





I Shall But Love Thee Better... **Artistic Credits**

Linda S. Barth

Calligraphy Renderings of:
"Catherine Lives" - Peggy Garvin
"Sonnet" - Elizabeth Barrett Browning
"The Day Is Done" - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
"Circle of Life" - Elton John/Tim Rice
"Dream Weaver" - Gary Wright

You may contact her at P. O. Box 2014, Branford, Connecticut 06405-1114

EI

Original painting photographed for use as front color cover
and computer-scanned black and white version of cover following page 27.
She wishes to remain anonymous; however, any favorable comments about her illustration
may be sent c/o Dream Weavers and I will personally see that she receives them.

Neal Farris

Interior illustrations following pages 49, 77, 81, 97, 101 and 132.
You may contact him at P. O. Box 145, Evans, Georgia 30809

Renate Haller

Original painting photographed for use as back color cover
and interior illustrations following pages 2, 9, 23 and 39.
You may contact her at Missianerweg 1/a, I-39050 St. Pauls, Italy

Rosemarie Hauer

Interior illustrations following pages 9, 31, 61, and 75.
You may contact her at Muhlgasse 20/5, A-2560 Berndorf, Austria

Letters and comments about I Shall But Love Thee Better... are most welcome.
Please address them to:
Peggy Ann Garvin, P. O. Box 477, Montmorenci, SC 29839-0477

Catherine Lives

*How ridiculous this headstone,
how absurd its lofty claim;
That beneath it - lost and alone
there rest her loving remains.*

*No, there is nothing of her here
in this cold and empty grave.
Nothing of my Catherine dear,
for all that she was - she gave.*

*And all she was is with us still;
in all that she touched she lives.
She guides us and she always will;
through our hands it's she who gives.*

*Soothing arms to the sad and weak
and kind words to each who grieves.
Through our voices Catherine speaks,
and within our hearts she lives.*

*Peggy Garvin
April 16, 1992*

LSB.

Sonnet

How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and
breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my
childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints - I love thee with
the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!
- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Sonnets From the Portuguese
1850

CSB

I Shall But Love Thee Better...

Loving eyes focus on the man as he gracefully walks past. His broad back is straight with pride and his shoulder-length blond hair glows as though a hundred brush strokes had been vigorously applied. He senses their gaze and turns crystal blue eyes on Father and Mary. They are huddled close together, hands clasped. As his eyes meet those of the old man, his memory is flooded with flashes of scenes from his childhood. This couple is dear to the tall, regal man, and he pauses momentarily to reflect on the past. They, too, are thinking of how much they have loved this magnificent man since he came to the Tunnels as a tiny baby.

Farther down on the bench, Mouse and Jamie sit watching the man with pride and love as their youngest son, Peter, squirms on his mother's lap. Peter doesn't understand why they are sitting in this huge room and why his mother wants him to be quiet, but he recognizes the man with the long blond hair and squeals with delight. Mouse bends his shaggy head to the matching tiny one and whispers that he must be still.

With a shy smile for his friends, the gentle giant continues down the aisle.

A solemn voice reads another name and a man unknown to the Tunnel dwellers passes through the crowd. He, like the man they all love, has a sense of pride emanating from him that causes the entire gathering to hush in awe.

As more names are read, people proceed, one by one, toward the front of the huge, high-ceilinged room.

The man they have come to see takes his seat on the stage. The burgundy satin draped around his neck extends down the front of his chest contrasting with the solemn black of his robe. It is obvious to his friends and family that he struggles to maintain an outwardly proper demeanor. Even after all these years, the innocent boy inside the man longs to break free of the restraints. The man wants to run from the stage, scroll in hand, to the one person who has sacrificed so much to make this day possible -- his father.



CHAPTER 1

Far below the city streets another man sits, alone. He slumps in a large carved wooden chair. The room is illuminated by a single flickering candle. His head is bowed over his leathery hands as he steeples them in his lap. His eyes are closed. The trail of dried tears is evident on his aging face which is all but obscured from view by the heavy cascade of his silvered amber hair.

“Today we reached another milestone, Catherine,” the man says with a sigh. “Our son is graduating from New York University. At 22, he’s the youngest in his class to receive his MD. I truly believe the unique education he received from everyone here Below, especially Father, has given him the foundation he needed to achieve the honors he is receiving today. But he has earned his place Above through diligent effort and sacrifice these past five years.

“And although we are unable to attend the ceremony in person, the bond Jacob and I share enables me to experience it through his feelings and, perhaps you are feeling it as well...

“I have sensed in our son a restlessness of late -- a desire to be on with his chosen mission. And today marks a very large step toward achieving his goal.

“Oh, Catherine, how I wish you were here. You would actually be able to attend -- for both of us. He’s graduating with honors. You would have been so ... proud.” The final word was spoken in a tremulous voice as fresh tears coursed down his wrinkled cheeks.

Vincent had every right, from birth, to curse his fate, to feel cheated and punished. And yet instead, no matter what life had handed him, somehow he had lived it with compassion and love.

He was still an impressive figure of a man, even at the age of 60. Though his golden mane was generously shot through with silver and his face had relented slightly to the ravages of time, his stride was strong and sure and his eyes were the same striking sapphire blue.

As he reflected on the past, he remembered how grateful he had been for Jacob. Vincent had absorbed himself totally in his new role as a father. Forgotten were the hasty pledges of saving the world Above from those who would kill or harm or destroy. After several attempts to make a difference in that world, he had realized that no matter how hard he tried, nothing he did would truly make an impact on what happened Above. But here Below ... here he had a chance to make a difference.

A flash from the past almost took his breath away -- a conversation with Catherine. She had been staying Below in order to come to terms with the death of her father. It had been a time of great sorrow but also a time of deep closeness. She had needed the healing balm of sharing, and Vincent had been a most receptive vessel for her outpourings.

One evening while he was reading to her, Catherine began to sob softly. She had told him of a time not so long ago when the loss of her mother had surfaced with such overwhelming sorrow that she felt she could not bear the pain. When her father had tried to comfort her, to strengthen her against the loss, he had told her she must continue to strive for the happy life that her mother had wished for her. For in achieving peace and contentment in her life, she would afford her mother the

same. Yes, he admitted to his little girl now all grown up, it was considerably harder to continue living after the death of a loved one than he imagined dying to be!

And Vincent would be the first to agree. After the loss of Catherine it would have been very easy to walk to the Whispering Gallery bridge where the precipice was very accessible and quietly slip over the edge.

But little Jacob ... what consequences would his tiny son bear from this action, this giving up. And Jacob was his precious burden not to be easily relinquished.

No, he could not bear to take the easy path. But, his life had never been simple or uncomplicated. There had always been choices, difficult choices.

And he had never regretted his choice of life. Every time Vincent looked at Jacob, the miracle filled him anew. As he had quoted nursery rhymes or passages from Kipling to him, Vincent had observed how attentively the tiny boy seemed to listen to his every word. He recalled thinking, as he held Jacob in his arms, here lay a future leader of this world. Here lay Catherine's son and ... yes, his son. Never would this child feel abandoned as he had. So long as Vincent drew breath, Jacob would know his mother. Catherine would live with them ... in them ... always.

Vincent had always patrolled the outer perimeter of the Tunnels, checking for water leaks, breaches in their defense, or anything else that might signify danger to the Tunnel World. The other men Below took their turns at patrolling the inner perimeter and standing shifts of guard duty, while only he roamed the outer reaches. Until Jacob.

When his son had been restored to him, he had been reluctant to be parted from Jacob for any lengthy period, so he had designed a special backpack and, with Mary's help, he had fashioned a way for Jacob to accompany him. When the baby had matured into the boy, he had allowed his son the freedom to walk as long and as far as he wished, carrying him when he became overtired. These excursions, in addition to the usual activities of a boy growing up Below, had brought Jacob to a physical prowess admired by many of his playmates. Vincent often speculated that Jacob may have inherited some of his own natural stamina.

Vincent had not only overseen his son's physical training, but he had raised Jacob to be inquisitive and to speak his mind. He'd tried to teach him to be mindful of the feelings of others, yet he'd insisted Jacob believe in his own worthiness as a person.

Vincent had tried to be open with Jacob at all times -- accessible. No business was so urgent that a moment couldn't be spared to answer a question or explain the circumstances. And Jacob had always shown a keen sense of logic and a natural problem-solving ability.

When Jacob was young, Vincent had posed situations with complex details, in the form of a game of mental acuity; yet as Jacob's abilities stretched and grew, it became increasingly difficult to challenge him.

To Vincent, Jacob sometimes became an obsession. He couldn't stand the thought of anyone or anything detracting from his growing closeness to his son. Yet he recognized the boy's need to have friends, so he kept a constant check on his own behavior to determine if he was acting too selfishly.

Sometimes, in his nightmares, he would relive what had happened. All of the violence, the pain, the sense of enormous loss would come crashing down around him.

At other times, he would reflect on situations like the one when Catherine had brought Eric Below for safety from those who had sold him into virtual slavery. She had been hesitant -- fearing the already frightened boy would be unable to cope with Vincent's appearance. But Vincent had been confident. He'd felt the child's awe and wonder immediately. Acceptance such as Eric's was a gift Vincent seldom experienced, so he'd reveled in the opportunity to show Catherine that phenomenon.

If only the world Above had been able to accept him ... his differences. If that had been the case, Catherine would probably still be here -- with him. They might have been able to share a normal life. He could have been with her and protected her. Perhaps ...

But the world Above could not accept him and she was gone.

In order to endure the pain, he would flood his mind with thoughts of baby Jacob being welcomed Below, of his family and friends gathered at the naming ceremony.

And of Diana. He owed her a debt -- one that could never be repaid -- for it was she who had drawn him out of his intended revenge against Gabriel. She who had helped him to focus on his real purpose, his son. And it was she who had, in his stead, ended the life of the vile creature who had stolen his Catherine.

Vincent had told Diana the tunnels would always be there should she ever need a home or a place to rest. It had seemed so insignificant, but it was all he could offer her.

After her first visit, Diana had returned the following week. Her fascination with the world Below was written in her sparkling, inquisitive eyes. She had asked a million questions; about their way of governing, how they got supplies, how many people lived there. Her mind wanted to absorb it all -- explore it all.

He had tried to show her his world, to satisfy her curiosity; and, for a short time, it had held her spellbound.

Although he felt a pull of emotion whenever he and Diana were together, Vincent knew a large part of it must be attributed to his overwhelming gratitude. And should she ever ask it of him, he would do everything in his power to help her.

He and Diana were connected by the terrible struggle they had shared and by the fact that Vincent knew in his heart that Jacob would not be alive today had it not been for her courage and her perseverance. Those were the same qualities she continued to bring to each of her unique cases.

But there was something else that linked Vincent and Diana. There was a bond, of sorts -- certainly not of the all-encompassing magnitude that he shared with Catherine or even like the one he and Jacob enjoyed, yet he could detect in her a very strong psychic personality. Coupled with Vincent's phenomenal empathic powers, the combination must have heightened their connection. Diana had mentioned feeling somehow drawn to him as well -- a sensation of great potential strength like she had never felt with anyone else.

To help her understand, Vincent had shared with Diana his early experiences with people -- discovering that he could sense strong emotions in others, especially those he cared for deeply. And most uniquely with Catherine. Diana was the first person he felt had actually come close to understanding the incredible bond that he and Catherine had shared.

But Diana was governed by a much stronger bond -- her sense of duty. Soon Vincent began to notice that her visits became less frequent.

On one of her last trips Below, she had tried to explain about her job. Even though Vincent had told her there was no need, Diana proceeded anyway. Every case she chose to take was an obsession. She dreamed about it, followed every hunch, even absurd ideas -- she lived it. She tried to get inside the people involved. The sadness of the victims carried over into her. Sometimes it was frightening, but it was this all-consuming dedication that made her good at what she did. And she was needed Above ... it was her life.

Gradually, Diana had just ceased to come Below. She still supported the Tunnel World as a Helper but never visited, nor did she attend any functions. Her absence at Winterfest was painfully obvious, even though each year one of the children always presented her with a candle in invitation.

Often, Vincent would think of her and a faint sensation of satisfaction would come to him. She was happy with her life Above.

Suddenly, he sensed Jacob's approach. Vincent rose. Swiping away the evidence of his tears with one huge calloused palm and squaring his shoulders, he strode from his Chamber to meet his son.

"Father."

"Jacob."

Long blond hair blended almost indistinguishably as the two men collided in a fierce hug in the corridor just outside the entrance to Vincent's Chamber. After a long, heartfelt embrace they turned as if on cue and hurriedly entered the comfortably cluttered room Vincent still occupied.

Jacob's eyes quickly surveyed the room. He drank it all in as if he had been in the desert without water for the past five years instead of just away at school. The work had been rewarding yet taxing. It had not been easy to attend classes year round, while watching his friends go home for the summer, but he had been driven by the underlying need to finish with his training as quickly as possible. He had a job to do, and although there was nothing specific to which he could attribute the feeling, he knew instinctively that time was running out.

Jacob immediately recognized that the years had altered the appearance of his father's Chamber very little. The ever-present candles provided Jacob's senses with the welcome aura of smoke and beeswax while the muted glow permeated his very soul and brought the calming peace he always felt in this room. It struck the young man that the Chamber was the epitome of his father -- the room of a man who emanated great comfort because he was at peace with himself.

The Persian carpet was slightly more worn than he remembered, the shades faded to colorless softness. The beautiful fan-shaped window of peach and aqua stained glass reflected

the candles' glow, heightening the sense of dancing lights as nowhere else Below. The same worn quilts, adorned with some bright new patches contrasting with their overall muted shades, still covered the large bed. The huge carved mahogany chair with the hand-tooled leather seat still held its place in front of the burl wood writing desk. The oversized fountain pen lay in the valley between the open pages of the leather-bound journal. The rock walls were almost completely obscured by the massive wardrobe and tall oak bookcase. Familiar objects long treasured by his father were still evident -- an obviously repaired carousel music box, a bronze souvenir model of the Empire State Building, a worn copy of "Great Expectations". And the ever-present portrait of his parents.

Patiently, Vincent watched his son. His infrequent visits had taken their toll on them, but they both knew the unspoken need.

As his focus returned to his father, Jacob extended his hand. Grasping the leatherette case carefully, Vincent opened it and stared at the cream-colored paper with the raised black letters proclaiming that Jacob Chandler Wells was now officially a Doctor of Medicine. Eight years of studies completed in only five. It was an accomplishment few achieved. Pride flooded Vincent's face and spilled down his aging cheeks as identical pairs of sapphire blue eyes met in loving recognition of what this achievement meant to their world.

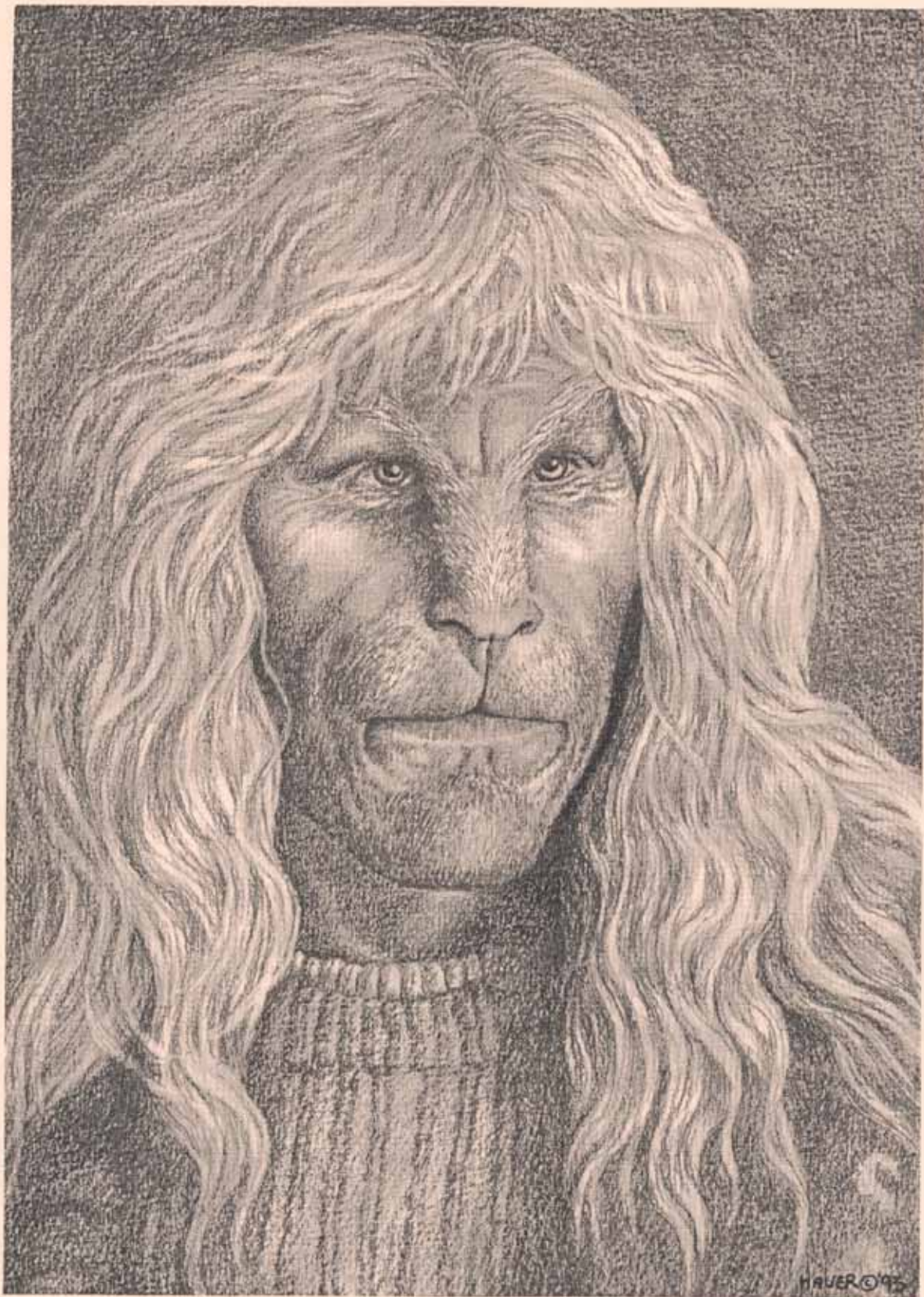
For his entire life, Jacob had been carefully preparing to eventually help govern and protect this unique world beneath the streets of New York City. Everyone in the Tunnel World had grown to expect his eventual leadership. Yet only these two men sensed the subtle growing urgency.

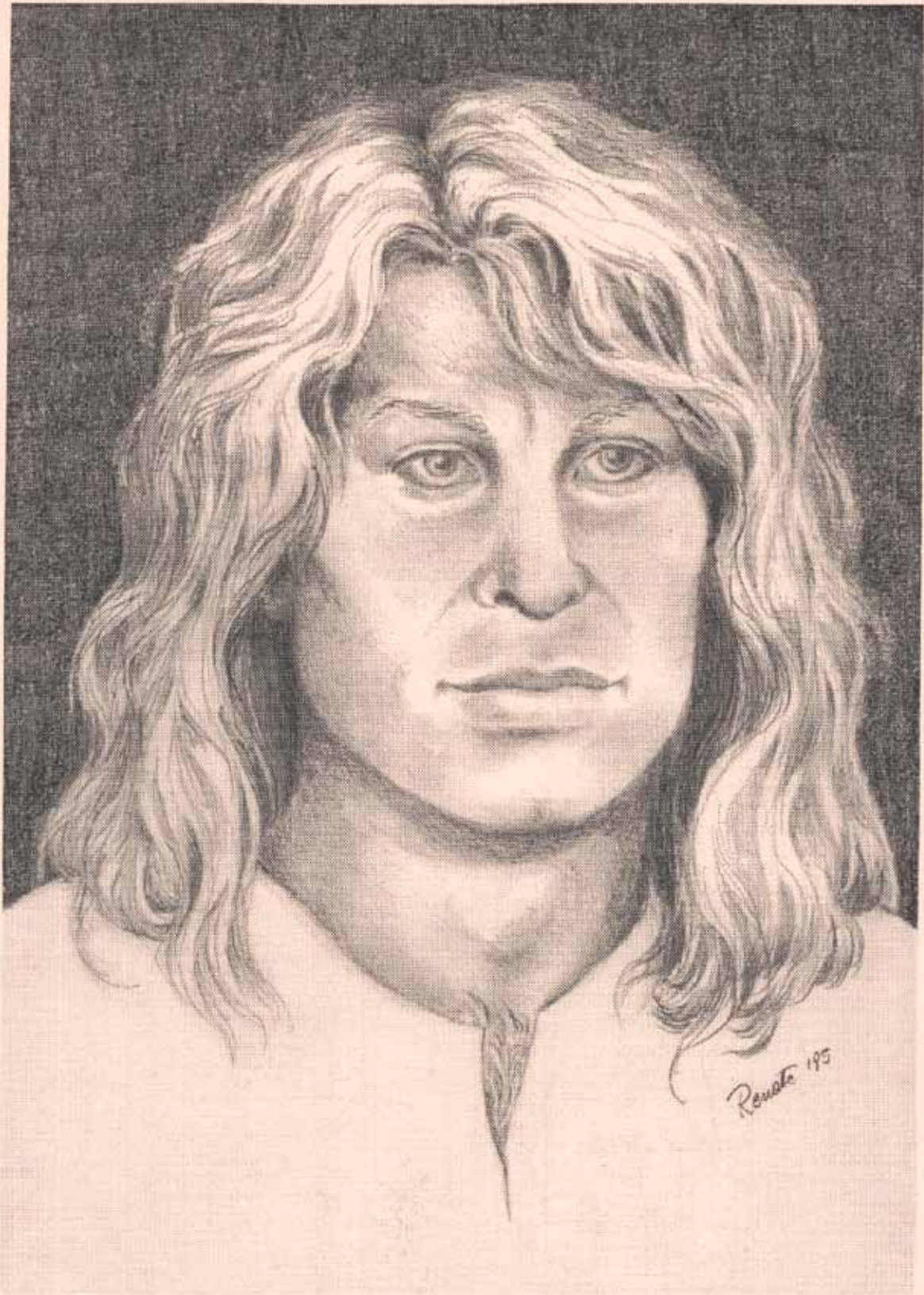
CHAPTER 2

After leaving his father, Jacob had entered his Chamber, the one that was always waiting for him, and had been overwhelmed by the intense feeling of welcome and belonging.

His room was the same as he remembered it. The sturdy mahogany chifforobe still occupied the far corner, the door slightly askew as always. The ancient rolltop desk was closed, but as he drew the slatted top back he could see that all his childhood treasures were right where he had left them. The books by Kipling that his father had never tired of reading to him, the sparkling crystal keepsake from the trip he and his father had made to that mysterious cavern, a special rock, a ball of aluminum foil collected from a foraging trip with Mouse, a pile of bottle caps ...

As he sat in the old wooden office chair, fond memories flooded his mind of a time when his feet would not touch the ground. He had twisted his shoulders from side to side as hard as he could just to make the old chair budge. Now, as he easily swiveled





to survey the familiar surroundings, the chair creaked its welcome.

The dark distressed pine bed was still covered with his favorite quilt cut and lovingly pieced together from scraps of denim. A treasured present, Jamie's first attempt at making an afghan, lay neatly folded across the foot of the bed.

As Jacob's gaze settled on the neat stack of folded clothes, he eagerly rose to investigate. Unfolding the creamy chamois cloth, he realized that loving hands had fashioned the pieces into a handsome pullover laced up the front with leather ties. Quickly he divested himself of the uncomfortable white dress shirt and burgundy tie, slipping the soft leather over his head. As it molded itself to his muscular form, he sighed in contentment. Beneath the shirt lay an almost new pair of jeans with which he immediately replaced his navy dress pants. At the end of the bed he spotted a heap of leather, and upon closer examination he discovered a pair of butterscotch suede knee-high moccasins. As he laced them up the front and smoothed the fringed tops, he felt he had truly come home.

It was this outfit that Jacob wore as he preceded his father into the room.

Vincent was similarly attired in a natural-colored homespun cotton shirt with leather lacing up the front, buttery-soft tawny leather vest, softly worn dark brown corduroy jeans with leather knee patches, and pieced-together sheepskin boots with the fur turned inside for warmth against the ever-present chill Below.

As Vincent and Jacob entered the Great Hall, all eyes turned to the father and son -- so different and yet so alike. A resounding cheer filled the cavernous room. This, like all occasions of importance to the entire community, would be a celebration the Tunnel Dwellers would reminisce about for years. It wasn't every day that one of their own graduated from college! The last such party had been when Michael graduated from Rayfield College.

Father stood, leaning heavily on his cane. His white hair and beard glowing in the light from the many candles gave him an aura of mysticism.

"Jacob," he intoned in his most serious Fatherly voice, "this is truly an auspicious occasion. The time of your absence is ended, bringing us to this day. We welcome you with love that you may be able to love. We welcome you with gifts that you may know generosity. And finally, we welcome you with your doctorate diploma," Father added, a mischievous twinkle in his faded gray eyes.

At the sudden realization of Father's paraphrasing of the Naming Ceremony, the laughter of the Tunnel Dwellers filled the Great Hall. Jacob strode forward engulfing his grandfather in an almost overwhelming hug.

"You go on now," he sputtered as he abruptly seated himself in the large, overstuffed chair he always occupied during these festivities. "There's a pretty young lady waiting for you by the punch bowl. You'd best not keep her waiting."

With a somewhat shy smile and a quick nod of his head, Jacob disappeared into the crowd.

"He is truly a fine boy, Vincent," Father stated with pride. "You have done well raising him."

"We, Father," Vincent replied, placing his hand upon the heavily padded, stooped shoulder of the man who had lovingly raised him as his own son. "We have all done well. It is the combination of all the special people both Above and Below who have touched Jacob's life that has made him into the man we see before us."

"Yes, a truly fine man," Father amended, covering his own son's large hand with his heavily wrinkled one. "Like his father."

Vincent could think of no greater compliment than to be told Jacob and he were alike. With his head bowed behind the curtain of his hair, he uttered the only words he could manage. "Thank you."

Suddenly a loud, booming voice broke the spell as William strode up to the solemn pair. "Is that Lena's Cathy with Jacob?"

"Why, indeed, it is," Father answered. "Cathy insisted that she must have something special to wear to Jacob's homecoming and her mother and Mary have worked diligently these past two weeks to finish that chamois tunic. I don't know where they found the Indian beads, but I suspect Mouse had his hand in it. And the flowered fabric for the dress was donated by one of our new Helpers, Mrs. Lang. She has that tiny dress shop in the East Village."

"And don't they make a lovely couple," added Mary as she came from behind Father's chair to stand on the side opposite Vincent.

"Yes, Mary, they do," Vincent said wistfully. Jacob had confided in his father that he intended to ask Cathy to marry him as soon as he felt more settled Below, and the brief realization flickered through Vincent's mind -- I will not be here -- before he dismissed it. I must not let myself dwell on regrets. I have too much to be thankful for.

Gradually, one by one, the inhabitants of the Tunnels and the special guests at this celebration came to pay homage to the man whose dream had made this world possible. And Father reveled in the sense of peace and happiness that filled this great room tonight. He was so grateful that Jacob had returned to their world. He had secretly feared the world Above would steal him from them, but he could see tonight where Jacob's heart dwelled -- Below.

Even Pascal, the aged yet still-faithful pipe master, had put in a brief appearance in honor of Jacob's return. And following close in his footsteps was his own son -- a full head taller than his father -- quietly and steadfastly preparing for the not-too-distant day when his father would relinquish the care of his precious pipes to the next generation.

As the audience around Father pressed in, Vincent silently moved from his father's side to the outer fringes of the room where, individually, he spoke briefly to each attendee. This was perfect, almost everyone he wished to see was here ... almost. He hoped the others would understand.

"Vincent seems terribly subdued on this joyous occasion," Mary whispered to Father with a tinge of worry in her voice. The crowd around him had finally returned to the food, music and dancing, leaving this couple to enjoy a quiet moment together.

