

**PARALLEL WORLDS  
WITHIN THE CITY**

# Parallel Worlds Within the City

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Peggy*

## Foreword

I became an avid fan of Beauty and the Beast in June, 1991. On a whim I ordered the videotape of the pilot and when it arrived I sat down to watch what I hoped would be an entertaining fantasy. Well, that was all it took and I was hooked. I immediately ordered the rest of the tapes that were available at that time. To my dismay, they only confused me. I met the immediately appealing Vincent and believed the love he and Catherine shared was "worth everything". I suffered with Catherine through the death of her father and with Vincent when she returned Above. I reveled in Vincent's rescue of Catherine from the evil Paracelsus. And I lived the horror and confusion of Catherine's death. WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY? I was filled with questions and I didn't know where to find the answers.

I will always be eternally grateful to my son, Rob, who called one night to tell me that Beauty and the Beast was BACK. I live so far out in the country that we were told we wouldn't have cable for ten years, so I started my weekly trips (50 miles roundtrip) to my son's house to watch and tape the episodes. And I began to learn the wonders of the Tunnel World.

Thanks to the many warm and wonderful fans I have met through this fandom, I have come to this milestone -- writing my own version of Vincent and Catherine's "happy life."

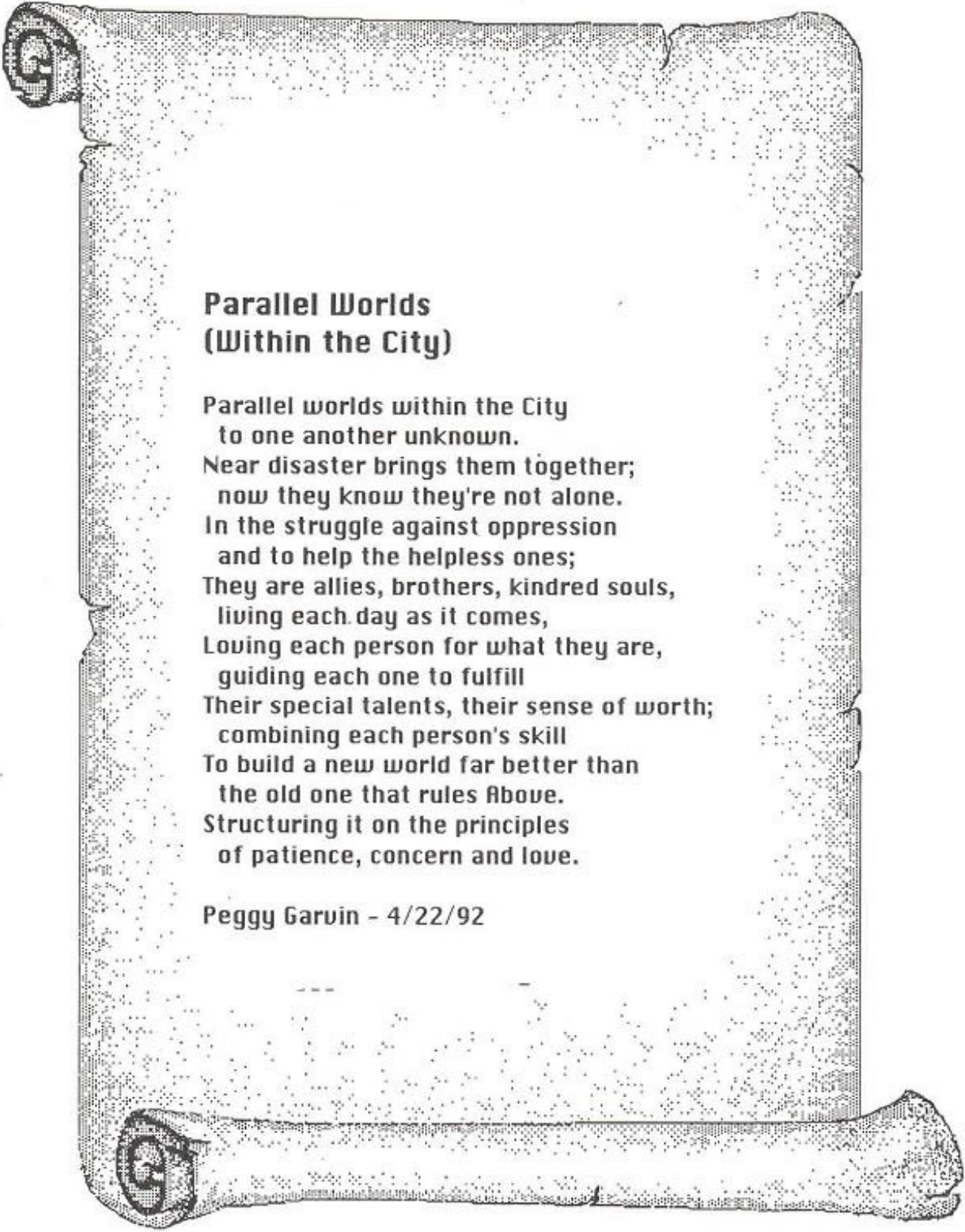
But this 'zine is so much more than that. For over three years I have been going through one of the darkest times of my life. Literally, without Beauty and the Beast I don't think I would have survived. When I felt I couldn't face another day, I would sit down in ; front of my computer and escape to the Tunnels. But my story is far from unique. I can't count the number of fans who have told me their own version of how B&B guided them through what seemed like impossible times. Just a television show? We know better!

In addition to my son and I want to thank my daughter, Michele, for her never-ending support. Without her assurance that she would "do some drawings", I would never have been brave enough to add illustrations to my story. She surprised me with her talent, patience, hard work and understanding. In addition to her beautiful artwork, she produced the original borders for my poetry and taught me the tricks she knew about using our Macintosh computer.

My husband, Frank, deserves a medal for putting up with the chaos and craziness my writing brought to our house. He also "dressed up" as Vincent to my Catherine at Tunnelcon II and we hope to do an even better job at Great Expectations. In so many ways he reminds me of Vincent -- a man who is often judged by his outward appearance while the gentle, loving man is left undiscovered. I thank God I looked beneath the surface.

A special thank you to all the artists who contributed their wonderful creations enabling my words to come to life.

And last, but certainly not least, to Linda (Barth) Sobolewski, my editor, my mentor, my teacher and my best friend. Without her encouragement "Parallel Worlds" would NEVER even have been started. And without her unfailing support and strength, it NEVER would have been finished.

A black and white illustration of a scroll. The scroll is unrolled, showing a central rectangular area with text. The scroll has a textured, stippled appearance. The top and bottom edges are slightly irregular, suggesting a hand-drawn or aged style. The text is centered within the scroll's frame.

**Parallel Worlds  
(Within the City)**

Parallel worlds within the City  
to one another unknown.  
Near disaster brings them together;  
now they know they're not alone.  
In the struggle against oppression  
and to help the helpless ones;  
They are allies, brothers, kindred souls,  
living each day as it comes,  
Loving each person for what they are,  
guiding each one to fulfill  
Their special talents, their sense of worth;  
combining each person's skill  
To build a new world far better than  
the old one that rules Above.  
Structuring it on the principles  
of patience, concern and love.

Peggy Garvin - 4/22/92

## Parallel Worlds Within the City

It was a blustery April evening. As Catherine walked along the deserted street, she pulled her coat more tightly about her, shielding herself from the cold and the gathering darkness. When Joe had asked her to do a short interview on the Lower East Side, she had taken one look at the piles of case files on her desk and jumped at the chance to leave them behind. The interview had taken much longer than it should have, and now she found herself alone on this shadowed street. As she rushed toward her car, a high-pitched whine ripped the air. Its sudden noise tore a terrified scream from her throat. In a matter of minutes, three futuristic motorcycles were circling her menacingly, cutting her off from all possibility of escape.

With nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, Catherine stood frozen, staring at her attackers. If the eyes are the windows to the soul -- Catherine had no way to see into the souls of the creatures on the bikes. Each wore something that looked like a spacesuit and a fullface helmet with the visor pulled down, obscuring their eyes from her view. Their motorcycles were the kind that were completely enclosed in plastic and painted in glow-in-the-dark, fluorescent colors. As they continued to circle her, the colors blurred -- reminding her of the sensation she got when watching the whirling carousel in Central Park. The combination of psychedelic colors and the deafening whine reverberating off the buildings made Catherine sway with overwhelming waves of dizziness and nausea.

Terror rose up to choke her and she was paralyzed with fear. Using every ounce of her strength, she forced the fear to subside in a vain effort to close off the signals that would be transmitted to Vincent through their bond. Too many times he had rushed to her aid and paid the unbearable price of guilt and shame.

Perhaps they're only trying to scare me, she told herself. Maybe I'm overreacting. Please, let that be the case!

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Months ago Catherine had paid a long-overdue visit to her boss, Joe Maxwell. She had expected a big confrontation to her suggestion of being removed from the dangerous assignments she had been shouldering since she had become an Investigator with the DA's office. In the beginning she had felt an overwhelming urge to prove herself. But after repeated incidents where Vincent rushed in to save her life -- at the horrible expense of his own identity -- she just could not continue to put him in those situations any longer. Surprisingly, Joe was in complete agreement, and her position had been slowly shifted to more paperwork, research, and court appearances.

Tonight's interview with a minor witness in a drug case had seemed quite innocent and a welcome respite from the piles of case files littering her desk. But now she found herself involved in a situation where Vincent would feel compelled to risk his life again for hers.

"It's not fair," she screamed, just as a rumbling sound like thunder began to make the pavement tremble under her feet. The thunder erupted into a sea of shiny metal with lightning glints of chrome and blurs of black leather. In a matter of seconds, the trio of bullet bikes that had been circling her scattered in different directions leaving behind the fading whine of their engines.

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Below, Vincent was peacefully sitting in his Chamber absorbed in the Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Suddenly, his head jerked up, his eyes wide with alarm. He willed himself to absolute stillness, not moving a muscle for fear he would miss it. Something -- but what! A jumble of emotions bombarded the bond that he was so grateful for, that had saved Catherine's life so many times in the past. He would gladly suffer any injuries, bear any pain, even give up his own life in exchange for the life of his Catherine.

An elevator ride of fear overwhelmed him as he sat frozen in his chair. There was a sudden void -- nothing -- and then something faint, fading slowly to nothing again.

"Catherine, no!" The primal scream echoed out of his Chamber and down the corridors of the Tunnels. It couldn't be, he told himself in desperation.

Months ago Catherine had assured him she and Joe had discussed at length the dangers she had faced in the past and agreed she would stop putting herself at risk. Joe had been so understanding and agreed that she had been in jeopardy too many times. Vincent knew he would NEVER have asked Catherine to change her job; but, when she had done it of her own free will, he had been so relieved.

Catherine's fear had suddenly escalated again, then almost immediately it had changed. A recurring jumble of confused emotions came crashing in on Vincent. Without waiting to analyze the feelings a second longer, he grabbed his cloak from the back of the chair and flung it around his shoulders, fastening it as his powerful legs carried him through the Tunnels toward his sense of her fear. The feelings were there, not growing, not subsiding -- just there. His heart began to pound and the adrenalin to pump as the feelings grew stronger. He was getting closer; she should be right above him now. It seemed as if he had been running for an eternity, yet it had been only a few minutes.

As he approached a little-used entrance to the world Above, he saw the rock slide blocking it. Blocking him from Catherine! In his singular purpose he flung the rocks aside in frantic abandon, giving no thought to where they were landing.

Why had this rock slide gone unreported? he silently raged. He knew this delay could cost Catherine her life -- and his as well, for he could not survive without her. He would never be able to endure the pain of knowing he didn't reach her in time.

As the final debris was cleared and he maneuvered his large frame through the cramped opening, he emerged into an abandoned warehouse. He ran the length of the huge room, scattering empty boxes and crates in his path as he forged his way to the door. His powerful body splintered the rotted wood, and he emerged into an alleyway.

He could still sense her presence very near, but he could not see her. His eyes frantically scanned the alley and the pull of the bond sent him speeding down its length, his cloak swirling behind him. As he erupted from the alley onto the intersecting street, he immediately spotted a gang of bikers descending on Catherine.

With his overpowering need, Vincent smashed through the line of hulking black leather and chains, tossing aside men who would be considered formidable by others. I must reach Catherine and be sure she is uninjured, he vowed, before disposing of this human garbage that threatens her. As he grabbed her shoulders, taking a quick inventory for injuries and finding none visible, he turned and in one motion pushed her behind himself to shield her with his body.

Screaming. She was screaming.

He quickly sent a silent message through the bond. It's all right, Catherine -- I'm here. No one will harm you.

So overpowering was the rush of blood pounding in his ears, he could scarcely make out the words in her screams. Yet a question formed in his mind. Screaming, why is she still screaming?

"No, Vincent -- stop! No, stop! Please, Vincent!"

Her terror-filled voice broke the raging spell as the words slowly penetrated the haze. He thought he heard her say, "They saved me." But that simply could not be. He had felt her fear. The small fists which were pummeling his back had been totally insignificant when he was consumed by the rage. Yet now he felt her hands clutching at his cloak as she shouted repeatedly, "Don't hurt them! Please, don't hurt them!"

Immediately he thought of all the times he had maimed and killed for her. As horrible as the guilt and shame had been for him to endure, he would gladly face it again. He had not been able to share that pain with anyone, not even Catherine. He had sent her away and dealt with the Beast alone, and each time it had become more difficult to overcome the darkness that threatened to envelop him. But each time he had returned to her. He could do it again. He must protect her no matter what pain he would have to deal with later. It wasn't important; only Catherine was important. She must realize that.

As these thoughts were flashing through his mind, he realized that Catherine had moved from the safety behind him to face him, her back to the menacing crowd. As he reached out to thrust her behind him once more, their eyes met and locked. He could feel her pleading for his understanding. But what was there to understand. She was in

danger and he was going to protect her -- even with his life!

"Vincent, these men are innocent," she shouted. "They are not the cause of the fear you felt." Thankfully she could feel the rage retreating as Vincent struggled for understanding.

His hands relaxed on her shoulders and drew her protectively into the circle of his embrace. His stubbled chin rested in her hair as he warily surveyed the sea of faces.

"Tell me," he said, struggling to maintain control and focus on her voice.

"These men arrived just in time to save me from whatever the other bikers had in mind. They chased away the ones who frightened me and they saved me," she explained with a desperate need to see that he understood. Catherine could feel Vincent's body relax slightly, but his eyes never left those of the man who stood closest to them.

"They weren't bikers, ma'am," the stranger stated in a weary tone. "They're just some of the street scum that give the rest of us a bad name. We're real glad we were here to stop them from hurting you."

The tall, dark biker turned his attention to Vincent and, without even flinching, continued his explanation. "It's become a game in this neighborhood -- scaring people, especially women. Then, when scaring them wasn't a big enough thrill, they started getting real ugly. They ride those 'chainsaws' they call motorcycles and terrorize the streets at night. Then, when daylight comes, they turn into the upstanding citizens everyone assumes they are. We're watching them as best we can -- you see, we protect the people we care about."

This man was very soft-spoken with a manner that immediately put others at ease in spite of his appearance. His black leather jacket was worn and faded as if it had seen him through many hard times. The leather vest he wore over the jacket was laced on both sides and contained many frayed patches that obviously had contained writing when they were new. His eyes were a piercing green. The long tangle of black curly hair fell to his shoulders, and it like his beard was sprinkled lightly with gray. He was not a stranger to the streets; anyone could read that in his leathery, rugged face. But that face held a gentleness that poured through his sea-green eyes.

"Reaper, that's what they call me," he said, as he extended his hand to Vincent.

Vincent just stood there, mesmerized by the lack of reaction in this man's eyes. It was dark, yes, but not so dark as to obscure his features from sight. Vincent knew if he took this man's hand, the terror would surely engulf those calm eyes and he would be repelled by the realization of Vincent's appearance. After a long pause, Reaper let his hand drop slightly; and then, in a sweeping gesture he began introducing the other bikers who were gathered protectively on either side of him.



"This here is Tank." He started with the largest, burliest biker of the lot. "Don't mind his looks -- he's gentle as a lamb."

His words caused Vincent to look deep into Reaper's eyes to fathom if there were a hidden meaning. Finding none he turned his gaze to the man Reaper had just introduced. Tank reminded Vincent so much of his beloved friend Winslow, who had been killed on the journey to save Catherine from Paracelsus. Winslow had been a hulking man of immeasurable strength, but with a heart as kind and loving as any child. Vincent could sense this same character emanating from Tank.

"That there's Tattoo Scott," Reaper said, pointing to a slightly shorter man with long straight blonde hair and gray eyes. He was covered from head to toe in the same black leather jacket, vest, and chaps that seemed to be the uniform of the group. As Scott nodded, Vincent noticed him relax slightly.

"And this here's Mouse."

With that introduction, Vincent's eyes shot to the face of a small, fidgety man to Reaper's left. He had long, wavy red hair and darting, child-like blue eyes. A big grin erupted on his face and Vincent immediately liked him.

Now, who would ever expect there to be another Mouse? he thought to himself.

"My name is Vincent. This is Catherine," he said in his back-to-normal, velvet-on-sandpaper voice. "Please let me apologize for my actions. I hope I did not harm anyone. I felt so strongly that Catherine was in danger. When I arrived there were no others."

"We're just glad to be of help. We're the 'Iron Vultures' motorcycle club. Our clubhouse isn't far from here. We were on our way home from a run when we heard the commotion," Reaper explained.

"I'm very grateful that you were here to protect Catherine from harm and that she was able to explain the situation to me. You see, I too protect the people I care about."

With those words, Vincent inclined his head to look into Catherine's eyes and allowed his emotions to flow freely through their bond, washing over her with an intensity that almost brought tears to her eyes. The bikers witnessed this obvious devotion with admiration. The ones who were lucky enough to have experienced those feelings looked on with understanding. Those whose hearts still searched for that special someone watched with an increased hope that they too would someday care about someone that way.

Suddenly it occurred to Vincent that they had been standing openly in the middle of the street making polite introductions. In the presence of these people he had

forgotten, if only for a short time, the need to stay in the shadows and hide from the eyes of the topsiders. For a moment he had felt the acceptance he knew only in the comfort of being among friends Below. It was a very strange sensation and one he would have to analyze carefully. For now, the growing need to take Catherine and return to the safety of the Tunnels was overpowering. But somewhere in the back of his mind he felt a sense of loss for having to leave these seemingly gentle, understanding people.

"Thank you again, all of you," said Catherine as she slowly acknowledged with her eyes each of the rather unusual assortment of people who had come to her rescue.

Reaching for Vincent's hand, she said, "We really must return home before our family worries."

"Yeah, we need to be getting on home ourselves," said Reaper with a nod. "You two be careful, OK?" Before the words died on his lips, Vincent and Catherine had melted into the shadows.

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"My, God, whadda ya think happened ta his face?" exclaimed Tank. "And did ya see his hands -- with hair like fur -- and he had claws?" There was no malice in his remarks, only concern and wonder.

Tank had been a biker ever since he could remember. His ol' man had started riding him on his '47 Harley-Davidson Knucklehead when he was barely old enough to sit up. He had ridden to Bike Week in Daytona Beach many times behind the wiry old biker he called "Father Time". Many a mile he had slept, rumbled to sleep by the engine of that old Harley, with his arms wrapped tightly around his ol' man's waist and his head resting on the club patch stitched to the back of a worn leather jacket. When Father Time had gotten sick, Tank took care of him, and when he died Tank inherited the only possession the old man had -- the '47 Knuck. It was his pride and joy, a tribute to his father's memory, and he would ride it until he too went to the "big clubhouse in the sky."

Because Tank grew up as a biker, he had a very colorful display of tattoos on his back, his chest, and down both arms from shoulder to wrist. These "sleeves" were rather hard to hide. He figured it was one of the reasons he'd been turned down for many jobs even though he was well qualified for them. He knew the bitter pain of people's judging eyes and the fear in their faces when they first saw him. It seemed like no one took the time to get to know him -- they just took one look and didn't like what they saw and that was the end of it. He did a few odd jobs when he could get the work, and the rest of the time he kept the aging combination store/apartment building they used as a clubhouse in good repair. He was a very capable carpenter and had made much of the sturdy, basic furniture that the community used. He knew he was accepted by his "family" and felt safe and secure in their home. It was his ventures into the city to deal with the citizens that had proven over and over to Tank that he just didn't fit in out there.

Seeing Vincent had made him remember all the hurtful looks and remarks he had endured throughout his life. He never would have uttered a word or let a look betray his surprise at Vincent's appearance. But after Vincent was gone, Tank felt the overwhelming urge to talk about what he had seen with the people he knew would understand.

"Yes, but did ya see the way she looked at him -- for that matter, the way they looked at each other!"

A feisty spitfire of a woman appeared before Tank. She had been there all along; in fact, Tank hardly ever went anywhere without her, but she knew to keep in the

background whenever something was going down. Now that the ruckus was over, she felt safe to enter the conversation.

Tank's ol' lady was called Eve of Destruction, Eve for short. Her eyes fairly shot sparks when she was mad, but they melted with love whenever Tank came into view.

They were a sight to see -- this loving couple. When Tank would reach for his leathers, he'd give Eve that look -- the one that said he had to be in the wind, and she'd bounce alive with anticipation of the thrill of wrapping her arms tightly around the man she loved as they became one with the bike and the highway. Sometimes they would ride like that for hours, away from the dirty, depressing city into the countryside upstate where they could ride free. When they got tired he'd take the bedroll he always kept bungied behind Eve's backrest and make a warm cocoon of love for them under the stars. Eve was never afraid when Tank was with her. She knew he would protect her with his life.

With his 6'4" frame, Tank towered above most men. He had a muscular, strong build but his love for beer had added a bulge to his midsection. He always meant to work it off, but there were so many other things that needed to be done around the clubhouse. And whenever the work let up, he just had to get on his Harley and ride.

He had a scruffy start of a beard that never seemed to grow evenly and long straight black hair that he kept pulled back into a ponytail. Whenever they went for one of their long rides, Eve would grab a handful of rubber bands and stuff them into the pocket of her leather jacket. When they reached a state where they were not required to wear helmets, she'd add several bands, one every couple of inches, down the length of their ponytails to keep their hair from getting tangled. Once in a while Tank would just let his hair fly free as they rode. He loved to feel the wind whipping through it, but it had gotten so long that the wind would whip it into Eve as she rode behind him, making her bury her face in his back. He had no desire to cause her any discomfort, so he usually just tied his hair.

Eve was a volatile personality, all tanned with long, wild, curly blonde hair. Her sky-blue eyes opened right into her soul. She had a perky, upturned nose and dimples that appeared at the slightest smile. At 5'2" and 100 pounds soaking wet, she and Tank made quite a pair.

Her dad had been an alcoholic and had beaten her mother into an early grave. With his wife out of the way, he turned his unwanted attentions to his budding young daughter. She had endured his early advances with dread and disgust; but, as he grew bolder, she had run away from home rather than submit to his obvious desire.

She was one of the lucky runaways. The Iron Vultures had saved her from the streets and accepted her into the community. She worked at a coffee shop in midtown and was taking computer classes, whenever she could scrape together the extra money, in hopes of getting a better job.

Eve proudly called Tank her ol' man. He was devoted to her and she knew that he loved her, but he was shy and insecure. She took every opportunity to tell Tank how much she admired his talent for making furniture and repairing things. She also went out of her way to let him know how much she loved him. In fact, she made sure everyone knew she loved him. But he had yet to offer her his property patch and declare to everyone that she was his ol' lady. Sometimes she just felt she would come right out and ask him, but that wasn't the way things were done. She got so frustrated waiting for Tank to get up his nerve to ask her, but she could never even consider turning to another man. She loved him and only him, and she would wait -- if not patiently, at least she would try.

Suddenly it became very obvious that standing in the middle of Broome Street in New York City at midnight was not one of the better things to do with their time. On signal from Reaper, everyone mounted up and rode out with a rumble toward the dilapidated apartment building they called home.



## **The Bridge is Love**

Catherine's world is  
-- the world of her birth

Its outward appearance is one  
of colors and light  
But its inner being is  
of darkness and hate.

Dincent's world is  
-- the world of her heart

Its outward appearance is one  
of darkness and cold  
But its inner being is  
of beauty and love.

Catherine is  
-- a woman of BOTH Worlds

Dincent is  
-- a man of Below

**BUT LOVE**  
-- that is always and forever

is the bridge between two worlds

**AND COURAGE**

is the ability to cross the bridge.

Peggy Garvin - 3/13/92



## **Different Worlds**

**In my world there are people  
whose beauty hides their soul.  
Who use their face for fortune  
gaining wealth is their life's goal.**

**In his world all the people  
lay their soul out for your sight.  
And no one makes their fortune,  
but they strive to do what's right.**

**To help and protect others  
is the way of life Below.  
And though he can't accept it,  
it's the life I long to know.**

**So I will live in my world  
waiting for that precious day  
When he takes me in his arms  
and says, "Catherine, please stay".**

**Peggy Garvin - 4/21/92**

## Chapter 2

As Vincent and Catherine drew closer to the inhabited tunnels, it became increasingly obvious that they did not want to part. Vincent had shortened his usually long stride to accommodate Catherine's high-heeled steps. He had his cloak-covered arm drawn about her shoulders in a very protective way, and she enjoyed being nestled against the warmth of his side. Now that the danger had passed, Catherine contemplated her gratitude that Vincent had not been forced to defend her. Instead of strolling back to the Tunnels in this loving way, they could be dealing with the horrible aftermath of Vincent's ordeal.

Vincent was reliving the near rescue in his own mind as they walked along. He was totally aware of Catherine's slim body pressed against his side. In fact, he found it difficult to think about anything else at the moment. Once again he had felt the dread at the possibility of losing her, of not arriving in time when she needed him. The crisis was past and analyzing it was better left for a time when he was alone. The moments he and Catherine shared were so few, he did not want to waste them with dark thoughts.

As they neared Father's Chamber, Vincent inclined his head with an unspoken question. Catherine nodded her assent and they entered just as Father was pouring himself a cup of Earl Grey tea.

It was difficult to enter Father's Chamber when he wasn't either pouring a cup of tea or drinking one, thought Catherine with a silent chuckle.

"Vincent, Catherine, come and sit down. I was just having a cup of tea. Will you join me?"

At this remark, Vincent and Catherine immediately glanced at one another with knowing smiles.

"Thank you, Father. That sounds wonderful," said Catherine with a sigh.

Vincent approached the large chair he always sat in when he visited with Father. Looking around, he pulled another chair up close to his so that Catherine and he would not be separated by too much space. Right at this moment Vincent felt the tangible need to have Catherine close to him.

Vincent's actions did not escape Father's scrutiny, but he decided to hold his comments for a time when he and his son were alone.

"Well, what brings you two here so late?" Father set their cups of tea on the large desk as Vincent carefully stacked several volumes of medical books to one side.

"Books," replied Vincent.

"Books?" Father queried.

"Yes, Father. Remember, Catherine and I offered to help you put some of the volumes into the new shelves that Cullen has just installed. I was getting ready to walk Catherine back when we decided to stop and see what time in the morning you wanted to start. Tomorrow is Saturday and Catherine does not have to work."

"Well, yes, I do remember something about your offering to help organize the books. I had planned to read these new medical journals that Peter brought last week, but I can do that after we finish. Shall we say about nine o'clock?"

"That will be fine, Father," answered Catherine sensing a disquiet in his demeanor.

Vincent rose and offered Catherine his hand. This gesture, too, was not lost on Father.

Apparently they are reaching a point where physical expression of their feelings in public is not as uncomfortable as it once was, thought Father. I must remember to speak to Vincent about this. If they are holding hands in front of me, what might be happening when they are alone?

This had been an ongoing discussion between Father and a very reluctant Vincent. Every time Father had tried to talk to Vincent about his relationship with Catherine, Vincent had become quiet and defensive. Several times Vincent had merely changed the subject or remembered that he had somewhere else he needed to be, immediately. It was obvious the subject was one that had dominated an increasing amount of Vincent's thoughts of late. It was also obvious that Vincent did not want to discuss it with Father.

Vincent and Catherine continued to hold hands as they slowly walked toward the tunnel entrance to Catherine's apartment building. After the tension of tonight, neither wanted to part.

All too soon they reached their destination and parting was imminent. By the look on Catherine's face, Vincent could tell that she was still upset and did not want to be alone.

Catherine tried to pretend that she was all right, but she knew it was ridiculous to try to deceive Vincent. He could sense her apprehension almost precisely at the moment she felt it.

"I will meet you on your balcony in a few minutes," was all he said. Then he reassuringly tightened the pressure on her hand and abruptly turned away before he could change his mind. Vincent had barely glimpsed the relief wash over her face, yet he was immediately happy that he had made the hasty decision not to end their evening just yet.



Rather than the slow, plodding steps she would have taken to her empty apartment, Catherine's step was light and hurried. She wanted to get there before Vincent arrived, put on a pot of tea, change her shoes, and tidy up the place if needed -- just in case.

Well, she told herself, that's probably wishful thinking, but you can't blame a girl for trying.

As Catherine frantically tried to fit the key into the lock on her apartment door, her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would jump completely out of her chest.

"Calm down, Cathy," she whispered. "Nice and easy does it."

The key slipped into the lock, and she was inside securing the bolts as she kicked off her high heels. Scooping up her discarded shoes on the way to the bedroom, she quickly glanced around the place to make sure it was presentable. Now she wanted to make herself a little more presentable.

Catherine knew there was no time to freshen up or change, but a few quick strokes of her brush brought the shine back to her hair. She was thinking about applying a little blush or lipstick when she heard the familiar tap on the glass.

Boy, can he move fast, she thought as she spun around and headed for the door.

As she flung the door open, she launched herself into his waiting arms. All at once she was shaking. It wasn't that cold outside. It must have been a delayed reaction to the earlier events of the evening -- or perhaps it was being this close to the man she loved.

"Are you all right, Catherine? Why are you trembling so?" Vincent questioned as he tentatively enfolded her slender body within his cloak.

There was genuine concern in his velvety voice. She concentrated on the sound of his words, allowing the mellow timbre to bring her the comfort only he could provide.

"I'm fine -- now," she said as she raised her meadow-green eyes to meet his sky-blue ones.

His eyes had always drawn her into their depths. They seemed as bottomless as the abyss and as mysterious. Sometimes she felt she could read his emotions if she just looked deep enough, but always they would elude her, and she would turn away for fear of making him uncomfortable. Tonight was different and she could not seem to tear her gaze from his.

Hesitantly, she inched her hand up toward his face -- his beautiful face. She locked her eyes with his and, through their bond, she implored him to let her proceed.

Please, Vincent, her eyes begged, just let me touch you. Trust me, please.

His intense blue eyes melted with acquiescence and lowered slightly as he tilted his head in that special way of his. He would temporarily allow her hand to resume its intended course toward his face.

Ever so tentatively, Catherine allowed just the barest tip of one finger to brush his cheek. She stopped, frozen, half expecting him to flee. But he stood his ground, his eyes apprehensive yet resolute. Catherine allowed the rest of her fingertips to press ever so lightly against his cheek. So soft. She was awed by the texture of his smooth high cheekbones. Her total sense of Vincent had always been that of strength tempered with gentle caring -- but softness?

"God, how soft," she whispered and Vincent strained slightly forward to discern her words. In so doing, Catherine's entire palm pressed into the side of his face and sent unexpected tingles flashing between them through the bond.

Surprise again registered on Catherine's face. Vincent's stubble-covered jaw and chin were not like the whiskers she had felt on other men's faces. She had expected the usual prickly, stiff hair of a beard just beginning to grow out, but Vincent's stubble was more like rough silk, softly scratchy. Now that she thought about it, she realized she had never seen his face change. He did not look freshly shaven when she saw him early in the morning, nor did he appear to have a five o'clock shadow at dinner time. His face always had the same sprinkling of amber hair no matter what the time of day or night.

A questioning look appeared on Vincent's face. While Catherine had been puzzling about his soft-feeling stubble, Vincent had become very uneasy. What is she thinking? he wondered. Fleeting thoughts of Catherine comparing him to other men flitted through their bond and his discomfort mounted.

Sensing that her wandering thoughts were disturbing Vincent, she concentrated her attention on him with her most reassuring, loving smile. She tried to let all the love she felt for him pour out of her heart through her eyes and blanket him in the warmth of her reassurance and love. She saw his eyes soften with her acceptance and felt him relax ever so slightly.

Instinctively her other hand reached up to join the one still resting lightly on his face. Momentarily frozen in time, Vincent and Catherine absorbed the feel of her hands cupping his face. Slowly, her breath escaped from parted lips. She suddenly recognized she had been holding her breath for fear he would change his mind. An almost imperceptible sigh escaped from Vincent's mouth, drawing her eyes to its presence. She had always loved his mouth, had dreamed of fitting her own quite ordinary lips to his enticingly unique ones. Now she allowed her right hand to move timorously toward her goal -- the cleft of his upper lip. As her forefinger traced its shape, she felt his body tense. Catherine's eyes darted to his and she flooded him with all the thoughts she had ever had about his wonderful, sensual mouth.

Confused wonder washed over his face as he drank in the images of Catherine's thoughts. How could this beautiful, perfect woman be attracted to him? But he could not mistake the message she was sending through their steadily increasing connection.

A slight lowering of his eyelids was not lost on Catherine. She understood it was his permission to continue.

She glided two fingertips of her right hand over the leathery tip and up the coarse but satiny hair that covered the bridge of his nose. When she reached the sensitive spot between his luminous eyes, her left hand joined the journey. Feathery touches smoothed his slanting eyebrows, and, involuntarily, Vincent allowed his eyes to slowly close. In darkness, bereft of his visual senses, her touch became searing and electric yet soothing at the same time. Catherine's fingers were gently kneading his temples, traveling tentatively across his brow and back to the edge of his hairline. The almost nonexistent scrape of her fingernails trailed along his scalp as she separated strands of his silky mane. Drawing her hands away from his face, she allowed his hair to slip through her fingers, sending electrifying sparks slicing through his entire body. Inundated as his senses were with this totally new feeling, he was dragged back to earth by the insistent pressure of Catherine's palms as they slid down his chest.

Savoring the ebbing sensations, he languorously opened his eyes to meet the dark-green depths of hers. Never had anyone touched him as Catherine had just done. Never would he have dreamed that anyone would want to.

Caressing the words with the music of his voice, Vincent uttered the only thoughts he could express. "Beautiful... for just a moment you made me feel... Catherine, I don't know what to say -- there are no words."

"Vincent, we don't need words when we can convey so much more with a touch," she sighed.

"Yes, Catherine, you are right -- there are no words needed."

But Catherine could sense that Vincent had another need -- the need to be alone, to ponder all that had taken place tonight. His manner was one of a person blind from birth whose sight had been miraculously restored. It was just too new, too overwhelming, to grasp all at once.

"It's late and we both have to get up so early in the morning. Remember, Vincent, we promised Father we would move his books."

"Yes, we will need our rest," he stated, but Catherine could see that his thoughts were already a million miles away.

To soften the parting and give him just one more thing to think about, Catherine

reached up with both hands to once more gently cup Vincent's face. Ever so slightly she slid her hands into his hair and around his neck before pulling his head down. At the same time she stood on tiptoe and pressed her forehead to his mouth. She hesitated for only a second, and then in one motion she turned and disappeared through the open glass doors into the darkness of her apartment.

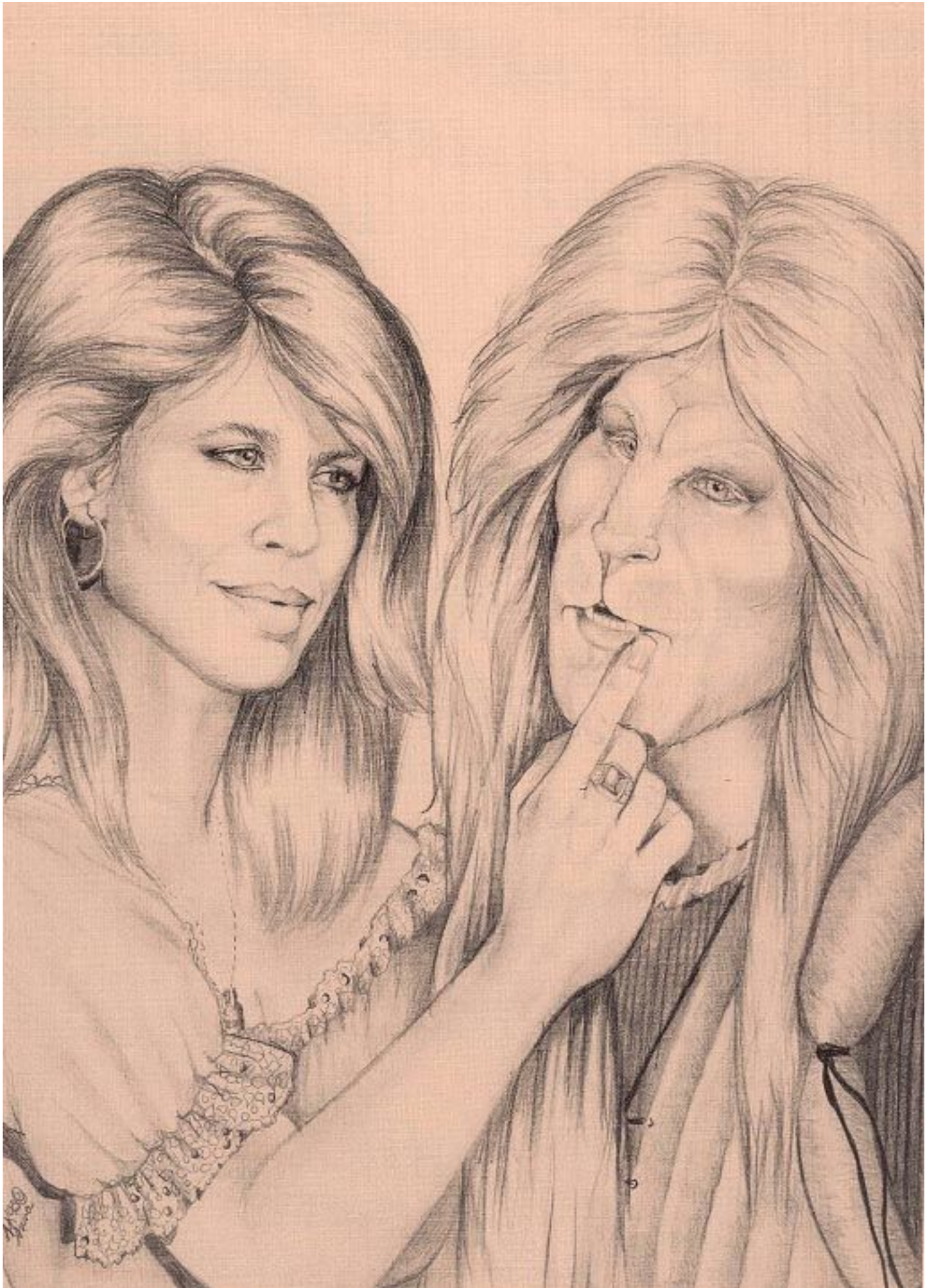
Her actions had been so quick that Vincent had been powerless to do anything, either to prevent or continue their tentative kiss. A leathery, clawed fingertip strayed to his mouth where only moments ago her forehead had been pressed. Then he turned with a swirl of his cloak and disappeared into the night -- to reflect.

Catherine, too, was pondering the wisdom of her impetuous actions. She hoped she had not gone too far, but she wanted so much to convince Vincent that the feelings they had for each other were not wrong. She knew that the physical expression of those feelings could be wonderful and fulfilling for both of them if she could only help him move through his past and into their future. Yet his words from the past echoed in her mind. He had cautioned that they must go with courage and with care. She knew she had the courage, but she would have to temper it with patience.

As Catherine went about her nightly ritual preparing for bed, her thoughts were constantly on Vincent. As she repeatedly pulled the brush through her hair, her fingers could still remember the exquisite feel of his hair gliding through them. She put forth tentative inquiries through the magical thread that inexplicably joined their souls, not wanting to intrude on his private thoughts but seeking some way to gauge his mood. She sensed a rather confused jumble of emotions that she could not put in any semblance of order, but she did not feel any real distress or, more important, any sense of his withdrawing from her gentle probe. Taking this as a positive sign, Catherine lay down and willed her warring mind to cease fighting battles that had not yet been declared.

Deep within the secret place inhabited by the essence of Catherine's being, Vincent felt a timorous but persistent entreaty. He intentionally opened himself up to her quest, wishing to hide nothing from her, but doubting that she would have any more luck discerning the meaning of his thoughts than he himself was having. He purposefully conveyed the reassurance that he was not retreating from her and hoped that she would find comfort in his efforts.

Lately, Catherine had been making a monumental effort to become more receptive to the impulses she received through their bond. It wasn't that the connection was weaker for her. It was that she had never experienced the need to separate her emotions from those of another person. This bond was something she held in awe and, though she treasured it as a true gift, she did not yet understand the intricacies of its existence. Vincent had spent his entire life learning to differentiate between his own emotions and those he sensed from the people he held most dear. But never had he been as acutely linked to anyone as he was to Catherine.





## **The Bond**

Silken thread of gossamer hue  
Inexplicably ties our two  
Souls together and we are one  
Through this unique phenomenon.

Your essence dwells inside the part  
Of me that's nestled near my heart.  
Intercepting the rise and fall  
Of your emotions when they call

Me to defend you, Catherine dear  
From whatever causes you fear.  
My life for yours I'd gladly give;  
No price too high so you can live.

But there are things I can't explain;  
That I ignore yet they remain.  
Through our bond overwhelming need  
Envelops me and I must heed  
Your desire as it sears my core  
Igniting thoughts I can't ignore  
Melting my will of iron so we  
can live the life that's meant to be.

Peggy Garvin - 8/13/92

### Chapter 3

When Vincent left Catherine's balcony, he aimlessly wandered the darkened streets of New York City, searching for something unknown even to him. Without any conscious thought, he found himself at the very spot where he had first found Catherine two years ago. That night, the world as he knew it had shattered and was reborn through her.

Vincent was still unsure of what had drawn him Above on that fateful night. He had been restless all day, anxiously awaiting nightfall. These feelings were not that unusual for many times his frustrations would drive him to walk the streets or sit on a building rooftop observing the city below. Those journeys were a symbol of a freedom he could not enjoy during the daylight but would not relinquish completely. Yet on this particular day Vincent had sensed the presence of a flicker of unrest he could not understand. It was embedded deep within his inner being, in a place he had not even known existed.

Vincent had instinctively hurried to find Father, fearing something was wrong. When he reached the threshold of Father's Chamber, he could see his beloved parent intently examining the page of a book, his glasses carelessly pushed up on his forehead. Obviously, Father was contentedly doing what Father normally did this time of day. Not wishing to disturb him, nor wanting to admit his unfounded fear, Vincent quietly backed out of the doorway.

A little sheepishly, Vincent proceeded down the tunnel to find Mary. Perhaps, he thought, one of the children was sick and she needed assistance in some way. Tentatively poking his head into the Nursery Chamber, Vincent spied Mary rocking baby Caroline. Obviously, it was nap time and all the little mats were spread about on the floor occupied by tiny, sleeping bundles. Nothing amiss here, either.

As Vincent backed into the corridor, he became aware of the tapping of the pipes. No alarms being sounded, just Pascal attending to daily business.

Vincent decided to check on William, perhaps wheedle one of his famous oatmeal cookies out of the gruff-demeanored giant with the generous and loving heart. On his way to the Kitchen Chamber, Vincent spotted Mouse and Jamie, heads bent over his latest gizmo.

Everywhere he looked he found the everyday activities taking place in the Tunnels just as they should. Yet a foreboding feeling of fear, perhaps pain, waxed and waned incessantly in his very depths.

As dusk finally arrived, it found Vincent standing impatiently at the Tunnel entrance to Central Park. Something had inexplicably drawn him to this particular exit when there were a myriad other ways to reach the world Above from his home Below.

Nightfall finally allowed Vincent to wander through the park, ever mindful of the possible hidden dangers. Using his extraordinary perceptions, he delved into the hidden recesses, searching, but for what? There was nothing.

Just when he was about to abandon this mysterious journey that had called to him relentlessly throughout the day and return Below to find something to occupy his frantic mind, he heard the approach of a vehicle. Melting soundlessly into the darkness as the screech of tires filled the air, Vincent observed a bundle being tossed from a passing van.

Why must people litter the park with their garbage, he thought disgustedly.

As the bundle met the ground, pain slashed through Vincent like glass shattering into a million shards -- piercing his consciousness. At once he knew that this was the reason for his presence Above. As he cautiously approached, he could feel the life draining from the entity that had summoned him. Without questioning the purpose or rightness, he shouldered the fragile body and hastened to the sanctuary of his home Below.

Ever since that fateful day, Vincent had experienced life in a way he had only dreamed about or known through books. Catherine had gently but insistently unlocked inner doors, one after another. And tonight, a giant door had swung wide and left him feeling vulnerable but hopeful.

As a very young boy, Vincent had been aware of his differences, but his family and friends had never allowed him to dwell on them. He had always felt accepted and loved. When adolescence made its raging entrance, the acknowledgment of those differences could no longer be as easily suppressed.

Vincent had always been small for his age, but as he hovered on the edge of his teens, he shot up so quickly that Mary all but gave up trying to keep the hems of his pants somewhere close to his ankles. On his thirteenth birthday, Father had presented him with the most beautiful knee-high leather boots. Now his too-short pants could be tucked into the tops of his boots to save Mary's sanity and Vincent's ankles from the cold.

On that same birthday, Mary had given Vincent his cloak. She had secreted away a soft woolen blanket that had been in one of the many boxes sent Below by the Helpers. It was just too beautiful to be used as only a blanket. She had searched through all the boxes hoping to find another so she would have enough material to make Vincent a warm winter coat. But this blanket was unique, one-of-a-kind, so Mary decided to make Vincent a one-of-a-kind winter cloak which could not be so easily outgrown.

She had painstakingly fashioned the garment to last a long time, using the blanket as the body and hood. As she had known, there was not enough of the plush black wool to complete the garment, so she had taken the softest pieces of leather she could find and finished the sleeve. Over one shoulder she had placed a patchwork of



leather and, by hand, had knotted fringed laces for decoration. She knew that Vincent loved fringe and hoped this would make up for the patched sleeve. The other sleeve was a section of the softest black leather which she rolled and tied with laces. The blanket was edged down both sides of the front with the same black leather and tied with laces.

The total effect was one that was unique indeed. Mary had been slightly apprehensive about giving Vincent the cloak, but the feeling had been completely wiped away by the way his eyes had lit up at his first sight of it. It looked to him like something out of one of the books he had read and, as he settled it about his broadening shoulders, he felt special and just a little bit mystical. The practicality of the hood that completely engulfed his head and face suggested a sense of safety for his forays Above.

Looking very noble, Vincent flourished his cloak and approached Mary with the look of a knight in shining armor. He had taken her hand and bowed over it ceremoniously, calling her "milady". Mary had blushed and everyone had joined in the charade.

Vincent had thought his thirteenth birthday to be the most wonderful day of his life. And it had been, until the night he found Catherine.

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As adolescent boys will, Vincent had become acutely aware of girls. Up to this point girls had been friends, different from the boys in their abilities to fight and climb and run; but now he realized that girls were very different in ways he'd never noticed before. Overnight they seemed to acquire a softer, less angular appearance. They lost interest in the usual Tunnel games and no longer wanted to go exploring. He found them sitting quietly, alone or in small groups, sewing or just talking. Whenever he would draw near, their conversation would stop. He and the other boys would approach the girls with some planned expedition, only to be rebuffed. After they walked away, the girls would resume their conversation in hushed tones. Often Vincent would inadvertently come upon a group of girls and hear them talking and giggling, but they would never share the cause of their mirth with him. It was an emotionally confusing time for Vincent. He had tried to talk to Devin about it because he was older and Vincent was sure he could explain the situation to him. But all Devin would say is that he would understand when he was older. Vincent wanted to understand now!

When Devin had left the Tunnels without so much as a goodbye, Vincent had been desolate. His older brother had been his closest friend. They had dared to dream dreams together that no one else could even imagine. Yet, Devin had left and Vincent had struggled to cope with his awakening masculinity, alone.

Lisa and Vincent had been friends since they were very young. She had never been good at climbing and fighting, but she had valiantly tried. Sensing her frustrations, Vincent had always lagged behind to help her over the rougher parts of their adventures. They had always been able to talk about their feelings as children, but one day Lisa just

stopped joining in on the adventures of the Tunnel children and became seriously absorbed in her greatest love -- dancing.

Vincent saw very little of her from about age ten until his thirteenth birthday celebration. Her gift to Vincent had been a tiny, porcelain ballerina. "To remind you of me when I am on tour as a famous prima ballerina," she had told him. Her gift and her words had touched him in a most secret part of himself; and he had spent many sleepless nights lying awake turning the figurine, making it twirl and spin between his fingers. In his mind's eye he could picture Lisa dancing just for him!

If only he could talk to someone about this assault of unfamiliar feelings. He tried to approach Father once but just couldn't seem to form the words that would have broached such a delicate subject. Abruptly, Vincent had exited the chamber leaving behind a very puzzled Father. Vincent had never repeated the attempted conversation with Father or anyone else. As was becoming Vincent's way, he would take long walks pondering and analyzing his problems. Many times, solutions would present themselves, but this particular problem just would not be solved. He even turned to books. They had been his solace and his teacher throughout his entire life, but books could not answer questions he did not know how to ask.

It was as vivid in his memory today as the day it happened. Lisa had come to Vincent's Chamber and, as was the custom Below, she had called out softly at the doorway requesting entrance. Privacy was a very limited commodity Below, and the Tunnel dwellers tried to respect one another's Chambers as their private sanctuaries, although the absence of real doors afforded little insurance against interruption.

Vincent had been reclining on his bed, trying to read while absentmindedly fingering the porcelain ballerina resting at his side. When Lisa had called to him, he had been thinking of her. Startled, he groped for the figurine, dropped the book and bolted upright in the bed all in one movement. His adolescent-changing voice cracked as he uttered the words, "just a moment." Lisa, misunderstanding him, entered his Chamber and came face to face with a flustered Vincent. Her eyes unconsciously dropped to the open neck of his suede shirt. The unexpected glimpse of long amber hair peeking through the loosened laces sent a blush to her cheeks. As his hands flew to his shirtfront, Lisa spotted the ballerina clutched tightly within one of his large, furred fists. Their eyes locked briefly before Vincent dropped his head allowing his golden mane to shield his face from her view. He set the figurine on his writing table and hastily drew the laces of his shirt closed.

"I wanted to invite you to a special performance of Swan Lake that I've been practicing," she said, recovering some of her composure with the recitation of the speech she had rehearsed for days. "Could you come to the practice room tonight at eight o'clock?"

"I'd like that very much," Vincent stammered through the curtain of hair concealing from her sight the amazement reflected in his eyes.

"Good, then I'll see you in half an hour," she tossed over her shoulder as she bounded from his Chamber.

Vincent was riveted to that very spot as he stared after her retreating image. Several seconds passed before he realized he had been holding his breath, and he let it escape in a low hiss.

When his senses had recovered somewhat, he realized there wasn't any time to waste. Thinking the performance to be like one of the many recitals given by the children Below, Vincent hurried to change into his best white linen shirt and his brown corduroy dress pants. He pulled on his knee-high leather boots and bolted for the door. Halfway out, he hastily returned to his wardrobe and donned the new forest-green suede vest he had been saving for Winterfest. Perhaps Lisa would notice him in the crowd. After all, she had come to his Chamber personally to invite him to the performance. Funny that he hadn't heard anything about it before now.

Oh, well, he told himself, I suppose I have been in somewhat of a fog lately -- perhaps I've just not been paying attention.

There was a spring of anticipation in Vincent's step as he rounded the corner and proceeded toward the practice room. This was the room reserved for the dancing lessons that all the Tunnel children were required to take. Vincent, too, had laboriously endured his share of dance lessons. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy music and dancing; it was just another painful event that had accentuated his differences.

Strangely aware that he was alone in the corridor, he hurried thinking he must be late. As he burst through the entrance to the large practice room, he was assaulted by the vast emptiness. He could hear a faint scraping sound and then the old phonograph brought forth the familiar strains of the dying swan scene from Swan Lake. As the music filtered into his consciousness, it was almost totally subjugated by the all-consuming vision of Lisa floating across the room toward him. Her hair was pulled back in a severe knot at the base of her slender white neck. Her off-the-shoulder dress dipped low in the front barely revealing the tops of her budding breasts. Vincent had never seen so much soft, creamy-looking skin in his entire life.

As Lisa fluttered and whirled to the strains of the music, her bare back was revealed by the low-cut bodice and the filmy chiffon of her skirt accentuated rather than concealed her long shapely legs.

Vincent felt his heart leap and his chest constrict making it almost impossible for him to breathe. Lisa was, at that moment, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. Vincent stood rooted to the place where he had halted when he had first heard the music and lifted his eyes to behold the vision now before him.

As Lisa danced nearer, Vincent directed his gaze toward her face and was

overwhelmed by the look he beheld. Joy, rapture -- such pleasure as he had never seen on the face of anyone before. And she was looking at him!

Vincent's senses whirled with the blending blur of creamy flesh and chiffon until he felt dizzy. Lisa kept dancing around him, dipping close and then retreating slightly. She trailed her fingertips over his shoulder, and a tingling sensation lingered where her fingertips had been. Her touches became bolder and her dancing more beguiling. In his euphoria, Vincent reached out to halt the source of his dizziness lest he faint.

At that moment, Vincent sensed, as through a fog, the presence of another person in the room. Lisa tensed and spun around. The rapturous look on her face turned to one of fear. Before Vincent could anticipate her sudden movement, she had turned into the hand that was gripping her shoulder forcing his claws to scrape across her back. Her cry of anguish was like cold water splashing over Vincent. He was at once alert to the situation and started forward to comfort Lisa. A grip of iron on his shoulder halted him abruptly.

Confused, Vincent turned into the unexpected wrath displayed on Father's face. Vincent had seen Father angry before, but never had he seen this particular look of horror. Wrenching his eyes from Father's face, Vincent turned to glimpse Lisa's torn and bleeding back as she ran to the dressing area at the back of the practice room. That image -- blood trailing down the ivory of her back onto the white chiffon dress -- would be forever etched in his memory.

Vincent had been very upset when Father told him Lisa had decided to go and live with her aunt in Connecticut. It was then impossible for him to talk to her, to try and understand, to resolve what had happened.

That had been the last time he had seen Lisa until many years later. She had returned to the Tunnels to escape the world Above. During her stay Vincent had finally mustered the courage to broach the subject.

"Oh, Vincent," she had laughed. "You take things much too seriously. It was a flirtation, nothing more -- I had forgotten all about it."

But Vincent had not forgotten. The unresolved state of this painful memory was one that had haunted Vincent for years. As time passed, he had relegated it to an almost-forgotten place where other such memories were sequestered behind their closed doors. He had opened that door briefly with the woman Lisa had become and her comments had helped him to be able to examine it in a different light.

The door to the memory of the pain Vincent had caused Lisa had then been closed tightly again until Catherine had unknowingly opened it. They had enjoyed a very pleasant, peaceful evening reading on her balcony. Vincent had risen from the floor and bent to offer Catherine his hand in helping her up. As she put her delicate hand in his,

she lifted her face to gaze up at Vincent, and that same rapturous look he had seen on Lisa's face assaulted his senses. He had dropped Catherine's hand as if it were a hot coal and retreated from her nearness. Shock had immediately replaced the look of joy, and Vincent had felt very contrite, but he had been unable to explain his reaction. He had reassured Catherine that it was nothing she had done and bid her a hasty goodnight.

Days later Catherine had returned to the subject, as Vincent knew she would, and he had agonizingly explained the painful memory of what he had done to Lisa.

Catherine had tried to help Vincent analyze the unfortunate but typical adolescent incident, but he had been too embarrassed to delve into it with her. Her final words to Vincent had been, "I'm not Lisa."

Afterwards, whenever Vincent would sense the first signs of his control weakening and feel the desire for Catherine flooding through his body, he would distance himself from her until he could rebuild the protective wall she so diligently continued to dismantle. Sometimes he would leave and be gone for days, yet he always returned with an apologetic look on his face. And Catherine always understood and forgave him. Then the whole vicious cycle would begin again.

Although Vincent knew in his heart that what he felt for Catherine was far beyond the adolescent yearnings Lisa had awakened in him, he also realized the emotion of desire and the injury to Lisa were irrevocably linked. Father had reinforced in him the indisputable need to avoid any emotional or physical display Vincent might feel toward a woman. "It is simply too dangerous," Father had declared. And Vincent had come to accept this premise as fact without further examination.

