

LOVE BADE ME WELCOME

A BEAUTY AND THE BEAST CONSUMMATION NOVEL

BY P.S. NIM



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Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back
-George Herbert

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for Tina
the best sister in the world
June 1989

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The names of the two anthropologists and some aspects of the opening scene (greatly modified) are borrowed from the episode 'Nor Iron Bars a Cage'.

- Vincent's junk verse is from Speak Roughly to your Little Boy ed. by M.C. Livingston, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

Love Bade Me Welcome

by P.S Nim

She had never seen anything like the creature on the table before.

Elizabeth Sprague stood inside the private basement laboratory, in front of the closed door which had been locked behind her by Professor Hughes the moment she arrived. She was a tall, angular, square-jawed woman whose stony presence in the room made the two men watching her uneasy — even though it was a feather in their caps that she had come at all, and especially on such short notice.

Her mouth, customarily inexpressive, was now a straight grim line. There was a determined hardness behind the planes of her aging face. The only soft thing about her was the cloud of grey hair that was mostly pinned on top of her head in a tight knot. She stood there with her hands clasped, saying nothing.

On the other side of the steel examining table the two men, Professor of Anthropology Edward Hughes and a sly-looking, round-faced graduate student named Jonathan Gould, waited for her to enlighten them.

The creature that lay on the table, bolting continually against the restraining straps and emitting furious snarls, was man-like in his basic proportions and structure. In fact, his musculature would have made any weightlifter green with envy — except for the fact that his upper body was covered with sleek, short fur. The rest of him was concealed inside a pair of close-fitting pants. Erect, he would stand well over six feet and must, she estimated loosely, weigh at least 265 pounds. But there all similarity to *Homo Sapiens* ended — and similarities to *Felidae*, the big cat family she had come to know so well over her lifetime, began. His ample cranium was covered by a dense thatch of long, lustrous, mane-like hair, honey-gold in color as was the delicate fur on his face and neck. His blinking, human-looking eyes were deeply set between thick brow ridges and prominent cheekbones. His long nose was cat-like, ending in a pink triangle with the tiny cleft in the septum. He had the fleshy whisker pads of a cat, and a divided upper lip. As he lurched and snarled that lip was curled back, exposing upper and lower canines of prodigious length — over an inch, she guessed, with unexpressed astonishment.

His nose was bleeding copiously and each time he threw himself forward a fine spray of blood landed on his chest and on the steel-wire-reinforced straps.

"Why is he bleeding?" she demanded.

Hughes licked his lips and glanced at Gould who said defensively: "He tried to bite me so I popped him one."

She moved to a location behind the top of the creature's head so that he couldn't see her and, reaching out, she laid a hand on his forehead. He stopped growling and swallowed nervously.

Hughes gave a start. "Be careful! He's dangerous!" he said sharply.

Ignoring this she waited a moment and then, with her hand still in place, she moved around to where the creature could see her. Angry, frightened and remarkably intelligent eyes stared into hers. A bluish arc was beginning to form under one.

Icily, she questioned: "What did you pop him with?"

Her insinuation — that the pudgy grad student was not man enough to have done this much damage with his fist — was not lost on him and his face darkened.

He answered: "A flashlight." There was a large one lying on the counter beside the dart gun the men had used in the capture.

Her gaze dropped again to the creature. He was still watching her warily, breathing in short, stressed gulps.

Suddenly he coughed up a bloody froth and she said: "Give me a towel."

"Oh, sure," Gould replied with heavy sarcasm. "And we'll even sew your hand back on after that thing takes it off." But he handed her a clean lab towel.

She turned the creature's head to one side, encountering less resistance than she would have expected, and pressed the towel against the corner of his mouth knowing that any blotting motion would probably only frighten him. With his tongue he pushed out a small flood of pinkish drool and gave an angry gurgle as he did so. Obviously, he didn't relish swallowing his own blood.

"Don't blame you...", she muttered under her breath.

Once again the men received her chilly stare. She packed the towel beneath the creature's jaw and then moved to inspect, the gas-powered dart gun. Picking up one of the tasseled darts she asked: "What did you use?"

"M90," Hughes said.

She tossed the dart in her knotty, capable hand and then replaced it.

"Not feeling very humane today, are we?" she said in her softly abrasive way.

"What did you expect me to use — a butterfly net?" Hughes retorted.

She did not bother to respond to this. M90 was powerful stuff. Unlike most dart anaesthetics it took effect immediately — in the process sometimes throwing its victim into convulsions. But the worst thing about it, in her opinion, was that while it rendered an animal totally helpless — able only to breathe, blink, swallow and move the jaw a little — it also left the unfortunate beast fully-conscious, and therefore able to experience the pain and terror of anything that was done to it.

The creature bolted against the straps again, his arms flexing with a great rippling of biceps.

Obviously the drug was wearing off.

She remarked: "I don't suppose you bothered to grease the dart tip with Penicillin cream."

"Miss Sprague," Hughes said in a conciliatory tone. "You were a zoo vet and animal supplier for over thirty years, and you are a world-renowned authority on everything that walks, climbs and crawls. Please — have you ever seen anything like this creature before?"

"Actually, we're hoping you'll say no," Gould put in, his voice always a bit snide. "More money in this for all of us if you say no."

The creature bubbled out another foam of pinkish saliva.

She saw that his hands were fully prehensile, fur-covered like the rest of him, the thick muscular fingers tipped in opaque, lethal-looking claws.

One swat of those claws could no doubt remove somebody's entire face.

He was not *Homo Sapiens*. Nor was he any genetic accident; his differences were too extensive and too consistently specialized. But neither did he belong anywhere in the 192 fur-bearing species of monkeys and apes. If he was indigenous to Earth — and her sternly sensible mind balked at any other idea — then at some point in primate evolution his ancestors had split off and become an independent breeding population. But what population? Where were the rest of them? And how had the characteristics of *Felidae* become embedded in their genes? Her eyes lingered admiringly on his legs. His sartorius made a beautiful and well-defined curve. He was a magnificent specimen — of something.

"Was he clothed like this when you found him?" she asked.

Hughes replied: "In several layers. The rest of his stuff is over there." He indicated a chair that held a pile of garments including what looked like a black-hooded cloak and a heavy, metal-studded belt.

She said: "So he was clothed. And he walks erect. You say you've spotted him roaming Central Park after dark—"

"On several occasions. I've watched for him repeatedly so I could plan his capture."

"Well developed cranium," she mused. "Could be quite intelligent."

Gould gave a snort.

Hughes pressed anxiously: "Miss Sprague — is this thing a Freak of nature, a — a Bigfoot, or what? *What* should we say we've found when we make our statement tomorrow?"

She impaled him with her stony glance. "What statement?"

He explained: "Jonathan is a bit impatient... He wants us to make a public announcement tomorrow, and since he put up the cash for the gun and some other things I feel obligated —"

Her gaze traveled to Gould. She had taken a strong dislike to the shiny-faced thickset young man from the moment she had arrived. He returned her look sullenly.

She said: "Even if this creature isn't sapient, the fact that he is clothed does suggest that he has owners/trainers/keepers. And if they've managed to keep him a secret for this long, then they can probably manage to get him back once they find out where he is. You'd better think about that before you hold any press conferences."

The men exchanged a glance.

Hughes said: "She could be right." Gould said nothing.

Hughes explained: "It's just that we need money — a grant so that we can pursue this as a research project—"

Gould cut him off with a scornful laugh. "Yeah — like for starters he needs to pay for the cage."

It stood at the opposite end of the long, rectangular room. The steel bars were as thick as her wrist and the measurements appeared to be somewhere in the realm of six and a half by six and a half by six and a half feet.... Her charge would have room to stand upright and lay full length in his bare and lonely prison. Nice.

"So — you've been ready for him for quite a while." She knew from experience just how long it took to get a cage that size shipped.

Hughes rubbed his hands together. "You bet I have. This could put my name in the headlines of every newspaper in the country." He amended somewhat lamely, "And you two as well, of course."

She could read his subtext all too clearly and her grey eyes remained latched on his a beat longer than he could tolerate without fidgeting.

The pale and perspiring Hughes was thoroughly unhappy. The sheer magnitude of this woman's experience and knowledge — to say nothing of the fact that her writings sold extensively to both scholarly and popular markets — made her approval a valuable prize. And they weren't getting it.

She asked: "Did you get a blood sample?"

Hughes nodded.

"What's his heart rate?"

"An incredible twenty-one beats per minute."

"Internal body temperature?"

Hughes gave an exasperated sigh. "Look, Miss Sprague, there just hasn't been time for everything. To be absolutely frank, Jonathan and I were hoping that you would be willing to make the preliminary examination. We are prepared to offer you a third of whatever money this discovery brings—"

"Oh, I see. You two have been busy seeing dollar signs."

At this point Gould giggled unattractively. "I'd settle for contacting all the medical research labs in the country and selling him to the highest bidder," he said. She did not bother even to glance at him.

Hughes was growing tired of this contest. But he couldn't afford to go into high dudgeon. Not with his career tottering on the brink of collapse. Not with the Board of Trustees complaining about his 'low national visibility'. Not with his course enrollments at an all-time low and no entries whatsoever under his name in 'Books in Print'.

And especially not when he had managed to enlist the help of the famous and reclusive Elizabeth Sprague.

He studied his watch. "It's seven-thirty," he announced. "I have to attend a faculty dinner in half an hour and Jonathan has to study for a final. Would you be willing to examine him tonight? We'll sedate him again for you, of course—"

"Not with V190," she said curtly. "Have you got phencyclidine?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I've a measured dose right here in this hypo. Shall I inject him now?"

She unbuttoned her coat. "Yes. And then — if you *think* the two of you can manage it — carry him into the cage. I don't want him spending the entire night strapped to a table."

Hughes picked up the hypo and she turned to hang up her coat. And then something happened.

From behind her came a bellowing roar. It was an incredible sound, deafeningly loud and with all the rumbling percussive quality of the King of Beasts in full voice.

She whipped around just in time to see the creature lunge off the table, ripping the straps right out of their steel retainers. Panicking, the men bounded out of reach. The creature grabbed the edge of the table to steady himself and then threw himself toward Hughes with a menacing snarl. Hughes rushed to the other side with a yell of fright. Gould, overtaking him, ran all the way around the table, pushed in front of Elizabeth Sprague, and snatched up the dart gun. Wheeling, the creature faced them.

She cried out, "No!" but it was too late. Aiming, Gould pulled the trigger and there was a loud PFUT of carbon dioxide gas as the dart was fired. It slapped into the creature's massive pectoral muscle and he reacted with a bellow of rage and pain. Plucking the dart from his flesh he hurled it across the room. But it had discharged its contents in a fraction of a second and as they watched he looked faintly puzzled, swayed, and then crumpled heavily to the floor.

* * *

Catherine hadn't heard from Vincent for several days, but this was not unusual. He was, nonetheless, very much on her mind

She wandered through the big pharmacy as though in a trance. Usually she grabbed what she needed and got right into line but tonight was a read-all-the-greeting-cards night.... That meant lingering beside every display — even the insipid pink and purple Easter stuff — and in particular considering the jigsaw puzzles, perhaps even buying one. The one time she had been able to entice Vincent into her living room, she'd had a puzzle laid out on the coffee table. They had ended up sitting on the sofa with their thighs pressed cozily together, leaning over the assemblies of pieces.

It wasn't a bad ploy.

But as she stood there studying the box-lid pictures she found that she wasn't really seeing them.

She was seeing Vincent... She was seeing Vincent sitting unafraid on a blanket in the spring sun, drowsy and sated with warmth. She was imagining what it would be like to lay a hand on his head and feel the sun in his hair. She was seeing him without his cloak standing in the middle of a twisting dirt lane, gazing up into a canopy of green leaves and smiling. She was seeing him climbing over a split-rail fence, sitting beside her on the bank of a pond, strolling beside her through an apple orchard at twilight....

She stopped beside a display of sun-glasses and caught a glimpse of her own blissful smile in the small countertop mirror. One Size Fits All... Picking up one of the men's frames she considered it thoughtfully. It *looked* big enough....

Vincent's eyes would not be accustomed to so much bright sunlight.

* * *

As the men dragged the creature into the cage, Elizabeth Sprague folded another clean lab towel into a square. She waited until they left the cage and then she stepped in with the towel, intending to slip it beneath the creature's head. They had positioned him on his side as she had requested. As she approached him his breathing took on a quickened sibilance. It was a reaction she knew well. He was completely helpless and at her mercy. He had to be terrified. At once, she began and kept up a flow of soothing talk; it was an old routine designed to reassure frightened wild things, and she had always found that it worked well.

She also believed in cuddling her furry charges once their fear had been overcome — but never, never when anybody else was looking on.

"There, there. Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you. I'm not like those imbeciles that just left." She was abundantly uncaring as to whether or not the men were listening. "I'm just going to have a closer look at you, that's all. And make you a bit more comfortable. There, there."

She raised his heavy head and positioned the towel so that it was between the side of his face and the cold floor of the cage. He lay on it and quietly drooled pinkish saliva, staring at her from vigilant blue eyes, his bruised cheekbone a darker shade of purple than before. He was breathing entirely from his mouth.

Kneeling, she looked at him closely. The nosebleed had tapered off, but his nostrils were clogged with drying clots of blood. Rising, she left the cage, ignoring the men who had retreated to the other end of the room and were conversing in low tones. She made a quick inventory of the lab and then returned to her charge with cotton swabs and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

Again she spoke to him in a soothing undertone: "Take it easy, honeylocks. I won't hurt you. Attaboy...." She thumped a hand down on his shoulder, making firm contact, and then rubbed him gently. "There, there. There, there." As a rule she did not believe in endearments — not with people anyway. She saved them all for her fur-bearing creatures.

With a swab dipped in the hydrogen peroxide she carefully cleaned away the encrusted blood from inside his nostrils and soon he was breathing normally again. The panicky sound was gone. Throughout the procedure she kept one hand firmly across his forehead as a sentinel toward any intention to bite her. She knew he was too well drugged to accomplish this, but years of experience had taught her *always* to take precautions. Besides, it was of interest simply to know if the attempt was going to be made. Most wild creatures, and many "tamed" zoo animals as well, did try under such threatening conditions. Under the paralysis of M90 the attempt would come through as a sudden feeble twitch of the head. But he made no attempt to lunge at her.

As she worked on him with their faces so close she was continually impressed with the amount of eye contact he made with her. After the wild rage he had exhibited on the table she had not expected him to gaze at her like this. It was quite unsettling. She could almost... almost expect him to speak. But, if by some miracle he could do so, the drug would kill even that ability for some time yet.

She also got a whiff of him, and again she was surprised. He did not smell like an animal. Not that animals had a generic smell — well; actually they did in a way. Dogs and other large mammals especially had a heavy, oils-scent — which, when their fur was damp became the "wet fur smell." But this creature's scent was something between clean, starched linen and sun-warmed hay. It was a pleasant, even attractive scent.

Finished with his nose, she climbed stiffly to her feet and surveyed his great, powerful length. As if it wasn't enough for him to be conscious of all this, the drug had also rendered him incontinent and a large wet stain had spread across the front of his pants. Her annoyance at Hughes and Gould deepened; only sadists used M90. The men were putting on their coats.

Hughes asked: "How long do you expect to be here, Miss Sprague?"

She replied: "Hours. I will stay until at least five o'clock in the morning. I have to go home and get some things. Then I will assess him and put together a preliminary report. After that it's simply a matter of observing him — and letting him get used to me. I also happen to think he should not be left alone the first night."

They clearly believed her a dotty "humaniac". But Hughes nodded condescendingly and said: "In that case I will leave the phencyclidine here on the counter. If you would be good enough to inject him right before you leave it would be very helpful —"

"Just when do you intend to allow him to recover enough to be fed?" she demanded.

Gould said: "We'll need to get him up on the table again in the morning without getting ourselves ripped to shreds in the process."

"The two of *you* plan to lift him up to the table?"

Again her insinuation was a kick in the balls — it was something she enjoyed doing to namby pamby men with inflated egos. The three of them stood there looking at each other with undisguised dislike. She knew that the two men were in awe of her, and she intended to keep them as demoralized as possible, so that she could remain in control of this creature's welfare. And that was the only way she could be happy. The comfort of her charges always came first, and she intended to see that this remarkable creature was cossetted in every possible way.

Hughes handed her the keys to the cage padlock and the laboratory door and the men left.

As soon as they were gone, she flew into action, moving much faster than she ordinarily allowed herself to do in front of other people, especially men.

Inserting the keys onto her key ring she grabbed her coat. As she locked the cage door she said, "Don't you be afraid, honeylocks. I'll be back real quick and then we'll get better acquainted. And I'll do something about some of your problems, too." She left the lights on so the creature wouldn't be terrified by the sudden glare when she returned.

Ten minutes later, at her apartment, she changed from her skirt to wool slacks and then she ransacked supplies. One entire room served as a repository for the relics of her animal handling career, and the medicines and devices still came in handy when the occasional sick or injured cat, pigeon or squirrel turned up. She decided to start her new charge on the same vitamin drops that had always worked so well with the apes and big cats. Good — there were still a few bottles left. She tossed one into her vet bag, Then she grabbed the bag, a blanket, several clean old towels and washrags, an old dishpan, a bottle of PhisoHex — and strangely, a ribbon-tied sachet filled with crushed pine needles and bayberry leaves. She dug out a clipboard and pad of paper. Usually, she dictated her notes, but the tape-recorder was no longer working. She also fetched a container of 'zoo cake', a highly nutritious if not very tasty recipe developed by the Philadelphia Zoo in the 1930's. It would tide her new patient over until she could devise a diet for him. She always kept a fresh supply on hand.

She wondered about the fact that he roamed Central Park after dark. This supported her growing conviction that the creature had high intelligence, having his stroll after dark when

he could move about unobserved (or so he had believed?) and then returning to wherever he lived during the day. Many wild creatures when held in captivity came to regard their cage or artificial habitat as their personal territory, or home, and would voluntarily return to it if permitted to leave. It was even possible that his owners/trainers/keepers did not know that he was making these nocturnal expeditions.

As she drove back to campus she smoked a cigarette and entertained herself with outrageous ideas; perhaps this creature was the long-sought-after Sasquatch, captured in the Himalayas and brought back here for secret study by one of her colleagues — who would be extremely chagrined to discover that his specimen had escaped and was now in her hands.... But the footprint casts made by Marley and Ellison back in 1964 had been twice the size of this creature's feet. A young one? A runt?

'Runt' was hardly a term to apply to her latest charge....

She honked angrily at the driver in front of her who seemed to have been stricken with green-light catatonia....

The creature still lay exactly as he had been placed. Only his eyes moved, following her as she set down her gear on the cage floor and unpacked certain items.

"Here I am again. Just take it easy. Everything's going to be all right."

In her methodical way, she decided to start with the top of his leonine head and work downward. Why not... ? At the lab sink she filled the plastic dishpan half full of warm water and carried it into the cage.

Tenderly, she washed the dried, encrusted blood off his face. "There — doesn't that feel better?"

She reached for her otoscope. Pushing aside his thick tresses she exposed a small, delicate, human-looking ear. His respiration quickened again.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she mumbled. He couldn't understand, but what the hell.... She just had to talk to her creatures. His ear passage was longer than she would have expected, and on the inside there were some of the odd little nodes and membranes that characterized a cat's ears. Strange.... Human on the outside. Pussycat on the inside. He probably had quite acute hearing. She progressed from his ear to his eyes, shining the tiny light of the ophthalmoscope directly into the pupil. The pupil obligingly contracted — with a slight vertical pull. If she hadn't been paying such close attention she could almost have missed it. Just a slight vertical pull.... And there, too, behind his retina, was the tapetum — a reflecting layer meant to increase the amount of light passing through — so he would have excellent night vision, as well.

"So now we know why you don't look good in family photographs."

He did not have nictitating membranes. She peered up his nasal passages, her knees screaming in protest as she hunkered there with her rump in the air. Just as well those imbeciles had to leave.... She liked privacy anyway, no matter what she was doing. With a gasp of relief she settled onto her thigh, leaning against him slightly, and then considered his mouth. Lifting his lip she scraped at one canine with a dental tool. No build-up of plaque.

"Somebody takes very good care of you, honeylocks. Feeds you king-size Milkbone, no doubt.... And I bet you have exactly thirty teeth."

She wanted in the worst way to pry open his mouth and have a good look inside. He could roar like a lion; no primate was capable of making such impressive sounds. This meant that he must, like the lion, have a special elastic ligament associated with the bone that supports the tongue and its muscles. She was also dying to know if he had sharp carnassials at the back of his jaw or if he had flat molars for grinding and chewing like the primates.

"So tell me, do you have to swallow everything whole?" But she decided against invading his oral cavity this time; he had already been overburdened with unwelcome attentions and

was now receiving more. And mouth work was always so upsetting to her charges.... It could wait.

She fingered his velvety whisker pads. Then, retrieving a small magnifying glass from her bag she had a really close look at the tiny dark spots which should contain *tribrissae*. Sure enough, there was a stump of a whisker in each spot.

"So — who clips your whiskers?" He did not once take his eyes off her and this continued to give her a peculiar sensation. In the animal kingdom such prolonged eye contact was totally out of order, although among the apes it would signal hostility. But this was no unfriendly stare...

He was immaculately clean. No dander flakes, no scaly build-up in his ears, no sign of vermin. His luxuriant hair and short fur were glossy with health.

"Uh-huh, somebody really fusses over you. If Hughes and Gould go public, somebody's going to knock them on their asses real fast — and I'll be the first to applaud."

Something about the configuration of his split upper lip made her hold the magnifying glass over this area and look closely. What she detected gave her quite a start. Where the human filtrum would be there was evidence — minute evidence — of surgical intervention. Beneath the downy fur was a faint line of *cicatrix* — scar tissue — with suture marks. Some attempt had once been made to repair him — but why?

At this point she removed the sharply fragrant pine and bayberry-scented sachet from her bag and placed it against the creature's cleft lip just below his nose. His eyes crossed slightly as he tried to see what she was holding against him. Then his nostrils twitched and his mouth sprang open. He made a long pull on the sweet-sharp smell and then looked at her questioningly —

She had learned what she wanted to know.

She put away the sachet and took out her stethoscope. Leaning over him and placing it against his back she listened to the slow, measured beating of his heart. But when she moved to repeat this procedure on his chest his breathing quickened again and then she saw that the darts had raised large, angry welts.

"Oh, you poor thing. We'll do something about that." Very gently, she applied a soothing ointment. This business of using his breath to communicate was interesting.... He was anticipating her moves and letting her know of his alarm. *Definitely* intelligent. As much or more-so than a gorilla? Than a porpoise?

She examined his hand admiringly, and the tough, iron-hard nails. They were clean — so clean. She looked at his arm. On the ventral surface of the elbow joint the skin was downy and delicate as it would be under his arms, in his groin and behind his knees. Fur-bearing creatures tended to have the same vulnerable spots — and these were all used by vets for specific tests. She unwrapped a single-unit tine test and pressed the tiny ring of barbs into his arm. He watched this with interest.

"We'll have us a look in a few days," she promised. "And if it's not puffed up or reddened then everything's peachy-keen."

Lifting his arm she looked for any suggestion of dew claws and then, nor satisfied, she actually thumbed back the fur beneath his forearm and there near the wrist was a tiny scar. Nah.... Just a coincidence... She inspected the other arm. In exactly the same location was another tiny scar.

Somebody had removed his dew claws.

Her pulse quickened.

First the lip repair and now this. He had been worked on. But why? He belonged to somebody. Who? And, most intriguing of all, what had they learned from their study of him?

Absorbed in these thoughts she sat idle for a moment and then, guiltily aware that he was still lying there wet and in need of attention, she snapped back to reality. She would hurry through the rest of the examination...

His thorax did not have little rows of vestigial nipples. Gently she palpated the over-relaxed abdomen. Nothing revealing there. His navel was human-looking, too, almost as though the umbilical cord had been professionally cut and tucked at birth.

She passed a hand along his flank then pinched a tuft of fur between thumb and forefinger and manipulated it thoughtfully. Peering at it through the magnifying glass she muttered, "Uh-huh. Why, you're just a babe..."

She now found herself considering his pants — and how to get them off.

They were made of some sort of highly durable dense cotton weave, almost like denim but slightly coarser.

"Your owners must have a time portal," she commented. "Haven't heard of cloth like this since my great-great-great grandmother stopped bragging about the good old days..."

His pants fastened along the side in a flap like a naval uniform — and the buttons were of tarnished silver. Not only that, they were purely ornamental. She lifted the edge of the flap. It fastened with velcro! Somebody had really done some thinking.... He had the manual dexterity and undoubtedly the learning capability to dress himself. Apes could be taught to do it right down to buttons and laces. But with claws like these he might have trouble with buttons. This was a clever solution.

"Probably need a microscope to find your wee-wee," she commented wryly as she yanked open one side of the flap and tugged the soggy pants down over his thighs. "If you're anything like a mountain gorilla —"

She glanced at his groin and never finished the sentence. Between his thighs was a large, firm, and very delicately-furred scrotal sac and just above it, encased in a soft cuff of downy flesh was a generously-sized and eerily human-looking glans penis. She was startled on three counts: first its size, second its human appearance and third, as she clinically tweaked it between thumb and forefinger, its remarkable firmness. This and the fact that it amounted to only about an inch of protrusion lead her to suspect that the rest of his penis was housed inside his broad muscular belly.

"Well, I'll be damned." She glanced at his face but he was no longer watching her. Instead he was staring fixedly into space. Trying to pretend this all wasn't happening? She sighed. Anthropomorphism was always tempting with the higher primate types.... Gently, she palpated his lower abdomen. Sure enough.... Because of the M90 he had absolutely no muscular tension and she could feel the shaft beneath the surface. Her fingers pressed inward and the entire organ suddenly surged out of its hiding place.

She stared, for once in her life totally dumbfounded.

He was now — aside from the downy fur of the general area and the lack of pubic hair — indistinguishable from any particularly well-endowed human male. Although plainly not erect, his penis was quite firm — it would have to be to slide in and out like this — and of normal length. There was no sign of a foreskin; evolution had apparently confined that principle to the soft sleeve of flesh that now lay at the base of the extruded member.

Well shit, he was beautiful...

Aloud she remarked: "You'd sure make a mountain gorilla jealous. For that matter you'd probably make Hughes and Gould jealous." At this point she allowed herself a rare, dry chuckle. "Well, honeylocks — I've seen all kinds of anatomy in my lifetime, but never any creature, per scale, as well-endowed as you are."

She pressed a sugar-test paper strip against the soggy fur. It did not turn blue. "No diabetes. Attaboy..."

She quickly checked to make sure her fingernails were short, then, very carefully, she probed beneath the ring of flesh. On the dorsal surface of the penis was a muscle which, under excitation, would contract and pull the organ into its necessary upright tilt. Undoubtedly, he would become harder and bigger and longer, too, but nature had provided him with a built-in crane as well. Remarkable.... Absolutely remarkable. Then something else occurred to her.

"Uh-huh... Now I know all your secrets. You can piddle like anybody in any little boy's room, right? But I'll bet you can also propel it out of you in an aerosol jet — WHOOSH! Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

She patted his thigh. He made a sudden noise in his throat — it sounded almost like a human voice — and she found that he was watching her attentively again. This gave her the strangest impression that he was trying to answer her question.

She greased a thermometer with vaseline. Leaning over him she spread his buttocks and slipped it into place. Then, with the Phisohex and warm water she washed his pelvic area, rinsed him and carefully toweled him dry.

"There—now you'll feel better. No urine scald for you — eh, big fella?" she said, mentally tying timber hitches in the *vas deferens* of both Hughes and Gould. This was not going to be a happy association...

She worked the pants the rest of the way off, removed his cotton socks and had a look at his feet. Unlike his hands, they had hard pads on the bottoms. Claws too, but they were much smaller and less lethal-looking than those on his fingers. "—but I'll bet your socks don't last long, anyway." He had only four broad toes on each foot. She checked between them for ulcerations. Nothing.

She pinched the pads on his feet to check his pain reflexes. He whimpered.

"I'm sorry, darling. Won't do it again." At this point, she unfolded the blanket and moved to spread it over him. He whimpered again.

Feeling like an idiot she retrieved the thermometer. 98.6. Well, why not?

She covered him snugly and climbed, groaning, to her feet. Somebody had thrown sand into every joint in her body. Five years of retirement had made her forget about some of the positions you had to get into when examining strange creatures...

She carried the pan of waste water to the lab sink and emptied it. After washing her hands thoroughly with iodine soap she rubbed at tired eyes and readjusted a few hairpins. It was getting late, but there was still one more errand she wanted to run before settling down for a night of quiet communion with her new charge.... Good thing the student laundromats stayed open all night...

Naked light bulbs in the ceiling fixtures shed sallow illumination over a row of detergent-sprinkled washers and driers and a row of tables and chairs. She paid 25-cents for a small packet of soap flakes from the vending machine and tossed the pants and used towels and washcloths into the first available machine.

While the laundry churned and spun, she sat with her clipboard and began to work up a report based on her observations of Honeylocks. I'll have to come up with a better name than that. He's such a masculine-looking thing...

She had no classification to give Hughes and Gould.

As far as she knew the creature was unique.

He still lay as she had left him, but it had been a couple of hours since he had been darted and she had no idea of what his recovery rate would be.

"It's me again. Nothing to worry about."

Extending one foot through the wide-set bars she gently nudged him in the back, pushing hard enough to move his shoulder. He grunted but otherwise did not react. At the door of the cage she rattled the padlock in a violent, menacing manner. He lay inert.

Unlocking it she entered and stood looking down at him, holding his clean, dry and folded pants over one arm. He made a slight sound in his throat again and his mild blue eyes gazed up at her.

Something stirred in her breast... My God, *tenderness*. I almost didn't recognize it... It had been five years since the last time she had ministered to a large, warm, breathing, fur-covered creature. She had always liked them big. The big cats, the gorillas, the oranges, the timber wolves....

She liked the husky sound of air puffing in and out of a big throat, the rippling of a large musculature beneath sleek or shaggy fur. And she was fast becoming attached to this tawny creature.

She would do everything she could to protect him from the exploitations of Hughes and Gould. Even if it meant practically living in this Godforsaken lab...

Suddenly, she remembered the vitamin drops and she rifled through her bag until she found the small dropper-bottle.

"Here we go. Something to keep you sharp-eyed and sassy. Lucky thing you came along when you did. These expire in six months."

Unscrewing the dropper she crouched down again. She lifted his lip, expecting to have to dribble the orange-flavored dose in through his teeth, but to her astonishment he obligingly opened his mouth.

"My, aren't we getting tractable. But I bet you won't be such a good boy when the dart wears off."

She placed two drops on the tip of his tongue. His teeth really were awesome, and a quick peek told her that he did not have carnassials, but molars and premolars for chewing.

Wearily, she crossed her legs and placed a hand on his powerful shoulder. "You sure are a bundle of contradictions, Honeylocks. Non-retractile claws. Olfactory apparatus in the roof of your mouth. No tail — but once you had dew claws. A fully prehensile hand, but only four toes on your feet. No pads on your hands — but pads on your feet. A Mr Universe body and a penis that ought to be commemorated in marble. But no carnassials."

The fur over his spine was long and probably capable of erectile response. Reaching under the blanket she ran her fingers through it and tugged it gently the wrong way, knowing this would feel good to him. She stroked his clean, wavy hair and once again fingered his tender, velvety whisker pads.

"You are an exquisite creature. Simply exquisite. Tomorrow, after those imbeciles let you recover and eat, we'll see what you can do with bristle blocks." She yawned, enormously tired. "When my subjects have opposable thumbs I test them with bristle blocks. Always interesting to see what happens. And what will you do? Ignore them? Examine them one by one? Try to eat them? Stick them together? Bang them on the bars the way chimps do? Hurl them all at your keepers?" She gave another chuckle. "Or maybe make fools of us all and ask to read the directions..." She was suddenly too tired to talk to him anymore.

Retirement did have its good points, she was forced to admit. You could drift off to sleep comfortably at nine o'clock in your own bed with a book in your lap, instead of finding yourself still hunched over a tissue specimen at midnight, or peering down the gullet of an impala with a throat tumor at one o'clock in the morning. And the phone didn't ring anymore...

But she was glad she had answered Hughes' call.

She wouldn't have wanted to miss out on this one.

Dragging herself to her feet one more time she went to check that the lab door was locked and she turned on one tiny light near the microscope rack and then snapped out the main lights. The room was plunged into a relaxing gloom.

Back inside the cage she made herself comfortable leaning against the bars across from the creature, her arms folded over her bosom and her head just perfectly braced in the space between the bars. He made a large, indistinct form against the opposite wall of bars. She would watch his shadowy twitchings and wriggings as he began to come out of the M90, and when he started to become generally mobile she would lock him in and take up a position outside the cage...

The room was comfortably warm. Only one small window. No drafts.... Seductive tides of sleep began to befuddle her thoughts.... She resisted...

She woke suddenly. The small window framed the grey light of very early morning and there was a warm weight against her thigh. Glancing down without moving she saw that the creature had changed his position and was now lying against her with his head on her thigh.

A surge of excitement jostled her senses to a fully wakened state. Had she succeeded in winning his trust already? Almost immediately following this question came the realization that if he had recovered enough to move this far — and, she could see, to put his pants back on (How had she slept through *that?*) — then he had recovered enough to attack her.

But he had not attacked her.

Nor had his instinct been to move to the farthest corner of the cage. Instead he was lying here in close contact with her, and she could hear his light breathing. Cautiously, she unfolded her arms. He gave a slight start. He was awake! She hesitated a moment more and then, watching him carefully through the dim light, she laid a hand on his shoulder. He didn't move; she did not sense the coiled tension of a frightened animal about to spring away or worse, deliver a bite in self-defense.... She laid the other hand on his head. He lay still — and she could no longer hear his breathing...

The moment drew, like a field of magnetized bits, closely around one tantalizing question.... Hardly daring to hope — and not sure exactly what to hope for—and feeling a little silly, she said in a very low voice: "Do you have a name?"

The minutes went by and she could hear his breathing again. And then a soft, deep voice answered her question: "Vincent."

Oh, my God...

"Can you — can you understand what I say to you?" she gasped.

Again came the soft voice: "Yes. Except when you talk about carnassials. I don't know what those are."

Stunned, she gazed blankly down at him, her hands still in place. This was no animal.... This was a person.... This was a person who had somehow managed to be born looking like something that should be bringing down a wildebeest on the African plain. *How on Earth had this happened?* Or, if this being who lay with his head on her lap could not properly be called a 'person', then what was he? Her brain felt like a seismic disturbance. And yet, as the thoughts piled one on top of another, she was most conscious — through all of it — of one enormous thing, one thing totally unrelated to the scientific quandary at hand.... It had been over twenty years since anyone — *any person* — had cuddled up to her. She had forgotten how it felt. She had not particularly wanted to remember how it felt.... And she was not prepared for the fierce tenderness that came over her as his warmth and weight and quiet trust made their delightful impressions... More than ever she wanted to protect him, and now, on top of that, she wanted to get him out of here.

As though reading her mind he spoke again, in the same gruff but gentle tone: "Can you help me?"

She said: "Yes. Yes, Vincent. I'm sure I can. Just let me think for a few minutes—"

The questions began to flood her. She asked him: "Are there others of your kind, Vincent?"

"I don't know. I've never seen or heard of any."

"Where do you live?"

"I can't really answer that. It's not far from here. It is a hidden place. If I could get away from here, I could find my way. But my limbs still don't work very well. I doubt I'm strong enough to walk yet, or even stand up for very long."

"You must be feeling pretty rocky."

"My chest hurts. I have places that are sore from their rough handling. And my stomach has a dead feeling in it, as though it might help to be sick. Only I can't be."

"That will go away soon." She wanted to reassure him and one hand moved, stroking his hair. Again, her feelings surprised her.... She had always enjoyed touching her fur-bearing charges. But people never. or very, very seldom. In particular not men. Not. even, really, the two men she had been briefly married to in her youthful optimistic attempts to find some missing dimension in her life....

"You poor thing. You've been through such an ordeal." In her straightforward way she said: "I must apologize for taking such liberties while you were helpless."

With incredible kindness he replied: "You did nothing to be ashamed of. You are a scientist, and I was something you had never seen before — so you examined me. I needed washing — and so you washed me. I could feel that you meant me no harm and I know that you are my friend."

After a moment more he said: "Do you mind my resting on you like this?"

"Not in the least."

"I find it so comforting..."

Is that what I'm feeling...?

He turned over on his back and the pleasant aroma of his hair and breath drifted up to her. God, what an endearing creature...

He said earnestly: "You know — you're right. Remember when you said that you thought I could propel my urine out of me in an aerosol jet? You're right — I can do that. When I was a child the other boys would have... They'd have..." He halted.

"Peeing contests?" she prompted.

"Yes."

She chuckled. "A very ancient custom among small boys."

"I always won. Why do you suppose I can do that?"

"Well, Vincent..., you appear to have many of the characteristics of *Felidae* — the big cat family. And that's one more that you share. Siberian tigers and lions mark their territory that way."

He was silent.

She continued: "But don't bother piddling in any corners. Your urine is practically odorless, Like I said before — you're a bundle of contradictions." She couldn't believe they were having this conversation. She still found it hard to believe they were having any conversation. The questions continued to stack up, and not necessarily in any kind of order. She asked him: "Who gave you the palate closure?"

"I don't understand —"

"Who repaired — modified I guess I should say — your upper lip?"

He mulled this over. "I suppose it would have been Father. But he's never said anything to me about it."

"Your father?"

"My adoptive father. The man who raised me; he is a physician. We have all your books. You are Elizabeth Sprague the author, aren't you? You're the one who wrote 'A Habit of Creature' and all the other accounts of experiences with animals ..."

"Yes —that's me. Author, teacher, zoologist, retired zoo vet and animal supplier, twice divorced, friend to few and mother of none. That's me."

"I can't believe that you are 'friend to few'. You have so much kindness inside you —"

"Well, I don't know about that."

"I do know about that,"

She quickly moved on to something else. "You may call me Liz."

"Liz..." His soft voice seemed to take up the name and embrace it. "You have examined me very thoroughly. Tell me, have you any ideas as to — what I might be?"

"No. Not yet." She felt like having a smoke and decided against it. Besides, it would mean she'd have to move him off her lap. "Here I am, a retired animal dealer and vet. I have spent my life collecting, treating and classifying all kinds of living things. From the exotic to the commonplace. You, my dear, are completely off the spectrum."

He sighed deeply.

Presently she asked: "How old are you, Vincent?"

"Thirty-three."

Something about that bothered her. From the substratum of her experience bank came a strange feeling... A feeling that this creature called Vincent was very young — younger than his age measured in human years would place him. And it was more than just the quality of his fur... It was a vague impression but she paid attention to it in her methodical way.

She was enjoying this. It was like a dream-come-true, being able to converse with one of her furry charges. She was also contrasting this gentle, soft-spoken creature with the raging beast that had wrenched the straps right off the table. He certainly could be savage when provoked. But that was a trait she knew well and could understand. She had much more trouble coping with her fellow Man, who was so apt to be insidiously savage all the time...

"Are you color-blind?"

"No."

"Who clips your whiskers?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"They embarrass me."

"Oh."

He moved a little, drawing up his knees and flexing his arms experimentally. But basically he remained where he was while above him Liz continued to sort through dozens of questions.

"And your dew claws — was it your father who removed those?"

He seemed puzzled. "It must have been," he replied. "I can see that I am going to have to have a talk with him."

"Your fur is in excellent condition. Do you go through a seasonal moult?"

Unexpectedly she sensed embarrassment. There was a long silence before he replied in a very low and rather pained tone: "Yes..."

"And your diet — do you have a generalized digestive system?"

"The only thing I can't tolerate is chocolate. Father keeps me on a high-protein diet. It seems to work."

"Good for him." She gave him a pat. "Do your footpads ever dry out and crack?"

"Yes. It can be quite painful."

"Rub baby oil into them. And Vincent, don't be tempted to bite off bottlecaps or anything like that. Canine teeth as long as yours have a nasty habit of splitting lengthwise. Also, you should eat lots of eggs. I have a strong feeling that your system can't synthesize vitamin A."

"I do like eggs."

"Good."

He laid a fuzzy hand on top of one of hers. He asked quietly: "Liz — what kind of trouble will you get into if I escape?"

A rare smile broke the habitual reserve of her squarish face. It was still too dark for him to see this, but some of the smile found its way into her voice as she dryly explained: "If you leave now they will think I stole you and I will be harassed and pursued to the ends of the Earth. You have to break out when they're here — and that's easy enough to arrange. It seems, Vincent, that I have forgotten to give you your shot of phencyclidine. Tut, tut. Such a shame. Shows you what can happen when you leave things in the hands of a woman. Especially a dotty *old* woman clearly past her prime.... The best thing to do, Vincent, is to lie here as though you were fully drugged. Wait until they unlock the cage door. Wail until you feel hands upon you. Then act. And I *suppose* it's my collegial duty to request that you not hurt them too badly. Are you capable, under normal conditions, of breaking down a door like the one over there?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. Then you should have no trouble. Let's see how you're doing, by the way..."

She slipped both hands beneath his head and encouraged him to sit up. He managed this with no problem, but when he tried to rise further his knees buckled and he flopped weakly over onto his thigh and grabbed the bars with both hands. Drunkenly, he tried again and this time managed to attain a kneeling position.

"You'll get better. Another fifteen minutes and you'll be able to stand and walk . "

"Even if I'm not fully-recovered when they arrive, my anger at them will give me twice my normal strength."

Suddenly, she remembered her prime directive of Comfort First. "Are you thirsty, Vincent?"

"Yes."

She had seen a water cooler in the hall. She fetched him a paper cup of water and when he drained it, fetched him another.

"I want you to keep these vitamin drops. Two drops on the tongue at bedtime. You're in fine fettle, overall, but they'll get you through your seasonal moult easier. You won't feel quite so cantankerous."

"Thank you. I will take them faithfully."

He stood up, clutching the bars for support. His height was somewhere around six-four.... As the creeping light of morning from the window touched him he seemed deeply affected by something.

Tenderly he said to her: "Liz — you have saved my rife. If you walk out of it forever I will grieve."

She had never been one for soppy farewells, and although something about this situation tugged at her heart in a new and most distressing manner, she became outwardly her usual stern and efficient self. It was six o'clock. Hughes and Gould could arrive at any time. She rummaged in her bag.

"Here is my card, Vincent. It has my address on it. If you develop any medical problems feel free to come and see me."

"My father—"

"Is a doctor, I know. But Vincent, you are a fur-bearing creature. There are going to be times when you will need a vet!"

* * *

At ten o'clock the next morning, she telephoned Lieutenant Hatchell of campus security. She was awfully sorry; she hadn't expected to sleep this long. Would he do her a favor? There was no telephone in Professor Hughes' basement lab. A large and possibly dangerous animal was caged in there, being studied by the professor. Would the lieutenant mind terribly getting a message to the professor? It seems she forgot to sedate the animal last night after completing her own examination. This might cause problems if the professor should decide to remove the animal from its cage...

In a harassed and irony-laden voice the lieutenant filled her in.

Both Hughes and Gould were in the hospital. Hughes had a concussion, three broken ribs and a broken ankle. He had been hurled bodily across a lab table. Gould had only a concussion and was missing a few teeth, after this so-called animal had bashed him in the face with a flashlight before throwing him on the floor. Every piece of glassware and equipment in the room had been smashed and the cabinets had been yanked clean down off the walls and the door had been ripped right off its hinges. A dart gun had been snapped in half like a stick of candy. Some early grad students, who had heard the noise and rushed to the scene, had been terrorized by a gigantic, roaring, fang-bearing monster who rushed outside and disappeared.

What the hell kind of animal were they studying in there, anyway???

"Now, Lieutenant — you don't really believe in King Kong, do you?" She allowed her voice to smile at him through the phone and then she hung up. She opened the phone book.

When Hughes and Gould were sufficiently recovered there would be all sorts of recriminations. But they wouldn't be able to call on her because they'd never get through lobby security once she left their names and descriptions at the main desk. As the only celebrity in the entire building, her privacy was jealously guarded by the staff — all of whom possessed autographed copies of her best-selling books.

And in the meantime, she could make things even more frustrating for Hughes and Gould. She could get an unlisted number...

* * *

"He's an invalid, so I can't bring him in. But maybe this will help. You could measure it for size." Catherine unfolded a tracing of Vincent's foot which she had secretly obtained from Mrs Larrimore.

Thank goodness the dear old lady kept tracings of everybody's feet — along with all their other measurements. Catherine had been able to get everything she needed, including some enjoyable scraps of unsolicited information about Vincent such as the fact that he detested a color known as 'Copenhagen blue', was allergic to polyester, liked to sleep in thermal undershirts size XXL, and couldn't wear undershorts because they would ride up, bind him around his powerful thighs and wear his fur off (instead Mrs L. lined his pants with soft flannel at strategic points).

The shoe salesman looked a bit dubious but within minutes he did come up with a size and Catherine said: "Wonderful. I'd like a pair of moccasins, a pair of canvas boaters and a pair of trail boots please." She dug out a credit card and sat down happily to wait while these items were collected and brought for her inspection.

This was *such fun*...

Her next stop was the men's department at Macy's. She bought Vincent two pairs of blue jeans—(WHEE! He would look so sexy in crisp new denim) — and several lightweight shirts of soft combed cotton, no loud colors. Oh, and a belt! She found one decorated with indian beads. He would love it.

Oh — this was *such fun!!!!*

This wasn't going to be like what happened last year.

This was going to work.

It had to..

* * *

"Father — does this look all right to you?" Vincent pushed up his sleeve and inserted his arm between Father's face and the huge sheets of diagrams, drawings, equations and piles of index cards the older man was bending over. Father muttered something and straightened up with a groan, grabbing at the small of his back. Absently, he took hold of the arm and looked at it. Irritably, he removed his specs.

"Does *what* look all right? I don't see anything, Vincent, and besides, can't you see that. I'm trying to decide whether to put linear functions of vector arguments ahead of systems of linear equations — or systems of linear equations ahead of linear functions of vector arguments?"

Having delivered this expostulation without a single falter he limped away from the long, paper-covered table that now dominated his study and went to his desk.

Feeling remiss, Vincent withdrew quietly and after watching Father a moment longer he turned to go, but Father spoke out again, this time with supplication: "I'm sorry. I suppose if you hadn't interrupted me, I'd have frozen into that position permanently. Come here," Vincent did so and Father examined the arm under the strong light of his desk lamp.

"Why it looks like a tine test. Did Sprague give you this?"

"Yes, it was one of the things she did."

Father cleared his throat and pushed the arm away. "Yes, well it's fine, Vincent. You do not have TB. Now, I really must get on with my notes. I've a great deal to organize yet and I'm in a bit of a dither about it."

He sat down, sank his cheek into one hand and turned his attention downward to an opened notebook, gradually becoming immobile as the handwritten tangle claimed him. In the soft orange light of the room he looked like a sepia photograph.

Vincent wandered slowly around. He spun the dusty globe, then opened the glass front of a Victorian mantle clock, picked up the key and wound it noisily. Moving on, he picked up the stereoptican bin, flipped through the stiff antique cards and set it down again with a thump.

A muscle gathered in Father's cheek.

Vincent picked up a ruler and idly thrashed the posterior of a brass Scythian archer.

A distinctly aggravated look appeared on Father's face. Closing the notebook he studied Vincent's burly frame.

"You seem very restless today."

Vincent paced. He murmured: "I can't get my mind off her..."

"Catherine?"

"Well — I never can get my mind off her," Vincent corroborated. "But actually it's Liz Sprague I keep thinking about. I wish you could have seen the way she treated those two anthropologists, Father. If I hadn't been so frightened and upset, I would have enjoyed it immensely."

Father adjusted his specs and squinted at Vincent. It was unusual for his son to come to him in such a felicitous mood, especially considering the ordeal he'd just been through. A long spell of depression would have seemed more likely...

Father inquired: "Are you feeling better? You still have quite a shiner."

Vincent was actually grinning. "I know. William says it's the first time I've ever looked as though I'd been in a fight."

This got a vague and somewhat alarmed smile. Father stared at Vincent a moment more and then took off his specs and cleaned them on a handkerchief.

Vincent roved on, tinkering with this and that. "I don't think she likes men very much, Father."

"From what I've always heard, she doesn't like anyone very much."

"She examined every inch of me," Vincent said emphatically. "Right down to my toes. By now she's had the time to think about it all." His fuzzy eyebrows drew together and his head tilted to one side. "I wonder what she has concluded."

Once again steeped in his notes Father made a noise that sounded like "Hrumpf."

Obviously he was not in a speculative — or talkative — mood...

"She found evidence of surgical repair on my lip and on my arms."

Father reared upward and knocked a candle over. Quickly, he righted it again and with an index card scraped the spilled wax of a book cover.

"I — I must say I'm really quite *amazed*, Vincent. She must have gone over you with a magnifying glass."

"She did."

The silence that followed was not broken by any further commentary from Father, so Vincent resumed what he quite plainly intended to be a discussion.

"Did you operate on me when I was a baby, Father?"

Father wasn't prepared for this. "Well, yes," he admitted somewhat defensively. "When you were about six weeks old I removed a couple of vestigial structures from your arms —"

"You mean my dew claws."

"Er — yes. They would have caused you no end of trouble — catching in your clothing, for instance. And then, when you were a year old or thereabouts I attempted to tighten up your lip a bit. Not being a plastic surgeon I couldn't repair it completely, but I did manage to improve the situation..."

"What situation, Father?"

"You were trying to learn to drink from a cup. But it was impossible. The liquid would simply go right up into your nose and choke you." Father shrugged. "Something had to be done."

Vincent accepted this and nodded gravely. He asked curiously, "Did you remove anything else?"

"No." Father pulled at his beard and cast about for a change of subject. "Sprague of course has no idea of where you live?"

"No. But even if she did figure it out, I believe she can be trusted." Vincent started toward the short flight of steps that led to the tunnel then turned back. "By the way, Father — it's your turn to empty the rat traps."

"Oh, no — not again. Not already." Father pushed his chair out from his desk and slumped dejectedly. "I feel as though I just did it yesterday." City sewer rats were an especially fierce breed and frequently the traps did not succeed in killing them. This meant hitting them over the head with a heavy object — usually a shovel. It was not a pleasant task.

"It always feels that way," Vincent said sympathetically. "I believe I will visit Catherine this evening. I have so much to tell her."

"Oh — yes, good idea. A long climb up a tall building is just what you need, Vincent." Father slumped even more, still preoccupied with the unhappy prospect of rat-smashing. "Have a good time. Don't keep her up too late..."

* * *

A tapping on the glass made Catherine glance up to see a familiar shadowy shape beyond the gauzy curtains of her balcony doors. Tumbling off the sofa, she skipped over, opened the doors and flung herself into his arms.

