

# ***STILL LIFE***

***by Nan Dibble***

Vincent left Diana's loft somewhat bemused, not quite certain what he thought or felt about the sociable time he'd just spent in the company of she and her new friend, another police officer, whom she'd insisted he meet.

First meetings always made him anxious, even when they happened Below. He worried about the reaction to his appearance. He hated knowing he'd frightened someone, just by being. And he hated the way he felt, feeling what they felt, for it was always a shock, confronting someone so irredeemably different as he. However they might try, in kindness, to conceal it, however Father or some friend might have tried to prepare them, there was always the instant of shock and stillness, within. His empathy sense heightened by his anxiety, he always felt it, and it saddened and depressed him. But past that bad first moment lay all the possibilities of friendship, of a new relationship, of time spent together and shared experiences to be looked forward to. So he always forced himself into such meetings with, he hoped, no sign of how much he dreaded them.

Even Catherine, at first sight, had flung a headlight reflector at him.

And yet, when Diana had admitted him through her roof door and he'd hesitantly entered, the new friend seated on the couch had swiveled her dark-haired head and exclaimed, "So you're Vincent!" grinning broadly, her teeth especially white because her countenance was tanned, almost swarthy.

Thinking she must not have seen him plainly yet, Vincent deliberately advanced into the light and laid back his hood, waiting for the rigid instant of shock.

That didn't come.

That never came.

As it never had, with Diana.

Maybe the immediate acceptance derived somehow from being a police detective. He couldn't fathom it, but enjoyed the relief deeply, with an astonished happiness, as though the woman had greeted him with a wonderful, unlooked-for gift.

A little younger than Diana, she was animated, outgoing, and good-natured, laughing easily, so

that even Diana, commonly reserved and watchful, seemed more at ease and happier than Vincent ever remembered seeing her. After a few minutes, Vincent found himself not so much setting aside his inner guards, but forgetting about them completely and repeating a rather crude joke Jamie had told him that morning. Both Diana and her new friend had exploded most gratifyingly.

Shutting the upper door and settling his cloak straight across his shoulders, Vincent found himself chuckling at the memory.

How good it was, he thought as he started across the roof, that Diana had found such a friend, one from whom she now need keep nothing hidden. So often, Diana struck him as fundamentally isolated, if not precisely lonely. Now, perhaps, that might change because of the unselfconscious camaraderie that had apparently sprung up, immediately and easily, between her and this fellow detective, Elisa, one morning when the paths of their different investigations had converged on a midtown rooftop ...

*Presence!*

Vincent froze, then took cover against a broad chimney. Someone was watching him.

"Don't be alarmed," said a deep, rumbling voice. "I mean you no harm."

As Vincent quickly scanned the rooftop's varied projections, finding nothing man-shaped or man-high, the voice continued meditatively. "I have seen you often here, watching over your friend, Diana. As I watch over mine."

A large, triangular shadow he'd taken for the housing of an air vent stirred and spread vast batlike wings as Vincent stared. *Wings* - at least twenty feet from tip to tip. Then a fanged smile as the creature took a strangely delicate tiptoe step because his legs were back-bent, like an animal's. As his shape came more clearly into focus, Vincent took in broad, bare shoulders the blue-grey color of granite, over which fell a cascade of coarse black hair almost as smooth and sculptured as a helmet. Bare, muscled arms, thighs - he wore only a broad leather belt and a loincloth.

The creature came forward another mincing pace, on clawed, three-toed feet. Claws like an extra joint of each finger were on the hand the creature placidly extended. Vincent got the sense of something very calm, very old, and very powerful.

"I am called Goliath," said the creature, enfolding Vincent's hand with his larger one, with what seemed great and habitual care, so as to do no harm. And yet a bit stiffly, as though the gesture wasn't one that came naturally to him. There were only three fingers, too. And a clawed thumb.

Vincent wasn't quite startled enough to fail in the most basic of courtesies. "My name is

Vincent."

As Vincent's hand was released, they both stepped back a little, frankly considering one another in what, for neither of them, was truly darkness.

"I know," said the creature, still with that immense composure. "I've wanted to meet you for some time. Ever since I realized there was another who haunted the rooftops and stood guardian over the night. I told my friend Elisa, who then sought out an opportunity to make the acquaintance of your friend Diana. So we all might come to know one another. I am always hopeful of finding new friends in this strange city."

