

Beauty and the Beast
The Silent Self

BOOK FIVE

by Rhonda Collins



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
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THE SILENT SELF

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special thanks to all the wonderful readers who have written or called to give me their impressions of the story, and the other 'zine writers, whose wonderful stories remind me over and over why I'm doing this...especially at midnight! For *all* the fans, writers and readers both, remember: without us all, the Dream would sleep itself away. So let us all continue the Dream in all its myriad forms, sharing the love, the laughter, and the sorrow as best we can.

Remember. The Dream is still in the dreaming, and the promise in every day.



If you wish to contact Jan Durr about her wonderful artwork, her address is:
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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I have been accused with the story line in this 'zine as "explaining away the wonder of Vincent," because as Kristopher says, "You explain all the wonders and mysteries of life and all the wonders and mysteries of life die." Believe me, that was not my intention. To my mind, as to so many others, Vincent just simply is, and it doesn't matter whether he came from under a cabbage leaf, out of a garbage can, dropped out of the sky, or came through a door from an alternate universe. He is who he is, no matter what, and nothing can ever change that fact. However, I can also be somewhat pragmatic at times, and I suppose this is one of them. This story is in a way, for Vincent, as I think most of my stories are for Vincent in some manner...and he needs to know some answers, even if he doesn't like them very much. Since in this series of stories I have basically kept to a reality-based story line (except with Narcissa and the "otherworld"), I felt I needed to stay with it. Some of the events may be offensive in content, but remember, Paracelsus is the orchestrator, and one should expect to be offended. If the literalism and reality pushes the fantasy to the side just a little, remember that even in "real life" we all are little pieces of magic...and Vincent's magic is not born from where he comes from, but from who he is inside, so look beyond the reality to the true magic within and the wonder of his being able to be who he is and triumph over the reality. Besides..."there are many stories, and this is (only) one."

In this 'zine, which picks up shortly after LEGEND OF THE SOUL, wherein Vincent learned things about his origin which have disturbed him tremendously, the story begins with Diana and Vincent having an extremely heated (almost violent) argument about an event which took place near the end of LEGEND, in which Diana willingly and knowingly makes love to "The Other" who had temporarily taken control while Vincent slept. Needless to say, Vincent is most irate. To him, that is less understandable, and even less acceptable than her kissing Elliott...at least he considers Elliott an honorable man.

Have fun...and remember, the Dream is still in the dreaming.

..... Rhonda

Some men see things as they are and say, why?
I dream of things that never were and say, why not?¹

THE SILENT SELF

The rage rises from a hidden place deep inside.
Searching, with a hunger not to be denied.
Desire rises swiftly, inexorably as the seas' tides.
I do not know myself, I lose myself...I hide.

Where does my consciousness go when it's not here?
Does it hide in some silent city, some other country far...or near?
When I return what will I find...some other atrocity to bear?
Whether he comes to bring me pain, or spare me, the cost is dear.²





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THE SILENCE OF A GREAT LOVE



incent slept restlessly. Between his tossing and turning and Diana's picking up his dreams, she slept just as restlessly. Finally after hours of being pushed to the edge of the bed...and the edge of her sanity by the nebulous, yet violent images she was receiving, Diana reluctantly forced herself up and settled in the leather chair across the room. She brushed her tangled red hair back out of her face, lit a couple of candles, and huddled under an afghan as she watched him. He looked terrible. He'd had little or no sleep for days, and she had gotten almost as little herself. Diana chewed her nail and wondered how she could possibly help him. Then she began picking up feelings of distress from their daughter, Cathy. Shrugging aside the afghan and pulling on her robe, Diana dug under the chair for her fur boots. She wiped the tears of frustration and fatigue from her face and headed for the children's dormitory.

As Diana trudged toward the dorm, she thought back over all the events which had led Vincent to the situation he was now in. *If I just had not encouraged him to try relaxing his control: to try and assimilate "The Other," then perhaps none of this would ever have occurred.* Groggily she tried to piece things together: *his dreams of Paracelsus, the knowledge from Father's journal that he was the result of a genetic experiment performed by Paracelsus and others; the fact that he had...or has...a sister somewhere, plus the fact that he had been trying to allow himself more freedom in loving me: trying to get to where he could allow himself to show the passion he truly feels. Now his control is almost non-existent.* By the time she reached the dorm she was more confused and depressed than before, and Cathy could feel it. She noted that Jacob was also awake, sitting on his bed, knees up, tousled blond head resting on his crossed arms. She picked Cathy up and tried to quiet her own inner turmoil so she could soothe her. "Cathy, honey, I'm sorry. Your father can't help bothering you." Cathy clung to her hair and neck, snuggling in for reassurance. Diana walked across to Jacob, who sat sniffing on his bed. Sitting down next to him, she put her arm around him and rocked them both for a time. "Jacob, would it help if Cathy slept with you?"