"Oh, Vincent — I'm so glad to see you. It's been *days*."

The last half of the sentence was lost as she buried her face in the folds of his tunic and vest, and she continued to murmur incoherently, soaking up his warm embrace, breathing him in, squeezing him, smothering her face against his shoulder. She listened to his deep sigh of contentment, as he wrapped his arms around her. Lifting her face, she nibbled quickly on his neck and then pushed back to look at him and gauge his reaction. He was smiling, but in the next instant she forgot all about it.

"Vincent! You have a black eye? What happened?"

"A graduate student in anthropology hit me in the face with a flashlight."

"What?"

He sat on the bench and pulled her down beside him. Over the next twenty minutes he told her the story, omitting only the finer details of Elizabeth Sprague's intimate examination...

"Oh, Vincent — what a close call. They would have made a freak show out of you and kept you in a cage for the rest of your life."

He said heavily: "I would have had no more life, Catherine. I would have died behind those bars, as soon as I had begun to believe you would never find me —"

He was wearing his hood. Rising to her knees she pushed it back and then she tucked his head beneath her chin and kissed his forehead lingeringly. Holding him snugly this way, she was pleased to feel him relax.

"It's so nice to be held like this," he murmured, his eyes closed.

She whispered into his hair: "Well, I love to hold you like this." Her fingertips traced the bruise very gently. "Does it still hurt?"

"No."

She rocked him a little, enjoying his closed eyes and total submission.

She commented: "What a way to meet Elizabeth Sprague. She must have found you fascinating."

"She knows more about me than Father does." His eyes were still closed and his voice sounded sleepy.

"Want me to keep rocking you?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Just a big b-a-y-b-e-e..."

"Mm-hmm."

She smiled against his hair. "What should I do when you fall asleep — roll you under the bench and go to bed?"

"Mm-hmm." His eyes popped open. "I mean — *no*; don't let me fall asleep." He reached up suddenly and scratched at the top of his shoulder.

She sat down beside him again. "Then tell me about Elizabeth Sprague. What's she really like? I've always wondered."

"She doesn't have much trust in people."

"That comes through in her writing."

"And yet there is a great longing inside her. Her books convey that, too — it's one of the things that makes her style so captivating. I don't think she realizes that it shows the way it does. She was very kind to me; of course she thought I was some sort of animal. She talked to me reassuringly throughout the examination and she was very gentle, attended to my injuries and cleaned me up. I was afraid she'd withdraw all that warmth as soon as I began to talk to *her* — but she didn't."

"You had won her heart. That doesn't surprise me."

Vincent shoved a hand beneath the cloak fastening and scratched at his shoulder again, harder than before. He muttered: "I seem to have a most annoying itch. If I scratch it as hard as I'd like to I'll tear my clothes."

"Here, let me." Without giving him time to object she plunged her hand into the neck opening of his tunic, through the collar of the soft shirt he wore beneath and dug her own fingernails into his fur, approximately where he had been scratching.

"There.... How's that? Oh—" She groped around. "Vincent, you have a bald spot."

"I do?"

"Yes. The fur seems to have fallen right out. Why don't you go have a look in my bathroom mirror?"

"No."

"Oh, go *ahead*, Vincent. Don't be so bashful."

"All right. But you wait here."

As he disappeared through the bedroom doors she mumbled, a mischievous glint in her eyes: "What if I don't, ..?"

When he emerged from the bathroom he almost fell over her.

"I — uh, you're right, Catherine. There is a bald spot. I shall have to show it to Father—" He moved toward the balcony doors but she was standing directly in his path. Catching up his hands she said, "Come with me. I want to show you something."

She tugged on him and pulled him into the living room with all the energy of *The Little Engine That Could*. "Sit *down*."

He remained standing in front of one blue winged sofa, staring around awkwardly. She backed him up against it and gave him a push. He sat down. Taking a photograph album from the coffee table she opened it and placed it on his lap. He looked down at a layout of color snapshots depicting country scenes: a small pond with ducks and cattails, a dirt lane with deep tire ruts and a profusion of wild flowers along the banks, a charming red-board barn, an apple orchard, a row of bee hives, a sprawling shingled cottage with an old-fashioned hand pump in the side yard...

"This is my Aunt Lila's and Uncle David's place in rural Connecticut," she said. "It's not far from that lake where we used to camp when I was a kid."

"The lake you wanted to show me."

"Yes. But there's one very important difference about this place." She explained, "This isn't public. Aunt Lila and Uncle David have forty acres of untainted land and it's totally private. They used to spend all their time puttering on the property but now they're getting along in years and they've decided to spend more time traveling. In June they're going to spend two weeks in Florida with some friends — and they've offered me the use of their place. Think

of it, Vincent — a country vacation for two whole weeks in return for housesitting. Doesn't that sound like *paradise*?"

"What a wonderful escape for you, Catherine." His soft, whispery voice enfolded her with the selfless warmth of his nature and his eyes reflected her happiness. "To walk in a fruit-laden orchard, to hear the droning of bees and feel the sun in your hair. To be completely away from all the demands of your daily life here. It's a priceless opportunity for you, a total escape—"

She gazed at him intently. "It can be for you too, Vincent. I want you to come with me."

The meaning of her words took some time to get through. He stared at the pictures, his sensitive lips slightly parted, one fuzzy finger tracing the edge of a plastic page.

His whispered response was barely audible: "You are so kind. Always thinking of me..."

"Well of course I'm always thinking of you. We're part of each other. And where I am I want you to be — but especially when it's someplace where I can really be *me*, and just enjoy all the best things in life. I don't work in a place like that. I don't live in a place like that. The best I can hope for is to be able to visit a place like that. Once in a while as a special treat — and when I do I want you with me. And Vincent, I've thought about this very hard — and I don't see any reason why you can't be."

He didn't lift his eyes from the pictures.

She repeated: "It's absolutely private. The mail doesn't even get delivered to the house. And when they don't want access from the main road they just close and lock a gate at the end of a very long tree-lined private lane. The house and immediate grounds aren't visible from any public point of land. It's perfect."

She reached out, closed the album gently, and replaced it on the coffee table. "I wanted to tell you now because I know you'll need some time to think about it. I know you've never been away from home before."

"Catherine..." His eyes, filled with sadness, worshiped her. He placed a hand on her arm and then, very shyly, he laid the other against her face and cupped it around her cheek. She sank against the contact and kissed his thumb.

She said: "I know it's risky."

"Catherine — you said something to me once that I've never forgotten. You said 'Vincent, some risks are worth taking'. I want you to know that I think this is one of them."

She waited, knowing there was more. Alas, she was right.

He went on bleakly: "If my own safety were the only consideration I would say yes in an instant. But it's not that simple. It's not just that I will be without the protection of the World Below. They will also be without mine." He rose, his cloak swaying and curling around his legs. "I will have to talk this over with Father. I'm afraid it will really have to be his decision."

These words went down like ice cubes.

But she had to admit that they were not totally unexpected.

"Vincent—" She followed him as he headed toward the balcony doors and he stopped and turned back.

She said simply: "I want this." With her chin raised and every sense alert she studied him carefully, and then she asked: "Do you want it too?"

His shoulders, so big and square, stirred a little and a soft, golden light seemed to frame his hair. From across the room his eyes burned with their message of adoration and desire. It was the most nakedly longing gaze he had ever turned on her. Standing there apart from her, he was somehow at that moment more enmeshed within her most vital hopes and yearnings than he had ever been before and she felt the full impact of his own need, given life and fed by hers.... He closed his eyes and drew in a long, deep breath.

Then he gazed at her again, and he said: "Yes."

Then he turned quickly, went out through the balcony doors, and was gone.

* * *

"Hmm. You would appear to have developed some sort of atopic eczema," Father said as he inspected the bald scaly spot on Vincent's shoulder. While Vincent sat quietly on the edge of the bed with his tunic and shirt removed, Father gave the rest of the furry torso a cursory going-over, but he could not find any other spots.

"I think perhaps a cortisone cream might nip it in the bud." He removed a slender tube from his bag, opened it and applied a thin coating to the problem area. "Put some of this on it three times a day and we'll see how it does."

"All right, Father."

"And don't scratch it."

Father closed his black bag but did not leave. Instead he hovered there, his fingers idly plucking at the latch on the bag. Vincent remained sitting with his shaggy head lowered forlornly, his whole body in a dejected slump. There was an oppressive silence in the room. Even the pipes were still.

Father felt as though he had swallowed a brick. The sorrow and turmoil inside him clenched at his vitals so hard that it was an effort to breathe in and out. At this moment he wanted only to be able to say something — anything — that would give Vincent a reason to look up with his gentle smile and go to bed happy. But it just wasn't possible. At least not yet.

"I know this means a great deal to you, Vincent. I wish I could give you an answer tonight. I can't. I'm sorry. There are so many considerations. There is so much thinking that I have to do."

"I understand."

"You do realize that you would, in effect, be risking your life."-

Vincent replied with quiet force: "Father, without Catherine I can have no life. And I must have more of her in my life than I am getting right now. We both have reached the point where we simply must have more."

"You would be totally without recourse if you became ill or were badly hurt. I would be unavailable to you. And there would be no one else you could call without signing yourself away to eternal hell and risking exposure of our world. Well, I've been through all this already and I should shut up. It just happens that I am feeling particularly miserable because I have an announcement of my own."

Vincent waited.

"Harvard is hosting a week-long symposium on 'Mathematics, Chemistry, and Philosophy'. They've managed to get Linus Pauling, among others. I sent in my registration months ago and I plan to attend. It's next week. Mrs Larrimore is rushing to get my clothes finished. I'm sorry I haven't mentioned it before.... Things have just been —"

"Father!" Vincent was suddenly gazing at him with shining eyes. "You haven't gone to anything like this since before I was born. This marks an incredible turning-point in your life —."

Father shrugged, allowing a slight flush of pride to darken his cheeks. "Well — I've gone a little tipsy, I suppose, over this math project I've undertaken. And I'm hoping this event will both inspire me to complete it and give me some new ideas." He sighed. "I just feel somewhat wretched, announcing my own spree when I can't yet consent to yours."

"You mustn't let my situation dampen what should be a joyful occasion for you, Father."

"Perhaps if Catherine were to tell me some more about this place.... On her next visit, maybe....," he said huskily: "You must know, Vincent, that I do wish things could be otherwise. No one deserves happiness more than you." He bent down quickly and kissed Vincent's forehead. "Good-night."

"Good-night, Father."

Vincent lay awake for a long time. Only a few candles glowed wanly here and there, dusting the familiar surroundings in vague, uncertain light. His eyes opened now and then, peered absently through the gloom, registered nothing much... He lay on his side curled up, resisting the urge to scratch his shoulder.

If Catherine had been asleep, and he had been left entirely alone with his own thoughts, he would have given in to a sadness too diffuse for tears. He would have lain there apathetically, dull all the way through with resignation, until his mind began to wrap around his dread of having to disappoint her when Father said no. Then he would have tossed and turned and probably slipped into a nightmare or two...

But Catherine was not asleep.

She was awake, but she was sublimely comfortable. She seemed to be totally immersed.... warm.... frothy.... a bubble bath perhaps? Her body was a silkily tangible presence in his mind and she was very conscious of all her sensations. So he was conscious of them too.

It was a welcome distraction...

This was always an enchanting state to find her in because his own awareness, in turn, became directed toward his own body and its sensations. He would feel hers.... He would feel his...

There were secret parts of her that were awakened by special memories and caressed into a glow by the smooth and weightless feeling as she soaked.

These sensations lured him most fervidly and drew every bit of concentration he had... and every bit of fascination.

And then, as all his nerves became tingled with a delightful state of heightened feeling, his own body searched itself for memories, for special revelations.

Usually he didn't have much to go on, having spent a lifetime denying his body and keeping it well sealed against the vision and touch of others...

But tonight he found himself thinking back to the penetrating eyes and probing fingers of Elizabeth Sprague. Her casual acceptance — even appreciation of each thing revealed by her minute examination...

"You are an exquisite creature. Simply exquisite..."

Lying there, unable to move or speak, he had become intensely aware of each part of his body as it was carefully and approvingly handled. He had experienced each part of his body as a separate entity, with its own unique set of reactions and sensations. It was an experience he had never had before...

He recalled how she had run her fingers through the long fur over his spine. That had felt so good. It had never occurred to him that his fur could be a pleasure zone.

And she had touched him *down there* quite a bit.

The removal of his pants had come as a total shock. But once he had been able to get past this initial horror, her explorations had not been unpleasant...

What had impressed him the most about this part of the examination was that it had caused him to wonder ever since — repeatedly and intensely — what it would be like to be touched there in such a gentle and lingering way by Catherine's fingertips — except with unscientific interest.

His desire for Catherine had always come to him as an intense general yearning, different from other feelings, in that it brought a tension to his belly and filled him with urges that left him restless and somewhat confused. Sometimes, prompted by her private sensual moments, it went farther and nearly drove him mad... But until now he had never been able to sort it into specific anticipations... He had no reference points in his memory, the way she had in hers.

No woman had ever touched him *there* before.

Now that one had, his imagination was still on the rebound.

Catherine's feeling were a tranquil plateau, blissfully centered around her special places...

Her feelings.... His thoughts...

Fattened by all this, his penis slid pleasantly out of him.

Vincent stretched his legs out straight, arched his back and sighed deeply.

Then suddenly, the cold finger of reality touched the back of his neck. His precious, sensual connection with Catherine was trampled beneath a storming rabble of fears, and the breath went out of him in a little moan. The leader of the rabble — his most secret and horrible dread — taunted him with the memory from which its ugly presence had first risen:

Oh, no.... She had taken off her bandages and was looking at her reflection in the small hand mirror. She was looking at those terrible scars. Unthinkingly, he rushed up behind her and spoke her name. Seeing his image in the mirror, she whirled with a deep cry of horror and revulsion. The mirror flew out of her hand, grazing his head and causing him to react with an inadvertent snarl. He stood there a few seconds longer, watching her horror-stricken face, then he turned and fled into the tunnel. Out of her sight, he leaned against the wall, trembling. He could hear the sound of her weeping. He could feel her feelings.... Some of them were self-pity because of the terrible, disfiguring scars. But most of them were remorse — because she knew she had hurt him. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to ease his pain, or the appalling threat of loss. His chest tightened and his heart became a cold lump of grief. He laid a hand against his chest and gasped. It hurt.... Oh, it hurt...

She had quickly grown used to his looks. She had not minded the fur. She had even anticipated the fur, according to Father. But never in her wildest dreams would she anticipate this...

In his thoughts and feelings he was human. In his love for her he was human. She thought of him as human, and responded to him as a woman to a man, as one human to another. She could overlook his differences because she thought of him as ultimately human. But at love's most important site, he was not human.

He was made like an animal down there...

This was going to have to be revealed to her.

And if she experienced even the faintest flicker of repugnance he would know it — instantly. And it would kill him. It would simply kill him.

This was not his only fear...

* * *

Slanting in through the mouth of the pipe, sunbeams touched Vincent's hair with the jewel-like brilliance of early morning and a breeze carried a medley of city noises and the raw bite of early March. Setting down Father's suitcase, Vincent faced briefly into the strong light, his eyes narrow and his smile wistful.

Nattily attired in a new three-piece suit, Father made quite a picture as he joined Vincent at the wide circular entrance. Even his cane had been refinished by Mouse for the occasion. Leaning over, he reached absently for the suitcase handle, then pulled his hand back, straightened up with a nervous smile and moved into Vincent's waiting embrace.

It was an odd and unsettling moment for Father — to be saying goodbye. But there was more...

As affectionate as they were with each other, embracing like this was rare, mainly because neither one ever went away for extended periods of time. And so, Father was made conscious all at once, and for the first time, of several things: of his own diminished size compared to Vincent, of all the rippling muscles in the arms that held him, of the vast and

solid power contained within the burly frame that his own arms encircled. Their embrace was no hasty and perfunctory one, as neither of them was inclined to be hasty and perfunctory, especially in matters of the heart — and so, Father had the time to experience the full impact of Vincent's physical being, his sheer size, solidity and controlled strength. Father had with his eyes observed these things in Vincent — but feeling them physically; that was something else. He was astonished and pleased and greatly disturbed at the same time — and unsure of what these various reactions meant. So much was revealed to him... Overburdened, his mind retreated backward to a time when things had been simpler, to a time when —

"When you were little," Father said, his voice growing tight with emotion. "I never left you. Not once." He felt Vincent's cheek against the top of his head.

"You need not fear leaving me now. Nothing bad will happen. I'm not little anymore, Father."

"No..." Father gave another long squeeze and a long and careful one was returned. "What I'm feeling right now is odd, as though — as though something were leaving me."

Above him Vincent's soft voice peacefully clarified:

"Father, in our world below the streets, we live in an illusion of changelessness. We live surrounded by rock that never moves, is always the same. Nature's state of flux, the changing seasons, are not apparent to us unless we go Above. Without schedules to arrange our daily lives, we wouldn't even know the time of day. It can be tempting to think of everything as constant. But things are not constant, Father. Children grow up, people change — even you. What you are feeling right now is the past — leaving you."

It was more than that, Father suspected, but there wasn't the time to examine everything he felt, so he drew gently apart from his son and picked up the suitcase. He did know, in one sudden flash of insight, that the matter of Vincent's trip with Catherine had dimensions and resonances far beyond his current grasp of the situation.

Through his moment of physical contact with Vincent just now, he had somehow learned that he really didn't know Vincent...

Had he been living an illusion?

He heard Vincent's voice again: "On your journey, Father, keep an open heart as well as an open mind. Let this experience be a renewal for you and a source of strength."

Father stepped into the daylight. "Be sure to tell William if you go Above."

"Yes, Father."

"And be careful."

"Yes."

He started to leave and then turned back. "Oh, and Vincent —" His eyes lovingly roamed the tawny face for a moment more. "I've asked Mary to be sure to give you a good-night kiss."

"Thank you,"

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Father."

He walked away in the sunlight.

* * *

"Vincent — may I come in?" It was Mary's voice, calling from the tunnel.

"Yes." He had been reading in bed. He laid the book down on the quilt as she entered the room.

Mary looked at him and smiled warmly. She wore a shawl around her shoulders and the candlelight flickered against the fine bones of her kindly face. She went over to him and sat on the edge of the bed.

They had known each other for a long time and so were able to be quiet together without awkwardness. Vincent lay on his side propped up on one elbow and he studied his old friend and caretaker, as she musingly plaited the tassels on her shawl.

Presently, she said: "I can't get used to the way it feels without him. Can you?"

"It is strange," Vincent admitted. "I find it hard to focus on anything for very long."

"So do I." She adjusted her shawl and smiled at him fondly. "This is your first night without Father — ever."

Vincent nodded slowly.

"It's a little scary, isn't it? It is for me. Silly, I suppose, but it is. I've known him for almost twenty years. A kinder, more dedicated man simply cannot exist... I do hope this trip turns out to be everything he wants it to be." There was a slight quaver in her voice and her wispy grey hair trembled a little.

Vincent watched her carefully. She was a rather timid person, deeply dependent on Father for her sense of equilibrium.

He told her solicitously: "If you have trouble sleeping or feel frightened you may come here and talk to me, Mary. I don't mind." He sat up, leaned forward and held out his arms. "It wasn't just me that Father was thinking about when he suggested you stop by to tuck me in. Wasn't that clever of him?"

She blinked watery eyes, smiled helplessly, and leaned into his generous hug.

"How are the children?" he asked, as they drew apart.

The subject, as always, brightened her up. "Not a single case of sniffles right now. Of course, that won't last long. Oh, that reminds me; Father said to remind you about some medicated salve you're supposed to —"

"I remembered." Vincent retrieved the tube from the table beside the bed. "But there are a few spots on my back that I can't reach. Would you attend to them for me?"

"Of course."

He pushed the pillows to one side and rolled over and she folded the quilt down to his waist. She pushed up the soft thermal undershirt and found several bald spots about the size of a quarter. They were angry-looking and flaky.

"Is it spreading?" she fretted as she applied the ointment.

"It would seem to be."

"Have you told Father?"

"No. I didn't want him to worry about me. Besides, I doubt it's anything serious."

But he couldn't see the way his back looked. Her lips tightened and a thin line appeared between her eyebrows.

He said: "All the same, it might be wise to wash your hands carefully. I don't know whether it's catching." He tucked a pillow under his head. and she pulled the quilt up around his shoulders and kissed him.

"Good-night, Vincent."

"Good-night, Mary. Will you be all right?"

She gave a soft sigh. "Oh, I expect so." At the tunnel entrance she paused and glanced back at him. From his bed he was still watching her gravely.

He said: "Sleep well. Don't worry about anything."

She left. A few minutes went by and then Vincent grimaced and writhed against the bed as a swarm of tiny itches beset him; after they receded he lay wide-eyed, staring into the nearest candle flame.

A subway rumbled distantly. He stared at the ceiling and then at the rug. After a while he pulled the pillow out from under his head, buried his face in it and inhaled deeply.

It was Father's pillow. He had taken it off Father's bed two hours ago.

* * *

Leaning against the file cabinet and swirling the dregs in his coffee cup, Joe Maxwell chattered amiably in her direction:

"....and that's why I'd like to see more women in the criminal-justice system. They have a remarkably hardline approach and they're causing verdicts and sentences to change all across the country. Women like you *do* make a difference, and are pioneering changes; don't ever doubt it. I like to work with you because you inspire me; yeah, you really do. I know how tough it's been for you. Winning over a jury — heck, that's nothing compared with trying to convince male judges and male defense lawyers that you have a place in the legal world, too. Your determination, your guts, your street-smarts, even your pizzazz all make you a real winner in this line of work. Why, I've seen prosecutors wither and die —"

He rambled on, in one of his pep-talky moods, and Catherine listened politely and flashed an appreciative grin at regular intervals. But as she sat behind her desk supposedly chatting with her boss, her mind was taken up with something else...

Almost a week had gone by since the last time she had seen Vincent and for some reason she was growing uneasy. It was not unusual for this much time to pass between visits; she had demanding friends and he had Topside contacts to keep up with. But for some reason this time she was feeling edgy. Especially today. She kept thinking about Vincent with a kind of general, festering worry.... Her eyes, moving to the wall clock, noted that it was just precisely lunch hour.

"— and you haven't heard a word I've said," Joe finished up, and he grinned, forgiving her instantly as he always did. "Look, uh, Radcliffe — why don't you go out for lunch today. Get away from this place—"

"Good idea! See you later, Joe." Leaping up, she grabbed her jacket and purse and rushed past him.

He stared blankly as she fled down the corridor.

"Gee — thanks anyway, Radcliffe. Kind of busy.... Y'know? Maybe I could join you some other time...?" he mouthed as the door slammed behind her.

Ducking beneath the portcullis, she hurried down the tunnel, wishing she hadn't put on heels today.... Vincent wouldn't be expecting her at this hour. She hoped he was all right. Probably, he was just upset about something and this message had somehow filtered up to her through the ever-strengthening and always unpredictable linkage of their bond. If he were sick or hurt she would have been notified. Father always sent a note up by courier and in one serious case had come up to fetch her personally.

She was almost there before she saw Vincent moving slowly toward her in the tunnel ahead. But before he had come close enough to resolve out of form and into features his big shadowy shape came to a standstill and he leaned back against the tunnel wall and waited.

Something was wrong...

"Vincent.... Vincent?" Something in his bearing made her stop a short distance from him. His face was in deep shadow. Pressed against the wall he seemed to be pulling himself away from her. Then his voice came to her in a tortured whisper.

"Don't touch me, Catherine. What I have may be contagious."

She stepped closer anxiously. "What you have? Are you sick?"

"I am — afflicted..."

He moved into the light and she stared at him with consternation.

Something was clearly tormenting him. He was pale and drawn, as though he hadn't slept in days, and in his eyes a feverish gleam of frantic desperation jarred her as she met his gaze. He seemed to be gritting his teeth. She had never seen him look like this.

"What is it, Vincent? Are you in pain?"

"Not pain..." He squirmed in an odd way against the wall, laid his head back suddenly and exhaled as though he had been holding his breath for hours. She could feel his enormous tension.

Forgetting, she reached out and he drew sharply away from her.

"Vincent — please. Tell me what's wrong. I've been feeling that some-thing was wrong. That's why I'm here. Something in our bond told me."

His eyes softened briefly, but the desperation instantly returned. He murmured: "Let's go down to my room."

She followed him, perplexed and deeply worried, missing the warm, fuzzy grasp of his fingers around hers.

When they reached his room he gazed at her apprehensively for a moment and then unfastened his cloak and dropped it on the bed. Then he stripped off his tunic and shirt.

She stared with horror at what this revealed.

His shoulders, chest and midriff were covered with ugly lesions — some as big as the palm of her hand — where the fur had fallen completely out and the flesh was raw and inflamed. Big naked circular scaly patches.... It was a gruesome sight...

"Vincent! How did you get like this? What does Father—"

"He's not here. He's gone to a symposium — remember?"

Never happy about exposure, he quickly pulled his shirt back on and reached for his tunic. He said: "He gave me some medication before he left. But it hasn't helped. And this condition — whatever it is — is spreading like wildfire all over my body. The itching is unbearable and I can't sleep at night. And scratching only makes it worse. Catherine, I'm about to lose my mind."

She said fiercely: "Well, something has to be done. It looks to me like some of those spots are oozing—you could get a terrible infection."

He shook his head abjectly. "I don't know what to do."

All of a sudden it came to her. "I know what you should do! You should go to Elizabeth Sprague!"

He stared. "Liz Sprague..."

"Yes! Yes!"

"Father is coming home tomorrow morning."

"I don't *care*, Vincent. This can't wait. You're in terrible shape. Don't let it wait. Go see her tonight. She might know what this is."

"Father left me in charge. I suppose I could leave William in charge..."

"Of course you can," she urged him: "Please, Vincent. Please go see her tonight."

He seemed relieved, as though he had needed her to make this decision for him. "All right. I'll go."

* * *

Liz Sprague sat in a lounge chair on the spacious terrace of her dwelling, which happened to be the one-and-only penthouse apartment of the twenty storey complex known as Skyview. The vista promised by this appellation was nothing more than a distant clutter of center-city skyscrapers, which were at best jaundiced by a heavy tinge of pollution, at worst completely obscured from sight (or perhaps that was 'at best?'). What she liked about her location was its privacy. She could sit and read on her terrace without the feeling of eyes watching from hundreds of neighboring windows; nobody could see onto her terrace without the aid, at least, of a powerful astronomical telescope. Not that anyone would find the perambulations of a bony, granite-faced, borderline-elderly woman very interesting... But still, she liked the privacy. She liked the distance.

It had been an interesting day.

She had spent it communing with the electron microscope on campus after bumping an indignant graduate student.

First she had inoculated a culture dish with a few cubic centimeters of blood from a certain sample she had swiped from the laboratory of Professor Edward Hughes. Then she introduced the chemicals necessary to stimulate division of the white blood cells. Then she added chemicals which caused the chromosomes to swell, and stopped the process of division at a stage when the chromosomes would be most easily distinguishable from one another. At this point she broke open the cells under the microscope and examined the chromosomes, then she photographed the chaotic array. Bumping another indignant grad student from the laboratory darkroom, she developed and printed an enlargement of the photograph, cut out the individual chromosomes with sharp scissors, and lined them up in matching pairs to form a *karyotype*.

She then scotch-taped the neat little rows of cut-outs onto another sheet of the university's expensive photographic paper.

It now resided on the door of her refrigerator, held in place by a ladybug magnet.

Its message was very much on her mind...

For the moment shifting her thoughts into neutral, she moved the unread book and the cushion she had been using for its prop off her lap and stacked them on the round patio table. Rising, she thrust her hands deep into the pockets of corduroy slacks and roamed the perimeters of the terrace. She could not see over the immediate edge because the shoulder-high walls had been constructed to serve as wide planting boxes for dwarf trees and other small shrubberies, all of which had died of some sort of plant anemia shortly after she moved in. Not having a green thumb, she had never bothered to plant anything else. Still, when she peered across the fragile weeds growing in the hard-packed dirt, she was reminded of how relentlessly nature sought to infuse even the most barren places with life.... And of how, sometimes, places inside her which she had thought long dead would call out with tiny echoes, before withering once more into stillness...

She had foolishly invested too much of herself in a certain strange new furry charge...

Books and journals had made a poor substitute for a daily fare of living things, and after five years of deprivation she had allowed herself to become overly excited by the prospect of caring for, taming, studying and learning to communicate with this unique creature she had tagged Honeylocks. The unexpected outcome — discovering his humanity and releasing him — had left her painfully floundering. But to her really intense dismay, much of that pain and sense of loss went beyond a matter of wrecked plans.

His case was a fascinating one — the scientific challenge of a lifetime. But even when she buried herself in conjecture and hypothesis her mind inevitably would boomerang back to waking up in the semi-darkness and finding his head in her lap.

She missed him.

It was soon too dark to keep reading on the terrace so she went inside, prepared and ate a light supper in the company, as usual, of books and journals. There was just enough room at the kitchen table for her solitary place setting. She had closed but not locked the sliding

plate-glass door between the kitchen and the terrace. That had been another selling point when she first considered this apartment; she liked well-lit rooms.

Beyond the huge expanse of glass now lay a pall of blackness and the glass was a mirror image of the kitchen and herself. Her reflection moved as she rose from the table to clear it — And then suddenly something was wrong.

From the corner of her eye she thought she saw a movement in the glass that was not part of her own reflection.

Stopping in the middle of the kitchen she stared fixedly toward the source of this impression, but there was nothing more to be seen. What had she seen? Had she seen *anything*?

Her heart seemed to detach and sink coldly through her body.

Along with this sensation came the horrid, crawly feeling that if she moved even the tiniest fraction of an inch every evil spirit in creation would instantly take notice...

This is all psychological, you ass. You feel bereft because you had to let Vincent go and so now your senses are building monsters into the shadows, so that you'll really have something to worry about. So just get hold of yourself—

Whatever was out there, It could clearly see her as she stood in the full glare of light. The sliding glass door was unlocked. Whatever it was would see her start to move toward the door to lock it.... Whoever, or whatever it was, could be standing right on the other side, closer to it than she was now, and so would be able to get inside before she could throw the lock. Whoever or whatever it was would see her if she attempted to call building security...

In spite of all the pleading of her better sense her hands grew clammy and her breath grew short. She had never called security in a frightened-old-lady attack. She'd be damned if she would— From the terrace came a low, menacing snarl.

She recognized it instantly.

Vincent!!!

How did he get out there? How did he get up here?

Why was he snarling? Her veins turned to rivers of ice.

Suddenly there was a crash — the rather tinny sound that might have been made by somebody falling over the aluminum patio furniture — and then another crash, and more snarling that sounded exactly like, and had to be, Vincent.

There was some kind of violent scuffle going on out there.

Breaking out of her rigidity she dashed to the wall switch and threw on the terrace lights.

It was Vincent. The light, coming from only two working bulbs out of an original set of six, was not very good, but she recognized the shaggy hair and black cloak as he lurched toward the far side of the terrace — apparently locked in mortal combat with something-or-somebody else. The two grappling figures turned and she saw that Vincent was struggling with a man dressed in black leather — a man who was every bit as tall and muscular as Vincent and who was also brandishing a knife with a wicked curved blade. They fell apart and the man struck out at Vincent savagely. Vincent leaped backward with a snarl and the man stabbed toward him again, lightning fast and obviously well-schooled in his art...

Snatching up a heavy kitchen spoon, Liz hammered loudly on the glass. This momentary distraction of his opponent gave Vincent the edge he needed and he grabbed the man's fighting arm and gave it a wrench that dragged a scream from his victim. But the knife remained securely in the other's grip.

The stranger backed away, coming toward Liz and dragging Vincent with him.

My God, what a brawny son-of-a-bitch. How on EARTH did they get up here?

All of a sudden, she realized what was going to happen and she hastily retreated to the farthest wall of the room.

In the next instant, Vincent and the stranger crashed against the plate glass, shattering it into a tympanic explosion of flying shards. Locked together, they fell inward and rolled on the floor amid the still raining splinters and pieces. There was one last loud smash as the uppermost piece of broken pane gave up its tenuous hold and dropped out of the moulding strip, narrowly missing Vincent's thrashing feet.

Then Liz saw that the man beneath Vincent wore a stocking pulled down over his face. Her heart gave a sickening squeeze...

In the strong light of the kitchen, this man saw Vincent clearly for the first time. He gave a terrified scream, wrenched himself free and leaped to his feet with the agility of a Ninja. He tore outside with Vincent close behind and Liz dimly saw him vault in one frenzied motion up to the top of the planter-box wall.

In a horrified reflex her eyes winced shut and stayed shut for the next few ghastly seconds. There was no further sound.

She opened her eyes. There was one large dark shape perched on top of the wall, indistinct through the poor light. Her legs were rubbery, as she pushed herself away from the kitchen wall and took a few steps forward, crunching over mounds of broken glass.

It was Vincent.

Stepping through the empty door frame she went over to him, her muscles already recovering their tone and coordination. The danger, obviously, was past and the thought of her would-be burglar/assailant's remains lying twenty stories below, although not appetizing, did not cause her the slightest regret. She had lived in or near New York City all her life; she was tough and resilient. As well as thoroughly cold-hearted...

"He went over, didn't he? Well, good riddance to bad rubbish."

In the semi-dark Vincent's expression was not discernible, but he was breathing hard and his panting held a slight chesty rumble. He was still aroused, still in a fighting state. His legs were dangling as he sat there leaning toward the edge. She touched his knee and he flinched violently. She backed away.

Once again, she felt comfortable with him, entirely familiar with his reactions and needs. This pattern of behavior, too, was one she knew well.

"Vincent?" She waited and then repeated his name again, gently. He turned toward her and the sound of his breathing changed. His defensive rage had subsided and he could be approached now.

"Vincent, are you all right?" Reaching up she touched his hand and her own hand came away sticky. "You're bleeding! Get down from there. Come inside!"

She seized his arm and tugged, to her great surprise unseating him. He landed on his feet rather clumsily and let himself be led across the terrace and into the kitchen. She pushed him into a chair beside the table and he sat there silent and dazed, bleeding copiously from multiple gashes in both hands and one forearm.

She pushed up his sleeves. "Oh, my God, you're a mess. Oh, *shit* ..."

Broken glass crunched and snapped underfoot, as she yanked open a drawer and grabbed three clean dishtowels. Hastily, she wrapped one around his left hand, the other around his right hand and the third one around his badly gashed right forearm. Then she placed his right hand on top of his left hand and told him to bear down. Then she rushed into her storage/lab room and fetched her suturing kit, antiseptics, bandaging material, a syringe and a local anesthetic.

"By the way, hello," she said grimly, as she dumped this collection onto the kitchen table and cleared a working space.

He replied in a voice understandably tight with stress: "Hello, Liz." Then he said: "I'm sorry about the door—"

"Well, let's just say it went in a good cause and let it go at that, Vincent. Besides, it had the last word, if I'm to judge from the number of stitches you're going to need." He was very pale. His head drooped a little. The dishtowels were turning bright red.

"Hold your breath. This will hurt a bit."

He rigidly endured an injection of local anesthetic into each arm and then released his breath in a gust.

She asked: "How did you get up here?" She got out nylon suturing thread and organized her equipment. It would be a few minutes before the anesthetic took full effect.

Sitting there leaning on the table he was rigid with tension and pain, but he managed to smile at her a little and his eyes glimmered with their usual gentle expression, as he blinked at her through disheveled locks of hair. Reaching over, she pushed the hair out of his eyes and he smiled again.

He replied: "The same way your intruder did, I suppose. There's a service stairs with roof access."

"I know the one you mean, but it's been locked up tight for years."

"The locking mechanism is broken. Your intruder was slipping his fingers into the crack of the sliding door, just as I was getting ready to drop down onto the terrace from the roof. He must have arrived just ahead of me. He was looking right at you. I do believe he meant you harm."

"Probably sent by Hughes and Gould in retaliation for my carelessness with *you*," she snorted and then said: "I'm only kidding. They wouldn't have the money, to hire a kid to soap windows."

Actually, she was shuddering inside, but she did not allow it to show. Reaction was beginning to set in and her legs were weakening again, and her mouth was going dry. She feared that her hands might tremble visibly as she worked on him - and that would never do. She forced herself to concentrate on breathing deeply and evenly.

"I had hoped merely to frighten him away," Vincent added. "But after I snarled at him, he attacked me."

"Just as well," she said tersely, examining his right hand after removing the bloodstained towel. "Now he'll never attack anybody again. Good thing you showed up when you did."

She would have to clip some of the fur. The lacerations were all dorsal, across the proximal and median phalanges, but fortunately no tendons had been severed. Here, the unusual thickness of his fingers had saved him from grievous injury. Unlike the human hand, his fingers had muscles on the dorsal surfaces beyond the first row of knuckles. These extra muscles served him well. They added to his ability to weld his fingers together into a solid, cuplike formation so that he could do fantastic amounts of damage with a single rake of his claws — and without tearing his fingers off in the process.

Each cut would require a number of stitches to close. The arm wound, she supposed, had been delivered by the knife.

She cleaned up his right hand with the antiseptics, clipped back the fur and applied herself to the suturing. Her impulse was to talk to him soothingly — but that would have meant resorting to endearments, and she did not use endearments on people. So she worked in grim silence.

After a few minutes a warm weight came gently down on top of her shoulder. It was his forehead. He was leaning against her and his sweet-smelling hair lay against her cheek.

She muttered: "Are you feeling faint, Vincent?"

"Yes." He added: "I hope you don't mind if I lean on you this way."

"Not in the least."

Since she was right-handed and he was sitting on her left it didn't really interfere with her movements — but it did strange things to her inside. So after she had bandaged his right hand and was ready to tackle the arm wound she suggested: "Tell you what — let's move this operation to the guestroom. Then you can lie down."

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't watch, but I can't help it."

"What. you need is a ceiling to stare at."

In the guestroom, she pulled his boots off and he lay down gratefully on top of the chenille spread and stared obediently straight upward while she finished her slow and meticulous suturing. When the job was done, there were blood and antiseptic stains on the front of his tunic and his wounds had been closed with a total of thirty-eight stitches. His hands were bandaged up mitten-style and his right forearm was snugly wrapped in gauze.

Vincent had not been talkative either, breaking the silence only with an occasional deep sigh. He seemed vastly relieved when it was all over.

She pushed back her bedside chair and stood up. "I'm afraid I haven't much in the way of analgesics," she apologized, picking the fur clippings off him and disposing of them in the wastebasket. "Can you take aspirin?"

"No —"

"Tylenol?"

"Yes, but they make me very drowsy."

"Just as well. You're staying right here tonight anyway."

"It looks as though I will have to," Vincent mused. "With my hands and claws useless like this I have no defense.... I hope it will not be an imposition."

"You're always welcome here, Vincent."

"Thank you, Liz. You are so comforting to me."

It was an interesting statement.

She said flatly: "I always get along well with fur-bearing creatures."

"Liz—" She gazed into troubled eyes. He said: "I have another problem.... The reason why I came to see you."

"And what is that?"

Sitting up, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and leaned forward. "I shall have to ask you to undress me," he requested softly.

She complied and his tunic and shirt came off and were draped over the footboard. With the exception of a thoughtful scowl, she did not react to the deplorable condition of his upper body. As she studied him, he looked away from her and lowered his head in an oddly contrite gesture.

"I think I know what your problem is," she stated. "And I think we can fix you up before you have to wear a tungsten-wire whole-body toupee." She lifted his hair and inspected his back. "That's a fungus infection, very common to fur-bearing creatures. And I believe I know precisely which one, but we'll check to be sure and then we'll get you started on treatment. Stay here. I'll be right back."

In the bathroom, she sterilized a razor blade and fetched a pair of clean slide mounts from the closet which contained, along with her meager supply of toiletries, a vast assortment of animal medicines and medical tools, still undisposed-of after five years of retirement. If she had kept her black light unit she could have used that as her diagnostic tool — for she suspected that his trouble spots would fluoresce bright green.... But she had given that away, so the microscope would have to do.

Returning to him, she took a careful scraping from one of the flaky lesions. "Itch like fury, don't they," she remarked compassionately, and he nodded.

The microscope confirmed her suspicion. *Tinea*. An old, old acquaintance.

Ordinarily, she would have treated a case this bad with griseofulvin tablets, but a strong hunch told her that in Vincent's case the powder would suffice.

When she returned to the guestroom she found that he had left the bed and was inspecting the titles of the books in the bookcase on the opposite wall.

"Come over here," she commanded. "Sit down."

He did so meekly.

She showed him a plastic can of medicated -powder. "See this? It's called Tinactin, and it's available in any drugstore. Next time you get a tiny itchy bald spot in your pelt use this stuff right away. Don't let things get this bad."

"Father was wrong, then."

"Oh — did he prescribe something else?"

"A cortisone cream."

She rolled her eyes. "Lie down," she said. "You have to be dusted on each side three times a day until all your fur has grown back."

He stretched out face down and she, pushed his hair aside, dusted the lesions on his back and rubbed the powder in with firm, no-nonsense motions. He was big and broad and powerful, and as her fingers connected with this area of solid muscle she experienced a relaxing satisfaction. This was the sort of thing she liked to do with her hands. Even the suturing had been a treat after so long.... She felt perversely grateful to the tiny fungal spore that had originally penetrated his fur, and even to the unknown intruder whose body would not be discovered, on that side of the building, until morning. Oh, God — *that...*

"Remind me I have to make a phone call," she muttered.

Vincent said: "I see you have Kundy's 'Mathematical Models'. That's one of Father's favorite books."

"That so?"

"Yes. He's been attempting to construct an encyclopedia of mathematical forms as a resource for the children where I live."

"Sounds like quite a project."

"Do you like mathematics too?"

"Love it. Unlike most of my sex, I happen to have been born with a fully functional left hemisphere. I've always been good at logic and math. Medicine, of course, is my first great love, but it is an inexact science. Mathematics is an exact one. So that's where the attraction lies for me."

"How remarkable! That's exactly what Father says."

"Is it?"

"Yes. I wish he could meet you. Your opinion of his project would be valuable to him."

"I doubt it. Roll over, Vincent."

He adjusted his position and lay gazing placidly at her, holding his bandaged hands away from his sides.

"I'm afraid your bedspread will suffer," he worried suddenly.

"Washable." She tapped a liberal quantity of powder into each ugly sore and rubbed it in.

"Father read your first book out loud to me when I was a boy," Vincent told her. "Because of you, we were able to go on wonderful safaris together."

"I suppose you ought to call him and let him know where you are —"

"Call him? You mean on the telephone?"

She looked at him oddly. "Of course I mean on the telephone."

"We have no telephones where I live. But there is a way to get a message to him." He explained and Liz stared at him, thunderstruck, and retorted: "Wha-a-t?"

Vincent smiled humoringly. "I know it sounds strange. But if you drop it down there tonight our gleaners will find it before Father gets home in the morning."

She had treated all the spots above his waistline.

"Where else have you got it?" she questioned in an austere tone and his eyes filled with a look of embarrassment which she promptly and somewhat callously ignored. Pulling open the flap on his pants she treated another cluster of hideous sores while he stared resolutely at the ceiling. Then she quickly covered him up again.

"Thank you, Liz."

"Is it on your legs yet?"

"No."

She set the can down on the bedside table. "All right," she declared. "I'm going to wash my hands now and put your tunic through a wash. Then I'll get some notepaper and we'll write us a message to your father."

Dear Father,

Liz Sprague is writing this for me because both my hands are quite thickly bandaged. I had a slight accident (nothing serious) this evening and she is caring for me at her apartment at 1660 Garland Ave. Please do not worry. It will not be safe for me to attempt to come home until she has taken out my stitches and reduced my dressings, so that I could use my claws if I had to.

I hope your symposium was a delight and that the whole experience has reminded you of the words of D.H. Lawrence: 'Life is ours to be spent, not to be saved'...

Liz requests that you feel free to stop in.

Please kiss Mary good-night for me.

Love,

Vincent

P.S. If you do decide to visit would you bring my toothbrush and a change of clothes?

Not quite believing what she was about to do Liz stood on the curb several yards from the garage entrance to Skyview. She peered through the mist-shrouded pools of light from the streetlamps, checking in all directions to see if anyone appeared to be watching. Then she stooped and slipped the tightly capped bottle containing the note into the storm drain at her feet.

It was almost nine o'clock. Back in her kitchen, she scanned the yellow pages and called up Brockman's Home and Building Center. Good — they were still open. As she waited for the girl who answered to connect her with the manager, she lit a cigarette and shivered in the cold raw draft that flowed in through the empty gaping door frame. Spring hadn't managed to achieve a believable toehold yet...

"Hello. Are you the manager? Good. This is Elizabeth Sprague on Garland Avenue. Yes. Yes — that's right; the same. Yes, I wrote 'A Habit of Creature'.... Listen, I need a favor. I need a plate glass door replaced and I need it done immediately. Tomorrow morning as soon as you open. I will pay you triple the price — cash — if you'll come tomorrow morning. I'm scheduled for a video-tape interview and I just can't have this door standing here broken. Do you understand? I just can't have it. So — get it out of the warehouse now. I told you I'd pay triple. How often do you get an offer like that? *Cash*. That's right.

Measurements? I don't know and I don't intend to bother measuring it. It's a Collegiate — stupid name.... So, how many sizes can they possibly come in? Just load one of each size you have onto your truck. No, I don't mind if you come personally. Of course I'll autograph your copy. Be here first thing in the morning."

After hanging up, she went in to Vincent. He was lying on his side with one of her books open on the bed, and he was even managing, with enormous patience, to turn the pages.

"You don't have to stay in here, you know. You're welcome to wander around."

He explained shyly: "I don't feel that it would be very good manners to wander around half-dressed."

"The hell with manners," she declared. "But I don't want you to be cold. Sit up and I'll help you get your shirt back on."

As she did this she explained: "On the other hand, you may have to spend some time in here tomorrow. Some men will arrive to replace the door first thing and I expect that eventually the police will work their way up here to ask questions. I'll have to let them ask and check their little notebooks a few dozen times and then I'll send them on their way. So don't you worry about a thing. By the way, have you had your dinner?"

"Oh yes, Liz. Before I came. Thank you."

"Not a bit hungry?"

"Not a bit, thank you."

She lifted his gorgeous hair out of the collar and fanned it out across his back. "Couldn't even manage a glass of milk and a slice of cake?" she interrogated sternly. Stepping back she folded her hands across the front of her slacks, affecting her most intimidating look.

"Well;..."

"Good. I'll bring it in. It's too cold in the kitchen, anyway."

She brought him a glass of milk, two Tylenol tablets, and a slice of zoo cake. He was able to manage the glass of milk but when he began to paw clumsily at the cake she said: "Wait. Here — open up."

Breaking off a bite-sized piece she held it out to him and then popped it into his mouth between his gleaming white fangs.

She said dryly: "When I first met you, Vincent, I really didn't expect to have you eating out of my hand this soon."

He studied her thoughtfully and observed: "There are times when I can sense that you are smiling inside, Liz. You are right now."

"Take your Tylenol," she said gruffly.

"This cake — it's very good. What is it?"

"Zoo cake."

"Zoo cake? Something they sell to the public at zoos?"

"No. Something they feed to the animals at zoos."

His eyes widened abruptly and as she offered him the last piece, he turned his head away like a baby refusing his Pablum, then gave her a deeply aggrieved sideways glance.

A chuckle escaped her. "It's all right, Vincent. The keepers munch on it all the time — but only when the vending machines run out of Twinkies. I'm afraid that, like so many things that are very, very good for you, it doesn't have much taste."

He said hesitantly: "Well — I find it quite tasty..."

She continued to hold out the remaining morsel. "Then you'll finish this up?"

His pride did brief and feeble battle. "Yes."

The Tylenol took effect immediately. She could almost see the lethargy creep through his system, but before it got too firm a hold, she made him push down the covers and crawl between the sheets.

"I've never slept away from home before," he murmured, gazing at her blearily from heavy-lidded eyes. "I'm so glad you are my friend, Liz..."

"Good-night, Vincent." She picked up the empty milk glass and turned toward the door but his soft voice detained her.

"Don't go."

She put down the glass and stood beside the bed looking down at him. He continued to gaze up at her and two tiny points of light glimmered from the deep shadows around his eyes. As she watched, she could feel the gradual slackening of all his senses and what remained was a need, in him, to share a quiet moment with her as he floated on the edge of sleep...

It was trust.

This came through to her — and bounced off her impregnable heart straight into its proper and acceptable perspective. He was a big, powerful, fur-covered creature who had come to her for help, and she could permit herself to be special to him for that reason.

"Never slept away from home..." he whispered again. She sat down in the chair, watching him, and one of his hands slid toward her a little. He said again, inexplicably: "You comfort me."

"And why is that?"

He sighed deeply.

She switched off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into a darkness cut thinly by a path of light from the hall.

"Liz..."

"What is it?"

There was a long silence. "Oh — never mind..."

She stood up and leaned over him in the dark, her face close to his. His bandaged hands lifted slightly toward her and then retreated.

"What is it?" she repeated.

He murmured hesitantly: "Where I live.... Somebody always kisses me goodnight..."

She didn't kiss people.

For that matter, she didn't kiss fur-bearing creatures, either.

Inside her a chain-reaction of gentle damage occurred...

Bending down, she pressed her lips against his forehead and accepted the brief embrace of his arms. Then, in a state of shock she turned to leave the room.

"Don't go yet—"

She said sternly: "If you don't go to sleep, Vincent, I shall have to bring you some blocks and test your intelligence."

"Oh yes," Vincent mumbled. "See if I ignore them.... Try to eat them.... Bang them on the bars.... Throw them at my keepers..." His breathing deepened. He whispered: "Catherine.... Catherine..."

At last he was asleep.

From the doorway, Liz looked back at him again. The shaft of light from the hall reached the bed and crossed his motionless, bulky form.

She murmured: "Good-night, Honeylocks."

Father had arranged things so that he would travel home late at night and arrive Below very early in the morning. He found Vincent's message waiting for him and despite its placating tone he felt greatly alarmed. After hastily stowing his suitcase and briefcase full of lecture notes, and fetching the things Vincent wanted, he promptly turned around and climbed back Above. He diverted his route to the south-east exit in Section D, and from the closest street he flagged a taxi.

It was no wonder Vincent did not dare try to come home while his hands were bandaged. There was quite a bit of overland travel between the Section D exit and Garland Avenue which meant that Vincent would have to navigate a whole maze of alleys and back lots.

In the opulent lobby of the Skyview, Father waited impatiently, leaning on his cane, while the receptionist phoned Sprague.

Having just spent a dizzying week in the company of prominent academics and eminent intellectuals from all over the world — and having managed, somehow, to engage in conversation with every guest speaker at some point during the event — he would have thought himself quite jaded. But as he faced the door of Sprague's penthouse apartment, his nerves sang out in a quick trill of anticipation.

