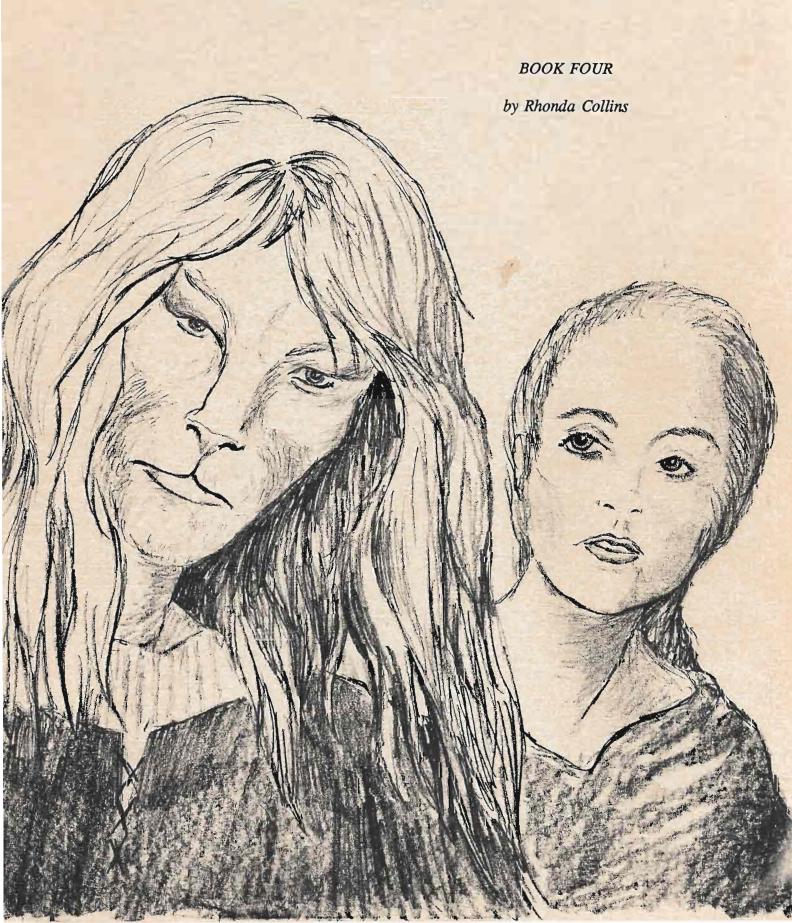
Beauty and the Beast The Legend of the Soul



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST BOOK FOUR THE LEGEND OF THE SOUL

Story by Rhonda Collins Based on the series created by Ron Koslow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As always, my sincerest thanks to Ron Koslow, all the writers, actors, cast, crew, and production - to everyone involved in bringing the story to life for us all. Special thanks to Ron Perlman for Vincent, and Linda Hamilton and Jo Anderson for Catherine and Diana.

Since I wrote my first three 'zines without even realizing that such a thing as a 'zine existed... or so many wonderful authors writing them, I have to thank Nan Dibble of the Helper's Network Hotline and Therion Press for enlightening me, and letting me know how I could share my vision of the story with others... and also read theirs.

A special thanks is due to Paul Harwell from The Booketeria, who made a special effort to help me find one quote that was driving me crazy. I quite literally "couldn't have done it without him"... or at least that chapter would certainly have had to read differently.

Finally, I want to thank the readers. If you have managed to make it through my first 'zines, I hope you find THE LEGEND OF THE SOUL to be even more fun to read. Without you, without all of us... the dream would sleep itself away, but as long as we write about them, read about them, talk about them and dream about them, the tunnels will continue to hold the magic for us. My son asked me why I liked to write, and I told him that while I write, and whenever someone reads what I have written, I have "made something be." I cannot think of anything I would rather "make be" than a Beauty and the Beast story. If you would care to write me and tell me what you think of the story, please do. I will write when I can, and I treasure all the comments, both positive and negative. The positive encourage me and the negative hopefully make me try harder.

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This is an amateur publication, by and for the lovers of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and does not intend to infringe upon any rights held by Ron Koslow, Republic Pictures, Witt-Thomas Productions, or any other rights-holders to BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

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THE LEGEND OF THE SOUL

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Vincent has always been, and always will be the major character in Beauty and the Beast, whether he is alone, with Catherine, or with Diana. He is a complex, multi-faceted man whose psychology has always held my interest. In the series I found it fascinating as they took this man from a state of near innocence to "adulthood" so to speak, as if slowly opening a chrysalis. However, very little mention was made of the events that went into Vincent's psychological makeup. Hints were given, but nothing was ever elaborated upon. Telling old tales in new ways can sometimes help shed some light, and as a beginning and a preface to the main story in this zine I have written DREAMS OF LIFE. There is still a great deal of Vincent's younger life to be explored and wondered at. How did he cope with growing up so very different? Even in such a protected, cocoon-like society, it must have been very difficult. In addition, because of his protected upbringing and the fact that he was in his thirties before ever truly falling in love, there are many everyday experiences and emotions which he has only experienced through books... and the real thing can be quite different.

In my previous three zines, Vincent and Diana have grown together through the time since Catherine's death with a closeness that unfortunately we can only guess at; but this closeness also raises the question of How is Vincent dealing with this? He has always been a very self-contained individual, and even his bond with Catherine did not infringe upon this because it was only one way. In THE TRUTH OF LOVE, Vincent's deeper psychology begins to play a part... one that he is not quite ready to deal with. He has all his life kept those parts of himself that he could not control (his rage) and the strong emotions he had no outlet for (his desire) bottled up into a separate part of himself... this "Other" being which has become very real for him. And he has found that when you open that bottle too far when you have not learned how to close it... strange and disturbing things can happen. However, Diana has made him realize that he must learn to accept these feelings as a natural and normal part of himself, or he will never be able to control them. Opening up... changing... and facing one's inner self can be a painful struggle, especially when you have as much that you wish to keep hidden from the world as Vincent has. In addition, he has the added problem of needing to protect those he loves... from himself. He feels he has a long way to go to get to where he wants to be. No mention was made in the series of how "The Other" came to be. This story begins to make some speculations in that area as well.

The views expressed in my conception of Vincent are of course only one view... and we all see the characters differently. That is what makes the storytelling... and the reading especially wonderful and so much fun. By the time all the stories are told (Will they ever be?) Vincent may well be one of the most analyzed men in history... and perhaps we will all know ourselves much better as a consequence. In my 'zines Vincent told Diana that "All the world needs to learn is the art of being kind." That means kind to one another and kind to ourselves. Perhaps he needs to learn how to be kind to himself.

Phouda

DREAMS OF LIFE Short Story by Rhonda Collins Based on the series by Ron Koslow

h! Man! That was dirty"! Devin chased Vincent as he dove under the falls. Shivering, treading water, he looked for some sign of his so-called friend. Suddenly he was pulled under...then came up sputtering. After coughing for a minute or two, he yelled..."Darn it Vincent...stop it! I'm sorry already! Truce!" Vincent popped up behind him and ducked him once more...just for good measure, then they tussled a bit more...the roughhousing warming Devin up some.

Vincent was treading water in front of Devin, watching him solemnly. "Truly?" Vincent asked.

"Sure. I was just kidding anyway...you should know that, stupid."

"All right, then." Vincent swam to the edge and pulled himself out. Sitting on the edge of the pool, he put out a hand to help Devin...and Devin looked at it skeptically...wondering whether to trust him or not...and finally deciding Vincent meant only to be friendly, he took it and pulled himself out.

As the two boys dried off with the tattered old towels... the only ones they themselves possessed... they discussed what had begun the argument.

"It was not amusing, Devin."

Vincent's long shaggy blond mane was frizzing up quite nicely as it dried, and Devin considered another crack, but decided against it. "Guess not. You sure got mad."

"I do not call you names... not like that anyway... not names that hurt... even if they fit."

Squirming a little, Devin agreed. "Yeah. Sorry... really."

"I know you did not mean to hurt... but it does. When others say things... or look at me funny... it's bad enough. I mean..."

Devin was beginning to get a little mad. "Look, Vincent...I've been calling you names like that for years... never bothered you before. You know I never mean anything. You call me stupid and bog-brain, and anything else you can think of, don't you? Can I help it if you just inspire more imaginative comments?"

Vincent rose suddenly and threw the towel over his shoulder. His pale gold pelt shone in the lamplight, and Devin watched as he dressed. I guess it is hard on him sometimes. But he still didn't understand why his calling him a shit-for-brains alleycat should have upset him so... after all, he'd called him far worse.

"Doesn't matter," Vincent said quietly, but when he looked up and Devin saw his eyes, he knew it did.

"What is it, Vincent? Why so touchy all of a sudden?"

"I said it doesn't matter, Devin. Drop it."

Devin moved over by Vincent, his slim boyish body almost hairless in comparison to Vincent's pelt. The boys, similar in age at twelve and thirteen, were very dissimilar in appearance. Though Devin was older by probably most of a year...almost fourteen...Vincent was heavier, bigger boned... with an impression of density of bone and muscle mass that Devin couldn't compare with; and that was not all. As Vincent

pulled on his shirt Devin noticed that the pelt on Vincent's lanky arms was lengthening and darkening... and just as Devin was beginning to acquire hair where he had never had it before, Vincent's was lengthening and coarsening. He noted how carefully Vincent handled the fabric so as not to tear it with his claws. When Vincent's head pulled through the neck of his shirt, Devin looked down... not wanting to be caught staring. He'd never thought that much about Vincent's differences: Vincent just was. They'd grown up together, fought, played... loved each other for a long time. They slept in the same bed, had shared the same toys. They resented each other and would fight for each other... just as any brothers would, though they were foster brothers by choice, not brothers by blood.

Devin shivered, and Vincent commented, "You had best dress. If you catch cold. Father will have a fit."

They looked at each other and grinned. Vincent's long canines flashed as he laughed unselfconsciously... once again totally at ease with his brother. He never did that with anyone else, not even Father. In unison they chanted, imitating Father: "You boys keep out of the pool by the falls... it is too deep, too cold, and too dangerous and the current is too strong!" Then they burst out laughing, and Devin sneezed.

"Oh shit!" Devin commented.

Vincent just threw back his head and howled with laughter.

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That night Devin was more congested. When Father came in to tell them goodnight, he noted his sniffling. "Devin, are you not feeling well?"

"No... I'm fine ... A-choo!" As he sat there sniffling, Vincent just continued reading, or rather re-reading, <u>Treasure Island</u>. He glanced up, then looked down innocently, a small smile playing at the side of his mouth.

Father was solicitous. He called Mary to get the boy some hot tea with sugar and lemon and gave him some decongestant that Peter had left them. He took Devin's temperature. "Hm. No fever. Perhaps it's just allergies."

Devin laughed... "Yeah... Maybe I'm allergic to cat hair."

Not bothering to look up, Vincent threw a pillow at him... then went back to his reading.

Father watched the interplay between the two boys with interest. *Inside joke?*"Well, perhaps the decongestant will help. Let me know if you feel worse." On his way out of the chamber he noted the two towels carefully hung over one of the chairs to dry, and he smiled. When he glanced up, he saw Vincent watching him, but the boy dropped his eyes as soon as he looked his way. "I see you boys took baths today."
Both boys looked up quickly... guiltily... and he continued... "Good. Cleanliness is next to Godliness... at least that is what I hear. Vincent... lights out."

Father limped out of the chamber, then paused outside the door in the connecting tunnel. The pipes were temporarily quiet and he was able to hear Devin's sharp half-whisper... "He knows!"... then smiling to himself, he continued on down the tunnel toward his chamber.

After Father left, the boys blew out the candles, but lay in bed talking. Devin listened to Vincent's rough chuckle as he teased Devin about catching a cold just from a little swim. "Well, it must be nice never to get sick... I don't ever remember you being sick. Sometimes I think it'd be nice to have some of your differences."

Vincent became quiet again, then he said quietly, "Do not ever say that, Devin. I would give anything to ... well... just to be normal. I would not even care if I were ugly ... just if I were normal."

Devin couldn't see Vincent... except as a rough lump in the darkness. He knew, though, that Vincent could see him quite well. He coughed, and Vincent sat up. "You really <u>are</u> getting sick, Devin. We should have listened to Father... it is still too cold for swimming anyway."

Vincent could see Devin turn away to cough again. "Get real, Vincent. It's always cold down here. Sometimes it's just a little colder than at other times... if we always listened to Father, we'd never do anything." Sitting up, he shook Vincent... and said excitedly, "Oh! By the way... I had an idea the other day. Remember how you said you wished you could see inside the museum?"

Suspiciously, Vincent asked, "Yes?"

Devin explained that he, Pascal, and Winslow had gone to the museum the other day to check things out. "I even looked at some of Father's maps ... when he was out of course... and found a way to sneak in!"

Now Vincent was interested. "Where? How?"

In the midst of coughs, sneezes, and blowing his nose, Devin explained to Vincent where the basement of the museum came into contact with an old sewer line. If they could find that sewer line, maybe they could make a hole and get in... they could fix the hole... or make a false wall, and then they'd have an entrance.

"You did all that for me?" Vincent was impressed and touched.

"Yeah, well... we all did. We felt bad... getting to see all that neat stuff and you left here. Didn't seem fair. Besides, you know how Winslow likes projects."

The boys lay quietly for a long while... with the exception of Devin's sneezes and blowing his nose. Finally, in a very small, very quiet voice, Vincent asked Devin, "Devin... when you grow up, when ... we grow up ... what is it going to be like? I mean... girls and... and things... do you know?"

Devin coughed, then cleared his throat. "I don't know. I mean... well...Father talked to you just like he talked to me. You know as much as I do." Devin shifted in the darkness. He thought he had a pretty good idea what Vincent was working up to, and he didn't like the thought of having to answer him, but he was hard to lie to. He always knew.

Long sigh. Discouraging sound in the darkness, Devin thought. The only sound was their breathing and the soft tapping of a sentry checking in. Vincent commented... "Last time I went swimming with... with everyone... like we used to do when we were little, it was different... I have not done it again."

In the darkness Devin could see Vincent sit up and turn toward him... he was outlined against the dimly lit stained glass window. Devin told him, "I know. You notice I don't swim with the girls anymore either. Stopped awhile ago. Makes me feel

funny."

"I know... me too."

"G'night Vincent."

"Yes. Sleep well Devin."

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Devin's cold got worse, and Father confined him to bed. Vincent stayed with him, playing games, chess, checkers, even Parchesi. Devin tried showing Vincent how to make cats-cradles with string, but Vincent had problems... his talons got in the way. Games got old, and Vincent read aloud to him. Eventually, even that got old.

Pascal and Winslow stopped by and they discussed their plans for the museum project, with the boys taking turns watching out for Father. Devin sent them to find the sewer line and check it out, so they could plan further, and while they were gone, he hatched plans in his head as to how they were going to hide the hole in the basement wall. Had to be a way. If it was old brick they could make a false wall. Gotta make it work.

With his hand-drawn map, Pascal led the other two boys through the connecting tunnels. They'd had to ride the subway for part of the way, and Vincent had pulled what Pascal termed his "Lone Ranger imitation" on the top of the car. Really amazed Pascal. Hi-Ho Silver - Away! Heck of a horseback ride. When they reached the spot on the map that should be under the museum, Winslow volunteered to double check Above to make sure they weren't going to be breaking into some apartment building or something instead of the museum. While he was gone Pascal and Vincent examined the brickwork and tried to figure if they could match it. When Winslow came puffing back, he was grinning ear to ear. "Sure enough. We got the right building. All we gotta do now is get Devin up and about so we can work together on this."

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When the boys made it back to the central living areas, they split and went their separate ways. Vincent stopped by the kitchen for a snack. Whenever their supplies allowed William usually managed to have something left over for the youngsters... especially Vincent. They were always hungry. Before leaving the kitchen, Vincent slapped together a sandwich for Devin. If he is not hungry... I will eat it...

Before he ever turned into the chamber door he could hear Devin coughing. The coughs were liquid, and racking. He was <u>not</u> getting any better. Vincent turned and went to Father's chamber.

Standing in the door almost in the dark, outside the warm circle of candlelight, Vincent called quietly to Father. "Father, may I come in?"

Looking up over his glasses, Father put down the book he was reading. "Of course. Is something wrong?"

"Devin. He's worse. He sounds awful."

Father grabbed his medical bag and followed Vincent back to his chamber. After examining Devin, Father told him, "Now you have fever, and you're very congested." He felt Devin's throat. "Hurt there?" Devin nodded. Father sent Vincent to his chamber to get some antibiotics he had put away. *Thank God we have Peter*. Even with his help antibiotics and other medications were hard to come by.

Inside Father's cluttered chamber Vincent found the shelf with the medicines easily enough; he just couldn't reach it. He piled some books up and stood on them, then hauled himself up shelf by shelf until he could reach the bottles. He saw the one he needed, grabbed it quickly and jumped down, then took off like a shot back to his chamber. Father gave Devin two tablets of Ampicillin and gave him instructions for the rest. "I believe you are old enough to keep track of it yourself. Take one tablet with each meal and one at bedtime... and take them until they are gone. Can you remember to do that?"

Nodding, Devin said hoarsely, "Yes. Thanks, Father."

Father busied himself with putting his stethoscope away, then turned to the boys. "You know... we do not make rules lightly around here. There are reasons for each and every one. I realize you were swimming in the falls the other day, and you think it was great fun... I am sure it was. But now, we are out of antibiotics. If there is another emergency we will have to wait for Peter to get us more. Also, I am sure the consequences to yourself are now quite apparent."

The boys looked down, and Vincent shuffled from one foot to the other. Finally Vincent said, "I am sorry, Father."

Devin echoed the sentiment with a sneeze.

Satisfied, Father said goodnight and left the chamber.

After Father was gone the boys again talked for awhile in the darkness. Devin let Vincent do most of the talking. His throat hurt.

"The brickwork is the same as down in the water tunnels. We have some of the old brick left from there if we need it. Winslow says he will make a false wall before we ever to tear it out, and if we are careful no one will be able to tell. It is going to work, Devin!"

Devin just nodded, knowing Vincent's keen night sight would be able to see the gesture.

Vincent pulled out the sandwich he had stashed away and offered it to Devin.

"No, thanks. Mary brought me supper. You eat it... you're always hungry anyway."

Vincent mumbled something between bites, and Devin asked, "What?"

"Nuthin'... munch... You should sleep. We need you better so we can start."

"Sure. G'night Vincent."

Vincent's eyes gleamed in the dim light from the window as he nodded. "Goodnight."

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The following morning Mary brought Devin some breakfast, and while Vincent

was visiting with him, Lisa and Janet came by. Lisa was totally uninhibited as usual, jumping on the bed next to Devin... and somehow managing to look graceful as she did it. She ruffled his hair and teased him, making him blush furiously, and Janet pulled her away scowling. "Come on, Lisa... we're going to be late for class."

Lisa reached up and caught Vincent's hand and looked up at him... "Coming, Vincent? Just because Dev's sick doesn't mean you can play hookey too." She tried to pull him along, but with his weight, it was somewhat like dragging a log, so she just

flashed a smile and followed Janet. Vincent watched the girls leave, his face never changing expression. He didn't

notice that his hand was still outstretched from when Lisa had dropped it. Devin cleared his throat. "Hey... Vincent.... over here... Mona Lisa's gone." Startled, Vincent swung his head around, his ears... and brain... finally

registering Devin's remark. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, defensively. Grinning, Devin just hooted... then coughed. "Means... Vincent's got the hots for Lisa!...HA!"

Vincent stared daggers at Devin. "Don't say things like that!" Vincent summoned what dignity he could manage and scowled at Devin.

"No, little brother... I know... Can't fool me!" Spinning on his heel, Vincent left without another word, and when he reached

Father's chamber where their literature class was already in session, Father just honored his presence with a nod. It didn't matter in any case, because he barely heard what was said the entire class. When Father called on him he had to admit he was lost. It didn't make it any easier when both Lisa and Janet laughed.

After class, Father drew him aside and asked him what was wrong, and Vincent just mumbled something. "You're not getting sick are you?... I cannot believe that!" Vincent couldn't stand it any longer, and he cried out at Father, "I am fine! I

wish everyone would just leave me alone!" As Vincent ran from the room Father just rubbed his chin, thinking how unlike

Vincent it was to be acting that way. He started after him, but realized he would never catch up to him, so he went back to his desk and sat down. Vincent went first to the Mirror Pool, but Pascal and Winslow were already there

swimming. They invited him to join them, but he shook his head; he didn't want company right now. He turned and walked past the falls up to the Whispering Gallery and sat for awhile on the bridge, listening to the voices. He could hear Chinese being spoken from somewhere... probably drifting down from Chinatown. He wished he were in China right now... anyplace but here. He wished he were anyone else but himself. He looked up when he heard a soft footstep on the bridge.

"Thought you might come here... I saw you rush out... Are you okay?" Lisa seemed genuinely concerned, and Vincent's throat was too tight to speak, so he nodded and just looked at her. She sat softly next to him, leaning back on her hands, knees up, eyes closed. "Listen...there's music. Wish we could hear more of that and less of these crazy voices... But it's neat here anyway." She opened her eyes, and scooting over to

him she hugged him... and his heart stopped momentarily. "It's okay. Father wasn't mad at you. He knows you know it almost as well as he does anyway." Looking up

into his eyes, she said, "You feel better?"

Vincent still could barely speak, but he nodded and managed to get out a quiet, "Yes."

"Okay. Just wanted to check. Gotta go. See you later..." and she was gone, tripping lightly off the bridge and back down the dark tunnel.

Vincent drew up his knees and folding his long arms over them, rested his chin there.

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Math class was later in the day, and Vincent hated math. The only thing that ever made it bearable was when Devin was there, and with him sick Vincent seriously considered playing hookey... but he knew Father would be furious. Of all his classes math was the one he could <u>least</u> afford to skip. He sat through the class and tried to pay attention, and did actually manage to answer a few questions correctly... enough at least to satisfy Father.

As Vincent was on his way out, Father called him back. What did I do now? he thought.

"Vincent, I notice that your shirt is beginning to split at the seams again."

Embarrassed, Vincent said, "I take care of it, Father... of all my clothes."

Father turned him around and examined the shirt. "It is not carelessness, Vincent... it is just growing up. Go and ask Mary if she can start on a larger shirt for you, and when she is finished she can repair yours and someone else can have it. At this point there is not much point in making you more than one or two... you outgrow them too fast."

Vincent nodded and headed back out the door, and Father called to him softly once more. "Vincent."

Turning, expecting Father had finally remembered what he had wanted to rebuke him over, Vincent stood waiting..."

"Don't be so hard on yourself... now go on... and do get Devin moving. I do believe he is feeling somewhat better."

Watching Vincent leave, Father sighed heavily. He knew growing up was harder on Vincent than on the other boys... everything was harder for him. Watching the child struggle day by day just to get by hurt him. It is always hard to be different in <u>any</u> way, and no one was <u>ever</u> as different as Vincent; but he bore it all with a good-hearted gentleness that seemed innate to his nature... despite his frightening appearance.

Pulling out his journal, he wrote:

"I must watch Vincent carefully from here on out. I fear the strains of adolescence are going to be much more difficult than usual with him. I suppose it is good that he and Devin are so close. He needs someone to talk to, and probably the last one he would speak to is me... at least about some things."

Father closed the journal with a thump and picked up Shakespeare instead.

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When Vincent reached his chamber Devin was already getting dressed. He was, indeed, feeling better and was anxious to begin their project. "The Old Man finished with you for the day?"

"I suppose. Are you sure you are well enough for this?" Vincent asked anxiously.

Eyes gleaming with mischief, Devin just replied... "Sure! Go find Pascal and Winslow... see if Winslow has built the false wall yet, and I'll met you at the bridge."

Vincent trotted off to find Pascal and Winslow, and found Pascal finishing up his lesson in the pipe chamber. His father was teaching him some new codes, but when Vincent appeared in the doorway he told Pascal to go play. "All work and no play, you know... take off and have fun... stay out of trouble."

"Where's Winslow?" Vincent asked.

"Down in the water tunnels. He said he was almost finished with the false wall." Vincent considered... "You go to the bridge to meet Devin and I'll go get him."

Once Pascal was gone, Vincent could travel much faster by himself... at least until he picked up Winslow. He felt much better now that he was able to get out and do something, and he was excited about the project. He just hoped they didn't get caught. When he found Winslow, Vincent helped him carry the false wall back up to the bridge. A couple of the adults saw them and asked what they were doing, but Winslow told them they were helping to repair a false wall up in the upper east tunnels... which wasn't entirely an untruth. Vincent just kept quiet, though lying by omission bothered him almost as much as an outright lie.

By the time they reached Devin and Pascal at the bridge in the Whispering Gallery Devin was getting nervous. "C'mon... we've gotta get going."

Vincent shouldered the false wall and they took off through the tunnels toward their destination. They had to travel slowly because of the wall and Vincent was unable to take the subway, so it was late afternoon by the time they reached the narrow tunnel under the basement of the museum. Reluctantly they decided to leave the wall and crowbar and come back tomorrow. They reached the living areas much faster going back because they were able to ride the subway. Vincent hung back in the shadows waiting, then just as the train began moving he leaped for the top. He had only recently begun doing this, and it still thrilled him every time he made it... if he hadn't made it there wouldn't have been enough left of him for anyone to find. Be quick or be dead... he thought. Hanging onto the top of the car with it speeding along gave Vincent an adrenaline rush... he loved the speed... and for once he was glad of the differences that allowed him the strength and agility to perform such a feat. He was still on somewhat of a high when he leaped off the top and met the others in the shadows.

"Damn!" Winslow exclaimed. "I'd like to do that!... "

Vincent shook his head, blond mane flying, then said jokingly... "No. You're too heavy, Winslow... you would die trying."

Winslow pushed Vincent hard, making him stagger... "What makes you think I couldn't... I can do anything you can do!"

With his adrenaline already pumped up, Vincent didn't even think twice before he swatted the much bigger boy aside as though he were made of paper. Winslow hit the wall with a thud and looked at Vincent in astonishment... even his quick temper temporarily put aside in awe of Vincent's unaccustomed aggressiveness... and strength. Usually Vincent just laid back and took whatever anyone handed him. He looked up and the look in Vincent's eyes would have truly made him think twice before trying something like that again... even if he'd wanted to. He and Vincent fought frequently and he called Vincent names... even hit him sometimes, but for the most part he really liked him. Just now he was afraid for the first time.

"Hey... Vincent... sorry, Man. I didn't mean anything."

Then, just as if someone had snuffed a candle, the anger died from Vincent's eyes, and he held out a hand. "Sorry, Winslow. I didn't mean to push so hard. You took me by surprise." Vincent looked a little puzzled, and a little disturbed, as though he had not really realized what he was doing. Winslow reached out and took Vincent's hand and Vincent pulled him up. Devin had watched the exchange silently. It had happened so fast... and he'd never seen Vincent lose his temper before.

By the time the boys reached the main living areas, the small spat was forgotten by everyone except for Devin and Vincent. They had of course missed supper again and snuck by the kitchen to try and find something. There wasn't much left and they had to make do with a little leftover potatoes and some scraps of meat. Vincent found a couple of apples and they split those.

Pascal cocked his head and listened... "Darn. My father is looking for me... knew I'd get in trouble. Missed my stint on the pipes." He rubbed his hands on his pants and grinned sheepishly at the others. "I'll get double duty tomorrow, but it was worth it."

Winslow took off to go to his family's chambers, tossing a backhanded wave at Vincent and Devin, leaving them to head to their chamber.

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As they snuck past Father's chamber they thought they had managed to make it when they heard Father behind them..."Ahem. It is well past time for lights out, and you missed supper. Where have you two been?"

The boys turned in unison and Devin told Father... "Well, we were out exploring and just lost track of the time..."

Father gave the boys a look that indicated very clearly that he didn't believe a word that Devin said... especially since Vincent wouldn't even look him in the eyes. "I think that tomorrow you two will be restricted to classes and chores. The rest of the time you can spend on kitchen duty."

Flopping down on the bed, Devin swore. "Damn! Tomorrow I was going to go buy that knife I wanted... the one you helped me collect bottles for. I would have had time before we went back to the museum... and now we can't even do that!"

Vincent lay back, his arms behind his head... thinking more about pushing Winslow... and the way he had felt. "It's all right, Devin. The knife will still be there, and so will the museum. Besides...you know Father doesn't want you to have a knife anyway." He blew out the candles and turned over.

Devin put his hand in the middle of Vincent's back and pushed him to get his attention. "Hey, Vincent..."

"Yes?"

"You sure swatted Winslow down today."

Vincent turned over and leaned on his elbow. "I wanted to do more than push... for a minute. Why did I do that, Devin?"

Devin shook his head. "Well... Winslow can be aggravating. I get pretty tired of his bossiness sometimes... but when I do I yell at him, or we fight, and it's over. You never do. Maybe you just got tired of it."

"No..." Vincent mused. "That wasn't it. It was something different. I wanted..." Vincent's voice trailed off, and he lay back on the pillow.

"Wanted what?"

"Nothing. Go to sleep, Devin." But long after Devin's breathing slowed and quieted into sleep Vincent lay awake staring into the darkness, thinking of the disturbing urge he had felt... the wave of anger. He shook his head to clear it, then closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

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The next day Vincent and Devin spent most of their free time washing dishes for William, sweeping the floors and peeling potatoes.

Devin muttered "Sweeping dirt floors" peeling stupid potatoes. " He held up

Devin muttered, "Sweeping dirt floors... peeling stupid potatoes..." He held up his hands..."I've got raisins for hands, they've been in water so much today."

Vincent just smiled a little and tossed a few potato peels at Devin. "Complaints do no one any good... except they entertain me somewhat. Tell me instead about the museum."

"It's great! You'll love it. They even have dinosaur skeletons... and old armor... all kinds of things."

When suppertime came Vincent and Devin had the dubious privilege of helping William serve up dinner, and Vincent had to endure numerous joking comments about his friends not wanting cat hair in their food. Devin even laughed at him because he had tied his hair back to keep it out of the way... and when Lisa and Janet came up to be served, Vincent thought he would die. If he could have crawled under something, he would have. Devin just poked him in the ribs after the girls left and grinned at him, and that just made it worse. Eventually they finished serving and were able to eat their own supper... but then they had to help clean up again.

By the time they made it back to their chamber they were exhausted; when Father came in to tell them goodnight they were already asleep. He grinned a little as he leaned on his cane. Vincent was asleep lying half off the bed and Devin had thrown one arm over him and was snoring. He blew out the candles and left them.

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The next morning when Vincent woke, Devin was already gone. Vincent was a little hurt. He knew Devin had gone to get his knife and that he couldn't go Above anyway... but he still wished he'd waited. He went to breakfast with Father as usual.

"Where's Devin, Vincent?" Father asked.

Vincent, not wanting to lie, thought quickly... "I really don't know for sure, Father." True in an offhand sort of way... I don't know exactly where he is. "He was gone when I woke."

Devin was still not back in time for literature class, or social studies. He did finally make it back in time for math... *Thank goodness*, Vincent thought. But Father was not impressed.

"Devin... could you please grace us all with an explanation as to your whereabouts this morning? I suppose you know everything you need to know about Julius Caesar's Rome, and probably everything you need to know about the American Indian... So perhaps you can give us a report on both of them in... Oh, three days. You know what we have been covering."

Devin just blushed furiously and everyone laughed except Vincent. Lisa and Janet laughed the hardest.

After class, Father kept Devin to talk more to him, and Vincent waited pacing the tunnel outside their chamber. When Devin came storming down the tunnel he walked right past Vincent.

"Was it bad?" Vincent asked, trotting after him.

"Of course. You know how he is... he hates me."

"You know that's not true."

"Other people miss class sometimes... but they never have to do reports... or give detailed explanations of where they've been."

Vincent thought about that. "Well... when Pascal missed a few weeks ago, Father did talk with him. I don't know what was said, though."

"He's always harder on me, Vincent... and you know what he said?... He said he knew I was not telling the truth... he said I was lying!"

Objective, as always, Vincent replied... "Well, you were, were you not?"

Reaching the Chamber of the Falls the boys perched on boulders while Devin pulled out his new knife. He showed Vincent all the blades. "I know! I saw Old Sam and Derek out by the west park tunnel entrance doing some concrete work. It's still damp.... I have an idea! C'mon."

They took off out toward the park, and once they reached the tunnel exit they used Devin's knife to carve their names in the still-damp cement. Afterward they swam in the Mirror Pool for a while... the water not being quite as cold as the falls... and not forbidden by Father because of any dangerous rocks and currents. While they were swimming they talked about the girls. Devin apologized to Vincent for teasing him about Lisa.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I know how you feel. Janet makes me crazy." Vincent felt a little better, knowing that it wasn't just him. It was good, having Devin to talk with. While they were talking, Mitch Denton came by. Mitch was always a troublemaker, and though for awhile Devin and Vincent had tried being friends with him, eventually they quit hanging around him... Devin had no problem staying on Father's bad side without Mitch's help. Mitch stood by where they had left their clothes and called to them, so they swam over and hung on the side of the pool. They didn't notice how Mitch's eyes kept straying back to Devin's knife. After staying still and talking with Mitch, Devin started getting cold, so they got out and dried off. After Mitch left they continued making plans for their "raid on the museum," and in general had a pretty good time. Fortunately they were almost completely dressed when Lisa and Janet entered the chamber. They were planning on swimming and teased the boys for chickening out on them. Janet poked Devin and accused him of not liking them anymore. Lisa headed straight for Vincent, who was struggling as fast as he could to get back into his shirt to cover his pelt... so he wasn't so obviously different... at

Lisa and Vincent... Man... he has it bad... and bad choice of girls. Lisa wasn't interested in anyone but herself and ballet... and having an admiring audience. Unfortunately, Vincent had always been just that. By the time Vincent was dressed, Devin had managed to make their excuses plausible enough and they took off. Vincent looked very flustered, so Devin didn't say anything... he didn't even grin.

least no more so than usual. Devin just bantered back and forth with Janet and watched

softly to him, Vincent startled and put the music box away... almost guiltily. Devin wondered about that... Vincent had sure been acting strange lately.

Before supper, Father called Vincent into his chamber, and Devin went on

to their old carousel music box... his mind seemed very far away. When Devin called

A little later, in their chamber Devin came in just in time to see Vincent listening

without him. When Vincent returned and joined him at the table, he seemed even more withdrawn than usual... even for lately.

"You okay?" Devin asked.

"Yes. Just leave me alone, okay?"