Jacob looked up at her with his father's blue eyes, which were shadowed to a deeper gray-blue, just as Vincent's did when he was worried or upset. It broke Diana's heart. "Why is father so upset, Diana? When he dreams like that, we can't sleep."

At five, Jacob was so mature it almost frightened Diana. Cathy, too, seemed well beyond her two years. It had to be the bond that heightened their responsiveness to just about everything.

"He has a lot on his mind right now, Jacob, and when he's asleep he is not able to block, and neither are you. That's why he disturbs you. We both wish we could do something about it, but we don't know what to do. We're working on it, though."

Cathy was almost asleep again in Diana's arms, and she laid her in Jacob's bed, then tucked Jacob in next to her. Lying down next to them, she put her arms around them, almost like a shield, and tried to soothe them to sleep. Jacob had no direct bond with her, but with touch he was able to pick up images with anyone, just as she and Vincent could. She tried to quiet her mind and think only soothing thoughts, and eventually all three of them slept.



Vincent dreamed he was down in the maze. He was wandering in circles, and could not find his way out. He spun in frustration. He knew this place like the back of his hand. This was ridiculous! Suddenly he found himself face-to-face with "The Other." The apparition leaned against the rock of the tunnel wall and looked at him almost sadly. It seemed a strange look for him to have...this being who had always caused him such pain and grief.

"The Other" shook his head and smiled. *The labyrinth of the mind...so frustrating.*

Vincent charged at him...tried to grab him...and he was gone. Then he heard the voice behind him.

You're never going to manage things if you keep this up. Bouncing into walls only gives you a headache. Diana wants us to be friends. He smiled knowingly at Vincent. *She loves me, you know. She told me so when she made love to me in the Crystal Cavern.*

Vincent lunged towards him, then stopped as though he'd hit an invisible wall...and rocked on his toes. "What did you say?"

"The Other" sidled around Vincent, stopping to whisper in his ear, *You didn't know that did you? Strange isn't it? I always know what you're up to, but you never know what I'm up to.* He grimaced bitterly. *Unless of course you need me for something...like to do your killing for you. I come in very handy for that. But you never let me love anyone...not Catherine...not even Jacob or Cathy. I just have to look on in envy. But you could not stop me that time. I wanted out...and I took what was mine. Did she tell you about that? I thought not.* The apparition winked out as if someone had flipped a switch. Vincent woke sweating...and as angry with Diana as he could ever remember being.



Diana felt Vincent's anger and hurried toward their chamber before he woke the children again. When she rounded the corner and came into the chamber, he swung around to face her, his eyes blazing and lip pulled back in a snarl. His mane was tangled and hung down over the shoulders of his homespun shirt. He was not blocked, so Diana knew just what he was so angry about. She'd been dreading this. At least this wasn't "The Other" facing her...not even a portion of him. This was just a royally pissed Vincent...not killing mad...just hurt mad. She could handle that...she hoped.

"How could you, Diana?"

"How could I not?" she asked calmly.

"What is that supposed to mean? You know how I feel about him." Vincent paced the room, clenching and unclenching his hands.

Diana reached out to touch him, then reconsidered. "Yes. I know how you feel about him. I also know how he feels about you. I keep telling you that your other side is not as evil as you always think he is. Your fear blinds you to the truth." She groaned as his increasing anger radiated at her, hot as a blast furnace. She added: "Vincent, please block. You will wake the children."

Vincent turned to face her and leaned on his desk. His eyes bored into her, but he put up his block between himself and the children. "So he is not as evil as I think..." he said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Obviously you do not think so." He picked up his desk chair and threw it against the wall with a force that splintered it.

Diana sighed heavily. That chair had had too many beatings lately. She cocked her head and said quietly with a calm as intense as his anger: "Now you'll have to stand to write in your journal."

That was the wrong thing to say, as well. "Go ahead. Make light of this, Diana. It is not amusing, I assure you."

Finally losing her temper, Diana rubbed her tired eyes. "Damn it, I'm not trying to make light of anything! You simply do not understand."

"Really?" Vincent said, in a voice made heavy with sarcasm. "Suppose you enlighten me?"

"What choice would I have had, Vincent? In the first place, he is *not* someone else. He is you, whether you want to admit it or not. I have told you before, I love all of you, not just select parts. You know, you give him a pretty raw deal. You get all the love and caring and all he gets are the leftovers...the rage...and the bottled up desire that just builds until it blows. He may be a safety outlet for you, but it's not fair either...he has no outlet."

Vincent glared at her. "Apparently he does now. How convenient for him...and for you."

Diana crossed her arms and glared back. "Yes. I made love to him...to you. Does it really make any difference? If it makes you feel any better, I probably wouldn't have had a choice in any case: had I refused, his desire would have turned to rage and he would probably have torn my throat out. I would like to think that you would have preferred me alive."