But tonight, the tentative yet loving touches he had allowed Catherine made it impossible to leave those memories locked away. They must be dragged into the light and examined carefully.





## **How do I love thee, Vincent?**

**I loved, first, the timbre of your voice  
The sound that brought me back from death  
Your healing words became my ray of hope  
Your gentle soul poured out to make me whole**

**SHOCK**

**My face ... Your face**

**and then...**

**I took a second look.**

**You gave me the courage to return  
Told me I had it all the while  
And I began to build my hollow past  
Into a life of substance and of worth**

**SATISFYING**

**Yes ... No**

**and then...**

**I realized just why.**

**Peggy Garvin - 3/13/92**

## Chapter 4

It was a typical day at the office for Cathy Chandler. Her desk was piled ridiculously high with case folders, and styrofoam cups still housing part of their murky contents were scattered about the room haphazardly. She had just gulped down two aspirin with the brew at the bottom of one of those cups, sputtering as the tepid liquid hit the back of her throat.

The clock on the far wall told her it was 2:25 in the afternoon. She had stayed until after ten last night, whittling away at the stacks of files on her desk so she would be able to leave on time tonight. She suspected Joe had arrived very early this morning, because, when she entered her office, the desk was once again piled high. Dejected, she had bent to put her purse in the bottom drawer of the desk and spotted the telltale evidence in her wastebasket -- the wrapper from his favorite snack -- chocolate-covered cheese doodles!

"Not tonight, Joe," she whimpered to herself. "Please, not tonight."

It was Friday night and she had "places to go and people to see." Perhaps not people, but one very special person.

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Wednesday night she had trudged home to her empty apartment, briefcase bursting with work that had to be done this week. After wolfing down a pimento cheese sandwich and a diet Coke, she'd settled in for an evening of paperwork.

A soft knock made her heart skip a beat, but, when it was repeated, she realized it was the dull sound of the door instead of the precious tap on the glass that always lightened her heart. She was well aware that Vincent had been away since early Sunday morning examining a project in the lower Tunnels. She knew it could not possibly be him -- but she could hope.

Pushing down the disappointment that had welled up in her throat, she hurried to check the peephole to determine who her caller might be. Either the person was very short or had disappeared. Cautiously, she unlocked the door, keeping the chains securely in place and her knee braced against the door. No one. The hallway was empty. As she stepped back she caught sight of the creamy vellum envelope. She had been concentrating so hard on seeing a person, she hadn't even thought about the possibility of a note.

Picking up the envelope and relocking the door, she tried to calm her racing thoughts. Vincent was away -- unable to send a note. Her heart quickened -- trouble Below! With trembling fingers she ripped open the envelope and withdrew the folded vellum. At once his now-familiar script appeared before her worried eyes and relief



flooded her senses.

*Dearest Catherine,*

*The pleasure of your company is requested at a homecoming celebration -- Friday evening at eight o'clock. The guest list is very limited. I hope you can attend.*

*V.*

Limited guest list, indeed! She suspected, and hoped, that there were only two guests on that list.

Catherine had not seen Vincent since the past Saturday. After meeting him for breakfast Below, they had tackled the ever-growing mountains of books that filled every available space in Father's vast library. Their offer to help him move a few books onto shelves had consumed the entire day and extended well into the evening. Catherine had always loved books and Father had such an unusual collection it was fascinating just to read the titles. There had been a quiet camaraderie among their small group, and several tea breaks had afforded them the chance to exchange philosophical ideas and explore their differing opinions. On any other morning it would have been fine, but this particular day Catherine was anxious to be alone with Vincent in hopes they could discuss the tiny step they had taken in their relationship the night before. Judging from the weariness around Vincent's eyes at breakfast, Catherine suspected he had been deep in thought on that very subject until the wee hours of the morning.

They finally finished filling the available shelves with books; and, promising to return to complete the task when Cullen had installed the rest of the new shelves, Catherine and Vincent bid the weary man goodnight. If they were tired, they knew he must be exhausted, although Father had done more directing than actual moving.

As they were leaving Father's Chamber, Vincent allowed the soft fur on the back of his hand to lightly brush against Catherine's own smooth one. Without a word, she slipped her small hand into his large one, and they silently strolled down the corridor.

Abruptly, Catherine halted their progress with an insistent tug on Vincent's hand. "Where are we going -- I thought we would talk," she stammered.

She had just assumed that Vincent would want to share his thoughts with her as soon as they were alone; but, as they walked it had become very apparent that he was guiding their progress to the basement entrance of her apartment building. He was intending to just walk her home.

As Vincent dropped his head forward, the curtain of his work-tousled hair slightly obscured his face from her sight. He often used this particular posture to avoid eye contact when he was uncomfortable with the subject they were discussing.

"It is late, Catherine, and you are tired. I know you have work you must complete tomorrow in preparation for your meeting Monday morning. I felt it was best to delay our talk until a more opportune time."

"But it's only nine o'clock," she protested with an exasperated look. "I can sleep late tomorrow and still finish that deposition. We need to talk."

"I know," he sighed. "But I must prepare to leave at dawn to inspect the new storage chambers under construction in the lower levels beneath the Falls. The crew that started the excavation last week reported some strange fissures in the walls and recommended to Father that they be examined before they continue working on those chambers. Cullen is the most knowledgeable about this type of construction. And Mouse, well -- you know Mouse; he didn't want to be left out. Father felt it best that I go along in case..." At this point, Vincent's voice trailed off.

"In case there was any danger," she stated, finishing his sentence. "Oh, Vincent, why must it always be you who takes all the risks?"

Her eyes dropped dejectedly. She understood Vincent had duties and responsibilities. She tried to be patient when the world Below seemed to conspire to keep them apart. But, tonight she needed to hear what was in his heart. And she needed to tell him what was in hers.

Vincent knew that Catherine's overreaction was triggered by the frustration she felt at the delay in their planned discussion and at their impending separation. She was usually so understanding and patient, even when they were repeatedly interrupted by the needs of his world.

"We should return in a few days," he offered as solace.

"It will have to do," she conceded with an obviously disappointed sigh. Their discussion would have to wait, but the topic was going to be approached again, very soon -- of that she would make certain.

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The day had begun like any other, but it seemed that the harder Catherine worked the further behind she got. As Joe poked his head around the corner at five o'clock, supposedly their quitting time, Catherine gave him a scathing look. She was still buried in files, and there was no way she was going to be able to finish and make it to the "homecoming celebration" by eight.

"Hey, Radcliffe, why so testy?"

Silence was his only answer. It was Friday night. Everyone else had gone home. Even he was on his way out the door when he had noticed her light.

"What are you trying to do here, anyway -- steal my job? Go on home."

At that, Cathy Chandler wrenched open the drawer that held her purse, grabbed her coat, and smeared lipstick across Joe's cheek as she streaked by him and out the door!

The man was human after all, she thought, as she impatiently awaited the descent of the elevator. Homecoming here I come!

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Vincent was just settling back into the warmth of the bathing pool when he felt Catherine's skyrocket of emotions. Obviously she was very happy about something. He secretly hoped it was because he had returned and they were to meet tonight. He felt a flicker of apprehension as he wondered, what if she didn't get my note? No, he knew he had sent Mouse back from the construction site a day early with specific instructions to find a reliable messenger and see that this very important message reached Catherine immediately. Upon his return, Vincent had checked with Mouse and been told that he'd given the note to Kipper. Vincent had tracked the lad down and been assured the message had been delivered to Catherine.

Right now, he knew he needed to relax his weary muscles and rid himself of the grime of the lower tunnels. He wanted to look and feel his best -- for Catherine.

The trip to examine the construction site had given Vincent the extra time he needed to think before the talk Catherine so wanted them to have. He wanted to be able to explain his feelings to her, but he wasn't sure she would ever be able to understand. They had discussed Lisa and the trauma he had suffered after she left. But there was no way to explain the desolation, the utter shame he had lived with for so many years.

The event itself had been gradually relegated in his mind to a place of lesser importance. As Vincent had matured, he had been teacher to many of the adolescents Below. He had seen some of them struggle with the same rampaging emotions that he had experienced at that age. He had even comforted a few bruised or crying young ladies after less-than-gentle displays of affection had been thrust upon them by boys they had been friends with all their lives. Perhaps he had not really been that different on the inside than the other boys his age. Maybe he had allowed his outward differences to influence his thinking. Undoubtedly, he had not been the only teenage boy who felt an overwhelming need to express his feelings.

The difference had been that Vincent had not had a teacher, someone he could

talk to, so he had resolved it in the only way he knew how. He had accepted the burden of spending the rest of his life -- apart.

Tonight, he would try to open his heart to Catherine. He would put his trust and faith in the love he felt pulsing between them through that gossamer thread that bound their souls as one. Yes, tonight he would try.

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Freshly scrubbed, hair brushed into a cascade of blonde waves settling about his shoulders, Vincent stood like a small boy trying to decide what to wear on the first day of school. Finally, he decided on a simple ivory linen shirt with tiny pleats down the front and a pair of dark brown corduroy pants. He tucked them into the tops of soft leather boots the color of butterscotch. To this he added a tawny-colored suede tunic fastened only at the waist allowing the pleated shirt front to show. He had taken far too long getting ready and could feel Catherine preparing to leave to come Below.

With a grace he was totally unaware of, Vincent settled his cloak about his shoulders and with anxious strides devoured the distance from his Chamber to the entrance below Catherine's apartment. He wanted to be waiting for her when she appeared through that corridor of light. It had been almost a week since he had seen her, and he felt like a starving man waiting to be served.

His heart quickened as the vision that was Catherine registered in the whole of his being. She was always lovely to him -- the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was adorable in jeans and a sweater, sophisticated in a business suit, enchanting in Tunnel clothes. But tonight...

The emerald green of her dress was reflected in her eyes, giving them a brilliance that was intoxicating. The material was a soft wool that caressed her slender frame and clung in such a way as to accentuate her femininity. The sleeves were slightly full at the shoulder but tapering into gathered tucks just above her elbows. The neckline was demure, dipping only slightly in the front. As Vincent's eyes followed the chain he knew held the crystal he had given her, the trail ended abruptly. The crystal itself was out of sight, and the mental picture of his gift nestled between her breasts caused his heart to constrict sharply.

As he shook his head imperceptibly to clear that vision from his mind, Vincent noticed a matching wool shawl draped across her arm. Catherine held the shawl out to Vincent and he shook it gently to release it from its folds. As he opened it between his hands, Catherine turned her back into the outstretched fabric, allowing Vincent's arms to enfold her in a cocoon of warmth. For just a moment she leaned back against his chest as her hands covered his, and they were lost in the mindless sensations that seeped into every part of their bodies. Slowly he withdrew from the contact and allowed her to replace his hands with her own on the shawl. In one fluid movement they turned, intertwining their hands, as they started toward the inhabited section of the Tunnels.

If only there was somewhere we could go to be alone, Catherine wished silently in dismay.

Instantly, Vincent felt her desire as it blended with the secret knowledge that he had arranged for that particular wish to come true this very night.

As they strolled leisurely through the tunnels, absorbing the peace and contentment of just being together, Vincent inquired about the case she had been working on before he had left for the construction site.

"Oh, it's an ongoing process. Our judicial system is an exasperating combination of 'hurry up and wait'. That deposition had to be taken Monday without fail so that we could wait for several months before getting on the court docket to hear the case. I guess I've grown more accustomed to the inevitable frustration, but there is nothing quick about justice. And how did the inspection go?" she asked with as much enthusiasm as she could force into her voice when her mind was so totally occupied with other thoughts -- thoughts of what they really needed to be discussing.

"Quite well," answered Vincent, sensing her restlessness but wanting to delay the discussion of their relationship until they reached their destination. "The fissures in the walls were merely surface cracks and the rock underneath was very solid. The original crew will resume work on those storage chambers next week. It was a lengthy delay, but we can't be too careful when the safety of the community is involved."

"Of course," Catherine murmured. At that point Catherine realized that they had passed Father's Chamber and Vincent's Chamber and seemed to be heading away from the inhabited area of the tunnels. But where are we going? she wondered.

When Vincent had sent Mouse back early to arrange delivery of the note to Catherine, he had also prevailed upon him to prepare the Chamber of Solitude. This chamber had been created as a retreat to be used whenever someone needed to be alone for any reason. Often, one of the Tunnel dwellers would need time to recover from the loss of a loved one or to deal with an emotional situation that only solitude could heal. It was very comforting to have friends in times of need, but sometimes the company of one's own thoughts was the only way to sort through all the finer details and resolve a dilemma.

Some members of the community used the Chamber of Solitude as a place for religious renewal. It had also been put into service as a getaway for newlyweds or a weekend break for new parents to renew their commitment to each other. In a world where privacy was at a premium, the chamber held a quiet respite from the daily pressures that sometimes threatened to overwhelm.

Vincent had never availed himself of the solitude this chamber offered because he preferred to sequester himself deeper within the earth when the need for renewal or

contemplation overtook him. But this situation was different. He and Catherine had reached a crossroads in their lives, and they needed a place that was safe but secluded. Vincent only hoped that Mouse had been able to accomplish all that he had requested on such short notice.

Catherine's curiosity was definitely getting the better of her now. They had been steadily strolling away from everything familiar to her. She had suspected Vincent was leading her to The Chamber of the Falls, but they had passed that juncture without so much as a hesitation in Vincent's step. She was dying to ask but felt that the effort would be futile. It was obvious Vincent had a secret and he was taking his own sweet time about revealing it.

Catherine had been so absorbed in her thoughts, she had missed the subtle slowing of their pace. As they came to an intersecting tunnel, Vincent turned, taking her fragile hands in his great ones and looked at her with trepidation.

"What's the matter, Vincent?" At his hesitation she begged, "Please, tell me."

"I was so sure in my heart that this was the right thing to do. Now, on the threshold of this journey, I am not so certain."

"What is it, Vincent? I don't understand." Catherine stood looking up at him with those incredibly deep green eyes trying to grasp what he could not explain.

Finally, Vincent released one of her hands, and, guiding her with the other, they rounded a corner that led to a narrow entrance. It appeared to be a chamber, but they were so far away from the rest of the inhabited chambers. As Vincent ducked through the entrance, still holding her hand, she was drawn into a room that was stark in comparison to the homey, lived-in appearances of most of the chambers she had visited. It was clean and neat, but it failed to reflect any particular personality.

"Who lives here?" she asked, turning to Vincent with dozens more questions in her eyes, each waiting its turn to be asked.

"No one and anyone. It is what we call the Chamber of Solitude. It is a retreat our community uses when someone needs a quiet place to think -- or to talk. But, if you prefer to return to the more inhabited area of the Tunnels, we may do so."

"No, this is perfect. But why have I never heard of this place?"

"It is a place that is not spoken of -- everyone in the community who is in need of its solitude learns of its existence. It is a very private place."

"Yes."

"Forgive me, Catherine -- would you care to sit down? Let me take your

shawl."

Immediately Catherine realized that she had not really looked at the Chamber. She did so, as Vincent placed her shawl on a slightly tattered but serviceable chair and began lighting the candles that were strategically placed in niches around the walls.

To her left was a small oak table and two wooden chairs. Next to the faded brown sofa stood a bookcase with what appeared to be an odd assortment of books in varying sizes and styles. A huge comfortable-looking chair loomed in the far corner. The mismatched ottoman in front of it had a valley sagged into its center, testimony to hundreds of feet having rested upon it. A well-worn oval rag rug filled most of the space that was not occupied by furniture and added a homespun dash of color. Across the room was a small doorway leading to another part of the Chamber, but its contents were obscured from her view by a heavy blanket-like curtain. On second look, she decided it was a very charming room.

"This is lovely," she sighed as she settled into one corner of the sofa. It had the kind of high back and overstuffed cushions that seemed to envelope one in its protection. As Vincent turned to face her, Catherine patted the empty space next to her and silently beckoned him to sit beside her. His eyes never leaving her face, he nervously approached, but he stopped just short of his destination.

"Trust me -- trust yourself," Catherine implored.

With trepidation etched deeply in his face, Vincent turned, removed his cloak, placed it on the arm of the chair next to Catherine's shawl, and returned to sit beside her.

"You look very handsome tonight. I've never seen this vest before, have I?"

He knew she was trying to put him at ease and readily accepted the gesture. "I had been saving it for a special occasion, such as Winterfest, but I felt tonight was ... special. Forgive me, Catherine, for not telling you how beautiful you look tonight. When I saw you coming through the entrance you appeared, for a moment, to be floating toward me -- like a vision. I was so mesmerized, I forgot to tell you."

"Oh, but Vincent, you did tell me. Not in words, but with your eyes."

At that, he dropped his head slightly forward causing the deep blonde mass to cover the reaction on his face. But she knew -- she felt it deep in the place inside herself where he had taken residence. It was a warm, pulsating surge that filled her with joy.

After what felt like hours in the echoing quiet but, in reality, was merely a few minutes, Vincent raised his misty-blue eyes to once again meet the sea-green ones of the woman he loved.

"I have done a lot of thinking this past week. I'm afraid I was not very good

company for Cullen and Mouse on our inspection trip. But the quiet time, after they had fallen asleep, was what I needed." Hesitantly, he whispered in a thready voice, "I would like to share what I discovered, with you -- if you..."

Catherine gently placed her trembling finger on his lips to silence his question. "You know that I want us to share everything, Vincent -- it's what I've dreamed of for so long," she said with a wistful look.

With her declaration hanging in the air, Vincent relaxed against the other arm of the sofa as Catherine kicked off her shoes and curled her feet under her. She would allow him to guide the conversation from here.

"I know that you have sensed in me a fear that you consider unfounded. When we first broached the subject of our deepening relationship, I told you of the painful memories of Lisa and how I had injured her. I felt that explanation was one you could easily accept and understand, so it was the most logical way to deal with the situation at hand.

"In truth, I feel I buried that incident until I was mature enough to deal with it. Through my work with the adolescents, as their teacher and their friend, I have counseled many of them through very similar emotionally charged situations. In retrospect, I believe I was reacting in a manner not unlike the reactions I have observed in others of that age. Because of my outward differences, it was assumed that I was also very different in my emotional makeup, and too much emphasis was placed on what took place. Even Lisa, upon her return to the Tunnels, indicated she had all but forgotten the incident. I am not blaming Father, mind you. He has always done what he felt was best for me -- out of love. But he is, after all, only human."

At Catherine's quick intake of breath, Vincent silenced her with a look.

"No, Catherine, the fear has not been vanquished, because it has been fed by more than just that one flame. It burns brightly still. And that is what I have wrestled with this past week -- the resolve to share the rest of the fear with you. I cannot banish it alone."

Vincent had unconsciously turned slightly toward Catherine during this last declaration. His left leg was bent, pressing into the edge of the sofa while his hand clutched at his knee. Leaning forward and extending her arm to span the space that separated them, Catherine placed her hand over his reassuringly. She hoped her touch would convey unmistakably her need to understand his fears and to help him move through them. As quickly as it was extended, she withdrew it to allow him to proceed.

"Until last Friday night, when you touched me, I had never dared to hope that you would want to do such as that. When I was a very young child, I was cuddled and held -- by Mary and by Father and others. But after Lisa left, I felt the unspoken



command -- from within and without -- to hold myself separate from this type of affection. This self-imposed exile has always felt right -- until the day I found you. As you lay healing, blinded by the bandages, I fed you and cared for you -- read to you. But what I wanted more than anything was to hold you in my arms and comfort you. Yet I knew that this was an impossibility.

"When you returned to your world I intended to distance myself from you, relegating the feelings to memories. Then I began to recognize the growing connection we had and was drawn to you. I had justified to myself the need to see you -- one last time. But that resolve crumbled as well. I have lived with the looks on the faces of people when they first see my face. The pain is expected and I am prepared to bear it. It is what I must do. But seeing that look on your face when you first saw mine was more than I thought I could bear. As our time together continued, I felt you had come to accept me as a friend -- in spite of my appearance. I felt this was a gift I gladly accepted knowing it could never be more than friendship. It could not be -- I could not bear even the thought of seeing the look in your eyes that I had seen reflected in those of countless strangers. So I built a wall between us that allowed the friendship to seep through the tiny cracks. And every time you tried to break through, I would shore it back up with a determination born of years of exile. Friday night you pushed through part of that wall with such gentle touches I barely felt it crumble. And I have been reluctant to repair the breach."

Deafening silence filled the solitary chamber. Unwilling to pressure him, Catherine held her breath to quell the words of love that threatened to tumble out to fill the void.

"There is more," he uttered like a prisoner confessing numerous crimes.

"The flames that feed the fire of my fears come from many directions. When your father passed away, you came Below. You needed the time and a place to heal from your loss. I understood that need from my experience of watching others deal with the loss of their parents. But I could not truly understand because I have never really known what it is like to have ... parents. I love Father and would grieve his loss no less because he is not my biological father. You knew your mother for only a short time, but you did know her. And her memory was enhanced by the love your father felt for her and shared with you. The loss is not the same. You lived in the sunshine of their existence and endured the darkness of their passing. I have lived in total darkness from the beginning. I don't even have the memories of sunny days to call on in times of despair. There is nothing but an echo of the emptiness in answer to my questions. I do not even know what I am. I am only me. And what is it that I presume to offer you? What, indeed."

At that, Catherine could still her voice no longer. "Not what, my dearest Vincent, who. My heart knows who you are -- you are the man I love. Nothing else matters." With every ounce of emotion she could pour from her heart she said the words she had wanted to say for so long. "I love you."

With tears welling up in his eyes, Vincent whispered, "And I, you." Then he lowered his head and his face disappeared behind the protective shield of his mane.

Slowly, deliberately, Catherine rose until she was kneeling on the cushion of the sofa a mere arm's length from Vincent. Her movements caused him to raise his head. The look on her face was that of a small child begging permission to do that which had always been reserved only for the older children. He no longer wished to deny her -- or himself. As he opened his arms, she melted against his chest, and he was unable to deny that it felt right.

So exquisite was the experience of being held lovingly in his arms, Catherine relinquished all thought of talking. She wanted to concentrate totally on examining every sensation. Her cheek rested against the softness of his suede vest. Her left arm was nestled in the space between the sofa and his strong, hard back, while her right hand rested lightly on his chest. It was the first time she could remember being aware that he was not insulated from her by his usual layers of shirts and sweaters. Sensing his relaxed state, she carefully slid her hand over his vest toward the center of his chest. She allowed it to rest lightly, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath the tiny pleats covering the front of his shirt. As she cautiously traced the surface of one button with the tip of her finger, she felt his heart flutter. His hand that had been resting on her sleeve, pressed her hand into his chest, halting further exploration. Perhaps you're right, she thought.

As Catherine raised her head, their eyes met in a flood of understanding. She reluctantly separated from the warm circle of his loving arms as he relinquished his hold. They would be grateful for this monumental step in their journey.

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In the ensuing months, Catherine and Vincent fell into a comfortable lull -- they neither moved forward nor away from their love for each other. They simply enjoyed being together, allowing the peace of their relationship to wash over them like a healing balm. Their lives together had been consumed by turmoil and indecision. They needed this respite.



### **A Babe to a Man**

**A babe abandoned and all alone  
found on St. Vincent's step  
Frightened he cries out in mewling tones  
when out of the shadows swept**

**A figure dressed in outdated clothes  
with a heart both good and kind.  
Possessing a nature that is loathe  
to leave the helpless behind.**

**Inside those warm, safe, protective arms  
the babe is cradled away.  
Into a world where he'll not be harmed;  
one where he's welcome to stay.**

**Holding onto life tenuously  
the poor babe fights to survive.  
Growing each day in strength, steadily;  
his daily goal -- stay alive!**

**While his faint-beating heart is nurtured  
to know the love that's within  
His soul has already been tortured  
by betrayal of his kin.**

**Years later the man he turns into  
was formed by the world Below.  
And evidenced in all he will do  
to repay the debt he owes.**

**He's a figure in outdated clothes  
with a heart both good and kind.  
Possessing a nature that is loathe  
to leave the helpless behind.**

**Peggy Garvin - 6/6/92**

## Chapter 5

"I have to hurry, I'm going to be late," Nadia announced in an exasperated tone. "You know how much flak I have to take from Demetri when I'm late."

"I've almost got it fixed -- just hold tight for another five minutes, OK?" Reaper was buried to the elbows in the engine of the old '58 Chevrolet Apache pickup. He had traded a guy a perfectly good '76 Chevy Impala convertible for this troublesome truck.

Just goes to show you even a mechanic could be fooled by a cream-puff appearance, he told himself. But Reaper was known for his stubbornness. He never gave up until he did what he set out to accomplish, and this truck wasn't going to be the first thing to defeat him.

Reaper ran a small automotive repair shop near Seward Park simply called "My Shop". He got the name from the deep feeling of accomplishment he derived from finally making the last payment on the broken-down old building. The minute it really belonged to him, he changed the name and started fixing it up. His customers didn't come to him because of, or in spite of, his looks. They came to him by word-of-mouth recommendations. On the street it was well known that Reaper had a reputation for honesty and for being a "damn good wrench".

Nadia was almost Oriental in appearance. Her dad had been Cherokee Indian and her mom English. She assumed the Indian blood gave her the heavy hair that fell well below her waist and was so shiny it looked like the blue-black barrel of a gun. Her eyes were black, too, slightly slanted and mysterious.

At 5'7" tall and 120 pounds, she moved with a panther's grace. She was a belly dancer at the Grecian Gardens, a local restaurant on the Upper East Side. It was a high-class place that catered to very wealthy New Yorkers who liked to do something different and unusual. A lot of the girls who worked with Nadia tried to get the attention of these men. Some hoped to find rich husbands; others only wanted to find a man who was willing to spend his money on her no matter what the terms. Nadia, on the other hand, was soulmate to Reaper. She had no desire to attract any of these men. Dancing was as necessary to her as breathing, and the restaurant provided a way for her to dance and make some money. When she was dancing she became lost in the music and the crowd disappeared. Sometimes she would allow her mind to wander and she would imagine that she was dancing for Reaper, but she never let herself get too involved with this fantasy. She liked to provide sensual entertainment but not offer any encouragement to the customers.

Back at the clubhouse she proudly wore Reaper's property patch as the symbol it was in their biker community -- proof that he had promised to love and protect only her and that she accepted him as her man. It was a very proud day in her memory when Reaper had presented her with the black leather vest. It was buttery soft with long fringe flowing down the front. She loved it the moment he held it out to her; but, when she

turned it around and saw the embroidered vulture on the back ringed with the words "Property of Reaper", it had been the happiest day of her life.

Or so she had thought. The very next day, Reaper had asked her to be his wife and they had been married just two months later. His love was the most important thing in her life and her happiest days were the ones they spent together.

"I got it, babe," he stated with a satisfied wink. "Hop in."

Tonight was a big night at the Grecian Gardens. They were catering a private party in the secluded back room, and Nadia had been asked to perform. She was always grateful for the extra money Demetri gave her for these special performances, but she was well aware that the clientele tonight were among the most powerful and feared of the Bertinelli family. She had a fearful respect for these men and had talked to Reaper about it on several occasions. He had reassured her that men like that were only interested in money and power.

"Give them a good performance for their money and keep your distance and everything will be all right," he'd warned her.

And that was just what she intended to do.

When she arrived, the whole restaurant was bustling with activity. These big private parties always took a toll on the waitresses and kitchen help, not that Demetri cared about anything except the money he was getting for this affair. He was a cold, calculating businessman who had to answer to the owner of the restaurant, and the owner expected a handsome profit from his investment. Demetri had always delivered, so he kept his job. That was just the way it was. He would drive his employees to the limit and pay them the smallest wage he could in order to please Alonzo Zappacosta.

Nadia glided past the door of the kitchen as she headed toward the room at the back that the dancers used to store their costumes and dress. Demetri spotted her and fell into an easy stride next to her.

"I need a little extra effort from you tonight, Miss High and Mighty -- this is important to me." His piercing green eyes narrowed as they bore into the black depths of hers.

After dropping her eyes in acknowledgement of his words, Nadia proceeded to the dressing area with a quiet dignity that drove him crazy.

Somebody needs to teach her some humility and obedience, thought Demetri, and I would love to take on the job. But I really don't have time for that right now -- I'll just have to put that little task on hold, he decided as he strode away.

As she entered the dressing area she shared with the half-dozen dancers who

worked at the Grecian Gardens, she noted a tension hanging in the air that always seemed to be present whenever they were having a big private party. Obviously, Demetri had been around bullying the other dancers. The man was an obnoxious creep and she often wished somebody would give him what he deserved. She just didn't want it to be Reaper.

As she dressed, Nadia could hear the muffled sounds coming from the room next to the dancers' dressing area. She could hear Nick plucking soulful, haunting sounds from his oud. The lute like instrument was one of Nadia's favorites because it seemed to penetrate right to her soul. Anton was absentmindedly checking his darbouka. The two-part drum provided the heartbeat of the band with its varying flat and sharp sounds. She knew his heart wasn't in his playing right now because the sounds were muddled together in a careless way. Anton never played like that unless something was bothering him. Nadia guessed the tension she felt in the dancers' room was also present in the band's dressing area. She wondered where Ben was -- she didn't hear his santour. She stopped applying her makeup to concentrate on listening for the xylophone-like tones of the metal strings being struck by the small mallets he skillfully wielded. Ben was her favorite of the musicians because he was shy and polite and always pleasant. Together the skillful musicians made dancing a pleasure. Nadia had danced with many different Middle Eastern bands in her 13-year career as a belly dancer, but these three were the best.

There was a sharp knock on the door and a boyish head poked in. Demetri had sent Eddie, the busboy, to let the dancers know they would be going on in five minutes.

The band filed past their dressing room, alerting Nadia to her need to hurry with the finishing touches of her makeup. She always tried to go upstairs to the tiny window overlooking the private room. She never tired of watching the other dancers and it gave her a chance to gauge the mood of the crowd. If they were sedate, she could relax a little. If they were rowdy, she knew to be on her guard.

Nadia peered down on the crowd from her hidden window as the Middle Eastern music told its story, changing moods as it progressed. The five parts of the first performance had been divided among the other dancers. Dahlena was performing the short but fast introduction. She had a very energetic style that immediately electrified the audience and brought their attention away from the conversation or food that had been so important mere seconds before. Maya's entrance coincided with Dahlena's exit as the music slowed and took on a gay, festive feel, allowing the audience to relax into the mood of the dance. With bouncy hip-drop steps, Maya exited as Natasha camel-walked into the painfully sad portion of the interlude. Her brooding personality was especially suited to this portion of the dance, and it produced the calming effect needed to accentuate the coming storm. Jana's entrance was an explosion of swirling skirts and shimmying hips that immediately riveted every eye to her lithe body.

This was Nadia's signal to get ready, and she descended the winding stairway as the music slowed for Helena's closing dance. She heard the music turn light and happy, allowing the guests to once again relax and enjoy the blending of body and music in perfect harmony. As Helena exited, a shower of coins hit the floor in appreciation of

their performance. The Grecian Gardens believed in that traditional manner of tipping and would not allow money to be placed in the costumes of the dancers. Two small boys with baskets scurried out onto the floor to clear away the coins in preparation for Nadia's performance.

The chefta-telli portion of Nadia's dance began before she was even visible to her audience. As Anton's darbouka set the steady rhythm, Nadia accented each beat with the finger cymbals known as zills.

The art of using zills was one she had acquired as a young child. She had grown up in a shabby room above the pub where her mother had tended bar. The owner of the pub had taken pity on them and let them have the room for a reasonable amount of rent. Her dad was always gone, out of town on some construction job, so her mom was left to scrape by. One of the waitresses, Julia, had been a dancer in her younger days. After the bar closed, she would sit sipping a beer and playing her zills to whatever tune the groaning old jukebox was playing. Nadia had been fascinated from the moment she heard the staccato beat, so Julia had tightened the bands of the cymbals over her tiny thumbs and middle fingers and shown the wide-eyed waif the basic rhythm. "Tek" -- the fast beat was sounded with the right hand; "A" -- the heavy, solid beat with the left. Nadia's "Tek-A-Tek" could be heard many a night coming from the room above the bar. Finally her mom would come to her door which signaled it was time to go to sleep. Julia had given Nadia her own set of zills for her birthday and they were her favorite gift, even above the sleepy-eyed doll from her mom.

Those early lessons were what had led Nadia to where she stood today. As the beat picked up, Nadia made her entrance with thrusting hips and swirling veils. Her underskirt was a shimmering gold metallic material that flowed with a sensual grace. The topskirt was turquoise shot through with gold and silver threads. Slung low on her hips was the glass-beaded wide belt that shimmered and glinted in the light from the lanterns positioned about the walls of the room. The lighting was subdued but her costume gathered every ray and reflected it back in the eyes of the audience. Suspended from the hip band were rows of delicate gold chains and dangling gold coins. Traditionally, these had been symbols of the skill of the dancer. Some of her tips would be pierced and hung from her belt denoting her favor with the crowds. The same gold coins and chains cascaded from her matching beaded bra. A glass-beaded choker encircled her neck with strands of gold chains lengthening to a point at the cleavage between her breasts. At the end of each chain was a tiny gold coin. Each wrist was encased in a turquoise cuff with beaded fringe spilling down. Her entire body was wrapped in a luminous, transparent veiling that seemed to enhance rather than conceal.

As the beat of the music slowed, Nadia removed her zills and artfully handed them off to Ben as she swirled by him in a blur of veiling. Now her hands were completely free to work the veils. The slower section of the chefta-telli portion of the dance was devoted to the mysterious and graceful swirling and dipping movements of the filmy material as it was gradually unwrapped from her body. The tempo increased and the sedate veil movements developed into the complete abandonment of the material. As

it was swirled into the air and slowly pooled on the floor, one of the small boys reached out to whisk it away freeing the dance area for the upbeat shimmies of hips and shoulders all combined to form the light and happy portion of her dance. No sooner had the audience become involved with the mood of the music, than it changed abruptly. The drum beat stopped and the only sound was that of the violin-like strains of the oud. As the haunting sounds filled the room and Nick began this soulful, wailing chant, the music became the focal point. Nadia was gone. Before the questions could be formed in their minds, she again made her entrance holding a gold sabre. The handle was encrusted with jewels and its arching blade glistened in testimony to its lethal sharpness. The taxim portion of the dance was the most difficult because there was no written music. The musician must ad-lib the way he felt and the dancer interpret the sounds with the sensual movements of her body.

The Dance of the Sabre was one that Nadia had perfected over the years and would perform tonight. As the crowd registered its good fortune, Nadia placed the glinting blade on her head. Slowly leaning back and coming forward while her snakelike arm positions told the story of the doleful chant, she descended to the floor. Throughout the entire floor routine, the sabre remained perfectly balanced atop her head. As she rose and removed the blade swinging it in a wide arch above her head, the breath of the crowd was released almost as air rushing from one body. The beat of the darbouka resumed and took over from the wailing oud. A vibrant drum solo accompanied the staccato movements of Nadia's lithe body. She had become a blur of swaying blue-black hair and shimmering turquoise and glinting gold. The pace slowed as the other instruments joined in to lead Nadia through the final snakelike movements. The musicians sensed rather than rehearsed that the end was near and, as Nadia sank to the floor and assumed her final stance -- the music stopped.

For a brief second the quiet was deafening. In one fluid movement Nadia disappeared in a trail of gossamer skirts, and the stage was bombarded with the sound of the coins offered in tribute to her skill and grace.

Returning to the dressing room, Nadia was in a dream-like state that always followed her performances. To the other girls this was a fun, sexy way to make some money; but to Nadia it was food for her soul.

As she changed back into jeans and a t-shirt and packed away her makeup in the battered case, Nadia realized that the other girls were already gone. Reaper would be coming to pick her up; in fact, he probably was out in the alley waiting in the truck, wondering what was taking her so long. He always picked her up every night after work. He was very protective and she liked it that way.

In the banquet room the entertainment was over, and the guests began to mill around in small groups, talking, drinking, conducting business. It was amazing how many really big business deals were sealed at affairs like this one.

Suddenly, Lucian Bertinelli slumped forward in his seat. His wife, Angeline,



had been talking to Lu's brother, Marco, so her attention was directed away from her husband. At the look of surprise that crossed Marco's face, Angeline spun around in her seat. The red stain was already being absorbed by the white tablecloth and was spreading out from beneath the patriarch's chest where it rested on the table. A scream tore from Angeline's mouth, setting up a din of screams and shouts that filled the private dining room.

As the realization of what had happened spread like wildfire throughout the room, Lu's bodyguards scrutinized the area for any sign of the assailant. Marco lifted his older brother's shoulder noting the vacant look on Lu's face and the slack way his jaw drooped allowing a trickle of blood to escape from the corner of his mouth. It was too late to help Lu, but Marco knew he had to find the killer.

At the instant the side door opened, Lu's bodyguards elbowed their way through the frantic crowd, trying to stop the figure that slipped through the emergency exit into the alley. Marco leaped onto the long banquet table and ran the entire length before launching himself toward that same door. All three men spilled through the doorway after the killer, but they were too late. All they saw was a woman, sprawled face-down in the alley, and the headlights from an approaching pickup truck. There was no sign of the person who had cold-bloodedly gunned down Lu Bertinelli.

As the pickup came to a screeching halt, the woman raised herself to a kneeling position. The palms of her hands were scraped, and blood oozed from the gash on her cheek. Helping her to stand, Marco recognized her as the featured dancer at the party. The knees of her jeans were torn, revealing ragged skin peeking through, beginning to seep red.

The truck door flew open, and Reaper closed the distance between it and Nadia with gigantic strides. "What the hell are you doing?" he roared as he strong-armed Marco away from Nadia and pulled her against his chest with the other arm.

"I'm OK, honey, honest. Just calm down. These men didn't do anything," she assured a barely under control Reaper.

"Then how did you end up like this," he asked surveying her from the blood dripping down her cheek to the torn knees of her jeans.

"Some guy came running out of that side door just as I was walking by. As I turned to run, he shoved me down. Then, a few seconds later, these guys came pouring out of the door. This man was just trying to help me up," she explained.

Reaper turned steely eyes on Marco. "What's going on here?"

"None of your business, buster. Just take the little lady home and clean her up. She was real lucky she didn't get hurt any worse than she did. Take my advice and just forget the whole thing ever happened." With that, Marco and the bodyguards turned and went back inside the club.

"Come on, babe, let me get you home," Reaper said as he picked up Nadia's makeup case and slipped a protective arm around her waist.



Yadia

NEAL FARRIS 93''

## Chapter 6

"I just can't believe they shot him right there at the party under the very noses of his bodyguards and family." Joe was pacing back and forth in his office as he tumbled his hands over one another. A large, sturdy rubber band confined the movement, but it was obvious he was agitated.

The story had hit the papers that morning. Lucian Bertinelli had been murdered -- shot through the heart -- while attending a private party at the fashionable Grecian Gardens supper club. The assailant had escaped and no arrests had been made.

The incident put great pressure on the DA's office. The police had been notified by the manager of the restaurant, a sleaze named Demetri Meilach. The place had been sealed off and everyone questioned, but miraculously no one had seen anything. The Bertinelli family offered absolutely no help. These families had a way of taking care of their own, and they really didn't want the police or the DA's office to get in their way.

"Well, what do you think, Radcliffe? Any bright ideas?"

"I thought you said the police had questioned everyone at the party and there were no witnesses." Cathy shrugged and plopped down in the chair opposite Joe's desk hoping he would do the same. As Joe continued to pace, she reached across the desk and picked up a handful of darts. "Here, Joe. Use these to let off a little steam but please sit down. You're making me dizzy."

"Sorry, Radcliffe," he pouted. "I wouldn't want to upset you!"

"Look, Joe, if you just want somebody to pick on -- find someone else. I've got a desk full of case files calling my name and I don't have time for this."

"OK, OK, I'm sorry. It's just that every time we get smeared by the newspapers for not solving one of these mob killings, it just makes my blood boil. I know these families -- they'll quietly take care of the poor slob who shot Bertinelli, and then that family will retaliate, and pretty soon we'll have a dozen unsolved murder cases the public will hang around our necks come election time. I don't care if they kill each other off -- I just hate being made to look like an idiot while they're doing it."

"So what do you want me to do, Joe? You know we agreed that I was going to stay off the streets. I've put in enough time proving myself. It's time somebody else got a shot at it. Remember ... we agreed."

"Yeah, I know, kiddo. And I'm not really asking you to put yourself on the line. All I was suggesting is that you might like to have dinner at the Grecian Gardens, and if somebody just happened to mention having seen anything the night of the murder ... well, you know."

"Yes, I know. Well, I'll think about it, Joe. But this really isn't playing fair. You know that, don't you." Cathy rose to leave but was stopped by Joe's parting comments.

"Yeah, well, on second thought, Radcliffe -- just forget it. It was a long shot anyway. You probably couldn't find out anything." At this comment, Joe looked up from where he was seated with his feet propped up on his desk. One eyebrow was slightly raised, and a distinct smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Without a word, Cathy Chandler turned abruptly and exited Joe's office. The thud of a dart hitting the wall was the last sound she heard.

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Why do I let this man push me into these things? she puzzled as she was being seated in the elegantly appointed dining room of the Grecian Gardens. She had heard about the place but had never been there. Greek food was not a real passion of hers, and she had always thought the place to be a front for some mob-related activities, maybe a way to launder dirty money. Anyway, it had just not been one of the socially-accepted restaurants among her circle of friends, and since she had met Vincent, she had stopped going to restaurants almost completely. She much preferred the simple but delicious meals William prepared in the huge kitchen Below. And, besides, the company Below was much more pleasant than any of her socialite friends had ever been.

She had been seated at a table near the back of the room and was looking over the elaborate menu when the lights flickered, indicating the show was about to begin. She had heard there was a nightly performance of Greek dancing or something but had assumed she had missed the show.

Well, at these prices, she thought, I might as well watch and get my money's worth.

Throughout the performance Cathy was mesmerized. She had never seen a belly dancer before. She was overwhelmed by the similarity of the movements of this exotic dance to those of the many ballerinas she had seen perform at the Met. Somehow, she had always expected belly dancing to be just that -- somebody wiggling her belly and other parts of her anatomy in a rather low-class display of sexuality. The performance she had just seen was not sexual -- it was sensual and breathtakingly beautiful.

Well, you live and you learn she reminded herself, knowing she certainly had learned something tonight.

After finishing a scrumptious if exorbitantly priced meal, Cathy decided to do a little investigating. Just a question or two couldn't possibly hurt since I'm already here, she told herself. As the waiter approached, she asked to speak to the manager. The waiter's eyebrows shot up and he immediately began bowing and apologizing, offering to

take care of whatever was wrong. She assured him that everything had been wonderful and placed a generous tip in his hand. He turned eagerly and scurried off across the room.

A few minutes later an enormous man, obviously very uncomfortable in his imported silk suit, appeared at her table. "Folla me, da boss wants ta see ya," was all he said as he swung around and strode away. Snatching up her purse and hurrying after him, Cathy wondered if she should just head for the exit and forget the whole thing.

The huge man stopped and opened the door, obviously wanting her to go in first. Catherine questioned again the wisdom of her decision to stay and talk to the manager.

"Miss Chandler, what brings you to my humble establishment?"

The practiced culture of the voice did not fool Cathy. She knew this was just a higher-up hired hand in a much more expensive silk suit. As Demetri Meilach rose from his big leather executive chair and stood in front of the highly polished mahogany desk, he motioned for her to be seated. She noticed he was tall with a swarthy complexion and would have been a striking figure of a man if it were not for his eyes. They were cold and deadly like that of a pit viper.

"Thank you very much for seeing me, Mr. Meilach."

"Demetri -- please call me Demetri, Miss Chandler."

Once again Cathy was struck with the insistent way he pronounced her name. She realized that he obviously knew who she was and that she might as well come to the point of her visit and get it over with.

"I assume you know why I am here, Mr. Meilach ... Demetri ... since you obviously know my name."

"Well, I admit I was a little puzzled, Miss Chandler, since the police have questioned everyone at the party and my entire staff -- without gaining a single clue I might add. I cannot imagine what you think I can contribute. I was not even in the private dining room at the time of the murder. I was informed of the situation and immediately notified the authorities. That is all I can tell you."

"Yes, well, I'm sure you wouldn't mind my asking some of your staff a few more questions, now would you ... Demetri." Catherine almost choked at the sound of her own voice, trying to cajole this sleaze into cooperating.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Chandler, but my business has been damaged quite enough by the entire incident and I want everyone, including my staff, to forget it ever happened so we can get back to the business of running one of the finest supper clubs in

New York City." His tone was that of dismissal touched with warning.

"Very well, Mr. Meilach, I will inform my superiors of your decision not to cooperate. Good night."

With that Cathy rose and gathered her dignity about her as she walked toward the closed office door. Before she could touch the doorknob, the door opened and her previous escort guided her toward the front of the restaurant.

Well, I've been thrown out of nicer places than this, she thought jokingly. But deep down inside she was relieved that she was back outside and quickly decided the best place to be right now was home.

As she tried to hail a cab, an old red pickup pulled up to the curb and stopped. She jumped back turning to go inside to ask the maitre d' to call her a cab, when she recognized the head sticking out of the window of the truck.

"Catherine, it's me, remember ... Reaper."

"Of course I remember you," she smiled. "I never felt like I really thanked you properly for saving me from those crazies on the ... what did you call them, chainsaws."

"Yeah, chainsaws, bullet bikes, sewing machines -- call 'em anything but motorcycles. And call the riders anything but bikers -- it gives the rest of us a bad name! But what are you doing out here? Didn't anybody tell you it's dangerous to be walking the streets of New York at night by yourself?"

"Yes, they've told me, but I guess I'm a slow learner. I just stopped for dinner and was trying to get a cab when you pulled up."

"Cab ... you don't need a cab. That is if you don't mind riding in this old pickup -- and if you give me a minute to pick up my ol' lady."

"Your old lady?" Catherine asked completely baffled by what he meant.

"Yeah, my wife works here. I pick her up after work. She'll be getting off in a few minutes. In fact, here she comes now."

Cathy immediately recognized the performer of the sensual dance she had enjoyed so much, even though the woman looked very different in jeans and a t-shirt. Cathy also noticed that her left cheek was raw and discolored. She must have had on heavy theatrical makeup to hide it during the dance.

"I loved your performance tonight -- it reminded me so much of the ballet." Catherine noticed the puzzled look on the woman's face as she took in the scene -- her husband with his head hanging out the window, talking to some strange woman she had

never seen before. "I'm Catherine Chandler -- your husband rescued me from some 'chainsaws' ... I mean riders of chainsaws ..."

Realizing Nadia's complete confusion, Reaper got out of the pickup and came around to open the door for her. "This is the lady I told you about a couple of months ago. The one those hoodlums were threatening when we just happened to be riding by and helped them decide to tuck their tails and run."

"Oh, hi, I'm Nadia. Those creeps are always causing problems and trying to scare people. Lately they've been doing more than just scaring. I'm glad Reaper was there to help."

"Me, too," Cathy stated with sincerity. "I hate to think what might have happened if he and his friends hadn't come along when they did."

"I was just offering Catherine a ride home if that's OK with you, babe," Reaper said as he helped Nadia into the truck.

"Sure, hop in, there's plenty of room," Nadia said as she scooted to the center of the big bench seat.

As Reaper pulled the pickup away from the curb in front of the club onto East 78th Street, he joked, "Where to, lady?"

"Oh." Caught off guard it took Catherine a few seconds to realize he was playing the role of cab driver. "Well, mister, you don't look like the sort I'd want to have my address, so just drop me off near Central Park."

With that, Nadia looked at Reaper checking for any signs of his being offended by Catherine's comment. Then his booming laughter confirmed that it was definitely all right for them to joke with this lady.

"She's OK, honey -- honest," he said seriously to his wife. "This is one lady who doesn't judge people by their outward appearance."

Even though Nadia had a puzzled look on her face, she relaxed and began to chat with Catherine.

"Seriously, I do live near Central Park -- East 60's. Just head that way and I'll let you know when you need to turn. And thanks again for the lift, I'd probably still be standing there trying to hail a cab."

"No problem, just glad I came along at the right time," said Reaper.

"Yeah, for the second time!" said Catherine with genuine gratitude in her voice.



As they rode along, Catherine asked Nadia how she had learned to belly dance and Nadia explained about her childhood and her need to express herself. Nadia wanted to know about Catherine's job and why she was at the club. Reaper just sat back and listened.

With cursory directions from Catherine, they arrived all too soon in front of Catherine's apartment building. Since there was nowhere directly in front of the door to stop the truck, Reaper swung into the edge of the alley at the corner of the building.

"Wait for me to walk you to the door," he stated in a way that made Catherine realize he wasn't requesting but telling. Instead of taking offense, she was grateful and gave him a smile she hoped conveyed that thought.

"Stay in the truck, with the doors locked, until I get back, babe. I'm just going to walk Catherine to the door and I'll be right back."

As Reaper crossed in front of the truck, he saw Nadia reach across to push down the door lock on the driver's side. He was helping Catherine down when he felt the pressure of the gun in his back.

A second man appeared and snatched Catherine from his grasp, putting a gun to her head. "If you want to be a hero, go ahead. But both the ladies will suffer for it. It's all up to you -- makes no difference to us," the big, burly man said with conviction.

Reaper nodded his acceptance of the situation, for the time being. Holding Catherine's arm behind her back and the gun to her head, the bully pushed her toward the dark alley. The man behind Reaper pressed the gun insistently into his back saying, "Tell your lady friend to unlock the door and get out."

"Do as he says, babe, it'll be OK," Reaper said as he tried to reassure Nadia. Panic was written all over her face. As Nadia climbed out of the truck, the man grabbed her arm, jerked her to him, and put the gun that had been in Reaper's back to the side of her head.

"Now, nice and easy, get in the truck. Nobody's gonna get hurt unless you make it happen, OK ... understand?"

Reaper nodded again, his throat too choked with anger to allow the words to pass through it.

As Reaper stepped up into the truck and slid across the seat, thoughts of possible things he could do flashed across his brain and were discarded as quickly as they occurred. Anything he did would get Nadia, and probably Catherine, killed. He'd just have to wait for these guys to make a mistake and then they were history.

The man holding Nadia was not nearly as big as the one who took Catherine,

but he had the strangest cold gray eyes. Even in the dark cab of the truck, Reaper could see those eyes, glittering with something like anticipation. This guy really wants me to do something stupid, he thought to himself, just so he can kill me.

The thug pushed Nadia up onto the seat of the truck and climbed in behind her with the gun still pointed at her temple. The bile rose up in Reaper's throat when he saw the terror in Nadia's eyes. These guys were going to pay for what they were putting her through!

"Now drive, nice and slow, down the alley and stop by that limo," the man instructed with a coldness in his voice that matched his gray eyes.

As Reaper pulled up behind the long, black limousine he noted the license plate number and stored it away for future use. The headlights of the truck had illuminated the area around the limo, allowing Reaper to see one man standing by the driver's door. The man he had seen take Catherine into the alley was on the opposite side walking toward the truck, gun in hand. There was no Catherine to be seen, but the windows of the limo were blacked out and he had to assume she was inside. The man near the driver's door started toward the truck and reached into his jacket -- these guys obviously were not here to play games. The big burly one walked past the truck and around behind it to come up and meet the man Reaper guessed was the driver. They both pointed their guns at Reaper through the window and the big one gestured for him to get out.

As the thought of smashing the truck door into them flashed through Reaper's mind, the men stepped back making that impossible. He knew he'd just have to stay on his toes; eventually they would make a mistake.

Reaper stepped down from the truck, trying to keep his eye on both men. The big man leveled the gun at his face and growled, "Go ahead, hero, pull something and it will be your last!" With his attention riveted to the gun just inches from his nose, something exploded in Reaper's head and blackness overtook him as he felt himself falling.

"Good job, I just hope you didn't hit him too hard with that nightstick, in case Big Al wants to ask him some questions."

"Nah, I just tapped him one, he'll be right as rain when he wakes up," said the skinny punk-looking driver.

"Well, get him tied up in case he comes to before we get where we're going. I don't want to deal with him in the limo," said the burly man in a tone that obviously brooked no questions.

"Sure, Tony, no problem."

"Shut up, you know better than to use my name, you stupid ... just tie him up

and the two of you load him in the limo."

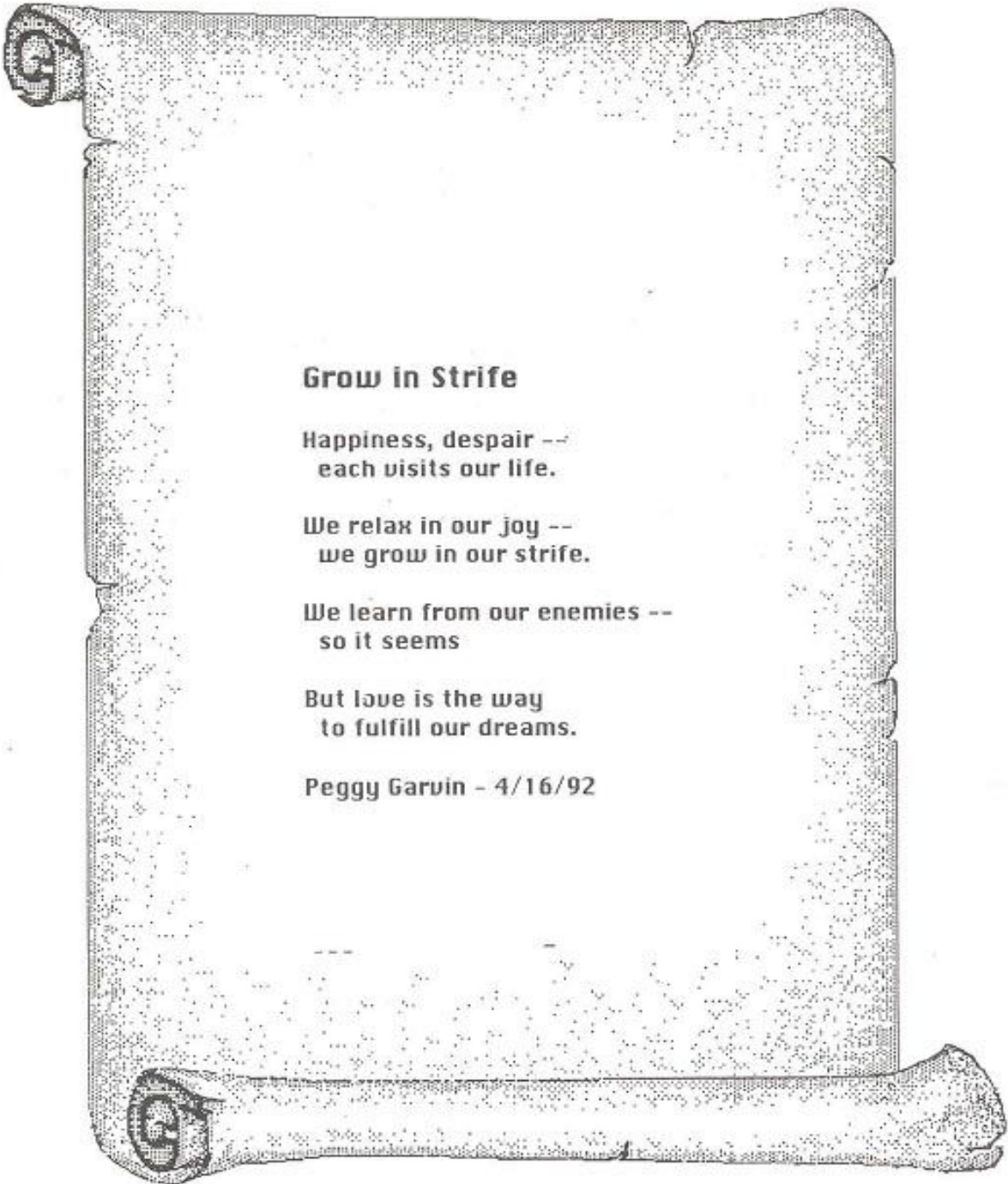
When Nadia had seen Reaper slump to the street, a scream welled up in her throat, but the man beside her in the truck with her had stifled it with his left hand while the gun in his right hand still pressed insistently to her head. He jerked her head back with the pressure of his big hand under her chin, slightly choking her.

"None of that or I'll kill you right where you sit, got it?"

He released the pressure on her throat as he felt the tears slide over his hand. Pushing her head down on the dash of the truck, he roughly yanked her arms behind her and tied them securely.

As Nadia was pulled from the truck, she watched two of the men carry Reaper to the car and dump him in. Immediately she was dragged to the same door and found herself shoved in, landing on top of him. With her hands behind her back, it was very difficult to get off Reaper. Sliding until her knees contacted carpet, she laid her head on his back and listened intently. A faint echo of his heartbeat made her cry even harder.