"You're not ... from around here, then," Vincent found himself saying.

"No." The wings, that had remained spread to give Vincent a good view, slowly closed into something very like a cloak. Hooked projections at the top joints latched together at Goliath's throat almost like small clasped hands. The wing tips modestly swathed the ankles. "I and my clan were brought from another place, another time ..."

"Clan?"

"My companions are few, but I am lucky to have any at all. The rest were destroyed. Long ago. Humans betrayed us. They are so intolerant of whatever is different, or merely outside their experience," reflected Goliath meditatively, without anger that Vincent could hear or sense ... or perhaps only bitterness, so long accustomed it was almost forgiveness.

"Yes," Vincent found himself agreeing. "They are. Fortunately, there are exceptions."

"Like my Elisa, and your Diana."

"She is not," Vincent corrected uncomfortably, "*my* Diana."

Goliath smiled, again displaying fangs. A coronet of knoblike projections banding his forehead suggested horns. He was altogether the most outlandish living thing Vincent had ever seen. Vincent still couldn't help staring, though his own reaction embarrassed and annoyed him immensely. Confronting such goggling astonishment was precisely why he dreaded first meetings. But clearly Goliath had no such dread and bore the rudeness composedly, with a courtesy that shamed Vincent even more.

"I knew," commented Goliath happily, "we should be friends if I could contrive a meeting! But I knew it would have to be done with some delicacy. I didn't want to ... alarm you any more than could be helped."

Vincent found himself smiling too, at the intense irony of hearing his own reflections so solemnly echoed, with such a lack of awareness that they could have any application to Vincent himself.

He shook his head. "This is so very strange."

"Then let us talk together and cease to be strangers," Goliath suggested cordially, moving, in his stalking, tiptoe gait toward the parapet, in a way that drew Vincent along with him. Vincent's eyes were about level with Goliath's shoulder. He felt dwarfed, and that was unusual enough to make him uncomfortable. Though he had no reason to think the giant anything but kindly disposed toward him, he couldn't help imagining what could happen if a creature of such immense size and strength were to turn on him. The potential was there, merely in the disproportion between them - as it was between Vincent and Diana, or Elisa, or almost anyone else he knew. It was so profoundly unsettling to find himself contemplating such reflections, which he so regretted whenever he'd been on the receiving end! So strange not to be the *different* one in his own automatic imaginings.

But it was true, even he wasn't so different as this!

Seen side-on, Goliath had a long, thick tail tapering to a flexible tip, the same slate grey as the rest of his skin. Vincent had thought himself beyond further surprise. But watching, sidelong, that tail stirring in counterpoint to each bent-kneed step made him feel that the creature at his side was utterly alien. No wonder Elisa had showed no startlement at meeting him, if *this* was what she was accustomed to! He felt his back hair beginning to rise. Again, he was ashamed of his own reactions, his half-formed imaginings of combat. Goliath had done nothing to deserve such mistrust except to *be*. Vincent became all the more determined to return this creature's courtesy in full measure.

But ... to have a *tail!*

Instead of seating himself on the parapet, as Vincent had expected, Goliath settled himself a conversational distance away, dropping to a comfortable crouch and then actually setting both hands on the roof, the tail as a balance behind, so Vincent couldn't help realizing that Goliath's bipedal stance was merely a matter of choice. The creature could have gone on all four just as easily, and probably did.

With a lifetime of schooling himself to show as little as possible that had any suggestion of *animal*, Vincent was astonished at how comfortable Goliath clearly was with his own alien being. A confusion of astonishment, disapproval ... and envy, that nothing in Goliath's pose or manner suggested the least apology for being what he was. And what he was...

Seeing the crouched, horned, winged figure whole, Vincent realized, "You're a gargoyle."

"Of course. Everyone finds us familiar. We have been mankind's companions for a very long time. Forever, our legends tell us. The memory of us informs their art. I have found us depicted on more than a few rooftops of this city. So the shape is not unfamiliar, the only startlement is in realizing that we live ...

"If I may ask without offending, of what race are you?"

Vincent settled his hip on the parapet and clasped his hands. "I ... envy your freedom to say 'we'. I can never say that. I don't know what I am. I know of no other like me."

"Are you a creature of magic, then?"

Vincent tilted his head, puzzled at what obviously was a serious question. "I know nothing of magic. But I also know that there is much beyond the everyday sort of knowing. So again, I cannot answer you. I am as I am. I know nothing more of myself than that."

