

THE GLOW FROM WITHIN

by Julie Crutchley

How beautiful was the night, Vincent thought, stopping under a snow-laded pine tree to take in his surroundings. Winter was such a magical season; all it took was a touch of Jack Frost's breath to transform the familiarity of Central Park into a fairy land. The crunching of snow underneath Vincent's boots brought back battles he'd had with Devin, and the sculpture of the Loch Ness Monster they'd made one night. This place was the site of many memories, present and past. Why, just last night he and Catherine....

Vincent's sharp ears caught a faint noise near the dumpster across the path. Pulling his hood tighter around his face, he silently went to investigate, keeping himself hidden in the process.

A shrouded figure lay in a huddle on the snow beside the dumpster. Vincent's forehead creased as the figure moved and groaned softly. It made an attempt to roll over, but the attempt was thwarted as an obvious cry of pain wrenched forth. Nonetheless, the figure attempted to pull itself through the snow with one small arm. As the arm moved away from the shadow of the dumpster, Vincent saw the blood that stained the back of the head and didn't hesitate a second longer. Rising up from his place of concealment, he walked swiftly over to the injured person and bent down, ready to help.

"Don't touch me."

The voice was calm, low, and unmistakably female. It was also dripping with icy hatred. Now understanding what had happened, Vincent ignored the warning and put his hand on the girl's shoulder, which was painfully thin and covered by a mildewed and torn blanket.

"Please," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. Let me help you."

At the sound of his voice, her body tensed under the weight of his hand and she attempted to back away. Another involuntary groan was released and she raised her head, her face a mask of hatred.

"Let go of me," she demanded quietly.

Vincent didn't. He studied her face intently, puzzled that there was no reaction to his appearance. Then, as if a light bulb clicked on somewhere in his mind, the answer came to him. She wasn't looking directly at him and there was a slight tilt to her head - nature's way of compensating the body for senses that were lacking.

"Let go of me!" she repeated, her voice rising.

Vincent released the small shoulder and sat back, his eyes running over the battered girl. "You're bleeding," he observed, seeing the red stream that ran from her nose to her jaw line. He reached into his vest pocket and withdrew a handkerchief. "Here, let me," he said and very gently wiped the blood from her face.

"Thank you," she muttered. "Now just go away."

Vincent shook his head. "My father is a doctor. I'll take you to ..."

"No, you will *not*," she interrupted angrily. "Look, just because I'm blind doesn't mean I can't see. Don't you think I know what you're trying to do?"

"You misunderstand me," Vincent countered softly. His heart went out to the girl, for she couldn't be more than eighteen. "You've been through a terrible ordeal and you need someone."

"What the hell do you care?" she spat back, pulling away from him and gasping again as she moved. "I've been on the streets for a year and no one has even bothered to look twice! Why should you be any different?"

Her eyes, blind though they were, were not devoid of life; in fact, they were blazing with anger. Vincent saw pain behind that anger and gently grasped her shoulders again.

"I *do* care," he said softly. "I know many who have lived on the streets.... cold, hungry, in pain... just as you are now. I can take you to a safe and warm place where no one will ignore or hurt you. I promise you."

She sat quietly, mesmerized by his voice, and Vincent felt her resistance begin to weaken. "Come, let me help you," he whispered. He began to stand, attempting to help her up in the process, but she suddenly shrank away, her eyes now wide with fear.

"Go away!" she cried, suddenly collapsing into a ball and bursting into tears of hysteria and pain. The blanket fell away from her shoulders and Vincent's eyes widened as he saw her naked back, covered with bruises and slashes.

Her clothing was in tatters and looked as if it had been ripped from her body. A stab of anger went through his heart at the sight, then melted into compassionate pity for what this girl had been exposed to. Kneeling, Vincent pulled the blanket carefully around the cut, bruised body and gently pulled her close to him. She didn't try to pull away this time; instead she clung to him and buried her face into his shoulder. He sat quietly, stroking the tangled brown hair and making soft sounds of comfort, until her sobs subsided and she leaned against him, taking in his warmth. When he offered safety again, she didn't refuse.