Vincent's voice was as sharp as a razor. "So now it was rape?"

"Hardly. I would not have refused in any case. It was merely a point of interest to bring out." Diana was so exhausted from lack of sleep, frustration, and worry that she was getting punchy. She raked her tangled hair back out of her face and said quietly, "I'm sorry if my loving you...all of you...disturbs you, but I do, and that's not going to change."

Diana noted Vincent's anger had cooled just a little. She felt instead his concern for her beginning to take precedence over his own hurt feelings. Quite obviously he knew she was right. He just didn't like it.

He came to her gently and closed his arms around her. "You're exhausted, and it is

my fault." He drew her to the bed and held her. Diana leaned against him, grateful that his anger was cooling some.

She shook her head, not necessarily in negation, but just to be making some comment.

Vincent held her silently. She could still feel his turbulent emotions. He was still upset with her. He simply could not bear the thought that she had willingly made love to "that thing." She held him tighter. "I know how you feel, Vincent, but you and he absolutely must at least reach a compromise...a point of sharing and a way to touch...before you drive yourself...and me...crazy. You cannot keep on this way: always afraid to lose your temper...afraid to let yourself love me. I promise you... he will not hurt me. I know that..."

Bitterly, Vincent replied, "You should know."

Refusing to rise to the intended insult, Diana just commented, "Yes. I should, and I do...at least if I don't cross him. If you weren't so ruled by your own fear, you would know it as well, and would not keep those emotions so tightly bottled." Changing the subject, she asked, "By the way, did you know that 'The Other' is not empathic?"

Vincent turned towards her, seemingly surprised and interested in spite of himself. "No. I did not. That is interesting. Somehow I just assumed he was. He certainly seems to know about me."

Diana yawned. "That's different. He is you. As much as he resents you, he still accepts you. That's probably why you know so little about him...your lack of acceptance. Vincent, I'm sorry, but I've got to get some sleep, and so do you. Are you still mad at me?"

Vincent drew the quilts back and picked Diana up. He put her in bed and covered her up. "What do you think?"

She patted the other side of the bed. "I think you are as exhausted as I am...too exhausted to be mad. You'll think about it some more and get mad some more later on. Come to bed. We'll talk about this another time."

Vincent slid in next to her and pulled the quilts up around his shoulders. When he slept this time, it was without dreams, and all of them slept late.



When Vincent finally woke, his eyes felt as though he'd been through a sandstorm, but he did feel somewhat better. Diana was already up with the children and at breakfast. He dressed quickly and joined them. When Jacob saw him coming, he ran to him and Vincent swung him up. Cathy, and Toby, Jacob's surrogate brother and friend, whom they had all but adopted, waved from the table. As they ate, Jacob asked Vincent why he had been so upset.

"It is not anything you need to worry about, Jacob. I am sorry I have disturbed you."

Cathy looked up at him and said, "Me too...woke Cathy too!"

Vincent patted her hand. "You too, minx."

After eating and thanking William for accommodating their late breakfast, they all went



down to the Mirror Pool and cleaned up. Jacob was still asking questions though about feelings he had been receiving. "Not just you, Father...everyone. Why can we feel things and other people, like Toby, can't? Sometimes I don't like it."

Vincent sighed, looking up at Diana, who was bathing Cathy. "I know. It can be difficult, Jacob. It was difficult for me when I was young as well. It is still so now. When Diana was small, her problems were even greater than ours. No one understood her, and she was forced to do many things she did not wish to do, with her mother trying to make her like everyone else. Here, everyone knows not to touch you unless you wish for them to; then the feelings are easier to control." He hugged Jacob and tousled his hair. "It is harder on you, though, than it was on me, because you pick up my feelings even from a distance...and Cathy's. I did not have to worry about that, and neither did Diana. But always remember, Jacob: you are loved. If you need anything, there are many people who care about you, not only Diana and I, or Grandfather...or Cathy and Toby."

Jacob listened quietly as Vincent spoke to him. Vincent knew he listened with his ears and with his bond. He laid his cheek against his father's pelt and relaxed in Vincent's arms. Toby swam up and splashed them both, prompting a game of chase. After watching for awhile, Vincent finally called out to them, "Come...we need to go. Others want to use the pool."

After the children were dried and dressed, they were sent to the dorm to meet Michael and Brooke. Michael was teaching the class for the younger children this morning, and Brooke was caring for the toddlers for Mary. Vincent looked up and saw that Jamie and Mouse had brought the twins to the pool. Ellie and Aaron were growing like weeds and Mouse had decided it was time for them to try out the pool. Vincent waved to them, then put an arm around Diana and they left them to their fun.

"I promised Mouse that after classes today I would go help him work on the Catacomb Project. I was not much help before. Perhaps I can help some today."