"Kipper," Father called stopping the man as he hurried past them. "Bring Mary a chair. Yes, here close to mine," he stated with a thankful but dismissing nod of his silver head.

"Yes, Father," Kipper answered and quickly placed another overstuffed chair next to the one Father had claimed as his own. Even though he was now in his thirties, a command from Father could reduce him once more to the small boy willingly running errands.

"Please, sit," Father encouraged extending his hand to assist Mary.

"Thank you," she answered taking his hand, "and thank you, dear," she said with a gentle pat on Kipper's now quite broad shoulder.

As he turned to join his wife, Samantha, and their new arrival, Kipper was silently thankful for the two dear souls now bent in quiet conversation. Father with his stern, commanding exterior had proven countless times that he had a heart of solid gold. And Mary. With tendrils of white hair escaping the knot atop her head, she had tirelessly tended the Tunnel children. She was a gentle woman. They were the closest thing to parents he had ever known.

As Mary settled into the chintz-covered softness of the comfortable chair, she sighed with contentment. Sometimes she allowed herself to remember her former life. The careworn face of the man she had diligently tended until he had succumbed to the long-endured illness. And their child who had joined him scarcely a week later. The fever had claimed everyone she loved -- stolen her life. That was over forty years ago. She had come to the Tunnels and had begun a new life -- one filled with children who needed her. And gradually, over the years, she and Father had slipped into a comfortable relationship. To grow old with someone you care about is a precious gift, and they both valued it highly.

Turning to gaze at her gentle face, Father continued, "I, too, have noticed an unusual soberness in Vincent tonight. Perhaps he is just tired. He has been carrying the entire burden of our world. No, don't dispute my words," he stated silencing Mary's protest. "I am no longer able to do much more than offer my opinion when he comes to me for advice. Although Michael is a great help to him, Vincent feels compelled to do everything himself. He oversees the work details, he monitors the inventories and arranges for deliveries of needed supplies, he mediates disputes, counsels those in need and generally tries to be everything to everyone. As he always has. But Vincent, too, is not as young as he used to be. Now that Jacob has returned ..."

"Yes, now that Jacob has returned ..." Mary echoed. Soon the weight of this world would be shifting to a new generation, but they had been well prepared for the task.

As Father and Mary surveyed the festivities, the Tunnel Dwellers went about

the joyous task of celebrating. The older inhabitants formed clusters where friends from Above and Below could catch up on happenings since their last visit. Several chess games were in various stages of progress. Sebastian was seated in the center of a large gathering, his trembling hands offering instruction and encouragement to his young magician apprentice. Around the old player piano that had been found Above last year, a group of young people were singing the same three songs over and over to the only player rolls that had been with the ancient instrument. But no one seemed to mind the repetition.

Slowly, Vincent finished his circuitous tour of the huge room -- nodding, stopping for a brief word here and there, patting a tousled head, laying a reassuring hand on a youthful shoulder, or clasping an equally aging hand. These people were his family, and he would miss them very much.

Gradually, his journey brought him to his final destination.

"My son," Vincent interrupted Jacob whose shaggy blond head was bent close to Cathy's soft brunette one. "Forgive the interruption, but I wish to bid you good night."

"Are you all right, Dad?" Jacob asked in a serious tone, excusing himself from Cathy and guiding his father to a quiet corner near the hanging tapestries.

"Yes, I'm fine," Vincent answered with a weary edge to his usual gravely voice. "Just a little tired. I did not wish to take you from your friends, only to say ..."

"Oh, Dad, you know there is nothing so important that it can't be put aside ... for you. You taught me that. And so much more."

"You have learned your lessons well, my son. I am very proud of you."

"And I'm proud to have you as my Dad ... and this wondrous place," he gestured with a sweep of his large hand, "as my home." With that he clasped his father in a somewhat serious but loving embrace. "I love you, Father."

Vincent clutched his son desperately. Then, with firm hands on the younger man's shoulders, he pressed a distance between them and locked his sapphire gaze with its mirror image. "Be well, my son. Remember, whatever happens ... whatever comes ... I love you." With that, Vincent bowed his head, turned and strode across the room, but not before Jacob had detected the gathering moisture spill from his father's eyes. A swipe of his hand across his own wet cheeks cleared his sight for a final look at his father's departing back before a small, smooth hand on his shoulder turned his shimmering sapphire eyes to lock with Cathy's deep brown ones.

CHAPTER 3

As Vincent left the celebration and silently traveled down the stone corridor, his head was bowed in thoughtful contemplation.

He had tried to raise Jacob in such a way as to give him a sense of occasion -- to know that some times had more meaning than others.

For instance, he had stressed that having a birthday meant more than just presents. Each year on Jacob's birthday, Vincent had silently mourned Catherine's death so as not to bring a pall to the occasion -- a day of great joy and great sorrow so interwoven he had felt it pressing down on him as if the weight of the Tunnels were physically held in his hands alone.

And each year, to ease this pain, Vincent had shared a part of Catherine with her son -- their son. Among the many heartfelt gifts from his Tunnel family, Vincent had always made sure there would be that special gift -- something that had once belonged to his mother or that was deeply touched by her memory.

Long ago Vincent had knelt in the dust of the cave clutching Catherine's crystal and promised to remember every moment, every word, every look, every touch. He had remembered. And though Catherine could not actually be present in their lives, Vincent had made her live for Jacob. Catherine lived so vividly inside him that her memory had warmed Jacob through the bond Vincent and he shared.

And Vincent had confided his fears and, yes, his triumphs -- his and Jacob's -- to Catherine. She was ever present in his heart and in his mind. Sometimes he would rush to his Chamber in anticipation of sharing some escapade with her. Often he would write in his journal, pouring out his longing on blank white pages, needing to feel her presence in their lives. Sometimes he would reread the books they'd read to each other -- and always he would feel her as a palpable presence.

Yes, she lived -- always.

His thoughts wandered back to one such birthday celebration. Jacob had been seventeen. Vincent had carefully chosen a slightly crumpled piece of wrapping paper from the footlocker where they stored the bits and scraps of such things the world Above discarded. This particular piece of paper was larger than most and had a soft texture like fine linen. As Vincent smoothed the paper onto his writing desk and lovingly placed the worn leather-bound volume within the slightly tattered folds, he caressed the supple cover one last time. He didn't need to open the volume to know what inscription it held -- it was imprinted in his mind. "With love all things are possible. Forever, Catherine."

Jacob had read the journal and it had revealed things for which Vincent had been unable to find spoken words. It had been given just as Jacob was preparing to leave for college. The time had been right for another fragment of Vincent's tangible possessions of Catherine's to be transferred into Jacob's care.

Yes. Time.

Vincent looked back to another crystal-clear memory -- desolation and despair at the loss of his beloved Catherine. Had it not been for Jacob, and the sense of purpose their baby had given to his life, he knew without a doubt he would have joined her immediately.

Many times over the years he had inexplicably found himself teetering on the edge of the Abyss, not knowing how he came to be there. But his purpose for being there was always clear -- an undeniable, all-encompassing longing to be with Catherine. Then the cherubic features of a trusting boy would obliterate the vision of their anticipated reunion. Well, perhaps not obliterate ...

But now the time had come. This was the day he had lived toward. His work here was complete. Their son was now a man, and a fine one well worthy of the awesome responsibility lying before him. Vincent's loving task of father, teacher and guide was at an end.

His stride turned purposeful as he neared the Chamber he still thought of as theirs. Indeed, no woman had ever shared it with him, physically. But Catherine's spirit dwelt there as certainly as his own.

In the peaceful quiet of night, he would draw her aura about him like a blanket against the terrible aloneness. And she would shelter him until the light of day. Then he could once again fill his mind with thoughts of tasks and friends. Yet always, deep in a special place, her essence lingered -- waiting.

Catherine was an integral part of his heart and soul. Though their destiny had proved to deny them a life together, he knew in his heart that their time was drawing near.

As he entered the Chamber, his gaze traveled around the organized clutter. Bits and pieces of his life lay on shelves and nestled in corners and cabinets. It would all be left behind. But it was worth it. No earthly possessions could compare to this long-awaited reunion.

Briefly his gaze locked with the image of his beloved as Kristopher Gentian had captured her. The painted canvas had played a large role in Vincent's effort to keep Catherine alive in Jacob's mind.

When their baby had developed into an inquisitive toddler, Vincent had introduced him to the likeness of his mother. Many times little Jacob would crawl to the base of the painting, pull up, and raising one chubby arm would wobble against the rock wall in anticipation of being picked up. When the desired action wasn't forthcoming, a mournful wail would draw his father. It was then that Vincent would tell little Jacob about his mother and tell Catherine about their son's latest accomplishments.

Vincent was never sure whether these "talks" the three of them had made any impression on Jacob until the boy was about eight. He had returned from teaching a literature class and since Jacob was now old enough to stay in one of the shared children's chambers, Vincent's hurried footsteps had been stilled by the boy's distinct voice echoing from inside his Chamber.

"Oh, Mother, I wish I could honestly say that I remember you. But I can't. Dad has told me so much about you I almost feel like your memory is here inside of me ... almost."

Peering around the Chamber entrance, Vincent spotted the small figure standing on the leather seat of the huge carved chair that usually sat in front of the desk. His heart ached at the

sight.

Jacob must have been extremely determined to speak to his mother, Vincent mused, as moving the solid wooden chair was no easy task for an eight-year old.

“Sometimes I wonder what you thought of me.” Jacob was gazing so intently at the picture he was completely unaware of his father’s presence.

“I know you only saw me for a minute before that mean man took me away, but Dad says you told him I was beautiful. Did you mean that? Or did you say it because I was an ordinary baby and you were glad. Or would you have thought I was beautiful no matter what I looked like?”

He paused, took a deep breath and then continued. “Aunt Jamie told me you thought my Dad was beautiful. That you loved him very much and that you didn’t want to go away.”

A snuffle muffled his words, but after another deep breath Jacob bravely blurted out, “I’ve got so many things I want to ask you, and tell you, and...” After a long pause his next words were little more than a whisper. “But I can only talk to you with my heart and hope yours hears my thoughts. Even though you haven’t really been here, Dad has helped me to feel like you almost are. And ... well, I love you, Mommy.”

At his son’s heartfelt words, Vincent’s throat constricted and he turned to go so Jacob would not know he had listened in on his private conversation with his mother. But a louder and stronger voice caught his attention.

“Oh, and Mom, one thing I’ve wanted to tell you more than anything. When I look in the mirror, I see my face and it looks kind of like you. Only I’m a boy, of course,” he added with a chuckle. Then his voice deepened with seriousness. “But sometimes things aren’t what they seem. I’m much more like my dad than I look. It’s what I’ve tried very hard to be and ... I hope it’s what you wanted me to be.”

As those grownup words echoed in his Chamber, a tear coursed down Vincent’s cheek and he silently left the brave little boy to finish talking to his mother.

How many times Vincent, himself, had spoken to Catherine in much the same way he’d heard Jacob talking to her that night. And Vincent knew she had heard.

“Jacob’s party was a grand celebration tonight, Catherine,” Vincent stated to the empty Chamber. “Almost as festive as Winterfest. As I watched him renew friendships with his boyhood companions, I was reminded of the wonder of his growing-up years. He was always a treasure, the one true joy in my life after you left. Thank you, Catherine, for giving me Jacob.”

Far away, in another world, separated and yet connected, Catherine closed her eyes and delved deep within herself to stroke the threads of their wondrous bond. She paused intent on experiencing the minute vibration she always felt when she consciously tried to project her feelings to Vincent.

Almost immediately his response filled her soul with flickering emotions; a warm glow raced through her blood, the whisper of his kiss touched her heart, a gentle caress soothed her mind. They loved.

Vincent sometimes regretted the fact that he would not be there when Jacob married. He would never be called Grandfather. But those regrets paled when he thought of her. His Catherine. Waiting.

The time was here. Surely Jacob must know it, too. The bond they shared had been a tentative connection at best. Only during times of great emotion would it strengthen -- but never like the link he'd shared with Catherine. Yet Jacob knew. They'd never spoken of it, but Vincent had sensed his son's reluctance to give voice to the knowledge. By choice they had left the words unsaid.

As myriad memories surfaced, collided and slowly faded, Vincent lay down on the firm mattress. His back protested. It had only been in the past few months that the pain had grown more insistent. Never mind, it would end -- soon. He was grateful that his strength had been of service to his World. Now there were others who increasingly bore the burden he had carried so long. That part of his duty was also drawing to a close.

After Father had retired as head of the Council, a Triumvirate had been formed. Vincent, of course, had been unanimously elected Elder Triumvir. Mid Triumvir position had been expertly filled by Michael after he had returned from Above with his law degree. And to the delight of his doting father, Jacob had been chosen as Novice Triumvir.

Jacob had always, from a very young age, known that this responsibility would pass into his hands. He had always followed Vincent and hovered near during council meetings, absorbing his father's wisdom. At an extremely early age, Jacob had shown an aptitude for medicine. Whenever he wasn't shadowing Vincent, he had been helping Father.

As Vincent settled more comfortably on his bed, he pulled the tattered quilt up under his chin. The flickering lights of the candles reflected the muted shades of the stained-glass window.

There was no sadness in what he was about to do -- no regret. His World would be in good hands. As his eyes closed, a building sense of anticipation caused an intake of breath. Then, as he exhaled, a sense of peace flowed through him and he knew that Catherine was feeling his growing nearness.

The colors of his mind faded as a brilliant, stark white light filled the room and Vincent's journey began.

Father had left the party shortly after Vincent's departure. He had resisted the nagging urge to stop by his son's Chamber and bid him good night. It had been a stressful day, and they were both tired. Tomorrow ...

Upon leaving the party several hours after his grandfather, young Jacob had also felt drawn to Vincent's Chamber. The barely discernible light emanating from the Chamber prompted the young man to call ever so softly, "Dad."

Impatiently Jacob remained standing just outside the entrance to his father's Chamber. When he received no response from within, he called again.

"Dad." This call was still soft but more insistent.

"Father, may I come in!"

Rising panic propelled Jacob through the entrance. When his eyes adjusted to the fading light of the sputtering candle, he knew he had come too late.

Jacob's anguished cries echoed down the passageways. His grandfather had been fitfully attempting sleep throughout the night, but it had insistently eluded him. Hobbling painfully on his cane from his nearby chamber, he was the first to arrive. Even though Father's body was frail, terror had driven him swiftly to Jacob's side.

"What is it, Jacob? What's happened?"

As the boy raised his tear-streaked face to meet his grandfather's aged gray eyes, an unspoken knowledge passed between them. Vincent was leaving them.

Father, too, had sensed the coming of this ominous day but had never been able to speak of it.

Mary followed closely on Father's heels. Soon the corridor outside Vincent's Chamber was filled with people. Jamie, Mouse carrying little Peter, William, and Kipper crowded at the entrance with more arriving as the news was tapped to all parts of the Tunnel World. They all gathered, looking at one another. Slowly, with heads bowed, they began entering the near-dark chamber. At the first sight of Vincent's still form, Mouse dropped to his knees beside the bed of his friend and wept.

"Please, don't go," was all Mouse managed to say as he buried his face in the worn quilt.

As the gathering throng gazed at Vincent's sleeping features, his changing emotions were reflected in his face. Vincent's deeply creased brow relaxed and the tense uneasiness was replaced by a look of serene contentment.

"I've never seen Dad look so peaceful ... so happy," said Jacob as he gazed down at his father's still form.

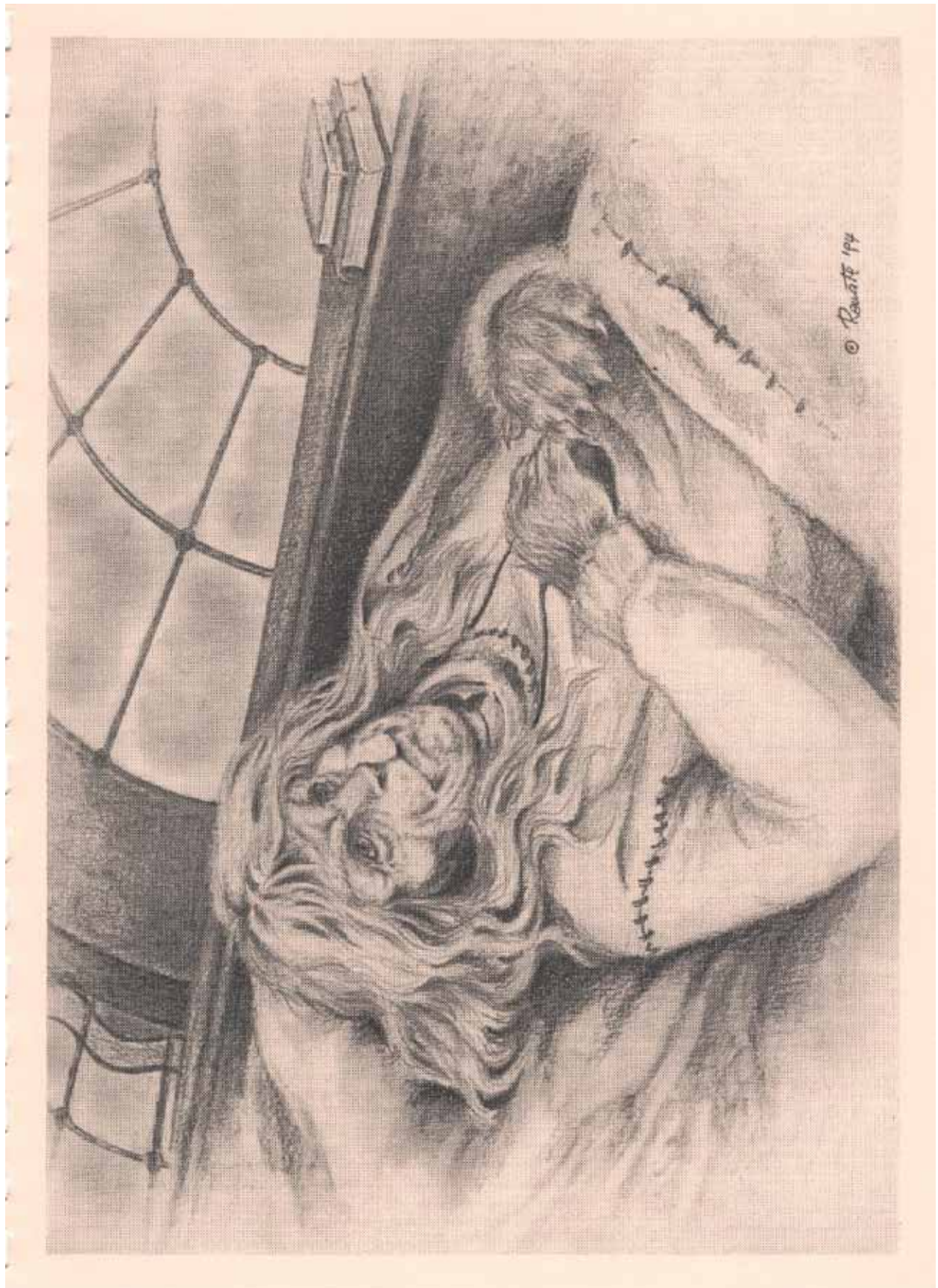
One by one, each person knelt to say a quiet goodbye to the man they had known and loved. Now Vincent's subdued behavior at the party seemed to make sense. Finally, as the Chamber became quiet, only two men remained at Vincent's bedside.

Father watched silently as Jacob's eyes took in the familiar Chamber in its usual ordered clutter. Almost immediately the boy's gaze fell to his father's leather-bound journal lying open on the massive writing desk. Turning to face his grandfather, Jacob's look was a silent plea for permission and understanding, and the elderly man's nod was the immediate granting.

Not wishing to intrude yet needing to read Vincent's last written words, Jacob rounded the burl wood desk and gingerly seated himself in his father's carved mahogany chair. The Chamber was totally silent. There were no familiar tappings on the pipes, no shouts of joy or sorrow in the passageways. It was as if the Tunnels themselves held their breath awaiting these final words.

Jacob's strong voice rang out the last eloquently-penned entry:

"Tonight when I returned from our son's celebration, I felt the time was at last right -- for him and for us. The words from the Diary of Anais Nin called out to be recorded here.



*'And the day came
when the risk to remain
tight in a bud
was more painful
Than the risk it took to blossom.'*

How true these words are, especially tonight.”

Strangely enough, Vincent’s final words were a comfort to the son he had left behind.

“He sensed that I was ready,” Jacob stated in a trembling voice. “And I shall not disappoint him.”

As Father laid a quaking hand on Jacob’s shoulder, the tall, strong young man was once again a small boy turning to his grandfather for comfort. They stood for a long time watching the still form of the man -- one’s son, one’s father.

Then, quietly Father bent and placed a loving kiss on Vincent’s forehead and turned, leaving Jacob to say his final goodbyes.

As he stepped to his father’s bedside once more, his foot brushed against an object. As he pushed it slightly aside with his boot, determined to ignore whatever it was, a sense of urgency drew him down to retrieve a worn, leather-bound volume of poetry. As if fate’s hand were guiding the book, it fell open in Jacob’s grasp, revealing a well-read verse by William Barnes:

Sonnet

*In every dream thy lovely features rise;
I see them in the sunshine of the day;
Thy form is fitting still before my eyes
Where’er at eve I tread my lonely way;
In every moaning wind I hear thee say
Sweet words of consolation, while thy sighs
Seem borne along on every blast that flies;
I live, I talk with thee where’er I stray.
And yet thou never more shalt come to me
On earth, for thou art in a world of bliss,
And fairer still -- if fairer thou canst be --*

*Than when thou bloomed'st for a while in this
Few be my days of loneliness and pain
Until I meet in love with thee again.*

Raising his head from the small book, Jacob spoke to his father. "I'm sorry you must leave, Father. I will miss you so very much.

"But I understand why you have to go. I've never seen you look so happy. You deserve happiness. You and mother. Tell her for me... tell her that I love her. Thanks to you, her memory will live in my heart ... with yours -- forever.

"Everything that I am I owe to you. If I had been able to pick a father from any in all the world, I would have chosen you. Please know that.

"Goodbye, Father. I love you." As those words hung in the air, Jacob was suddenly filled with such a sense of love that he knew his father had heard his goodbye.

As Vincent's journey continued, he could see a shadowy form of Catherine in the distance. Looking back over his shoulder he could still see Jacob clearly, hear his words of understanding and love. Sending one last surge of love to his son, he turned and began closing the distance between him and his love. His Catherine.

He could now see her more clearly. She was coming toward him, her face radiant with joy and love.

"My Catherine," he uttered in amazement. "At last."

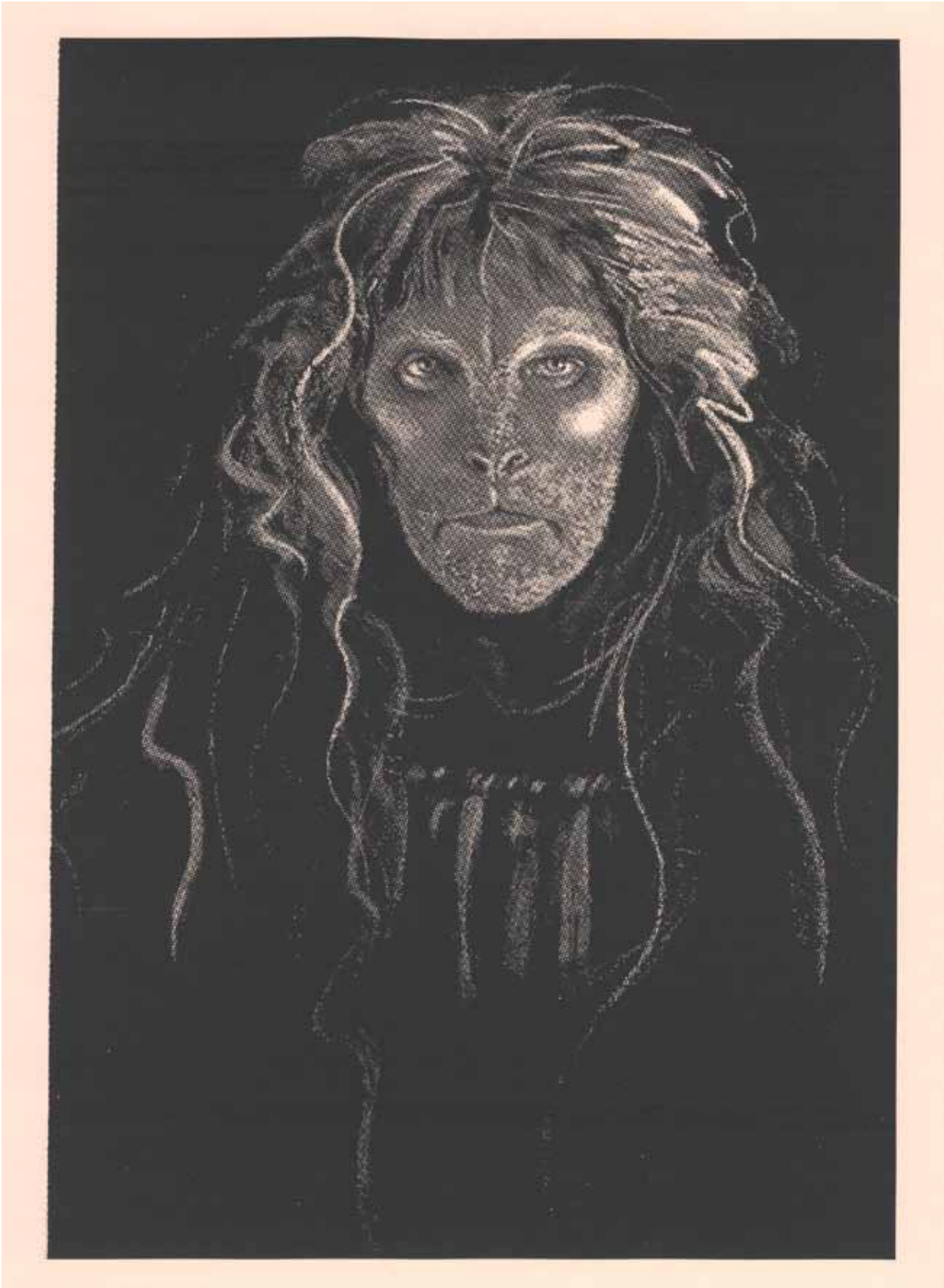
As her image became fully clear to him, he drank it in with eyes that had long thirsted for the sight of her. Her floor-length white cotton dress was fastened in the front by a row of tiny white pearl buttons. As his gaze settled on her face, he noted the sparkling green eyes filled with anticipation and the full moist lips parted in a welcoming smile. Continuing the feast for his eyes, he beheld her slender pale throat, the tips of her shoulders and the barely-revealed swell of her breasts peaking from the low-cut, lace-edged neckline. The last sight jolted his concentration, causing him to refocus his gaze to encompass the billowy sleeves with matching pearl buttons at the cuffs, the folds of her long skirt blowing in the breeze and the fluttering ends of the pink satin sash that encircled her tiny waist.

"She is just as young and beautiful as I remember her," he exclaimed.

Suddenly, Vincent realized that Catherine had not changed, while the years had taken their toll on him. Will she still love me, he thought, even though I am now an old man.

The magnitude of his fear caused his steps to falter and the mounting doubts halted his journey toward her.

Catherine's first glimpse of her love was as his image rose from the dense fog that always appeared with a Reuniting. She had never witnessed an arrival personally, but had heard the others talking about how their soul mates had appeared to them. Now it was her turn -- finally. She felt as if she had been waiting an eternity.



He's not wearing his cloak, she thought, as his image sharpened. Of course not, she chuckled to herself, he would have no need of it here. In this place he would be accepted ... and loved.

The gentle breeze swirling about them caught in his hair, lifted the leather lacing that fastened the front of his creamy homespun cotton shirt, and pressed the soft fabric of the long sleeves against his well-muscled arms. Her fingers ached to caress the buttery-soft leather vest. She longed to cradle her cheek against his chest. The worn corduroy jeans fit snugly against his thighs before dipping into the tops of his pieced sheepskin boots.