"Barbarians." Father spat the word, his face twisting with rage. He made his way down the spiral stairs, crossed the floor, and sank into the chair behind the old oak desk. "How *'anyone'* could be mad enough to wreck such havoc on a young woman.... and a handicapped one at that."

Vincent was sitting across the room, now he stood up and began to pace thoughtfully. "At least she's alive, Father. We can help her to forget by giving her love and strength. Those are some things she's had little of."

"Of course," Father agreed. "That's also what I mean by calling these people *'barbarians!'* No home, no family...." His hands combed through his gray hair in frustration. "God seems to send them all my way...."

Vincent couldn't help smiling as he moved toward the older man. "That's why he named you *'Father'*," he said warmly.

Father's turmoil eased at his adopted son's tone. "And that's why he also sent me you - to play the buffer."

Vincent bent over and kissed Father's cheek. "Where is she now?"

"Who? Oh, you mean..." His forehead crinkled, and both realized they didn't even know the girl's name. Looking sheepish, Father gestured toward the entranceway. "She's in the second guest chamber. Mary's with her."

Vincent turned to leave, but Father's voice stopped him. "Why do you want to see her?"

A thousand possible answers flashed through Vincent's mind, and finally, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, he replied, "To play the buffer." He raised an eyebrow slightly, then left the chamber with the sure grace of a forest creature, taking the steps two at a time.

Vincent turned the corner sharply and almost collided with Mary. "Goodness, Vincent!" she breathed, placing a hand to her chest. "Can't you at least make some noise, child? You scared me to death."

"I apologize, Mary," Vincent said contritely. "I was on my way to see you and our newcomer. How is she?"

"She'll be fine," Mary said, smiling. "She's a strong girl. I told her to get some sleep, but she says she isn't tired... she wants to read a while. So, I was on my way to find you. Do you think you could find any of those old Braille books of Ezra's in that ungodly mess Father calls a library?"

Vincent chuckled. "I'm sure there are a few volumes around... somewhere."

"Would you please look for them? That place make me dizzy," Mary said, only half in jest. "I won't set foot in it until it's been cleaned up and organized."

Ten minutes later, Vincent was walking down the corridor, his arms laden with books of various sizes and thicknesses. Mary was right - the library was an ungodly mess, for Father never put books back in order once he was finished with them. Thus, there were work books mixed with fine literature, and children's fair tales piled atop bibles and dictionaries. But as the old adage goes, clutter is the sign of a brilliant mind, and Vincent - being his father's protege - had no trouble finding a few required tomes.

Shifting the books under one powerful arm, Vincent formally announced his presence outside the blind girl's room by tapping lightly on the wall. "Hello?"

"Who's there?"

"I've come with some books you requested," Vincent replied, knowing she would recognize his voice.

"Come in," she invited quietly. He entered the chamber and put the books on a table near the bed, studying the girl standing by an antique bureau in the corner.

A bath and fresh clothing had done wonders for her. The shrinking, pitiful creature he'd found in the park had been transformed into a tall, slim and very graceful young woman. The patched jeans and oversized forest green sweater she wore took nothing away from her appearance; the slight cuts and bruises on her face failed to dim her natural beauty, and golden brown ringlets fell past her shoulders in a neat cascade, shimmering with soft radiance in the candlelight.

"Your name is Vincent?" she asked, interrupting his scrutiny.

A full minute slipped away before he said, "Yes," his voice as calm and steady as his gaze. "What is your name?"

"Brittany," she replied, acceptance of the situation coloring her tone. "It seems I owe you a great deal of thanks, Vincent." She crossed the room and stood in front of him, surprising him greatly.

"It's very ..." She paused and frowned. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" he echoed, still wondering how she'd managed to stop right in front of him without bumping into anything.

"What is the matter?" she repeated, placing her hands on slim, denim-clad hips. "You're astonished."

"You walked right up to me...."