Diana touched his face lightly and looked into his eyes, which were shadowed with fatigue and worry. "Are you all right?"

He caressed her with their bond momentarily and she smiled. "I suppose that means you are."

Holding her close, Vincent rubbed his cheek against hers, savoring the feel of her skin, and murmured, "For now, at least. I must begin getting some work done or even Father will lose patience with me. Already Michael has been complaining that he has had to handle most of the classes, and you know what Mouse has had to say about his project. When *Mouse* begins complaining, I *know* I have been neglecting my work. Elliott is supposed to join us to help, so it will be pleasant visiting with him as well."

"I overheard you speaking with Jacob. It has been hard on him...and on Cathy."

Vincent began walking back towards their chamber, his arm around her. "I know. I wish I could make it easier...wish I could stop projecting my dreams, but none of us has any control while we are asleep. It is a problem." Vincent was quiet for quite a while, then he added, "I am hoping that when Jacob reaches adolescence he has an easier time than I did. He should. At least his appearance is normal and is not a disadvantage. That time was one of the darkest of my life. Without Father, I simply do not think I would have survived."

Diana looked thoughtful, then asked, "Lisa?"

His head swiveled to look at her, eyes narrowed in query. "What do you know of Lisa?"

"Only what little was in Father's journal. It sounds as though it was a fairly innocent happening. Things like that can happen, Vincent."

Shaking his head ruefully, blond mane swinging, Vincent commented, "I know that now...intellectually at least. But emotionally, the memory still imparts a feeling of guilt and disgust at myself." He stopped suddenly, a thought striking him.

Diana stopped as well and caught his hand. "What is it?"

"It is odd. All this talk of 'The Other,' and now Lisa...it makes me remember: My first memory of seeing 'The Other' was after I hurt Lisa. I dreamed of him. I still remember that dream vividly...how I watched, unable to stop him...and in the dream he not only hurt Lisa, he killed Father."

Vincent knew Diana was watching him as he was telling her this...felt the changing emotions.

Diana asked quietly, "What did you do...after the dream?"

Vincent looked up, meeting her eyes. "I ran...as far away as I could go. Diana! I went to the river; I remember that, but I do not remember what I did there. I had just found it not too long before that, and Father had complained I had been away... and I didn't remember. Diana? Is it 'The Other' that goes there...to the river? Or is it me?"

Diana didn't meet his eyes and just continued walking for a short way. Finally, she answered. "I don't know, Vincent. Let me think about it. Solving puzzles is what I do best. Let me put together a profile in my mind of all we know, and see if I can have anything grow out of it. Intuition only goes so far. It takes work to get it to come together."

When they reached their chamber Vincent began getting his shoulder bag and tools together. When he turned and their eyes met, Diana told him, "Don't worry about it. For once, let me do the worrying. Let me do some more research and I'll let you know. Try and ignore the whole issue for awhile."

Vincent leaned down and kissed her gently, his mane falling around his face. "I will try. Diana. I am sorry about my anger earlier. I know that whatever you did, for whatever reason...it was the right thing. I trust your instincts. But I do not have to like it. Involuntarily, Vincent thought: *Catherine would never have made love to "The Other"...*but he thought it without rancor...or even comparison. It was merely an observation made to himself.

Diana commented on the unspoken thought, however. "No. She would not have. But remember, Vincent: Catherine was afraid of the Dark, and she was not married to you, either." With that obscure comment, she kissed him and left the chamber.



Diana checked with Mary to see if she needed any help, but Brooke had things well under control, so she decided to go back and begin her research on "The Other." She passed

Father's chamber, but did not stop. She and Father were somewhat on the outs since their disagreement over what was right for Vincent. Father had once accused her of protecting Vincent from his nightmares...which she had been...but Father had been protecting him all his life. *That's a very "Father-like" thing to do, but it also treats him like a child, and he is no longer a child.* Going to their chamber, she went to her backpack and pulled out Father's journal. She opened it to her bookmark and re-read the last two entries:

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 mused quietly to herself, chewing on her nail. *So...he had already begun disappearing for days at a time...not realizing the passage of time...being disoriented. After Devin left...and before the event with Lisa. But he claims he does not remember seeing 'The Other' until after he hurt Lisa.*

Diana dug under the bed and pulled out a legal pad she had stuffed under there. Wishing desperately for her computer, she started a list.

1. *Began disappearing before he hurt Lisa, but after Devin left. Perhaps since he no longer had Devin as his buffer against the world, he needed to get away from the constant bombardment of everyone's feelings. Consider also his desire for Lisa and all those wonderful adolescent hormones beginning to pop...not so wonderful to someone who felt there was no way he would be accepted.*
2. *When he returned was always disoriented as to time...seemingly little memory of what had occurred. Extreme hunger...also... Note: Always had scratches and*

bruises. Father notes that in journal. Why scratches? What had he... or "The Other"...been doing. When he was in trance state and I was there he did nothing but sit.