Goliath regarded him steadily for a moment. "Diana," he said at last. "How did the two of you become acquainted?"

"She found me, near death, in a cemetery. Not knowing what I was, or whether I might harm her, she took me to her home and gave me refuge until I was well enough to leave. I can never repay what I owe her."

"Friends do not repay friends, except with their friendship," the gargoyle responded in a tone of absent correction that unexpectedly and incongruously reminded Vincent of Father. "I met Elisa on the rooftop of what was then our home. I fear my sudden appearance startled her. She fell off the roof. It was a considerable distance down. I was obliged to rescue her. It was not, at first, a meeting I thought likely to produce friendship."

Vincent bent his head and let his hair, and his tightened mouth, hold a smile in check unseen.

"But it has," the gargoyle continued reflectively. "She was our first human friend in this age, and remains the best. But I hope we will soon number Diana among our friends, as well. She and Elisa seem to get along well, didn't you think? They have so much in common, after all - they are both dedicated police officers, and much of an age, and have lived in this city all their lives. Certainly, strong friendships have been founded on less."

Goliath seemed to be waiting for agreement or even reassurance. Vincent said, "I hope they will be friends. They do seem to enjoy each other's company. But to me, they seem very different. Diana is so fair, so pale ... seems so fragile. Holds so much so tightly within. That glory of auburn hair, like the sun's brilliance I have only seen, in my life, through her windows ..."

"I have never seen the sun," commented Goliath. "By day, we are stone. So you have the advantage of me, there. They seem different to you, you say. How ... does Elisa seem, to your eyes?"

Vincent thought about it. "Carefree. Younger, in a way that has little to do with years. Much ... more open, more impulsive ..."

"She *is* that," Goliath commented ruefully. "Quick to anger, quick to laugh. Quick to lunge headlong into any danger when she believes she must, with no thought of her own safety. With no thought of how very easily she might be hurt. They are so fragile. So easily broken ... How else does she seem to you, Elisa?"

"Whereas Diana is fair, Elisa is dark. But brighter-hearted, I think. Happier, I think. She may have known less sadness in her life, and so expects it less. But I should not be making such sweeping generalizations, since I know hardly more of Diana's life than of Elisa's. But ... she often seems sad to me, Diana."

"But you do not inquire as to the cause."

"I think ... like many of us, she dreams of what she cannot have. But ... no. I have never asked her. If someday she chooses to tell me, then I will know. Now, I can only hope ... that I am not the cause of her sadness. Perhaps it's better not to know."

"Tell me," Goliath said abruptly, "is Elisa beautiful? As such things are judged by this time's people? Is she ... attractive? I cannot judge. Without wings, balanced only on two sticks of legs, her face and form so much like those of other women, she is certainly not unpleasing and she is my friend, but ... not unique. Each of us," Goliath explained, "is unlike all others. Very unlike. So except for terrible deformation, I cannot judge which, among human women, is comely and which ill-favored. They seem to me all so much alike ..."

The gargoyle's voice trailed off, and Vincent thought that Goliath was embarrassed. And Vincent felt how bizarre it was for anyone to be soliciting his opinion on the standards of human beauty, as though he could be an appropriate judge.

"Is Diana beautiful?" Goliath asked, as though to turn his curiosity into some safer channel

"I ... don't know," Vincent realized. "I *feel* her more than I see her. As one does members of one's own family. I cannot stand far enough away to see her objectively. I feel her gladness to see me, and the intensity with which she meets each new experience, each new thought, how wholly she throws herself into her work, her life, the lives of others ... *That* is my strongest sense of her. The inward, not the outward. And yet ..."

He remembered his first waking in her loft. A blurred figure approaching him, a cloud of vivid hair, a slim figure solicitously bent, the large bright eyes that saw so much and imagined more, visionary and acute, the soft, vaguely husky voice.

"Yes," Vincent said at last. "She is beautiful, as such things are judged. Down through the ages, great artists have chosen women whose appearance was not unlike hers as the subjects for their greatest art. Yes, she is beautiful - outwardly, as well as within."

He nodded, settling the new-felt fact in his heart, in his mind. He knew it would be part of his

awareness of her from now on. He also knew it to be a dangerous thing to know, one he'd avoided knowing until now.

"But even if she were not, she would be so. To me. Because she is valiant and compassionate, and that is more beautiful than any accident of shape or coloring."