The New York Times blurb on the dust jacket of his edition of 'A Habit of Creature' ran through his mind:

"The force and clarity of her writing is nothing short of astounding. Through flawless literary control she evokes the nature, personalities and intrinsic beauty of animals from the whole spectrum of wild life."

Both her success and her solitude were to be marveled at. Her books had conquered two markets: scholarly and popular, and to the general public her name was a household word. Yet she had always, remarkably, kept a strict distance from the rest of humanity, cloistering herself instead with her animal work. Her books reflected her seemingly endless knowledge, and yet her personality, he recalled from a magazine article, had once inspired a cartoonist to depict her nonchalantly running down a colleague with her car — on which a bumper sticker declared I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS.

Hastily, Father straightened his tie and inspected his travel-worn suit for glaring flaws. His pant legs did look awfully limp. He ran a hand across his thinning hair and then rang the doorbell. His grip tightened spasmodically on the cane as he waited.

The door opened and he found himself looking — up — at Elizabeth Sprague.

"I'm — I'm Jacob Wells." he stammered.

She was taller than he was.

She said nothing, but merely stepped aside so he could enter.

The silence was totally unnerving to Father, and after he had entered and she had closed the door behind him, he simply froze. As though searching desperately for inspiration, he stared down at the lush blue carpet and then raised his eyes again and stared at her. She had quite broad shoulders and a long, rangy frame, which was clothed in a black sweater and a grey wool skirt, and her hair, piled on top of her head, was rich in silvery touches. But she could not be looked at comfortably for very long because her direct, unwavering gaze met his interested one with something very close to stark belligerence...

One by one, Father's social graces lapsed into comas. He had never felt so completely intimidated in his life.

Suddenly, she spoke to him in a low voice: "I'll show you where Vincent is. He's still asleep."

She turned away and he followed her.

In the guestroom bed Vincent lay face down with his head turned to one side and one arm bent so that the hand was up near his face. The leg on that side was slightly drawn up. It had been his favorite sleeping position since infancy. Father approached him and laid the bundle of clothes on the nearby chair. Bending over Vincent, he noticed the thickly bandaged hand and he listened to the deep, regular breathing and looked carefully at Vincent's face. Then he stroked the wavy, fanned-out hair and kissed Vincent's temple. Staying that way a moment longer, he then pressed his cheek against Vincent's forehead. Vincent did not stir.

In a low voice Father said: "His temperature is slightly elevated."

In a low voice Elizabeth Sprague responded: "I know."

"What happened?" Father asked. He glanced at her.

She was leaning against the door jamb, her arms folded and her face impassive as she observed the two of them.

She said very quietly: "Don't you think we should talk somewhere else? He seems to need sleep."

Father straightened up. "It's all right," he said in a normal tone. "He's quite oblivious — and he may not wake up for a couple of hours more. He does this sometimes — usually when he's been hurt. It seems to be some sort of a healing trance." He repeated: "What happened?"

She said: "He went through a plate glass door."

Father felt himself subjected to intense scrutiny. He also began to suspect that if he were going to get any further information, he would have to pry it out of this strange brittle woman.

But she spoke again. "There's something else you should see if you're certain it won't wake him up." She dictated: "Push down the covers and pull up his shirt." Puzzled, Father did so and nearly recoiled in horror. Silently, he stared down at the terrible lesions which now, caked with the white powder, looked more ominous than ever.

"What is it?" he found himself asking faintly.

"A fungus infection very common to fur-bearing creatures. *Tinea*, to be exact," she explained as though to a backward child.

Father readjusted Vincent's shirt and covered him up. There was a burning sensation in his cheeks and neck and he recognized the slowly tightening stranglehold of embarrassment... After thirty-five years of exclusive practice in the World Below, he was unaccustomed to being embarrassed by a colleague — even if it were only a vet. Only a vet... He could imagine how she'd react to that thought!

She said: "He heals very fast, doesn't he? And is inclined toward abscesses."

"Yes — how do you know that? Did he tell you?"

"He doesn't have to. It's typical of *Felidae*."

"*Felidae* - the big cat family?" Father drew himself up, suddenly angry. "Vincent is *not* a cat!"

Her face remained impassive and her eyes cold. "If you could allow yourself to think of him as one every now and then, you would be able to diagnose his ailments *correctly*," she replied.

Father absorbed this barb in silence, his jaw tightly clamped.

"Did it occur to you to take a scraping?" she pressed. "You do own a microscope, don't you?"

She might as well have accused him of being a total philistine.

He retorted indignantly, "Of course I have a microscope. Several, in fact."

She nodded with exaggerated approval. "Good, Jacob Wells, Good. Next time use one. And always suspect *Tinea* when your fur-covered friends develop an itchy bald spot."

Father resented the way she kept harping on Vincent's fur. "Vincent is not an animal," he snapped.

"And he's not a man, is he? He's something else, it would seem. And if we are to be able to help him, we must not ignore what he appears, at least partially, to be. I've had a close look, and it's quite apparent to me that his basic physiology is largely big cat."

"Oh, please."

"How can you be blind to it? Look at him! Consider his traits one by one and what do they stack up to? He's a fur-covered cat-like carnivore that evolution somehow merged with the primate form." She paused and then, pressed by a deep streak of sheer cussedness, she went on: "Do you know that he has the vomeronasal organ in the roof of his mouth?"

Father gritted his teeth. Nonetheless he confessed: "No. I didn't know."

"You've never noticed that Vincent opens his mouth when he wants to get a good whiff of something?"

"No. I've never noticed."

"And I suppose nothing is suggested by the fact that his hyoid bone is partially cartilage, or that he has only four toes on his feet, or that he's nocturnal. Am I right to assume that he likes to roam about at night and sleep all morning? Thought so. And I suppose you've never thought much about the structure of his ears and eyes and the fact that he can navigate better than any person you've ever—"

"I *have* noticed that," Father put in desperately.

"Iron salts in the brain," she explained. "They act as a geomagnetic compass."

Father lifted his hand, silently begging for a reprieve. He wished he'd never come. He had not been prepared for this. Thoroughly ill at ease, he was now furious, as well — furious at her presumption, her audacity. And yet on some fundamental level, she was reaching him. He didn't like that, either. Perhaps there were things about Vincent that he should look at more closely and ponder more carefully, but he would do so in his own good time. He was not about to be rushed. And he certainly did not need her help.

He said: "I have my own theory about Vincent."

"And what is that?"

"I found him abandoned outside St Vincent's hospital when he was newborn. I have always believed he was an accident — some sort of genetics experiment gone wrong, perhaps. Naturally, I've never discussed this with him and I don't think —"

She interrupted with a snort of derision. "And you call yourself a medical man? For God's sake, have another look, *Dr Wells*. Vincent is no accident. His genetic legacy is one of pattern and purpose. I really have to wonder why that isn't obvious to you."

"I think it's presumptuous and dangerous to probe into Vincent's origin," Father contended irately.

"Try *necessary*."

He eyed her narrowly, suddenly very alert... "Why do you say that?"

There was a long silence and for the first time, her steady gaze flickered and she seemed to regret having blurted out that last statement. Her eyes traveled to Vincent and Father thought he detected a softening in her face. Finding this interesting, he watched her closely.

Finally she said: "I think I've pieced together some of Vincent's story. But I'm not ready to tell it yet."

"You're still studying him."

"Yes."

Father stared down at his son again and murmured; "He's very fond of you."

"He's very cooperative," she corrected automatically and as Father laid a hand on Vincent's forehead she remarked: "If the fever hasn't subsided in an hour I'll give him a broad-spectrum antibiotic."

Father questioned: "You have antibiotics here?"

It was her turn to look offended. "Quite a supply," she pointed out.

"Good. He tolerates them all fairly well."

For the first time, Father began to relax a little. Some of the tension had evaporated, although he could still feel her implacable scrutiny and he was still smarting from the acid bath of her professional disapproval a moment ago...

Bending over Vincent again, he stroked the shaggy head and tenderly touched the bandaged hand. He gazed down at his son for a long time and then gave him another kiss.

From her post at the door, Liz watched this with reluctant fascination. Here was an anomaly more disquieting than the karyotype on the refrigerator door. She had never seen any man display such tenderness and the sight threw her into turmoil. Her invariably low opinion of the male sex — heavily laminated on all sides with contempt — could not simply and suddenly be raised a notch based on what she was seeing now. Not even one tiny notch. It might, she reflected, throw her psyche into anaphylactic shock. She was experienced - hardened and obdurate, and she knew what she knew. Men were callous imbeciles. Men were a preening bunch of narcissists, ruled by grandiose illusions and ruined by their gonads. In her informed and inflexible opinion, all of the men in the world, lumped together, had all of the intellectual content, charm, wisdom and grace of a bran flake. They were inferior genetically, even — the male chromosome was a puny travesty next to the robust female chromosome. Men were rubbish ...

"-- and I've always loved your books."

Skillfully, she managed to suppress a violent start. Jacob Wells was standing before her quite close, leaning on his cane and regarding her with friendly eyes. She could see that his fine brown hair was thinning on top and running to grey and that the skin of his face had an unusually creamy, fragile appearance and was pink along his cheekbones.

His clear, restless eyes held a gleam of emotion as he said, "I'm glad to have had this chance to meet you and to thank you, personally, for saving Vincent's life a few weeks ago. He would not have lasted long behind bars. I will always be grateful to you for your quick-thinking and your kindness. And so — again, thank you. With all my heart."

She said: "I'll show you out."

At the kitchen table, Liz savored a mid-morning cup of coffee and re-read yesterday's mail. Usually, it got little more than a cursory glance, but occasionally it got a second cursory glance. This batch was the usual assortment of demands, announcements and ingratiating requests: an obscure Midwestern zoo had named her honorary chairman (she was already honorary chairman of five zoos), the wildlife conservationists wanted money, votes, money, subscriptions, money, money and money, a local TV station talk show wanted to feature her, several magazines wanted to feature her and an eight-year-old had written in childish scrawl to ask if a bear cub would make a good pet (the family was planning a Yellowstone Park vacation). She threw everything away except the letter from the eight-year-old and then searched through the piles on the table for a pad of paper.

A cheerful flood of sunlight laid its brilliance and slight warmth across her. She worked on a brief reply which discouraged the desire for a pet bear, but encouraged an interest in bears — and for good measure she added a couple of lines warning against feeding the park transients.

The sliding glass door was once again intact. True to his promise, the manager of Brockman's had arrived at store opening time — shortly after Jacob Wells' departure — flanked by two of his installation men and bearing several copies of the latest paperback edition of her most popular book '*A Habit of Creature*'. In between their departure and the arrival of the apartment manager with the police, she had cleaned up every bit of broken glass and put to rights the overturned patio furniture.

She had put on a convincing act of shocked indignation over the fact that any cat burglar would have the colossal gall to slip and plunge to his death from her terrace — and after a half-hearted look around outside, the police had also gone away.

Throughout all these comings and goings, Vincent had not stirred and by now it was almost eleven. She had gone in and laid a hand on his forehead ten minutes ago and he had seemed cooler...

"Good-morning, Liz."

The soft voice came from behind her and she turned just in time to see her guest, fully dressed except for his cloak, lean against the kitchen door jamb and yawn. His capacious maw separated widely, displaying the rows of great, gleaming teeth. When his jaw clicked shut, he blinked at her mildly and looked somewhat abashed.

"I've slept a long time. I missed Father, didn't I?" The fur on one side of his face was all flattened and a sleepy early-morning look clung to him, but he was clear-eyed and looked well.

"Yes, he was here," she confirmed noncommittally, picking up the kettle and taking it to the sink to fill it. "He left you some clothes."

"I do wish I had waked up," Vincent sighed. "I have missed him terribly. He's been gone for such a long time."

"A long time?" she repeated in a vague tone, after a quick and fruitless search for a change of subject.

"Yes. A week."

"I'll fix you some breakfast."

"Did he look well? Did he seem happy?"

"He was worried about you."

"Surely not. Not with you looking after me."

"It's part of the medical personality, Vincent. You never entirely trust anybody else with your own patients. Now, let's think about what to feed you for breakfast."

"I'm so glad he got to meet you," Vincent exulted in his deep, softly gruff voice. "He must have been so thrilled. He must have been so delighted to have even a moment to talk to you..."

She found herself staring adamantly through the new glass door. She found herself wondering whether there might be something with a pleasant candy flavor that you could take for pangs of conscience. But her remorse — if you could call it that at all — was characteristically brief. All she really wanted to do was change the subject...

Vincent drifted close to her, his enormous passive presence a good distraction. He was gazing at her entreatingly, his feline head tilted to one side.

"Liz..."

"What is it, sweetheart?" Oh, God — there I go...

"Would you wash my face for me?"

* * *

In his bedchamber, Father stood in the middle of the floor staring around absently. Someone, probably Mary, had laid his favorite tunic, vest, shawl, cloak and pants on the neatly-made bed, and his suitcase had been unpacked. The walls were festooned with colorful posters made by the children and crudely emblazoned with the words WELCOME HOME FATHER, in various styles of drunkenly leaning and mismatched printed letters.

His mind was a whirl of inspirations and ideas from the week at Harvard. But now, taking uneasy precedence over all of these were the things Elizabeth Sprague had said to him about Vincent --

The *vomer nasal organ!* Good God...

"Father — may I come in?" It was Mary, calling from the tunnel.

"Yes, Mary." She entered and stood smiling, a dove-like presence in her layers of grey shawl, apron and long skirt. They hurried together and embraced.

She said: "You went right back up again — did you go up to see Vincent?"

"Yes."

She asked anxiously: "Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes. He has a bad case of ringworm, that's all — and some cut fingers."

"Ringworm! Is that what he had? But his fur was falling out in great patches!"

"I know. That's the form it takes in —" He faltered, rubbed his chin irritably and then used Elizabeth Sprague's phrase with distaste. "—fur-bearing creatures."

He shrugged out of his jacket and looked for a hanger. Mary handed him one. She asked: "This person Vincent is staying with Above — is she a doctor?"

Father received this question with quiet resignation. Bottled messages from Above were just about impossible to keep private, and by now Vincent's situation had doubtless been piped all over the community.

"In a manner of speaking. She's a vet."

Mary's eyes widened. "A vet! You mean an animal doctor?"

Father was tired, hungry and emotionally depleted. He was bursting with ideas that needed sorting out, names and contacts that needed to be remembered, his own reactions too, and impressions of the World Above after thirty-five years of living like a mole. And inside him now was a raging new conflict that begged for all of his attention — not just some of it but all of it.

Ever since Vincent's arrival as a helpless baby, Father had been putting something off...

Always, he had looked upon Vincent with love. Never had he looked, really looked, at Vincent with a scientific eye. But he was going to have to do this — and soon.

Because now there was someone who knew more about Vincent than he did.

"That's right," he said tonelessly.

Her mouth fell open slightly and she gasped, "But Vincent is not an animal!"

Despite his turmoil, Father couldn't help chuckling. He gave his head a sudden shake, as though to dispel a feeling of unreality.

"I know. The idea does take some getting used to. But I have to admit she is doing the right things for him. He'll be home in a day or so, I expect." He sighed, unknotted his tie and dropped it onto the bed. "Mary," he declared. "It's good to be home."

"It's good to have you back," she said with her abiding fondness in the gentle smile. "Now everything feels normal again, except for Vincent being gone."

He began to unbutton his shirt and she turned to go, but at the tunnel entrance she turned back.

"He was very frightened and upset the last three days," she reported. "He wouldn't let me help him. He sent me away each time."

Father stared at her. "He did?"

"Yes. He's never done that before in nineteen years. You know, Vincent is so peculiar about his fur. He's so — well, almost ashamed.... So secretive about it. And yet underneath all that, I really don't think he wants anything to happen to it."

She left and Father re-buttoned his shirt. Then, with vexation, he unbuttoned it again, took it off and picked up the one which went beneath the tunic. From the back of his churning mind came, unexpectedly, a memory.

As usual, he was late bringing Vincent to the tub room and the women had already begun with the other children. The scene was one of cheerful splashing, noisy, happy chatter and childish squeals. Setting the toddler down beside the nearest unoccupied tub, Father hastily began to undress him. Suddenly, he stopped and stared at Vincent's body. No... No, he hadn't been imagining things last night. The hairs, tiny and fine, were denser than ever and were beginning to give the little squirming body a distinct golden tinge. This wasn't peach fuzz.... this was fur coming in.

He stared and his jaw sagged and then he raked a hand dementedly through his hair. No — this couldn't be happening. Wasn't it enough that Vincent looked the way he did? What malicious curse was at work here? Why was this happening to this poor child? It wasn't right.... It wasn't fair.... What were they going to do? What did this mean? What else was going to happen?

Abruptly, his eyes ceased their horrified scanning and met the toddler's wide, alarmed gaze. Vincent was standing there rigid, pulling at his little fingers the way he always did when very nervous, often right before bursting into tears. And then, right on cue, he whimpered and the tears began to fall. With a stab of remorse, Father knew that he had frightened the child and he kissed the fuzzy little face and began to mutter comforting words. But Vincent went on sobbing in his squeaky, hiccuppy way. The women glanced at them curiously. Grabbing a large towel, Father wrapped Vincent in it and carried him out of the room.

Vincent would be bathed separately from now on.

Deeply disturbed, he headed back toward his chambers. In his arms the little boy lay rigid, and the crying became full-throated wails.

It was almost as though Vincent could read his thoughts and sense every bit of his dismay...

* * *

In the archway between the hall and living room, Liz found herself actually stifling a laugh. On the deep-pile blue carpet of the living room, in a huge slanting patch of mid-afternoon sunlight, Vincent lay sprawled, his head on his arms. His hair, catching the radiance, was a soft golden glow around his head and over his shoulders, and a book lay nearby. Approaching him quietly, she peeped at the title: '*Mammalian Endocrinology*'. No wonder he had fallen asleep. Stooping down, she placed a hand against his face. He was quite warm, but that was probably from the sun. On the other hand....

Vincent stirred and blinked up at her. "Liz..."

She said: "If you promise not to bite the thermometer in half, I'll take your temperature orally."

He rolled over on his back and inquired innocently, "Do vets have oral thermometers?"

"Impudent creature! I have an oral thermometer for me."

He lay quietly while his temperature was taken and she sat beside him on the rug for old times' sake, and studied his intriguing leonine face. She admired the two columns of delicate fur which rose upward from his nose into wided set pointed eyebrows, and she was

pleased to see that the black eye he had sustained in Hughes' lab had faded to a slight tinge of yellow. In all the excitement of last night, she hadn't really taken the time to study him closely. Again she thought: **You certainly are an exquisite creature...** As her eyes traveled appreciatively over his face, he smiled around the thermometer and his friendly, candid gaze seemed to follow her thoughts; in fact she felt curiously vulnerable as he lay there looking deeply into her soul. She had a sudden, nudging suspicion that her eyes — in which she habitually kept an entire shipyard of steel — must soften a good deal when she looked at Vincent, and she wasn't sure how she ought to feel about that, or what she ought to do about it. Or whether there was anything she *could* do about it. As a fur-bearing creature, Vincent sent out strong signals that tempted the softer side of her nature, the side she never showed to people.

But Vincent was also a person. Well, *shit...*

She drew out the thermometer and had a look. Only a shade over normal. Hardly anything to worry about.. She brought her hand up again, this time with a wooden tongue depressor.

"If I promise not to bother you again today, may I have a look inside your mouth?"

He replied graciously: "You don't bother me, Liz," and opened wide.

She peered into his mouth with fascination. The rows of gleaming white teeth were flawless, but then *Felidae* did not tend to have problems with tooth decay. Again, the contradictions presented themselves. His palate was heavily ridged, like a cat's, but his tongue did not have papillae although it was much broader than the human counterpart and curled around the edges and at the tip as she gently probed it with the depressor. He was missing an uvula, but he had tonsils.

"Very nice." She withdrew the tongue depressor and climbed to her feet. Then she went to the sofa and sank down into it with a groan. "My floor-sitting days are over, I'm afraid. But I never get too old to have questions and I still have a number of those about you..."

"About my body?"

She gazed at him pensively. "No, sweetheart. About your life."

Vincent flopped onto his side and propped his head on one hand. He was a big, golden creature with a totally benign expression, lying in the sun on her carpet — and she almost expected him to purr. He was, just then, the very epitome of wildness to her, and the epitome, too, of everything unlike *Homo sapiens*. For all wild creatures, when they didn't have to fight, were totally benign.

"Who is Catherine?" she asked.

He glanced at her obliquely and she explained: "You mentioned the name in your sleep last night."

Vincent stirred a little and smiled, and his eyes deepened and took on a faraway look. He seemed to gather thoughts and words and to savor them as though talking about this person named Catherine were the most enchanting thing Liz could have suggested to him at that moment — or perhaps anytime. He lifted happy and grateful eyes to her and she smiled at him encouragingly — then instantly lapsed back into her usual stern look.

He said softly: "Catherine is my life. She is my entire reason for being, my whole cause. Without her I could not exist. She is my nourishment and my succor; she is more vital than the air I breathe or the blood that runs through my veins. Inside her soul is a place that keeps me, so that I can be alive and real; from her mind comes a direction that calls me, so that I can always find my way to her. It is her presence in my heart that leads me from moment to moment in my life. It is the sound of her voice that wakes joy inside me. She is everything, and more than everything. She is more than I ever would have dreamed of, or hoped for, and all that I will ever need."

She stared at him, riveted, her elbow on the armrest and her chin braced in her hand. She was in a state of profound but not unpleasant shock... Not that she had really expected, "Well, gee — Catherine's this girl I know... ", but she certainly had not anticipated a poetic

outpouring of this magnitude, delivered with a subdued passion that left her awash with goose-pimples from head to foot.

"Tell me more about her," she coaxed, mentally commanding her skin to cut out the silly nonsense.

"I wonder where to begin..."

"Why don't you begin at the beginning."

And so he did.

Again, her reactions surprised and somewhat dismayed her. There were times, as she listened, that her throat tightened and her eyes began to burn, but she refused to give in to these sensations. It was an entrancing story, and Vincent told it in a way that transported her to another dimension, another reality.... As he talked, he gradually changed position, first lying on his back, relaxed and serene, then sitting up with his legs crossed, then slowly moving closer to her. He ended up sitting beside her legs with his shoulders propped against the front of the sofa. Occasionally, he paused in his tale to sigh deeply and tilt his head against her knee, and then they would both stare through the living room's pair of sliding glass doors onto the sunlit terrace, or they would gaze through the hanging green fronds of the Boston fern into the opaque sky.

"You enjoy talking about her, don't you?" she murmured, after he had fallen silent again.

"Mm-hmm. It's so kind of you to listen."

"Well, it's quite a fascinating story. And you've even managed to answer a few of the questions I still had."

He turned around and looked up at her. He said: "I have only one question for you, Liz. But I'm not sure when I should ask it."

"I know the question. And yes; you may ask it now. But let me point out that the really important question is not 'do I know what you are', but 'do I know what your papa was?'. Unfortunately, the answer to that one is still no, but I do know what you are. You are a hybrid."

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and she could no longer see his face. He was very quiet for a long time.

At length, he asked softly, "How can you tell?"

"From your chromosomes." She informed him in a self-satisfied manner: "I swiped your blood sample from Hughes."

Vincent remained immobile and silent for a while longer, then he asked: "Is there anything more you can tell me?"

"Right now? Only bits and pieces of informed speculation, which amount to this: I think your papa was a bipedal, highly-aggressive, immensely strong, fur-covered creature who looked very much like you, but came from God-knows-where, and I think your mama was a hapless local girl."

He turned and stared at her with a peculiar intensity and then gave her a faint smile. "It's strange," he murmured. "But your theory matches a feeling I've had deep inside me all my life. I used to dismiss it as just wishful-thinking, a longing to have ancestors, to believe that somewhere there exists a race of beings who look like me. Because if I'm an accident, then I have no history, no roots... So I used to dismiss that feeling as a wishful dream. But it would always return."

She nodded sagely. "Your hunch is right on target, Vincent. You're no accident. You see, when you've studied life forms the way I have for as long as I have, you learn that every attribute has a reason behind it — a principle which made it evolve. And you are a composite creature made up of traits that are the end result of a very long evolutionary process, not some genetic mishap. Your chromosomes show that half of you is *Homo*

sapiens, and half of you is an anthropoidal creature whose physiology is most closely related to that of *Felidae*, the big cat family."

She broke away from this discourse suddenly and requested, "Tell me more about this bond you have with Catherine. Anything you can think of — how it's grown, changed. Anything."

He talked for a while, and when he had reached the end of what there was to say, she mused, "And so your father doesn't want you to go on this trip with her."

Vincent shook his head dejectedly.

"I think his objections are valid ones—"

Vincent's face fell even further.

"— but he needs to be made to see beyond them," she concluded, speaking very slowly and thoughtfully. "There is a great deal more at stake here than he realizes."

Vincent waited for her to elucidate, but she did not.

She was thinking about the psychic bond, and of what it implied to her scientific, zoologically-oriented mind. Everything he had just said merely underscored what she already knew about him. A thing like this bond was no freak of nature; it was a variant of the pair-bonding mechanism, developed over thousands of years of evolution.

It was a device designed by nature to ensure the survival of a highly aggressive species...

It was a device designed by nature on some other world.

* * *

Despite the frantic pace of activity in the office, Catherine's phone had been quiet all morning and all afternoon. Now it was almost four, and as she scribbled notes industriously there were times when she felt herself oddly merging with the yellow legal pad before her. And her hand was beginning to cramp. So when the phone finally did ring, she picked it up with a sense of relief — a break at last!

An almost hysterically tearful woman's voice shocked her out of her inertia. .

"Cathy! Cathy, oh I'm so glad you were there—"

"Aunt Lila? Is that you? Aunt Lila — what's the matter? What's wrong?" A cold wall sprang up around her heart; if something had happened to Uncle David, and so soon after Daddy's death —

Her aunt sobbed, "It's Brandy. He died in my arms this afternoon."

"Oh — Oh, *no*. I'm sorry, Aunt Lila. I'm so sorry..." Brandy had been their oldest and favorite feline companion. He had been over twelve years old, with a heart condition and other complications.

"David and I buried him in the flower garden. I don't know — I just don't know what to do, Cathy. I feel so completely destroyed."

"Of course you do. You've lost a very dear friend."

"I don't know if I can face the trip. I just can't face the thought of going anywhere... or doing *anything*."

Catherine clutched at the phone with both hands, hating the impersonal distance, the insufficiency of giving comfort over a wire.

"You feel this way right now. Of course you do. But you really will feel better in three months, Aunt Lila. And besides, Brandy would want you to make the trip. He wouldn't want you to give anything up."

"I don't know. Oh, I just don't know. That lonely little grave... The thought of being greeted by the others but not Brandy when I get home. Oh, Cathy — do you think there's a cat heaven somewhere? Do you think my darlings go to some kind of hereafter—"

"Of course they do. They have feelings. They make you happy. They know and give love, don't they? Of course they go to heaven."

"I hope I made him happy. I tried to be good to him."

"Aunt Lila, he has got to be up there right now bragging about you to all the other kitty angels — *really*."

By the time she was able to hang up, Catherine's heart was chugging unpleasantly and her throat was beginning to ache. She was stricken with misery for Aunt Lila, and the conversation had awakened lingering pain and grief from her father's recent death. Pushing her hair out of her face, she stared unseeingly at the legal pad, shaken and disoriented. A shadow fell across it and she looked up.

Joe Maxwell grinned his huge, watermelon-slice grin. "Congratulations, Radcliffe."

She stared at him blankly.

He dipped his shoulder toward her and said: "You *are* happy about it, aren't you?"

She mumbled: "About what, Joe?"

He rolled his eyes. "Cripes! The Ambrosio case, of course. I just heard that you got your appeal. I just wanted to say —" His smile became twisted and then vanished as her expression crumpled and her eyes filled up with tears. "Wha— Cathy, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

She leaped up and grabbed her jacket and purse, angrily ducking her head as the tears spilled over. "Oh, it's nothing. Never mind."

As she pressed a fist against her mouth, choking and gasping, he stared. "My, God — has something happened?"

"No. No, Joe," she managed, pushing past him. "It's just been one of those days."

"It has?"

"Look — I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

"OK. Take it easy, Radcliffe. You hear?"

* * *

Liz hated to leave her fascinating guest but a small shopping list absolutely had to be done. When she returned at half past four, she saw that he was not in the living room. In the kitchen she put down the paper bag of groceries and caved in to a rare fit of chuckling.

Vincent had found the container of bristle blocks in the lab/storage room. The empty can sat on top of one pile of books and journals and on top of another pile lay a long, clumsily twisting multi-colored structure of bristle blocks, all stuck together.

"You clown!" she called out. There was no reply.

Puzzled, she peered across the terrace but he was not out there. She found him in the guestroom, curled up on the bed, asleep — *Again?*

"Vincent — are you all right?" She leaned over him and placed a hand against his face.

He was hot.

Oh, no...

The suture kit still lay on the bedside table. She picked up scissors and cut away the gauze from around the arm wound. At the sight of the pulling stitches and the angry, purple swelling beneath she caught her breath. God, he'd abscessed already...

"Vincent! Wake up!" He did not stir.

She walloped him on the rump with everything she had and he snapped awake with a gasp.

"Get up. Come with me. Come on—"

She dragged him into the bathroom, removed the stitches, drained the abscess and flushed it with hydrogen peroxide. He endured all of this in stoical silence, but when she filled a syringe with an antibiotic he suddenly disappeared.

Brandishing the hypo in one hand and a cotton ball soaked with alcohol in the other she stepped out into the hall.

"Vincent?" She looked through the open door of the guestroom. He lay on his stomach with his face buried against the pillow, his freshly bandaged arm outstretched.

As she approached the bed his voice came to her, muffled by the pillow: "Must you?"

"I'm afraid so. Take your britches down, please."

"Not there—"

"Vincent — unlike your dear father, I am not accustomed to having to reason with my patients. Do as I say."

He rolled over briefly, fumbled with the velcro seams, pushed his pants down and flopped back onto his stomach, hugging the pillow. His great, massive shoulders were rigid with tension. She tried to give him the shot and the needle snapped in half.

Oh, God...

"Use a bigger needle," he moaned frantically through the pillow.

When this ordeal was finally over, she sat down on the edge of the bed, watching as he gradually relaxed. After a while she pulled the pillow away from his face.

"Still friends?"

To her astonishment, his face was blotchy with tears. He gazed at her vacantly from brimming eyes and said nothing. It was as though his consciousness had somehow flown out of the room and hadn't returned. Alarmed, she found herself staring straight into terrible distress — but Vincent wasn't there. Then suddenly, he was back, blinking at her. His tears spilled again and he turned away to face the wall.

She was not sure what to do.

As she sat there bewildered, he reached behind him with one arm and slowly rubbed at his aching bottom.

It was an absolutely pathetic gesture.

"Vincent, I'm sorry. I didn't know shots were so upsetting to you."

His voice came to her then, all pulled out of shape by emotion. "No. It isn't that. It's Catherine..."

Her bewilderment deepened. "*Catherine?*"

"Yes. Something's wrong. Ever since you woke me I've been feeling it. She's terribly despondent. She's — she's *desolate*. And I can't go to her. I can't do anything about it."

She allowed herself a good long deep breath. "Of course you can do something about it."

He turned to her and she handed him some tissues from the box on the bedside table.

"Here. Blow your nose. I'll be right back."

Striding purposefully out she went straight into her bedroom and gathered up the phone. Then she carried it into the guestroom, placed it on the bed beside Vincent and plugged the cord into the wall jack with a resolute flourish.

"There! Now, for God's sake call the poor girl up!" Vincent stared at the phone and then, with panic, at Liz.

"I — I've never used one of these before!" he gasped. He said in a strained voice: "I don't know her telephone number!"

Her tearful departure from the office had erupted into a full-blown crying jag.

Stretched out on her bed, Catherine sobbed noisily against the sheets. She was crumpling one of her best suits and her shoes lay in opposite corners of the room - and there was mucus smeared all over her face and she just didn't care...

Now and then she hammered the bed with one fist.

How could everything go so wrong? The trip had been such a tantalizing bunch of grapes, such a shining oasis on the desert, such a glimmer of gold at the end of a rainbow, such a ... And now it was going to be snatched away from her. Or possibly snatched away... It just wasn't fair.

All she wanted was a chance, with Vincent, to be man and woman together. Was that asking too much? Okay, so she had bid adieu to the idea of having any kind of simple life; apparently that was not in the cards... All right, fine. Over two years' time, she had grown accustomed to the weekly treks Below, for a few minutes here and a few minutes there of semi-semi-semi-just-barely-intimacy with Vincent. Just barely intimacy. And it was. How could you relax — really relax — and merge with that special someone's soul with messages clicking and rapping through pipes all around you and children's voices echoing up and down the tunnels and without even any *doors* to close, for Christ's sake?

Her sobs came faster and turned into the deep, hard, painful gasping type...

How could you feel alone when several dozen lovely, kindly, benevolent, interested people knew you were there and were consciously 'leaving you alone'...? That wasn't really privacy. Not really. Not to her.

Goddamn it, she just wanted to be alone with Vincent,

ALONE WITH HIM.

Without phones ringing, or pipes tapping.

JUST ALONE.

And then, as if all this wasn't enough, something else occurred to her. She had forgotten to tell Vincent that there would be cats at Aunt Lila's and Uncle David's place...

Vincent didn't much like cats. What was it he had said to her once...?

"Cats are little greed machines wrapped in fur and claws. All they do is lie around and covet things — what you're eating, what you're doing, where you're going. They try to control you in every way they can. They would own your soul if they could."

Maybe if he knew about the cats, he wouldn't want to go. No, surely it wouldn't matter that much... But then, maybe it would. Would it??? Perhaps she had allowed her hopes to build too far, too fast. It had been such a compelling dream, but she hadn't thought it through. She had allowed it to carry her away. And Father hadn't given his consent yet. *He* would come up with some set-in-stone reason to deter Vincent from going. Why hadn't she learned from what happened last time? But something inside her kept saying that it could be done..

Oh please, Father. Please...

The sudden jangling ring of the phone on the nightstand was such an offense that she had to fight an impulse to pick the whole thing up and hurl it to the floor.

Reaching out, she grabbed the headset, allowing it to slip and whack the nightstand in what she sadistically hoped would be an ear-shattering noise to whoever was on the other end...

"Hello?" she grumbled thickly.

"Catherine..."

"Yes, who is it?"

"Catherine, it's me."

"Me who?" she growled, her irritation building.

"Vincent."

She lurched abruptly to a sitting position.

"WHAT? Vincent...? *Vincent!!! It is you!*"

"Catherine, are you all right?"

"Vincent — it really *is* you. You're calling me on the *phone!* I can't believe it! Where are you calling from?"

"Catherine — is everything all right? Are you all right?"

"Vincent — this is unreal. You on the phone!!! Why are you calling me? Where —"

"Catherine — *are you all right?*"

A sudden realization squelched her surprise and delight. Chagrin swept over her. Damn it. She did not want Vincent to know why she was so upset; it would only put an even more unhappy burden on him.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I — I am," she stammered. "I had a bad day. Things didn't go well. I — Joe can be unreasonable sometimes..." Mentally, she prostrated herself in apology to Joe Maxwell, who had done nothing but praise her to the skies all week.

He said: "You've had bad days before, and I've felt your heavy heartedness. But this seemed different. You've been so utterly desolate..." His whispery voice caressed her through the phone, bringing more of his presence than she would have thought possible. "And crying. You've been crying, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have. Well, Aunt Lila called me today at work. Her favorite and oldest cat died and she was just inconsolable. I did my best... Well, I guess it kind of got to me."

"I'm sure that talking to you helped lift her sadness."

"I hope so. Vincent, how did you get hold of a phone? Where are you?"

"I'm still with Liz Sprague. She's been treating my skin condition and I'm much better. But I also had an accident — cut my hands rather badly — and she had to make a number of stitches. I'm still mending from that, but I'll be all right."

"When do you think you'll be home?"

"In a day or so, I expect. Are you going to be all right?"

"Yes. Really." Her voice lost its quaver and took on a gently teasing resonance. "I'll bet you and Liz are having a wonderful time together. Are you still under the magnifying glass?"

She listened with delight to his slow chuckle...

* * *

On the darkening terrace, Liz sat in the patio lounge chair with her back to the sliding glass doors, smoking and thumbing through 'Scientific American'. As usual, a cushion on her lap propped up the magazine, and beside her on the table was a pile of reading material and an ash tray. From behind her, the kitchen lights shed a strong-enough illumination for reading, and it was too early in the season for bugs yet, so she remained despite the deepening twilight.

It occurred to her that she hadn't gone into much detail with Vincent about his ancestry. But perhaps this was just as well — at least for now. Even the initial revelation — that he was a hybrid — was a weighty idea, a lot to think about and assimilate. The rest could be given to him in small doses, whenever he seemed ready for more.

It was Jacob Wells who really needed the details.

Whether or not he would welcome them — that was another story.

Just then the door slid and Vincent stepped out onto the terrace.

She glanced at him without speaking, and then studied him attentively as he stood there.

Across the short distance he stared at her fixedly, his expression quite inscrutable — and yet she could sense that something was wrong.

Liz blew out a mouthful of smoke and pulverized the stub in the ashtray. Then she laid the magazine on the table and glanced at Vincent again. He remained unreadable and motionless except for tawny bits of hair that stirred in the slight, cool breeze. His eyes had a miserable, inward-looking dullness, and as she watched him, a tense line etched itself between the fuzzy brows.

Finally she spoke to him: "How was the phone call? Was Catherine surprised?"

"Yes."

"Cheered up?"

"Yes."

"But you're not feeling very cheerful, are you?"

"No—."

She considered the slump in his tone as he answered that last question and then she stretched out an arm toward him.

"Come here."

He came forward, drew up another chair and sat down. For a moment he gazed at her from the epicenter of some inexpressible turbulence deep inside him, and then his eyes lowered bleakly and to her great surprise he leaned forward, elbows on knees, and laid his shaggy head on top of the cushion in her lap. From this position, silent and immobile, he stared out across the terrace.

She laid a hand on his back and because he couldn't see her, she allowed the trace of a smile to pull at her stern mouth.

"Still wishing you could be with her?"

He nodded against the cushion. Then he hiccupped suddenly and dug one bandaged hand against an eye.

A tremendous, wholly engulfing wave of tenderness deluged her and left her feeling as though all her internal organs had come loose and were floating against the top of her ribcage.

He hiccupped again and she rubbed his back. At last, almost inaudibly, and in a voice sodden with emotion, he spoke: "Liz — there is a wish that goes beyond just being with her."

A moment passed in which she sensed enormous tension and distress, and she waited patiently, utterly absorbed in his closeness and his trust.

He murmured: "It is a difficult thing to speak of."

She replied in her blunt manner: "Probably won't be so hard once you get started."

"Perhaps not. Still..." He swallowed and over the edge of his face she could see one eye blinking rapidly. He went on in a muffled undertone: "I've never spoken to anyone about this before. Never..."

She said: "All right." She thought about lighting up again and then, instead, she laid the other hand on his head. Her soul flowed into unexpected corners of the universe and found levels of wisdom she hadn't known she could attain. "Maybe it's time to try."

He sighed and twitched with the effort of a few false starts. Finally he said: "Catherine and I ... We haven't.... We've never—"

"You've never *done it*," she supplied, inexorably matter-of-fact.

He was a great boulder of tension. In a strained voice he said: "No."

"But you want to."

"Yes."

She reflected, staring into the darkening sky. This conversation was forcing her to think of him in terms that went far beyond the implications of the karyotype on the refrigerator door, or the medical needs of his furry body, and thinking about him and his predicament this way did not come easily to her. Choosing her words carefully she asked: "Is the — the hesitation — with Catherine or with you?"

"With me." He shifted and then raised himself from the cushion and gazed at her with burning sadness in his eyes. "You've seen my anatomy, Liz. I'm not what she's accustomed to. I'm different. Even there. Do you — do you think she'll be—" He struggled for the right word. "—revolted?"

"Is she revolted by any of the rest of you?"

"No..."

"It won't matter, then."

"Do you really think so?"

She answered him with absolute conviction. "Yes. I do."

Tears glimmered in his eyes and he rubbed them away with the bandages.

Crazily, she wanted to hug his head against her bosom and kiss him and rock him, and inside her a door slammed on these impulses with such vehemence, that she halfway expected them both to hear the report. She was glad when he laid his head down again.

"I have so many fears," he whispered brokenly.

"About sex?"

"Yes."

She waited but he said nothing more. Presently, she commented: "You've told me your father has a vast library. He must have books on the subject — you know: Masters and Johnson, the Hite Reports, stuff like that..."

She could feel the inadequacy of this suggestion but she hoped it would get the discussion going again. There was so much to be sorted out here, and, well, she was good at that. She was good at logic. And there was logic to be found even in the most complex matters...

"I've read them to learn about Catherine. But those books aren't about me."

"You and Father seem to be very close. Haven't you ever talked to him about this?"

"No. I can't do that to him. When I am unhappy, Father feels my pain very deeply; it can be almost unbearable to him. It took him a long time to accept Catherine because he was so afraid I'd be hurt. I can't bring myself to burden him with this."

"I understand." She thumped his back gently. "I'm afraid your old man tries a little too hard to live your life for you at times. A common parental mistake."

The darkness beyond the terrace was cut in blinking, gliding lines by the lights of planes circling toward the landing strips at Newark. Supper would have to be late, but she didn't care.

She queried: "How many people in this little world of yours know about your anatomy?"

"Aside from Father, no one."

"No one else has ever seen you undressed?" Immediately, she amended, "Well, it's not as simple as that, is it?" Then she demanded: "Am I the only woman in your life who knows you can reel it in and out?"

He sat up again and this time he sprawled slowly back in the chair and placed one leg over the other. To her surprise and relief he looked somewhat more relaxed and there was even the faintest hint of a smile at the corners of his broad mouth.

"I like the way you express yourself, Liz. Sometimes you remind me of Catherine."

She made a huffing sound. "Well I do hope she isn't anything like as ornery as I am."

"She isn't ornery." He gazed at her steadily. "But then neither are you."

She turned away from him and reached for her cigarettes. "Your Catherine sounds like one in a million."

"There is no one like her," he said fervently. "Before we met, a part of me had always been missing. I found it with her." A slight tension crept into his voice again. "She doesn't know how greatly she affects me. Sometimes, when I visit her on her balcony, she'll emerge from her bedroom wearing some lovely, clinging garment... And then, with her beauty and her nearness, and those big expressive eyes that see only me... Sometimes I just have to turn away."

"I suppose it can get quite uncomfortable if you have an erection when it's still inside," Liz mused.

Appalled, Vincent glanced hastily away.

"We can talk about something else if you like," she offered, but he shook his head.

"No," he said resignedly. "I have to talk about this to someone."

She clamped an unlit cigarette between her lips. "Well anyway — you were going to tell me how many people have ever seen you undressed. At this point, I can't help wondering just how secret you've kept that body of yours all these years."

He replied gravely: "I've been very secretive always. Among the men presently living with us, no one except Father has ever seen my body. Among the women, there are two who have: our seamstress, Mrs Larrimore, and Mary. Mary has known me since I was a boy. She still helps me with my bath because —" He smiled and looked a little sheepish. "I have to have some assistance. I am ill-equipped to give myself a shampoo. I almost always manage to cut myself quite badly, or at least I did so often as a boy that Mary began to help me. And she has done so ever since. I should explain this a bit more..." He sighed regretfully. "We don't have showers where I live. Mouse — our resident tinkerer — is bored by plumbing and has never taken the project on. So we all bathe in big galvanized iron tubs." He leaned forward and said confidingly: "When I bathe, of course, I wear that part of me on the outside."

She nodded soberly.

"By the time Mary comes in to help me with my hair and to scrub the fur on my back, I'm sitting in very soapy water and feeling somewhat decent. Still — I'm sure there have been times when she's seen it, and so she probably thinks I'm quite conventional down there. But Mrs Larrimore has never seen it. On the few occasions that I have completely disrobed with her in the room, I've kept it firmly retracted. For all I know, she may think I don't have one. In fact, it occurs to me that if those two ever compare notes there will be some confusion..."

Liz felt her face rumple up and her lips compress. Something expanded urgently inside her. Then she threw back her head and laughed helplessly and with total abandon. He watched this with a grin that was tentative at first and then slowly broadened, exposing his gleaming teeth.

"Think about that, Vincent!" she gasped. "That's really terribly funny. If those two ever — Oh God, that is *funny*."

She coughed and shook her head as though in denial, and was instantly carried off by another spasm of mirth. He continued to gaze at her, enjoying the effect his tale was having on her. There was some sadness at the edge of his smile — for there always

seemed to be some sadness clinging to him somewhere — but it wasn't very much. She wondered if he had ever before in his life made any kind of joke about his body or his strange predicament, and something told her that this moment they were sharing could very well be a milestone for him.

Their mood considerably lightened, she lit up the second smoke and Vincent rambled on a bit more: "Father says the tub room is the most popular chamber in our world. It's in use nearly all the time. I go first, usually in the middle of the morning because that's when Mary has the time to help me. Then the women bathe together in groups, then the men. The children are bathed at bedtime and the rest of us take turns helping them, just as we take turns doing all of the other chores that have to be done — even Father. Although he gets exempted from some of them because he's lame in one leg."

"So you bathe alone?"

"Except for Mary."

"I suppose the thought of anyone else helping you would send you running for cover."

He nodded.

"Start running." She stubbed out the cigarette. "You must have a bath tonight, my friend. All those lesions must be carefully washed and thoroughly dried, at least once a day, until you're better healed. I think that if we tie large baggies over your bandages you can wash yourself pretty well. But if you want a shampoo, you're going to have to let me stand in for Mary. I hope you won't suffer overly much."

"I won't suffer, Liz. Thank you."

She remarked: "Somehow I didn't think you'd hide under the bed..."

* * *

Joe Maxwell snapped off a few more lights, tossed his jacket over his shoulder, and was adamantly on his way out of the office, when he stopped in mid-stride and spun around. Catherine Chandler was back at her desk, hunched busily in one small pool of light.

He ambled up to her. "What are you doing back here at this time of day?"

She gave him a lopsided grin. "Oh — I felt a little silly I guess.... I just have a few things to catch up on and then I'll go home."

"Colombians again?" he questioned, making note of the files.

"You've got it. I wouldn't exactly mourn the loss of professional challenge, if I never had to deal with another illegal immigrant case," she complained, stacking papers.

"I hear you and I savvy," he said as he picked up her coffee cup. "The Colombians have no respect for life — their own or anybody else's. Too bad they keep crossing our borders — but what can you do?" He placed the cup in the middle of her paper pad. "Just don't let it stop you from enjoying your 100-percent Colombian coffee —"

She chucked a paper clip at him.

A few minutes later, she looked up and found that he was still there, fiddling with his tie and staring at her oddly.

She put down her pen. "Well, what is it, Joe? You look like you're trying to get up the nerve to ask me to drop everything and run away with you to a tropical paradise."

He snapped his fingers. "Gee, I never thought of that." But the odd expression returned. He leaned against the file cabinet. "You know, Radcliffe, there is something I've been meaning to ask you about..."

Somehow she knew this was going to be personal. The empty office... The time of day... The nervous way he dug the toe of his shoe into the carpet... It all suggested that he wasn't about to ask her what she thought of so-and-so's conduct in the courtroom, or where she'd lost the files he had given her yesterday so that he wouldn't lose them...

She acted casual. "Well, what is it, Joe?" she repeated.

A shrewd light crept into the humor-edged gaze, but he still conveyed a certain awkwardness.

He said: "A couple of weeks ago in Central Park — it was a Saturday evening — I was jogging through one of the wooded areas. I thought I saw you walk into some kind of big drainage pipe... Some kind of pipe, anyway..." He faltered a bit, his shoulders lifting and his smile going crooked. "What do I mean *thought?* I *know* it was you." Her cool reception of these words and her unreadable face made him even more nervous. He settled himself in his stance as though refusing to be intimidated. "So... I sort of waited around, but, uh — you didn't come out again. I mean — I really didn't mean to spy, Radcliffe; just wanted to say hello. But you didn't come out of there. So ... uh... Well, it sort of made me wonder. You know. Like — what were you *doing* in there?" He squinted at her and waited.

There was a sustained silence.

Her eyes dropped obliquely and she studied the corner of her desk. Finally, she said: "Funny you should mention that, Joe. It was me. You see I thought I saw a large white rabbit holding a pocket-watch and saying 'Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!'"

She gave a squeal, as he lunged forward and scattered the entire contents of the paperclip holder across her desk.

* * *

She tapped on the bathroom door. "You ready for me in there?"

"Yes."

She went in and closed the door behind her to keep the steamy warmth in the room. Then she just stood there for a moment and stared at the spectacle that greeted her.

In the pale blue decorator-tub that had come with her opulent apartment, Vincent looked a bit cramped, but he had managed to wedge all of his bulky frame into a comfortable position and he certainly was wet — there was no doubt about that. His hair clung to his head in drowned snakes and water made zigzagging furrows down his face, giving it a peculiar striped look. Wet, he was a shade darker all over and the fur on his body stood up here and there in whorls and clumps. He looked so different, and yet so familiar —

An unexpected tonnage of feelings and memory fragments descended over her. Herself, alone and enjoying the solitude after the staff had gone home, washing one of her big furry charges in a sudsy tub, spraying it with warm water that made channels through the fur... The pleasure that came from the feeling of a big animal relaxing against her hands... The pleasure of doing something so basic and necessary for another living creature — one that simply accepted and enjoyed her touch... Contact with another living being — but contact without complications...

He met her enigmatic expression and said: "I remind you of something."

"You're uncanny," she accused. With her wry humor she said: "I'm never going to be able to look at this tub again, Vincent, without seeing this sight." She was rewarded by a wide, canine-tipped smile.

She removed a bottle of shampoo from the closet, went to him and settled down on the edge of the tub. "How are we doing?"

"Not very well," he confessed, his smile turning sheepish. He held up his dripping, baggie-wrapped hands and said: "I've managed to squeeze some water over myself — but I can't hold onto the soap." He stared up at her impassive, unsmiling face and his own began to redden slightly beneath the soggy fur. "I feel so — strange..."

She said in a stern, measured tone: "Kind of giggly and shy?"

He slapped one hand against his face with a loud plasticky splat and began to quake with silent laughter.

She went on: "After all the assaults I've made against your dignity, Vincent, I'm surprised you have any shyness left."

She fished the washcloth out of the water, wrung it and rubbed up a lather of soap. "Would you like me to wash your rot spots for you?"

"If you don't mind—"

"Not in the least."