About that time, Father came up and called Devin to his chamber. Vincent and told Devin he would wait for him down in the Chamber of the Winds

followed and told Devin he would wait for him down in the Chamber of the Winds. As he left, he could hear Father's voice raised... and he hurried off so as not to overhear. Waiting for Devin, Vincent was anxious... Devin and Father never got along

well... Oh, at times they did... but those times were few and far between. It seemed as though Father singled him out for every mistake; Devin was not wrong in that respect. It puzzled Vincent, and hurt him because he loved both of them so much. When he heard Devin coming, he looked up...

Devin began accusing him of telling Father about the knife... then accused him of lying when he denied it... and he called him a freak! Vincent was so hurt and angry he didn't know what to do... then Devin hauled off and hit Vincent smack on the nose, causing it to bleed. The sudden pain, the hurt feelings, and the smell of blood... enraged Vincent and without thought he struck instinctively with his claws across Devin's left cheek... leaving three ragged gashes. Then, as suddenly as the rage had taken him, he was sorry...desperately sorry.

"Oh,... Devin... I'm sorry. Please...let me help." Vincent tore his only good

shirt to put a pad over the gashes... "We need to get you to Father..."

"NO!... Not Father. Mary."

So, they went to Mary and she bandaged the cuts. She put butterflies on them, then a gauze pad. "I don't believe they need stitches, but Father will need to see them." So, taking him by a handful of leather-clad shoulder, Mary dragged him to Father.

In the midst of solicitously doctoring his cheek, Father had to get in his sermon... to both of them... "I cannot believe you two were fighting... fighting, of all things. Devin... whatever did you do to provoke Vincent into this? You know he is the gentlest of all the boys... you must have provoked him."

Vincent tried desperately to interrupt ... to defend Devin, but Father just kept going... on and on. Once they managed to get out of Father's chamber with a room restriction for the rest of the day and evening, Vincent thought Devin would have been angry with him again, but instead, he put his arm around his shoulders. "It's okay, Vincent. I finally figured out what happened. I saw Mitch's smug look when he passed by the door of Father's chamber earlier... he must have seen the knife when we were at the falls and come running to Father. I should've known you wouldn't tell on me. I'm the one who should be sorry. I just get so angry at Father I don't know what to do sometimes."

Later, they sat taking turns reading out of <u>A Tale of Two Cities</u>, which was their current reading assignment... in addition to <u>Julius Caesar</u>. When Vincent finished his chapter, Devin laid the book down and looked up into Vincent's face. "I saw you playing with the music box earlier. You haven't done that in years. You've been acting funny lately. Is everything okay?"

Vincent looked around the chamber, idly noting the shadows the candlelight made. Devin, in turn watched Vincent's face. He noted how very much Vincent had changed just in the last few months... he had grown larger, heavier, his pelt had lengthened... he exuded a feeling of power... of immensity... even though he really wasn't even as tall as Devin himself... he just seemed more "there." In the shadows from the candlelight, Vincent's eyes were so deepset as to appear pools of darkness. Finally, after a long pause Vincent answered.

"No. I suppose it is not. Things are ... changing... I am changing... the way people look at me is changing. I can feel it... I can see it in their eyes when they look at me... Winslow... Lisa... Father... even you." Vincent turned to Devin in the dark and sighed hugely. "I sometimes feel so frustrated I cannot stand it. I feel I just have to get away."

Devin reached out and touched his shoulder, but when Vincent felt the compassion... the sorrow flowing from that touch, he moved away... unable to bear the sympathy. "I'm sorry, Devin ... but lately, also... whenever anyone touches me... the feelings are too strong."

Devin knew Vincent could "feel" things from other people. He'd read some about people like that... empaths. "Sorry. Must be hard, huh?"

Vincent turned to Devin, and in the dim candlelight from the one or two remaining candles Devin could see the wetness there. Vincent said quietly, "Goodnight Devin," and turned away... ending the conversation.

Devin lay awake for a long time... looking across the room to the shadow of the music box... and he hatched another plan.



was there for he was distracted. Father called him on the carpet twice and berated him for neglecting his studies and in general being irresponsible. Devin fidgeted, but seemed far more concerned with getting away than in paying attention. Later that afternoon Pascal and Winslow wanted to see about re-starting on the museum project, but Devin

The next day Devin was once again missing from some classes, and the ones he

proposed a different plan. He called several of the children to the west park entrance before supper and told them what he planned...

"I checked out the park carousel today... the operator showed me how it runs, and I know how to hot-wire it. I think we should take Vincent and go for a ride tonight."

Winslow and a few of the others were skeptical. "We're too old for that carousel

anyway... besides ... why not just wait for tomorrow and go ride it?" "Think! Vincent can't ride a carousel." Devin wanted so badly to make up to

Vincent for blaming him for the knife... and maybe lighten his mood a little. When the children approached Vincent with their idea, he was delighted. They

snuck out and Winslow stood guard while Devin and Vincent broke the lock on the carousel and got the door open. Once inside, Devin quickly managed to get the motor started, and soon they were having a great time. Vincent thought it was wonderful... the lights, the colors, the music... and mostly the warmth of knowing he had friends who cared enough to go to this much trouble for him.

Suddenly they heard an angry voice calling out "What's going on here!" Everyone started scrambling to get out and away, and everyone scattered in different

directions... but eventually headed towards the tunnels. The mounted policeman snagged Devin, but Vincent's roar turned his attention to him. He released Devin and reached for his gun, aiming it at Vincent! Devin grabbed a rock and threw... fortunately his aim was good. The boys ran for their lives... and made it safely home.



Father, of course heard about the incident. Devin could not imagine who had told, but in the end it didn't matter anyway. Father was furious, Devin had heard it all before... how he was the oldest and should know better, how Vincent looked up to

him... how irresponsible he was. "You risked his life! And for what? A ride on a merry-go-round?? Maybe you did it deliberately! Is that it? You seem to take a perverse pleasure in defying me and exposing Vincent to danger. Did you want him to get caught? Was that it? Was that

your way for getting back at him for your fight?" Finally, Devin couldn't take it any more. He loved Vincent, but sometimes this was just too much. Nothing he ever did was right. He wanted Father to love him, and all he could do was make him angry...even when he was trying to do something nice for someone. "Yes! I wanted him to get caught! He's a little freak and I hate him!" Devin ran from the room and went straight to his and Vincent's chamber, grabbed his coat and his knife and left.

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Once Devin's disappearance was discovered everyone searched... Vincent searched hardest of all. He knew how hard it was for Devin to remain friends with him with Father always comparing the two of them... always blaming Devin for everything and Vincent for nothing. The fact was that nine times out of ten Vincent was just as guilty... at least on a participation basis. Vincent always tried to make Father see, but once he started a tirade it was hard to get him stopped... and by the time he did, the damage was done. Vincent searched all the places he and Devin explored... and the places Devin would go to be alone. He scoured the maze... a place they were never supposed to go, and did anyway. With his night-sight Vincent was especially good in the maze, and knew it like no one else did, but Devin wasn't there. Father became especially morose, and Vincent caught him crying several times. Vincent tried a few times to talk with Father about Devin, but the feeling of overwhelming sorrow Father felt flooded through him when he touched him. Eventually Vincent stopped speaking of Devin... or trying to, but he never stopped missing him.

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Once Devin was gone, Vincent found himself alone more and more often. The museum project had never been finished. He and Winslow had never been very close because of Winslow's quick temper; they remained friends, but there was always an uneasy truce between them. Pascal was becoming more and more involved with the pipe codes. They still spent time together, but without Devin there, the group just more or less broke up. Devin had been the glue that bound them all together. Vincent found himself more and more seeking out Lisa... which delighted her. Vincent had always been her favorite of all the boys because she could get him to do anything she wanted... and Lisa always liked an adoring audience. Besides, she genuinely liked Vincent... he enjoyed the ballet, and music and would listen or watch for hours. She felt as though no one else really cared. He had taken her to her first ballet recently, and she had been touched that he had gone to the trouble to find a way to share it with her. She wanted to prove to him that she really could become a ballerina... she practiced for days, and she worked on her skirt, so she could perform her own ballet for him.

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Vincent lay across the bed in his chamber. He was bored and restless... and was missing Devin. He had been exploring day before yesterday and had gone deeper than he had ever gone before, and found a river flowing through the darkness. Devin would

have loved it! They could have made a raft and pretended it was the Mississippi. He'd been gone so long, though, that Father had been upset with him. It seemed he had been gone all night... but it had been so quiet down there, so peaceful that he had lost track of how long he'd been gone. Now that Devin was gone, Father seemed to focus his attention on him... but it was in a positive way, for the most part. Vincent yawned, his canines flashing. He had apparently missed a whole night's sleep without realizing it. He laid his head across his arm and fell asleep, and woke only when Pascal came by to see if he wanted to go to supper with him.

Pascal and Vincent joined Winslow at the long table, and Winslow immediately

began asking Vincent where he had been. "Can't ever find you here lately when we need help. Now Devin's gone, you're useless."

Posignedly, Vincent just shrugged, "Father puts me to work Winslow, and I as

Resignedly, Vincent just shrugged. "Father puts me to work, Winslow, and I get my jobs done."

Pascal shook his head at Winslow and made a cut-off motion, and for once Winslow took the hint. He wasn't mean, just short-tempered. Pascal began telling them about how well he was doing in the pipe chamber. "My father says I've just about mastered all the codes. He wants me to start spending a regular shift there." Pascal's animation and obvious love for what he was doing made Vincent somewhat envious. Even Winslow liked the fact that eventually he would take over the forge for his father. He enjoyed working with metal and building things, and was well-suited to it. Sometimes Vincent felt as though he was only a burden to the community. He couldn't go Above, and he had no father to learn a skill from as Winslow and Pascal did... he brought nothing to the community at all. While they were finishing up, Janet brought Vincent a note from Lisa, and giggled as she walked away. Winslow just raised his eyebrows, but bit back any comment he was about to make, and Pascal took one look at Vincent's face and decided that he, too, would forego any teasing at the moment.

"Excuse me." Vincent said quietly, and picked up his plate to return it to William. He still had not opened the note. Walking slowly... at what he hoped was his normal pace, he left the dinner hall and went to his chamber... where he opened the note and read, "Meet me in the Great Hall after supper." Vincent carefully folded the note and placed it in a book, then wiping his sweaty hands on his pants, he left for the Great

With the wind tearing at his hair, he wrestled the huge bar off the door and pulled the door open... he could have gone around the other way... it was easier... but going in the proper door seemed more ... impressive.

Hall.

Lisa was waiting for him, and she looked beautiful. She took his breath away. She had new toe shoes and her long skirt floated around her legs like a cloud. She had been practicing one of the scenes from the opera they had seen together and wanted to show him. She told him to stand still and be "her prince" and danced around him. Vincent was so bemused he could barely stand it. He kept reaching for her as she would dance away out of reach... she twirled behind him, lightly touching his shoulders... giving him light butterfly kisses... his head was spinning, and a feeling was breaking over him like a tide. The pull he felt to her was impossible to resist... he had to hold her. He reached out and quickly caught her to him, but immediately she pulled back

for what he was... but simply because the game had gotten out of hand. But when Vincent looked up into her eyes and saw that fear... felt it flowing from her into him... he became desperate to make her understand... and his grip tightened reflexively even as she pulled away. He could feel her skin part under his hand... smelled the blood... felt her pain and fear. Just at that moment a hand fell on his shoulder and pulled him back, and the tide of passion... and now rage that anyone would keep him from what he desired... peaked and he whirled and roared. "NO! Vincent... No." Father's firm but gentle voice broke through to Vincent... and he realized what had happened... what he had done; he sobbed against Father's shoulder. He cried for everything... his loss of Devin... his brother and friend, his differences...what he had done to Lisa... he cried for the sudden insight this had given him into just what his differences meant.

afraid... suddenly this wasn't a game anymore. It wasn't that she was afraid of Vincent

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Vincent collapsed in the Hall, and Father had him taken to his chamber. Once he had seen to him and assured himself that he would recover, he dealt with Lisa. Her scratches were only that, and he treated them and had her pack. He had already made plans for her to go Above. It is unfortunate that I was short sighted enough to let it go on this long. It is past time for her to leave us. Lisa would be studying ballet Above and living with a helper; if he had done this earlier... if he'd only been more foresightful, Vincent would have been safe from the pain she had caused him.

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Vincent had come to briefly after collapsing, then fallen into a more or less

natural sleep, but that sleep was now becoming restless. He dreamed he was back in the Great Hall, with Lisa, and he saw it all as an outsider... an onlooker to himself: and the self he saw was a monster. He could feel the hunger and the rage seeking to find an outlet, and the beast-thing that was somehow himself looked up at him and smiled... a grotesque parody of a smile. Vincent strained... seeking to reach him ... to stop him, and he could not. He could only watch as this other self reached for Lisa. When she pulled away and her skin parted, the scent of the blood... the sight of her fear brought the hunger to a sharper pitch, Vincent had to watch still as Father tried to stop him, and "The Other" spun and tore his throat out, then turned again to Lisa.

"NO!" Vincent roared, starting up in bed, eyes staring, his body cold with sweat and fear. Throwing back the covers, he pulled on his boots and ran... as far away as he could go... to the river he had found far Below... where he could hide his shame in the quiet dark.

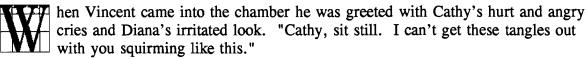
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After treating Lisa and arranging for her to leave, Father sat briefly at his desk and made an entry in his journal.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST BOOK FOUR THE LEGEND OF THE SOUL

Story by Rhonda Collins Based on the series by Ron Koslow

A ONCE BRIGHT DREAM



Cathy looked as though she were about to explode. Her face was red with suppressed rage.

Taking pity on both of them, Vincent took the comb from Diana. "Why not take a break and let me try?"

With an explosive sigh Diana gladly gave him the comb, then feeling a little bad because she knew she had been hurting her, she tried to apologize to Cathy. She reached for her, saying, "I'm sorry sweetheart,..." but Cathy knocked her hands away and turned to Vincent with tears in her eyes. Diana shrugged helplessly, looking entreatingly at Vincent. "I hate this...but she insists on going with the boys to play in the Chamber of the Winds, and her hair is going to tangle... she won't let me tie it back."

Vincent smiled gently and waved her out. "Go visit with Mary for awhile. She will calm you. Besides, Joe and Erica should be here soon."

After Diana left, Cathy climbed up on Vincent's lap and hugged him. He stroked her hair and said gently, "We still have to get those tangles out." She shook her head fiercely, tears standing out in them... she knew tears always melted her father's heart. "Come... let me see..." He gently picked knots out with his talons... a procedure which was not easy for him, but with infinite patience he continued.

"Mama hurts..." Cathy commented almost with venom.

Vincent admonished her, "Mama loves you. This is hard to do." He pulled her hair back with his hands. "If you would let us tie your hair..."

Cathy pulled her hair loose. "No."

Vincent sighed deeply. For someone only one year old, Cathy had more determination than any ten people he knew. "Then it will just have to hurt. Now I have to use the comb... and I cannot keep it from hurting, so sit still."

By the time he was finished, Cathy was crying again and his nerves were frayed, but her hair hung over her shoulders in a beautiful amber wave. She turned her slanted blue eyes to him and blinked. "No more, Fa-ther. Please."

Vincent hugged her softly, his huge fearsomely taloned hands stroking her gently, with infinite tenderness. "No more. Come. Let us go show Mama how pretty you are."

About that time Jacob and Toby came trotting into the room, and Cathy flung

herself into her brother's arms. "Look Jacob...Pretty!"

Jacob held her hand and Toby reached up to stroke her hair. Jacob looked at his father accusingly. "You were hurting her."

Vincent just threw up his hands despairingly and rolled his eyes. "Cathy... show the boys your new clothes Mama and Mary made you for your birthday." Cathy held out her leather tunic and leather pants that Diana and Mary had made for her. Dresses for Cathy were out of the question. His patience almost exhausted, Vincent told the boys, "Stay here with Cathy and I will get Diana to get her dressed."

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Vincent walked swiftly to Father's chamber, not wanting to leave them alone for too long... it hardly took any time at all for Cathy to undo what he had just painstakingly done. When he reached Father's chamber, Diana was already on her way out. She had felt him coming.

"Well?" She asked.

Vincent put his arm around her briefly and hugged her. "It is done, but you had best hurry if you want it to last." He could feel Diana's amusement and added... "How did she get so... so impossible in just one year?"

Diana laughed outright and patted his arm. "She takes after her mother in some ways, I'm afraid." She kissed his cheek and added, "Joe and Erica are on their way with the ice cream, so if she's anything like Jacob was at his first party, she'll be a mess anyway." She left to dress Cathy for her birthday party as Mary was already gathering the rest of the children in the kitchen.

Vincent settled himself on the edge of Father's desk and crossed his arms. He looked at his foster-father anxiously. "Was I that impossible at that age? Jacob is enough of a handful, but Cathy..."

Grinning, Father just commented, "What goes around comes around Vincent. You and Devin ran me ragged. Fortunately Devin was a <u>normal</u> child and it took him a couple of years to get into what I hear they now call the "terrible twos"... you were <u>born</u> that way. You settled down though by the time you were ten or so... then Devin took over." Father limped on his cane over to the other side of the room and picked up his journal. "Someday perhaps I should have you read this." A shadow crossed his face..."Or perhaps not... But...the times you children put all of us through! I remember the day that you, Devin, Pascal, and Winslow all disappeared for hours and we had half the tunnels looking for you. You weren't any older than Jacob. We found you safe and sound down in the maze, but it aged all of us a few years."

Vincent looked over Father's shoulder and said quietly, "Speak of the devil..." Father turned to see Devin swing in the door.

"Father..." Devin hugged his father and put a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Had to come for the festivities. Ruth would have had a fit if we hadn't. She and Alex are with Diana now." Devin leaned on the desk next to Vincent and told them about his classes, with Father interjecting stories about when he had attended medical school himself, and how things had changed. Vincent listened in amused silence to Father's

over. Diana had managed to get Cathy into her clothes, sighing because she knew they

unspoken pride in Devin, and was pleased that the constant struggle between them was

would be filthy within the hour. She was so pretty though with her honey colored hair and blue eyes under wildly slanted brows. The delicate red-gold down on her arms and the tiny talons just seemed to fit her somehow. Ruth took out her camera and snapped a few pictures of Cathy and the boys. Alex had run on to the kitchen to join the older children.

Ruth commented, "She really is pretty, Diana."

Cathy smiled up at her aunt, and Diana commented quietly, "Don't encourage her, Ruth. Her ego is large enough already... Come on. Let's go to a party." The boys dashed out, then ran back and each took one of Cathy's hands and ran out... a little more slowly. Diana called after them..."Don't let her fall in the dirt...!"

She shook her head and Ruth laughed. "She really is just like me, isn't she?... Heaven forbid. I'm not sure Vincent can stand two of us." Laughing, they followed the children to the kitchen with Ruth recounting stories about how Diana had run their parents ragged... puzzled and frustrated them, especially their mother after their father's

death. "You were terrible, Diana. You were always angry with everyone because they didn't understand what you tried to tell them. Mom never could understand why you were so sensitive and hated to be around people."

"I know, and in return she always tried to push me into meeting people... parties, learning to skate, ballet, anything she could think of, and I hated all of it."

Ruth was quiet for a while, then recounted, "I remember when you ran away at ten. You sat in the empty house next door almost all night while everyone looked for you. Mom even called the police."

"I felt bad about that one. Mom was so upset... even her anger when I finally came home couldn't hide that from me... damn it... that was always the problem... no one could ever hide how they felt from me, and I hated it. That's why I went into psych

in college... why I went into Behavioral Criminology in the end." "And then you regretted that choice as well." Ruth watched her sister carefully.

Diana nodded. "But then, in the end... if I hadn't done that I would never have met Vincent. I can't really say I hate it now. Joe understands how it gets to me, and if

I keep my cases infrequent I can handle it." She glanced over at Ruth, "But I really

think if it hadn't been for Vincent... and the tunnels... eventually I would have lost it... lost myself, as Vincent so succinctly puts it."

When everyone had made it to the kitchen Diana, Ruth and Mary began dishing out the ice cream that Joe and Erica had brought. Joe was holding Cathy, his eyes

gleaming. He was as smitten as everyone else with the little minx... "It's no wonder she's spoiled rotten," Diana thought ruefully. Diana started to take Cathy from Joe, but Cathy wouldn't come to her. Sighing, she asked Joe to put her in her chair.

Vincent came up behind her and hugged her. He whispered in her ear, "I know it hurts when she does that..."

Diana just shrugged. "She resents me because she knows I'm the only one who sees through her... that's all. She can twist everyone else around her little finger... you especially."

Smiling gently, Vincent had to agree. "She needs your discipline and strength... but I know it hurts you. I will try to be more strict."

Diana just smiled and shook her head. "No. All little girls should be able to twist their fathers around their little fingers... I think it's a natural law or something... and besides,... she does it so well."

The children had a wonderful time, and when they sang Happy Birthday to Cathy, she just sat there smugly. She knew all this was for her and she loved being the center of attention.

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After the party, Vincent took Cathy to clean her up and the women stayed to clean up. Jamie and Diana were chatting as Erica came up and asked, "Jamie, when are you due?"

Looking down at her bulging stomach, Jamie grinned. "Soon, I hope... although I don't know if I'm ready for one of these characters."

Diana laughed. "Not all children are as impossible as Cathy... or Jacob. Look at Toby, he's a sweetheart."

"So far..." Ruth commented wryly.

Jamie giggled. "Oh, they're really not so bad. They just like to have fun.

Cathy reminds me of myself. I never did like girl things... Mouse and I ran the tunnels and explored like crazy." Her eyes seemed to see another time, another place. She sighed. "Guess those times are over, huh?"

Diana hugged her saying, "Oh, I don't know. Vincent and I do a little spelunking now and then... I can always babysit for you, or Mary can... and you're still pretty darned good with that crossbow."

Jamie grinned.

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Joe went with Vincent to rinse Cathy's hair, and watched as he tried desperately not to let it knot again. He was amused and amazed at Vincent's enforced dexterity with those talons

those talons.
"I really don't know how you have the patience, Vincent... I think by now I'd be

ready to scream."

Vincent barely looked up, but his half-smile said volumes. "Whoever said I am not ready to scream... or roar? What would be the point... except perhaps to scare-her

out of her wits.?"

After her bath, with her sitting on his lap, Vincent ran the comb through with relief... there were few knots. He kept combing it until it was dry while they watched the boys and Mouse swim in the Mirror Pool. Joe commented on the boys' swimming ability.

"They swim like fish. Never saw kids who loved the water more." He pointed out how they were chasing Mouse. "Mouse will do okay when the baby gets here, don't you think?"

Vincent nodded. "He worries about his ability... but not much. It is not Mouse's nature to worry. He accepts what comes... something all of us could take a lesson in."

Something in Vincent's tone make Joe pause and look at him... but he seemed only to be watching the boys... nothing startling or unusual. By the time Mouse had the boys out and dried off, Cathy's hair was dry. Vincent dressed her once more and she was ready for bed. When Vincent took the children to read to them, Joe and Mouse went to meet Erica and Jamie.

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Once she had told Erica and Ruth goodbye, Diana went by the dorm to tell the children goodnight. She had just missed Vincent. Jacob and Toby hugged her enthusiastically, but Cathy just hid under the covers. Diana touched her mind delicately, and realized she wasn't really angry with her... she was just working her usual power struggle, so she projected her love and patted her. She blew out the candles and left them to go to sleep. As she wandered down the tunnels toward Vincent, she sighed. She closed her eyes and leaned against the tunnel wall, listening to the pipes. There were messages from sentries checking in, a message from Sarah to Mary... all softly tapped and musical. Pushing off from the wall, she continued on her way. Dealing with Cathy lately set her nerves on edge. She didn't know how she could adore the child so and stay so frustrated with her at the same time. How she could manage to defuse this power struggle between them, she didn't know either. Thank goodness for Vincent with his patience and strength. When she walked into the chamber, he was standing there, his cloak already on.

"Come. A walk will do us both good."

They walked quietly toward the park exit. After the hectic afternoon and evening the quiet, the background music of the pipes, and Vincent's arm around her soothed her ragged nerves. Once the steel door rolled back letting in the fresh air from outside, Diana was already feeling better. They walked hand in hand through the spring night.

Vincent picked her a flower and presented it to her gently. "Everything will work out, Diana. She is only testing you."

Slipping her arm around him under his cloak, she leaned against him, feeling his strength. As he held her she closed her eyes and said quietly, "I know... but it is draining Vincent, trying to block my distress from her so she doesn't realize how she is getting to me." She smiled up at him. "She is a little devil, you know."

He grinned wickedly, feigning astonishment... for once his amusement allowing a wide enough smile to show his canines...something he never did with anyone else. "Our angel? Never. How could anyone so adorable be as diabolical as you make her out to be?"

Diana poked him and laughed. "You are <u>no</u> help at all. You and Jacob... and Toby are her biggest fans... it's no wonder her ego is so huge."

With a chuckle that was somewhere between a purr and a growl, Vincent agreed. "Jacob was even angry with me this afternoon because I had been hurting her while combing her hair... I could feel his resentment."

They walked on awhile in silence, then Vincent told her to wait a moment. She was astonished to see him drop his cloak and climb a tree. When he came down he was smiling.

"What is it?" He pointed to a hole far up in the tree. "See there? A raccoon family has a nest. I have been watching them for awhile. The little ones are almost ready to leave. I plan on picking one out for the boys for Jacob's birthday."

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By the time they returned to their chamber Diana was much more relaxed. She

dressed for bed and watched Vincent. He sat down at his desk and pulled out his journal. Since she couldn't get to her mirror with him sitting there, she sat on the bed brushing her hair... she just wouldn't braid it tonight. She watched Vincent, his head bent as he put his feelings into words. He was so intense. It was no wonder Jacob and Cathy were the way they were - Cathy in particular. With Vincent's intensity and her mother's difficult temperament, it was no wonder she was so hard to handle... and her high degree of psychic ability did not help matters at all. Thank heavens Jacob had inherited some of Catherine's temperament. Once she finished brushing her hair, she went to Vincent and laid her brush by the mirror. She leaned down to kiss him, her long russet hair covering his journal. He looked up, pulling himself away from his writing: looking into her eyes he suddenly forgot what had been so important that he needed to put it into words. He closed the journal and pulled Diana down onto his lap. He brushed her hair back and kissed her once, then again more deeply. Lifting her and carrying her to bed, he let his actions say more than any words could have. The candles burned low as they lost themselves in their bond and each other.

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As Vincent woke the following morning, he stretched luxuriously. Diana stirred next to him and he ran his hand gently down her body and snuggled closer. It was wonderful to be able to be so relaxed in loving Diana. He still worried most times about "losing himself" and hurting her... Always, always from the first he had been so careful, so gentle...almost exaggeratedly so. He was still gentle... but he had been trying, slowly, to establish more control... and lately the worry that he would not be in control be was pushed much farther to the back of his mind and relegated only to a small

thinking of it, only of the wonderful silky feel of her skin under his palm and the delight it gave him. "Um. Good morning," she murmured. Kissing her neck, he whispered, "It's getting better by the minute." With his

awareness of the possibility. At least he was not worried today... today he wasn't even

laughed.

bond touching hers, he could sense her amusement and her building desire... and his was building slowly... at his own well-controlled rate. She turned to him, arms around his neck to draw him closer. About that time, three small bodies landed with a thump on

the bed. "You're late for breakfast, so we came to get you!" Jacob said cheerfully. Startled, they looked up and saw Toby, Jacob, and Cathy all still in pajamas perched on the foot of the bed. Vincent sighed, disappointed and frustrated, and Diana

She shrugged and reached for her thick terrycloth robe. "Why don't you boys go get dressed, and I'll dress Cathy... run on, and we'll be there shortly." She tied her robe and bent over to kiss Vincent, whispering, "Sorry..." and giggled at his dismayed look.



As Diana pulled Cathy's clothes on she discussed her plans for the day with

Vincent. He still had not gotten out of bed, and lay with his hands locked behind his head, watching her. His tangled golden mane tumbled around his shoulders. " ... so, since Father noticed Eric's problem with his reading, we became concerned. He hasn't had his eyes checked since moving to the tunnels, and he really needs a change of prescription. I plan on taking him today to have his eyes tested and to order new glasses."

Nodding, Vincent finally forced himself to get up. He flipped the covers back and swung out of bed, noting with satisfaction as he touched Diana with his bond that she was no happier at the interruption this morning than he was. He pulled on his pants and boots and slipped into his vest. He reached around her from behind and pulled her

close. "We could both use a shower... or a swim... do you have time?" Laughing at his insistence ... amused, and a little startled because she could not remember him ever being this persistent, she said regretfully... "Not for what you have

in mind, I'm afraid. Why don't you go on and I'll feed the children, then I'll take a

quick shower before I go." Cathy pulled on Diana's pants to hurry her up.

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As Diana ate breakfast with the children, she could feel Vincent's frustration... and wondered a little... "Oh well," she thought, He will be able to make good use of the cold shower anyway. She left the children with Mary while she went for her shower, and found Vincent still there, waiting for her. She grinned at him as she shed her clothes and stepped under the shower. "Cold shower didn't help, huh?"

He sat on a nearby boulder working the knots out of his hair and watching her, his look as enigmatic as his thoughts. He shook his head gently. He handed her a towel as she got out and kissed her briefly, his eyes soft and liquid in the lamplight. "Hurry home." Diana watched as he swung off down the tunnel, his long strides graceful. The knot in her throat and the band across her chest threatened to suffocate her. All she wanted to do at this moment was to rush into his arms. Shivering, and not only from the cold, she dressed quickly and went to get the children.

When Diana reached the children, Vincent was already with them, talking with them. Cathy was sitting in his lap. "Are you planning on taking Jacob and Toby with you Above?"

Diana reached for Cathy and nodded. "I'm taking Cathy as well."

Diana could feel Vincent's sharp touch of alarm. "I'm not sure that is wise, Diana."

"I think it is. She needs to see what the world is like, too." Vincent's unspoken thoughts unnerved Diana, but she was determined. "I refuse to hide her, Vincent. It's cool out, she can wear sleeves to cover her arms. I can do nothing about her nails."

Vincent told the boys to take Cathy to Mary, and after they left, he turned to Diana. "Do not do this, Diana. It is dangerous." He knew Diana's determination... he could feel her resolve, and he knew that they were about to have a fight over this if he continued, and that was the last thing he wanted - to spoil the mood of the morning. Looking into her eyes, he knew he had lost before he started anyway... so he sighed and relented. "Be careful."

Diana's eyes softened and her Irish determination softened as well. She pulled his head down and kissed him. "I will be. I love you."

Watching her leave, Vincent shook his head ruefully. He had a feeling the rest of his day was going to go downhill, despite all he could do to prevent it. He was still frustrated when he left to do his sweep of the tunnels.



Diana took the children through the tunnels to the subway, and as they rode the subway, Cathy bounced on the seat between Jacob and Toby. Eric watched everyone around him through his thick glasses, wishing things were clearer. Diana watched the people around her for reactions to Cathy, but no one had noticed anything odd about her yet... especially since Diana had put some light gloves on her. They left the subway and walked down the street to the optometrist, and the children looked in the windows of the shops as they walked. Cathy was having a ball, and was actually talking some with Jacob and Toby. A few people smiled at the children, but again, no one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. Diana was beginning to relax. After they got to the optometrist's office and Eric went inside for his exam, Diana and the children waited and looked at magazines, the boys arguing over a catalog with toys. Cathy pulled off her gloves and unceremoniously dumped them on the floor at Diana's feet.

A woman came up and asked Diana about Cathy. "She's adorable. How old is she?"

Delighted, Diana answered, "One year. Her birthday was yesterday." The woman kneeled and spoke to Cathy, smiling... then she noticed Cathy's nails, and gasped.

"What...!" She looked at Diana in dismay. The woman was embarrassed at her reaction, and not repulsed... but very curious.

Diana could feel all the conflicting emotions going through the woman's mind. She smiled at her, trying to cover, and said... "I know. It is a little startling, but they just grow that way."

The woman took Cathy's hand in hers and touched the nails. "So unusual. Do you know what causes it?"

Uneasy, Diana just shook her head. "Just an anomaly, I suppose."

About that time Eric came out and the doctor called Diana over to speak with her. "He has a change in prescription, but it is not too severe."

They picked out some new frames for Eric, the boys teasing him over several of the frames. Diana noted uneasily that the woman was still watching Cathy. They left to go see Joe while they waited for Eric's glasses to be finished, and Diana could feel the woman following them from a distance. She was beginning to get worried.

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Vincent could feel Diana's worry and reached deeper to try and find out more, but all he could feel was a vague unease. He could feel Jacob and Cathy, and they seemed fine, but Diana's worry bothered him. He finished his sweep and went to sit in on Michael's class, thinking that perhaps it would distract him from worrying about Diana and the children. The class was practicing their play: they were doing The Taming of the Shrew, and Samantha was supposed to be Katharina... Vincent had a hard time imagining her as a shrew. He would have cast things differently, but this was Michael's production. He had a hard time concentrating, so after awhile, he quietly slipped out to go pace his chamber and wait for Diana.

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Diana was feeling nervous now about even taking Cathy up to see Joe. She was afraid of what people were going to say when they saw her, and that made her angry at herself. But she was still concerned about the woman. She had not followed her into the building, but Diana could still sense her nearby. Why was she following them? As they got off the elevator, people waved to her and several people came up to see the children. If anyone noticed Cathy's nails, they at least had the courtesy not to mention them, though Diana did receive a few disquieting impressions. By the time she made it to Joe's office she was a nervous wreck. She opened the door and peeked in. "Busy boss?"

Taking his feet off the desk, Joe sat up, and his jaunty grin flashed at her. "Not if I can help it. Come on in." His eyes widened as he saw the troupe of children. He whistled. "Getting brave, Bennett?" He took Cathy from her, smiling as the little arms

wrapped around his neck. "How's my favorite girl, huh?" Cathy went to Joe immediately and proceeded to knock a huge stack of papers over. Diana flinched, but Joe just laughed. The boys were busy looking out the window and pointing at things, the younger ones fascinated at how different things looked from this angle.

Diana smiled and relaxed a little. It was hard for her to stay anxious when

around Joe's cheerful good humor. "She's fine, Joe. Impossible as always." She explained about going to get Eric's glasses and about the woman following them. "Vincent warned me, but I didn't listen... I don't know who she is, but I've got to shake

her to get back to the tunnels."

Joe told Diana, "You take Eric and the boys to get the glasses and I'll slip out the back with Cathy and take her home. Perhaps it will confuse her."