"At least he's alive," she murmured and gave herself up to the sobs she had been trying to hold in.



**Grow in Strife**

Happiness, despair --  
each visits our life.

We relax in our joy --  
we grow in our strife.

We learn from our enemies --  
so it seems

But love is the way  
to fulfill our dreams.

Peggy Garvin - 4/16/92

## Chapter 7

"Let me talk to Big Al."

As he held the phone, waiting for his boss to come on the line, Demetri waved his bouncer out of the room. The big bruiser had escorted Catherine Chandler to the front door of the club, as instructed, but the timing had been very unfortunate. Then the bouncer had almost busted down his office door with his violent knocking.

Demetri had just about decided to fire the stupid giant. He was very impressive to look at but it was so hard to make him understand even basic instructions. The bouncer had forced him to raise his voice, which he hated to do, and repeat himself, which he also hated to do, just to let the moron know he could come in. Then it had taken five minutes to understand what the giant was trying to tell him.

When it became clear that Catherine Chandler had left the club with Nadia, the only person who could possibly identify the murderer of Lu Bertinelli, Demetri realized it was out of his hands. He'd immediately placed the call to Alonzo Zappacosta.

A very brief conversation let Demetri know Al was not happy about the fact that he had allowed the Chandler woman to make contact with Nadia. Al said he would get someone "reliable" to handle it from there -- and hung up. As Demetri stared at the telephone receiver, he wondered if he should start thinking about moving on. His sister in Chicago had been bugging him to come for a visit. Maybe this would be a good time.

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The floor was hard and smelled of old grease, oil, and dirt, Reaper noticed as he slowly woke up. His head felt like somebody had driven a ball-peen hammer right through the back of it. As his eyes focused, he could see Nadia slumped forward in a chair. She was obviously tied to it or she would have crumpled to the floor. Catherine was sitting on the floor a few feet from him. She was propped up against the wall with her arms pulled behind her back and ropes visibly circling her ankles. She had a handkerchief tied across her face with the large knot in her half-open mouth. Her head was thrown back against the wall as if she were unconscious or sleeping. Surprised that he was not also gagged, he softly whistled to get her attention. She reluctantly pulled her head up from its resting place and turned a very tired and dirty face toward him. She didn't appear to be hurt, other than the discolored place on her right cheek. She gave him a weak nod and let her head rest back against the wall.

Nadia was a different story. His soft whistles had not roused her. Reaper was just about to scoot closer to her when the sound of the door unlocking alerted him that someone was coming in. He quickly lay back down on the floor and pretended to still be unconscious. He sensed that Catherine was doing the same.

"Looks like it's still nap time," the big burly thug boomed with a nasty laugh.

"Yeah, looks like they don't want to play with us anymore, huh Tony." The smaller thug with the long white scar across his left cheek laughed.

"You stupid ... I thought I told you not to use my name," growled Tony.

"They're out cold, so what difference does it make, huh?" the scarfaced one asked sarcastically.

"Just shut up -- Sal -- and stay here," Tony spit out. "I thought I heard the limo."

As Tony left, Sal let his eyes wander over the three still-unconscious figures in the room that used to house the factory's machine shop. He slowly walked over to the chair where Nadia remained tied just as they had left her. He was rather pleased with the way things had gone. Tony had let him do the questioning, and he had really enjoyed the terror he had brought to the pretty face of the dancer. He'd been to the club a couple of times -- on business -- and he'd tried to speak to her, but she had just ignored him. It had been real enjoyable paying her back.

As Reaper lay very still on the floor watching the scene through slitted eyes, Sal tangled his hand in Nadia's hair and pulled her head up. As Reaper let his gaze fall from the satisfied look on the thug's face to that of his wife, he felt as if his heart were being squeezed in a vice.

Both of Nadia's eyes were puffy and discolored, appearing to be swollen shut. Her mouth had dropped open slightly, and Reaper could see the trickle of blood spill over her bottom lip and run down her throat into the neck of her t-shirt. Sal let Nadia's head drop forward and turned toward a wooden chair by the wall as Reaper squeezed his eyes shut willing himself to lay still.

Now was not the time -- but soon he'd make these creeps pay for what they had done to Nadia. As the thug sat down and leaned the chair back on two legs to rest against the wall, Reaper concentrated on thinking about something other than the battered face of his wife.

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There had been other times of pain -- not like this one, but times he had wished he could have spared Nadia.

He remembered the first time Nadia had gone to Daytona Beach with him. The Iron Vultures went to Bike Week the first week of March every year. They had just pulled in and were standing around the hotel registration desk waiting to check in. Reaper had gotten into a conversation with a laid-back bro with long straight blonde hair and a Fu-Manchu moustache.

Bobby had been the kind of guy who could make people feel they'd known him all their lives after only ten minutes of talking to him. He was there with a small group from Orangeburg, South Carolina. Bobby had introduced himself and his ol' lady, Linda. His buddy, Rob and his ol' lady, Carrie, were rooming with them. They agreed to meet Reaper and Nadia in about an hour. They'd all dumped their gear, met in the lobby, and headed to the barbecue place for ribs.

Several times during the week they had run into the Orangeburg bunch, and when Reaper and Nadia needed to leave a day earlier than the rest of the Iron Vultures -- well, it just seemed natural to ride with Bobby and his group.

They had gotten a late start and Reaper was glad he and Nadia weren't riding back alone. He always liked to ride with at least one other bike -- in case of mechanical trouble and just because it was safer that way, especially when he had Nadia with him.

After about an hour, Nadia had started to get antsy. She finally poked him in the ribs, leaned over his shoulder and said into his ear, "I got to go!" He had taken his left hand from the handlebar and slid it down her leg to let her know he understood. She could talk to him but the wind just seemed to whip his words out of his mouth and right past her before she could catch what he was saying.

Reaper pulled out of formation, past Rob and Carrie on their Tourglide, and up beside Bobby on his old Electra-Glide Shovelhead. "She's got to go!" Reaper shouted across the space.

As Bobby raised his fist, thumb extended, and pointed it toward Linda, he hollered, "Her, too!"

With that, Reaper slowed and fell back into line. He knew Bobby would be looking for a bathroom.

It was beginning to get dark as Nadia squirmed on the seat behind him causing the bike to wobble with her movements. Reaper saw the convenience store in the distance. Then he noticed Bobby's hand drop, signaling the group to slow down. As they approached the store, Bobby leaned his Harley into the turn and the other four bikes trailed in behind him.

Nadia pushed on Reaper's back letting him know she needed to get off right now. As everyone was getting off the motorcycles and stretching cramped muscles, Nadia quickly headed for the store entrance. She was about halfway there when the lights in the parking lot and inside the store went out. She stopped dead in her tracks. It was too soon for them to be closing. There must be something wrong.

Reaper could barely make out Nadia's form as she reached the glass entrance door. As he approached he could see her cupping her hands and peering into the store. He couldn't quite make out what she was saying, but he knew she must be trying to

explain to someone inside that she just wanted to go to the bathroom.

As he walked up beside her, she looked into his eyes with a sad, hurt expression. There were people inside but they wouldn't open the door. Obviously, they had heard the motorcycles and decided to close early.

"Don't worry about it, babe; we'll find another place. Don't let those people get to you," he had told her as he held his arms out and she willingly came to rest her face against the front of his jacket. With a glance over his shoulder and a shrug, he nudged her toward the bikes. They walked back, her head bowed and his arm slung protectively across her shoulders.

A little further down the road, they'd found a gas station that hadn't felt the need to close early.

As they'd waited for the girls, Bobby had told him about the time their club had gone to buy flowers for a bro's funeral and found another locked door. A few minutes later the cops had arrived at the florist shop and told them to leave.

Reaper would never understand why most people judged others by what they wore or the kind of vehicle they drove -- or rode. It was something he had come to accept, the instant disapproval. All that mattered to most people was the outside, and it never seemed to get any better.

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As the door opened and two men walked through, Sal's front chair legs hit the floor and he snapped to attention. This brought Reaper out of his thoughts from the past and back to their immediate need -- to get the hell out of this mess.

"I see you can't handle a simple job without making a mess of it," the calm but sinister voice intoned. "Well, what did you find out?"

"She didn't see nothing, boss," the now-nervous thug blurted out. "She didn't talk to nobody -- she didn't even tell the Chandler woman about it."

The man standing next to Tony just glared at the babbling man.

"He's right. She didn't recognize Parelli even when he knocked her down in the alley. She hadn't even connected it up with the murder."

"I see. But now we have a situation that must be taken care of. Finish this and make a neater job of it than you have so far." With that the tall, heavy-set man with the silver hair turned and left.

Quickly sweeping his eyes around the room and deciding that the three were



still unconscious, Tony motioned to Sal and they both left the room.

Reaper had been quietly working at loosening the ropes that confined his hands behind his back. He'd found a fragment of metal on the floor and had been able to slip it between his wrist and the loosened ropes just enough to wiggle it back and forth silently.

Unsure which was going to give up first, his wrists or the ropes, he worked methodically until his hands were free.

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Back in the Tunnels, Vincent had been writing in his journal when he got the first wave of alarm through the bond he shared with Catherine. She had been frightened, but it had stopped almost as quickly as it had started. He felt her become calm, and then a peacefulness settled into that special place where her essence had taken residence almost two years ago. He resumed his writing secure in the feeling that she was safe.

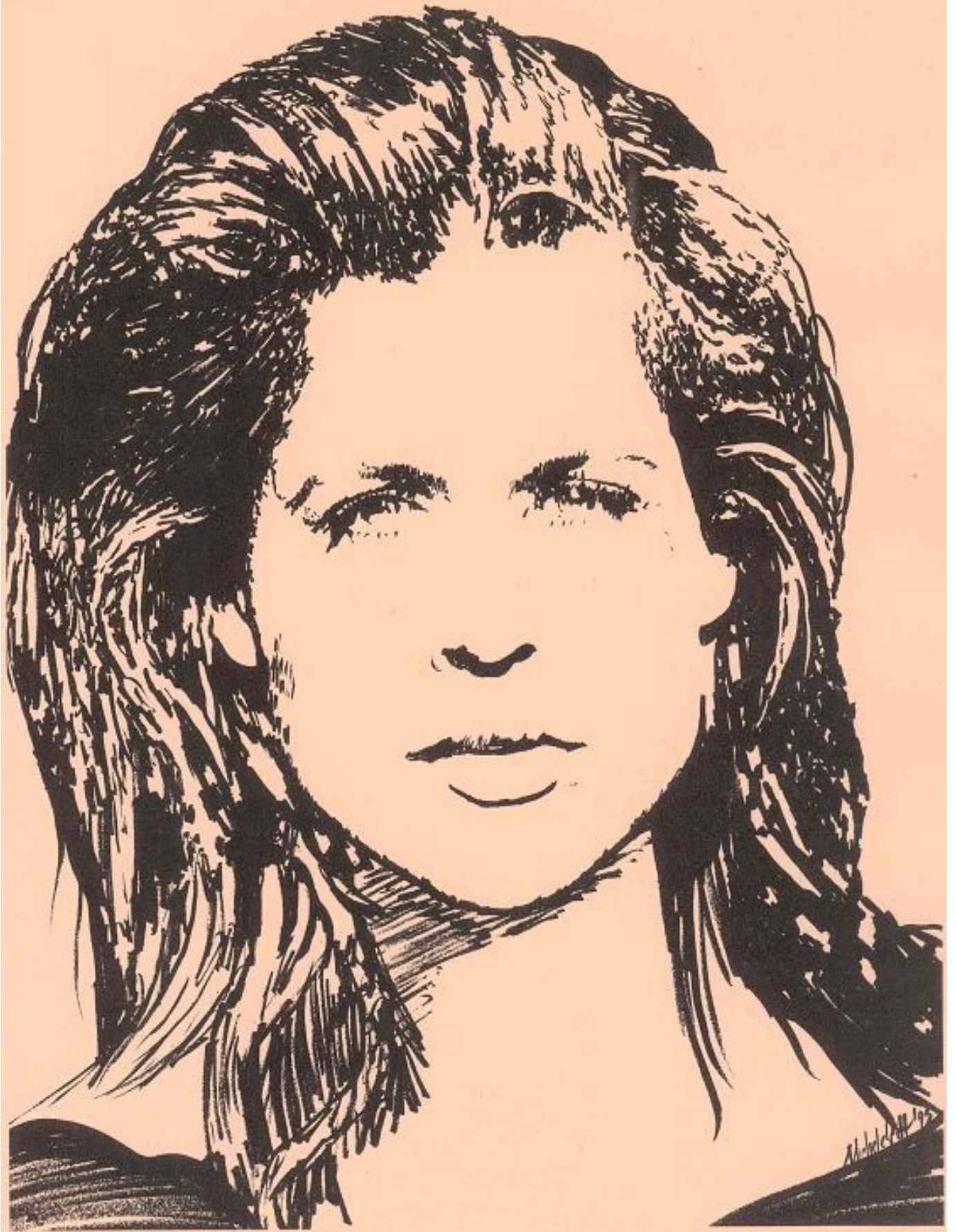
Quite a bit of time had passed when the second wave of fear had engulfed him. This one, however, had not subsided. He had hesitated only a moment, hoping the bond would once again return to its peaceful message as it had earlier. It did not.

Settling his cloak about his shoulders, he proceeded toward the source of her distress. But it kept changing. It was very confusing. He had been running down one tunnel secure in the knowledge of the location of his beloved Catherine, only to have the direction change. He stopped to concentrate and realized he was receiving signals from a different location. As her emotions swirled about him, he turned -- first one way, then another. In frustration he stopped at the intersection of two corridors, unable to decide which way to go. A roar escaped his throat, and he dropped to his knees unable to comprehend the unceasing yet changing signals that called to him.

Finally, the confusion was replaced by a steady pull. Frantically running toward his sense of Catherine's escalating fear, he prayed he would reach her in time.

I'm coming, Catherine, I'm coming, he sent through the bond.

But, he couldn't feel anything to reassure him that she had received his silent message.



## Chapter 8

"Pick up the phone, Radcliffe, please..."

Joe had been calling her apartment for hours. He had left dozens of messages on her answering machine, figuring she was refusing to answer because she was mad at him for trying to goad her into investigating the murder of Lucian Bertinelli. He could just picture her waiting for the answering machine to pick up and going back to whatever she was doing when she heard his voice.

"I'm sorry -- I was wrong -- I never should have tried to get you involved in this Bertinelli case. I let the newspapers get to me. Please, Radcliffe, pick up so I can apologize," he'd pleaded to the machine. Even this message hadn't gotten through to her.

Finally, around eight o'clock Joe had left the DA's office -- he wasn't getting anything done anyway -- and caught a cab to Cathy's apartment. Jimmy, the doorman, had told him he hadn't seen Miss Chandler since she left for work that morning. Joe insisted she had left the office hours ago. Finally, Jimmy had contacted the manager of the apartment complex for permission to let Joe into her deserted apartment.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Joe said as minutes later they rode down in the elevator together.

"No problem, Mr. Maxwell. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

Jimmy hailed him a cab, and a dejected Joe Maxwell rode home in silent contemplation.

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When Joe flopped down on his couch, he realized he just couldn't sit there without knowing where Cathy was.

"Greg, Joe. Yeah, OK, I guess -- how about you?" Greg Hughes and Joe Maxwell had been friends for a long time, and Greg could tell that this wasn't just a friendly 'hi-how-are-you' call.

"What is it, Joe?" Greg finally asked after a prolonged silence.

"It's Cathy, Greg. I did something real stupid and I think she might be in danger. I let the newspaper hype about the Bertinelli case get to me, and I sort of conned Cathy into going to the Grecian Gardens to ask some questions. Hell, the police didn't come up with anything, and I was so frustrated. But I shouldn't have tried to get Cathy into it.

Now I think she might be in trouble. I've been to her apartment and she's not there."

"Hang on, Joe. The fact that Cathy Chandler is not home has convinced you that she's in trouble? Cathy is a very beautiful, single woman, and I'm sure she has better things to do with her evenings than hang around her apartment."

"Greg, trust me on this one. I know Cathy. I put it to her as a challenge and she would never be able to let that slide. Would you please, as a friend, just go over to the Grecian Gardens and see if she's there. If she is, just tell her I'm sorry and to forget the whole thing -- it's too dangerous. And, Greg, bring her back even if you have to kidnap her!"

"OK, OK, I'm on my way out the door now. But if she bites my head off for coming to get her like she's a naughty child, you're going to get the blame. I'm not taking this one for you."

"Sure, sure, just get going; and call me the minute you find her."

With that, Joe hung up and slumped back on the couch determined not to move until Greg called, hopefully to let him know he and Cathy were on their way back to her apartment.

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As he cruised by the Grecian Gardens for the second time, trying to decide exactly what to do, Greg spotted Cathy being handed into a pickup truck by a man. As the man rounded the back of the truck and got into the driver's side, Greg caught only a glimpse of him in the rearview mirror, but it was enough to shock him into action.

What in the world was Cathy Chandler doing getting into a truck with a scuzzy-looking biker! She must have lost her mind! Or Joe must be right -- she was in trouble, he decided.

As the truck pulled away from the curb, Greg turned from worried friend into Detective Hughes and skillfully followed them. When it became obvious that the pickup was heading in the general direction of Cathy's apartment, Greg relaxed just a little. After the pickup pulled to the edge of the alleyway by Cathy's building, Greg decided to stop in the shadows and watch just so he could call Joe and tell him Cathy was safe at home. Then maybe he could go home, too.

Just as the biker was opening the door for Cathy, two men appeared; and it didn't take a genius to see that the men were abducting the occupants of the pickup truck. Alone he couldn't do anything, and since he was in his personal car he didn't have a radio. He was forced to bide his time and see where they were taking them. Then he'd have to get to a phone and alert Joe as to what was going down.

Once they reached the deserted factory, Greg watched two men carry the biker inside leaving one man standing beside the limousine. A few minutes later the two men returned and dragged two women, one of whom was Cathy Chandler, through the same door. Immediately, Greg went to the nearest phone and called Joe.

"No, God, no ... it's all my fault."

"No time for that now, Joe, just pull yourself together and get down to the old textile mill on Rutgers Street with the police. There's three men that I've seen, but who knows what's been happening while I've been on the phone with you."

"Right, you got it -- go back and stake the place out and we'll be there pronto."

"Sure ... just hurry -- these guys look like they mean business."

At that Greg slammed the receiver back in its cradle and ran for his car. He sped back around the block and parked in the shadows to wait and watch ... and pray.

## Chapter 9

As Reaper motioned for Catherine to turn around so he could untie her, she heard a tapping sound above her head. Looking up she saw the two most beautiful blue eyes peering at her through a crack in the ventilation louvers on the roof. Catherine signaled with her eyes for Reaper to look up. As Reaper stared at the ceiling, unable to figure out what Catherine was trying to tell him, he noticed a large furry hand widening the gap in the opening of the window.

How did this man, who obviously loved Catherine with a devotion very few experience, know how to find her when she was in danger, he wondered. The same thing had happened when the bikers had saved her -- he'd just appeared out of nowhere. And now here he was again.

Well, who cares how he got here, Reaper decided. They sure could use his help!

As Reaper finished untying Catherine's hands, Vincent looked down trying to figure a way to silently enter the room. The window just wouldn't open wide enough, and he did not want to risk any noise breaking it.

At that moment, the two thugs unlocked the door. Reaper barely had time to get back to his unconscious position as they walked in carrying large burlap bags -- obviously intending to dispose of their captives like three sacks of potatoes. The two thugs untied Nadia and laid her on the floor shaking her vigorously. Getting no response, they checked her pulse. Satisfied that she was alive but unconscious, they decided to check the others.

As Tony approached Reaper, Sal started toward Catherine. Seeing him approach her, Vincent allowed a low growl to escape his throat. This startled the two thugs, giving Reaper and Catherine the element of surprise they needed. Reaper crouched and, using the force of his thighs to drive his head into Tony's stomach, he leaped to straddle the big man and began pummeling the thugs with his fists. The vision of Nadia's battered face loomed before him, and Reaper allowed all of the rage he had been suppressing for hours to be vented on Tony. It felt so good to be doing something instead of enduring the maddening waiting.

Distracted by the sight of Reaper attacking Tony, the other thug was momentarily frozen in place. This allowed Catherine to remove her shoe and connect one well-placed high-heel with the side of Sal's neck. Isaac was right, it really does work, thought Catherine, picturing in her mind the sawdust running from the side of the dummy's neck when Isaac had demonstrated the use of common objects as weapons.

In a shower of glass Vincent landed next to Catherine just in time to see the thug she had kicked crumple into a heap on the floor. Vincent's entrance had jolted Reaper back to his senses preventing him from beating Tony to death. As he sat on the

man's stomach, spattered with Tony's blood, he realized that they needed to get out of there ... now!

Vincent surveyed the room with his eyes, making sure there was no immediate danger. Then he engulfed Catherine with his cloaked arms and pulled her to his chest. As she reached her arms up to pull the gag from her mouth, Vincent tipped her face up with the knuckle of his hand under her chin. "You're hurt!"

"I'm fine ... now," she sighed as she laid her head against his thickly padded chest.

Reaper had dropped to the floor beside Nadia's unconscious body. "She's alive, but she sure looks bad," he flung over his shoulder as he gazed at her swollen face.

Suddenly the sound of approaching police sirens snapped them into action. As Vincent swooped to Reaper's side and picked up Nadia, he quieted Reaper's protests. "You're hurt and I can make better time carrying her than you can. Please -- just follow me," Vincent pleaded.

"Come on, we have to hurry," Catherine said as she grabbed Reaper's hand and pulled him along.

Completely familiar with the deserted factory, Vincent quickly led them to the small opening hidden beneath the stairs. Pushing aside some dusty barrels, he lifted Nadia's limp body across his shoulder and turned.

"I'll go first and then you, Catherine. Reaper, slide the barrels back in place as you climb down. And be careful, the rungs of this ladder are damp and slippery."

"Where are we going?" Reaper whispered.

"Just trust him. Vincent will lead us to safety, I promise." Catherine turned around and gave Reaper's arm a reassuring squeeze before she disappeared down the ladder. Turning and quickly following her, Reaper stopped long enough to slide the barrels back into place, concealing their exit from view.

When the police crashed through the door and swarmed into the factory, everything was quiet. A thorough search produced two unconscious and worse-for-wear thugs. But no Catherine!

"Greg, are you positive this is where they took them?" Joe said as he turned tired and worried eyes on his friend.

"Of course I'm positive, I saw them with my own two eyes," Greg answered with an exasperated look

As the Tunnel widened, Reaper caught up with Vincent, begging him to stop so he could carry Nadia. Knowing what the man must be going through, Vincent transferred the light burden of Nadia's limp form to her husband's anxious arms. Then, he pulled Catherine within the protective folds of his cloak and resumed leading them toward his home.

Finally, Reaper began to notice torches stuck into holders in the stone walls and to hear faraway voices echoing down the tunnels. As they turned a corner, they encountered Mouse -- so intent on his destination, he almost passed right by the two couples. Vincent's raspy voice brought Mouse out of his preoccupation.

"Mouse, go tell Father we are on our way to the Hospital Chamber. This woman is hurt."

Mouse spun around and scurried off ahead of them. Vincent turned to Reaper. "My father is a physician, and he will be waiting for us when we arrive."

Father rushed into the Hospital Chamber just as Vincent was helping Reaper place Nadia on the bed. At the sight of the strange, sinister-looking man with Vincent, Father scowled. What has he brought to us this time, Father thought as Vincent turned allowing him to see the brutally beaten Nadia.

"My, God, what on earth has happened to this poor woman," he uttered as all thought of his anger dissipated. "Vincent, go immediately and bring Mary. Tell her I will need plenty of hot water and clean towels. Go on now and hurry."

With a glance at Catherine, Vincent rushed from the Hospital Chamber to do as Father had bidden.

"You are hurt, as well, Catherine," Father stated as he touched the bruise on her cheek.

"It's nothing, Father, I'll be fine. It's Nadia that I'm worried about."

"Well, yes, let me examine her." He turned toward Reaper, who hovered protectively over his wife. "Young man, I assure you I am a physician and well equipped to handle this situation if you will just allow me access to my patient."

At the amazed look on Reaper's face, Catherine reached her hand out and guided him away from the bed. "Relax, she's in good hands."

"Yes, why don't you two go to my Chamber and prepare a pot of tea," Father suggested as Mary and Vincent arrived carrying clean towels, a basin, and a steaming kettle of water.

"A pot of tea!" Reaper shouted. "I don't want any tea, I want to know how my



wife is."

With that declaration hanging in the air, Vincent and Catherine both began reassuring Reaper that Nadia was in very capable hands and that Mary and Father would give her the best care she could possibly get.

The next thing Reaper knew, he found himself sitting in Father's Chamber staring at the cup of hot tea clenched in his hand.

A short time later, Father joined them. "Mary is with your wife. She's resting comfortably. When we got her cleaned up, it was not nearly as bad as it had first appeared. She will be quite uncomfortable for several days and will require complete bed rest and quiet. Barring any unforeseen complications, she should be fine in a week, perhaps two."

"Can I see her?" Reaper asked anxiously.

"Most assuredly. But I must caution you that she awakened while Mary and I were attending her injuries and I have administered a strong sedative. She will be asleep for several hours."

"I need to see her ... be with her. I just need to."

"Of course, well, come along," Father said as he leaned heavily on his cane and proceeded back out of the Chamber with a very anxious Reaper following on his heels.

Vincent and Catherine decided it would be best to allow Reaper some time with Nadia, so they sat back down to finish their tea. In a few minutes, Father returned.

"Can I get you some tea, Father," Catherine asked as she noticed the pronounced weariness in his limping gait.

"Yes, please. You know, you haven't told me who these people are and how that poor girl came to be in that condition. She appears to have sustained a severe beating."

As Vincent and Catherine explained how Reaper had saved Catherine's life several months ago, Father settled back in his chair.

Catherine went on to tell about the murder at the club and how Nadia had seen the killer running away. While trying to help with the investigation, Catherine further explained, the manager of the club had shown her the door. Reaper had come to pick up Nadia from work and had offered Catherine a ride home, but they had been kidnapped.

"They just kept slapping her whenever she would try to answer. She told them over and over that she didn't know anything -- that all she saw was a man run out of the

door and knock her down. Then three other men came out that same door. She didn't know any of them. She had gone home and hadn't talked to anybody except her husband about it. They kept asking her the same questions over and over, and she kept repeating the same answers. They even hit her in the stomach a couple of times and finally she passed out. I was afraid they were going to kill her. I kept begging them to leave her alone. I guess the creep with the scar on his face got tired of my begging so he slapped me in the face."

At that, Vincent bolted to his feet to lift Catherine from her chair and into his embrace.

"I'm fine, Vincent -- honest."

He held her for a moment and then, realizing that Father was staring at them, he sat back down in the chair next to hers. But he continued holding her hand as she related the rest of the story to Father.

"Obviously, the three of you need to remain Below until it is safe for you to return Above," Father said.

"But, I have to get word to Joe Maxwell at the DA's office. I know who the man is who ordered the kidnapping. I heard him tell those two thugs to get rid of us. I've seen his picture in case file after case file. He's never been convicted because he has too much money and power. And I'll bet he's the one behind the murder at the club. Don't you see, I have information that Joe can use to put this man where he belongs -- behind bars."

"But it's too dangerous for you to go Above right now, Catherine. They will be looking for you. This man will send more of his hired killers to hunt for you. Surely you see you must remain Below," Vincent pleaded.

"But I can't Vincent. I must see Joe. As soon as I get the information to him, I'll come Below and stay until things are under control. But I have to go, Vincent, I have to. Don't you see, it will never be safe for any of us until the man responsible for the murder is caught.

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In the meantime, Joe had been frantically looking for Cathy. Completely exhausted from the tension of the day and the fruitless search, he had returned to his apartment to get a couple of hours sleep before starting to search again.

I promise you, Cathy, I'll find you and make it up to you for getting you in this mess, Joe thought as he opened his apartment door and turned on the light.

"Radcliffe, how did you get in here -- where the hell have you been." The tears

welled up in his eyes as he walked over to her and put his arms around her. "I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry -- I never should have..."

"It's OK, Joe," she said, putting her hand over his mouth to stop the flow of his apology. "I'm fine."

"But Greg said you were kidnapped -- he saw them take you and two other people into the abandoned factory on Rutgers Street. When I got there with the police, we found two thugs unconscious in the old machine shop. We took them into custody, but they had to be admitted to the hospital. We can't even question them until the doctor says it's OK. But you and I both know they won't talk and we can't hold them without any evidence."

"I know, Joe, but I've got the information you need."

As Cathy explained what she had seen and heard, Joe started taking notes. Soon it became very clear to Joe that with the testimony of Cathy and her two companions, he could charge Al Zappacosta and the two strong arms they had in custody with kidnapping, aggravated assault, and attempted murder. And if this Nadia could identify the guy who knocked her down, they might be able to link him back to Big Al, too.

It certainly gave them more than they had ever had on the creep before, Joe thought. But it was really going to be risky for Cathy and her two friends until after the trial.

After Cathy was sure she hadn't forgotten to tell him anything, she got up to leave. "Where do you think you're going?" Joe said with an amazed look on his face. "You need protection and so do your friends. Let me call and get you taken to a safe place until this whole thing can be handled. Just tell me where your friends are and I'll get Greg to pick them up. You guys can't be running around on the streets, Cathy, they'll kill you."

"I have a safe place to be, Joe, and I'm headed there right now. Reaper and Nadia are already there -- waiting for me. Just get Al Zappacosta put where he belongs and let's make it stick this time."

"I don't like this, Radcliffe. I really wish you'd let me get you out of the city for a while."

"I'll be safe, Joe, honest. I have to go now. I'll be in touch in a few days." She put her arms around him for a quick hug and then turned and disappeared out the door.

## Chapter 10

As Reaper sat dejectedly by Nadia's bedside all night, staring at his wife's battered and bruised face, he prayed silently that she would be all right. Just as his head was drooping onto his chest, a soft moan jarred him awake. Leaning forward and clasping her hand, Reaper stared intently at Nadia's swollen eyes, wondering if he had imagined the sound.

Slowly, Nadia opened her eyes to see her husband's worried face hovering over her. As he gently gathered her into his arms, she began to cry. The salty tears burned her eyes and face and caused her to wince in pain.

"Oh, babe, you're hurtin'. You want me to get the doctor?" Reaper asked as he started to lay Nadia back on the bed.

"No ... please, just hold me," she answered in a shaky voice as she clung to him.

"You're safe now, relax. No one is going to hurt you ever again, I promise," Reaper said softly as the tears flowed down his cheeks. After a few minutes he could feel Nadia relax in his arms.

Slowly, painfully, she raised her head from his chest and, looking around asked, "Where are we?"

"We're in a safe place," he answered as he gently lowered her to rest against the pillow. Holding her limp hand in his two large ones, he started, "Do you remember when I told you about us rescuing Catherine from those creeps a few months back and the strange man who crashed through our line to rescue her -- from us?"

At her nod he continued.

"Well, he showed up again and brought us here. This is where he lives and his ol' man is the doctor who patched you up. You were out cold so you didn't get to meet Vincent. I guess they're all in bed, but I wouldn't go -- told 'em I wanted to be the first thing you saw when you woke up."

"I'm glad," she said as she drifted back to sleep.

"I love you," he whispered as he placed her hand under the blanket and drew it up under her chin. Then he too drifted off to sleep.

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Vincent had purposely stayed away from the Hospital Chamber. He had been afraid of causing Nadia more distress and confusion by meeting him, and knew she needed to adjust to her surroundings slowly.

He had spent most of this time in his Chamber, trying to read. Vincent had quite a growing personal library of first editions that Catherine had given him. His initial reaction was that she spoiled him unmercifully; but, deep inside, he felt blessed to know she wanted to please him. As generous as he usually was, he had not been able to relegate these precious volumes to the common library for the other Tunnel dwellers to read. Each represented a part of Catherine, thus a part of himself. He held each one so dear to his heart he just could not bear to have any of them out of his Chamber for more than a few minutes. One separate shelf had begun to fill with her gifts, and they had become the most precious of the myriad possessions in his Chamber. He wanted to think that eventually he could share these books with his friends -- but he just wasn't sure.

Suddenly Vincent sensed Catherine's approach. Relief flooded over him as he ran to meet her at the West 81st Street tunnel entrance near Joe's apartment. Vincent had been unable to rest knowing Catherine was in possible danger while she was Above. The urge to hold her and force her to stay Below -- to keep her safe -- had been overwhelming, but he knew that she must do what she felt was necessary to bring this man to justice.

As the door slid open, Catherine propelled herself through it and into his arms.

"Catherine," he sighed as he placed a tentative kiss in her hair and held her allowing her presence Below to wash away the hours of apprehension.

Pressing her face into the layers of clothing covering his chest, she inhaled the special scent that was uniquely Vincent. His clothing held the scent of burning candles, but that wasn't entirely it. He usually wore wool and leather which added their own special aromas to his presence. The homemade soap he used had a pungent, clean smell. Yet there was something else -- an underlying aura that was the very essence of him. It never ceased to excite her when she was able to be close to him and feel it seep into her senses. And this was one of those times.

Suddenly, Vincent pulled back slightly and asked, "What it is Catherine, what are you feeling?"

With a slightly sheepish look, Catherine said hesitantly, "I was enjoying the essence that is you."

"Essence?"

"Yes ... you have a ... scent ... well, it's just a certain ... way ... I mean, your clothes and the candles and the soap ... but you ..."

Vincent was looking at her intently, trying very hard to follow what she was saying, but he was finding it impossible to make any sense of it. He tilted his head in that way that was unique to him and just stood there with a completely puzzled look on his

face.

"Never mind, I can't explain it. I was just enjoying you holding me in your arms," she said, giving up trying to explain something she didn't even understand herself.

"And I was enjoying holding you," he stated shyly. "I have been very worried about you."

"I'm fine, now. I told Joe all about what happened and he's going to handle the case personally. He said not to worry, that he'd get things rolling and try to wind it up as fast as he could. I told him I'd contact him in a few days to see how things were progressing. Perhaps we can get word to Peter Alcott and have him talk to Joe. Joe knows that Peter and I are very close and wouldn't be surprised to have me contact him that way."

"I'm sure we can contact Peter through one of the other Helpers," Vincent said as he placed his arm around her shoulders. "Come, you must be tired and hungry. We can go by the kitchen and see what William can find for us. It appears that I'm very hungry, too -- now that you are here."

Catherine gave him an exasperated look that let him know she didn't approve of him not taking care of himself on her account. He only dropped his head causing his hair to obscure his face. Pulling her closer to him, they walked toward the kitchen.

William had gone to bed, but Vincent found the small pot of potato soup he'd left simmering on the stove. Sitting in the big, warm kitchen, they ate steaming bowls of the delicious soup with slices of William's fabulous homemade wheat bread.

Mary had prepared the chamber Catherine had stayed in after her father's death. As Vincent was guiding her to it, they passed the Hospital Chamber. "How is Nadia doing?" she asked.

"Mary said she had eaten some broth. Reaper has not left her side. He is doing much better and has started eating since she awakened."

"Can we stop and see them?" she asked, not wanting to intrude but feeling a need to let them know what was being done Above.

"I believe they would like to see you," he stated. "I will wait in my Chamber.

"Oh, Vincent. I'm sorry. I forgot that Nadia has not met you yet. How like you to always think of others before your own feelings. But look, she's sleeping; so you could come in and speak with Reaper. We won't stay long."

Vincent nodded as they quietly entered the Hospital Chamber. Reaper was gazing at Nadia so intently he didn't hear them until they were well inside the room.

"I came to see how you both were doing," Catherine whispered with a concerned smile.

"She came to earlier -- she's real weak and tired, but she seemed to relax when I told her she was in a safe place. I want to thank you, Vincent, for bringing us here -- to your home. And for your father patching her up." He paused slightly and then proceeded, "Not that we're ungrateful, but when can we go home? I know everybody is wondering about us -- where we are -- why we aren't back. They're probably riding the streets looking for us."

"It's really not safe for any of us to go home right now," Catherine said as she explained that the two thugs who kidnapped them were in Westchester County Medical Center under armed guard and that Joe Maxwell was working on getting the indictments against Alonzo Zappacosta.

"I thought about trying to contact your friends ... I know they're worried. But it's just too risky. And I couldn't tell them where you are anyway. You and Nadia must understand that the lives of the good people in this community depend on your keeping this place a secret."

"Yeah, I understand and I'm sure Nadia will too."

A moan escaped Nadia's lips and Reaper turned to comfort her. Startled, Vincent quickly left the room before she woke up.

As Nadia opened her eyes, Reaper turned to ask if they could get her some water and was surprised to see that Vincent was gone. Catherine filled a glass with water and handed it to him. She had tears in her eyes.

"It's very hard for Vincent to meet people for the first time. He is only concerned with Nadia's health -- he didn't want to cause her any more upset."

"We understand -- more than you could possibly know, right babe?" he said to Nadia. She nodded weakly. "You see, bikers get sort of the same reaction from people. We get judged by what we look like and people usually are afraid of us. They don't give themselves the chance to know us -- they just take one look and don't like what they see. So you can tell Vincent he doesn't have to worry about Nadia. She's lived with me long enough to understand how I feel. And she understands how Vincent feels. Besides, I told her about him coming from out of nowhere to save you from us. I don't know if she really believed me," he said looking at his wife with a question in his eyes, "but she will now. Trust us. Go get Vincent and tell him it's OK -- we both want to thank him for helping us."

Catherine looked at Nadia. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, bring him back -- I won't hurt him, I promise," Nadia said with a reassuring smile.

As Catherine ran from the Hospital Chamber, Reaper took Nadia gently in his arms and just held her.

In a few minutes, Catherine and a reluctant Vincent appeared at the door. Reaper got up and walked toward them. He stopped in front of Vincent with his hand extended and Vincent slowly reached out to clasp his new friend's hand.

"We both want to thank you for bringing us here and making us feel welcome. Come on and meet Nadia, she's heard about you and she's anxious to meet you."

Surprise registered in Vincent's eyes as Catherine took his hand and walked with him to the end of the bed where Nadia was laying. He stood looking very uncomfortable, as if he would like to disappear again.

"I've heard so much about you," Nadia said as she looked at Vincent with a smile. "You risked your home and family by bringing us here. You didn't know us. People usually condemn us for what we look like without giving us a chance. Instead, you trusted us with everything that is most important to you. Thank you."

Vincent stood completely still, eyes wide with the amazement he was feeling at Nadia's words. He had always thought himself to be the only one who faced other's condemnation at their first meetings. It had never occurred to him that these normal-looking people were judged by their appearance, too.

"You are most welcome, and if there is anything I can do to help you during your stay Below, please don't hesitate to ask." With a slight bow and a glance at Catherine, Vincent left the Hospital Chamber.

"Is he OK?" Nadia asked. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, you didn't say anything wrong," Catherine assured her. "I think he's confused and needs time to think about what just happened. He'll be fine. If you two need anything, please let us know." With that, Catherine left a rather bewildered Reaper and Nadia.

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"Catherine."

"Yes, Vincent, come in."

"Am I disturbing you?"



"Of course not. Please ... come in, sit down. I was trying to occupy my mind by reading, but I've been worried about you. I thought about trying to find you, but I sensed your need to be alone."

"Yes," he whispered.

"But you don't want to be alone any more." It wasn't a question. "Tell me, Vincent."

"Nadia's words prompted such confusion in me. All of my life I have dreaded the look in people's eyes when they first see me. When new people come to live in the Tunnels, I am always reluctant to meet them. Yes, gradually they come to accept me, but there is always the struggle to be known as I am. It is beyond my comprehension that Reaper and Nadia have faced this same struggle."

"Vincent, the world Above condemns people for their differences. What is different is feared. What is feared must be controlled or destroyed. You are not the only one to be judged so harshly. My world has lost so much because of its prejudice and hatred, and it has truly denied itself someone wonderful by its inability to accept you."

As he gazed lovingly into Catherine's eyes, he opened his arms and she rose from the chair and eagerly stepped into his embrace.



## **The Essence of Vincent**

*(Through the Eyes of Catherine)*

What aura of mythic power  
emanates deep from within?  
What rugged sensuality  
forms the essence that is him?

Cloaked, hooded, protected he stands;  
lethal weapons gloved from sight.  
And that warrior he commands;  
ready in defense of right.

Is that the Vincent I long for;  
the man I hold in my dreams?  
His slightest touch all I wait for;  
the object of my love schemes.

No, a scholar is my Vincent  
with an understanding mind.  
A demeanor that's innocent;  
a heart both loving and kind.

Bottomless, sapphire depths -- his eyes,  
wild, thick, tawny mane -- his hair;  
Velvet, sandpapered voice belies  
the persuasive power there.

Hard-muscled, gold-carpeted chest  
begs my head to shelter there.  
Strong, comforting arms end my quest  
for a haven from all care.

Supple leath'ry palms stroke my cheek;  
stubbled chin rests in my hair.  
His words are the solace I seek  
saying he's ready to dare

To forget his oppressive past,  
to join hands -- go forward with me,  
As we venture, safely at last,  
on our journey toward destiny.

Peggy Garvin - 4/1/92

A black and white illustration of a scroll with a textured, dotted background. The scroll is unrolled, showing text in the center. The scroll has a small circular emblem at the top left and bottom left corners, containing a stylized letter 'G'.

## **The Heartbeat of the Tunnels**

The pipes are like the life blood  
of the Tunnel World's domain.  
Every tap is understood  
by the souls who must remain  
Safely hidden 'neath the street  
engulfed in the warm embrace  
Absorbed in a life complete  
in this caring, unique place.

Cries for help, sounds of alarm,  
daily communication,  
Joyful news, warnings from harm  
and useful information.

All this and more the pipes give  
in the hands of those who know  
How precious it is to live  
in this magic world Below.

Peggy Garvin - 5/9/92

## Chapter 11

"But this game just doesn't make any sense. What does it do? We put all these funny-shaped things on this board and then we start jumping them around. Every one of these things moves different. This one jumps over stuff but this one can't. This one can only go straight, but this one has to go crooked. I just don't get it. And then, when we're all done, we put them back and start all over again. Reminds me of a dog chasin' its tail," Reaper stated as he slumped back in the big chair.

"Yes, well, I suppose that could be one interpretation of the game. And one I can honestly say I have not heard before," Father answered as he removed his spectacles and pinched the area between his eyes as if he had a headache.

A giggle came from another big chair across the room. Nadia had been watching intently as Father tried to explain the game of chess to her husband. "Father, I think maybe Reaper feels more comfortable moving the pieces around inside an engine than he does on a chess board."

"Yeah, you can say that again," Reaper stated. "Now, if you guys have an engine that needs fixin', I'm your man."

"Well, yes, I'll keep that in mind. Perhaps we can introduce you to Mouse. You and he would probably have a lot in common."

"Mouse ... that's the little guy we ran into when Vincent brought us here. I'd never forget that name, we have a Mouse, too!"

"You do? How extraordinary," Father said as he put his glasses back on to peer into Reaper's face trying to determine if he was joking.

"Father, Father." Kipper came barreling into the room waving a brown envelope. "Clarence said this was real important and to bring it to you right away."

"Thank you, Kipper." As the boy turned, Father said, "Wait just a moment, in case this message requires an answer." Kipper halted, obviously anxious to be on his way.

"We have many people who live Above who watch out for us," Father explained. "Clarence is one of our Helpers. These Helpers assist us in many ways. They provide us with food, medical supplies, clothing -- many of the things we need in order to survive. They also provide us with a way to communicate with your world while remaining separate from it. Unfortunately, things that happen in your world often affect our world. Let me see what we have here."

Reaper stood up and walked to where Nadia was sitting, as Father withdrew the

newspaper from the large, brown envelope. "Perhaps we should go," Reaper said as he helped his wife to stand.

"No, wait, this concerns you," Father said. "Kipper, tell Pascal to send a message to Vincent. Tell him that I need to see Vincent and Catherine in my Chamber immediately." The boy scurried off as Nadia and Reaper exchanged worried looks.

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"What is it, Father," Vincent asked as he and Catherine hurried into the room without the usual amenities. "Pascal's message said it was urgent. Is there trouble?"

"I just received this newspaper and a short note from Peter. Please, sit down," Father said to the four anxious people standing before him. As they all settled into chairs, Father continued. "According to the article he has circled, two men were found dead in their hospital beds at Westchester County Medical Center early this morning. These men were being held under police protection at the hospital in connection with a possible kidnapping. There are very few details, but it states that an investigation is pending."

"Alonzo Zappacosta is responsible for this, I'm sure of it," Catherine stated as her eyes swept the sea of questioning faces. "He couldn't take a chance on those two thugs talking, so he just had them killed."

Vincent rose, walked behind Catherine's chair, and placed his hands on her shoulders. As she raised her eyes to meet his, she placed her small hands over his large ones drawing strength from his nearness. Reaper comforted Nadia as he waited for someone to speak. He hated this feeling of helplessness.

"This emphasizes the need for all of you to remain Below. This man is too powerful, too dangerous for you to return," Father stated.

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "We will just have to wait and trust Joe to handle the situation."

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"This workbench. These gizmos," Mouse stated as if that was all the explanation Reaper needed.

"Yeah, great ... gizmos ... sure," Reaper stammered as he stared at the assortment of things piled on the table. Pointing to the raccoon perched on the corner of the table, Reaper asked, "Gizmo?"

"Not gizmo," Mouse laughed. "Arthur."

"Well, hi, Arthur." Reaper chuckled as the raccoon went on noisily washing the

apple slice in his goblet and splashing water onto the table. "So, Mouse, these are gizmos," Reaper said holding parts of what obviously once had been a radio.

"Yes," Mouse stated simply as he picked up a screwdriver and started taking the screws out of the bottom of an ancient toaster.

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"Thank you for letting me help, Mary. I'm about to go crazy just laying in bed doing nothing," Nadia said as she finished sewing the patch on the elbow of a huge sweater. "This one must belong to Vincent, huh?"

"Yes, how did you guess," Mary said with a laugh.

"Well, I think I've met just about everybody in the week I've been here, and I haven't seen anyone else this would fit!"

"Your stitches are so tiny and neat. Where did you learn to sew like this?" Mary asked as she took the sweater from Nadia and examined the patch.

"I'm a dancer and I make my own costumes. It's just too expensive to get somebody else to make them and they never do it the way I want. So, I just had to learn to sew."

"Nadia," Catherine called at the entrance to the Hospital Chamber.

"Come on in," Nadia shouted.

"Father sent me to find Reaper. Apparently there is something wrong with the hot plate he uses to heat water for tea. He can't find Mouse so he thought perhaps Reaper could fix it. You know how Father gets when he can't have his tea," Catherine stated, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, dear, yes," Mary said. "I do know how testy he can be when he needs a cup of tea. I'll go make some in the kitchen and take it to him."

As Mary hurried out of the room, Nadia said, "I haven't seen Reaper for a while. Mouse came in and got him hours ago. Lord knows what those two have gotten into in that amount of time."

"Well, I'm sure they'll turn up. And Mary is taking care of the immediate problem. How are you feeling?"

"Weak but bored. Mary is letting me help her with the mending. She really is a gentle soul. She kind of reminds me of Kitten back at the clubhouse. Kitten does most of the cooking and washing and takes care of us. It just wouldn't be home without her."

"You're homesick, aren't you," Catherine stated as she walked to the side of the bed and put her arms around Nadia. "Maybe it won't be too much longer before you can go back."

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"Pass the biscuits, please," Reaper said to Vincent. "William sure is a great cook."

"Yes, I don't know what we would do without him."

"The stew is particularly delicious tonight," Father said dabbing at his mouth with his napkin. "And I hear we are having peach cobbler. I wonder where William acquired enough peaches for such a treat?"

"Got to go," Mouse tossed over his shoulder as he scurried from the table. Father just shook his head.

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"I love this place," Catherine said as she leaned into her favorite spot in the curve of Vincent's shoulder and gazed out at the waterfall.

"Yes, the Chamber of the Falls is one of the most beautiful in my world and one of my favorite places," Vincent said as he brushed the top of her head with his mouth. "And sharing it with you has added to the special memories it holds for me."

"Anywhere we can be together is special, Vincent."

"I agree. And even though I would prefer the circumstances prompting your visit to be pleasant, I do love having you here." Vincent put down the book he had been reading to Catherine and pulled her close.

As Catherine twisted slightly to look into the sapphire blue eyes she adored, she stated with obvious meaning, "I can't think of anywhere else I would rather be."

Closing his eyes, he pressed his mouth to her forehead as thoughts flooded his mind of the time Catherine had pulled his mouth to that very spot.

Those same memories came rushing to Catherine's mind. He did this of his own free will, she thought. That made it even more special.

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"I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." Catherine was standing in the center

of Father's Chamber.

"It's true, Catherine," said Peter Alcott. "I just came from Joe Maxwell's office. He called me this morning and said it was urgent. I left patients sitting in the waiting room and rushed over to see what he wanted. He told me to get the news to you right away. He said you should wait a few more days until he was certain there was no more danger, but your desk was piled high and he expected you in the office bright and early Monday morning."

"That sounds like Joe, all right. But to think that Al Zappacosta was murdered before the police could arrest him. It's just like Joe told me when Lucian Bertinelli was shot at the club, those families take care of their own. I guess this means I won't be staying here after this weekend," she stated as she locked her gaze with Vincent's. A mixture of relief and regret mingled in her forest green eyes, and the sky blue stare Vincent returned mirrored those same emotions. The danger to her had passed, but with it went the exquisite joy of having her in his world.

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"Catherine, I would like to make these last few days into memories we can call upon when we are once again in separate worlds. I know I haven't been able to spend as much time with you as I would have liked since you have taken sanctuary here Below. There have been numerous problems that have required my attention and I could not leave the responsibility to others."

"I know that, Vincent. I'm aware of your responsibilities and how your world depends on you. You know I cherish whatever time we have together. But I understand. And I've been able to get better acquainted with Reaper and Nadia. They really are caring people."

"Yes, the time I've spent with them has been very pleasant. Reaper and Mouse have grown quite close and Mary speaks very highly of Nadia's expertise with a needle and thread. Even Father seems to have forgiven their unorthodox introduction to our world and has come to accept them as friends."

"Do you think they could ever be accepted as Helpers, Vincent?" Catherine asked tentatively.

"We can't assume that they would want to be Helpers. From the conversations I've had with Reaper, he has conveyed his concerns about his own community of friends. Apparently, he is their leader and is very concerned that harm could have come to them in his absence."

"Yes, I know," Catherine agreed. "He has asked me several times when I thought they would be able to go home. He seemed extremely relieved to know the danger had passed and we could safely return Above Sunday night."



"Sunday night," Vincent said softly. "Only two and a half days until ..."

"Yes," sighed Catherine as her wistful green gaze met his misty blue one.

"And I would like to spend the remaining time with you ... if you ..." he said hesitantly.

"You know I would," Catherine said, allowing the love she felt for him to radiate from her.

Drawing reassurance from the love he saw reflected in her eyes, he continued. "There is a place, an almost forgotten place from my boyhood. A special place known only to Devin and myself.

"When we were young, we used to act out adventures of characters from our favorite books. One week we would be knights of King Arthur's court slaying dragons; the next pirates sailing the raging seas and discovering buried treasure. But one of our favorites was pretending to be," he hesitated and with his look beseeched Catherine not to laugh, "Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn."

As a smile came to Catherine's lips, she asked, "And which one were you?"

"Since Devin was older, he always chose to be Tom Sawyer, but I didn't mind being Huck," he laughed feeling her enjoyment of this childhood memory.

"We would stay awake half the night, hatching plots and making up stories to act out the next day. But we would still awaken very early on a Saturday morning and rush down to breakfast begging Father to allow us to pack a picnic lunch. That way we would not have to return until supper. Father always lectured us sternly about limiting our activities to the inhabited tunnels, but I'm sure he suspected our intentions."

"I'm sure," Catherine said knowingly.

"We would combine the exploration of our world with the exercise of our imaginations and create the most exciting adventures. On one such trip, we discovered this special place. We made a pact never to tell anyone about it.

"When Devin left, I went there expecting him to be waiting for me. But he wasn't. I stayed all day knowing he would join me at any moment. When he did not come, I knew he was truly gone. I cried.

"I never went back to that place because the memories were just too painful. It was hard enough hearing his voice in the Whispering Gallery or seeing his reflection in the Mirror Pool. But that place had belonged only to us.

"Then, when Devin returned to our world a few years ago, he asked me if I'd ever told anyone about our secret place. I confessed I had waited there for him and that I had never returned after that day. I told him I had almost forgotten about its existence.

That memory had been locked away with other memories too painful to endure at that time. But his return unlocked that door."

Vincent looked into Catherine's gaze and knew that she too was thinking about other doors that had been unlocked to other memories.

"I asked him then if he would mind if I shared our place with you, Catherine. He acted very indignant and began a pompous speech about brotherhood and secret pacts, but he couldn't keep from laughing. He told me he could not think of anyone else who would appreciate that place as you would.

"So you see, I've been preparing this treasured place of memories for some time in hopes the day would come when I could take you there. It's not very far, about half a day's walk. And the way is not too difficult."

Out of breath with anticipation, Vincent paused to see Catherine smiling at him with tears in her eyes.

"How generous of you to share this place of boyhood memories with me. I'd love to go there ... with you."

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"Do you think you will be able to manage this pack, Catherine?" Vincent asked as he helped her adjust the shoulder straps of the canvas knapsack.

"Of course; I'll be fine. Mine is tiny compared to yours," she pointed out as he shouldered his substantially larger pack.

"But I am accustomed to the rigors of life Below while you ..." he stopped, sensing her pique.

"Sit at a desk all day," she stated with a stern look. "But that doesn't mean I'm a physical wreck. I jog and try to keep myself in shape."

"I was not criticizing your shape, Catherine," Vincent said with a playful look.

Serving to emphasize how ridiculous her anger had been, the comment completely diffused it. She met his teasing eyes with her slightly embarrassed look. "Lead the way, Huck," she said with a laugh.

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The next few hours were spent in pleasant conversation as they left the inhabited area and descended into a section of the tunnels Catherine had never seen before.

"You were right, Vincent, the walk has been easy," Catherine said as they strolled along holding hands.

"The way becomes narrow just ahead, and there is a part of our journey which requires some climbing, but it is not actually difficult nor is it dangerous," he reassured her.

As soon as Vincent had spoken, the tunnel narrowed, forcing him to take the lead and bringing a halt to their easy conversation. Following him, Catherine thought

how gracefully he walked, carrying the heavy pack as though it were nothing. She noticed how considerate he was, constantly checking to be sure he wasn't walking too fast. He was always more worried about the feelings and comfort of others than himself. Her heart was so filled with love for this gentle man she felt it would burst.

Vincent stopped, turned and stood gazing at her with a look of wonder. So overpowering were the waves of love flowing through their bond, he knew he must look into the face of the woman who loved him enough to follow him into the bowels of the earth with total trust. He held out his arms and she came willingly into the warmth of his embrace. There were no words needed to convey what they were feeling.

After a few moments, Catherine raised her head from his chest and smiled. Placing a lingering kiss on her forehead, Vincent turned and resumed their journey.

A short time later he came to an abrupt stop. She almost collided with the pack he had strapped to his back.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter, Catherine," he said turning aside to reveal a huge boulder blocking their way. "Devin and I wanted this place to be our secret, so we sealed the entrance with this rock. In our youth it took both of us to move it, which served to insure it was our secret place. Neither one of us came here without the other, and we never revealed its location to anyone else."

Vincent easily rolled the boulder aside to uncover an opening in the stone wall. "The path descends rapidly from this point. Please be careful," he said with genuine concern and he gestured for Catherine to follow him.

"It's much cooler down here," Catherine remarked with a shiver.

"Yes, we are in a section of the Tunnels far below the area you are accustomed to. I brought a heavy sweater for you. It's in your pack. If you will turn around, I'll get it for you."

"No, thank you, I'm not that cold -- it's really rather invigorating," Catherine replied.

"Invigorating? Well, yes ... if you are certain, then we'll continue. Ahead is a rather steep cliff we must climb down. Over the years Devin and I chipped hand and foot holds into the face of the rock to make the descent much easier. I'm positive you are in good enough shape to manage easily," he finished with a glint in his eye.

"Oh, you are," Catherine said with an answering smile.

As Catherine was nearing the end of her downward climb, she felt strong hands encircle her waist. Relaxing, she allowed Vincent to lower her the last few feet.