But her professional eye never rested and she noted as she went to work on him that he was looking decidedly better. There was new skin forming across the biggest lesions and the fur was already beginning to grow back. **Good. Up yours, Jacob Wells.**

"Am I hurting you at all, Vincent?"

"No. And the itching has almost all gone away."

"I think you're mending."

"Thanks to you, Liz..."

She made up a fresh lather on the cloth and handed it to him. "There now, I've done your back. Think you can manage your front?"

As he soaped the lesions on his chest and belly she leaned back against the tiles, folded her arms in her characteristic pose and stared tactfully into the corner.

At length, she said conversationally, "I'm quite intrigued by those velcro seams in your clothes. Whose idea was that? And is it because your claws get tangled up with button-fastening?"

He replied: "Actually I can manage buttons quite well. We all wear velcro closures because our seamstress, Mrs Larrimore, doesn't like to sew buttonholes."

"But she doesn't mind sewing on rows of decorative buttons?"

"The children sew on the buttons. As a penance if they don't learn their lessons, or if they shirk their chores. It's a kind of positive punishment; it's tedious and it's work, but it's also creative. They get to pick out which buttons to use from Pascal's antique button collection, and sometimes there's a story that goes with a particular set. Pascal is very generous with his buttons, but of course, anytime a garment wears out the buttons are carefully removed and returned."

"Such a well-oiled little gearbox, this society of yours..."

"It is that. And Father likes to have the children learn to see some high purpose in even the simplest things they do. It's quite amazing how he goes about it sometimes. I've seen him talk to a child about the binding force that governs the nuclei of atoms, and then he'll hug the child and say 'and this is the binding force that makes us friends'."

Their eyes met fleetingly but she had no comment.

Suddenly, she said: "It's underground, isn't it?"

Clumsily, Vincent wrung out the cloth, his entire front a great lather of suds.

"With all the stories I've been telling it was inevitable that you'd guess," he said, without any regret in his tone.

"Well, you have dropped a number of hints. And Hughes said he'd seen you coming and going from a large pipe that leads to an underground network of other pipes and from there to God-knows-where. But don't you worry about him. He has neither the wits nor the resources to track you down. And as for me — I don't make social calls, anyway." She anointed his head with shampoo and began to work it in briskly. "Don't worry about this stuff, by the way. It won't sting your eyes."

"What about house calls?" Vincent queried, his eyes closing anyway as the suds began to creep down his forehead and temples. "Would you make a house call if a fur-bearing creature were in need of your services?"

"Don't know," she muttered, kneading his scalp. "I'm retired. I suppose I might."

"Mouse's pet raccoon has had an infected toe. I don't believe it's been responding to his treatment. And Mrs Larrimore's cat has been coughing lately."

"That so?" Rising, she detached the shower-massage unit from its bracket and set it on fine spray. She slipped a hand behind his neck. "Tilt your head back, darling — that's the way."

With the wet, warm weight of his head against her arm she directed the spray over his hair, watching as the suds billowed out and down, and as the tides of soap ran out of the fur of his shoulders and back.

Eyes closed, he sighed deeply. "What a wonderful device! I do wish Mouse weren't so bored by plumbing."

"Send him up for a shower sometime and we'll convert him."

She didn't really mean it. She didn't really want anyone visiting her. But she had to say something to take her mind off the memories and the strange, painful sense of longing that this experience was generating inside her. It couldn't have been a more unwanted feeling. And yet there it was. This was better than simply having both hands caringly busied with the warm, wet body of a fur-bearing creature. This was better — *damn it* — because this one could talk to her. Because this one could look at her with melting blue eyes filled with intelligence. Because this one could cry human tears — and she could handle it.

And his complications didn't matter.

She handed him the shower-massage so that he could experiment and she left him happily playing with it.

"There's a blow-dryer in the closet, Vincent. Use it and all the towels you need. Be sure to get thoroughly dry."

"I will. Thank you, Liz."

She closed the door behind her and went into the kitchen. Fumbling with her purse, she located her cigarettes and jammed one between her lips.

She dropped the lighter twice.

* * *

Hunched over her microscope in the darkened lab/storage room, Liz adjusted the focus and peered intently at a slide containing fur clippings she had taken from Vincent before that evening's dusting session. Like any furbearing creature his coat consisted of two types of fur: the primary or guard hairs and the secondary hairs, or underfur. She had carefully snipped a tiny sample of each.

Sure enough — the greatly enlarged view showed that the primary hairs had a scaly outer cuticle with a solid pigmented inner medulla, while the secondary hairs had a ladder-like formation caused by the air spaces that made them so soft.

It was the fur of *Felidae*.

Raising her head, she stared vacantly at the wall for a while, her mind compiling alignments of hunch and observation with long-standing facts from her lifetime of inquiry and experience.

Light shining up from the microscope outlined her grim, straight mouth and taciturn, granite-planned face, and flowed in gentler, silvery filaments through her hair. Motionless, her square shoulders rigid and her back straight, she was very much a statue right then, alive only deep inside where an inherent brilliance hid itself from probing eyes, fed on knowledge, rewarded her in its welcome and predictable ways and, reliably banished anything that did not nourish its flame.

Frequently, at this time of night, she sat here like this in the lab/storage room, alternately reviewing old slides and staring off into space, alone with meanings and possibilities.

She had always possessed a phenomenal attention span and usually she was good for hours of microscope study. Usually nothing could distract her... But tonight something did, and she switched off the microscope light and stood up.

Vincent would be waiting for his good-night kiss.

* * *

"Father — do you suppose I could be sterile?"

Father started violently and nearly lost his footing on the library ladder.

Instantly Vincent's strong hands grasped him gently at the waist and the soft voice said: "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

The older man cleared his throat with a loud, rasping cough and stiffly and carefully climbed down.

"Oh, I knew you were here, Vincent. I just, ah —The *question* was rather unexpected, that's all." He laid aside a couple of books and dusted his hands. He directed a nervous scowl at the floor and then briefly at Vincent before glancing away. "Why on earth would you want to know — Well, I guess that's your business," He hawked his throat again and reached for his cane. "I suppose this is because Elizabeth Sprague told you you're a hybrid."

"Liz," Vincent corrected gently. "Yes." He inclined his head judicially. "I know that some hybrids are sterile. So I'm wondering if I could be."

Father limped slowly to his desk and sat down. He pursed his lips and considered the faint tapping along the pipes in case it contained any urgent messages. William had said he was going to stop by to discuss—

He said in a voice that sounded unnaturally loud: "Yes, well I suppose it's possible, Vincent. Hybrid sterility is relative however, not absolute. As a general rule, the more distantly related the parents, the greater the chance that the offspring will be sterile. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm still trying to find some good basic exercises in linear algebra for my section on—" His mind appeared to wander, "—linear algebra," he finished.

Vincent picked up the books which Father had retrieved from the higher shelves. "You were looking for them in Milton and Donne?"

"If you really want to know, I suppose we could find out," Father said hastily. "Get me what I need and we'll have a look through the microscope. In fact — catch me this evening after dinner. I haven't anything planned."

He settled back in his chair, crossed ankle firmly over knee and opened his notebook with a gesture of dismissal.

Vincent remained standing nearby.

Father glanced apprehensively over his specs, then tossed the notebook back onto the desk and muttered: "Well... Oh, all right. I guess— Wait a minute."

Rising, he made his way to a metal cabinet which contained overflow medical supplies from the hospital chamber. Opening it he reached into a plastic bag full of small plastic specimen cups with lids, removed one, carried it to Vincent and pushed it into his hand.

"Here. There — now run along, will you? I've a great deal of work to do."

He sank into his studies — or at least he tried to. He allowed three, maybe four, epochal minutes to drag by before he glanced at Vincent again from over his specs. With great reluctance he questioned: "Well, what is it? What's the matter?"

Vincent's eyes dropped and he studied the container desperately for a moment. Then he gave Father an uneasy stare.

"What's the matter?" Father repeated hollowly.

Vincent swallowed. "It — it's not as simple as you think."

Father processed these haltingly spoken words with something close to dread.

Vincent paced to the short flight of steps and lowered himself to the middle one. Sitting there rigidly, he turned the container around and around in his furry hands and a stark silence descended over the room.

Father cleared his throat again and massaged his jaw nervously. Summoning his courage he blurted, "Surely you know what to do —"

Vincent made a sharp, impatient movement with his head and Father heaved a sigh and drummed the chair arm. The silence continued unbearably. After a few more minutes of this interminable impasse, the older man laid a finger alongside his cheek and spoke out again, this time in the lecture hall tone which always helped him articulate more fluently:

"Vincent — in adult males and females there is an actual physiological need for sexual expression. If this need is not met — for whatever reasons — a, um, a *tension* builds up to the point where the body from time to time, er — demands release.... Doesn't this ever happen to you?"

Clearly tortured, Vincent leaped up and paced farther away. But he did not leave.

Father hated to do this but he just had to. He muttered: "Well, Vincent — I'm just not sure I understand."

Vincent whirled and stared at him intensely. Then he turned away again and finally replied in a barely audible voice: "Father, I didn't have those feelings until Catherine came into my life." He broke off there and said: "I — I can't just.... You see, it needs the bond to work."

"What?"

"It needs the bond to work."

"I *heard* that. I'm just ... I guess I'm just a little..." Father spread his fingers.

With great effort Vincent explained: "Sometimes Catherine has dreams... moments of remembering times from the past... Or she sometimes —" His voice trailed off to a strained whisper. "— *anticipates*. Only at such rare moments can I.... well..."

Father's eyebrows fluttered and he seized and rubbed the end of his nose. "Yes, yes, well — all right," he said hastily. "I think I understand. Well — you always are full of *surprises*, Vincent." His pragmatic mind moved beyond their harrowing plight and he said: "Why don't you just hang onto that and, er, save it against, ah — against the next such opportunity." He delved into his notebook once again with an explicit gesture of finality. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really must get to work."

Vincent climbed up the steps and fled into the tunnel.

Father expelled his breath in a long gust. The tension flowed out of him in a great wave. Turning pages he stared down and his fingers began to curl and re-curl one top corner. Finally, in exasperation he shut the notebook with a thump and pushed back his chair. Sitting on the edge of it, he stared frozenly into space.

"Oh, *Jesus Christ*," he muttered.

* * *

Assembling Easter baskets had turned out to be a lengthy but enjoyable Saturday afternoon project, and there were about a dozen left to fill.

On the long pantry table between the dining hall and the main kitchen, the brightly colored little wicker baskets sat in neat rows, their handles decorated with ribbons — blue for the boys and pink for the girls. Catherine thought this a bit sexist, but decided she could hardly expect the World Below to be trendy about such things.

At her end of the table were the boxes of chocolate bunnies and marshmallow chicks, and she was assembling the paper cut-outs that came with the egg decorating kits. At Vincent's

end of the table were the jellybeans, the large bowls full of gleaming hard-boiled eggs William had cooked up and the saucepans full of red, yellow, blue and green dye. He sat there, a great shaggy block of silent concentration, his hair concealing his face, as he very soberly bobbed the eggs about in the dye, lifted them out with the wire egg-lifter, and laid them on paper towels to dry.

Catherine glanced at him frequently, secretly amused by his extreme reverie. Each time one of the cut-outs went together exactly the way the instructions said it should, she let out a rapturous sigh — but he did not react to any of these sounds. In a way, he seemed almost catatonic. But she was not perturbed by this. On that keen subliminal level made available by the bond, she could tell that he was relaxed and in good spirits. He was deeply absorbed in some thought — but it was not an unhappy one.

Nevertheless, she kept darting glances at him and in her own mind small, pleasant, bubbly thoughts idly chased one another around. Dominant among these was a mental celebration! As of a phone call last night, Aunt Lila had relented and planned to make the Florida trip after all...

At last, she slid down the bench and pressed up against him and then gave him a strong, jolting nudge with her thigh. He blinked at her dreamily and bent forward to retrieve another dyed egg, his face hidden again by hair.

She said: "I suppose we should be sure to put the exact same number of jellybeans in each basket. They'll probably count them."

"I always did," Vincent admitted. It was the first time she'd heard his voice in almost an hour.

Suddenly, Catherine lit up with impish glee and reaching out she pushed aside his hair and stared at him.

His mouth was black.

"Vincent! You've been eating the licorice jellybeans!" She studied the big bowl full of candies and added: "You've eaten *all* the licorice jellybeans!"

He ducked his head, but not fast enough to hide a distinctly sheepish grin.

She declared roguishly: "I like that smile, Vincent. It's so *guilty*, Come on, lemme see it..." Slipping a hand beneath his chin she tried to force his head up, but he turned away from her and lowered his head stubbornly.

And then, amazingly, a tiny helpless chuckle escaped him...

Thoroughly entranced, Catherine climbed up to her knees, slid her arms over his hunched shoulders and seized him by the chin and forehead. Giggling, she tried to pull his head around and he continued to resist her. Ducking even lower, he pulled her along until he threatened to topple her bodily over his shoulders and she let out a delighted squeal of alarm ---

Just then William stepped in, carrying another batch of freshly-boiled eggs. He took one incredulous look at the tussling pair and stammered: "I ... I'll come back later." And he hurried away.

Lightheaded and giggling, Catherine relaxed and lay against Vincent's back, her chin on his shoulder. She kissed him through his hair and then resumed a sitting position on the bench. As she reached far across the table to get one of the baskets, Vincent turned and glanced at her tentatively. Then, leaning over, he buried his nose in her hair and took a long, deep breath, his eyes closing. As she straightened up to respond to this, he pulled away again and meticulously fished an egg out of the blue dye.

Catherine stared at him, newly entranced. It was unlike Vincent to be playful. With her head tilted fetchingly she stared at him some more and then demanded, "What's got into you?"

He merely returned her gaze with sweetly shining eyes and said nothing.

She queried: "Is it the licorice jellybeans?" Her fingers raked through the bowl of candies. "Are there any more?"

Again came that wonderful chuckle...

They sat in silence for a while doing nothing, and then Vincent murmured: "I do feel good inside today. You've been here for a long time. And lately, something has happened that has given me a new sense of myself and a new sense of us."

He picked up her hand. His fuzzy fingers were rainbow-hued from the dyes. He pressed it against his cheek.

"When I was with Liz, she wanted to know all about you. So I told her our story — from the beginning. I've never told anyone that story before. That was such a magical experience for me. I was showing my most precious treasure to someone who would really understand. And in showing it, I began to see it more clearly, myself. And what I saw... what I saw, Catherine! It was like looking at the most beautiful and uplifting work of art that I could possibly imagine, letting my eyes move from one side of the frame to the other, until I was dizzy with joy — and then.... and then knowing that there would still be more.... There would be even more. More to be seen and felt. More to be lived. More joy—"

She launched herself into his arms and they cuddled feverishly for a long time.

She whispered against his ear: "There is much more, Vincent. I promise you..."

Around the door jamb William's yellow-bearded face once again appeared — and was instantly withdrawn.

Catherine found another black jellybean and pushed it into Vincent's mouth. Then she popped three red ones into her own.

"And what about your other feeling — about yourself," she prompted obstructedly through sticky chewing.

"That's harder to describe," Vincent reflected. "It's as though somehow — through learning that I have ancestors — I've begun to feel more like *me*."

"I think I understand. Your sense of who you are is more complete."

"Mm-mm."

"You're still thinking about getting her down here for a visit, aren't you?"

He picked up a dyed egg and a crayon and applied himself to drawing flowers.

Presently, he said: "Father won't discuss what happened between him and Liz. Every time I bring it up, he changes the subject. Somehow I don't think it went well."

He said earnestly: "But what I want to do is get her down here for an evening — *as Father's guest*."

The crayon fell out of his hand and he stared off into space. After a moment, he passed a blackened tongue futilely over his blackened lips but he remained silent and distant, a tiny light gleaming in his eyes.

"You look like you're hatching a plot," she observed.

He said enigmatically: "Let's go see Mouse."

Mouse's lab was the usual shambles of mixed scientific impedimenta and trash. In between bins of glassware and rusting bits of scrap iron, lay mouldering heaps of newspapers and magazines, most of which had been chewed and shredded around the edges by Arthur. As Catherine and Vincent entered from the tunnel, green sine waves rippled across the bug-eye of an oscilloscope facing them and various chemical solutions bubbled sedately over Bunsen-burners.

Mouse rushed gnome-like from a far corner.

"Vincent! Catherine!" His welcome was split between a huge grin and various half-begun words and at last, his vocal ability undone by excitement, he gave up and pointed hospitably toward a couple of chairs.

"You stay for a while?" he finally managed to blurt out and then he beamed at them proudly.

"For a few minutes, Mouse," Vincent said, straddling one chair. Catherine remained standing, playing idly with a magnet sculpture as she waited to see what Vincent had up his sleeve.

Mouse ogled Vincent's colorfully stained fingers and puzzled at the blackened mouth and then his eyes lit up.

"Easter bunny coming! Right?"

Catherine giggled: "Well he won't be bringing any black jellybeans this year," and she draped an arm across Vincent's shoulders.

"Mouse —" Vincent's soft voice held a furtive purr. "Would you like to be part of a conspiracy?"

The younger man fumbled delightedly with a ragged hole in the elbow of his sweater, his eyebrows working up and down. He was easily the most jittery person Catherine had ever met, but he could settle down and he had even been known to sit quietly during meetings.

Vincent continued: "There is a lady veterinarian Above who has become a friend of Father's. Her name is Liz. I want to get her down here for a dinner with Father and I need a good excuse. I understand Arthur has had a sore toe —"

Mouse shrugged effusively, "All better," he pronounced with regret.

Vincent gazed at him steadily. "Yes, but, Mouse — the point is that it's not all better. That's what we want to tell Father."

Catherine gave Vincent's shoulder a surreptitious squeeze. She was greatly impressed. This was a side of him she'd never seen before...

Mouse said: "Oh-h-h-h..." Then tiny wicked dagger points of glee sparkled in his eyes and he said: "OK — good. OK — fine. Mouse understands."

"And furthermore..." Vincent dramatically lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "When Liz comes down here to check Arthur's toe, you can always say —"

Tossing his head nonchalantly Mouse chirped: "Toe all better! Happened suddenly! Don't know why! Must be miracle!"

"Exactly," Vincent confirmed. "I knew I could count on you, Mouse..."

In the sewing chamber, Mrs Larrimore sat alone at her machine, surrounded by the cutting tables piled high with bolts of cloth. From the tunnel, Vincent and Catherine peeked in at her and then withdrew back into the shadows. Lowering his head, Vincent whispered: "I think you should stay here. If you go in with me she'll want to know all about what people are wearing Topside and you'll be stuck for a long time..."

Catherine whispered back: "Good idea" and slipped him a quick squeeze before he went in to Mrs Larrimore.

She looked up as he approached. "Vincent, luv! Have you split your shoulder seams again?"

He pulled up a chair and sank down. Folding his arms on the end of the sewing machine, he laid his head down and looked up at her endearingly.

"Mrs Larrimore," he murmured. "Would you like to be part of a conspiracy?"

In the tunnel on the way to Father's study, Vincent walked beside Catherine with his high-shouldered flowing grace, lightly clasping her hand. His face was as grave as usual but hers was all puckered with a bursting inner hilarity.

This was absolutely incredible...

At the entrance to the study chamber, Vincent pushed her behind him and had a quick peek inside. At his desk Father was enjoying his solitary late lunch from a tray. It appeared to be his favorite — tomato soup and crackers, and he was reading, completely engrossed, while he ate.

Vincent looked down at Catherine dubiously. "Will you wait again?" She hissed at him: "Of course. I'm having a *ball*."

He started to move through the entrance, but her hands slipped inside his vest — into the warmth — and lingered against the muscles that stirred beneath his tunic. She felt his breath along her hair, and his hesitation as he enjoyed her touch for a moment in the darkness. His lips moved against her forehead...

Vincent entered the study chamber and trotted down the steps.

Father noted his arrival with apprehension.

Father hadn't been quite the same since their last discussion...

"Yes, well — what is it, Vincent?" He took a very deep breath and gripped the chair arm.

"It's about the animal members of our community," Vincent stated evenly. "Arthur and—" He searched his mind, desperately trying to remember the name of Mrs Larrimore's cat.— Mrs Larrimore's cat."

Father stared at him glassily. "Very well," he said faintly. "What about them?"

"They are both in need of medical attention. Arthur has an infected toe and the cat has developed an alarming cough. Could I suggest, Father, that you inform the council at tonight's meeting that Liz Sprague will be asked down to treat these two beloved pets?"

Father scrubbed at his mouth with the napkin. "I don't see why she has to come Below," he contended. "Can't the animals be crated and taken up to her?"

In the tunnel, Catherine tensed but Vincent replied without missing a beat. He said: "Arthur has never been outside Mouse's lab since he was found as a tiny, helpless baby. The trauma for him would be extreme. And the weather Above is still quite cold and damp. A cat with a cough should not—"

"Very *well*, Vincent. You have a couple of good points. All right. I will bring it up at council tonight." He gulped down some soup and started to raise the book again.... But Vincent was still there.

"There's just one more thing, Father."

Father stared at him with a hunted expression.

"Couldn't she be invited for dinner?"

Father's expression changed to gap-jawed bewilderment. Slapping down his napkin, he glared at Vincent who simply gazed mildly back at him with mute appeal.

"You know, I just don't understand you," Father asserted hotly. "For the life of me I simply fail to understand what you see in this woman. Frankly, Vincent, she has all the earmarks of a total shrew."

Vincent tossed out an arm. "How can you say that, Father? Liz is a pillar of warmth and solicitude."

Father retorted: "To you maybe." He bit a cracker in half with a loud snap. "I got quite a different kind of treatment. My every effort at friendliness was rebuffed. First she made a fool out of me because I had misdiagnosed your skin condition. Then she proceeded to attack my powers of observation *in general* concerning you. Frankly, I find her a most unpleasant and antagonistic woman." He inhaled a mouthful of crumbs and exploded into a coughing fit. Vincent went to him and thumped his back.

"Then there's only one thing to do, Father."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"You must ask William to serve the two of you dinner together here in your study —"

"*Wha-a-a-t?*"

"— so that the rest of the community can be spared her unfriendliness."

In the tunnel, Catherine huddled against the rocky wall, silently convulsed with laughter.

Father splashed a spoonful of soup down his vest and scrubbed at it violently with the napkin.

"Are you trying to martyr me or something?"

"If it's really too much to ask, Father —"

Father slammed the heel of his hand down on the desk. "Oh, I suppose it *isn't*," he thundered. "But just a simple dinner. Absolutely nothing fancy. Perhaps that duckling in Flemish olive sauce —"

"But that's one of William's best company recipes. I thought you said —"

"Well, we don't want to offend the woman. My God, she thinks little enough of me as it is. And have Sarah order a bottle of that Mouton Cadet Blanc. Perhaps the '83 —"

"Father — that's one of the most expensive—"

"Dammit, Vincent, I know how much it costs. Do you want me to look like a total cheapskate?"

In the tunnel, safely out of earshot of the study chamber, Catherine emitted a squeal, threw her arms around Vincent's neck and hugged him madly.

"You are *fiendishly* clever! I never knew you had such talent!"

"Are you impressed with me, Catherine?"

"Impressed is hardly the word!"

"It's as Homer said, isn't it? 'A decent boldness ever meets with friends'."

* * *

A pair of legs dangling over the edge of the roof made Liz glance up from her book with an involuntary smile.

"Vincent! Back so soon? Come on down."

He slid off and dropped lightly to the terrace. His hood was up, and since it was just barely dark, she assumed he must have done some of his traveling in the daylight.

As he pulled a chair up close she said: "I knew there was a reason why I didn't report that broken lock."

"You are taking a risk," Vincent admonished gently.

"Hell with that. If I have to sit here with a shotgun across my knees I'll do it. How are you, Vincent?" She picked up one of his hands and inspected the pink scars. "Looks good. How's the body?"

"All my fur has grown back."

"Great. Been taking your vitamins?"

"Mm-hmm."

She reached out and flipped back his hood. "And how's Catherine?"

He murmured with quiet reverence: "Catherine is Catherine..."

"In other words she's just fine."

He nodded and began to rummage in the deep pocket on the inside of his cloak. He produced a small envelope sealed old-fashioned style with a blob of sealing wax and he handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"A dinner invitation from Father."

She scowled. Picking up the book she laid it aside and instantly, as though he had been waiting for this cue, Vincent leaned forward and laid his head down on the cushion. This so distracted her, that she did not crumple the envelope into a ball — which is what she had been about to do.

His soft voice floated up to her: "I do hope you'll accept."

There was something so touching and ingenuous about his personality. How could she say no to Vincent? From the beginning he'd had her totally beguiled and he still did.

I wonder what you would think, Vincent, if you knew how long it's been since I accepted a dinner invitation..

"Will you come?" he asked wistfully.

"All right." She reflected a moment or two and then said: "I suppose the raccoon still has his sore toe and the cat is still coughing."

He nodded against the cushion and then just stayed there quietly resting on her lap. Dammit, Vincent, there isn't anything more appealing you could do, more guaranteed to make me go all soft and buttery, you old charmer... Nevertheless, she placed a hand on his head. Beneath the sleek black cloak his back moved with his breathing and the breeze lifted bits of his hair. He was very still.

Presently she asked: "Has Father said anything more about the trip?"

"No."

"But you still want to go."

"With all my heart." He stirred a little and sighed heavily. "If only I could know that I can be what Catherine needs.... what she longs for..."

"I see. You're still worried about sex," she said bluntly.

"Something could go wrong..."

"Well, you're no macho clod, Vincent."

He said enigmatically, in a strange, dull tone; "Part of me is a raging beast."

"I know. He's magnificent. He is your strength."

Vincent went on in a dreary voice: "He is also my curse. He lives inside me and I use him, but we are not the same, and I fear his strength. Sometimes, if there is more than one enemy to be fought, the beast takes over so completely that I become lost. But when this happens, Catherine is able to break through to me. With her voice and her touch she can bring me back to myself."

"So Catherine can short-circuit the beast?"

"Yes. She can cause me to revert to my normal self. And then she comforts me."

"I imagine you need that after the beast has been on a rampage."

Vincent said darkly: "But there are other times when he comes over me. If I'm startled or suddenly hurt, it is the beast who reacts. If I have a very bad, frightening dream, it is the beast who wakes me with his growling. And so I wonder if.... I wonder..." He swallowed and fell silent.

"You wonder if he'll intrude where he's not wanted?"

He nodded, very tense beneath her hand. "I'm afraid — afraid that he might hurt Catherine," he whispered tightly.

She stroked his hair and the tenderness welled up inside her. "Vincent — you must have more faith in yourself."

He said raggedly: "I don't know how to have faith in myself. I don't know all of me. All of me hasn't emerged yet. The bond grows and changes, but so does the beast inside me. He becomes stronger and more vigilant and always closer to the surface. I don't know what to expect of myself, Liz. There aren't any others like me to ask. I don't know who or what I'm going to become." His voice carried a raw edge of despair.

"You won't hurt Catherine, Vincent. It would be impossible."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Well, I think you will believe it after I finish putting together all the facts. But I need a little time, and, I suppose —" She sighed grimly. "— a few talks with your father. Can you have some faith in me?"

He lifted his head and gazed at her fondly. "I do have faith in you, Liz. You are so good to me. You've already done so much."

"Nonsense."

"I remember the first time you touched me in Hughes' lab. I knew right away that we were going to be friends. But even before that, you did something special."

"I did? What was that?"

"The first time you looked at me you liked what you saw. That's never happened to me before."

He laid his head down again and she stroked his hair.

* * *

Father glanced around the room, seeing it with critical eyes for the first time in thirty-five years: the untidy heaps of books, the mismatched, carelessly arranged furniture, the large dent in the brass Corinthian helmet that hung over a gaping hole in the wall without quite covering it, the tiny specks and puddles of hardened candle wax all over everything, the threadbare oriental rugs, the layer of black dust that quite obscured the continents on the antique globe, the cracking and curling theater posters, the layer of grime on the glass top of the antique medical instrument display case, the tarnished silver candle-holders, the spider-web networks in the big brass candelabra, the overflowing trash baskets, the piles of yellowed notes from abandoned projects, the dusty frayed rolls of structural diagrams jammed into every niche and cranny, the soot-blackened messy fireplace, the veneer peeling off the inlaid cabinet beside the sprung old Victorian couch...

He sighed heavily and dropped the dust cloth he had been about to wield. Then he kicked it under the desk. What was the use, anyway? The whole place suggested seedy bachelor. And he'd even been married once...

At least he could congratulate himself on being the one presentable thing in the room. And he was immaculate. Scrubbed, clean-clothed and freshly trimmed, he wore a handsomely embroidered vest which had been a Christmas present from some of the women years ago, and around his shoulders was draped a shawl which actually didn't have any moth holes. It had taken him most of the afternoon to find one that didn't.

He couldn't understand his mood. Nothing seemed to be very clear, and then at times everything seemed too clear. He found himself drifting in unexpected areas of the tunnels, suddenly confused and wondering where he'd originally been headed. He found himself whistling little tunes. He found himself thinking the most unexpected thoughts — like the fact that he really should have married Mary a long time ago, but had never wanted to.

That impulse had never come to him, even though Mary had been a close friend for almost twenty years, often more like a right arm. And they certainly were close, stopping just short of intimacy. They had hugged and kissed many, many times, she had held him when he was upset, nursed him when he was sick, assisted with many of his medical routines. He had treated her womanly complaints and patiently listened to her long, often repetitious accounts of the children. And he had always loved her for her motherly attentions to Vincent. But somewhere deep inside them, their personalities were like two separate pieces of a bridge constructed on opposite shores of a river — and never quite meeting at the center.

They were too old — or perhaps merely too wise — for unrealistic expectations of each other.

He heard voices in the tunnel. Father raked his fingers through his hair one last time and nervously faced the entrance. Elizabeth Sprague and Vincent emerged from the shadows and stood together on the platform at the top of the stairs. She was carrying her vet bag and she wore a light coat over a plain navy sweater and a pleated blackwatch-plaid skirt - and she somehow managed to convey a gruff elegance as she stood there gazing down at him with her bold expression.

As he opened his mouth to say hospitable and welcoming words she demanded, "Well Jacob — what nostrums and quackeries have you been prescribing lately?"

Father decided to let that pass. Making an expansive gesture with his hand he said, "It's good to see you, er — Liz. Please — come on down and make yourself comfortable."

Vincent discreetly turned to leave but her hand shot out and seized his arm. "Just a minute," she said, almost snapping at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Vincent's head inclined with an apologetic air. "I'm afraid I must excuse myself," he explained. "I have chores to do, including tub room duty in half an hour." He freed his arm, backed away and with a whisper of cloak disappeared into the shadows. Liz turned a cold eye on Father and remained standing at the top of the stairs. He retreated a few steps and briefly looked away, just as she, also, turned and stared bitterly into the darkness that had claimed Vincent. Then, at the same moment, they both turned again and met each other's reluctant gaze.

"Please—" Father repeated. "Come down."

She did so at last, the lines and planes of her craggy face touched by the warm orange light, and she laid the vet bag on a chair. Then she shrugged off the coat and flung it over the chair back.

They stood looking at each other.

Father said: "Have you been to see the animals already?"

She replied with slow and heavy emphasis: "Yes. They're both very healthy."

Father muttered something absently under his breath. Aloud he said: "Oh. Well, ah — can I offer you a glass of sherry?"

She said incisively: "Please do."

He limped over to the cabinet and took out a small silver tray — noting unhappily that it, too, was badly tarnished—and two sherry glasses. At least those were clean. Liz went over to the long table and critically surveyed the array of notes and drawings.

She said: "This must be the math project Vincent told me about."

He responded proudly: "Yes. It —"

"I can see that it, like your medical diagnosing, is on the haphazard side."

Father's hand dropped from the cabinet latch and clenched at his side. "What?" he said tersely.

She reached across the notes and drawings and he hobbled quickly over and hovered there protectively but she was only pointing.

"Look, Jacob — this layout is backward. You've got topics in analytic geometry ahead of basic concepts and linear spaces. Those ought to come first. Then treat multilinear forms, tensors and linear transformations."

He stared at her, first taken aback, then perplexed and finally angrily defensive. "What do you know about this sort of material?" he demanded irately.

"A thing or two," she retorted. "This layout would make better sense if you flung all these papers into the air and let them settle at random —"

He almost bellowed: "Do you always ram your opinions down other people's throats as though you were loading a Howitzer?"

"Why not? Is there some other way to get through to you thick-headed. imbeciles? If I were a man, you'd be standing there smugly chortling to yourself and saying, 'Isn't it nice of the dear old boy to give me a few tips.' You show me a man who can take a useful tip from a woman without acting like she's trying to cut his balls off. You show me just one —"

* * *

Vincent slunk into Mouse's lab and looked around. The tousled blond head emerged suddenly from behind a network of wires and vacuum tubes, and Mouse greeted his visitor with a grin that came close to a leer. When his effusive facial signals got no answering trace of enthusiasm from Vincent, the young man lapsed into uncertainty and then hunched his shoulders in a silent question.

Vincent sank into a chair and sat staring glumly at the floor.

"They're shouting at each other," he said. To his surprise, Mouse gave a gurgle of delight.

"Is OK! Is good! Is fine!"

"It is?"

"Mouse knows! Mouse has seen!" Mouse lowered his voice confidentially and said: "People Topside.... Holding hands in park.... Shout for a while — yell even.... Shake each other even... And then—" He rolled his eyes and nodded vigorously. "And then — *iss, kiss, kiss!*" Another gurgling laugh rolled out of him. He questioned: "Father.... This lady — in love?"

"I think that would be stretching it a bit," Vincent confessed.

Abruptly, Mouse's mood changed. Tossing his head in the general direction of Father's study chamber he whispered in a dark, significant way: "Vincent... Listening..."

All of a sudden Vincent knew what he was being accused of, and his gaze slid away from the younger man and came to rest, unfocused, in a corner. The undeniable fact hung heavily between them.

"Vincent — listening! Vincent — eavesdropper!" Mouse crowed with glee, flung himself on a lab stool and rocked back and forth.

* * *

Dinner mellowed them both.

As they sat beside their empty plates, replete and still sipping wine, they had not exactly progressed as far as friendship, but they had reached a state of what might be called armed neutrality.

Liz said grudgingly: "That was very good."

Father smiled. "Yes — William is an excellent and dedicated cook. Before he joined us, we used to eat a lot of bean and frankfurter casseroles."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No," he said resignedly. "It will be carried out. One thing we have plenty of down here is drafts." Nevertheless, he eyed her disapprovingly as she arose with her cigarette in hand and strolled toward the other end of the room.

"You should quit those deadly things," he said flatly.

"I never smoke until after five," she pointed out. "That way I can never smoke too much."

"Any at all is too much," Father declared.

She moved slowly around the room with her cigarette, inspecting the wall decor and she stopped in front of his framed MD certificate from Johns Hopkins.

"I remember the Chittenden Institute trial," she murmured, and she happened to glance at him as she said those words. She saw the sudden darkening of his eyes and pressure along his mouth and the drawn look of pain that came over him, before he turned away to light another candle. His reaction dismayed her in a way that was unsettling. His feelings were not particularly important to her; feelings seldom were. Yet she regretted the careless remark and for a moment she studied him with close attention. He was not a big man. His frame was slight, his hands sensitive and rather delicate, his hair and beard had a very fine, soft-looking texture. There was something familiar about him — he was gentle the same way Vincent was. He had the same fragile inner core of sadness.

In a softer tone that she would normally have used only with Vincent, she asked gently: "Is that why you came down here?"

He nodded.

"There have been times in my own life..." she began, then she re-phrased: "If I had known about this place years ago, you might have met up with me sooner, not that you'd have wanted to."

"We would have been happy to have you," Father said quietly.

She glanced at him with an expression that barely disguised a smile. "Not enough fur-bearing creatures down here."

It was the first time he had seen her face relax, and in his eyes she was briefly transformed. In that instant, he had a quick glimpse of a path into her soul, into a realm of peace and purpose and even considerable joy. It was as though a sudden breeze had lifted the corner of a blank page to reveal a beautiful picture beneath. Then the tough, gritty reserve fell back into place and she was again the austere face he had always seen in publicity photographs.

"Speaking of fur-bearing creatures," she said. "I want to talk to you about Vincent."

Father set his wineglass aside. He had been expecting this, but he still didn't exactly welcome it.

She rummaged in her vet bag and produced a stiff piece of paper which she handed to him.

He muttered: "This is a karyotype. Vincent's?"

"Yes. Look it over. While you're at it do some counting."

He glanced up quickly and with some alarm. "You mean there aren't forty-six chromosomes here?"

"Try fifty."

"Oh, dear God..."

"And have a look at the size of that Y chromosome."

Father stared at the paper, his eyes widening.

She said: "No human male could possibly have contributed a Y chromosome that size. I've never seen anything like it. It doesn't exist in the animal kingdom either."

Father muttered: "This is unheard of."

"I just said that."

"The haploid sets were slightly mismatched," he observed, fascinated. "And yet they were able to join..."

"And build a composite offspring developed from two conflicting plans. Remarkable, isn't it?" She went on: "Vincent's physical characteristics are *interspecific*; he is the progeny of two different species. His parents differed enormously in genetic hereditary makeup. Both parents were anthropoid; one was human."

"And this other species — I wonder who — what—?"

"We may be seeing more of them. Their species and ours have gametes that are chemically attracted to each other."

But then Father's ambivalence swept over him like a returning tide and he dropped the karyotype onto the desktop and said: "This conversation makes me uneasy. I'm not sure I really know why."

"It makes you uneasy, Jacob, because you love Vincent and view him as a human being. You don't like to think of his differences, his alienness. But if we are to help Vincent live as best he can, we *must* think about them. We must learn all we can about him, and what we don't know we must guess at."

He frowned, his gaze drawn back to the karyotype.

She said: "Vincent's paternal forebears have a physiology very close to that of *Felidae*, yet they walk erect, have highly developed brains and fully prehensile hands."

"And yet Vincent had dew claws—" Father interposed, "—giving him, in effect, six fingers."

"The six-digit mutation is very common in the cat family," she reminded him. "I think that's all it amounts to."

He nodded agreeably. In spite of his reservations, discussing Vincent scientifically with this woman did have its irresistible elements...

She went on: "As you know hybrids tend to be intermediate between parental type, and so from this can deduce that. Vincent's papa was a creature even bigger, stronger and more aggressive than Vincent." She paused, allowing him to reflect on this and, predictably, to take issue with one part of the statement.

Father said decisively: "Vincent *isn't* aggressive."

She humored him with uncharacteristic patience. "How's that?"

"Well, quite simply, he's the gentlest individual I've ever known. He's sensitive, tender and deeply compassionate. He needs to give and receive large amounts of affection. Spiritually and emotionally he shuns violence."

"I don't dispute any of that. But you're talking about his personality. I'm talking about his physiology, which includes his programmed behavior. And physiologically, Vincent is equipped to be a fierce fighter, which indeed he is. His bond with Catherine and his role in this community both require that he fight, but unlike you or I or anybody else, Vincent doesn't need to pick up any weapons. His weapons are built in. He has what it takes to do lethal damage, or to make a viable threat of lethal damage. He comes from a species that evolution has equipped to fight enemies. What does that suggest to you, Jacob?" She waited a moment and then prompted: "You find it everywhere in nature. Where you have a species that is fighting enemies you have a species that possesses a strict internal dominance hierarchy —"

He concluded rapidly: "I know, I know — you have a lot of in-fighting: status challenges, alpha/beta male stuff..."

"Very good, Jacob."

"Well, I have read your books. And I've always admired your treatment of the theory of critical reaction."

She felt a quiet elation and then wondered, puzzled, why she should care at all about what he thought of her work. In her singleness of purpose here, she had no use for his favor, only his open-mindedness.

"All of Vincent's fighting is critical reaction, Jacob. It is the strongest and most dangerous type of fighting that exists — because it is motivated by a strong social tie."

"Catherine."

"Or the community."

"Which means —" Father continued, anticipating her, "— that any threat to Catherine or to the community excites his strongest fight impulses. I think that's always been obvious. I just never linked it to critical reaction, before. But you're right. That's what it is."

"Jacob, in Vincent's case, critical reaction goes further than that. Or perhaps I would better express it if I say that *it is going to go further* than that."

"What do you mean?"

"The psychic bond, Jacob. This is something that must also be protected and defended. If the bond is threatened — by Catherine's absence, let's say, because that would mean Vincent couldn't respond to her psychic cues with rescue or solace — Vincent's aggression is also unleashed. Perhaps right now this just takes the form of restlessness, irritability and emotional breakdown. Am I right?"

After a long, searching moment of reflection Father nodded.

"But you must remember that the bond is growing stronger all the time, and with it Vincent's commitment strengthens — all the time. His reactions are also becoming stronger, and harder to control. Before I say anything more on this, I want you to take a minute and think carefully about the last two years. How has Vincent behaved when the bond has been threatened - even if it was just a case of Catherine needing something *other than rescue*, which Vincent was unable to give her."

Father brooded in tight-lipped silence as she pulled deeply on another cigarette. At length he said: "Last year Catherine wanted to take Vincent on a trip to see a lake she had enjoyed visiting as a child. I forbade it. After—" He broke off, a tension building harsh lines into his face. "After Vincent returned from telling her that he would not be going with her, all — he went into a sort of frenzy, absolutely trashed his room. I heard the noise of furniture breaking and rushed to the scene, just as he collapsed in a faint. We were unable to waken him. It was one of those deep sleeps he sometimes goes into when he has been physically hurt — and of course this time he was emotionally hurt. He remained unconscious for eight hours, and while he was asleep I had the men repair all the damage. I also summoned Catherine. He woke up when she kissed him. She was able to comfort him and after that he was all right."

"I suppose you're glad nobody was present when he had this tantrum."

Father's grip on the chair arm tightened. "Vincent would never attack one of us."

"Not under normal circumstances. But under normal circumstances, he doesn't break furniture either, does he? I would say that Vincent wasn't in his right mind at that moment. Wouldn't you?"

Father stared at her, his eyes cavernous.

She pressed onward relentlessly. "I suppose you think that incident was a pretty extreme example of what can happen to Vincent when the bond is thwarted. But, Jacob — you haven't seen anything yet." She returned to her chair. She asserted in a grave and measured tone: "Vincent is not an adult creature. He hasn't finished developing. Physiologically, he is still a juvenile."

"What?"

"I believe that Vincent's paternal forebears are designed not to reach complete sexual maturity until the psychic bond has been fully formed. Vincent is in the process, right now, of attaining sexual maturity. And perhaps you've read enough of my books to know what happens, as a rule of thumb, in nature when a male creature belonging to a highly aggressive fighting species attains full sexual maturity."

Father's mouth went dry but his lips moved automatically. "He becomes more aggressive."

"Precisely. In any highly aggressive fighting species, critical reaction intensifies one hundred-fold. And, of course, the other kinds of aggression as well, even in the less aggressive species. Just for example let's take the case of the chimpanzee. All the chimps you see in circus acts, TV advertisements or children's shows are juveniles. And there's nothing more charming and adorable than a young chimp. But as soon as it matures, it becomes a vicious, fiendishly powerful tyrant, particularly the male. Another example is Mouse's raccoon which currently happens to be a juvenile. In another three or four months, I fully expect that Mouse is going to have to turn the animal loose. It is a male. It is going to become unpredictable, unmanageable and most likely a vicious biter —"

Father railed at her: "Are you seriously asking me to believe that Vincent will become *vicious*?"

"*Of course not.* Vincent will not become vicious. I'm just giving you examples. What I want you to comprehend, Jacob, is that Vincent's moods and impulses are going to change, and his reactions when Catherine or the bond is threatened are going to intensify. Vincent's psychic, nervous and hormonal processes of maturation are not yet complete. Even Vincent himself is aware of it. He very succinctly expressed it to me a few evenings ago."

Father shifted his position uncomfortably. "Yes, well — ah, Vincent has also recently implied to me that, er... the advent of Catherine in his life has brought him to a sort of, well — sexual awakening." He swallowed nervously and looked around for another candle to light.

Liz folded her arms across her sweater, leaned back in the chair and adopted an expression of tired patience. She commented flatly: "Jacob, you express yourself like a non-conformist lay preacher. In other words, Vincent didn't know how to feel horny until Catherine came into his life."

Father blushed and rubbed his chin.

She got up, dug out another cigarette and roamed a short distance away. She said dryly: "I've spent a lifetime dealing with strange sexual anatomy and even stranger sexual habits. One of a zoo vet's many priorities is to ensure the reproductive success of all charges. It tends to give one a certain jaded outlook." She drifted around the room and smoked. In the candlelight her eyes seemed a luminous grey. "I'm not saying that Vincent isn't 'grown up'. He is grown up. It's just that certain attributes aren't yet fully formed. And he has certain changes to go through."

"What exactly do you predict?"

"Generally, he will become more solitary, more restless and unpredictable. He won't accept his restrictions as passively. His metabolic rate and energy level will not allow him to be sedentary. Specifically, he will acquire a bit more muscle bulk, his fur will become denser and the guard hairs coarser, his urine will take on a stronger smell and, of course, he will begin to manufacture sperm cells — unless he is going to be sterile."

Father said quietly: "I think Vincent is hoping he's sterile."

"He may be. It's a common hybrid effect. But he'll still go through the other changes because his body is programmed to do so. His Leydig cells will still produce the higher levels of testosterone, even if he doesn't produce sperm. There is one thing that puzzles me about Vincent, though." She dropped the cigarette butt into the fireplace. "He's thirty-three years old and still physiologically a juvenile. He comes from a species that evolution

has left equipped to mark territory and yet his urine has no odor; he still has his fluffy baby fur. Now it's possible that Vincent's paternal forebears are designed to reach puberty much later than *Homo sapiens* and after most of the adult physical growth has been attained. But even if that's so, it seems to me that Vincent's bonding mechanism has been considerably delayed. I have a strong hunch that he should have bonded much earlier in life and should be a fully mature male by now. Did something happen, Jacob?"

She gazed at him with those penetrating eyes and despite his qualms over the subject and its implications he felt a keen admiration for her. She had assembled a convincing theory around Vincent, and though Father knew he would have to reflect on it further before accepting it fully, he was deeply impressed. It all made perfect sense — and there was no disputing that karyotype.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I think I know the sort of incident you're looking for, and yes, something like that did happen. When he was sixteen he had a violent crush on a girl he had grown up with. Her name was Lisa Campbell. You may have heard of her; she's now a well-known dancer." His eyes clouded and grim emotion thinned his lips. "She had a mean and shallow side to her nature that I could see but Vincent couldn't. She was talented, she was beautiful. He was totally dazzled by her in every way. I watched one day as she teased him, dancing up to him and starting to kiss him and then coyly pulling away. She'd done this sort of thing to him before, playing with his feelings — and it seemed almost spiteful."

He paused there and glanced at Liz. A dark fury had settled over her as he spoke these words and he observed this with close attention. At that moment he saw directly into her heart, and there he found love for Vincent. There he found a full, surprising blend of tenderness and compassion, along with the anger that his tale evoked — an anger that grew out of caring.

His eyes filled and he had to clear his throat to keep a quaver out of his voice. "But all he could see was her beauty. He finally managed to catch hold of her and then he didn't want to let go. Because of his ardor she grew alarmed and struggled and ended up getting cut by his claws. It was her own stupid fault, but Vincent, being the way he is, blamed himself bitterly. At that point I sent the girl Above to live with guardians, with whom she could pursue her career in dancing."

He stopped here and they shared a long silence.

"That was absolutely the right thing to do, Jacob," Liz said. "If Vincent had bonded with such a woman, he would be a very unfulfilled and frustrated creature by now."

Father added: "He went into a severe emotional decline for a while but he came out of it. There were other young women who passed through our community from time to time, but he didn't make another investment of that nature until he found Catherine."

Her anger had subsided and she now reflected carefully for a moment. "Yes, that was exactly what I was looking for. He tried to bond with this girl, and if he had done so, his sex drive would have formed then. But it was derailed because the hardly-formed bond was abruptly terminated. This was a set-back to his entire system. I'm not surprised it took him so long to recover. It's fortunate, I suppose — in fact I'm sure it is. He certainly has found the right bond-mate now."

"Yes, I'm very fond of Catherine," Father admitted. "But I do fear for them both..."

"Let me tell you a bit more about what you should fear, Jacob." Her eyes blazed at him with her intensity of feeling as she settled into her chair again. "You should fear the *consequences* of any extreme threat to the bond at this stage in its development. Vincent is still an unfinished creature. He is not yet fully mature. He is becoming sexually aware and will shortly become sexually active. This is going to precipitate changes that will leave him ill-suited for a daily straight-jacket of restrictions. He must have an outlet — or at least periodic outlets — for the energy he is going to be feeling, for the psychic and sexual energy that must be applied toward the bond. If he doesn't have this outlet the result could be disastrous — to Vincent and very possibly to anyone who gets in the way. I'm not saying

it *will* be; I'm saying it *could* be. I reiterate, Jacob, that we have no way to predict exactly how much control Vincent could lose if he is forced to deny the ultimate requirements of the bond. If I were you, I wouldn't want to risk finding out." Her watchful gaze traveled over him, from his rigid, set jaw to the whitened knuckles on the chair arm, and she felt an inward satisfaction. She summarized: "With Catherine, Vincent is programmed by heredity to progress along an axis of psychic, emotional and physical achievement. He *must* be allowed to realize those potentials."

She folded her arms again and gave him a hard, probing stare. "Jacob — you *must* let Vincent go on this trip with Catherine."

* * *

Vincent reported to the tub room and checked the posted schedule on the tunnel wall outside. He had been assigned the nine-to-eleven-year-old boys. Good. That meant he wouldn't have to do anything except sit remotely in a corner and keep an eye on things. He briefly considered returning to his room to fetch a book, but then he discarded the idea.

Entering, Vincent found the large, warm, echoing chamber a blur of dashing, tussling, skidding and skittering naked or mostly-naked young bodies.

His ears were painfully assaulted by the squeals and shrieks of boyish exuberance. Puddles of water and piles of abandoned clothing lay everywhere. But the noise.... The noise...

Throwing back his head and filling his lungs, Vincent opened his jaws wide and let out what he gauged to be a moderate roar...

As the incredible sound died away to a rumble, a couple of dozen pairs of rounded eyes were fixed on him briefly, then there was a lot of splashing as the children climbed into their tubs. They knew the routine: two to a tub, a wash, a shampoo, and a rinse with large plastic pitchers. Tub-mates were all pre-assigned to eliminate confusion.

Something tugged at Vincent's left leg. He looked down at a naked four-year-old.

"Justin! What are you doing here? You aren't supposed to —"

A scream of rage dragged his attention to the right. Jeffrey, in a tub with Kipper, was red in the face and sputtering mad. Pointing at the smugly giggling Kipper he yelled: "He stuck the soap in my mouth!"