Brittany waved away the rest of his reply. "Oh, *that*.' It's called *'facial vision*.' That means I pick up

sound waves as they bounce off of objects. You should have been in here earlier when I was still getting my bearings and bumping onto everything. I'll have to get used to other rooms, but I know this one pretty well now."

"I see," Vincent said, impressed. "And how could you tell I was astonished?"

Brittany looked a little uncomfortable. "I just knew," she answered. "Call it a sixth sense, if you will. Or, in my case, a *'fifth'* sense."

Vincent studied her face thoughtfully. Her eyes were a pale green, the color of the clover in the park at the height of spring. If one didn't know, one would have thought those eyes could see perfectly.

"Anyhow," Brittany continued, breaking the awkward silence. "I owe you my life, and I thank you for giving me an opportunity to pick up the pieces."

Vincent shook his head. "You owe me nothing at all," he said. "You were in pain; you reached out, and I happened to be there."

She shrugged. "It's happened before; I'm just grateful someone paid attention this time." She made her way over to the table and ran her hands over the stack of books. "What do we have here?"

"Things I thought you might like," Vincent replied, watching her pick up a volume.

Brittany ran nimble fingers over the titles, one by one. "*LeMorte d'Arthur, Shakespeare's sonnets, The Illiad, The Phantom of the Opera, Walden, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," she read the titles out loud, then smiled. "Such classics, and so old. You have other blind people here?"

"A few," Vincent admitted.

Brittany sighed and caressed a faded cover. "These are hard to find nowadays. They've almost passed into the ages, thanks to the new audio books."

"Well, we believe in learning and tradition," Vincent explained with a rueful smile. "We also use these books to teach some of the children how to read the Braille language."

"Can you read it?" Vincent's eyebrows rose slightly and Brittany blushed, embarrassed. "Of course you can. sorry."

"Ah, but I didn't say I could," Vincent countered and there was a hint of a smile in his voice. "How do you know I can?"

"I *'know'*," she said confidently. "Besides, how would you know which books to choose if you didn't?"

Vincent didn't tell her that the titles were written inside; he didn't want to put her on the spot.

"I'm surprised that the children here like to read *'classical literature'*."

"Oh, yes," Vincent said, his blue eyes glowing. "They've recited works by *'Yeats'* from memory; they've sailed the seas with Horatio Hornblower and explored the depths with Captain Nemo. They've visited Camelot and accompanied Lancelot on his quests.... When classical characters beckon, how can one refuse?"

Brittany did not answer, but opened a book and touched the dots on the page. "My family owned a very small Braille bookstore in Queens when I was a child. My mother was blind - she was the one who introduced me to reading. I used to read voraciously as a child, and during a quiet moment in the store, you'd find me in a corner with a book, even when I was old enough to work there."

She set the book aside and raised her face to Vincent's. "Quiet moments were many. We lost a lot of money because there were so few customers. Finally, we were bankrupt and had to shut the store down. My father had tried hard to keep us going, and later that year, when my mother died suddenly, my father's world simply fell apart." She picked up the book, walked over to the the bed and sat down with a sigh.

Vincent sat down across from her. "Where is your father now?" he asked.

Brittany's expression grew sad, but there was a bitter edge in her voice when she spoke. "He shut me out. I reminded him of Mother and he was trying to forget."

"So you don't know where he is?" Vincent pressed.

"Oh, yes. I know where he is. My wealthy uncle in Malibu gave him a job at his club. He told me before he left that our old apartment was mine to do with as I wished - only he didn't leave me a penny." Brittany snorted cynically. "Such a wonderful father. He gallops off to the good life and leaves me here to make it the best way I can because I remind him of his dead wife. That's rich, wouldn't you say?"

Vincent looked away at the pain in her voice. "Let me know when Father's Day comes around," she continued sarcastically. "Because I want to send him a few dead roses."

"Brittany...." Vincent began in mild reproof.

The delicate features turned hard. "Don't start telling me that I'm feeling sorry for myself, Vincent. I think I'm past that stage now, and I simply don't care anymore. But you can't deny me the right to hate the man."

