with gentle pain. "Lisa is.... so different from everything I am," he said quietly. "She makes me happy. Is that so wrong, Father?"

"No," he heard himself reply softly. "But later on you'll.... begin to realize why there can never be...." Then he stopped, biting his lip until he tasted blood. "We won't speak of it any more, Vincent. Help me up." He held out his hand and obediently the boy rose and drew him effortlessly to his feet. They stood and gazed at one another, and for the first time Father realized he didn't have to look down quite so much now. Vincent seemed to have grown up almost overnight - and in more ways than one. With an effort, Father had to resist the impulse to stroke that tangled mane with wandering fingers.

"Did I fail you both so badly?" he heard himself murmur, so softly it was almost lost in the roar of the falls. "I always did what I thought was right for all of you, but.... you and Devin were.... so special. You were brothers...."

Only an abrupt intake of breath, a restless lift of the head answered him, and for a moment he paused, wondering if he should stop right there and spare them both. "I'm not giving up, Vincent. He's my.... you're all my children and I won't ever stop loving you. You understand me?"

Just for an instant, he wondered if Vincent had noticed the hesitation, but there was no reply. Not even a flicker in that startling blue gaze.

"Perhaps I shouldn't even be surprised," Father added, looking away from the angry hurt in the boy's tight shoulders. "He's irresponsible, never thinks of the consequences or the pain he causes to others.... And I know he always let you believe you could both.... do anything together, even Above. But it just isn't possible, Vincent. You know that. And maybe that's why I've always blamed him...."

Then he stopped, unable to go on. Once he had believed it was a blessing that Vincent could be allowed the opportunity to imagine things. But not any more. There could never be anything other than the chambers and tunnels and darkness for this wonderful, unique boy, and to let him believe anything else was simply cruelty.

And he had loved Devin so much....

"You didn't fail us," Vincent said at last, quietly, softly. "I promise you - no boys ever had a better father. Devin needed what no one here could give, and I.... I had to try and understand just who I am and what I am. And I had to do that on my own, Father. There was nothing you could do to help."

"Perhaps I should have tried."

"You did." Suddenly there seemed to be a fleeting smile on those leonine lips. "You promised to thrash me

at chess. Does that challenge still stand?"

Father stared at him for a moment, then a slow, answering smile spread over his face, ending up almost as a silly grin of triumph and relief. With the wordless satisfaction of a dream come true, he deliberately wrapped his arm around Vincent's shoulders and drew him purposefully away from the cliff edge, towards the tunnel and a waiting chess board.

Later, much later, Vincent stood in the entrance of his chamber and gazed silently around him, a wealth of regret in his sad eyes. Tomorrow, he would have to start rearranging things, packing up Devin's belongings and getting used to the fact that he was now truly alone. To the idea that there would never be any more nights of shared dreams, or whispered reading to each other under the blankets. No more secret smiles between two boys who knew each other's hearts like no one else ever did....

Sighing, he allowed his gaze to rest on the toy carousel standing beside his bed. The chess game with Father had been interesting, but within a few moves, he had seen through the new strategy and the promised thrashing had turned into another inevitable defeat for the doctor, much to the latter's chagrin and Vincent's own vague sense of guilt. To make matters worse, the next game had ended even more spectacularly and quickly and Vincent had felt compelled to finish the evening there and then, before Father turned morose. But it had meant coming back to his own chamber - to the emptiness and the reminders of what he had lost. It had meant remembering....

He slowly moved forward and picked up the toy, turning it round and round in his hands. He had experienced the real thing because of Devin, and for that he would be forever grateful. Those memories were a part of him, deep and joyous, and no one would ever be able to take them away but somehow, when he looked at the toy now, all he could see was Reb, wrapped in the red and blue of past glory and he himself, too late to save....

With a slow deliberation, he went over to the large wooden chest where he kept his treasures. The carousel fitted neatly in between a copy of Kipling's *'Jungle Book'* and a squeaky-wheeled roller he couldn't even remember playing with. Even as he laid it reverently inside, he knew he would never bring it out again. It seemed to belong to a part of his life that had ended a long time ago, and somehow he could feel nothing except an overwhelming sense of relief. He'd lost the albatross and the fear of painted shadows - he'd even lost the source of all his imaginings and the pain that went with them. What he had left was the peace and resignation he had found in those far-off tunnels, the knowledge of what he was, and the limitations that placed on him.

It was strange. Devin's loss meant the end of so many things, yet at the same time it left him feeling freer than he had ever done before - as if his brother had taken him to that Californian beach and left him there, alone with the sea and the gulls and a wide blue sky. He couldn't have said why, but beyond the grief was a strength he had never even imagined he could possess, and he clung to it as if to a lifeline, knowing it was the only thing that could save him now.

He closed the lid of the chest then sat down on the edge of his bed as if at a loss at what to do next. Part of him didn't want to go to sleep surrounded by all the reminders of Devin's presence, but he felt too tired to do anything about it now. Tomorrow, he promised himself vaguely. Tomorrow....

He didn't know what made him turn, but when he did, it was to see her standing, smiling softly, in the doorway. Watching him with those luminous eyes of hers.

Why, thought Vincent absently, had Father warned him about Lisa? Why....?

Wordlessly, she came forward and sat down beside him on the bed, her elbow and thigh just barely touching his. Neither of them spoke, but something about her very presence touched a deep part of his soul and he stared fondly into the candle flame, trying to understand why she would do this. Why she could

accept him into her world of light and beauty to bring him such comfort.... And then he felt her gently reach for his hand and entwine her fingers with his - and the realization filled his eyes with tears.

The END