"Then Elisa must be beautiful, as well. Even though the form I once thought the loveliest in the world, I now know to be that of one who is cruel, obstinate, and relentlessly selfish. So I must teach my eyes to see what my heart already knows. I must admire and value Elisa as she is and not wish for wings."

"What is it like," Vincent asked after a moment, "to fly?"

The massive head, with its suggestion of horns, lifted. "In truth, we do not fly. We are too heavy for our wings to bear us up. But leaping from a height, we can use the rising currents of air and glide ... I cannot tell you what it is to fly unless you can tell me what it is to be landbound. For I have known nothing else. I cannot even imagine it, any more than a fish could imagine a life without water. It is the medium in which we exist, the heights and depths of air, the living flow of it... Any more than I can imagine the sun. I have been told of it. Seen the brightness rendered in pictures. And, lately, on the television. But it cannot be the same as knowing for oneself."

"No," Vincent agreed, thinking of all his lifetime before he'd seen sunrise and sunset and the blaze of day through Diana's windows. "It is not the same."

"But forgive me," said Goliath, rising to loom, all unfamiliar angles, wings suddenly unfurled and uplifted like those of some gargantuan bat. "Your question wasn't theoretical. So neither should my answer have been. Although it is not truly flying, would you like to find out?"

An extended hand was again an invitation. And the broad, fanged mouth was again smiling.

Vincent hesitated barely a second. Then he was on his feet, setting his hand in the gargoyle's, that truly felt as hard and immovable as stone. but warm with life. The hand of a friend, whom he refused not to trust.

"What must I do?"

The gargoyle said kindly, "There are no words for such things."

In an instant, Vincent had been turned and launched in Goliath's clasp off the roof in a breath-stopping swoop. Diving fast toward a wall of brownstones, their trajectory curved sharply upward and then past the raked roofs. The wings tilted. There was an instant that felt like falling away, with the city's lights and strong verticals canted dizzily sideways. Then the geometric grid of streets righted itself, smaller than before, below them and there was no more falling. Only the wind of motion, a sense of nearly disembodied weightlessness, and

smooth forward momentum. An occasional strong wingbeat, adjusting their relationship to the flow of the air. A slight rolling to either side, following a stronger updraft. Then again a motionless silence, such as Vincent had found only in the deepest places of his world.

There seemed no effort to it, no frantic beating of wings to keep them aloft. The gargoyle lay comfortably upon the air, gliding, his arms locked immovably around Vincent's chest. Less like the flying Vincent had imagined than like floating.

After a time he forced his attention from the panorama of the city, from locating the landmarks, diminished but still familiar, and set himself to learn what the air, the motion, and the gargoyle's strong clasp and easy balance could teach him.

His heart was pounding. If Goliath noticed, he gave Vincent the compliment of attributing it to exhilaration, not fear, and continued his wife, upward spirals until the whole of the island lay below them, bracketed by its rivers that converged in the shining harbor far away.

To Vincent, the city again appeared as it had once seemed from high, solitary ledges; a magical place garlanded with jeweled lights, alive with endless, intriguing possibilities, a place of solemn legend where sorrow, if it came, could never tarnish inexhaustible delights.

He had thought never to see that city again. He had thought it lost to him in the viciousness of street gangs, the pain of the ill and mad and desperate, the disillusion of his own loss. But it had been here, all along. Waiting for him to regain the clear sight to see it. Or perhaps only to find the proper perspective, by starlight in the company of a friend.

The descent was a series of gradual swoops. Nothing vertiginous or abrupt. But Vincent had lost sight of his landmarks, his eyes blurred with tears from more than wind, and the rooftop seemed to explode toward them like the roof of an ascending elevator. At what seemed the last instant, Goliath broke his level glide to straighten, wings beating in strokes so long that the wingtips almost touched, in front. During those enfolding downstrokes, Vincent could see nothing. The last yard or so, they fell. Goliath's bent knees took the impact in an accustomed crouch. Set down lightly and precisely, Vincent found himself amazingly still, again standing on Diana's roof.

The suddenness, rather than any impact, almost made his knees give way. But he set his feet apart and found his balance, then turned, brushing hair back from his face, to thank this seeming bat-winged demon who had taken him to a high place and showed him the world.