3. ?

Sighing, she flipped through more entries, smiling at a few. Father certainly had a knack for storytelling. She read on for quite a while, but other than routine entries and more dates when Vincent had disappeared ...same sort of thing, there was not really too much interesting...nothing that would give any clue to "The Other," or even any further mention of Vincent's supposed sister. She did run across the mention of the formation of "The Rat Patrol" by Vincent in the performance of his security duties.

January 21, 1979

Common meeting today was interesting. Addressing the rat problem this year, Vincent suggested forming what he jokingly termed "The Rat Patrol" by some of the youngsters. Jamie and Mouse volunteered to lead it. With Mouse knowing the tunnels as he does, and Jamie with her crossbow, this should prove extremely interesting. There were clamors from numerous other children wanting to be included, but Vincent insists on them meeting rigorous standards of conduct and knowledge. Interesting that he should manage to make it a reward for good study habits. He is a natural teacher...and a natural at security. Unfortunately security sometimes requires drastic measures. Vincent killed an intruder three days ago. He came to me so shaken it took me hours to calm him. This is not the first time he has killed to defend our home, but every time it does something to him...diminishes him.

Diana thought ruefully...*Sure, push him into security...just because killing is what he does best...yet that destroys what is best in him.* She wondered, as she often had, if all of Vincent's family really understood just what being the tunnel's one man security force had done to him. She thought not. Some of them, like Father, understood to a degree, but none of them...not even Father, knew about "The Other," though she had a gut feeling that Mouse suspected...or came closer to knowing than any of them. *All right, then. Back to the list.*

3. *Was made head of security...obvious choice, but very bad for him psychologically. Couldn't accept the killing rage...and the accompanying desire...bottled it away. Since Lisa, he felt he couldn't do anything with the desire by itself either except bottle it away...shove it aside. All the feelings he picked up...all the people depending on him...the responsibility. "To be or not to be." He couldn't be who he really was...not without the constant guilt. He would have frightened the entire tunnel community: So, he became what they wanted of him...except when he needed to protect them...but he couldn't deal with it...so was born "The Other." That was his way of "not being" for awhile, with "The Other" pushed to the side until desperately needed...or until he couldn't bear the weight of the emotions or the responsibility and escaped to the darkness. Love and death. Desire and rage. Two sides of the same*

coin, but either way you flip it, "The Other" comes up. No wonder he has so much trouble when he reaches a certain point...that point of no return.

5. *Why the ritual of the "song" he sang, the sing-song growl. He told me that in the dreams, Paracelsus told him he was to come when "she" called him, but Vincent has no sense of her...never has had that he knows of... "The Other" is not empathic (except with his twin?) Must ask him...or have V. ask him. No. I will ask, if he will give me the chance...more likely to get a straight answer.*

Sighing, Diana put the pad and the journal aside and rubbed her eyes. She decided to go help Brooke and let things germinate for awhile.



Vincent taught his intermediate literature class and his math class for the younger students. He let Michael teach the higher math. Vincent hated math enough for all the students. He struggled as hard as the children to get through the class. He understood it well enough, he just didn't like it. By the time he was finished, he was relieved to be going down to do some heavy labor in the Catacombs.

He traveled through the tunnels quickly, his long strides devouring the distance in no time at all. Traveling through the maze he did not bother with a lamp or torch. Here, he was in his element. Traveling down through several interlocking levels of maze, he finally reached the Catacombs.

He could hear Elliott and Mouse long before he rounded the corner and saw them. Mouse heard, or sensed, him coming and greeted him with his guileless smile. Sometimes Vincent wondered if Mouse hadn't a touch of some type of unknown sense... perhaps not empathic...but something... He understood Vincent probably better than anyone, except Diana. Having existed in the dark...alone with the silence for so very long, he better than anyone else could understand why Vincent sought the darkness as a refuge...but he didn't like it when Vincent went alone into the dark. Mouse held no fear of the darkness, but he hated being alone.

"Vincent! Look! See beams?" Mouse pointed out the progress that had been made in his absence. He was proud of the project and enjoyed showing it off. He loved working with Elliott and was especially pleased when the builder came down to help him with it.

Elliott smiled at Vincent and briefly touched his shoulder in greeting. He had been warned by Diana about how little Vincent cared for being touched...and why. Vincent surveyed the project, impressed at the progress Mouse had managed in spite of his lack of help.

"It's coming along well."

Elliott explained to Vincent about some changes he and Mouse had made to the drainage system, and how it would require fewer aqueducts. They began working, and Vincent found, as usual, that the physical labor cleared his mind somewhat. He was amused by Mouse's animated conversations with Elliott. *Kindred spirits if there ever were.* While Elliott pointed out to Mouse the significant difference that a change in angle would make,

Vincent heard a voice behind him, and turned abruptly to see

"The Other" smiling at him.