"Vincent," she exclaimed with joy, "there are so many gifts waiting for you to receive them. All you have to do is open your arms."

Those same words echoed in his mind, warm and familiar. She had spoken them long ago and he had opened up to her love, only to have her cruelly wrenched from his life. That must not happen again -- he could not survive it a second time.

Her emerald gaze locked with his, flooding his senses through a bond whose existence had sustained them both through the eternal wait.

"Yes," he breathed. "Oh, Catherine, yes."

His arms slowly opened and she glided forward fitting herself against his solid form. The essence of him filled her senses.

"I've missed you so," he whispered against her fragrant hair and his raw silk voice awakened every nerve in her trembling body.

"I've dreamed about this moment ... longed for it. Sometimes the dreams would seem so real that I could feel your strong arms drawing me to the haven I sought, hear the beating of your heart as I rested my head against your chest. Your lips would press gently into my hair, and I would be overcome with the need to feel your mouth against mine. But whenever I lifted my head for your kiss, I would wake up -- alone.

"Please don't let this be just another agonizing dream, Vincent. Please be here, be real," she intoned as she raised her tear-streaked face in desperate anticipation. As her eyes closed, large salty droplets slid across the tracks of her previous tears.

"I am here, Catherine," he answered lowering his face so close to hers that their breathing stopped in unison. "Reality, I can't be sure of -- but I am here with you, of that I am certain," he whispered as his mouth touched hers so lightly, so hesitantly, that she had to open her eyes to assure herself it was really happening.

"Vincent, there are so many of your friends who have been anxiously awaiting your arrival. But tonight you belong to me!"

CHAPTER 4

Walking arm in arm, Catherine guided Vincent to the Chamber she had so lovingly recreated from her vivid memories. From the outside it appeared to be an ordinary stone cottage in the woods. Yet, on closer examination, the large trees surrounding the house looked very much like the trees of Central Park. And when Catherine pushed open the massive oak front door, Vincent was transported back. Home.

“I wanted to make the transition to my world as easy for you as I could. There will be so many things that are new and different. I wanted you to have a place where you felt comfortable and ... well, I hoped you would feel ... at home.

“Catherine.”

“No, don’t say anything yet,” she said silencing him with the minute pressure of her fingertips against his lips. “Look around, make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.” As she crossed the replica of the Chamber he had just left, he felt overwhelmed with mixed emotions. Approaching a closed door on the far side of the room, she paused, hand on the knob, and turning whispered, “Vincent, please don’t leave -- I couldn’t bear it.”

Rushing to her side he clasped her shoulders, lightly guiding her head to nestle against the soft leather vest covering his great chest. He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head and promised, “I will not leave. But, hurry, Catherine ... I will miss your presence.”

Standing alone in the center of the Chamber so similar to his in the Tunnels, Vincent began to feel almost at home. Turning slowly, he noted that there were subtle differences, but Catherine had done a magnificent job of recreating his Chamber from her memory.

Beside the door stood a large white column and on the other side was a life-size statue holding a sword in one hand and a balance in the other -- very similar to the one he had just left. The flickering of a globed oil lamp reflected in the colored glass of the hanging Tiffany lamp and another leaded-glass creation stood on a mahogany end table. The comfortable feeling of deliberate clutter enveloped him as he spotted an old restaurant jukebox, a well-used chess set, an ancient toy carousel.

The biggest difference was not in the physical objects but in the colors of this new world. So different from the muted tones of Below where everything was softened and blurred by the candle glow, here everything was so vibrant, so vivid.

It reminded him of the colors he’d seen in the “tube of colors” -- the kaleidoscope Mouse had made for Father. Father had been so relieved when Mouse, his innocent blue eyes looking straight into Father’s serious gray ones, had assured him he hadn’t stolen it -- he’d made it himself. Later Father had learned that Mouse had stolen the parts!

Mouse. He had grown into a fine man. As his thoughts wandered from the past back to this strange present, he became absorbed in the play of colorful light dancing across the quilts. He was jolted to his feet when the awareness of Catherine’s approach exploded within.



It was like in the beginning, when he had first sensed the ever-strengthening connection between them. Once again the bond was restored, and the overwhelming relief of its power propelled him toward the door.

When she entered the room, she knew he had felt her approach and her heart swelled with his response. "I've brought some fruit and cheese and bread -- you must be hungry from your ... journey. And a decanter of water from the spring -- it's cold and delicious!"

"Catherine, I am like a starving man with a feast laid before me. I appreciate the meal you have prepared for me, yet I feel food will not sate my hunger. So much has taken place that I can't yet comprehend. How did I come to make this journey? Where am I? How is this possible?" His questioning eyes sought hers and knew that the answers would all come -- in their time.

Setting the tray down on the writing desk, Catherine answered, "You will come to understand it all, Vincent, I promise." Then she stepped toward him and grasped his huge, furred hands in her delicate, smooth ones. When she raised them to rest her cheek against the soft amber hair, Vincent realized that his hands had changed. Gone was the sprinkling of silver that had joined the golden hue.

"Catherine. My hands..."

"Yes, Vincent?"

"They are ... different," he announced with awe.

"Oh, Vincent," she said tenderly, "You know your differences don't matter to me. I love you .. not in spite of who you are, but because of it."

Her words drove the original thoughts from his mind, as he enveloped her fragile hands in his great ones, drawing them one at a time to press a kiss into her soft palms. As he drew his lips from her right palm, she resisted the parting, placing her hand against his softly stubbled cheek. At this touch, he tensed with the realization of what he had done ... of what he longed to do.

Undaunted, Catherine's left hand joined her right, cupping his face and drawing it down to hers. Placing her moist lips against his tense unyielding mouth, she kissed him deeply allowing her need to pummel his senses. She could almost taste the longing coiled deeply within him -- taut and ready to spring forth.

As the realization of his surfacing emotions flooded him, he abruptly withdrew his mouth from the delicious assault hers had been waging. His eyes were wide with confusion ... fear.

"You never remembered our time together," she stated with sadness. "Did you?" It was more a statement than a question, but he felt compelled to respond.

"I'm sorry."

"I am too, Vincent. But not because it happened -- only because you were deprived of the beautiful experience and the precious memory. Sometimes it was the lifeline to which I would cling when my longing for you would overwhelm me. Selfishly, I would want you here ... with me. When my heart would relent, my mind would know that your task was not yet completed. Jacob needed you. And then I would remember the tender, sweet lovemaking we shared when he was

conceived. Our son. You did a wonderful job of raising him, Vincent -- for both of us."

As he bowed his head before her praise, she continued. "Now is the time for us ... to fulfill our destiny."

"Our destiny?"

"Yes, that is what this world is for. Elysion is a place assigned to good souls after death, an abode of the spirits of the blessed." At his confused look she continued, "This world is for lovers whose destinies were somehow interrupted. Here we can continue our lives as they were meant to be."

"Together?" he asked with wonder etched on his face.

"Together, Vincent ... always."

"Always?" he whispered in questioning awe.

"Always," she echoed as she slid her hands around his neck, joining her full lips with his unique ones and pressing her slim body to his hard muscular frame.

The tension in his body melted in response. His arms enveloped her lithe body, drawing her ever tighter against the length of him. He felt the molten fire from the core of his being spreading throughout, consuming him in a yearning so exquisite he shuddered with its impact. And that very response jolted him from the spell.

Suddenly, she felt his arms release her, clutch at her shoulders and thrust an unwelcome distance between them. She had felt the fire and ice in his kiss, the passion and frustration, the ferocity and tenderness. It was the kiss of a man truly at odds with himself, but there was no denying the coil of aching warmth unfurling from deep within his very core.

Shattered, she tried to regain her position against him, but he gently held her at bay. Hurt and confusion filled her mind, reflecting these emotions in her passion-darkened eyes. "Don't you want me, Vincent?"

He responded by throwing back his head, his golden mane cascading behind him as an anguished sound escaped his throat. Then silence.

Frozen in misery she repeated in desperation, "Don't you want me?"

His hands released the tense grip on her shoulders as he turned his back to her.

"Vincent?" Placing her hand on his shoulder, she tried in vain to bring him back around. When he refused to face her, she circled stepping in front of him. He lowered his head using the curtain of his amber mane as a barrier between them.

"Vincent." She stepped closer, imploring him not to shut her out.

As another of his heart-rending cries filled the air, his arms opened to enclose her in his embrace. Catherine sighed and pressed herself even closer to the heat of his body. His ragged, uneven breathing became less labored until a sense of peace wrapped around them, allowing them an emotional respite.

Unsure of how to express all that he was feeling, Vincent stood holding his beloved Catherine.

She moved her head from its resting place beneath his chin, tipping it back to allow her lips access to the soft hollow of his throat.

Tan leather lacing at the neck of his homespun cotton shirt kept the garment snugly closed against her inquiring mouth. He must have worn this soft, natural cotton shirt and supple leather vest to Jacob's party, she thought with the ever-present feeling of regret at not having been there -- physically -- to share in their son's upbringing. But Vincent had shared every moment with her through their unique connection. It had made the years of waiting tolerable.

As her kisses fluttered to the pulse point in his neck, she untied and loosened the leather laces, only to be thwarted by the banded neck of his fleecy thermal shirt.

Frustration building, she slid her arms around his neck, kissing first his full lower lip, then his softly stubbled, divided upper lip and on to the leathery tip of his nose. Following the furred flat of his nose, she kissed her way across one arched eyebrow and then another, finally placing her lingering mouth to the deep crease between his midnight blue eyes. Locking her gaze with his, she whispered huskily, "I want to make love with you, Vincent."

"I can't!" he choked, his hands instinctively tightening on her shoulders, attempting to distance her demands from his weakening resolve.

"But you can, Vincent. I remember. Oh, yes, you can." His bewildered look halted her for only a heartbeat. "It was beautiful. And it can be again. I know it can."

His mind frantically raced through the recesses of his memory. One after the other he discarded the memories frantically. The one he was seeking simply was not there. Why couldn't he remember that night? That night above all others. The first, and only, time they had made love. Was it so horrible he had blocked it from his memory? Had his bestial urges overcome him causing him to take her with total disregard for her feelings? Or, had it been beautiful as she insisted?

If it had been other than beautiful, why would she want to repeat the act now? Or was she hoping he would be able to control his urges, complete their union more humanly? Did she love him so much she was willing to try one more time? And what if he failed?

Had he loved her or mated with her? Had his hands roughly bruised her delicate body, had his horrible claws marred her alabaster skin, had his terrible teeth embedded themselves in her tender flesh? The possibility that he had bitten Catherine was unbearable! And what would happen now? Oh, why couldn't he remember? Why?

Yet, could she have hidden these unspeakable truths from him even if she had wanted to? No. The bond would have revealed the memories of such a devastating experience. And the flow from her soul to his through this magical channel revealed only the beauty she spoke of time and again.

He must trust her ... and himself. He must give all of what he was to this woman he loved beyond his own life.

After all -- wasn't that what he had waited for all these years? Wasn't that why he had come

to her?

Yes.

As his newly found courage was barely flickering into existence, yet another fear extinguished the flame. "I am not as I was. The years. But you, Catherine," he sighed. "You are perfect -- just as I remember you."

"Vincent," she stated with great care, "you are exactly as I remember you. That is the way of Elysion. When lovers are separated, when their destinies are temporarily halted, they return to the way they looked at that time in their lives."

At his quizzical look she continued. "My mother died very young. I was only ten. Yet my father lived well into his 60's. They're here, Vincent, and they are both as young as the day they were parted. They have a second chance to live out their lives -- the way it was meant to be."

"But how?"

"I don't know, really. All I know is that it is so."

"And we ...?"

"Yes, and we have the same chance to live the life that we thought could never be. Here. Now."

The wonder on his face made her smile and Vincent responded with a rare, self-conscious grin that revealed the glistening tips of his incisors.

"I love to see you smile," Catherine stated as she stepped once again into his warm embrace.

"I feel ... I don't know. The words simply will not come," Vincent stated nestling her back under his chin.

"Try," she begged against his chest.

Recalling another such time, he whispered into the softness of the crown of her head, "blessed."

As the silence of the room engulfed them and the setting sun muted the colors glowing through the panes of the stained-glass window behind the bed, Vincent uttered her name in a hushed whisper. When she tilted her head back in response, he placed his mouth softly, tentatively against her forehead. He kissed her glistening eyes, her nose, her downy-soft cheeks, her chin, the deep scar that ran just in front of her ear. Finally, his mouth fitted itself to hers in a kiss so filled with yearning she felt the molten fire of her desire rekindled deep within her.

"I want to ..." he stated and then hesitated.

"To what, Vincent?" she prompted gently but insistently.

In a silk-on-sand voice, he returned her earlier words to her. "I want to ... make love with you, Catherine." Then he added in words so low she had to turn her head and hold her breath in order to catch the last of them. "Help me to love you."

Those words poured hot, liquid excitement through her veins, inflaming all her senses. "We will help each other to ... fulfill our destiny."

In that moment his world had spiraled down -- ever smaller -- until it encompassed only the two of them. Their surroundings were almost familiar; the reality one he had lived -- no, existed -- toward for so long it felt like a dream. He reached out and tenderly touched her silken cheek. Softness anointed his fingertip, bringing the reality into focus. Their world was here, in this room. And it was now.

For many minutes Vincent held her within the circle of his arms, reveling in the reality of what they were about to do, yet unwilling to demonstrate his lack of knowledge -- his ineptitude. Everything he wanted was within his grasp, yet he lacked the courage to proceed.

Sensing their impasse, Catherine tilted her head back just far enough so that she could gaze into his apprehensive cobalt eyes.

"Vincent," she implored. "Look through my eyes. See how beautiful you are. Feel my emotions. Can you feel that I need every part of you -- dark and bright, pain and joy, anger and patience, eagerness and hesitation, knowledge and naivete? If any of the pieces were missing, you would not be the man that you are -- the man that I love!" She gently placed her open palms on either side of his face and spoke softly, "I love you. Everything will be fine -- you'll see."

He smiled and echoed her words. "I love you."

As his eyes locked with hers, a sense of calm flowed through their bond, washing over him like an incoming tide. Then he felt her fingers deftly unfastening the lacing at his throat. As she drew the ends of the leather strips slowly through the eyelets, he felt the material parting. Midway of his chest her progress was halted as she let the laces dangle from the last holes in the shirt front. Gliding her hands up the broad expanse of his loosened shirt, she slipped her palms over his shoulders beneath his soft leather vest, guiding him to shrug free of this first garment.

While his arms were captured by the descending vest, she grasped the homespun cotton covering his abdomen and began pulling the shirttail from the waistband of his wear-softened corduroy jeans. Reaching around him, she continued to tug until his shirt was finally freed from its confinement. The last pull coincided with the soft thud of his vest hitting the stone floor.

The sound drew his eyes downward allowing him to survey her progress. He watched as her delicate hands grasped the hem of his thick shirt, gathering and struggling to inch it over his abdomen.

Gently, he placed his large furred hands over her small, smooth ones, staying their progress. As he sensed her rising protest, he patted them reassuringly. Crossing his arms and grasping opposite shirttails, he slowly pulled the shirt over his head and dropped it atop his discarded vest.

Her eyes contemplated this action, sensing his warring emotions as if they were her own. The bond was so strong, so open that she felt as if she were experiencing every sensation from both viewpoints.

It was slightly overwhelming, yet exquisitely exhilarating.

His wariness grew on her silence. In response, she placed her hands on the fleecy thermal



shirt that was the only barrier between them and stretched up to place her lips against his jaw line.

“Thank you.”

The release of his long-held breath was his only answer.

Encouraged by his acquiescence, Catherine reached up, sliding the buttons of his thermal shirt through their buttonholes. One by one they slipped free, allowing the dense auburn curls to spill through the ever-widening opening. Unable to resist, she covered the newly-revealed space with her trembling hand. Slowly her fingers slid beneath the edge of the opening, her nails parting the thick hair, her fingertips seeking the warmth of his skin.

Her touch was electric. He answered it by pulling her against him, kissing the crown of her head and inhaling the tantalizing herbal fragrance of her silky hair. He trailed feathery kisses from her temple to the square line of her jaw and down the delicate column of her throat where he placed a lingering kiss to the pulse he felt wildly beating at its base.

Interpreting this lingering kiss as uncertainty, Catherine placed her hands on either side of Vincent’s face, gliding and tangling her fingers in his thick tawny mane and drawing his head down to cradle it against the slight swell of her breasts barely revealed above the neckline of her flowing white cotton dress.

“This is a dream come true,” he whispered against her soft flesh.

“I know, Vincent. I know.”

Turning his head he placed his mouth against the slight cleft between her breasts. The tiny pearl buttons glinted, drawing his gaze. Raising his head to look into her deep emerald eyes, he read her willingness for him to continue.

With hands trembling, he carefully slipped the tip of one claw beneath the edge of the opening at the front of her dress, amazed at how easily the rounded button slid from its confining hole. One by one he released them following their descent to her waist which was encircled by a pale pink silken sash.

Not wishing for him to stop, Catherine reached behind her back, deftly releasing the bow, pulling the sash free and letting it drift to the floor.

Vincent continued, releasing the remaining three buttons, then following the slightly parted material back up to the neckline. Unsure of what to do next, he stood mutely, his hands dropping to his sides.

Following his earlier lead, Catherine unbuttoned the cuffs and slowly shrugged the soft cotton from her shoulders, pushing it down over her hips. Then she stepped free and tossed the dress over the back of the desk chair. The full-length satin slip was concealing yet revealing in the way it clung to her lithe body.

Vincent was mesmerized by the vision before him. He stood transfixed as she approached him, her arms encircling his waist and her head resting against his partially revealed chest.

Several heartbeats passed while he gathered his courage, then tentatively his hands explored the length and breadth of her back. Her skin was so soft, it was almost impossible to distinguish

it from the silkiness of her slip -- except for the intense warmth her bare skin radiated against his calloused palms.

He felt her hands work their way beneath the edge of his thermal shirt and embark on their own journey, exploring the broad expanse of his lightly furred back. Her touch was soft yet insistent, and he felt its impact course through his body.

Written on his face was undisguised vulnerability, yet Catherine sensed his pleasure at her touch. She continued stroking down his back to his waist, following the soft corduroy around and then gliding her hands upward in caressing circles across his rippled stomach, reveling in the feel of the springy dense hair against her sensitive palms.

Tilting her head back, seeking eye contact, she silently pleaded with him to remove his shirt. As it joined the growing pile on the floor at their feet, she leaned her silken-clad breasts against his newly-revealed chest and breathed in the masculine scent that was uniquely Vincent. Candle wax, leather, wood smoke -- all blended with his natural scent to comprise the essence she identified as his.

"I love the way you smell, the way you feel, the way you look. I love you, Vincent," she whispered as she burrowed her face into the dense curls of his chest and inhaled deeply.

"And I love you, Catherine. Your beauty takes my breath away. I am awed to think that you wish to be here ... with me ... like this."

In answer to his words, she raised her head, her molten green eyes locking with his of intense blue. "Undress me. I want you to," she pleaded breathlessly.

His eyes widened as their color deepened. Slowly, carefully he slipped one claw-tipped finger under each satin strap, sliding them over her silken shoulders. As the bodice pooled around her waist, he gathered the silky folds on either side and drew the material down over the swell of her hips, releasing it to puddle at her feet.

His sharp intake of breath let her know the sight of her standing before him in lacy white bra and panties had deeply affected him. He seemed frozen ... immobile.

Stepping from the circle of her slip, Catherine stepped out of her low-heeled pumps and slowly turned her back to Vincent. Glancing demurely over one shoulder, she said, "It fastens in the back." A long time passed before she felt his trembling hands fumbling with the fastener. Then the fabric sagged away from her breasts indicating his success.

The parting of the strip of fabric revealed the creamy expanse of her back to his wondering eyes; yet, when she turned to face him, he was awe struck. "Catherine, you are truly beautiful," he whispered in a voice choked with emotion. "I am humbled."

"You needn't be, Vincent. For you are truly beautiful to me."

As he searched her eyes, he could see that she spoke her heart.

"In the cave, we loved."

At the mention of their first time, Vincent's eyes clouded slightly with painful doubts not completely banished.

“And it was everything I dreamed it would be,” Catherine said reassuringly. “Yet, in the dimness of that cave, I knew your beauty more by touch than by sight. That, Vincent, was my only regret.”

Her words bolstered his courage and, stepping toward her, he softly asked, “Would you ... would you want to ... help me ... to...”

“To undress,” she finished for him with a nod. “Yes, I would very much like to help you undress.” Taking his hand, she guided him toward the quilt-covered bed. “Sit down, Vincent,” she encouraged with her voice and the gentle pressure of her hands on his chest.

As he sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, she knelt before him and began tugging at one coarsely patched sheepskin boot. His sense of chivalry simply would not allow her to continue and, placing his fingertips gently beneath her chin, he brought her eyes into contact with his own and silently conveyed his discomfort. As Catherine rocked back on her heels in quiet understanding, Vincent deftly removed his heavy boots and then his thick woolen socks.

As her gaze fell to these most recently uncovered parts of Vincent’s body, Catherine noticed that his feet were covered with amber hair like his hands, but the nails of his toes, unlike his clawed fingers, were neatly trimmed and quite ordinary. His obvious discomfort with her brief study of his feet brought Catherine from her knees. As Vincent reached out to assist her in standing, she guided him to rise into her reassuring embrace.

“You are still beautiful, Vincent. I’m sorry that I made you uncomfortable. It’s just that I have waited so long for this...” As her final word hung in the air between them, her slender fingers unlatched the clasp of his leather belt and let it slip to the floor. Then the soft whirl of parting metal teeth afforded her a glimpse of more homespun cotton. Feeling his rising panic through the bond, Catherine hooked her thumbs into the slightly frayed waistband of his jeans and tugged them swiftly down his lean cotton-covered hips, over his golden-sprinkled thighs and calves into a pile of dark brown corduroy atop his feet. Gracefully, he stepped free of the tangle of jeans she had created, his gaze unfaltering.

The warm spread of his fingers across her back drew her into the haven of his chest. The prickling crisp hairs against her smooth bare breasts drew her nipples into small, eager peaks that pierced the dense golden curls where their bodies touched. She sensed the vibration building within him before the deep moan escaped his throat. As his unique mouth covered hers, she felt as if she were melting, losing shape and form -- their bodies blending to become one. The bond opened to her and she felt it all and reveled in the reality of it.

The surprise he registered at his bold act of initiating this soul-rending kiss paled in comparison to the emotions bombarding him from within and without. He thought he felt her rising need, but it quickly became indistinguishable from his own. Wave after wave of sensation washed between their connection, drenching them in the onslaught.

Her passionate response to his boldness completely blocked out the rest of the world, leaving them alone to deal with only their emotional barriers.

As their lips parted and their eyes locked, she noticed that his were now dusky blue with desire.

She ran her fingertips down his chest, feeling the soft, springy dusting of hair part, allowing her mouth access to the smooth flesh beneath. Her fingers splayed over the taut ridges of his abdomen and trailed down his sides and beneath the worn cotton waistband. As her hands continued their journey downward, his final barrier joined the rest of his clothing on the stony floor.

A delicious shiver sliced through her as his work-hardened hands gently slid down her ribcage and over the swell of her hips carrying with them the last piece of satin and lace that had separated them.

As their bodies closed the unwanted distance between them, his arousal became an unyielding ridge of heat against her already inflamed body. For long, languorous moments they stood, searing one another with the heat of their mutual desire.

Separating slightly from her, Vincent slipped his arm beneath the bend of her knees and drew her up cradling her against him protectively. Slowly, deliberately he turned and carried her to the bed she had so lovingly prepared -- the bed they would share tonight. Yet as he lay her upon the patchwork quilts, his resolve faltered.

He was trembling as she drew him down to lay beside her, guiding his head to pillow against her soft breasts. As he gradually relaxed, releasing the breath he had been holding, his whispered plea was almost unintelligible.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Relax, Vincent,” she coaxed with gentle pressure against his well-muscled shoulder. Finally he allowed himself to be guided onto his back. “Trust your instincts ... trust yourself,” Catherine reassured as she slid her arm across his chest, feeling the insistent pounding of his mighty heart. “And trust our love,” she nuzzled into his neck, “for with love all things are possible. We above all others are proof of that,” she uttered as her slightly parted lips lowered to taste his rigid mouth.

She could sense her kisses rekindling the embers of his passion. Slowly her mouth seared a path across his stubbled chin, stopping at the pulse point of his throat and then continuing through the dense curls covering his chest. There she uncovered one small, flat nipple with the tip of her tongue. She felt it grow taut at the same moment she heard Vincent moan. That sound impelled her to continue the intended journey.

His hands strayed to her silky hair. He thought to stop her descent; yet his body trembled with the need for her to continue.

And continue she did -- across the rippled muscles of his abdomen, then skirting the leanness of his smooth hip to his down-covered thigh.

As her fingernails gently parted the sparse downy hair of his inner thighs, her moist lips skimmed lightly over his smooth flesh.

Vincent cried out at her electric touch only to do so again as her lips parted, encircling him completely. Bolts of lightning pierced him to the very core as Catherine took him deeply. His heart pounded against his chest, reverberating in his head like rolls of thunder before a mighty storm.

His emotional reaction pummeled her through their connection, eliciting memories of the

buffeting currents in the Chamber of the Winds.

Unable to contain his building desire, Vincent drew Catherine up until her body covered his. As if they had orchestrated the move, her thighs parted and their bodies united, welcoming the whirlwind storm. With her head thrown back, lips parted, Catherine's body initiated the rhythm. A heartbeat later Vincent's body was in tune with her movements.

Her body's response to his swelling solidity elicited a moan from deep within her. The sound inflamed him -- driving him on to ... he knew not what.

His questions were quickly answered as they were swept away by the impact of the symphony they were composing, their voices declaring the culmination of their mutual completion.

Fulfilled, both emotionally and physically, Catherine allowed herself to settle her supple body atop the hardened planes of her love. Immediately he enveloped her languorous form and feeling how chilled her flesh had become he turned, fitting her against the hollow of his shoulder. Deftly he located and untangled a discarded quilt, drawing its warmth over them.

Gazing in wonder at her serene expression, he paused a moment to taste the sheen of perspiration dotting her forehead.

A sense of well-being filled the room -- their love the source -- and they cherished the long-deserved contentment.

"Catherine," he whispered, wondering if her stillness meant she slept, yet not sensing it through their connection.

"Yes, Vincent?"

"Are you ..."

"Yes, Vincent. I am more than all right. I am ..." As she searched for just the right word to try and describe what she was feeling, he spoke tentatively.

"Happy?"

"Yes, Vincent -- very happy."

"Is there anything I can do ... something I can get for you?"

"All I need is you."

"And I you, Catherine," he said with a sigh as he mentally wrapped his love around her.

After a moment more of lying contentedly in his arms, she raised her head and posed, "Unless you would like to read to me."

"But, of course. What would you like for me to read?" At her hesitation, he rose from their bed saying, "I know." When he returned, he had with him several volumes.

"But how did you know what was here and where to find these?"

"Your memory is very good. Most of my library is here. Not much new has taken up residence in our room since you left."

“Our room?”

“Yes, Catherine. I always thought of my Chamber as “ours”. Your presence was there to sustain me through the long wait. Somehow I must have sensed that we would eventually be together ... here in this Chamber.”

“And your presence has always been here. From the time I fashioned this room into the replica of your ... I mean our ... Chamber.”

Lying back down beside her and settling her on one side of him and the three books on the other, he opened one thick, leather-bound volume and quickly found the passage he sought. “Do you remember when you rescued me from Dr. Hughes?”

“Very well. It was a turning point for me. It was then that I knew without a doubt that I could not face losing you.”

“And do you remember this?” he asked as he began to read.

*Surprised by joy -- impatient as the Wind
I turned to share the transport -- Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent Tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love faithful love, recalled thee to my mind --
But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss! That thought's return
Was the worst pangs that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.*

“Of course I do. It's Wordsworth, and I read that passage to you when you were safely Below.”