The wings were once again mantled into a composed, modest cloak. Goliath forestalled Vincent's thanks by remarking. "I still find it difficult to allow for the extra weight, while landing. And Elisa is a much lighter weight than you, my friend."

"You take ... Elisa on such flights." What began as a question ended as a statement, a

realization.

"It's sometimes the most practical way." Goliath looked aside, embarrassed. Then he looked back, resolving to abandon the excuse. "And ... it is as close as we can come."

Vincent was silent a moment, considering the layers of that. the implicit, wistful finality. "Why?"

"I wonder that you ask. I would have thought it self-evident." When Vincent made no comment, merely waited attentively, Goliath made an open-handed gesture, either of impatience or of dismissal. "It's not merely the lack of wings, I am accustomed to that. The differences are simply too great. Women of my race do not bear their children alive, as your kind do. They lay beautiful spotted eggs we can cherish and nurture together, awaiting the time they hatch. Our ways are not human ways. And ... there is no longer any women of my race whom I desire. That chapter of my life is closed. But ... even without desire, it is still love," Goliath ended simply.

What reechoed within Vincent was the casual phrase, *your kind*. It was startling to realize that from the distance of Goliath's benign differences, which he appeared to regret not at all, Vincent, Diana, and Elisa were lumped together indistinguishably with the rest of tailless, wingless, mammalian humankind. It was dizzying to realize that the differences Vincent felt so keenly were, to Goliath, as vanishingly unimportant as the blur of traffic seen from half a mile up.

"And you assure me," Goliath continued, "that my Elisa is beautiful. So I shall learn to see her so, and cherish and protect her, just as though she were fully my consort. There is no other who could contest that with her. So we shall be what we can be, and be glad of that."

As Goliath grew more composed, Vincent grew less so. It seemed to him that the gargoyle too easily reconciled himself to limits that were untested, unproven. But it also seemed to him presumptuous to challenge the convictions of a couple he barely knew. Assuming Elisa had even been consulted on the matter, which he found he rather doubted.

Being part of a clan with its own customs and traditions, its unified culture and history, seemed to have given Goliath a self-assurance Vincent knew he himself lacked. But it also gave the gargoyle a parochial readiness to accept the customary, the traditional, rather than risk the possibilities of the new and untried.

"It's said," Vincent commented carefully, "that souls have wings."

Goliath commented unexpectedly. "Hope is the thing with feathers - "

"- that sings within the soul," Vincent finished delightedly.

It was as though they'd exchanged a secret password; they were beaming at each other in the

happy recognition of one book-lover for another.

Vincent blurted, "Isn't she marvelous? Alone, with no audience, or teacher save herself, to have created so much wisdom and beauty!"

"I have only just discovered Miss Dickinson," confessed Goliath shyly. "I am a thousand years behind, in knowing the finest and most wonderful thoughts of humankind. The poetry of my youth was ... almost excessively metric, to make it easier to memorize and recite. And it wasn't so ... personal. More like the fiction of today; accounts of battles, praise of some leader, legends of heroes. Duty. Honor. Do you know the tale of Beowulf?"

Vincent nodded emphatically.

Goliath asked, "And the British writer, Shakespeare?"

Vincent nodded even more emphatically. "The plays are wonderful - "

"- Yes. The language and the ways of thinking are more like what I am accustomed to. But ... the sonnets."

"Yes," Vincent agreed, almost a sigh, and they fell silent in perfectly shared wonder at that unique outpouring of passionate lyricism. Then Vincent asked urgently, "Have you yet encountered Rilke?" At Goliath's answering headshake, Vincent blurted, "Oh, you must! I'll lend you my copy. But ... do you read German?"

"A little. With difficulty. It's not so very different from the elder English, once I can make out the sounds from the letters."

"Splendid. It's best in the original, though there are several fine translations. And do you know \_"

When Diana and Elisa wandered onto the roof, neither Vincent nor Goliath noticed them, obviously immersed in a discussion of whether Donne's more sexually-explicit sonnets should be categorized with his sacred or his profane writings. Goliath had been maintaining the former position, with examples. Yet when Elisa came and folded her arms companionably across his shoulder, the gargoyle gulped and fell silent, and his countenance went a shade darker, as though he'd been caught exchanging bawdy stories. Then his head turned, and on his face, in his eyes, was the gentlest and most rapt adoration.