Vincent chided gently: "Kipper! Why did you—"

A small fist pounded him on the left side of his body, but higher than Justin should be able to reach. Vincent confronted an anxious-looking pudgy ten-year-old known as Spud.

Spud whined: "Vincent — I can't find my soap! I'm supposed to use this special soap because of my allergies. Mary *said*. And I just had it a minute ago."

A burst of furtive giggling issued from behind Vincent. He spun around and demanded:

"Did you boys hide Spud's soap?" The soap was quickly found but Justin still clung to Vincent's leg. Scooping up the child, Vincent went over to the pipe that ran through Mary's chamber and with Justin perched on one arm he tapped out a message.

Justin in tub room. Please—

A tidal wave of water cascaded across his waist. Justin yowled and began to cry. Vincent whirled and stared reproachfully at a row of innocent-looking wet heads, then he started toward an empty tub with his burden. Since Justin was naked *and* wet, he might as well be bathed. He deposited Justin in the tub, gave him a toy boat and went to separate Jeffrey and Kipper, who were struggling over the soap.

"Vincent! Joey threw my towel in the water!"

"I'll get you another towel, Peter."

He separated two more sets of tub-mates and then attended to several complaints about too much water, not enough water, too hot, too cold, and no-more-shampoo. Every now and then a cake of soap flew past his nose.

Suddenly, in a panic, he rushed back to Justin. The water, still pouring into the tub, had just about reached the four-year-old's chin. Hoping Mary would not choose this moment to come in he opened the drain and let half the water out.

And then, from the tub on his right, came a rising mirth-filled falsetto: "Charlie peed in the BATH-TUB!"

The red-haired, freckle-faced Charlie, who wasn't even in the same tub as the accuser, stood up instantly and bellowed: "I DID NOT!" The room exploded into water slapping, shrieks and giggles. Charlie implored: "Don't believe him, Vincent. He always does this to me!"

To Vincent's dismay a general chorus picked up and swelled with enthusiasm:

"CHARLIE PEED IN THE BATH-TUB! CHARLIE PEED IN THE BATH-TUB!"

Justin threw his toy boat on the floor.

And *then* Mary came in.

* * *

About an hour later, sodden, soapy and broken in spirit, Vincent escorted the pajama-clad group to their dormitory. Next time he would request the six-year-olds...

* * *

"By the way..." Liz paused in the act of putting on her coat. "What vaccines has Vincent had?"

Father thought back. "Oh — the usual. Polio, diptheria, rubella, pertussis, and he gets a tetanus booster every five years."

"But I assume you've never immunized him against feline enteritis or feline rhinotracheitis?"

Father chuckled tolerantly. "Those are not vaccines that I would typically have, or even be able to get." He glanced toward her bag. "Did you bring them with you?"

She reached into her vet bag. "Of course."

* * *

It was close to eleven before Vincent was able to report back to Father's study chamber, He escorted Liz Topside, guided her to the street, watched from cover while she flagged a taxi, and then returned Below.

On his way to his room he stopped to kiss Father good-night. To his horror Father gave him two injections.

* * *

The next morning, feeling poorly with reactions to the shots, Vincent heard the fifth-grade recitation class from his bed. After the youngsters had filed out of his room, he was left with only Kipper, who had been unprepared for his recitation and so had been asked to stay after class.

Lying swathed in the quilt and supported by pillows Vincent thumbed through Kipper's primer of American poetry.

"What seems to be the problem with *Evangeline*, Kipper?"

"I just don't like it."

Vincent protested softly: "But Kipper — *Evangeline* is one of the most hauntingly beautiful, evocative epic poems ever written. How can you feel that way?"

The curly-haired youngster gave a shrug and said: "Well, it just doesn't make sense. It's dumb!" He went on to explain with utter conviction: "Why would any girl follow some guy around for the rest of her life like that?" Perfectly persuaded, he went on: "I like girls, Vincent. I think they're nice! But I sure wouldn't go following one all over the place and use up my whole life looking for her, and I sure can't imagine any girl hunting for me, either. I mean it just seems dumb."

Vincent's eyes remained on the stalwart young face for a moment longer. Inspirational words came to him — a whole fleet of them — but then, as he gazed at Kipper, they all sank ignominiously beneath little wavelets of better sense. His eyes dropped to the book. Delicately, with one claw, he turned pages to '*The Song of Hiawatha*'.

"Why don't you try this one."

Kipper read a few stanzas silently and nodded agreement. "Oh, yeah. Much better. Okay, see you later, Vincent."

"Just a minute."

The youngster stopped and glanced back warily.

"You must now report to Mrs Larrimore, Kipper."

"Aw, Vincent — do I hafta?"

Vincent nodded soberly. "Mm-hmm." He said appeasingly: "I believe Pascal has some genuine ivory buttons from an nineteenth-century Nantucket whaling captain's coat."

Positively failing to look thrilled by this prospect, Kipper made his exit.

Shortly after that, Father came in, leaning heavily on his cane. As he hobbled over, Vincent gave him a brief stare and then turned his head to one side and gazed forlornly into the nearest group of candle-flames.

Father sank with a groan into the big mahogany chair with its worn velvet covering and said reproachfully: "You needn't look at me as though I were the grim reaper."

There was only silence. Vincent did not look at him or reply.

Father glanced at the empty dishes on the breakfast tray which lay nearby. "Still feeling ill? I see you ate a good breakfast."

Vincent said nothing. A spattering of messages came along the pipes and they both eavesdropped briefly. Then Vincent stared bleakly into the flames again and Father resumed his own melancholy expression.

At last Father heaved a definitive sigh. "I think it's only fair to tell you that the whole thing was Liz's idea. And she was right, of course. There are certain immunities that we need to make sure you have."

Vincent turned a softened expression on him. "I forgive you, Father."

"Oh, fine." Father rolled his eyes and tossed a hand. "If Liz sanctions it, then all is forgiven. I like that."

He rose and began to limp toward the tunnel, then he halted and looked back at Vincent. Father's cheeks became slightly flushed and his eyes began to glisten in an odd way. A smile began to twitch into being and was held back.

"Vincent," he said firmly, now staring with careful indifference at the rug. "There is an aspect of your education that. I have, er — *neglected*."

Vincent shot a startled glance at Father and then looked primly away. He did not appear to squirm or change expression, and yet muscle by muscle, tissue by tissue, he braced himself.

Without raising his head Father raised his eyes. The smile fully conquered his lips as he finished: "I've never taught you how to pack a suitcase."

Cognition came slowly to Vincent. His searching gaze found the twinkle in Father's eyes, the flush of pleasure on his cheeks and the anticipation in his whole attitude as he waited for these words to sink in.

Vincent gasped: "You mean —"

Father nodded. "Yes. I think you should take some good news to Catherine tonight. That is, of course —" He added solicitously: "— if you are feeling up to it—"

Vincent's eyes became blue pools of emotion. Flinging aside the quilt, he leaped out of bed and rushed to grab his cloak.

"I must tell her right away!" Then he stopped abruptly, almost skidding on the rug, and his hair flopped over his shoulder as he spun around to stare distractedly at Father. He stood for a moment, irresolute. "I can't. It's still morning."

Father smiled indulgently. "Well, Vincent.... I'm sure that if you were to tear into her building, leap into the elevator, rush across her crowded and busy office and throw yourself at her feet she would assume you had something special to tell her —"

His words were squeezed off by Vincent's embrace. Vincent lifted the older man right off his feet, provoking a startled gasp.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you, Father!"

Unseen by Vincent, a shadow crossed Father's face as they hugged. But it was only there for a moment. It had sprung briefly from feeling, with his own arms once again, the enormous, restrained power in his son's body, and from remembering the sobering implications of the things Liz had told him. But beyond all that, and more important than any of it, was his sincere and tremendous joy at being able to say yes.

Beyond all that lay his love for Vincent.

* * *

Please don't be late, Catherine. Not tonight...

On the balcony in the darkness Vincent paced back and forth. At times he would sit down on the bench or in one of the chairs — then instantly he would have to rise and pace again. The breeze rustled the flowers and plantings and swirled his cloak, but he did not feel its cool bite.

She was on her way...

He pressed his hands against the glass and laid his cheek briefly on the cold surface. Then he backed away and paced.

The lights snapped on.

Vaguely, through the curtains, he could see her slender form as she flung her coat and bag on the sofa. He rapped on the glass.

Her hair bounced as she hurried to the balcony doors.

She opened them and they stood looking at each other for a moment.

Her eyes were very full, her lips soft and still, her face was open and serene and filled with that wonderful luster that seemed to emanate from deep inside her. Around her neck she wore the fine gold chain that held the crystal pendant he had given her on the first anniversary of their meeting, and it lay in tiny sparkles against her pale smooth skin.

Her hands fell away from the doors and she smiled up at him.

"Catherine," he murmured. "I have good news."

Her chin lifted and she said in a tone softly touched with wonder: "I thought you might. All day I've had a strange, inexplicable feeling of joy. And it's just been a day like any other. It had to have come from the bond."

"Catherine — we can be together."

"Father said yes!"

He nodded and they fell into each other's arms. He rocked her, adoring the tight squeezing grasp of her small arms and the warmth of her silky hair beneath his chin. Her sweet aroma made him feel giddy and daring, and he had to take a deep lungful of cold night air to restore his inner balance. But her body, nestled so tightly against his, also worked its spell as it always did, only more intensely tonight. He was aware of heat and pressure in his secret places, and these were good feelings. Tonight they did not frighten him. Claspng her, he probed her feelings and sensations in a tentative, wondering search and found that they were much like his own — but gently restrained. She was consciously controlling her feelings. This pleased him, for there had been times—

"His decision came sooner than I thought it would," Catherine said, starting to pull away but Vincent recaptured her and she gave in with a comfy little grunt.

"I think Liz had something to do with it."

"Liz?"

"Yes. Her dinner-date with Father was last night and they talked till quite late. Most of it was about me."

"You mean you listened?"

Vincent stared blankly at the city lights, realizing that he had inadvertently revealed his shamelessness once again.

"Well, I—"

She giggled against his vest. Reaching up, she pushed back his hair and smoothed his face with both her hands. Her fingertips passed lovingly over his cheekbones, eyelids and temples. Inside him the heat grew more intense and began to trickle pleasantly along his nerves in other directions... At this point he released her gently and sat down on the bench.

She sat down beside him and took his hand. Gazing at him, her hair framed in a halo of light from the night gleams and glows of the city, she asked quietly: "Would you like to come inside?"

He leaned over and kissed her forehead and murmured: "Not yet."

Her eyes were full of kindness and understanding as she replied: "All right."

They both knew what this brief exchange had really been all about.

But nothing was lost from that magical evening.

How could it be when there was so much to look forward to?

* * *

**She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;**

The Lord Byron poem was one of Vincent's favorite ways of thinking about Catherine. The first four lines sifted through his scattered thoughts, as he reviewed the day's trivialities, and then, with a contemplative smile, dwelled happily on the day's golden moments: Father's consent and Catherine's joy. He could feel that she was still awake and thinking about him, and this awareness was like the satiny touch of a rose petal somewhere inside his head, centering his thoughts on her, cushioning them in bliss.... He repeated the lines of Byron's poem in a reverential whisper, and his gaze was drawn to sacred places in the room where various little gifts from her lay among his things.

He opened his journal and spent twenty minutes writing vividly, then checked his calendar. They would return from Connecticut on July 3, the last day of Catherine's requested vacation allotment, and the next day was, of course, a holiday. Good. They would be home in time for Father's Fourth of July talk and they could sit together in the common room, listening to his wise and thought-provoking words along with the rest of the community. Knowing Father, he would already be collecting his ideas toward this speech and Vincent resolved to try hard not to disturb him so often. That was always such an easy promise to make, and such a hard one to keep. He could recall that, even as a boy, he would vow not to interrupt Father and then something — a knot in his laces, a skinned knee, an unfathomable line in his reading assignment, or simply a need to sit on a lap — would send him scurrying into that study chamber again.

"Yes, Vincent — what is it now?" Father had always been so patient with him.

It was getting late. Rising he stripped down to his pants, took his vitamin drops and crawled into bed with a volume of Samuel Johnson. Curling up on his side, he propped himself on an elbow and began to read. He hoped Catherine would fall asleep soon. She had such a pleasant way of gliding into slumber. It always helped him to— His eyes swung away from the printed page.

She was thinking about him. She was thinking about their being together in Connecticut. She was anticipating — she was thinking about him that way. Wanting him.... Imagining it.... Wanting him, and without realizing it, making him want her — desperately, urgently.

A sudden heat rushed into his loins. The intensity of the feeling made him lurch upright into a sitting position.

She was feeling.... She was feeling so...

Something grabbed him like a vise in the groin. With a gasp of pain he flung himself over onto his face and dug both fists into his belly. Nothing happened. The engorged organ was trapped and would not emerge, and the pleasure his body should have felt splintered into a million tiny shards of pain. These seemed to grow, like razor blades in his tissues, and the pain grew with them.

He buried his face in the pillow, then sank his teeth into it and bit right through it. Frantic with pain he clawed it away, snarling, and bolted off the bed. His hip struck the table and knocked it over with a crash. Coming to his senses briefly, he grabbed the hearth broom and swatted out the tiny flames before the rug could catch fire. Then he just stood there, hunched over and in agony. There was nowhere to go.... There was no way to escape this...

Perhaps her mind would wander. Perhaps she would think about something else. Please, Catherine — please think about something else... But this was not to be.

He threw himself face down on the bed again. Something in his connection with Catherine peaked and he was dragged relentlessly beyond any possibility of conscious restraint into a place where pleasure should have claimed him, but pain won out. A gathering rush was brutally choked off, something inside him seemed to break and he thrashed on the bed, stifling a cry. The ghastly moment passed and then, to his intense dismay, he felt Father's hand on his shoulder and he heard Father's voice above him:

"Vincent — what is it? What's wrong?"

He gasped: "*N-nothing*. Just a bad dream. Please leave me, Father."

"But you seem to be in pain—"

Unable to stop himself Vincent lashed out with one arm. Instantly, he was horrified, even though, blessedly, he missed.

"Father — *please. Go away Leave me alone.*"

Dimly he sensed Father's retreat and this added another layer of ache to his receding torment. He lay for a moment breathing raggedly, then looked up. Father was gone.

Remotely, he became aware of Catherine's relaxed state and pleasant sense of well-being; against this lovely setting lay the abomination of his own exhaustion and fear. His belly still thumped with a ragging echo of the pain he had just endured.

As his tortured muscles relaxed he suddenly became aware of a hot oozing. Then he remembered the specimen cup. Leaping off the bed he searched for it among the things that now littered the floor. Quickly, he yanked open the flap of his pants and salvaged what he could.

A strange blankness came over him then, a loss of connection with Catherine, with the room, with himself, with what had just happened. But a nailbed of anguish awaited his returning senses, and he wondered how long he had been standing in the center of the room, sticky, terrified, and degraded and betrayed by his own body.

His mind cleared somewhat. He went to the fireplace and took the brass kettle off its iron shelf. The water in it was hot but not boiling. He poured some into the china wash bowl, dipped a towel and wrung it out. He washed himself and found a clean pair of pants. Tears blurred his eyes as he put them on.

Moving mechanically, he blew out candles and climbed into bed, where he lay under the quilt with the towel as a hot compress against his groin. His body and mind went numb again. He couldn't think. He couldn't weep. All he could feel was a deep, paralyzing terror and a despair that murdered all the day's joy.

This, then, was his answer.

He couldn't be what Catherine wanted and needed, or what he wanted and needed...

His body, beyond the exaltations of his heart and mind, would refuse to take part in love.

Father looked for Vincent at breakfast the next morning and was told that Vincent had taken sentry duty for the entire day up in Section K, relieving the scheduled watch who happened to be Mouse.

Vincent took sentry duty out of turn only when he wanted to be left strictly alone.

Father reported to his studies and glumly spent the day getting nothing done.

For no good reason, his leg began to pain him considerably, so he took an analgesic and went to bed with a heating pad and an armload of books right after dinner. He'd been there about half an hour when Vincent wandered in silently and sat down on the edge of the bed. Vincent leaned over and kissed Father then leaned over again and pressed his face against Father's shoulder.

He murmured brokenly: "I'm sorry about last night."

Father's arms went around the massive shoulders and his cheek came against the top of Vincent's head. He detected unshed tears and he pressed a kiss through the shaggy hair.

After a moment he whispered: "I love you, you know."

"I love you, too, Father."

Father's anxiety and inner nature strongly pressed him to demand an explanation, but into his mind, vividly and abruptly, came an image of Liz Sprague wagging an admonitory finger in his face.

"He will become more solitary, more restless and unpredictable..."

Despite his emotional resistance to the subject matter, Father had to congratulate himself on the fact that he had paid absolute, unflagging attention to everything she had said — and he had not missed a single word. If Vincent were truly to become more solitary, then vigorous parental cross-examination would only erode their relationship and undermine the closeness they had always enjoyed. Father was a man of strong impulses and old habits, but he was not stupid. So, when no explanation was offered he forgave Vincent's reticence, respected his privacy — and wistfully told himself that he should be proud of himself...

"One of my favorite memories of your childhood came to me today," he said and his features creased with tender reminiscence. "One day when you were a little boy you climbed up on a high ledge and then you were afraid to climb back down. Your little feet were just above my head and you looked down at me with big scared eyes, all upset. I told you to bend your knees and lean forward into the air — and I said that I would catch you. Well, I expected you to fret about that, or at least think it over — Devin would have — but no, you launched your little body straight outward so fast I hardly had the time to raise my arms to catch you. I've never forgotten that — how quickly and thoroughly you trusted me."

Vincent was very quiet.

After a long time he murmured huskily: "I don't want to hurt you, Father. I don't want to cause you any pain."

Father's eyes reddened briefly. "Vincent, sometimes a little pain makes the joy all the more keenly felt."

Vincent sat up slowly. He reached inside his cloak pocket and his hand emerged holding the specimen cup. He stood up and asked: "Where would you like me to put this, Father?"

"Oh—" Father pushed down the blankets, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and groped, with his feet, for his slippers. "Well — let's have a look, then. Hand me my wrapper and my cane."

Vincent reproved softly: "You don't have to do this right now. Mary told me your leg is bothering you—"

"That's all right." Father knotted the belt on his wrapper. "I didn't always get out of bed when you cried in your crib, Vincent — but I will always get out of bed for something new to look at through the microscope."

He grinned at his son, went over to the table that held the microscope, and began to make necessary adjustments. As he made up the slide he glanced at Vincent covertly and his apprehension returned in force. Vincent was clearly very depressed. As he stood nearby with his head lowered he looked pale and there were dark shadows under his eyes. His eyes were dull and apathetic.

Deeply disturbed, Father brought the smear into focus and examined it. He stayed hunched over the eyepiece for a long time, then made up another smear and examined that one. At last he raised his head and tried to sound cheerful.

"I don't find a single sperm cell in this, Vincent."

"Then I'm sterile."

"I wouldn't be sure of that. At the moment it would certainly appear that your body isn't making any, or perhaps you have some structural impediment. But Liz says that you are in the process of going through some hormonal changes and this could affect the final picture. If you want to be sure, I think we should wait a while and then repeat the test."

Vincent received this news with apparent indifference. He said woodenly: "I'm going to see Liz tonight."

At this point Father's Brave New World of resolutions collapsed. "Vincent — er.... Is — is everything all right?"

"No. Goodnight, Father."

Father sighed and answered with resignation: "Goodnight. Be careful."

Vincent left and Father's head sank lower on his chest. A chill, gnawing emptiness lay inside him, wanting to be filled by Vincent's trust.

He couldn't help his son down from high ledges anymore... Things had been simpler then.

* * *

Feeling somewhat ashamed, Liz lit her fifth cigarette, took a deep pull on it and blew the smoke far out into the cold night air. She usually quit after three smokes, just as she usually went inside as soon as it turned too cold and dark to be comfortable. But tonight she remained in her chair, still smoking, still thinking, long after her fingers had become too stiff to turn the pages of the journal she was not really reading...

Her head was full of unusual images...

Winding tunnels filled with unearthly light, friendly people bundled up against the cold drafts in layers of medieval-style clothing, the sounds of children laughing and of a pipe organ in some distant chamber being beautifully played, the strange, grinning, wild-eyed young man who owned the healthy raccoon, the sweet little old lady who owned the healthy cat, the miles upon miles of bookshelves...

She had experienced an unaccustomed peace.

She hadn't expected that. In fact, she hadn't known quite what to expect. Her reservations had deepened into apprehension when Vincent met her at the pipe opening and began to escort her downward through ever-bigger pipes and conduits, followed by shadowed, rocky tunnels lined with burning torches. And then, just as she was expecting to hear Karloff laughter and find manacled skeletons drooping from the walls, the most enchanting world began to unfold.

She had found, somewhat to her consternation, that she really did not mind Jacob Wells.

For her, it was making a very generous statement, saying that she did not mind some man...

She had even managed, somehow, to apologize for her effrontery toward his math project, and to this he had added an apology of his own, stating that he was, perhaps, overly sensitive about it.

He had then mentioned a crystal cave which had been recently discovered at a lower level and he had said: "We plan to take the older children who are studying geometry down there on a class trip. This will give their mathematical studies a connection to something beautiful and real—something in their own world."

She had found that idea very appealing.

Over dinner, they had discussed unitary spaces and quadratic forms—

A sudden movement at the roof's edge on her left distracted her. A pair of legs swung over and then came a dark blur of billowing cloak and a thud as Vincent landed on the terrace.

"Vincent!" She squinted toward him as he stood in the darkness on the other side of the big square of light thrown out by the kitchen lamps. "Come over here."

But he didn't, nor did he speak. Instead he drew back against the wall and his cloak hung motionless around him like black, folded wings. For a long time, he was nothing more than a dark, silent shape and she hesitated on the edge of speaking to him again. Instead she watched and waited, vaguely uneasy. Then he slumped a little and raised a hand to his face, and from him came a tortured, muffled sound that riveted her whole attention. He was crying!

Jolted out of her composure, she leaned forward. She tossed the magazine onto the table and parked the cigarette in the ash tray.

In a sharp tone she said: "Vincent — come here!"

This time, as soon as he laid his head on the cushion she touched him with both hands, first pushing back his hood, then grasping his head tenderly. He sobbed in great, wrenching spasms, quietly but with terrible force, while above him she stared down in shock.

"Vincent — what's the matter?"

He made a strangled, inarticulate sound followed by an enormous, silent effort to regain control. At last the sobs faded and there was only the sound of his heavy, desolate

breathing. "Liz—," he managed. His voice caught and broke and he tried again. "Liz— Father says I can go with Catherine. I know you influenced him. Thank you." Beneath her hands he was trembling.

"You're welcome. Now tell me what's the matter."

"I — I don't know whether I can do that."

"I think you had better try."

"It's a difficult thing to speak of..."

"That old song again?"

She rubbed his back in slow, circular motions and after a while she sensed that this was helping him.

Very slowly, and in a ravaged voice, he murmured: "Sometimes, because of the bond, Catherine's special secret thoughts waken my body and I can respond to them with her name on my lips and feel a certain oneness with her, even though she is far away. But— but sometimes—" He drew a deep, painful breath. "Sometimes—"

"Something goes wrong," she prompted. "Tell me what."

"It's difficult."

"I know. Tell me anyway."

Haltingly, with many false starts and unfinished sentences and tearful hesitations he managed to convey the whole thing.

She took a long drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke carefully straight upward. She asked.: "Has this ever happened before?"

He said miserably: "Yes." Beneath her hands he fought for control, lost it and wept against the cushion again. "I don't work right," he sobbed. "I can't be what she needs, Liz. I can't be what she wants—"

It was too much. Her soul rebounded from this and yet, within her, certain gears, rusty from disuse, began grudgingly to turn. But not fast enough. She was not sure what to do. So she stayed with what she knew best — Elizabeth Sprague the coldly rational. Slipping her hand in close to his scalp, she gathered up a large clump of hair and gently raised his head up off the cushion. He blinked at her from tear-blurred eyes.

She said sternly: "Well, Vincent, nothing's to be gained by feeling sorry for ourselves. Faint heart never won fair lady, you know."

"I don't know what to do."

"You let me worry about that. In fact, I believe there is something that can be done." Grinding out the cigarette she rose and tossed the cushion into the chair. "But first I'm afraid I will have to examine you."

She said to him dryly: "I suppose this gets awfully predictable, but would you kindly step inside and drop your pants."

* * *

After Vincent left, Liz dug out her old surgical procedures manuals and a pad of sketch paper. Clearing a space at the kitchen table, she sat down and sketched out Vincent's internal pelvic anatomy, as best she could determine it based on her examination and her knowledge of various similar arrangements encountered over a lifetime of study. But even here, Vincent was off the spectrum — a strange mixture of human and feline characteristics. She worked up several sketches of his pelvic musculature, then modified and refined them, until one was, she believed, an accurate map of his layout. His vascular system was, of course, less obvious, but she felt it safe to assume that he did not have a complicated blood supply in the external structure he referred to as his 'cuff'. Still, great care would have to be taken...

Well, Vincent — I seem destined to meddle about in, your nether regions.

At ten-thirty she made a cup of coffee and stared at the wall for a while. She found herself reviewing her response to his tears and feeling self-reproachful. She hadn't done much to comfort him, and she had sent him away with only a vague reference to some 'corrective measures' that might possibly be taken after she'd had another conference with Father. What kind of hope did that represent? She could still see his face, furrowed by tears, as he had rested on the bed listlessly enduring her probing fingers. She should have said more to him about her plans, for she was confident that his problem could be fixed. She should have hugged him and promised him that everything would be all right. And yet, he'd been so grateful.... And his softly-voiced, fervent appreciation had seemed so totally undeserved.... What had she done to ease his suffering? Nothing.

And yet he acted as though she had. That was the part she couldn't understand.

It made perfect sense that he would continue to seek her help. She, alone, in all the world, was superbly qualified to help Vincent. Medically.

Then she remembered how he had talked about her first reaction to him in Hughes' lab. That memory was precious to him...

Am I an experience you needed to have, Vincent? Did you need a member of the opposite sex — even a grouchy old woman — to view your body in its entirety, with all its secrets exposed, and accept it without revulsion? Does that give you hope, sweetheart? The hope you need for yourself and Catherine?

This was all so much more than she had bargained for.

All messy personal involvements and complications had been ruthlessly pruned from her life years ago, and she had rejoiced in the featureless plateau which had remained. Since retirement, her world had been a place of quiet and solitude, familiar walls, familiar books and slides, predictable little routines — and she had been comfortable that way. Comfortable. Because she did not want anything from, or for, anybody else...

But now she did want something. She wanted Vincent to be happy.... She wanted him to be able to leap into bed with his beloved Catherine and do all those things that ought to come naturally.... It was not easy to want happiness for someone whose life was so filled with obstacles — and she began to understand Jacob Wells a little better. It was not easy. But she liked it.

What kind of sense did that make? It was not easy to have someone cry in her lap. And yet, if today's experience had been a selection in a vending machine, she would have inserted her quarters and pulled the appropriate knob. Why? For God's sake, why?

And it was all so terribly important. But why?

An answer came to her.

Vincent was a lonely creature.

As was she.

There was one big difference between them though. Vincent was trying to find a way out of his loneliness. Thank God she didn't have any such ambition... Thank God she had better sense.

Suddenly, for no good reason, her eyes stung with tears and her fists, in answer to this, balled up. Aloud she said vehemently, "*Shit...*" And then she became unpleasantly distracted by something else. Her throat was sore. She was coming down with something.... She picked up a much-thumbed edition of primate hernia repair and then she slammed it down on the table so hard that papers flew in all directions.

How could she tell Vincent that everything would be all right when she, herself, had never believed that everything would be all right, not under any circumstances, with any people, at anytime, anywhere, ever??? How could she comfort someone going out into life when

her own answer had been removal from life? How could she take someone into her arms when she would have rejected with scorn any pair of arms that opened to her?

She was in the most unwieldy state of mind she could ever possibly have imagined...

As if that weren't enough her body ached all over and she felt distinctly unwell. Pushing away the books and drawings she went in search of her thermometer. She was running a fever of 103. In a thoroughly rancid frame of mind, she took two aspirin and went to bed.

She awoke the next day with a full-blown case of the flu.

Three days later, in a worse mood than ever, she dragged herself out of bed, gaunt and sunken-eyed, and got dressed. Jamming the appropriate surgical texts and her notes and diagrams into a bag, she put on a coat and called a taxi. It was early afternoon when the taxi dropped her at West Central Park in the cold, spitting rain and as she faced the muddy trek she gave thanks for having been born a sensible-shoe personality. It did not take her long to reach the large pipe where Vincent had awaited her on the evening of her first visit to the World Below. He had shown her the small vertical pipe next to the locked iron gate and he had also shown her the brick which lay beneath and was used by initiates to send coded messages Below.

Picking up the brick she began to bang on the pipe.

WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM.... Hopefully, it would not matter that she didn't know any of the goddamned code. Hopefully, the noise alone would bring someone. WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM. WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM.... Pausing, she fell against the clammy slab of rock and coughed for a while. Then: WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM.... Doggedly, she kept up the racket.

Just as she was expecting her arm to drop off there came a soft, scraping sound... The sealing panel on the intersecting pipe slid open and a pair of furry, claw-tipped hands emerged from the darkness, reached through the iron gate and unlocked the chain that secured it. She remained leaning against the rocky wall, as Vincent opened the gate and came through.

"Liz—" His vigilant eyes took in her pallor and slouch, noted the bright gleam of fever and became filled with concern. He took the bag from her and slipped a hand beneath her elbow. "Are you all right?"

"Take me down to Father," she commanded in a croaking, guttural voice. "And then make yourself scarce."

* * *

"Jacob."

The unfamiliar, clogged and raspy-sounding voice made him look up from his book with a start.

At the bottom of the short flight of steps, Liz hesitated, clutching the bannister for support. The room had developed an alarming tendency to keep shifting to the left and she felt oddly out of contact with her legs and feet. The bag dropped from her hand and landed on the rug with a thump.

"Liz! Are you all right?" Father scrambled from behind his desk and limped hastily to her side. He took her arm and she shook him off with annoyance.

"There's nothing wrong with me. Well, not very wrong. I have to talk to you about Vincent."

"You're running a fever." His hand made contact with her forehead before she could back away. "You look terrible. Come with me." He grasped her arm and pulled her gently but firmly toward the lower tunnel entrance but she resisted him in her stubborn way.

"Why can't we talk in here?"

"Because there's a better place." He studied her with growing concern. "Come with me, Liz."

"No."

He picked up her bag containing the surgical texts and hobbled quickly to the lower entrance. His strategy worked and she followed him.

"I have to talk to you about Vincent."

"I know. I know. This way..."

He led her down a short tunnel and into a room with smooth white walls and a row of neatly made cots with screens in between.

"What the hell is this place?"

"The hospital chamber," Father replied. He set the bag down on a chair and gestured invitingly toward one of the cots. "Please — sit down."

"This is not a professional call," she said defiantly, but she did sit on the edge of the nearest cot because this room, too, kept threatening to dump her off balance — and the result of that would be most undignified.

"It is now," Father countered. He opened the door of a small enamel cabinet and took out a stethoscope. "Take off that sweater and unbutton your blouse, please."

"I will not."

Father turned slowly and met her affronted gaze. His eyes held a naked gleam of authority she had not seen before. She experienced a chill that was clearly unrelated to her fever. She pulled off the sweater and unbuttoned her blouse.

"I want to talk to you about—"

He stuck a thermometer in her mouth. He warmed the business end of the stethoscope in his hand and slipped it in against her skin. His body came very close to her as he did this and she found herself resisting an inexplicable urge to rest her head against his shoulder.

"Breathe deeply," he commanded, and he listened attentively to heart and lungs. "You have a pretty stiff bronchial infection," he announced. "I shall start you on an antibiotic at once. But the place for you is bed."

She squinted at him resentfully and started to mutter something around the thermometer, but he bent down and deftly slipped off her shoes. Then he lifted her legs, effectively turning her body so she had to sink backward and come to rest on the pillow. Much as she hated to admit it, even to herself, it did feel good to lie down.

He withdrew the thermometer, read it with arching eyebrows and listened to her lungs a second time as she lay there. As he did this, his head came down close to her face and their eyes met. His eyes were very blue and filled with a deep inner stillness and she couldn't deny herself a certain strange pleasure in what she saw there. She also felt a crawly sense of urgent pressure to tell him something important — but to her bitter frustration she could no longer remember what. Her brains felt heavy and useless and she couldn't even recall how she had managed to get herself down here.... Her chest spasmed and she rolled away from him and doubled up in a fit of coughing. Pain backed up in her head and she groaned and tried to remember how to curse. A hand came down gently on her forehead. Irritably, she struck it away, but when it returned she allowed it to remain. It was his hand.... Jacob's hand. Oh, well.... He stroked her forehead soothingly. In fact, that was nice. So nice....

Time seemed to blur but she was too hot and dull to care. She heard a tapping noise and vaguely she saw Jacob Wells bending over a pipe in the wall. His voice seemed to come from a great distance: "One of the women will bring you a nightgown."

"Don't need one. Not staying."

His crisp voice was closer suddenly and those blue eyes were shining down at her, "You have more bluff in you than an entire range of mountains."

Her jaw felt flaccid but somehow it moved: "Oh, shut up."

She was asleep and dreaming.... A man she knew was touching her, holding her head between cool, pleasant, sensitive hands.... At least she thought she knew him.... Oh yes, him. Jacob. Jacob Wells.

His face came close again and he kissed her. Such a tender; lingering But it was only a dream.

Well, shit.

* * *

All of a sudden, the telephone messages and where-have-you-beeps piled up to the point where Catherine succumbed to social demand and allowed herself to be dragged on a round of after-work hotel bars, nightclubs and eateries by her crowd of attentive friends. Since most of her girlfriends from college had married and moved to the suburbs, she found that her crowd had changed; she spent a lot of time these days tactfully defeating the advances of the same few ingratiating young men, or providing advice and big-sistership to younger single women who were trying to make it alone in the Big City.

Increasingly, she missed undemanding companionship and so, increasingly, she missed Vincent.

When during a breather she collected her thoughts and figured out that only five days had passed since Vincent had awaited her on the balcony with his wonderful news, she was amazed. She felt as though she hadn't seen him in weeks. It was a Friday afternoon when she made this discovery and she had no commitment ahead for that evening. She puttered around the apartment, hoping he'd tap on the balcony doors, but he didn't show up. So she watched a TV movie, read a mystery until bedtime — and checked the balcony one last time before turning out the lights.

The next morning she ran errands. Then, after a hasty lunch, she put on an old pair of Reeboks, took the elevator to the basement, slipped cautiously through the boiler room and penetrated the tunnel world.

As she neared the home section Father emerged from a branching passage ahead of her and limped into the shadows.

"Father!"

He stopped, turned, and waited for her to catch up.

Smiling, she hurried up to him. "You're wearing your stethoscope. Is somebody sick?"

"Oh, I always forget to take the thing off." He stuffed it into his cloak pocket. "Actually, yes. I have a new patient. Liz Sprague is here. Quite ill. Severe respiratory infection—"

"She's here?" Catherine gasped. She felt a prickling apprehension. "Will she be all right?"

"Oh yes, yes. In fact, I think she's recovering with *finesse*; she managed to hurl the kleenex box at me this morning. Just needs plenty of rest and the proper care, that's all."

"I'd love to meet her. Can she have visitors?"

Father shook his head. "Not yet. I want her to stay very quiet for a while." In the sepulchral light he looked suddenly grim. His restless eyes grazed her and flickered away. She became aware of tension between them and she wondered where it had come from and how to diffuse it. Perplexed, she said nothing and jammed her hands in her pockets, waiting to see where this was going to lead.

Father said: "Vincent's down in the kitchen shelling beans for William." He glanced at her again as though about to say something more.

Then he appeared to think better of it.

Vincent was sitting alone in the pantry, hunched over a tall wood-slatted basket full of bean pods. On top of an empty and overturned basket beside him was the pot into which he was dumping the shelled beans. As she entered, he murmured her name and glanced up at her from dull, black-shadowed eyes. He looked terrible and she immediately connected his depressed and exhausted appearance with the strange tension she had sensed in Father. Something was wrong...

"Vincent!" She hurried over to him and stood staring down at the top of his head as he went on mechanically shelling the beans. "You haven't been sleeping."

His reply was almost inaudible. "No."

She leaned over and closed a hand around his busy fingers, gently squeezing off their motion. He turned his troubled and weary face to her and found vibrant concern in her widened eyes.

She whispered: "What is it, Vincent?"

He said: "Liz Sprague is here."

"Yes, I know. Father told me."

"She's very ill."

"And you're worried about her?" She pulled up a wooden kitchen stool and sat down.

"Father says she'll be all right. And he's taking good care of her. She'll be all right, Vincent."

"She's my friend."

"Yes."

He lamented in a strange tight voice: "I never thought anything could happen to Liz. I've been so selfish, so wrapped up in my own problems—" A sudden look of alarm crossed his face and he said hastily: "I mean — Liz has been very good to me. She's done so much for me, Catherine. It's hard to explain. You don't know..."

Catherine thought back to Vincent's first encounter with Elizabeth Sprague and the various things Liz had said to him — things which he had later repeated in his telling of the story.

"You are a fur-hearing creature. There are going to be times when you will need a vet!" She remembered her own private reaction to those words. Yes, yes, yes! she had screamed joyously inside. This was a part of Vincent that needed support, that needed to be upheld in just that kind of affirming, straightforward way.

She said earnestly: "Yes, I do know. There's a part of you that has never had proper care, not even from Father. She reaches you there, in a place where no one else ever has reached, and she takes care of you in a way that no one else has ever done. You need that, Vincent,"

He listened to this with his head aslant, his eyes glistening softly from their deep shadows.

He picked up another bean pod.

"Would you like help with that?" she asked.

He hesitated, seeming on the edge of gallant refusal. Then he said: "Yes."

Grinning, she delved into the pile and clumsily split a pod along its edge. She watched as Vincent expertly slit a pod with one claw and then used the same claw to rake the pale green limas into the pot.

"I think you have an unfair advantage, Vincent."

They worked in companionable silence for a while, except that Vincent was occasionally racked by an enormous yawn.

Then suddenly he said: "I may be sterile."

Catherine was bowled over, but she did not react other than to push some hair out of her eyes and glance at him briefly. He was staring straight down into the basket. They went on shelling beans.

Presently, she said: "Because you're a hybrid?"

"Mm-hmm." A shyness came into his voice. "Father checked through the microscope and I do appear to be sterile. But he says we should check again to be sure." He raised his head and gave her a long, searching look, "I thought it might relieve you to know that you would never have a baby that looks like me."

She gazed at him with very full eyes, his name a silken murmur on her lips: "Oh, Vincent..."

There was an unavoidable pathos in his statement and it wrung her heart. She dropped the bean pod she'd been holding, rose and stepped around the basket to his side. As she had done weeks ago on the balcony, she tucked his head beneath her chin, slid her arms around his big yielding frame and rocked him in a motion that was very slight but very tender.

He wrapped his arms around her and murmured: "I love you, Catherine..." Oh, such a tired voice.... He said: "When we can be truly together – I don't want any shadows hanging over you."

She was still amazed. Because he had always been so reticent about his body and the physical potentialities of their relationship, she had always thought she would be the one to bring this subject up.

"There won't be any shadows, Vincent," she assured him. "Accidents don't have to happen, you know. There are certain responsibilities that big girls like me take on." She studied the top of his head. "And what about you? Do you have any shadows?"

His voice came to her, very soft and constrained: "I have them. But when you are with me they lift. And by the time we can really be together, perhaps they will be gone."

"Only perhaps?"

"All I can say right now is perhaps."

In the sanctuary of her arms, some of Vincent's fears began to dissolve, as they so often did when she held him. She did not question him any further. Instead, she murmured against his hair, soft sounds that soothed him in a cleansing way like a gentle, invisible rain. Cradling his head, she fed him serenity, eased him away from his wretched state, and he clung to her, silently pleading for more. Again she rocked him.

Unseen by him, Catherine smiled in the way she always did when special, very secret thoughts about him whispered through her mind.

But she held her mood in check.

Recently, she had begun to suspect that more of her inner self was revealed to him through the bond than she had previously believed, The full, startling potency of their psychic link had been brought home to her by one incident that had happened a couple of months ago.

The broken fragments of his youthful dream had risen up en masse to stab him after all these years and he was still in shock from it. She knew only too well how much this kind of experience could hurt, how much of a wallop the past could still pack — and present, happiness was never enough to assuage it. She had comforted him as best she could. She had kissed the hot tears off his cheeks and out of his eyes as they stood there in the darkness on her balcony. She had held onto his hands for a long time and nuzzled the fur on them and kissed them...

But how to reassure him about the future?

About his claws, which seemed to symbolize his deep dread that he would not be able, as a man, to express his love to her, that his differences would ultimately prevent them from expressing their love, as man and woman, to each other. What could she say? Vincent had

demonstrated so gracefully, over the course of their relationship, that words were unequal to certain issues, certain things. And this moment was one of them. Vincent was a person of beautiful, eloquent silences, and she had always met those silences adequately with her own, speaking to them only with her eyes or her touch.

But tonight silence just wouldn't do. There was too much pain, too much uncertainty and fear.

Still clasping his hands she whispered forcefully: "Vincent — I love you. I love you..." If she had known what speaking those words — precisely at that intimate moment — would do to her, she would not have said them.

The actual physical presence of his immense, strong, warm, breathing maleness flooded her senses, throwing switches and setting off reactions, and she experienced a turgid rush of desire for him. It was overwhelming. And it was instantaneous... What happened next could only have been Vincent's response to what was going on in her mind and body.

He backed away from her, staring at her from very dilated eyes. He suddenly began to stammer excuses. For a moment he stood there awkwardly, staring at his feet.

Then he almost dived over the balcony wall in his haste to get away from her...

She presumed that distance made this part of the bond somewhat less volatile. She presumed...

Vincent's head drooped a little in her embrace and she glanced down at him. His breathing had gone quiet and regular. He was asleep!

"Vincent. Vincent — wake up."

His eyelids fluttered. "Huh?"

She lifted his head off her shoulder and with his face between her hands she studied him tenderly.

"Come on — let's take you down to your room and give you a nice nap." She moved away and he remained sitting, slumped, his eyes glassy.

"Come on, Vincent." At the tunnel entrance she turned and looked back at him. "Get up. Come on."

He got up.

In his room he pulled his boots off and sagged into bed. She tucked the quilt around him. He was instantly asleep.

She sat and watched him...

After a while she pried a bean pod out of his hand and placed it on the table.

* * *

"Jacob."

The voice was raspy but stronger-sounding than last time. Father put down his book and glanced toward the stairs. At the bottom stood Liz, fully dressed, holding her bag of notes and texts. She was pale and seemed to have more corners and planes than ever, but she was looking better.

He said slowly and in a tone of heavy rebuke: "What are you doing out of bed?"

She said defensively: "I felt up to it."

Her direct, unabashed stare didn't have quite the same effect on him that it used to, and she seemed to sense this. Her gaze wavered sideways and then returned. From his ensconcement behind a candelabra and a pile of books, Father smiled — a warm, intimate smile. It had not been invited and it was not returned. But it did affect her. Shifting the bag on her arm she looked briefly uncertain. Then she marched forward to the chair beside his desk and sat down.

He leaned toward her a little, resting on his elbows. There was silence and he continued to regard her as he might a very close and dear friend, in a composed and affectionate manner, with no need to make conversation.

A close and dear friend...

Even if that analogy was inappropriate — as she hoped — he was still clearly in command of the moment.

How the hell had that happened?

She said: "Well, it's — It's been — It's been quite..." She tried and utterly failed to quit stumbling around, to pull a measure of asperity into her voice.... Her mood oddly went flat, almost equable.

She re-phrased: "I've had more TLC than a birthday puppy. I've been checked every hour by a ministering angel named Mary, I've been fed thicken soup and ginger tea, had my back rubbed with alcohol, my face washed for me, my pillows plumped..." She frowned, wondering how to restore her thawed disposition to its usual iceberg state. "I've been *nursed*. I haven't been nursed by anybody since I was a little girl."

Father watched her with an amused narrowing of the eyes. "See what you've been missing?" He grinned. "You sound positively mellow."

This appeared to unnerve her. "Illness takes the bite out of my personality," she explained in a chilly tone. "But as soon as I get my strength back I hate everybody with my usual vigor."

He merely looked her serenely in the eye and continued to smile. Rising, he picked up a couple of books. One hand rested lightly on her shoulder as he came around behind her, and then he limped over to the bookshelves. She watched him as he scanned the rows of book spines for empty spots. Finding these, he poked the two books into place.

"I have to talk to you about Vincent," she said.

His head snapped around and suddenly she knew she had the upper hand again. "Oh yes, that's right," he muttered. "You did say something about that before. I'm afraid I was rather preoccupied with your illness." He returned and sank into a winged chair close to her.

She folded her arms. "It seems that Vincent has a slight inguinal hernia," she announced. "Fully reducible. It's also asymptomatic. He doesn't even know he's got it."

Father's eyebrows elevated and then he glanced away from her testily. A burning sensation crept up his neck and around his ears — a sure sign that his choler was rising. And for a few minutes everything had been so pleasant...

Dammit, he had never thought to examine Vincent for hernia. "Why ever didn't you tell me this before?" he demanded.

"I didn't know before. My initial examination in Hughes' lab didn't reveal it. I didn't know about it until a few nights ago, when Vincent came to me with another problem, just before I got sick."

Father stared at her with frank amazement for a moment, and then a disheartened slackening came into his bearing. He exhaled in a gust and dropped his eyes.

"What — what sort of a problem?" he asked faintly.

Liz hesitated. Suddenly alert in a new and not altogether welcome way, she observed him carefully. Feelings were not important to her, particularly not those of the male sex — which didn't have them, anyway. At least not usually... And yet... Her brow furrowed and her expression grew wary.

"Your feelings are hurt," she accused.

Father nodded. Then, tight-lipped, he gave her a level stare, ready to be angry with her. But something inside him wouldn't permit it and the impulse collapsed. He allowed his hurt to show plainly.

In a very subdued tone he said: "Yes, ah — yes, I suppose you could say that. Vincent has always come to me with his problems. He has always trusted me — with everything. There has never been anything we could not discuss—"

"What about sex?" she asked starkly. "Can you discuss that? Easily?" He looked away again. "Well..."

He said in a small voice: "No."

Prompted by some sort of irrational kindness, she found herself explaining: "It's not a matter of trust this time, Jacob. You must not look on this as any kind of a loss. Vincent feels the depth of your empathy for him very keenly. He came to me because he did not want to add to the burden you bear in caring about him so much." She was astonished at her ability to express all this incidental stuff...

Father shrugged helplessly. "Why is it easier to discuss these things with you than it is with Vincent? I wish I understood..."

She said in a direct but non-judgmental way: "It's because not all of Vincent is admissible to you. You don't really know all of him because you have denied part of him — always."

He was suddenly very agitated. His voice trembled. "I — I don't think so. I have always accepted Vincent totally. How can you say that?"

"You accept only what you're comfortable with, Jacob."

"Your implications are — very painful."

"All right. They're painful."

He massaged his jaw and stared at the floor, deeply miserable, not wanting this conversation, not wanting the reproof of her honesty and vision. Despair crowded him — but he refused to buckle. For a moment he sat locked in torment. But at last, the really gracious nadir of his soul began to respond to something that had been there all along, and he raised his head from his hand like a man emerging from a dream.

"This is good of you, Liz. I can't tell you how good. Nobody has ever really helped me with Vincent before, not like this. Not really." His eyes glistened with emotion. "It's been a very lonely, groping thirty-three years." He cleared his throat and said hastily: "Now tell me about this new problem."

She plunged a hand into the bag and withdrew the sketch of Vincent's pelvic musculature. She handed it to him.

She said: "Vincent has a not quite annular muscle, located behind what he calls his 'cuff', which virtually holds his penis in place. For lack of a better term, we can call it his pubic sphincter. Normally, it is in a contracted state, and as you know, pressure applied on an area rich with nerves just above it causes it to relax and allow extrusion of the member. This also occurs as the result of internal pressure — specifically the early stages of erection. But sometimes the process goes awry and the muscle locks him up. This seems to happen when arousal occurs suddenly — as it sometimes does through this bond with Catherine. The results are extremely painful and unpleasant."

Father's face grew very grave as he listened, and yet he felt part of his attention move irresistibly from these disturbing words to their speaker. She talked with the detached clarity of a physician and yet he could sense the turmoil of emotion behind her words. It intrigued him. He felt a great affinity with her. That intrigued him too.

He inquired, frowning: "Vincent hasn't been himself, lately. Is this why?"

She nodded.

Father stared morosely at the sketch. "Why does he have to have so many problems?"

"Well, don't let it embitter you, Jacob. It hasn't embittered him. Problems occur — and they can be fixed, like having Mary wash his hair. This one we will fix together, that is if you're

agreeable. I suggest a double operation. You perform the herniorrhaphy with my assistance. I'll attend to the rest of the agenda, with your assistance." -

"What exactly do you propose?"

She handed him another sketch. "Very simple. I aim to notch the pubic sphincter a tiny bit on each inside edge. That'll widen the aperture and give him a little more room to play around with, if you'll pardon the expression." She pointed to the drawing. "He'll have two small incisions. Here and here."

"It's risky. That area is rich with nerves and probably a complex blood supply."

"It's got to be tried, Jacob. Vincent has got to be able to approach Catherine with more confidence than he has right now."

Father continued to look grave. "He is in a state. He hasn't been eating or sleeping well. I'd even say he's on the verge of a decline. I'm hoping Catherine has been able to cheer him up."

"Is he visiting her today?"

"No, she was here. She made him take a nap, which I also hope will be restorative, and then she visited with some of the women for a while. I don't know whether she's still here." He reflected for a moment, chin in hand. "It's been a long time since I've done any surgery."

"Between the two of us I'm sure we can come up with all the necessary equipment. And I suppose we should wait at least a week, to make sure I am free of contagion."

He nodded pensively. "But no longer than a week. I can't have him rupturing himself the next time he rushes off to defend Catherine.... As for this other problem — well, I'm still amazed he would talk to you. He's such a prude —"

"He is also desperate."

"Yes, well..." He chuckled. "You seem to have become Vincent's Dr Ruth." Then he glowered at her mildly. "I want you to know that I haven't been as oblivious to all this as you might think. I've been aware for some time that Vincent has been experiencing some, er — ambivalence about consummating this relationship —"

"It's a bit more than your usual case of honeymoon jitters I'm afraid. Think about it, Jacob. If you could reel your penis in and out of your abdominal cavity, wouldn't you find that a bit hard to explain to a girlfriend?"