Relieved, Diana agreed, but asked Joe to take Jacob and Toby as well. "That

way, if she follows me, it will be easier for Eric and me to ditch her."

As she left Joe's office, Edie sauntered by and commented with a grin, "Makin' the D.A. babysit, huh... that's a trick." Diana winked, and she and Eric took the elevator down. Joe took the children out the back, hailed a cab, and took them to his apartment to wait awhile before taking them down.

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but she was following anyway. They got Eric's glasses and once that was done, they

When Diana and Eric left the building, Diana could feel the woman's confusion,

were able to slip away from the woman fairly easily, and left her confused and frustrated, standing in an alley. Once down in the tunnels, Diana relaxed her control and began shaking. She knew from her bond with Cathy that Joe already had her in the tunnels and heading for home, so she and the boys were safe. She could also feel Vincent's confusion; he couldn't figure out why they had separated and wanted to meet them, but wasn't sure where to go. If she were not so tired and angry, she would have laughed. Finally, she felt Vincent heading away from her, so he had decided to meet the children. Eric chattered happily, unaware of her inner conflict. He knew someone had been following them, but knew they had gotten away, so he was cheerful and relaxed...

By the time they reached the living areas, she found that Vincent had already met the children and Joe had gone back to work. Vincent met her in their chamber. He could feel her anger and distress and asked gently. "Are you all right?"

and glad he could see properly again.

could feel her anger and distress and asked gently, "Are you all right?"

Diana told Toby and Jacob to take Cathy to Mary, and when they left, she exploded. "I'm so angry I can't stand it!... To think I cannot even take her Above, to see our friends,... or anything... without worrying about what people will think ... or do. I hate having to hide her, as though she were something to be ashamed of." She

turned to him with tears in her eyes. "She's beautiful, Vincent."

He closed his arms around her wordlessly. What could he say? Certainly not "I told you so." He held her while she cried, and his heart ached. He had known all along that this was coming, and dreaded it. He had worried about the possibility even before the birth of their first child. Cathy's differences were not frightening to people, as his

were, but she was just as different in her own way. Her world, too, was to be limited. By the time Diana had cried herself out, Vincent brushed the tears away. "I'm sorry, Diana." He led her to the bed and sat next to her. "You remember what it was like growing up different. Your differences didn't show, but you were still singled out... made to feel different. You were called "freak"... made outcast. You grew away from everyone... but you grew strong. Cathy will adjust, just as you... and I... have. Love ... and her differences ... will make her strong."

Diana reached out to touch Cathy and found her contented, playing with the other children her age. The boys had gone off with some of the older children. She wrapped her arms around Vincent's neck and buried her face in his shoulder. He gently stroked her back, rocking her a little to soothe her. "Love me, Vincent... please... I need you." She didn't have to ask twice.

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As they lay there afterwards, deep in their bond, Vincent murmured something... remembering, and she asked, "What?"

Thinking a moment as to whether he should say anything, he closed his eyes and quoted:

"Is there sadness now with rosy glasses off
To watch the sun that sets upon a once bright dream
Swept swiftly out to sea?
No sadness left in memory,
For set somewhere in someone's heart
Is the faintest picture held
Of one majestic castle dream
No wave can wash away."

Diana's eyes filled with tears again, but the gentleness of Vincent's love washed over her and eased her pain. "She will be fine, Diana... and so will you."

CONTROLLING THE TIDE

he following evening an urgent message came from Joe for Diana in reference to the woman who had been following them. It seemed she was a reporter from one of the tabloids, and Joe was afraid she had the scent of a story. She had been asking questions of people in the building about Diana and the children and getting some interesting comments, which only made her more curious. He was concerned in case Diana had any plans for returning Above and advised her to stay Below for awhile... at least until the woman's interest waned.

Crumpling the note reflexively, Diana stared at the gray stone walls. "Damn and double damn!"

Vincent looked up, startled. Diana swore, but usually not in front of him... she knew it grated on him, and it was a concession she made out of politeness. For her to so forget, he knew she was very upset. He touched her arm and immediately all her anger and pain flooded across into him, and he gathered her into his arms. "What is it? Without speaking, she handed him the balled up note and watched his reaction.

Vincent read the note quickly and glanced up, his eyes shadowed, but she read his feelings. Extreme sorrow, regret...no anger. Just acceptance of a thing he could no more change than he could bring the sun down to the tunnels. He turned away from her so she couldn't see the tears that were forming... though he knew she could feel his sorrow, tears embarrassed him acutely and at times he still could not bear that she should see him cry. He felt a tentative hand on his shoulder, felt the draining away of her anger as she felt his sorrow and pain.

"I'm sorry, Vincent."

"For what?"

She lay her head on his shoulder. "I don't know. Just... sorry."

Sighing and wiping away the tears with the heel of his hand he faced her. "You have nothing to be sorry for. You bring me only joy... as do Cathy... and Jacob. Even Toby fills my heart with pride as though he were my own. It is I who should be sorry..." He held up his clawed hands... "for these." He walked to her mirror and uncovered it and looked into his reflection, pointed to it. "For this." He gestured gracefully with his huge hands toward his chest. "For what is inside here... For these things it is I who must be sorry... not you."

She started up to go to him... to protest, but he held her down, and at the touch, the impressions were even more intimate than if he had reached out to bond, and she was reassured. She felt his sorrow and his pain, but still there was the acceptance... for what was and could never be changed.

Then he smiled at her, just a small smile, and rubbed his thumb across her cheek. "Do you mind so very much being tunnel-bound for awhile with me?"

When she met his azure eyes, made an even deeper blue from the shadows of his emotions, she sensed a small current of amusement beginning... at least he had not lost his sense of humor. Suddenly it was as if it had never happened... well, perhaps not quite that, but all right. She was here... with him... and nothing could touch her, or

Cathy, or the boys... never anything as long as they were together. Together they could do anything. A smile twitched at the side of her lip and he leaned over to kiss her. He playfully nipped her ear and she startled so that he backed off suddenly... the amusement of the moment gone in a flash.

"I'm sorry..." he stammered... and asked anxiously, "Did I hurt you?"

Suddenly very confused and anxious herself, Diana asked... "Are you guite all

right Vincent?" She didn't understand this. Vincent never did anything that might tempt him to use his teeth or claws on her... not in the slightest way... and though it would not have bothered her at all at times,... within reason... she knew better than to encourage him. Only he truly knew how far below the surface his beast - his combined rage and desire - lay. That was why long ago she had made peace with the fact that it must always be Vincent who initiated any sexual activity... something she would have resented with any other man. Instinctively she knew that it was not that he wanted control of her... but that he had to have control of himself. She could hint... and did... she sometimes would even begin, but she would back off immediately if their bond gave her any hint that he was not in the mood. She had learned her lesson the one time she had pushed him too far and he had retreated to the lower tunnels for three days to regain his control. His constant gentleness... almost exaggerated at times... was something he had to work at. He was passionate, but he never just "let go" of his control. He couldn't afford to. Diana shook her head slightly, perplexed: his persistence yesterday, then this? Not that she minded, but it worried her a little as well. She knew from personal experience how "lost" Vincent was capable of getting and what could result from that. She also knew that at the time she would not mind... but her body might very well tell a different story later. She hastened to reassure him that he had not hurt her... only startled her. "Vincent... you never do that... that is what startled me... that's all."

Vincent looked away, suddenly embarrassed.

"Can you tell me why you tried it... why now after all this time?... You knew... surely you knew I would not have minded." Diana prodded at him both with her words and with her bond, and he closed up tighter and tighter... building barriers everywhere... his body language had shifted to defense postures... his arms crossed... legs crossed...his mental barrier was up.

"Don't." Only that one word... no more. No playfulness. All gone, wiped away.

"Don't yourself. The Other? Is that it?" Diana had hoped that by accepting the "Other" as a part of himself he would be able to break down the barriers he had built all his life around anything that dealt with his rage, his killing... or his desire... so he could begin harnessing the power and freeing himself from his constant torment. She had encouraged him to try to gain control of that part of himself. Perhaps... just perhaps that was beginning. She cursed herself for a fool for pushing him and dropped it. She put her arms around his unyielding shoulders and whispered into his ear. "It's all right, Vincent. I liked it." She lay there against him, her face against his back with the leather smooth against her cheek, the laces a tracery of texture on the shoulder. She breathed deeply, inhaling the strong masculine scent of him... but different somehow.

"charged" somehow. She felt him begin to relax a little, the muscles slowly going a little looser... but not completely. "Diana." "Yes?" Vincent began tentatively..."Am I different to you lately?... I mean, when we

Again she was a little startled... his scent even seemed slightly different to her... more...

bond... when we... when we make love... am I different?" Diana thought briefly about making a comment about just how different he was in general. Usually she could tease or chide him out of the doldrums, but before she did, she almost snapped her jaws closed. This wasn't a joke, and couldn't be treated as such.

She thought back and shook her head. "No. Not that I know of." She could feel him relax even further... but she couldn't help adding, "Not until a few minutes ago." She pulled him around to face her. "It's really all right, Love. You only startled me."

Thoughtfully, she asked him... "Do you feel different... to yourself?" His eyes were still shadowed, his barriers still up... he looked away momentarily, then down. "Yes." Diana's heart gave a thump of both anxiety... and desire. She couldn't help it... her mind automatically flashed back... back to the day Vincent had rescued her from the

two men intent on raping her. She remembered how their bond had caught in that unending loop as his rage had turned to desire and her desire had fed his. Quickly she put up her own barriers to avoid causing more problems. She wanted him badly right now... wanted to comfort him, to show him it was all right between them... but something... despite his barriers and hers, was being passed between them, hot as an electric current. She had taken his hand, and dropped it as if burned. Swallowing through a throat that was suddenly cottony and thick, she managed to get out..."I think I

Vincent looked up at her through eyes gone suddenly glassy... smoldering. "Yes."

As Diana stumbled off down the tunnel... she tried to put distance between

had better leave you alone for now."

herself and Vincent... to cool that white-hot heat that had been building. She made it to

the Mirror Pool, and finding it deserted she pulled off her sweats and all but fell into the cold water. The shock brought her to her senses almost immediately. She dropped her barriers and reached for Vincent... to see what condition he was in, and found the barriers still up... but she had expected that. Shuddering with the cold, she pulled herself out and dragged on her sweats while she was still dripping. She sat shivering and shuddering next to the pool. Their love life had always been good... Diana had

never had any complaints; but after what had happened that day in the tunnel, she realized that there was a great deal of passion that Vincent had bottled up that she had never been able to touch... and it had bothered her. She would have died rather than

admit to him there was anything lacking... but now ... God! The sheer desire she felt radiating from him was like sitting next to a radiator. How am I going to handle this

now? I have less control than he does. Diana had seen "The Other" look out of Vincent's eyes before, but she knew that despite everything they were one and the same. If she could just get Vincent to accept that...

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Vincent looked up from his journal when Diana came back into the chamber. His eyes were quiet and gentle once more. She stood in the doorway and they looked into one another's eyes a long moment; he simply held out his hand and she took it. moving into his arms easily. She sat on his lap with her arms wrapped around his neck, her face buried in his mane. "Are you all right?"

His hand stroked her back and he murmured. "For now."

"What is it, Vincent? Can you tell me?"

around them became thick, then the pipes began their usual rhythm and Diana could hear Jamie's voice far down the tunnel calling to Mouse. Finally after a moment... a year...an eternity... Vincent spoke. "I am not sure I can explain. You know the problem... you showed me the answer. I am trying, Diana... to reconcile myself... to assimilate Him ... but to keep control." He shuddered. "Keeping control is... difficult. I have barely enough control to manage... and since I have begun trying... it is easier to

He became very still... it almost seemed even his breathing stopped. The quiet

... forget myself... to ... to..." His voice trailed off. Diana finished for him. "Your trying has formed a pathway that is hard to close

once opened... you let the genie out of the bottle, but cannot get him back in."

He looked up, grateful for the words. "Yes."

Stroking his face gently, feeling the velvet-like texture of the fur under her fingers, Diana smiled at him. "It will become easier. As long as we can avoid having our bond form that loop for the desire to play to one another... avoid my desire feeding

yours. Perhaps we can help you to build the gate and learn to close it at will." He crushed her to him... "I cannot bear the thought of once again hurting you...

as before."

Pulling back, Diana gazed into his troubled eyes... right now the color of the sky after a storm... "I love you, Vincent. If it should happen again, remember that it will be because we both want it... you didn't hurt me... not really."

He shook his head miserably...."What if it is worse... suppose I cannot gain the control back at all, and ...?"

"We will not allow that."

Vincent's arms closed around her and she twined her arms around his neck. He rocked her slowly, and eventually his heart slowed as he relaxed.

For the next few days, Vincent's control held: he didn't test it. He played with the children, took care of his maintenance sweeps, his security sweeps, his classes... he took several stints of sentry duty. These allowed him to be completely alone on

journal. "The wave sweeps across me, then pulls back... like the tide. If I could only allow part of it to escape... to release... and not all at once. It is everything... this power. It is life... and death: it is the taste of blood, the exhilaration of sensing the fear before I

legitimate business...and no questions were asked. He did not attempt to make love to Diana. He could feel her frustration, and he was sorry... he knew she wanted him and would not approach him... at his own request. He traveled quickly in the water tunnels checking for leaks or any weakness of the tunnel walls in this area of instability due to periodic flooding. He thought about his reluctance lately in even attempting to love Diana. No. Cowardice. After finishing and delivering his report to Father, he prepared for his literature class. He hurried through, finishing early, leaving them with a play to begin reading, then stopped by their chamber... knowing it was empty. Diana was with Jamie helping her with preparations for the baby. Sitting at his desk, he opened his

Diana. I must learn to control it... use it... not let it control me. Not let the one... become the other... not let Him escape to do his will indiscriminately. Vincent put his head down on his crossed arms, closed his eyes, and sighed. He had not been sleeping badly, but he had been waking early and going for long walks in the park before dawn, and he was extremely tired. He woke to Diana rubbing his

kill... the rage...it is the power of the storm... but it is also the love and desire I feel for

shoulders gently. "Come to bed, Vincent. You cannot be comfortable here." Vincent lay without moving, his eyes sleepy and his golden mane tousled. The candlelight created an aura around him: an aureole of golden light. "Um. Yes."

Laughter gentle and soft, drifted down, delighting him. "Yes what? Yes you

will come to bed, or yes you can be comfortable here?" He reached behind him and caught her hand, caressing the palm with his thumb, and he felt the sudden passion and delight surge through her... and the tide began to rise once more.

Diana could feel that same current between them, ... the charge effect she had felt before, and she tried desperately to clamp down on her own emotions to avoid

making it harder for Vincent.

"Don't..." he managed, his voice as rough and ragged as his breathing. "Let it

felt the controlled rise and fall... and rise again... of the desire - his and hers.

be." When he stood he kicked the chair away... but as he picked her up to carry her to the bed, he was almost as gentle as always. He fought the urge to open up completely... to let it go... to let the tide wash over him. He tried to let it rise slowly... but at a steady rate... and did not try to close the gate on it. Diana groaned as he slowed, as she

Vincent lay watching Diana sleep. Her hair was tangled and sweaty, and to him the scent of her was almost overpoweringly provocative. His nostrils flared and he lay

back shuddering. He could not believe he had been able to keep the control he'd needed: there wasn't a scratch on her... there may be a bruise or two, but he thought she would probably only tell him it was worth it. She woke and reached for him... "Vincent..."

When he turned to her, it only took one look to begin it all again... this time with more confidence in his ability to control himself.



They snuck like teenagers quietly down the tunnels, past Father's chambers... down to the Mirror Pool. Slipping into the water they rinsed off, splashing one another and playing. He held her close in the water, and as she looked up at him, she could feel his peace... his satisfaction with the night.

"Proud of yourself, are you?"

He smiled widely, his canines flashing, and to prove his point, he bent down and his canines closed on her shoulder delicately... and something like a purr escaped. "Yes."

"I'm proud of you, too." Yawning very indelicately, she said, "I'm exhausted.

Pleasantly exhausted... but we need to get some sleep. It's almost morning." They walked quietly back to their chamber, and smiling to himself Vincent bent and picked the guilts up off the floor. As Diana climbed into bed, he spread the covers over her, then joined her under them. She was almost asleep by the time he settled in next to her, fitting his long body around hers. He tried to lie awake and think about what had happened, but he was so sated he simply could not. Rolling over, he buried his face in Diana's hair and slept.



THE RAIMENT OF MY HEART



few days passed, with Diana and Vincent joyfully exploring his newfound confidence in his control. There was a time or two when he had to have her pull back... break the bond, and help him back down. For the most part, however, he was gaining a control over himself he had never thought possible. Jacob and Cathy had been restless since all this had begun, sensing something. Vincent's automatic block usually went up, but there had been times... early on especially ... that Mary had complained that they had both been disturbed ... waking and acting somewhat disoriented and agitated.

As they settled in finally for the night after putting the children to bed and listening to Mary comment on the problems with them, Vincent had reached for her and she had slapped him playfully. "Please! Have some control! Think of the children!" When their eyes met, they dissolved into gales of laughter. It was always so delightful to Diana to see and hear Vincent laugh... really laugh. The sound echoed off the walls... and she wondered briefly what anyone out in the tunnels might think... since no one else ever had the privilege of seeing him laugh like that.

In the middle of the night, Mary came to their chamber and woke Diana. "Diana, sorry to wake you, but Jamie is delivering her baby and she wants you."

Diana hurriedly slipped into her robe, waking Vincent in the process. She told him what was happening and left quickly. She found Father in Mouse and Jamie's chamber, and he assured her everything was going well.

Mouse was a nervous wreck and was having problems remembering what Diana had taught him... "Not helping, Diana..." He looked up at her with his shock of blond hair down in his eyes, but he never left Jamie's side.

Diana looked at her friend, "You doing okay, kid?"

Jamie nodded. "But it hurts." A contraction started and she began her breathing.

When it was over, Diana commented, "You're doing fine. Father says it won't be long now."

As time wore on, Vincent paced the tunnels outside their chamber. It was far worse not knowing what was going on than he had imagined it would be. He was glad he had been with Diana... both times. Suddenly, he heard a baby crying and stopped to listen.

Inside, Father smiled at Jamie and Mouse... "It's a boy." He gave the baby to Jamie after Mary had cleaned him and Mouse just beamed. Suddenly Father commented, "What have we here?" He went back to work as Jamie began having contractions again. Shortly and with no problems, Jamie presented Mouse with another baby... a daughter. "Twins!... Father's voice held delighted amazement. There had never been any indication that Jamie was carrying twins... he had never heard more than one heartbeat.

Mouse just stared down at Jamie holding his children; the look on his face was an

amazing combination of delight and wonder. His son grasped his finger with a tiny hand, and he beamed at Jamie. "So beautiful, Jamie... so small." Jamie watched Mouse, love shining in her eyes. Diana just smiled and left to tell Vincent.

The look of surprise on Vincent's face was comical. "Twins?"

Diana laughed, delighted. "You and Father. You both act as though they are the first twins ever born to woman...

"Well, they are the first twins born in our world, so it is quite an event for us."

He chuckled, thinking of Mouse. "What does Mouse think?" Diana hugged Vincent and looked up at him. "I think they are going to be more

spoiled than Cathy... you really should have seen the look on his face. Oh, dear. Jamie is really going to have her work cut out for her... three children at one time!" Their heads together, arms linked, they walked slowly back to their chamber to try and get a little sleep.

Before the hour was out, everyone in the tunnels knew about the twins, and by morning the tunnels were already preparing for the naming ceremony. It would be a few days, but all the Helpers needed to be told and preparations made. When Jacob and Toby found out, they wanted to go see the babies immediately, but Vincent insisted they wait.

"Jamie is very tired. She had a long night. You will simply have to wait until later." To soothe their disappointment, Vincent agreed to take them swimming before lunch.

"Can Cathy come?" Toby asked. "If she will let me try to teach her to swim." Vincent had tried repeatedly to

teach Cathy to swim, to no avail. The child refused to cooperate, and only became angry with him every time he let her go under water. Diana decided to go along, though she really had other things needing to be done.

"I want to watch this. The last time you had her in the water it was a disaster."



Reaching the Mirror Pool, the boys shed their clothes and jumped in with Vincent

not far behind. Vincent didn't have to worry about them... they had been swimming like fish since they were babies. Diana undressed Cathy and handed her to Vincent as she kicked and screamed, "No!" She drew up her legs as far as she could to avoid the water, but it didn't help. "Fa-ther...No!"

Trying to soothe her with his bond, Vincent spoke firmly to her. "Cathy... you need to learn to swim. If you do not, you cannot run loose in the tunnels with the boys." Vincent opened his mind for Cathy... visualizing images of her always having to stay with Diana or Mary, the boys running off to play, ... and Cathy grew very quiet. Her frown and bad temper remained, but she quit kicking and screaming. Diana, in the meantime had undressed and joined them in the pool, thinking that perhaps she could

help. Vincent was bouncing Cathy up and down in the water, and Diana could feel her

relaxing somewhat, enjoying the play. "Now hold your breath..." Vincent made a face that almost made Diana burst into laughter, but it seemed to convey the message, because Cathy held her breath... and he dunked her. When she came up, however, she was yelling. Vincent comforted her and tried again... and again... Cathy wasn't frightened... she was angry. If she had been frightened, he could have understood it... but why she was so angry was beyond him. Finally it seemed Cathy became resigned to the fact that neither of her parents were going to give in, so she cooperated, and by the time Vincent's nerves were

shredded to the breaking point, she finally swam to Diana, then back to him.

By the time the boys were ready to dry off Cathy seemed to actually be enjoying herself; in fact, when they started to get out, she began kicking and saying "No!" again. Diana had gotten out and dressed, so she took her from Vincent and dried her off. The

short, red-gold of her pelt on her back and arms fluffed as it dried.

As Diana dressed Cathy, she watched Vincent swimming laps. When he finished, he pulled himself out and threw his mane back. The water streamed from his pelt as he stood. When he turned to face Diana, he saw her looking at him with a very

strange look. "What is it?"

She just shook her head and smiled. "Nothing... except that you are so beautiful..."

His face softened and he spread his hands... "I would kiss you for that... but I

would get you very wet."

Diana put Cathy down and called the boys. "It's almost lunchtime, so why don't

you all go on to the kitchen. We'll be there soon."

As the children ran laughing down the tunnel, Diana turned to Vincent, who was busy drying off so he could get dressed. She took the towel from him and laid it on the

busy drying off so he could get dressed. She took the towel from him and laid it on the boulder, then moved into his still damp arms. "A little water never hurt anyone... and it's well worth it."

After lunch, they went to see the babies. Vincent had still not seen them himself

Vincent over to the crib, where both babies were sleeping and showed them to him proudly. They were both so tiny it amazed Vincent... he could have held one with one hand. The children were very quiet and well behaved, and Jamie congratulated them on their conduct.

Vincent glanced up at Diana, worried. "Are they well. I mean they are so

and was as anxious as the children. When they entered the chamber, Mouse pulled

Vincent glanced up at Diana, worried... "Are they well... I mean... they are so small."

nall."

Jamie assured him they were fine. "Father says they're all right. They each

only weigh about 5 pounds, but they're not premature."

Diana had brought Jamie her lunch, and Mouse promised he would bring her

supper. Jamie just leaned back and enjoyed the attention. "It's not often Mouse treats me so delicately..." She laughed at his puzzled look, and told Mouse, "I only mean that usually we are exploring tunnels or whatever... I think when I had morning sickness and now are the only times I've ever known you to treat me this way... it's kind of nice for a change."

Mouse went to her and put another pillow behind her, tucking her in solicitously. "Have to take care of you now... harder for you to take care of yourself."

As Vincent and Diana left, Vincent whispered to Diana, "I think that is about the

most romantic thing I've ever seen Mouse do, other than their wedding." Laughing, Diana just commented... "Mouse is very sweet... I certainly haven't

heard Jamie complain... I think he probably does a lot more for her than even you know."



Once the preparations for the naming ceremony were complete everyone gathered for the ceremony. Even Devin and Ruth, Joe and Erica, and Elliott were there. Mouse and Jamie stood, each holding a child as Father began the ceremony:

Father looked at them and smiled, "It has been said that the child is the meaning of life. The truth of that has never been more apparent to me than on this day, when we are to celebrate these children... these two new lives that have been brought into our world. We welcome the children with love, so that they may learn to love. We welcome the children with gifts so that they may learn generosity, and finally, we welcome the children with names..." He looked expectantly at Mouse and Jamie... not

But Mouse just smiled at Jamie and said, "His name is Aaron."

Jamie smiled and said, "Her name is Ellie."

quite sure what to expect from Mouse.

outdone himself, and everyone was stuffed by the time the tables were cleared. Jamie was obviously tired, so Diana and Ruth offered to help her with the babies. Mouse stood in a circle with Father, Vincent, Devin, Joe, and Elliott, nodding enthusiastically and obviously enjoying himself tremendously. Michael and Alain sat at one of the tables observing the phenomena of Mouse as a father.

Gifts were exchanged and everyone found their way to the feast. William had

Father and Mary left a little early to take a walk, and Diana and Ruth took Jamie back to her chamber so she could get some rest. By the time the festivities were over, everyone was tired... but happy.



Father and Mary stood on the bridge in the Whispering Gallery listening to the voices. Father tentatively put an arm around her, and gratefully, she leaned against him and closed her eyes. Strains of music... Bach... filtered down from a concert Above, and when it faded, Father commented, "It makes me feel so very old, Mary. To have Mouse and Jamie ... two of our children ... have children of their own."

Surprised, Mary looked up at him. "What about Vincent? We already have his children..."

Waving her objection aside, Father commented... "I know... but somehow this is different. Mouse is... well, he's Mouse. Somehow I suppose I expected him to be forever young...forever a child himself."

Mary smiled gently, "And I suppose as long as he remained a child, you grew no older yourself?"

Chuckling at his own faulty reasoning, Father commented, "Perhaps." The voices began again, then more strains of music drifted down. Father looked down at Mary, at her gentle, understanding face, and bent to kiss her. Her arms came up around his neck and held him.

"Ah, Mary. Why have I been so stubborn?" Her hand touched his face and she smiled, shaking her head. Father quoted for her,

"My glass shall not persuade me I am old, So long as youth and thou are of one date; But when in thee time's furrows I behold, Then look I death my days should expiate. For all that beauty that doth cover thee Is but the seemly raiment of my heart, Which in thy breast doth love, as thine in me: How can I then be elder than thou art?"²

"I think you, at least, will be forever young, Mary."

Far down the tunnels, Vincent had paused, and stood leaning against the cold rock wall watching Father and Mary and smiling. "It's about time..." he thought, and turned away to go home to Diana.

WIFE, MOTHER, AND LOVER

ne night weeks later, Vincent was walking along the piers, watching the moonlight dance on the water. Everything was still going well between himself A and Diana. He felt very satisfied with himself and with his life. Suddenly, he felt an overwhelming urge to visit Elliott. He hadn't seen him since the naming

ceremony, and then only briefly. He wondered how he was doing. His apartment was not that far from here if he took the tunnels. By the time he reached the tunnels under Elliott's apartment building it was raining, and when he went Above he was soaked.

Elliott wrapped the towel around himself and dried his hair. The steam in the bathroom fogged the mirrors, so he opened the door, and when he did, he heard a tapping at the window. Walking over, he pulled the drapes and grinned at Vincent... he looked like a drowned rat. He opened the window and let him in.

As Vincent stood there dripping on the floor, Elliott shrugged towards the bathroom, "Why don't you go get out of those clothes and into a robe... there's one

hanging in the bathroom. No sense in being uncomfortable." Looking at himself in the mirror, wearing Elliott's robe, which was a little small,

Vincent felt more than a little silly. If he were not afraid of damaging Elliott's furniture or carpeting, he would have put his wet clothes back on. There were worse ways to be uncomfortable than by wearing wet clothes. When he came tentatively out of the bathroom, it took everything Elliott could do not to laugh... not so much because Vincent looked ridiculous,... but because he so obviously felt ridiculous.

Elliott indicated for Vincent to sit and offered him some coffee, which Vincent declined. "No... thank you Elliott." Hugging the robe around himself and feeling very exposed, Vincent wandered to the window and watched the rain... and wished he was back out in it rather than here in this ridiculous robe.

From the couch, Elliott asked, "How are the children?" Going back to the couch, Vincent sat and told him about Cathy's birthday,

forgetting his embarrassment in his sharing of the story. He loved Jacob fiercely, but his love for Cathy was different... softer, gentler, and more protective. almost jealous as he watched Vincent's face change as he spoke of his daughter. "She is so ... independent ... so like Diana." Pride shone in his face as he spoke... a respect for Diana's independence... and a certain quiet happiness that Cathy was so like her. Looking up at Elliott, he smiled and quoted:

> And thereupon my heart is driven wild: She stands before me as a living child.³

He shook his head ruefully, "But she can be so impossible... she tries Diana daily." He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness... "They have this power struggle constantly between them, and I do not know how to help."

Elliott drained his cup, meeting Vincent's eyes over the top. "Just be there for her, Vincent... but I imagine you spoil Cathy somewhat as well... that probably doesn't help either."

Turning his head and looking sidelong at Elliott, Vincent smiled. "How can I not?" They both laughed, thinking of how Cathy always managed to wrap both of them

around her little finger...Elliott was as helpless as Vincent when it came to her. "Jacob's birthday will be here soon as well. I have my eye on a young raccoon

for him and Toby to rear. You are invited to the party, you know. We were sorry you could not make it to Cathy's." Elliott promised he would make it down on Jacob's birthday. "Will you be

visiting Catherine's grave again later, after the party?"

Vincent nodded. "I always do." They sat silently for awhile, each lost in his own thoughts... then Vincent offered, "You are welcome to come with me, if you wish."

Nodding gratefully, Elliott got up and put the coffee cup in the sink. When he looked up, he noticed that Vincent had gone to the bathroom to get dressed.

When Vincent returned re-dressed in his wet clothes, he commented, shrugging... "At least I can get no wetter." Elliott looked over Vincent's shoulder at the storm... "I love weather like this...

Vincent just smiled, one of his rare smiles,... images of storms that had nothing to do with the weather flitting momentarily through his mind... and met Elliott's eyes... "Not at all. I love storms." When Vincent slipped carefully into bed beside Diana, he leaned on one elbow

watching her sleep for a long time. He touched her sleeping mind delicately, sensing the peace, and sighed. He picked up a slim volume of poetry that Jamie had brought him recently from Above. He opened it and read a passage silently:

> "You are wife, you are mother, You are friend, you are lover, Filled with fire and with courage, With tenderness and love -You are a gift of God from the heavens above."4

He lay the book down and blew out the one candle. He lay a long time in the darkness, his eyes gleaming, as he let Diana's sleeping mind lull his to sleep.

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The following morning while they were at breakfast, a message came for Vincent. He opened the envelope, and while he was reading it the changing emotions running across his face prompted Diana to bond with him lightly... and she was startled to find him blocked.

"What is it?"

crazy, huh?"

Fingering the message, folding and re-folding it, he said, "Nothing..." Then looking up and meeting her eyes with his troubled blue ones he said, "A friend is coming to visit... someone who used to live here for a time. She left about five years ago. I must go meet her and her daughter."

As he pushed back his chair and left. I

and the look on his face further alarmed her.

and knew he could not avoid.

As he pushed back his chair and left, Diana noted he stopped to speak with Father on the way out and showed him the message. The look on Father's face startled Diana... especially when he looked anxiously over at her then back at Vincent, and Vincent shook his head. Diana asked Jamie if she would watch Cathy and sent Jacob and Toby off with Brooke. She thought, *I'm going to find out what's going on*. However, before she reached Vincent he was already gone down the tunnels, and she'd be damned if she was going to chase after him. She asked Father who this friend was,

"What is it, Father? Is Vincent in trouble?"

Father fidgeted, but only patted her hand and said,... "Ask Vincent when he returns." The impressions of embarrassment and anxiety she received from Father truly disturbed her.

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in his throat... but when he leaned against the tunnel wall, he could feel it pounding against his ribs. "Lena." He thought back to when Catherine had brought Lena to

As Vincent walked slowly towards his destination, he felt as though his heart was

them, a young prostitute, pregnant, and alone... and she had fallen in love with him. He had felt for her a love he was unaccustomed to. With Catherine everything had been so... controlled by circumstance. He knew she was undecided... unsure as to a sexual relationship with him. He had accepted that and never pressed; besides, he had been equally unsure if he himself were ready. He was always too worried about losing himself with her. Just being with her, and with his bond with her... it was almost enough. But that did not keep him from the dreams he'd had occasionally... dreams he could not control. When Lena had come to him that night in his chamber, he had been dreaming. When she woke him he was already aroused... and her presence was further disorienting... then when she offered herself to him he was appalled at the desire he felt for her... compounded by his innate desire to give her the love she so desperately needed. With Catherine, the only time he came close to feeling such desire was when he killed for her... when he had no control over himself... and the rage slipped over into desire... but he had always managed to control it. Though he knew she shared this with him, her bond was weaker and unable to feed his... so he had been able to push the tide back... and the shame he felt had helped him control himself. He shook himself. I will not think of this... I will not! But he could feel the tide rising... and he desperately tried to push it away. He looked down at his hand... it was shaking. This is the last thing I needed right now! He leaned his head back against the smooth surface of the pipe and closed his eyes, crossing his arms...tucking his hands under his armpits to still that shaking. This situation presented an unbelievable amount of problems. Diana was not

Catherine... she would know what he was feeling. He could not hide from her how he felt about Lena... he couldn't hold his barrier forever... and if Lena stayed... Pushing off from the wall, he continued toward the meeting place... for the meeting he dreaded

When the door rolled open and he saw Lena standing there with the light from the tunnel opening casting a halo around her golden hair, his breath caught in his throat. She was lovely... no longer a child, but a mature woman.... and he was no longer the relative innocent he had been the last time. He made a small noise... almost a groan, and she turned.

"Vincent," she breathed, and suddenly she was in his arms. Her voice caught as she said, "I've missed you."

Vincent could barely speak. He could feel Lena tremble as he held her, felt her heart beat, and tightened his embrace protectively... almost instinctively... and tried desperately not to crush her. "Why are you here, Lena?"

Backing off... noting his reaction... secretly pleased,... she said, "I lost my job, and I had nowhere else to go. I needed somewhere to stay until I find another." She turned and called softly, "Catherine... come and meet Vincent."