Didn't like sharing her, did you?

Vincent leaned back against the wall, groaning inwardly. Pushing off from the wall, he walked over to Mouse and whispered to him.

Mouse nodded. "Okay good, Vincent. Okay fine. Don't worry. Tell Diana."

Glancing up at Elliott, Vincent excused himself and swung off down the dark tunnel, going deeper into the Catacombs...

Elliott glanced questioningly at Mouse, but Mouse just shook his head.

With no answer forthcoming from Mouse, Elliott was left to wonder what exchange had just occurred between Mouse and Vincent. Mouse seemed to understand exactly what was going on...though Vincent had only spoken with him a moment. Finally, Elliott couldn't stand it. "Mouse...where did he go? What's wrong?"

Mouse looked extremely uncomfortable. "Went Below...that's all. Just does that sometimes. Be all right when he comes back."

Be all right? What the devil...? Elliott just stared down the tunnel where Vincent had disappeared.

As Vincent walked, "The Other" kept him "company," striding along beside him...saying nothing, but knowing that his presence was irritating. Finally Vincent stopped, and bracing himself, addressed his unwanted companion, "What do you want of me?"

"The Other" spread his arms wide in a gesture of feigned humility. *Me? Want something? Is that allowed? What have you to give?*

Vincent leaped for him, and as they locked in combat, "The Other" laughed... and winked out. Vincent crashed against the wall. Turning, he held himself in place against the wall by sheer force of will, when his body just wanted to slide to the floor. Finally, after gathering strength, he continued on his way, deeper into the bowels of the earth. He stopped once to drink from a trickle of water, then continued his journey. He was headed with a relentless and single-minded need straight for the river. At this point, it would have been difficult to tell if the traveler were Vincent...or "The Other."

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Diana was furious, and Mouse cringed a little. "No one said, Diana! Vincent always goes down there. Sorry."

Ashamed of taking her frustration out on Mouse, Diana apologized. "No...I'm sorry, Mouse. You didn't know." She realized Mouse was used to Vincent's jaunts into the darkness, nor had he realized what was going on. Diana looked around at Cathy, who was playing peek-a-boo with Jacob and Toby around one of the boulders by the Mirror Pool, then she looked up at Elliott, who was standing behind Mouse, obviously perplexed and uneasy. "Elliott, can you take the children to Mary and explain that I need to be gone awhile?"

"Sure, but what...?"

Diana waved away the question. "I can't explain." Addressing Mouse, she asked, "Mouse, can you go to William and get him to pack some food for me...?"

Mouse nodded enthusiastically, seeming anxious to make up for his mistake. He



Mouse nodded enthusiastically, seeming anxious to make up for his mistake. He started to take off, then turned and asked..."Go with you? Mouse knows the dark...Knows Vincent. Can help find."

Relieved, Diana hugged him. "Oh, yes, Mouse. Thank you. Hurry now, and get ready, and so will I."

Mouse hurried off, and Diana thanked Elliott for his help. She called the children and told them she needed to go find their father. Jacob hugged her. "He is hurting again, Jacob. Can you feel him?"

Jacob nodded. "Will you make him be okay again?"

Kissing him, she told him, "I'll try, sweetheart." She hugged Cathy and Toby, then headed back to their chamber to gather her things.

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By the time Diana had finished gathering her things from their chamber, Mouse was ready with the food, and they stopped by his and Jamie's chamber to get his gear and to tell Jamie where they were going. Obviously furious that she couldn't go along, Jamie hugged Diana and cautioned Mouse to take care of her...though Mouse knew that would amuse Diana, who was perfectly capable of caring for herself. Mouse played with the twins for a few minutes, then kissed Jamie goodbye. "Find Vincent. Don't worry." He glanced up at Diana and said plaintively. "Goes there a lot... always has. Nothing to worry about."

Diana patted his back. "Maybe so, Mouse. I hope so...but it is different now."

Shrugging, Mouse shouldered his pack and grabbed a couple of his miner's hats and spare batteries. He usually managed quite well in the dark...even without light, but he knew Diana wouldn't like it.

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Once they got under way, little was said. Diana let Mouse lead, as he knew the way to the river better than she did. Following Mouse in the darkness, Diana felt comforted that at least this time she was not alone in her search. "Mouse...how much do you know of Vincent's other half?"

Mouse stopped so suddenly that Diana ran into him. When he turned, he looked worried. "Not really Vincent. Does bad things...but he knows Mouse."

Diana nodded. "I figured. Have you followed him down here before?"

Looking uneasy, Mouse was very quiet, then added, "Sometimes."