"You have no hate in you," Vincent said. "You only have a build up of grief and pain."

"And isn't it ironic that the '*grief and pain*' were caused by hate?" she retorted, then calmed her tone. "Enough, Vincent. I can't dwell on the past. I have to push forward." She leaned back on the pillows and opened the book on her lap. "And what I want to do right now is read." Her fingers began to skim the page lightly. She didn't acknowledge Vincent as he got up and quietly left the chamber.

"How much acid did you have to neutralize?" Father asked innocently as Vincent entered his chamber and poured two cups of tea. Vincent shot the elder man a look of admonishment, causing Father to reward his statement. "What did you find out?"

Vincent placed a cup in front of Father, then sat down, cupping his hands around the other. "She has great strength," he said thoughtfully. "To go through an ordeal like she had gone through and to recover so soon."

"Are you so certain that she is back to normal? She could be hiding it, an attempt at false bravado...."

"No, Father, it is not false bravado," Vincent confirmed. "She knows what has happened. She told me that she must go on, no matter what she has suffered. "

Father accepted Vincent's evaluation without further complaint. "Then she possesses a strength which others only wish for."

"She may possess something else as well," Vincent said quietly. He told Father how Brittany seemed to know his very deep feelings and thoughts. "She claims it is a '*sixth sense*' she's developed through the years, but could she possibly have some empathic abilities?"

"It is possible," Father said after a long moment of consideration. "But it may not be possible. Since Brittany is blind, her body compensates for the loss of a primary sense by strengthening the others. Thus, her sense of hearing, for example, can be rather acute and she could pick up some things a normal ear would miss."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Now it could be entirely possible that she does possess this so-called '*sixth sense*' which would allow her to '*see*' things she physically cannot. If she has facial vision, as you say she does, then she is already able to sense, say, where people or objects are in a

room."

"So empathy could be a factor?"

Father hesitated only a moment, then smiled warmly at his adopted son. "It can, indeed. After all, I've seen empathy at work."

Vincent ducked his head, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Pay it no mind, Vincent," Father advised. "It is not unusual. The blind wish to be normal, too, no matter how they accept their handicap. Brittany has simply conditioned her body to accept a little bit more."

Catherine nestled in the comfortable warmth of Vincent's arms, sighing luxuriously. A king-sized bed with satin sheets just couldn't compare to the relaxation she found in this position. The steady beat of his heart in her ear, the musky, manly scent of his body in her nostrils, and the reassurance of their deep and wonderful love solid in the bond they shared. She smiled contentedly; she was a lucky woman.

"I've missed you," she whispered, "even if it *'has'* been only two nights."

"Yes." His voice was hushed... relaxed, but there was the hint of resignation within the silken tone tonight, and Catherine looked up, concerned.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Remotely." Vincent released her and put his hand on the balcony rail. "I must... break our concert date tomorrow night, Catherine." His sigh was deep, heartfelt. "Something has come up that I cannot ignore."

She felt a rush of disappointment and Vincent turned toward her, his eyes asking for forgiveness. Catherine could refuse nothing those eyes asked.

"It's all right," she said with an understanding smile. "There's another concert next week that we can go to. They'll be performing Wagner then."

Vincent's heart warmed. "Nothing will stand in our way next week," he promised, and feeling that Catherine deserved an explanation about his cancellation, he told her about Brittany.

"She's suffered so much and has no one who cares," he concluded. "I feel the need to talk to her, to help her. She's reaching out for someone - like she's been reaching out for years, with no one to take her hand. I want to offer mine."

His voice sounded husky and Catherine put a hand on his shoulder. "I know from personal experience how comforting and wonderful it is to accept your hand," she said gently and took both his hands in hers. "Concerts in the park occur every week or so. The opportunity to help someone shouldn't be wasted. Go to her, Vincent. If anyone can heal her spirit, it's you."

Catherine kissed the tips of his fingers lightly. " *'The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray'*," she quoted and Vincent's arms slid around her waist and pulled her close; his chin nuzzled into her hair. At that moment, the winter air didn't feel quite as cold.