Gently setting her down without releasing her, he whispered, "Don't turn around yet, please." He hesitated. Then, sensing her acquiescence, he lifted the pack from her back and placed it on the ground. "Close your eyes."

"All right," she said with a hint of anticipation in her voice. In darkness she could hear him removing his pack and dropping it to the floor.

Hesitantly, he encircled her waist with his left arm as his right hand grasped hers. Slowly turning with her, he guided her forward and to the left. "Now you can open your eyes."

"Oh, Vincent, it's beautiful!"

The chamber contained a shimmering pool of water that reflected the blue of the sky, much like the larger Mirror Pool near the inhabited area of the Tunnels. The light here, however, was diffused giving a softer appearance to the surroundings. Muted tones of tan and brown blended together to form the stone walls that rose upward disappearing from view and giving the impression of vastness as if there were no ceiling.

"Vincent, I feel as if we are in the mountains."

"Yes, that is exactly how Devin and I felt when we came here. It was a magical place where we could pretend to be anywhere ... and anyone."

"I can't think of anywhere else I would want to be right now ... or anyone else I would want to be," Catherine said as she turned and rested her head on Vincent's chest.

"Nor I, Catherine," he sighed contentedly.

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"Are you hungry?" Vincent called from where he squatted unpacking items from his knapsack and piling them in a heap around him.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I'm starved."

Returning with an armload of wood from a neat stack along the far wall, Vincent began building a small cooking fire within a circle of charred stones that had obviously housed many such fires in the past. Then he produced a battered pot from the items scattered about and began filling it from a large container.

"What's for dinner?" Catherine asked as she strolled over and squatted down next to him warming her hands at the crackling fire.

"I'm afraid tonight we will have to suffer with the beef stew and homemade bread that William insisted I bring on our journey," he said in a voice tinged with mock apology.

"Poor us, how ever will we survive such a fate!" Catherine announced pressing the back of her hand into her forehead and striking a pose of dismay.

"True, but tomorrow we will be able to have fresh fish for supper."

"Fish? Don't tell me you packed fresh fish in one of the knapsacks?"

"No, but they are in the pool just waiting for us to coax them onto our hooks and into our frying pan," he stated with a great deal of satisfaction.

"In the water ... fish ... down here? But where do they come from, how did they get down here?" she asked with confusion.

"The source of this pool of water is not an underground spring but a stream that originates Above. Devin and I discovered the fish quite by accident. We had just finished building our raft ..."

"Building your raft ... you have a raft down here?" Catherine exclaimed.

"Of course, how else could we be Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn if we didn't have a proper raft!" he answered with a laugh. "As I was saying, we had just finished building our raft and were taking it on its maiden voyage. We discovered that a few slight improvements were required to make it seaworthy. While we were swimming back to shore we realized that we were not the only two inhabitants of the pool. On our next trip back we brought a sturdy rope to retrieve the raft and our fishing poles from their resting place at the bottom of the pool. That was when we truly came to love this

place."

"I'm so excited! I haven't been fishing since my father and I went to the lake in Connecticut. He always had such elaborate fishing equipment, but I insisted on using the cane pole he gave me when I was only five years old. It was my first fishing pole but I always loved it. I never was a very good fisherman, but it gave us a chance to spend some quiet time together. And that was what made our fishing trips so special."

"That's a wonderful memory to have," Vincent said with a wistful look on his face. "The times that Devin and I spent fishing together are some of the most precious memories I have. We would sit on our raft, with our bare feet dangling in the water and talk about all the wonderful places we were going to go and the things we would do. I know now how impossible all those dreams were, but for a little while I believed it just might happen."

"And Devin really wanted to do all those things with you, Vincent. When he and I were returning from the carnival after intimidating Charles' brother, Devin was very depressed. He told me he felt he had failed you. That you were his little brother and he had wanted you both to fulfill the dreams you'd shared. He said he left because he realized that he couldn't do those things if he stayed in the Tunnels. And he always felt guilty because he couldn't take you with him. That's why he left without saying goodbye. He just couldn't bear to see the disappointment on your face. He loves you very much."

"Yes. And I love him. All the time I spent here ... waiting for him ... deep down inside I knew he wasn't coming back. But I didn't want to let go of the dreams. I knew he had to leave and I understood. It was very painful and, for a long time, it overshadowed the memories of the good times we had shared. That is why I tried to forget this place. When Devin reminded me of its existence, I knew that I wanted to remember the good times we had here, but I also realized that I wanted to make this place even more magical by sharing it with you."

"And I'm very grateful that you brought me here. This time spent together, in this special place, will be one of my most treasured memories." As Catherine gazed into Vincent's eyes lovingly, her stomach growled protesting its empty state.

"Unless I let you starve to death," he said as he laughed and turned his attention to preparing the stew. Placing a charred metal rack over the now-smoldering coals, he set the pot of stew on top.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"If you would like," he nodded. "Here's a blanket we can use as a tablecloth," he said handing her a thick, patched quilt, "and there are bowls, cups and spoons in that box. If you would like to set the table, I'll cook."

Catherine gathered everything and walked a short distance from the fire.

Spreading out the quilt on the stone floor and placing the mismatched cups and bowls on opposite sides took only a moment. She rose and strolled to the edge of the pool. An air current crossing the water created slight ripples in the surface and accentuated the crisp coolness of the chamber.

As Vincent turned to retrieve the package of bread, he noticed Catherine standing by the water hugging herself. Silently, he moved to where her knapsack lay, removed the heavy sweater he had packed, and walked up behind her. Gently placing the sweater around her, he allowed his hands to remain, lightly resting on her shoulders.





As Catherine leaned back against his chest, she sighed "It's so peaceful here. Thank you for sharing this place with me."

"It is I, Catherine, who need to thank you for allowing me to share it with you."

"Is that our dinner I smell burning?" Catherine said with a jolt that broke the romantic mood.

Her comment hung in the air with the smoke from the burning stew.

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"Even though it was slightly scorched, dinner was delicious," Catherine said as she sank back on the thick quilt contentedly.

As Vincent began gathering the dishes, Catherine raised her head silently offering to help.

He declined gently. "There is a small hot spring around the bend. I'll rinse these and return shortly. You rest," he said with a shy smile.

Gratefully, she sank back into the quilt. All of a sudden I'm so tired; maybe I'm not in such great shape after all, she thought with a chuckle.

When Vincent returned, Catherine was sound asleep. He placed the clean dishes back into their plastic box, gathered another thick quilt in his arms, and returned to her side. Carefully he covered her with the second quilt and, lying down beside her, he pulled the remaining half of the quilt over himself. In the fading light, he watched her sleeping until he too drifted into a contented slumber.

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The aroma of Earl Grey tea mingled with the crisp, cool air awakened Catherine from a deep, dreamless sleep.

"Oh, Vincent," she said as she stretched, "That tea smells so delicious. I slept like a baby. But you should have awakened me. I could have helped make breakfast."

"You were sleeping so soundly that I was reluctant to disturb you. And breakfast is not elaborate. William included some blueberry muffins, fruit and tea in our package of food, but I'm afraid we will have to work for our lunch," Vincent said holding up two cane fishing poles.

"Cane poles!" she exclaimed. "Just like the one I had when I was a little girl."

"Yes, and since you are an experienced fisherman, I expect extraordinary results. I'll just warm up the muffins, if you want to wash and change clothes at the hot spring around the bend. Mary packed what clothing she felt would be appropriate. I hope you have everything you need."

"I'll be right back," Catherine said scooping up the knapsack and bounding around the corner.

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"Are you sure this thing is safe?" Catherine said as she looked suspiciously at the old, homemade raft.

"I am quite certain. About a month ago I came to this chamber. I brought a load of firewood, and launched the raft to insure its seaworthiness. At the time I had no idea we would be using it so soon."

"How in the world did you and Devin know how to make a raft, and where did you get the material?" Catherine asked as she took a closer look.

"Most of the things I know, I've learned from books," Vincent said pointedly. "As for the items needed for construction, Devin was as equally talented as Mouse at foraging from Above. The wood planks came from a fence that Devin assured me had fallen down. The empty oil drums were just sitting behind an abandoned garage, according to him. The most difficult part was obtaining enough rope to securely lash the raft together. It took quite a long time to assemble all of the necessary items. Devin would locate what we needed, send word to me, and we would store the items in one of the lower chambers until we could bring them here. Other than the fact that it sank on its maiden voyage, this raft has proven to be a worthy craft."

"OK, Huck, if you say it's seaworthy, then let's get this fishing trip launched," she said noting that Vincent was obviously very proud of the raft he and Devin had built.

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"The fish are almost done," Catherine called.

"Yes, the aroma enticed me at the hot spring to hurry and change clothes. Fishing always makes me hungry, especially if I'm not the one who has to prepare them."

"Well, I felt it was only fair. Since you made dinner last night, and breakfast this morning, and you cleaned the fish, the least I could do was cook," she said emphatically.

"Then I'll set the table," Vincent announced as he retrieved the cups and bowls from their box.

As Catherine turned the fish in the pan and stabbed the potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil to see if they were done, Vincent set the utensils on the quilt that served as their table and their bed.

As Catherine waited for their dinner to cook, she glanced up to see Vincent standing by the edge of the pool. He had changed into a worn pair of jeans heavily patched at the knees and a thick, cream-colored turtleneck. His hair was still damp where he had washed it in the hot spring.

He looks so relaxed, she thought. I wish we could stay here forever. As she tore her eyes from the imposing figure of the man she loved, she chuckled silently thinking, I'd better keep my mind on cooking or these fish will end up like the stew did last night.

A flicker of Catherine's emotions caused Vincent to turn just as she averted her gaze to the task of cooking their dinner.

Mary packed very serviceable and sturdy clothes for Catherine to wear on our trip, he thought. Even though they are worn and patched, she looks lovely.

When they had returned from their fishing trip, Catherine had gone to wash and change clothes while he cleaned the fish. She was wearing a pair of faded denim jeans and a blue chambray shirt with tiny hand-embroidered flowers on the collar and cuffs. Over the shirt she had pulled a bulky, cable-knit tan sweater with large suede elbow patches. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail.

She looks so content, he thought. I wish we could... "No," he said softly. I will not spoil our time together in wishing for the impossible were Vincent's last thoughts as he went to kneel beside Catherine at the fire.

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"Supper was delicious, Catherine. Let me wash these dishes and ..."

"Oh, no, not tonight. I'm going with you. Obviously, I can't be trusted to stay awake while you wash dishes. And I don't want to waste our time together tonight sleeping," she stated with an embarrassed glance as she picked up her cup and bowl.

Silently, Vincent gathered the remaining dishes and led the way toward the spring. It took very little time to wash and put away the utensils. The air hung heavy with their silence.

Perhaps I should not have made an issue of my not wanting to waste our time together tonight, Catherine thought. We've been so comfortable, and now I've ruined it.

Feeling her discomfort, Vincent searched for something to bridge the gap. "I've brought a book I wished to share with you, if you would like."

"Yes, I'd like that very much. You know how I love for you to read to me," Catherine said grateful to him for his efforts to ease the tension that had developed between them.

"Come, I have the perfect place for reading," he said as he gathered his book and a couple of large candles. Holding out his larger, fur-covered hand, he smiled as she placed her small, smooth one within his warm grasp as they walked toward a crevice in the far wall near the edge of the pool.

"I never even noticed this opening was here," she said with surprise. "Where does it lead?"

"You'll see," was all he would say as he gently coaxed her through the opening and up a narrow, winding path. "The climb is steep, so hold onto my hand very tightly."

The climb was indeed steep but short. The path opened onto a ledge overlooking the pool, and the moonlight reflected in the water cast a shimmery glow

below them. As Catherine gazed at the breathtaking view, Vincent placed the candles in niches that had been carved into the wall by youthful hands and then carefully touched a match to each taper.

"This is incredible. I didn't even see this ledge from below," she said as she turned. The sight that met her eyes was even more incredible -- Vincent reclining on patchwork cushions scattered about the floor. He beckoned her to join him, not only with his outstretched hand but with his magnetic blue eyes. Willingly she sank down and snuggled against him in her favorite reading position.

*"If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable."*

"This passage from a letter written by Rainer Maria Rilke always came to mind whenever I was here. As you said, Catherine, this ledge is virtually hidden from sight yet it holds such great beauty."

"Like you, Vincent," she said lovingly. "Hidden away in your world Below, I might have missed the immeasurable joy of knowing you had fate not brought us together."

Dropping his gaze and allowing his amber mane to conceal the emotions written in his face, Vincent paused, deeply affected by her words. After a moment his silken voice, resonant with love, resumed his reading.

The time passed quickly as Catherine lay nestled into his chest, reveling in the wisdom of Rilke's words imparted by the mellow timbre of Vincent's voice.

*"For one human being to love another is perhaps the most difficult task of all, the epitome, the ultimate test."*

When he finished reading that passage, the silence was deafening as neither one of them spoke.

"But it is worth the effort," he finally stated, placing a kiss in her hair.

"Yes," she answered, lifting her head from his chest to gaze into the face she loved. "It's worth everything. No matter how difficult the journey, we can travel it together," she stated as she sat up and turned to face him, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them.

Vincent raised his right knee and pushed himself into a more upright seated position against the stone wall. "The fact that you want to travel this difficult journey with me is still astonishing to me, Catherine." His determined look silenced her protest.

"The night I went to see you one last time, I looked into your face. And when I saw how beautiful you were, without the scars, I knew how foolish I had been to think you might need me. You had a world of possibilities open to you. Yet, when I turned to go, I could feel your genuine need for me to stay. You wanted to spend time with me. My wonder at this has not lessened. Your desire to understand my fears and your willingness to help me resolve them never ceases to amaze me."

"Your fears are very real to you, Vincent. Because of their reality in your life, they become a reality in mine. If we are ever to join our two lives, we must strive to understand and resolve each other's fears."

At this statement, an implausible thought came to mind. She said "resolve each other's fears" he thought.

"Yes, Vincent. I have fears too. I try to suppress them but they are very real -- to me."

"Please, Catherine, tell me your fears," he said with genuine concern.

"All right," she said resolutely. "My worst fear stems from the times you have pushed me away -- thinking it was for my own good." As Vincent dropped his head to hide behind the curtain of his hair, Catherine reached out and placed her hand under his chin. Applying gentle pressure, she brought his gaze to meet hers. "I know you did it out of love for me, Vincent. But just as Father did things for you, out of love, the pain was no less real. Each time you would drive me from your life, I would wait -- praying that you would return. And when you did return, I would try to understand your motivations

so that I would not trigger a repeat of that rejection."

With this harsh word, Vincent's head shot up, eyes wide with realization and guilt.

"No, Vincent, I'm not trying to hurt you by discussing the pain I felt. I'm trying to help you understand my fear. Each time you tried to reject me -- for my sake -- and failed, I thanked God. And each time I feared you would one day be successful and I would never see you again."

"I only wanted what was best for you," he said empty.

"I know," she replied with a loving smile. "And I only wanted what I thought was best for me -- you. Which led me to another fear I faced." Hesitating, she lowered her forehead to rest on her knees.

"What is it, Catherine?" he asked as he gently stroked her hair with his outstretched hand.

Drawing courage from his touch, she raised her head and continued. "I was afraid I would lose you, but I didn't know what to do to prevent it. Sometimes I felt I needed to be more ... aggressive. I mean ... I thought if I pressed the issue of our physical relationship, perhaps I could overwhelm you with my love and prove you had nothing to fear. I was so certain, at times, that I could barely contain myself. Then, just as I had convinced myself this was the right course of action, I would sense your panic. Your fear triggered in me the fear that, if I pushed you too hard ... too far ... too soon, I might lose you completely. And I couldn't risk that. So I remained trapped between two opposite courses of action -- afraid to do anything."

"For someone who is supposed to be perceptive, especially where your feelings are concerned, I am overwhelmed with my failure to recognize these warring emotions in you. The only explanation I can imagine is that my own fears were so overpowering, they pushed yours aside. For that I am sorry," he said as he held out his arms and she melted into his embrace.

"There is nothing for you to be sorry about, Vincent. Even with your incredible ability to sense my emotions through the bond that we share, you cannot be expected to know everything. And the fears I shared with you just now were emotions I consciously tried to conceal from you. I'm just so relieved that I don't have to deal with them alone anymore."

"Catherine, I never want you to feel you must conceal your emotions from me. I always want to be there for you. Together we can truly conquer any obstacles."

Taking both of her hands in his, he stood and pulled her with him and into his arms. "Come, it's late and I don't want you to become chilled." Arm in arm they retraced

their steps until they stood beside the patchwork quilt that had served as their bed the night before. Vincent bent to unfold the quilt they had used as a blanket. Spreading it out to cover the one beneath it, he methodically turned one corner back and continued smoothing it unnecessarily as if the act itself could soothe his misgivings. Finally he rose to face her once more.

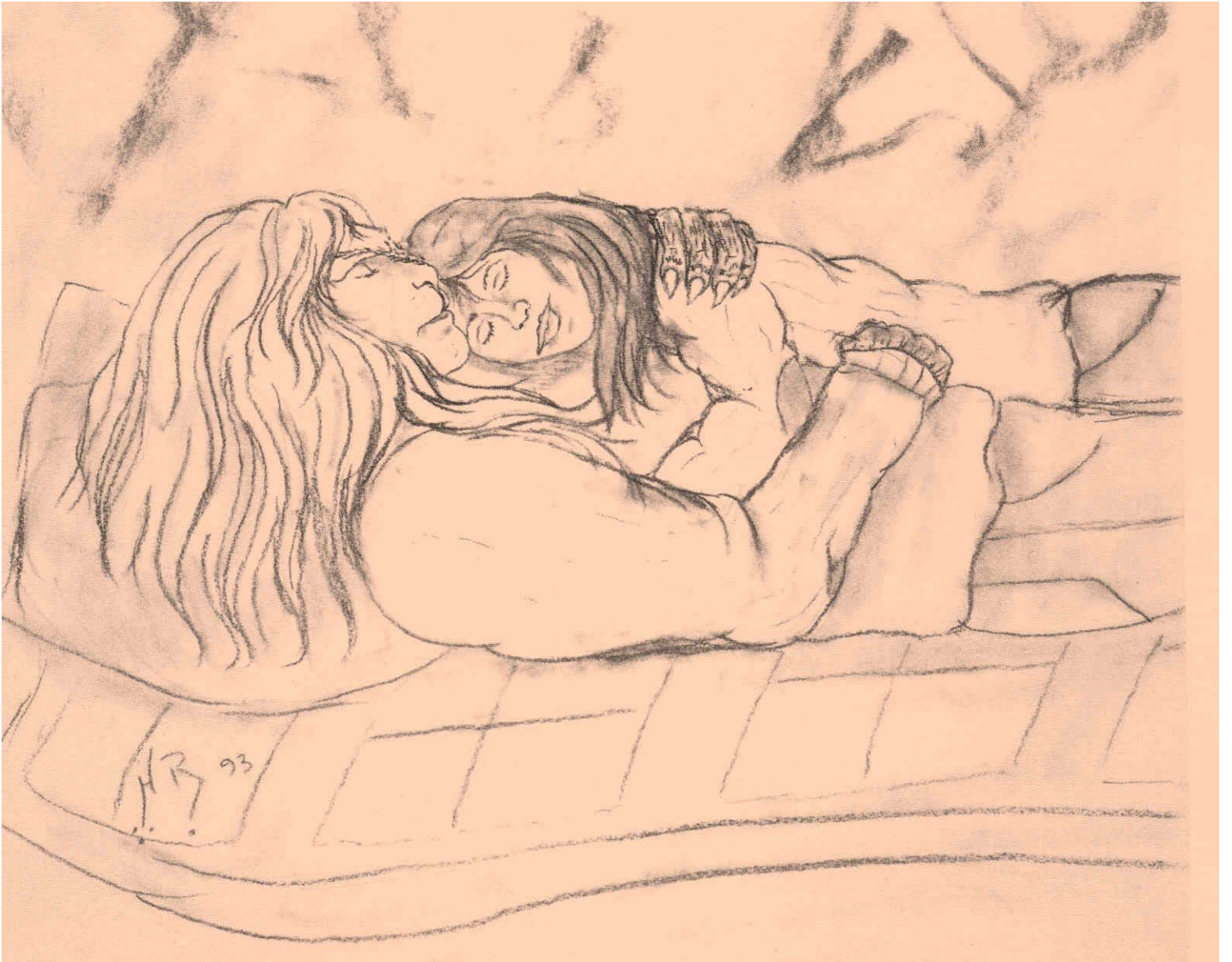
"Earlier you said you didn't want to waste our time together tonight -- sleeping. Last night was not a waste to me. When I returned from the hot spring to find you asleep, I lay down on the quilt and watched you. I was worried that I would offend you should I touch you in such a vulnerable state. Yet, I wanted to do just that. I want to sleep with you tonight, Catherine. I want to hold you in my arms throughout the night. If this is what you also wish," he added with a tremor of uncertainty in his voice.

"It is what I wish, Vincent. It is."

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He lay on his back, his left arm encircling her slim back allowing his hand to rest on her shoulder. Even though his sleep was uninterrupted by dreams, he awakened often to wonder at this new sensation -- Catherine contentedly sleeping in his arms. Her head lay nestled in the hollow of his shoulder while the length of her slender body molded perfectly against his side.

A sense of peacefulness enveloped them as they slept in each other's arms on the thick, patched quilt, content in the knowledge that yet another step in their journey had been taken.







## Love Away Our Fear

I love your boyish wonder --  
your innocence of soul.  
I love the spell I'm under;  
your touch can make me whole.

I love the hesitation --  
and the way you search my eyes  
For any inclination  
the embrace that you devise  
May not be what I'm wanting  
not the same that I desire.  
Those doubts are ever taunting;  
they douse each love-kindled fire.

But Vincent if you'd only feel  
through the bond that we have found.  
You'd know my longing is as real  
as the one that has you bound.

You'd hold me as I want you to;  
you'd kiss away our fears.  
And do the things you're aching to;  
erasing all our tears.

Upon my breast you'd lay your head  
as you pulled my body near.  
We'd softly sink into your bed  
where we'd love away all fear.

It's what I'm wanting more than all  
the world Above can give.  
Take me, love me -- break down the wall  
and let us start to live!

Peggy Garvin - 4/7/92

## Chapter 12

As they neared his Chamber, Vincent stopped and said, "We are in time for supper. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I guess I am," Catherine answered with a sadness in her voice.

Noticing her tone and demeanor, Vincent asked, "What is the matter? You seem so sad?"

"Not sad, Vincent, confused. You've hardly spoken a word the entire trip back. I sensed a withdrawal ... have I done something?"

"No, Catherine, you have done nothing. I'm sorry if I was not good company on the trip. I suppose I fell into my usual manner of thinking while I travel. So often I take long walks into the less-traveled tunnels when I need to think. It's a habit I have developed over the years that is apparently deeply ingrained. Please, forgive me," he said earnestly as he took her hands in his and gazed deeply into her moist eyes.

Returning his intent look, she said, "Of course, I forgive you. But what were you thinking about?"

"Us."

With an understanding nod, Catherine released one of Vincent's hands, turned and started toward Father's Chamber. "Perhaps we should alert Father that he'll have two more for dinner."

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"Vincent, Catherine -- over here!" called Reaper from his place at the table. "Where have you guys been?"

"We traveled to a secret place from my childhood," Vincent said with a loving glance at Catherine. "I trust that you have been well taken care of."

"Yeah, sure. Everyone has been great. I spent some time helping Mouse fix an old gas generator. We didn't have any fuel to try it out, but I think it'll work. It would be good to have around in case you had an emergency and needed electricity, but the fumes could be a problem in the tight quarters down here. Anyway, it kept me busy while we were waiting to go home."

"Yes, aren't you excited about going home, Catherine?" Nadia piped in before thinking. At the saddened looks on Vincent and Catherine's faces, she lowered her eyes unable to think of anything to say.

As Vincent and Catherine placed their steaming plates of chicken and dumplings down on the table across from Reaper and Nadia, they looked into each other's eyes and then sat down. "It's all right, Nadia. We understand," Catherine said trying to make her new friend feel better. "I am anxious to return Above in order to find out what has happened since I've been gone."

Ignoring Catherine's attempt to smooth things over, Nadia said, "I know you two don't get to spend much time together. It's just that I'm so excited about getting back and seeing everyone that I didn't think."

"It's quite all right, Nadia," said Vincent sincerely. "Catherine and I treasure whatever time we have together. I only wish all of you had come to visit under more pleasant circumstances. But then we most likely would never have come to know your friendship."

"When I was a little girl, and something terrible would happen, and I would be crying, my mother would come into my room to comfort me. She always said the same thing -- all things happen for the best," said Catherine with a smile. "I would protest that there was nothing good about what had happened, and she would assure me that I just couldn't see it right then but that later I would understand. And she was right. We endured something terrible, yet something good has come from it."

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"Ready, babe?" Reaper called to Nadia as he rounded the corner and stuck his head in the entrance of the chamber they had shared during their stay Below. "Vincent is ready to lead us out."

"Just a minute," she answered looking up. She and Jamie had been deep in conversation when he had arrived. "Now don't you worry about a thing, just try what I told you and see if it works, OK?" With a quick hug for Jamie, Nadia turned and rushed into Reaper's arms. "I'm so happy to be going home, but I sure will miss everybody down here. Do you think they would let us come back and visit?"

"Yes, Nadia," answered Vincent. "We would love to have you visit us." She had been so engrossed in talking to her husband she had not even noticed that Vincent was approaching.

"Gosh, Vincent, I didn't mean to just ask like that. I mean, I didn't see you and...."

"It's quite all right. I had intended to invite both of you to return. Perhaps Catherine can arrange it," he said turning and extending his hand to his beloved as she approached from behind him.

"How did you know it was Catherine?" Nadia asked with an amazed look on her face.

"Vincent and I have a special ... connection; he senses whenever I am near. It is a very special gift that I don't completely understand but something that has great meaning in our relationship."

"Gee, you mean he feels that you are close by. That's incredible," answered Nadia obviously impressed.

"It's more than that, actually. We have a bond -- not telepathic, like reading each other's thoughts, but ... well, more empathic. We can feel each other's emotions. Of course, Vincent is much better at it than I am," Catherine said with a loving look into Vincent's eyes.

"So that's how he knew you were in trouble," Reaper said. "I always wondered how he just happened to show up. Wow, that's unreal!"

"Yes, sometimes it does almost seem just that -- unreal," Vincent said to Reaper but his eyes never left Catherine's loving gaze. After a rather long silence, Vincent broke the gaze and turned to Reaper and Nadia. "Are you ready to go?"

"Boy are we," said Reaper as he hugged Nadia to his side.

A short time later, they reached their destination.

"This is where you go out," Vincent said motioning to the exit he had used the first time they had met. "It comes out inside that abandoned warehouse down the alley from where I tried to rescue Catherine from you," he said laughing.

"Yeah, you sure know how to make an entrance," Reaper said with a chuckle as he offered Vincent his hand. This time there was no hesitation as Vincent took it.

Catherine and Nadia hugged. Then, as Catherine turned to give Reaper a goodbye hug, Nadia stepped hesitantly toward Vincent. "May I hug you goodbye?" she said shyly.

With an incredulous look on his face, Vincent slowly nodded. She stretched up, placing her hands on his shoulders and pulled him down into a friendly hug. "Thank you," she whispered and then she turned and bounded into Reaper's waiting embrace.

"Listen, you guys. Why don't you come to a party at our clubhouse this Saturday. It's an engagement party for our Mouse. We'd really like for you to come."

As Catherine looked from Reaper's expectant face to Vincent's sad one, she realized that it was impossible.

At their silence, Reaper continued, "You'd be safe, honest, Vincent. Nobody comes to the clubhouse except the people we think of as our family. It's kind of like down here. You've already met Mouse and Tattoo Scott. Oh, yeah, and Tank. His ol' lady was there too but I don't think you guys saw her. Her name's Eve. Then there's

Mouse's ol' lady. She's real shy. She has a Korean name but we just call her Kitten. I know they'd love for you to help them celebrate their engagement. And Scott's ol' lady, Boa -- you'll like her. There won't be any strangers at this party -- it's just our family."

"I'm sorry. Thank you ... really. We appreciate being invited but ..." Catherine stammered not really knowing what to say in order to make the situation less embarrassing for Vincent.

"Catherine, it's quite all right," Vincent said, understanding her desire to shield him from discomfort. "You see, Reaper, I have been raised in these tunnels among people who are my friends, my family. I do venture Above but I must be very careful. I'm sure you and your friends mean me no harm. But I must think of more than myself -- I have a responsibility to the others here Below. If I were discovered, it could endanger them as well. I hope you understand how much it means to me to be invited to your home."

"Sure, we understand," Reaper answered with resignation. "But if you change your mind, feel free to come," he continued, laying his hand on Vincent's shoulder. "The clubhouse is on Stanton Street near Hamilton Fish Park. You can't miss it -- just look for all the Harleys." Then he and Nadia turned and disappeared through the small opening into the warehouse.

Silently, Catherine walked into Vincent's open arms and hugged him fiercely. "Oh, Vincent, I'm so sorry."

"Catherine," he said pressing his lips into her hair, "You must go to this party -- for both of us."

"But I don't want to go without you. Are you sure you couldn't go? Maybe I could go and see what their clubhouse looks like. You could find out if there is a tunnel entrance. They seem like such warm, friendly people. Maybe all of them are like Reaper and Nadia. Oh, Vincent, could you just think about it for a few days ... please!"

"I will think on it," was all he said as they walked back toward the Chamber she had used during her stay.

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"Goodbye, Father," Catherine said as she tentatively hugged him and turned to leave with Vincent.

"Goodbye, Catherine," he said. "And Vincent, would you stop by my Chamber when you return?"

"Yes, of course, Father," Vincent said as he escorted Catherine from Father's Chamber with a hand lightly placed in the small of her back. The gesture certainly did not go unnoticed by Father.

"I'm sorry I tried to pressure you into going to the party, Vincent," Catherine said as they reached the entrance to the sub-basement of her apartment building. "For a moment I let myself hope that it was possible, but I know you must consider the safety of your world above all else. I would not want to risk having anything happen to you -- you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Catherine, I know you only wished for us to be able to do something together, like ordinary people. For a moment I, too, felt the stir of hope and anticipation," he said sadly lowering his head to obscure his face from her view.

Peering through the cascading mane covering his face, Catherine found his crystal blue eyes with her emerald green ones. "I wouldn't trade you for all the ordinary men in the world, Vincent. I love you."

Unable to speak, Vincent pulled her into his chest holding her close as a single tear slid down his cheek and into her hair.

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"You wanted to see me, Father," Vincent said as he entered the book-cluttered chamber.

"Yes, Vincent ... come, sit down," he said motioning to the chair Vincent always occupied when he visited.

Lowering himself into the chair wearily, Vincent waited impatiently for Father to speak. As the silent seconds ticked by, Vincent became apprehensive. Something must be troubling Father, he realized.

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" Father asked rather uneasily.

"Yes, Father, that would be fine," Vincent answered resigned to the fact that this was not going to be a short talk. Then Father set the cup of tea in front of him, sat down, and began sipping from his own cup. Vincent decided to start the conversation and hope that Father would eventually discuss what was obviously a subject he was having trouble introducing.

"Reaper and Nadia were very excited about going home," Vincent stated.

"Yes, I would expect they were anxious after being away from their friends for over a week."

"They are good people. Catherine asked if it were possible for them to become Helpers. I told her they had not indicated a desire to do so, but I believe I sense it in them. The way Reaper was helping Mouse to repair things. The way Nadia helped Mary ... and she and Jamie were becoming quite close."

"Yes, they appeared to have a need to help, to be a part of us. Oft-times people take sanctuary here and are grateful for our help but they never feel comfortable with our way of life. I did not sense this about Reaper and Nadia. We would have to bring it before the Council, but I cannot imagine that anyone would object to their becoming Helpers, if they desire it."

"I'm very happy you feel that way, Father. I will let you know if the situation arises." Another obvious silence prompted Vincent to continue. "Reaper invited Catherine and me to attend a party at their clubhouse this Saturday when we ..."

"Vincent, surely you didn't consider such an invitation seriously. What if you were caught Above? The risk is simply too great!" Father said interrupting Vincent.

"Yes, the risk is too great. I refused the invitation ... but for a moment ... Father, for a moment I felt the exhilaration of the possibility that Catherine and I would be able to attend a party, together, like any other couple and ..."

At Vincent's slight hesitation, Father again interrupted, "But you and Catherine are NOT any ordinary couple. You must know this, Vincent. Obviously you have allowed this fact to slip your mind on other occasions as well."

"What do you mean, Father?"

"It has not passed my notice, of late, that you and Catherine seem to be, well ... more relaxed in your relationship. Your gestures toward her, in public, disturb me greatly."

"And what gestures could possibly have caused you concern, Father," said Vincent with an edge of defensiveness to his voice.

"Vincent, it does not take a very observant person to see that your relationship with Catherine has ... well, shall we say deepened. If you feel comfortable touching her in my presence, what must you feel when you and she are alone?"

"What Catherine and I feel when we are alone is not a topic open for discussion. Good night!" With that statement, Vincent forcefully pushed the large chair, rocking it backward before it settled onto its front legs with a resounding thud. An abrupt turn that

caused his cloak to swirl behind him and long, purposeful strides made it clear that Vincent was ending their discussion.

"Wait, Vincent, please ...," Father said as his son disappeared through the doorway. I handled that very poorly, thought Father as he sat down fighting the urge to follow the son that he loved so dearly.

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Unable to sleep, Vincent arose from his bed clad only in a nightshirt. He quickly pulled on his trousers and boots to ward against the late-night chill of his Chamber. Walking to his desk, Vincent picked up his fountain pen and stared at it. Perhaps if I write in my journal, he thought. The simple act of putting down in words the happenings of the last few days might help to bring some clarity to the confusion. No, he decided, I'm too restless to sit in this room. I need to get away, by myself, to think.

With that decision clearly in his mind, Vincent finished dressing, swung his cloak over his shoulders, and strode from his Chamber.

The Chamber of the Falls -- that was his destination.

His long, powerful strides consumed the distance. With the faint roar of the Falls growing louder with each step, Vincent felt his warring emotions ebb and flow, each vying for attention. I must bring some calm to the storm deep inside me, he thought as he rounded the curve and was once more engulfed by the magnitude of the rushing water.

The sight and feel of this particular chamber always filled him with the same awe it had on his first visit. It reminded him, too, of the many precious moments spent here with Catherine, and it was these memories that he thumbed through now like the pages of a favorite book.

Tearing himself from his reverie, Vincent chose the gentle sloping path and quickly maneuvered through the twists and turns, finally collapsing against the rough stone wall. From this ledge he could survey the entire chamber while enjoying some respite from the thundering sound of the water. The mist filled the air, yet this niche of rock sheltered him from most of its spray.

As he settled himself more comfortably against the wall, he felt the jab of something sharp against his back. Rising to his knees, he adjusted his cloak and retrieved a small book from its deep pocket. Rilke's Letters To A Young Poet. The same book he had been reading to Catherine on their trip. A scrap of ribbon marked a well-read passage and he scanned the lines again.

*"Your doubt can become a good attribute if you discipline it. It must become a knowing; it must become the critic. Ask it, as often as it wishes to spoil something, why*



*something is ugly. Demand proof of it, test it, and you will find it perhaps perplexed and confused, perhaps also in protest. But don't give in; demand arguments. Act with alertness and responsibility, each and every time, and the day will come when doubt will change from a destroyer to become one of your best fellow-workers, perhaps the wisest of all that have a part in building your life."*

Yes, I doubt, thought Vincent. The doubts have been nurtured and fed, keeping them alive in me. I have clung to them like a lifeline because of their familiar feel. Yet I have experienced new and exciting feelings and choked them with this same lifeline of doubt. For what reason?

The old familiar feelings of responsibility are good and solid, Vincent surmised. They have purpose and a soundness that is proven. All my life I have thought first of the needs of others. This has been very rewarding for me. I have offered protection and love to those I care about. And I have felt loved and accepted in return. I have come to feel that I must always subjugate my needs to those of others in order to retain their love and acceptance. It is not their fault that they overlook my needs, for I have trained them well. I have made it totally impossible for me to think of my own needs, thus they have come to accept this as the way things are.

My needs have ceased to exist. The blame does not lie with anyone in particular, even myself, for I have not consciously set out to accomplish this. It has just evolved.

But it must not continue.

I do have a responsibility to our world. Father has his responsibilities, and Pascal and Mary and Mouse. We all have responsibilities to each other and to the community as a whole. But responsibility to others only? Do I not have a responsibility to myself, one that I have suppressed. Isn't this need that cries out in me just as deserving?

And Catherine's needs. She asks so little. When she wanted to share with me the lake of her childhood, I let my responsibility to others overpower her need -- and mine. Or did I use that as an excuse? Did I demand proof or did I simply allow the destroyer, doubt, to have its way? Have I acted with alertness or allowed the lethargy of former resolutions to stand unchallenged?

Perhaps it is time to move toward the transition rather than retreating -- to embrace the future by leaving the comforting arms of the past.

With that thought, Vincent rose and retraced his steps from the ledge to the edge of the pool where the pounding water swirled and churned. His cape slipped from his shoulders puddling at his feet. With a wild abandon, he wrenched his boots from his feet and dropped them to the floor. The remainder of his clothes gathered in haphazard piles as he divested himself of all encumbrances. A feeling of freedom enveloped him as he

stood poised on the edge of the pool. His body knifed through the surface of the water, and the cold sent chilling shockwaves to the core of his being. With singular purpose, Vincent swam into the turbulence allowing it to conquer him totally. Buffeted from side to side, swirling out of control, he relinquished himself to the will of the current. Seconds turned into minutes while a mounting tension rallied his strength demanding he regain control over his body. The struggle to free himself from the clutching fingers of the water emerged in his mind as symbolic of the will to free himself from others who would control his fate. Powerful strokes and kicks brought him to the edge of the pool where he lifted himself from the water -- triumphant.

Mere seconds were consumed retrieving his cloak from the piles of discarded clothing. Wrapping it about himself to ward off the chilled air, Vincent quickly gathered his belongings and hurried from the chamber. A hidden alcove nearby housed a small brazier, a woolen blanket, and some candles. He fought to control the involuntary shaking brought on by the numbing cold of his impromptu swim and finally succeeded in lighting the fire. Shrugging out of his damp cloak, he scrubbed the water from his body with the woolen blanket and donned his thermal shirt and trousers. Crouched near the fire with his arms wrapped around his knees, he began to feel the warmth creep into every fibre of his body.

It was worth it, he thought with satisfaction. The act of conquering the forces of the raging water had granted him permission to choose his own course of action.

With the resolution of his inner turmoil, his body relaxed allowing sleep to overtake him.

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As Devin entered the world of his childhood, he signaled to Jamie who was on sentry duty at the Central Park entrance. "Don't tell anyone I'm here, OK? It's late and I don't want to disturb them."

"Sure, Devin. Welcome home. Will you be here long?"

"No, just a day or two. I'm on my way to Maine. I have a job on a fishing boat. I just couldn't resist stopping by to see my family," he said with emphasis on the final word. "When you get off duty, come and see me."

"Sure, Devin. It's good to see you again."

As he proceeded down the tunnel toward the inhabited area, his footsteps drew him to Father's Chamber. Reason told him Father would be asleep at 3 AM, but his heart guided him. As he approached the entrance, he could see light coming from the doorway. Perhaps he's fallen asleep with the light on, he thought silently peering into the Chamber.

It was an intrusion in this world to enter someone's chamber without first

announcing your intentions. Privacy was a scarce commodity and one highly valued by all Below. But Devin didn't want to disturb Father if he was asleep.

The patriarch appeared to be intently reading. Not wanting to startle him, Devin called softly, "Father."

Raising his head and removing his spectacles, Father looked up in utter disbelief. "Devin, is that really you?" he said rubbing his weary eyes and taking a second determined look.

"Yes, Father, it's me. Am I disturbing you?"

"No, no, of course not. Come in. I was just ... reading. Or I should say, trying to. Sit down. What brings you here? It's so good to see you."

Father is obviously surprised to see me, Devin thought, but there's something else. A sadness in his eyes like he is trying to pull himself from the depths of troubled thoughts back to reality. "Are you all right?" Devin asked as he hesitantly put his hand on his father's stooped shoulder.

"Yes, I suppose I am. Vincent and I ... quarreled. He was angry when he left. I went to his Chamber, but he was not there. I have been sitting here trying to decide ..."

"Father, I know in the past you did what you felt was best -- for Vincent; and yes, for me. It has taken me a long time to be able to look at those years with any objectivity. I think now I have the maturity to realize that what you did, you did out of love. And what you try to do now, for Vincent, you do in the name of love ..."

As Father began to speak, Devin silenced him with a look.

"I need to say this, please. I'm not around here very much, but I have eyes -- I can see what is happening between Vincent and Catherine. I can also see that you do not approve of their relationship."

Unable to remain quiet, Father interjected, "Devin, I do not believe that approve is the proper word. I am afraid -- for Vincent and, yes, for Catherine too. In the beginning I doubted her love for Vincent could cause him anything but harm. Time and again she has proven me wrong. They have a love that is beyond anything I have ever encountered before in my life. But ..."

"But, Father -- but, it is their love. And Vincent and Catherine are the only ones who can decide what boundaries they will place on it. I know you love Vincent, but he is no longer a child -- to be protected, warned, restricted. Vincent is a grown man, with the desires and needs of a man. You **MUST** let him truly be a man, if that is what he decides to do. But it is his decision -- and Catherine's."

With unshed tears glistening in his eyes, Father looked into Devin's worldly expression and nodded. "You are right, my son. I must let Vincent go. I know he is no longer a child, totally dependent on me. But it is every bit as painful as it was to let you go. You were the stronger of the two of us -- you made the decision for both of us." At this statement Father looked directly into Devin's astonished eyes. Father continued, "You left. I don't want to force Vincent to feel he must escape from me, from my love. You had options. Vincent does not. I almost lost you, forever. The pain was almost unbearable. Thank God I was given a second chance with you. I don't want to chance losing Vincent."

This outflow seemed to put into words everything that Father had been thinking since Vincent had retreated from their discussion. With resolve, he stated, "I'll speak with him first thing in the morning."

As Devin stepped forward and pulled him into a consoling hug, Father slowly raised his arms and placed them around his son. As they stood drawing comfort from one another for a lifetime of regrets, tears streamed down their faces.

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"Devin, I didn't know you were here," Vincent said as he nearly collided with his brother in the corridor leading to his own Chamber.

"I just got here. I went to your Chamber, but obviously you weren't there."

As Devin closed the gap between them, they clasped each other in a deeply felt, affectionate hug. Separating, Vincent explained, "I was at the Chamber of the Falls ... thinking. I lost track of time and am just now returning." Desperate to change the subject Vincent asked, "Have you eaten?"

"No, and I sure am ready for some of William's homemade bread and jam!"

"Give me a few moments to change, and we'll go to breakfast. You are staying in your usual Chamber," Vincent said, as more of a statement than a question.

"Yeah, see you in a few minutes," Devin said swinging a duffel bag over his shoulder and heading in the direction of the Chamber that he used on his visits Below.

It feels good to be here, he thought, as he traveled the familiar corridor and entered the cozy chamber. The same warm, homey feeling enveloped him that he always experienced in this particular room. This was the room where Father had come to him the night following his declaration that Devin was truly his son. It had been very difficult for Father, and for himself, but they had talked long into the night. It had been the beginning of the relationship a father and son were meant to have.

"Devin." The call from just outside the entrance brought him out of his reverie.

"Coming," he said as he dropped the duffel bag beside the bed and joined Vincent outside the chamber door. Striding in the direction of the dining area, Devin suggested, "We have to go right by Father's Chamber, let's stop in and see if he wants to walk with us to breakfast." At his brother's obvious hesitation, he turned and met Vincent's saddened look with his own questioning one. "OK, what gives? The old man giving you a hard time?"

"Father only does what he thinks is best. It's just that last night he wanted to discuss certain ... issues ... that I was unwilling to discuss with him. I left in anger and have not seen him since."

"Boy, do I remember the times Father wanted to 'discuss' things with me. His idea of discussing is telling you what he thinks you should do. Even now, he has a knack for saying just the thing that makes me feel like I'm ten years old again -- and in trouble. But he means well, Vincent ... he loves you."

"I know. And I love him. But I've come to a time in my life where I am faced with many very difficult decisions. These are choices only I can make. I don't want to hurt him, but I must make him understand that I cannot share everything in my life with him."

"He knows, Vincent. Believe me, he knows," Devin said as he stretched up to put his arm around his 'little' brother's shoulder and nudge him in the direction of the dining area. As they neared Father's Chamber, Devin sensed Vincent's discomfort and lagged slightly behind allowing him to make the final choice.

Slowing his steps to an uncertain stop, Vincent made his decision and called in a quavering voice, "Father."

"Yes, Vincent, please do come in," Father answered with obvious relief in his voice. As Vincent stepped inside the entrance, Father hobbled toward him with determined haste, leaning heavily on his cane.

"I'm sorry."

These words, uttered in two voices, blended in the air as one apology that was immediately accepted by both men.

"Did you know Devin is here?" Vincent said with a touch of excitement in his voice as he gestured toward the corridor just as Devin stepped through the doorway.

"Yes, he arrived very early this morning. I was still awake ... reading. We had a long talk." With those words suspended in the air, Father and Devin exchanged knowing looks.

Realization washed over Vincent that he had been part of this discussion. For some inexplicable reason, he felt no intrusion at the thought. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new depth of understanding for us all, he thought with a smile.

A black and white illustration of a scroll. The scroll is unrolled, showing a central rectangular area with text. The scroll has a textured, stippled appearance. The top and bottom edges are slightly irregular, suggesting a hand-drawn or aged style. The scroll is set against a plain white background.

### **Fear Faced**

**Fear -- faced and subdued does not weaken  
it merely waits its turn.  
In silent contemplation seeking  
your new respect to earn.**

**In dreams your vulnerable mind betrays  
your iron will of strength.  
It opens in innumerable ways  
and goes to greater lengths**

**To overturn the new-found peace  
you've fought so hard to gain.  
Conquered fear is the masterpiece  
we fashion through our pain.**

**Peggy Garvin - 4/16/92**

## Chapter 13

"Welcome back, Radcliffe," Joe said with a big grin as he dumped an armload of file folders in the center of her desk. "We missed you."

"Yes, so I see," she said with an answering smile.

"Seriously, Cathy, it's great to have you back -- safe. I'm sorry I ..."

"Forget it, Joe. I'm as much to blame as you are. Nobody forced me to go to the Grecian Gardens. It's over ... or is it? Fill me in on the details."

"Yeah, it's over, all but the paperwork and I put that new kid, Watkins, on it. I figured you wouldn't want to see it. I'll get him to give you a copy of the file if you really want to read it," he said with apprehension in his voice.

"That's OK, Joe. I'll get it from him later. Thanks."

"Sure."

With a smile, Cathy pulled the top folder from the stack, opened it, and started to read. Sensing there was something else Joe wanted to say, she raised her head with a questioning look.

Joe rounded her desk slowly and stood with a sheepish grin on his face. As he opened his arms, Cathy rose and went into them for a big, friendly bear hug.

"I really am glad that you're safe, Cathy. I don't know what I'd have done if something had happened to you. No more dangerous assignments for you! The worst thing that will happen from now on is a stack of file folders may fall on you."

"I'm fine, Joe, honest. I don't blame you for what happened. OK?"

"OK."

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"What a week," Catherine said to herself. She couldn't talk to anybody since they had all gone home. I'm sure glad they didn't miss me any more than they did, she thought, or I don't think I would have survived this week. Maybe tonight Vincent will come since I haven't seen him all week, she hoped. With this pleasant thought, she quickly gathered her purse and briefcase and left the office.

On the ride home, she had to fight falling asleep. I sure hope I have time to take a shower -- maybe that will wake me up. She sighed with exasperation at how tired she was. The world Above exacted a heavy price from her, she realized, as she compared



this hectic week to the time she had recently spent in the Tunnels.

As she wearily pushed open the front door of her apartment, she noticed the vellum envelope lying on the floor. Her name on the front of the envelope was not in Vincent's familiar handwriting and that fact triggered instant panic. Dropping her things, she scooped it up and quickly ripped it open.

*Dear Catherine,*

*Vincent has asked me to convey to you that he was unexpectedly detained on a most urgent project. We have had considerable trouble with leaking pipes in the chambers right below the inhabited area. It was unavoidable that he accompany the crew to the site, yet he asked me to assure you he was in no danger.*

*Father*

Relief washed over Catherine and, mixed with her near exhaustion, caused her to sink to the living room floor. Only then did disappointment nudge its way into her consciousness. I'm not going to see him tonight, she thought dejectedly, as she rose from the floor not even bothering to retrieve her purse and briefcase. With leaden footsteps, she made her way to the bedroom, discarding clothes on her way. By the time she reached her bed, she was clad only in her slip and underwear which seemed perfectly good enough to sleep in. And that's exactly what she did.

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The morning sun peeking through the curtains fell across Catherine's face insistently. Flinging her arm across her eyes to shield them from the brightness, she realized it was late. I was so tired last night I didn't set my alarm, she thought as she bolted upright in bed. "Eleven o'clock," she shouted in disbelief. "I can't believe I've slept the whole morning away." She muttered as she headed for the bathroom in hopes a shower would clear the cobwebs from her head.

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged wearing a soft, velour robe and vigorously toweling her hair. "Coffee," she stated aloud as if that were the answer to all the world's problems.

After putting on a pot of coffee, she returned to the bedroom and donned a comfortably worn sweatsuit. I really don't want to dress at all, she realized, so this is the best I can come up with. I'll change into something more suitable later, in case Vincent comes tonight.

Tonight, she thought with sudden realization. Tonight is the party at Reaper and Nadia's clubhouse. And Vincent can't go. I won't see him. More than a little depressed, she slumped down onto the bed and considered just going back to sleep. "I really don't want to go without him," she said aloud as if the walls of her empty apartment could give her solace.

I've got to shake this mood, she realized, rising from the bed before the idea of sleeping became any more appealing. Maybe I'll go for a run, I'm sure dressed for it. No, I don't feel like running. Besides, it's almost noon -- too hot.

The ringing of the telephone startled Catherine out of her concentration. "Hello ... yes, Jenny, it's great to hear from you! I was just trying to figure out what to do with myself ... sure, I'd love to ... one o'clock at Mario's. 'Bye."

Well, at least I didn't have to make that big heavy decision all by myself, she sighed, as she changed into more suitable clothes to meet her friend.

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Struggling with the five boxes that were the product of her afternoon of shopping with Jenny, Catherine finally located her keys and pushed the door open just in time to dump everything on the floor at the entrance to her apartment. The contents of one of the boxes had spilled out and the entire pile made it impossible for her to close the door. On hands and knees, she carefully placed the mauve silk nightgown back into its box, and set it on top of the other boxes she had restacked. Then, shoving the teetering stack aside, she rose and closed the door. As she did, Catherine looked carefully about the floor in case Vincent had sent her a message. Nothing. Oh, well, she thought with resignation, I didn't really expect him to change his mind.

The packages abandoned, she hurried into the bedroom to change for the party. In her haste, she missed the tiniest corner of vellum barely peeking out from under the stack of boxes. Boy, when Jenny and I go shopping we forget the rest of the world exists, she told herself. I barely have enough time to change and I don't want to be late.

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Vincent sat alone in his Chamber. He had not even bothered to light a candle because the darkness seemed to make it easier to concentrate on their bond.

I have missed Catherine so, he thought pensively. But I know that what I did was right. It would have been selfish of me to keep her from the rest she needed this week.

Vincent had gone to Catherine's balcony several nights during the past week and peered through the window at her sleeping form. He had wanted so much to be with her,

but he knew her week had been a very tiring one. Out of deference to her, he had waited until he sensed she was asleep and then, very quietly, had gone to satisfy himself that she was well and drink in her beauty to sustain him until they could be together again.

I wanted so much to tell you that I have decided to go to the party -- to talk about my decision, the discussion with Father, Devin's visit. Oh, Catherine, I need to share these things with you, he thought with a restlessness he struggled to control.

Why didn't she reply to my note, he wondered. All day he had sensed that she was very busy. Perhaps she did not receive the note. Perhaps it was never delivered, he thought as panic rose in his throat. He went immediately to find Kipper. The boy assured him the note had been slipped under the door to Catherine's apartment. This knowledge was reassuring but the lack of reply still nagged at him. Unable to resolve the dilemma without speaking to Catherine, he chose to go to the bathing pool to try and relax.

I cannot relax. I am too anxious, Vincent thought as he rose from the steamy water and toweled himself dry. It is almost dark, I will go to Catherine's. I must speak with her. Donning the soft terry robe that she had given him, he returned to his Chamber.

As he dressed in jeans and a camel-colored chamois shirt, donned his quilted vest, and pulled on sturdy boots, he tried to clear his mind. But his own jumbled thoughts clouded the channel that connected him to Catherine.

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Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that proclaimed across the front in bold print, "Save the Whales", Catherine stood in front of the mirror trying to decide exactly what to wear. I don't want them to think I'm making fun of them by trying to dress like them, but I don't want to be overdressed either. The shirt had been a purchase of guilt; the proceeds went to the project to save the whales from extinction and she felt less like the uncaring American after buying it -- but she had never worn it. Pulling off the t-shirt, she held it against her for one last look before tossing it on the bed. Too much, she thought. Perhaps I'd better just be myself. With that thought, she pulled a soft, cotton sweater over her head, ran a brush through her hair and bounded for the door.

Only moments later Vincent stood on the balcony peering into a dark, empty apartment. I sensed she was not here, but I refused to believe it, he chided himself. I feel her anticipation. She must already be on her way to the party.

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"Sorry I'm late," she said to the big, burly man who opened the door of the obviously old but newly repainted building. "Tank, isn't it?"

"Yeah, and you're Catherine," the big man said, pleased that she had

remembered his name. "Come on in ... you by yourself?" he asked peering into the darkness.

"Yes, I'm alone. Vincent couldn't make it but he asked me to come -- for both of us."

"Oh," Tank said without completely understanding. As he stepped aside to allow Catherine to enter the clubhouse, Reaper appeared.

"Catherine, it's great to see you. Glad you could make it. Where's Vincent?" At her embarrassed reaction, Reaper was immediately sorry he had asked. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel bad. He didn't change his mind about coming, huh?"

"No, I'm afraid he didn't. I've been so busy at the office this week that I haven't even seen him, but I'm sure he would have told me if he were coming. I really didn't expect him to -- but I hoped."

"Well, come on in and meet everybody. Maybe he'll think about it and come another time. You two are always welcome."

As Catherine followed Reaper into the room, she noticed how much the place reminded her of the Tunnels. The furniture was old but sturdy. Some of it was repaired but some was handmade. The downstairs of this old building had obviously been a store of some kind. The room was large and open and there were marks on the wooden floor where cabinets or counters had been removed. Someone had carefully sanded and refinished the floors, but the telltale marks remained. Across the front of the building were large, storefront-type glass windows that had been painted black. There were no other windows in the room, but the inside was warm and cheerful.

In the center was a large pool table. The rest of the room was scattered with comfortable-looking overstuffed chairs, couches, and scarred end tables and coffee tables piled high with magazines. The walls contained pictures of motorcycles, antique cars and trucks mixed with various Harley-Davidson plaques and signs. The entire atmosphere reminded her of a slightly different version of Vincent's Chamber. Obviously, every item in the room held a special meaning for the owner, but there were so many cherished things that some of them just naturally spilled onto the floor.

Books. That surprises me, thought Catherine as she noticed a makeshift bookcase in the far corner of the room. A rather ingenious idea, the bookcase was no more than concrete blocks and planks of wood stacked to house large bound volumes. I wonder what kind of books they are, Catherine thought, but she was distracted from these thoughts when Nadia came up and hugged her.

"Wow, I didn't think you'd come. Let's go in the kitchen and I'll introduce you to the girls."

"Sure," Catherine replied as she willingly followed Nadia through the door. Apparently the building was much larger than it appeared because the old kitchen was huge. The righthand side of the room had a big, old fashioned porcelain double sink in the center with a row of white painted cabinets suspended above it. An enormous cast-iron stove flanked the sink on the right and an ancient refrigerator on the left. There were three huge picnic tables but not the kind sold in a store. A craftsman had obviously made them with durability rather than beauty in mind. The feel was one of functional comfort, but there was something more than that.

"Hey, I want you to meet somebody," Nadia called as they walked into the kitchen. "Girls, this is Catherine. She and her ol' man kept us safe after we got away from the kidnappers."

"Catherine, this is Eve," Nadia said pointing to a perky blonde.