Diana didn't like the impressions she picked up from Mouse. "Did you see what happened...what he did?"

Mouse turned and continued down the serpentine without answering, and Diana had no choice but to follow, stumbling awkwardly after him. They continued in silence for a long while, but once they reached the bottom, Diana pursued her question. "Mouse, it is important. What did you see?"

Mouse's shock of blond hair stood out untidily from under his miner's hat, and his eyes had the startled look of a deer caught in a headlight. "Don't want to tell."

Diana put her pack down and stretched. Placing her hand on Mouse's shoulder reassuringly, she told him, "I know you worry about revealing confidences, Mouse, but believe me...I'm going to love him no matter what, so it is safe. I need to know what we're dealing with. I know you take care of him."

Mouse shuffled his feet. "Always take care of him. He found Mouse...took care of Mouse...taught Mouse. Mouse doesn't forget." Finally, he looked up into Diana's face and shrugged. "Saw him with a woman...looked like him, kind of."

Excited by someone who had actually seen Vincent's sister, she encouraged him, "Good! Mouse...tell me, please. I know about her, but I need to know what happened."

Mouse blushed...you could even tell in this light. "Don't want to say."

"It's okay. Did you see them make love?"

Mouse grimaced. "Not love...didn't seem like it. But...yes."

Diana paced a little, and Mouse became agitated. "Didn't want to tell, Diana. Sorry."

Looking up, startled out of her reverie, Diana answered, "Oh. No. That's okay, Mouse. I'm just thinking. It was only what I expected. What did they do...you know...afterwards?"

Mouse shrugged. "She went away...but saw Paracelsus once."

That really startled her. "Paracelsus!? What did he do? When was this?"

Mouse's blue eyes met hers, then shifted away. "Just talked to him...like...told him something, then went away. Long time ago."

They had continued walking as they spoke, and they were nearing the first set of downward-sloping tunnels they needed to take to reach the river. It took all of Diana's concentration to navigate the slopes and crevices, even with Mouse's help. Eventually they came to the site of Vincent and Diana's last camp next to the river. There was no sign of Vincent. Diana hadn't really expected there would be, but it would have been nice to have found him so easily. Her bond could not pick him up at all...which was very frightening. She could not even touch that tight core of consciousness she could feel when he was in trance. *Hopefully that just means that "The Other" has taken over completely.* She refused to believe he was dead. *I would know that...I know I would.*

Mouse called her over to the side of the river to show her some tracks, which obviously were Vincent's...

"But Mouse, they could have been here for a long time."

"Maybe. Don't think so. See. Rat tracks in other tracks near here...not in these."

Looking closer, Diana had to agree. These tracks had to have been made later than the others had been.

"Okay. So what do we do? Just follow them?"

Mouse nodded. "Come on."

Diana had no choice but to follow when Mouse took off. They traveled along the river for some time, then Mouse pointed out where Vincent had pushed the boat into the river. "Harder now."

"He must have continued downriver, Mouse. With the boat, at least we know that."

Mouse nodded. "But may have gone a long way." He looked critically at Diana. "Tired. Need to rest. Camp here."

Reluctantly, Diana agreed. As they made camp she continued questioning Mouse. "When was it that you saw Vincent with that woman, Mouse? Was it a long time ago or just recently?"

Mouse thought for a long time. Diana knew that time to him was relative, so he probably had to think of some point in time to relate to. "Before Catherine."

"Before Catherine? You mean before he met Catherine, or before Catherine died...or what?"

"Before he found her...long time now." He looked worried. "May have seen her after that...but not Mouse." Mouse busied himself with rolling out his quilts and tried to avoid any further questions.

Diana had already rolled out her quilts and settled in. Right now, she had no further questions. "G'night Mouse."

Mouse looked up gratefully. "...Night."

Diana reached out with her bond...trying to touch Vincent, but there was still nothing...not the blankness of a block, or the tight knot of his consciousness during trance: just nothing...as if he simply "was not."

Diana tossed and turned restlessly for awhile, then sat up, resting her chin on her arms. Mouse snored softly nearby. It had taken him almost no time to fall asleep. *Such is the sleep of innocence, I suppose.* Digging in her backpack, she re-read her notes, desperately trying to put things together. *Okay. Assume Paracelsus did "create" Vincent, and that Vincent has a sister...or had one. "The Other" was not empathic...but did he have a bond with his sister? Vincent doesn't remember her...but he does remember vaguely Paracelsus "telling" him not to remember...something?* Diana ran her fingers through her hair, raking it back out of her face and holding it there with one hand. *Damn. Should braid it, but I'm too tired.* She rummaged in the pack and came up with a bit of leather fringe and tied it back as well as she could. It probably wouldn't stay, but for now it helped. *Okay. Now that I can see again... Mouse says he saw "The Other" making love to this woman...obviously Vincent's sister. That should freak him. Course he wouldn't have known...but still...or maybe "The Other" just didn't give a damn.* She shook her head. *No. Don't think so...he's not that different...I don't think.* Frustration, worry, and exhaustion were combining to give her the worst headache she'd ever had. *I give up. I'd give a million dollars for an aspirin.* She reluctantly put her notes away and pulled the quilts up over her shoulders and closed her eyes.