The child that rounded the corner took Vincent's breath away. She was tiny for six, and had her mother's golden hair and wide blue eyes. She was like a tiny angel. Concentrating on the child, the tide retreated. Gratefully he knelt, and holding out his arms for her, she came into them as fearlessly as her mother had. He stood and held her, remembering the night she was born, and how he had held Lena's hand and helped her though the birth... he almost felt as though the child were his own.

"She has grown to be very beautiful, Lena."

Lena looked up at him through long golden lashes, "I'm sorry about Catherine."

Vincent nodded, looking away... not wanting to think about Lena... or Catherine.

He said gently, "Come, let me take you to the guest chamber. Everyone will be glad to see you... and Mary will be delighted with Catherine."

Lena came close and put her hand on his arm. "Are <u>you</u> glad to see me, Vincent?" Wordlessly, he nodded. He built his barriers higher in his mind and closed his eyes, seeking his control. How am I going to tell Diana about this?

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Diana sat on the bed in their chamber, her knees drawn up to her chin, arms wrapped around them. She shivered as though she were cold, though she had an afghan wrapped around her shoulders. Her eyes were wide as they stared at the candles,... watched the candlelight dancing on the walls. Vincent's barrier had been shaky enough that he had not been able to keep her from feeling some of his emotions... and what she felt worried her deeply... as did the fact that he was trying to keep them from her at all. She looked up as he appeared in the doorway.

"Diana... we must talk." She nodded, unable to speak. Vincent sat next to her and told her about Lena and all that had transpired when he had met her... his feelings for her then ... and now. "She needs a place to stay, Diana." He hung his head, his long honey and gold mane obscuring his face. He was not sure he could look at her. "I... think I had best go below for awhile, by myself. It would be best to keep distance between us."

Diana got up and moved slowly around the room, not looking at him. Her

fingers trailed over the books on the bookshelves. Vincent had dropped his barriers and they had bonded while he was telling her about Lena, and what she had learned shook her... but they were not bonded now and she built her own barriers so she could feel free to feel the anger that was building.

"I want to meet her... alone." Diana said quietly.

Vincent's head came up at the tone ... a tone he had never heard from Diana before. He felt for their bond and encountered her barrier... shut tight against him. "Diana..."

"I want to meet her... without you there," Diana said again... her eyes meeting his in a stare that caused him to drop his eyes.



Lena had taken Catherine and left her with Mary, who was delighted to see the child again. She had been introduced to Jacob and she envied Catherine that she had been able to give Vincent a son. She had been told about Diana. Her hopes that she might possibly have had a chance with Vincent were crushed. When she looked up and saw him standing there, filling the doorway with his huge frame, her eyes filled with tears.

"Why didn't you tell me about her?"

Vincent just shook his head slightly and answered, "It was not the time."

She rose and went to him...looking up at him. She was so small compared to Diana... who was much of a height with him. "I hear you have a daughter as well... I met Jacob. Will I meet her...and her mother?" *Strange*, she thought... seeing Vincent so indecisive. This was really bothering him. ... *Good*.

"She wishes to meet you as well. She is down by the falls." Without another word, Vincent turned away and disappeared through the tunnel exit.



When Lena came through the entrance into the Cavern of the Falls all she could see of Diana was her back, but obviously the woman knew she was there.

"Why did you come, Lena?... Why now?"

Surprised at the question, Lena started, "I lost my job... needed..."

Diana interrupted harshly, "Cut the bullshit. I'm not Vincent. The job is an excuse. You came because of him. You figured it had been long enough since Catherine's death for you to have a chance. Well, you don't. Not a chance in Hell."

Taken completely off guard, Lena defensively told Diana, "All right, yes. I did..." She steeled herself, looked Diana in the eyes and said, "I came for him... I want him. I've always wanted him... and I saw him first."

Possession is nine points of the law, you bitch... Diana thought... then reconsidered. She, more than anyone else knew that any ties she and Vincent had had to be strictly voluntary. He was a big boy now... Diana knew her own rules. God, I hate this bitch! She was going to have to force herself to accept whatever happened... and

enough sharing him with Catherine's memory... but that she could tolerate. But this unresolved ... something... between Lena and Vincent had to be taken care of. He couldn't just run away from it... this feeling couldn't be something else for him to package away into "The Other." He had to face it and deal with it, one way or another.... and so did she. How he felt about her would also ultimately depend upon how she dealt with this... Freedom for him to make his own mistakes was part of the silent bargain she had made with herself. She knew she had made enough in her own

understand... just as she did with Catherine, and Lord, how that galled her. It was bad

Diana looked daggers at Lena. "Go ahead and try. If he takes you, I wish you joy of it... but in the end, Lena... in the end, whatever happens he will come to me."

Lena watched Diana's stiff back as she walked away and left her standing there alone in the tunnel.

He reached out and steadied her. "Diana... what?"

She smiled... a little forced, but what did he expect anyway? "I'm taking Cathy and going Above to visit Ruth and Devin. I'll be gone awhile.... I'll know when it's time to come home."

When Diana entered the chamber she almost ran into Vincent coming back out.

Perplexed... somewhat desperate, Diana thought, Vincent held her. "Diana... don't. I can't..."

"Can't what, Vincent? Can't handle the situation? Sorry. It's not my situation. It's your situation. Deal with it."

Vincent could feel very little of her feelings through her tight barrier, but he could tell she was disturbed... perhaps even angry. "I did not ask for this, you know.

Do not just walk off and leave me "

As Diana packed a bag, she shot a look of scorn at Vincent. "I'm not leaving permanently, Vincent. She's not worth that. But there's more here than meets the eye... mine or yours. You feel something for her... and you desire her. That makes it dangerous. But you have to deal with it. I don't... and I can't. I might even make it worse by being here." She went to him and reached out softly to touch his face. "I

As she left, Vincent said quietly, almost plaintively, to himself, "But how am I to

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love you. I will always love you... whatever happens. Don't worry so."

deal with it. Diana?"

As Diana left to collect Cathy the tears finally began, but she brushed them angrily away and forced a semblance of calm as she saw Lena approaching. Damned if I'll let her see me cry. "Damn you, Lena. You don't know what you're doing to him. He's not like anyone you've ever known... or slept with... before. Maybe you don't

know or care... maybe you do... I don't know."

Lena studied Diana from under her long golden lashes. "I know. I knew it from

the first. We know each other, understand each other..."

Diana studied her... picked up her impressions... and shook her head. "If that's true, then God help you both." As she walked away, she thought, And God help me as well.

Diana left Lena standing there and continued on to get Cathy. She told Jacob and Toby she would be gone for awhile, but would be back soon. Jamie walked with her a ways, silent... she knew something about the situation... just from what she had picked up when Lena had been living Below before she left. She had been young, but not stupid. Finally, when they reached the subway exit, Jamie reached out and hugged Diana. "Come back soon..."

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On the subway, with Cathy looking out the window and bouncing around, Diana thought, I'll be back as soon as I can. As she waited for her stop Diana thought about Vincent. She knew what he was going through,... his struggle... he didn't want to give in to this... thing... controlling him. It should be his to control, and that angered him. Then the rage would come...and the desire, mostly because he knew how much Lena wanted him, needed him. He had this damned intense need to give to the people he cared about,... to give whatever he could... He knew Lena needed his love, and he wanted to give it to her, and that was going to be his downfall. If he just didn't care... the desire would be no problem. At least there was no bond between them... perhaps that would make it easier. The tears started again. Damn it! Diana thought, truly furious... with Lena, herself... Vincent. If he could just screw her senseless and get it over with... without caring for her so goddamn much, maybe I wouldn't mind so much. But then he wouldn't be Vincent... wouldn't be the man he is. Diana was truly angry... and hurt... not so much at the desire... she could understand that... but at the depth of caring she had felt from Vincent. "Bitch!" She muttered.

"Pardon me!" the woman next to her said, angrily.

"Sorry. Not you." Diana said apologetically, smiling a little for the first time that morning.

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Vincent sat for a very long time by himself, staring at his painting of himself and Catherine, then walked around the room restlessly, picking up things and putting them down again. He sat twirling Diana's amethyst crystal formation ... holding it up to the candlelight. He put it down and sighed. Finally he settled and opened his journal.

"The feelings rise and fall in me. I alternately curse myself... then blame Diana for leaving me to handle this. When I began loving Diana, it was so gentle... she allowed me to love her gently. This... desire... was there... but always under my control,... until that one time... with Diana."

He stopped, unsure of how to continue.

"I no longer feel the shame that desire engendered in me, thanks to Diana, and lately I have achieved more control than I ever thought possible. But I have lost control before... and hurt Diana. It could happen again. In addition, I fear I will lose control and go to Lena. How could I do that to Diana? How can I even be considering the possibility?" That's a stupid question. Vincent whipped around to see who had spoken, and sure enough, The Other sat

propped up in their bed.

writing.

Go away. The Other grinned and thumbed his nose at him. Not on your life. Or is it

mine? It's play time... The Other held out one huge, grotesquely taloned hand with a tiny bottle balanced in the palm. Such a small bottle... and I am so huge. The Other hopped off the bed and leaned one arm on Vincent's desk in front of him, gesturing widely with the other. What is it that artist said to Catherine that she found so

amusing? "I am large,... I contain multitudes!" I really am over the edge, Vincent thought. I refuse to play this game. I know what you are... who I am. Now go back in the bottle like a nice genie.

Forget it. Vincent decided to ignore the whole thing and get back to what he was doing. Diana was right. He had to get "himself" assimilated... but considering this "conversation" at least he was able to keep his sense of humor. He went back to his

"I can only consider the possibility because I know Diana would understand... but then I have to ask myself how far her understanding could possibly reach." He wasn't worried that she would suddenly cease loving him. He knew that was impossible, just as it would be impossible for him to cease loving her. But it would

hurt, nonetheless, and he cringed from the thought of causing her that pain. "There is always another consideration as well... what could I do to Lena if I lost control? I could hurt her, as well. True, we do not have a bond... the intensity of the

desire would be less... I think... because I would not be picking up her desire as strongly as I would Diana's."

He heard a noise and turned sharply, lip lifting in a snarl, expecting to see "The Other" again. I have to resolve this! Frustrated in more ways than one, Vincent finally decided to go for a walk, but about the time he was heading out the door Father came in.

"Vincent." Father greeted him politely, looking worried.

"Father." Vincent waited impatiently to see what Father wanted. He shifted restlessly.

obviously not planning to leave. Sighing, Vincent drew his cloak off and threw it over the desk. "I suppose not.

Did you need something?"

"In a hurry?" Father asked, as he settled in the leather chair next to the bed,

Father fiddled with his gloves, his attention on them as he asked, "Are you

well?"

Vincent reached out and put his hand on Father's shoulder, and squeezed gently. He felt the love and concern, and sat hesitantly across from Father, reluctantly preparing himself for a talk he did not want to have.

"Did you and Diana have a disagreement?" Father asked.

With a smile that held nothing of amusement, Vincent answered, "No. Not a disagreement."

"She left because of Lena." Father's eyes bored into him and he turned his head.

"Yes." Father leaned on his cane as he forced himself up. "Difficult situation. Perhaps

you should go Below for awhile ... stay out of the way." Vincent glanced up through the blond strands of his mane. He noted almost absently how the years were telling on Father, but how almost regal he was still when he felt he was still in control. He knew that feeling... wished he had it now. "I suggested

Father looked almost amused. "Then she proceeds to run away. Quaint attitude."

that and Diana vetoed it... said I need to face my problems, not run away."

Vincent shook his head. "No. She left to give me space... to remove the pressure of her presence."

They talked for awhile of Catherine, of Lena and Diana... of times past and

present. Finally, Father rose, leaning on his cane. "Perhaps Diana was right, Vincent. This is something you need to resolve, one way or another. Only you can know what to do... what is right for you and everyone involved. But Vincent...be careful." He laid a hand on his huge foster son's shoulder in sympathy, and Vincent's hand came up to cover it.

"Thank you, Father."



After Father left, Vincent stood quietly for a time, then snatching up his cloak he turned and left his chamber. He strode quickly through the tunnels, avoiding any possible chance of meeting Lena. Once at the west park exit, he rolled the steel door back and opened the gate. Once he had closed it, he leaned against the wall feeling a strange sense of relief. He knew it was ridiculous, but he felt "safer" with her on one side of the door and him on the other. The spring air that drifted in to him was

wonderful, and he pulled his hood up and set out for a long walk. He walked for hours, even visiting Catherine's grave for awhile... but even that vigil, which usually gave him a sense of peace, did nothing for him. He tried several times to touch Diana with their bond, but as soon as she felt him try she threw her barrier up and shut him out.

Once Vincent was back Below and had made it to the living area, he went directly to the guest chamber. Standing in the doorway, his hands braced on either side, he called to Lena. "Lena." His voice was velvet laid over granite and sent shivers through her. "Vincent. Come in." He shook his head. "No. We need to talk. Will you walk with me?" They walked in silence through the tunnels. When they reached the falls, they stood beside them. Lena said, "I saw you for the first time near here." Vincent nodded, remembering. "You saw me, and were not afraid... there was only love when you looked at me. I will always cherish that moment... when you accepted me." Lena placed her hand on his chest and looked into his beautiful unhuman face.

Frustrated... both sexually and in general, he also started to become angry. All I ask is a little peace! Why does it seem that fate conspires against me? He understood why Diana had shut herself off from him... to spare both of them and to let him solve his problem without any pressure from her, but it still, irrationally perhaps, made him

angry. He was so distracted that he almost... but not quite... ran into some joggers. As

he dodged unseen into the bushes to let them pass, he decided he had best go back Below and "face the music," before his distraction caused him to be caught Above. He wished desperately for the darkness and fought the urge to forget Diana's advice and retreat far Below to the safety and peace of the darkness... where he could be himself.

didn't she?... Didn't she, Vincent?" Releasing her, Vincent moved over to a boulder and sat, draping an arm over his

"You accepted me as well." She placed a hand on her breast... "There is still only love

Vincent closed his eyes and leaned his head back. His arm came up around her

Lena watched him through a fall of bright blond hair. "She left because of me,

here. That will never change, Vincent."

and tightened. "I... cannot... let myself... love you, Lena."

knee. "Yes."

The roar of the falls seemed very loud ... or perhaps it was only the sound of his heart pounding... as Lena came up behind him, putting her arms around him and laying

her head on his back. "Please love me Vincent... only once. So I can go on... so I can remember. I have been so alone. There has been no one... I have not been with anyone since I left the streets... and I have never loved anyone...except for you. I have to know what it is like... what it can be like."

Vincent pulled away abruptly. The tide was rushing over him...NO! He stood some three feet away from her, breathing raggedly. "Lena," he managed. She reached out to touch him, and he barked, "NO!" She pulled back as if bitten. "Do not touch me, Lena. Not now. You do not understand." The tide was receding somewhat... he pushed "The Other" back...as long as she didn't touch him and he couldn't receive any

She stood watching him, arms wrapped around herself... but totally unafraid. She had never seen Vincent's rages... never seen him kill. She had heard about it... had heard stories from Helpers ... probably exaggerated, she thought... about his madness

of her impressions of desire, he could manage. He stood still as a statue for awhile as his control returned and his breathing became more regular, then he turned to her.

and his rages. Lena was no fool. She had seen almost everything in her time on the streets. She may not understand completely, but she probably understood a great deal more than Vincent thought. "I am not as fragile as you think Vincent." She started

more than Vincent thought. "I am not as fragile as you think, Vincent." She started towards him and he backed up... until he could back no further. She lay her golden head against his chest and then took his hand in hers... delicately tracing the palm and touching the talons with her thumb. "They are beautiful." She placed his hand on her throat. "I trust you, Vincent."

Vincent's control held... barely. "Diana trusts me as well," he said quietly.

"She's not here. She won't know."

"Yes." Vincent shook himself free and moved away once more. Haltingly, he told her of their bond. "She will know... whatever happens... but that does not matter.

I cannot betray that trust."

Angered, Lena told him her own version of what Diana had said to her. "She told me to love you...that she wished me joy from it... that you would come back to her

Vincent was not thinking very clearly by this time, but suddenly everything seemed clearer...as though a veil had been removed from before his eyes. The relief was overwhelming. Diana had known... that was why she had left. She had told him

she would understand. Without words, and without hesitation, he walked with Lena back to the guest chamber and dropped the curtain over the door. He tried to build his barrier between himself and Diana as tightly as he could... though he knew it would not be enough.

It was easier to control the tide once his mind was made up... which was just as well, because Lena was smaller, more delicate than Diana. He marveled at her

It was easier to control the tide once his mind was made up... which was just as well, because Lena was smaller, more delicate than Diana. He marveled at her delicacy... but she astonished him with the fierceness of her own response to him. She had no thoughts of fear and no inhibitions of any sort as she raked him with her nails or bit his neck... spurring him on even further. Nothing he could have done would have shocked her. All things considered, he felt he managed enough control.

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Much later, with Lena lying in his arms, Vincent lay staring at the ceiling through half-closed, sleepy eyes. She stroked the swirls of long golden hair on his chest. It had not been the same without the bond. It had been strange ... to be so close and yet still to be apart... still separate. He had, of course felt some of her emotion with his empathy...but it was not of the same intensity. But... he had loved her; it had been love not merely desire. What had been unresolved between them was gone and

been love, not merely desire. What had been unresolved between them was gone and Vincent was at peace. In fact, he felt sated to the point that all he wanted to do was lie there permanently... Lena had been if anything as insatiable as he... he wasn't sure he

could get up... but he forced himself up on one elbow.

"Thank you, Vincent."

Vincent brushed the golden strands of tangled hair out of her eyes and smiled gently. "Are you all right?... I didn't... hurt you?"

As Lena started to sit up, her shoulder hurt... she must have pulled a muscle, And I'm sure that's not the only one... but she smiled gently. "Of course not. Nothing that I'll remember... not like I'll remember the rest. You worry too much."

Relieved that he had not hurt her... at least not too badly, Vincent traced her face with his finger. "This cannot happen again, Lena."

"I know. It doesn't matter. I will always know that at least for this time... you loved me."

He swallowed through a lump in his throat... "I always loved you. I still love you. I will always be here for you... but never again like this."

He eased himself free of her, and as she watched him dress, slowly pulling on his breeches, boots... she watched and wanted to reach out and stroke the fur on his back, but he drew on his shirt. When he leaned down to kiss her, his golden mane brushing her face, the sense of loss almost overcame her, but when he smiled, she smiled bravely back... then he turned and left.

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Diana tried to block Vincent's emotions as he loved Lena, but some filtered through. She had left Cathy with Ruth and Devin and pleaded a headache, though they both seemed to sense there was something more amiss. Diana lay for a long time staring at the ceiling, tears sliding down the sides of her face. She had built her own barriers high, and as tight as she could... She had hoped things would go the other way, but she was not overly surprised. She finally cried herself to sleep, leaving Devin and Ruth to deal with Cathy, who was restless and unhappy. Between her father's emotions escaping his barrier and Diana's... she was giving Ruth and Devin fits. She wasn't happy with anything they wanted to do.

"Want Jacob." Devin decided to take her back down to the tunnels to see Jacob. Perhaps that would calm her, but when he managed to make it down to the nursery, Mary told him Jacob was just as fussy, so he picked up the boys and took all the children home with him. At least that way Mary could have some peace.

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The following morning, Devin brought the boys back to the tunnels, leaving Cathy with Diana. He sought out Vincent to see what was going on, and Vincent was extremely uncooperative.

"It's nothing, Devin. Are the children feeling better?"

Frustrated, Devin almost yelled... "Yeah, they're great!..." Then looking into Vincent's eyes, he softened somewhat. "They're fine, now. Diana seems a little better this morning, but to tell the truth, you look like shit. Want to talk about it?"

Vincent grimaced a little. "The wages of sin, so to speak." He shrugged. "It is of no great moment, Devin. Please tell Diana I love her." He patted Devin's shoulder, then walked off. Obviously having been dismissed, Devin stalked out and headed home, and found Diana and Ruth in deep discussion. He interrupted the conversation, and they obviously

"By the way, Diana... I just saw Vincent." The way Diana's head snapped up as he said that sent bells ringing in Devin's

mind. "Oh? What did he have to say?" "Just that he loves you. He looks tired, by the way."

"Perhaps his conscience bothered him," Or maybe he just wore himself out. Diana just got up abruptly and left the room, and Ruth shook her head.

had no intention of telling him what was going on.

any of us."

A day or so went by and Lena and Vincent spent a great deal of time together, playing with Toby, Jacob and Catherine. They never mentioned what had happened... and Vincent did not try to bond with Diana, though he could feel her sorrow...but from a great distance. They spoke of the children and Diana. Vincent told her of how they

had met and how their love had grown... of their bond. "How strange to think that she knows."

Vincent nodded, eyes shadowed. He held her hand and looked into her face. "You will always be a part of us, Lena. The love we shared will not be forgotten... by

Lena looked across the Mirror Pool, feeling a sharp resentment for Diana... and sympathy as well. It must have been very hard for her. She did not, however, feel any remorse: she would do it again in a heartbeat. As they sat quietly, watching the children swim, Mouse came up silently behind

them. Vincent turned to see his friend watching them quizzically; he had a message in his hand. "For Lena... from Peter." Vincent watched as Lena read the message. "What is it?" He asked, as she

looked up. Lena stood and nervously rubbed her suddenly sweaty hands on her pants. "Peter

has found me a job. I'm to start tomorrow." She turned to him, her eyes sad... "I

have to go." Vincent looked back across the pool at the children splashing one another. His

blond mane obscured his face. Softly he answered, "Perhaps it is for the best, Lena."

Lena bent and kissed him, and embarrassed, Mouse turned away to leave. Once he was gone, Lena told Vincent... "I will always remember. Now that I know what love can be like, I can go on. Perhaps I will find someone else to love me for myself." Vincent nodded, staring out over the water... tears filling his eyes. "The greatest

happiness in the world is the conviction that we are loved, loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves."5

home. Before he reached his and Diana's chamber he could feel her presence. When Diana looked up and saw him leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed, she went to him, and he opened his arms for her. As he stood there wordlessly holding her, his head resting on hers, the love he felt threatened to swallow him. It was not the tide of desire... just his deep and abiding love. His voice was rough with emotion as he said

Later, after he dropped Lena off with Peter, Vincent walked slowly towards

quietly, burying his face in the russet fall of her hair, "You are incredible. Is there no limit to your love and compassion?" At this moment, his love for her was greater than it had ever been, and as they bonded deeply no words were necessary for either of them. Later, Diana lay with her head on his chest, her hand trailing gently through the

red-gold pelt. They had made love far more gently than had been their wont recently. Their bond was slowly dissolving as they relaxed and trailed toward sleep. Just as Diana closed her eyes, Vincent's gentle voice woke her, and he shifted her off of him, to where he could see her. He leaned on one elbow and looked into her sleepy eyes.

"How did you know what I would do?... What was needed... when I did not know

myself?"

Diana's hand reached up to touch his face ... to trace the high cheekbones... and his mouth...even touched his teeth briefly. "You knew. You are so giving, Vincent. Her need for your love was so great... and you knew, in some deep, inner part of yourself that she needed to be healed by your love. Like you, she had a desperate need to be loved for herself by someone who forgave everything and loved her in spite of her past. She felt a kindred spirit in you from the first... she loved you from the first moment. You couldn't help but love her in return and want to give what you could to

her... and that was all you had to give. You knew. That was how I knew I had to let

you go to her." Silently she added, I had hoped I was wrong. Vincent crushed her to him to keep her from seeing the tears that were sliding down his face... tears of sorrow for the pain he had caused her ... though her pride would never let her admit it. She already shared his love with Catherine; he did not know how she managed. He knew that in her place, he could not...at least he did not

think he could. Quietly he asked, "You know that no matter how I feel about Lena, no matter what happened, none of it diminishes the love that I feel for you?"

His bond reached out for Diana and she touched him briefly and nodded. He held her until she fell asleep, then he lay awake for a very long time. Loving Lena had not been without guilt. He knew that Diana had been with him on some level, despite

their barriers, and he knew the pain she had felt. But despite everything he could not bring himself to regret his action. He felt as though he had given Lena a gift, and in giving to her he had received far more in return than he himself had given. He thought of the moment Lena had first met him and how he had felt at her total acceptance and love, and of the guilt he had felt when he had rejected her... after she'd had a lifetime of

rejection. That guilt was now gone... replaced perhaps by another. But his and Diana's love was strong... and Diana was strong...far stronger than Lena. Their love would endure and they would grow closer from this. He looked down at her sleeping face and brushed the russet hair back. He lay his great, shaggy head upon hers, closed his eyes, and slept peacefully.

FAITH AND UNFAITH



ichael waited for Vincent as he stopped by his chamber for his cloak. They were going out to the park tonight to get the raccoon for the boys.

Michael held the box and asked Vincent, "You don't suppose it will bite,

Eyes twinkling, Vincent held up his leather gloves. "Hopefully these will be thick enough."

Diana watched the proceedings with amusement. "What are we to do with this... creature... after you acquire him? The birthday is not for another day or so."

Vincent sighed. "I know. But if we do not go tonight, they will be gone. Mouse has made a cage and said he would keep it in the Mousehole until the party...

that is the best we can do." After they left, Diana went to put the children to bed and to read to them. They had been reading Call of the Wild for the second time. As she read, the boys listened

father's reading sessions... but then again, Diana could scarcely blame her. As she tucked the children in, Jacob and Toby both hugged her lovingly. Thank goodness for the boys, because when she tried to tuck Cathy in, the child refused to hug her. She stroked Cathy's hair and tried to tuck her in. "I love you Catherine." She projected her love to Cathy as hard as she could. "I love you, baby." Sighing, she got up to leave, but Cathy grabbed her around the neck and hugged

avidly, but Cathy fidgeted: she didn't enjoy Diana's reading as much as she enjoyed her

her tightly. "Love you Mama." Diana picked Cathy up and held her, rocking her, tears streaming down her

cheeks. She held her and rocked her until she fell asleep, reluctant to lay her down; tomorrow Cathy would probably hate her again.



Vincent and Michael walked quietly through the park visiting. Finally Vincent pointed out the tree with the nest. Dropping his cloak and pulling on his gloves, Vincent climbed the tree and left Michael holding the box. Once on the limb next to the nest, Vincent peered inside and found one small male that seemed likely. When he was about to reach inside and pick it up, something hit him from behind, biting and scratching.

Grabbing the huge male raccoon, he tossed it down and quickly grabbed the baby. Jumping down, he landed with a solid thump next to Michael ... to find him chasing the male parent off with the waving box.

Michael was laughing almost hysterically, "A little more exciting than you had planned!"

Putting the spitting, growling youngster into the box and closing it, Vincent chuckled. "Good thing you came along, or he would have been back up there before I got down the tree."

Retrieving his cloak and putting it on, Vincent felt better. He hated being out here without his having his face covered by the cloak. They hurried back to the tunnels and took the youngster directly to Mouse.

As Michael and Vincent entered the Mousehole, Mouse looked up from the array of lights in front of him. "You got him? Okay good, okay fine. Cage all ready."

The cage was well-made, and once the small raccoon was inside, Vincent breathed easier. "I hope we can tame him... he is extremely wild now."

Mouse wasn't worried. "Arthur was wild too. Young one's better.... no problem." He stooped and gave the baby a treat he had left from supper and they watched as the baby washed the food in the water bowl. "See? Happier already."

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Michael left for a date with Brooke, and Vincent was relieved to leave the animal

with Mouse and get back to Diana. On the way back up to his chamber, however, Vincent stopped by to see Jamie and the twins. This was the first time he had seen her since Lena had left. The babies were doing well and Jamie was content in her motherhood. For someone who had been so worried about her capabilities, she seemed quite competent. Vincent sat next to her on the bed and held Ellie. He was still amazed at how tiny they were. Jamie was quietly amused at Vincent's diffident demeanor around the twins. He was always so confident with his own children, but his had never been quite this small. She watched Vincent with Ellie; she was dying to know how things had gone between him and Diana after Lena left. Personally, she would have killed the little witch. If Mouse ever...!

Brushing against Jamie, Vincent received brief impressions and glanced up, his eyes locking momentarily with hers. He was embarrassed, but somehow not as much as he'd thought he might be... after all, she didn't ask...and she was Diana's friend as well. "Diana and I are fine, Jamie. We are returning now to peace and quiet..."

Jamie smiled at him,... "and made more wise?"6

Jaime sinned at min,... and made more wise?

Vincent raised an eyebrow a little and shrugged. "Perhaps. Time will tell."

When Jamie held out her arms for Ellie, Vincent was more than happy to hand her over. "How do you handle two of them? I had enough of a problem keeping up with Jacob alone... and he was older when I recovered him from Gabriel."

Laughing and shaking her head, Jamie just said, "I don't know... you just manage. Mouse is actually very good with them... a lot better than I thought he would be." She told him how Mouse had been busy working on a machine that would rock the cradle for her to keep them quiet. "Now if he could just get it to where it will rock gently and not swing them around in circles, I may let him try it."

Chuckling to himself, Vincent thought he wasn't at all sure he would have Jamie's confidence if he had to entrust Jacob or Cathy to one of Mouse's inventions. He took Aaron from Jamie and put him in the cradle when she asked him to, then left to meet Diana in Father's chamber.

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Diana was with Father and Mary discussing the birthday party. Mary was commenting,..."It is really not fair to have such festivities for Jacob and Cathy when we do not even know when the birthdays of many of the other children are... Toby for example." Father bemoaned the fact that their simple life had become so complicated in

recent years.

Diana was a little hurt, "Well. I could just move back Above, you know." Alarmed, and afraid he had hurt her feelings, Father hastened to reassure her.

"Don't mind me, my dear... only an old man missing his peace. I wouldn't change a thing, and certainly would never wish you or the children away."

Diana hugged him, "I know... it's just that I find things complicated too, at times." When Diana looked up and saw Vincent in the doorway, she smiled. "Did you manage to get the raccoon?"

Nodding, Vincent came slowly down the steps. He had overheard the conversation about the birthday parties. "Perhaps Mary is right, Diana. Perhaps we need to stop celebrating birthdays after this. We have never really had birthday parties in the tunnels before... I think probably for just this reason. So many of the children are cast-aways, with no idea of when or even where they were born. At least we should celebrate in a quieter manner."

Thoughtfully, Diana nodded. "I suppose you're right. After tomorrow, I think we should explain to Jacob... Cathy will never remember." After bidding Mary and Father goodnight, Vincent and Diana walked slowly back

to their chamber. Diana commented, "Father and Mary are doing well, had you noticed?" Vincent told Diana of the scene he had witnessed between Mary and Father after

the birth of the twins.

"I'm glad, Vincent. They belong together... and they deserve happiness."



When Vincent settled down to write in his journal, Diana walked down to the falls. She sat quietly thinking, letting the sound of the water wash over her. She had been restless all day, and she was vaguely unhappy. She was happy for Father and Mary, and a little sad about stopping the birthday celebrations, though she could see the reasoning behind it. In fact, she had never even told Vincent when her birthday was

because she knew they could not celebrate his. Somehow celebrating January 12th as his "finding day" just didn't seem appropriate. The whole thing made her sad.... that, and other things. Restless, Diana walked farther... down to the Whispering Gallery, and stood listening to the voices and music. Briefly she heard Chopin being played somewhere, then it was gone, replaced by a child crying. Suddenly, she found herself crying... why exactly, she didn't know, except that recently so many things had happened to upset her... and tomorrow was the anniversary of Catherine's death. She was once more going to have to share Vincent's sorrow over his loss of Catherine, and this year, after what had happened with Lena she was unsure if she was strong enough.

Suddenly she heard a soft voice near her. "Diana? Are you all right?" She looked up to see Elliott standing next to her. She had been so immersed in her thoughts she had not sensed him. She turned away briefly and brushed away her tears... embarrassed that he had caught her this way.

"I'm fine, Elliott. What are you doing here?"

"I came early for the party... to stay over in the guest chamber... Diana... what's wrong?" Elliott turned her to him, and she could feel his concern, his caring, and burst into tears.

into tears.

He held her gently and let her cry, feeling somewhat helpless. When her tears

subsided, he asked again, "What's wrong, Diana? Please. I'd like to help if I can."

Diana couldn't really tell him... not about Lena... so she told him about Cathy's constant rejection of her, the birthday celebrations, ... and about how she felt about Catherine. "It's not that I mind his loving her, Elliott, but it is hard sometimes...

especially on top of... other things.... I... I have to share him with so many people."

Elliott knew there had to be more to it than what Diana was telling him, but he didn't press. He just held her and let her cry a little more.

Vincent stood at the edge of the tunnel entrance near the Gallery watching. He had felt her distress and had gone to her... only to find her in Elliott's arms. He knew what was happening was innocent... he could feel that, but he was hurt nonetheless that she would not have come to him and let him comfort her. The bitter taste of jealousy

she would not have come to him and let him comfort her. The bitter taste of jealousy was not pleasant at all, and he turned away to go wait for her back in their chamber.

Diana felt Vincent's presence about the time he turned to leave, and felt his jealousy... his sorrow. She was a little ashamed of losing control of herself...

especially with Elliott. She tried to excuse herself, but he wouldn't let her go.

"You're not ready to face him yet... you know that. Calm down. I don't know what's going on, but I can tell something is bothering you." He handed her his

handkerchief and started to hug her, but she drew back.

"If you do that, I'll just start again, ... but thank you."

If you do that, I if just start again, ... but thank you.

Elliott leaned down to give her a gentle kiss... only meaning to be friendly and comforting, but suddenly he found himself holding her much closer than he'd intended, and kissing her much more passionately than he should have... and she found herself responding momentarily.

When she realized what she was doing, she pulled away abruptly, shocked. "No!" She stood, her hand across her mouth, looking at him in dismay. She thought to herself, God!... What must Vincent think! "I have to go, Elliott."

She ran past him, past the waterfall, down the steps into the Chamber of the Winds. She continued even further down and entered the maze, and finding a dark, quiet, place... past the scattered torches and candles, stopped and sank to the ground. It was useless to run and hide. She didn't even worry about getting lost... she couldn't. She knew he would find her anyway... if he wanted to. How could she explain herself? She huddled on the cold floor, trying to understand what had happened. As she sat there, however, she began getting angry. She'd never intended for Vincent to make love

to Lena... just because you give a man enough rope to hang himself doesn't mean he should take you up on the offer! Damn that bitch for coming here anyway. Oh, yes...

she could understand all the reasons for why she loved him What idiot wouldn't?... why she needed him... She could understand why he wanted her... she was lovely... she could even understand why he loved her... and she could understand his damn desire to give her what he could of himself (He's too damned giving sometimes).... but DAMN it, she was tired of being understanding! Understanding only went so far. It really pisses me off that after all this time I finally get him to release some of that strangle hold he has on his desire... and look what he goes and does with it! Diana got up and paced in the dark, alternating between shame at what she had allowed to happen and righteous anger at Vincent.