Turning a deep shade of pink, Father buried his face in one hand and restrained an impulse to laugh. Finally, he muttered: "I've never met any woman who expresses herself as you do."

She said wryly: "Well, now you've met Elizabeth Sprague."

"Yes," he murmured, dropping the hand and studying her. His candid eyes remained transfixed, contemplating her with an aspect of wonder. He smiled faintly, his gaze still locked in hers, and after a short-lived restraint she returned the smile.

Then something caught in her chest and she burst into a prolonged fit of coughing.

"Back to bed with you," Father said sternly.

"No. No, not yet," she said, when she'd recovered her breath. "I've got to talk to Vincent before he turns himself grey. At the very least, we need his permission to operate, so that we can start making plans. I'm sure he'll go along with the herniorrhaphy, but he may not want me to go snipping around in his crotch." She rose stiffly from the chair. "I've always understood you males are squeamish about such things. Is Vincent awake?"

"I think so. He wouldn't miss dinner unless he were in a coma."

Liz paused halfway up the stairs and glanced back at him. In a strangely incongruous quiet tone she said: "Why don't you come along?"

"I will in just a minute," he replied, not missing her fleetingly benign expression. "I have a few more books to put away. I'll join you shortly."

After she had left, he sat there holding his cane and smiling as he remembered how startled she had looked when he had thanked her for her help with Vincent.

* * *

"Liz!"

Vincent pushed his chair out from the table where he had been writing in his journal and he held his arms up to her. The hug happened as part of the moment. His joy and relief were evident as he pulled her into a fervent embrace. But what foreign impulse made her so glad of this chance to hold *him*? What insanity made her respond so immediately and so deeply to this tender squeeze? She no longer knew herself...

"Liz — I was worried about you."

"You needn't have been. I can curse my way out of a sickbed most of the time." She started to release her hold, to step back, but he was not ready to end the hug. His arms merely tightened a little.

With his head against her he murmured: "Are you feeling better?"

"Depends on what you mean. I am free of fever and pain. Otherwise, there's been no improvement." She gathered a handful of his hair and tugged lightly. "Listen, Vincent — I believe your problem can be fixed." Without fanfare she announced her plans. He listened soberly.

"Perhaps the hernia is a blessing in disguise," he murmured, still holding onto her. "If you and Father operate on me, everyone will be very curious. It's something I can tell them."

"And what about the other procedure? Are you willing to let us try it?"

"It's the only hope I have," he said in a bleak tone, and then he added graciously: "Thank you, Liz, for giving me that hope."

"It will be painful. You'll be very uncomfortable for a few days."

His voice grew indistinct and seemed heavy with fatigue. "Father says 'a little pain makes the joy all the more keenly felt'. I know he's right..." He tilted his head back suddenly and Liz saw, to her dismay, that there were tears standing in his eyes.

"What is it? What's the matter, Vincent?"

"Something — in me." He gasped: "It — it's too abhorrent!"

"Nothing about you is abhorrent."

"It can be. It might be."

"What, then?"

His voice shook. "When — when I'm with Catherine.... When we're alone. If the beast should engulf me at such a time... If it should overtake me. Then I might behave in a frightening and repulsive manner. Then I might hurt Catherine — I might hurt and disgust Catherine —"

"There is nothing hurtful or disgusting in you."

"How can you say that when you know — you've seen — what I can do? I destroy. I kill. Once — once, Liz, I did hurt someone I loved. I became uncontrolled and I did hurt her—"

"You're talking about Lisa Campbell."

"You know?"

"Yes. Father told me about it. The bond wasn't fully formed with Lisa, Vincent. It was hardly begun. You can't use that incident as a measure of what could happen now."

"Liz — please tell me again what you said to me a while back, about not hurting Catherine. Please. I need to hear that. *I need to hear it!*"

A hard, frightened light shone up at her through his tears and she felt again that deep shock at the extent of his suffering, and her own inadequacy as comforter... She tried to speak, but her throat constricted and she had to swallow. When she did manage to speak she was surprised at how strong her voice sounded.

"You won't hurt her, Vincent. It would be impossible."

"Why? Why are you so sure?"

"Because the bond is there to protect Catherine. It evolved in your papa's ancestors for that very purpose — to protect the females and the young. I've seen such things time and time again, from wolf packs to fighting fishes. It's an infallible pattern. And there's a rule of nature that goes along with it: the more savage the potential of a creature, the more efficient its set of controls. Why do you think Catherine can break through your killing rages and restore your balance? Because you are programmed by nature, by evolution, to respond to *her*. To *her*, Vincent. The bond will always ensure that you will not hurt Catherine. You must have faith in it. It is there for both of you."

She rubbed gently at the wet trails on his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "I can't help crying. I hope you don't mind."

"Not in the least."

"What you say does make sense."

"Well, it's just logic. I'm very good with logic." She hugged his head. "And with fur-bearing creatures."

"Liz... Oh, Liz..."

"Believe me, Vincent, everything is going to be all right." She clasped the shaggy head and stroked his hair and murmured: "Everything is going to be just fine. Really. Don't cry anymore, sweetheart... No need to cry anymore..."

Inside her, something happened. It was like a scab falling away to reveal tender new flesh beneath. She was remade. She felt a dizzying sense of exultation. She had said *those words!* She had comforted! She had comforted a person...

It was the most sacred moment she had ever lived.

In the tunnel, just past the entrance to Vincent's room, Father listened to this conversation with tears streaming down his own face. Groping around for a handkerchief and not finding one, he finally rubbed them away with his sleeve like a schoolboy and tried to snuffle quietly. He heard Liz suggest that Vincent go to bed and he heard Vincent reply: "I haven't kissed Father good-night."

At this point, in a slightly quavering voice, he spoke out: "Here I am, Vincent."

He left the shadows of the tunnel and limped over to them. They were still holding onto each other. Bending down, Father laid his cheek against Vincent's forehead. This brought him very close to Liz — and into the embrace. He could feel her breath stirring his hair. One of his arms went around Vincent and his hand found where Liz's hand lay on Vincent's back.

As he kissed Vincent he pried her fingers up and interlaced his own with hers. Father gave those fingers a squeeze.

The squeeze was returned.

* * *

Hunched over the coffee table, Catherine studied the box lid of a fine, glossy 800-piece Springbok puzzle. It was a colorful panorama of hot air balloons sailing across an azure sky. She had assembled all of the border, except for one piece which stubbornly refused to

present itself, as she shifted the remaining mound of pieces from one side of the box to the other.

She had showered and her hair was still slightly damp, but she was very comfortable in a light pastel sweat suit and bare feet. The evenings were definitely getting warmer...

There was a light tapping on the balcony doors.

Leaping up, she trotted over, pushed them open and greeted Vincent with a quick smile.

"Hi. Come on in; I'm in the middle of a puzzle," she said casually and then she promptly spun around and returned to the coffee table. With her back to the balcony, she slithered down between the sofa and the table and stared intently into the boxful of pieces.

Vincent blinked.

In the darkness, with a breeze ruffling his cloak and a volume of Wordsworth under one arm, he stood uncertainly.

She had not even turned on the balcony lights.

He stared into the bright expanse of living room with its blue and white tones and sparkling accents of glass and china. His gaze lingered on the back of Catherine's head. Opening the book, he held it out to the reaching light and read a few lines silently. Catherine didn't move. His eyes jumped from the page to the back of her head once again, but she did not so much as turn around...

Vincent lowered his head. Then he looked at her again.

Her hair appeared to be damp. The zip-up pullover she wore was a very soft-looking pink and yellow...

Stepping inside, he paused beside the hutch and examined her collection of geodes for a long time, but without the scantest amount of attention. Every now and then his eyes whipped around toward her in a bashful and somewhat desperate glance.

She ignored him.

When he finally made it as far as the end of the sofa where she was wedged with the puzzle box, she stuck out an arm and patted the cushions invitingly. Then she went back to stirring around in the puzzle pieces.

Vincent moved in between sofa and table. Carefully lifting one leg completely over her, he straddled her and sat down so that her shoulders were between his knees. She made an appreciative little sound in her throat, wriggled against him and hooked one arm over his thigh. He leaned over her, almost engulfing her, and gazed at the assembled border, his heart chugging oddly.

"May I see the lid?" he requested. She passed it to him. He stared at it without seeing it.

"Father and Liz are going to operate on me tomorrow morning," he murmured.

She almost dropped the box and a wave of puzzle pieces fell noiselessly to the rug.

Twisting around, Catherine stared up at him in alarm. "*Operate* on you? Why? What's wrong?"

He smiled at her reassuringly. "I have a slight hernia. It's not serious; I hardly notice it. But Father feels that it must be fixed."

She got up, climbed out of the knee pen and sat down beside him.

He continued: "Mouse has spent the last few days constructing an operating table. And Liz has been bringing down the most unappetizing equipment." He sighed. "Will you visit me, Catherine? Father says I can have visitors by tomorrow afternoon."

"Of course I'll visit you," she said tenderly, leaning against his arm. "Oh, Vincent — you shouldn't be climbing up buildings..." She questioned: "Are you scared?"

"Only one thing scares me. I won't be able to come to your rescue for some time. You must stay safe, Catherine."

"Of *course* I'll stay safe. I'm saving myself up for a trip to Connecticut — remember?"

Vincent looked at her with his slow, shy smile. Then he ducked his head forward and studied the puzzle. Grinning, Catherine waited a moment and then pushed his hair aside and saw that he was still smiling demurely.

A rascally light gamboled in her eyes. She said in a purring tone: "Well, I was going to seduce you tonight, but I guess it can wait."

Vincent ignored her.

Reaching into the box, he extracted the missing border piece and slipped it into place.

* * *

As usual the light in the common room was Rembrandtesque and the assembly of solemn, respectful people was quiet, as Father stared down at his handwritten agenda.

He waited somewhat impatiently until a noisy jangle of messages had finished clattering along the pipes then he said: "As you know Elizabeth Sprague and I are going to operate on Vincent tomorrow morning at nine. Mouse has done a fine job on the table and I would like it to be moved from his lab down to Vincent's room this evening before dinner. William, Vincent will not have any breakfast in the morning. We will require absolute quiet — no distractions of any kind, please. Pascal, would you arrange for an all-quiet on the pipes until at least eleven? Magister — no music until noon; I don't want the children encouraged to be noisy. And please, all of you, see that the children don't race up and down the adjoining tunnels. William — a soft diet for Vincent over the next couple of days, unless I say otherwise." He frowned thoughtfully and glanced at the agenda. "Regarding the southeast storage chamber — it should be emptied and sealed up. Mouse has reported seepage from the maze at several points..."

* * *

On the operating table in the middle of his room, Vincent lay swaddled in sterile sheets, an IV taped to a shaved area of his forearm. Although drowsy from the pre-anesthetic sedative, he was watching Father with some concern.

Scrubbed and gowned, Father checked the stainless steel bin of supplies and peered at the instruments in the sterilizer. He was pale and moisture was already glistening on his brow. He checked the respirator, glanced at the endotracheal tube and then made still another restless survey of the instruments and supplies.

Vincent summoned his remaining energy and tried to speak. Then he tried again. His voice sounded as though he had been gagged by six-inch-deep cotton batting.

"Father... Please try to relax... Everything will be all right."

Father limped over and took the tawny head between his hands. He would have to scrub again but he didn't care. The activity would help calm his nerves.

"I don't want you to be frightened, Vincent."

"I'm not frightened, Father... Faith in you and Liz..."

"Good. Remember the words of Cervantes, my son: 'Valour lies just halfway between rashness and cowardice'. And of course—" His eyes roamed up and down the IV stand. "— from C.S. Lewis: 'Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at its testing point, which means —'Let's see.... How does the rest of that—"

"Father, please..."

Father glanced again at the respirator. "Yes, well, I must go scrub." He kissed Vincent's forehead and hobbled toward the lower tunnel entrance. From it emerged Liz.

In her white surgical gown she looked taller than ever, and her eyes, as she assessed Father's haggard expression, held a steely forbearance.

"For God's sake, Jacob. Pull yourself together."

Father put a finger to his lips, glanced toward Vincent and shook his head. In a low voice he said fervently: "If it were Pascal or William or, well — any one of the other men..."

Her look of scorn withered him and the sentence trailed off. He took a deep breath and whispered vehemently, his voice squeaking off a high note of emotion: "You have to understand.... That's — that's *my baby* over there!" He stood before her humiliated, a quivering wreck, wondering if he had really said those words...

She rolled her eyes and pushed past him.

He was not going to get any sympathy.

There was no single operative technique appropriate to all hernia patients. Basically, the approach had to be selected — or designed — at the operating table. But Father forgot his qualms the moment they got started. They deepened Vincent's anesthesia with oxygen and halothane gas and then, while Liz monitored vital signs, Father began the repair. Once he had opened the abdominal wall, he could tell that the hernia had been present for some time, for the internal ring was slightly enlarged and the inferior epigastric vessels had been displaced medially. He avoided looking at Liz, as this fact was laid bare by the scalpel, but peripherally he could see her strain to get a good view of the exposed peritoneum. Again the now-familiar burning sensation closed around his neck. Once a year, he gave everyone — except Vincent — a complete physical, and with the men this always included a hernia check.

It was the cobbler's children going barefoot all over again...

In the realm of certain personal responsibilities, he was lazy. He had to face this fact about himself. He had waited thirty-five years to confess certain truths to Devin. He had never talked to Vincent about sex. He was still procrastinating over starting a program of speech therapy for Mouse. He still hadn't ordered UV lights, so the children wouldn't suffer vitamin D deficiency. He hadn't inspected kitchen sanitation in ten years. It seemed to him that while he had the courage and tenacity to manage an entire community, he lacked just that extra measure of discipline needed to ferret out and follow through on certain important details. And his sharpened self-awareness had lately revealed something else: a profound longing to have someone in his life who would force him to take that extra initiative. Perhaps this was another reason why he had never married Mary. Mary never stepped forward and showed his better self to him. Mary never insisted — on anything. His memory dredged up incidents — times, for instance, when he had been unreasonable with Vincent and had talked about it to her, hoping, yes actually hoping, that she would castigate him. If anyone down here could do that and get away with it Mary could — but she never did. Yes, *Father. Whatever you say, Father...* Mary thought he was perfect. Well, that was nice. But a man shouldn't live that way...

Against these memories he contrasted what Liz had said to him a few days ago, while they were reviewing Vincent's spottily recorded medical history during their preoperative huddle, **"What you need, Jacob Wells, is a swift kick in the ass..."**

Father decided on the posterior repair — suturing fascia to fascia instead of using the more superficial structures as anchoring points — and proceeded. In a moment of suspense, he wondered if Liz would argue for an anterior repair and he felt a glow of satisfaction when she did not. But almost immediately, he realized that her assent deprived him of the fun of scrimmaging with her over whether or not to use the anterior lamina, and he realized with a further dampening of his triumph, that all the brilliant arguments he'd spent most of last night lining up were now *DE TROP*. As he ligated the hernial sac, his ego offered to be shaken and then, finally, bowed to something much more attractive...

It was enjoyable to find that her knowledge equaled his.

And it was exciting that, in many areas, her knowledge surpassed his.

He hummed a little as he inserted a finger through the internal ring and their eyes met fleetingly above the surgical masks. And then, he experienced a sensation he had not known since the time of Margaret: a lifting beneath his heart, a sudden feeling of vitality beyond his years, a sense of being euphorically suspended in one moment of time, a vision of the highest truth of the universe — which was merely the sum of two hearts.

He removed the retractors and the internal ring was now buttressed by overlying muscle. He sprinkled the area generously with bactericidal powder. Liz depressed the tissues with a clamp while he tied off the sutures.

Feeling a need to break the silence Father murmured: "I'm almost ready to say 'isn't this fun?'."

"That's an improvement," she responded dryly.

"It's been so long since I've done any surgery."

"Well, we could take out his appendix while we're at it," she suggested. "But I doubt it would be appreciated. This darling has to be in shape to lose his virginity in six weeks."

Father applied a dressing to the incision site and then changed places with Liz. He wanted to breathe a sigh of relief at having completed the procedure, but instead his nerves began to jangle again. There were no textbook guidelines for this half of the project. There was only mystery and risk — and hope.

Father assured himself that Vincent's color, pulse and respiration were good. Then he watched Liz, and he felt as though he and this woman were the only living things in the silent black universe of their concentration.

If she felt any trepidation at this point she didn't show it. Deftly, she made a small incision, causing miraculously little bleeding. With the tip of a hemostat she brought forward the lateral edge of the grey, glistening sphincter muscle, made a tiny notch in it and allowed it to slip back into place. A few quick sutures and that side was done. She repeated the process on the other side and then it was over. It was as though she had done the procedure hundreds of times. Father's throat constricted with relief and admiration.

"Well, it certainly looks promising," he said shakily.

She responded: "We can't go throwing our hats in the air until Vincent returns from his trip with a big grin on his face."

Their patient was breathing suitably on his own and all his signs were good, so they turned off the cardiac oscilloscope and mummified him still further in more sheets and a special lintless blanket. Then Father tapped out a message of all's-well on the pipe, which passed through the common room. This was also a signal to a waiting team of the men, that it was time to move Vincent from the table to his bed. This was quickly done and the men left. While waiting for Vincent to wake up, Father and Liz put away equipment and folded up the operating table which Mouse had thoughtfully designed to be collapsible. An aura of professional tension still sharpened their movements and narrowed their attention strictly to routine. But gradually, it faded and when Vincent began to sigh and move his head they even exchanged a smile.

As they stood side by side watching their patient Liz suddenly spoke. She said: "he means everything to you, doesn't he?"

Deeply stirred, Father turned and gazed at her. But she presented only her craggy profile, eyes lowered, jaw very firm. He replied in a voice full of emotion: "Almost. He gives my life purpose and meaning. But somehow, my life is given even more of those things when someone else loves him too."

They were standing very close and she was taller. Glancing at him now, she could see the thinning places in his hair and the ragged spots where he had trimmed his beard carelessly. She could also see the slight flush on the skin of his cheekbones and the glow of fervor in the eyes that were turned to her, a glow that suddenly went liquid. Bending over, he rubbed fiercely at his eyes and the top of his head brushed against her. His fingers

somehow found hers and she squeezed his hand. Strangely, she wanted to keep holding it. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, a great bubble of emotion expanded inside her, searing her eyes and tightening her throat. It was a feeling so basic, so wonderfully half painful and half joyful - and for so much of her life it had been unfelt. She held out both arms to this man, bumping into him awkwardly as, in the exact same instant, his arms reached out toward her. They came together in a great, easing, comfortable squeeze, each amazed at how easing and comfortable the other felt ... Each simply amazed.

From his bed, groggy and in growing pain, Vincent watched this happen.

Forgetting his discomfort he smiled.

He was still smiling when Father gave him a shot for the pain.

* * *

Vincent was enjoying his convalescence, despite feeling as though a horse had kicked him in the crotch. He slept until two o'clock, then Mary came in and fed him some jello. Then Father and Liz came in, took his temperature, checked his incisions and gave him a sponge bath, all the while bickering amiably with each other about something called anterior lamina. After that, Kipper came in and played several hands of gin with him. Then Magister came in and collected requests for selections on the pipe organ. While the music drifted pleasantly down from the common room, Vincent dozed.

When he awoke Catherine was bending over him...

Catherine laid a book of short stories and a package of licorice sticks on the bedside table and sat down on the edge of the bed, gazing tenderly at Vincent. With his hair fanned out on the pillow, he languished in silence, blinking up at her vaguely.

After a moment he managed a feeble ghost of a smile.

Inwardly, she crumbled. His plight flooded her with nurturing impulses which were swelled all the way to the burgeoning point by that cuddly, claspable look he always had when lying down — or in any other position, frankly. She found herself crooning to him in a tone one might use with a half-drowned kitten.

"Vincent... Are you all right...? Are you going to be okay...?"

His hands moved half an inch, but it seemed too much of an effort to reach up and embrace her, so she leaned over and sank carefully against his shoulder. Tenderly and with great deliberation, she kissed him all over his fuzzy face. When she drew back, his eyes were closed. The arm he had managed to slide around her shoulders fell off limply.

With growing concern she stroked his forehead. "Are you depressed?" she queried anxiously.

His lips moved. He mumbled: "No..." He managed another sad little smile, which quickly faded.

"Just very tired and weak?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

A slight line appeared between his eyebrows and he moved one shoulder as though in an effort to shrug. Faintly, he murmured: "Not so very much..."

It was like him, she thought, not to want to burden her with an honest answer.

She crooned: "Oh, po-o-o-r Vin-cent..." She winced inwardly at the sound of her own voice. The half-drowned kitten had turned into a whole basketful of dead kittens.

"Has Father been in lately?" she pursued.

He shook his head in pathetic slow motion, his eyes sagging closed again. Then he sighed deeply.

She clasped his hands and then kissed them. "Poor Vincent. You must have spent a very lonely day."

He said nothing and she wished that she had come down at lunchtime.

"Have you been able to eat much?"

He shook his head pitifully—

At that moment, Kipper tumbled into the room from the lower tunnel and marched up to them with an air of undistractable purpose. He gave Catherine a hasty greeting then turned to Vincent and began to boil over with messages: "Jeffrey says that since you played eight rounds of gin with me he gets to play battleship with you after dinner. Father says yes, you can have a full dinner if you're really all that hungry, but if you throw up he doesn't want to hear about it. And he says you can't have the dartboard because Jamie's using it. And he says he doesn't know where the dominoes are. And he says will you please stop banging on the pipe for Mouse because Mouse has sentry duty until nine o'clock. *OK?*"

As Kipper delivered all this, Vincent gradually took on an expression of disconcerted perplexity. His eyes slid away from Catherine. The silence that followed was finally broken by his pained voice as he said: "Kipper, would you *please leave?*"

"But you said I could have another chance to beat you later — you promised."

"Not now."

"Okay, okay." The boy turned to go.

"Thank you, Kipper," Catherine said smoothly. She slanted a stern gaze upon Vincent and mercilessly held him pinned. "Eight rounds of gin?" she interrogated.

With massive composure, he stared fixedly at the stained-glass arch above his bed. At last he looked at her beseechingly, and she dissolved into giggles.

"Oh Vincent — I love it when you're bad..."

They gazed at each other for a long time, half listening to the Bach fugue that Magister had begun to play. Catherine's mind went comfortably slack. She reached out and laid a hand on Vincent's cheek.

His expression changed.

He looked up at her speculatively, and then with a concentrated interest of a type she had never seen before... She received this look with surprise and then delight. It reached far into her, found a special center and tickled her warmly there. This inspired a reverie that spread through her tissues in a delicious languor, breathing itself sweetly into her remotest nerves. Vincent's eyelids lowered halfway over a vague, inward look and she could almost feel him pulling on her sensations with his mind. She could feel the questions.... The wondering.... Utterly absorbed, she laid one finger upon his sensitive lower lip and idly stroked it. His lips closed gently on the finger and she felt his tongue come against it.

Her feelings spun pleurably out of control.

Time slowed down and the moment became feathery and delicate with possibilities...

With a mightily happy, sighing, forgetful collapse into total abandon, Catherine leaned down, fitted her lips against his and thrust her tongue into his mouth.

In the next second she realized her mistake, but by then Vincent's arms were closing around her shoulders — in a way that was hardly debilitated — and he was pushing against her with soft, searching lips.

Then he stiffened.

Then he gave a strangled yelp and pushed her away.

With her hair hanging in her face and her breath coming in short little puffs she stared down at him contritely.

"I'm sorry — I wasn't thinking!"

"Neither was I!" he gasped, rolling his head from side to side. He was panting and there was a sharp light of pain in his eyes. But it soon faded and gradually he relaxed.

For an awkward moment, they did not say anything or look at each other, but soon their gazes returned and they smiled helplessly. His warm, fuzzy hand closed around hers.

"Catherine," he murmured in a voice that brushed her senses with the remaining traces of what they had just experienced. His voice was very shy and soft: "You affect me — easily. I feel what you feel — always."

She let out a sudden peal of laughter. "I should remember that, when you've just had an operation!" She seized a handful of her hair and pulled it across her face in a charming, distracted gesture and as he studied her all his fears receded.

She was such a powerful consolation to him! There were times when she seemed to emanate an almost tangible vitality and joy. Her presence always cheered him, always lifted him from his gloomy, rock-walled world into sunshine and breezes. As she sat there, she seemed weightless and radiant, like some ethereal jewel in a dream.

Inside he quietly celebrated what had just happened between them. He would relish the memory of it throughout the rest of his convalescence. He wanted to think about it some more right now, to lapse, in fact, into a pleasant, reflective stupor — but the sudden flare in his circulation had left all his incisions aching.

He said sadly: "It's time for Father to give me another shot."

"Want me to go remind him?"

Vincent nodded.

* * *

In the tunnel outside Jacob Wells' study chamber, Liz smoked and leaned against the wall beneath a bracket lantern. She wore old and familiar attire: a canvas skirt with deep pockets and the usual dark sweater, a pair of scuffed oxfords, and the cigarette tasted the same as it always did — but she felt strangely different inside. It was as though her body, clothing and habits had somehow been wrapped around the wrong personality. It was a feeling she couldn't get used to — and couldn't discard. And she was still having the same conversation with herself that she had begun during Vincent's last visit; she was still warring with herself over what she truly believed... Did comfort for her exist only in her static penthouse world of safe and reliable things, or was there also comfort to be found here, in this almost chimerical place of shadows, distant music, candlelight and gentle faces?

Comfort...

Is that what I'm feeling...?

She dropped the butt, ground it under her heel and started to head back to the study chamber. Something caught her eye — a young woman, hardly more than a girl, was coming along the tunnel with a jaunty, head-bobbing stride. She was dressed unlike the community members in jeans and a denim jacket. Her shoulder-length blond hair curved softly at the ends and she had an appealing face, sparkling with zest and a hint of mischief. As she drew closer, she returned Liz's curious look with a hearty smile.

Suddenly enlightenment struck — and it struck both of them at the same instant. Catherine called out: "You must be Liz!" Breaking into a trot, she closed the remaining distance quickly and threw her arms around the older woman. "I'm Catherine! I'm so glad to meet you! I feel as though we're already old friends!"

Liz responded — but it was getting so nothing surprised her anymore...

Her arms went around this young woman's slender frame and squeezed her, and she felt a smooth warm cheek come tightly against her own. Then a kiss was planted there and, still

hugging her, Catherine whispered: "Thanks for everything you've done for Vincent — for us."

Speechless, Liz stepped back and gazed upon the happy, smiling face. So this was Vincent's Catherine.... My God, they were perfect for each other.

Her face felt strange.

She was smiling.

Like some goddamned idiot...

* * *

Three and a half weeks later Catherine jogged through a populous area of Central Park, keeping to the sidewalks, gravel walkways and bicycle paths. Having to go around people always made her work harder, and that was the whole idea, after all. The sun was beginning to lower and people were calling out to straying children, picking up blankets off the grass, folding them.

In Section G, Vincent charged at full speed down a long tunnel, his cloak billowing. He hated having to slow down in order to round a corner, so Section G with its extra-long passages was always his choice when he felt like running. And he did feel like running, despite Father's admonitions. His incisions had healed to pink scars. He tore past the pipe chamber, catching a glimpse of Pascal's surprised face. This reminded him of a recent conversation with Liz:

"Sometimes I wake up in the morning with such a pressing need to see her, Liz — just to hear her voice, to look at her face... And then I realize that I must wait for hours, until dark. It can be so hard to wait. It can make me feel quite ill-tempered..."

"Perfectly natural. What you are feeling is a new kind of energy. You will feel it more and more — and when it is frustrated you must find ways to diffuse it. What kind of hard labor can you do around this place?"

"Well, I can always go up to the pipe chamber and help Pascal disconnect and reconnect pipes."

"Sounds good. Keep a pipe wrench handy, then."

"I just use my hands."

"Sounds very good."

He passed a solitary child whose thin voice was lost in his wake: "Hi, Vincent. What's the —"

He rounded a corner. Oh no. Two children were playing marbles in the dirt. Vincent hurled himself into the air and cleared them both easily. He left them giggling with astonishment...

There was a playground ahead. Grinning, Catherine deviated from her usual route and trotted into the maze of swings, see-saws, slides and monkey bars. At the biggest monkey-bar structure she paused, then climbed up, lowered herself from the center section and dangled there happily while a breeze tickled her exposed midriff...

The sound made by tons of falling water was a dim roar ahead and the light at the end of this tunnel was greyish. Vincent dashed into that misty light and came to a skidding halt on the top of a cliff overlooking the waterfall cavern. Below him and on the other side of the wide subterranean river, was a series of gradually descending cliffs and rocky steps, following the downward-leading course of the river. To his right was the thundering waterfall and directly beside him, tethered to an eyebolt at the tunnel entrance, was the long swinging-rope he remembered from his childhood. He hadn't used it since he had stopped playing Tarzan... But he assumed the children still used it.

Vincent untied the rope, got a firm grip and pushed off the edge of the cliff.

The rope broke and he plunged twenty feet into icy water.

Catherine dropped off the monkey bars, turned west and jogged toward the home stretch.

* * *

"I suppose it's a hedge against becoming bored with my primary field," Father said as he and Liz paused at the top of a long flight of slate steps. "But math, for me, is also a vision of, well — something higher."

"Know what you mean," Liz muttered absently as the heavy sound of rushing water distracted her. "Medical practice is pretty grubby stuff..." Her words trailed off and she allowed herself to gawk with obvious astonishment at the vast expanse of climbing granite cliffs shrouded in rising mist, and the wide, sedately flowing river that wound away between these rocky formations.

"And what is this place?"

"The waterfall cavern. There's a good viewing spot at the bottom of these steps."

She started downward and then realized that Jacob was not descending with her. She looked back at him. "Well — aren't you coming?"

Father wore an aspect of nervous hesitation. He shuffled his feet a little and then said: "I'm not so young and agile as I once was, and uh, now that I have this leg... Those steps can be slippery. I never go down there unless someone holds my hand."

She glared. In a trenchant voice she accused: "You dragged me all the way down here just for an excuse to hold my hand."

"Honestly I *didn't*. I, well.... I —"

Still glaring, she thrust out her hand. "For God's sake, hold it then,"

Father descended with great caution and she tucked his arm against her body. She said gently: "Be careful, Jacob."

"Yes, yes." He glanced at her sideways.

When they reached the bottom, oddly enough neither seemed to notice the fact that they were still holding hands. Together, they moved to the iron railing at the edge of the rocky protuberance. It was hardly necessary to have a railing here, for the gurgling edge of the river was only two feet below it, but Mouse had installed it a few months back because he thought it looked romantic...

Mentally, Father awarded Mouse about a hundred brownie points...

The mists hovered like fine lacework. Even the rather metallic grey light that permeated the cavern formed unearthly, delicate highlights along the watery course.

At the railing they gave the waterfall a prolonged stare and then Father recited gravely and beautifully:

"With what deep murmurs through time's silent stealth

Doth thy transparent, cool, and watery wealth

Here flowing fall,

And chide, and call,

As if his liquid, loose retinue stayed

Lingering, and were of this steep place afraid,

The common pass

Where, clear as glass

All must descend—

Not to an end,

But quickened by this deep and rocky grave,

Rise to a longer course more bright and brave."

Feeling her eyes upon him he explained: "That's from 'The Waterfall' by Henry Vaughan. It's always been a favorite of mine —"

At his feet, a totally unexpected sight dragged his attention away from her. Wet, fuzzy fingers popped over the edge of the rock and Vincent's drenched head and shoulders bobbed up from the watery depths.

"What on earth —" Father exclaimed.

Staring at his son in shock, Father got the distinct impression that Vincent would have liked to sink back into the water and unobtrusively drown himself. Without speaking, Vincent paddled past the end of the railing and hauled himself with a great wet slap onto the surface of the rock. Exhausted and panting, he lay for a moment at their feet.

"A mighty peculiar-looking stranded fish, Jacob," Liz commented wryly.

"What *have* you been doing?" Father demanded. Not waiting for a reply he commanded: "Go home at once and have a hot bath. And some hot tea. Honestly, Vincent, you do tax my patience sometimes."

Vincent climbed to his feet, leaving an enormous puddle, and slogged up the stairs to the tunnel.

Liz was unconsciously smiling as she watched Vincent leave, and as she stood there with her hands clasped and her chin raised, Father studied her. There was something precise and almost regal in the lines of her back and shoulders. Reflected light from the water outlined her sturdy profile and touched her hair with silver. It occurred to him that she was a very handsome woman...

The ardent declarations of a thousand romantic poems spiraled through his mind. Surely there must be one — just the right one — that would recapture the mood they had begun to feel, just before Vincent crawled out of the water...

He returned to the rail and stood close to her and she glanced at him.

She said: "By the way, are you using that book on asymptotic expansions?"

"Ah — no. Take it along with you if you like." Somewhat crestfallen, he stared at the waterfall again and so did she. She leaned on the railing with both elbows, her gaze drawn to the cloud of churning spray at the base of the waterfall, and he watched her keenly. His shoulder came against hers but she did not move away.

It was difficult to conceal certain impulses from another human being, particularly a member of the opposite sex. Particularly at their age. Somehow — surely — his intention must be telegraphing itself to her across those formidable barriers she always tried to erect between herself and the rest of life.

She turned her head and looked at him without expression. She straightened up and was then looking down at him.

Something in Father's imagination detached itself, stepped back and found this scene comical.

He began to chuckle helplessly. He said: "You know, they used to make Alan Ladd stand on a box—"

She bent over the railing again, leaned on her elbows and gave him a level stare. Then she said: "Oh for God's sake, Jacob — shut up and kiss me."

* * *

"Now, Vincent, you must beware of poison ivy. It tends to grow around the bases of trees and also along road banks. It's a shiny, three-leafed, vine-like plant... Well —aha! Here we are. It looks like this." Opening the book wide, Father thrust the illustrated plate in front of

Vincent's face and Vincent gave it a cursory glance. Then Vincent went back to pulling books off bookshelves and tossing them into the battered old valise which lay open in the middle of the rug.

"I'm sure Catherine will not let me run afoul of it, Father."

"Well, she'll have to teach you how to survive. You'll sit right down on a thistle or something —"

"Or a pasture pie."

Father's head snapped up. "Now, wherever did you hear that phrase?"

"I've been talking to someone named Catherine," Vincent replied evenly.

He stared at the titles and pulled out a volume of John Galsworthy, '*The Chronicle of English Drama*', a classic ancient mythology, the Oxford Companion to English Literature, '*The Letters of Charles Dickens*', the collected poems of William Butler Yeats, Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, the poems of Robert Browning, the '*Confessions of Saint Augustine*', the Norton anthology of English literature, the Norton scores (Catherine's aunt and uncle would probably have a stereo), Bartlett's quotations, several volumes of Shakespeare and the '*Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck*'.

The books landed one by one with dull thwacks, as Father watched absently and continued to lecture: "And don't go wading in muddy streams or you will become infested with nasty little things called chiggers. And don't stay in the hot sun for longer than half an hour at a time, Vincent — you're not used to it."

"Liz says my system is designed to tolerate extreme temperatures." The first edition of Tennyson, the '*Complete Sherlock Holmes*', '*The Portable Swift*', and Homer's '*Odysseia*' went into the suitcase followed, after a moment of intense reflection, by several more volumes of Shakespeare.

"And of course I do hope you know enough never to stand under a tree during a thunderstorm."

Vincent gave him a blank stare. "Why not?"

Father groaned and started to explain then gave up and said, "Look — just stay close to Catherine and you'll be all right."

Vincent gazed at him with patience. "Father, I *intend* to stay close to Catherine."

Father cleared his throat nervously. "Yes, well... All right."

From the table, Vincent collected his journal and junk verse scrapbook and tossed them onto the pile.

Just then Mouse wandered in and stared at the suitcase which was now brimful-to-overflowing with books. He rolled his eyes and giggled: "No clothes?"

"I was getting to that," Vincent said quickly. He stared at all the books. Then again, perhaps they wouldn't do all that much reading...

* * *

In Catherine's bedroom, late afternoon sunbeams slanted across neat piles of clothing on the bed and an occasional gust of warm breeze billowed the gauzy curtains alongside the open balcony doors. The weather continued to look promising...

She stood in the middle of the room, hugging herself and smiling as she remembered her last brief talk with Liz. It had been so nice to walk along with an older woman's arm companionably around her shoulders, to look up and see that behind the protective cynicism in those steady eyes was a great deal of sympathy and understanding. Catherine felt very drawn to this straight-backed, taciturn Liz Sprague, and she could see why Vincent was crazy about her and why Father was so fascinated by her.

Liz had said in her: gruff, surprisingly deep voice: "You should invest in one of those expensive birch English hairbrushes with real pig bristles."

Catherine had answered innocently: "I have a hairbrush."

Liz had replied: "Yes, but one of these days soon your furry friend is going to need some heavy-duty brushwork. Better be prepared."

There had been no explanation, but the cryptic glint in Liz's eyes and the kindly expression on her face, as she gave Catherine a squeeze, had been enough.

The hairbrush, still in its plastic box, lay on the bed next to Vincent's new blue jeans and shirts.

Thoughtfully, she folded a creamy sheer nightgown and laid it next to a frothy pile of lingerie. She inventoried shorts and tops, jeans, socks, some beach-size towels for lying on the grass in the sun.

The conversation with Liz had reminded her of how much she missed having a mother to confide in, especially at this time of her life. And a sadness had risen within her. But it had been slowly vanquished by a new and wonderful anticipation...

Liz was going to be her friend. Perhaps she could talk to Liz...

* * *

In her customary chair on the terrace, Liz contemplated the deepening twilight. On the table beside her was a single potted geranium plant with one small, rather anemic-looking bloom. She had brought it home and watered it. She figured she'd plant it in one of the planter walls as soon as it began to look stronger. And if it survived the summer, she figured she might plant something else.

Also on the table was an odd assortment of loose pages from various magazines, weighted down by the ashtray. From Scientific American she had clipped, for Jacob, an article on the diseases which had hastened the decline of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia, and from Small Animal Practice she had clipped a very comprehensive feature on cat care for Mrs Larrimore. Then she had found and clipped two more articles that might be of interest to Jacob.

She wasn't really surprised when there came a scraping sound at the edge of the roof on her left. As she glanced up with a grin, Vincent dropped lightly to the terrace. He eased his bulky form into the chair beside her.

Liz grinned again and patted the cushion on her lap. "How about once more for old times' sake?" He put his head down and she squeezed his big shoulders affectionately. She said: "So, tomorrow's the big day,"

In reply his voice was soft and tranquil. She would miss that voice. "Yes. Catherine's picking me up just before dawn at the West Central Park tunnel entrance."

"All packed?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Remember your vitamins?"

"No. Thank you for reminding me."

"And how's the body?"

"It's all healed. Father still thinks I should be careful about lifting, but he's always telling me to be careful about something."

She asked pointedly, "And what about other things? Working better, I hope?"

He answered very softly: "I don't know yet, Liz. Nothing has happened lately."

"I see. We'll just hope for the best, then."

"Yes."

"And how's Father holding up?"

"He has fears."

"Guess that will never change."

"But underneath he's happy for me. But he will miss me. Will you visit him, Liz?"

"Only if the cat gets sick or the raccoon begins to limp again." Vincent began to raise his head but she pushed it down firmly. "I'm only kidding. I suppose I will visit him."

"He's very fond of you."

"That so?" she murmured and her eyes grew cloudy.

She was glad of the thundering waterfall because her heart was behaving rather like a fist hammering on an old door and she was sure the noise could be heard.

This was absurd. Elizabeth Sprague, the coldly rational, was standing before a waterfall, hundreds of feet beneath New York City, with a racing pulse, being kissed by a man dressed like Erasmus. And yet suddenly, she could not look upon herself and this scene with mockery. She felt within him kindness and wisdom, confusion and old hurt, loneliness and need. And she felt those things within herself. His moustache was very soft, as he touched her lips with a tentative kiss and then drew back. The expressive crinkles around his eyes deepened and his face held a quiet appreciation of the moment. Despite her innate cynicism she felt it too — that appreciation. And in some way she must have reflected it, for he leaned toward her again and this time she met his face with hers. They kissed longer, and with an affectionate, familiar nuzzling, as though they had been lovers for years. Somehow their arms went around each other.. ,

"You've changed," Vincent said.

She was startled. "How's that?"

"You've been smiling more often. I used to have to look for those smiles inside you."

"Why did you bother looking?"

"Because I knew they were there." He raised himself and nestled sweetly against her shoulder, heavy and warm, and she couldn't help putting her arms around him and squeezing hard.

"Liz," he murmured. "I wish I could find the words to thank you for everything you've done. You've been so good to me. You've given me so much. And Catherine too." A furry hand touched her cheek. "I wish I could find some way to thank you."

"She's a wonderful girl, Vincent." Liz kissed his forehead and held him tight and remembered that once she had been frightened by her impulse to hold him and comfort him. How long ago that seemed.... "And let's not have all this fuss about thanking. There's only one thing I want you to do. No matter what happens, you must remember that Catherine loves you. You must always remember that, Vincent. It's all that matters. And it will get you through anything. Anything at all. Oh, and there's one more thing." She kissed him again and pressed the furry hand against her cheek. "I love you too, sweetheart."

Her lips moved again with the unfamiliar words: "I love you, too..."

* * *

It was the latest model of Ford station wagon with air conditioning, cruise control, a tape deck and the works, but Catherine had made it her rental choice exclusively because of the heavily tinted windows. Even so, she felt she couldn't risk having Vincent sit in the front with her because Route 95 was a toll road and that meant lowering the driver window at regular intervals, mostly to fling coins into a basket, but sometimes to pay an actual laconic, gum-chewing toll collector.

She had collapsed the back seat to create the optimum amount of space, and she had made Vincent a padded nest of two unrolled sleeping bags and a pillow. On these he was curled up happily, with his head and shoulders right behind her, and she could hear an occasional thump, as he bumped into a suitcase while changing position. Otherwise, he was very quiet.

That was just as well. She would need to concentrate as she navigated a tangle of freeways on the way to Route 95.

As she proceeded uptown to 96th Street, a light drizzle sent droplets zigzagging across the windshield. The entire city, from the jagged skyscrapers to the puddle-strewn streets, seemed the same flat metal grey. She made a right onto the Henry Hudson Parkway, feeling a little shivery inside her lightweight jacket. It was cool for a June morning, but the day was destined to get hotter. These little tremors were probably just excitement. She was immensely pleased with herself, with Vincent, with Aunt Lila and Uncle David, with life in general.... This was WORKING. This was REALLY HAPPENING. She turned onto the Cross Bronx Expressway at the George Washington Bridge. The early hour and scant traffic gave her a feeling of unreality.

"You comfortable back there?"

"Yes."

"It's better than the top of a subway car, isn't it?"

She heard that delightful, soft chuckle.

Catherine felt unfairly deprived because she couldn't enjoy the sight of him as he lay all curled up among the bags, but soon enough she'd get to see him from all kinds of interesting new angles. Her lips curved into a dreamy, secret smile and then widened with an impish grin. She had packed a frisbee and a kite, a giant container of soap bubble solution, a softball...

A couple of trucks passed them and Vincent's voice sounded apprehensive. "Catherine, are you sure no one can see me?"

"Absolutely."

Another truck passed them and from behind her came a dull thud that vibrated the entire car.

"What *are* you doing, Vincent?"

"Moving to the other side."

"Believe me, nobody can see you."

On the Hutchinson River Parkway she watched for exit 6, and then, finally, they were on Route 95 headed north — and she could relax. The rain had stopped and dawn was rapidly giving way to a sparkling morning. They had a four hour drive ahead.

She said: "When I was a kid my parents used to play a memory game with me to help pass the time on long car trips. It was called 'Packed Grandmother's Bag'. Want to try it?"

"All right."

She began: "I packed grandmother's bag, and in it I put a hairbrush. Now you repeat that and add an item."

There was a measurable silence.

"Come on Vincent..."

"I can't think of what to add."

"Well, it can be anything. And if it's something silly it will be easier to remember."

There was an even longer silence and a heavy sigh from behind her. "I know you can do it, Vincent."

He explained: "I'm trying to think of something silly." Then, quickly, he said: "I packed grandmother's bag and in it I put a hairbrush — and Catherine."

"All right! Good! I packed grandmother's bag and in it I put a hairbrush and Catherine and — Hey, wait a minute... Are you implying that I'm silly?"

His tawny face appeared in the rear view mirror. He folded his arms across the back of the seat and put his chin down on them. He said reasonably: "You would be, inside grandmother's bag."

Inside her, something gleefully began to spin and bubble. A sensation of lightness almost lifted her off the seat. This just confirmed what she'd always suspected — that if she could get Vincent all to herself for a while, he'd begin to loosen up in a very short time. She'd always known he had a sense of humor submerged beneath all the cave-grown melancholy. Only a humorist would write her a love letter, as he had once done, using third-century runic characters...

Half an hour later, Catherine was struggling: "I packed grandmother's bag and in it I put a hairbrush, Catherine, an alphorn, a pair of finches, a lavender sachet, the Gutenberg Bible, a personalized squash, a theodolite, a piece of jade, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a brace of quail, a Windsor chair, a doggie biscuit, an ant farm, the British Parliament, a candle mold, a head of lettuce, the Periodic Table of Elements, and uh —" She paused and her grip on the steering wheel tightened. "—a club moss, a diesel yacht, an ozone layer, a hurricane lamp, Roberts Rules of Order, a lobster trap, and uh.... Uh..." She gave up. "I guess you win. I know I've forgotten something."

"You forgot the tin snips," Vincent offered.

Well, she should have known better than to play memory games with someone who could recite twelve hundred cantos of poetry...

Vincent's voice became suddenly charged with quiet excitement: "Catherine, I forgot to tell you something important."

"What's that?"

"Right after my operation, while I was still recovering from the anesthetic, Father and Liz *embraced!* And a few days ago, in the waterfall cavern, I saw them *holding hands!*"

She grinned. "Sounds fatal. And you're really enjoying it, you match-maker. I'll bet you, had it all planned from the start."

Vincent said modestly: "Fate is no more apparent to me than to anyone... But I did have hopes. I just didn't expect it all to happen quite so fast."

"Oh, I imagine people their age are a lot more direct about these things... "

* * *

"Come on down, Liz."

Jacob Wells stood at the bottom of the steps looking up at her with an eager, dancing light in his eyes. His hair looked damp, as though he had just slicked it down with something, the books and other materials on his desk were sitting in unnaturally neat little stacks, and he appeared to be slightly out of breath.

She gave him a long, appraising stare. "You look as though you've been expecting me."

He shrugged offhandedly. "Well, ah — yes, I suppose I was. The sentries reported through the pipes that you were on your way." He said with very heartfelt approval: "I see you've learned a route down here."

"No, I just got lucky. Actually, I was expecting to get quite thoroughly lost."

She descended the steps, gave him a stiff look and held out a book to him. "I just came to return your book. I don't want to interrupt your work, so I'll be going."

"No, don't go."

With his polished charm of gesture Father turned and waved a hand toward a small table. On it lay an elegant teak tray containing a fine bone china tea service and a plate piled high with delicate-looking pastries. The spout of the teapot was steaming cozily.

"Sarah just brought in tea. There's an extra cup."

Her look of suspicion remained as she studied the tray. "I see. You always get served your tea with an extra cup."

Father's lips compressed. He pointed toward a chair, unceremoniously, with his cane. "*Sit down.*"

She complied and he joined her and poured their tea.

He inquired: "Do you like movies?"

"I don't go to them, if that's what you mean." Over the rim of her teacup she watched him from narrowed eyes, waiting for the reply to deflate him.

"That's fine, Liz. That's fine," he declared in a placating tone. "No one, I am sure, would ever require you to *go* to a movie. Certainly not. And certainly not I. *Not ever.*"

At this point her smug look began to disintegrate into one of wariness and Father continued smoothly: "Do you ever watch them on TV?"

Reluctantly, she admitted: "I've been known to."

"Good. *Good.* Then I don't suppose you'd be averse to staying a little longer and watching one here with me."

Bitingly, she said: "It's a funny thing, Jacob — but I don't recall seeing any TV antennae hanging in any of your tunnels."

He turned in his chair in a significant way and gazed toward one end of the room. She followed his look. There, on a wheeled cart, was an old Graflex 16-millimeter projector.

She was cornered.

She grumbled: "Well, you certainly do seem to have all the amenities down here."

He smiled expansively. "As many as we can possibly manage to find room for." Rising, he went to a small pipe in the wall and rapped out a brief message. After a few minutes a small, scrawny blonde woman appeared on the platform above the steps. She had short, limp hair, gold-rimmed glasses, and was dressed like a boy in tunic and thong-wrapped leggings.

"Ah — Meg. Good of you to come. Tell me, what do we have that's new in the film archives?"

The skinny blonde frowned at them nearsightedly and replied: "You already asked me that once today."

"I did. Oh." Father rubbed fretfully at his beard, then said with a renewed firmness; "Well, what did you tell me?"

With a great show of patience Meg recited: "*Night of the Hunter; 1951.* Shelley Winters, Robert Mitchum, Lillian Gish. Just got it in. It's the only movie Sir Charles Laughton ever directed. It was made the year I was born. It —"

"Yes, yes. That's fine, Meg." He glanced at Liz with naked entreaty. "Would you like to see *Night of the Hunter?*"

"All right."

He began to turn back toward Meg, then glanced at Liz again with astonishment, then turned back toward Meg. "Well then, yes. I think that will do just fine."

"Okay. I'll bring it. But remember, Father, call me if you get into trouble with the projector. Not Vincent. He —"

Father said quickly, as though anticipating a lecture: "I know, I know. He leaves hairs all over the film. Vincent isn't here, Meg. He's gone to Connecticut — remember?"

Meg looked embarrassed and left quickly.

Father said to Liz, with a shake of the head: "A bit absent-minded, that one. Always writing stories..."

"You're a fine one to talk," Liz said severely.

* * *

"Aren't you going to come out of there, Vincent?"

She had parked the car near the barn, across the driveway from the back door of the farmhouse and she had climbed out and raised the tailgate. In fact, she had already removed the smallest bags and carried them into the kitchen after grubbing around in the birdfeeder for the key. Somehow, it seemed to her a rather obvious place to hide a house key, but Aunt Lila and Uncle David had never demonstrated any fear of unsavory characters or incidents, and they had lived here for twenty-five years. It was one more reason why she had known this was a safe place to bring Vincent.

Now if she could just convince him that it was safe to leave the car...

In the back of the station wagon he remained sitting on his thigh with his arms folded across the back of the front seat. Each time she peeked in at him, he was still making a slow, circular scan of the area. If his eyes hadn't been so bright she would have thought he was acting dazed.

But perhaps he was dazed. She could easily imagine that to someone who had never seen anything but rocky tunnels and caverns and various segments of New York City after dark, this scene must bear the aspect of a beautiful storybook picture come alive.