“Yes, you did. And I never forgot those words. Nor the look in your eyes. At that moment, when you were sitting reading to me, I never dreamed those words would echo through me at a time when you were lost to me.”

“Oh, Vincent,” she uttered as she nestled closer to his side.

“But you see, Catherine, the words don’t apply to us. We are each restored to the other ... for always.”

“You’re right. We are.”

And as his voice, resonant with love, continued to fill the air, she drifted into a sated sleep. Laying the book aside, he joined her.

CHAPTER 5

Holding her like this was both heaven and hell. He could feel her wavering at the edge of sleep and was reluctant to disturb her. And yet...

Tipping her head back to meet his deep blue gaze, she whispered seductively, “I’m not asleep, Vincent. I want you, too.”

Her words flashed through that special place deep inside him where she always resided. Of course she would know. So this must have been what it was like for her when he would know what she was feeling!

In response, he slid his hand downward, over the slight swell of her abdomen and into the springy soft curls. He could feel the damp heat radiating at the juncture of her thighs. His caress was awe-filled. As his fingers found the secret place within her, all thoughts fled save one.

She took him in her hand and instantly felt the fullness of his desire. His fingers continued their gentle assault concentrating his attention on her pulsing center. Deeper she sank into the exquisite sensation of his unbelievably gentle touch.

As he withdrew his other arm from where it cradled her against him, he rose above her, enveloping her small form within the confines of his arms and legs. Pressing his mouth to her forehead, the tip of her nose, grazing her lips and nibbling down her throat, he continued until he captured one small, eager peak ever so gently between his teeth.

Her gasp fueled his resolve and he ventured lower.

Immersed in their connection, she felt his rising passion and clutched at his shoulders, attempting to draw his fullness to fill the empty ache of need he had created.

Grasping her small hands in his large ones, he pressed them to her sides and continued downward, over her smooth abdomen and into the downy soft curls that hid the heat of her desire.

Inhaling the aroma of her sweetly scented femininity, his mouth sought and found her moist readiness. Soft mewling sounds of pleasure were summoned from somewhere deep within her and flowed over him igniting his senses. He explored her petaled softness deliberately, slowly. There was no need to hurry -- they had eternity.



His tongue caressed her in maddeningly slow circles, driving from her whimpers begging for release. She felt as if every nerve in her body was taut and aflame. Her swollen breasts crested in tight aching buds -- begging for his touch. As if he knew her every need, his mouth ceased his previous ministrations. His tongue teased its way up the line of her hipbone and across the slight swell of her abdomen. There he dipped into the hollow of her navel, eliciting a gasp from her throat. Satisfied, he continued the journey along her ribcage to the underneath of one breast and culminated with the cautious capture of one eager peak between his unusual divided upper and full lower lips.

Once again the sound that had become music to his ears came from deep within her body and hung suspended in the air above them like the vibrations left behind when the last chord has ended. Indeed he felt like a musician -- her body the instrument he was fated to play.

The intense sensations elicited by the gentle suckling of his mouth on her hardened nipple caused liquid fire to course through her veins. She had never known such overwhelming desire. Her need of him was the only thing that existed in this, their world of only two.

As he knelt between her thighs, she reached between their bodies, stroking the evidence of his arousal. As one hand continued its insistent movement up and down the hard length of him, the other cupped the heaviness beneath, kneading gently.

A sound similar to her own yet deeper in resonance escaped his throat as his mouth involuntarily released her tight, quivering peak.

"Oh, Catherine, your hands," he whispered huskily, "they torment me."

Her answering voice was low and passion-filled. "No more than you have been tormenting me," she answered, never ceasing the tantalizing movements of her hands on his flesh.

Rising from her body and rocking back just out of her reach, Vincent concentrated to bring his mind into control over his body. He somehow knew instinctively that he was close -- too close. He must calm himself.

Catherine rose to her elbows questioning his abrupt withdrawal. "What is it, Vincent? Is there something wrong?"

"Not at all," he answered as his gaze locked with hers. "In fact, everything is very right." After the words left his lips, she noticed the tensing of the muscles in his thighs as he rose from his resting place on his heels. His hands came to rest on the soft cotton sheets on either side of her shoulders, his biceps flexing to accept his weight as he pressed his body downward, hovering over hers. His mouth claimed hers in a kiss so tender, so uniquely his that she was at once engulfed with her need of him.

When his lips parted from hers, she implored him, "Now, Vincent -- please, I need you."

As she opened to welcome him, he hesitated, struck with the wonder that this was indeed real. He felt his need and hers ebbing and flowing through their bond.

Then, in a rush of realization, the memories flooded him. In the cave ... he had loved her ... it had been beautiful. And it would be again ... now.

With that knowledge, he slowly sheathed himself in her warmth. As her body drew him more deeply, enveloping him, she felt him stop. The enticing sensations flashing between them through their connection gave her insight into what he was feeling. Suddenly, she realized -- he had remembered their first time together!

He began to move, slowly at first, his deep blue eyes revealing the intense pleasure this unhurried union was evoking in him.

Her hands abandoned their languid state at her sides and moved to his back. As she drew her nails lightly downward, parting the hair in a path from his shoulders to his waist, his muscles rippled their response.

She felt herself slipping into a mindless whirlpool of sensation. Spiraling downward, she pulled him with her. Then as the crescendo of their mutual desire soared to undreamed-of heights, the very breath was stolen from their bodies and they hung suspended ... waiting on the precipice.

Finally, it came. The ultimate release they had been striving toward. And their restored breath enabled their cries of fulfillment to fill the Chamber.

Although sleep eluded them, they lay in each other's arms, reveling in the comfortable intimacy.

CHAPTER 6

"It's my turn to read to you," Catherine stated as she rose from their bed to retrieve a small volume. Quickly returning, she sat cross-legged on the bed beside him and opened the book to a page marked with a pink ribbon. Turning to her lover with a conspiratorial look, she confided, "I had our first evening all planned in my mind. I'd gone over it so many times, Vincent, that I felt it was fated to happen just this way."

Retrieving several pillows from the floor beside the bed, Vincent eagerly settled himself for the story Catherine obviously wished to share with him.

"It's a collection of poems from a book entitled Erotica," she continued, giggling at his raised-eyebrow reaction to the title. "I had chosen the menu very carefully for our romantic supper. 'A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou beside me ...' Well, you know what I mean." At his slightly amused nod, she started again. "So, after we had eaten and you were mellowed by the wine, I had planned to read suggestive poetry until you succumbed to my irresistible charms!"

"And what happened?" he asked in mock seriousness.

"You know -- the best laid plans of mice and men ..." she answered.

"Well, let's not waste this literary delight. Please ... read to me."

"Are you sure? Do you still want to hear it?"

"I'm quite certain," he stated, opening his arms for her to join him against the pile of pillows.

As she snuggled into the hollow of his shoulder, she twisted her head and warned in her most ominous voice, "Now don't you dare laugh! You asked for this! It's by Emily Dickinson."

"I'm surprised. I was not expecting it to be anyone or anything that I would recognize in a book with such a title."

"And just what's wrong with erotica?" she challenged.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

And as she began to read, he was touched by the elaborate preparations she had undergone for his benefit.

*Wild Nights -- Wild Nights?
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!
Futile -- the Winds --
To a Heart in port --
Done with the Compass --
Done with the Chart!
Rowing in Eden
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor -- Tonight --
In Thee!*

When she had uttered the final words, she lifted her eyes to seek his reaction.

"Very ... erotic!" he stated simply as they collapsed into fits of laughter.

"OK, you ... let's see if you like the next step of my plan any better." Bouncing from bed, Catherine insistently pulled Vincent toward a door on the other side of the room. He had noticed it earlier but had been apprehensive about exploring beyond that Chamber alone. As she opened the door, urging him through the opening, he raised his arm to shield his eyes from the brightness.

Unlike the larger room whose only natural light source was filtered through colored panes, this small one contained large, clear windows. It was obviously a bathroom, with modern conveniences, yet the artful design gave the sense of almost being outdoors.

"I must admit that I wanted you to feel at home, but I simply could not bear the thought of

giving up the wonders of modern plumbing!” she announced as she explained the arrangement. “Behind this partitioned wall are the absolute necessities; toilet, sink and shower. But I hid them from view so we can pretend that they don’t exist when we are in the bathing pool. Voila!”

As she led him further into the room, he realized that the carefully placed plants concealed a deep pool of water. The floor and walls were built of a natural gray stone and the huge bathtub was sunken into the floor. Beyond the tub was a bay window comprised of three panes of glass that extended from the floor to the ceiling.

“Care to join me?” she asked invitingly, as she carefully descended into the still water. “Come on, Vincent, it’s wonderfully warm.”

Without further hesitation, he followed her and settled into the water beside her. “This is very lovely, Catherine, and ingenious. But I must admit it feels quite strange to be sitting here naked ... in front of these windows.”

“No one can see us. There, look,” she pointed. “It’s a walled courtyard. Besides, our house is a long way from the nearest neighbor. And no one will disturb us tonight.” With a touch of her hand on a hidden button, the waters began to swirl about them -- soothing their bodies and relaxing their minds.

“This reminds me of the hot springs in the Tunnels. Thank you for all of your careful planning and, yes, I do like this part of your scheme very much!”

As the waters gently buffeted them, nightfall slowly stole the brightness from the room. Reaching into a marble canister, Catherine withdrew a long wooden match and lit several large candles on the stone windowsill.

“Perhaps we should get out,” she suggested, “before we turn into prunes!”

“You’re absolutely right. I have no desire to spend eternity with a prune!” Vincent quipped in reply.

After toweling dry and availing themselves of the modernly convenient hair dryers she had tucked out of sight, they left the warmth of the bathing area. With the setting sun had come a slight chill to the larger room, so they quickly dressed in the clothes they had so diligently removed from one another earlier.

“Let’s take a walk,” Catherine suggested. It looks like a beautiful starry night.”

“But isn’t it a bit chilly for you?” he asked in genuine concern.

Catherine disappeared through a small oaken door near the foot of the bed, only to return with two long black cloaks of the softest wool. The larger one she held out to him, and he reluctantly took it.

Misunderstanding completely, he flung the cloak around him and helped her into the smaller matching garment. But when he reached for the hood, he found none. He reached again but to no avail.

“But, Catherine, the hood ... mine is missing.” A slight hint of panic had crept into his voice.

"These cloaks don't have hoods. The night is not that cold. We'll be fine."

"But my face ..."

"Oh, Vincent. No. You have no need to fear any of the inhabitants of Elysion. You are welcome here ... and you will be loved, I promise you. Many of the people here have been waiting for your arrival just as I have. They are anxious to meet you. But I have selfishly kept you all to myself. Perhaps I was wrong but ..."

"No, Catherine. You were not wrong. This day has been a treasure I will add to my collection of wondrous memories."

"As will I," she said taking his arm and leading him into the moonlit night.

"The sky is so dark ... or perhaps the stars are simply much brighter than I've ever seen before. It's breathtaking."

"Yes, this place has many wonders and I will delight in sharing them all with you, my love."

"And was this romantic moonlight stroll also a part of your grand plan," he asked as they walked the grounds around the small stone cottage. It was too dark to be able to discern many details, yet the air was fragrant with unseen flowers and the night sounds revealed the existence of many woodland creatures.

"But of course," she quipped, settling her head against his side as he pulled her within the folds of his woolen cloak.

About an hour later, they returned to the comforting warmth of their Chamber. When Vincent helped remove her wrap and had discarded his own, she led him to the door near the end of the bed. Flicking the switch, another compromise of modern convenience, the two neat rows of clothing were illuminated for his perusal.

"This is our walk-in closet," she stated matter-of-factly. "And these are our clothes -- one side yours and one mine."

"You certainly are full of surprises," Vincent answered as he surveyed the neatly hung cotton shirts, jeans and vests of various fabrics and colors. "But how?"

"I'm not really certain, Vincent," she answered truthfully. It seems as if I envision what I need and a way to achieve it is provided. But not like magic.

"For instance, Michele, who runs the antique store here, helped me to locate most of the items that I remembered were in your Chamber in the Tunnels. And the local bookstore provided the volumes you see here. The plants around the bathtub were chosen by our local florist.

"And, there is a very capable stone mason here in Elysion," she stated, pausing until Vincent's gaze locked with hers. "He was killed in a terrible cave-in about four years ago ..."

"Kanin? Kanin Evans?"

"Yes. He's here ... waiting for Olivia," she said with a knowing smile. "And he's been so anxious for you to get here. He has a small farm nearby -- we're neighbors."

“Will I be able to see him?”

“Oh, yes, Vincent. Whenever you want.”

“As you know, Kanin was a dear friend. I was on the work detail when he was killed. I always felt that ... perhaps ...”

“Vincent. It wasn’t your fault. You must stop trying to accept the blame for everything that happens to other people. Kanin and Olivia will be together eventually. Their life was meant to continue ... and it will, someday -- right here in Elysion.

“With some of the other residents of this world, he built this cottage. And the clothes, well, Myra is our village seamstress. You don’t know her, but she is very excited about meeting you. She spent a lot of time making your wardrobe to my hopefully correct specifications.”

With a nod of her head and a reassuring hand on his shoulder, she led him out of the closet to the large carved oaken chair so much like the one he had left behind.

“Not Cullen,” he stated hopefully as he stared at the intricately carved wood. “He was alive and well when I left.”

“No, our furniture maker is Joshua Allan. Not everyone here is someone you knew. Most people have no past ties to each others’ lives. Some couples have already been reunited -- like you and I are now. Some are here waiting for their soul mates to arrive, like Kanin.

But everyone works together, in harmony. Life is simple here -- like in the Tunnels. Everyone has certain talents which they use for the good of the community. Whenever we need something, it seems there is always another willing and eager to provide the service or product. I just know you’ll love it here!”

“I already do,” he stated as he drew her onto his lap and settled her slight weight comfortably against him. “I already do.”

CHAPTER 7

As the sun filtered through the stained-glass window, Catherine awoke. For a few moments she lay beside Vincent, enjoying his heavy presence in the bed beside her.

So many lonely nights had been spent in this big bed ... waiting. But the waiting was now over and he was really here.

The sheer excitement coursing through her body would not allow her to return to sleep and, not wishing to disturb him, she crawled carefully from their bed. Picking up one of the books he had brought to their bed the night before, she sat in the smaller version of his carved wooden chair and began to read.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning ... she had always been one of Catherine’s favorites. Finding

several poems she liked, she reread each one and finally settled on the ones she liked best.

As she stretched to relieve a tenseness in her neck, she glanced for the hundredth time toward the tousled golden mane burrowed into the large feather pillow. A stirring sound alerted her, affording her the chance to watch his cobalt blue eyes open to the morning light.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up,” she said with a sparkle in her eyes. “I’ve spent the time with our friend, Elizabeth,” she stated holding up the volume of poetry. “I found several selections I’d love to share with you.”

Sleepily he propped himself up in the bed, drawing back the covers for her to join him.

Laying the book down, she dropped her robe to the floor and cuddled against his warmth. He began to nuzzle her neck, but she halted him with a resounding kiss and a persuasive,

“I want to read you something ... first!” Her final word held promise, and he encouraged her to begin.

*I flung closer to his breast,
As sword that, after battle, flings to sheathe;
And, in that hurtle of united souls,
The mystic motions which in common moods
Are shut beyond our sense, broke in on us.
And, as we sate, we felt the old earth spin,
And all the starry turbulence of worlds
Swing round us in their audient circles, till
If that same golden moon were overhead
Or if beneath our feet, we did not know.*

Awestruck, he sat with no visible reaction. Finally, she could contain herself no longer.

“Didn’t you like it?” she said with a slight pout. “It’s from ‘Aurora Leigh’. Browning was always one of my favorite ...”

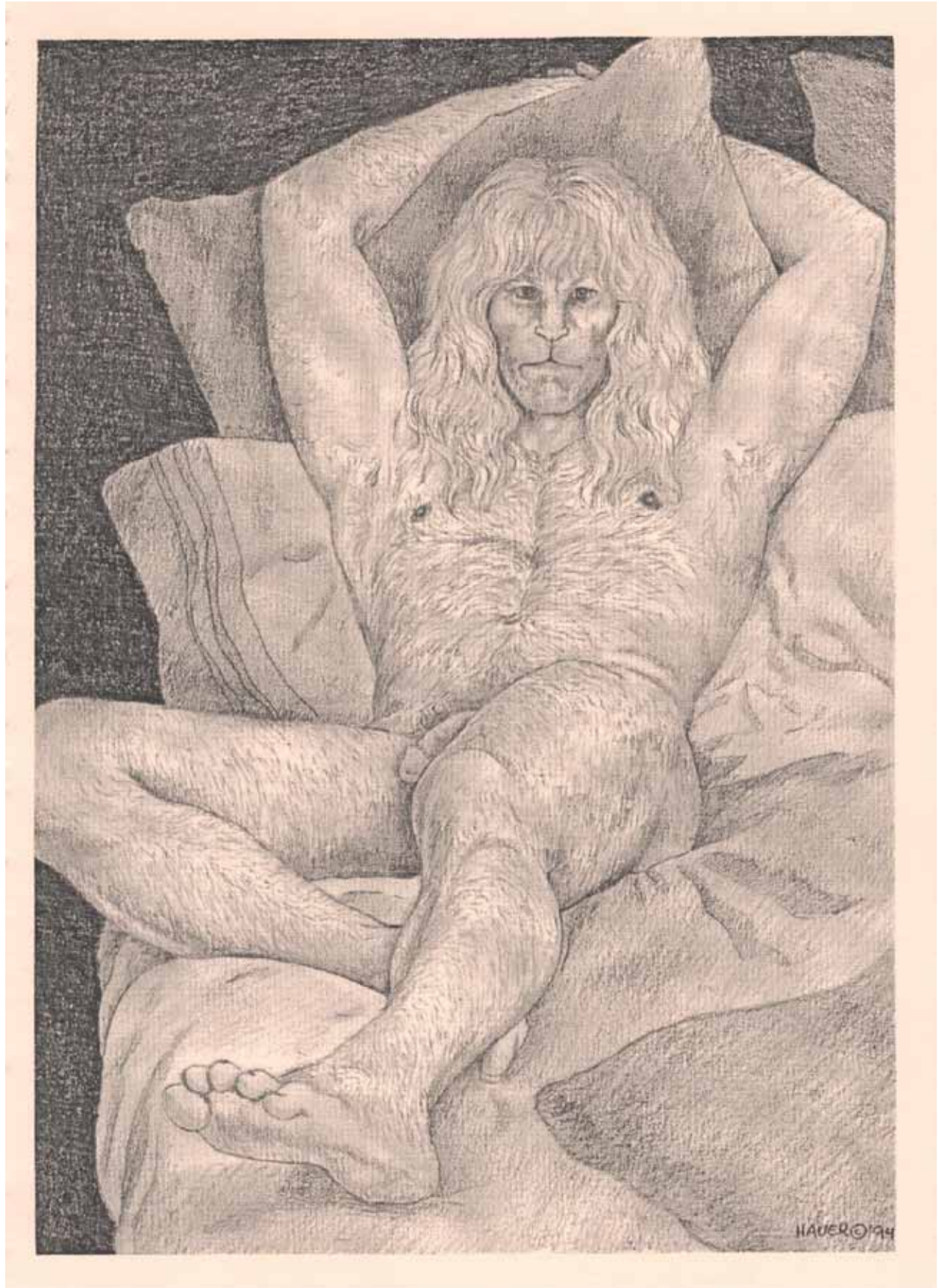
“I loved it, Catherine,” he stated cutting her off in mid sentence. “It is one that I had chosen to read to you last night.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Only you fell asleep,” he added with a touch of mischief.

“OK, so we’re even now. I fell asleep when you wanted to read it and you wouldn’t wake up when I wanted to. Here, what’s in this third book?” she asked handing him the last volume he had brought to their bed.



“Edna St. Vincent Millay - Collected Lyrics,” he quoted from the cover of the book. Glancing up at her and smiling slightly, he continued, “Though I generally am not as enamored of the modern poets, I made an exception for this one. Millay is a fascinating woman and a very moving poet. She speaks in rich and subtle ways of topics as varied as life.”

Silently, Catherine urged him to continue.

“Of course, at first I took note of her because of her name. Then I became even more interested when I learned that her family actually called her Vincent.” Noting Catherine’s rapt interest spurred him to go on. “Such a shallow reason to be drawn to her works, but I’m very glad that I took the time to learn more of her.

“She too had only one parent -- her Mother, and even though money was scarce, her family was a close-knit one. In her life there was always music -- and books.”

“Now doesn’t that sound familiar,” Catherine piped in with continued interest.

“Yes, it does. In fact, Vincent lived for a time in New York City. While she attended Vassar she stayed at the YWCA Training School and when she graduated she was drawn to Greenwich Village. That area around Washington Square was, then, a haven for young writers and artists. When she felt the need for change, she went to Europe. But for a time ... Well, somehow I sensed her presence when I read her lyrics.”

“How fascinating,” Catherine said. “You referred to her as a very moving poet. Please, read me your favorite of her lyrics.”

“Catherine,” he started and then paused for a long time.

“What is it, Vincent?”

“I do not wish to bring a sadness here. It’s just that ... when I was missing you terribly ... that is when I turned to this particular poet,” he emphasized by gesturing with the small volume.

“It’s all right, Vincent. I was aware of your sadness. I had poetry and music that I was drawn to in my own time of waiting. And even though all of that is behind us now, there is no way we can ignore the fact that we lived through it. There is no reason why we should. Please. Read to me.”

“Although the title of this one is very misleading, the content spoke to me,” he stated as his roughened-silk voice filled the still Chamber air.

To the Wife of a Sick Friend

*Shelter this candle from the wind.
Hold it steady. In its light
The cave wherein we wander lost
Glitters with frosty stalactite,
Blossoms with mineral rose and lotus,
Sparkles with crystal moon and star,
Till a man would rather be lost than found;
We have forgotten where we are.
Shelter this candle. Shrewdly blowing
Down the cave from a secret door
Enters our only foe, the wind.
Hold it steady. Lest we stand,
Each in a sudden, separate dark,
The hot wax spattered upon your hand,
The smoking wick in my nostrils strong,
The inner eyelid red and green
For a moment yet with moons and roses,--
Then the unmitigated dark.
Alone, alone, in a terrible place,
In utter dark without a face,
With only the dripping of the water on the stone,
And the sound of your tears, and the taste of my own.*

As Vincent raised his eyes from the volume resting in his large hand, he felt a smaller hand cover his. When he sought her eyes with his own, he noticed hers glistened with tears just brimming. Intently he watched as, one by one, they slipped from the moist green depths and trickled down her cheeks. With one soft fingertip, he halted their course of travel. Then, glancing at the wetness clinging to his finger, he tasted her tears.

Moved by his gesture even more than Millay's words, Catherine brought his hand to her lips and pressed a kiss into the work-worn palm. "I'm so sorry, Vincent."

"For what, my love?"

“For the years of waiting ... of separation. For the pain you had to endure. When all I ever wanted was to make you happy.”

Drawing her slim and supple form against his massive chest, he held her as if he were clinging to life itself. “I am happy -- very happy. And all the time I spent in the Tunnels ... waiting ... was not spent enduring pain. You were never out of my thoughts, but there was so much to do. And there was another of Vincent’s poems that I read and drew from it the strength to continue.”

“Oh, read it to me, Vincent,” Catherine pleaded as she turned in his embrace and settled herself beneath his arm to allow him to find and read another lyric.

With a faint lift in his gravelled voice, he continued reading.

Sonnet

*Time, that renews the tissues of this frame,
That built the child and hardened the soft bone,
Taught him to wait, to blink, to walk alone,
Stare, question, wonder, give the world a name,
Forget the watery darkness whence he came,
Attends no less the boy to manhood grown,
Brings him new raiment, strips him of his own:
All skins are shed at length, remorse, even shame.
Such hope is mine, if this indeed be true,
I dread no more the first white in my hair,
Or even age itself, the easy shoe,
The cane, the wrinkled hands, the special chair:
Time, doing this to me, may alter too
My anguish, into something I can bear.*

As the last sentence echoed in the still air, Vincent pulled Catherine closer, cradling her head in the hollow of his shoulder. “You see, these words were of great comfort to me. It was like Edna St. Vincent Millay was writing about me. Me, as a small boy, walking alone, yet always questioning what the world was about. The watery darkness from where I came is my uncertainty about my parents. And time didn’t forget me when I became a man. The shedding of my skins was the time we spent together. So brief. And then, time marched on and as I grew older it allowed me to cope with my sorrow at your loss. Time gave me Jacob to build and teach and... and somewhere beyond her written words I sensed that I was allowed to hope. And I did. Somehow I always knew

that what we had was too special to end forever. There had to be more.”

“And here we are,” she stated pressing her head more deeply into his shoulder, affording her a sideways glance at his chiseled profile.

“Yes, and here we are,” he echoed just before he turned her to rest across his arm and slowly lowered his searching mouth to meet her waiting lips.

CHAPTER 8

“Come on, lazy bones. Get out of bed!”

As Catherine burrowed her icy fingers beneath the warm patched quilt and into Vincent’s sensitive ribs, a delightful giggle filled the once-still air. His answer was a low, rumbling sound from deep within his throat that erupted into a rare laugh as he quickly rolled her onto her back, pinning her ineffective hands to the bed on either side of her tousled head.

“I give. I give. You win!” she shouted with a surprised yet happy look on her face. “But you’re going to miss the town tour if you keep me pinned to this bed all day.”

With an in-drawn breath, Vincent whispered, “He’s magnificent!”

“He’s yours, Vincent.”

“Mine?”

“Yes, if you want him. He, too, has been impatiently awaiting your arrival,” she added with an impish grin.

“And does he have a name?”

“Yes.”

The stillness filled the barn as he waited for Catherine to continue. Finally she said, “Sir Lancelot, what else?” And Vincent’s laughter echoed in the rafters of the stone barn. A snort from the stall drew his attention back to Lancelot. As Vincent extended a palmful of sugar cubes, the ebony nose eagerly nuzzled into the huge, furred hand.

“Catherine, I am at a loss for words. I have never seen such a beautiful creature. And to think that he is ... mine?”

“Yes, Vincent, he is yours. And we’ll have plenty of time to let you two get better acquainted, but right now we need to get ol’ Nellie hitched up to the wagon and head for town.”

+++

As Catherine maneuvered the horse and buggy out of the barn and into the sunlight, Vincent was awed by her expertise. “How did you learn to drive a horse and wagon?” he asked.

“A young couple has a horse farm north of here. When I first arrived, the Nortons came over and introduced themselves. When I returned their visit, I saw Lady and instantly fell in love with her. Jack gave her to me as a welcoming present. He also helped me locate the wagon and our sturdy transportation of the day, Nellie. When another neighbor wanted to find a home for one of his stallions, I taught his wife how to make candles in trade for Lancelot. I hoped you would like him.”

“Oh, Catherine. I’m overwhelmed by your generosity.”

“Nonsense, Vincent. It’s not generosity. I love you!”

Bowing his head to press a kiss into the crown of her sable hair, he whispered, “And I love you, Catherine.”

Companionably they jostled along the country lane, passing farmland and woods. As they plodded over a sturdy wooden bridge spanning a swift-running stream, Catherine pointed to a small stone cottage similar to their own. “That’s where Kanin lives. He’s been preparing their Chamber to look a lot like the one they shared when they lived Below. He’s even asked the flower shop in the village if they can get lilacs!”

Vincent smiled in memory of the chamber he and Catherine had helped to prepare for Olivia and Kanin. That had been a happy time for Kanin and Olivia, but a painful one for them. It had been all too clearly written on Catherine’s face -- the longing for a life they feared could never be. And his own inward emotions had matched hers perfectly. They had no idea then that they would be together -- in the sunshine -- as they were today.

“We’re almost there,” Catherine announced, interrupting his reverie. “It’s not a large town, but we have everything we need.”