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Vincent sat stonily in their chamber, his jealousy tearing at him. He fought the tide as it threatened to wash over him... afraid of what he might do. His claws made deep furrows in the underside of the armrests of the chair as he unconsciously clenched and unclenched his hands. Throwing his head back, his lip lifted in a snarl. When he got up, he kicked the chair out of the way. Breathing in shuddering gasps, he leaned over the desk, blond mane hanging in his eyes. Push it back! Must... push it back... can't ... kill. Not... No. For a very long time he stood there, immobile as a statue. When he looked up, his eyes were clear... but still smoldering. He turned and swung in long strides out the door...going not to Diana, but to Elliott.

When Elliott saw him coming, he knew he was in trouble and drew himself up to face the music. He was scared to death... he knew what Vincent could do... had done. Vincent stood before him, his fists clenched, nails biting deep and drawing blood. He could smell his own blood... and the scent maddened him further... and he could smell Elliott's fear, which brought a sweet sense of power by itself. He struggled to control himself. His soft voice held the threat of an approaching thunderstorm... "Why?"

Elliott spread his hands wide, his face confused and ashamed. "I don't know. She needed someone... it just happened. It was my fault... don't blame her." Vincent turned away, his back still rigid with rage. His entire body shuddered with his effort not to strike out... to kill. "I do not blame her, Elliott. The fault lies with me... and with you." He turned to Elliott again, his eyes blazing in the light from the torches ... his canines flashing. "Do not touch her again... on your life... not again." Shaken, realizing just how close to death he had been, Elliott nodded.

As Vincent strode off down the tunnel towards Diana, Elliott leaned against the wall, sweating and feeling fortunate to be alive. Then, almost laughing with relief, he said to himself... "I wonder if I should stay in the guest chamber and go to the party or not?" He decided he had best stay... to leave would only cause other problems. Perhaps Vincent would have calmed down by tomorrow. Besides... he was worried about Diana... he didn't think Vincent would harm her...

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her face. He stopped in front of her and stood silently. They both stared at one another like strangers. His features were barely discernible to her, but she knew he could see even that she had been crying. Somehow that made her angry. His voice was flat and emotionless as he commented, "Come to bed. It's late." Diana started to speak to him,

Diana felt Vincent coming and stood to face him in the darkness, tears drying on

but he shook his head and turned away. "Not now. Neither of us can talk about this now. Come to bed." Not having energy enough to fight, she let him take her hand and lead her back to their chamber, where they went to bed silently. The wall between them seemed very thick, and Diana pulled the quilts up around her shoulders. They lay back to back staring at the cold gray walls. Sleep was long in coming, and when it did, their

dreams were uneasy. Vincent dreamed he killed Elliott in a jealous rage.... He dreamed that his rage drove him to kill Diana... for such a small thing. He tossed and turned, seemingly in agony. Bits and pieces of his and Diana's life together kept running through his mind. He saw himself with Lena... with Catherine. He re-lived when he and Catherine had finally made love... and her death, his first time with Diana in the Crystal Cavern. His emotions tumbled between joy, sorrow, and rage... once he started up... mane tangled, eyes staring... only to have lost the thought of whatever it was that had brought him out

of his sleep. Diana slept almost not at all. She was picking up Vincent's dreams. The one time she did manage to get to sleep she found herself dreaming with him, and found herself back on the bridge with Elliott... and seeing it from his eyes. She saw him kill

Elliott... and dreamed her own death at Vincent's hands. She woke and lay next to him crying. She wanted to reach out and touch him so badly... and she didn't dare. She buried her face in her arms and thought, He must realize it was not intentional... it just happened. She was still angry with him over Lena as well... but she hated this wall of anger between them. They had always been so close. Besides, she was still ashamed of her behavior with Elliott; she didn't want him to think she had done it to spite him... because she hadn't... at least not intentionally. Eventually when it was almost time to

get up, she dozed off, only to have the children come in and wake them. Jacob was jumping on the bed gleefully, saying "Time to get up! Time for

breakfast!" Cathy sat looking at them seriously. After a few moments, even Jacob sobered...

they were both picking up their parents' distress, so with effort, both Vincent and Diana built their barricades and tried to smile. It was, after all, Jacob's birthday... and there was no sense in upsetting the children. Without looking at one another they got up and

dressed and went to breakfast. They tried to carry on normal conversations, but when

Elliott came in, Vincent got up and left abruptly. Jamie watched Vincent leave... saw Diana's face... and Elliott's. Uh Oh. she thought, Perhaps we've been made a little wiser than we wanted to be.

As preparations were made for the party, it seemed to Diana as though the day dragged on forever. Joe and Erica came down bringing the ice cream and Devin and Ruth came with Alex. Father asked Diana what was wrong, and she shook her head. "Nothing, Father. I just didn't sleep well."

"Where is Vincent?" Father inquired, looking concerned.

Diana shrugged and said quietly, "I suppose he had things that needed to be done."

Elliott stayed well away from Diana, though he wanted desperately to apologize. Their eyes met briefly once and he spread his hands in a gesture of futility. She shook her head and turned. Elliott visited with Mouse and held Aaron while Jamie changed Ellie's diaper. He laughed delightedly watching his friend's unabashed pride in his children, and it helped to ease the anxiety he was feeling over Diana's and Vincent's pain.

.

Vincent wandered in the maze by himself. He couldn't go too far because of the

party. He knew he should be there helping, but he just could not bring himself to face everyone just yet... especially Diana or Elliott. He hated the jealousy he was feeling. He knew he was being unfair to Diana... Heaven knew he had given her far greater cause for jealousy than she had him... but it still hurt. What hurt the most was not the kiss... it was that she had let Elliott comfort her instead of him... and he was angry with

Elliott for betraying him yet again... he had trusted him. They had become close friends. His dreams last night had been extremely disturbing, and he had to sort things out before he went back... at least enough to control himself. You should have let me out... just a little.

Vincent spun, eyes blazing, knowing what he would see. "The Other" stood leaning casually against the tunnel wall.

"You would have killed them... what would that have accomplished?"

Satisfaction. He smiled wickedly at Vincent and wrapped his tongue around one long canine. Besides... how do you know I would have killed them? Diana is mine as well... and Elliott... has his uses.

Trembling, Vincent turned and lay his head against the smooth, unyielding rock and tried to empty his mind... to reach some point of reasonable control. When he finally looked up, "The Other" was gone.

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People began asking Diana where Vincent was... especially Jacob. He was not accustomed to his Father disappearing on his birthday... and he could still sense there was something wrong.

Diana cheered him as best she could. "Everything is almost ready for the party.

I'm sure he'll be here soon, Jacob. Run and play with Toby and the others."

Diana reached out with her bond to find Vincent, and found only the fuzzy blankness of his block. He was still barricaded, but at least he was coming... she could tell that much.

Diana just looked up with tears in her eyes. "He's coming, Jamie. We... had a disagreement last night." Jamie handed Aaron to her and said, "It must have been one hell of a disagreement. I've never seen the two of you like this, not even, well... you know."

Jamie came up with the twins to talk to Diana. "Are you all right, Diana?

Where is Vincent?"

Diana said quietly, "I know." She looked up to see Vincent coming into the chamber. He stood across the room looking at her, his face smiling, but his eyes shadowed. She handed Aaron back to Jamie and went to him. Without looking at her, he brought his arm up around her ... obviously for

appearances only... and said quietly, "Let us just get through the party... we will talk later."

The children had their ice cream and cake and Vincent disappeared once more to go to the Mousehole and get the raccoon. When he brought the cage up, the boys were so excited and pleased that it made him feel somewhat better. He cautioned them that

this was not Arthur, that the baby was still wild and needed their love to tame it. "Be careful not to let him bite you." Followed by half the other children, Cathy included, they carted the cage with them to the dorm to put between their beds, and the party began breaking up somewhat.

Everyone sensed that Vincent and Diana were not in a festive mood tonight. After a few quiet words with Diana, Father and Mary went to play some chess. After everyone else

had left, Elliott was still there, not sure whether to stay or go. He had been planning on visiting Catherine's grave with Vincent tonight, but under the circumstances that seemed out of the question. Finally he decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and started to leave. As he headed out the door, Vincent came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. Tensing, Elliott turned to face him.

"Leaving?" Vincent asked quietly. Silently, Elliott nodded, then added... "I thought it best." Vincent shook his head. "Stay. We will talk later when we go to visit

Catherine."

Shaken, but relieved that at least Vincent was speaking to him... and he was still

invited for the vigil, Elliott left and went to sit by the falls. Devin and Ruth had left, needed to get back because Devin needed to get up

early for classes tomorrow, and Mouse had taken Jamie back to their chamber to rest.

Even Joe and Erica had gone. The only ones left were Diana and Vincent, who were

cleaning up the last of the mess so William didn't have to bother. Vincent came up

behind Diana and put his arms around her. He could feel her trembling. "I am sorry, Diana. I know you did not mean to hurt me... but next time you

need someone to hold you... to comfort you... come to me."

Diana was crying raggedly, her tears soaking his homespun shirt and spotting the

leather of his vest. He stroked her hair, her back, and just held her, rocking her gently. Finally, she managed to speak. "I couldn't talk to you about what was bothering

me, Vincent... I ... just couldn't."

Suddenly understanding... even without their bond... Vincent asked quietly, "Lena?"

Diana nodded silently, then added, "... and Catherine." Looking up at him with the tears blurring her eyes and streaking her face she told him, "For some reason everything seemed to come down on me at once. Elliott came while I was crying, and only meant to comfort me. I think he didn't mean for it to happen either... it just did." Vincent held her closer and kissed her gently. "Tell me next time... trust me."

> "In Love, if Love be Love, if Love be ours, Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers:

> Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.7

"Now. Let me finish up here, and you go put the children down and go to bed. You're exhausted. I still need to talk with Elliott."

Alarmed, Diana asked, "You won't..."

He quoted:

Vincent shook his head a little sadly. "No. Do not worry so." He looked at her from half-closed eyes... "I am not always the monster I appear."

Diana held him tightly, "Oh, Vincent... I didn't mean..."

Rocking her gently in his arms, he quieted her. "Hush." He kissed the top of her head. "I know what you meant. Go now." Then, as she turned, he put one fiercely taloned hand gently on her arm. She looked back at him questioningly and saw his eyes gleam with unshed tears. "I am sorry, Diana... about Lena."

She came back into his arms and lay against his chest. "I love you, Vincent." "And I you."

When Vincent entered behind Elliott at The Chamber of the Falls, he came up so quietly that when he placed his hand on Elliott's shoulder, Elliott jumped about three feet.

"God! You scared me, Vincent."

Vincent couldn't help but smile a little... "Nervous?"

Without changing expression, Elliott looked Vincent in the eyes and answered, "Yes."

Dropping his hand from Elliott's shoulder, Vincent turned and started off for the tunnel exit in the park, but not before Elliott heard him say quietly, "Good."

Elliott caught up, his long strides matching Vincent's well, and by the time they

reached the exit and the steel door rolled back, Elliott was beginning to feel there was hope to salvage their friendship... at least Vincent hadn't killed him yet. They walked quietly through the park, not looking at one another and without speaking. When they reached Catherine's grave, Vincent knelt and checked the rose bush.

"Needs water."

Elliott looked up at the sky and commented, "It is supposed to rain tomorrow." Vincent nodded. As he tended the grave, he thought of Catherine, carrying on his usual one-sided conversation with her in his own mind. He quietly quoted to himself:

"But surely it is something to have been The best beloved for a little while, To have walked hand in hand with Love, and seen His purple wings flit once across thy smile.8

After musing for awhile, he went to his daughter's grave and cleaned it. His quiet communion with Catherine had helped him to put his own thoughts and emotions in order. He brushed the dirt from his hands and turned to Elliott, who stood silently, busy with his own thoughts.

Vincent stood before him... his gaze level, and Elliott said quietly, "It won't happen again, Vincent... I never meant it to happen this time."

Vincent finally took pity on Elliott and smiled at him. "No." Then, with one more sidelong look, he added, "It had best not."



When Elliott left him, Vincent headed home. He was anxious to see Diana and

have things right between them once more. When he stood once more in the door to their chamber, Diana was waiting for him. Most of the candles were out except the candelabra next to the bed. She stood, like a marble statue in the darkness, the candlelight casting an amber glow over her skin and her hair gleamed like fire where the light touched it. As she reached for him, he wasted no time in shedding his worry, his guilt, his jealousy... or his clothing. Diana watched him as he came to her, and as their bond touched and blended, Vincent knew ... as he had always truly known, that there was no one else she would ever love as she loved him... and Diana could find no sense

of Lena... or Catherine.

A PLACE TO DREAM

iana had arranged to take Joe and Erica to visit the Painted Tunnels and old Elizabeth. When they arrived, Elizabeth was painting Jamie and Mouse's twins. Diana pointed out to Joe that she had already painted in the new raccoon that Vincent had acquired for the boys.

Erica was fascinated by the artwork. "Elizabeth, this is amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

Pleased, Elizabeth just replied, "It has been a labor of love... the work of a lifetime. When I die, it will be finished."

When Joe looked around, he saw Diana standing off to one side examining a piece of the wall... it showed Vincent holding their first daughter ... who had been stillborn. Joe went to stand beside her. "Was she really so very much like him?"

Diana nodded. "I come here sometimes just to look at this painting. Elizabeth is truly wonderful."

Suddenly, Elizabeth gasped and grasped her chest. She fell, with Erica catching her, and when Diana got to her she was white with pain. "Get Father... quickly!"

Joe dashed for the lower tunnels, hoping he could find his way. As soon as he saw a sentry, he told him to send a message... it would be quicker, and he ran back to Diana to see what he could do. Almost at the same time he reached them, Father and Vincent came in, and Father examined the old woman. He gave her a nitroglycerine tablet and waited. Eventually her color came back and she seemed better. They helped her to her bed in an adjoining tunnel, and Father sent Vincent for Mary to attend to her.

"I knew this was coming. She is getting too old to be allowed to stay by herself."

Diana shook her head. "Getting her to leave her work will be impossible." They looked over at the frail old woman, and Diana commented, "Perhaps we can get some of the older children to take shifts and stay with her. They all love Elizabeth."

"I would rather she moved further Below, but that does seem the only plausible course. After Mary comes, I will see what I can do to arrange it."

When Mary arrived, they went Below to have a council meeting, and Joe and Erica left. The oldest of the children attended the meeting, and they all agreed that shifts could be worked in around their duties as sentry, etc. Samantha and Kipper were elected to work out the schedules.

Once the others had left to go about their task, Vincent came down from his perch on Father's railing. "I cannot imagine this place without Elizabeth, though I know the time is coming. It seems she has always been here. I remember watching her paint in the tunnels when I was a small boy. Devin and I used to go watch her work her magic on those cold, lifeless walls." He shook his head sadly. "In addition to the fact that we will all miss her sorely because we love her, who will continue chronicling everyone's lives? Those walls have become important to us, a part of our history and our heritage."

Father sat idly drumming on his desk with his fingers. Diana watched as Father fidgeted. She could feel his distress, but it was more than the impending loss of a

sitting on the old, battered hassock on the floor, one of her favorite perches, with Cathy on her lap, and she went to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Can I help?"

Father looked up at Diana and placed his hand over hers gently. "Perhaps you can."

friend, there was something else bothering him. "Father, what is it?" Diana had been

Vincent came and stood before them and looked questioningly at Father. "What is it, Father? If there is anything we can do to help, you know we will." Vincent glanced over at Toby and Jacob, who were playing with Father's chess pieces on the

glanced over at Toby and Jacob, who were playing with Father's chess pieces on the floor, then looked back at Father. "Is it something to do with Elizabeth?"

Sighing, Father explained. "Elizabeth has a daughter whom we have searched for several times. I am sure she would like to reach her now, but I see no reason to

hope we would be any more successful now than we have been in the past."

Vincent glanced at Diana. In a softly musing voice he said, "I remember... once many years ago there was a search for her. She had married someone Elizabeth did not

approve of, and they had lost contact."

Father got up and limped over to his journal on the shelf. Taking it down, he pulled out a yellowed news clipping showing a wedding announcement between a Linnel Weiss and a George Farwell. "This is all we have. We never found out much more,

but Elizabeth said that George was always in trouble. She was always afraid of his doing something to harm Linnel, but we never found her."

Diana commented, "If he was always in trouble, perhaps he was also in trouble

with the law at some time... there may be records, perhaps even a way to trace him.

But Father, even if we find her, can she be trusted to bring here?"

Father shook his head. "I don't know."

Vincent looked at Diana knowingly, and spoke softly, "If you were to find her, Diana... if anyone would be able to determine that, you should."

Diana... if anyone would be able to determine that, you should."

Diana nodded. "I suppose I could try." She went to Vincent and put her arm through his. "I will go Above in the morning and talk to Edie. She can help me run a

search."

Vincent took Cathy from her, and the child twined her hands in his hair as he kissed her gently. "If you can find Elizabeth's daughter, it would be wonderful. She

should see her again, at least one more time."

Vincent and Diana took the children to put them down for bed, and Diana listened as Vincent finished the last chapter of <u>Call of the Wild</u>. Tucking the children in, Cathy was much more loving than usual with Diana, which pleased her tremendously. Jacob and Toby settled down nicely and begged Diana to please start <u>The</u>

Wizard of Oz tomorrow night.

As they left the children, Vincent laughed gently. "There will not be much for them left to read when they get older at the rate they keep us going." He put an arm

around Diana. "Would you walk with me tonight?"

Smiling, Diana nodded. They went by their chamber to pick up Vincent's cloak

and headed Above. As they walked through the tunnel exit into the night air they discussed Michael's play. Vincent just shook his head. "Michael is a wonderful teacher, and this play should be interesting. His casting is ... unusual."

Diana was puzzled, "Why do you say that?"

Vincent explained, "He has cast people far differently than I would have. I can see, though, why he has. For example, he has cast Samantha as Katharine. She is having a hard time portraying her... she is far too sweet and good natured... but he is trying to get them to reach for their talent... to be completely different from themselves. An interesting approach."

Diana danced ahead of him, teasing him, "Oh... she doesn't make a good shrew... perhaps you had someone else in mind?"

Seeing Diana was in one of her teasing moods, he pretended to think about it seriously, then keeping his face as solemn as he could, said... "Well, you are far too old for the part, and Cathy is far too young."

"Too old am I?" She started to run away from him, and looked back over her shoulder, "See if you can catch me!"

Looking to see if there was anyone around, Vincent grinned and took off after her. She dodged around trees, laughing as he kept catching his cloak on the bushes, slowing him down. "Seems you're the one who's too old... catch me if you can!"

Redoubling his speed, Vincent finally caught her and spun her around, catching her to him. As he looked down into her face, lit with love and the moonlight, he quoted, "Did ever Dian so become a grove as Kate this chamber with her princely gait?

O, be thou Dian, and let her be Kate; And then let Kate be chaste and Dian sportful!"

Looking smug, she peered up at him through her lashes, "Where did you study all this goodly speech?"9

Startled, Vincent laughed, "You've been studying! ... Ah, come on and kiss me,

Kate!"

Diana wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down to kiss her, then

laughing gently, said: "Am I sportful enough for thee, my lord?"

As he looked up and saw the tunnel entrance near, Vincent swept her up in his

arms and carried her inside, whispering to her, "We shall have to see."

Lying in bed a little later... as Vincent held her he commented, "I do believe you

Lying in bed a little later... as Vincent held her he commented, "I do believe you have enough life in you yet to play Kate."

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The following morning, Diana prepared to go Above to talk with Edie. As she dressed, Vincent watched her from the bed, his hands clasped behind his head. "You are lovely, you know."

As Diana tucked her emerald green silk blouse into her skirt, she turned and smiled at him. She leaned over to kiss him, and he pulled her down on top of him. Giggling, she pulled away and re-adjusted her skirt. "Not now. No time. If I am to get that information on Linnel, I need to get moving."

Vincent leaned on one elbow and sighed. "I hope you can find her, Diana. I

By the time Diana had grabbed a quick breakfast, Vincent was up and taking care of the children, and she told them goodbye before she left.

hate to think of Elizabeth never seeing her again."

growing like weeds.

Riding the subway, Diana reviewed what little information she had and sighed. There wasn't much to go on, and she had little hope she would find Linnel. After getting off the subway, she walked the rest of the way to the office. It was pleasant to

be out in the sun for a change. She wandered along, watching the people, relishing the fact that she, at least, did not have to be anywhere at any particular time. That was something she loved about the world Below... for the most part everything went at a much more leisurely pace and there were few deadlines and little hurrying. As Mouse always said, "Late, come after Mouse, early, come before." She smiled, thinking about their friend's cheerful innocence. He and Jamie were enjoying their twins, who were

Lost my job a few months ago ... my apartment ... it's kind of hard to get started again."

Diana dug in her pocket and pulled out a five. He pushed it back at her, "No, that's too much... I appreciate it, but all I really need is some coffee and a donut, and I'll be fine."

Diana hesitated... she felt something about this young man that concerned her ...

A tug at her elbow stopped her, "Lady, could you spare a buck?" Turning,

Diana saw a rumpled young man, clean, but whose clothes who had obviously seen better days. "Sorry to bother you, but I really need some coffee, and maybe a donut.

something desperate, and really needed help. "Nonsense. Come on, let me buy you breakfast, and we can talk awhile. I could use some coffee too."

They found a coffee shop and sat talking while he ate the scrambled eggs and bacon Diana bought him. Her own finances were getting very low, as she had not had a

the impressions she had from him convinced her that he was truly on the verge of doing

case for quite some time, but she couldn't simply walk away from this young man. "Now, my name is Diana, tell me what your name is."

He smiled, "Jeff." He continued, "You're really kind, Diana."

She asked him. "What type of work did you do?"

She asked him, "What type of work did you do?"
"I was a florist. The company I worked for went out of business, and I just

haven't found anything else. I'm really getting desperate."

Diana thought quickly. "Jeff, I may be able to help you, but I need to know where to find you again."

He told has that he had been staying at a homeless shelter near there and that he

He told her that he had been staying at a homeless shelter near there and that he could usually be found there at night... if he could get in. If not, he slept on the street. "At least it's warm now."

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After leaving Jeff, some of the brightness had gone out of Diana's day. She wished she could help all the homeless, all the poor people who needed help so desperately, but she couldn't... but if she could help even one, it would be a start. Riding the elevator up to the computer room, Diana found Edie hunched over her terminal munching on a donut.

When Edie looked up, she grinned, her braids bobbing. "So, you decided to come to visit. Let's see, can't be my good looks or our enduring friendship either, since I never hear from you anymore, so you must need my expertise." "Sorry, Edie... I just never make it this way much anymore, but you know I miss

"I'd love to know where you disappear to all the time... can't be the Bahamas, since you're as lily white as ever."

"Sure, sure. You're as full of it as a Christmas turkey." She grinned again.

Laughing at her friend's joking... and brash inquisitiveness, Diana said, "Well, you're right about one thing, pal, I do need your expertise." Diana told her about her

you."

search for Linnel. "A friend of mine is dying, Edie. She and her daughter have been estranged for years, and we have no idea how to find her, except that she married a man named George Farwell, who might possibly have a record. Can you help?"

Edie wriggled her fingers. "Well, let's see what the golden digits can find out for you." After accessing screen after screen, Edie sat back, putting her feet up. "Bingo."

Diana looked and jotted down the information. Apparently George Farwell had been convicted of murder and was serving time in Huntsville. "Thanks Edie, I owe you."

Dropping her feet, Edie patted her braids. "Lunch sometime would be nice." "You got it."

. On the way back to the tunnels, Diana wondered just what to do. Her account

would be wiped out if she made a trip to Huntsville, but she needed to go. Sighing, she thought ruefully, "I thought money wouldn't be a problem once I moved down Below."

When she reached the living areas, she went directly to Father's chamber. He was sitting discussing Elizabeth's care with Mary, and he rose as she came in. "Diana, what did you find out?"

As she explained, she apologized to Father. "I don't know what to do, Father. I don't think I even have enough money left in my account to get there and back and pay my expenses."

"That can be taken care of. Peter has already said he would pay any expenses

involved, so do whatever you need to do." Relieved. Diana then told father about Jeff. "I would like to help him if I can. He seems like a good person, Father, and he is becoming desperate. Perhaps we could

help find him a job."

Father told her that they would see what they could do. "I will check around... Vincent can as well."

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As she went back to their chamber to change, Diana reached out to touch Vincent with their bond to see where he was, and found him deep in the tunnels doing his sweep.

Brooke came in with Cathy and dropped her off. "The boys are with Michael. He is playing some games with them."

Cathy sat on the bed playing with Vincent's old carousel music box while Diana packed some clothes to go to Huntsville. Vincent came in a little later, and seeing her packing, became concerned. "Are you going somewhere?"

Diana explained about her trip and what she hoped to accomplish.

Vincent picked up Cathy, who was clamoring for his attention, and looked away.

"So far away. Will you be gone long?"

Closing her bag, Diana straightened up and looked at him. He stood holding Cathy, his patchwork clothing of leather and rags so at odds from the world she had just left, but he himself so strong and beautiful he took her breath away. She could sense his dismay at her trip and tried to reassure him. "I won't be gone too long, Vincent. I

don't want to go, but it is necessary." He nodded and put his arm around her. "I will miss you, that is all."

To change the subject, Diana spoke to him about Jeff. Could you help find something for him? Perhaps one of our Helpers has something."

"As a matter of fact, Matthew could use someone to help him at the greenhouse. I will go see him tonight, but how will we contact Jeff if you are gone?" Diana was indecisive. "Perhaps Michael could take him a message... I imagine he could find him." She gave Vincent the address of the homeless shelter, and hoped

things would work out. Jacob and Toby came in and climbed up on the bed. Jacob asked what Diana's bag was for. "I'm taking a trip, Jacob. I will be gone a few days." "Can we come too?"

Diana shook her head. "Not this time, sweetheart. Maybe another time." Jacob was upset. "Don't go. Please stay here."

Cathy started crying, picking up on Jacob's distress, and Diana picked her up. She looked at Vincent. "I had better say my goodbyes quickly and leave. I need to go

meet Peter to get the funds to go." By the time Diana left, she was depressed. She really hated to go with everyone

feeling the way they did. It made her feel guilty, but Vincent knew she needed to go if they stood any chance of finding Linnel. Elizabeth was getting no stronger and Father had urged her to please hurry. Making her way to Peter's office, she got the cash she needed and hailed a cab for the airport. She bought a ticket for Huntsville, Texas and waited for the flight, thinking all the while of the world she was leaving behind... and of her family.

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As soon as Diana had left, Vincent took the children to Mary, as he still needed to finish some repairs to the Lafayette Street tunnel exit. The mechanism to the steel door was malfunctioning, and Mouse had repaired it... now they needed to re-install it... right now it was closed off with a false wall. As he and Mouse headed toward the tunnel exit they discussed Diana's trip. Mouse could tell Vincent was not pleased she

babies." Vincent allowed himself a small smile, thinking of Mouse trying to care for Ellie and Aaron by himself. "Mine are older, and they are still a handful... it will be

Vincent shook his head slightly and shifted the parts he was carrying to his

Mouse walked quietly awhile, then commented... "Glad Jamie doesn't go Above.

shoulder. "No, and hopefully she will find out where Elizabeth's daughter is."

or away. Would miss her." When Vincent glanced over at him, he grinned, his tousled blond hair in his eyes... "Especially now... don't know what to do with the

had left. "Won't be gone long, will she, Vincent?"

interesting to see how I do with both of them while Diana is away." Once they reached the tunnel exit, fixing the mechanism required their complete attention, and thoughts of the children were put aside. Vincent did wonder at times what Mouse thought about what had happened with Lena... he was sure that Mouse knew that something had happened... but he had never said anything... probably never would.

Mouse glanced up and met Vincent's eyes and they both smiled ... very quietly... and went back to work. When they finished and returned to the living areas Vincent was met by a

distraught Mary who informed him that Cathy was missing. "Missing!" Vincent immediately tried to find her with his bond, but reached only

that fuzzy blankness that indicated a block. Naturally, she had already learned to

block... Jacob didn't learn until he was older, but he too, had learned by himself... in fact, Vincent thought ruefully,...Jacob probably helped Cathy learn.

Vincent comforted Mary. "She's all right, Mary... I can feel her, but I cannot

locate her because she's blocked. She is probably hiding because she's angry about Diana's leaving. Where is Jacob?"

"He and Toby are with Michael and Alain. They have been looking for Cathy as well."

Suddenly very worried, Vincent told Mary, "We had best get everyone together

to look for her... there is no telling where she is." Mary told him, "Vincent, everyone has been looking all afternoon. We knew

you would be back soon, so we didn't send you a message, but we are really getting concerned. We figured she would turn up, and Jacob insisted she wasn't hurt, but she

has been gone for awhile now... and even Jacob cannot locate her. Father is even out looking, and his leg is bothering him badly." Mary wrung her hands. "I'm so sorry I

let her out of my sight... and I'm sorry I didn't send you a message earlier." Mary began to cry and Vincent put his arms around her and comforted her. "It's not your fault, Mary. You know how she is." Vincent lifted his head, listening to the

pipes. Messages were coming in about Cathy, but it appeared no one had found her. "I had best look down below. Has anyone checked the maze or the catacombs?" Mary shook her head. "We really didn't figure she would have gone there... you

don't think she did, do you?" Vincent headed for the wardrobe to get his cloak... the catacombs were cold.

"Who knows, Mary... all we can do is hope she is all right." Vincent felt chilled

thinking about Cathy being hurt, but he was trying desperately to stay calm. When he

opened the wardrobe and reached for his cloak he happened to glance down and saw a pair of tiny fur-booted feet sticking out. Relieved, he turned around and winked at Mary and pointed, indicating for her not to say anything. "Well. I suppose there is no sense in continuing to look for her. She will come home when she is ready, Mary." He closed the wardrobe, and he and Mary walked out into the tunnel.

Mary whispered, "What are you going to do?"

Folding his arms and leaning against the tunnel wall, Vincent smiled. "Wait. She will get hungry and tired eventually. But do me a favor and alert the searchers and let them know she is fine. Also... could you see that a message is sent to Matthew that Diana knows someone who needs a job, and see if he could use him in the greenhouse. He apparently used to work for a florist. I meant to go tonight to see him, but with Cathy..."

Mary nodded. "I'll see to it and let you know... I'm so glad she's all right."

Vincent nodded. "I am too... but I am not sure how to handle this. She has
certainly caused a lot of trouble and worried everyone needlessly. I wish Diana were
here..."

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As Diana lay back in her seat on the flight, she felt Vincent's distress. She reached out to bond with him and was able to touch him, but the bond was no longer as clear. After lying there worrying awhile, she tried again, and this time she no longer felt the distress, but more of a tired aggravation. Sighing, she realized it must be something Cathy was up to... perhaps Jacob, but more likely Cathy. Smiling, she wished him luck, and closing her eyes, fell asleep.

Michael brought Jacob and Toby to Vincent, and he kissed them goodnight. He drew Michael aside, "You have told them about Cathy... that she's all right?"

Michael nodded. "They understand. Jacob is concerned that you are going to punish her."

Smiling grimly, Vincent said, "I am. I am just not sure how as of yet. Thank you for putting the boys to bed... Mary has had enough from my crew today."

After Michael had taken the boys, Vincent lay on the bed reading. He reached out with his bond to try and touch Cathy and was able to touch her... she had not been able to hold her barrier. He thought a moment, wondering what to do, then he closed his eyes and projected thoughts of hunger, of loneliness. This was not especially difficult to do, as he was feeling fairly hungry and lonely himself. After awhile, he got a response. The wardrobe door opened a crack and Cathy came out. Vincent didn't look up; he simply kept reading. Cathy came over to him and climbed up on the bed next to him. "Why Cathy! What a surprise. It is nice to see you, I've missed you."

She crawled up and snuggled in under his arm. "Hungry, Fa-ther."

"Sorry, Cathy. You missed supper, just as I missed mine looking for you. I suppose we both will have to go hungry tonight. And tomorrow you can apologize to Grandfather and Mary ... and everyone else, for worrying them."

Tears slid down Cathy's cheeks, and Vincent could feel himself weakening, but

forced himself to keep his resolve. "Cathy, can you tell me why you hid?"

She looked up at him and said, "Mama went away. Want her back."

Vincent hugged her. "She will be back soon. I miss her too." Picking her up, he carried her to the dorm, and by the time he put her in her bed she was sound asleep. Diana would be pleased to know how much Cathy had missed her. He bent and kissed her, covering her with the quilt, then headed to bed himself.

As he headed toward his chamber, he stopped by Father's, once again walking in on Father and Mary embracing, and backed out, waiting. When he once again heard conversation, he appeared in the door. "Mary... did Matthew get my message?"

Mary seemed a little flustered, but answered quickly, "Yes. He said he would go to the address you gave him tomorrow and try to find Jeff... he said he would give him a try."

Vincent told them goodnight and walked slowly to his chamber. He sat at his desk and opened his journal.

"Diana has been gone only a short while, but everything seems different somehow. It is amazing how <u>alone</u> being alone feels. I had forgotten that feeling of aloneness. I can touch her still, and I know she misses me as well... but it is not the same. The bond is more tenuous, more fragile."

He glanced up at his painting of himself and Catherine and smiled. That painting always cheered him with its magic, and its promise. He stretched, blew out the candle, and undressed for bed. As he lay there, his long-taloned hand reached out and brushed across the empty side of the bed. "I can only embrace the emptiness beside me. Come home soon, Diana... I miss you."

Vincent slept, and as he slept he dreamed. He was with Diana in that black otherworld. She came to him and embraced him, laying her head on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her gratefully... and far away, in Huntsville, Diana dreamed the same dream, and smiled gently in her sleep.

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The following morning Diana went to the prison and asked to see George Farwell. When he was brought out to her, he looked at her puzzled. "Who are you?" Diana stared through the glass at this stranger and told him, "I am looking for

Linnel... your wife. Her mother is very ill and would like to see her."

George Farwell just shrugged. "Don't know that I can help you, lady. Linnel and I were divorced when I was convicted. I can give you her last address, but I don't know that she's still there."

Diana got the address from him, which was in New York, thanked him, and left. She hoped Linnel was still at this address, or that she had left a forwarding address.

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Vincent woke to clamoring children. Gathering Toby and Jacob into his long arms he stilled their cries and asked what was wrong. "Arthur is gone."