"So, what have you boys been up to?" Elisa inquired casually, fitting herself against Goliath's side as the gargoyle slowly rose. One furled wing moved to cup itself around her back - a protective, loving gesture that Vincent found immeasurably touching. Elisa seemed small as a child, leaning so trustingly against that granitic bulk.

Diana stood a few yards away, arms folded, benignly smiling. Then she lowered her eyes, as

though shy of intruding on the other pair's easy intimacy. The sight of her standing alone like that made Vincent feel alone as well - unhappy and inadequate.

"Our new friend," Goliath was replying, "has been taking me flying."

"Flying?" Elisa prompted, head and one eyebrow cocked skeptically.

"Across the vastness of time, and wonders I've only begun to discover, haphazardly and superficially, on my own. There is so much to learn, Elisa! So many words, so little time!"

"Yeah, time," said Elisa, lifting her glad face to look into the gargoyle's. "That, I think, we all lost track of. It's gonna be dawn pretty soon, and unless you want to roost up here all day, we better get going. And I'm due on duty in about an hour."

"With no sleep," said Goliath remorsefully. "Again."

"Again," she agreed. "Don't sweat it. Another two weeks and I'll rotate back to third shift. Diana's got the right job - picks her own cases, keeps her own hours, sleeps anytime she pleases. Wish I could land an assignment like that!"

"You serious?" Diana asked. "If you are, I could ask around, maybe pull a few -"

"No thanks, just grousing. I can't leave now - just about got my partner broken in right. Pity to waste all that work..." Elisa looked up at Goliath again. "What I wondered was, since we're both headed in the same direction, how's about a lift?"

Scooping an arm under her knees, his other arm around her back, the gargoyle gave her exactly that, holding her cradled against his chest. They smiled at one another.

Then Goliath said to Diana, "Elisa is right. We must go, or your roof will find itself with an unaccustomed ornament. Thank you for your hospitality. Next time, you must come visit us at our new home. Both of you."

"Bye," called Elisa, waving as wings snapped wide. Goliath bounded to the parapet and then was aloft, soaring. Vincent turned and set both hands on the parapet, watching the incredible silhouette diminish against the lightening sky.

He felt an inner jar of startlement as Diana's arm touched his. She'd come to the parapet and stood looking, as he'd been looking, head tilted back, flaming hair spilling across her shoulders, loose wisps stirring around her pensive face. He wondered that he should have needed more than a second's thought to declare her beautiful.

He held himself very still, so she wouldn't notice how the contact affected him. He wished for wings, to ease around her in that particularly poignant, loving way. He was freshly conscious that if each of them turned, their eyes would meet on a level, they were much the same height. And the disproportion between her willowy slenderness and his own broad solidity

seemed only the minor variation between individuals - between male and female. A desirable contrast.

Neither of them moved.

"Aren't they something?" Diana commented, still looking outward.

Through the contact, he felt in her a resigned, accustomed sadness.

She said, "And I thought / had problems ... Think they'll ever get together?"

"Borrowed wings," reflected Vincent, "are better than none. They are good people. And already closer than I think either of them fully realizes."

Diana's arm moved against his as she made a despairing gesture. "But it just seems so hopeless. She kids about it, brushes it off. But I could tell. She's crazy about him, and he draws this line and expects her to keep back behind it, all just pals together. And it's driving her nuts. I could tell. What the hell's gonna become of them? At least you don't turn into a chunk of rock at daybreak. Or a pumpkin, at midnight..."

She lifted a hand to brush a floating strand of hair away from her eyes. "The traffic's starting. I guess you gotta go, too."

Sad. Resigned.

Vincent could bear it no longer. He lifted an arm and clasped Diana's back. It seemed no pressure at all was needed to draw her closer. Everywhere they touched, shoulder to heel, he felt. And the drape of a heavy wool cloak was almost like an enfolding wing.

For an instant Diana was still, as though waiting, listening, making sure she wouldn't as abruptly be pushed away. Then she relaxed against him, leaning, letting herself be held. The soft weight of her cheek came down on his shoulder.

"Don't start," she muttered, "If you won't finish."

"Hush," he said, watching pink and apricot streamers fan across the eastern horizon. His desire to see the once-forbidden sunrise was intense and irresistible.

They stood together as quietly as statues.

Presently she warned, "If you don't go now, you'll be stuck Above till sundown."

"I know."

Brilliance erupted at the far horizon. Vincent didn't even blink, gazing steady-eyed at the glory of the new day.

END