Her words startled him into the reality that they would be entering a town -- with people. Instinctively he reached for his hood, knowing full well it was not there. Long years of wariness could not just vanish. He felt the panic rise in his throat, trying to choke him.

Sensing his discomfort, Catherine placed her small hand over his great one. “Vincent.” When he did not raise his head, she again spoke his name.

Reluctantly his eyes met hers; and, as their gaze locked, Vincent drew strength from her soothing love. Speaking softly, she reassured him. “Everyone here knows who you are. I have been in Elysion a very long time ... waiting for you. And these people have waited with me. They are my friends. And they want to be your friends too. There is no prejudice in this town -- no fear. We all live here in peace and love. Please, try to relax. You’ll see. Everything will be as I’ve said.”

Slowly, Vincent released the breath he had been holding and, motioning for her to proceed, he stated, “I will be all right.”

But Catherine wasn’t sure whether he was reassuring her or himself.

As they rode through the village, Vincent turned his head from side to side trying to absorb it all at once. He seemed to be relaxing, so Catherine slowed the horse with a gentle pull on the reins allowing him a more leisurely view.

Slipping into tour-guide mode, Catherine droned, “On the right we have the country store. It’s run by Ray and Sara Johnson. Whatever they don’t have, they’ll try to get it. And next to the general store is the flower shop. Mathilde Timmons runs it and her husband, Sven, is the local blacksmith. That’s his livery stable at the end of the street. And just before it is Myra’s shop, you know, the dressmaker I was telling you about. You have her to thank for the outfit you’re wearing!”

“Yes, I would like to meet her and thank her,” he stated as he surveyed the sturdy corduroy jeans and chambray shirt. It seemed strange to be wearing clothes made new just for him. Yes, the talented seamstresses of the Tunnels had made him some very serviceable garments from the discarded clothing of the world Above, but these were brand new!

“And across the street at the far end is the bakery. That is where I got the blueberry muffins we had for breakfast. The Smoaks have the most wonderful fresh-baked crescent rolls and homemade bread!”

As Catherine approached the tiny bake shop and negotiated a wide turn to let Vincent see the other side of this section of the main street, the smell of fresh-baked muffins and bread drifted past them. “It reminds me of Saturday mornings when William would bake and the delicious aroma would fill the Tunnel corridors.”

“You miss them, don’t you,” Catherine stated rather than asked.

“Yes, I miss them. They are my family ... my friends. But, they are not gone. I have the wonderful memories of the past that I can relive any time I need.” Placing his large, warm hand over hers, he stated solemnly, “I would not wish to be anywhere but here -- with you. This is a dream come true.”

This time it was Catherine’s turn to smile.

Continuing on their tour, she pointed out Valentino’s, the Italian restaurant run by Carmen and her husband, Anthony. The tangy smell of spaghetti blended with that of fried chicken as they passed the next restaurant. “Barry and Sandy Phillips make some of the best Southern fried chicken, rice and gravy, black-eyed peas and cornbread I’ve ever eaten,” Catherine announced as she sniffed the air.

“And when did you ever have such a meal before?”

“Well...”

Vincent smiled at the startled look on her face.

“Well, never. But it’s still the best I’ve ever eaten,” she declared triumphantly.

As they proceeded down the street, Vincent remarked, “I have observed many people in this village, adults of varying ages. And most of the people you have mentioned are couples. But I don’t see any children. Are they in school?”

“There isn’t one, Vincent.”

“Isn’t one? But where do you hold classes?”

As she abruptly halted their progress with a sharp tug on Nellie’s reins, Catherine turned

to face Vincent. "There aren't any children here. Elysion is a place for lovers, remember? People like you and me, who were meant to be together and raise a family. But something happened to interrupt destiny. So, usually one partner is left to accomplish those tasks while the other comes here to prepare for their eventual reunion. When I was taken away..."

At the hesitation in her voice, Vincent encircled her slim shoulders with his strong embrace and nestled her against him protectively. It was still very painful for him to remember his failure at not being able to protect her.

Sensing his guilt and wishing to dismiss it immediately, Catherine pressed back from his comforting embrace enough to look him squarely in the eyes. "It was not your fault, Vincent. It was fate. It was meant to be. You were left to care for our son, Jacob. And I was sent ahead to prepare a place for us ... here. The couples you see in Elysion will remain just two -- there are no babies conceived or born here. Men and women who are not part of a pair are waiting for their soul mate, preparing for their Reuniting. Just as I waited here for you."

After a few moments of clinging together, Catherine lifted her head and looked around. "This place, Vincent, is our destiny. And we share it with other couples who endured separations similar to ours. People here value each other and love one another. We all look for opportunities to help each other. If someone has a need, a means is always provided for satisfying it. For the most part, the pressures of living as people knew it before coming here are left behind. The time here is spent in sharing and giving and loving."

With a gentle slap of the reins, the wagon jolted forward. "You mentioned that you have v-neck sweater topped with a slightly rumpled, beige corduroy jacket. His hair, mustache and beard were sandy brown, and the horn-rimmed glasses emphasized the sparkling humor in his deep brown eyes.

He greeted Catherine warmly and waited impatiently for her to introduce her companion. As she was formulating the words in her mind, Jonathan rounded the counter and announced, "I can see you're not with the tit-willow. So who have we here?"

Extending his hand to Vincent, he proceeded without pause, "I'm Jonathan Smyth."

"Vincent. Vincent Wells," he blurted recovering slightly from the onslaught and completing the handshake.

"Pleased to meet you, Vincent Wells." As a tall, plain woman appeared from the back of the store, Jonathan turned and pulled her protectively to his side. "This is my Agnes. We've heard a lot about you."

"So glad to meet you at last," Agnes said, clasping Vincent's hand with her sturdy one. "Make yourself at home, browse around. If Jonny or I can help you, just let us know."

"Thank you," Vincent and Catherine answered in unison and everyone laughed.

The store inside was almost identical to the first version. The floor-to-ceiling, plain wooden shelves gave it the feel of a small library, yet it was not so orderly as that.

As Catherine guided Vincent back to the poetry section, they both half-expected to see Kristopher materialize from behind one of the tall shelves. Yet his presence made itself known in a much more subtle way.

As Vincent gently lifted an aging volume from the top shelf, he felt a sudden coldness. He was not surprised when the label inside declared this first edition of Tennyson to be from the private library of Kristopher Gentian. As he smiled and extended the book to Catherine, he noted that she didn't even have to read the inscription to know what he held in his hand. They just stood in the dark aisle, holding the book between them and remembering the magic of the painting the eccentric artist had done of them.

"We must get it, Vincent," Catherine whispered insistently.

"Yes, but how?"

"We'll offer a service in trade. Often, in the past, I have bartered for books by delivering merchandise to the outlying farms. Perhaps they are in need of that service again. Let's ask."

As Vincent and Catherine made their way to the counter, Jonathan once again looked up from his reading. "So, you've found a book. Good. And an excellent choice it is, too."

"I'd like to offer you my delivery services in trade for it, Mr. Smyth," Catherine stated, extending the book toward the shop owner.

"I'm sorry, but I don't need any books delivered," he stated flatly.

Immediately, Vincent spoke up. "Perhaps there are some chores I might do in exchange for ..."

Suddenly, Vincent grew quiet. The sparkle in Mr. Smyth's eyes gave away his attempt at dry humor. "It's a Reuniting gift. For both of you. From me ... and Agnes and ... well -- you know who."

"Thank you," Vincent and Catherine again intoned together and looked at each other, grinning with the knowledge that they did indeed know to whom Mr. Smyth was referring.

Chuckling, Mr. Smyth started to recite his favorite statement, "Did you know that all books wait? They sit patiently on their shelves, collecting the most refined dust until their cover is opened and their pages are turned by the proper person."

"Why, no, Mr. Smyth. I didn't know that," Catherine stated in answer to his sly grin. It had become a ritual; whenever she picked out a book, he would quote those same words to her and she would act as if she had never heard them before.

Vincent just stood beside Catherine, listening to their banter and enjoying the feel of this tiny shop. They would have to come here often, he thought.

"We must be going. And thank you again for the book -- all three of you!" With a wink to Jonathan, Catherine picked up the first edition, tucked her hand into the crook of Vincent's arm and, with gentle pressure, guided him toward the door.



“Nice to meet you, Mr. & Mrs. Smyth,” Vincent stated resisting her lead momentarily.

“Jonathan and Agnes,” the shopkeeper stated with a wry grin.

With a nod, Vincent smiled and allowed Catherine to guide him from the store.

Outside she apologized with a hasty, “We’ve got an appointment and”

“An appointment?”

“Yes. There’s a couple I want you to meet. Well, actually you’ve sort of met him before and I’ve told you about her,” she stammered uncomfortably.

“What is it, Catherine? Tell me,” he stated in that quiet, understanding tone he used when he could sense something was bothering her.

“Well, when I told you earlier we’d have a late lunch in town, that wasn’t completely true. This particular couple lives just outside of town and ... Vincent, we’re supposed to be having dinner with ... my parents.”

Stopping abruptly, Vincent whispered in disbelief, “Your parents! Why didn’t you tell me. I’m not prepared. How is it that they are here? What can I say?”

“It’s all right, Vincent. Calm down. We have a little time before we’re supposed to meet them. They live on the outskirts of town. Let’s walk over to the park and talk.”

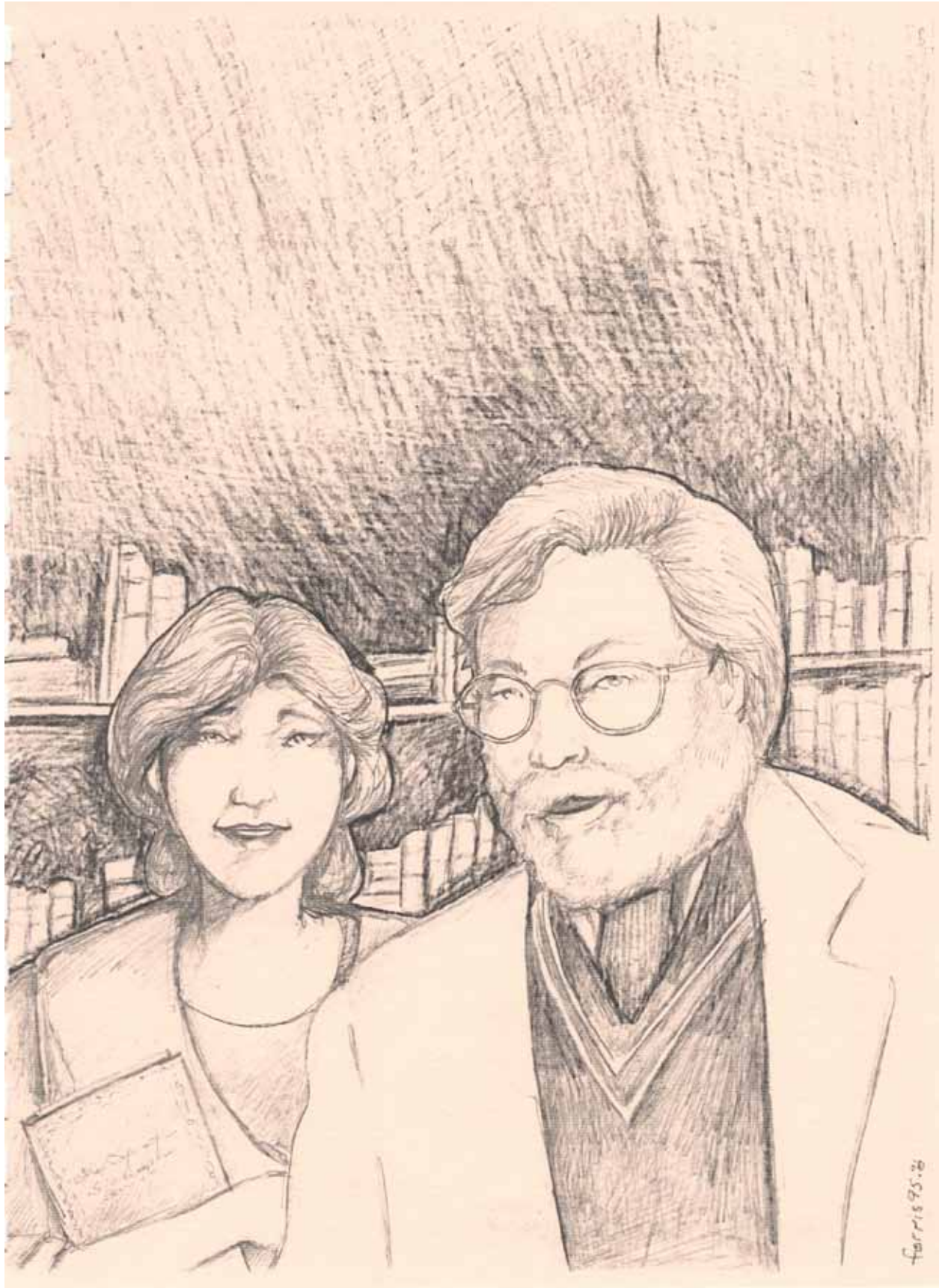
“All right,” he stated flatly as she guided him past the antique shop adjacent to the Smyth’s book store. A tall wrought iron fence surrounded a small grassy area, and Catherine led him through the gate to a wooden park bench. In the distance a gazebo nestled among the trees, and a man was lounging on the steps, strumming a guitar and singing softly. But Vincent was so deeply stunned he didn’t even notice.

“Here, sit down. I know I should have prepared you, but I was afraid you would worry. And there really isn’t anything to worry about. They are both so anxious to meet you. The meeting you and Dad had, if you could call it that ... in his hospital room right before he died. Well, that was pretty one-sided. He and I have discussed that night, and he told me he heard every word we said. It made it much easier for him to ... leave. And he was very grateful for the risks you took to come and speak with him. He wanted so much to be able to tell you then how he felt. Now he welcomes the chance to actually talk to you, to get to know you.”

At his look of disbelief, Catherine continued reassuringly. “Trust me, Vincent. Everything will be fine. We’ll only stay for a short time -- not even for dinner if you don’t want to. If you are uncomfortable and want to leave, I’ll know it. And we’ll go. I promise.”

A silent nod of his head was the only answer she received. As they walked back from the park and he helped her onto the high seat of the buggy, Catherine could tell that Vincent was absorbed in the past. She allowed him time with his thoughts as they headed away from the village. He had been through so much in such a short time, he needed to contemplate this meeting.

The ride was not nearly long enough from Vincent’s viewpoint. All too soon Catherine halted the buggy in view of a rather small cedar cabin nestled between a grove of trees and a lake whose vast expanse reflected the setting sun. Under other circumstances, Vincent would have been



able to enjoy the view, but a pall had come over his earlier jovial mood.

“They’re on our side, Vincent. They are happy for us! They know how much you mean to me. When I first arrived, they helped me to adjust. It’s been wonderful being reunited with Dad -- getting to know my mother. I was only ten when she died. She had been sick for a long time. And suddenly she was gone. Dad did a great job of being both mother and father to me, but ...”

“I know, Catherine. There is no real substitute for the loss of a mother. I know.”

Catherine dropped her head guiltily, but Vincent was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he didn’t notice her emotions. His own were so raw and overpowering. There was more she had to tell him, but not today.

Laying her small hand atop his larger one, Catherine patted reassuringly. “Come on, Vincent. It will be OK. You’ll see.”

“I hope you are right, Catherine,” he answered resignedly.

When the buggy pulled up in front of the cabin, the heavy wooden door immediately swung open and an attractive, slight-built woman with shoulder-length dark blonde hair emerged. She was followed closely by a tall, dark-haired man who carried himself rather stiffly, with almost military-like bearing.

This regal gentleman bears little resemblance to the silver-haired man I spoke to at the hospital, Vincent thought. And Catherine’s mother is almost as beautiful as her daughter, he observed.

“Cathy. Vincent.” Both Caroline and Charles quickly stepped forward. Charles embraced Catherine, while Caroline walked toward Vincent with arms extended in welcome.

“I’m so happy to meet you, Vincent,” she said stretching up to place a hand on each broad shoulder and pull his raw-silk cheek into contact with her own smooth one.

With barely time to recover from her unexpected hug, Charles had approached with hand extended and strongly clasped Vincent’s, while covering the furred back with his other hand. “I have waited so long for this moment. At last I get a chance to say something. I was somewhat at a disadvantage the first time we met,” he stated with a sparkle of humor in his slate gray eyes.

“Yes, sir. Well...”

As Caroline released Catherine from her enthusiastic hug, she grasped her daughter’s hand on her right and extended her left to Vincent, drawing them both into the house. Charles followed close behind.

“There’s a chilly breeze blowing over the lake tonight. Let’s sit by the fire where it’s cozier,” Caroline suggested. In front and on either side of a huge stone fireplace were two love seats facing one another. A fire had burned down to glowing red coals and, before sitting, Charles added another log. When he turned, he motioned Vincent and Catherine to sit on one of the love seats while he handed his wife toward the one opposite it.

“I’ll get some coffee ... or, I believe Cathy says you prefer tea?”

“Coffee will be fine, sir,” Vincent answered stiffly.

“What’s this ‘sir’ stuff? Call me Charles. After all, we’re family.”

With that, Charles turned toward the kitchen and Vincent sat next to Catherine in stunned silence. Family. He said I was family, he thought.

After the coffee was served, the four sat silently sipping the hot brew and enjoying the warmth of the fire. An unwanted air of discomfort hung over the gathering.

“More coffee?” blurted Caroline and Charles, almost simultaneously.

“No, thank you,” answered Catherine and Vincent together.

The situation was so absurd that they all began to laugh and the silence was broken.

“You have a beautiful home,” Vincent said surveying the comfortable surroundings. “Not at all what I expected ... I mean ... not that I didn’t expect it to be beautiful.”

“I understand, Vincent,” Caroline answered earnestly. “When I first came to Elysion I stayed at the boarding house in town. I was uncertain how to make a life without him ... and Cathy,” she continued leaning forward and patting her daughter on the knee. “After a few months I realized that I had a lot of work to do. I didn’t know how long I had to get things ready, so I started by deciding not to recreate our townhouse in New York. Instead I chose the mountain cabin in Connecticut. When Mr. Stallings, the innkeeper, told me about this property, it sounded perfect. And after seeing it, I knew it was the right place. The whole town helped me, and within the year I was settled in here. But it wasn’t really a home until Charles arrived.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Mother. Our Chamber is finally complete now that Vincent is with me.”

As the two women talked, the men sat reassuringly by their sides but something still wasn’t right. After about twenty minutes of small-talk, Charles asked Vincent if he would like to see the new dock. Unable to fabricate a reason to refuse, Vincent reluctantly rose and followed Charles outside. They walked in uneasy silence across the yard and onto the sturdy wooden dock. When they reached the end, they had nowhere else to go. Perhaps ten minutes of silence passed before Charles found the words he had been searching for.

“I understand.”

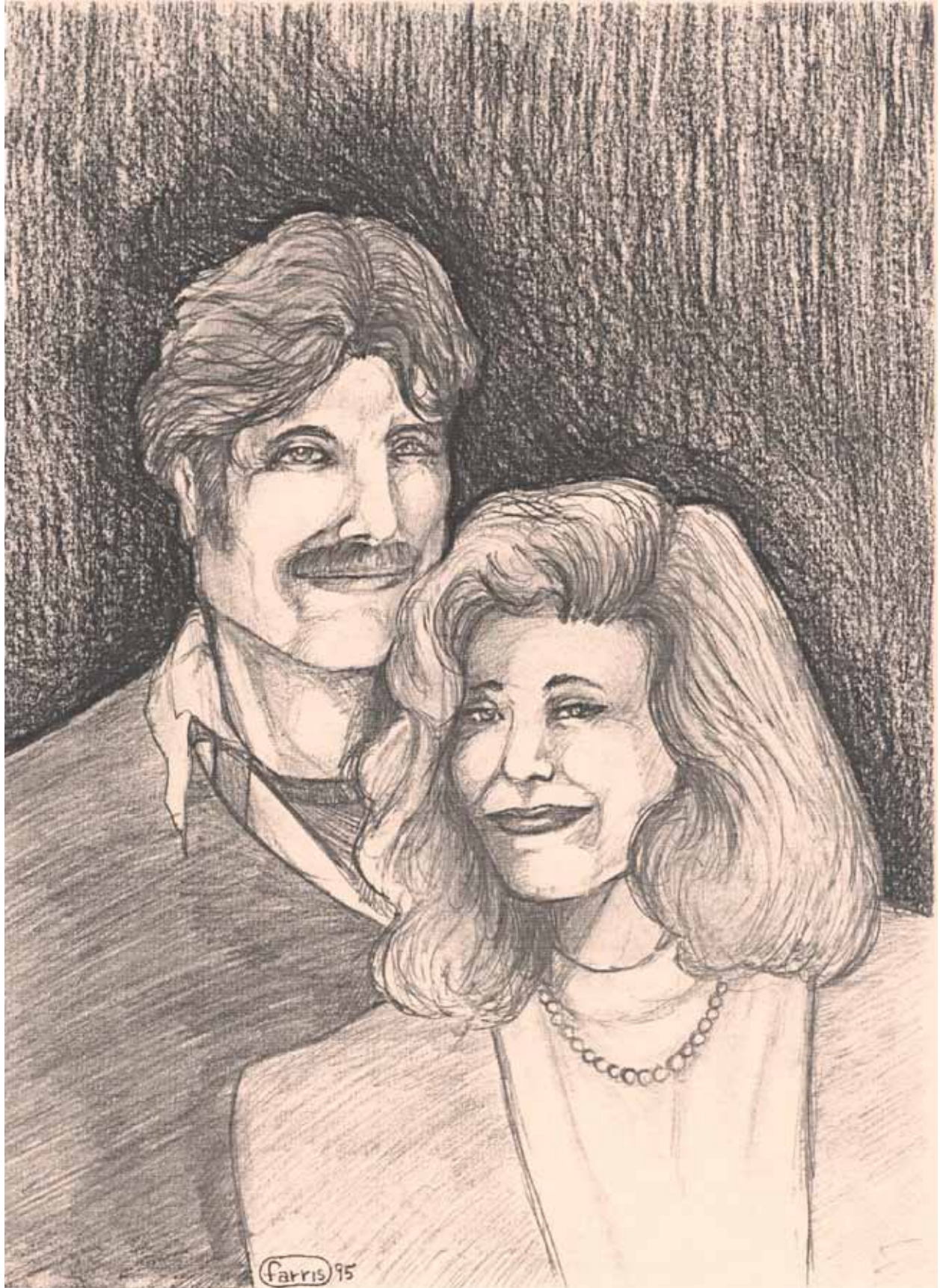
“What!” was Vincent’s shocked reply.

“I understand what happened.”

“But I promised. I promised,” he repeated dejectedly.

“You did everything you could, Vincent. Catherine explained the circumstances to us years ago. And it wasn’t your fault. The bond was gone. You couldn’t find her. You tried. You did everything you could.”

“But I promised you. I can still recite the words: ‘Please know this. That I will protect Catherine, watch over her, and love her until my last breath.’ And I broke that promise,” Vincent stated, his head falling forward and his great shoulders slumped with the weight of his guilt. “She



led me from the darkness. She sacrificed everything, and I let her die.” With that final word he broke down, sobs wracking his mighty chest.

Charles stepped toward him, placing a hand on each shoulder and pressed until Vincent raised to his gaze. “It wasn’t your fault.”

For a long minute Vincent struggled to gain control of his emotions.

Guiding him to a bench, Charles stated, “Here, sit. Let’s talk about guilt. I carried a lot of it around with me for a long time. Caroline was sick for many years, and we hid it from Cathy. We thought it was best. And despite the services of the best doctors money could buy, I still couldn’t save my wife. And then, suddenly, my little girl didn’t have a mother and she wasn’t prepared. Neither was I.

“For a long time I grieved for myself, neglecting Cathy’s needs. When I finally realized what I was doing, it was almost too late. My daughter barely knew me. So I spent the rest of our lives trying to make it up to her.”

Vincent had now assumed his all-too-familiar role from his Tunnel life, that of confidante -- his own problems and guilt set aside for the time being.

“When Cathy was missing for those ten interminably long days, I blamed myself,” Charles continued.

“But that wasn’t your fault,” Vincent interjected.

“No, it wasn’t. But that didn’t stop me from accepting the blame anyway. I was afraid that my money hadn’t been able to save Caroline, and now it might not be able to find Cathy. But I tried. And when she returned, I was thankful; but I didn’t know who was responsible. I wish then I had known you, so that I could have thanked you for saving my daughter’s life. But Cathy knew that I wasn’t prepared for ... you know -- so she spared me ... and you ... the painful experience.”

Vincent only nodded.

“And even after she came back to me, I blamed myself for pushing her into corporate law -- yet I tried to hold her in that life I had chosen for her nonetheless. But she had the courage to follow her heart. Now she has told us that was what you had taught her those ten days when she was missing. You showed her that she had the strength.

“You were very brave to come to my hospital room that night. And I heard every word you said. About the secret that you and Cathy shared and the sacrifices she had made. But I also heard her words, Vincent. She said she was happy, and I knew that you were the reason. It made it so much easier for me to go -- knowing Cathy had someone who loved her.”

“And I do love her. With all my heart. And I will spend eternity trying to make up to her ... to you ... for my failure.”

“No, Vincent. It’s over. You have to let go of the guilt.”

Vincent only bowed his head in silence.

“When Cathy first arrived in Elysion, she came to me with her guilt. She felt she had let me

down by not being there to take over the firm. Felt her absence may have caused my stroke. The truth was, after she left, I realized corporate law wasn't everything. I took time for other things -- the theater, travel, old friends. The stroke was just the signal that it was time for me to come home ... here ... to Caroline."

As Vincent locked his deep-blue gaze with Charles' softened gray one, he listened intently.

"It's time, Vincent, for you to come home ... here ... to Catherine and to your family." After a long pause, Charles clapped Vincent on the shoulder and, standing, announced, "Come on, I'm starved. Let's eat."

The return to the house was a much more comfortable walk than the one that had preceded the heartfelt conversation.

As Vincent and Charles entered the greatroom, they paused. Catherine and Caroline were deeply into their discussion. As their men approached, both women rose and were welcomed into grateful embraces.

"Is everything all right, Charles?" Caroline asked in a trembling voice.

"Fine. Everything's fine. Right, Vincent?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, Charles," he corrected with a rather self-conscious smile.

Relieved, Catherine drew him down beside her on the love seat they had occupied earlier. "Vincent, I was just telling Mother about your rose."

Unconsciously his hand encircled the pouch containing the ivory token as Caroline and Charles resumed their seats.

"The night I gave it to Vincent, Mother, I explained to him how you had told me to hold the rose whenever I was frightened and know that you were thinking of me."

At this memory, Caroline's hazel eyes grew misty and she smiled while unconsciously squeezing Charles' hand. He, too, was enjoying the memories of their past time together.

"Until Vincent came into my life," Catherine continued, "I had never truly known how it felt to be connected to someone."

"Oh, Cathy, that's beautiful. And, Vincent, I'm so glad that you came into our daughter's life. Welcome to Elysion. Welcome home."

CHAPTER 9

"Good morning," she whispered as she placed a kiss into the sensitive spot beneath his ear.

Sleepily rolling over and pulling her down beside him on the patchwork quilt, he returned

her morning kiss with a playful peck on the end of her nose. "Catherine, what time is it? Why didn't you wake me?"

"You were sleeping so deeply, I didn't have the heart. You had a very tiring day yesterday. The tour, and then, unexpectedly meeting my parents. You needed the rest."

"Yes, I suppose I did. Your world ... this ... our world is so different. I am adjusting rather slowly, I'm afraid."

"Actually, I think you are doing marvelously well," she countered, nuzzling his neck. For a long time they lay together, watching the play of the rising sun turn the worn quilt into a kaleidoscope of colors.

"And what adventures have you planned for us today?" Vincent teased. "Or do you plan to hold me captive here until I wither away from lack of nourishment?"