Confused, Vincent shook his head, thinking he had heard wrong, or that perhaps he was still half asleep. "Arthur?"

Jacob shook him ... "Remember? We named the baby Arthur."

Remembering, Vincent smiled... "Oh, yes. Gone? What do you mean?"

"The cage was open and he's gone." Toby explained.

Suddenly Vincent's head ached. It seemed as though all he had done is solve problems involving the children for two days. It was much easier when things were shared... besides... it seemed there had been an over-abundance of problems in any case. As he dressed, his tangled chestnut mane hung down in his eyes. He really wanted a shower and he was starving... he'd had time for neither supper or a shower last night. The boys were pulling on his vest, telling him to hurry. He passed Father in the tunnel and told him about "Arthur."

Father's gentle face showed some irritation. "I had best check with William... when the original Arthur was around, he had a habit of showing up in the kitchen. Perhaps the baby has gone there as well, led by the smell of food."

Continuing toward the dorm, Vincent stopped momentarily and smiled... he could feel Diana coming closer, so she must be returning from Huntsville. The boys pulled at him again, and he continued toward the dorm.

Squatting in front of the open cage, Vincent asked the boys, "Did you close the cage last night?"

They both assured him it had been closed, and suddenly Vincent had a thought... "Where is Cathy?" Jacob pointed towards the smaller children's section, and Vincent walked over there. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and innocent, but in trying to touch her with his bond he found her blocked... a sure indication she was up to something. "Catherine... did you let Arthur out of his cage?"

Cathy shook her head, her blond mane flying.

"Truly?" Vincent asked again, looking at her harder.

She shook her head again, but not quite so hard and her lip quivered.

"Catherine...we do not tolerate untruths here. Did you open the cage?" Cathy reached up to hug him and he moved away... and she cried. "Did you open the cage?" She nodded, tears slipping down her face beside her nose.

"I do not know what to say Catherine. Your behavior lately has been terrible. I am very unhappy with you. Opening the cage is bad enough... it was an unkind thing to do... but telling an untruth... and to me! You will stay in bed until I come for you. You stay here."

Vincent strode from the room, frustrated and upset. As he reached the boys he stopped... there was a message on the pipes from William that the baby raccoon was, indeed, in the kitchen, so he informed the boys and headed there... he was hungry anyway. He thought about Cathy missing yet another meal... and shrugged. He would take her something later. His relief at the thought of Diana returning was overwhelming. He had never realized just how difficult Cathy could be... or just how much of this behavior Diana had always had to deal with... of course she had been

worse than usual the last two days <u>because</u> Diana was gone, but that was no excuse. He sighed, hoping Diana would be home soon.

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When Diana left the airport, she took a cab to the address George Farwell had given her. It was a run-down apartment house in a slum neighborhood. Once there, she had the cab wait, and picking her way through the garbage in the street and foyer, she rode the elevator to the fifth floor. Finding the right door, she knocked, and a slim woman of about 35 opened the door. "Linnel?" Diana inquired, as she looked at the quietly pretty woman with the tired brown eyes.

"Yes... who are you?"

Relieved, Diana told her, "I am a friend of your mother's. Could I come in?" Linnel's eyes widened and she pulled the door open further. "Mother? My Lord. I had given up hopes of ever finding her... Please... come in."

Diana went into the apartment, which was tidy, but sparsely furnished. Linnel obviously had been living hand-to-mouth for a long time. Linnel offered her some coffee, and as they sat on the battered couch, Diana told her about her mother's illness.

"Our friends have tried to find you before, but were never successful. When your mother's heart problem became more acute, we thought we would try once more."

Linnel's eyes filled with tears. "I'm so glad you did. Please, can you take me to her?"

Hesitantly, Diana explained that her mother lived in a place where secrecy was important... "It is a place of refuge for many people who need help or a safe place, and its existence depends upon no one learning about it."

Linnel shrugged. "I can keep a secret. Besides... if it is, truly a place of refuge, I could certainly use some of that myself." She indicated her apartment... "What little I have I am about to lose... I can't even pay my rent anymore."

Diana felt she was telling the truth, and told her to pack her things. When they finally entered the cab, Diana had him take her to the subway entrance at Lexington, where she paid him, and they entered the subway. Indicating for Linnel to follow her, they slipped quietly into the shadows and down into the tunnels.

Linnel was confused. "Where are we going?"

Diana explained as they went about the tunnels, and as they went lower they could hear the singing of the pipes, and Diana explained about their message system. "Father already knows we are coming... I can hear sentries checking in." Hesitating, she also told her about Vincent so she would be prepared. "His appearance may shock you at first, but be assured, he is the gentlest man in the world."

When Father met them, he greeted Linnel like a long-lost daughter. "I am so pleased you came. Come... let me take you to your mother." As they walked towards Elizabeth's chamber Vincent joined them, hesitating a moment before coming into the open. He pulled his hood over his face, but Diana called to him... "It's all right Vincent. Linnel knows." She put her arm around Linnel, who looked up expectantly. When Vincent came out of the shadows and hesitantly dropped his hood, Linnel smiled, seeing the gentleness reflected in his liquid eyes.

She extended her hand, and he took it in his huge, clawed one. "I am glad to meet you, Vincent."

His soft, velvet voice slid over her... she could sense the granite-like strength behind it... "I am pleased to meet you, as well." They continued on to Elizabeth's chamber, and when Mary saw them, she touched Elizabeth's shoulder and spoke softly to her. When Elizabeth turned, the smile transformed her face. The pain was gone, replaced by an incredulous joy. As Linnel sat on the edge of the bed, the others slipped away and left them alone.

Vincent embraced Diana gratefully. "I cannot begin to tell you how I missed you." As Diana closed her eyes, she snuggled against him, his clothing smelling of candle wax, smoke, and leather... the homespun shirt rough against her skin. She could hear his heart beating and feel his strength as his arms tightened around her.

"I missed you too," she murmured. As they walked slowly back to their chamber, Diana asked, "How were the children?"

Groaning, Vincent replied... "Don't ask... in fact... I suppose we had best stop by the dorm. They know you are home and are waiting for you."

As they headed towards the dorm, Vincent filled Diana in on the situation with Jeff. "Matthew says he is working out well. You will have to go visit him."

Relieved, Diana hugged him. "Thank you for taking care of that for me. I was very concerned about him."

As soon as they entered the dorm, Diana was "attacked" by all three children. She picked Cathy up and hugged the boys, listening to both boys regale her of tales from while she was gone. Cathy just hugged her neck and hid her face in her mother's hair. Vincent leaned in the doorway watching and smiling gently. Diana began reading The Wizard of Oz, and the children listened with fascination. Jacob wanted to know what a tornado was, and Diana tried to explain. Toby couldn't understand how a whole house could be lifted into the air... and what was a witch anyway? Cathy never let go of Diana and fell asleep clinging to her hair; she had to pry her hands loose when she put her down. By the time she joined Vincent, still leaning in the doorway, she was tired, but infinitely glad to be home.

"She missed me, didn't she?" She asked, pleased.

Nodding, Vincent commented... "Very much... we all did."

As they walked slowly to their chamber, he told her of everything that had happened. "I barely had time for a shower before you got here. How do you keep up with her? I thought I was helping... but I wonder now if I help enough."

Diana assured him he was doing enough... and hugged him. "It sounds as though she was acting out far more than usual. At least it is good to know she missed me."

As they approached their chamber, Vincent looked sidelong at her through the gold-touched veil of his hair and asked shyly... "Is it good to know that I missed you as well?" Her bond touched his, and reaching out, she grasped his belt buckle and drew him after her into the chamber, her light laughter floating back out into the tunnel after they disappeared inside.

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The following morning a common meeting was held which included Linnel. Everyone was present, as everyone had to vote on a newcomer. After visiting her mother, Linnel had decided she wished to remain in the tunnels. Looking out over the stacked books and miscellaneous in the cluttered chamber, she presented her situation to the tunnel dwellers gathered in Father's chamber.

"I am an artist myself, and if you have ever heard the term 'starving artist', well... that certainly refers to me. Things have not been going well, and I was about to be homeless very shortly. I have seen my mother's work here in the tunnels, and the idea excites me tremendously... the thought of a continuing work of that kind chronicling the life of a world, is amazing. I would like to stay and care for my mother, and help her with the paintings." She paused a moment... the words becoming difficult... "When my mother is gone... I would like to continue her work of chronicling your lives here, if you will allow me to do so. I cannot think of a better way to use my talents than by continuing this wonderful work."



She stood watching as everyone discussed her, feeling very alone until Father came over and put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at Vincent and Diana who stood at the top of the steps watching and smiling encouragement. Jamie and Mouse stood beside them holding the twins. Looking out at everyone, Father called order and said quietly... "We have all had time to discuss Linnel's case. Now it is time to vote. Father waited and looked out over the many faces of his friends and saw only smiles... no one turned away.

Looking down into Linnel's face he smiled and told her, "It appears you have a new home, my dear. Everyone wishes for you to stay."

As the meeting broke up, Father came up to Diana and hugged her, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "I cannot thank you enough for finding Linnel. Elizabeth's condition has improved already with her daughter here. It has given her new strength." He looked up into Vincent's serene face and commented, "Our world has so many fine people... with so many wonderful talents and ideas... our morals and ethics... that are being passed down and becoming tradition. I worry sometimes that it will not continue, then something like this happens to give me hope. It is almost as though there is a plan beyond our own."

Vincent nodded and smiled, glancing over at his own children sitting now with Mouse and Jamie ... they themselves being further indication of the tenacity of their world, and hope for its continuance. "Pascal's pipes, Elizabeth's paintings... Father... do not be concerned; our world will continue. It must continue. We will all do what we must to assure that this safe haven, this refuge... this place to dream will be here for a long time to come."

STILLNESS OF THE HEART

ouse was working in the Mousehole when Vincent stopped by. They were supposed to go survey down in the Catacombs for the project he had suggested to drain away the water eroding the tunnels. When Vincent came in, Mouse was just sitting, chin in hands, thinking. The lights from his alarm in front of him flashed on and off randomly... it hadn't been working properly for the past week.

"Mouse..." Vincent called softly from the doorway. There was no indication that Mouse had heard. Vincent stepped into the chamber and alarms began flashing all over the chamber and bells ringing. Startled, Vincent clapped his hands to his ears and roared. "MOUSE! Turn that off!"

Mouse was already scurrying around, pulling switches and disconnecting wires. Suddenly everything ceased, and in the blessed quiet that followed, the quiet tap-tapping of the pipes formed a soothing background music. Vincent sighed gratefully. To his acute senses that much noise was a punishment.

"Sorry, Vincent. Tried and tried to get this straight. Just won't work."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Vincent looked at Mouse with amusement. "Are you ready to go or do you have some other treat for my senses?"

Mouse scurried over and picked up his backpack and miner's hat. "Ready." As they headed down the interlocking tunnels towards the maze and Catacombs Vincent noted that Mouse was quieter than usual.

Vincent cocked his head and put his hand on Mouse's shoulder, "Is there something wrong, Mouse?" Mouse didn't answer at first, then stopped and looked at Vincent.

"Almost time for our anniversary. Don't know what to do... need ideas... and someone to keep babies."

Vincent thought awhile, then started walking with Mouse following him, looking at him questioningly. "How would you like to take Jamie to the Crystal Cavern this year?"

Mouse looked at him incredulously... "Thought you didn't want anyone else there... special to you."

Vincent smiled gently at his friend. "Perhaps at one time that was true. I realize now that I was being a little selfish. There are few special places in our world... few places for those of us who need them." He grabbed Mouse by the back of the neck playfully... "Besides... perhaps I simply want to share it with a friend."

Mouse was beside himself with excitement and they made plans for how to surprise Jamie. "Going to be hard, Vincent. Jamie can't stay away from babies long... too little."

Vincent knew just how true that was, thinking back to when Cathy was very small, and how available Diana had needed to be. They decided that Vincent and Diana would accompany them to the Cavern, then take the babies with them to see Narcissa. They could then camp out nearby in case the babies needed Jamie. That way, they could be alone in a special place, but would not have to worry about the little ones. Jamie could come and feed them, then go back. "With a little ingenuity and determination"

anything is possible," Vincent reminded his friend. As they worked, taking their measurements and discussing the project, they also discussed the plans for the surprise.

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By the time Vincent got back to their chamber after cleaning up and grabbing leftovers in the kitchen, it was late. It was dark in the chamber and even the lamps which usually shone through the stained glass window were out. With Vincent's night sight he was able to see quite clearly, however. He stood next to the bed watching Diana sleep and undressed quietly. Diana had unbraided her hair and it tumbled over the covers and framed her face. She looked so angelic asleep, and he smiled... knowing that angelic was not really the way to describe her. True, she could be saint-like at times, but more often she was a great deal more earth-bound than any angel or saint. She made life quite interesting. Yawning, his huge incisors flashing in the dark, he stretched luxuriously. It had been a long day. He sat briefly at his desk, lit a candle, and opened his journal, wanting to write just a little.

"Mouse and I planned a visit for him and Jamie to the Crystal Cavern today for their anniversary. I hope Diana will not mind... I do not believe she will. I want to plan something different for Diana and myself this year... perhaps a brief visit to the cavern... but I would like a longer trip this time, and with the children older we can manage it. The logistics of getting Jamie and Mouse to the cavern are going to be interesting."

Smiling at the intricate plans he and Mouse had had to make, he closed the journal, blew out the candle, and went to bed. He slid in carefully, not wanting to disturb Diana, but she opened her eyes sleepily and smiled at him.

"You're late."

Pulling her close to him, he wrapped an arm around her. She drifted back off to sleep, her sleeping hand closing gently on the long hair on his hip. Smiling softly in the dark, he thought to himself, Your hand half-sleeping finds me ... your touch is very dear. Now you are all sleep, alone within yourself - if I were but to try... you would wake to find me near... and love me. He lay quietly, not wanting to disturb her... not wanting her hand to leave him. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

While sleeping Vincent had some strange dreams. He saw Cathy wandering ahead of him through towers that looked like glass. He saw Catherine and he saw his and Diana's first daughter... but all this was as though seen through a gauze... a veil of clouds and shadows. The dream was not ominous... it did not seem to portend disaster... it was merely strange.

By the time Vincent woke the next morning to Diana's gentle lovemaking (now that he had gained more control, she took full advantage) he had forgotten the dream entirely. He turned to her lovingly, and afterwards he brought up his idea for Mouse and Jamie to go to the Crystal Cavern.

Diana ran her hands through the long red-gold hair that covered his shoulder and

back. Nodding, she agreed. "I think it's a wonderful idea... and the idea of camping out nearby with the babies sounds like fun."

As they were discussing their plans, Jacob and Toby came in to "remind" them that it was time for breakfast. Vincent looked behind them for Cathy... their little shadow. "Where is Cathy?"

Jacob looked puzzled. "She's still asleep. She won't wake up."

Diana and Vincent looked at each other alarmed and hastily got up and dressed.

By the time they got to the dorm, Mary was also concerned. "She simply will not wake up. I sent for Father."

As she was speaking Father came through the door carrying his bag. As Vincent and Diana watched anxiously, he examined her and shook his head, puzzled and worried. "I don't understand. All her vital signs are fine. She has no fever. Her pupils are not dilated. She has no signs of any neurologic damage... her reflexes are fine... but she will not wake."

As Vincent stared at his daughter the memory of the dream tugged at the edges of his consciousness and he remembered how he had told Diana he was concerned about what might happen to Cathy if she managed to dream herself to that other plane of existence and could not return... and he became frantic... suddenly sure that that was exactly what had happened. He told Diana what he feared and asked Father to send for Narcissa.

Vincent and Diana sat next to Cathy and bonded... they tried to send their minds after hers... to bond with her and bring her back. They found themselves in that black, empty otherworld that Narcissa had helped them to find. They searched, but had no idea what to do... the swirling mists concealed any answers and left them with more questions than they started with. They could feel Cathy... but as if at a great distance... and she did not seem distressed.

Remembering his dream, Vincent called... "Catherine!... not knowing if he was calling his daughter or the woman she was named after.

Diana gripped his hand and sent her mind searching. They <u>had</u> to find her. Suddenly there was another presence beside them... it was Narcissa... but not the Narcissa they knew. This Narcissa was young and strong, and her eyes shone with intelligence ... this was how Narcissa saw herself... "De child... she is lost, Vin-cent... but she is not afraid... come, we will find her."

Between the three of them, their power was enough to break through the haze and Vincent saw what apparently Cathy saw... the towers of crystal, or glass... and he saw Cathy coming towards them. When she reached them, she smiled and held up her arms for Narcissa to pick her up...

"'Cissa!..." She waved to Vincent and Diana as though nothing at all had been amiss.

When they opened their eyes to the world of the here and now, Cathy sat up and hugged Diana, then turned to Vincent.

"You went away, Father. Wanted you to play with my friends."

Puzzled, Vincent replied, "What friends, Cathy?"

Frustrated at her lack of words, Cathy projected the image to him of a very

familiar woman and a child... who looked like Vincent... "Friends."

Speechless, Vincent looked at Diana helplessly and she stared back... she had picked up the image as well.

Narcissa spoke harshly to Cathy, shaking her gently to get her attention. "Mus' not go der, child!"

Innocently, Cathy just said, "Why, 'Cissa? Been there lots."

Narcissa struggled to impress upon the child the importance of her not attempting to return to where she had been. She sent Vincent and Diana from the chamber and stayed to talk with Cathy.

Out in the tunnel, Vincent paced, angry with himself that he had not taken Cathy to Narcissa after he first suspected her of traveling out of body in her dreams. "I should have done something sooner, Diana!"

Equally anxious, but trying to comfort him, Diana replied, "We didn't realize she was doing it so extensively, Vincent... how could we?" She continued, wonder ... and fear in her voice... "But Vincent, it is amazing... she saw Catherine... and her sister... wherever they are. Even to me, that is almost beyond belief."

Vincent came to her and held her, stilling the trembling. His tangled honey-colored mane mingled with her long red hair as he murmured, "I know... how true it is that "Death Shall Have No Dominion."¹⁰

When Narcissa led Cathy from the chamber, the child was pasty-white and looked almost ill.

Vincent knelt and picked her up, scowling at Narcissa. "What have you done to her!"

In a flat, sorrowful voice Narcissa just replied... "Taught her some lessons. She will not try dis again... not for a long while."

Later, after breakfast and after the children were off... the boys in their new class with Michael and Cathy with Mary,... Vincent, Diana, and Narcissa sat next to the falls talking.

"She has gone to dat place many times, Vin-cent." Narcissa told him. "She tell me she remembers being wit' dem before she was here.... I tell her dat der are two worlds and we mus' stay in dis one and dey mus' stay where dey are...until time has come for dem to return...or for us to leave dis one. If we go to dat world, we risk not being able to come back."

Vincent and Diana were very silent, and Narcissa continued... "I tol' you before... to bring de dead to life is no great task, for none are wholly dead... but for us to go to dem is very dangerous."

Diana asked quietly, "So you think she will try it again?"

Narcissa laughed her crowlike laugh... "Oh, yes. Assuredly. But she will wait until she is older and stronger. When one has de power she has, one uses it... but she knows de danger now... even for one so young... she knows." Narcissa patted Vincent's face gently. "Dis one knows... he knows de drawing power of de dead..." she glanced sympathetically at Diana... "as do you. But you know your limitations. De little one has just learned one of hers."

They walked Narcissa part way home and told her of their plans to bring Jamie

and Mouse's twins to her this evening so Jamie and Mouse could have some time together.

Narcissa cackled again... "To have the Mouse have children...it is wonderful...No? He is a good-hearted child himself. I will be pleased to see them."

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The rest of the day was taken up with Mouse and Vincent's preparations. It was too late to go prepare the chamber, so that would have to wait until they got there. Diana consulted with Mary and fixed a basket of food for herself and Vincent... including some cereal for the twins to tide them over, and a basket for Mouse and Jamie. Mouse and Vincent gathered all the quilts and lanterns, etc. that they needed, then once they all had everything together they left Jacob, Toby, and Cathy in Mary's competent care and went to pick up Jamie and the twins.

When Jamie looked up and saw everyone standing in the doorway to the chamber she didn't know what to think. "What's wrong?"

Mouse came up to her and hugged her. "Have surprise for you... going on a trip."

Astonished, Jamie looked from one to the other and absently brushed her sandy blonde hair out of her eyes. "A trip? How, Mouse? What do we do with the twins?" Mouse pointed to Diana and Vincent, and Vincent shrugged and winked. Jamie could feel her excitement building; she and Mouse had been unable to do any exploring since she became pregnant, and she really hadn't expected to do anything this year on their anniversary... This could be fun.

Mouse told her to get dressed in something suitable for exploring and get everything the babies needed, and she bustled around getting everything ready. As they left, Mouse and Vincent swung their bags over their shoulders and Diana and Jamie carried the babies in some backpacks Diana had found for them Above.

"Where are we going, Mouse?"

Mouse kissed her lightly and replied, "You'll see... Like it... can't tell, ruin surprise."

As they traveled down the winding stairway Jamie mused silently. She and Mouse had traveled the tunnels in the maze and she had been down to see Narcissa, but they had never gone farther... at least she hadn't. She and Diana watched their steps especially carefully as they were carrying the babies, and when they reached one tricky spot Vincent helped them over. Eventually they came to a huge cathedral-like room with columns and arches and stopped to rest.

Jamie was astounded. "What is this place! It's beautiful!"

Vincent leaned against one of the pillars and adjusted his pack. "No one knows. Diana and I have seen it several times and it astounds us every time we come through here."

After resting they traveled through several interlocking tunnels which were so low that Vincent had to stoop to get through, and the water dripped from the walls. Jamie really wondered where they were headed... the babies were beginning to fuss.

Vincent conferred with Mouse and then came back to tell them they were heading over toward Narcissa's chamber where he and Diana were going to camp. They came out in a large cavern with huge stalactites and stalagmites forming grotesque figures and what looked almost like a waterfall.

Diana told Jamie, "We will stay here with the babies so you can have your time alone."

Jamie fed the twins and thanked them, hugging Vincent fiercely. She had a feeling this had been his idea.

As Mouse led Jamie away, back into the tunnels, she felt anxious being away from the babies at all, but tried to concentrate on having fun. This was the neatest thing she and Mouse had done in a long time.

They reached an opening to a cavern and Mouse told Jamie... "Wait here, and don't peek." He disappeared into the cavern and was gone for a long while. Jamie fidgeted, wondering what on earth he was up to. Mouse came back out grinning, his blond hair down in his eyes. He took her hand and led her toward the opening saying, "Close eyes." Obediently she closed her eyes and stumbled towards the opening with Mouse guiding her carefully. There was a rough spot where she had climb down... which was difficult to do with her eyes closed, but when she got to the bottom, Mouse stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders, and told her, "Open eyes now..."

When she did, she gasped... "Oh, Mouse! The Crystal Cavern!" Mouse had carefully set up the candles and lit them, and the candlelight sent shimmering rays of color throughout the chamber. Jamie threw her arms around Mouse, and he hugged her. "Like it? Wanted to do something special for you."

Kissing Mouse gently, she told him, "I love you, Mouse... thank you."

Mouse blushed... "Vincent's idea, really..."

Jamie held him closer... "Maybe... but I'm not in love with Vincent... and I'm here with you, so let's take advantage of the time."

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Vincent and Diana took the twins to visit Narcissa. The old woman was delighted with them. "Oh, Vin-cent... So tiny!" She held them both carefully, running her hands over their faces and feeling the tiny fingers. Vincent told Diana later that he had never seen Narcissa so delighted with anything... it had been as though she were a child with a new toy.

When they returned to their campsite, Vincent built a fire and they sat watching it as the twins slept. Diana reached over and brushed Vincent's mane back so she could see his face. "It was sweet of you to offer to let them come to the Crystal Cavern... it was a wonderful idea."

Vincent reached over and tossed another stick on the fire, then looked over at her. "There is another place I would like to take you this year, now that we can stay longer. Perhaps we can stop by the cavern, and the pool, but this place is even farther down... it is an underground river flowing deep beneath us." He gazed into the fire. "I used to go there when I needed to think... to get away. I haven't been there in years."

Vincent watched the fire, his eyes closing sleepily... he loved to have a campfire and didn't indulge himself often, as it required dragging the wood with him below, but it was worth it. Diana just watched him, noting that the light from the fire made his hair shine like copper, and how the changing shadows danced over his face. Her heart ached with love. It angered her to think that there were those who would find him ugly... to her he was beautiful.

Feeling Diana's emotions, Vincent reached over and took her hand and said quietly, his voice the texture and weight of velvet, the touch as soft as a cloud, "I love you Diana." He reached up to touch her hair and trace her face with his hand. "There is a stillness in my heart when I look at you. How can it be that after so long your love still fills my soul with wonder?"

There was a small sound at the edge of the firelight, and they looked up to see Jamie and Mouse... and at about the same time Aaron woke and began crying. Jamie went to him and picked him up. Vincent was astonished.

"How did you know he would wake, Jamie?"

Laughing, she just replied... "They are regular as clockwork, Vincent...Mothers know these things... even without the kind of bond you have with your children. She'll be up by the time I finish feeding him."

Diana and Jamie sat talking while Jamie fed Aaron, and Mouse and Vincent walked off into the shadows to go examine some of the rock formations.

Jamie told Diana, "The cavern is wonderful... thank you for sharing it with us... and for keeping the twins. It has made our anniversary very special."

By the time Jamie finished feeding the twins, they were both asleep again, and she and Mouse returned to the cavern leaving Vincent and Diana with them once more. Once they left, Vincent realized the fire was going out and he regretfully tossed some sand on it. there was no more wood anyway. After putting another quilt on the babies, he and Diana snuggled together under the quilts and fell asleep.

Diana and Vincent woke to the twins' crying. It seemed they had barely gotten to sleep at all. Diana had forgotten how tired she had been when Cathy was this small. She got up and fixed them some of the cereal Jamie had left for them as Vincent tried to quiet them. Vincent fed Aaron and she fed Ellie, then rocked them as Diana sang to them. Eventually they fell back to sleep. As they climbed back under their own quilts, Vincent chuckled a little, the sound almost a purr...

"I must admit I am glad ours are older... I'm getting too old to lose that much sleep all the time... I'll leave it to Mouse any day."

When the twins woke the next time, Jamie and Mouse were back and ready to head back home. Once the babies were fed and changed again, they gathered their things and headed back towards the upper levels. Mouse and Jamie were so tender with one another and with the twins that it surprised Vincent... It is still difficult to see Mouse being romantic ... it seems so out of character, he thought to himself.

He wrapped one long, leather-clad arm around Diana and smiled down at the tiny bundle she was carrying. "Don't get any ideas..."

Startled, Diana glanced up at him to see him smiling, and she smiled back... "No... no ideas. I promise."

WHEN YOU ELIMINATE THE IMPOSSIBLE

incent paced the chamber, his rapid movements causing the candle flames to gutter... he swung around to face Diana... "No. I do not believe that."

Diana grinned... she was winning and she knew it. "Why? What makes

this so different?"

"It simply is not the same... a human being is different from a machine."

They were having an extremely heated philosophical discussion prompted by a science fiction novel Diana had been reading. She had been trying to get him interested in reading a few of her favorite novels and had not had much luck. His tastes tended to the classics and novels with extremely intricate human relationships. Since he had no experience with computers or scientific matters in general...other than what he and Mouse dealt with... and little likelihood of acquiring such experience, science fiction was low on his reading list. Diana was delighted to find a subject she could run him around in circles with... it didn't happen often.

"How is it different... at least in this instance? If a machine were sentient, self-aware... thought of itself as human... had a personality... had a conscience... why should it not be considered murder to turn it off?"

Vincent stood with one foot resting on his stool, his arm resting across his knee. He stared at the floor with his long hair hanging across his face. He shook his head, his mane tumbling around his shoulders. "It just is. It would have no soul."

Grinning... loving this... whether she was right or not made little difference... it was delicious fun to frustrate him, and she could feel his indecision. Diana rolled over on her side and leaned on an elbow... she answered..... "How do you know? What is a soul?... What makes a human human?"

Groaning, Vincent looked up at her, then laughed quietly. He was tired of the game, but he could feel her delight in baiting him... She was so obviously having fun at his expense. "Who knows... after all, look at me! All right...I concede. I don't know." Diving for the bed and pinning her down as she squirmed to get away, he answered, "But neither do you... so that makes it a draw."

They heard a noise at the door and looked around... Devin leaned in the doorway laughing, "Come down for a visit and can't find you two... should have known I'd find you in bed."

Diana's face turned as red as her hair and Vincent just turned the other way to avoid laughing. Devin always managed to embarrass Diana... of course she would get him back as soon as she could possibly manage.

"Actually, I am only an humble messenger." Devin presented an envelope to Diana with a flourish.

Taking the envelope from him and thanking him... though the look she gave him was scathing, she opened it and read the short note. She looked up at Vincent and saw him watching her curiously.

She explained, "Joe wants me to consult on a case. Guess I had best get changed and go up to see him."

Sliding off the bed, she headed for the wardrobe to get something to wear, and

glancing at Devin she said archly, "Well... are you going to stay here and watch me dress, or what?"

When Devin blushed, his scars stood out whitely. She grinned at him from around the wardrobe door, then winked at Vincent.

Vincent rolled off the bed and took Devin by the arm, shaking his head sympathetically. "Come," he chuckled. "Voluntarily fencing with Diana is like asking to be flayed alive...believe me, I know." Glancing back at Diana he commented, "We'll be with Father. Come by before you leave."

Diana dressed in her tailored brown slacks and a green silk blouse. She pulled on her suede boots. Sitting in front of her mirror she braided her hair and applied her makeup, then covered the mirror again. Vincent still did not care to catch his reflection unawares. On the way to Father's chamber she went by Brooke's chamber. Brooke was caring for some of the younger children today, and Cathy was with her. When Diana looked inside, Brooke was on the floor with the children and they were building things out of some clay that Vincent had dug out for her. Unfortunately the children were wearing as much of the clay as was in the figures they were creating. Vincent was going to have a wonderful time getting her clean... "Better him than me," she thought with a grin. She knelt next to Cathy and admired her creation. "It's beautiful Cathy!"

Cathy had clay smeared on her face and in her hair... fortunately her clothing was the oldest she had. Cathy held up this lump of wadded up clay and said proudly, "Father!"

Smiling indulgently, Diana replied, "Wonderful! It looks just like him." Brooke giggled. "No, Diana. I think she means she made it for Vincent." Cathy was giving her mother a dirty look.

"Oh." Diana said. "Sorry." She turned to Brooke. "I have to go Above for awhile and don't know when I'll return, so Vincent will come get her in awhile. Are Jacob and Toby still with Michael?"

Brooke nodded. "They are working on learning phonetics today. They're really doing well. He says they'll be reading before you know it."

After leaving Brooke, Diana went by Father's chamber to say goodbye. As she entered, she interrupted a discussion Vincent and Devin were having with Father.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt... I only wanted to tell you I was off, and to say goodbye."

Vincent hugged her. "You look beautiful. Be careful."

Devin walked over and grinned at her. "You do look lovely." He bowed, then held out his arm for her...winking at Vincent... "If I may, I'd love to escort you Above, since I happen to be going that way myself."

Diana kissed Vincent and explained about the children, then slipped her arm in Devin's... "Wonderful."

As they left, tossing quips back and forth, Vincent just shook his head. "Those two are impossible..."

Father re-directed Vincent back to the conversation they had been having previously. "Vincent... since you and Mouse have finished your surveying down in the



Catacombs, could you show me where the drainage pipes should be laid to redirect the water away from that site?"

Turning and leaning over Father's desk, Vincent examined the maps he and Mouse had created and pointed out the area where they felt the drain pipes should be located.

"How long should this project take to accomplish?" Father asked.

"Perhaps several weeks. Mouse, Alain, Cullen, Michael, and I can probably do it alone, though Elliott said he would come down to help as well when he can. Of course any help from anyone who is available would be appreciated."

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As Diana and Devin neared the tunnel exit, Devin apologized to Diana for embarrassing her earlier. "I'm really sorry... there's just something about you that inspires me to tease you."

"Don't be sorry... I got you back." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, causing him to blush again. "Tell Ruth hello for me. I've gotta go."

Devin steadied her as she climbed the iron rungs of the ladder with her heels, then followed after. As he watched her disappear around the corner of the alley, he shrugged. Diana was lovely, but Vincent was right... fencing with her was somewhat like asking to be flayed... however, she made it so enjoyable, it was hard to resist.

As Diana waited for the elevator, she fidgeted. She wondered what kind of case Joe had in mind for her this time. When the elevator opened, she was carried inside with the wave of people getting on. She felt somewhat like a sardine, and the multitudes of impressions pressing in on her caused her to put up her barrier automatically. She got off and wound her way through the maze of desks and people, the noise grating on her nerves. Knocking on Joe's door, she peeked inside, ducking as a dart flew past and imbedded itself in a picture of the Commissioner that was tacked to Joe's dartboard.

"Ouch! I take it things are not going well?"

Joe removed his feet from his desk with a thump. "Nope. Come on in."

Diana put her carryall on the chair and leaned on the desk. "You called. I came. What's up?"

Joe handed her a file. "Odd deaths at the hospital. They've had several deaths that seem suspicious, but we have no reason to say for sure it's murder... We're not sure what the connection is."

Diana sat and read quietly, becoming puzzled. "They were all on life support that was turned off."

Joe nodded.

"Mercy killing maybe?"

Joe shrugged... "Maybe... maybe not."

Diana flipped through the pages. "Were the same nurses or doctors attending?" Joe shook his head. "Nope... already checked that."

Frowning, she scanned some more. "Different floors... different ages... different problems... different physicians, different nurses..."

She stared at Joe. "So what do you want me to do? Interview the staff?"

Joe perched on the edge of the desk. "It's a start. You realize of course that this is Jimmy Faber's case again."

Diana shrugged. "That's all right. I think we'll do all right from here on out... Jimmy's okay, just a little touchy."

Joe nodded, "Okay, then. Jimmy's over at the hospital now. Go meet him and see what you can find out."

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Once at the hospital it was an easy task to find Jimmy... as usual he was antagonizing someone, and heated voices drifted around the corner. "Just who do you think you are, accusing my staff of complicity in murder?!"

Jimmy's level voice could barely be heard over the other man's roar. When Diana stepped around the corner Jimmy grinned at her. "Bennett! Glad to see you. Will you take over here with Dr. Ferret... oops... excuse me, Dr. Ferrell?"