"Yeah, I saw her the night of the rescue, but I doubt if she saw me," Eve said as she gave Catherine a genuine smile of welcome.

"I don't remember seeing you that night, but I was pretty upset. Anyway, I'm glad to meet you, Eve," Catherine replied with a laugh.

"And this is Boa. You met her ol' man, Tattoo Scott."

"Hi, glad to meetcha," said the redhead.

"Hi," Catherine returned, noticing that Boa had the most beautiful dark green eyes.

"And this is Kitten. Her real name is Kit-Ling but we just call her Kitten. Besides, she's Mouse's ol' lady. You know -- Mouse and Kitten."

Catherine smiled at the delicate Oriental woman who shyly peered at her from a partially bowed head.

"That's the girls. Did Reaper introduce you to the guys?"

"Well, Tank met me at the door, and I really didn't see anybody but him and your ... uh, husband," Catherine said rather reluctant to use the term 'ol' man'. It seems like a strange way to refer to their men, she thought.

"Scott's still at the tattoo parlor," Boa piped in. "He'll be here any minute. I don't know where Mouse is. You know, Kit?"

Kitten just shook her head shyly.

"Well, why don't you go on in and sit down -- relax. We're about ready to put

out the food and as soon as the guys get here, we'll eat," said Nadia as she started to lead Catherine out of the kitchen.

"Can I help?" Catherine asked hesitantly, not knowing whether they felt she was intruding.

"Why, sure you can -- if you really want to," said Nadia as she steered Catherine toward the big sink.

I'll bet they don't have a melon baller, she thought to herself.

"When do we eat?" asked Scott as he burst into the kitchen.

"Give us about ten minutes," stated Boa as she bounced into the arms of her ol' man. "Have you seen Mouse?"

"No, I just got here. The shop was really busy tonight. I kept tellin' 'em I had to go, but some guy all but insisted if I didn't do his tattoo right then and there he'd never get up his nerve again. I asked him if Steve could do it, but he said he wanted me to do it. Said a friend of his recommended me."

"That's 'cause you're the best," stated Boa with pride.

"You don't think you might be just a tad partial to me, do ya, baby?" he answered giving her a big squeeze.

"Ahem, break it up guys," said Nadia teasingly. "We do have company in case you hadn't noticed!"

"Yeah, Scott, this here's Catherine Chandler, remember?" said Boa with an embarrassed laugh. "Sorry, Ms. Chandler, we didn't mean to ignore you."

"Cathy or Catherine but definitely NOT Ms. Chandler. That makes me feel like somebody's grandmother," Catherine stated with a big smile. "I guess you could say we've already met, Scott," she continued as she extended her hand.

"Yeah, I remember. It's good to see you again," he said returning her smile and looking around the kitchen. "Where's Vincent?"

"Uh, he couldn't make it," Catherine stated trying not to show her disappointment.

"Oh, I put my big foot in my mouth, huh? Sorry," he stated with sincerity.

"It's OK," Catherine said trying to sound convincing.



Scott was, indeed, a tattoo artist. He'd been learning the trade since he was fourteen years old. He stood about 5'10" tall with long straight blonde hair and gray eyes. He ran a small shop called the "Wizard's Lair". It had taken a lot of scrimping and saving to get this far, and the business was starting to pick up as his reputation for being a very talented artist slowly spread by word of mouth.

Reaper had been one of his early clients, when Scott was just one of several tattooists working in a shop owned by a man who didn't even care about tattoos. All he wanted was the commission he collected from each of the artists at the end of the week for the privilege of being allowed to have a tiny amount of space in the grungy building he called "The Tattoo Place."

No one was making any money except old man Jackson, and Scott dreamed of the day when he would own his own place. As his reputation grew, the customers started asking for him. Then the other artists started complaining to Jackson and threatening to leave. Rather than risk losing ALL of his tattooists, he fired Scott. That was when Scott came to be a part of the Iron Vultures and their family. They had taken him in when he was down and out and helped him keep body and soul together. He had done tattoos out of a small but clean room in the back of the clubhouse and had saved every dime until he finally got his own place.

Scott had been immediately attracted to the 5'8" buxom redhead with the flashing green eyes. She was slim but sturdy, something acquired from living on the street and taking care of herself from an early age. She had such a gorgeous body that most men never even noticed her face. But that haunted look in her eyes had been the first thing that had drawn Scott to her.

He had met her at the clubhouse and they'd hit it off right away. She'd been so easy to talk to and talk is what they had done -- for hours. It had been so nice just to feel comfortable with someone. They had been inseparable ever since.

Boa was a dancer at Lucifer's Inferno on 42nd and Eighth near Times Square. But she wasn't just any ordinary stripper -- she was the "Snake Lady." Every night at midnight the familiar strains of her exotic music would draw the attention of the customers, most of whom had come specifically at this late hour to catch her show.

Boa would ascend the steps to the stage completely concealed in a floor-length black cape with the hood pulled up and forward to hide her face from the eager crowd. As the tempo of the eerie music quickened, she would begin to whirl allowing the cape to billow away from her body. At the peak of the music, the cape would flutter away from her and sink to the floor revealing a strikingly beautiful woman with long, wavy auburn hair holding two boa constrictors each about 3 feet long.

Boa was dressed in a very sophisticated black sequin evening gown that hugged



her curvaceous body like a second skin. The contrast between this elegantly dressed beauty and the two snakes she carried was startling to those attending her show for the first time.

Even more difficult to believe was her performance, a combination of sensual dancing and remarkably talented animal handling. She was always gentle with her "pets" and they were her willing servants.

After dancing with the two smaller snakes for a short time, Boa would exit and return with the real star of the show and her favorite snake, Damian.

She had gotten him when he was not much more than a baby, and now he was 13 feet long and weighed about 45 pounds. She could always gauge how many people in the audience were first-timers by the sound of the indrawn breaths. Some nights the entire room felt like it breathed in one huge breath, held it, and then exhaled as a whole.

More often than not a customer or two would decide they had somewhere else they needed to be -- right away. This always brought a sly smile to Boa's lips. Damian was a very impressive red-tailed boa constrictor, but he also had the most gentle disposition of any snake she had ever owned. And she had owned a bunch of them!

Boa and Damian had a special rapport, and he would do almost anything she wanted him to do. It was as if they were connected in some way. Because of this, their performance appeared to have been carefully orchestrated and rehearsed to perfection. In actuality, each night's dance was different from the night before. Boa became absorbed in the rhythm and feel of the music, moving and swaying with the mood, and Damian seemed to react to her movements. The total effect was mesmerizing.

And it was very profitable for the club. It had taken a long time for Boa to convince Johnny, the club's owner, to let her bring in the snakes. But after seeing the increase in business, he'd been more than happy to listen to any new ideas she had. Due to the popularity of her show, Boa no longer had to work as a stripper. She still took her turn as cocktail waitress, wearing the required skimpy little tuxedo outfit, but the midnight floor show was her only performance. For that she was thankful.

She had become a stripper because it was the only thing she knew how to do in order to survive on the streets. But she had never gone out with the customers nor fallen into the trap of making easy money after hours. It had been a job, nothing more. Now she actually looked forward to her nightly performance with her pets -- and the pay was better, too.

All the other snakes stayed at the club except Damian. Scott would come to the club at 2 AM and wait outside with the big, soft carrying case. Then the three of them would go home together. This nightly ritual was the only time Scott did not ride his '71 candy-apple red Electra Glide. For this task, he brought the old El Camino.

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"OK, guys -- and gals," Reaper said with a knowing nod in his wife's direction. "Let's get this show on the road. Where are the guests of honor?"

"Kitten's in her room. She said she had to go change clothes, but I think she's upset 'cause Mouse isn't here yet," said Nadia as she opened the front door and peered out into the darkness as if she could will him to appear.

"He'll be here. You know that. He probably just got stuck at work. He's been putting in a lot of overtime on that new construction job, you know -- trying to save for the wedding and all."

"I know that," Nadia said shutting the front door and turning to look across the room toward another closed door. "But you know how upset Kitten gets when he's not around. She starts to imagine that something awful has happened to him and that she'll never see him again. It doesn't take much to ..."

"Sorry I'm late," said the small man as he burst through the door, almost knocking Nadia down. "Oh, sorry, Nadia, why're you standin' in front of the door?"

"I was looking for you."

"Is she upset?" Mouse asked as his eyes turned to the closed door that led to the room he and Kitten shared.

"What do you think," Nadia answered.

"I'll be right back," he said heading for the room.

Catherine had been standing near the doorway to the kitchen when he had arrived. She had immediately recognized the rather nervous man with the long red hair as the one she and Vincent had met the night the bikers had rescued her -- the one with the same name as their very own Mouse. But now, as he made his way across the room, she noticed he moved with an obvious limp. I wonder what happened to him, she thought as she stood awkwardly feeling like an intruder to this tense scene.

Sensing the uneasiness in the room, Eve suggested with an air of forced happiness, "How about we all get the food set out and get ready for this party. Come on, Tank, help me get the cake," she said tugging the big, burly man toward the kitchen. "You, too, Cath," she said putting her arm around Catherine's shoulders and dragging her along into the kitchen.

Soon the entire kitchen was filled with men and women bustling around setting out big bowls and pans each filling the air with their individual aromas. They must be

planning for an army, Catherine thought surveying the abundance of food.

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Vincent had gone to Father's Chamber in order to consult the maps to determine the nearest exit to the Stanton Street side of Hamilton Fish Park. He had been careful to go during supper when he felt sure Father would not be in his Chamber. I certainly don't need to eat before going to a party, thought Vincent, as he pored over the intricately detailed maps. After locating the desired exit, he began rolling the map to return it to its storage cylinder when Father appeared in the doorway.

"Vincent, is there a problem?" Father said as he hurriedly limped into the room. "Has there been an accident?"

"No, Father, everything was as it should be when I made my rounds."

The silence hovered in the air between father and son. Finally, Vincent broke it with a quiet declaration, "I am going, Father."

"I see."

More silence. Neither man was able to formulate his thoughts and transform them into spoken words. Still more silence.

"Be careful, my son. Please, come home safe," Father said as he tentatively touched Vincent's sleeve.

"Thank you, Father. I will," Vincent answered with a trembling voice as he pulled the man who had been the only father he'd ever known into a warm, loving embrace.

Vincent walked quickly through the Tunnels while his mind mulled over the monumental undertaking he had chosen for himself tonight. He was going Above -- to a party.

She is waiting for me there, he thought. We will be attending our first party together -- Above.

When he reached the exit nearest the park, Vincent hesitated. This park was not nearly as familiar to him as Central Park. In fact, he had not used this particular exit in a very long time. Carefully, he slid the door aside, opened the iron gate and stepped through. As the door closed behind him, he felt the panic rise in his throat. Why am I afraid, he pondered as he peered into the darkened area just beyond the drainage pipe.

Several minutes passed before Vincent ventured into the park. As he skirted the edge, traveling under the cover of the trees and bushes, he quickly oriented himself.

Stanton Street bordered the park for less than a block, so it was relatively easy to locate the building Reaper had described as their home.

Reaper had said, "Just look for all the Harleys", and it was very easy to understand what he meant. On the sidewalk in front of one of the buildings Vincent could see a line of motorcycles leaning onto their kickstands. Now what do I do, thought Vincent. I can't just walk up and knock on the door. I wish I were more familiar with this particular area. Perhaps there is a sub-basement entrance; I should have checked into this more thoroughly.

As he was staring at the building contemplating his course of action, a small man came limping down the street, unlocked the front door of the clubhouse and disappeared. That looked like the man they called Mouse, Vincent thought as he relaxed slightly. These people are not strangers to me. I have been invited to this party. So why am I hiding among the trees?

Still unsure of his next move, Vincent crouched down into the concealment of some bushes at the base of a large oak tree. Leaning against the trunk of the tree, he concentrated on the ever-increasing bond that linked him to Catherine. Yes, she is inside, he thought with relief. But she seems ... what? Uncomfortable. How can this be? Now the apprehension he had felt for himself was totally overshadowed by his concern for Catherine.

Quickly surveying the street and finding it vacant, Vincent darted noiselessly across and into the narrow alley that ran beside the clubhouse. As he passed the front of the building, he noted the store-front style windows were covered with iron bars and had been painted black. When he arrived at the back of the old building, he could hear numerous voices blending together, muffled by the thick concrete block and stucco walls.

Catherine was very near and, to his relief, she seemed content. The disquiet he had detected earlier was gone. With the urgency of Catherine's needs removed, his resolve weakened. Perhaps I should just return to the Tunnels. No, I can't do that. Catherine is expecting me. I have made my decision and I will go through with it.

Before he could change his mind, Vincent tapped lightly on the back door.

"What was that?" Reaper said with alarm. "Nobody ever comes around back." Suddenly alert, Tank and Scott flanked Reaper. Signaling for the girls to leave the kitchen, the three men paused until the last one disappeared through the door into the living area. Only then did they proceed toward the back door.

"Who's there," Reaper shouted in a gruff voice.

"Vincent," a gravelly voice responded.

"Who?" Reaper repeated, unable to understand their unexpected caller.

"Reaper, it is Vincent," he stated in a louder voice upon recognizing Reaper as the person on the other side of the door.

"Vincent?"

"Yes."

Throwing open the door, Reaper stood staring at Vincent, unable to believe he was really there. Finally overcoming his surprise, he clasped Vincent's arm, stepped back and drew him into the large, warm kitchen.

"Come in, come in, sorry about the less-than-friendly reception. We don't get many unexpected knocks on our back door. Catherine said you couldn't make it so we weren't expecting you."

With a questioning look on his face, Vincent entered the room.

Thinking he was just uneasy, Reaper said, "Remember, Tank ... and Scott. We shooed the girls into the other room in case of trouble. Come on in, relax, I'll let 'em know everything is OK."

As Reaper left, Tank held his hand out to Vincent. "I sure am glad you changed your mind and decided to come to the party."

With this warm welcome, Vincent relaxed a little and felt, for the first time, that perhaps he had made the right decision.

"Vincent!"

"Catherine."

"I'm so surprised that you changed your mind and decided to come to the party," Catherine said as she rushed toward Vincent with her arms open. "But I'm very happy, too!"

Catching her hands in his and holding her at arm's length, Vincent looked extremely uncomfortable. "Catherine," he said again as if he were struggling to formulate the words to express himself.

Aware of his discomfort, Catherine ceased her intended ardent welcome. Instead she tried to send waves of her love and happiness to quell his fears and confusion. "Vincent," she whispered, "I'm just so happy to see you ... here. It is such a wonderful surprise."

"But, Catherine ... my note ... Kipper said he delivered it," Vincent said with intense confusion. "I came to the terrace, but I must have just missed you. But the note..."

"What note, I didn't get any note," she stated with equal confusion. Suddenly Catherine realized that everyone else was standing quietly, and that she and Vincent were the center of attention. "It doesn't matter, you're here and that's all that matters," she stated looping her arm through his and turning to stand beside him. "Vincent, you remember Nadia, of course."

"Yes, certainly ... Nadia, it's good to see you. I trust you found your home and friends were safe when you returned."

"Yes," Nadia answered as she extended her hand to Vincent sensing a hug in front of everyone would just make him more nervous. "They were all pretty frantic and had stirred up the neighborhood looking for us, but everybody was OK once they realized we weren't hurt or dead. Thanks to you."

Clasping Nadia's hand briefly and then releasing it, Vincent said, "Actually, Reaper and Catherine had the situation well in hand when I arrived. I merely led you to a place of safety."

"Hey, Vincent, you probably didn't see me the night of the rescue. I always hang back until I'm sure it's OK to come out," said the perky blonde as she bounced forward and quickly shook his hand. "My name is Eve."

Catherine had to suppress a laugh by covering her mouth when she glimpsed the look of surprise on Vincent's face.

Recovering quickly, Vincent stated, "Yes ... well, it's very nice to meet you."

"This here is Boa," Eve said as she motioned to a tall buxom redhead standing next to Scott. "She's Scott's ol' lady."

"Pleased to meetcha," Boa said with a nod.

"Where's Mouse and Kitten?" asked Nadia as she surveyed the kitchen and realized they were missing from the introductions.

"Still in their room, I guess," Reaper said.

"I'll go see what's keepin' them -- after all, this is their party!" Nadia said as she left the kitchen.

"Well, let's put out the food. I sure hope Nadia brings Mouse and Kitten soon, I'm starved," said Tank as he patted his ample stomach.

"You're always starved," laughed Eve as he took Tank's hand and dragged him toward the stove.

"Come on, Catherine, Vincent, make yourselves at home. Sit," Reaper said as he led them to one of the picnic tables at the far end of the kitchen. "You'll have a little privacy back here and we may have to wait a bit for our guests of honor," he stated with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh, Vincent, I'm so happy. This is our first party Above -- together," Catherine said excitedly. Noticing Vincent's hand resting on the picnic bench between them, she slipped her hand over his for a quick caress.

Catherine's unexpected touch was like an electric jolt. Unable to halt the reaction, Vincent felt the blush creep up his neck and its warmth bring a glow to his face. He quickly lowered his head allowing his long hair to obscure the blush from view, but not before Catherine glimpsed his reaction. An apology was halted on his lips when the kitchen door swung open and Nadia walked through followed by Mouse with his arm clasped tightly about Kitten's shoulders. She had her face all but buried in his chest.

"Great, they're finally here, let's eat," said Tank in a booming voice as he started toward the couple.

"Tank, behave," said Eve slapping him on the arm.

"I'm with Tank," Scott said standing up with a laugh.

"Shush," Boa piped in as she hooked her thumb in the back pocket of Scott's jeans.

"OK, everybody," said Nadia clapping her hands for quiet. "Reaper."

At that, Reaper appeared with a huge, two-layer chocolate cake which he placed on the table nearest the kitchen door. "This cake is for you two, in celebration of the fact that you've decided to take the big step and get married. As your family, we wanted to share this happiness with you."

"Thank you, everybody, this is great -- chocolate, my favorite. Kitten and I feel like we've been pledged to each other ever since she started wearin' my property patch. But, we decided we wanted to make it official and stand up in front of you guys and a preacher and all. Well, I dunno what else to say."

"Let's eat?" Tank whispered to Mouse from the crowd.

"Oh, yeah, OK ... let's eat," said Mouse with a big grin as he looked down at his bride-to-be and hugged her. "Come on, Kit, relax," he whispered lovingly as he led her to the table where Reaper had placed the cake and helped her climb over and onto the

picnic bench. "You just stay put, I'll fix us some plates and be right back, OK?"

With a slight nod, Kitten lowered her head and sat very still.

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Reaper and Nadia had filled their plates and joined Vincent and Catherine at the picnic table at the far end of the kitchen. Tank had piled his plate high and headed straight for a seat across from Mouse and Kitten -- and the cake. Eve followed a few minutes later. Scott and Boa had seated themselves at the vacant table between the other two tables.

A silence fell over the room as everyone concentrated on their food.

"Well, that was great," Reaper said as he stood, gathered his paper plate and plastic fork and tossed them into the big green plastic trash can next to the sink.

"Yes, it was good, even if I do say so myself," said Nadia as she gracefully rose from the picnic bench with her plate.

How can she do that, thought Catherine. I must look like a cow with a crutch getting up from a picnic bench and she makes it look like a ballet step.

At that moment, Vincent rose with equal grace and offered her his hand.

Grateful for his help, Catherine extricated herself from the bench thinking, Vincent also has the natural grace of a dancer. Images of Vincent looking elegant, and sexy, in tights performing intricate lifts with a willowy, long-legged ballerina flashed through Catherine's mind bringing a smile to her lips and a blush to her cheeks.

"What is it, Catherine?" Vincent whispered close to her ear as he sensed a rush of emotions flash through their bond.

"Oh, nothing, really," she answered with an embarrassed giggle. "I was just thinking about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, remind me and I'll tell you about it -- later," she answered with a conspiratorial look.

"You guys, come and meet the honored guests," said Reaper as he stepped between Vincent and Catherine and ushered them across the big kitchen toward the table where everyone was gathered around Mouse and Kitten. As the three approached, the crowd separated.



Mouse was just getting up with his plate in his hand as Reaper said, "Hang on, Mouse, look who's here -- Vincent and Catherine."

Setting down his plate, he said "Boy do we have a lot to thank you guys for. We were worried sick about Reaper and Nadia. When they showed up and said you'd hidden them until it was safe, we were so happy we partied all night. I almost didn't make it to work the next day."

As Mouse extended his hand and Vincent reached out to clasp it with a friendly shake, Kitten raised her head. The sight of Mouse's hand engulfed in a huge, furred one with long claws forced her head to jolt up. As her eyes locked on Vincent's face, her screams filled the kitchen. She grabbed Mouse's arm and wrenched his hand from Vincent's with such force that she was propelled backward. Her fall and the fact that she still had Mouse's arm clenched firmly in both of her hands caused Mouse to lose his balance. She toppled over landing on her back with a solid thud and Mouse landed right on top of her. Screaming and fighting, Kitten flailed her arms and legs as if she were fighting for her life. A long stream of unintelligible words escaped her lips as she quickly scrambled backward through the kitchen door, a look of sheer terror on her face.

"Wait, Kitten, wait," yelled Mouse as he gained his footing and pushed his way through the door. All he saw was her back as she disappeared through the front door into the night.

As Reaper rushed through the kitchen door after Mouse, he saw his friend limping frantically toward the front door screaming Kitten's name. "It's OK, Mouse, hang on. We'll help you find her. Go get your jacket."

"OK, OK, but hurry," Mouse said looking at Reaper with tears running down his cheeks. Then he rushed toward their room.

By this time, everyone had gathered in the big living area. Reaper shouted in an excited voice, "Tank, you stay with the girls. Scott, get your jacket, we'll go with Mouse to find Kitten."

"Right," answered Scott as he rushed toward his room.

"Come on, let's go," said Tank as he ushered the girls toward the door. The sound of Harleys rumbling to life filled the air and then the sound faded. Last to enter the kitchen, he swept the sea of faces quickly. "Where's Vincent," he asked as his eyes locked with Catherine's.

Whirling around with eyes frantically searching the entire kitchen, she realized he was gone. "He was right behind me. I have to go. I have to find him. Please, I'm sorry. Please let me know if Kitten is ... Oh, God ... I have to find him. I have to go," she said blinded by the tears streaming from her eyes as she pushed past Tank.

"Wait, Catherine -- wait," Tank said pursuing her into the living area and grabbing her arm to keep her from rushing out the front door. Holding her at arm's length, he said, "Calm down, let me take ya wherever ya need ta go. It's late. Ya can't just go chargin' out into the night like this."

Ceasing her struggles, Catherine stood still as the magnitude of what had taken place washed over her making her knees buckle. Tank supported her with his grasp on her upper arms and guided her to the couch where she collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Eve, get my jacket and find Catherine's too," yelled Tank as he sat down next to her. "Look, this ain't gettin' us nowhere. I'll take ya wherever ya need ta go. But ya gotta get aholda yourself, OK?"

As her sobbing slowed, Catherine nodded.

"Here's her coat, Tank," said Eve holding out the lightweight wool stroller Catherine had worn to the party.

"That ain't no coat," he said with disgust. "She'll freeze ta death before we get a block. Gimme your jacket." As Eve darted to jerk her leather jacket and Tank's from hooks by the front door, Catherine turned a tear-stained face to his.

"I can't take Eve's coat."

"Sure you can, she's got another one. 'Sides, if ya wanna ride with me, we'll have ta go on my bike and it's mighty chilly out there for this here thing ya call a jacket."

With a sad look of gratitude, Catherine allowed Eve to help her into the soft black leather jacket with the thick, quilted lining. She knew she didn't have any choice, she needed to get to Vincent as quickly as possible. "I'll bring your jacket back, I promise," she said turning her head to look into Eve's concerned eyes.

"Now, don't you worry about this old jacket. You just take care of your ol' man and we'll worry about it later." With a pat on her arm, Eve turned Catherine toward Tank. "Now hurry, honey, and go on with Tank."

"Eve, you gals lock all the doors after I leave and don't open 'em for nobody. I'll be back in a flash." With a quick peck on Eve's cheek, Tank turned and propelled Catherine toward the front door.

"Ya ever ride before?" he asked as he stepped into the saddle and pushed the old Knucklehead upright.

"No, not really," Catherine answered with a bewildered look on her face.

"Well, it don't matter. Ain't no big deal. Just let me kick 'er over, then ya climb

on the back. Wrap yer arms around my waist and kinda lean into my back and just hold on. You ain't bigger'n a minute so it'd be tough fer ya ta dump us. Just remember, let me do the driving. When I lean into a curve, you'll want ta lean the other way. Do us both a favor and don't. I gotta lean ta make this here Harley go where I want it ta go. Just stay with me and we'll be fine."

"OK, I'll try," she answered without much conviction.

"Oh, I almost forgot. You gotta wear a lid," he said handing her a battered helmet and picking up his own.

"Now, when I get 'er started, ya put yer foot on this peg and swing yer leg over the backrest," Tank said as he stood up and put his considerable weight behind his leg driving the kicker down. The engine immediately roared to life. As Tank put out his hand toward Catherine, he leaned forward allowing her to climb onto the small, padded seat behind his larger one. "Ya settled?" he called over his shoulder.

Reaching her arms as far around Tank's middle as she could, Catherine shouted over the roar of the motorcycle engine, "I guess so," and buried her forehead into the center of Tank's back.

After a few minutes, Catherine began to relax and actually enjoyed the strange feeling of freedom she derived from the ride. Almost before she knew it, they pulled up in front of her apartment building. Tank leaned forward in the seat, turned slightly, and helped Catherine dismount.

"Thanks, Tank," she said handing him the helmet as she turned to rush toward the door.

Jimmy held the heavy glass door open as she ran past him toward the elevator. "Are you all right, Miss Chandler," he called to her as she disappeared through the elevator door. By the time Jimmy had turned his attention from Catherine back to the street, the motorcycle had disappeared. With disbelief, Jimmy closed the door and sank into a chair nearby. Maybe I've been working too hard, he thought to himself. I know I didn't see Catherine Chandler arrive on a motorcycle. I need a vacation.

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"There she is," shouted Mouse as he extended his arm pointing in the direction of the doorway they had just slowly cruised past. As he pulled over, eased the Harley onto its kickstand, and killed the engine, Reaper and Scott did the same. Mouse called softly in a reassuring voice, "Kitten, it's me. Everything's OK."

She was huddled in the dark doorway with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her sobs were weak and punctuated with sharp intakes of air. As Mouse limped forward, she struggled to her feet as if she might try to push past him. Reaper and Scott came up

behind Mouse, one on either side, and the three men filled the doorway. When Mouse stepped forward with his arms extended, Kitten collapsed into them. Struggling to maintain his balance, he pulled her into his embrace and slumped against the brick wall.

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Instead of going up, Catherine frantically pushed the button for the elevator to take her to the basement. This is taking forever, she fretted, as she shifted her weight restlessly from one foot to the other. When the door began to open, she squeezed through and rushed into the basement hurriedly looking around to see if anyone else was there. Pushing aside the boxes that hid the secret entrance to the Tunnels from view, she turned, descended a few rungs of the ladder, and then slid the boxes back into place. Hurrying down the last few rungs, she dropped to the ground in search of a rock with which to tap out her message. As her hand closed around a good-sized stone, Catherine realized it was probably better not to send a message over the pipes. Rising from her knees and dropping the rock, she started to run toward the inhabited area of the Tunnels.

As she ran, she thought, please, God, let me reach him in time. But deep in the place where she could feel his presence, she could tell he was distancing himself from her. She was not sure if this meant he was physically moving away from her or if he was closing himself off from their bond. Vincent, don't leave. Please. Wait for me, she pleaded making an effort to project her feelings through the quavering connection that remained between them.

When she reached the doorway to Vincent's chamber, she hesitated and called his name softly, praying he was inside. When she received no answer, she called out in a louder voice. No answer. Then she rushed through the doorway to be welcomed by an empty room. All of his special possessions were in their specific places, nothing seemed to have been disturbed. He hasn't been here, she realized as she whirled around and headed down the corridor toward Father's Chamber.

"Father," she called at the entrance.

"Yes, Catherine. Come in. I have been expecting you," Father said as he rose from his chair and limped wearily toward her. "Sit down," he said motioning to the large chair Vincent always used. "May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Where is he, Father?" Catherine said, ignoring his attempt to calm her.

"I am afraid he has gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" she asked with panic in her voice.

"I am quite uncertain of his exact destination. He instructed me to tell you that he had need of solitude. He begged me to admonish you not to attempt to find him.

What happened tonight, Catherine?" he said allowing an accusatory tone to permeate his voice.

Desolate, she collapsed into the large chair in front of Father's desk, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob uncontrollably.

Immediately sorry for the harsh tone he had used with her, Father limped to the chair and placed his hand on her arm. "Catherine, whatever it is, you know I will try to help you. But you must tell me what has happened."

"Oh, Father," she said raising her tear-streaked face to meet his softening gaze.

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"Come on, Kitten. Everything will be fine," Mouse said as he helped her toward the door of their room. Over his shoulder he called, "Thanks, guys," as he and Kitten entered the room and closed the door behind them.

As Mouse helped Kitten into her nightgown, settled her into the big iron bed, and pulled the worn patchwork quilt up under her chin, his thoughts turned to the first time he had placed her in his bed.

She had been a battered woman with a broken spirit, but the people Mouse thought of as his family had welcomed her gladly. Reaper could tell she was in need of medical attention, but, more than that, he could see how frightened she was. As the thin, frail woman clung to Mouse with a desperate, frightened look pouring from her huge, sad eyes, Reaper had thought to himself that these two people could probably be good for each other.

Kit-Ling had been brought to America by her G.I. husband after his tour of duty in Korea had come to an end. She had shared her meager hut and herself with the lonely man who had been far from his own home. She had thought this American soldier loved her.

So, when it came time for him to go back to America, she had left her home to be with him. When they had settled into the married barracks on his new post, the pressure had become too much for her husband. He was unable to take the kidding from his friends about his strange wife who couldn't speak English and didn't fit it with the other wives.



NEAL FARRIS 93''6

Kitten

Eventually, he began to take it out on her. She dreaded the sound of his footsteps coming in the door knowing he would be angry with her, but she never understood why he was angry. When she told him that she was carrying his child, he flew into a rage and began hitting her in the face and stomach. Their neighbor had broken down the door and pulled him off her, but she knew that she could not go on like this any longer. She would rather be dead.

When her husband left that night, she had gathered her tiny bundle of belongings and run away. She had not been prepared for just how hard it was to survive on the streets. She couldn't seek out people of her own nationality because they had turned against her when she shamed herself by accepting the American soldier into her home. Through lack of food and shelter, her body had been unable to maintain the tiny life that had just begun to grow inside it. She had miscarried; and, having lost her reason for struggling to survive, she had just laid down in the alley to die.

Mouse had found her unconscious body and brought her to the clubhouse. He had settled her in his bed and cared for her night and day for weeks. He wouldn't let anyone else even touch her. Gradually, she had come to trust him and had responded to his care. He had managed to heal her body in a few weeks, but it had taken months to start the healing of the emotional scars.

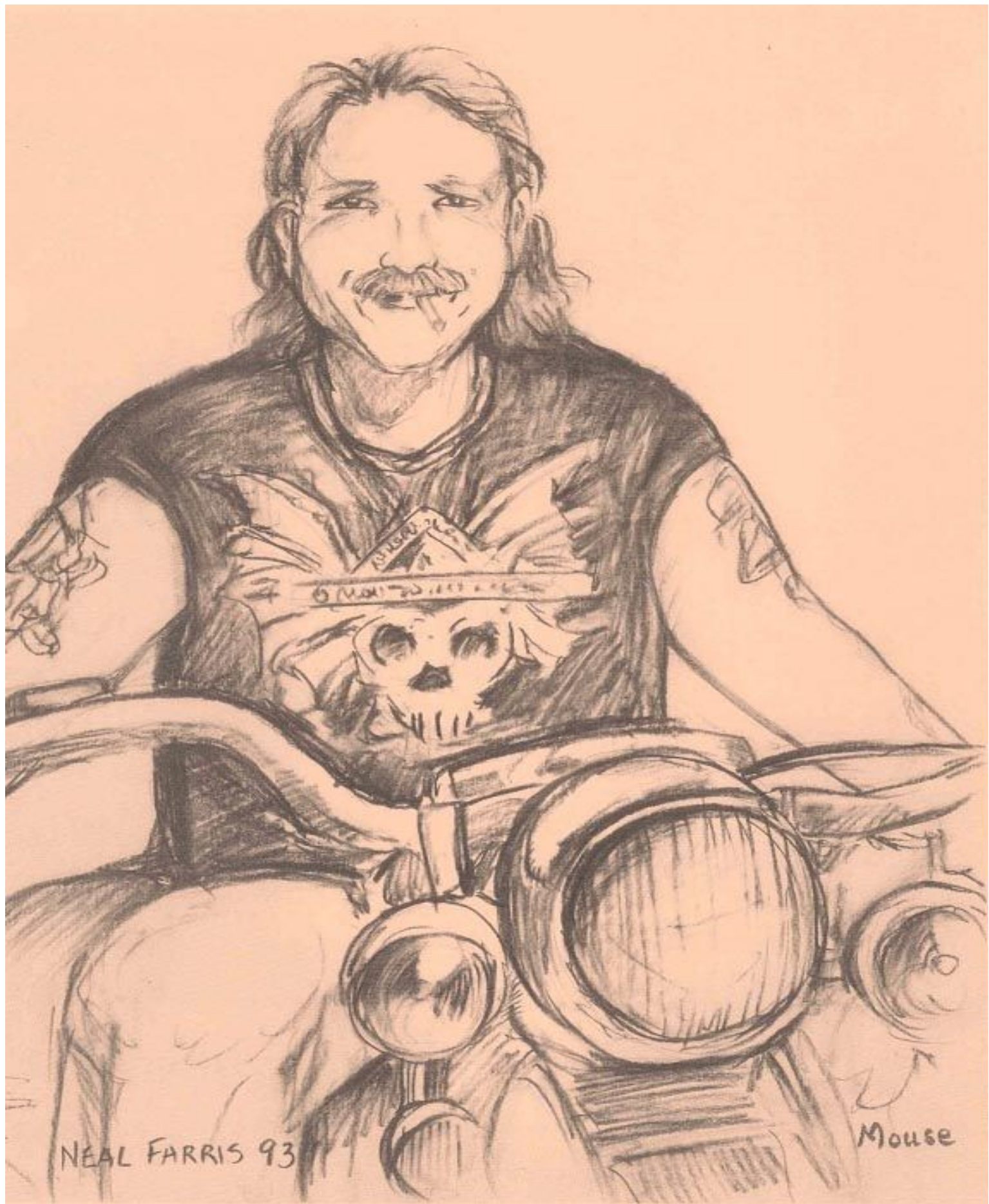
Because Kitten was not readily accepted in the local Korean community and due to her inability to grasp very much of the English language, she wasn't yet able to get a decent job; so, she did what she did best. She sewed and mended for her new family, helped with the cooking and washing, and made the clubhouse a nicer place to live.

Mouse was very protective of Kitten and, at first, wouldn't even let her out of his sight. But as the family came to accept and love her more every day, Mouse, too, came to realize that he didn't have to protect her from them -- she was a part of them.

At one time Mouse himself had been alone in the big city, trying to survive on the streets. The frail young man had been rescued from a gang of toughs by Tank. When he got the badly beaten, half-starved man back to the clubhouse, Tank wasn't sure he would survive. But Reaper had called in old Doc Sanders, and he'd patched the boy up and announced he'd be just fine if they could put some meat on his bones.

When he had finally gotten out of bed, Mouse had walked with an obvious limp. Everyone thought it was from the beating he had taken, but it was later learned that he had laid his bike down on a deserted road when he was just a teenager. The big Harley had been his pride and joy, but it had left its mark on him for life.

As he lay unconscious, the exhaust pipes had burned steadily through his right calf. When he came to, he was so weak from the pain, he couldn't lift the 600-lb bike off his leg. He was trapped there all night until an old man and his wife had come by early the next morning.



NEAL FARRIS 93

Mouse



Every Sunday morning, the elderly couple drove from a small town in New Jersey into Chelsea to the flea market where they tried to sell her handmade quilts and rugs. They had almost driven right past the downed motorcycle with its nearly unconscious rider pinned beneath it. When they had seen him, the old man had turned around and hesitantly stopped on the opposite side of the road. Looking for signs of a trap, they had sat in the car for several minutes watching the still form lying under the motorcycle before deciding the situation was real. When they realized how heavy the motorcycle was, they had tried to flag down someone to help them but no one would stop. So, the old man had taken the jack out of his car and used it to lift the big bike off the injured man.

Dragging and pushing, the old couple had finally loaded him into the back of their '55 Chevy station wagon. His half-alive body had been cradled in the stacks of quilts and rugs all the way to St. Vincent's Hospital.

After the kindly old couple hurriedly turned him over to the intern at the the emergency room, they had gone on to the market never knowing what had happened to the unconscious boy they found that morning.

Due to the fact that Mouse didn't have any insurance, he had been put aside to wait his turn. This had almost cost him his entire leg -- and definitely had made his lower right leg almost useless.

Years of hard work and perseverance helped him to overcome his injury. Handicapped was just not a term anyone felt inclined to use when thinking about Mouse. He still rode his big blue and silver '76 Electra Glide with the best of them and never asked anybody to cut him any slack.

Perhaps his past had made him more attuned to Kitten's situation. Just caring for her had given him the sense of purpose his life seemed to lack. And he had given her a reason for living.

Mouse had gotten his name because of his nervous, skittish manner. When Kitten had first come to them, they had asked her what her name was and she had told them in her heavily accented English that it was Kit-Ling. After struggling for a while to carefully pronounce her name correctly, they had all just started calling her Kitten. It was easier to say and, besides, it just seemed to fit.

She had been one of the many strays that had been taken under the wings of the Iron Vultures. Some of them stayed just long enough to get back on their feet or save enough money to move on. But it was obvious to Kitten that she would never find a man more devoted to her than Mouse or a place where she felt more at home. So she stayed.

## Chapter 14

This is where I belong, thought Vincent as he sat on the cold stone floor in the damp, dark chamber far beneath the inhabited tunnels. This is where monsters belong so they cannot frighten or harm people.

I was a fool to have thought that I could go Above like a normal person. I am not normal. I am not human. I don't even know what I am. But whatever it is I must accept the fact that I have to remain apart from the world Above -- and from Catherine. I cannot give her what she deserves -- a life Above, a home, children. I am incapable of such a simple thing as attending a party with her because of the fear I instill with my very presence.

With this thought came his tears. As they flowed down his cheeks, he sensed a glimmer of Catherine's emotions flicker in the special place where he felt her presence. Unable to accept the love she was attempting to send through their bond, he all but severed the connection and gave himself up to the despair that engulfed him.

Exhausted from his long journey to this desolate place, Vincent slept. But he did not rest for his slumber was filled with hideous nightmares and in each one he was the villain terrorizing the normal people with his terrible countenance.

Hours later, Vincent awoke, disoriented. Where am I, he thought as he surveyed the mold-covered walls of this foreign chamber. When his head cleared, he remembered all too clearly his reason for being in this isolated area. The party.

Rising from the cold, damp floor, Vincent realized he had made no preparations for his survival on this journey. His only thoughts had been to put as much distance as possible between himself and everyone else, especially Catherine. He had known she would come to him and try to offer comfort. He had felt her drawing closer and, in sheer panic, had fled with no thoughts except escape.

But now his mind dwelled on thoughts of Catherine. I hope Father was successful in dissuading her from trying to follow me. If I were to see her now, I would not have the strength to let her go. I must prepare myself for this, the most difficult thing I will ever do. But do it, I will, for her own good. I must force myself to be strong so that I can show her she has the strength to follow her own path, away from this hopeless dream of a life with me.

"A life with me," he muttered aloud allowing the words to resound from the confining walls, bombarding him with the impossibility of their meaning. "There is no life with me, Catherine," he shouted to the walls and their echoes drove him to his knees where he wept again.

As he rose from the floor, he gathered his strength of purpose around him like

armor. I know what I must do. I must confront Catherine and prove to her that she has the strength to find and love another. What we have worked so diligently toward is, in truth, an impossible dream. I am now fully awake and I must awaken her to the fact that

loving me can only bring her pain. There is no place for me in her world. I cannot give her the happy life her mother wished her to have.

The journey back to the inhabited tunnels took much longer than had his flight away from them. With a heavy heart, Vincent plodded his way toward the conclusion of his life, for he knew that life without Catherine would not be worth living. With every step, he strengthened his resolve. I cannot give her what she deserves. I must think of what is best for her.

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Outwardly it was a day no different from many others she had spent since coming to work at the DA's office. The case files littered the top of her desk demanding her undivided attention. But that was something she was incapable of giving today. Her thoughts were constantly on Vincent.

Where is he, she worried as the pages blurred before her eyes. What am I to do? I know he needs time to think but I must talk to him, assure him of my love for him. Why did I pressure him into going to that party? I thought it was a chance for us to have some semblance of a normal life, like other couples. But it just isn't important. I don't want parties. I don't want a "normal life" if it means a life without him. I want Vincent.

"Are you OK, kiddo?" said Joe as he poked his head in the door. Ever since Catherine had switched from her often-dangerous assignments to more advanced research, he had felt she needed a place where she could concentrate. That was when he had moved her into this tiny office.

"I guess so," she answered as the tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Well, maybe not, Joe."

Grateful for the privacy of her office, Joe stepped through the entrance and closed the door behind him. Quickly he strode to her side, grasped her upper arms, and pulled her to her feet directly in front of him. "Are you sick? Hurt? What's the matter?"

"Oh, Joe. I'm just ..." Unable to think of any way to explain what was wrong, she rested her forehead on his chest, drawing strength from his friendship. "I'll be OK, Joe, honest," she said with as much conviction in her voice as she could muster.

"Are you sure?" he replied, holding her at arm's length and looking her directly in the eye.

Dragging her eyes away from his searching stare, she said, "Sure, I'll be fine.

It's just one of those PMS things, I guess."

Slightly embarrassed, Joe slowly removed his hands from her arms and walked toward the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned to look over his shoulder, but she had resumed working. Shrugging, he reluctantly left the office.

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"A man to see you, Cathy," said Rita with raised eyebrows.

"A man?" she answered with a puzzled look. "Who is he?"

"He wouldn't give me his name, but he's tall, has long hair, a beard and he's wearing black leather!" Rita stated waiting for Cathy's reaction.

"Oh," she said realizing who it must be. "Well, show him in."

Shock registered on Rita's face as she muttered, "Sure thing."

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"Well, you created quite a stir at the office," Catherine said jokingly to Reaper as she took a big bite of her hamburger.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to cause you any trouble. I just didn't know what else to do. I knew that doorman would never let me in your apartment building. And I couldn't just climb eighteen stories up the side of the building. So I decided to come to the DA's office."

His comment about climbing up the side of her building had drawn her thoughts immediately to Vincent and a sadness filled her eyes.

Noticing this immediate change, Reaper said, "Hey, I'm really sorry. I guess I should have called or something. It's just that I was so frantic to talk to you about what happened at the party and I didn't think we could talk on the phone. Is he OK?"

"I don't know," Catherine answered with tears glistening in her eyes. "I went Below, but Father said Vincent was gone -- that he needed to be alone and didn't want me to try to find him. I know he needs time to think, but I need to tell him ..."

When she didn't continue, Reaper reached across the table and touched her hand. "I know how you feel. We feel real bad about what happened. Here I told him he didn't have to worry about coming to the clubhouse, and then this had to happen. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but I'd sure like to try."

"You don't have to explain. Remember when Vincent didn't come to meet

Nadia when you were Below? Lots of people are afraid of Vincent the first time they meet him."

"Yeah, but I told him it wouldn't happen. And then it did. Please, let me explain, OK?"

"If you need to," answered Catherine with a sad smile.

"You see, after we met you and Vincent, I went home and told Nadia about him. I don't think she really believed me but I told her anyway. Scott talked to Boa about it, too. Eve and Tank were both there that night. I guess we all just assumed Mouse had told Kitten about Vincent. Well, Kitten's been through a lot and I guess Mouse just decided it would be better not to try to explain it to her ... so, he just didn't. But we all thought he had. Then Vincent said he couldn't come to the party and we just forgot about it," he finished with a downcast look.

"I understand, Reaper. Is Kitten all right?"

"Yeah, Mouse and Scott and me found her about an hour after she ran off -- she was just scared and needed to get away, kinda like Vincent. She's back home now, and Mouse explained it all to her. She's real sorry and, well, that's the reason I'm here. Kitten wants to talk to Vincent, tell him about why she got so upset and all. I know you said he's gone off by himself to think, but it's real important that she get a chance to talk to him."

Catherine noticed that Reaper's voice had taken on an edge of desperation. She too felt the frustration of his absence. "I appreciate Kitten's offer to explain what made her afraid of Vincent, but I don't think it would be possible for her to speak with him. I'd like to be able to talk to Vincent, myself, Reaper. But I don't know where he is." This statement caused the tears to again well up in Catherine's eyes. Not wishing to embarrass Reaper by crying in the coffee shop, she rose, quickly skirting the crowded tables and darted into the room marked "Ladies."

A few minutes later, she returned and noticed that Reaper was at the cash register. Striding to his side, she whispered, "I didn't mean to ruin your lunch."

"You didn't. I wasn't hungry anyway," he said as he guided her out onto the crowded sidewalk. "Look, I've got to get back to the garage. Please, talk to Vincent, tell him how sorry Kitten is that she hurt him. If you can, please ask if he'll see her, OK?" Reaper grasped Catherine's hand and then turning, disappeared into the crowd.

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"Cathy, who was that?" asked Rita when she returned from her lunch with Reaper.

"Oh, he's just a friend," Cathy answered with a sly grin as she ducked into her office. Boy, am I glad Joe moved me into this office, she thought as she closed the door, which afforded her an escape from the prying eyes of her coworkers. I'll bet the grapevine is buzzing right now -- it's not often a lawyer goes to lunch with a biker.

As she returned to the file she had been working on, her mind once again focused on thoughts of Vincent. Sitting very still, she concentrated on sending her love through the gossamer thread of their bond. Please Vincent, know that I love you.

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"Is she any better?" Reaper asked as he entered the front door of the clubhouse.

Nadia shook her head. "She's still in her room, refuses to come out, and won't talk to anybody but Mouse," she answered sadly.

"I talked to Catherine today, but she says Vincent has gone away and no one knows where he is. I told her Kitten wanted to talk to Vincent, to explain. But she just said she didn't think it would be possible." As the front door opened, Reaper called out, "Oh, Mouse, how's it going?"

"Not so good. Kit's pretty broke up over the whole mess. Keeps saying she hurt our new friend and that everyone hates her now. Says she ain't comin' out of that room again until she can fix things up with Vincent." With a shake of his head, he entered the room he shared with Kitten.

Reaper looked at Nadia and, seeing the stricken look on her face, he opened his arms. "It'll be all right, babe," he said as she nestled into his embrace.

"Yeah, sure," she said with disbelief as they stood staring at the door behind which Kitten had taken refuge.

"But I must ... no, no ... must see him, must tell him."

"Reaper tried, Kit, but Vincent's gone. When he gets back we'll try again. Just calm down. Come on, let's go have dinner," Mouse said, trying to coax Kitten to get dressed and go into the kitchen to eat with everyone else.

"No, no, no -- must talk to him. Must tell him. Can't eat -- everyone hates me." Kitten struggled out of Mouse's embrace and crawled back into the big iron bed, pulling the covers over her head.

Mouse just stood there, helpless, listening to her sobbing through the quilt. I don't know what to do, he thought hopelessly as he turned and left the room.

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"Father," he called softly at the entrance.

"Vincent?" answered Father excitedly. "Is that you, Vincent?"

"Yes, Father."

"Come in, my son. Please," he said hobbling as quickly as he could to greet his son. "You look tired. Come, sit down. I'll get you a cup of tea. Have you had anything to eat?"

"I'm not hungry, Father. Sit down, I'll get the tea," Vincent said, steering him toward his chair behind the book-strewn desk.

"Well, if you insist," Father said as he lowered himself awkwardly into his chair and leaned his cane against the desk.

After placing the two china cups and saucers brimming full of fragrant tea onto the desk, Vincent sank wearily into the large chair opposite the man who had been the only father he had ever known. The silence was overwhelming. Neither man could calm the turbulent thoughts that kept each from starting the conversation both knew must take place.

Finally, Father broached the subject gingerly. "Catherine arrived shortly after you left. I gave her your message and she seemed to understand, but ..."

"But, Father?"

"She was very upset. She explained what had taken place at the party. She wanted very much to speak with you. In lieu of that, I believe she opened her heart to me, Vincent."

Vincent lifted his head and met his father's intense gaze.

"She loves you very much," Father said.

"Yes, I know," was Vincent's desolate reply.

"You need to speak with her."

"Yes, Father, I do. I know now that you have always been right. I cannot give Catherine the things that she deserves. I must be strong enough to let her go." As Vincent slumped forward, Father struggled to reach his side.

"No, my son," he said as he grasped Vincent's shoulder to draw his attention. Looking deep into the troubled depths of the man his son had become, he stated firmly, "I

was wrong. I listened to your Catherine pour out her heart to me, and I realized that the love she has for you is totally unselfish. In order to serve her own needs, she wanted to follow you. But she respected your wishes. Even though it was infinitely painful for her, she did not try to find you."

As Vincent started to speak, Father stopped him with a commanding gesture.

"No, Vincent, please let me finish." A nod from Vincent allowed Father to continue. "I thought she would grow weary of the difficulties a relationship such as yours would entail. She has not. In fact, her love for you has continued to grow. I thought she would cling to her world and never fit in here. Yet, time and again, she has proven to be a friend, and much more, to all of us. I thought her background of wealth and position would make her long for those things from her past. But Vincent, don't you see that the things you value so highly on her behalf are not what makes Catherine happy. Yes, at one time she valued those things -- but no more. Loving you has changed her life. You are now her happiness."

"But, Father ..."

"No, you must allow me to finish," Father said silencing Vincent with a raised hand. "You are now her happiness -- but what you propose in order to make her happy is to remove the one thing she requires -- you. Yes, my son, she needs you. And now you must release the fears that keep you apart. You have been progressing together in that direction, have you not?"

A silent nod of affirmation was all Vincent could give in answer to Father's question.

"Then don't let this one incident undermine all of the progress you have made. Vincent, this is merely one more stumbling block on the path to whatever life you and Catherine choose for yourselves. I beg you not to place more importance on it than is necessary. Speak with Catherine. You truly love one another, and together you can work through whatever is necessary for that love to endure."

As the sincerity of Father's words penetrated Vincent's resolve, he covered his face with his hands and wept.

Slowly, Father straightened releasing the tension in his back. His movement caused Vincent to raise his head.

"Vincent, you must know that I have come to love Catherine as a daughter," he stated solemnly.

Rising to his full height, Vincent pulled Father into a heartfelt hug. "There are no words with which to thank you, Father. Without your counsel tonight I would most certainly have driven Catherine from my life ... but never from my heart. I truly do not



know how I could have survived without her -- she is my life. Thank you."

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That evening, as Catherine prepared for bed, her thoughts were totally concentrated on Vincent. Please, my love, come to me soon. I'm so worried about you. I need you. With those thoughts she settled beneath the covers.

On his way to her balcony, Vincent had opened the bond completely and was once again feeling her love flow into his heart, allowing it to warm him and fill him with renewed hope.

As she lay in her bed, unable to sleep, Catherine felt a surge of love fill her heart. Leaping from the bed and grabbing her robe, she flung open the French doors just as Vincent stood poised to tap on the window.

"Oh, Vincent," she said as she launched herself against his chest and held on fiercely.

"Catherine," was his only reply as he stroked her silky hair and finally enveloped her in his embrace.

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"But, Mr. Reaper, I must see him -- tell him. Sorry. Hurt him."

"Kitten," he replied with a gentleness in his voice, "I talked to Catherine and she said he was gone. That's all I can do, Kit. I tried. Now we just have to wait until he gets back. You didn't hurt him on purpose. You can't let yourself get so upset about this."

"Hurt him -- have to tell," she repeated with tears streaming down her face. Then she turned and ran back into the room she and Mouse shared.

As that door slammed shut, the front door opened. "Hey, Reaper, how's it going?" asked Scott as he hung his jacket on the hook near the door.

"OK, Scott, I guess," he replied, looking toward the door through which Kitten had just disappeared.

"She still upset?"

"Yeah."

"Can't you take her to see Vincent, let her explain why she was so scared of him? They'll probably both feel better for it."

"I'm tryin', man," he answered with an exasperated tone. "Vincent's gone -- run off. Catherine says she'll let me know when he comes back -- if he does. She was pretty upset herself."

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"Vincent, would you like to talk about what happened ... at the party?" Catherine said hesitantly as they lay on the double lounge chair she had bought with this very purpose in mind. It was thickly padded and made for two people to stretch out side by side. A down-filled comforter covered them both to the waist and she was nestled against Vincent's chest.

"It is still very painful ... for me. But, I do want to thank you."

At that, Catherine sat upright and turned slightly to face Vincent, tucking her legs beneath her. "Thank me, Vincent. For what?"

"For respecting my wishes, my need for solitude. Father told me of your own need ... to follow me, and your unselfish love ... for me. When my mind was clouded by the terror I saw in Kitten's eyes, he talked to me of possibilities and progress. He told me he was wrong, Catherine. Wrong about us. It was difficult for him to admit, yet he assured me that the love we share -- you and I -- is strong enough to work through the obstacles that confront us."

"Father said that?"

"Yes. He told me he had grown to love you as a daughter. When I once again had resolved to turn from you, for your own happiness, he showed me how futile it was. He sent me here ... to you."

"Oh, Vincent, he's right. You know that now, don't you? I could never be happy without you. You are my life."

"And you are mine. Yet, still I held myself apart from you. The incident at the party, Kitten's horror and fear of me, caused those fears to resurface. They had been suppressed but not resolved. I have held back because of a lack of knowledge about my origins. This I cannot resolve. So, I must either cling to it and allow it to separate us, or I must let it go.

"I am standing on the threshold of ... I know not what. But I want to know -- I need to know. I long for the touching, the giving and taking, but I must be sure that I can offer you ALL that I am. For I am the man who loves you, therefore, I must be able to freely offer not only my love but the differentness of my body and the complexities of my entire being. I've lived with the whole that is me, sharing myself totally with no one. Am I strong enough, now, to lay myself bare before you -- body and soul? Am I, Catherine?" There was a tinge of desperation to this last question, in his voice and in the expression of

his eyes.

"You love me, Vincent," she stated. "Then you ..."

Impatiently interrupting, Vincent tensed and, rising to a more upright position, he stated urgently, "You know that I do, more than life itself!"

"Then you must be willing to let me truly know you," Catherine continued, locking her gaze with his. "All of you. And you must trust that I accept you -- all of who you are. I don't love you in spite of your differences, Vincent, I love you because of them."

As Vincent raised his head and stared into space, realization dawned in his heart. What I have always wanted is for Catherine to do just that -- accept me as I am. But in order for that to happen, I have to accept myself for what I am. I think somehow I am now ready to begin.

His prolonged silence and faraway look caused fear to well up in Catherine's throat preventing her from speaking. She was overwhelmed with the need to be close to him, to feel the reassurance of his warm embrace. But at the same time, she was frozen, waiting for his response.

Her disquiet clutched at his soul, and he was drawn from his pensive thoughts by her need. "Catherine," was the only word he uttered as he lowered his sapphire blue eyes drawing hers of emerald green into their fathomless depths.

I feel as if I'm falling, she thought, as his emotions flooded her. She had never felt him so deeply, as if her entire being was washed in his love.

His warm hands came to lightly rest on her upper arms, tentative and hesitant. In answer to his touch, she crossed her arms in front of her and covered the large, furred tops of his hands with her own small ones, pressing gently. As his fingers tightened slightly around her arms, his thumbs gently kneaded the hollows at the front of her shoulders. Opening herself to him, she uncrossed her arms and placed her hands lightly on his chest.

The space that separated them was electrified with tension, immobilizing them with its very power. In increments almost too tiny to measure, Vincent lowered his mouth toward hers. In anticipation of his touch, Catherine drew a sharp intake of breath. The slight sound startled Vincent, halting his progress. As his eyes searched hers for understanding, she slowly exhaled, relaxing slightly and allowing a hint of a smile to form on her lips.

You are so beautiful, he thought as he felt her anticipation. Reassured by the love radiating from her face and through their bond, Vincent pressed his mouth ever so lightly to hers. So soft, he thought. Coinciding with this perception was the ever-present

fear of his differences. As he withdrew slightly, he pondered. This is all new to me and very pleasurable. But she has kissed men before, men whose mouths are like hers. While mine is...