"Oh, Vincent, I'm sorry," she answered bolting upright in their bed. "Of course, you must be hungry. It's almost ten o'clock. You're used to getting up early and eating one of William's hearty breakfasts. What can I get for you?"

"Relax, Catherine. I was only teasing you," he answered pulling her back into his arms.

Turning to gaze into his magnetic blue eyes, she whispered, "I want you to be happy here."

Squeezing her tighter, he explained, "I am, Catherine. Happier than I have ever been in my entire life. I love you."

"And I love you, Vincent."

As they lay contentedly in each other's arms, an insistent growl intruded on the quiet. Although they each blamed it on the other, obviously someone's stomach was tired of waiting for breakfast!

"How about fresh strawberries and grapes, blueberry muffins and tea on the terrace?" Catherine suggested. "It's quick, and I'm starved!"

"Sounds perfect to me," Vincent answered as he rose from their bed, donned the soft terry robe lying on the chair beside the bed, and padded toward the kitchen.

"Wait for me," she called, grabbing her own robe and following him into their other compromise of modern conveniences.

+++

"The sun feels so warm today. We should take advantage of it. It won't be long before cold weather will be here and we'll be forced to stay inside." After a short pause, Catherine announced, "I have a wonderful idea. Let's go horseback riding."

Vincent just looked at her.

"Unless you don't want to," she offered in response to his silence.

"No, it's not that, Catherine. Well, I don't know how to ride. I think I would like to get to know Sir Lancelot a little better before we attempt riding."

“That’s a great idea! We can start by letting you feed and curry him. Then you could just try sitting on his back. Get better acquainted.”

“Curry?”

“Yeah, that’s what they call brushing a horse.”

“Oh.”

+++

“Now, hold the reins in your left hand. That’s right. With that same hand, hold onto the front of the saddle. Put your left foot in the stirrup. Then, swing your right leg over the back.”

As Vincent followed her directions, Catherine continued her encouragement. “Let Sir Lancelot know that you are there, but don’t put too much pressure on his sides. And don’t hold the reins too tight. That’s great! How does it feel?”

“Strange. Yet, interesting. I can sense his acceptance of the role he plays in our partnership. He is not subservient to me as his rider. No, he is too proud for that. Instead, it is like a kinship,” Vincent answered with an awed expression.

“Yes, you’re right, Vincent. I just knew you would be a natural for this. Now, sit up a little straighter but relaxed, not stiff. Hold this rein in your left hand and this one in your right. When you want him to stop, you pull gently on both reins. When you want him to go right, pull the right rein -- left, pull the left one.”

“That seems simple enough!”

“It is. Now, when you want him to go, just make a sort of clucking sound, like this.”

At the sound Catherine made, Lancelot stepped out and Vincent’s face was a mixture of excitement and confusion. “What do I do now?”

“Just ride, Vincent. Relax and try to feel the horse -- move with him. I’ll be right there!”

As Catherine bounded onto Lady Guinevere’s saddle and maneuvered the mare alongside Vincent and Sir Lancelot, her face showed the delightful knowledge that she and Vincent would have many enjoyable evenings riding the nearby countryside.

+++

“That was great for a first ride,” she exclaimed as they each brushed their own horse.

“It was a remarkable experience. Thank you for teaching me.”

“No, thank you. For being such a wonderful pupil. I just knew with your natural grace and balance that you’d have no trouble learning to ride.”

Blushing at her words, Vincent lowered his head to the task of brushing Lancelot.

He is still embarrassed by my praise, Catherine thought as she vigorously applied strokes to Lady. Well, he’s just going to have to get used to it, she decided silently.

“I have a great idea! Let’s ride over to see Margaret. Her cottage is only a short distance

and it's too beautiful to go inside yet."

"All right, Catherine. I would welcome a visit with Margaret. But I think perhaps we should take the buggy."

"But you rode beautifully, Vincent, and we can take our time. It's not very far ..." Suddenly, she remembered her own first ride and realized that he was probably a little saddlesore. "Perhaps you're right, Vincent. I'm a little, uh ... tired myself," she stated with an impish grin.

Gratefully, Vincent again bent his head to his task of grooming the magnificent black stallion.

+++

"This is the cottage where Father will be reunited with Margaret," Catherine said as they reined up in front of a field-stone structure very similar to their own. Catherine's feet barely touched the ground when the big, wooden front door squeaked open and Margaret bustled down the steps to welcome them. Gathering them each into an arm, she pulled them into an exuberant embrace.

"Oh, Catherine ... Vincent. It's so good to see you. I have been frantically trying to finish the chamber. He's coming. He's coming soon, and I'm not ready. Mr. Johnson says the wrought-iron railing should be in tomorrow, and Sven Timmons and Jack Norton are coming over to finish putting up the spiral staircase. I've found the perfect globe and Michele, that sweet girl at the antique shop, located a little brass cannon almost identical to the one Jacob had sitting on his desk. I know I haven't nearly enough books -- not like he has in the Tunnels. But it's been so difficult to get everything ..."

"Relax, Margaret. We're here. Let's go inside, and perhaps Vincent can suggest some finishing touches," Catherine said patting the older woman on the back.

"Yes, yes, do come in. I'm so excited. I didn't mean to leave us all standing out in the front yard."

As Margaret hurried up the steps, Vincent asked, "When is Father arriving?"

"Come in. Sit down."

As Vincent and Catherine sat in two rather large, overstuffed velvet chairs, Margaret continued, "I'm not certain. Catherine, you know how these things are. You're told that the Reuniting time is getting near. And then you wait! I received the news over a week ago, so it could be any day!"

"Oh, Margaret, I'm so excited for you." Claspng Vincent's hand across the small, octagonal mahogany table between their chairs, Catherine stated more to Vincent, "I remember exactly how it feels to be waiting for someone you love."

As they stared adoringly into each other's eyes, Margaret whispered, "I know you do."

After a long, silent moment, Vincent and Catherine suddenly realized they had been lost in thought. "I'm so sorry, Margaret," she stated, reluctantly pulling her gaze from his.

"Don't be sorry, dear. I'm sure Jacob and I will enjoy some very similar longing gazes -- as

soon as he gets here!”

As the laughter died on her lips, the seriousness engulfed her face and she returned to the problem at hand. “I do worry about Jacob, you know. Whether he will like this place. What he will do here. Agnes Smyth has been teaching me chess, so Jacob and I will have something in common. You know we didn’t have much time together.

“Margaret, I’m certain that you and Father will have many things in common. You did not seem to have any problem filling the days when you came Below,” Vincent reminded her.

“No, those seven days were the happiest of my life! It was so wonderful having him show me his world.”

“And I’m sure that Father will be equally happy having you show him Elysion.”

“And the chamber looks wonderful, Margaret,” Catherine stated as she looked around. “I like the way the living area is sunken. Those steps lead to the kitchen, don’t they?”

Nodding, Margaret pointed to the balcony, “And the bookshelves for the loft are ready to be installed as soon as the staircase is secure.”

“It’s perfect. I know Father will love it -- as he does you,” Vincent said rising and engulfing the distraught woman in a reassuring embrace. “Now, sit down and try not to worry. Everything will be all right.”

After seating her in the large, wooden chair behind the desk, Vincent returned to his chair next to Catherine.

“I’m so happy you are both here. I’ve needed someone to talk to, and you two know Jacob much better than I. Back in 1951, when we were first married, he was so handsome and I just knew that everything was going to be perfect. Then, the horrible accusations, the committees, the court, the newspapers. When he was blacklisted, I should have stood by him. I wanted to -- I knew he was innocent, but I just didn’t have the strength.”

“Margaret, it’s over ... you don’t have to ...” Catherine pleaded.

“No, let me finish. I need to say this,” she said, emphatically motioning Vincent and Catherine back to their seats. “When it became painfully obvious that Jacob was going to be publicly disgraced, my father sent me away to Paris. He had the marriage annulled, but I didn’t really fight him. In fact, I didn’t even blame him very much. I just took the easy way out.

“When I was Below for those seven wonderful days, Jacob and I talked. He was wonderful! He told me that he had forgiven me years ago. And it was then that I finally was able to forgive myself. But I felt the need to tell the two of you ... what happened ... and that Jacob and I had made peace with the past.”

“And it is just that, Margaret -- the past. And the future is here, in Elysion. It is your opportunity to be with Jacob -- a chance to fulfill your destiny,” Catherine said, looking knowingly at Vincent.

“Yes, and I can hardly wait for him to arrive. But then I start thinking about this

place, the way things are here. And I worry whether he will be content. Did you know, Vincent, that there are no doctors here? There will be no need for his medical services -- no one ever gets sick. Whatever will he do?"

"I'm sure he'll have plenty to do," Catherine interjected. "My father was a corporate lawyer, and we certainly have no need for his services here either. There are no courts, no DA's office -- but I'm finding plenty to occupy my time. Especially since Vincent has arrived!" Catherine stated with an impish grin.

"You're probably right. I'm just worrying over nothing. But..."

"No buts, Margaret," Vincent stated emphatically as he rose from his chair. Offering one hand to Catherine and the other to Margaret, he announced, "Now, let's get this chamber ready for the Reuniting!"

CHAPTER 10

A distantly familiar voice drew Vincent from a deep sleep. It was Catherine's voice. He hadn't heard her sing since the night she had sung the lullaby to Ellie ... No, he would not spoil their time together with sad thoughts from the past. This was a time for new beginnings. What was that she was singing?

Donning his thick terry robe, he padded into the kitchen. On silent feet, he approached suddenly engulfing her from behind in a warm embrace and nuzzling his nose into the soft folds of her neck.

"Oh, Vincent, you startled me. Your nose is cold!" she squealed, turning into his embrace. "I hope my singing didn't wake you."

"As a matter of fact, I'm very glad it did. Do you intend to let me sleep away every glorious morning?"

"You need your rest," she said rising on tiptoe and planting a kiss on his raw-silk stubbled chin. "We have a busy day ahead of us," she said in a more somber tone. "Come on, help me cut up these strawberries while the waffles are cooking."

As he fell to the assigned task, Catherine unconsciously returned to the tune he had heard upon waking.

"What is that song? It's not one that I've heard before."

"I'm not surprised you haven't heard it. It's rather modern compared to the music of the Tunnels. I have a pretty extensive library of tapes. I don't think I pointed out the music shop when we toured the town. It's farther down the street, past the park. Anyway, I have been trying out a lot of different kinds of music since I've been here. I'll have to introduce you to some of the more modern stuff. Some of it's great.

“The one I’ve been singing this morning is a favorite of mine; it’s by Whitney Houston. It goes like this,” she said starting to sing in a deliberately clear voice.

*I used to cry myself to sleep at night
But that was all
Before he came
I thought love had to hurt to turn
out right
But now he’s here
It’s not the same
It’s not the same
He fills me up
He gives me love
More love that I’ve ever seen
He’s all I’ve got
He’s all I’ve got in this world
But he’s all the man that I need*

As the meaning of the words began to penetrate, Vincent’s eyes misted with grateful tears. Snuggling beneath his robe, she rested her head on his golden-haired chest and hugged him fiercely. Leaning back and looking longingly into his eyes, she continued her song.

*And in the morning when I kiss his
eyes
He takes me down
And rocks me slow
And in the evening when the moon
is high
He holds me close
And won’t let go
He won’t let go.*

Scooping her up in his arms, Vincent carried Catherine to their bed. She was all the woman he needed, and he needed her very much right now.

+++

“Oh my God, Vincent. Something’s burning!”

“The waffles!” They shouted in unison rushing to the kitchen.

“Well, these certainly aren’t fit to eat,” Catherine stated, holding up a waffle-shaped object that resembled a block of charcoal.

“The strawberries seem to be fine,” Vincent said, picking up the knife he had abandoned and resuming his task of cutting.

“I’ll get the mix and make some more waffles. It’ll only take a few minutes.” Passing him on the way to the refrigerator, she whispered in his ear, “It was worth it.”

“It most certainly was,” he answered with a shy grin before bending his head to the task of slicing the fruit.

After finishing their breakfast, Catherine led Vincent onto their balcony-like porch. The view was absolutely nothing like the one from her New York City apartment, and the porch was only a few steps from the ground instead of eighteen stories, but she hadn’t been able to resist having one when she had designed the cottage.

As they were seated in the porch swing, his arm extending behind her and her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, she began, “I have something I need to tell you.”

“I know,” he said with a tremor in his voice. “I feel it.”

“Yes, of course you do. And you can also feel how uneasy I am with this subject. Right?”

“Yes.”

“There are many people here in Elysion. Many people I want you to meet. Many people who want to meet you ... who have been waiting a very long time to meet you. And ...”

A long silence filled the air.

“Tell me, Catherine,” he said pulling her tighter to his side. “There isn’t anything we can’t discuss.”

“I know that, Vincent. But this is very difficult. I’m not sure what to say, how to tell you. I ...”

“Just say what is in your heart, Catherine. We have been through too much for there to be anything we can’t face -- together.”

“Yes, Vincent. Together. We will face this together. The people I want you to meet ... well ... they’re your parents.”

“My what?”

“Your mother and father, Vincent. They are here, in Elysion, just like my parents.”

“My parents? You know my mother and father?”

Abruptly, he rose from the swing, releasing her, and began to pace the length of the porch. Back and forth. Back and forth. The pacing continued until she thought she would go mad.

“How, Catherine? How is it that you have come to know ... my parents? How?” he begged.

“They have been here for a very long time,” she answered rising from her chair and going to him.

“They were friends of my parents. When I first came to Elysion, Mom and Dad showed me around, and gradually they introduced me to everyone. Your parents invited mine to a party, and they asked me to go along. That was the first time I met them. But it was years later that I realized why I was so comfortable with your father. He, too, is tall and muscular. His hair is about the same color as yours, but he wears it much shorter and he has a bushy beard. But the most striking resemblance is his eyes -- they are a deeper blue, but they reflect the same compassionate understanding that yours do.”

“Does he ... does he look ...?” Collapsing into one of the chairs next to the balcony rail, Vincent broke down and cried.

Quickly kneeling in front of his chair, Catherine clasped his hand and squeezed reassuringly. As his tear-streaked face appeared from the curtain of his hair, she finished his question. “No, Vincent, he doesn’t look like you. Similar, but not nearly as beautiful!”

“Then how? Why?” Vincent asked in an emotion-filled voice. “How did I come to be like this? My mother? Is she?”

“No.”

“Then, how?”

“Perhaps it would be best for them to explain. I have heard the story, first from my parents and then from yours. But I really think it would be better for you to hear it directly from them.”

Nodding, Vincent rose, pulling Catherine to her feet and into his trembling embrace. “I will trust your judgment in this matter, Catherine. But, please ...”

Sensing his need, she reassured him before the words could be spoken, “I will be there with you. We will face this together. But I want you to know that they wanted you. They did not abandon you. And they have been anxiously awaiting the time when they could see you and tell you.”

It was all too overwhelming for Vincent to comprehend. Grasping his hand, she led the stunned man from the balcony. Woodenly, he followed Catherine inside where she gathered their cloaks. As she held his out, he took it and just stood staring at the folds of woolen fabric hanging from his hand. Shrugging into her own cloak, Catherine took Vincent’s from his loose grasp and placed it about his shoulders. As the heavy fabric enveloped him, his gaze met hers.

“I’m sorry, Catherine. I ...”

“It’s perfectly understandable, Vincent. This has come as a big shock to you. I have agonized



over how to tell you about your parents, but I just could not come up with a good way. I didn't want to spring them on you as I did my own parents. I wanted to prepare you in some way. But ..."

"It's quite all right. I understand how difficult this must have been for you," he said pulling her close against his side.

"I'm not worried about myself. It's you I'm concerned about, Vincent. And it will be all right."

Silently they walked arm in arm toward the barn.

+++

As Catherine reined in Nellie, the wagon creaked to a halt just within sight of a small, wooden house. Sitting on the ridge overlooking the home of his parents, Vincent panned the view slowly. The cottage was painted white with cornflower blue wooden shutters and a front door that matched. The neatly trimmed, grassy front yard was encircled by a tidy picket fence, and the flower beds still contained a few blooms that had not yet fallen to the increasingly colder weather. Through the big picture window, Vincent could see the flickering light from a fireplace and shadowy images of the room's furniture, but no evidence of the people who lived inside.

Turning his gaze to meet hers, he uttered softly, "I'm frightened, Catherine."

"I know. I can feel it," she answered, encircling his waist tightly in a reassuring hug and laying her head against his chest. She could feel the thudding of his heart so strongly against her cheek that she pulled away slightly and looked into his apprehensive blue gaze. "We don't have to do this today, you know. It can wait. Perhaps tomorrow..."

"No," he interrupted. "Today. I must know today." Realizing his tone had been overly harsh, he immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I didn't mean to speak so..."

"I understand. You don't have to apologize to me. I know what a shock it was seeing my parents for the first time. They were the ones who met me when I arrived in Elysion. But this meeting is much different -- much more difficult. You have every right to be nervous. They are expecting us and I'm sure they are just as anxious to have this first meeting as you are."

As they rode toward the distant cottage, Vincent asked, "Is this a recreation of their former home?"

"No, this is a house that your mother always wanted to live in," Catherine replied, glad to have some small talk to fill the time. "They lived in a tiny walk-up apartment in the Bronx. Your mother arrived first, and she chose not to have their apartment recreated, but instead to have their dream house built. They had always talked about leaving the city and going to live in the country. You know, the city dweller's idea of the ideal place to live -- an ivy-covered cottage with a white picket fence!"

For some reason, this appealed to Vincent, and a glimmer of a smile touched his eyes.

"And my father. When did he arrive?"

"About five years after Eleanor arrived, she and Douglas had their Reuniting."

“Eleanor. Douglas.” Vincent repeated the names, trying to comprehend that he would soon be meeting the two people who lived in the little white house they were now approaching. And that these two people were his real parents. The halting of the wagon jolted him from his deep concentration, and panic rose in his throat threatening to choke him.

Sensing his rising fear, Catherine tried to reassure him, but he only sat stiffly beside her in the wagon, staring at the blue front door of the tiny house. Patting his hand, she tried to bring him out of his paralyzed state by requesting, “Would you help me down, please?”

“Of course. I’m sorry,” he answered, quickly jumping from the seat of the wagon and rushing to offer his assistance.

She knew him well. No matter how upset he was or what his problems were, the needs of others had always taken precedence over Vincent’s own. As he turned to face the house, Catherine slipped her arm around his waist and whispered, “I’m here with you. It will be all right.”

As they walked up the worn wooden steps, the door slowly opened, and Vincent froze. The couple framed in the doorway appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties. The man was as Catherine had described him earlier, about his own size and build with blond hair barely touching his ears and collar and a heavy beard of a slightly darker shade. He was wearing a heavy woolen sweater, corduroy jeans, and roughened-leather boots. But his eyes were what drew Vincent’s attention. They were set in a ruggedly handsome face, at a slight slant and with a bushy arch of brows crowning them. Their color was a deep shade of blue, but it was none of the physical aspects that locked their gaze. The moment he looked into his father’s eyes, Vincent felt more at ease.

Silently suspended by the intensity of their meeting, the two couples stood for what seemed like a long time. Reluctantly Vincent pulled his gaze from that of his father to take in the tall, angular woman who was his mother. Her face seemed hauntingly familiar, yet it bore no resemblance to his own. She had short, curly auburn hair and vibrant green eyes. She was dressed in a blue cotton dress with a starchy-white apron tied around her tiny waist. Her face was rather plain, but her gentle soul reached out and touched Vincent’s with the first touch of a mother’s love.

As he watched in amazement, he saw the tears well up to cloud the sparkle of her eyes and trickle one by one down her pale cheeks. “My son,” she whispered in a trembling voice. And as she took one tentative step toward him and extended her arms, Vincent hesitantly offered his calloused palms to receive her frail, shaking hands. At that moment he felt the first tear course down his own cheek.

“Mother?”

“Yes, Vincent,” was her earnest reply. “And this is your father,” she stated simply, drawing her husband into the tearful reunion. Douglas clasped his son’s shoulder with one mighty hand while he gently drew his other arm about his wife’s slender shoulders. At this gesture, Vincent turned his eyes to meet Catherine’s happy expression. Placing one hand on Vincent’s shoulder and the other over his mother’s hand, which was still resting in Vincent’s palm, Catherine completed the circle.

Another few minutes passed. A loud whistling noise broke through the intensity of the occasion. “Oh, my, that’s the teakettle. Come inside. Please. I’ll make tea. We have so much we

need to say to you, son,” she said lovingly as she clasped his hand and drew him toward the door. “Catherine, it’s so good to see you again. Douglas, the door.”

Her words jolted him into action, and as Eleanor drew Vincent through the doorway, Douglas guided Catherine to follow.

A short hallway led them past an archway that opened into the living room. This was the room Vincent had glimpsed through the large picture window. A fire was blazing in the weathered-brick fireplace and several sturdy, overstuffed chairs dominated the room.

“Let’s sit in the kitchen,” Eleanor said, leading them farther down the hallway and through another archway. As she rushed to the stove to silence the teakettle, Douglas gestured for Vincent and Catherine to be seated at the massive oak table. Pulling out one of the heavy dining chairs, Vincent seated Catherine and then settled into another which he had placed close beside hers. He needed her reassuring nearness.

Douglas placed a large tray containing the steeping teapot and four sturdy mugs in the center of the table and seated Eleanor and then himself across from Vincent and Catherine. Soon they were all self-consciously sipping the steaming brew in silence.

As Vincent looked around the large room, he felt himself relax slightly. There was an almost familiar feel of deliberate clutter. The counter tops were arrayed with various appliances and containers and every available surface seemed to house some obviously treasured object. “Your home is very ... comfortable. I feel ... welcome,” he continued hesitantly, not knowing exactly how to convey what he was feeling.

“Thank you, son,” his father answered, and noting Vincent’s startled reaction to the reference, he continued. “You are our son, Vincent. I realize this is all somewhat overwhelming, but I want you to know that your mother and I did not abandon you. We wanted you very much.”

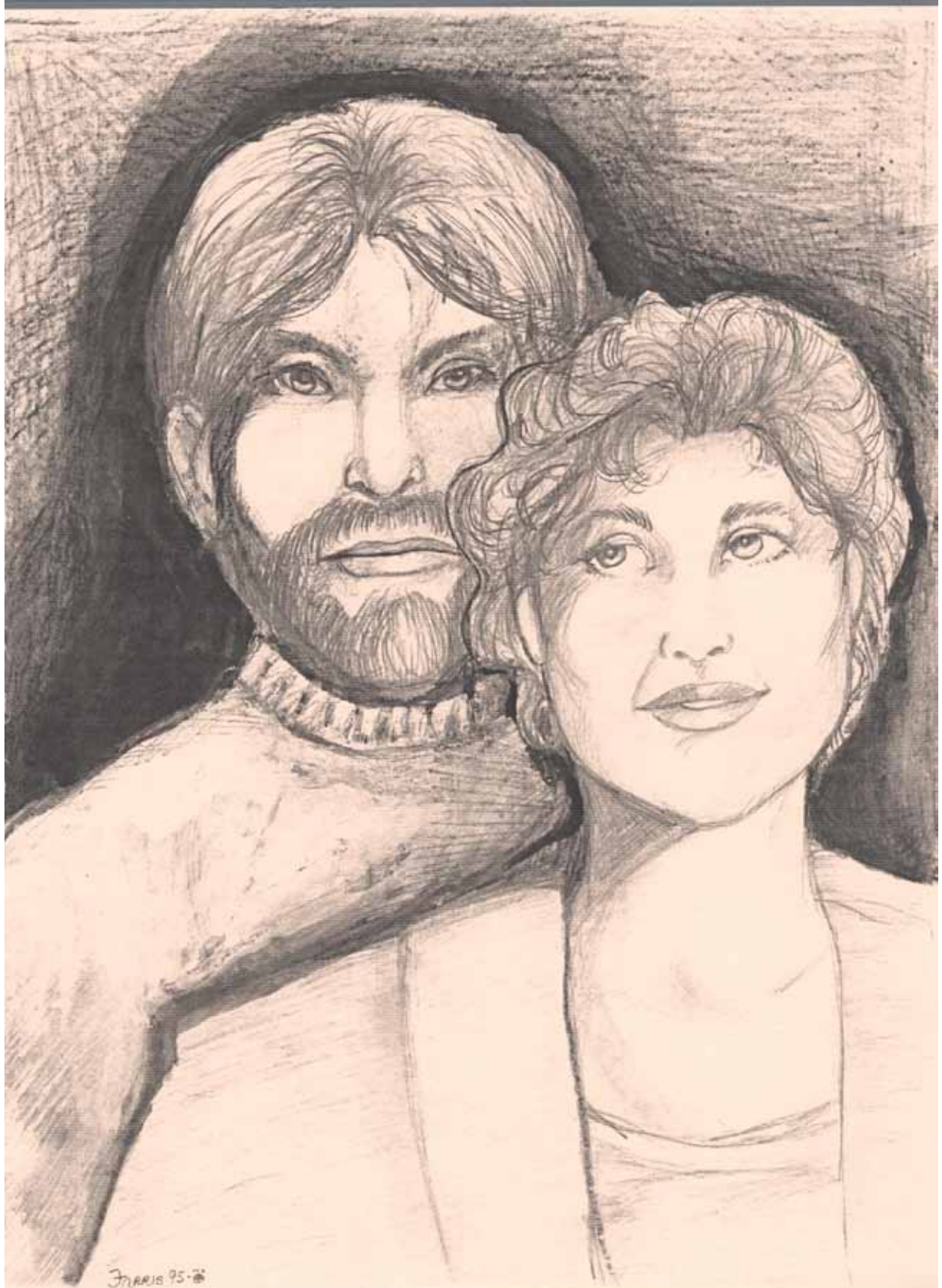
“Yes,” Vincent responded with a look at the woman seated close beside him. At her nod he continued. “Catherine told me. But how ... why? I have so many questions, and yet I don’t know where to begin or what to ask. Perhaps it would just be better if you could ... tell me. Tell me what happened, please.”

“All right. I will try,” his father answered. Douglas took a deep breath and looked lovingly at his wife. He covered the slender hand Eleanor had rested on the table with his own large one. When he turned his attention back to Vincent, he noticed his son was staring at his hand. The overhead light glinted off the thick golden hair covering the back of Douglas’ hand, and Vincent quickly compared it to his own fur-covered one.

“Yes, son, I think you must have inherited your large hands from my side of the family. And the blue eyes. My father’s were just the color of yours,” he stated with a smile.

“But you want answers,” he continued. “And we want you to know what happened.”

With a quick glance at Eleanor and an acknowledging nod from her in return, Douglas settled back in his chair slightly and began. “I met your mother when I was at New York University. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship, which took care of tuition and books. We didn’t have much money, so I couldn’t eat out very often; but every once in a while, when I just couldn’t stand



the idea of eating another salami sandwich in my room at the dorm, I'd go to this great restaurant in Little Italy, Antonio's. The prices were reasonable, and the place just felt like home. Besides, Elly was a waitress there," Douglas said with a loving smile for his wife.

"Her father had left when she was only twelve, and she and her brothers, Robert and Frank, and her sister, Marie, had all been forced to get jobs to help support the family. She'd been waitressing at Antonio's ever since.

"Well, she was nice to me, and we just seemed to get along right from the beginning. One night, I ate really slow. She was finishing up when I finally paid my check. I asked her if I could walk her home; and the next thing we knew, we were in love."

Another loving glance at his wife and the radiant answering look told Vincent and Catherine that this couple was still very much in love.

"We decided to wait to get married until Douglas graduated," Eleanor added. "But when that time came and we finally moved into our own tiny flat, you would have thought we were living in a castle. And it was to us. My family had shared a two-bedroom walk-up. My mother and sister and I shared one bedroom and my brothers had the other. Five of us and one bathroom!"

"And there were eight of us at home when I left," Douglas added. "So Elly and I felt like we were doing pretty well. I'd just started my internship at Jarrett Medical Institute. I was one of three junior researchers assigned to the team of geneticists headed by Dr. Nelson Victor. They were studying the neural effects of various chemicals on cell structure. I felt I had been extremely lucky to get that particular team assignment and was trying very hard to impress Dr. Victor. The work was unbelievably demanding, and we had been putting in long hours; but he never expected more from us than he was willing to give himself.