The late morning was dazzlingly lovely, and in the orchard off to the far right of the side yard, the apple blossoms swayed in a fitful breeze. The two-storey Dutch-colonial farmhouse was a deep wine red with black shutters and gleaming white trim. Checkered curtains and hanging plants showed at the windows. The only movement was a constant changing of the guard at the kitchen window as cats displaced each other in their efforts to keep up with what was going on in the driveway. The box hedges enclosing the yard were neatly trimmed, the grass lush and immaculate — the entire place, as always, looked like a page out of *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Between the barn — which was really an elaborate garage and hadn't housed any livestock in over forty years — and the garden shed, she glimpsed a vista of pond fringed with cattails. The surface of the water was flat and glassy. A sudden puff of warm wind reminded her that the air had been very still when she had first emerged from the car. Glancing east, Catherine saw a purple gathering near the horizon. They were going to get a thunderstorm... But it would pass quickly, she hoped. She did not want their first day alone in the country to be rained out.

On the other hand, you could get a lot of cuddling accomplished when rain spoiled other kinds of plans...

The sun waned into a rosy light that grew sharp and tense with the oncoming storm. The storm was approaching fast. All around her leaves rustled, bunching up before the wind and coyly showing their undersides.

The cats should be let out for a short time before the rain began...

She gathered up the bag of groceries she had stopped to buy on the way through Cooperville. On her way back into the kitchen, she propped open the door and the cats spilled into the driveway, twitchy and nervous with their awareness of the approaching storm.

Inside the car, Vincent was having an unusual problem. He was finding it hard to believe in his own senses...

His senses told him quite plainly that, aside from the small, scuttling variety of wildlife, there were no other living things for miles. He had even seen, during the last leg of the journey over country roads, that this property was bordered on two sides by other farms and on one by a deserted trap rock quarry, and that had been reassuring, but still he found the privacy hard to believe. The privacy... There was so much of it!!!

Catherine had made him take off his cloak and stuff it into a suitcase. It was all he could do to keep from pulling it out again and putting it on. And yet they truly were alone.... There was not another soul for miles.... Only rabbits, squirrels and birds.

And cats.

A fluffy blur of orange and black touched down briefly on the tailgate and hissed at him, then disappeared. That would be Bridget.

Catherine was back, peering in at him with an encouraging smile. She said: "I'm leaving the heaviest bags for you." Then she lowered her chin and ogled him roguishly. "Have you ever been raped in the back of a station-wagon before?"

Vincent's eyes widened.

She doubled up with a rippling little laugh and a gust of wind blew her hair across her face.

He gazed at her adoringly.

Her teasing sallies often brought back the kinds of feelings he'd had as a small boy, when Father would toss him in the air and he'd experience a surge of joy and terror both at the same time. And Catherine could leave him feeling the same way — happy and disoriented, and a little short of breath.

Vincent found his courage. On hands and knees he crawled slowly forward and looked up at her through his tumbled hair. She was still giggling, and she was such an appealing sight.... He swung his legs over the end of the tailgate and sat there and she plunked herself down beside him.

Vincent looked around again. Then he drew in a deep breath and exposed all his teeth in a wide, exuberant grin.

"What are you feeling?" she asked, watching him closely and trying to imprint his expression permanently on her memory.

"The air — it feels so open. There are no city smells. There are so many new smells..."

"Yes, isn't it yummy? It's called nature. You've only read about it in poems and stories. Now you know what those poems and stories smell like."

"Mmm." Vincent put an arm around her and drew her head in beneath his chin. Within her, he could feel little knots of tension — leftovers from the long drive — slowly loosen and fall apart. She made a soft sound in her throat and raised her face to him and he kissed her shyly once — then again with more deliberation...

Something brushed insistently against his ankle and he looked down at a grey and white cat with big vacuous eyes. It gaped up at him and meowed plaintively.

"That one is Jane," Catherine introduced. She gave a quick little sigh and a shake of the shoulders. "Well, come on! Let's get the rest of this stuff inside before it rains!"

Vincent hauled out the two heaviest suitcases and carried them across the gravel driveway and into the kitchen. There seemed to be cats everywhere — even though there were only four of them — twisting and slinking and stretching and curving hither and yon. On the gravel near the back steps lay the orange neutered male named Bennie, his six-pack-and-pickup-truck personality very much on display, as he rolled and yawned, thrusting a paunchy belly toward the sky. Inside, Bridget crouched beneath the kitchen table, fur bristling untidily, her eyes baleful as she watched Vincent set down the bags. She made a half-hearted swipe in his general direction. A grey blur named Walter scampered in from the hall.

Vincent looked around at copper pans, wooden beams and maple countertops. On the table lay a conspicuous array of cans of cat food, boxes of kitty kibble and treats and six pages of handwritten notes to Catherine from Aunt Lila. Also on the table — in use as a paperweight on top of the notes — was a small, round, clear plastic tub containing some sort of minced dried green leaves. Vincent picked it up and examined the label.

Catnip.

Immediately he was curious. He'd heard of this herb that was supposed to drive cats wild, but he'd never seen it before...

He pried off the lid, held the container under his chin and sniffed. Reflexively, his mouth sprang open and the sudden intake of air pulled about half a dozen tiny leaf pieces onto his tongue. Spluttering, he returned the container to its original spot and looked around for the lid, which he had apparently dropped. He couldn't find it. The tiny papery leaves were sticking unpleasantly to the roof of his mouth, his gums, his tongue.... He gave his head a violent shake and went through a series of futile spitting contortions while a couple of the cats watched interestedly. If there was anything he hated worse than foreign objects in his mouth, it was having to probe around in there with his own fuzzy fingers.... He would have to ask Catherine to — Unexpectedly his teeth clanked together and one of the tiny leaf pieces just happened to be right in between.

A strange, totally exotic flavor filled his mouth, curled along his senses and wafted its way up into his brain.

The tendons in his knees turned to jelly. His toes thrummed. His nostrils prickled with a thousand tiny, delicious needle stabs. Doubling up, he rubbed violently at his nose with his knuckles, and this seemed to release even more of the incredible aroma. His entire being reacted with a voiceless, frolicking squeal.

Giddily, he leaned on the table with both hands and stared, grinning with amazement, as the walls around him began to dip and flow.

A sudden laugh tore out of the middle of his diaphragm.

The cats had somehow acquired little white pinafores with duck and rabbit appliques.

Vincent stared, enchanted.

The copper pots and pans had all sprouted legs and were walking obligingly into the sink.

Perched awkwardly on the front seat of the car, Catherine hunkered down and lifted up the floor mats as she searched for the comb she had lost somewhere around New London. It wasn't on the floor. It wasn't in the glove compartment. At last she found it in the crack of the seat. She was just about to insert the key into the ignition and move the car into the barn when a very strange sight in the rear view mirror caused her arm to freeze.

It was Vincent.

He was coming through the back door. But he wasn't just coming through the back door, he was *staggering* and *lurching* through the back door...

Catherine whipped around and stared. Then she leaped out of the car with her heart hammering.

Just barely balanced and clinging to the door jamb, Vincent stood swaying on the back step. His face was unrecognizable.

It wore a goofy grin.

Catherine gasped: "Vincent?" She gasped again: "*Vincent — are you all right?*"

He stumbled off the step, tacked erratically in her direction, collapsed at her feet and rolled over on his side, giggling weakly.

All she could do was stand there and stare.... And stare... And stare...

"Vincent," she managed faintly, absolutely thunderstruck. "You're drunk."

Just then there was a sudden, perceptible darkening around them and a fat droplet splashed on her nose.

Vincent blinked up at her vacantly, teeth still widely displayed and then he mumbled: "Boy stood on the burning rock.... Listen my children and you shall..." He grimaced and pushed his tongue through his teeth in an irritable way.

There were bits of something sticking to his tongue. Her totally stunned mind managed to latch onto this fact and she crouched down beside him.

"Vincent, what's that in your mouth? What *have* you gotten into?"

He gasped: "Cromwell, I charge thee — wing away... By the sin that..." He nudged her in a rubbery motion with his head and her shocked expression seemed to register on him at last.

He inquired with exaggerated concern: "Catherine---are you all right?"

"Vincent, what have you been eating?"

He muttered something incoherently and sagged against her with drooping eyelids.

"No, don't do that! Not out here, Vincent — it's starting to rain. Come on, let's get you into the house." She shoved her hands under his arms and tried to shake him. "Get up. Get up, Vincent!"

He frowned vaguely as she tugged and pulled at him. "By the sin that... Love thyself last; cherish those carts that crate thee... I mean hate thee... I mean those celery hearts that hate thee..." He rolled unsteadily into a sitting position. "I come to ferry Caesar, not to braise him... The evil that men do..."

There was a silent flicker of white light, followed by a grumble from the east, and the trees began to hiss and sway.

Catherine had no idea what was wrong with Vincent. At first she had been quite frightened, but as she tugged at him and listened to his incoherent ravings something began to happen to her inside....

Suddenly, as she implored: "Vincent, get up," her words were shaken apart by a helpless giggle.

Vincent was drunk — irrefutably, inexplicably drunk.

And it was insanely funny.

He babbled: "And grievously bath... And.. And grievously..." On hands and knees he swayed back and forth slowly, his hair hanging down. He chanted confusedly: "Monday's child is full of space... Tuesday's child is... is tangled lace. Thursday's child is full of Poe... Friday's child has jars to grow..."

Catherine doubled up, laughing hysterically.

The rain began to fall in wide-spaced droplets and this development seemed to spur Vincent into action — of a sort. He rose unsteadily to his feet. She dusted him off and he reacted to this with a muzzily injured air, as though she were slapping him. Then he stumbled sideways. Still laughing helplessly, she grabbed his arm and pulled it across her shoulders. Locked together they stumbled, somehow, to the back step. There he couldn't seem to understand about lifting one foot up.

"Find a manhole..." he muttered, as she struggled with him.

"No, Vincent — this isn't New York." The rain began to come down in torrents and they were getting wet. "Come on, let's get inside." He stepped up finally and she pushed him into the kitchen and closed the door behind them.

Vincent slouched against the wall and gazed up at the ceiling. "Pretty flowers," he breathed.

Catherine was still laughing so hard she could scarcely think and her bladder, aggravated by these spasms, was begging her to get it to the bath-room fast... But she had to find out what was the matter with Vincent.

Then she saw the plastic lid on the floor, and her eyes, jumping to the table, found the open container.

"Oh my God, Vincent — catnip! You're drunk on catnip!"

Darting forward, she snatched up the lid and recapped the container.

Vincent stumbled and slid along the wall, and caught himself by clutching the radiator. His giggling was a series of tiny, muffled, high-pitched sounds coming from the back of his throat and his arm was very unsteady as he pointed at the suitcases and said: "Look, they're waving..."

The cats were sitting huddled together in a tense knot under the table. They seemed to know that something bizarre was taking place...

Catherine opened a cabinet and jammed the catnip far in the back, behind some nesting bowls. She began to worry; how long would Vincent remain intoxicated? Would he suffer a hangover; would he be sick?

She was quite sure nothing like this had ever happened to him before...

"Vincent, I think you should lie down for a while. Let's go upstairs."

With complete docility, he allowed himself to be steered into the hall, but at the stairway he balked. As she shoved and pushed from behind, he reacted with little complaining grunts. As he stumbled and finally sprawled halfway up the stairs, she dissolved into giggles again. The searing clutch of laughter bent her almost double and her stomach seemed to cleave to her backbone.

"Oh, Vincent, this is crazy! Come on, don't you want to lie down on a nice comfy bed?"

"Mesh."

She squeezed her thighs together as a sudden 'gone' feeling in her bladder threatened her with loss of control.

"Oh, God — Vincent, you've got to get up these stairs by yourself! I have to get to the bathroom!"

He mumbled, "Actor struts and craps upon the stage—" and she gave a little shriek and grabbed at her crotch. Bent over and still giggling uncontrollably she left him and fled to the upstairs bathroom. She made it just in time.

When she returned Vincent was still sprawled halfway up the stairs. He smiled at her sweetly and kissed the wall.

* * *

There was something so comforting and essential in lying close together, warm and undressed...

On the book-strewn table beside Father's bed, only two candles burned but Liz could see that, he was smiling as he lay there gazing at her.

"I think we both need practice," she muttered and he broke into a chuckle and reached for her. They squirmed together again and enjoyed another long embrace under the blankets.

She reflected on how odd it was that the weather Toplevel was hot and humid, yet down here it always seemed cold and drafty... It all felt so good, the blankets, the warmth of Jacob's softly-fleshed masculine body against her own.

"The young and inexperienced do have a point," he murmured, still chuckling as he held her. "Fumbling is fun."

It had been a terrific release just to sit in the dark, in the study chamber, kissing each other — until the flap, flap, flap of the end of the film on the take-up reel had finally disrupted them. Then, hand-in-hand, they had come down here and silently, purposefully undressed. Under Jacob Wells' blankets and the faint, guttering light of two tiny candles, they had discovered each other's repressed high charge of passion and need.

After a while she queried: "What time is it?"

He held his watch to the candlelight. "Just two o'clock."

She said thoughtfully: "Vincent and Catherine have arrived by now. They've been there a few hours..."

He mused, with a smile in his voice; "Yes. I wonder what they're up to right now?"

She said dryly: "Well, it's one thing for us to wonder what they're up to — but you can be sure they'll never imagine what *we're* up to."

* * *

Catherine made a tuna salad for lunch, but Vincent could not be persuaded to eat anything. Sprawled in a loose heap on the guestroom bed, he continued to stagnate in euphoria.

The storm passed overhead with kettle drum grandeur and thrashed the area with wind and rain. Inside, the house held a day's collected heat, but the sound of the pummeling rain promised a gradually seeping coolness, so Catherine decided she could live with all the windows closed for a while. In Aunt Lila and Uncle David's bedroom, where she planned to sleep — hopefully with Vincent — she turned on the big, rotating electric fan and hoisted her suitcase up on top of the blanket chest. Then she lay down on the nubby cotton bedspread, intending to close her eyes for just a few minutes. She awoke an hour later, drenched with perspiration. Outside, the rain was still coming down in sheets.

A tremendous crash from the guestroom vibrated the entire house. In a panic Catherine leaped up and rushed around the corner.

Vincent had fallen off the bed. But he was already blearily climbing back up, grumbling under his breath. As she watched, he collapsed on his stomach and then flopped over on his back.

She was still worried about him. For one thing, the room was oppressively hot and close, and he was still dressed for the cold drafty depths of the World Below. For another, he hadn't gone to the bathroom all day. Twice during the trip she had offered to stop along heavily wooded areas of the interstate, but he had turned her down both times. It had been *eight hours* since he had left the tunnels.

A trickle of perspiration ran down her neck and the wind-driven rain splattered noisily against the windowpanes. As Vincent lay there on his back he panted slightly, his lips parted, his eyes closed. Every now and then he muttered a garbled fragment of poetry.

"Vincent."

He opened his sky-blue eyes, looked at her inquiringly and closed them again.

"Vincent, are you going to be all right?"

"S'hot in here..."

"Yes, I know. Want to take off some clothes?"

He mumbled: "Take'm off..."

This brought a rash grin to her face. Despite her anxieties, this whole thing was still hilarious. She went to him and pulled off his soft boots and socks. Then she coaxed him into a sitting position. She unbuckled his belt and removed it. She unlaced his vest and pulled it off. She unfastened the collar of his tunic and pulled it off over his head. And she removed his long, ruffled shirt,

"There. Isn't that better?" Her hands, savoring the feel of him, smoothed the fur of his powerful chest and glided down his ribs. His furry raiment was sleek and very warm to the touch, but dry. It was odd that he wasn't sweating the way she was.

"Mm-hmm," he said in a delayed reply to her question. He was very still as she caressed him, and she sensed his absorption, so she continued. As her fingers explored the long fur over his spine he leaned forward and rested his forehead on her shoulder.

It was wonderful to be alone with him. The rain and his soft breathing made a lake of peaceful sounds on which her heart floated, utterly content. His strong, muscular frame was the other half of her being, the rest of her universe, a form and solidity that, with an almost painfully joyful constant desire, she wanted to have both inside and outside of her own body.

She groped around in his long back fur, and practical concerns gradually bobbed back to the surface of her mind.

"Vincent — don't you want to go to the bathroom?"

"Don't have to."

"But you haven't been all day."

He straightened a little. His voice sounded clearer. "That's not unusual for me. Liz says I have a water-efficient system because my ancestors came from someplace resembling our arid plains and savannas."

"Vincent!" She held him off and stared at him, wide-eyed with relief. "You're getting better!"

He gazed at her curiously, his eyes quite lucid. He no longer seemed wobbly, "Better at what?"

Laughter welled up inside her but she held it back. "Oh, Vincent — you should have seen yourself. You've been drunk! Drunk on catnip."

"*Catnip?*"

He stared around incredulously. The sound of rain pelting the roof and gurgling through gutters and downspouts was so new. The air was heavy with the taste and smell of water. The room with its pale paneling and chintz window curtains was unfamiliar. He was extremely thirsty.

"It's raining outside," he exclaimed. "How did we get here, Catherine? Where are we?"

"We're upstairs, in the guestroom. Don't you remember anything?"

"I remember arriving Unloading the car..." His eyes grew vague and he slumped a little.

"You must have tasted the catnip, or tried to sniff at it, maybe. There were tiny bits of leaves in your mouth." She studied him carefully. "Do you feel all right?"

"Yes." His voice sounded strained. "How did I behave, Catherine?"

She giggled. "As though somebody had hot-wired your funny button. You went staggering around, babbling all kinds of botched-up poetry."

He seemed relieved.

"Vincent, will you please go to the bathroom?"

"I don't —"

"I don't *care*. Just *go*. *I'll* feel better. It's down the hall,"

Obligingly, he left and went down the hall to the pink and blue ceramic-tiled bathroom. He lifted the toilet seat, pulled open the flap of his pants, pressed out his penis — Something bumped against his leg and he looked down. It was Jane, and she was staring up at him with an expression of unmistakably prurient interest. Planting one foot carefully along the cat's side, he rushed the animal out of the room. Then he closed the door.

It suddenly occurred to him that if it had not been for Jane he would not have bothered to close the door.

It was fortunate that Catherine had made a large pitcher of iced tea. She decided to take a shower, and while she was engaged in that, Vincent sat in the kitchen drinking the iced tea and fending off the cats. He was feeling a little disoriented, not in the sense of any lingering effects from the catnip, but simply because everything around him was so new. He wanted to focus on something, but he did not know where to begin. The heavy rainfall was distracting. The heat and his half-dressed condition were distracting. The maddeningly friendly cats were distracting. The strange, small, tidy, color-coordinated, square little rooms were distracting. As he sat there overly warm and inert, he began to see himself as a large stuffed animal that some child had perversely crammed into a dolls-house.

A sudden jangling noise issued from the wall behind him and he gave a wild start, frightening the cats.

The phone was ringing.

He stared with consternation at the red plastic wall-mounted unit. It rang again. And then again. His shoulders swiveled and he inclined his head toward the stairway in the hall. Above the dull beating noise of rain he could hear running water in the upstairs bathroom. Catherine was still in the shower.

He left his chair, grabbed the headset in mid-ring and placed it against his ear.

He listened and heard breathing.

Then a rather uncertain-sounding woman's voice came through: "Hello? Is someone there? Cathy, is that you?"

Vincent swallowed.

"Catherine?" the voice queried again, beginning to sound alarmed.

Almost whispering he said: "This is Vincent."

"Who? Oh dear.... Is this 243-2121?"

He glanced at the number printed in the waist of the headset and said: "Yes." Jane threw herself against his legs, purring loudly.

There was a long pause and the woman asked again: "What did you say your name is, dear?"

Vincent began to collect some nerve, in a stronger voice he responded: "Vincent. I'm a friend of Catherine's."

A pleased and knowing lilt crept into the voice. "O-h-h-h, I s-e-e-e. Well — how perfectly lovely." She made a tittering sound. "Oh, *that girl*, Well, Vincent, tell me — do you suppose Cathy would be willing to speak to her old aunt for a moment? This is Lila, by the way. I'm just calling to make sure she arrived safely and that everything's all right."

"It's raining," Vincent said.

He struggled to think of something more to say, and then he recalled, with enormous relief that she wanted to speak to Catherine, anyway. To his even greater relief he heard a soft downward bounding on the stairs and then Catherine rushed in, clad in a terry wrapper, her hair turbaned in a bath towel. Her eyes went very round and then gleamed with amusement when she saw Vincent with the phone. He held it out to her gravely and she snatched it up.

"Hello? Oh, Aunt Lila!"

Vincent sank into a chair and two cats sprang into his lap. He stood up again.

Catherine chatted happily, scrubbing at her wet hair with the towel. "Have you been to any casinos yet? Tomorrow? Oh, that's nice! Wonderful. I'm so glad. Yes, we've been here for hours; we left New York at dawn. Who? Oh, Vincent... Oh, for a long time — over two years. Oh, but I'm sure I've mentioned him before. Well, it was just an oversight, then." Her

eyes danced mischievously. "Yes, I know; I've always loved his voice, too!" She glanced at Vincent and the dimple in her left cheek deepened. "Well, let's see... He's big. He's got blue eyes and blonde hair."

An irrepressible tremor of hilarity wavered through her voice and she tore her gaze away from Vincent in an odd, frantic way. He realized, as he watched her with fascination that she was teetering on the brink of hysterical laughter.

"He's uh..." She pulled her mouth in desperately, shot another glance at Vincent and then jackknifed with silent mirth. He grinned at her and she sank helplessly into a chair. Jane, Walter and Bennie were all rubbing against his legs. Only Bridget kept her distance, content to watch sullenly from the windowsill. "What's that? Oh, no — I'm all right, Aunt Lila," she gasped. "It's — it's just the cats. They're acting funny." Immediately, she amended: "They're *all right*; I mean they're just — just playing. You know how they can get..."

Vincent had had enough. The cats were driving him crazy. Bending over and placing his head close to the pestering animals he bared his teeth and threw out a bellowing snarl that would have spooked a grizzly bear. The cats scabbled violently on the linoleum and streaked out of the kitchen. Catherine slapped the palm of her hand over the mouthpiece but she was too late. Giving Vincent a horrified stare she stammered out answers to Aunt Lila's questions.

"That? Oh, that was just — just Vincent. Yes, I know. Yes, he does sound like a lion sometimes. I mean, he can sound like a lion. He's very good at it." Vincent backed away with a hand over his mouth. He tried to apologize to Catherine with his eyes but her dimple had returned in force... "Yes, he's amazing, really. He does sound effects for recording studios..."

After the phone call, Catherine went back upstairs and Vincent poured himself another glass of iced tea. He drank it slowly, noting with satisfaction that the cats, except for Bridget, were avoiding the kitchen. But Bridget seemed content to crouch in the trash basket alcove and glower at him.

The rain began to taper off.

After a while, Vincent rose and wandered into the living room. There were framed Renoir reproductions on the paneled walls. The sofa and matching upholstered chairs were plaid with pleated skirt bottoms. The cushions had pictures of mallards on them. There was a console TV and stereo combination and a fireplace with glass doors. On each side of the fireplace was a small unit of shelves containing mostly things like conch shells, Hummel figurines and colored glass bottles, but here and there a few books reposed. Crouching, Vincent examined these; they were all books on home improvement, needlework, cooking and cat care, the Ann Landers Encyclopedia, and a number of Agatha Christies. Then a title caught his eye: *Poems for Everyday*.

Ah.

Vincent plucked it off the shelf and started back toward the kitchen. There was no sound from upstairs. He paused at the bottom of the stairway and raised his chin, listening. He focused his senses.

She was awake and comfortable.

"Catherine?"

There was no reply.

Vincent climbed the stairs, strolled down the hall and entered the master bedroom— Catherine was sitting in the middle of the enormous, king-sized bed, brushing her hair.

She was naked.

She looked up briefly as he entered and then went on brushing her hair.

Vincent froze. Astonishment and rapture and desire all slammed into him at once and, wheeling abruptly, he braced his hands against the wall and leaned on them, his heart racing.

His breath went somewhere and wouldn't come back...

Almost timidly he turned his head and looked at her again. She was the most beautiful sight he had ever in his life beheld... His gaze touched her rhythmically moving arms, dreamed across her creamy shoulders, along her small, exquisite, finely curved breasts, down her slender, supple waist and along her lovely thighs... Beyond her the window was open and a refreshing coolness flowed into the room. The electric fan, humming gently, turned this coolness in Vincent's direction and along with it came her scent — a delicate, flower-tendrill beckoning that was a siren call in his mind and a thousand caressing fingertips at his senses.

She gave him an encouraging smile and went on brushing. After a few minutes she said almost absently: "Put the book down. Take off your pants,"

The words were a delicious jolt.

A flush rose through his tissues, spread outward all through him and then collapsed into a sea of warm tickles in his belly. Something hot and almost painful began to grow there and all at once it gave way in a very pleasant dislodging.

He silently blessed Liz Sprague.

"Take off your pants," Catherine repeated softly.

He turned, dropped the book and stripped quickly, his erection catching clumsily on the flap. Then he turned around and faced her.

She put down the brush and stared at him, beaming with raw approval. Her voice was a high, gusty surge: "Oh, *Vincent! You're beautiful.* It's so big! It's — it's almost *ostentatious!*"

He glanced down at himself. It had never occurred to him to think about its size...

Both her hands stretched out. "Don't stand over there! Come *here. Gimme!*"

He brought himself over to her and she reached out and grasped him. A charge of feeling rushed his nerves, and before they could fall back from this assault, the sensation of her gently working hand became a slow climbing languor that arched his back a little and closed his eyes. It was completion — to be touched there, in his most secret place, by Catherine, to bring himself out for her, to trust her with that special part of him that he always carried inside, warm and safe. And her enjoyment as she touched him there... It was extravagance beyond belief... Greedily, he pulled at her feelings and found within them how much she had wanted this moment and for how long; in her imagination she had been framing the feelings it would give her to explore this tight and tender part of him. Insatiably, he tipped her feelings, along with his own, into the furnace in his belly.

Her fingertips walked along his penis and slipped around his cuff.

Her voice drowsed: "This is a nice, strokeable place..."

He couldn't speak. He wanted to exist only within her feelings and his own: in the pleasurable tightening-up of her special places, and in the singing heat of his own body as each nerve answered to her gliding fingers.

His excitement fed voraciously on hers...

He looked down at her upturned, dreaming face and her smooth, flawless body.

She whispered: "Come down here."

He collapsed on the bed beside her, sank backward on one elbow and turned in gently against her. His lips came down on one soft breast and he kissed it. Her hands trapped his head and for a moment held it there against her and she was sighing. He nuzzled her with his lips and his fuzzy cheeks and she emitted little purring sounds — And from somewhere deep inside him the beast rose up in a rutting fury and flooded its burning blood through his

veins, and to his horror a rumble issued from his chest. But then Catherine's hands were working tenderly at his face, soothing away his expression of alarm, and her voice was breezing into his soul.

"Yes. Yes. It feels good, doesn't it? It's okay. All those feelings are good. It's okay to feel that way..." and the beast sank below the threshold of consciousness, quelled by the essence and wonderful balm of his precious Catherine. Vincent was left — suddenly, blessedly — with himself, with the part of him that was a man, and this part of him glorified in a fire the beast could never understand, lay panting on the edge of a violence born of pleasure, a violence that Catherine felt too and understood, a violence that was an exaltation of themselves. Incredibly, he was free of the beast. He had never before in his life been so free.

He experienced a savage joy.

He flung himself on top of Catherine and kissed her vigorously. She reacted with a pleased little squeal and tilted her head back, offering him a soft stretch of throat to nibble on. He indulged her abundantly. And then he slid off her, fearful of crushing her beneath his weight. She grappled with him and tried to detain him and they struggled exquisitely for a few seconds. Again came the rumble from his chest, but it was not the beast speaking, it was him. It was the way he was made, and he couldn't help it.

And Catherine, giggling and clutching at him, was reveling in it... She pushed her tongue into his mouth and squirmed happily up and down against his sleek fur and made the little nerves at the small of his back ecstatic with her digging fingers.

He pushed her away and stroked her naked skin with his furry hand and she went limp and murmured: "Oh, Vincent — that's unearthly.... It's just like a piece of velvet." She pushed his hand down her body and into her groin where the soft mound between her thighs ached with anticipation. He hesitated.

She moaned: "Don't worry, Vincent. You won't scratch me. Besides—" Her eyes had been closed. They opened reluctantly and shot him a quick, clear look. *I'm* not trying to get away from you. Look, I'll show you something."

She showed him something involving moisture and a tiny spot that suffused her nerves with screaming, arching pleasure at each touch. Fascinated, he glutted himself with discovery and both of them with mounting sensations that finally prompted her to grab hold of his slightly moving hand.

She gasped: "Nuff! Let's save it..." She tackled him and rolled over on him and nibbled his face and neck. She slithered up and down on his fur and her belly rubbed his penis, encouraging the dense pressure that was growing inside him. They discovered, as tall/short combinations always do, that if their heads were level she couldn't quite reach his penis and that if he obligingly scooted upward so that she could play with him there, he no longer had any part of her to nuzzle and nibble on. So they wriggled in a delightful, desperate, slow-motion chase around the bed, finding places to stimulate and explore and having to give them up. In a lucid moment, Catherine reached out and unplugged the bedside table telephone. A moment or two later, she scampered off the bed, tossed one of the cats into the hall and closed the door.

Vincent could not take his eyes off her. She stood there for a moment, grinning coyly and letting him relish the full view of her nakedness, and he was vaguely and happily aware that she was likewise scanning his entire length of furry body and finding it intensely exciting.

He found himself wondering how they could possibly have managed to wait so long. Oh yes — he, Vincent, had resisted this. He had resisted *this!* And she had always been so patient with him, so sensitive to his hesitation and shyness — it was part of the kindness that made her so precious to him.

But how could he have been so backward? Who was this fearful, haunted, tortured creature that had still dwelled within him only moments ago? How could he have allowed this creature to thwart his union with Catherine? How —

She made a running leap back onto the bed and he cared about absolutely nothing except her smooth, pliant body in his arms.

The room was growing dim with the lowering of twilight, the air was cool and the electric fan was a gentle humming sound at the edge of their awareness. Catherine's breathing changed, became softer, and her motions quieted to a calm deliberation. She moved beneath him, sliding her fingertips into the sensitive downy area of his groin. He felt her mind whispering to his, her senses drawing him, pulling him, coaxing him to one place. He watched her face with deep attention — her eyelashes pressed tight to her cheeks, her lips parted and loose with her sensual wallowing. Her fingers stroked the hot urgency in his belly, closed around him, drew him downward, downward. She opened her eyes and grinned at him briefly then wriggled beneath his chin and pushed him into her body.

Her hands whipped upward and around him and she squeezed his buttocks and pressed him down. Her tissues were a hot, slippery enclosure that pulled deliciously at him and raked his nerves with pleasure. He heard his own ragged breathing. His back arched a little and then he hunched pleasantly over her and pushed against her gently. And then again.

She kept whispering: "Yes, Vincent. Yes. Yes."

The urgency in his belly was almost unbearable, and it was not just his need. It was her need. Within her, he felt tiny ribbons of sensation curl and uncurl, and he fed them the pushing and dragging pleasure they craved, and they in turn sweetly pierced his body.

Tenderly coached by her, he moved inside her and with her and against her, just a little, just a sweet, painfully sweet little bit of movement back and forth... He felt her reach her peak, knew the singing and throbbing of every sensation within her and his own body was pulled and squeezed and coaxed by her up to the same incredible heights. She shuddered richly beneath him and gasped out his name and her fingers dug into his thighs. Her release was powerful, ecstatic.

It set off his own.

As it happened to him, he rested his cheek on her forehead and moaned.

Time stood still...

Then her lips were caressing his temple and she was whispering in her breeziest tone:

"There.... Wasn't that nice? Didn't that feel good?"

"Uh-h..." Vincent managed.

She was grinning at him through strands of disheveled hair. She said: "I always think of orgasm as the body *celebrating*... . But that's probably not original. Have you ever heard it before?"

"D'no..." He stopped panting long enough to kiss her ardently. Perhaps that would stop her from talking. He just couldn't... Just couldn't focus on words right now. Or even thoughts. His entire body was a delirium of pleasure. An almost impossibly sweet sensation of well-being flowed through him. He had never known anything like it before...

He rolled over to his side, bringing her gently with him. They were still attached, and it was wonderful.

They lay for a while clasped together, their souls floating in mutual relief and peace. And then she stirred in a lovely, sinuous way, nudging his secret places into fresh exhilaration. He rubbed her back, remembering with delight her comment about velvet, and he nuzzled her hair and rested within her happy torpor for a while.

But his muscles were still interested. His nerves were tingling and alert, oddly expectant. There was a sea of tickles in his belly...

He was just beginning to focus on this and wonder about it when she said: "You know, Vincent, I think you could do it again."

He looked at her.

She pushed his hair behind his shoulders and smiled at him in a lazy, contented way.

"I won't be able to manage another orgasm for a while, but I love all the other stuff, too." Her eyes gleamed suddenly and her voice became low and vibrant, nudging gently at his impulses. "Come on, see if you can do it again."

He contemplated for a moment, but not for long. Drawing himself over her he kissed her tenderly and began to move — carefully as though she were terribly fragile. Her nerves, he detected with great interest, were still jumpy with little traces of remaining pleasure and she squeezed these traces against his movements, sighing. She was expecting them to wink out slowly, one by one as her body continued to relax — this had been her experience in the past — but he found himself enjoying her astonished, intense concentration as the little traces remained and grew, and grew...

Welded to her growing excitement he clamped down on his own. His belly went rigid and drew to a center, racking him with demands that he fought off, gasping harshly. It was good, though. It was — He pushed Catherine over the edge and beneath him, painfully gripping his fur, she thrashed and groaned and tore open all his controls. He spilled into her with wrenching spasms, murmuring her name...

"So make a liar out of me!" she gasped out joyfully.

Absolutely pulpy with satisfaction, they flopped over onto their sides. They rested for a while.

And then she moved against him experimentally. She said: "You're still hard. I'll bet you can do it again."

"Catherine!"

But he tried.

And she was right.

When he got his breath back she began to giggle against his chest.

"What is it, Catherine?"

Her laughter pealed out. "We haven't even unpacked yet!"

* * *

Catherine awoke in stages, at first aware of the usual impending pressure to hurry out of bed, shower, grab some coffee and rush off to work. Then, blissfully, she remembered... This was Connecticut — Aunt Lila and Uncle David's place — and she was on vacation, and it was the first full day, and she was with Vincent. The pressures floated away on a cozy, warm languor and she stretched and opened her eyes.

Vincent was gone.

There was a smell of bacon in the air.

She giggled at the thought of Vincent cooking breakfast, and then recalled that once he had mentioned that he was quite proficient at breakfast-making, because he tended to sleep late and miss William's scheduled morning feasts.

Her mind rolled lazily, sensually backward into memory; she had fallen asleep nestled against Vincent, irresistibly lulled by his soft breathing and his velvety hands. She had touched one last time — and then one last time once again — the penis that lay fatly between his thighs, wondering how he could still be so firm after three orgasms... He was remarkable.

But then, somehow, she had always thought that he would be.

She bolted out of bed, hurried through her bathroom routines and dressed in jeans and a tank top. The sun was shining and the air was just perfectly crisp-warm... She bounced down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Vincent was sitting near the kitchen table, turned slightly away from the hall entrance. He wore a fresh tunic and pants from his suitcase, and she made a quick note to re-dress him in jeans and a cotton shirt after breakfast.

"Hi!"

He did not reply, and he did not turn to greet her. This prickled her consciousness with a tiny filament of alarm, but sheer hunger drew her over to the stove, where breakfast lay on enticing display. In the large fry pan was a curly mound of golden yellow scrambled eggs, lightly dusted with pepper, and on paper towels lay rashers of bacon, well blotted. Another pan contained diced, fried potatoes, browned to perfection. A wisp of steam rose upward from the tea kettle.

"Oh, Vincent!"

A medley of dedicated guzzling sounds drew her gaze downward and she saw the cats lined up at their kitty dishes.

"And you even fed the cats!"

Vincent did not reply.

She looked at him and then drifted over to him, concerned. He was pale and very still.

"Vincent... What's wrong?"

He gave her a brief, dull stare and hung his head.

"Vincent ..."

She sank into a nearby chair, saddened and dismayed. What could be marring his happiness? She waited.

When he finally spoke his voice was faint, almost inaudible, and trembling.

"Catherine, I am deeply ashamed."

It was the last thing in the world she expected to hear. "Ashamed? Of what?"

He said wretchedly: "I haven't been honest with you. About my body."

Oh, God...

She tried not to smile. She had noticed his feet, and had even been somewhat startled. One could get very biased in favor of five digits... But his hands were different, so why not his feet? She was used to Vincent being different. Everywhere... He threw her a look of terror and gripped the edge of the table.

"It's my penis. I can pull it up inside my belly" He added mercilessly: "Like an animal."

She stared at him with no particular expression.

He swallowed.

For a long moment, their gazes remained locked and he tried desperately to probe into her feelings, but there was no shock or repugnance anywhere in her, or really anything at all except for, well, a slightly exasperated patience...

She rose abruptly, went to him and pushed herself onto his lap.

She twined her arms around his neck and continued to stare fixedly into his uncertain eyes.

She said very firmly: "Vincent, I don't care *where* you keep it as long as *I* get to keep it for you every now and then!"

* * *

"You realize, of course, that Mouse is suffering from savant syndrome," Liz commented, as Father set out the antique basswood chess pieces.

"Well, I don't know that I'd call it suffering," Father replied. "Actually, he's quite happy." After a moment's reflection he added: "But yes, I have long suspected it. He certainly does

exhibit what the experts call 'islands of ability'. His grasp of electronic and mechanical things appears to be innate, and would be more than impressive in any normally functioning human being. And Mouse cannot be said to be 'normally functioning'. His speech is retarded, he has never been able to learn to read more than one word at a time, and can barely write his name, and his thought processes tend to be more concrete than abstract. You're right. It all adds up."

Actually, Liz was a little miffed. Psychology and brain function had always been sideline interests of hers, and she hadn't expected Jacob to be conversant in something as tangential as savant syndrome. But then, discussions did tend to flow more rewardingly when both parties knew what they were talking about...

"He's atypical in one respect, though—"

"Yes, I know," Father affirmed. He lined up the chess pieces and tossed the box aside. "Savants are almost universally dull in the emotional area. 'Flat' is the word most often used to describe them, I believe. But Mouse isn't like that. He's joyful and enthusiastic and always, always responsive. Is that what you were going to mention?"

She nodded grumpily. She stared at the board and then started their game by playing her pawn to King Four.

Father continued: "I've thought about therapy from time to time, but if Mouse is indeed a savant, his talents could literally be erased by any dramatic improvements in deficient areas. And since he has a useful, and to him fulfilling, place in our society, I strongly doubt that such a course of action would be wise." He played pawn to King Four. "Do you concur?"

She grunted. She replied to his move with knight to King Bishop Three. He sank chin into hand and brooded for a while, then moved knight to Queen Bishop Three.

He said: "It was good of you to stop in again today."

"I'm under orders from Vincent."

Father sneaked a look at her across the board. She was regarding the game layout steadfastly and so missed his twinkle and tiny pucker of humor. She played Bishop to Knight Five.

"Did you take my suggestion about eigenvectors and eigenvalues?" she questioned, her eyes brightening with a predatory gleam, as he answered her move with knight to Bishop Three. Her hand shot out and she castled kingside.

Father scowled and muttered absently: "Er — no. I came up with a better idea." She glared, but he was now staring unhappily at the game. While pondering his move, he explained about the math, and she slouched backward in her chair, her mouth twisting sourly.

He played pawn to Queen Three.

"I'll bet you've forgotten all about the Hamilton-Cayley theorem, though," she said crisply. Her eyes leaped to his face.

"Haven't," Father replied.

She played pawn to Queen Four and Father's knight captured her King's pawn.

She lunged forward in her chair and Father jumped.

"You startled me!" he reproved.

"You made a stupid move," she pointed out, grinning at him luridly. She sat there with her elbows on the chair arms and her hands clasped loosely in front of her. Smiling craftily down at the game, she deliberately delayed her move, enjoying his flustered and pitiable attempt to gauge what she was about to do...

"Vincent tells me that the two of you play chess fairly often," she said conversationally. She still made no play.

Father began to drum his fingers. "Yes. Yes. I taught him years ago. He's very good; beats me some of the time."

"He has such beautiful hair," she remarked, apropos of nothing.

"Yes. Well, yes. He ought to have; he fusses over it like a teenage girl. I used to try to cut it when he was a child, but it grew so fast it was like trying to chop back crabgrass..." Father put on his specs, took them off, put them on again and glared at her from over the tops.

She played pawn to Queen Five and he stared down with dismay. Perhaps he should simply have confessed that Vincent beat him all the time...

He feebly counterattacked with pawn to Queen Rook Three, the only possible defense.

Just then Meg entered from the upper tunnel and trotted down the steps. Father glanced up at her and thundered irately, "*Yes, what is it?*"

Meg fell back a step. Then she jammed her hands into the pockets of her tunic and said defensively: "I only wanted to see if you would like another movie later..." She glanced at Liz nervously and waited for Father's reply.

Father railed: "Well, what makes you think — I mean, just because —" He sighed sharply, glanced at Liz, composed himself and then glanced at Liz again and his eyes deepened. He turned to Meg and said very affably: "Yes, another movie would be fine. Anything. You pick it out."

Meg left and Father, returning to the game, found that Liz had moved Bishop to Queen Three. He retreated with knight to Bishop Three, knowing instantly that this, too, was unsound. His leg gave him a sudden, nasty twinge and he gripped it under the table and set his teeth.

Observing this, Liz queried; "Is your leg bothering you, Jacob?"

He nodded. Her pawn captured his knight..

Rubbing his knee he played pawn to King Five.

"What happened to you, Jacob? Why are you lame?"

"I — uh.

She played rook to King One and he responded with pawn to Queen Four, supporting the King's pawn.

"I had an accident. Down here, when Vincent was just a baby. I believe I ruptured the medial collateral ligaments of my right knee."

"You should have had surgery. But you didn't, did you?" She played Bishop to King Two and his pawn took her knight. Immediately, her Bishop's pawn took Father's pawn.

"No. I didn't particularly want to renew acquaintance with —" He leaned forward and moved his Bishop to take her pawn.

She played Bishop to Knight Five.

Checkmate.

" — any of my colleagues," he finished with a heavy sigh.

Liz reached for her purse and rummaged for a cigarette. She clamped it, unlit, between her lips, and gave him a long, searching look.

"You know, Jacob, I could fix your knee."

He gazed at her silently.

"You're a primate," she said.

"It would be illegal."

"Up there." She rummaged for her lighter. "What about down here?"

He gazed at her steadily, intently, high emotion glowing in his eyes and a flush rising in his cheeks. His mouth twitched a little and his hands slid toward her across the chessboard and stopped.

"Liz—"

She looked at him.

"I love you," he said softly.

* * *

Vincent tried desperately. one more time, to concentrate on something else... The sky above them was a cloudless, hard blue and the kite was a dancing diamond of red and yellow, high enough to be little more than a spec.

They lay side by side on a blanket in the back yard, wearing plastic sunglasses and watching the kite drift and bob. Vincent held the kite string and many of his senses were engulfed with new and marvelous sensations: the warmth of the sun baking into him through the stiff new denim of the jeans he wore, the absence of city sounds, the profusion of rain-freshened earth-and-flower smells, the wonder of having Catherine at his side in such a huge expanse of open air and sunshine.

The wonder of having Catherine at his side for so long...

But it was the exquisite memory of yesterday that held him hostage, as he tried to focus on his enjoyment of the kite and the sun and the smells... And the slight pressure made by Catherine along one side of his body irresistibly flayed his senses with remembrance.

A minute ago he had been reciting from Sir Thomas Moore's '*The Meeting of the Waters*' and then, oddly, he had faltered and lost his place...

"Go on," Catherine prompted drowsily.

But Vincent was hearing her voice from another time.... "it's okay to feel that way..." and he was seeing her face, slack with sensual hunger as she lay beneath him. He was remembering how intensely her pleasure had amplified his own.

She gave a sudden little laugh. "We're going to have to think of an occupation for you, Vincent. Something that will keep you so busy that I just won't be able to tear you away for an introductory weekend visit with Aunt Lila and Uncle David."

He dimly realized that she was waiting for him to suggest something, but his brain refused to engage. Instead, the rhapsody of their union was playing in every memory circuit and his groin, in response, was beginning to ache sweetly. He was astonished. Catherine was happy, warm, totally at ease. But she was not aroused. Could just the *memory* of yesterday be sufficient stimulation to provoke him into such a state?

Then he thought of what Catherine's memories could do to her.

Immediately, he was sorry he had thought of that. It merely titillated his body even further. Much further. He wriggled, but the tension in his belly continued to grow.

"Are you hungry, Vincent? There's that tuna salad I made yesterday. We should have some lunch..." She waited and then repeated, "Are you hungry?"

"Mm-hmm."

"After lunch I'll show you how to climb a worm fence. You know what that is?"

"No."

"It's one of those zigzaggy wooden fences made of very rough rails. There's one at the back of the orchard. I think they're so quaint-looking."

Vincent flexed his knees, amazed that his own thoughts could have such power. But surely her nearness and the light pressure of her briefly-clad body against his own had something to do with it. He glanced down at the curvy little thigh which lay against his hip. Flexing his knees had not helped. Something very specific and distracting was about to occur. He tried

to pull upward on his abdominal muscles but they merely lay there in a tingling swoon of excitement and refused to cooperate. Seconds later, as though to spite him, his penis was ejected in a languid, pleasurable surge. The organ bumped uncomfortably against the tough inside zipper seams of the jeans. He squirmed, gulped and darted a glance at Catherine. He couldn't see her eyes through the dark glasses, but perhaps they were closed. She wore a blissful smile and her hands were folded across her tummy. She was sun-hued and beautiful.

"I'm just so-o relaxed," she sighed. "I'd forgotten what it feels like. Are you relaxed, Vincent?"

There was a strained silence.

"Vincent?"

He writhed over on his side, facing her. Her scent, her lovely scent, shimmered into him and his heartbeats began to go all fluttery. Hastily, he wrapped some more of the kite string around his hand. His scrotum seemed uncomfortably pinned between his thighs. Why had that never bothered him before?

"Are you relaxed, V—"

"Yes."

She turned her head toward him, lifted her sunglasses and gave him a squinty, questioning glance.

"Are you sure? You keep squirming." She reached up and pushed up his sunglasses and his eyes winced shut. She replaced them. "Is the sun too hot? Father made me swear not to keep you out in it too long." She slipped a hand inside his shirt collar. His fur was very hot and slippery-dry.

It felt wonderful.

Just as she had dreamed it would...

Catherine rose to her knees, seized him by the shoulder and hip and pushed him over onto his back.

She was suddenly biting back a devilish grin.

"Is the sun too hot? We can go inside and listen to records..."

She crawled sinuously across him, her warm breasts brushing him through the thin shirt. The kite string began to slip off his fingers and he grabbed it back frantically. Her weight pressed his erection deliciously against his belly and inside him trails of heat knotted and dug their way up toward her, demanding that he give her an answering push.

Then, against his ear, her voice was a sweet, husky tone: "You're breathing rather hard, Vincent.... Are you sure you're not too hot?" His arms crept around her and he was barely aware of the kite tugging against its string, She blew some more delicate whispers against his ear and gnawed tenderly on his cheek. Then she gave an airy little giggle and fumbled with his lower shirt buttons.

"Catherine..."

"You're panting. I have to find out what's the matter."

She slid off him and unsnapped his jeans. Then she unzipped them and he gasped:

"Catherine! We're — we're outside!!!"

"Oh, Vincent, you townee. There's nobody around for miles. What's a few birds? They've probably always wondered how people do it!"

She tugged his pants down and slipped off her shorts. Vincent lurched to a sitting position and tried to compose himself long enough to point his senses in all directions at once, to confirm that truly there was nobody —

"Lie down," she commanded.

She slipped off her panties, giggling.

He stared at her wildly.

Catherine threw herself on top of him.

The kite stayed airborne about a minute more.

Then it plummeted into a tree.

* * *

After lunch Vincent enjoyed yet another new experience. Catherine gave him the first bubble-bath of his life.

It was glorious. He wallowed in the mounds of suds for a long time, while she sat beside him watching and lamenting that there wasn't room enough for both of them in the tub. Then she washed his hair, soaping it twice and kneading his scalp with amazingly strong, supple fingers. She remarked with fascination that he seemed to get smaller when his fur was wet. He sensed her solid, honest enjoyment of his powerful physical being, as she tickled and teased his body in inventive little ways, nipped his tender areas with the washcloth, raked soapy trails through the long fur on his back... It was intimate and pleasurable and exciting... It was *fun*.

Dizzily, he savored the knowledge that two weeks of this lay ahead.

Afterward Catherine sent him back outside to the blanket, to discover the pleasure of having the sun dry his hair. Then she took a shower, and when she went outside to join him she found him poring over some sort of notebook.

"Oh, Vincent, you look like a corn shuck," she commented, ruffling his fluffed-out hair. She sank down beside him with a happy sigh. "What's that?"

She wore only brief shorts and a bandeau and her wet hair was wrapped in a towel. It would be dry in no time. The sun was full and warm, but the humidity was low enough to be very comfortable. A light breeze scented with lilacs and apple blossoms wafted over them, bearing an occasional cat hair, as either Walter or Jane ventured close. Catherine batted them away, knowing that they irritated Vincent. Bridget remained in the house, squatting with watchful malice in some dark corner, and Bennie was always content to roll in the driveway and yawn.

Vincent adjusted his sunglasses and showed her the front of the notebook, which turned out to be a scrapbook with a thin cork cover. The words JUNK VERSE were scrawled on it in crayon.

"It's my junk verse scrapbook. I made it when I was a child and I came across it when I was trying to decide which books to pack." He explained: "I never exactly rebelled as a boy — but I did collect junk verse."

She grinned. "You mean things like 'High-O Silverware, Tonto lost his underwear...?'"

"Well, not that one. But others like it. Here's one of the earliest that I found: 'Now We Are Sick'." He read to her:

"Hush, hush Nobody cares! Christopher Robin has fallen downstairs..."

Just as she had thought. Not only did Vincent have a sense of humor, but he'd always had a sense of humor; he just needed a little encouragement, that's all...

"What else have you got?" She sat cross-legged, rubbing at her hair.

"Here's one by Edna St Vincent Millay: '*Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand- ... Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!*'"

"Sounds like us."

He turned a page. "Here's an excellent parody on the opening lines of Evangeline." He read eagerly: "*This is the metre Columbian. The soft-flowing trochees and dactyls, Blended with fragments spondaic,—*"

"Skip that one," Catherine directed. "What else have you got?"