Catherine's words shattered his reverie. "I've waited so long for your kiss, Vincent. An eternity. And it was worth it. I've always been fascinated by your mouth. Did you know that?"

A quizzical expression and a silent shake of his head formed his only visible answer to her question.

"It's true," she continued in earnest. "I've often dreamed about you kissing me, but I always woke up. Vincent, please tell me this isn't a dream."

"We are both very much awake, Catherine," he said as he touched his lips to hers again, reveling in her obvious delight at his differences.

Overwhelmed by need, Catherine increased the pressure of their touch, deepening the kiss. After a mere heartbeat, she felt Vincent's mouth begin to retreat. Unwilling to relinquish the pleasure of his kiss so soon, she slid her hands up his chest halting his withdrawal with the slightest pressure of her fingertips on his jaw. As he stopped, she parted her lips slightly, allowing the mere tip of her tongue to caress the fullness of his lower lip. An almost imperceptible moan escaped his lips. The sound evoked a tightening in her abdomen as a tingling warmth spread throughout her body.

Encouraged by his reaction, she allowed her tongue to continue its explorations, halting at the cleft in the center of his upper lip. Tracing this indentation elicited another moan deep from within Vincent's throat.

As his arms encircled her, his tongue tasted the sweetness of her mouth, exploring its contours. Deep within the core of his being, a primal need cried out. He answered the call by reclining against the cushion of the lounge chair and drawing Catherine down beside him. As she fitted her lithe body to the hardened planes of his, he slid his hands down her back pressing her tighter against him. Every nerve in his body was alive as ribbons of electricity pulsed through his veins. Once again his mouth claimed hers, but this time the hesitancy was gone.

Responding to his boldness, Catherine's hands glided around his neck, her fingers tangling in his thick mane. His mouth covered hers, relaxed and receptive. Accepting the unspoken role of teacher, she slipped her tongue between his easily parted lips intent on exploring the inner recesses of his mouth. The tip of her tongue glided across the edges of his front teeth and down the length of one slightly longer incisor. A rush of excitement flashed through her like summer lightning and simultaneously jolted Vincent through their ever-increasing connection.

His body tensed as his hands abandoned their position at her lower back and

returned to her upper arms. Gently, yet with a determined firmness, Vincent pressed against her arms, parting their upper bodies and causing his mouth to withdraw from hers.

Unwilling to relinquish their new-found intimacy, Catherine strained against his efforts to increase the distance between them. Gradually, she sensed the strength of his resolve and allowed him to accomplish the separation.

Agonizing moments passed as they each brought their emotions under control. Finally, Vincent relaxed in the lounge chair and pulled Catherine into the hollow of his shoulder. He stroked her hair, guiding her head to rest on his chest.

His heart is pounding, she observed. But no harder than my own.

After several minutes, Vincent broke the silence. "Catherine, I've known kisses as a child -- from Father or Mary. They were meant to soothe fear, ease pain, provide comfort, express love. But I have never known kisses such as the ones we just shared."

"I, too, have experienced the kind of kisses you described," she answered tilting her head to gaze into his eyes. "And even kisses that were meant to be what you and I just shared. But they pale in comparison to what I felt just now, when you kissed me. No, Vincent, I've never really felt the kiss of true, complete love." As she nuzzled her head into the special place near his heart, she sighed.

After a long silence, she asked, "But why haven't you allowed us the intimacy of a kiss such as this before now? Did you not know how I longed for your kiss?"

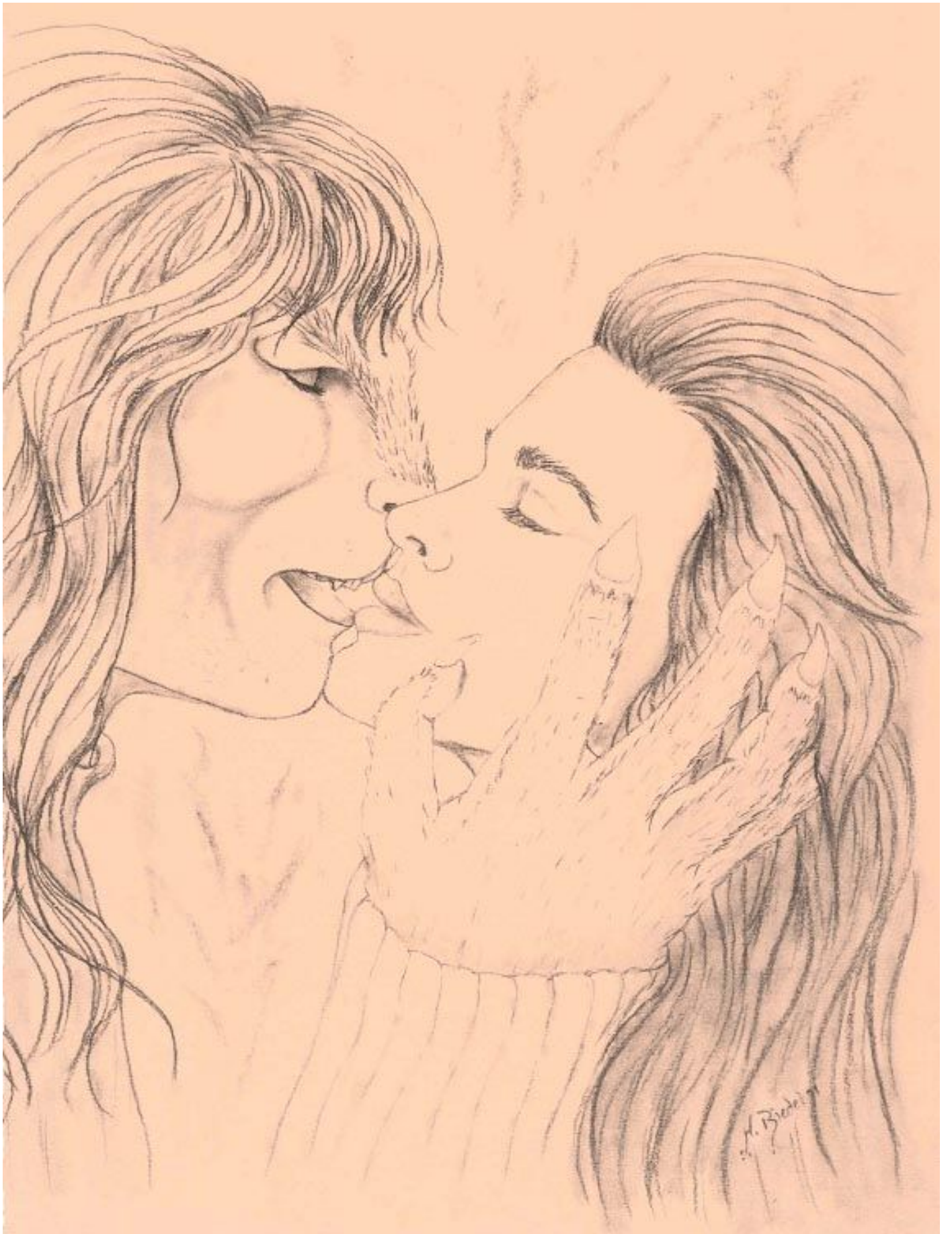
"Oh, yes, I knew your desires -- intimately. Some nights, when you were dreaming, it took all of my strength not to come to you, to complete those dreams. My own desires were ignited, and I spent many late nights quenching them at the Chamber of the Falls," he admitted with an embarrassed laugh.

"But why?"

"Because I thought that if I allowed myself to taste your lips, I would be unable to stop at that. I knew that would be the spark to ignite a fire I couldn't control. And I feared the fire would destroy us both. I couldn't risk losing you," he stated drawing her tighter against his side.

"But you should have known you could never lose me, Vincent."

"I was unable to move past the fear -- it clouded my senses."



"And now?"

"Now I want only to love you -- to make up for all the times I have wanted to touch you and didn't. To learn to welcome the caresses you've wanted to give me but I was unable to accept. To move toward our future by putting the past behind us."

"Oh, Vincent. You have no idea how long I've waited to hear these words."

"And you cannot imagine how I have wished that I could say them. I have come to realize tonight, Catherine, that I could not hope to believe in your acceptance of me -- as I am -- until I could accept myself. Before I met you, I thought I accepted what I was, without regret. In actuality, I deluded myself into thinking I was content with my lot. I pretended it was enough to be loved and respected by my friends and family Below. I strove to make myself indispensable to insure their continued acceptance of me. But never did I feel worthy of their love. Grateful but never deserving. In my ignorance, I thought I was content with my life ... until you began opening doors that had always been forbidden to me. But not until tonight could I bring myself to believe, to hope, that there was any life for me beyond the hollow existence I had resigned myself to live."

"Know that I love you more than life itself. After you saved my life, you guided me toward becoming a person who could be worthy of your love. I too was living a hollow existence. Hold me, Vincent. Never turn away from me. Together we can conquer anything."

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A few days later, Vincent and Catherine stood alone in a tunnel still damp from disuse. At her almost imperceptible shiver, Vincent pulled Catherine against the warmth of his side.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Vincent? You don't have to, you know."

"Yes, Catherine, I am certain. I am learning to face all of my fears, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she answered, smiling as memories of his kisses flooded her mind. He, too, smiled as those same memories brought warmth to his cheeks.

Hand in hand they strode toward the newly discovered tunnel entrance leading to the clubhouse. Vincent and Mouse had spent many hours pouring over old maps until they came across a passageway that had been all but forgotten. With very little excavation, a safe entrance had been provided into the abandoned warehouse next to the building the Iron Vultures used as a clubhouse. It was through this passageway that Vincent now assisted Catherine.

"Reaper is expecting us," Catherine said happily. "I contacted him right after you finished this entrance. He was amazed that there was a direct route between your

world and his."

"Yes, Mouse was very helpful in securing this entrance. I had forgotten about its existence until he reminded me. It is much safer than the route through the park that I used the night of the party."

"Kitten is very anxious to talk to you. She was extremely upset that she hurt you and Reaper says she's been tormenting herself since that night. It's so like you to face the possibility of more injury to yourself in order to relieve the pain of someone else. You always put others' happiness before your own."

"I am so grateful for the happiness that I have come to share with you, Catherine. In truth, the incident with Kitten was instrumental in breaking down more barriers to that happiness. I remember your telling me that your mother always said everything happens for the best. When I was hurting, it was almost impossible to imagine that any beauty could come from such pain. Yet, patience often reveals just that. Your mother's words were true."

"I'm so happy, Vincent. I love you," Catherine said turning to face him.

"And I love you, Catherine, with all my heart and soul." Taking her hand, he guided her through the trap door that led from the Tunnels into the sub-basement of the building adjoining the clubhouse. Shortly they came to the brick wall that divided the two buildings and Vincent guided her through the section that had been broken in order to gain their access. A short distance found them ascending the creaky wooden stairs and knocking on the basement door leading into the kitchen of the clubhouse.

"Come on in," Reaper said with a welcoming smile and a hand extended in friendship.

Vincent clasped his hand eagerly and, stepping aside, followed Catherine into the big, warm kitchen.

"Kitten's in her room -- waiting. I don't how to thank you for coming and giving her a chance to explain. She's been in pretty bad shape ... worried about what she did."

"There is no need for explanation. I wish only to assure her that I understand. If speaking with me will ease her pain, then that is what I wish to accomplish."

"Well, we all just want you to know that we'd like for you guys to consider us your friends 'cause that's the way we feel about you. Come on in and sit down."

As Vincent and Catherine settled themselves on one of the tattered but comfortable couches, Reaper crossed the room and knocked on the door leading to the room Mouse and Kitten shared.



A tiny voice called softly, "Please to wait ... coming."

A moment later, the fragile-looking Oriental woman stepped through the doorway. Her face showed the ravages of many recent hours spent crying. There was also a hint of fear in her eyes before she lowered her gaze to the floor.

She still fears me, Vincent thought with regret.

Slowly, deliberately, Kitten walked toward the couch where Vincent and Catherine were sitting. When she was standing directly in front of Vincent, she raised her head and looked directly into his eyes. Almost immediately, she formed her hands into the praying position, the sign of supplication, and bowed. Vincent bowed his head in reply.

With a tiny, quavering voice, Kitten spoke. "Mr. Vincent, thank you. You not have to come. Please to forgive me. I very foolish. Hurt you. So sorry, so very sorry."

"It's all right, Kitten. May I call you that?"

"Please, yes."

"It is not a new experience for me, Kitten. Many people fear me on first meeting. I wish to assure you that I would do you no harm and I hope we can be friends."

"Friends, yes, please. But need to explain. Yes?"

"You don't need to. I understand," Vincent replied earnestly.

"Yes, need to explain. Please?"

"Certainly, if you wish. But, please, sit down."

The large, overstuffed chair Reaper pulled up in front of the couch dwarfed the delicate woman. A silence fell over the group as Kitten seemed to struggle with a way to begin the explanation.

"When I a child, in small village, tiger comes. Attacks my people. Steals children. Kills. Mother tell me bad stories. Tell me this demon. Say it will kill me. All children afraid. Older ones draw pictures. Terrible teeth and claws. Please to forgive my foolishness. I not know you. No one tell me. I not expect. When I see your hand holding hand of my Mouse. I no think. I just afraid child again. I know better in my heart. I so shamed. Mr. Reaper tell me you save him. Save Miss Nadia. You friend," she said as the tears streamed down her face.

"Yes, Kitten, we are friends. I want you to know that I understand. I, too, still

have ... nightmares. Sometimes they seem so real. Then they are gone. Yet, when you least expect it, something will bring them back, stronger than ever. We all have hidden fears. It's nothing to be ashamed of, nothing at all."

"Thank you, Mr. Vincent, thank you. You and Miss Catherine, please to come to our marriage. Mouse will take Kit-Ling for wife. They have mountain cabin, pretty place, lake. We will marry there. Please you come?"

As Catherine's hand covered Vincent's for reassurance, he hesitated. Regaining his composure, he said gently, "Thank you very much for your kind invitation to your wedding. I fear I cannot ..."

"Please, no. Want you to come. Please?"

"You see, Kitten, you are not the only person who fears me. I cannot live in the City. I live in a safe place ... a secret place. I cannot come out in the daylight. It is too dangerous. But thank you for asking me. I truly wish I could attend. Perhaps Catherine ..." Hesitating, Vincent looked at Catherine with the question in his sad blue eyes.

"Of course, I would love to come to your wedding," she said directly to Kitten. Then, turning her gaze to Vincent, she added, "For both of us."



### **More or Less**

I could not love you less or more  
if yours was the face that you  
Seem to think that I would adore  
each time you came into view.

I could not want you more or less  
if you changed to features new.  
Than this you I long to possess;  
it's all in my point of view.

For you are beautiful to me  
on the inside AND the out.  
And even though you disagree;  
I have no reason for doubt.

So I will tell you once again --  
I love the you that I see.  
We deserve it all -- let's begin  
our happy life that CAN be.

Peggy Garvin - 5/15/92



### **Once Again - Alone**

Your touch is as I always  
knew that it would be  
Sensuous and haunting as  
just your touch could be.

Your kiss is just as unique  
as you are, my love.  
Your hair is even softer  
than I had dreamed of.

Your eyes are molten azure;  
darker than the blue  
That I remember seeing  
when I've looked at you.

My body has this aching  
only you can ease.  
But then I feel you leaving;  
Vincent, please don't tease.

The magic of the moment  
slips away and fear  
Washes o'er my waking mind  
as I wipe a tear  
From my cheek where once your kiss  
made its presence known  
And I find myself in bed;  
once again -- alone.

Peggy Garvin - 6/5/92

## Chapter 15

"Catherine, it's very hard for me to explain, but somehow I'm drawn to Reaper and Nadia and their friends. I feel a certain kinship. Before I frightened Kitten, I was relaxing. I felt like I was among friends. Although the experience with Kitten was very painful for everyone, it was the catalyst that enabled me to finally accept myself."

"You don't have to explain to me, Vincent. I feel very relaxed around them, too. I like them. And I'm actually grateful to Kitten, in a way. Not for the pain she caused, of course, but for the results." This last statement was punctuated with an impish look directed at Vincent.

"Yes, I, too, am ... grateful, in a way," he said returning her look shyly.

"Why don't we go visit them?" Catherine asked enthusiastically. "I could contact Reaper, find out when would be a good time and then we could just go to the clubhouse and get better acquainted with everyone. It would be wonderful." At Vincent's silence, Catherine stopped her exciting plans and waited for his response.

"I'm uncertain, Catherine. Do you think that would be wise?"

"Why not? We've been there twice already. You said yourself you felt comfortable. The entrance is there, just waiting to be used." Suddenly Catherine stopped. I'm doing it again, she thought with horror. I'm pushing him to do something he doesn't want to do.

"Never mind, Vincent. I'm sorry. I just got carried away again. I never want you to do anything you are uncomfortable doing. Perhaps you could think about it. If you decide you want to visit them, I'll contact Reaper, OK?"

"You have no reason to be sorry, Catherine," he said, allowing his love for her to fill his gaze. "Yes, I will think on it."

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"Hey, guys, come on in. This is great. We haven't seen you two in a long time." Reaper's enthusiastic welcome came as no surprise, but it did make Vincent feel more like he had made the right decision.

"We are most grateful that you would receive us into your home," said Vincent as he shook Reaper's hand. The awkwardness of the act seemed to have faded.

"Go on in the other room and make yourselves at home. Can I get you a beer? Or, uh, how about a coke? Iced tea?" Reaper's slight discomfort compelled Vincent to do what he could to dispel it.

"It's quite all right, Reaper. We do on occasion drink alcoholic beverages Below. Father has a very old bottle of brandy we share for special celebrations.

However, I suppose I have never acquired a taste for spirits. But a glass of iced tea sounds refreshing. Perhaps Catherine would care for something ... stronger."

Both men turned their questioning eyes toward a smiling Catherine.

"Iced tea sounds great to me. I'm always too lazy to make it but I like it."

"Two teas it is. You guys make yourselves comfortable and I'll bring the drinks right in."

As Vincent opened the door to the living area and paused to allow Catherine to pass through, he noticed Kitten sitting in a large, overstuffed chair intently mending a shirt. For the briefest of seconds he hesitated, remembering the painful past. Then he followed Catherine into the large room.

"Miss Catherine! Mr. Vincent!" Kitten dropped the shirt and came to greet them. "So happy you come. Sit. Please?"

"Thank you, Kitten. It's good to see you again," answered Vincent as he led Catherine to the couch they had occupied on their last visit. "How is your Mouse?"

A huge grin lit her face as she answered, "Wonderful, he is." They could see the love pouring from her eyes at the mention of Mouse's name and especially at the thought that he was her man.

"Vincent. Catherine. Man, this is great! When did ya get here?" Tank came down the stairs and straight to the couch with his large hand outstretched.

Vincent clasped the big man's hand and felt the controlled strength in Tank's grip. As the handshake ended, Tank nodded his welcome to Catherine. "Does everybody know you're here?"

"Reaper met us at the door. And Kitten welcomed us. We haven't seen anyone else," replied Catherine.

"Let me go tell everybody, they'll all want ta see ya," he stated with a big smile as he went back upstairs.

"Well, here's the tea," Reaper said as he backed through the kitchen door into the living area with two tall, frosty mugs of iced tea. "Hope you guys like it sweet."

"Yeah, that's fine," Catherine said taking the glass he held out.

"Thank you," replied Vincent. Taking a sip, he said, "Delicious."

"Good. Good. Now, where is everybody?" Reaper said looking around the almost empty room.

"Tank was here a minute ago. He said he was going to go get everyone," Catherine answered.

"Great," said Reaper as he sank into one of the many comfortable chairs scattered about the room.

"Do you play billiards?" Vincent inquired, referring to the large pool table prominently placed in the center of the huge room.

"Well, I don't know if we exactly play billiards, but we sure do play pool. Do you play?"

"I've never had the pleasure of actually playing. Father has spoken enthusiastically of doing so in his younger days. I'm afraid we do not have a table. We content ourselves with the game of chess."

"Chess, yeah, well, Father tried to teach me that, but I just couldn't get the hang of it. Come on, I'll teach you a real game."

"Catherine?"

"Oh, no thanks. I'll just watch. Please, go ahead."

"Well, if you're certain," Vincent said as Reaper guided him in the direction of a wooden rack bolted to the far wall.

"Now, Vincent, these are cue sticks. You need to pick out one that feels comfortable. You know, one you like the heft of," Reaper stated as he handed Vincent the stick.

"Yes. Well." Vincent had a puzzled look on his face as Reaper guided him toward the table.

"Now, we'll just rack 'em up and I'll show you how to break."

"Break?"

"Yeah."

"Catherine!" A squeal from across the room jarred Catherine's attention from the game to the bouncy blonde.

"Eve, it's good to see you again," said Catherine as she rose from the couch to meet her halfway.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Reaper was going to teach Vincent to play pool. I was just watching."

"Hey, just watchin' is pretty boring. You wanna play, too?"

"No, I'm really not very good at pool. But, thanks anyway."

"Well, then, let's go find Nadia and Boa. They're around here somewhere. Come on, Kit."

As Catherine turned to say something to Vincent, she realized that he was completely absorbed in trying to master the art of holding the cue stick. Claws are definitely not a help in playing pool, she thought with a chuckle. Then she turned and followed Eve upstairs. About halfway up they ran into Tank and Scott.

"Hey, where're you gals goin'?" Tank said just before he pecked Eve affectionately on the cheek as they passed on the stairs.

"Girl talk," she answered with a giggle.

"Uh-oh, looks like Reaper's tryin' to show Vincent how ta play pool. We better hurry before he teaches him ta play as bad as he does!"

The booming laughter caused Reaper to raise his head from the task at hand. "I heard that, Tank."

As he approached, Vincent witnessed the way Tank playfully slapped Reaper on the back. Scott held out his hand to Vincent, "Great to see you again. Now, forget everything Reaper told you. Me and Tank'll show you the right way to play the game." This comment brought more booming laughter from Tank.

Several hours later, Vincent was doing surprisingly well. In fact, he had picked up the game quite easily, once he understood the basic idea behind Eight Ball.

"Are you sure you ain't a hustler?" Tank asked as Vincent sank a ball into the side pocket.

"Hustler?" Vincent said with a quizzical expression.

"Oh, never mind," Tank answered as he stood leaning on his cue stick. The ringing of the phone brought his head up and the movement startled Vincent into missing



his next shot.

Tank chuckled. "Yeah, I always knew those things were good for somethin'," Tank said stepping up to take his turn.

"I'll get it," said Mouse from a large chair in the far corner of the room.

"Hey, man, I didn't even know you were here!" Tank said with a start.

Mouse set down the book he had been reading and crossed to the phone. "Scott, it's for you," he called with a strange look on his face. Covering the receiver, he whispered, "It's a female!"

"Here, take over for me," Scott said, handing Mouse his cue stick and taking the receiver from his hand. "Hello. Yeah, I could probably do that. No, not tonight. How about tomorrow, say around ten. OK. See you then."

As Scott strolled back toward the table, Mouse was all but bursting with the need to know who the female caller had been. "Well?" he finally said when Scott did not volunteer the information.

"Well, what?"

"Well, who is she? Boa'll kill you, man, if she catches you foolin' around on her!"

"I'm not foolin' around. That was a customer. Strictly business. One of those high-class chicks who don't want to be seen at a tattoo parlor. She wanted to come over here -- right now -- to get her tattoo." The panicked look on Vincent's face prompted Scott to continue. "Don't worry, Vincent, I put her off until tomorrow night."

"I do not wish to cause you any inconvenience. Or loss of business. I will leave and..."

"No way. I can do her tattoo any time. But a visit from you ... well, that's something special. Come on, let's play."

As Mouse handed the cue stick back to Scott, he said, "I'm going upstairs to check on the girls. I'm starved. Maybe I can get them to rustle us up some grub."

Almost dropping his stick, Tank turned and hollered at Mouse's disappearing back. "Hurry, before I waste away ta nuthin'."

"Fat chance," was Mouse's only reply.

Shortly, the sound of many feet on the stairs let the players know it was time to

quit.

"Food does sound pretty good," Reaper said. Slapping Vincent on the back, he said jokingly, "Besides, we can all use a break from the humiliation. I've never had anyone beat me the day I taught them to play!"

"I'm certain it was beginner's luck," answered Vincent with a shrug, but a rather pleased look had crept onto his face.

"Yeah, sure. Well, we'll see how yer luck holds after I get my strength back," said Tank with that same booming laugh Vincent had come to expect.

"OK, guys. Your arms aren't broken. The fixin's are all here, but the slaves have taken the night off." Nadia winked at Catherine as she finished piling the thinly sliced pieces of ham on top of the thick slab of cheese and pressed the second piece of bread down with determination. "Come on, Catherine, grab your sandwich and let's eat!"

With a backward glance at Vincent's smiling face, Catherine followed Nadia to the table where Eve, Boa and Kitten were already seated. It was obvious they still had plenty to talk about.

Tank grumbled something about women's lib as he fixed two overstuffed ham and cheese sandwiches, grabbed a big bag of potato chips and plopped down beside Mouse. Vincent, Reaper and Scott fixed their own sandwiches and joined the other men at their table.

Congenial conversation filled the room, punctuated by occasional laughter, as the time quickly passed.

"It's growing late and we really must be going. I don't want to cause Father any unnecessary worry. He was not extremely pleased with my decision to come Above."

"Well, Vincent, I think I can speak for everyone when I say we had a ball!" said Reaper. At Vincent's uncertain look Reaper continued. "I mean we really enjoyed your visit, right guys?"

"Yeah, even if ya did beat us!" boomed Tank.

"Sure did! Come back again, real soon," said Scott.

"Sorry I wasn't such great company tonight," apologized Mouse. "I'm tryin' to study for this welder's exam. If I pass, it means an upgrade and a big raise. With me and Kitten gettin' married soon. Well, I need the extra cash."

"It's quite all right. I hope we will have an opportunity to visit again soon." As Vincent turned to escort Catherine down the stairs to the basement, he watched her hug

each woman goodbye. Then she turned, said a collective goodbye to the group of men, and placed her hand in Vincent's.

"Did you enjoy the visit, Catherine?" Vincent asked as they made their way to the Tunnel entrance in the adjoining building.

"Oh, yes. It was so much fun. I haven't talked like that since I was in college. In the sorority, we used to sit up half the night, discussing all kinds of things. Particularly men."

"Men?"

"Yes, men," she answered with a sly smile. "Vincent, you can't possibly know how wonderful it is to be able to talk freely about the way I feel about you!"

"You discussed me?" he said with a stricken look on his face.

"Well, nothing specific. I mean I didn't tell them any details. Kitten's wedding was the big topic of conversation. Which prompted Eve to talk about Tank and how much she loves him and wishes he would ask her to marry him. It seems that Boa and Scott are married and, of course, Nadia and Reaper are, too. With Kitten getting married ... well, Eve feels left out. Vincent, the love I feel for you is so ... overwhelming sometimes I feel as if I will burst if I can't tell someone. But, of course, I can't. It just felt so good to be able to talk to someone about how much I love you."

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I never realized this was a need of yours. Once again it seems I am not very observant," he said casting his gaze toward his feet.

Stopping, she turned to face him. As she did, he raised his head and their eyes met. "Vincent, I do not regret the secret I keep. I would gladly keep it and never speak about our love rather than risk any harm coming to you or anyone Below. You know that, don't you?"

At his nod she continued. "When I went to see Nancy, when you tried to send me away, I talked to her about the special man that I cared deeply about. I didn't really tell her anything specific, but talking about it helped me to realize our relationship was worth everything. I've never been able to share my feelings with anyone. I can't even tell Nancy any more than I already have. It just felt so good tonight to be able to say your name -- out loud. To tell someone who knows you that I care very deeply for you. It didn't come as any surprise to them, Vincent. It's written all over my face every time I look at you."

A shy smile tugged at the corners of his unique mouth. "Of course, I have not felt this need in myself because you are known and loved by my friends. I can speak your name aloud any time I choose. I do not carry the burden of our secret as you do. I am happy, Catherine, that you were able to satisfy this need through the friendships we've

made."

"Thank you for understanding," she said as she circled his waist with her arms and hugged him fiercely.

Vincent returned her hug gently. Then he turned and nestled her close to his side as they proceeded toward the Tunnels. "I, too, enjoyed this evening very much. I learned to play pool -- quite well, according to Tank. I felt ... accepted. Yes, that is exactly how I felt. Totally accepted for who I am. These men and women who refer to themselves as bikers are truly a unique group of people. Meeting them has definitely reinforced my already existent feelings that not everyone Above judges others by their outward appearance."

\*\*\*

Several weeks later, Vincent and Catherine were preparing to return to the clubhouse for another visit.

"You must accompany Catherine and me to Reaper's clubhouse, Father. They have a pool table!" said Vincent enthusiastically.

"Pool table?" Father questioned. "You mean billiards?"

"No, Father, they refer to the game they play as Eight Ball. On my last visit I enjoyed it very much. Perhaps you would consider allowing Reaper the opportunity to teach you to play their pool in exchange for teaching him chess."

"Perhaps," said Father with a very doubtful look on his face. "But not tonight."

"Are you sure you won't come with us, Father?" Catherine asked as she and Vincent prepared to leave.

"No, thank you. Perhaps another time," he answered looking over his glasses. "I need to finish reading this latest article on measles. Peter says he may be able to obtain enough vaccine for us to inoculate the entire community against this disease. I need to study the possible side effects."

"Very well, Father," Vincent responded. "I will stop by when I return from Above."

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"I do not understand the purpose of a tattoo," Vincent said as he watched Scott applying the finishing touches to the vivid figure of the Grim Reaper.

"Well, let me try to explain," answered Reaper seriously.

"I do not wish to pry ... you do not have to ..."

"You're not prying, Vincent. Lots of people don't understand why we get ink. You see, several years ago a guy broke into our house. When I confronted him, he put a gun in my face and pulled the trigger. But the gun didn't go off. For a few seconds I just stood there, frozen, waiting for the pain. When I realized I had not been shot, we fought over the gun. Even though he was a little guy, he was so hyped up on drugs he was too strong for me to get the gun away. I just pushed him out the door. He fell down the steps and landed real hard but he bounced right back up and took off running. He never came back.

"But the whole point of this story is that I was wearing one of my favorite Harley t-shirts, with a Grim Reaper on the front. That guy was so caught up in staring at my shirt, he forgot to chamber the first bullet in that automatic. And that is the only reason I'm here to tell you this story. Ever since that night, the Grim Reaper has been sort of a guardian angel to me. That's why I got Scott to do this here tattoo."

Reaper pulled up his other shirt sleeve revealing a very realistic portrait of the Grim Reaper holding his sickle. "This is a copy of the Grim Reaper on the t-shirt I was wearing that night. And that's where I got my nickname." Rolling down his sleeve, he looked Vincent square in the eye. "It's pretty hard to explain unless you've experienced it. The first tattoo was a statement. A tribute. But once you've gotten ink, well, it becomes a need."

"Reaper, I am overwhelmed that you trusted me enough to tell me such a personal story. I am truly honored by your openness."

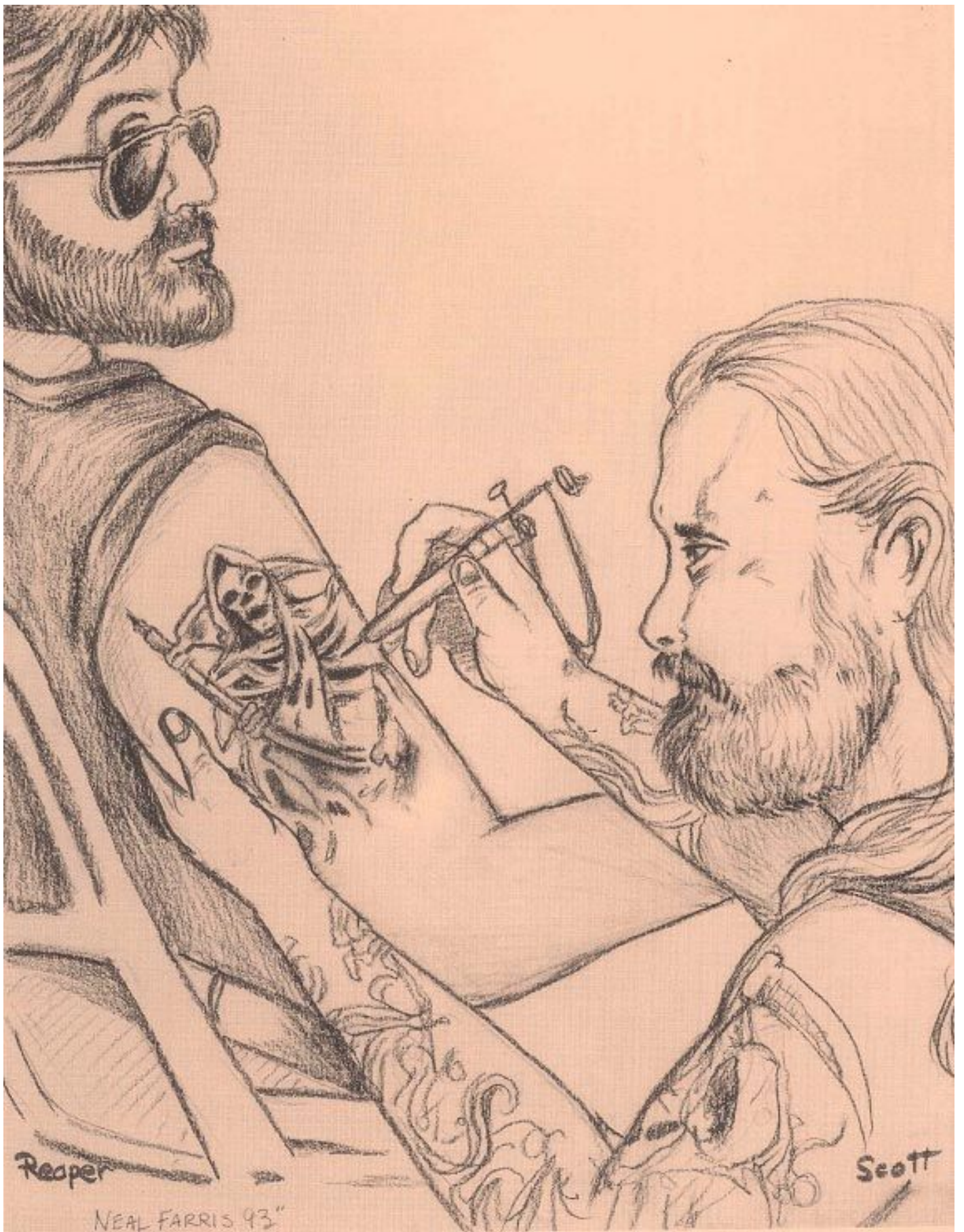
"Hey, man, we're friends," Reaper replied clapping Vincent on the shoulder. "You wanna try? I'm sure Scott would be glad to fix you up with a custom-designed piece."

"Thank you very much for the offer. I am fascinated, but I don't believe I would be a good candidate for a tattoo."

A slight tension filled the air as Reaper realized he may have inadvertently hurt Vincent's feelings. After all, his hands and face are pretty hairy, Reaper thought. I guess the rest of his body is covered with hair too.

"I didn't mean ..."

"It's quite all right, Reaper," Vincent said with a slight smile. "You have not offended me with your offer. After all, we are friends."



Reaper

Scott

NEAL FARRIS 93''

Relief flooded Reaper as he reached up and gripped Vincent's shoulder in a gesture of friendship.

"You are not going to believe this!"

Catherine's exclamation from the bottom of the stairs caused Vincent to whirl around to face her. "What is it, Catherine? Is there something wrong?" he said approaching her.

"Come upstairs. You have to see this!" she answered, grabbing his hand and tugging him up the steps behind her.

As they entered the room shared by Scott and Boa, Vincent's eyes immediately settled on the large snake coiled around Boa's waist. She does not appear to be distressed by this snake, he noticed with relief.

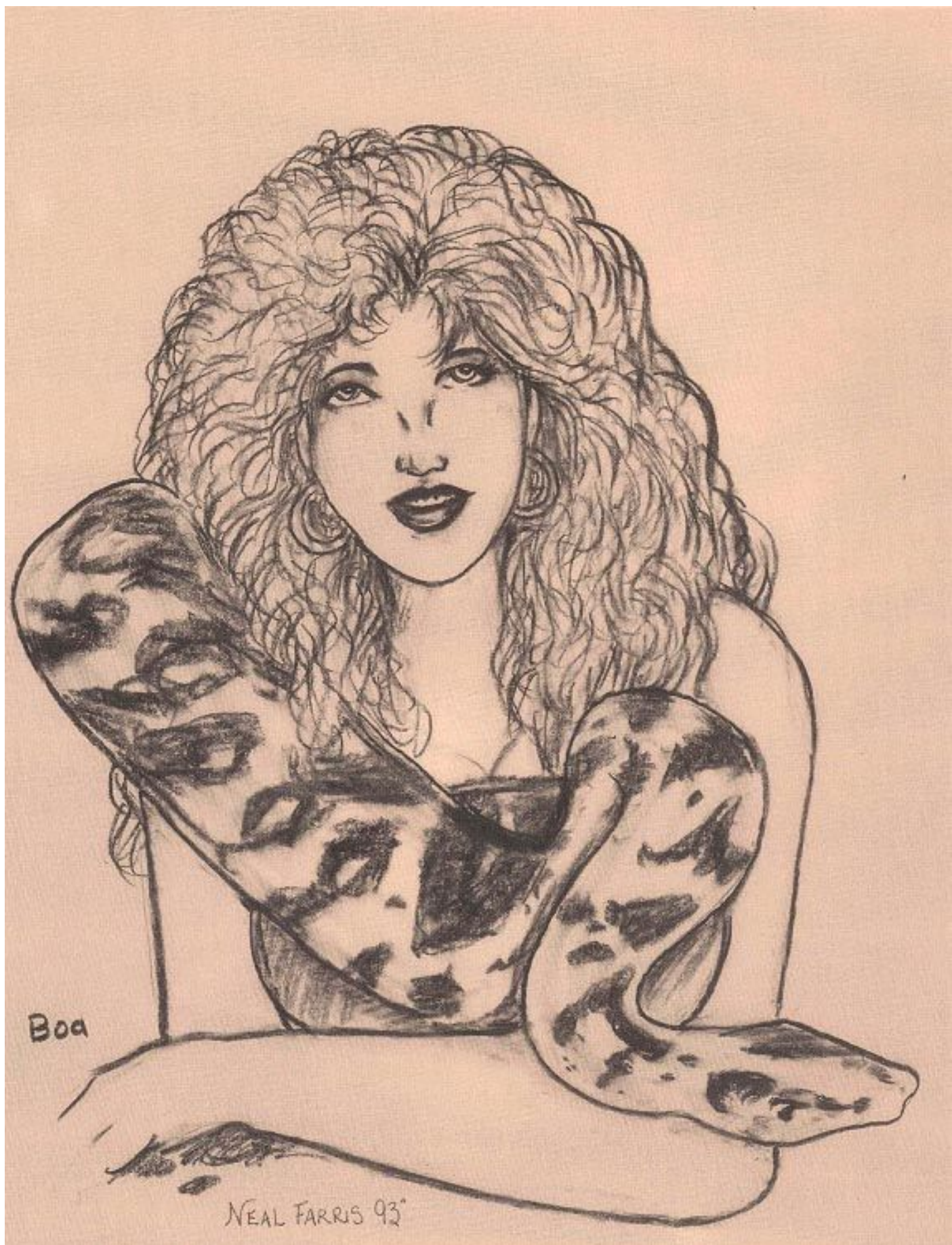
"Come on in, Damian won't hurt ya. He's gentle as a lamb," Boa stated as she placed a tender kiss on the snake's head. "He's like a kid to me."

"Isn't that the wildest thing you've ever seen?" Catherine said with an excited pitch to her voice. "We were just sitting here talking when Boa asked if I wanted to meet her pet, Damian. Well, I thought it was a dog or a kitten or something. Then out she walks with this huge boa constrictor. She even let me touch him!"

"Yes, Damian does appear to be a rather unusual choice in pets. He has very intricate markings. I've never seen a snake this close, in the light. We do occasionally encounter snakes in the Tunnels, but they are almost always shy and remain far from the inhabited areas. When approached, they always choose to retreat. He is actually very beautiful," Vincent said with sincerity.

"Wow, Vincent, you are the first person who agrees with me. I think Damian is a very beautiful creature. He and I have a special rapport. You see, I do this featured dance at the club where I work. And Damian here is my co-star. I sure couldn't be the 'Snake Lady' without him!" she said with a laugh.

"Snakes are very misunderstood creatures. Damian is very lucky to have your devotion ... and love," Vincent said. But his gaze was locked with Catherine's.



Boa

NEAL FARRIS 93



## Chapter 16

Several weeks later, Vincent and Catherine received a special invitation to the clubhouse. Shortly after arriving, they found themselves the center of attention.

"Vincent, we asked you to come here tonight because we wanted to give you this vest and ask you to become an honorary member of the Iron Vultures. As you can see, on the back of the vest is what we call our colors. That is the official symbol of our particular club. Whenever anyone sees a man wearing this particular patch, they know he's a member of the Iron Vultures motorcycle club. Nobody else is allowed to wear our colors."

Vincent's hand shook slightly as he took the vest Reaper held out. His silence was a testimony to the emotion he was feeling from this overwhelming gesture of friendship. He swallowed hard and let his eyes scan the room filled with now-familiar faces -- all smiling at him. Finally he spoke. "Thank you seems so empty when weighed against the gift of friendship."

Turning to Catherine, he handed her his new vest and began untying the laces on the patched suede one he now wore. Laying the old vest across the arm of a nearby chair, he turned to retrieve the new one. She held it up in front of her and assisted him in settling it in place.

The leather is very smooth, Vincent thought as he stroked one hand gently down the front. "It is beautiful. I am deeply touched," he said to the gathering of now-dear friends.

"Oh, and we almost forgot ta tell ya, we picked out a name for you," said Tank as he came from behind Reaper to claim the center of the gathering. "I hope you don't mind. You see, you got to have a nickname if you're goin' ta be a real member." Vincent nodded and Tank continued. "Well, a friend of my ol' man's had a motorcycle called a Vincent."

At the obvious reaction on Vincent's face, Tank nodded and let forth his unmistakable booming laugh. "Yessiree, I even got a picture of one in a magazine. I'll show it to ya next time I come across it. Anyway, this Vincent was the one they call the Black Shadow. So, we was all sittin' around tryin' ta think of a good name for you when I thought of this here scooter tramp and his Vincent."

As Tank started to walk away, Vincent just stood staring after him. Realizing he didn't understand, Tank turned back and said, "Black Shadow. That's the name we picked. Ya know, after the ol' man's scooter. We all just thought it was perfect ... but if you don't like it ya ain't gotta keep the name ..."

Extending his hand to grasp Tank's meaty shoulder, Vincent smiled and said, "It is a very fine nickname, Tank. I will be proud to use it because it was chosen by such

dear friends."

Immediately, everyone came up to shake Vincent's hand and admire his new vest. Turning, he gestured for Catherine to join him. When she approached, he drew her into his side and stood proudly among his friends with his arm wrapped around her shoulder as the warmth of friendship filled the room.

\*\*\*

Several days later, Vincent found himself making an impromptu visit to the clubhouse.

"Good evening, Tank," Vincent said as he came through the doorway from the kitchen into the living area. He noticed with surprise that the big man was sitting on his motorcycle -- inside the clubhouse!

"Oh, hey, Vincent. I mean Shadow," Tank called with a big grin. "How ya doin'?"

"Very well, thank you," Vincent answered and then paused to contemplate the situation. "And how are you?" he asked with a confused look on his face.

"OK, I guess. My scooter's busted," Tank answered with a dejected look. "Ya know, my motorcycle ... it ain't runnin' right."

"I see. I really don't know much about machinery, but perhaps Mouse could help you."

"Mouse!" boomed Tank with surprise. "Mouse couldn't fix a motorcycle if his life depended on it! He's forever buggin' me to work on his Shovelhead."

Realizing that Tank was referring to the Above Mouse while Vincent had been thinking of the Below Mouse, Vincent nodded and then proceeded to explain. "I am sorry to confuse you. I was thinking of my friend who lives Below and not your Mouse. Our Mouse is very talented at fixing things. Perhaps he could assist you."

"Well, I'm ready for some help, that's for sure. I know what's wrong, it's this here rocker arm. I checked the local Harley shop and they don't keep 'em in stock. Said they'd have ta special order one and I'd have ta pay in advance. I'm kinda low on cash right now and they wouldn't give me credit. I can't get any work without my scooter. And I can't get it fixed without the money."

"Catch 22," Vincent said solemnly.

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing, Tank. I was just thinking that perhaps my Mouse might be able to help. You said it was a rocker arm. Could I take this piece with me?"

"Yeah, sure, why not," Tank answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

The next evening, Vincent arrived and was greeted warmly by Nadia. He was beginning to enjoy the way she gave him a big, friendly hug whenever he came to visit. She'd explained that hugging was the way bikers greeted friends. Especially the very special ones. That had made Vincent feel even more accepted into what he now considered the home of his second family.

"Is Tank here?" Vincent asked as Nadia took his cloak.

"Yeah, he's in the living room -- him and his 'hog'. I wish they wouldn't bring those things in here," she said with an exasperated laugh.

"Hog?" Vincent said with a puzzled expression as he turned and pushed open the door. "Good evening, Tank," he said scanning the room with his eyes.

"Hey, Shadow. What's the matter, you lookin' for somethin'?"

"Yes, Nadia said you had a hog in here. Is it a new pet?"

His laughter filled the room. "No, man, I'm sittin' on it. Bike, scooter, hog. That's what we call our Harleys. Nadia's just pissed 'cause I got my bike in the house."

"Oh, I understand," Vincent said with a sheepish look. "I almost forgot, I brought you a present. From the Below Mouse."

"Man, you've got ta be kiddin'. This is great. Thanks! Wow, I can't believe it." As Tank quickly pumped Vincent's hand in a hasty thank you, he dropped to his knees and began putting the rocker arm in place. "Where did he get this?"

"Well, our Mouse has a certain talent for 'finding' things. Father has explained to him, many times, the difference between foraging Above and stealing. Truthfully, I did not ask Mouse where he obtained the part. He assured me he did not 'take' it -- that he 'found' it."

"Well, tell him from me it's about the best present I've had in a month of Sundays," Tank said grinning over his shoulder. Then he turned and applied himself to the repair.

Vincent found a comfortable chair nearby. It is fascinating to watch Tank, he thought as he settled himself and picked up a magazine from the table beside his chair. "Easyrider", what an intriguing publication!

For several hours, Tank and Vincent carried on casual conversation. Vincent leafed through many of the magazines and books at the clubhouse while Tank reassembled his Harley. Suddenly, Tank stood, wiped his greasy hands on a rag, and swung his leg over the saddle of the big Harley. A couple of kicks brought the big machine to life. The rumbling of the engine brought Nadia from the kitchen. With a glare from her, Tank cut the motor and sat back down dejectedly. "She's really mad now."

"Well, perhaps it would be better not to start this 'hog' in the house -- at least until AFTER she finishes fixing supper!" Vincent said with a sly grin.

"You got that right!" answered Tank. "While we wait, would you like ta know how this baby works?"

"Baby? Oh, your motorcycle. Do you not find it confusing having so many ways for referring to your motorcycles?" At Tank's questioning expression, Vincent assumed he did not. "Yes, I would love to know how this baby works, Tank," Vincent said with a chuckle that revealed the tips of his incisors. Tank didn't even notice.

"Come on, sit down on her," Tank said as he swung out of the saddle. "That's right. Now, this here is the clutch. You push this lever down when you want to change gears. This is the throttle, when you twist this that's what makes it go. You got two brakes. This lever works the front brake and this one is for the back brake. Yeah, that's it ... and this over here is the shifter."

Time passed all too quickly as Vincent's knowledge of the biker way of life expanded through his growing friendship with Tank.

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"Good evening, Tank. Are you having additional trouble with your motorcycle?" said Vincent as he entered the living area of the clubhouse several days later.

"Nah, that part your Mouse found for me fixed 'er right up, but while I had it in here I thought I'd clean 'er up real good. We're getting ready for a blood run and I'd like the old Knuck to shine!"

"A blood run?" Vincent said with a startled expression.

"Sounds pretty scary, huh? It's not, really. Ya see, the Iron Vultures put on two big events every year. We get a bunch of other clubs together and we all ride ta St. Vincent's Hospital and give blood. At last year's run, the bikers gave 82 pints!"

"That is a wonderful thing you do for the people of this city. I'm certain they must appreciate your generosity."

"Yeah, well ... the people of this city don't like us much and the ones at the hospital sometimes ain't too glad ta see us neither. Most of the other folks in the blood bank just get up and leave when we get there. But we do it 'cause we know it might be one of our bro's needin' blood one day. And what if there wasn't any?"

"The gift of life is the greatest gift one human being can give to another." As Vincent looked at Tank's somewhat confused expression, he continued, "You mentioned that the blood run was one of two events you sponsor during the year. What is the second?"

"A toy run. We all get together at that big vacant lot across from the park. One of the bro's, Woody, always gets dressed up like Santa Claus. He don't have ta use no paddin' or no fake beard. 'Sides, he loves kids. A couple years ago we built this big sleigh and painted it up red and all. Then Mouse always pulls the sleigh with his Shovelhead. Last year he got a big deer rack and wired it to the handlebars. Thought he was Rudolph for sure. We all line up and parade from there to the children's home. If you wanna ride in the parade, you got ta bring a toy. Lotsa folks tie big stuffed animals on their bikes. Ifn ya can't tie the toys on, we put 'em in the sleigh. Course, most of us bring a bunch of toys. In fact, I'm carvin' some wooden scooters for this year's run. I can't afford to buy fancy store-bought toys, but the rug rats seem happy with my homemade ones."

"Rug rats? Oh, you mean the children. How eccentric," Vincent said with a shake of his head. They really do speak a language of their own, he thought with amusement.

"Eccentric? What kinda word is that?" Tank asked.

"It means special, Tank. And you are very special, my friend."

"Me? Nah. Ain't nuthin' much special about me -- I'm just a biker. I'd maybe like ta have some rug rats someday. Get a house, nuthin' fancy, just a place of our own. Maybe if I could just get a job, I mean a real good one. Then I'd be able ta ask Eve ta marry me and we could save up. But ..."

"What is it, Tank?" Vincent asked when the big man grew quiet.

"Well, Vincent, ya see I can't seem ta get me no good job. People don't even give me a chance ta tell 'em what I can do. They take one look at me and it's all over. I can't even fill out the papers to apply ... I can't read," he admitted with tears in his eyes.

"Can't read?" Vincent replied with sympathy. "Tank, that is not such a grave problem."

"But it is. Don't you see? It's bad enough they don't like my looks, but if I can't

write I can't tell 'em what I can do. Nobody will hire me so I can show 'em."

Noting the frustrations of a lifetime in Tank's voice, Vincent moved closer and placed his hand on the burly biker's shoulder. "I would be most honored to teach you to read, my friend."

As Tank looked into Vincent's clear blue eyes, he could see there was no condemnation in them -- only one human being reaching out to help another in need. "Do you really think I could do it, I mean really?"

"Of course you can. Anyone intelligent enough to disassemble a complicated piece of machinery like that motorcycle, diagnose what is wrong, fix it and reassemble it ... you can do anything you really want to do."

"Vincent, I really want to learn to read." The big man's voice trembled with emotion.

"Very well. When can we begin?"

"Any time, man. Any time."

"I don't have any classes tomorrow," Vincent replied. "Shall we start at eight?"

"Eight it is ... and thanks."

"What are friends for?" Vincent said as he hesitated and then slapped Tank on the back.

A big grin erupted on Tank's face as he pulled Vincent into a mighty bear hug.

## Chapter 17

A tap on the French doors alerted Catherine to his arrival. "Vincent," she called excitedly as she threw herself into his arms.

"Catherine," he responded in his resonant, husky voice.

"I love the way you say my name. You make it sound like poetry."

"It is poetry, to me," he answered as he pressed his lips into her fragrant hair. "I love the scent of your hair," he whispered hardly realizing he had spoken aloud.

As she snuggled into his embrace, Vincent detected a slight tremor. "Are you cold?"

"I was. The night air is chilly, but I'm always warm when you hold me close. We can sit in the lounge chair. Let me get the comforter to use as a cover."

As she turned to go, Vincent whispered, "Perhaps we would be more comfortable ... inside?"

"Inside? My apartment? Oh, Vincent. Yes, please, come in." The smile on her face was radiant as she led him into her living room. "Here, let me take your cloak. Sit down. Can I get you something? A cup of tea?"

"Please relax, Catherine. I am the one who should be nervous," he said with a shy smile. "Tea would be very nice." Laying his cloak across the back of one of the couches, Catherine turned and disappeared into the kitchen. These couches certainly do not appear to be very sturdy, thought Vincent as he carefully lowered himself onto one of them.

When Catherine returned she found him seated rather uncomfortably on the edge of the couch. "You don't have to be afraid to sit down," she said with a reassuring smile. "They're actually much more practical than they look."

As she placed the silver tea service on the coffee table and sat down next to him, Vincent noticed just how small the couch really was. Handing him the cup and saucer, she picked up her own and settled back onto the cushions. Following her lead, he leaned back and took a sip of tea. The warmth dispelled some of his uneasiness.

"I am sorry for my obvious discomfort. I do not wish to damage anything. I'm more accustomed to the furniture Below."

"Vincent, anything that I have is yours as well. Nothing in this apartment is as important to me ... as you." Her green eyes sparkled with sincerity. Placing her cup and saucer on the silver tray she turned and took Vincent's and deposited it on the coffee

table. Then she snuggled into his side and raised her face saying, "Welcome to my home. Soon I hope you will feel as comfortable here as you do Below. I'd like for you to think of it as ... your home as well."

"I already do, Catherine. Wherever you are is home," he answered, gathering her into his arms. As he slowly lowered his lips to hers, she melted against him. For a long time, neither of them were aware of their physical location. They were safe and secure in the shelter of their love.

"You know, Catherine, over the past few weeks I have come to feel very comfortable at the clubhouse. I go quite often to visit now, and I have been spending a great deal of time with Tank. The others seem very happy to see me, but Tank seems particularly so. He and I have spent many hours just talking."

"I'm so happy you feel welcome there. They really are good people."

"Yes, they are," answered Vincent with a nod. "You know, Catherine, the world Below was formed by people who were rejected by the world Above -- who needed shelter from the sadness and pain that rejection instilled. So too the clubhouse is a refuge for those who are rejected. Both of those worlds are Above, but they are completely different. Father welcomes those in need to our world Below. Those without a family become a part of our family. And the hopes of the future -- the children -- are protected at all cost.

"In the same way, Reaper and Nadia have welcomed into their home people who had nowhere else to turn. It is so much like our world Below. The simpler lives of BOTH worlds -- the Tunnel World and the Biker Community -- bring into focus the more important things in life.

"Tank says they too have helped others who have stayed only long enough to regain the strength to return to their lives. But the eight of them who have remained are like the core of their world. And now they are a ... family. They make me feel almost a part of that family," he said with a wistful look.

"It only goes to show you that what my mother always said about everything happening for the best ... well, if I hadn't been attacked, we never would have met them."

"Your mother was a very wise woman," he answered pulling her closer to his side. "And I am very grateful that the bikers were there to help you."

"Me, too."

"Their club also reaches out to help the city in many ways. Tank told me of their blood runs and toy runs. Are you aware of these activities?"

"Yes, I've seen the motorcycles parading at Christmas. And I've heard about the



motorcyclists' generosity in giving blood to St. Vincent's. I was not aware of the Iron Vultures' participation. I guess I never really thought much about bikers until that night they saved me," she said as her thoughts strayed back to that fateful night.

"I suppose my basic feelings were that bikers were pretty much like what you see in the movies. You know, always drinking and doing drugs. Terrorizing people. Just a real bad lot. But getting to know Reaper and Nadia and the rest sure has changed my ideas. You know, it's really sad that people are saddled with a reputation they don't deserve. Even sadder when they are judged on appearance alone." Suddenly realizing what she had said, Catherine tilted her head to gaze into Vincent's deep blue eyes.

"How well I know, Catherine. How well I know."

## Chapter 18

"I am going Above, Father, to visit Tank," Vincent said as he paused at the top of the stairs. "I didn't want you to worry. I will return early."

"Yes, thank you, Vincent. You know I do worry when you are Above. You seem to have visited their clubhouse quite frequently of late."

"Yes, Father. I am teaching Tank to read."