"When I arrived early one morning, he was already hard at work. We all sensed that we were very close to a breakthrough on this particular study, so we kept pressing on to finish the last batch of formula before leaving for the night. I noticed that Dr. Victor seemed particularly exhausted, but he refused to stop until we had finished.

"As he was transferring the last batch of the feline platelet solution into a glass beaker, it slipped from his hand, shattered, and the contents quickly spread across the counter. I was seated directly to his right; and, before I could push my stool away, the liquid had spilled over the edge and into my lap, soaking through my lab coat and into my trousers. I was quickly hustled into the lavatory, stripped of my clothing, and thoroughly doused with water for what seemed like hours. Several others had made slight contact with the formula, mostly on their hands and arms. We were all tested and kept under surveillance for several weeks, but none of us seemed to suffer any ill effects. Soon we became absorbed in our experiments, and forgot about the incident."

"I didn't know anything about the accident at the laboratory," added Eleanor. "I didn't understand all that scientific research, and Douglas didn't want me to worry. Besides, he hadn't felt it was important," she added with a tremor in her voice.

"It was shortly after that when I realized I was pregnant. We hadn't really meant to start a family so soon, and I was reluctant to tell Douglas. But when I finally did, he was just as happy and excited as I was."

“Yes, it was a wonderful time for us,” Douglas continued. “I had gotten the job as research geneticist with Dr. Victor’s team, which meant I would get a small raise in salary. That would make up for the fact that Elly wouldn’t be able to work after the baby arrived. We decided it was a good time after all to begin our family.”

“It turned out that I had a lot of unexpected problems, and I had to quit waitressing to keep from losing the baby,” Eleanor stated with a touch of sadness in her voice. “I had always been a little on the frail side. We just thought it was because I was working at the restaurant. But when I quit, the problems didn’t get any better. I had to stay in bed most of the time after my fifth month.

“One night we decided to go to Antonio’s. Douglas said it would probably be our last big night out before the baby was born. We had just ordered, when I started having these terrible pains. It was too soon, but ...”

She faltered and Douglas continued. “I called a cab, and we rushed her to St. Vincent’s Hospital. They called Dr. Alcott, but he was out of town so ...”

“Did you say Dr. Alcott,” Vincent interrupted. “Dr. Peter Alcott?”

“Yes, the very same,” Eleanor answered with a big smile. “Catherine has told us he was the doctor who delivered her. And he was supposed to be the one to deliver you. How I wish he had, because things would have been so very different.”

The remark caused Vincent to inhale as if he were going to say something, but he remained silent.

“Elly wasn’t even due for another month. Dr. Alcott had just seen her at the clinic the week before and had told her he was going to Boston for a conference but would be back in plenty of time. He was due back the next day,” Douglas added sadly.

“As I said, we had decided to go to our favorite restaurant in Little Italy -- you know, kind of a last big night out since I had been having so much trouble,” Eleanor continued. “I probably shouldn’t have gone out, but it was our anniversary ...”

+++

“Here, lemme help ya wid that door.” The short, stocky cabbie scrambled from behind the wheel, snatched open the back door, and supported the frail-looking pregnant woman while the frantic man crawled from the far side of the cab seat.

“Thanks,” he said, stuffing a couple of bills into the cabbie’s hand. Then picking his wife up, he ran for the entrance to St. Vincent’s Hospital and Medical Center. Just as he reached the bronze door, a sturdy-looking nurse snatched it open.

“Calm down, Mister. You look like you’re in worse shape than she is. Here, let’s lay her down. That’s it.” The last thing the man saw was his wife’s stretcher being propelled down a long hallway by several men and women all dressed in white.

The man spent a restless night in the waiting room, pacing and smoking and drinking coffee. Finally, morning came and with it the announcement that he was a father, and that mother and baby were doing fine!

"I'm sorry, but your wife is still sedated. You can't see her yet, but the nursery is down that hall and to the right," the stern nurse stated without emotion. As the man walked down the corridor and turned, he saw a wall with a big, plate glass window. As he peered into that room full of bassinets, a nurse appeared. She mouthed her question to him through the glass and he mouthed back his name. She then turned, walked to one of the bassinets, and tipped it up to reveal a tiny, wrinkled face peering from a pink blanket. They had a beautiful baby girl!

+++

"Have you seen her?" the woman asked, her tired, pale face contrasting sharply with her sparkling green eyes and vibrant auburn curls.

"Yes. She's beautiful. She looks just like you," her husband beamed.

"But she has your eyes -- so blue," his wife offered smiling.

+++

"What do you mean I have to get rid of him! He's just a baby! Can't we take him somewhere? He's alive! You can't expect me to just leave him out in the cold," the nurse frantically pleaded.

"If you want to keep your job, you'll do as I say. Put that ... thing ... in the trash by the back steps. He's half dead anyway," the doctor stated flatly. "Just look at him! He'll never make it through the night no matter what we do."

"How do you know! We should try..."

"How would you like to have someone present ... that ... to you and tell you it was your son! That you had just given birth to a ... creature. Those people don't deserve to be saddled with a monster for a child. And besides, they have a perfectly normal, beautiful baby girl. They'll never miss ... this ... this whatever it is. And with my luck they'd probably try to blame me for ... it ... somehow. My reputation ... I just can't risk having to deal with something like this right now."

As the terrified nurse stood holding the tiny mewling baby, tears ran down her cheeks. Before she could plead with him any further, the irate doctor snarled, "Do as I say or you'll never work in a hospital again!" With that statement, he strode from the delivery room, confident that his orders would be carried out.

+++

About an hour after she had gently placed the tiny, deformed baby on the trash pile, the young nurse was running back down the corridor of the hospital.

"I can't believe I did it," she wailed as she flung open the back door and flew down the steps.

"He's gone! Oh, my God, he's gone. They haven't taken the trash -- he has to be here!"

As she frantically searched through the hospital garbage, a small figure dressed in outdated clothes and clutching a bundle of rags beneath her cape disappeared into the shadows.

+++

"Please help me, Dr. Peter. Please," she wailed to her friend.

Peter Alcott had known Carrie since she was just a little girl. He had obtained a job for her as an aide at the hospital and then helped her get through nursing school. She had just graduated last month and seemed to be doing fine, until Dr. Beecham had been hired. Peter hadn't liked the new surgeon after he had caught him shaking one of the elderly patients. But when Peter had intervened, the steely-eyed Morris Beecham had shoved him against the wall and threatened to kill him if he interfered in his business again.

The distraught girl was sobbing so hard that Peter could barely understand what had happened.

"I didn't mean to hurt him. He's gone. Where could he be? What am I going to do?"

"Calm down, Carrie," Peter said soothingly. "I know you didn't mean to hurt anyone. It's not your fault. Dr. Beecham is the one to blame for this. He's intimidated everyone at this hospital, but he's not going to get away with this. We've got to go to the police."

"Oh, no. I can't. They'll put me in jail!"

"Not if you agree to testify against Dr. Beecham," Peter stated firmly.

"But he'll kill me! He said he would!"

"He's not going to kill you. I'll see to that. I have a friend at the 52nd Precinct, Sergeant Maxwell. He'll see to it that you get protection. If you agree to testify against Morris Beecham. Now, come on. Let's go see what my friend, Tony Maxwell, recommends. OK?"

As Peter put his arm around the frail, trembling shoulders of the girl, she whispered, "OK."

+++

"I know you're frightened, Carrie," said the police sergeant, "but I promise this doctor won't hurt you. We'll put you up somewhere -- with police protection -- until you testify. I can almost guarantee that the judge will let you plea bargain for a lighter sentence."

"Sentence! I'll have to go to jail!" The young girl turned pale and collapsed against Peter.

"Tony, isn't there anything you can do? She's just a child. I've known her all her life. Her father deserted them, and she's been taking care of her invalid mother for years. She's so good at care giving, that's why I suggested she go to nursing school. Her mother passed away about six months ago. She hasn't got anybody. She was frightened and this so-called doctor intimidated her into doing something she regrets. She went back, but the baby was gone."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can get Judge Williams to talk to her. If she cooperates, she'll probably get eighteen months probation."

Looking directly into Carrie's tearful gaze, Tony Maxwell's heart melted. He had a brand new baby at home. Little Joey. And he sure wanted to get this doctor put away before he killed somebody. He just couldn't imagine anyone ordering a newborn baby to be put outside with the freezing weather they'd been having lately. "So, kiddo, you gonna help me put this doctor away

so he can't hurt anyone else?"

"Yes, sir. I'll try."

+++

"But, your Honor. Judge Williams. The baby was so deformed he probably would not have survived the night anyway. That child is better off dead! You didn't see him -- it was awful. Those people didn't need to be saddled with a monster son."

"Bailiff. Take him away."

+++

"I know this is extremely difficult for you, but Sergeant Maxwell is doing everything he can to find your son." Peter gently placed a reassuring hand on Eleanor's shoulder.

As the frail, thin woman buried her head against her husband's chest, Douglas stroked her back and tried to calm her. "She's been frantic ever since you told us about the boy. We just can't believe this has happened. Why would that ... that monster ... think that he could make our decisions for us? Why didn't he let us decide what to do about the boy? How dare he presume that we would not want to be bothered by our own son -- no matter what kind of problems he had!"

"I can't answer those questions," Peter said sympathetically. I can only say that Dr. Beecham is behind bars where he belongs. When they started checking into his background, they found out he was wanted in three other states for questionable medical practices and that his license had been revoked. He'd been stealing drugs from the hospitals where he worked and selling them on the street. He won't be out for a very long time."

"Good," stated Douglas as he continued to comfort his wife.

"And you have Carrie Jennings to thank. If she hadn't come forward, we never would have known about your son and there would have been no chance of ever finding him. And Dr. Beecham would have still been in a position to continue hurting people."

"Yes, even though what she did was wrong, she's a very brave girl for admitting that she made a terrible mistake and then doing something to right it. What will happen to her?"

"She received a suspended sentence because of the extenuating circumstances, and Dr. Alcott got her a job in another state. She has a chance to start over, and I know she'll try to make something of herself."

+++

"She's so beautiful, Douglas." Eleanor was sitting in the tiny living room of their apartment, holding their lovely daughter. "And I love her so much. But ..."

"You have to stop torturing yourself, Elly. Everything possible is being done to find him. Sergeant Maxwell says they haven't closed the case. I know for a fact that he's been working on it when he's supposed to be off duty. He has a baby boy himself. He understands how we feel."

"Yes, I know. It's just so unfair. Not knowing where he is. Whether he's being cared for. If he's hungry ... or sick ..."

"I know, darling. I know."

"Perhaps ..."

"Now, Elly. We've talked about this before. And you said you understood. We just can't risk having any more children. We were lucky to have a perfectly normal baby girl. Our son wasn't so lucky. And we don't know what might happen... with the genetic alterations ... and ..."

"I know, dear. It's just that I wish it all could have been different. I wish our son was here with us -- no matter what he looked like. We would have loved him. But we never got the chance."

+++

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear DeeDee. Happy birthday to you."

"Now, sweetie, blow out the candles. No, don't! Douglas! Come help me! Not in your hair."

"My goodness, aren't we a mess!" As Douglas lifted his daughter from her high-chair, Eleanor began cleaning up the disaster that had been her first birthday cake.

+++

"I can't believe she's gone! I just can't face it."

The tall, thin man with the angular but kind face offered his condolences to the large blond man standing beside the grave of his wife -- his tiny daughter held lovingly in his arms. A tragic automobile accident had taken away his Eleanor.

"It's just not fair, Peter. First my son -- now this. And DeeDee's only a year old. Just last week Elly was..." He began to sob and Peter took the baby as he guided his distraught friend toward the waiting car.

+++

"Peter, do you think that it's wise, bringing a stranger down here when he really isn't in need of a place to live? Our world hangs in such a delicate balance. This man is suffering. Sometimes people who are in pain strike out. They hurt innocent people. I can't take a chance..."

"I understand, Jacob. But I think this place could be good for him. His spirit is deeply wounded. All I'm proposing is that I bring Douglas Below, introduce him to this wondrous world you have built here, let all of you get to know him. He's a research scientist -- he has a medical background. He could be of help here Below -- and he's in need of help. Life has dealt him more than he can cope with right now. I think it would be good for him to share in some happiness for a change."

"Very well, Peter, I'll bring it before the Council tomorrow night. If they have no objections, you can bring him Below -- say, Saturday."

"Saturday. That's perfect. I've got a shipment of antibiotics scheduled to arrive Friday. Douglas can help me bring them down. You won't be sorry, Jacob."

“We’ll see,” the older man answered with uncertainty.

+++

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a wondrous place. Like nothing you’ve ever seen. It’s impossible to describe it.”

“You’re pulling my leg, right Peter?”

Judging by the expression on his friend’s face, Douglas realized that Peter was completely serious. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“No, I’m not. But I have to ask you to swear that you won’t tell anyone about this place. Not anyone!”

“OK. I swear. But how long have you been helping these people? And how come you never told me about this place before?”

“Because there wasn’t any need.”

“Need?”

“Yes, Douglas, I think you need this place.”

“But I thought we were going to help them!”

“We are. But ... you’ll see.”

+++

“You know DeeDee is turning three next week. You think you could come to her party? It’s not going to be real fancy, just some of the neighbors. We don’t have any family left, you know, but she loves you. Kind of like an uncle?”

“I’d love to come to DeeDee’s party, Douglas. Next Saturday? I just hope Mrs. Wilkins doesn’t decide to have her baby then,” Peter said laughing. “You know, sometimes I wish I had gone into research! The life of a GP doesn’t allow you to make very many plans.”

+++

“Douglas, what brings you Below? Is Peter with you?”

“No, Jacob. Peter had to go out of town unexpectedly, and he asked me if I could deliver these supplies for him. I told him you probably were in need of a good chess lesson ...”

“Lesson, indeed. I’ll give you...”

At the sound of Douglas’ booming laughter, Jacob realized he was being baited. “Come on, Douglas, let’s get that game started before someone else finds out you’re Below. I hardly get to see you when you visit!”

+++

“You know, Peter, I’m really quite fond of Douglas.”

“Oh, really? Did you manage to beat him at chess when he came Below last weekend?”

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact I did!” Father answered, beaming with pride.

“I see!”

“No, seriously, Peter. He’s a good man. And I’m very happy that you convinced me to allow him to become a Helper.”

“I am too, Jacob. I think it has been good for your world, but it has also been good for Douglas.”

+++

“Who ... who was that?” Douglas asked as he watched Mary hurriedly bustle the three small boys down the corridor and out of sight.

“That was Mary,” Peter answered. “She’s taking Winslow and Pascal and ... Vincent ... to the bathing pool. From the looks of the mud all over them, I’d say they’ve been exploring the lower Tunnels again and have discovered a leak. I’m sure she’s notified Jacob, but perhaps we’d better mention it to him just in case.”

As they proceeded silently down the corridor, Peter was unconsciously holding his breath. When the expected question was not forthcoming, he began to relax, releasing it in a grateful sigh.

“Peter,” Douglas started and then fell silent again. After only a moment, Douglas placed his huge hand on Peter’s shoulder and turned the slighter built man to face him. “Was it him, Peter? Was it?” he asked again anxiously.

“Yes.” Peter’s answer was not much more than a whisper as the two men stood facing one another in the narrow tunnel.

“Why didn’t you tell me!” Douglas boomed in anger. “You mean my son has been down here all this time and you didn’t even see fit to share this bit of news with me. With me -- his father! What kind of a friend are you, anyway? I could love him, Peter. I don’t care what he looks like. I could raise him. I have a right ...”

“Yes, Douglas, you have a right. But what of that small boy? He has a right, too. A right to live -- in safety -- and to grow up. A right to be accepted for who he is, not rejected for his outward appearance. A right to a life that is as normal as it possibly can be ... for him. Vincent has a right, too!”

After allowing the enormity of the situation to sink in for a few minutes, Peter continued. “What was I to tell you? Here. Here’s the son who was taken away from you. Take him Above and introduce him to his fraternal twin sister. DeeDee is getting ready to start first grade. She could take her brother to school and help him get settled in. When you have the neighbors over for Vincent’s birthday party, they wouldn’t treat him any differently than they do your daughter. After all, he’s your son. Right? Douglas, just think about it. Is any of that really possible?”

When Peter did not receive a response, he placed his hands on the larger man’s shoulders and looked directly into his clouded blue gaze. “Is any of that really possible?” he restated slowly.

Dropping his head and sobbing, the big man managed a strangled “no” before he completely broke down.

+++

“We haven’t seen Douglas Below in a long time, Peter. Has anything happened to him?”

“Actually, Jacob, he took a transfer to a small laboratory in upper New York -- Rochester. He felt it would be a better place to raise his daughter.”

“Ah, yes. This city can be a cruel place,” Jacob answered with a touch of sadness in his voice. “A cruel place, indeed.”

“Especially for him,” Peter muttered so softly that his words went unnoticed by the older man sitting behind his battered wooden desk deep in contemplation of the past.

+++

“Douglas, is that you? It’s so good to hear from you. Where are you? How’s DeeDee?”

On the other end of the telephone line a strong steady voice assured his friend, Peter, that everything was going quite well. DeeDee was doing well in school and making friends, although she missed her Uncle Peter.

“I just had to call and ask about ... Vincent. How is he? Is he well?”

“Yes, Vincent is doing fine. He’s an avid reader -- fairly gobbles up books. And he’s getting taller.”

“Like his dad?”

“Douglas, you made the right decision. Vincent could not have survived Above. He would have been treated like a freak. Below, he is accepted. He is loved. And Jacob has been doing a very good job of being a ... father to the boy. It was ...”

“But I want to see him. To be with him. Peter, you can’t understand how painful it is, knowing he’s there and not knowing how he’s doing. Not watching him grow up. I look at DeeDee and I wish I could be there ... with my son. It’s worse than when we didn’t know where he was. Because then there was nothing we could do. But I could come back. We could move Below. I could just be ... his friend. He and DeeDee could grow up together.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“Yes, Peter. I think it is.”

“You can’t think it is, Douglas. You have to know. And would you be able to be around Vincent and not tell him you are his father? Would you be able to just be his friend? Or do you intend to tell him? And what would that do to Jacob? He is your friend, too.”

Silence.

“Douglas.”

"I'm here."

Silence.

"I'll call you back. Goodbye, Peter."

+++

"Peter, I have to see him! At least talk to him!"

"All right, Douglas. I'll speak with Jacob. Do you want me to tell him about Vincent, or ..."

"No, I'll do it when I get there. And thank you. Thank you for being my friend."

"Douglas. Are you bringing DeeDee with you?"

"No, not this time. She doesn't know anything about ... her brother. I didn't want her to go through what I was going through. Knowing she had a brother she could never meet. I just don't know. I need to take this one step at a time. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I shouldn't come at all. But I have to see him. Even if it is just one last time. I think if I come I'll know what to do. What will be right for ... all of us."

"If there's anything I can do, just ..."

"You already have, Peter. I'll let you know when I'll be coming."

+++

"Dr. Alcott?"

"Yes, speaking."

"This is Miss Brinkley of the Rochester Child Welfare Division of the Department of Social Services. We have just started processing a case that we hope you can help us with. Are you a friend of Douglas Bennett?"

"Yes, but what's this all about?"

"Are you not aware that he was killed last week in a fire at the Harrison Laboratory just outside of town?"

"My, God. No!"

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew. We found your name and telephone number on a pad beside his telephone when we went to pick up his daughter. We were wondering if you could tell us who is the next of kin so we can turn the child over to them."

"Her mother passed away over five years ago. I'm almost positive there isn't ..." A long pause and Peter continued. "Miss Brinkley, would you mind giving me your telephone number? I'd like to check on this, and I'll call you back as soon as I have the information."

"Certainly. That will be fine, Mr. Alcott."

+++

"But you've got to help me, Tony. This little girl is stuck up in Rochester all alone. Her

father was killed last week in a fire.”

“But what can I do, Peter? I’m just a Sergeant. I don’t know anything about child welfare.”

“Don’t you remember this case, Tony? Carrie Jennings turned state’s evidence against Dr. Morris Beecham. He threatened her into putting the baby into the trash behind ...”

“Oh, yeah,” he answered interrupting. “Sure. I remember. And now the little girl is caught in the system. Ok. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Tony. I knew you would help.”

“Yeah, sure. But no promises, OK?”

+++

“Jacob. Do you remember Douglas?”

“Of course. How is he. He moved to ...”

“Rochester. He was killed a couple of weeks ago.”

“How awful! Didn’t he have a little girl? Deborah or Denise or Diane or something ...”

“He called her DeeDee.”

“Yes, that’s it. What’s happened to DeeDee?”

“That’s why I’m here. She’s in the child welfare system and Tony Maxwell of the 52nd Precinct is trying to pull some strings to get her into the city. If he succeeds, would you ...”

“Of course, Peter. You know she would be welcome here!”

+++

“I’m sorry, Peter. It’s the best I could do. The Department of Social Services -- a Miss Brinkley to be specific -- informed me that they would only allow the child to be placed in a foster home that they approve. They handled the whole thing. There wasn’t anything I could do. They agreed to place her here in the city so that you would be able to visit her. But since you are not a relative, they wouldn’t even consider giving you the little girl.

“Where is she?”

+++

Hours had passed and the foursome had resettled themselves to the living room. Vincent and Catherine were seated in two big, overstuffed chairs on one side of the fireplace. His large hand was resting on the arm and her smaller one was periodically patting it reassuringly.

Vincent’s face showed the strain of the past he had just lived through in the telling of his life’s story by his parents. He was still in shock and desperately needed time to be alone and contemplate all that had just been told him.

Catherine’s face showed signs of the stress she shared with Vincent through their ever-strengthening bond. He needed to be alone, yet he didn’t want to hurt Douglas and Eleanor’s

feelings. They didn't yet know him as she did.

Douglas leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees and his hands clasped between them. A weariness had settled over him as the last of the tale had finally been revealed. Now he sat waiting for Vincent's response.

Eleanor was perched on the edge of her chintz-covered chair, wringing a large, white handkerchief in her shaking hands. Her face was tear stained and the strain of the last few hours was evident in her swollen eyes. Vincent had been so quiet. She didn't know what his reaction to their story had been. All she knew was that she loved this man who was her son, and she wanted a chance to make up for all the lost years.

A deafening silence hung over the room.

Finally, Eleanor could stand it no longer. "We love you, son," she sobbed.

Slowly, Vincent rose and, with a loving look at his beloved Catherine, he walked the few steps to stop in front of the chair where Eleanor was sitting. As he bent down, enveloping her trembling hands in his own, he uttered the one word she had waited all these years to hear.

"Mother."

Pulling her up into an emotion-filled hug, he extended his other arm to his father who immediately rose and joined his wife and son in an embrace of love and hope.

CHAPTER 11

The ride home had seemed quite long. Vincent had gone into a state of silent contemplation after they had left his parents. It had been too much for him to deal with all at once. Sensing his need for time, she had brought him to their home -- the familiar surroundings he had grown to love -- and then told him she must go and check on Margaret. Grateful for her understanding, he had embraced the time alone.

Several hours later, Catherine entered the cabin and noticed that Vincent was still seated in his large carved chair exactly as she had left him.

"How was Margaret? Is she well?" he asked, looking up from steepled fingers.

"Yes, she's fine. She is so excited about Father coming. She asked me again if we wanted to be there ... at their Reuniting."

"And I hope you told her how we feel."

"Yes, I told her we had discussed it and that we feel it should be a time shared just by the two of them. I remember our own first meeting, and I certainly wouldn't have wanted anyone else to have been there."

“Nor, I, Catherine,” Vincent stated with a shy smile. He realized he still was awed by the fact that they were here ... together.

“I’m anxious to see Father again,” Catherine stated when she sensed Vincent’s slight discomfort at her mention of their lovemaking that first night. “Even though we had our differences, I still cared about him. I’m excited about watching his reactions to Elysion ... and Margaret!”

“Yes, I know Father will be overwhelmed, as I was. It does take a lot of getting used to! But I have my own reasons for wishing to see Father. I left without really telling him goodbye. I think he understood -- right before I ... arrived, I felt his presence. Not as strongly as Jacob’s, but I sensed that he knew I was going to be with you and that he wished us well. If I had spoken with Father before leaving, I’m afraid he would have tried to convince me to stay. He would have felt the time wasn’t right ... that I should wait just a little while longer. But I knew, Catherine. I knew that it was time.”

“I understand you need to explain things to Father. But after he has been here with Margaret for a very short time, there will be no need for explanation. When I first arrived, I felt I had so many things that needed to be cleared up between my parents and I ...”

At the mention of her parents, Vincent had visibly stiffened. Obviously, he was not yet ready to discuss parents. She abruptly changed the subject.

“You know, Vincent. I’m anxious for Father to get here so he can tell us all about Jacob. Since you arrived, I am no longer connected to the Tunnel World. Of course, it’s worth it ... having you here; but, I do long for news of our son.

“Yes, I am especially anxious to learn of how my ... leaving has affected him. He is a very strong and courageous young man. He has an ominous task before him, especially with Father leaving also. But I had begun to relinquish the running of the Council meetings to Michael months before I left. He will be the new Elder Triumvir and Jacob will have, I’m sure, assumed the station of Mid Triumvir. I’d be curious to know who was chosen as Novice.”

At her questioning glance, Vincent continued, “Yes, I was not alone in my tasks. When Father began to turn his duties over to me, I suggested the Tunnel World had grown too vast for one man to shoulder the entire responsibility. I knew I would not always be there,” he finished with a rare smile.

“And I am so happy that you are here. I need you.”

“And I you, my love. I am certainly not unhappy that I am here. After all, Jacob is continuing to live out his own destiny.”

“Are you all right, Vincent?” Her question was all he needed to open the floodgates of his emotions. He had needed the time for solitary contemplation she had allowed him, but now he wanted to share his newfound feelings with the woman he loved.

“I think I’d like to talk about what has taken place today. I’m ... it’s very difficult to put into words.”

“That’s understandable, Vincent,” she said placing her hand on his shoulder as she stood beside him. “It’s all been quite a shock. Let’s get ready for bed,” Catherine whispered into his ear

as she placed a gentle kiss on his stubbled cheek.

The moonglow shimmering through the stained-glass window cast a softened aura around their Chamber. As they lay in their bed, Catherine snuggled into his side. Vincent began.

“I am still overwhelmed by what has taken place today. There are no words to truly describe how I am feeling, yet I want to share it with you!”

“I’m feeling it with you, Vincent,” Catherine answered. And it is exactly that -- indescribable!”

“Today I have met two strangers who are my parents and learned that a dear friend, Diana, is actually my fraternal twin sister! Indescribable is actually an understatement of how I’m feeling.

“I know you never knew her, but she is the reason our son had a chance to grow up in the Tunnels with me instead of being raised by that ...”

Interrupting, Catherine halted his words, not wishing to relive the horrors of the past. “I did know Diana -- through you. I felt your gratitude and ... I felt the confusion you experienced at the bond-like sensations you two seemed to share. I knew she was your twin sister, but I wondered to what you attributed those feelings.”

“Yes, Diana and I had a ... sense of something. And it was stronger than any connection I had experienced with another person -- except with you, of course,” he added affectionately. “It was nothing like the bond we share,” he emphasized by pressing his lips to her forehead.

“But Diana didn’t afford us very much time to try to understand our link. Her life and duties Above called her back. I sometimes could sense her contentment. Often she was in turmoil. But the connection was tenuous at best.”

“I, too, am very grateful to her, Vincent. She saved our son and she spared you the torture of having to kill.”

“Yes, Catherine. And she did it for both of us. Did you know she used your gun to kill him?”

“No, I didn’t know that, Vincent. But we both know that incredible things can happen. Perhaps her path will cross ours again. Who knows?”