As Jimmy sketched a jaunty salute and headed down the hall, Diana sighed and turned to Dr. Ferrell. "I'm sorry, Dr. Ferrell. Please excuse my partner... tact is not his best trait, I'm afraid."

After fuming for awhile, Dr. Ferrell calmed down and was charmed by Diana's easy, gentle manner. "We don't like this situation any better than the police do, Ms. Bennett... we want to find out who's behind it, but I simply cannot believe that one of my staff is a murderer."

The impressions Diana picked up were only of honest confusion. Diana was introduced to all the nurses, orderlies, and technicians who had been involved with any of the patients who had died. By the end of the day she was exhausted just from the constant drain of trying to pick up any impressions of falsehood. Jimmy had been doing his research as well. On the way back to Joe's office, Diana lay her head back on the headrest in Jimmy's battered jalopy and closed her eyes. Jimmy glanced over at her.

"You look exhausted, Bennett. Was it worthwhile? Learn anything useful?" Diana shook her head. "I don't know, Jimmy. Everyone seems to be telling the truth... at least that is the 'impressions' I receive. I don't know what to think. Did you learn anything?"

Jimmy was very quiet for awhile as he navigated the New York traffic. When he spoke it was slowly... tentatively. "I may have. But first, I want to apologize."

Startled, Diana sat up and looked at him. "Why?"

Jimmy directed his concentration on the busy street, but continued, "I want to apologize because I've been close-minded and nasty. I haven't given you the credit due you. You're good. I saw that on the last case we worked on; you were professional and you gave it your all." He shrugged. "Maybe I still have my doubts about all this psychic shit, ... and I don't care much for your Behavioral Criminology... but hey, whatever gets the job done. It seems to work. Besides... what I don't see, you do."

Diana sat back, relaxing. "And vice-versa. You're good too, Jimmy. But I wish you wouldn't play good cop bad cop without telling me... you sure had Dr. Ferrell



upset this morning. I wasn't prepared."

Jimmy laughed. "Wasn't. He just ticked me off. I didn't know you were coming."

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After parking his car, Jimmy and Diana went up to see Joe and report on what they'd found out... which wasn't much.... well, maybe if you considered the negatives... that was something.

Jimmy finally told them, "I did find out one interesting point. The hospital is using some new-fangled life support system that is operated from a central computer. It cannot be turned off at the patient's bedside. There are only a few people who know how to operate the computer and have access to the codes involved."

Joe perked up. "Well, that should narrow it down. Did you get a list of the people?"

Jimmy nodded. "Interviewed 'em too. Dr. Ferrell has the codes, and the programmers. Nice bunch of guys. Can't really see 'em as murderers, and there doesn't seem to be any motive, but we'll keep looking."

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By the time Diana got home that night it was late and she was truly exhausted. Vincent was waiting up for her. As he rubbed her shoulders to ease the tension, he asked about the case, and she gave him all the information they had.

Vincent thought quietly as he gently worked her muscles. "Have you interviewed the programmers?"

Diana shook her head. "Tomorrow... tonight I have to brave that cold shower and go to bed."

Vincent walked with her down to the showers and watched as she undressed and stood under the shower... bracing herself for the cold. When she pulled the lever and the water turned on, she looked at him delighted... "The water's hot!" She quickly took her shower, then luxuriated a moment in the warmth before stepping into the robe that Vincent held out for her. She pulled on her heavy socks and sat on the boulder while he dried her hair for her with a towel. "How on earth did you manage the hot water?"

Vincent kissed her gently. "Wish I could take credit for it... Elliott and Mouse worked all day on their project - redirecting the water over the steam pipes. They <u>did</u> after all promise you hot showers, and they finally managed."

Diana stretched. "I think both of them deserve a kiss." Vincent picked her up to head back to their chamber, and his voice rumbled a little as he commented quietly, "I love you." Diana could feel the flash of jealously... obviously being forced to the background. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

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Diana finished brushing her hair dry as Vincent lay in bed watching her. When she finally slid in next to him, he commented, "When you interview-the programmers, perhaps you should interview the computer as well... maybe the computer did it."

Diana glanced back at him, and he looked so smug lying there, she had to laugh, thinking about their discussion that morning. She commented, "I don't think this one is quite that far advanced."

Vincent shrugged, unimpressed. "Well, you know what your Sherlock Holmes always says: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."¹¹

Tickled by his comment, because it meant he had actually read some of her favorites, Diana snuggled down next to him. "He's not 'my' Sherlock Holmes... he's Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes... but I'll think about it."

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The following morning in the hospital as Diana and Jimmy interviewed the programmers, Vincent's comment kept running through Diana's mind. The impressions she was getting from the programmers were innocuous. She didn't think they were involved... or knew anything, though Jimmy was giving them a hard time. Finally, Diana decided to begin asking about the life support system itself, how it worked, how it could be shut down, what happened if it failed, etc.

"... and if there is a power failure or system failure of any kind?"

The programmer proudly told her, "Impossible. If there is a power failure, the backup generator takes over immediately and the backup system kicks in. We haven't ever had a system failure yet."

"That you know of..." Diana mused.

"No..." he repeated emphatically, "We would know if there had been a failure." Diana decided to launch into sheer speculation. "Is there any way, ... or any reason that the computer would selectively shut down life support?"

"You mean on its own? No, of course not... well... wait a minute... there is a provision for if a patient wakes and begins breathing and systems start up by themselves... like if they decide suddenly to get up and take off, so that if they don't damage the equipment. It's kind of a protective device."

Jimmy pulled Diana to the side and conferred with her, then asked the programmer, "Could you find out if it is possible that could have occurred? Perhaps the computer received data in each case that made it 'think' that was the case."

"Sure. The computer keeps records of each patient... all we have to do is print out the data for around the time of death. That should do it. I'll get right on it."

While they waited, Diana and Jimmy went to the cafeteria for coffee. "Whatever gave you that idea, Bennett?"

She shook her head. "Would you believe a science fiction novel and someone's comment?"

Jimmy grinned... "At least you didn't say it was your Tarot cards or a dream or something. Man, if it turns out the computer is the 'murderer', the hospital is going to be in for some lawsuits. I never <u>did</u> trust computers anyway."

When they returned to the computer room the programmers were white faced and upset. "The readings are the same on all the patients. They were near to recovery... but not near enough to survive without the help of the equipment... the computer must have mis-read the data and cut off."

When the news was presented to Dr. Ferrell, he was no happier than the programmers were, but the information had to be presented to the families of the patients, and Jimmy and Diana had to make their reports. Joe was just glad the 'murderer' had been found and the case was closed. Jimmy leaned on the desk and grinned at Joe...

"Bennett really came through this time... and she did it without any of her 'impressions'... just a hell of a lot of solid thinking. That's the kind of police work I like to see."

Diana just laughed... "Sorry, Jimmy. This one you have to thank Sherlock Holmes for..." As she waltzed out the door, Joe and Jimmy looked at each other and just shrugged.



PROOF AGAINST DESIRE

iana peered around the doorway into the Mousehole where Vincent and Mouse were going over plans for the drainage project down in the Catacombs. They were not planning on beginning it until after Vincent returned from their anniversary trip. Jacob and Toby were chasing young Arthur around the room trying to put him back into his cage and Cathy raced around after them, causing even more confusion. As Diana came in, the raccoon darted towards her, and she grabbed him. He squalled, but didn't bite. He had become quite tame, but he did not approve of his cage...however since he would not stay out of William's kitchen either, he had to tolerate it. She handed the squalling baby to the boys, who put him away after thanking her, then together they carried the cage down the tunnel up towards the dorm. Watching them struggle down the tunnel, Diana smiled and grabbed Cathy on her way out.

"Not this time you don't. You stay here." Cathy sulked, but went over to play with the Electro-Storm... Vincent's "sky" that Mouse had built for him.

Vincent called Diana over to show her the plans. Elliott had helped them design the drainage system and it should help reduce the erosion in both the maze and the Catacombs. Mouse was excited about the project... he liked working with Elliott.

As he rolled up the plans he asked Vincent, "When will you get back? Want to start soon."

Vincent shook his head. "I am not sure, Mouse. We are taking enough food for several days."

Mouse wasn't happy at the delay... not that it was critical to begin right away, but he was just anxious to begin.

Vincent consoled his friend, "Do not worry so, Mouse, the Catacombs will still be there when I get back."

As they left Mouse sulking over his inability to begin his project, they headed back towards the kitchen to get their food basket from William. Diana handed Cathy to Vincent and put her arm through his.

"I'm looking forward to getting away by ourselves. I've missed being truly alone with you."

"I know. I feel the same. Jacob is upset with me also, though. He and Toby want me to take them camping. I suppose I will have to arrange it, but in order to do so it will require taking them down those treacherous steps. I will need to have Mouse or Alain... or perhaps Devin to come with me."

Diana was a little alarmed by his proposal. She had almost fallen on those steps herself before. "That stairwell is too dangerous for those children, Vincent! What if they slipped?"

Vincent shook his head, shaking his mane back out of his eyes. "Do not worry so, Diana. You know I would do nothing to endanger them. I will rope them to me in any case."

Diana sighed. "Great. Then if they both slip you can all go off the edge." Vincent laughed quietly. "Have a little faith. I've been maneuvering those stairs

alone since I was eight or so."

Diana said nothing, but he could catch her silent thought that with his reflexes he probably could have done it at two.

Reaching the kitchen they gathered their food basket and thanked William. They then took Cathy to Mary in the dorm and talked to the boys.

Vincent kneeled down beside them, "I hope you two will behave while we are gone... I do not want to get back and find that you have been a problem."

Jacob stood chewing on his thumb... he still had not broken that habit... and Vincent removed the digit gently. "Do you understand?"

They both nodded.

"Stay away from the maze and the bridge, and do not go swimming without someone with you... and do not drag Cathy into trouble."

Toby piped in, "Usually she's the one who gets us in trouble."

Smiling gently, Vincent hugged them both. He looked up to see Michael gesturing for them to come with him. "I think Michael wants you for reading class. Go on, and when I get back you can read to me."

With one last hug, they took off after Michael.

After talking to Mary briefly about Cathy, they gathered their things and left. Both of them were carrying far more than they usually did for their brief visit to the Crystal Cavern.

As they passed through the maze, Vincent explained to Diana how the Mouse and Elliott's project was to work. "Once that main source of water is diverted, it will stabilize things quite a bit, and will make things safer." He ran his hand over the crumbling wall and pulled a piece loose. "The damage that has been done already will continue to make this a dangerous area, but at least we may be able to prevent it from getting worse... and we can shore up bad areas."

They reached the Crystal Cavern, and left some of their things there. There was no sense in carrying everything with them. Diana was curious about the river Vincent had told her about.

"The river flows through the darkness... so silent... even deeper below that is an area I would not take you... where some of the people who used to follow Paracelsus still live... it is dangerous there. In addition, there is volcanic activity there, shedding a strange glow... and much hotter. I did want you to see the river though."

Diana was silent watching Vincent's calm face. Father had told her some about Paracelsus... and the events leading to his death at Vincent's hands. Father also told her that Vincent does not remember much of that time, and that it was best so. From what Father had told her, Diana somewhat agreed with him. No wonder Vincent was almost driven mad ... to think Paracelsus had goaded Vincent to lose control to the point where he had ripped him apart... but the truly horrible part is that Vincent had thought he was killing Father... one of the people he loved most in the world. To him... if his rage could get him to do that...he would be capable of anything. Diana had her barrier up as she was thinking this... she didn't dare let any of that slip past to Vincent.

They traveled for several hours, stopping to rest once or twice, and Vincent told her tales from Greek mythology. "The river reminds me of the River Styx... and I....

when I am poling myself across that river... Charon, the boatman. When I brought Catherine back from that place when Paracelsus was holding her, it was as if I were bringing her back from Hell itself.

"Why do you wish to come here again... now especially... if the memories are so painful," Diana asked.

Puzzled, Vincent dropped his eyes to hers... the blue almost lost in the shadows. He touched her face softly, and said haltingly... "I... am not sure." Looking away, and seeming cheerful again, he commented... "Truly, it is a wondrous place. I have many happy memories of going there as well. I went there when I needed to think... or to get away."

Diana was becoming uneasy. "You came here when you ... lost yourself? When you needed to regain control?"

"Sometimes."

Diana shifted her pack, and Vincent reached over to help her. "Is it far still?"

"No... come." He took her hand and led her over some jagged rocks and they continued for another half hour or so. When they rounded a corner, Vincent handed her over some boulders and the river spread out in front of her, flowing quietly through the dark. The lamplight on the water was lovely. She heard a splash, and looked to Vincent... his eyes reflected the lamplight back at her.

"What was that?

"Probably a fish. The fish down here are albinos... very strange. I once even found a python... probably one that had escaped from someone Above. The colors had faded almost to nothing....." He had become very quiet. He stared off into the darkness... and said quietly... "All the colors fade... in the darkness...all the passion fades... the fever... and the rage... only the center remains... the peace."

He looked so odd, standing there in the scant lamplight. His golden mane was washed out to almost a pale yellow-white... and his eyes had gone very strange. Diana didn't like this at all. She felt suddenly as though she needed to get him out of here... "Vincent..."

He didn't answer. He raised his head and began a strange sing-song noise - between a purr and a growl. His mouth hung open, showing his fangs. His eyes closed. He had forgotten she was there entirely. Diana backed off and sat on the boulder, watching. Whatever was happening, at the moment she did not feel the rage... or desire... that usually prompted his "losing himself." This was something else... Something very strange. Possibly this was something he always did when he came here... and was unaware that he did it. Slowly Vincent began peeling off his clothing... one piece at a time and just dropping them. When he was finished he stood, head back ... and roared... a sound that shook the cavern.... then he slowly lowered himself and sat against a boulder, staring out across the river.

Diana watched all this with amazement. Tentatively, she reached out with her bond to touch him, and found.... nothing. His mind was empty... there was something there... but so packed into a small knot she couldn't reach it. She panicked. "Oh God. Vincent... what's wrong?" She was scared to death. So what do I do now? Wake him? Can't. What if that's the wrong thing to do? Wait? How long? Should I get help,-or

would that be the wrong thing to do? She felt in truth that this was not something to be worried about... that he had done this the other times when he had come here. This helped him find his "center." He had said it... all the passion fades... the fever.. and the rage. He had found his center. But what was he going to do when he woke to find himself naked and realized what had happened?... Worry about that if... no... when he wakes, kid. Diana sat propped against the boulder watching him for a long time... she looked at her watch. Hours. He hadn't moved... hadn't even blinked. Diana got up and stretched. She felt as though she had been beaten. She picked up the roll of quilts and laid out a bed for herself. Not exactly the anniversary you expected. She dug in the packs and pulled out a sandwich, eating it while watching Vincent. Finally, after washing down the sandwich, Diana sighed and climbed in under the quilts. She hated to sleep, but if she didn't and something happened, she wouldn't be able to deal with it.

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Diana woke to the smell of coffee and the sound of a crackling fire. When she looked around she saw Vincent, dressed... fixing breakfast. *Thank you, God.* "Morning, Love."

Vincent swung around, an easy smile on his face. "Good morning." He seemed fine, but there was a little confusion there, as well.

"Did you sleep well?" Diana asked, fishing.

Vincent blinked. "I do not remember. Did I fall asleep on you?... Did you sleep well?"

Uneasy about lying, but not sure the truth would do any good, Diana just smiled and said, "Kind of."

Chuckling, Vincent replied, "You slept kind of well, or I kind of fell asleep on you?"

Grinning at his tone despite her worry, she replied, "Both, I guess." Stretching, she watched him as he busied himself fixing breakfast. He had even brought eggs, from the smell. "Smells good."

He brought her a plate and a cup of instant coffee..., kneeling before her with his hands outstretched... so strong and handsome... so gorgeously *alive* she could barely stand it. He was still very quiet as she took the food and went back to get his own. He settled back against a boulder a few feet away and watched her. She knew he was wondering about lost time... wondering what had happened, but she'd be damned if she would bring it up first and embarrass him. She felt his mind brush hers tentatively and she reached out to touch back. In their bond, they looked at one another... and he knew she had seen him do something strange.

"What did I do?... Tell me, Diana."

Diana fidgeted, then looked up at him again. Her bond caressed him as she said, "I'm not sure. I think you found your center."

Vincent looked at her as though she were mad. "What? What on earth do you mean by that? What did I do?"

Slowly, Diana explained, and Vincent looked away. "I don't remember.... anything."

Diana commented,... "I got the impression that this is something you do every time you come here... almost like a ritual... you mean you do not remember anything? What is the last thing you remember?"

Vincent thought... "Stopping to adjust your pack... I think.... No. Wait... I remember something about telling you about ... colors... and ... " He looked at her wide-eyed..." and about how everything goes away... and that is all I remember."

Diana finished off her cold coffee deliberately. "Well, everything went away... that's for sure. I tried to reach your mind, and your consciousness was packed so tightly into a ball that I couldn't reach it at all." She saw his dismayed look, and hastened to comfort him. "Come on... look at it this way... at least you know now what you do when you come here.... maybe even why you come...."

"When I woke this morning, I was already dressed... I don't remember that either. This is disturbing, Diana."

She went to him then, letting his huge arms fold around her. "It's all right. Vincent, really... I don't think this is a new development. I think it's something you have always done... for whatever reason. Perhaps the reason you wanted me to come here with you is that subconsciously you wanted me to see... to share this with you. Or perhaps you want to know more about it. But whatever... I don't think it is anything to be unduly concerned about."

Vincent thought for awhile, then said slowly... "It is true that I would come here... when I was restless... or "The Other" was trying to gain control, and many times Father would complain I had been gone for much longer than I had realized... and I would be very hungry when I got back.... I never realized, truly. Time means so little down here."

"Well, whatever the case may be, I think we should go... this place does strange things to you... and it's not what I had in mind for our anniversary."

Vincent looked at her sadly... his incredible eyes washed out in this light... but still amazing. "I'm sorry... for ruining our anniversary... if I had known..."

Diana looked up at him, grinning a little. "Don't be silly. I got to see a side of you I didn't know existed... that was special in its own way. Besides... anytime I can see you stark naked ... standing in all your glory next to a wonderful underground river... it can't be all bad!"

He stared at her a moment, then began laughing. "I am glad you think so. Would you like me to try it again?"

"Not on your life... not here anyway."

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Traveling along the river for a ways, Vincent assured Diana they could reach their lake and the cavern from a different angle without as much climbing.

"Vincent, perhaps we should go see Narcissa and ask her about your episode at the river. Perhaps she could give us some insight."

"Perhaps... later. I am about ready for a bath and some time with you."

Diana looked up at his tone and noted his lip twitch in a smile. "You are, are you?"

His long arm reached out and swatted her backside... "Yes.... hurry up."

Laughing, she shifted her pack and scampered up the steps and around the corner.

When Vincent rounded the corner, following slowly... she was nowhere to be found. "Diana..." he began... The pool lay directly ahead, so he went up to the edge and put his pack down. "Diana..." There was a slight noise and he turned, raising the lantern... and saw Diana standing naked before him. She had quickly shed all her clothes and stood in the lamplight, pale and lovely. "Diana!" The exclamation was a hoarse whisper.

She came to him and slowly helped him to divest himself of his layers of clothing... shivering a little in the cool air. When he finally pulled his boots off, she slid into the water and waited for him. He eased into the water beside her, and they began washing all the travel dirt from one another... Diana's job was much larger than his was... but she took it quite seriously... and he seemed to think she was doing it quite well, from the look on his face...and other even more obvious indications. "Diana..." His voice was gentle... but the look in his eyes was anything but...

"Is that all you know how to say?... Where is the poetry now,... hmm?"

Diana's bond touched his and his arms wrapped around her in the water. She rested her head on his shoulder and they moved slowly in the water... almost dancing to the music within themselves. Quietly he whispered to her: "There is a time for poetry, and a time for action." He then proceeded to show her the difference.

Later, as they dressed, Diana shivering in the chill, she said quietly, "Vincent..." Glancing over, stopping in process of pulling on his boot...sensing something in the tone, he answered, "Yes?"

Diana looked up at him, seemingly embarrassed,... "Remember last year... here... when you asked me if...if that... was what I wanted... and I told you no?"

Meeting her eyes with his level gaze and a small half-smile, he said, "Yes."

"I lied... just a little... I <u>don't</u> want it like that always... never <u>quite</u> like that...but sometimes..."

"I know... I knew then... how could I not? We were bonded. I am surprised you did not realize that I knew."

Diana truly was embarrassed now. "You never said... never challenged me on it."

Vincent sighed... and looked a little sad. "Diana... why do you think I have tried so hard for the past year to leash that particular beast? It is very difficult for me, ... more than you can know; but I have tried because I knew that at times you wanted everything I could possibly give you... everything I was... and I was unable to give it. That caused me pain. But I fear that beast because... had I even attempted it then, I could have killed you... it is a wonder to me still that I did not kill you in the tunnels



that day after I killed those men... the taste of blood in my mouth...the... rage... the desire... everything. I would not have meant to... but you would have been just as dead. Now at least I can try... and it is still a danger. Letting that tide rise too high..." He shook his head. "There is always the chance that I will allow it to go too far... and hurt you.... and if I wound you and scent blood... Heaven alone knows what I might do... what He might do. We must be reasonable in this, Diana."

"When Reason speaks to your inmost self, you are proof against Desire." 12

Diana stood hugging herself... and gazing at him. Vincent stood there, golden in the lamplight. He had only pulled on his breeches and boots, and his red-gold pelt and golden mane shone. His huge hands with the razor-sharp talons hung lightly at his side. Scars criss-crossed the pelt of his chest - gunshot wounds, knife wounds... he was a veritable warrior incarnate. Now, she thought, if he would only show his teeth...

Catching her thought, and the pride and desire in it... Vincent laughed, the sound of it echoing like thunder in the huge cavern... and his fangs flashed in the lamplight. "You are impossible!... and very bad.... You are not being... reasonable."

Diana smiled a little sheepishly. "No. Besides... You are the one who is impossible... impossibly beautiful... fantastic... and wonderful. I don't know what you are, Vincent... but whatever it is,... I wouldn't change a thing."

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As they dropped their things in the Crystal Cavern and laid the quilts out for their bed, Diana reached out to touch Cathy... to see if she was well, and found her content. "I assume they are both doing well,... Cathy would be having fits if anything were wrong with Jacob."

Vincent nodded... saying nothing. He was very tired...very distracted. Diana came and put her arms around him, laying her head on his back. "Go to sleep, Love. After last night, you need your rest."

Again, Vincent undressed, and Diana blew out the candles, leaving the lantern lit next to the pallet. By the time she slid in next to Vincent, he was already asleep. She snuggled in next to him, wrapping her arm around him. Sleep well, Love.

Diana tried to sleep, but ended up watching the lamplight on Vincent's face instead ... the colors from the crystals kept making rainbows there. She ached to stroke the hair back out of his face, but was afraid to wake him. She noticed he was sleeping restlessly in any case. Worried, she touched him with her bond... and found considerable turmoil. Lying back, she tried to sleep, but she worried.

In his dream, Vincent kept seeing Father... and Father was saying terrible things to him, She was your mother... your mother... You ripped your way out of your mother's body, Vincent... You were born in blood. Vincent sat bolt upright, staring straight ahead. He was drenched in sweat and trembling... but the dream and all memory of it was gone.

"Vincent... what is it?" Diana touched his arm and he shrugged away.

"Nothing... nothing... it's gone."

Vincent lay back immediately and closed his eyes... asleep again... or still. Diana was unsure if he had even been awake. I have to get him to Narcissa when he wakes. This is getting serious. Diana laid her head on his shoulder and tried to sleep.

Dreaming again, Vincent saw the same scene... saw himself lash out and rake Father from throat to groin... Father lying across his desk dying... then Father turning into Paracelsus... and saying *Now you are truly my son... my son... my son.*

"No...NO...NO!"

Diana woke abruptly to Vincent's loud roar. She pulled him down into her arms. "It's all right, it's all right."

Groaning, Vincent held Diana. He lay his head on her breast and sobbed. Diana just held him and stroked his hair... not knowing what else to do, or say. He fell asleep in her arms. A little later, Diana was roused by his insistent lovemaking. His hands were exploring diligently and she reached for their bond... and found none! Looking up into his face in the lamplight she realized just who this was with her. "The Other" leaned down almost delicately and nipped her neck.

"Finally... tonight you're mine, Diana... and he cannot stop me."

There was such a look of longing... and yes... a hunger that could be tipped easily from desire to rage... but the longing, the desperation... Diana was touched deeply. This was still Vincent... no matter what he said, or how hard he tried to deny it. She stroked his face, and his eyes closed. The moan ... part growl, that escaped him only excited her... she knew she was only in danger if she refused him, and she had no intention of doing that in any case.

"The Other" shuddered... "I want you."

The longing in his voice almost broke her heart. Diana reached for him and drew him to her. "I'm here. I'm always here... for both of you. I love you both."

His claws tightened reflexively on her shoulders, thumbs edging up to her throat. "You lie. No one loves me... and he will let me love no one."

Diana took his hands away from her throat and placed them in what she hoped were more "interesting areas," then tangled her hands in his mane. Pulling him down to her, she kissed him deeply, and as he kissed her back, hard... demanding... his upper canine caught her lip, cutting it a little. He drew back, tasting the blood, and shuddered... tried to pull back. His breathing was harsh... ragged, with an undertone of an ominous growl. Diana shook her head... "No... you can do it. Control it... let me love you as well."

He held her so tightly she thought her ribs would crack, and buried his face in her shoulder. She heard another low rumble of a growl as his tongue slid over her neck, delicately tasting... exploring. He shuddered slightly and managed to say, "I can taste no fear, scent none..." he seemed amazed... "You have no fear of me."

"No."

She realized that apparently "The Other" lacked the empathic sense that his other side had, and relied solely upon his other heightened senses of taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing... and his instinct... just as any other animal did. Lacking the bond, he had no way to realize that she did truly love him, as well... except for his sudden realization

of her lack of fear by his own means of deduction.

She felt his tears then even as he moved roughly against her. The intense need in his voice broke her heart when he hoarsely whispered, "I love you."

Diana arched her back and rose to meet him... this part of Vincent that was nothing more than his long-denied passion and desire... and when it was over, she stroked him gently as he fought to stay awake... not to "lose himself" to his own "Other Self."

In a quiet growl, his voice slurred, he said, "He never lets me love anyone... but I needed you."

Diana's tears wet the soft fur on his face as she kissed him. "I know. And you both need each other." She fell asleep with his arm around her.

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"I don't care what you say, Vincent...." Diana was angry. Vincent simply would not hear of bothering Narcissa with "his problem." When he woke and she suggested it, he had been adamantly against it.

"It's not that serious, Diana... a few dreams... that is all."

Diana watched Vincent as he spoke, and knew even without their bond that he was lying through those huge teeth of his... this <u>was</u> serious and he knew it. He knew nothing of last night... and she prayed "The Other" would not tell him... not yet.

"Vincent... what can it hurt? Narcissa will not mind... humor me."

"No."

"What about what happened at the river?"

Vincent was annoyingly reasonable. "You, yourself, said that was probably something I have done for a long time. Why should I be concerned about it now?"

Out-stubborned, Diana gave up. "All right. But if this continues, I want you to do something about it... is that clear?"

Relieved at the reprieve, Vincent nodded.

Diana had dressed before he woke and had hidden the scratches and bruises from the night before. Her lip was sore, but he had not noticed. She hoped she could hide the scratches and bruises until they healed. "The Other" was not much for conversation, but he was endearing in his own way. Diana shifted her pack to ease a sore, bruised shoulder. It would be so much easier if they could just get together and hit a happy medium. "All I can say is that this has been an interesting anniversary." She smiled gently up at him as he looked up, distressed. "Of course it had its high points... I will readily admit that!"

Sighing, not even bothering to answer, Vincent shouldered his pack and held out his hand. She took it and they headed home with Diana watching Vincent with worried eyes most of the time.

THE LEGEND OF THE SOUL

don't care what you say, Father... he needs help." Diana stalked through Father's chambers angrily. He was once again accusing her of trying to protect Vincent from himself... and his nightmares. As she brushed past a stack of books, they fell with a crash, and Father flinched... more at the indignity to his books than at the noise. Diana stooped and began picking up the books, placing them back on the desk. Mouse was sitting on the old battered hassock, hugging his knees... his head swiveling from Father to Diana, then back again. "Ask Mouse... he knows."

Father's attention swung to Mouse in inquiry. "Well?"

Mouse and Vincent had begun the Catacombs Project, as they were calling it, and it had bogged down because of Vincent's preoccupation. It had been left until a "more suitable time." Mouse started to speak haltingly... "Isn't good Father. Can't think. Goes off by himself. Not good being alone. Been seeing things... hearing things. Can't work."

Father sat tiredly in his chair and looked back at Diana. "Do you know what he is dreaming about?"

Diana stared stonily at Father. "Paracelsus... I believe."

"The bad time." Mouse said, quietly.

Diana nodded. She and Vincent had been back from their anniversary trip for a week now, and he had not had a good night's sleep yet. Every night he woke, saying "No!," but he never remembered what he was dreaming... or said he did not. Diana was picking up some of the dreams, but she did not dare discuss them with him. His temper had been short, and he had not once tried to make love to her... whether from exhaustion or lack of control, she didn't know... perhaps both. Of course, her crack about their anniversary being interesting had not slipped past him. She was sorry, because he had gone to great lengths, as usual, to please her. Thinking about the trip made her think about what had happened at the river. She was unsure whether to mention it... "Mouse, could you leave me alone with Father a bit? I need to talk to him about something privately."

Mouse, never one to take offense, just said, "Sure. Not much to say to help anyway. Go back to work."

After Mouse left, Diana took his seat on the hassock and looked up at Father. "Father, Vincent did something very strange on our trip..." She went on to explain to him about Vincent's going off on her... and how she couldn't reach his consciousness... not sure Father would even understand. "Before I lost him, he said things like... it all goes away... the colors, the passion, the rage... all goes away. He talked about the peace being at the center. He told me that when he was younger, he would go there and be gone longer than he had intended... that you would be angry with him... but that he would lose track of the time." She shrugged, begging him to help... "Does any of that make any sense to you? And how could this be connected to the dreams he is having of Paracelsus?"

Father fiddled with his glasses and finally spoke. "I don't know, Diana. Obviously that ... trance-state... has been one of his coping strategies in the past... but

his dreams of Paracelsus disturb me. He was not able to handle what happened before... and he blocked it out of his conscious memory. Obviously some of it still remains, and when he went into that trance-state, some of those memories surfaced... at least part way. Who knows how he will react if he remembers all of it."

Diana had been watching Father as he spoke of this, and picking up some of his feelings. "There is a great deal more to this than you are telling me, Father. You have been hiding something... from Vincent... from everyone. What is it?"

Father startled... "I forget... your empathy is so powerful. Vincent's is quite remarkable... but yours ..."

By this time, Diana was angry. "I love you, Father, but I want to know what's going on... Now."

Father looked past Diana with relief in his eyes... Vincent stood in the doorway. "What is it you want to know, Diana?" Vincent asked, puzzled by her anger.

Diana spun to face Vincent, ... "Nothing... nothing for you to worry about. Father and I were just having a discussion... a disagreement. Are you ready to go for our walk?"

Vincent nodded. Diana could sense his desire to be out in the fresh air. She knew he felt stifled. As they left the chamber, she threw a look back at Father that clearly stated, *This is not over yet!*

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When Vincent rolled the steel door back so they could go into the park, the breeze hit them in their faces bringing all the scents of the park and city to them. After the stale air of the tunnels it was wonderful. Vincent led Diana out under the night sky gratefully. Diana could tell he was fairly relaxed, but he still had said very little. He had been quieter than usual since they got back. The night was peaceful

"Why were you angry with Father, Diana?"

"I told you it was nothing."

"That is not true... it was about me."

Diana knew it was useless to argue. "All right, so it was. I've been concerned." Vincent walked steadily, making no attempt to fit his steps to hers. He knew she was well able to keep up. "The dreams are becoming clearer."

Diana's heart almost stopped a moment. "Do you remember them?"

Hesitating, Vincent shook his head... "Not entirely. I seem to remember jumbles of information... about Paracelsus..." He stood looking out at the city lights... "and something he said about my mother."

Her mouth gone suddenly dry, Diana asked, "What about your mother?"

"Nothing... just that he said something." He swung around to face her, hurt, angry, and confused. "Diana... why can I not remember? There are things... like whispers of thought... a mist... then they are gone. I need to know."

His look was so anguished it tore at her heart. In that moment she wanted to tell him what she knew... at least that much... and he picked up the thought.

His voice became hard: "What do you know Diana... that you are keeping from

me?...Tell me!"

Meeting his eyes... stone cold under the moonlight... she knew she had no choice. "All right... but you must remember, Vincent... all this happened before I met you. Father told me... and you must remember too, that some of the information that Paracelsus gave you is not true!" She went on to tell him of how Paracelsus had taken Father's identity in order to get to Vincent... to feed him information to drive him over the edge of sanity.... and how it drove Vincent to kill him..."

Vincent's eyes had gone the color of glass as he listened to Diana's account, and the look on his face froze her blood. He opened his mouth to speak, then turned abruptly away. Finally he spoke to her, his voice hard, grating. "Is that all... or is there more you have not told me? Things that have been kept from me as though I were a child?"

"If there is more... I am unaware of it.... Vincent... are you all right?"

He turned to face her, and as though nothing had been said, slipped an arm around her. "I am fine. Thank you for the truth."

They continued their walk, seemingly as though it were any other Fall evening. When Diana reached to feel for his emotions, he was blocked, and she backed out. She still had not told him about making love to "The Other." She was a little afraid of what his reaction was going to be.

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When they returned to the tunnels, Vincent went to read to the children and put them to bed. Diana stopped back by Father's chamber to finish what they had started.

"Now... I want it now, Jacob... the truth."

Father fidgeted. He limped on his cane to Diana. "I have kept this from him all his life... I do not want him to know. There is no need for him to know."

"Isn't that a little presumptuous of you? It is his life, after all."

Father rounded on her... angrier than she had ever seen him. "How would you know! You think that because of your bond you know everything! You weren't here when he was so tiny and ill... when he almost died... or as he grew up fighting his own inner battle day by day to become the man you now know. You weren't here when in adolescence the strains almost tore him apart... and me with him. I have protected him...from everything... from John... from everything and everyone...even, God help me, from Catherine. I have loved him all his life. When Catherine came into his life she made him believe in dreams... and daily she shattered those dreams."