"To read. I thought there were no children at this clubhouse. Is Tank this child's given name?"

"Tank is not a child. He is a full grown man, yet one who was not as fortunate as I. He did not have a loving father to educate him. He lost his father when he was not much more than a boy and he grew up alone until he found the Iron Vultures. They are his family. And I am his friend."

"That is a wonderful thing for you to do for your friend, Vincent. Wait just a moment, please," Father said, turning to rummage through several stacks of books in the far corner of the chamber. Finally, he pulled one black-bound volume out of the stack and held it out as he walked toward the stairs. "Perhaps Tank would be interested in reading this."

"Harley-Davidson, The Milwaukee Marvel," read Vincent. "This is wonderful, Father. A history of the Harley-Davidson company. Wherever did you get this book?"

"It was a recent 'find' of Mouse's. He brought it to me a couple of weeks ago. I stacked it with the other rather unusual volumes, uncertain of precisely where it should be filed. Please, tell Tank he may keep it."

"Thank you. I will tell him. It is far too advanced for him right now. But it will give him something to look forward to. He is doing quite well."

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"Come on in, Shadow. He's waitin' for you in the living room. Here, let me take your cloak."

"Thank you, Boa."

As Vincent opened the door, he could see Tank seated in the far corner of the room. They had pulled two chairs close together and found a good reading lamp. This was their study area whenever Vincent came for a lesson. Tank was so absorbed in the book he was reading, he did not see Vincent until his shadow fell obscuring the light.

"You are very absorbed tonight, Tank."

"Oh, Shadow, wow. Is it that time already? I've been sittin' here for hours, I reckon. Reaper gave me this book on motorcycle repair. I can't make out all the words, but the pictures are great. I can't wait until I can really read it!"

Vincent smiled. "It should not be long, Tank. You are making remarkable progress." Extending the black-bound volume, he continued, "Father has also sent you a book. It is about the history of the Harley-Davidson company."

"Wow, thanks." As Tank leafed through the book, the disappointment mixed with excitement was evident on his face. "The pictures are great, here's one that looks just like my bike. But the print's so small and the words ... it'll take me a long time to read this. When does Father want it back?"

"Tank, the book is yours -- it is a gift."

"Mine? Wow. Will you thank Father for me. First your Mouse helps me get my scoot runnin' and you offer ta teach me ta read and now this. You guys are great."

"We are your friends, Tank. That is all," Vincent replied warmly. "Speaking of reading, shall we get started?"

About an hour later, Tank said, "Man, my eyes are killin' me. I guess I shouldn't spend so much time readin' BEFORE you get here. Is it OK if we quit for tonight?"

"Of course it's all right. I, too, am tired. And I promised Father I would return early tonight. We are having a lot of problems in the lower tunnels. I have to lead a construction crew to survey the situation and report back to the Council. We will be leaving very early in the morning."

"Could ya stay for just a minute? I'd like ta ask ya somethin', Vincent."

"Certainly, Tank. What is it?" Vincent waited patiently as his friend hesitated before continuing. He could always tell when Tank wanted to talk about something serious, he called him Vincent instead of Shadow. In fact, Tank seemed to be the only one who did call him Shadow. I assume the nickname was Tank's idea, thought Vincent fondly.

"Well, I've been thinkin' that you been so good ta me, teachin' me ta read and bringin' me gifts from your family. Well, I'd like ta do somethin' for you, teach you somethin' -- if ya want ta learn."

"You and Scott have already been gracious enough to teach me to play pool. Tank, you do not owe me anything," Vincent protested gently. "I have truly enjoyed our

lessons together."

"Yeah, well. Remember when you came to visit and I was workin' on my Knuck? Well, you seemed kinda interested and I showed you how ta work the controls and all. We talked about ridin' and you said you wished ya could ride. Out in the sunshine." He looked at Vincent expectantly.

"Yes, I remember, Tank," came the quiet reply. "But that is impossible. I cannot go outside in the sun. It was only a wish ... a dream."

"But the whole thing might not be a dream! Ya see, I been lookin' into the idea of teachin' ya ta ride." Tank's tentative smile broadened in response to Vincent's wide-eyed astonishment.

"But how, Tank? Where?"

"Well, the warehouse next door has been vacant for years. We don't even know who owns it. Probably somebody who don't care nuthin' about it. And it's big, Vincent. Real big. Me and Scott, we went and cleared out a bunch of the junk that was stacked around. And we figure it's plenty big enough ta ride -- inside. So, whatcha say. Would ya like ta learn ta ride my bike?"

"I don't know, Tank." Years filled with doubt and uncertainty warred with Vincent's desire for this new experience. "Are you certain you want to do this? Do you think I could learn? What if I damage your motorcycle?"

"Sure you could learn. Look how fast you picked up on pool! You got a natural grace about ya. You already know how ta work the controls. All it would take is a little practice. Balance is the most important thing and you sure won't have any problem with that."

"But what if someone sees us?"

"Nah, I told ya no one ever goes there. It's safe, honest. Come on Vincent. Whadda ya say?"

"Well ..."

"Come on. Please. We don't have ta tell nobody. Scott didn't know why I asked him ta help me clear out that stuff. We could do it one day when everybody was gone. Just you and me."

"All right, Tank. If you really want to teach me to ride, I'd love to try." A boyish look overtook Vincent's face as he and Tank clasped hands.

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"Come on in, Vincent. They're all gone ta the meetin' about the blood run. I told 'em you were comin' over for a lesson and I couldn't go. It wasn't a lie. Just 'cause they thought I meant a readin' lesson!"

"Are you certain this is a good idea, Tank?" Vincent looked around nervously. "I would be very upset if I did anything to harm your motorcycle."

"Look, Vincent. Everybody has ta learn ta ride somehow. My ol' man taught me how ta ride on this Knuck. I dropped it a few times, but that wasn't the end of the world. Don't worry about it, OK? If we break anything, maybe we can get your Mouse to help us fix it. I ain't worried about it. You're gonna do just fine!"

"If you insist," Vincent answered half-heartedly.

"I do. Now, gimme that cloak. Ya can't wear that. It'll get all tangled up in the spokes. It ain't that cold in the warehouse. Ya think ya need a jacket? Ya might be able ta wear mine?"

"That's quite all right, Tank." Vincent smiled at the idea that his enthusiastic friend assumed his cloak was mainly for warmth. "I won't need a jacket."

"Well, then, let's get this show on the road! Go on back down the stairs and wait for me. I'll bring the bike around ta the side entrance. When ya hear me blow the horn, open that big delivery door. I'm gonna ride 'er up the ramp and through the door, so you step back after ya get the door open. OK?"

"OK!" Vincent said with a big grin.

As Vincent descended the stairs and made his way to the adjoining warehouse building, he could hear the rumble of the Harley as Tank kicked it to life. Just as Vincent arrived at the door, he heard the horn. Opening the door, he stood back and Tank came riding right into the huge warehouse. The low throaty sound of the Harley echoed off the walls of the empty building.

As Tank turned to see Vincent close and bar the delivery door, he stated with obvious affection, "Listen to her purr."

"Purr isn't exactly what I would call it," Vincent shouted as he cupped his large hands over his ears.

Shutting off the motorcycle, Tank swung out of the saddle and turned. Removing his own helmet, he dropped it to the ground and undid the strap that held another helmet to the backrest. "Here, put this on. It'll help." Tank handed Vincent a black fullface helmet with a face shield attached. "They make us wear helmets in this

state. If I have ta wear one, it'll be a half lid," he said kicking the helmet he'd dropped. "I can't hear nuthin' with that one on." Tank continued as he gestured to the fullface helmet. "But I guess your ears are a lot more sensitive than mine."

As Vincent pulled the helmet down over his head, he nodded. "Yes, this should help to muffle the sound." In order to be able to hear Tank's instructions clearly, Vincent did not pull the face shield closed. Settling into the worn but comfortable saddle, Vincent turned his full attention to Tank. "So, where do we begin?"

"Well now, the first thing ya need ta do is turn on the gas. That's this lever down here," Tank said pointing underneath the left side of the gas tank. If the bike was cold, you'd need ta set the choke right here; but its warmed up so you don't need ta worry about that right now. But, you gotta retard the timing. Twist the grip with your left hand. Good. Now, prime it by kicking down on this lever," Tank said pointing to the kicker on the right side of the bike. "Now, switch on the ignition and rare up and push your weight down through that leg."

As the engine rumbled to life, Tank shouted, "Great, you got 'er first try!" Vincent just nodded tensely. "This is the shifter," Tank continued. "Remember, just like we practiced in the house. She's in neutral. Forward is first gear. Push in the foot clutch and shift. That's all you need ta worry about right now. Ta start off, just put 'er in first, ease out the clutch, and give it a little gas by twistin' the throttle toward you."

As the bike lurched forward, surprise registered on Vincent's face. The old Harley coughed and died. "Tank, what did I do wrong?" he shouted in a distressed voice.

"Nuthin'. That usually happens the first couple of times. Ya gotta ease out the clutch. It's a matter of timin'. Ease out. Give it a little gas. Now, try 'er agin."

As the bike slowly pulled forward, Vincent turned the handlebars sharply to the right, let off the gas and the motorcycle engine died again.

"OK, here's what yer doin'," Tank said patiently. "First of all, let's get ya some more room."

They pushed the big Harley to the end of the room, turned it around and Vincent climbed back into the saddle.

"Now, when ya wanna turn, ya don't jerk the handlebars, ya just shift your body weight. Ya lean into the turn, a little for a small turn, more for a tight turn. And relax! You're doin' fine. OK, ready ta try 'er again?"

"I'm ready," said Vincent but the expression on his face didn't reflect his words.

This time, Vincent eased out the clutch, twisted back slightly on the throttle and the big old Harley slowly rolled forward. As he rode in large circles around the huge

warehouse, Vincent gained confidence with every revolution.

"Great, you're doin' great!" called Tank from the side of the room. And the big toothy grin he saw on Vincent's face was the only reward he needed.

## Chapter 19

Making repairs to leaking pipes was very dirty, cold work. Often the leaking pipes were almost inaccessible, making it difficult to get the necessary materials to the area at risk. While working, the crews were usually standing in water and mud. It took strong backs to support the pipes while others reinforced them and fixed them. This is where Vincent had always been invaluable -- but the project at hand was more than he could handle alone. If something wasn't done right away, the City work crews would probably be looking into a leak of this magnitude.

Vincent hurried from the work site to clean up so that he would not be late. Tonight was his weekly reading lesson with Tank, and he didn't want to disappoint the big man. Tank is doing so well, Vincent thought as he stripped off his dirty clothes and hurriedly washed. I really enjoy seeing the proud look on his face when he reads a passage.

Towelng dry and quickly dressing, he made a mental note to talk with Father when he returned. They needed to get more help in replacing that large section of pipe. The water level had steadily risen during the past week, and the project must be completed before it became a threat to the inhabited areas immediately above it.

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"Tank, I see you are reading the book Father gave you," Vincent said as he walked toward the large man hunched over the black-bound volume.

"Well, I don't know that I'm readin' all of it, but I'm gettin' most of it. It's real interestin'. Did you tell Father thanks for me?"

"Yes. And he said he had another book he wanted to give you, but he was unable to put his hand on it at the moment. If you could see his chamber, you would understand," Vincent said with a shake of his head.

"I'd love to see where you live," Tank said with a shy smile.

"And so you shall. We will have to arrange for you to come Below very soon."

"Great, I'd like that."

As Vincent settled himself into the chair beside Tank, he nodded for Tank to read aloud. He's doing remarkably well, Vincent thought as he listened to the steady flow of words. It's hard to believe he was unable to read even his own name when we started. And now ...



When Tank finished the last chapter of Treasure Island, he laid it down in his lap and looked over at Vincent. "You don't know what this means to me."

"Tell me."

"Well, me and Eve, we've been livin' together for over three years now. Don't get me wrong, I love her. And she loves me, too. I know she's been wantin' something more from me. She keeps lookin' at the other gals' property patches ... and weddin' bands. Then she looks at me with those big, sad eyes. But I ain't got nuthin' ta offer her, Vincent. I make furniture and repair this fallin' down building. I work odd jobs. She makes more money in one week dancin' at that sleazy club than I make in a month! What kind of a husband would I be? I can't even give her a real home."

"Tank, you just told me that you love Eve." Tank nodded as Vincent continued. "And you said she loves you, right?" Another nod. "Do you think it matters to Eve how much money you make or where you live?" Tank just shrugged his shoulders. "Have you asked her?"

"No, I can't talk ta her about it. It hurts too much. I want ta give her everything she deserves. And I can't."

Vincent sighed in heartfelt understanding. "But will you try talking to her, Tank?" Vincent asked as he laid his hand on the burly biker's shoulder. "Someone special once told me that all things are possible with love. Just try, OK?"

"Maybe, but ..."

Suddenly, a commotion from the kitchen drew their attention away from the discussion. As the Below Mouse burst through the door, he spotted Vincent in the far corner and scurried across the room talking excitedly. "Vincent. Good I found you. Got to come. Hurry. Pipes broke! Water everywhere!"

Each time the work crew repaired one leak and thought the problem was solved, another would appear in a different place close to the last one. Water was a very insidious opponent, often waiting, lulling one into thinking the problem was solved while it seeped its way through almost imperceptible cracks and crevices to reappear.

Vincent immediately grabbed his cloak and started after Mouse's retreating back. Tank clasped Vincent on the shoulder and said, "I'm coming, too -- you'll need another strong back."

The commotion had drawn everyone to the living area. As Tank grabbed his jacket, Scott piped in, "I'm coming, too."

"I don't know how strong my back is, but I'll help," chimed in the Above Mouse as he limped toward the rack near the front door where his jacket was hanging.

The three bikers followed Vincent into the basement of the clubhouse, through the adjacent warehouse and into the Tunnels.

As they hurried along the passageway, Tank caught up with Vincent. In an effort to lighten the mood he announced, "I wanted ta visit yer home but this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Nor I, Tank," Vincent readily agreed. "Perhaps we can resolve this situation and we'll be able to have that visit."

As they rounded the bend in the tunnel, they were met by Cullen and the rest of the construction crew. Father came limping up just as they were discussing the flooding.

"Vincent, who are these men? What are they doing here?"

"Father, these are Reaper's friends. This is Tank, Scott, and Mouse. When our Mouse arrived, they offered to help. I was planning to speak to you tonight about the need for more help, but there is no more time to talk."

"You're perfectly right, Vincent," Father said quickly. Turning to the bikers, he stated, "Welcome to our home. We greatly appreciate the offer of help."

"We must go, Father. Tell Pascal to sound the alarm. Anyone who is able needs to report to the construction site."

"It has already been sounded. He did that before Mouse came to get you."

"Very well, then we shall proceed to the site." Vincent reached out to grasp his father's shoulder reassuringly.

"Be careful, my son."

"I will, Father. And, could you please get word to Catherine? We may need her help in obtaining supplies."

"Peter has been contacted and will be getting in touch with her as soon as possible."

As Vincent led the bikers and the construction crew down to the lower tunnels, Father limped toward his chamber to await word from Catherine.

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"What a mess that was! I've never seen so much water," Scott dropped his mud-caked pants on the growing mound of filthy clothes.

"You can say that again," Mouse answered as he too peeled away the last of his soiled clothing.

A loud splashing sound drew their attention. "The water is great, guys," said Tank from the large bathing pool. "This is just like bein' at the Y!"

"Where's Vincent?" asked Mouse as he cautiously approached the pool.

"He said he'd wait 'til later ta wash up. Said he had ta talk ta Father. But I really think he don't feel right ... ya know. About him being different from us."

"Man, I don't even notice any more," stated Scott. "Yeah, when he first started coming around regular, I'd catch myself staring. But now, well -- he's just Vincent."

The others smiled in agreement as they relaxed their tired bodies in the soothing water.

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A few weeks later, Vincent arrived at the clubhouse for Tank's reading lesson.

"Hi, Vincent. How's it going?" said Eve as she opened the door to his knock.

"Very well, Eve. And how are you?"

"Just fine. You here for Tank's lesson? You know, I been meanin' to tell you how much those lessons mean to him. And to me. He's like a different man. It never mattered to me, that he couldn't read. Didn't make me love him any less, that's for sure. But now he feels better about himself. He got a job yesterday. But then, I probably wasn't supposed to tell you that. Pretend it's a surprise when he tells you, OK?"

"Of course," promised Vincent as a hint of a smile touched his lips.

"Well, I got to go to work. Make yourself at home. I think Tank's in our room. I'll tell him you're here."

As Vincent walked to the chair he always used for their lessons, he heard Tank coming down the stairs. "Shadow, you're early. Or I'm late. Whatever. It's good ta see ya. How's the pipes?"

"Everything seems to be in good working order. Father asked me to thank everyone for their help. He was very impressed with the work you three did. Mouse's welding talent and equipment were very helpful."

"We were just glad we could help," Tank said as he sat down and picked up the

book.

"Bye, Tank," Eve said bending over his chair. Placing her slender hands on either side of his scruffy beard, she kissed him on the lips, turned and headed for the front door. Over her shoulder she called "Bye, Vincent," as she slammed and locked the big, heavy door.

"Goin' to work," Tank said as he picked up his book and began to read. After only one chapter, the big man began to fidget. Vincent noticed his nervousness, but did not comment. Finally, Tank stopped. "Can we skip the lesson, just for tonight?"

"Certainly, Tank. In fact, I was about to tell you that you were doing so well I didn't see any reason for you to have to continue to read for me. You read beautifully. Practice is all you need now. If you would like to borrow some of the books from Father's library, he said he would be happy to lend them to you." Producing a book from his cloak, Vincent handed it to Tank. "I almost forgot, Father sent you this. It's the book I told you he was looking for."

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Repair," read Tank slowly. "Gee, thanks."

"You will find that book very different than the title implies. If you do not care for it, don't be concerned. It is more about philosophy than motorcycle repair."

"Well, I'll try readin' some of it this week and maybe we can talk about it next Tuesday," said Tank, hoping Vincent would agree to continue to come. "I'd really miss your visits if ya quit comin' ta see me."

"I would miss our visits also, Tank."

"Vincent, there's somethin' I just gotta show you. Wait right here, OK?"

"All right." As Tank thundered up the stairs, Vincent pondered the excitement he had seen in the big man's eyes. Almost immediately, Tank came back down the stairs, two at a time, and bounded across the room halting directly in front of Vincent.

He had a paper bag in one hand and what looked like a piece of black leather clutched in the other. Extending the leather toward Vincent, he said excitedly, "Look what I got fer Eve. She's gonna die!"

As Vincent unfolded the scrap of leather, he realized it was a small vest. Turning it around, he saw the now-familiar property patch of the Iron Vultures neatly sewn on the back.

"I sewed it on myself. Didn't want nobody else ta know about it but me and Eve. And you, of course. I just had ta tell somebody," he said with a big grin that encompassed his whole face.

"I really appreciate this, Tank. The fact that you wanted to share it with me," Vincent said with sincerity. "When are you going to give it to her?"

"This Sunday. Everybody's off work and we're havin' a little party ta celebrate me gettin' my new job." At that announcement, Tank's chest swelled slightly and Vincent could see the pride in the way he straightened his shoulders. "And I want you and Catherine ta come. I'm gonna give Eve the vest right before the party. That way she can show it off ta everybody."

"I will speak with Catherine about the party. I'm certain she will wish to attend. And I'm very happy to hear about your new job. You must tell me all about it."

"It's all thanks to you, Vincent. You teachin' me ta read and all. And just bein' my friend, lettin' me talk ta you about Eve. I haven't felt this good about myself in a real long time." Tank just stood in front of Vincent smiling.

"Tank, you owe me no thanks. You did all the work. It is your accomplishment, not mine. I was extremely lucky to have been given the opportunity to discover the wonderful world of books. I only provided you the same chance -- and you did the rest!"

"Yeah, well, I couldn't a done it without ya," he said with a firm voice. "Oh, and I almost forgot. This here's for you." Handing Vincent the paper bag in exchange for Eve's vest, Tank turned and sat on the edge of a nearby chair to watch him open the package.

"You don't have to give me presents, Tank. I don't expect ..." As Vincent pulled the piece of buttery soft black leather from the bag, his heart constricted slightly in imagined anticipation. Slowly he unfolded the small leather vest and turned it around. The words on the patch read, "Property of Black Shadow."

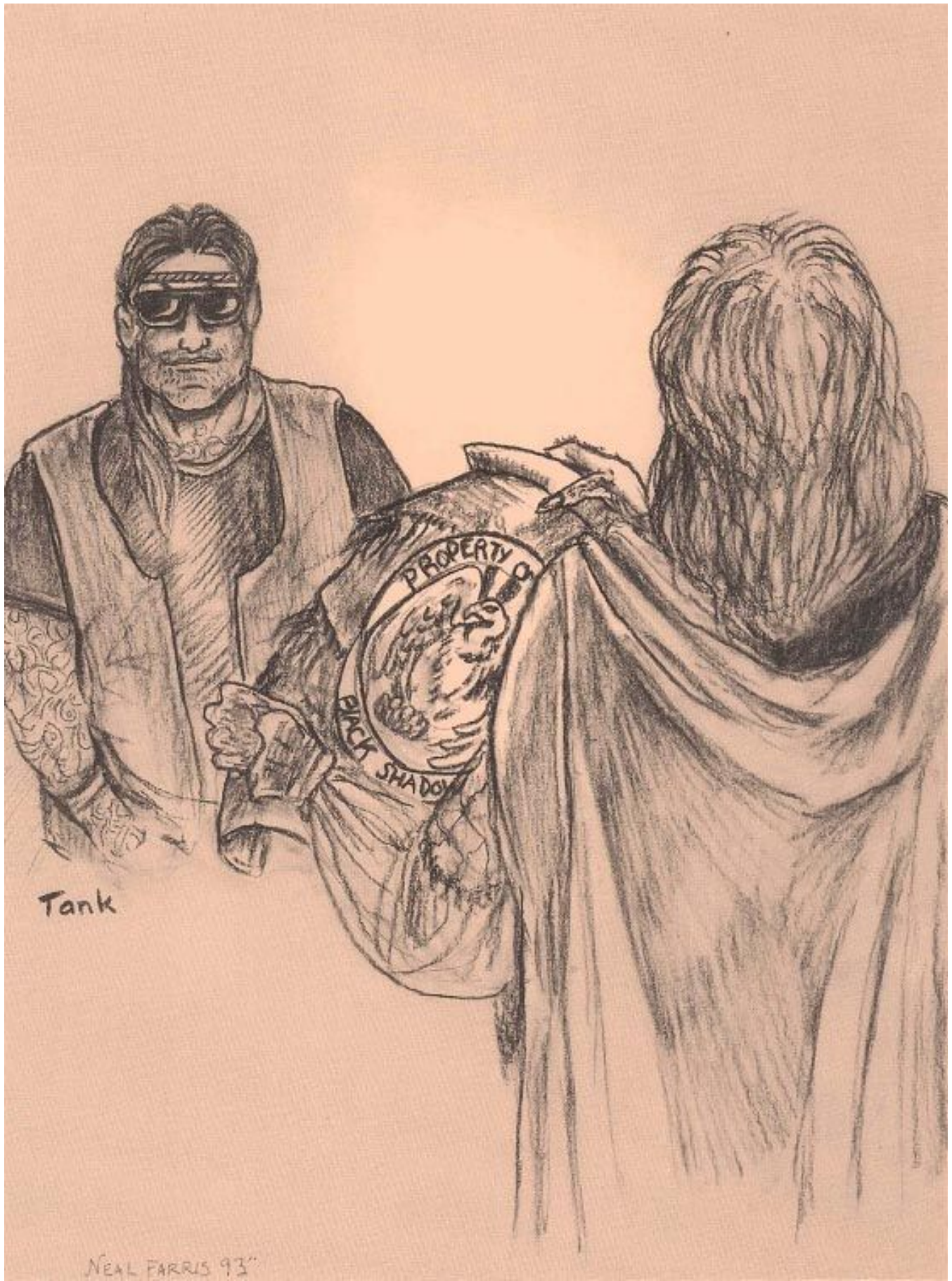
"It's for you ta give ta Catherine."

As the tears welled up in Vincent's eyes, Tank looked down at his hands in confusion. "I didn't mean no harm. I just thought about what you told me about how Eve loved me just the way I was. That she didn't care if I could read, or had a job, or could buy her a house. She just wanted ta be with me. And I knew from watchin' her eyes that Catherine feels the same way about you. She don't care if you're different. She loves you just the way you are. And I figured you'd never get up the nerve to give her your property patch. So, while I had up my nerve I just got one for you. Ya don't have ta give it ta her right away. You'll know when the time's right. But, I just wanted ta help ..."

Vincent stood and pulled the big, burly biker into a brotherly hug.

"Thank you. You are a true friend. You and your family have taught me much in the short time I've known you. I will have to think about this," he continued, holding

up the vest. "But I want you to know how very much it means to me to have your friendship."





### **She Loves Me As A Man**

Though it is hard to understand;  
I wonder at it still --  
Catherine loves me as a man,  
and says she always will.

And in her eyes of green I see  
the lovelight shining there.  
I feel her love is meant for me;  
so why do I despair?

I hear her words -- she feels they're true;  
I know she is sincere.  
But what am I supposed to do  
to overcome the fear

That's grown inside me through the years  
and lives within my heart?  
I'm sad that I have caused her tears;  
but how do I depart

From ways that are a part of me;  
embedded deep within?  
How can I help her see the me  
that I have always been?

And understand it's not the way  
I always want to be.  
It's just the price I've had to pay  
for being only me.

Peggy Garvin - 5/1/92

## Chapter 20

As they walked toward the stairs leading to the clubhouse, Catherine stopped and said, "Vincent, I'm so excited about this party. I know Eve will be very happy."

"Yes, Catherine, I believe that both Tank and Eve will be very happy tonight."

"And it's all thanks to you. Helping Tank to feel good about himself. Teaching him to read so he could get a job."

"No, Catherine. Tank himself worked very hard to learn to read. And I know it was important to him that he have a job. But the most important thing is that now Tank realizes Eve has always loved him -- for himself."

As Vincent bent and kissed Catherine on the cheek, he took her hand and led her up the stairs. His words echoed in her heart. Yes, Vincent, she thought, Tank now knows this truth. But when will you truly accept the fact that you, also, are loved for yourself.

"Come on in, Vincent, Catherine. The party's already started," said Nadia as she closed the door behind them.

"Catherine," squealed Eve from across the big, warm kitchen. "Come see what Tank gave me. You just won't believe!" As Eve turned around for Catherine to see her property patch, Boa and Kitten came up and they all began chattering at one time.

"Don't mind them, Vincent," said Scott as he hung the patched cloak on a hook by the door. "Eve's been like that ever since Tank gave her the vest. If she gets any happier, I think she'll bust!"

"They deserve the happiness," was all Vincent said as he watched the five women all trying to talk at the same time.

"Come on in the living room. You and me could teach Tank and Reaper a little lesson about pool. Whadda ya say?" Scott suggested with a big grin.

As Vincent looked over his shoulder at Catherine still very involved in "girl talk", he shrugged and followed Scott into the next room.

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"We give up. You guys are just too good," said Reaper slapping Vincent on the back. "Let's get something to eat."

"Yeah, that sounds like a great idea," said Tank as he stood his cue up in the



rack. "I'm starved. And I heard Nadia was gonna make one of her banana-split cakes to celebrate me and Eve gettin' hitched."

"Banana-split cake!" said a small voice from the corner. Mouse was still studying for his exam and had been quietly reading during their game of pool. "I'm about half blind and hungry to boot. Let's go."

The five men charged through the kitchen door just as Nadia was setting the cake on the center picnic table. "I was just about to come get you guys. Tank, Eve, you two come on over here." As Nadia put her arm around Eve and reached the other arm up to try and hug Tank's massive shoulders, she announced to the group, "This is a real happy occasion for our family tonight. Tank and Eve are getting married."

As everyone cheered, Boa came up and pecked Tank on the cheek. "We thought you'd never ask her, you big lug. What took you so long?"

"I dunno, I guess I just had ta get up my nerve," he said as he looked straight at Vincent and grinned.

As everyone filed by the big pan filled with cake, they talked about the wedding plans. First Mouse and Kitten and now Tank and Eve. As each couple sat down and the group became absorbed in eating, the room grew still. A few minutes later the men piled their plates in the sink and drifted back into the living area, while the women finished cleaning up the kitchen. As another game of pool was about to get underway, Nadia led the parade of women into the big room.

"OK, guys, it's time we did something together."

"How about we dance?" suggested Eve as she snuggled up to Tank and looked lovingly into his eyes.

"Yeah, that sounds great," he said returning her gaze. "But first, we've got a presentation ta make, right Reaper?"

"Right, Tank. How about if you go get the stuff."

Tank thundered up the stairs and quickly returned with two large boxes. Handing them to Reaper, he blended back into the group.

"Vincent, Catherine," Reaper began. "We never did get a chance to thank you properly for what you did for us ... saving me and Nadia and letting us stay with you until it was safe to come home. So, we all got together and got you something to show our appreciation." He handed the top box to Catherine and the remaining one to Vincent.

As they both stood holding the boxes and looking around the room, everyone

started yelling, "Open 'em up."

Catherine turned, placed the large box on a nearby chair, and raised the lid. Inside was a black leather motorcycle jacket. As she held it up, she noticed the long fringe on the front and hanging from the sleeves. She turned it around and saw that the fringe was across the back as well. As she unzipped it and slipped it on, she felt the thick, quilted lining envelop her. The waist was gathered in the back and a slim leather belt fastened with a silver buckle in front.

"It's just like the jacket I borrowed from Eve the night Tank took me home. It's beautiful. Thank you. But you guys didn't have to do this." Her final words of protest, however, were in direct conflict with the expression on her face. It was obvious to everyone that she was very happy they had presented her such a special gift.

"Open yours," said Reaper as he reached out to hold the box so Vincent could remove the lid. Inside was a much larger version of the jacket they had given Catherine. As Vincent put the jacket on, he noticed it too had long fringe back and front as well as on the sleeves. There were zippered pockets inside and out and a wide belt encircled his waist.

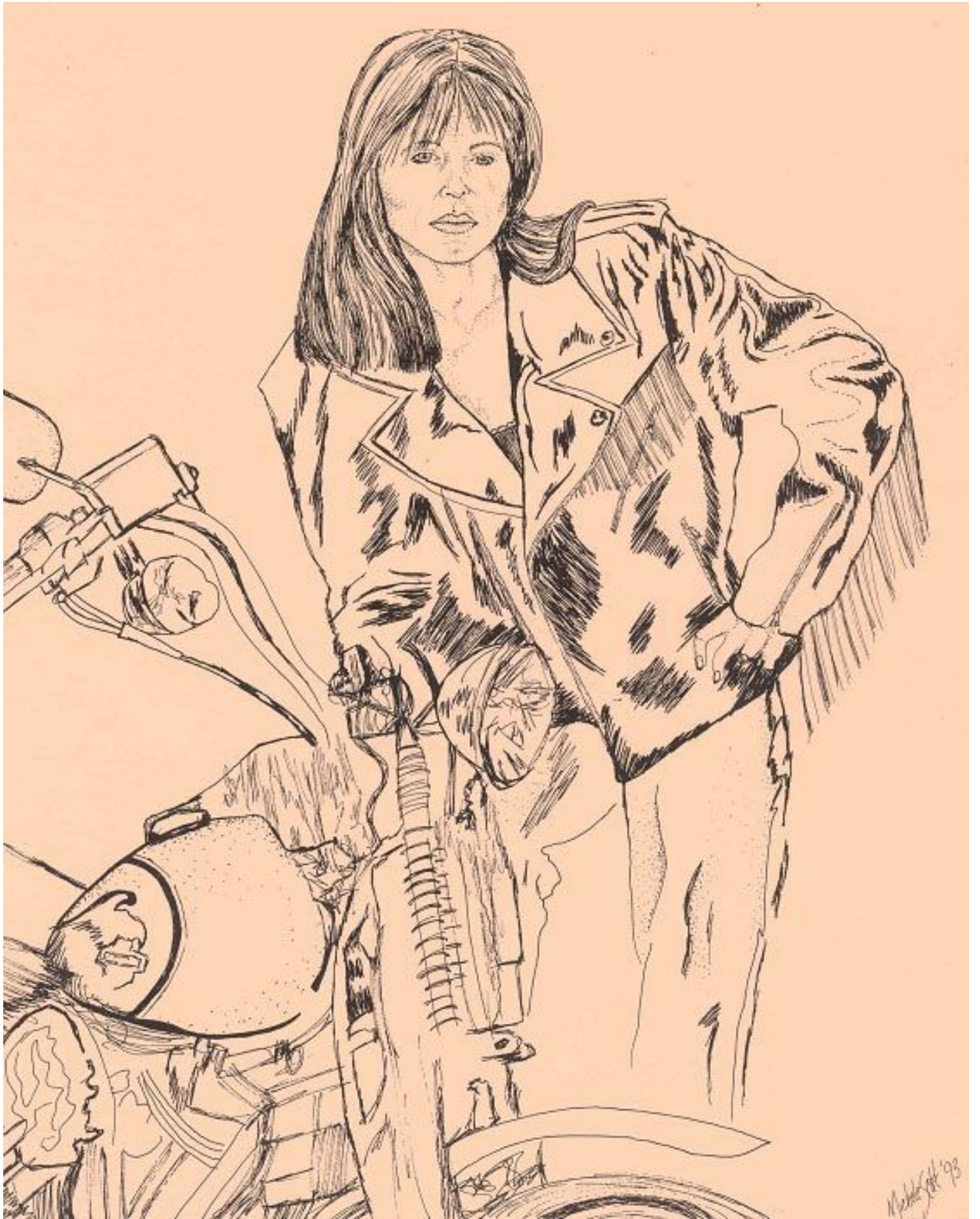
As Catherine pulled on her jacket, her gaze momentarily locked with Vincent's.

Reluctantly breaking eye contact with Catherine, Vincent turned to the gathering of friends and said, "There is nothing I can say to show you how much this means to me. Your friendship alone is more than I could have hoped for. I will treasure this jacket and think of each of you every time I wear it," Vincent said as he stroked the soft, supple leather. As Catherine came to his side, he opened his arms and drew her into a shy embrace. He was still unsure about showing her any affection in front of others, but he was slowly coming to realize that he would find no ridicule in the eyes of these gentle people.

As Nadia put on a tape, someone turned out the overhead lights, while Eve pulled Tank up out of his chair and dragged him to the middle of the room. They began to sway in time to "Just To Be Close To You" by the Commodores. Soon Reaper drew Nadia close and began moving in time to the music. One by one the couples began dancing until Vincent and Catherine were the only ones left standing. Catherine looked up into his shimmering blue eyes and waited.

"Would you care to dance?" he finally said.

His shy smile was met by her broad grin as she replied, "I thought you'd never ask."



They both removed their new jackets and laid them across the back of the closest chair. Turning to Catherine, Vincent held his arms out as if to waltz. Then quickly looking at the other couples, he slipped his arm around Catherine's waist and folded her hand against his chest. She sighed and snuggled her head beneath his chin as they moved to the rhythm of the music.

The next song was fast and lively. As a look of horror came over Vincent's face, Catherine laughed softly and led him to the couch. "I won't ask you to dance this one, just relax."

"Was my discomfort that apparent, Catherine?"

"Most definitely," she answered as she snuggled against his side while they watched Reaper and Nadia do a very professional jitterbug. The following song was "Proud Mary", one that Catherine recognized. As she snapped her fingers in time to the music, Vincent looked at her with amazement. When she posed the question with her eyes, the horror immediately returned to his face. She just smiled and kept tapping her foot. When she looked up, Reaper was standing in front of them with his hand out.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked, the question starting with Catherine but ending with a silent request for permission from Vincent.

"Do you mind, Vincent?" she asked.

"Of course not, Catherine. Please, dance."

It was difficult to tell who enjoyed the dance more. Catherine because she hadn't danced like that in years or Vincent because he hadn't seen her look quite so carefree since the time they had been caught in the rain beneath the storm grate while listening to a concert in the park.

The dancing continued for several hours. Vincent and Catherine enjoyed many romantic, slow dances. Tank, Mouse and Vincent were in agreement -- they did NOT do fast dances. So, Reaper and Scott took turns dancing with all of the women.

All too soon, the conversations turned to Monday morning and the fact that many of them had to be at work very early. Everyone seemed reluctant for the evening to end, and they all agreed they would have to get together more often.

As Vincent was talking to Mouse, Catherine excused herself and followed Tank into the kitchen. "Tank," she said in a whisper. "Vincent told me you were teaching him to ride your motorcycle. When he talked about it, his face lit up like a little boy's. I just wanted to thank you for giving him that special experience. He has so few opportunities to do things that are taken for granted by other people."

"No problem. I had a ball. He's a quick learner. And a Knuck is one of the

hardest bikes to learn on. If you can master a jockey shifter, the newer Harleys are a cinch." A strange look came over Tank's face and he looked intently at Catherine. "You may think I'm nuts, but there ain't no reason Vincent can't ride. I mean really ride."

"You mean outside? On the street? Tank, that would be too dangerous! He could never risk it. What if someone saw him? He feels safe here, but you know as well as I do, not everyone is as tolerant of Vincent's differences as your family has been. No, Tank, it just wouldn't be possible. But thanks anyway."

"No, wait, Catherine. Just hear me out. Vincent looks pretty much like anybody else in jeans and a jacket. If we got him some motorcycle gloves and put that fullface helmet I got on him. Well? The long hair ain't nothin' special. Lotsa bikers got long hair. He could keep the face shield down on the helmet and nobody'd be the wiser."

"Do you really think so, Tank?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, really. And I know the perfect place he could ride," Tank continued excitedly. "The cabin. You know -- for Mouse and Kitten's wedding. It's a nice ride. Not too long but nice. You know. Pretty trees, the river. And the cabin is real private. I mean nobody bothers us. He'd be safe, honest," Tank finished with an expectant look on his face.

As Catherine reached up and pecked Tank on the cheek, she said, "Thanks. I'll talk to him about it."

## Chapter 21

The steady rumble of the engine lulled Vincent into a brief state of reverie as he replayed in his mind the fateful conversation that had led up to this monumental day in their lives.

"Catherine, I just don't know."

"The decision is yours, Vincent."

"It is something I have dreamed of, a chance to walk in the sunlight -- with you," he said as he pulled her closer and placed a gentle kiss in her fragrant hair.

"Sometimes, it is possible for dreams to come true. Maybe this is one of those times."

"Perhaps."

A sudden movement jarred Vincent's attention back from the past. As he shut off the engine of Reaper's bike, he turned questioning eyes toward his friends.

"I want you to ride my bike," said Reaper. "It's easier to handle. Besides, Catherine will thank me even more than you will. That ol' Knuck of Tank's would beat both of you to death before we got halfway to the cabin," Reaper said slapping Tank on the shoulder and grinning.

"He's right, Shadow," Tank added. "The Knuck's what we call a rigid or hardtail. It's like a bicycle frame -- solid. So whatever the back tire rides over, your butt feels. There's nuthin' to cushion the ride.

"Reaper's bike's a softail. It looks just like the Knuck, but the frame has a pivot with hidden shocks. When ya go over a bump, you don't feel it as much. It would be harder on you, but the passenger -- Catherine -- would take the worst of it."

"I would not wish to cause Catherine any undue discomfort," Vincent said with a slightly shy smile. "Thank you, Reaper, for trusting me with your motorcycle. Thank you, both -- for everything."

"No problem. Now that that's settled, I'll finish loading the truck so we can get going," Reaper said as he turned to head outside.

"I'll help ya," said Tank. Over his shoulder, he smiled at Vincent and said with a sly wink, "Ya still got that vest, Shadow?"

"Yes, Tank. I certainly do."

"Vincent, I've been looking everywhere for you. What are you guys doing here in the warehouse?" Catherine walked directly to Vincent's side and, as he held out his arm she fitted herself comfortably into his embrace.

"Reaper was kind enough to offer the use of his motorcycle for the ride today. He brought it inside the warehouse to familiarize me with the differences in the controls."

"Eve said to give you this," Catherine announced as she handed him the fullface helmet. "She gave me these, too," she said holding up a handful of rubber bands.

Confusion invaded Vincent's eyes until Catherine explained that Eve recommended they secure his mane in a ponytail in order to keep the wind from tangling it on the ride. As Vincent straddled the Springer and turned his head, Catherine drew a small brush from one of the zippered pockets of her leather jacket. As she pulled the brush through his golden mass of hair, gathering it into a heavy handful, she questioned the ability of a small rubber band to secure the unruly locks. One, two, three bands in place, she stood mesmerized by her first sight of his exposed neck. The urge to bend forward and press her mouth to the smooth, pale skin was overwhelming. Closer examination revealed the tips of his earlobes peaking out from the taut stretch of hair. The brush trembled with her shaking hand. To quell the movement, she pressed her hands down to rest on his leather-clad shoulders.



Turning his head, Vincent read the building emotions on Catherine's flushed features and a rush of heat rose from the pit of his stomach to color his cheeks. To cover his reaction, he quickly donned the helmet and, with an unsteady voice said, "Could you please open the delivery door?"

A silent nod pulled Catherine's gaze from him. As she walked toward the door, Vincent snapped the visor on the helmet shut and concentrated on bringing the Springer to life. Peering up the ramp into the morning light, Vincent gathered his courage and then rode straight into the unknown, like a knight into battle.

After Catherine secured the heavy door, she let her eyes scan the crowd in search of that one special leather-clad man. To her surprise, Vincent blended into the crowd very well. Finally she spotted the fullface helmet. His was the only one like it. As she walked toward Vincent, she greeted the friends she passed on the way. It felt good to be among these people whom she and Vincent had come to trust. And indeed today they were trusting them with his very life.

"Hey, Catherine. Come on. We're about ta ride out," called Tank from a position next to Vincent in the line.

"OK," she answered as she pulled her own fullface helmet over her head and stuffed her hair up inside. When she reached Vincent's side, he held out his hand and, leaning forward, assisted her to straddle the smaller padded passenger seat behind him.

How strangely sensual it feels to be sitting like this, she thought.

Suddenly, Vincent's back straightened and he turned his head to look at her, but the cumbersome helmet prevented him from making eye contact.

Struggling to bring her emotions under control, Catherine called out a welcome to Eve who was approaching from the clubhouse. "Hurry, they're getting ready to leave!"

"Yeah, I know. Tank's been buggin' me for the past 30 minutes. Said he wanted to be sure we got to ride by you guys," she said with a big grin as she put her foot on the passenger peg and swung into position behind Tank.

I didn't react this way when I rode with Tank, Catherine thought as she tried to analyze her emotional response to sitting behind Vincent. And Eve seems perfectly comfortable sitting behind Tank.

Catherine noted the way Eve slid her arms around his waist and snuggled her mouth into Tank's neck. Flashes of Vincent's neck brought a fresh assault of emotions which she again wrestled into submission. Gradually, she slid her arms around Vincent's waist and waited for a reaction. Eventually she sensed a slight relaxation of his shoulders and she too relaxed. The confirmation that he had adjusted came when his large, leathery palm covered her small hands. As he removed his hand from hers and began putting on



his thick, leather gauntlets, she too donned her gloves.

Engines roared to life until the air was filled with the throbbing sound. Since Reaper had loaned Vincent his bike, Scott was leading the ride on his '71 candy-apple red Electra Glide Shovelhead with Boa riding beside him on her '65 Electra Glide Panhead with matching red paint. As they pulled out, they were followed by Nadia on her plum-colored '89 Sportster with Mouse and Kitten in formation beside her on his '76 blue and silver Electra Glide Shovelhead. As Tank pulled out into the street, Vincent's mind was jarred from the mesmerizing spectacle of the bikes to the task at hand. As they pulled into the street Rev. Stone, the old preacher who would be performing the wedding ceremony, nudged forward on his black '86 Tour Glide while his lady friend, Betty, rode next to him on her burgundy Sport Glide.

It feels good to be riding **outside**, thought Vincent as they rode across town and turned onto the West Side Highway, leaving behind the crowded city traffic.

As the noisy, cluttered city streets were replaced by winding side roads skirting around and through suburban areas, Vincent relaxed slightly. Yonkers, Tarrytown, Croton-on-Hudson -- signs bearing unfamiliar names whipped by as the line of bikes followed the winding Hudson River.

As he guided the Harley up hills and down, leaning into the curves and accelerating in the straightaways, he became enchanted with the overpowering feeling of freedom he was experiencing. I wish I didn't have to wear this helmet, he thought as he imagined the exhilaration of the wind whipping through his hair.

Vincent regretted their descent from the high crest of the river -- the view had been spectacular. As they turned inland toward Yorktown Heights and then northwest he was rewarded by the even more breathtaking view of Lake Peekskill. The huge, placid lake was surrounded by woods and several small signs proclaimed their offering of fishing and camping.

Putnam County was as different from New York City as night was from day.

All too soon the bikes slowed signaling the nearing of their destination. As Mouse signaled a right turn, Vincent slowed too, shifting his body weight and easing off the pavement. Riding on the gravel road was totally different from the highway, and Vincent tensed alerting Catherine to his uneasiness. As they rode, he became more relaxed and she was able to survey her surroundings.

The winding road snaked through what appeared to be a dense forest. The trees grew close to the roadside extending their branches out over the road to form a tunnel of foliage. Occasionally, a mailbox beside a dirt driveway marked the sparse inhabitants' existence. But there were no other vehicles on the road.

Mouse signaled another right and Vincent followed the other bikes onto a

narrow dirt trail. For the first time he was grateful for the face shield on his helmet as the dust roiled out from beneath the Harleys in front of him.

As the line of bikes pulled up into the front yard of the cabin, everyone started parking, unloading their belongings, and piling them on the big covered front porch. Vincent pulled Reaper's Softail up next to Tank's Knucklehead. Tank had insisted on riding next to Vincent in the center of the line of bikes -- just to keep an eye on him. Vincent leaned forward slightly, allowing Catherine to slip from behind him. As he slid the kickstand out, he was almost reluctant to get off the bike. The forty-minute ride had seemed much too short, and he regretted that it was over.

Suddenly, Vincent realized that the end of the ride marked the beginning of more new adventures. As he removed the helmet and rubber bands, shaking his mane loose to fall about his shoulders, he felt Catherine's eyes on him.

"Vincent, you are so beautiful. Your hair in the sunlight is the color of summer wheat. This is it, our dream come true -- you and I, walking in the sunshine." Catherine held out her hand and Vincent's large gloved one engulfed it. A need to feel her smooth skin caused him to release her hand momentarily. Removing his gloves and placing them on the seat of the motorcycle, he turned once again to clasp Catherine's hand -- flesh to flesh.

Vincent hadn't said a word since their arrival. His eyes were filled with the wondrous feel of the crisp spring air. His senses were overwhelmed leaving him speechless. Catherine felt his awe through the bond and was completely content to walk, hand in hand, toward the water.

The lake was calm and the breeze blowing gently across it brought more new experiences to assail Vincent. The blue of the sky was so different from the blue of the water. The trees seemed more green than any he had ever seen in Central Park. This was one memory he would treasure for the rest of his life.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vincent noticed a bustle of activity, and guilt washed over him. Here he was wandering around like a child while his friends were busy unloading supplies. As Vincent turned to go back and offer his assistance, he and Catherine shared a knowing look. There would be plenty of time for enjoying these wonderful new experiences together -- after the work was finished. Still holding hands they headed back toward the cabin.

While Vincent and Catherine were mesmerized by the scenery, Reaper had arrived in his old Chevy pickup with the bulk of the supplies.

As they arrived amid the frantic activity, Vincent noticed that Tank was attempting to unload a stack of firewood from the back of Reaper's pickup. Vincent immediately strode over to help his friend, while Catherine took two big sacks of groceries from Eve and headed inside the cabin. Everyone was unpacking boxes and

bags of food, bumping into one another, and laughing.

"Where do you want these," Catherine called out indicating the two bags.

"Oh, just drop 'em anywhere -- on the table or on that counter over there," Nadia said with a laugh. "We look like we're lost in this mess, but we'll get it together -- you'll see!"

"Well, what part can I help get together?" piped up Catherine. Immediately Boa handed her a paring knife and a big bowl and pointed in the direction of a huge bag of potatoes. "Oh, no," she groaned with a chuckle as she tackled the bag with a vengeance.

Obviously they've done this before, Catherine mused as the wedding feast began to materialize from the chaos.

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Tank and Vincent had just finished unloading and stacking the huge pile of firewood, as Catherine emerged from the cabin.

The "cabin", as the bikers had been referring to it, was really quite large. It was made out of logs with a rusty-brown tin roof and a gigantic porch extending all across the front. The view of the lake from the porch was breathtaking, and Catherine relaxed against the railing watching Vincent and marveling at the fact that they were really there.

As Vincent felt her eyes on him, he turned and saw Catherine. He pulled his gaze away from hers long enough to ask Tank if there was anything else he could do to help in the preparations. Tank shook his head no and pushed Vincent in the direction of the cabin and Catherine.

As Vincent strode toward her, she stood, mesmerized by the sight of him. He had taken off the heavy leather jacket and patched suede vest he had been wearing. His blue chambray shirt was damp from the exertion of unloading the wood and the heat of the sun. Vincent wasn't accustomed to working in the sun and Catherine noticed a sheen of perspiration glistening on his face. With his shirt clinging to his muscular chest, he was a very sexy sight, indeed.

As he ascended the stairs to the porch, she held out a tall, cold glass of iced tea and he took it gratefully. Gulping down large swallows, he suddenly realized what he was doing and apologized. "For what, Vincent -- for being thirsty," she laughed. And she took a big swallow from the glass of iced tea she was holding.

With her free hand, Catherine took Vincent's larger one and pulled him toward the swing hanging from the ceiling at the far end of the porch. As Vincent sat down, he steadied the swing so Catherine could sit next to him. He hadn't realized how small the swing was until her body pressed intimately against the side of his. To allow her more

room, he raised his arm and then realized he had nowhere to put it except on the back of the swing. Instantly, Catherine rested her head against his chest and snuggled even closer. He allowed his arm to slip around her shoulder as she pulled her legs up onto the seat. With a gentle push, Vincent set the creaky old swing in motion and relaxed -- just enjoying being outside with Catherine.

In a little while they strolled, arm in arm, back down to the edge of the water. Vincent sat down with his back pressed against the trunk of a big oak tree. Its branches extended out over the lake sheltering him from the direct sun. As Catherine stood looking down at him, he felt the overwhelming desire to pull her into his lap and kiss her. Before he could extinguish these thoughts from his mind and drop his head to hide the feelings reflected in his face, he realized that she had felt his desire. With a look of longing, Catherine sank down beside him wishing that they were there ... alone.

All too soon it became obvious that the time for the wedding was getting close. The sun was lower in the sky than when they had first walked to the water's edge. A couple of the men had erected a framework on which a huge black kettle hung, and now they were pouring water into it and lighting the fire beneath it. Catherine wondered what that was all about, when she saw several of the women emerge from the cabin carrying large bowls.

As they rose from the ground and walked toward the black kettle, she recognized one of those bowls as the one she had filled with newly peeled and washed potatoes. Other bowls contained carrots, celery, green beans, peas, and corn. Eve was struggling with a huge platter of beef that had been cut into hearty-size chunks. This procession of women filed past the big iron kettle, each dumping the contents of her bowl in the pot and heading back toward the cabin with the empty containers.

Well, so much for wondering what mysterious purpose the kettle would serve, thought Catherine -- obviously, it was to contain the "wedding stew"!

In preparation for the ceremony, the men and women began lining their Harleys up in front of the cabin. Reaper pushed his Springer into the line. Then he went to retrieve Mouse's Shovelhead because he knew Mouse was so nervous he would probably drop it. Scott lined up his Shovel directly across from Reaper's bike and then motioned Boa to pull her Panhead in close beside it. Nadia saw Boa pushing her bike and went to get her Sportster to add to the lineup. About that same time, Eve was yelling at Tank to line up the Knucklehead. The only bikes left were the tour bikes that belonged to the preacher and his new lady. As Tank finished dropping the kickstand on his bike, Reaper motioned for him to go get Betty's Sport Glide while he headed for Rev. Stone's Tour Glide. Eight bikes glinted in the waning sunlight -- four on each side, parked with precision. Handlebar to handlebar they leaned on their kickstands forming a walkway for the wedding party.

Folding tables groaned with the weight of the feast: Many different kinds of potato salad and coleslaw, long aluminum pans of various styles of baked beans,

cornbread and rolls. The ride and the preparations had whetted everyone's appetite. An impatience to "get on with it" began to grow as the crowd waited for the bride and groom to appear.

Shortly after arriving, Kitten had gone into one of the bedrooms at the back of the cabin and had not been seen or heard from since. Mouse had asked about her several times but was told he couldn't see the bride before the wedding. He was rather bewildered by the whole thing. When Reaper told him it was time to get dressed, he went into the other bedroom and put on his brand new, stiff blue jeans and his just-starched, white, long-sleeved dress shirt. He brushed his long red hair back into a low ponytail, donned his black leather vest with his colors proudly displayed on the back, pulled on his freshly shined black motorcycle boots and he was ready. So what was taking Kitten so long, he wondered.

Back in the City, Kitten had been very mysterious about packing and had made Mouse leave the room until she had the big, old suitcase filled and closed.

Mouse didn't have a lot of money. He worked as a welder through a local union and he made good money when he could find work. But construction work was pretty unstable -- some weeks they just had to make do with odd jobs he picked up to tide them over until the next big job. After Mouse had proposed to Kitten, he had been putting aside a little each week for the wedding. He knew that Kitten had never had many nice things -- especially clothes. He wanted their wedding to be special for her. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life trying to show her how much he loved her. When Mouse had given Kitten the money he had saved so she could get what she needed for the wedding, her eyes had filled with tears and she had put her frail arms around his waist and hugged him and cried until his t-shirt was wet. After that, she and Eve had borrowed Reaper's pickup and gone shopping. Mouse never saw what they bought because they took the boxes and bags to Eve and Tank's room.

Although she had shared his room and his bed, they had never done anything more than sleep. In the beginning, Mouse had been too concerned and Kitten had been

too frightened. They had grown to treasure the comfort of each other's arms, but Mouse had just not felt right about doing anything else. He had given her his property patch as a form of protection in the beginning, but he had come to feel a real pride in seeing her wear it. When Mouse realized that he wanted to offer Kitten more than just his protection, he had gone to talk to Reaper. A friend of his at the Army post had checked the records and found that Kitten had never really been married. So, Mouse had proposed and here they were at last.

As the sun was starting to set, Rev. Stone approached Reaper to see if everything was about ready. The beef and vegetable aroma surrounding the big black kettle had drawn many a hungry man only to be shooed away and told it was not ready yet. Reaper went in search of the bride and groom.

As the old preacher waited for the ceremony to get started, his thoughts wandered to the days when he and Reaper's dad had been like brothers. He'd shared Jack's disappointment when his son, Frank, had decided not to work in the family store. Reaper's mom had died when the boy was only nine, and Jack had tried to raise his son as best he could. Frank loved engines -- cars, trucks, motorcycles -- and he had a knack for being able to fix them. Before he was into his teens, he was making spending money working on cars. When Jack passed away, Frank (by then known as Reaper) turned the store and the apartments above it into a haven for friends who were down on their luck and needed a place to stay until they could get back on their feet. Gradually, the old store became the clubhouse and the "Iron Vultures" club was born. Whenever there was a wedding among Reaper's friends, the Rev. Stone was always asked to do the honors.

As Reaper walked back toward the old preacher who had become like a second father to him, he was followed by a nervous, fidgety Mouse.

"I reckon if we can pry Kitten out of the bedroom, we'll get this show on the road," Reaper said with a laugh.

While Rev. Stone turned to Mouse to tell him where he needed to stand and what he needed to do, Reaper left the nervous groom and began spreading the word to gather in front of the cabin for the ceremony. Immediately men and women started walking toward the area marked by the line of motorcycles, and Vincent and Catherine moved with them through the chilled night air.

Rev. Stone and Mouse took their places on the porch. Then Tank and Eve came out of the cabin and joined them -- Tank standing on Mouse's right and Eve to the far left of him. As the stillness of the night enveloped them, the headlights of the Harleys were turned on to make a tunnel of light leading to the well-lit porch. The gathering of friends was obscured in darkness and Vincent, wishing for his cloak that had been left at the clubhouse, opened his leather jacket and pulled Catherine into the warmth of his side.

A rustle of fabric and soft footsteps in the night alerted Vincent to the approach of the bride. He nudged Catherine as Reaper and Kitten passed behind them and walked toward the tunnel of light between the gauntlet of motorcycles. Reaper had on his usual "uniform", black jeans, black shirt, black cowboy boots and his black leather vest with his colors proudly displayed on the back. But no one paid any attention to him, because their eyes were all on the tiny lady clinging to his left arm.