"This is incredible!" Brittany's hand swept along the rough-hewn cavern walls and pipelines as she

and Vincent walked down a corridor. For an hour Vincent had given Brittany a guided tour, introducing her to most of the tunnel dwellers. Her hand was securely held in his arm and she was clearly impressed with the information she'd received.

"How much further do these tunnels go on?" Brittany asked. "I never even knew about them."

"Many people don't," Vincent replied. "As to how far they go, it is very difficult to say. There are hundreds of tunnels and they go in many directions. I've lived here all my life and I know a great deal about them, but how many there actually are is simply a mystery."

They walked for a while in silence and once, when Vincent glanced at the young woman, she wore a thoughtful, probing expression that reminded him of Catherine.

"What are you thinking?"

She stopped and turned her face up to his. "I was thinking of you," she replied. "Can I ask a question?"

"Of course."

Brittany frowned slightly. "Why have you always lived here? Why not in the city?"

Vincent placed her hand on his arms and resumed their walk. "I was abandoned as an infant in the city," he said cautiously. "It doesn't want me there... I have no place in its lavish hotels, its park side apartments... no matter how I dream of it." He sighed and then added. "Besides, this is my home."

They reached Brittany's chamber and she made her way to the bed, while Vincent sat across from her in the chair he'd used before.

"You're not hiding out, are you?" Brittany's voice cut into the quiet suddenly and the unexpected nature of her question caused Vincent to raise his head sharply.

"I'm sorry," she apologized contritely. "Of course you're not."

The silence rose up between them again and Vincent rose a few minutes later, ready to leave. "I'll let you know when supper is ready," he offered, turning toward the doorway.

"Vincent?"

"Yes?" He looked back at her and when she didn't respond, he walked over to the bed and sat down. "What is it, Brittany?"

Her mouth opened, then closed again. She was hesitant, but forced herself to take a deep breath and forge ahead. "I have a favor to ask of you... you can refuse, if you wish."

Vincent cocked his head to one side, giving her his complete attention. "What is it?"

She seemed to look straight at him; her eyes, illuminated by candle flame, were astonishingly bright. "I can't see you like others can," she said in a small voice. "All I have to recognize you by is the sound of your voice, the tread of your footsteps and the particular scent of your body. I am... not content with that."

Vincent suddenly felt the familiar stab of anguish pierce through him like a spear. He knew what she was asking and he did not know how to refuse her. She went to take his hands and he moved them away, so she couldn't feel the fur-covered backs or the curved claws.

"Vincent, I want to see you. I want to see the man who rescued me from the cruelty of the streets. Let me look at you."

"Brittany ..."

"Please, Vincent," she interrupted him. "I want to show you that I'm not a completely sightless person."

"I would never insinuate such a thing," Vincent exclaimed, shocked. "No one knows better than I how

well you can see things."

"Then let me look at you," she pleaded, forgetting her earlier comment about accepting his refusal. Vincent stood up and walked across the room, unable to look Brittany in the face, unable to meet those bright eyes that couldn't see, and yet could.

"You mustn't," he said with quiet resignation.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why won't you let me?" Her voice had a touch of the old hardness in it, a stubbornness that compelled him, and with a sigh, he turned towards her again.

"You are better off not seeing me," he said sadly. "My appearance would frighten you."

"Frighten me? How could you frighten me, Vincent? You've saved my life and you've been so good to me."

Vincent's smile was thin. "Yes, the Good Samaritan has saved another," he said bitterly. "Brittany, it's better for you not to know what I look like. You think I'm a normal man and I don't want to shatter your illusion. Fate made me... different, and the thought of you fearing me is a little difficult to bear." He dropped into a chair and hung his head.

A hand on his shoulder brought his head up sharply; he hadn't heard her cross the room. Brittany moved in front of him and sank to her knees. She raised her face to his, her blind eyes met his squarely.