At Diana's shocked look, Father made a despairing gesture... "I know... I know... Don't look at me like that. She never meant to hurt him... and she brought him great joy as well. But the strain on his control was tremendous. Whatever he is, Diana... he is still a man. Then, when Paracelsus told him his story... it pushed him to where he could no longer hold his control. It was a blessing when he forgot."

Diana reached out to touch Vincent softly with her bond... to make sure he was still with the children. Then she turned angrily to Father. "And you accuse me of trying to protect him from his nightmares! He has to face himself, Father. He has been

trying for a long time... how can he face himself if you keep turning the mirror away?"
"Some things are better left unseen...left buried."

"What things?"

Father pulled down his journal and handed it to Diana. "I give this into your care. I had once toyed with the idea of someday allowing Vincent to read it... or perhaps an expurgated version...please be careful with this information. I fear that with your bond even if you wish to keep it from him, you may not be able to. This is a burden you may not wish to bear... and the decision is yours... to bear it... or leave it."

Diana held the tattered journal as though it were a snake which might bite her at any time. "What is in here, Jacob? What horrible secrets?"

The man they all called Father... for good reason... watched her from eyes so filled with pain and despair she almost cried out for him to take it back... to bury it deep where no one would ever find it... but she couldn't. Instead, she nodded slowly and left the chamber, going instead to the chamber she shared with Vincent. She found a place where she could put the book ... hoping Vincent would not find it, then she sat in front of her mirror to brush her hair. Glancing down, she saw Vincent's journal lying there on the desk. She ached to open it... to read what he told no one... but she would never dare.

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By the time Vincent returned from putting the children down, she was in bed with a book, though it was impossible for her to concentrate knowing Jacob's journal was only a few feet away. Can I possibly read it and keep the information from him?... What if it is so horrible that Father is right... that he should never know?... What then?

Vincent sat next to her on the bed and gently took the book from her. "Diana... We need to talk."

"Yes?"

His eyes were calm, but his voice shook just enough to show the strain he was under. "I need... to go away... just for awhile."

Diana reached out to touch him... and he pulled back. His barrier was up... tighter than she had ever felt it... "Vincent, please..."

"No. It... is not...is not... you. I must go back to ... the river."

He turned from her then and began throwing things into his shoulder bag... random things... then he turned to his journal and holding it a moment as if deciding... put it inside.

Diana watched him move around the room, his usual self assurance gone... "Vincent. Let me go with you, please."

Without looking at her, he shook his head. "Do not worry so, Diana. This is not... new to me... as you said. I need the solitude..." He turned to her and his mouth lifted in a tiny smile... "I will return... as if all this never was."

Defeated, worried, and generally miserable, Diana said, "But you were doing so well!... What happened?..."

Vincent stood, arms slack at his sides, his back indicating more exhaustion than

anything else: but now that his mind was made up, he seemed calmer. He sighed. "Nothing... everything. Life happened, Diana. I have been trying ... too hard, I suppose. I was beginning to believe..." Stopping, he shook himself, then quoted:

"He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those he has.¹³

Diana's stomach had tightened to a hard ball... thinking of how hard he had been trying to please her...to be able to let her know the complete man... not just the part he allowed the world to see. This... this was what had done this... "Vincent... it's all right... I told you before... long before... I would accept whatever was offered... don't do this for me. ...But I still think you should do it for yourself."

"Diana... you still do not understand. It is not only that. These dreams... visions... whatever... they have some meaning for me. What you told me is terrible, and I understand that is what has prompted the dreams. But there is more there... some memories buried deep. I must remember. Try not to worry... though I know that is a foolish request." He came to her and brushed her hair back, his hand shaking only slightly. "Only be here for me when I return... that is all I ask... all I ever ask is that you be there for me."

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When the tears had finally cleared from her eyes, Vincent was gone, and since she knew she couldn't follow him, she decided the only thing she could do to help was to read Father's journal. She pulled it out and lay across the bed looking at it for a long time before opening it to the date she wanted...

January 12, 1955

Anna brought a child to us tonight... an incredible child. The story she tells me is unbelievable. John is furious. Apparently John has been going Above and working with a genetics laboratory on and off for years. The culmination of their efforts is this child. Anna found out about it and insisted John take her there, and using his key she has now stolen the child. After losing her own she has been inconsolable... and then... the thought of any child being kept in a cage infuriated her. He is very ill, and I do not believe he will survive... which might be a blessing. Dear God... how can men do such things? What did they think they were doing... and why? Simply because it was possible?

Diana put her head down on her arm for a moment and cried. What Vincent had always feared was true. He was the creation of some mad scientist. She alternately wanted to damn Paracelsus... John Pater... to the worst possible Hell... but at the same time she could hardly do that... because without him, Vincent would not exist. Wiping the tears away, she began again:

January 15, 1955

It seems the child may live. Peter and I despaired of helping him. Whatever disease or physical problem it was seems to have abated somewhat, though the child cried for three days straight... actually roared would be a more appropriate term, except that coming from such a tiny throat... and so weak... it could not truly be called that either. I am at a loss as to what we can do with him. What on earth has John gotten us into?

January 20, 1955

Anna has tended the child all this time. It is obvious she adores him, and the emotion appears to be returned. She has named him Vincent... "the conqueror."

January 21, 1955

The council meeting went on forever, and we are still undecided. The dissension is tremendous. Half of the people want him to stay; the other half want to get rid of him... no one will dare say how we are to accomplish that. Mary and Anna are adamant, and I certainly cannot disagree... how do you just "get rid of" a child, as though it were of no worth?

January 22, 1955

John came to me before the final meeting today and gave me shocking news. Vincent was not the only child which was created. There were others... failures. But Vincent also has a twin sister who lived. The female's differences are not quite as obvious as Vincent's. Apparently she lacks the facial and body hair, but otherwise the bone structure... facial and otherwise... and the talons... are the same. He refuses to tell me what has been done with the girl... nor will he tell me the name of the company that created such children, and he has forbidden Anna to do so. She has become frightened of him.

When we had the meeting, I thought at first from the heated discussions that we were going to have to find some way to return the child, much as it would have killed me to do so. However, the basic kindness inherent in most of the good people here came through. After all. This place was created as a refuge, a place of safety for those who need it, and who could possibly need such more than this tiny creature? Points were raised, however, concerning the safety of keeping him here. No one knows what he will grow into.

Diana just stared at the page. Dear God. What became of her? What became of Vincent's sister? She put a bookmark in the journal and paced the chamber. She

reached out for Vincent to try and find him, and could find only the fuzzy blankness of his block. At least he had not yet retreated into that "center core" where she could not reach him at all. Sighing, she slipped the journal under her pillow and went to take a shower.

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It was late and even the pipes were quiet as Diana showered and got ready for bed. She sat combing her hair dry... She was cold, but she was having a hard time forcing herself back to the chamber. Without Vincent there, and knowing what he was going through... and that damn journal under her pillow... that was the last place she wanted to be. She pulled on her fur boots... some that Vincent had made for her. She walked in her robe to the Whispering Gallery, and sitting cross-legged on the bridge, she sat listening to the voices. "Vincent... where are you? What can I do to help?" She wondered how he was going to handle just the two pieces of information she already had... much less any other nasty little secrets the journal had buried. Finally, she forced herself up and returned to their chamber... to read a little more.

February 1, 1955

The child is thriving. John is becoming even more erratic. He has some strange notions about the boy... whether they are true or not, I have no way of knowing. He claims he is the child's father. Some of his genetic material was used in the gene splicing. He told us a gruesome story of when the children were born. Apparently the mother was a young girl they had taken off the street, and she died in childbirth. He claims she hemorrhaged from numerous cuts from the babies talons. Again, whether this is true or not, I have no way of knowing. The story is too bizarre from beginning to end. There is of course, and has been, nothing in the papers about this. Any company which would do something like this would never advertise it. If they are searching for the child, it is being done clandestinely. Where is the girl?

February 19, 1955

John has been gone for two weeks now. No one has any idea where he is. Anna is frantic. We have asked all the Helpers Above to look for him, but we have heard nothing.

February 22, 1955

John returned last night late... with no explanation. We had an argument and he struck me... threw me against the wall. My hip is broken. James, Randolph, ... several of the

other men pulled him off of me. We called an emergency council meeting and it was decided John had to leave. We told him Anna could stay if she wished... but Anna said she would go with him, and she pleaded for us to keep the child here, safe from the world... and from John. He threatened to expose us to the world and raged over our keeping the child. Whether he will make good his threat to expose us, we do not know, but we cannot live with him any longer.

February 23, 1955

John and Anna left last night. The child misses her, but I love him as well, and I think he feels that. He will adjust.

February 24, 1955

John sent a message for a meeting. He had to come here because of my hip. I cannot believe what he has told me: Apparently he has poisoned Anna... he is convinced that she betrayed him by leaving the child with us. I do not understand... How did we come to this? John was always a good man. When he began to play God it did something to him. In any case, the child is safe, and thriving. The community has rallied around him. He has become somewhat a symbol of what our world is meant to be. If we can create a world that can love and protect this child... rear him gently... what can we not do? Instead of tearing us apart, he has bound us even tighter.

Diana flipped through the next few pages... nothing about Vincent. Her exhaustion was finally overtaking her, so she slipped the journal back in its hiding place and lay down to try to sleep.

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When Vincent reached the river, he stood staring out over the blackness for a long time. His night sight showed him every detail of the cavern, and it was not pitch black in any case... there were growths of iridescent fungi on the walls. He was so exhausted. The emotional upheavals recently had left him with nothing left over. He felt empty. *Perhaps that is as well, all things considered*. Walking along the bank, he found a flat-bottomed boat and staff ... stored away just where he had left it the last time he had been here so many years before. There was a certain anticipation in the way he moved now... a purpose... though his thoughts were innocent of any plan except to get away into the blackness and emptiness.

Once in the boat, he stood and poled his way down the river. The silence was eerie, especially to someone used to the constant music of the pipes above these levels ... and even the roar of the subway. Here there was only the sound of the river and the dripping of the water from the roof of the cavern.

After floating downriver for some ways, Vincent poled to the opposite shore and pulled the boat ashore. Lifting his head, testing the air... he turned and followed some trail only he could sense. Finally he stopped... seemingly content that he had found some appointed place..., unrolled his quilts and curled up in them to sleep.

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Vincent dreamed... again about Paracelsus... but not the same dream. This was a kinder dream... a younger Paracelsus than he remembered... and he remembered being young as well. You came, as I knew you would. You could not stay away when she called to you. Vincent tossed and turned... the images were so unclear. He saw himself... no... it was not himself... it was a girl... a young girl his own age who looked somewhat like him... Cathy? But instinctively he knew this was not his daughter... older... The girl came to him, and took his hand. Paracelsus spoke then, and what he said... Vincent could not remember... except the final command... You will come when she needs you... or when I tell her to send for you... You will come... and afterwards you will not remember.

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Diana dreamed about Vincent... and his sister... and Paracelsus. When she saw the girl she cried out in her sleep... she was so much like ... yet unlike ... the daughter she had lost...and Cathy... but there was a feral quality to her eyes that neither Vincent nor Cathy had. Though she did not speak, she projected an impression of power and viciousness. When the younger Vincent took her hand in the dream, she tried to call out to him to stop... not to go.

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The following morning when Diana woke, she felt as though she had been beaten. She ached in muscles she had never realized she'd had... except perhaps when she'd been in training in the Academy... or after a bout with "The Other." She remembered the dream... most of it anyway, and yearned to know if it had been merely a dream or if she had shared it with Vincent. When she reached out to seek their bond, he was once again blocked. She glanced reluctantly at the hiding place where the journal was, but dressed and went to take the children to breakfast.

Father saw Diana come into the dining chamber with the children and nodded to her. Her eyes met his, and he knew she had read at least some of the journal.

After breakfast, Diana took the children to visit with Elizabeth and Linnel. She showed them the various paintings and pointed out their own pictures to them. Elizabeth gave them paper and paint and they spent the morning painting while Diana visited with the two artists. Elizabeth took Diana far down the tunnels to show her the earliest ones... the ones of Vincent as an infant. Suddenly she stopped, startled. "Elizabeth... who is this?" The painting was of the same girl Diana had seen in her dream... or close

enough to <u>be</u> her. Elizabeth shrugged. "Just someone Vincent told me about as a child... someone he dreamed, he said. I figured that he, like many children, had an imaginary playmate, so I painted her for him. He said it looked somewhat like her. He was only about, oh... eight or ten."

Diana stared at the painting: just looking at it made her uneasy. Making her excuses to Elizabeth and Linnel, she collected the children... saving their paintings to hang up for Vincent. The boys trotted up ahead of her, but Cathy wanted to be carried. As Diana walked, carrying Cathy on her hip... Cathy just patted her reassuringly. She could tell her mother was upset. Diana kept watching Jacob... he seemed fine, which with their bond indicated that perhaps Vincent was all right. She called out to him, "Jacob... come here."

Jacob trotted up to her and looked at her inquiringly. "Yes?"

"Can you feel your father?"

Jacob thought a moment, closed his eyes... "Yes. But he feels funny."

Alarmed, Diana tried reaching him and could find... only that *nothing*. "How does he feel funny, Jacob?... Can you tell me?"

Jacob thought again. "No. He just feels funny. He's okay, though... not hurt or anything. Can I go now?"

"Yes, sure. Thanks, Jacob." Feels funny. At least Jacob can feel him... that's something. "Cathy... can you find your father?"

Cathy nodded.

"Can I go there... where he is?"

Cathy shook her head.

"Can you go there?"

Cathy just looked at Diana. "Cissa says no."

Horrified, Diana's thoughts ran around in circles... where was this place where Vincent had retreated to... "Is he safe, Cathy?... Can he come back?"

It was hard for Cathy to communicate on such a complicated level... she knew what she wanted to say, but she simply didn't have the words. "Don't know."

Hugging Cathy to her, Diana hurried the boys up, then took them directly to Mary so she could go to Vincent.

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Once in their chamber, Diana began throwing things into her backpack. She had gotten some sandwiches from the kitchen and a few other things... filled a couple of canteens. Then, grabbing Father's journal, she headed down to find Vincent. If she had to pick up Narcissa on the way, she would do it... but she was going to get him and bring him home. She didn't like this at all. Father appeared in the chamber opening.

"Diana..."

"Father."

Nothing had been said since he had given her the journal, and he met her eyes briefly, then looked down.

"You are going to him?"

"Yes." Diana continued digging in the backpack.

"Do you have any idea where he is?" Father knew Diana could generally find Vincent by following their bond.

"Vaguely... if he has gone where we were before when his mind retreated... otherwise... no." She looked up, desperation showing in her eyes. "I will find him... and bring him back... or die with him." She stopped briefly in the chamber door on the way out... rocking indecisively on her toes. Turning, she told Father, "Take care of the children... if neither of us comes back..." Then, she turned and was gone.

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Diana traveled carefully through the maze, making sure to go the way she and Vincent always traveled. She noted a few more rockfalls since she had been here last... just since their anniversary. Getting more dangerous... they need to finish Mouse's project... she thought abstractedly. Coming out of the maze after what seemed to be hours... may have been... she began down the long spiral rock stairwell... carefully keeping her hand to the wall. No slipping or losing lanterns this time... she couldn't afford it... Vincent couldn't afford it. Halfway down she stopped to rest, sitting down back against the wall and staring out into the gulf next to the stairs. The lamplight did very little to alleviate the darkness... and nothing to alleviate the loneliness. She laid her head back against the granite wall and sighed... so close to tears as to make no difference in reality. Why don't the tears just come?... Perhaps I would feel better. No time for tears... that's why. She forced herself to her feet and continued down the serpentine stairs - she hated the name the rest of the tunnel dwellers gave those stairs -Serpentine... she hated snakes... and she hated the darkness. Unlike Vincent, the darkness was not a friend to her. She closed her eyes and reached out for Vincent... and still could only feel that tight knot that nothing could penetrate... nothing escape. She sighed and rose to continue descending the stairway.

Once at the end of the seemingly endless stairs, Diana tried to remember which way to Narcissa's home... she wanted to consult the old woman about Vincent's condition. She wandered for a time feeling confident... then after taking a few wrong turns began getting nervous. Something skittered out of her way, making her jump reflexively. God! I hate rats. Father always insisted on keeping up what Vincent jokingly called the Rat Patrol... a group of youngsters who were good hunters and good with slings to keep the rats down, so they were never a problem in the upper tunnels. The children considered it an honor to be included in the Rat Patrol. Jamie and Mouse had led it for many years; now Kipper and Sandra led it. Diana had to smile momentarily thinking of how hard Kipper had tried to get Samantha to join him in a rat hunt, and how adamantly the girl had refused. She hated rats even worse than Diana did. But unlike Samantha, I'd enjoy the Hell out of hunting them. Rounding a corner... busy thinking about rats... she almost ran into Narcissa.

Holding up her hands to stop Diana's headlong rush, Narcissa cackled..."Wait... slow down child! I'm coming. I am an old woman and do not move so fast."

Relieved, Diana almost hugged her.... but restrained herself... somehow Narcissa

did not seem like the type who would appreciate touch. She was too sensitive to impressions... just as Diana herself was... and Vincent. "Oh, Narcissa... Vincent needs your help."

Narcissa's blind eyes looked up into Diana's... "He has gone Below?"

Startled, Diana replied, "Yes...." She told Narcissa of Vincent's strange
behavior on their anniversary, about his dreams of Paracelsus... and his desire to know
more... how she had told him what Father had said. "He left shortly after that. He is
remembering, Narcissa... but there is so much more..."

Narcissa was very quiet, and she turned, motioning Diana to follow. Diana



followed her down several rough flights of stairs and through several narrow rifts into her chamber. Out of courtesy she lit a few candles, then took her Runes and began laying out her cloth to scatter them. She sat holding the Runes in her hands, feeling each one, then put them into a small basket and shook them. She cast them upon the cloth, then reached out to feel for them...

"De starting point is de Self... He mus' be willing to change. Everyt'ing must be let go... wit' no exception. He must renew his Spirit."

Narcissa "looked" at Diana ... "When somet'ing wit'in is disowned, dat which is disowned wreaks havoc. Der is a cleansing required. He is at de Gateway. He is confronted wit' a true reflection of what is hidden wit'in."

Diana thought of "The Other,"... if anything had been "disowned," he had.

"De starting point is de Self...he has separated and retreated... as he has done before. He will remember some... perhaps not all. You cannot help him, child... except to be der for him. De t'ings he finds may cause upheaval. He will need an anchor. De evil one... he is dead... but never gone as long as de evil he created exists... but even de evil one had created some good. Now de good must stand against de evil yet again."

Diana sat with tears streaking her face. She had hoped desperately that she, or Narcissa, or perhaps both of them could help Vincent in this... but now she said that was impossible.

Reaching out and placing her hand over Diana's in a rare touch, Narcissa comforted her. "Remember child... Vin-cent is strong... and he has done dis before. His Soul... his Self knows what needs to be done. He is healing. You began de healing when you made him look inside himself and face his dark side... but he will always ... always have de struggle... for he, more dan anyone struggles, for perfection..." She shook her head. "No one is perfect... but he will always try... as we all should."

Narcissa gathered up her Runes and put them carefully away. "Go to him now, child." Narcissa left the chamber, leaving Diana to find her own way back.

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Vincent sat completely naked next to the cold ashes of his campfire. As before, his clothes were strewn about carelessly. It was cold in the cavern, but he did not shiver or take any notice at all of the cold. Images ran through his mind at a level so deep even his bond with Diana could not have reached it. There was a woman there... a woman so like himself... but wild... feral. Her skin was smooth, without the red-gold pelt he possessed; otherwise the resemblance was remarkable. Just as Vincent had his own kind of beauty, she did as well, and she lured him on enticingly, and teased him mercilessly. When she finally allowed him to touch her the tide of both desire and rage had completely overcome him... with her desire feeding his. At some point later in the dream Vincent heard... as if from a great distance... Paracelsus' voice telling him... Jacob can have you... or can believe he has you. The experiment will continue in any case. His trying to soften you... to make you human... can only make it more interesting.



When Diana finally reached the river, Vincent was nowhere in the vicinity of their last camping place. Frustrated, she sat and cried. She had hoped desperately he would be here, because without being able to touch him, he could not locate him. All she could tell was that he was alive. Angrily she brushed the tears away, knowing that tears were not going to help. She looked upstream, then downstream... and decided. Vincent had told her that he had a boat... so he would probably go downstream. She elected to try that, since she had no other choice. She started walking. She stumbled along through the rocks and realized just why Vincent kept a boat here... walking was a real pain. She had traveled for at least an hour and not made a great deal of headway, so she decided to stop to rest and eat. While she was eating a sandwich she pulled out Father's journal and opened it to her bookmark. She thumbed through quite a few pages... some had mention of Vincent, but it was routine stuff, nothing earth-shaking. She stopped when she reached something that caught her eye:

January 12, 1961

Vincent and Devin have become so close it amazes me, and pleases me as well. It seems somehow right that of all the children in the tunnels for Vincent to have chosen as a best friend and "brother" that it should be Devin. I have always tried to be impartial, but Vincent has always needed closer attention than the others, and for obvious reasons it pleases me for he and Devin to be so close. Vincent is a steadying influence on Devin.

Chewing her nail, Diana stared out into the darkness. She wished Devin were here right now... or even Mouse. Devin to help keep her sane here in the darkness... but Mouse... Mouse could find Vincent. He could always find him. "Shit!... why didn't I think of that?" *Too late now*. She bent her head and continued flipping pages... just day-to-day stuff... a few cute anecdotes about Vincent that made her chuckle, even in her anxiety. Then she caught something that made her look again...

May 26, 1965

Today Vincent just appeared in the kitchen, badgering William for something to eat. He was ravenous, but seemed totally unaffected by the fact that he had been gone since yesterday. He seemed surprised he had been gone so long, and seemed genuinely sorry to have caused us all worry. He claims he had been exploring and simply lost track of time. I checked him over, and aside from a few bruises and scratches and his hunger he seems fine. I cannot imagine where he has been.

"His first disappearance... did he come here? Seems about the right age... when he *dreamed* his imaginary playmate." Diana flipped through more pages... entries of council meetings, problems with the various children, his own thoughts on his life

Below... all interesting, but not what she was looking for. Then she found a whole series of entries within a short period of time...

September 27, 1969

Vincent has been so extremely disturbed by recent events. Devin's disappearance left him bereft of anyone he could be truly close to. I have tried desperately to fill the gap as well as I can, but it is not the same. He and I do not speak of Devin's leaving, but his shadow haunts these halls for both of us.

October 15, 1969

Vincent disappeared two days ago and showed up this morning, just as he did once before, badgering William for something to eat. He simply has no concept of how long he has been away, and shrugs off any attempt to find out where he has been. He simply says he has been exploring. He seems a little disoriented. It worries me, but otherwise again he seems totally unaffected by the fact that he had been gone for two days. He once again seemed surprised he had been gone so long, and again apologized for having caused us all worry. He has a few bruises and scratches, and again is ravenous. I cannot imagine where he has goes.

October 20, 1969

Vincent is becoming far too attached to Lisa, and that attachment concerns me. Since Devin left he shadows her, and she revels in the attention. She knows she can get him to do whatever she wants and it gives her a sense of power. If Vincent were only a normal teenage boy it would be bad enough, but I worry about what her eventual rejection of him is going to do to him... and she will eventually cause him pain. She thinks only of herself, not meaning to hurt him... but the harm will be very real nonetheless.

October 23, 1969

Vincent has become extremely restless and short tempered. I have tried to speak with him, but it does not seem to help. I cannot even touch him without setting him off... it seems even the love and caring that he feels from me are too much for him at times. It must be a terrible burden that he bears... never feeling quite alone, yet never truly belonging either.

November 25, 1969

Winterfest was wonderful this year. It is always heartwarming to share our blessings with all our friends. I was more than a little concerned however, watching Lisa dance with Vincent. The boy is definitely completely head-over-heels in love with the wretched girl. I must do something about this situation, but I cannot for the life of me think of what. Pascal suggested she stay with a helper and attend school for ballet. Perhaps her ballet teacher can assist in that. I will check on it.

November 26, 1969

Once again Vincent has disappeared. We were not quite so frantic this time, as we expected him to show up in a few days... and he did. He seemed quite normal once again except for his extreme hunger, the usual scratches, and his disoriented sense of time. Where does he go? He told me of a river far underground that he likes to visit, but he can tell me very little except that he enjoys the darkness and the peace. Perhaps that is what he needs... the solitude; I know that the impressions he receives from people around him become intrusive and unsettling.

November 28, 1969

Dear God, it has happened... what exactly it is, I cannot be sure, but when I came upon Vincent and Lisa in the Great Hall, I cannot help but believe she had enticed him just a little too far this time. She must have realized what she had gotten herself into and pulled away, but his claws left deep furrows in her shoulder and back. Vincent is devastated by his lack of control... and even more by the fear of him he saw in her. I waited too long, and now the damage is done, but I refuse to allow anything else to happen. I have sent her to stay with a Helper and arranged schooling with her ballet teacher. Perhaps time will help Vincent over this. Lisa will be fine. She will always be fine.

Diana flipped through a couple of more pages, then stopped. She leaned her head back against the stone of the cavern wall. Her hair had come loose and was down in her face, and her eyes felt as though she'd been through a sandstorm. I've got to get some sleep, or I'll be useless. God... Vincent. Where are you? Aloud, she said, "I love you. I need you... and I'm here." The tears streaked the dust on her face, and when she wiped them away she noted how dirty her hands were. Wearily, she unrolled her quilts and crawled under them to try to rest. She reached out to try to find Vincent, and was able to just barely feel a slight stirring of that hard core of consciousness... but she was so tired she couldn't keep trying for long. All she could do was hope that when she woke she would be able to find him.

Almost the second she lay down, Diana was asleep. She could no more keep her eyes open than fly to the moon. She found herself dreaming with Vincent once again, and in the dream he walked towards her and took her hand. She was so relieved to see him well... she reached up to put her arms around him and saw instead the ugly visage of "The Other." He smiled at her and dragged her towards him. We meet again. As she moved into his arms she reached deep within her memory for something Vincent had once quoted for her, she "spoke" softly to this part of him,

Love is all Unsatisfied That cannot take the whole Body and soul:¹⁴

"The Other" held her tightly, claws hurting, and bent to kiss her, and again Diana did not resist, but instead wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her. As she kissed him, she could feel the change... in the way he held her, the set of his body... and when he released her she saw that the image had changed... most of the way back to the Vincent she knew... but not entirely. The clawed hand reached out to touch her face, and she caught it and kissed it. *Come home, Vincent... please come home.* The image faded, and Diana slept once more.

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Vincent "woke" and tried to move. After being in virtually the same position for days, his muscles screamed in agony. Groaning, he massaged his muscles as he paced and looked around the cavern. Nothing had changed... but he was freezing... and starving. He gathered his scattered clothing and dressed quickly, then dug supplies out of his pack and downed most of them. His mind was going round in circles. Bits and pieces of information... memories... visions... kept flitting into the edges of his consciousness, then retreating. Frustrated, he dropped his head into his hands. Why can't I remember? Shrugging finally, realizing all he was doing was frustrating himself, he gathered his things, shouldered his gear and put everything into the boat. As he poled himself slowly back upstream against the current, he reached out and touched Diana... So near! Delighted, suddenly anxious to see her, he began watching the river bank, and eventually he saw her camp and beached the boat. His fur-booted feet made no sound, as cat-like he moved over to her. He squatted next to her and watched her sleep for a few minutes... she looked exhausted. He glanced around and his eye fell on her backpack. He was still hungry, so he opened it and took out a sandwich... then his eye fell on Father's journal: he froze. Then, reaching out tentatively he took the leatherbound book and held it a moment. If Diana has this, then Father has given it to her to read... Why? Gently he lay the book on top of the backpack and walked to the edge of the river, then turned to look at it. He ached to open it... but his lifetime of respect for the privacy of others was too strong. His entire body reflected his indecision. Finally,



with the greatest care, he picked the book up and placed it carefully back into the backpack. Watching Diana, he undressed again and slipped in beside her... so gently that he did not wake her... then touching her mind softly, he held that contact and let her mind lull his to sleep.

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Diana stirred finally, her exhaustion finally having slept itself out, and as she stirred she felt something beside her... startled, she turned to find Vincent. Tears of relief sprang into her eyes, and barely daring to touch him, she snuggled closer. Feeling her touch, he woke and turned to her with his normal, accustomed gentleness. They lay in one another's arms quietly, no passion between them, only their love, and their bond... but in that bond Vincent sensed Diana's knowledge of the things Father had felt best left buried... and she knew that he sensed it.

"Do you want me to tell you what I have found out, or do you also feel it is best left unsaid?"

Hesitantly, Vincent replied, "Perhaps <u>want</u> is not the correct word. I do not <u>want</u> to know. But there is need, Diana. I must put these things together, or how long can my sanity hold?"

They dressed, and ate, and went about clearing the campsite, then finally Diana spoke, and told him what she knew... and surmised. "I feel that when you disappeared down here it was because Paracelsus had lured you here with her... with the bond between you that you tried to deny. The bond between twins is often very strong, Vincent. That is perhaps even the reason for your illness when you were brought to Father as an infant."

Vincent started off into space. "Yes. The bond. Just as Jacob sickened without me... I sickened without nearness to her." He swung around to face her... "But if there was... or is... a bond... why do I not feel it always? Why do I not even remember, except in flashes or dreams?"

Diana watched him carefully and chewed her nail, not knowing what to say, except the truth... "I think Paracelsus has something to do with it, Vincent. He wanted to be able to reach you... through her bond with you... but did not want Father to stop his... experiment. Perhaps some post-hypnotic suggestion?"

Vincent nodded, his eyes shadowed. "I must be very careful from here on out, Diana... with you. The dreams... visions... I have had are very violent. I have done things in these dreams... or memories that I cannot even speak of. It frightens me. I no longer trust myself. I could... kill you... easily."

Diana moved into his arms, though he embraced her reluctantly. "You worry too much. I know you will not harm me. Even <u>He</u> would not harm me... because he is a part of you..."

Vincent held her away from him gently. "You do not understand His strength, Diana... or His hunger. I cannot always control Him... myself..." He shook his head. "So foolish... so ridiculous... to be unable to piece together what should never have been separated. It is as though we are two opposite poles of a magnet... always seeking to

push the other away."

Diana stroked his cheek, her thumb wiping away a tear. "Or perhaps like a torn piece of paper with the ragged edges trying to match up. We will match them up, and when we do, our love will be the glue that will bind you together. But Vincent, I know both of you... and you are not so different as you think. You forget one very important thing."

"Oh really," he said, his voice laced a little with irony, "And what, pray tell, have I forgotten? I suppose you will now enumerate further failings for me."

"Not at all. The reverse, in fact. You are always so quick to blame yourself... to see shame where none should exist. How many times have you made love to me?"

Vaguely astonished at the question, he peered at her suspiciously through tangled strands of golden mane. "Are we keeping count now? Perhaps I should keep a ledger."

"You are being deliberately obtuse. Think. Of all the times we have made love, of the time you made love to Catherine, even damn it, when you made love to Lena... no matter what the circumstances... you never hurt any of us." At his quick, mocking glance and the brief touch of his mind ... remembering a certain incident in the tunnels... she added... "Even then. A few scratches... bruises. Hardly anything disastrous. We all lived... Catherine to bear Jacob, and I to live with you these years and bear you two daughters even though one couldn't stay with us. Even Lena went trotting her merry way off into the world hardly the worse for wear."

He had to smile a little at the imagery her words drew from him, but he commented, "It hardly signifies. I could have..."

"Damn it!" she exploded. "Could have is not the same as doing. You are deliberately missing the point."

Vincent sat then, leg drawn up and watched her warily. "What is the point, then?"

"The point is, my dearest husband, that despite the fact that in the tunnels that morning after you had just savagely killed the two men who would have raped me... you had their blood all over you... the stink of it was in the air and on your tongue... despite even that... and the fact that my desire was goading you still further, still the worst I got out of it was a few scratches and bruises. The point is that you could no more hurt me under any circumstances than you could sprout wings and fly. I simply do not believe it to be possible."

"Your point is well taken, but belief is still not fact... and I did kill Paracelsus ... thinking at the time that he was Father. I, at least still do not trust myself. I wish I could see myself as you see me." He buried his face in her hair, his hands stroking her back. When he glanced up at her he said quietly, "Do you remember the conversation we had... about the computer... whether it had a soul?"

Startled, she answered, "Yes, of course, but what..."

Vincent stopped her, holding up a hand. "In a very real sense, I am much like that computer. I have been created... manufactured, so to speak. I have even been... programmed, in a sense. I am self-aware... I have a conscience... I feel I have a soul." His face held such pain she could scarcely stand it, as he glanced up again through strands of wild golden mane... to say, "But I am not a man.... I have not even been

created by the same Creator...except perhaps indirectly."

Diana opened her mouth to speak, to scream at him that there was no one more human than he was... no one who more deserved the definition... but then she saw in his eyes his usual resignation of his state of being. She reached out to touch him with her bond, and when he met her with his... she even sensed a small measure of amusement there at the irony... "It is all right, Diana, truly. I will manage. I have my own thoughts on the subject. I have been summoned to that winding ancient stair for my own dialogue of self and soul¹⁵ far too often for me to feel that I do not have one... and when we bond as we do, there can be no doubt to me at least that I do possess a soul."

Diana leaned against him, glad that for now, at least she had him here with her and relatively at peace... even if it was an uneasy peace. She hated to speak again, but knew she must. "Vincent. Is she still alive? Can you sense her at all?"

Vincent was very quiet, then sighed and answered, "No. I cannot sense her... but I do not ever <u>remember</u> being aware of her. So, I do not know if she lives or not. I still have flashes of memory... terrible things..." He shook his head, and hung it, mane down in his eyes.

"Do you want to read Father's journal?... Perhaps there is more..."

Vincent stood then and looked away. "No. At least not now. Perhaps he was wise in keeping it from me. Some things <u>are</u> too terrible to see the light of day... perhaps I am one of them. Dylan Thomas said, What's never known is safest in this life. 16 But, I have to know, so I will return to this innocent darkness again to delve into the less innocent darkness inside of myself another time... another day."

Diana moved to stand at his side, and his leather-clad arm came up around her, his taloned hand closing on her arm gently. She looked up into his face and told him, "If I can help it, you will not come here again alone, but we will face what needs to be faced together."

Vincent closed his eyes and nodded, then rested his weary head upon hers and drew her close.

"When the soul sought refuge in the place of rest, Overborne by strife and pain beyond control, From some secret hollow, whisper soft-confessed, Came the legend of the soul..."¹⁷

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