Kitten was dressed in a long, white cotton dress with flowing sleeves that almost enveloped her delicate hands. The neckline was slightly scooped revealing the ivory tops of her slender shoulders. The high waistline was gathered with a white satin ribbon. She had a tiny bouquet of wildflowers tied with white ribbons clutched in her right hand and the flowers trembled with her nervousness. Her long, straight black hair flowed about her shoulders and down her back, while the crown of her head was encircled by a halo of the same colorful wildflowers and white ribbons. Her appearance

was reminiscent of the 60's -- the proverbial 'flower child'.

At Mouse's gasp, all eyes turned from the delicate lady in white to the man who so obviously adored her. It was written on his face -- he was proud that she was walking toward him to say the words that would bind them together -- forever.

As Reaper and Kitten walked between the rows of bikes, the headlights were extinguished one by one until they all were dark. Reaper helped Kitten up the steps and stopped in the space between Eve and Mouse. When Rev. Stone asked the question, "Who gives this woman in matrimony?" Reaper stated, "I do, as representative of the brothers and sisters of the Iron Vultures -- her family." Stepping back he placed Kitten's right hand in Mouse's left and turned to disappear down the steps into the crowded night.

"Friends," began Rev. Stone. "We are here tonight to witness the joining of this man and this woman in the sacred vows of marriage. Through the years men and women have found that life is more complete if they can share it -- both the good and the bad -- with one another, in love. And so it is with Kit-Ling and Walter."

At the mention of his real name, a murmuring punctuated with soft laughter rippled through the crowd. No one had ever heard him called anything but Mouse. Rev. Stone silenced the crowd with a sweeping glance.

Eve took Kitten's bouquet and Mouse enveloped her tiny hands with his. "Kit-Ling, do you want Walter as your husband and do you promise in front of God and all your friends to be his wife until God, by death, shall separate you?"

"Yes," a quavering voice whispered.

"Walter, do you want Kit-Ling as your wife and do you promise in front of God and all your friends to be her husband until God, by death, shall separate you?"

"Yes," Mouse said with a big smile, as he squeezed Kitten's hand.

"What do you have to use as a symbol of your love?"

A moment of panic overtook Mouse's face as Tank searched his pockets for the tiny gold band he had been given only moments before the ceremony. Eve had slipped the large gold band on her thumb and removed it as Rev. Stone continued, "The wedding band -- like the property patch -- is an outward symbol of your pledge to one another. It says to other people 'I am married and I am faithful to one person'. The continuous circle of the rings stands for the never-ending love you have for one another. Walter, place the ring on Kit-Ling's finger as a token of your love."

Mouse turned to Tank who had finally located the ring. With a look of devotion, he placed the ring on Kitten's finger. "Kit-Ling, place the ring on Walter's finger as a token of your love," Rev. Stone continued. Eve placed the gold band in

Kitten's tiny palm and, with trembling hands, she slipped it onto Mouse's finger.

Rev. Stone turned Mouse and Kitten to face the crowd of friendly faces and stated, "With the giving and receiving of these rings your lives are joined as man and wife. Mouse, you can now kiss your bride."

As Mouse leaned down and touched his lips tentatively to Kitten's, cheers and shouts erupted from their friends and everyone pushed forward to congratulate them. Amid much hugging and back-slapping, Mouse and Kitten clung to one another and smiled.

In the darkness Vincent pulled Catherine into an embrace and tenderly touched his lips to hers. He tasted the salty tears that had flowed down her cheeks during the ceremony. He felt her warm body pressed against his and wished ... oh, how he wished, that this had been their wedding day.

Someone mentioned food and the crowd began to scatter. Two of the women disappeared into the cabin and came out a few minutes later with stacks of plastic bowls and cups. Three of the men lit the bonfires that had been strategically placed around the front yard to give warmth and light for the party. Scott went to pump up the keg and Boa headed for the big black kettle waving a large ladle in the air.

As the cups were filled and emptied, the crowd became louder and happier. As the stew began to disappear from inside the big black kettle, and the large bowls on the table were emptied, everyone found themselves growing content. It was good to be among friends who watched out for and loved one another and to witness two of their family pledge to spend the rest of their lives together.

But now it was time to pack up and head back to the clubhouse. Everyone pitched in and quickly loaded. In no time at all they were roaring down the blacktop, two abreast, piercing the night with their headlights.

I don't want this to end, thought Vincent as his hand unconsciously strayed to Catherine's jean-covered calf. When realization of his action struck, it jolted him upright causing the bike to wobble slightly. He felt her arms tighten about his waist and he brought his gloved hand to rest atop hers. I must keep my mind on what I'm doing, he chided himself silently. But it is extremely difficult with her body pressed so tightly against mine. Even the heavy leather jackets separating them did not dispel the sensation of Catherine's nearness.

All too soon the late-night ride came to an end. The sight of the clubhouse brought a sense of sadness to Vincent's heart. As he pulled the Springer in next to Tank's Knuck and quieted the rumble of the engine, he sat motionless. The scrape of the kickstand against the concrete as Tank swung off his bike, snapped Vincent out of his daze. Leaning forward, he helped Catherine from the bike and gracefully rose to join her.



"Come on inside," Tank shouted as he gestured to Vincent and Catherine to follow.

Once inside, Vincent removed the confining helmet and loosened his hair. Catherine too had removed her helmet and was pulling the brush through her slightly tangled tresses. He watched, fascinated as the shimmering strands slipped through the bristles. He longed to replace the stroking of the brush with his own fingers. A tingling sensation in his stomach brought his thoughts to his consciousness and he dropped his head forward combing his own mane with his nails.

"Come on, have a seat, you guys. Want somethin' to drink?" said Tank as he hung his jacket on one of the hooks by the door.

With a single look, Catherine conveyed her need. And it matched his own.

"There are no words for me to tell you how much this trip has meant to me. Tank, you are a true and dear friend," Vincent said as he gave the big man a hearty hug. "Yet, it is very late. We must be going." As his gaze locked with Catherine's, Vincent momentarily forgot there was anyone else in the room.

"Oh, yeah ... sure. It is late. Yeah, well, uh you guys come and see us real soon."

As Vincent reluctantly pulled his gaze from Catherine's, he turned and shook Tank's hand. "Thank you, my friend. I think the time is right."

With a knowing wink, Tank slapped Vincent on the shoulder and smiled.

"Catherine," was all Vincent said as he took her hand in his and led her through the kitchen. Some hasty goodbyes detained them briefly, but soon they were entering the tunnels.

"Are you tired, Catherine ... do you wish me to walk you home?" Vincent's voice quavered and he seemed to stop breathing as he awaited her answer.

"No, Vincent. I'm not tired. Today was so wonderful ... I just don't want it to end," she answered longingly.

"Nor do I, Catherine," he said as his footsteps guided them toward the inhabited area. They walked for awhile, each lost in their separate but similar thoughts.

As they passed Father's Chamber, she sensed an indecisive hesitation in his walk. She reassuringly squeezed his large furred hand.

Stopping in the corridor, Vincent hesitated and then proceeded in the same quavering voice. "I have a gift for you. It is in my Chamber. Would you prefer to wait

here or ... would you accompany me? I know it is late ..."

"Vincent, I'm not uncomfortable with the hour, with going to your Chamber ... or with you."

As the breath he had been holding was released, he smiled a shy but grateful smile and resumed their journey.

When she preceded him into his Chamber, he turned and dropped the heavy drape into place behind them. A silent look that spoke volumes passed between them.

"Please, sit down," Vincent said, gesturing toward the smaller of the two chairs. As she sat, he crossed to his armoire and opened the door. Hesitantly, he returned to her side carrying a large grocery bag.

The questioning look on her face brought a smile to his own. "The wrapping is primitive but the gift is from the heart." With that, he dropped to one knee in front of Catherine and withdrew it from the bag. "Milady, I pray you will accept this humble offering as a pledge of my undying devotion," he said with a sweep of his hand that left the gift laying across her lap.

As she unfolded the leather, realization of what she held in her hand -- and its meaning -- brought tears to her eyes. "Vincent, your property patch!" As she clutched the vest to her heart, she sank to her knees on the floor in front of him and rested her head on his chest. "Yes," was all she said as the tears spilled from her eyes onto his vest.

Standing, he pulled her with him and gestured for her to resume her seat. Then he turned and brought his own chair to place it directly in front of hers. "I want you to know that my heart has been yours since the day that I found you in the park. Ours has been a long and difficult journey, but we have traveled it with courage and with care. This is merely an outward sign of my devotion. I know it is not possible for you to wear this vest in your world. But I hope you will keep it as a reminder of ..."

At his hesitance, she continued, "Of our love, Vincent. Oh, yes. I will wear it when we visit our biker friends. And I will treasure it as the symbol of a silent pledge we have honored for years."

"Thank you."

"No, Vincent, it is I who should thank you. This is such a thoughtful gift."

"Truly, I cannot take credit for it. When Tank gave Eve his property patch, he gave this vest to me. He told me to keep it until I felt the time had come to give it to you."

"So that's what you meant tonight when you told him you thought the time was

right!"

"Yes," he answered, dropping his head forward to hide his features from her gaze.

"Vincent, I too have felt that the time for us ... was right. You know, physical love is also a gift. You give yourself completely to another person. It is a blending of your bodies, minds, hearts, and souls. Any one part, alone, diminishes the gift. All of these must be joined in order for two people to 'make love'. It is possible for some people to have a physical relationship outside of love. They can join their bodies for mutual pleasure alone. But that is impossible for you -- for us," Catherine stated as she gazed into his intense blue eyes.

"Yes, you are right, Catherine. The love you and I share is, indeed, the blending of our minds, hearts and especially our souls. I don't think any love has ever been so tested as ours -- and the trials and tribulations we have conquered have made our love stronger. And yet my fears have prevented us from taking that final step," he answered, bowing his head slightly.

"But, Vincent, don't you remember when we talked about the fears that I had -- they also helped to block the progress of our love toward its natural fulfillment. My need to overwhelm you with my love and make you forget your strength of resolve was the hardest for me to control. I would feel you weaken and my first instinct would be to press just a little harder. But I knew that what we shared must be given freely, without reservations on either side. And without regrets."

Rising from his chair, Vincent extended his large, clawed hands. Catherine willingly placed her smaller ones into his grasp. Gently, he pulled her to stand directly in front of him. As if it were a solemn oath, Vincent spoke the words she had waited so long to hear. "Know this, my dearest Catherine, all that I am I now give to you freely."

All the dreams Vincent had never allowed himself to believe might someday become real came unbidden to his mind as he enveloped Catherine in his warm embrace. The sound of their breathing echoed in the dark, candlelit chamber. As she arched her body into his, she slid her hands up his chest, over his shoulders and beneath the heavy mane to encircle his neck. Pressing her hands upward into his hair, she lifted and let the silken strands glide effortlessly between her fingers. The sensation sent shivers of anticipation throughout her body. As a muffled sound escaped Vincent's parted lips, Catherine realized her actions had affected him as well. Placing her hands on each side of his face, she drew him into a kiss that was meant to convey all the love and trust she felt for this gentle man.

As their lips blended and their bodies molded together, Catherine could feel the steady pounding of Vincent's heart thudding against her breasts. When their mouths parted, she noticed his breathing had changed dramatically. His hands grasped her upper arms and pressed her slightly away, separating their bodies. Holding her breath, fearing

he had changed his mind, Catherine waited for what seemed an eternity.

Finally, he spoke. "Are you sure?"

"Vincent," she said, allowing the breath to slowly escape her lips. "You are the last person I would expect that question from -- you feel what I feel. Tell me, what am I feeling now?"

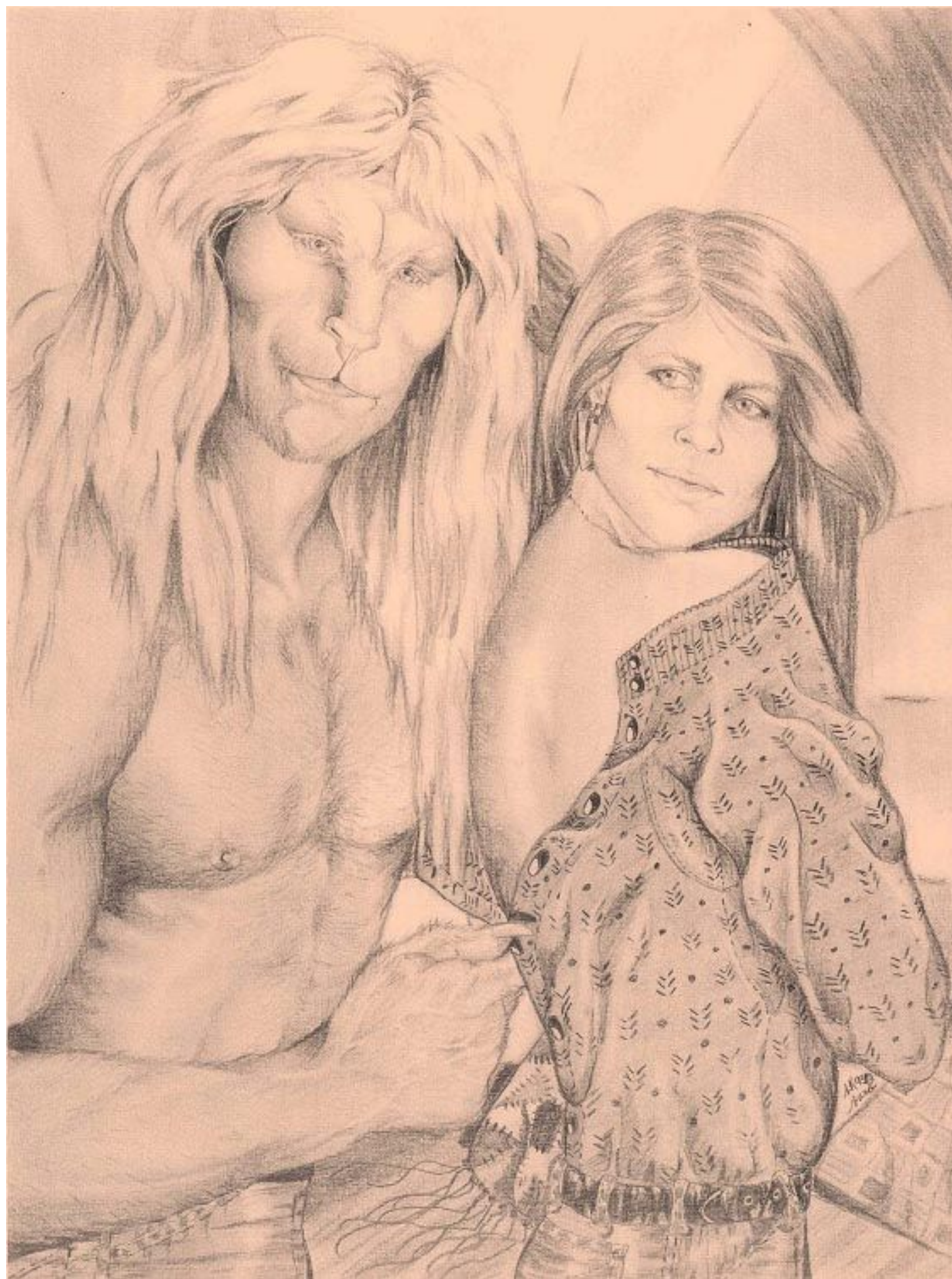
As he sorted through the chaotic emotions -- some his, some hers -- he hesitated. Finally, unable to answer in words, he pulled her softness into the hardened planes of his body and gently lowered his mouth to hers.

With almost imperceptible pressure, Catherine's hands separated their bodies just enough to allow her the freedom to begin untying the laces on his vest. As her fingers worked, she feathered light kisses on his neck and under his chin. He shook his head, tossing his mane away from his shoulders, silently signaling his acceptance of her ministrations. As each shirt button was released, she placed a kiss on the newly revealed part of his furred chest. Pulling his shirttail free, her hands slipped beneath his layers of clothing, their touch causing in him a sharp intake of breath. At his reaction, she dragged her nails tantalizingly down his chest and abdomen and then removed her hands.

Gazing into his midnight blue eyes, she smiled and then slowly turned her back to him. Lifting her hair and peering over her shoulder expectantly, she indicated the row of buttons that ran down the back of her blouse and said softly, "Would you please help me, Vincent? I'm sorry, I didn't come prepared for ... this."

With a shy smile he answered, "Neither did I." After a slight hesitation he continued, "But I am very happy to be confronted with this particular dilemma."

Very carefully, he released each small button from its confining buttonhole. As her blouse gradually parted, revealing her creamy white back, Vincent fought the urge to press his mouth to her now-bare flesh. To quell this need, he placed his hands on her upper arms and pulled, hesitantly, until her bare back rested against his chest. The sensation of her soft, smooth skin against his partially revealed chest brought another sharp intake of his breath.



Unwilling to retreat, Catherine leaned into his body, pressing her firm buttocks into his steel-corded thighs. As she did, she felt the growing evidence of his arousal in the small of her back. Unconsciously, Vincent's hand was drawn from her arm to gently cover her breast. Through the fabric of her blouse, he felt her nipple immediately harden against his palm encouraging his continued caresses. His other hand glided down her arm cupping her other breast. Her nipples strained against the silky material that separated them from his touch. The need for flesh against flesh prompted Vincent to slide his hands to her abdomen, gently tug her blouse from the waistband of her jeans, and slip his hands beneath the newly released fabric. As his leathery palms contacted the firm, bare flesh of her abdomen, his resolve faltered. He began to retreat, apologies forming in his mind.

Sensing his reluctance, Catherine brought her own delicate hands to press his more firmly to her stomach encouraging them to rise once again to cover her breasts. The filmy lace of her bra was still a barrier. Certain that Vincent would stop here without further encouragement, Catherine assisted him in twisting the plastic catch nestled between her breasts.

Quickly releasing his hands and straightening her arms, she allowed the silky fabric of her blouse to puddle noiselessly to the floor. As the fabric slipped away, Vincent tensed. His hands left their resting place and returned to lightly hover over her upper arms.

Catherine took this as the opportunity to shrug free from her bra, allowing it to join her blouse on the Chamber floor. Then she gently but insistently replaced his hands on her breasts while leaning more intimately into his body. A moan escaped his lips evoking the same sound from her own throat. The heat of his touch ran ribbons of electricity through her veins -- accentuated by every beat of her heart against his hand.

Turning in his arms she quickly unfastened the remaining buttons of his shirt, slid her arms around his waist, and pressed her bare breasts to his furred chest. "Oh, Vincent, that feels wonderful -- your body is so ... sensual. I have known for a long time how much I enjoyed looking at you, but the feel of your body against mine ... it's beyond anything I had imagined."

"I, too, could never have imagined this, Catherine -- never," he said breathlessly.

Catherine's hands gently explored Vincent's lower back. His skin was smooth, almost devoid of hair, and she delighted in the feel of her palms caressing its satiny texture. Sliding her hands further up his back, she noted an increase in hair, but it too was soft and silky. As she drew her hands down each side of his back from shoulder blades to waist, she allowed her nails to gently blaze a trail evoking a groan of pleasure from him. Tilting her face upwards, she observed the way his head was tipped back and his lips slightly parted. The visible tips of his incisors glinted in the candlelight and the sight caused a contracted reaction of excitement in the core of her being.

Prompted by her growing need, she grasped both of his strong hands in her own smaller but sturdy ones and backed up, tugging him toward the direction of his bed. Confused blue eyes locked with determined green ones. As the backs of her legs contacted the firm mattress, she slowly lowered herself until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Before he could consider retreating, she released his hands and placed her own behind her on the bed. Leaning back slightly, she raised her booted right foot and rested it against his knee.

"Would you help me with these?"

His silent hesitation filled the chamber. Then, with trembling hands, he pulled her boot off and dropped it to the floor. When she did not lower her foot, he proceeded to remove her thick white cotton sock as well, carefully avoiding touching her bare skin. Shifting slightly, she raised her left foot and he removed the remaining boot. As he grasped the toe and heel of her sock and pulled it free, Catherine lowered her bare foot into his retreating hand. At the unexpected contact, his eyes raised seeking hers questioningly.

"Touch me ... please."

The pleading in her voice left him no choice but to consent to her request and he enclosed her dainty foot within his warm, leathery palms.

"So soft and delicate," he whispered huskily as he knelt before her and pressed his mouth to the top of her foot. The sudden realization of his boldness caused him to drop her foot as he bolted upright. "I'm sorry ... I"

Before he could continue with his unnecessary apology, Catherine rose from the bed and encircled his waist with her arms hugging him tight. Conscious of his near-panic state, she flooded their bond with her feelings of love and acceptance. Gradually, she felt him relax. As he tentatively rested his hands on her bare back, she sighed.

"Yes, Vincent, I want you to touch me. I've wanted this for so long."

Her words prompted him to allow his hands to move slowly up and down the length of her back, his touch so light she wondered if she was only imagining it. Her own hands began kneading the hard muscles of his back giving him the courage to explore hers less tentatively. As he trailed his fingers down her spine, his nails grazed her skin lightly eliciting a sharp intake of her breath. Misinterpreting her reaction, his hands froze in their journey.

"You didn't hurt me. It feels wonderful and exciting. It makes me ... want you," she said raising her head from its resting place against his chest and gazing longingly into his questioning eyes.

"I feel an overwhelming need for, I know not what. It makes me ... ache, almost hurt, with its strength. I fear it will overpower my senses, cause me to lose control. If I hurt you ..."

"Vincent, I, too, am feeling that same aching, overpowering need. We love each other. It's perfectly natural for us to feel what we are experiencing right now. Natural and right. Don't fight it. Just relax and allow yourself to feel my emotions. I love you."

As she gazed into the beautiful, sculpted face of the man she loved, Catherine separated her body slightly from his, unfastened her jeans, and slid them down past her hips. Once again sitting on his bed, she extended her denim-clad legs toward him.

"Help me, please."

The longing in her voice coupled with his rising desire guided his hands to the hems of her jeans. As he gently pulled, he watched, mesmerized as her creamy white legs emerged from the dark fabric. Rising to stand before him wearing only her satin and lace bikini panties, she stood very still, inviting his gaze.

"Your beauty takes my breath away. There are no words to explain how I feel when I look at you. I am awed that you are here ... with me. I'm afraid to look away for fear that I'll look back and find that you are gone. That this is only a dream. And yet, I am concerned that I will offend you if I continue to stare."

"You won't offend me, Vincent. Everything that I am, all that you see, is yours. I offer myself to you with all the love and longing I've repressed. Now I wish for us both to allow the desire we feel to guide us toward the fulfillment we deserve."

As she moved closer to him, his eyes were drawn to hers. When she reached her hands up and grasped the front of his shirt, parting and pushing it back over his shoulders, he straightened his arms and let it whisper to the floor. Allowing her hands to glide down the length of his arms, she projected all the love she felt, willing it to flow through her fingertips to bathe him with reassurance.

The candlelight cast a shimmering glow about the chamber, licking intimately at the newly revealed planes of his body. "You are beautiful. So graceful. And regal. Whenever I thought you wouldn't catch me, I would watch you. The way you walked with such ease and natural grace. I used to try to imagine what your body looked like beneath the layers of clothing you wore to protect you from my gaze. Nothing that I imagined could equal what I see before me. You are truly magnificent."

An embarrassed flush rose to his cheeks while a sigh of relief escaped his lips.

Quickly, he balanced first on one foot and then the other, removing his boots and heavy, woolen socks. His feet were long and slender with a light sprinkling of hair

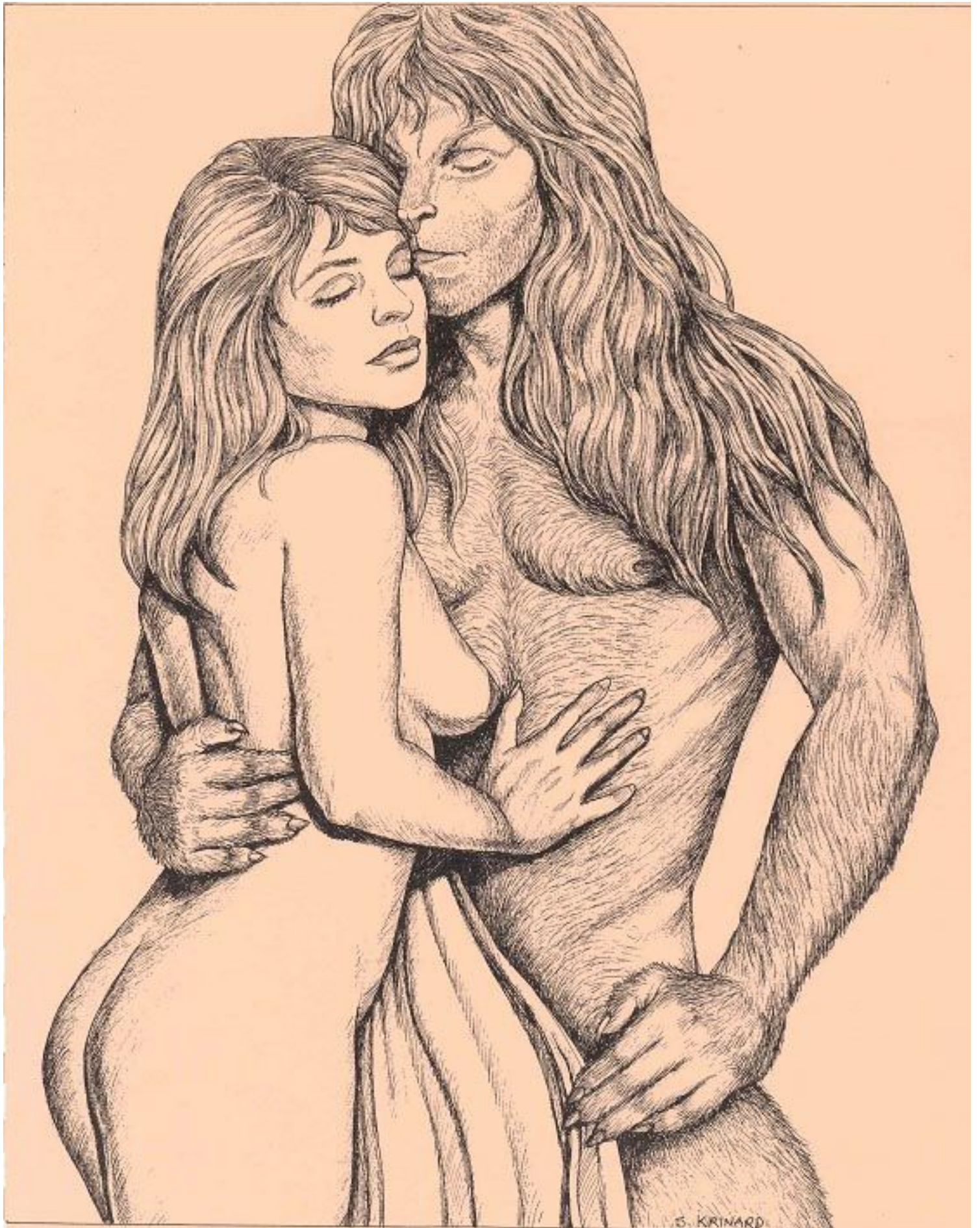


across his toes and on the tops of his feet. The nails were much like those on his fingers except they were neatly trimmed.

Before he lost his courage, he unfastened the buckle of his belt and let it clatter to the floor. The sound caused him to falter momentarily. Determined to resume the task he had begun, he released the snap at the waistband and unzipped his jeans. As the denim loosened, the evidence of his arousal pressed insistently against the white cotton of his shorts and caused his resolve to falter. His hands began to tremble.

Sensing his inability to continue alone, Catherine closed the remaining space between them. Covering his quivering hands with her own, she squeezed them reassuringly. Then she grasped the belt loops and tugged his jeans down the length of his muscular, hair-covered thighs. Stepping from the pile of denim that was his jeans, he bent to pull her into his embrace. He needed the added reassurance of her body pressed to his.

They stood for a long time experiencing the unmistakably similar reactions evoked by the molding of their very different bodies.



When her need to explore his newly revealed body overtook her, she grasped his hand and guided him toward the large bed. She had dreamed so many times of sharing his bed. Now her dreams were coming true. Never releasing his hand, she removed the large bolsters and placed them on the floor, allowing only two small, flat feather pillows to remain. Tugging the patchwork quilt and the underlying sheet down, she slipped beneath the covers, slid across the bed, and pulled insistently on his hand until he joined her.

Vincent lay awkwardly on his back gazing at the stone ceiling of his Chamber. As Catherine tentatively placed her hand on his chest, she felt the thudding of his heart. Molding her lithe body to the hardened planes of his, she nestled her head into the hollow of his shoulder and hugged him. A sudden release of the breath he had been holding signaled his growing relaxation. As his arms encircled her delicate frame, he placed a gentle kiss in her hair. The loving gesture was all the encouragement Catherine needed.

Rising on one elbow and pushing herself up to kneel beside him, she began massaging his shoulders and upper chest. Here the deep blonde hair was rather long and silky, and she delighted in the sensual feel of her fingers parting it to reveal the pale skin beneath. Lifting his heavy golden mane away from his face and placing one hand on either side of his head, she lowered her lips to his. Their meeting was light and brief. She continued to press light kisses on his cheeks, his softly stubbled chin, his furrowed brow, and the leathery tip of his nose before returning to his lips. This time she lingered at his unique mouth, deepening the kiss.

As his lips parted to allow her tongue entry, he placed his hands on her back and pressed her breasts to his chest. Sliding her left leg across his outstretched legs, she pressed her lower body to his side. When their lips parted, she trailed kisses down his chin and neck. Pushing herself up to once again kneel beside him, she began feathering kisses across his chest. Parting the silky hair covering one flat nipple, she teased it lightly with her tongue. His sharp intake of breath let her know her actions had not gone unnoticed. With light kisses and nibbles, she worked her way toward his other nipple and administered the same treatment. A soft moan was her reward.

Never had he felt anything like the sensations Catherine was creating with her mouth on his body. As she continued placing kisses on his chest and down his hard, flat abdomen, he felt as if he would explode with desire.

Aware of his growing need, she slipped her fingers beneath the elastic waistband and removed the one remaining barrier. At the sight of his rigid manhood, she felt as if her whole being was set afire, the flames engulfing her and urging her forward. Her right hand encircled the evidence of his growing need as her left hand gently stroked him. Slowly she leaned forward. Tentative flicks of her tongue elicited quivering reactions. Placing a kiss on the tip, she pressed her mouth to his smooth flesh and slowly enveloped him. A deep, rumbling sound escaped his lips. She withdrew slightly, hesitated, and then pressed forward again. When she withdrew the second time, she allowed her teeth to lightly graze the length of him. As she started forward again, she felt

his sudden spasms of release and the sound of his pleasure filled her with happiness.

The intensity of this first-time experience brought waves of pleasure to Vincent almost instantly. He was engulfed and could scarcely breathe with the overpowering sensations flashing through every nerve of his body. When the intense explosion subsided, he seemed as if he was in shock. As his breathing began to return to normal, he was overcome with a sensation just as powerful as the pleasure he had just experienced -- guilt. How had it happened? He was always in control. But he had not been prepared for the assault that had carried him to the culmination of years of waiting and denying. He simply had not been prepared for what had just taken place.

Sitting up, he allowed his eyes to dart around the familiar chamber. He wished there were somewhere he could hide -- hide from Catherine's eyes -- but there wasn't. Dreading the look he knew would be waiting in those green depths, he slowly turned his gaze to stare into her face. She sat quietly near the foot of the bed, her legs tucked beneath her.

"Catherine ..." was all he could manage to say. He had no other words. And he had no idea what she had felt while he was overcome with the most unimaginable feelings -- feelings he never could have dreamed of, let alone expected to experience.

"Yes, Vincent?" she prompted, hoping he would be able to vocalize the flood of emotions she had just shared with him through their bond.

He only looked into her eyes, trying to read and understand what she was feeling. He knew she was happy and that she loved him. Those things were evident in her expression.

"Vincent, that was wonderful! I felt what you felt. The bond ... it opened up as never before. It was beautiful!"

So that is why she is happy, he thought with overwhelming relief. She shared in my feelings. But I sense something else in her -- anticipation?

"I don't know what to do, Catherine," he said as he pulled her into his embrace. "Show me ... teach me the ways of love so that I will be able to please you."

"Oh, Vincent, just open your heart and feel my emotions through our bond. You please me just by being you. Relax, be yourself, and let our connection guide you."

Gently laying her down beside him, Vincent gave in to the overwhelming need to fully know this woman he loved beyond life itself. He touched her face as she had touched his not so long ago, when the walls of resistance had crumbled under her insistent onslaught.

His leathery palms cupped her face, one finger gliding over her moist, full lips

and across the bridge of her nose. His other hand joined as the tips of his fingers lightly brushed through her eyebrows and into her silky hair. A serene look enveloped Catherine's face and she lifted her chin to willingly expose the creamy length of her neck.

Bracing his hands on either side of her head, Vincent pressed his face very close to hers. The scent of her hair filled his nostrils, and he breathed deeply allowing it to intoxicate him. He loved the way she smelled -- her shampoo, her perfume, but something else elusive. This must be what Catherine had tried to explain to him but couldn't -- essence.

An overpowering urge to taste her prompted him to gently nibble on her earlobe. A quick intake of her breath let him know his actions had brought her pleasure. Sliding the tip of his nose down her neck, he inhaled, then exhaled -- his warm breath bringing shivers of response from her. A smile formed on his lips and one long incisor gently grazed the base of her neck. Another sharp intake of breath was evident.

He delved his tongue into the hollow of her collarbone and she tensed. He stopped, raising his head to look into her face. Had he done something wrong? No, her deep green, passion-filled eyes conveyed to him that he had done something very right.

Lowering his mouth to her shoulder, he trailed kisses down her arm into the bend of her elbow. There he lingered evoking slight whimpering sounds in her throat. He continued his journey, kissing his way to her palm. Her hand lay limp at her side. Kneeling beside her, he pressed his mouth into her palm. Nibbling his way down, he paused at the tip of her finger. Then he opened his mouth slightly. Grazing his teeth up the length of her finger, he paused, closed his mouth and withdrew with a gentle suction. A swell of emotion invaded him -- his reactions colliding with hers. He took each finger in turn, marveling at the mingling reactions they shared.

Rocking back on his heels, he let his eyes roam the length of her body. The candlelight reflecting off the stained glass behind his bed cast patterns of color on her alabaster skin. For a brief moment he was overcome by the idea that he was really there -- touching Catherine. How could this be? Sensing his hesitation, she reached her hand out to caress his lightly furred chest, allowing her nails to trail enticingly across it.

"Vincent," was all she said, but that one word conveyed her need for him to continue. Her want of him was a fog that descended all around them -- obscuring the rest of the world from their sight -- inviting the storm.

As he positioned his body over hers, he placed his hands on either side of her head and straddled her slim hips, hovering over but not touching her with his body. Lowering his face toward hers, he gazed deeply into her eyes letting her see the wonder of what he was experiencing.

He pressed his mouth to hers and marveled at how right it felt. He had always worried that his mouth was not made for kissing.

When he withdrew from the kiss, she whispered, "I love your kisses."

He smiled and dropped a light kiss on her chin and then continued down her throat. His silky mane fell on either side of her face and trailed onto her shoulders as he moved to kiss the gentle swell of the tops of her breasts.

Turning his head from side to side, very slowly, he brushed the ends of his silky hair across her breasts. Fascinated, he watched her nipples tighten and noticed the acceleration of her breathing. Unable to resist, he circled one tight bud with his tongue and then the other. The texture was unlike anything he had ever experienced -- soft, yet tight and hard.

Tensing his powerful thighs, he held himself above her while he gently dragged the backs of his claws up the entire length of her arms. When he reached her shoulders, he opened his hands and pressed one padded palm over each breast. Her nipples were still wet from his kisses and he swirled that moistness with his open palms causing the buds to tighten even more.

Her breasts were so smooth and satiny. He brushed the tips of his fingers down the sides and underneath, lifting them slightly. Once again he took each nipple into his mouth, this time sucking gently. Soft moaning sounds drew his attention to Catherine's growing need.

Reluctant to leave her breasts but anxious to explore the rest of her exquisite body, Vincent slid his body lower on hers and kissed his way down her flat abdomen to her navel. There he gently probed with his tongue as he grazed his nails down her sides to her hips where he encountered the elastic of her bikini panties. After a brief hesitation, he hooked his index fingers into each side of the narrow elastic bands, slowly drawing the satin and lace down the length of her smooth white legs.

Involuntarily, her knees flexed and he moved his legs from the outside of hers until he was kneeling between her parted thighs. He continued to lightly draw his claws down the tops of her thighs until, ever so gently, he grasped her knees causing them to bend, affording him access to her inner thighs. Leaning forward, his tongue followed a path to the juncture of her thighs where he hovered hesitantly.

"Yes, Vincent, please."

With her reassuring words suspended above them, he lowered his mouth and placed a tentative kiss on her honey-brown curls. As his tongue touched the inner folds of her being, he felt a hardening. Teasing it gently, he sensed a growing urgency in Catherine. Her body tensed as an emotional flood washed over him through their bond. Small whimpering noises escaped her mouth and she tangled her fingers in his hair as if she feared he would withdraw.

It was difficult for Vincent to sort out the myriad sensations bombarding him all at once -- sight, smell, touch, sound. Concentrating so he would not miss a single new sensation, an almost imperceptible metallic taste assailed his consciousness. As he continued his ministrations, Vincent noticed a moistness that carried with it a sweet taste. At that same instant, a sound he had never heard before escaped Catherine's lips. It evoked in him such pleasure, such excitement -- just to know that he was the cause of such an indescribable sound. Her very core pulsed and trembled against his lips and he held his breath so that he could experience even the tiniest of her tremors. In awe, he realized he could feel the very beat of her heart in this most intimate of kisses.

As the sensations subsided, Vincent felt an awesome peace envelop Catherine and seep from her body to wash over him.

Raising his head to peer across the sculpted surface of her body and into her eyes, he saw reflected there a love so pure in its radiance it took his breath away. Sliding his body the full length of hers, just grazing her satin with his velvet, Vincent turned on his side and pulled her against him. Still slightly disoriented, she nestled into his shoulder and sighed, unable to speak.

Not wishing to disturb her languor but unable to resist, Vincent glided his hand from her shoulder to her waist. Her skin was so smooth, so soft. He pressed his large hand into the small of her back, fitting her delicate body more closely to his. He felt as if he could not get close enough to her.

The insistent pressure of his hand aroused something deep within the pit of her stomach causing it to contract. Sliding her body up so she could reach, she began nuzzling her lips into the hollow of his throat. Her movement caused his hand to slip lower, resting on her buttocks. A growing pressure against her thigh alerted her to his recovered passion. He certainly wasn't like most men, she thought.

The touch of his hand on her hip urged her onto her back. He slid his hand to the apex of her thighs and gently parted her legs. As he delved hesitantly between the soft, hot folds, she arched against him and moaned softly. A wetness seeped from her, flowing over his hand. His touches inflamed her.

With her moans she urged him to enter her and salve her growing need. Pressing his painfully hard manhood against her softness, he hesitated at the threshold. Slowly, incrementally, he eased into her moist heat until he was fully sheathed deep within her body. Withdrawing slowly elicited a convulsive response from her body as if she involuntarily protested his retreat. Catherine slid her hands down his back and over his firm buttocks. With gentle pressure she guided him. In response, he pressed forward, hesitated, then withdrew. As he slowly moved toward her and away, she matched her thrusts to his natural rhythm, their bodies meeting and parting in their own dance of love.

Their physical joining alone was unbelievably satisfying yet heightened by the blending of souls through their bond. Vincent's feelings of filling Catherine inexplicably

changed to ones of being filled as her reactions to their lovemaking flowed through their connection to entwine with his.

He had always been more attuned to Catherine's emotions, yet the expression of their love, physically, had heightened her ability to sense his feelings. Theirs were no longer separate needs and desires. Pleasures blended and interacted, building until they strove for fulfillment as one. Her unspoken needs were automatically answered by him, and she felt an increasing awareness of his wants and gladly responded.

Vincent was a natural lover, his sensitivity turning him from novice to master in an uncommonly brief amount of time. He had a unique way of restraining his great strength. With infinite gentleness, he worshiped her body. Her soft warmth pulsed against his hardness as he felt her emotions shatter into shards of exquisite pleasure. The emotional onslaught triggered his own response.

Liquid warmth pulsed inside her as she heard and felt his all-consuming pleasure. Overwhelmed, her body convulsed, gripping that part of him which was lovingly held within her own body. Their bodies remained suspended in time as the tides of passion ebbed.



Unable to continue to support his weight on trembling arms, he rolled to his side drawing her with him. As they lay sated in each other's arms, Catherine snuggled her satiny body against Vincent's velvety-furred one and laughed softly in contentment.



"What is it?" he asked.

"Well, I know, in my mind, you are ... were a virgin," she answered looking up at him with an impish grin. "But what I don't understand is how you have learned so quickly what to do in order to make my body respond. I've never felt like you make me feel -- never."

"Catherine," he explained solemnly, "The greatest aid to the learning process is a willingness and a desire to learn. Let me assure you, I am a most willing pupil and I have an infinite desire to absorb every facet of this subject." His hand reached out to carefully caress her cheek as love flowed from his eyes.

"Vincent," she replied with a knowing smile. "I have a feeling it won't be long before the expertise of the pupil far surpasses that of the teacher. I've seen how you show Father no mercy in chess."

His only answer to her teasing was a shy, content sigh.

Several minutes passed while they drifted in the aftermath of their emotions. Vincent lay peacefully with Catherine's head resting on his chest. She slept, or so he thought.

Then she raised her head and looked into his eyes. "I love you so much. I had begun to think this moment would never come."

As Vincent lifted her slightly from him and slipped from the bed, Catherine reached out to him, clinging, asking, "What's wrong, Vincent ... did I say something wrong?"

"No, my love, I will return in just a moment," he said as he lit another candle from the one that flickered on his writing desk and picked up a book by Robert Browning. "I was reading this yesterday and I, too, wondered if this moment would ever come. May I read you a poem called 'Now'?"

As Vincent returned to the warmth of his bed and his Catherine, she sighed, "I've always loved for you to read to me; no one can make words come to life like you can."

As Vincent retrieved the bolsters from the floor and piled them on the end of the bed, Catherine arranged them. He slipped beneath the covers, settled himself, and pulled her against his chest. She blended comfortably against his warm body as he began to read:

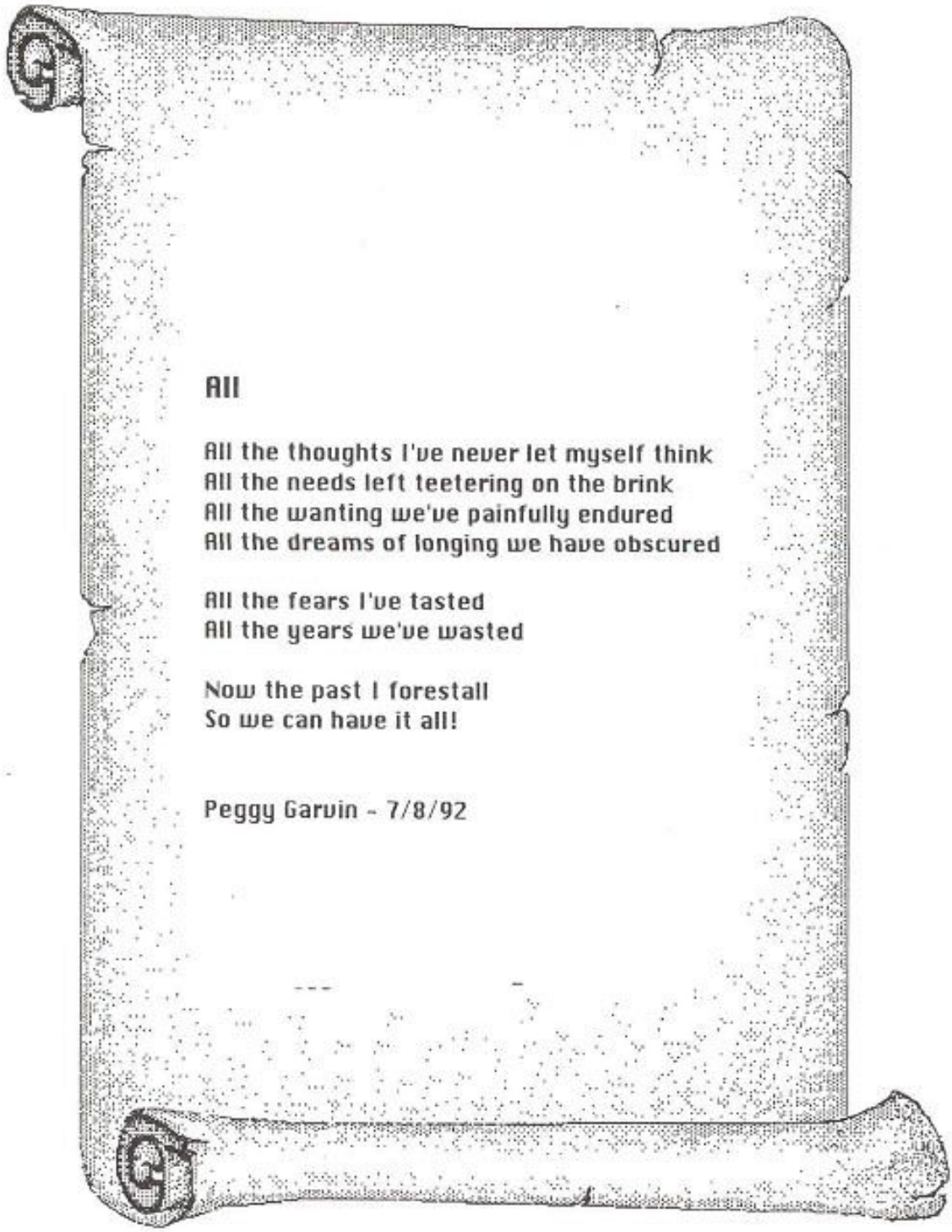
"Out of your whole life give but a moment!  
All of your life that has gone before,  
All to come after it, - so you ignore,

So you make perfect the present, - condense  
In a rapture of rage, for perfection's endowment,  
Thought and feeling and soul and sense -  
Merged in a moment which gives me at last  
You around me for once, you beneath me, above me.  
Me - sure that despite of time future, time past, -  
This tick of our life-times' one moment you love me!  
How long such suspension may linger? Ah, Sweet -  
The moment eternal - just that and no more -  
When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core  
While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut and lips meet!"

"Oh, Vincent, that is beautiful. As the moments we just shared were beautiful.  
And the moments we will share ..."

Catherine looked hopefully into Vincent's deepening blue eyes as he said, "Yes,  
Catherine, the moments we will share ... our future, that too will be beautiful."

As they relaxed in the peaceful shelter of their love, they knew another  
threshold had been crossed. Their unique journey would continue.



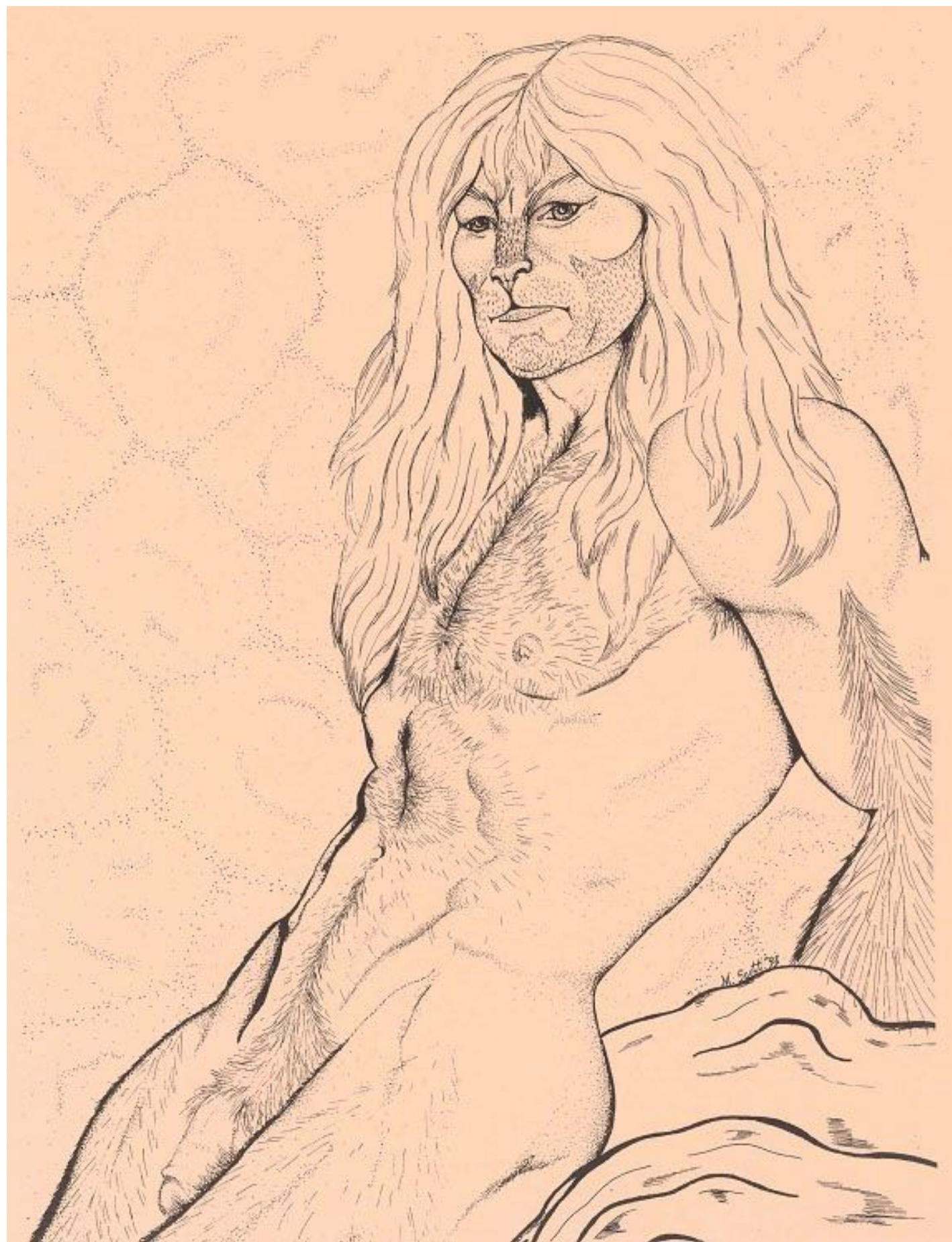
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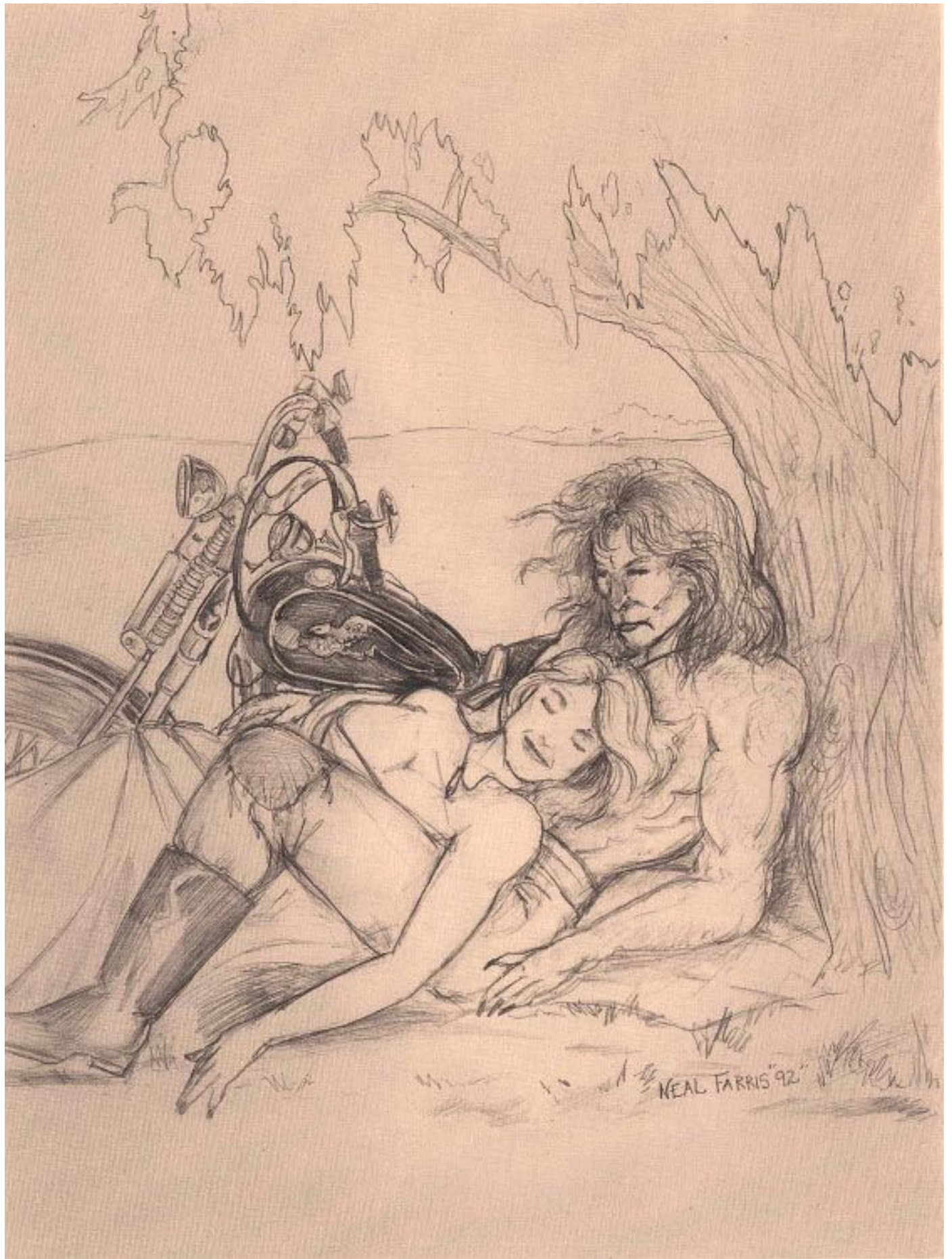
All the thoughts I've never let myself think  
All the needs left teetering on the brink  
All the wanting we've painfully endured  
All the dreams of longing we have obscured

All the fears I've tasted  
All the years we've wasted

Now the past I forestall  
So we can have it all!

Peggy Garvin - 7/8/92





## **Artistic Credits**

**Below is a list of the artists who contributed to "Parallel Worlds within the City". Each of them gave generously of their time and talent to make my 'zine come to life. Thank you just doesn't seem adequate but it is heartfelt.**

**Neal Farris:**

**I "found" him at a Star Trek mini-con. He brought my original characters to life and is in the process of developing his own personal concept of Vincent and Catherine. He is new to the Beauty and the Beast fandom and very interested in doing artwork for more 'zines.**

**Anna Kelley:**

**She's been with fandom "since the beginning". She and her husband, Wayne, are well known for their expertise in makeup and costuming and have appeared as Vincent and Catherine at numerous conventions. Her artwork was chosen for use at the Great Expectations convention in July and I want to offer a special thanks to her for working so hard to create the beautiful drawings for my 'zine even though she was very ill.**

**Sue Krinard:**

**I want to give special thanks to Sue for being such a good pen-friend and for taking time from her very busy schedule to do the gorgeous, sensual drawing for me.**

**Holly Riedel:**

**I thought I was all alone in South Carolina when I discovered that another Beauty and the Beast fan lived only a few miles from me. When I needed some last-minute artwork, Holly came through in record time and brought life to the romance between Vincent and Catherine.**

**Michele Scott**

**My daughter is a graphic artist. She is also part owner of a freelance graphics business. I knew she could do computer artwork, but the drawings in "Parallel Worlds" are her first in pen and ink. She is also doing a clay sculpture of Vincent. I have been utterly amazed at the talent she had hidden from me all these years.**

## **About the Author**

**Peggy Gavin:**

**Some people may read this story and think it complete fantasy as far as the portrayal of the biker lifestyle. The bikers in my story are composites of real people – our friends. My portrayal comes MUCH closer to reality than "The Wild One" or any of the other other movies and stories you've seen and accepted as the truth. I tried very hard to give you a feel for the fact that bikers, like citizens, are people -- just people.**



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