"It seems to me that you need to take some of your own advice," she said. "Grief and pain are hard to bear, and a twist of Fate is enough to drive the knife right home. I know Fate well and she's as malicious as the devil himself." Brittany leaned forward. "Vincent, your appearance, as you say, can't possibly detract from you. You have hundreds down here who love you for who you are, for that heart of gold beating within you. I've come to know that part of you, and I care for you as well, even though I've only been here for two days. You mustn't think that I will hate you for your appearance; you have no right to judge me in that way - especially because I'm different too."

Brittany raised her hand, as if searching for him to take it. "You've been accepted by everyone within these tunnels. Let me accept you as well as, at the same time, let me feel that you accept me."

Her hand still reached out to him and this time Vincent did not refuse. He reached out and took her hand in his, clasping it for a moment before slowly bringing it to his face. Her palm was soft and warm against his cheek against his cheek and she brought her other hand up to join its sister in its quest.

Very gently, Brittany's hands traveled across Vincent's face - along his forehead; across his silky, upswept brows and down the soft bridge of his nose. They traced a path along his closed eyelids and long lashes, across his high cheekbones... and Vincent opened his eyes to watch Brittany's expression change from puzzlement to awe to delighted acceptance. As her fingers whispered deftly across his upper lip and jaw line to his long, flowing mane, Vincent closed his eyes again and sighed in relief.

For a fleeting moment, he felt that it was Catherine who touched him with such care... what heaven it would be to experience the sensation of her fingertips kissing him gently in this way. He opened his eyes again as Brittany's hands fell away and brought him back to reality. Unshed tears sparkled in her green eyes as she smiled at him.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Now I can see you." A tear slid down her cheek, leaving a glistening trail in its wake, and Vincent touched her soft, pretty cheek with a thumb, carefully wiping the tear away. Brittany covered his hand with hers and for a moment their eyes met. She knew he was beautiful and felt that - at last - she belonged somewhere.

The person standing in the doorway felt very out of place, however. Catherine stood unnoticed in the shadows, watching the entire scene and trying to suffuse the jealousy that welled up within her.

Softly, so she wouldn't spoil the moment, she backed out of the chamber and went home.

The night was crisp and clear, but within the apartment, it was as warm as toast, and Catherine fell asleep faster than she wished. It seemed only a few minutes since she fell asleep when she faintly heard a familiar tapping on her balcony doors.

Grabbing a thick robe from the back of her vanity chair, she opened the doors and joined Vincent on the balcony. He was warmly dressed and not affected by the unpleasant temperature, but Catherine shivered involuntarily as the icy cold greeted her. Without a word, Vincent drew her to him and wrapped his cloak around her, tucking the ends into each other so that the night chill couldn't touch her. Catherine sighed and snuggled against Vincent's warmth, and for a time they just stood there, simply being part of each other.

"You were Below today," Vincent murmured into her hair. "But you left and ..." Vincent pulled her away from him so he could see her face. "For a moment, I felt something odd within you."

Catherine exhaled slowly and stepped out of his arms. He looked puzzled as she backed through the doorway and beckoned to him.

"It's too cold out here," she said in explanation. "Please... come inside, just inside the doors."

He hesitated, then followed her into the apartment, eyes on the floor. Catherine shut the doors behind them, then turned her gaze to Vincent; they seemed to contemplate each other for a long time. His forehead crinkled in concern.

"What is it, Catherine?"

She dropped her eyes and walked away from him. "It seems so stupid now."

"Catherine..." Vincent's voice was laced with quiet urgency. "We've never withheld the truth from one another." She looked up at the familiar phrase. "Don't hold back now. Tell me what you feel."

Catherine turned toward him and her eyes were sad. "I walked in at an awkward moment," she said haltingly. "I didn't want to... interrupt..." She dropped her eyes again.

Vincent crossed the short distance between them, put a finger beneath her chin and raised her face to his.

"There is more," he said softly. It was a statement and Catherine knew that she couldn't hide from him.