“Perhaps. But that is only speculation. The reality is that I am here and I have been given the opportunity to know -- and love -- my parents. It is something I never expected.

“As I was growing up in the Tunnels, I felt loved. Certainly Father loved me as well as any man could hope to be loved. Especially since he was not my biological father. He was the only real father I ever knew. Until today.

“But there was always something deep inside of me that would not allow me to feel ... worthy ... of being loved.”

“Oh, Vincent. You, above everyone else I know, are most definitely worthy of being loved!” Catherine answered vehemently.

Kissing the top of her head and nestling her closer to him, he answered, “Perhaps you are just a bit prejudiced.”

"I don't think so, Vincent," she countered, stretching up to place a gentle kiss on his golden-dusted cheek and then settling back into his embrace.

"Your love, Catherine, was the beginning of the end of my aloneness. Of that empty feeling of despair that was my legacy. I thought I had been rejected by my own mother and father. How could anyone love me? But you did. Unconditionally. And the healing began."

She tipped her head up to smile into the face of the man she truly did love.

"Then there was our son. More proof of our love. And he loved me. He told me that if he had been able to pick any father, he would have chosen me. More evidence that I was worth loving. You know, small children are guileless.

"But today ... today has given me the healing release I needed to completely accept myself! Catherine, today I learned that I was not rejected by my parents. I was wanted!"

Through the bond she could feel the lifting of this burden from his soul -- and it was glorious!

"I truly believe that they would have chosen to keep me and love me -- had they been given that chance. But I also realize that the odds of my surviving in the world Above would have been small. Flashes of the haunted look in Charles' eyes, the treatment he received at the hands of his own brother, and the painful memories of being caged by Dr. Hughes, all remind me of how I would have been received in their world.

"Somehow, I can't help thinking that it was all meant to be. That my life Below shaped me into what I am today. And your life Above guided you to a tragedy that enabled us to meet. And when that opportunity was taken from us, somehow ... some way ... we were afforded another chance. Here."

"I believe you are right, Vincent. Who was it that said, 'Everything comes if a man will only wait'?"

"I'm not certain," Vincent answered with a shy smile. "But whoever it was, they were very wise."

CHAPTER 12

"You know this isn't necessary. We already share something that binds us together more constantly than any vows we could speak -- our bond. I have felt that we were joined in spirit from the moment I realized that I loved you," Catherine stated as she stood facing Vincent on their balcony. He had asked her to wear the same white dress she had worn at their Reuniting, and his request had meant more to her than he knew. She would treasure this dress even more now.

“But I’m glad that we decided to have this private ceremony. I want to borrow the words of Bernard Barton as I pledge my love to you.”

NOT OURS THE VOWS

*Not ours the vows of such as plight
Their troth in sunny weather,
While leaves are green, and skies are bright
To walk on flowers together.
But we have loved as those who tread
The thorny path of sorrow,
With clouds above, and cause to dread
Yet deeper gloom tomorrow.
That thorny path, those stormy skies,
Have drawn our spirits nearer;
And rendered us, by sorrow’s ties,
Each to the other dearer.
Love, born in hours of joy and mirth,
With mirth and joy may perish;
That to which darker hours gave birth,
Still more and more we cherish.
It looks beyond the clouds of time,
And through death’s shadowy portal;
Made by adversity sublime,
By faith and hope immortal.*

“Those words are so true. That was beautiful, Catherine. As are you,” he said smiling down at her as he took both of her hands and enfolded them in his own.

Catherine had chosen the outfit he wore. She and Myra had thought it would be perfect for the Grand Festival that the inhabitants of Elysion held each fall to give thanks for the blessings of the year. But it was just perfect for this unique celebration.

His shirt was a creamy ivory fastened with black onyx buttons. The sleeves billowed in soft folds, ending with large formal cuffs held in place by gold and onyx cufflinks. An ebony brocade vest and black worsted trousers complemented the shirt perfectly. With the slight breeze lifting his

golden blond hair away from his face, he made a handsomely elegant bridegroom.

“This is the poem I have chosen as I plight thee my troth,” Vincent said echoing the words of Catherine’s poem and the traditional wedding vows. “The words are those of Winthrop Mackworth Praed.”

The Newly-Wedded

*Now the rite is duly done,
Now the word is spoken,
And the spell has made us one
Which may ne’er be broken;
Rest we, dearest, in our home,
roam we o’er the heather;
We shall rest, and we shall roam
Shall we not? together.
From this hour the summer rose
Sweeter breathes to charm us;
From this hour the winter snows
Lighter fall to harm us:
Fair or foul -- on land or sea --
Come the wind or weather,
Best and worst, whate’er they be,
We shall share together.
Death, who friend from friend can part,
Brother rend from brother,
Shall but link us, heart and heart,
Closer to each other;
We will call his anger play,
Deem his dart a feather,
When we meet him on our way
Hand in hand together.*

“Oh, Vincent. Yes. No matter what comes, we will share it together,” she answered as he gently kissed the bride.

When their lips parted, he continued to hold her. Softly, he spoke in earnest. “Catherine, I’ve never told you when I first knew that I loved you.”

“No, Vincent, you haven’t,” she answered breathlessly.

“You were a suffering spirit dreading the return Above. That first touch in the sub-basement of your apartment building -- when you came and lay your head on my shoulder. It was almost more than I could bear. I hesitated, afraid, yet finally I put my arm around you and felt you move infinitesimally closer.”

He pulled her tighter against him now as they stood on their balcony after pledging their love for one another. “I was overwhelmed, because it was at that moment that I understood longing ... and love.”

She lay her head against his chest -- remembering.

Placing a gentle kiss into her fragrant hair, Vincent continued. “All the love stories that I had read had not prepared me for how deeply someone could care. For eight long months I reread those stories I thought I had understood -- and discovered new meanings. I began observing couples Below. Subtle glances and gestures I had completely missed before now took on new meaning.

“Catherine, you led me from the darkness and gave my life new meaning.”

“That was beautiful, Vincent,” she responded by pressing a kiss into the pulse point of his throat. “And do you know when I first felt that I loved you?”

“No, when, Catherine?”

“I think I actually loved you from the very first moment I heard the mellow timbre of your comforting voice. I can still hear your first words. You said, ‘You’re safe. You’re safe now.’ And when I asked where I was, you replied, ‘No one will hurt you. You’re safe here.’ It was what I desperately needed to know after the brutal attack I’d suffered. And you knew exactly what to say. And when you said my name ... it was like no one else had ever said it before.”

“But, really, Catherine. When did you know that you loved me?”

“When you told me it was time to go back and I begged you to tell me it hadn’t really happened. I told you I didn’t have your strength and your words were, ‘You have the strength, Catherine, you do. I know you.’ Subconsciously, my heart knew then.”

Gently, his hand caressed her back, as he remembered how he had wanted so badly back then to comfort and strengthen her as she returned Above.

“But ... I think I was almost consciously aware of my love for you when you came to my balcony after eight long months. The surge I felt at just seeing you standing there was overwhelming. And the desolate coldness that crept over me when you said you had to leave ... when I thought you could forget me ... I just didn’t think I would be able to survive if you left then. And when you told me to find someone else to be a part of -- I knew that was impossible.”

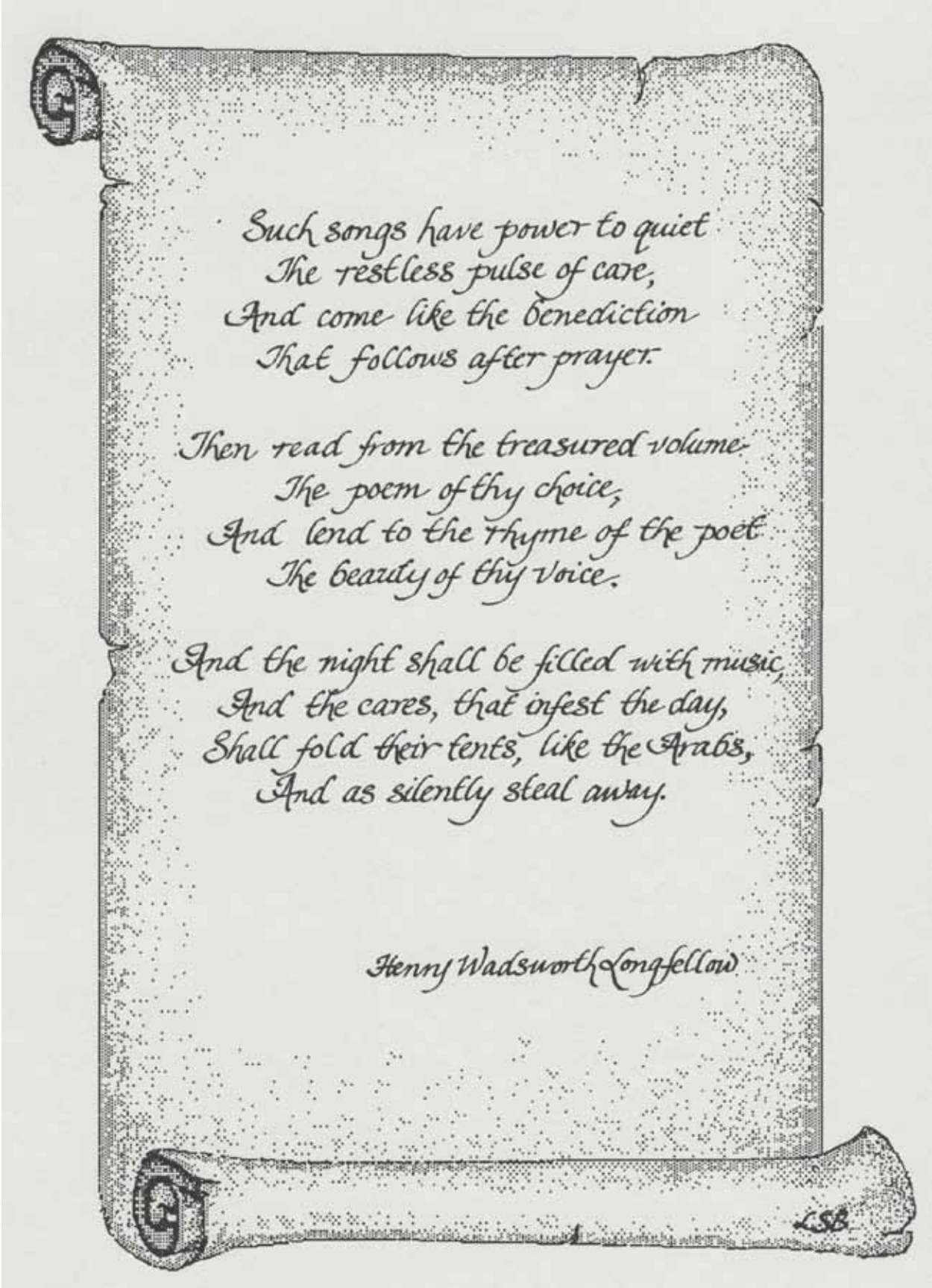
She reveled in the feel of the pressure of his lips against her hair as she continued.

“But I didn’t fully realize how much I loved you until the night you plucked the rose thorn from my hand. When the heat of your mouth touched my flesh, I felt something I had never felt before.” Looking deeply into the bottomless sapphire depths of his eyes, she assured him, “And I will love you for all eternity.”

“And I you, my dearest Catherine. And I you,” he repeated as his kiss warmed her to depths yet unexplored.

All the years of waiting were ended -- their love was worth everything. And now their destiny was to be together for all time.

END




Such songs have power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares, that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



Such songs have power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares, that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



I Shall But Love Thee Better... **Artistic Credits**

Linda S. Barth

Calligraphy Renderings of:

"Catherine Lives" - Peggy Garvin

"Sonnet" - Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"The Day Is Done" - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Circle of Life" - Elton John/Tim Rice

"Dream Weaver" - Gary Wright

You may contact her at P. O. Box 2014, Branford, Connecticut 06405-1114

EI

Original painting photographed for use as front color cover
and computer-scanned black and white version of cover following page 27.

She wishes to remain anonymous; however, any favorable comments about her illustration
may be sent c/o Dream Weavers and I will personally see that she receives them.

Neal Farris

Interior illustrations following pages 49, 77, 81, 97, 101 and 132.

You may contact him at P. O. Box 145, Evans, Georgia 30809

Renate Haller

Original painting photographed for use as back color cover
and interior illustrations following pages 2, 9, 23 and 39.

You may contact her at Missianerweg 1/a, I-39050 St. Pauls, Italy

Rosemarie Hauer

Interior illustrations following pages 9, 31, 61, and 75.

You may contact her at Muhlgasse 20/5, A-2560 Berndorf, Austria

Letters and comments about I Shall But Love Thee Better... are most welcome.

Please address them to:

Peggy Ann Garvin, P. O. Box 477, Montmorenci, SC 29839-0477

Linda S. Barth

Much of my story is a familiar one. I remember first being aware of "our" "Beauty and the Beast" when it was featured with other new shows in "TV Guide" in the fall of 1987. The article easily captured my interest, so I planned to watch the pilot episode and was drawn into B&B's unique and wonderful world from the first moment. That weekly hour of B&B became a time when I could set aside the real world and become immersed in a fascinating "secret place" full of love and magic and the most compelling characters ever created for television. I loved everything about it and looked forward to each new episode.

Yet no one else in a wide circle of friends seemed the least bit interested, except to comment, "No, I don't watch it, but I always thought it seemed like something you'd like." The message was clear and I even said it to myself. I'd never been so caught up in a TV show in my entire life (and there have been some very esoteric involvements in the past), and I grew a bit uncomfortable about it. As time passed and my B&B addiction deepened, I took my love for the show "underground." I was entirely alone because until the show was destroyed and -- at last -- mercifully cancelled, I had no idea something called fandom even existed.

After second season, I'd read newspaper articles that mentioned "Pipeline" as a source for information to help save B&B from cancellation. I requested a sample copy and began to discover fandom, although my only involvement then was to write CBS a letter begging them to keep B&B on TV. In retrospect, I never would have written to Ron Koslow et al had I known what they were planning, but at the time it was all done in good faith and trust. As third season progressed, I finally had to accept the fact that they really weren't going to make everything all right and I stopped watching. It was just too painful to see something I loved brutalized and destroyed in weekly increments of distortion and torture. What was the point? It took a very long time before I could even begin to see beyond that horror and again enjoy what I loved about B&B; and it was that factor that made me realize just how much B&B had come to mean to me.

When it was at last cancelled, I wished I had taped all the first and second season episodes. I remembered that "Pipeline" had contained ads placed by fans who would copy tapes for others. Entirely at random, I wrote to Edith Crowe in California, who graciously agreed to copy several tapes for me. In a subsequent letter, she mentioned two words I'd never heard -- fandom and zines. I wrote back and asked for clarification and, thanks to her thoughtfulness in sending a long introductory explanation, I discovered another new world. Sometime later Peggy Garvin wrote to me inquiring about B&B, and partly to "repay" Edith's kindness, I wrote a similarly long, informative letter to her. A first phone call soon followed and I found a person whose friendship has enriched my life.

I can't believe that over five years have passed since I first heard the word "fandom." My participation grew slowly, progressing from reading zines, to meeting other fans, to attending conventions, to writing and editing, etc. Fandom is still mostly separate from the rest of my life and that's the way it will remain. I know that the friends and family who love me would choose to either accept, enjoy, or ignore/overlook my involvement, but in recent months it somehow has ceased to be an issue for me. I want fandom to be a part of my life and it's fine just the way it is; in the midst of extremely busy, varied, and demanding days, I need my secret places, too. (Of course, the weekend trips and the annual cons are described as "visiting that group of friends from graduate school" or "going to a writing conference" -- thanks, Teri and Joyce!)

B&B has given me the push to begin writing fiction, something I've wanted to do for a very long time. Now within fandom I have written several short stories, film and play commentaries, a "collaborative" poem, and three novels. Outside B&B I have co-written a children's play which was performed by a community theatre company last fall, and I have two children's stories in the planning stages which I'd like to submit for professional publication. Then there's that novel....

Yet it's the people I've met in fandom who are by far the most important part of my involvement. I've always been blessed with a lot of wonderful friends, interests, and activities, and a job I (almost always) love. I wouldn't have guessed there was room for anything or anyone else, but now I wouldn't want to imagine my life without them. The people I've met include some of the most creative, intelligent, and sensitive individuals I've ever known, people from places and times that would not have crossed my life if not for B&B, and it's been wonderful to find that with several I now share friendships that exist beyond the love for B&B that brought us together.

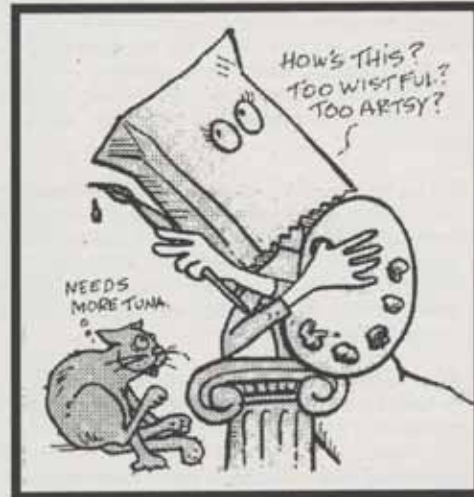
El, The Unknown Artist

"How did the cover art come about?" you may ask.

Peggy's cover evolved out of frustration and generosity -- her generosity in inviting me to a fun evening of painting, providing a blank canvas, paint, and a place to really slop it up big time; and my frustration at attempting to paint spontaneously for the first time in years. After a couple of false starts, I could see that spontaneity wasn't in the cards the eve of our "artfest". The canvas I spoiled followed me home and loomed vacantly for weeks -- then, in a brief frenzy of pastel and paint, there it was ... a portrait of the big "V"; which I promptly gave to Peggy for her enjoyment. (I'm not a B&B fan.)

To my surprise, Peggy chose to use the painting for her cover.

As for the anonymity bit with the cartoon of me and my paper bag, just consider it my portable "tunnel".



Neal Farris

I have been illustrating forever -- well as far back as I can remember. My days in school were spent dreaming of art -- drawings that could convey emotion through the eyes and movements. Emotions are shown so carefully that to capture one seems impossible.

I have been working in many fields of illustration. I had a comic published a few years ago. It sold over 800 copies, which is pretty impressive for a local talent. I attend comic conventions from time to time, and it was at one of these that I met Peggy. She asked me if I would be interested in doing illustrations for a 'zine. At that time I had no idea what a 'zine was. She took the time to explain it, and I happily agreed. I had seen only about a dozen of the "Beauty and the Beast" shows on TV and had loved every one of them. When it disappeared off the air, I was disappointed. I loved watching all of the episodes and seeing for the first time the full impact of the magic that unfolded. I watched as the love between Catherine and Vincent grew, and I fell in love with their love story!



"Beauty and the Beast" introduced me to another wonderful new world also -- the world of fandom! How beautiful life would be if everyone lived the principles set forth in that TV show.

I have never known people to be so warm and friendly as the fans of "Beauty and the Beast". We all share a bond -- a bond of love for Catherine and Vincent and each other.

Peggy Ann Garvin

I'm one of those fans who missed the entire experience of watching *Beauty and the Beast* unfold one episode at a time. During that time I was working two jobs and had no time to watch television. In the spring of 1991, I was looking through a video magazine, *Postings*; and, on a whim, I ordered the videotape containing "Once Upon a Time in the City of New York" and "A Happy Life". Well, that was all it took and I was hooked! I ordered the only other two videos that were available at that time, "To Reign in Hell" and "Orphans" and "Though Lovers Be Lost". After watching them you can imagine how confused I was. The pilot convinced me of the never-ending love of Vincent and Catherine and now she was dead! What happened?



At the same time I ordered the videos, I purchased Wendy Pini's graphic novels. In the back of one of them was a flier for Creation, so I sent for their catalog. I ordered a calendar, a coffee cup and a couple of books called 'zines and settled into becoming a "serious" fan. Just when I was wishing there could be some way for me to see more of the episodes, my son called to tell me *Beauty and the Beast* was back on TV -- in reruns. Since my son had cable, I drove 50 miles roundtrip every week to watch and tape this wonderful "new" (to me) show.

Since then I have discovered fandom and met so many wonderful and caring people. In fact, my best friend, Linda S. Barth, is someone I would never have known if I hadn't ordered her 'zine and begun corresponding with her. We attended our first convention together -- TunnelCon II, have visited each others homes (hers in Connecticut and mine in South Carolina) and have spent numerous hours and untold amounts of money on late-night phone calls. Her encouragement was the ONLY reason I wrote my first 'zine, *Parallel Worlds Within the City*. I have always written short stories and poetry (mostly during times of great joy or great sorrow) but Linda encouraged me to share my writing with others. The first time any of my poetry was printed was in her second 'zine, *Beyond Beginnings - Book 1*.

It was during a very difficult time of my life that I found *Beauty and the Beast*. I am a sensitive, emotional person who dissolves in the face of trouble. I am married to a man of unsurpassed, quiet strength. "When my world divides and shatters, your love is where I'll go" -- when I first heard those words I felt they had been written for me.

As *Beauty and the Beast* touched my soul, so it began to bring me a little inner peace. On the surface I longed for Vincent to come and rescue us from the "dragons" of our lives and turn them into "princesses". I wanted someone to tell me the Tunnel World was REAL and show me the way Below. I wanted to escape NEVER to return Above again. But as much as I wanted these things, I KNEW they could not be. So, instead, I escaped to the Tunnels with my writing. I got lost in Vincent and Catherine's unconditional love, and -- through 'zines with their happy endings and varied consummations of that perfect love, I was happy WITH them.

After waiting for years for Koslow and the "powers that be" to right what they did to our beloved show, I finally felt that I MUST do it myself. That was the motivation for *I Shall But Love Thee Better...*. I felt I had to take everything they gave us, no matter how horrible, AND FIX IT! Writing this story helped me, and I can only hope that it may help some other fans as well.

Beauty and the Beast will always be a part of my life; and I hope, someday, there is a movie -- but if not, we must all continue to keep the dream alive in our own special ways.

Renate Haller

I'm at a loss of words as to how to describe how B&B has affected my life since I - literally - fell in love with the show, and with HIM.

At the very beginning, I wondered if I were the only one in the world who was living this unique (so I thought) and rather disturbing experience, and I really feared for my sanity. Never ever before have I been so caught up with something, not even in youth! I spent a lot of time watching and re-watching the few episodes I've recorded, daydreaming, and drawing.

But then, almost a lonely year later, by chance I found an article in a German magazine about a German B&B Fan Club, and my new life as a "fan" began, on April 13, 1990.

It was - and still is - an amazing experience for me. I discovered B&B fandom. It brought wonderful people and true friends into my life, and then one of them, Rosemarie, opened up a whole new world to me: the American fandom. Two years ago finally the Italian B&B Fan Club was born, and last year I discovered the English fandom. And now I'm no longer alone and can share thoughts and feelings with friends all over the world who dream the same dream.

I'm 43 years old (yet) and have been married for over 23 years. I'm glad to have a husband and daughter who are very understanding (or at least try to be!). I have fond memories of myself and my daughter (who is now 23 years old) watching the show together during the first years it was aired on the Austrian ORF 1 channel.

My husband runs a firm which does installations and plumbing, and I'm his secretary and bookkeeper. I've also been working part time as a proof reader at a local magazine for over two years.

I always loved drawing. In fact, since childhood, drawing and reading were my favorite activities.

Before B&B came into my life, I didn't draw much anymore. I went to a couple of drawing and painting courses, though, but wasn't much interested in painting or drawing landscapes or flowers, it was sooo boring!

Then I attended a nude painting course and a portrait course, and this I found was far more interesting and satisfying. I love drawing people, always have. But only Beauty and The Beast rekindled the spark, and suddenly I felt in me the NEED to draw, as I had never before. It was like an inner urge. And now, drawing Vincent and Catherine brings me a joy and fulfillment I never thought possible. It's my way of expressing feelings I've never had before and it helps me to deal with them.

Loving reading, it was obvious I'd become crazy about reading stories of Vincent and Catherine as many as I could possibly manage. But there was a big obstacle to overcome: my little knowledge of the English language. There weren't any zines available in German or Italian yet. So I HAD to read the English zines, and I DID, with a big dictionary ready at my elbow, and boy, was it a strenuous job! But it was worth it, it was worth everything.

I'm always struggling to find a little time to dedicate to my beloved hobby. Well, for me, it's truly much more than a hobby. "Beauty and the Beast" and Vincent have become a very important part of my life. As Catherine says: "Now, wherever I go, he is with me in spirit, for we have a bond, stronger than friendship or love. And although we cannot be together, we will never, ever be apart."



Rosemarie Hauer

It was the 28th of December 1988, 6:29 P.M., when I made a decision that "changed my life forever". I switched on the T.V. against my initial decision not to, because the title of the show that was about to start didn't do much to attract me. "Die Schöne und das Biest" didn't say much, and I thought that it was just another "Horror Show" or something like that, especially since, in the German language, "Biest" is a term to describe a wicked and vicious person and in most cases a female(!) one. I think they just tried to keep the translation of the title as close to the original as possible.

Well, I guess there's no need to tell YOU what happened. When I heard Vincent say, "You're safe" I believed him immediately. Discovering his world -- the candles, the books, the whole atmosphere -- was like coming home. Meeting him was -- falling in love.

The first two years were rather lonely. All I could do was rewatch the episodes (I only had 18 at that time) and write some stories of my own. I had no idea that such a thing as fandom even existed, until I happened upon two addresses in the U. S. in "Starlog Magazine". That's how it all began. That's how I came to read my very first fanzine. I remember the awe I felt when I looked at the illustrations in there. (If someone had told me, back then, that I would illustrate fanzines myself, one day, I certainly would not have believed it.) It took another year until I discovered the German fandom and yet another year until I learned about the British fandom.

In the meantime I started to draw. Actually I have been drawing throughout my whole life, but nothing ever inspired me as deeply as BatB. I am a school teacher, teaching 6- to 10-year-olds (first to fourth grade), and it was quite intriguing to listen to the kids when they discussed BatB. It won't surprise anybody to hear that the girls mainly saw the romance whilst the boys were more action-oriented. But, no doubt, Vincent was their hero and they all missed him when he was no longer on the air.

I am lucky to have a husband who has been very supportive and understanding from the very beginning. He even helped with kitchen chores to give me more time for drawing. He read all of my stories and I appreciate his input very much. In the beginning it was a laborious task to read fanzines in a language that isn't my native one, but Vincent was a motivation one can hardly resist, and soon I was able to put my dictionary aside. German may be my native tongue, but English is my "Vincent tongue", and so I began to write my stories in English to be able to share them with my friends, most of whom are native English speakers. Now I'm in the process of putting out a zine of my own. (I'd like to see the face of my good old English teacher if I told her about my fan-activities.)

"Beauty and the Beast" has given me a wonderful dream and wonderful friends, and I was beginning to feel very contented and relaxed. That was the point in my life my baby daughter Johanna chose to make her appearance. Sometimes I am still overwhelmed and can hardly believe that she is really here. I can only hope she will find something in her life that will give her as much joy and fulfillment as drawing and writing give to me. And may the people she meets be as kind and warm-hearted as the ones BatB brought into my life.



Dream Weaver

I've just closed my eyes again,
time to board the dream weaver train.
Trying to take away my worries of today,
leave tomorrow behind.

Ooh, dream weaver, I believe you can get me through the night.
Ooh, dream weaver, I believe we can reach the morning light.

Fly me high through the starry skies,
Maybe to an astral plane.

Cross the highways of fantasy,
Help me to forget today's pain.

Ooh, dream weaver, I believe you can get me through the night.
Ooh, dream weaver, I believe we can reach the morning light.

Though the dawn may be coming soon
There still may be some time,
Fly me away to the bright side of the moon,
Meet me on the other side.

Ooh, dream weaver,
I believe you can get me through the night.

Ooh, dream weaver,
I believe we can reach the morning light.

Dream Weaver,
Dream Weaver.

Gary Wright
High Wave Music, Inc. (ASCAP)
Warner Bros. Records, Inc.