Vincent read:

"You are old, Father William,' the young man said.

And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head—

Do you think, at your age, it is right?

In my youth—"

Catherine whipped off her bandeau, liberating her breasts to the sun and breeze. He stopped reading and gazed at her raptly.

"Go on," she said.

He managed to finish reading Father William. His glance was drawn repeatedly to her sun-lit nakedness, but somehow he managed to decide on the next selection. "And here's the story of Little Suck-a-Thumb..."

"Oh, read me that one. Vincent, take your shirt off."

He shrank slightly away from her. "No..."

He was flustered. Earlier, when they had — She had just lowered his jeans and — And now, only a few hours later, he could still scarcely believe it had happened... He supposed it was understandable, in the sense that he had, well, definitely not been in his right mind... But now, once again fully in control of himself, he was flattened beneath an avalanche of inhibitions.

"Come on, Vincent. I want you to find out how good it feels."

He toyed absently with the edge of the scrapbook.

"I'll be disappointed..." she threatened.

Vincent unbuttoned his shirt. He shrugged it off and the sun gleamed on the sleek fur of his strong, barrel-chested torso.

A moment or two later, his face assumed a beguiling grin.

Catherine pounced on this expression with delight. "What is it? What are you feeling?" She couldn't see his eyes through the dark green plastic lenses, but his lips were parted, his mouth very soft, and he seemed to be gazing at her with quiet reverence.

He murmured: "You were right, Catherine. I can feel the breeze stirring the fur on my chest and arms... I've never felt that before. It's wonderful..."

"Well, see? I told you."

She cupped a hand against his cheek and he turned into it and kissed her palm.

Then he read: "*The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb:*"

'One day Mamma said 'Conrad dear,

I must go out and leave you here.

But mind now, Conrad, what I say,

Don't suck your thumb while I'm away.

The great tall tailor always comes

To little boys who suck their thumbs;

And 'ere they dream what he's about,

*He takes his great sharp scissors out,
And cuts their thumbs clean off — and then,
You know, they never grow again.
Mamma had scarcely turned her back,
The thumb was in, Alack! Alack!
The door flew open, in he ran,
The great, long, red-legged scissor-man.
Oh children, see! The tailor's come
And caught our little Suck-a-Thumb.
Snip! Snap! Snip! the scissors go;
And Conrad cries out 'Oh, Oh, Oh!'—"*

"Oh, God," Catherine gasped. "That's enough of that! What else do you have?"

Vincent smiled demurely as he flipped pages. "It's all right," he said offhandedly, "I stopped sucking my thumb when my fur came in." He hunted through the pasted-in entries. "Here's 'Cruel Frederick'." He explained in a quick aside: "Father didn't approve of these poems..."

He read: "*Here is cruel Frederick, see! A horrid wicked boy was he; He caught the flies,
poor little things, And then tore off their tiny wings, He killed the birds, and broke the chairs,
And threw the kitten down the stairs—*"

"Vincent!" Catherine stared at him, overwhelmed with revelation. "*You were a normal little boy!*"

He returned her startled gaze with a puzzled tilt of the head. Then he lowered his face and chuckled in a soft, muffled way, his big shoulders twitching. The remark seemed to amuse him no end...

She amended mischievously: "Except for having fur and a retractable penis..."

He gave her an enigmatic glance, laid aside the scrapbook and stretched out on his side. "I didn't know I could retract it when I was a boy."

"You *didn't*?"

She dropped the towel, shook out her hair and lay down beside him. Propped on elbows, pleasantly basking, they shared a companionable silence for a while.

"Tell me," she prompted.

He said: "I didn't know I was any different from other boys down there, except for my cuff, until I was around fourteen. Then one day, for some reason, I sharply pulled in my abdominal muscles, and I felt something very strange take place. It continued to feel strange. So I rushed to my room and undressed — and discovered that part of me had disappeared."

"That must have been a shock. What did you do?"

"I ran screaming with fright to Father."

Catherine collapsed with laughter and he seemed to enjoy that.

It was such a novelty for Vincent to be talking to her about his body... It was such a novelty for all the secrecy to be gone, the shadows lifted...

He reached across the blanket and very tentatively touched her breast. She grasped the shy, fuzzy hand and pressed it against her flesh, smiling.

Vincent said: "Poor Father. I was always bringing him some inexplicable new problem."

"What did he do?"

"He pressed against my belly and out it came. He's always claimed it was a coincidence, because he was examining me. But at the time, it seemed as though he knew exactly what to do."

"That must have been reassuring."

"I have to admit I was glad to get it back."

She giggled warmly and he reached out for her. They lay twined together. Still curious she questioned: "Did you start keeping it inside after that?"

"Yes. The older I grew the more I preferred to keep it inside me. Somehow, it always feels more natural that way."

He massaged her back and shoulders with one velvety hand, his thoughts sensuously stretching and turning in a kind of featherbed of wonders.... Even when they weren't cuddled up together he could sense the comfortable impressions that his physical being left on her soul, and her constant delight in knowing that he was only a few feet away. She was feeling so unusually good....

In his daily experience of her feelings some part of her was always taut with anxiety over the next briefing session or deposition or court appearance. He had never known her precious, familiar soul to glow with so much pleasure and relief.

Much of it was due to being in the country, away from the harsh demands of the city and her working life, but he could not ignore his own role as solacer. Most of her mind was happily curled around his presence, the effects of his voice and his touch and his nearness. She reveled in everything he did to her and in everything she did to him, and her signals, as she savored all of this, filled him with an elation he could never have imagined before.

He pushed aside her sunglasses, kissed her eyelids and soft eyebrows and nuzzled her still slightly damp hair. He murmured: "Catherine... Sometimes you have dreams.... Times of remembering.... And then all your secret places long to be touched and awakened —" He whispered in her ear: "— to bring the feelings back."

Her eyes opened briefly, deep blue and very still. "You can tell..." Her fingers smoothed his face lovingly. Her voice was low, with such a warm timbre.... "Do I give you good feelings at those times?"

"Mmm." He said softly: "At first I didn't understand what was happening. A strange feeling would come over me — of wanting to know more ... Wanting to feel more... Then I began to understand. But then I found out that I had a problem." He grasped her hand and lowered it to his groin. "The muscle in here that keeps me in place was too tight. And so my experience would be one of pain."

She looked horrified. "Oh, Vincent... I'm sorry. I had no idea I was hurting you. Why didn't you tell me —"

He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head beneath his chin and tenderly clasped her. "Catherine, don't be sorry. *All* of your feelings are precious to me. I wouldn't want to miss a single one."

"What did you do? Are you all right now?"

"Yes. Thanks to Liz."

"Liz?"

"Mm-hmm. Remember my operation? Father fixed the hernia and Liz fixed the muscle by notching it on each side. It works fine now." He sighed deeply. "I don't know what I would have done if Liz hadn't come into my life at this time." He answered his own question soberly: "I suppose I would still be living with fear — and allowing it to keep us apart, Catherine."

"Oh, Vincent..." Her fingers gently rubbed away the line that was forming between his fluffy eyebrows and her hand lingered, soothing his face. "I'm so glad you confided in Liz."

"I don't believe Father would have known what to do."

"But it's more than that, really. Liz is a good friend to have in your corner. But especially for you. She helps you to live because she makes you feel stronger inside. And she is like a special, wonderful mirror for you because she shows you to yourself as you really are—someone to be loved and treasured."

They cuddled for a long time and after a while Vincent said wistfully: "You were right, Catherine. The sun feels so good. I wish Father would go Above now and then just to feel the sun on his face. But I suppose he never will..."

* * *

"This was a good idea, Jacob."

They lay, side by side, on a large Hudson Bay blanket in the middle of an open, grassy expanse of Central Park, not far from the west park entrance to the tunnels.

Liz wore sunglasses and Father had folded a handkerchief over his eyes. He was dressed for Topside, in seersucker slacks and a short-sleeved shirt open at the throat.

The sun was strong, but not too hot.

The remains of a picnic lunch lay nearby.

She asked idly: "Have you remained in touch with any of your original collegial network?"

"Very few," he replied, coming out of a sun-lulled doze. "I've retained one or two trusted contacts because, of course, from time to time I have to re-stock medicines and supplies." He then replied to the subtext of her question with gentle irony: "It's better this way. I don't miss the rivalries and one-upmanship. The medical community, you know, is largely composed of double-edged razor blades with legs." He chuckled dryly. "And living Below has helped me avoid a common pitfall of doctors. My practice is necessarily rather limited. And so it has not become my only link to life." He lifted a corner of the handkerchief and peered at her. "Whatever made you decide on Colorado A and M?"

"It was far from home, and I wanted to see the Rocky Mountain west."

"Far from home," he repeated musingly. "The next best thing to running away?"

"You might say so. I was a handful. My formative years were tainted by a simple desire to defy. And since my parents believed my interest in animals to be unladylike, it naturally became my entire reason for living. Fortunately, what began as rebellion worked out to be the perfect choice. I've been content."

"Content... You mean happy?"

"No. Content."

"I see." Father winced with distaste, as a fire engine and several police cars hurtled screaming down the nearest street. When the noise had faded he said: "I imagine veterinary school was a trial of fire. Were you the only woman in your class?"

"Only woman in the entire student body."

"And so, in answer, you became solitary."

"Oh, quit the psycho-analysis, Jacob. I've always been an ornery woman."

She felt his fingers nudge their way into her hand, and she closed her own around them. His arm, extra warm from the sun, lay against hers and it was pleasant.

In answer...

Her answers had always been good ones. But yet, though she had graduated with honors, the most convincing thing she had learned from veterinary school was that nobody wanted to hear her answers...

She kept her chin high, her back very straight.

The three men who sat behind the table regarded the young woman before them with such unified antagonism that they could have been a single entity. Dean Troggurt, his glasses reflecting the window light in two round, flat, inhuman discs, his big loose body sprawled untidily — and disrespectfully — in his chair. The head of bacteriology, Sanderson, narrow-shouldered and weak-jawed with his freckled, mediocre face, and Professor Grodin, a blunt, muscular, humorless type with a square, arrogantly-tilted head.

Each question they asked her was preceded by an exchange of cagey glances, and the certainty of her failure was a tangible aura in the room, binding the three men together like some religious covenant.

Dean Troggurt's voice wearily coiled out of him as he reviewed her latest replies: "All right; we have decided that it's most likely a non-malignant cyst, lying fairly free in the ape's abdomen and containing pus produced by an amoeba parasite, and, ah— Which parasite did you say you thought it might be?"

She had not said. And she was growing hotly impatient with these sly, round-about attempts to trap her in ignorance. Why couldn't they just fire the questions at her the way they did with the men? Why did they have to turn each examination into a game of Daddy's-going- to-show-you-what-a-sweet-little-fool-you-are?

She named the parasite and then added coldly: "It's the same one that causes dysentery in man."

The pale, fidgety Sanderson tapped his fingers restlessly on the table. It was a sign of annoyance. It was a good sign, because it meant that once again she was right.

Dean Troggurt changed position abruptly and there was a sound of collective male exhalations as they tried to decide where to go with the problem next.

"All right," he said blandly. "Let's suppose you open the abdomen and discover a very large pus-filled cyst. Let's suppose that it turns out to be stuck to loops of intestine at many points and let's further suppose that while you are engaged in breaking the adhesions the cyst ruptures and floods the abdominal cavity with pus. What would you do?"

Her brain churned. She couldn't put in a drain; an ape would only pluck it out Flush it. Flush the area...

"I would flush the area."

Troggurt's voice knifed at her, sardonic, pitiless. "Would you, now?"

But his contempt merely fueled her certainty that she was on the right track. She knew these bastards, these imbeciles...

"Yes," she said firmly. "In fact I'd have my assistants prepare two or three sterilized stainless-steel buckets full of warm saline solution and then I'd simply and effectively swill out the abdominal cavity by pouring the stuff in and letting it wash out. Then I'd clean up with a tube and a vacuum pump. Anything remaining could easily be arrested with antibiotics."

There was dead silence. Then Sanderson. gave an odd little whine. "Are you sure that's what you'd do, Miss Sprague?"

"Absolutely."

She knew she was right. But what Troggurt said next came close to getting her expelled. Because she came close to committing assault.

He said, with unmistakable mockery: "But my dear, think of what a mess that would make. The table, the surgical drapes, the floor.... Your shoes. And your clothes. Think of what that would do to your clothes..."

"You're hurting my hand," Father pointed out gently. She dropped his hand. "I'm sorry, Jacob."

To her horror, a tear slid along her nose and trickled out from under the sunglasses rim. She stiffened and tried not to breathe, but the tears kept coming.

I don't believe this.... Oh, God. Oh, shit...

Father sat up. He rubbed her cheeks tenderly with the handkerchief and then took her hand again and held it.

He murmured kindly: "What is it?"

She muttered in a harsh tone: "I'm stronger than this. I am!"

"Yes. I know." He studied her for a while and then said fervently: "You are the most stalwart, daring, courageous woman I've ever met."

"I'm tough, Jacob."

"Yes",

He lifted her hand to his face, kissed it and pressed it against his soft beard. He kissed it again, then leaned down and kissed her.

He said: "But you don't have to be. Not anymore."

* * *

"Vincent — take off your pants."

"No..."

"Come on. Let's both be naked for a while and feel the sun everywhere. It's such a wonderful feeling... I want you to know what it's like."

"No. No, please, Catherine."

She was sitting up beside him, gazing down at him patiently.

He couldn't refuse Catherine...

But neither could he accept the notion of himself buck-naked beneath the open sky.

He curled up in a ball with his head in her lap, silently imploring... For a while, her arms lay close around him and he was sure she understood. He was a creature of dark, rocky tunnels and underground caverns, of shadows and dark nights and candlelight — and many layers of clothing. Over the last eighteen hours he had experienced enough liberation to last the rest of his life. She held him and rubbed his fur. He glanced up at her trustfully.

She pushed him off her lap, grunting with the effort, her smile one of total abandon, and she proceeded to tackle the snap and zipper on his jeans.

Vincent was learning a great many things.. .

He was learning that Catherine possessed amazing strength for one so small and slight. Not that it would be any help if he were to resist her...

But he was also learning that he couldn't resist Catherine. He absolutely couldn't. Well, not in any except the most perfunctory, playful manner.

He was also learning that it was sexually stimulating to wrestle with her this way...

"Catherine, please! Please don't —" But his words lost potency, jumbling into helpless laughter that welled up from the middle of his body. He tried pulling his knees up impedingly, but she merely forced them down again and he had to let her. He flopped over on his stomach and tried to crawl away, but this merely gave her the opportunity she had

needed. With her fingers locked in the waistband of his jeans she wrenched them down over his hips.

Oh, no...! He simply couldn't believe this was happening to him.

With a gasp, Vincent grabbed the blanket and wrapped himself up in it as she worked the jeans off over his ankles. Not to be foiled, Catherine merely yanked on the blanket until, forced by his torturous internal prohibitions, he had to let go. She pulled it out from under him and threw it aside.

And suddenly, Vincent was sitting on lush green grass, wearing absolutely nothing but a pair of plastic sunglasses.

Blithely, Catherine removed her shorts and joined him in total nudity.

He forgot everything for a moment except the enchanting sight of her lithe, radiant body against the backdrop of grass and lilac bushes.

Catherine paused in the act of spreading out the blanket again, and then knelt motionless for a while, studying him complacently. He was breathing very deeply, his great muscular chest expanding and contracting, his flat stomach slightly pulled in, the golden fur of this region thinning into the tender, downy triangle of his groin — and there was the tip of his penis, nestled attractively within its 'cuff'. It was the first time she had seen it retracted, and she stared, fascinated. She liked the sight of his penis, the feeling of it in her hand — but finding it this way, hidden inside him except for the very tip, was titillating beyond belief. It was clear to her, in retrospect, that he had agonized over the disclosure of this unconventional arrangement, and so she wished she could tell him just how much energy he had wasted with all that worry...

For it just made him even more exciting. In the realm of sexuality — as any mature person knew — novelty was an enhancement. But she realized that Vincent was still in the place tab-A-in-slot-B phase of sexual enlightenment. It would be a while yet before he'd understand such things.

She spread out the blanket and he joined her on it and stretched out on his back. She sank down softly on top of him for a moment, luxuriating against his sun-warmed fur and then she slid off him and sat leaning against him and holding his hands.

"Catherine," he breathed. "You're so beautiful..."

She passed a hand along his massive pectorals, his silky stomach, and then, with a gentle, exploring touch, into the tender area beneath. Her fingertips worked delicately at his 'cuff'.

"This is a good-feeling place, isn't it?"

He was very quiet, except for breathing in little gusts, his head tilted back against the blanket, his hair disheveled. His big, submissive, furry body had a kind of magnificence that gripped her in her most primal femininity. After a moment, she leaned over him and peeked beneath the dark glasses. His eyes, slate-blue, had taken on a blank, inward look. He was deeply immersed in those feelings... That was good. It was all such rich discovery for him. A heat crawled pleasantly into her tissues and she said, pressing against him and whispering into his hair: "I want to see it come out. I'd like that." There was a sudden warm nudging pressure against her fingers and she looked down. His penis, plump and firm, lay in her hand.

"Oh, Vincent — you sneak! I missed it."

She stimulated him, building her own excitement as well as his, and she kept on with sweet enforcement until his back began to arch and he began to push against the blanket with his palms. And she kept on — and at his moment of expulsive pleasure, he gasped out her name and reached up. She fell against him, trapping his ebbing spasms between her own smooth belly and his furry one. Almost immediately, the urgency came over him again, even greater this time, because he craved her satisfaction. He flipped her over onto the blanket and held himself lightly over her body for a moment, kissing her lips, her throat, her

lovely breasts.... Then he worked at her until she shuddered and thrashed, and a spark from her pleasure ignited his own again...

They lay for a while, limp and panting. But only for a short while.

Suddenly, Catherine was handing him his clothes and putting on her own. "Here, get dressed. I haven't really shown you around yet."

Vincent would have been content to wallow in afterglow for another two hours, but dutifully he put on the jeans, shirt and strange sneakers; he had never before in his life worn any kind of footwear that ended below the ankles.

Catherine's energy level seemed inexhaustible.

Tugging him along, she made him jog with her down the long, winding private lane, through the leafy tunnel of elms and oaks. They found a box turtle and waited for it to get friendly and emerge from its shell. She showed him how to pick apart a milkweed pod. They collected the mail from the leaning mailbox at the locked gate and returned. They walked around the pond and gathered cattails.

They returned to the blanket...

They strolled through the orchard and crouched in one niche of the worm fence, kissing. Catherine started to climb the fence, but before she was halfway up Vincent seized her gently, gathered her into his arms, and carried her back to the blanket.

Occasionally, they went inside for iced tea or lemonade.

By mid-afternoon, Catherine decided she needed another shower — and she made Vincent join her.

Another delightful new experience...

As well as a sexually stimulating one...

Afterward, they retired to the master bedroom for a while.

Evening approached as a kind of violet haze which gradually darkened the house and outbuildings. The cats gathered in the kitchen, drawn by their vigilant little tummy clocks to what ought to be a scene of dinner preparation. They had to wait rather a long time, but eventually their oddly-behaved sitters appeared and preparations were duly begun.

Catherine decided to make a large ham and bean casserole that they could finish up over the next couple of days. That and a large vanilla pudding would suit Vincent's unimaginative palate.

While she puttered around the kitchen with a lively, springy motion, pushing her way through the milling cats, Vincent sat at the table and read out loud to her from a Voltaire play.

But his mind was not really on the words.

It was occurring to him that his sexual prowess, once awakened, came close to extraordinary...

After a lifetime of only peripheral awareness of his own sexuality, he had managed to ejaculate nine times in less than two days. Since his pattern was clearly not a human norm he had begun to wonder about it — a bequest from *Felidae* perhaps? Among the meager collection of books in the living room, he had found the Readers Digest 'Book of the Wild Kingdom', and he had read the page on lions. But nothing was said about sex.

Oh well. Liz would know.

As for Catherine — she didn't have much to say about it. She just smiled a lot...

And then made him do it. again.

Vincent was beginning to assemble some very basic and conventional feelings of masculine pride over the whole thing, when suddenly his spine seemed to turn to rubber.

He drooped in his chair, catching himself just in time to prevent his head from falling into the book, and his internal organs all seemed to slide into a nondescript puddle of mush.

Right then, he knew that he couldn't have killed a mosquito for Catherine if she asked him to...

Barely able to raise his voice enough to be heard over the water running in the sink he mumbled: "Catherine, would you like me to put on a record?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful."

He waited till her back was turned and then very sluggishly disengaged himself from the chair. He trudged into the living room.

With flagging movements he pawed through a record bin full of Lawrence Welk until he came to half a dozen classical LPs.

Shortly, the reserved melodies of Tchaikovsky's Pathétique Symphony floated through the house.

There was a large, oval, braided rug on the living room floor. Vincent sagged down to it and lay on his side, inanimate and useless.

Jane approached him, purring seductively.

His lip quivered back and he managed to direct a feeble growl at her. She sat down and glanced to one side disinterestedly.

Vincent flopped weakly onto his back. He stared with glassy eyes at the ceiling.

He plunged into a deep sleep. Jane moved in.

After a while Catherine appeared at the living room doorway, mopping her hands with a checkered dishtowel. Her face broke into a huge grin.

On the rug Vincent lay snoring softly. On his chest was Walter, curled up and purring. On his crotch was Jane, curled up and purring.

Catherine shooed the cats away. She squatted down beside him and began to fumble with the snap on his jeans. His eyes slitted opaquely and he muttered: "Nuh—" and tried to push her hands away.

"It's just me, Vincent."

Reaching in, her hand smoothed the tender, pink, downy area between his wedges of hipbone and he moved his head feebly and squirmed.

"It's all right, Vincent. It's just me."

He began to come awake. Seconds later, from heavy-lidded eyes and with an expression of frank apprehension, he found himself watching Catherine undress.

"Catherine.... I — I don't think —"

"Hush!"

She pressed out his marvelous, ever-firm penis, straddled him and wriggled it into place. His body snapped to immediate, fully expectant arousal...

Even though somewhere deep inside him a tiny voice was screaming for mercy...

Five minutes later he had an explosive orgasm.

* * *

There was no return address on the envelope and the handwriting, neat and somewhat elegant, was unfamiliar. But it bore a Connecticut postmark...

Then she knew.

Liz tore it open and pulled out a single sheet of carefully folded paper.

Dear Liz,

Everything is fine.

Love,

Vincent

P.S. You were right.

With a jubilant smile, she laid the note on top of the pile of mail on the kitchen table.

I'm glad, sweetheart. I hope she wears you out...

Still smiling, she murmured: "Dear Vincent, Got your note. Glad things are fine. Around here, things have taken a rather unexpected turn—"

From the hall came the voice of Jacob Wells. "Are you speaking to me, Liz?"

He entered the kitchen and joined her at the table, dressed rather carelessly in his Topside clothes and looking rather ruffled about the head. The sight of him prompted her to adjust a few hairpins. She imagined she looked just as untidy.

They hadn't left her bed until close to eleven o'clock and a kind of torpor still clung to them both. It was one thing to be young and vigorous like Vincent and Catherine... But at their age, she reflected, a little sex tended to go a long, long way.

"No, I was just muttering. It's a habit you get into when you live alone." He rubbed at his eyes.

"Enjoying the slides?" she asked, slitting open a subscription renewal to *Veterinary Journal*.

"Yes. The cross-sections of the *Babesia* tick are especially interesting."

A slyness inserted itself smack in the middle of her lackadaisical mood. Her eyes glinted with the recognition of an unexpected windfall. She gave him a penetrating stare and said: "I suppose you've never heard of Nantucket Island syndrome and the—"

"Oh yes, yes! A fascinating development. The outbreak of babesiosis among humans couldn't have been more anomalous to the medical community at the time. I mean, it's one thing to find it among Texas cattle, but—"

"Oh, never mind!" she said sharply.

Father smiled into his hand, pretending to rub his beard. Then he confessed: "You have the entire story spelled out in your notebook of corresponding slide notes—"

She whacked him on the head with a rolled-up magazine and he yelped.

"Shall I make us some tea?" he suggested presently. She nodded and ripped up a flattering letter from the chairman of the Animal Rights Commission. He filled the teakettle at the sink.

He said: "I have you all figured out, you know. You went into the exotic animal specialty to avoid people." He leaned against the formica counter and a satisfied smile played across his neat, square face. "Because if you'd gone into an urban small animal practice you'd have had to deal with people on an average ratio of one owner per patient, wouldn't you? Whereas, in a zoo environment you have hundreds, perhaps thousands of animals, and only one board of trustees and a handful of administrators to—"

"Jacob, if you don't shut up I'm going to make you look at cross-sections of tapeworms." She crumpled a begging letter from the Humane Society. "Before lunch. By the way, speaking of parasites — you should check Vincent carefully for ticks when he gets back."

Father chuckled indulgently. "I warned him about those, and a number of other things as well, but I don't think he paid much attention."

"Always the prerogative of the young," she observed dryly, opening a large envelope from her publisher. It contained a batch of letters from readers. She sighed. As a rule the typed ones tended to harbor a thoughtful comment or two, but the handwritten ones all too often began with "I love animals too, and I just know you'll love this story about my

(cat/dog/canary/hamster/goldfish)..." But each one deserved and always received a short reply.

But she didn't want to think about this right now.

It was not every day that an amiable, fine-looking, scholarly gentleman stood leaning against her kitchen counter and she had recovered from enough of her prejudices to enjoy the sight — although she had to confess to herself with some amazement that she enjoyed the sight of him in her bed even more.

"Don't you think it will generate all kinds of rumors if you start spending nights away from home?"

"Rumors will be generated no matter what I do. Quite to be expected when you're paterfamilias."

She continued to study him, feeling a little awkward in her lightened, thoroughly equable mood. She muttered: "Nice spot you've made for yourself down there. You get treated like the Caliph of Baghdad and nobody ever questions anything you say or do."

"Well, you know, it's a funny thing..." Suddenly rosy-cheeked, he glanced at her obliquely and with an odd, very thoughtful expression he said: "I've been looking for somebody who might be willing to stick around and do exactly that."

She examined the mail again and replied with careful indifference: "That so?" She asked quickly, getting away from the subject: "How did you discipline Vincent when he was little?"

That was clever of her. Jacob loved to reminisce about Vincent's childhood.

With his expression settling into one of pleased anticipation, he carried the teapot over to the table. The spicy-soap aroma of Earl Grey drifted from the spout.

He said, sitting down: "Well, that took some opportunism on my part. The only time I ever tried to spank him he bit me to the bone, so I couldn't resort to that. But there was one thing that worked quite well." He rubbed irritably at his leg and she made a mental note to talk him into a hot soak later. "As you know, the city is literally choked with street vendors, many of whom sell cut flowers. One day when Vincent was about three years old, somebody went Above — I don't remember who — and brought back a whole bunch of them. Well, Vincent had never seen a flower before. He thought they were just the most enchanting things. And so, after that, it became customary for anyone going Above to bring back a single long-stemmed flower for Vincent. And so, if he refused to eat his cereal or go to bed or pick up his toys or whatever I would simply tell him that whoever was about to go Above would not bring him a flower. It never failed. He would comply with absolutely anything to he assured of his flower. I remember one time —" Suddenly he stopped.

Her face had tightened and was now set in a hard, furious glare. With an angry, absent gesture she slapped back a few straggling grey hairs. Then she rose stiffly, still glaring at him.

He cringed.

She flared: "Jacob, I think that was *cruel and unusual punishment!*"

She stormed out to the terrace and left him alone with the tea.

He stared unhappily out the open sliding door.

"Oh dear...", he sighed.

* * *

Catherine lay blissfully awake in the darkness. The clinging silk night-gown was a cool, smooth river of touch around her body and the inert, heavy-breathing bulk on the other side of the bed was a comforting presence.

The bed was so large that they tended to drift apart, but always, at some point just before dawn, Catherine would awaken to find that he had protectively drawn her into the curve of his body. He was a remarkably quiet sleeper, seldom restless. When he did twitch and

mutter with vivid dreams, she would reach out, not quite waking all the way, and gently rub his fur until he relaxed.

But tonight he was restless, and after waking up several times to stroke him, she had found herself unable to go back to sleep.

But that was all right. The wonderful silence, except for the sound of night air breathing through the leaves and grasses below their window, the soft darkness made so cozy by Vincent's nearness, the pleasure of knowing that sleeplessness didn't matter — that she could catch up on a blanket in the sun tomorrow.... All these things kissed comfort into her soul and made her smile against the pillow, sublimely happy.

They were ten days into their vacation, and every now and then moments of quiet would come over them both, moments of stepping aside from present joy to reckon with the approaching last day... Moments of recognizing that the fun would soon become memories that would have to last until next time!

Originally, Catherine had vowed to herself that she would wait until the last day to give Vincent the news... She had made herself swear up and down that she would wait... And then all he did was give her one sad, pensive look and she caved right in.

Aunt Lila and Uncle David were going to do this again. They were planning to travel at least twice a year, and they had told her that if the idea appealed to her she was to feel free to make use of the place whenever it was available.

"... and perhaps your uncle and I are incurable romantics," Aunt Lila had written in the notes she had left on the kitchen table. "But we are rather hoping that eventually you will come out here with a young man..."

Fortunately, they were the type who would only be pleased with the fact that she hadn't bothered to wait for 'eventually'.

Catherine was tempted to take Vincent to the lake...

At this time of year, though, it really was too risky. There would be campers and fishermen all over the place.

But Vincent was having a wonderful time right here. Forever sweet-natured and malleable, he was willing to do anything Catherine wanted to do, and he was only briefly discomfited by the unknowns and perils of nature. He hadn't minded being stung by a bee, or falling backward into the petunia bed while playing frisbee, and he had recovered quickly from his horror at finding spiny brown burrs on his legs after walking through a weed patch. And he had dutifully supervised her arboreal gymnastics... She liked to climb trees squirrel-fashion but Vincent preferred to ascend once, strike a lordly pose on a very sturdy branch and stay put while she clambered around. They had even pruned some of the trees through the simple but effective method of having Vincent climb up, grasp the dead branch and wrench it off the tree trunk. Together they stalked frogs on the muddy banks of the pond, drifted in Uncle David's rowboat, ate sorrel, gathered tiny sour-sweet wild strawberries, caught fireflies at dusk — and of course they spent much time on a blanket in the sun, contributing to the rhythms of nature...

In between all these activities, Vincent demolished enormous helpings of the vanilla pudding, and his piteous expression upon emptying the bowl inspired her to make another batch.

Oddly, it was this sort of thing she enjoyed the most — having him with her in the kitchen in the evenings when she made their dinner, sharing meals, washing dishes together, cuddling on the sofa in front of a TV movie, going sleepily up to bed hand in hand...

Because of this she wondered how much longer she could withhold her other piece of news.

For she had another secret... Something else she was intending to tell him on their last day

Vincent stirred again in his sleep and a tiny, sweetly melancholy sound came from his throat. Catherine reached out automatically and patted him, but this time her touch didn't have its usual quieting effect. Vincent stiffened, then suddenly he lurched to a sitting position.

She murmured with drowsy concern: "Vincent — what is it? Are you having a bad dream?"

But he didn't register these words. Instead he snarled — a high-pitched, hysterical sound — and catapulted off the bed.

There came a heart-stopping crash as he met the wall on the other side of the room.

With a gasp Catherine reached out and snapped on the bedside table lamp.

Naked — or, better stated, wearing only his fur — Vincent turned slowly away from the wall, blinking and confused. The rise and fall of his ribs was accompanied by a very slight rumble, like distant thunder.

Catherine sat up and studied him anxiously. "Vincent, come back to bed. You've been dreaming. You had a bad dream."

He drooped a little. Before he had turned around she had seen, in a quick glimpse, that his back fur along the spine was standing straight up. She wanted to be amused by that, but she was too distressed to give in to the impulse. How dare a nightmare disrupt his hard-won happiness!

Vincent returned to the bed, crawled close to her and lay face down with his head turned toward her. She pushed a hand through his still-settling back fur and peered closely at him.

She whispered: "What were you dreaming?"

Vincent didn't reply right away. His eyes filled and he rubbed at them and sniffed and Catherine huddled over him, pang-ridden and miserable.

"Vincent, please tell me..."

His voice was muffled against the sheet. "I couldn't find my way home. They were chasing me, and I couldn't find my way home."

"Who was chasing you?" Suddenly she knew. "The Silks? Was it the Silks?"

She lay down with her face very close to his, her arm across his shoulders.

"Do you have this dream very often?"

He whispered: "Sometimes."

She laid a hand on his face and he closed his eyes.

"Do you always wake up crying?"

His reply was barely audible. "Yes."

"And I'm never there to comfort you."

His eyes opened again, free of tears, and shone into hers with love and adoration, "Catherine," he murmured. "You were here this time. When it happens again I will have this moment to remember, to comfort me."

As she stroked his warm, soft face the secret pressed her hard, cajoling for release, flaunting its potential as the absolute, most comforting, inspiring and exciting piece of news she could ever give Vincent.... *Why not now?* it seemed to beg. *Why not now?* But she remained steadfast. She had held out for weeks, and they had four days of their vacation left. The best time to tell him was on the last day, when he would be feeling sad at the thought of returning to their old schedule of stolen moments together, of having to say good-bye all the time...

As her mind wandered and battled with her impulses her hand played caressingly with the long fur over his backbone. Suddenly aware of an odd sensation, she raised her hand and looked at it. Bits of his fur were clinging to her fingers.

"Vincent — you're shedding."

The effect on him was instantaneous. His eyes widened. Then he sat up and agitatedly moved aside from where he had been lying.

The sheet was covered with lost fur.

"Oh, no!" he gasped.

She stared at him. "Vincent — what is it?"

He lifted his face, tilted his head back, and made a sound she'd never heard before— something between a wail and a moan.

"It's my molt! I've got my molt!" He rocked back and forth, clutching his head.

Mildly perturbed, Catherine stared at the sea of hairs on the bed. She was dismayed only because he seemed to be so upset.

"Your molt? You mean your fur is all going to fall out and new fur is going to grow in? Do the big cats do that?"

"I don't know. But I do it. Oh —" His frustration now seemed mainly concerned with how to express his exasperation.

Catherine fought back a grin. She'd taught him a lot of things lately, but she hadn't yet taught him how to swear....

"Oh.... How vexing!" he rapped out, rubbing distractedly at his chest. A little cloud of hairs sifted down to the bed. "I knew it would happen sometime soon, but I was hoping it wouldn't be this week."

"Is it such a bother? Do you feel ill or lose your appetite or get cranky or something?"

"Usually all of those things." Vincent was beginning to relax. "But this time I feel quite well. It must be those vitamin drops Liz gave me."

Catherine finally gave in and smiled heartily. "Liz to the rescue again. How did you ever manage to live without her before?"

A trace of a smile further eased Vincent's face. "I don't know," he admitted.

Suddenly, Catherine remembered the conversation she'd had with Liz about the hairbrush.

"Vincent! Liz knew you were going to molt! She told me to buy a special kind of brush."

She clambered off the bed and dug around in her suitcase until she found the English hairbrush.

"How often does this happen to you?"

"Twice a year. I usually stay in my room and sulk until it's over."

"Do you have to brush yourself all over?"

"Oh yes. Constantly."

"Does anybody help you?"

"Father does. And sometimes Mary." He sighed sharply and looked freshly annoyed. "It is a bother. The bathtub drain clogs up. I have to take my clothes and my bedding above at night and shake them in the park. It is an ordeal that I thoroughly detest, Catherine."

She returned to the bed and applied the brush gently to his back. It came away choked with hairs.

"Well, don't feel too picked on, Vincent. I have *monthly periods* of feeling blah and having to put up with a lot of inconvenience." She giggled. "At least you only get yours twice a year."

After breakfast, they stripped the bed and shook the sheets on the back lawn. Then they retired to a blanket on the grass for a long session of what Liz had predicted as 'heavy-duty brushwork.'

By now, Vincent was quite accustomed to taking off his clothes beneath the open sky...

He dozed in the sun and Catherine read a Stephen King novel, occasionally disturbing his slumber with her feelings of vicarious horror and fright. In between chapters she plied the brush assiduously and tufts of fur drifted across the grass like tumbleweeds. His silky summer coat had already sprouted and was gradually revealed as the longer winter hairs fell away. Catherine enjoyed everything about the process and Vincent stopped bemoaning his plight, as he became aware of her pleasure in helping him through it.

"Remember that Catherine loves you. That will get you through anything. Anything at all."

Even a loathsome molt.

But despite feeling unusually well overall, Vincent had another bad night and woke up trembling and in tears.

In the dark Catherine held him, soothing him with whispered words and gentle, slow massage. He was so strong most of the time — but so frail and needy at times like this...

The secret became a powerful undertow.

He hiccupped against the pillow and she pressed kisses into his eyelids, nose and soft lips. She nuzzled him tenderly and tried to hug all of his huge, gentle shape at once.

She murmured: "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"I couldn't find you. Not even with my mind. I was hollow inside, in the most terrible way. It was as though you were gone."

"It's what you fear the most."

"Yes."

Now. Now.... *Now!*

Her heart began to pound furiously and she was overcome by the exquisite pressure from within.

He stirred and lifted his head slightly. He seemed to be listening for something.... After a moment he said: "Catherine.... You seem to need to tell me something. It's something that is making you very, very happy."

"Dammit, I can't hide anything from you!" But she was rejoicing, and as far as she was concerned, he could monitor every beat of her exulting heart with her total sanction. This was the time to tell him. This was the time...

She blurted: "Vincent, I'm buying a house! My friend, Sheila, is in real estate, and she's been showing me some possibilities. Daddy left me some money — quite a lot. And I've made a decision and a down-payment on a brownstone on Merriam Street. It has a basement with tunnel *access!* The former owners are very old, and they're selling it so that they can go into a nursing home. They bought it when they got married in 1933, shortly after Prohibition was repealed, and it was once used by bootleggers. There's still a big hole in the basement wall leading to a branch of tunnels beneath the street." She wriggled in his arms and her voice was a soft gale of rapture.

"They simply never bothered to have the hole walled up. They offered to have it repaired as a condition of the sale—" She paused dramatically, grinning against his warm furry chest.

"But I told them not to bother—"

"Catherine..." Vincent spoke as though from a dream. He raised his head further, and then sat up. The moonlight flowing in through the window made black hollows in his long,

leonine face, and from these dense shadows two tiny gleaming lights shone at her.

"Catherine — a house on Merriam Street.... You are buying a house on *Merriam Street...!*"

His voice was tremulous.

He went on with quiet intensity, more elated with each word: "That's over Section B! I know that branch of tunnels; it's never used by us and the entrances to it have been sealed for years — but one of them could easily be opened!"

She sat up and faced his dim shape in the silvery path of half-light from the window.

"We could be together, Vincent. Much more than we can be with things the way they are now. Just think about it. We could both come home to the same place at the end of the day, just like ordinary people. And we could have dinner and breakfast together and sleep in each other's arms every night of our lives. Think about that..."

They were silent for a while but she could sense the dizzying turbulence of feeling in Vincent as the full impact of her news worked its spell.

Presently he turned aside a little and said in a faltering tone: "I wonder how Father will feel —"

"I don't see why he should object. You won't be very far away."

Outside, the breeze shifted direction and moved tree branches in a long, soft sigh. Tiny dim patterns of leaves milled on the moonlit bedroom wall.

Inside, the silence was filled with their unvoiced ecstasy.

After a long while Vincent lay down and pulled her gently in against his shoulder.

He murmured: "I could comfort you when Joe Maxwell has been unreasonable."

She squelched a quick twinge of guilt. "Yes. And I'd always be there when you have bad dreams."

Fervently, he said: "Catherine — the thought of a life with you has been a beautiful, someday dream... But it was just a *dream* ..."

She said with quiet reverence: "It was a dream that deserved to come true."

* * *

"Everyone is waiting for you in the common room, Jacob."

In the lower entrance to the study chamber, Liz stood very erect, her hands clasped in front of her. Her gaze, nudging Father sternly, was direct and no-nonsense as usual, but it had little effect.

From his littered desk, Father glanced at her with mute appeal. He was wearing his best tunic, his embroidered vest and a new shawl that Liz had given him. It was made of acrylic, so the moths wouldn't attack it.

It was the Fourth of July and a festive mood lay enticingly along the tunnels, like another one of the delicious smells from William's all-morning excesses in the kitchen. The study chamber, like all the other chambers and many of the tunnels, was decorated with little flags made by the children and Father could tell, from the distant excited babble of voices, that the boxes of sparklers had already been passed out — perhaps in an effort to quiet them. Naturally, it had the opposite effect. They would not be permitted to burn their sparklers until after the speech and William's extravagant buffet luncheon — a torturous stay of entertainment for anyone wider age ten, of course. But then, at last, there would be the sparkler lighting and carefully supervised firecracker popping in the main tunnels. The acrid odor would hang around for days.

"I just need to review a few last notes," he said. "I want to be sure I haven't left anyone off the personal-accomplishment roster. If I should forget to mention some child —"

"You've already checked the roster three times. You're just stalling because Vincent and Catherine aren't here. They aren't going to get here in time, Jacob. Resign yourself."

But he couldn't resign himself. Vincent wouldn't want to miss his Fourth of July speech.

Liz wandered to the circular stair that led up to the book gallery. She said flatly: "They're young, Jacob. They're probably parked somewhere along the interstate, disporting themselves in the back of the car."

Father blushed violently and shuffled his notes.

She climbed the stairs and began to inspect the tiers of books. Since that was where he kept his medical texts Father now had to worry about prying her loose to attend his speech. He sighed dismally, aware that he was knitting himself quite a shroud of pessimism...

There was sudden movement on the platform at the upper entrance.

"Father—" It was Vincent's voice.

Father's head snapped up.

"Vincent! You're here in time! I knew you'd—" He stopped speaking abruptly and stared as his son trotted down the steps and hurried over. "*Vincent! My God! What on earth has happened to you?*"

Vincent was attired normally in long shirt, tunic and leather-reinforced pants, but his hair and facial fur had changed from their usual russet gold to a pale flaxen yellow. In fact, he was almost white.

"The sun bleached me, Father."

After they had embraced Vincent said: "Catherine says I look like a plush toy by Dakin. She keeps threatening to tie a pink ribbon around my neck."

Father continued to stare, utterly captivated. "Well it's — it's quite a stunning effect!"

Against his lightened color, Vincent's eyes were a brilliant blue. He said: "I imagine I will darken up again in a week or so."

Father gathered his lecture notes. "Is Catherine here too?" he asked hopefully.

"She went straight to the common room."

"Oh, good."

But he remained seated behind his desk, oddly in no hurry to join his waiting audience. His whole attention was riveted on the flaxen-yellow face from which the clear benevolent eyes shone down at him with affection. It penetrated his mind very slowly that Vincent's startling new coloration, even though temporary, was symbolic of deeper and more permanent changes. Vincent had somehow moved to another dimension of life, beyond the confinement of the tunnels, beyond the range of parental jurisdiction. He had successfully left home and returned. Behind that grave, composed and thoughtful expression lay an unspeakable happiness. Vincent was not the same Vincent.

And that was all right.

Suddenly feeling awkward Father said in a strangely cordial voice: "Well — it's good to see you."

Vincent tilted his head. "It's good to see you, Father."

"How was the trip? Did you have a good time?"

Vincent's blue eyes wavered just a bit. The high, wide shoulders stirred.

He turned aside briefly, then faced Father again and reported: "Yes."

He studied the older man carefully for a moment and then inquired in a genial tone: "Did Liz visit?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, she did."

"And did *you* have a good time, Father?"

Father shifted in his armchair and rubbed at his chin. He stacked papers.

"Well, ah... Yes." Then he put in with haste: "She's right up there, by the way."

Vincent glanced up at the book gallery and saw Liz watching them with her usual stern expression. But the colorful red and blue checked blouse she wore tucked into her skirt livened her appearance considerably. There was even a matching scarf knotted at her throat.

"Liz!"

She descended the circular stairs at an unhurried pace and held out her arms, her face breaking into one of its rare smiles of deep pleasure.

"Come here, Honeylocks! Welcome home."

He went to her and they embraced and held each other for a long, satisfactory time. Then she looked him over critically.

"Why, you're the color of a newly-hatched chick. Are you that color all over?" She added quickly: "Don't answer that or I'll be learning things that are none of my business."

She went back up a few steps and sat down so that Vincent's head, when he stood alongside the skeletal metal stairs, was just level with her shoulder.

"Come over here. Let me see an ear, sweetheart."

She reached out and took his shaggy head between her hands but he moved inward and pressed his face against her shoulder murmuring: "It feels even more like home with you here, Liz."

"Nonsense. Let me see an ear." After all, she couldn't trust Jacob to remember a detail like this...

She inspected his ear carefully for ticks and then turned his head and inspected his other ear.

"Still taking care of me, Liz?"

"Always."

He hugged her again.

From his desk, Father gazed upon this curiously enthralling sight, his chin buried in his hand and his eyes sparkling with high emotion. His hidden smile was one of unusual contentment.

For he was gazing at the two most important people in his universe.

And he was reckoning with the fact that there used to be only one...

A single rather elaborate message came plinking over the pipes and he rose. He mounted his notes on a clipboard and reached for his cane.

"Well, that's my final summons. I am told that if I keep them waiting any longer I will be expected to wash all the luncheon dishes by myself." He chuckled indulgently. "I wonder how many days that would take me? Oh, and Mary says she needs more help with the children."

Liz dropped off her perch and headed toward the lower tunnel. "I'll help her. I'm good at intimidation—"

"Liz, wait." Vincent detained her with one fuzzy hand. He said shyly: "There is something I need to ask you."

Father pushed past them and hobbled quickly into the tunnel and out of sight.

"Well, what is it?"

Vincent hesitated, feeling unaccountably tense and nervous. He was overcome with the desire to hide his face in her lap again — that had been such a helpful arrangement! Some things were almost impossible to talk about at all — not to mention face to face.

"My fur is different."

"That's because you're a big boy now."

She started to turn away but his hand closed on her arm.

"Liz—" He lowered his head and turned it aside. He mumbled clumsily: "Liz, how often can male lions — When they — Once they —" He floundered and as he was searching wildly for his scattered fortitude she answered him.

"They have orgies, sweetheart." She reached up and patted his cheek. "Absolute orgies."

A profound and courteous hush lay over the crowded common room. Everyone was there and the assembly looked like a vast painting done as a fall accent piece; everyone seemed to be wearing shades of brown and dark yellow, with an occasional touch of deep red or green. The men and women filling all the available chairs and standing along the walls were a sea of gentle, familiar faces, most of whom Catherine knew by name. They were quiet, moving only as needed to quell the carefully distributed groups of children. Sitting with one group of six-year-olds was Liz, and when she caught Catherine's eye she winked and then lapsed into her perfected granite look.

Catherine had saved a seat for Vincent and he was now beside her, holding one of her hands in both of his, and she leaned against him a little, feeling his warmth and solidity. Around them heads had finally stopped turning to stare at his new coloration and everyone's attention was now on Father, who was speaking to them in his refined and crisply accented voice from the lectern on the chamber's raised platform.

"... and so, although this is customarily a day to celebrate liberty, I wish to talk to you this year about *union*, about connectedness — that of our society with the World Above, and especially that of ourselves to each other..."

Catherine's large, expressive eyes moved to Vincent's sensitive profile and slowly beyond him. The wall torches and a dozen pedestal candelabras diffused a soft orange light through the room, touching each face with incredible sweetness. Squeezing the strong furry hands, she thought about how much was visible to her through that vague, indefinite light. Far above her the city's hard, white, noisy day shed a much stronger light all around itself and yet revealed nothing precious and vital, while down here in dusky tunnels and gentle orange shadows lay the sum of all her dreams...

She had found the perfect answer for herself and Vincent in the house on Merriam Street, for it connected to the tunnel world — that restorative they both would always need.... Closing was not until the end of the month. There had been many delays in the whole process, because of the age and infirmities of the old couple who were selling their home after so many, many years. It pleased her to think that she and Vincent would have their most intimate moments in a house that had been the scene of a long and successful marriage, a scene of shared joy, devotion and loyalty. Surely, some guardian spirit had been imparted to that house by such a lasting union, and was now waiting for them, and would bless each moment they spent together within those walls.

"... for down here what connects us is common pain and common joy. And as each individual journey is completed, we all celebrate its completion."

It must be kindness, she thought, that made Father's words ring out with such clarity and heart-stirring power and grace. She could see the kindness in him as he stood before them, a slight, bearded man of medium height who was known as 'Father' even to people older than himself. And once, in a magical instant of time many years ago, that kindness had also spoken through the movements of two hands that lifted an abandoned baby out of filthy rags, from desolation into comfort and hope.

She listened to Father's words and to the kindness in his voice, and deep inside her mind she seemed to hear Vincent's voice and his roaring, as he leaped out of the darkness to defend her. Inside her, these sounds were like a very gentle storm heard from far away. They carried the great force of his love, as though on a softly roaring wind to her yearning

ears. They showed her the spark and flash that happened inside him when her soul came against his own. They brought all of him to her and laid all of him at her feet.

And all of him was blessed as she gathered him up and tucked him away inside her heart.

"... and what wonders can we achieve when we are guided by love? What feats? What transformations? I will tell you what — sometimes we can dare to leave Eden. And when we leave hand in hand, everything will be all right. We have each other; we are joined forever in our souls, in the best part of ourselves and so nothing up there can daunt us. We have love to lead us out of the garden when we choose to go. We have love to make us all the right promises and to hear our vows and to be familiar and dear on every step of the unknown way. For when we have love we can dare to leave Eden.... When we have love, as John Milton so perfectly expressed it:

*Then wilt thou, not be loath To leave this Paradise, but shall
possess A Paradise within thee, happier far."*

* * *

In the waterfall cavern, Father and Liz stood facing each other beside the iron railing. Beyond them the waterfall was a high, mist-wrapped, churning entity, a ceaselessly pouring, thundering magnificence. The grey light of the vast chamber was broken by silvery gleams from the rushing water.

Father took both of her hands in his. "Will you marry me?" he asked.

Her face tenaciously kept its stern expression. "All right," she said. Her gaze veered suddenly to the waterfall and he released her hands. Instantly, she looked for him, but he had moved away. She turned around. A short distance away he was pausing at the bottom of a short flight of rocky steps she had never noticed before.

"You can get a better view from up here," he said. Smiling, he extended one hand.

He said: "I hope you won't mind holding onto my hand for a while longer."

She replied: "Not in the least."

This was absurd.... She, Elizabeth Sprague, the coldly rational, was standing before a waterfall, hundreds of feet beneath New York City, agreeing to marry a man dressed like Erasmus...

And she was smiling.

Like some goddamned idiot.

Well, shit!!

THE END