She shook her head. "She *'touched'* you, Vincent... in a way I've only dreamed about. I envied what she did. I hated her for what she did." Catherine felt tears threaten to fall, but she forced them back. "I don't want to share you, Vincent. Call me selfish, if you wish, but I can't help it. I want you to be all mine."

There. It was out in the open and she suddenly felt very vulnerable. The fragile grip she had on her emotions began to loosen and her vision began to blue. "I'm sorry; I'm making a big deal out of nothing ..."

"No, Catherine," Vincent's voice was full of understanding and love. "It *'is'* important." He touched her cheek lightly. "Look at me."

She raised her head obediently, looking into the beloved blue eyes which were also swimming in tears.

"No one," he said firmly, " *'No one'* will ever take your place, Catherine. You've had my heart since the

night I found you, and it is yours to keep. You are the air I breathe, the life I live, and life without you would be torture." A tear escaped the corner of her eye and Vincent touched it tenderly. "Never fear the loss of our bond, Catherine. You are my rose of all seasons and I will never let you go."

Both faces were streaked with tears now and, hesitantly, Catherine touched Vincent's cheeks and wiped his tears away. Vincent's arms slid tightly around her waist.

"I love you," she whispered, and Vincent impulsively kissed the top of her head.

"And I love you," he replied softly. "Always know that."

The tunnel world slept when Vincent returned to his chamber, ready to retire for the evening. Perhaps he should look in on Brittany...

He stopped himself. 'No,' he thought. 'Not tonight.'

He decided to write in his journal and sitting down, he reached for a pen. His hands stopped in mid-air as he caught sight of a piece of paper - folded in half, his name written neatly on it - lying next to his pen. Beneath the folded sheet was the old Braille edition of 'Shakespeare's Sonnets.' Vincent picked up the paper, unfolded it, and began to read.

Dear Vincent,

It's time for me to leave. I meant to tell you in person, but Father told me you'd gone Above. Something told me that it was better to leave before you came back. I've discovered something the short time I've been here. I do care. I need to start again. So, I'm going Above to try. I'm hoping to find a job, for starters. This place offered me sanctuary and time I sorely needed, but, like I told you, I need to push forward. The old cliché holds true... life goes on. And I need to catch the bus before it goes on without me. I don't have the words to tell you, and everyone else, how much I value what you have done for me. I've only known you for three days, and yet you've given me a lifetime's worth of strength. The best way I can think of to let you know my feelings can be found in this book. The Bard says it best, they say. The world's a big place, Vincent, and I haven't even begun to scratch its surface. But maybe one day I'll dig deep enough to come face to face with you again. And I'll see you before you see me... count on it.

Brittany

P.S. Don't look so surprised - I learned to write when I was five.

Vincent read the letter again and felt, deep within himself, that Brittany truly knew her way. Picking up the book, he left the chamber, putting his thoughts for his journal entry on hold.

The winter air whispered of coming snow when Vincent reached the park entrance. Taking in the scene before him, he opened the book to the page marked with a slip of paper and touched the raised dots.

'Can you read it?' a voice whispered in his head.

"Yes," he said aloud and proceeded to skin the page lightly with his fingers. When he finished the passage, a smile touched his features. "You're welcome, Brittany," he whispered.

Vincent let his gaze rest on the snow-covered grasses of the park. Spring would be a long time coming, but he felt it had already begun for a young blind girl whose sight came from that glow within. Closing the book, Vincent turned and walked back to the warmth of the tunnels, lost in thought. Outside, the snow began to fall.

*As a decrepit father takes delight
To see his active child do deeds of youth
So I made lame by Fortune's dearest spite
Take all my comfort of thy worth and truth
For whether beauty, birth or wealth or wit
Or any of these all, or all, or more
Entitled in their parts do crowned sit
I make my love engrafted to this store
So then I am not lame, poor nor despised
Whilst that this shadow doth such substance give
That I in thy abundance am sufficed
And by a part of all thy glory live
Look, what is best, that best I wish in thee
This wish I have, then ten times happy me*

(Shakespeare - Sonnet XXXVII)