A little farther down the river, "The Other" was busy climbing through the rocks toward them. When Vincent had come out of his trance state "The Other" was still in control. He could scent Diana and Mouse, and making a sudden decision, moved quickly towards their camp. Once his usual ritual was finished, and after experiencing the total freedom of the area around the river, normally he would have allowed Vincent to regain control. He had no interest in going through the motions required to sustain himself day to day...and since he was, in effect, Vincent...with Vincent's knowledge and intelligence...he knew that in order to survive he had to allow his more controlled twin to exist from day to



day up in the living areas with the people who loved him. He felt an acute stab of loneliness, however. The woman never came anymore. Other than Diana, she was the only one who had ever accepted him...and cared enough to love him. He missed her, and mourned her loss. However, once he sensed Diana so close, he decided to delay his departure for awhile. Something else to taunt Vincent with would be almost as enjoyable as the act itself. Reaching the camp, he looked down on the two sleeping figures. Mouse he knew and could be himself around. His eyes fastened on Diana and he smiled...almost gently...for him. He worked his way carefully down the cliff, silent as a cat, then squatted next to Diana's bed of quilts. He reached out carefully to touch her hair, but drew back abruptly as she turned towards him. He could feel Vincent stirring and determinedly pushed him back the only way he could...by thinking of Diana...his Diana...of touching her...desiring her.

Before he could do anything but think about touching her, Mouse leaped up, shouting a loud "No!" and then advanced towards him.

"The Other" recognized Mouse...didn't want to hurt him...but he would not be deterred from his purpose.



Diana woke, looking up horrified to find "The Other" crouched over her, snarling, right killing hand lifted to strike...but at this point only threatening...and Mouse confronting him. She scrambled to her feet, hair tangled and coming down in pieces around her shoulders. She tripped on the quilts...and stood between them, allowing "The Other" to wrap his left arm around her. He was already fully aroused, and pulled her tightly against his hips. Still watching Mouse, he leaned down and delicately closed his teeth on her shoulder...not biting down...just indicating to Mouse that she was his. She reached up and took his threatening right hand in her own and said in a quiet undertone to Mouse: "Go, Mouse...quickly."

Stubbornly, Mouse shook his head. "Can't. Vincent'd kill me if I left you with...him."

"The Other" raised his head and snarled threateningly...but still a little indecisively. He pushed her forward with him as he advanced on Mouse. Diana looked entreatingly at Mouse...this situation was intolerable. "Please, Mouse. Go. He won't hurt me...I promise. But I can't protect you much longer." The thought of what could...and probably would occur if he stayed was horrifying.

Mouse finally relented, backing off a little. "Sure?..."

Relieved, Diana nodded. "Yes. Please. Go. I'll handle him."

Mouse backed slowly off, disappearing behind the boulders and into the connecting tunnel beyond. He didn't go far...only far enough to not be a threat to him, then sank to the gritty sand of the tunnel floor and hugged his knees. There wasn't much he could do at this point to help, but if Diana needed help...he would try.



Once Mouse left, Diana had managed to turn "The Other's" attention away from him...with very little trouble. She tried to "turn him off" as well as she could, respecting Vincent's wishes. As his hands explored urgently, she tried to keep her senses clear...and put her block up...trying not to get caught up in his desire...which was difficult with all the skin contact. "Gently...please...I need...to ask you ...a few things." Her own breathing was becoming almost as ragged as his, just from her efforts to dissuade him.

"No."

She discouraged him from throwing her down on the rocky floor and moved him over to the quilts...not much...but all she had..."Yes...um...not so fast, mister...if you wait...it'll be better, I promise." He hesitated, and she asked him, "Tell me about the woman you come here to see..."

He buried his face in her hair, deeply inhaling the scent of her...his hands tightening painfully on her arms. "She's gone. But now I have you."

Diana tried to pull away, but that angered him, so she tried to relax as he pulled her against him. "She's gone? To where?"

Frustrated, he flung her away. This was not going at all as he'd wanted, and he wasn't long on patience. Without touching him, even if she dropped her block, she could not sense how this was going...and she didn't dare touch him just now...it could swing things either way.

"Just gone. Does it matter? She's been gone for a long time now...I can no longer sense her, and I have had no one. I loved Catherine, but he wouldn't let me touch her...except briefly when he allowed me to defend her...to kill for her." He swung around to face her, his face bitter, "I thought I had you, now."

"You do...just...not right now."

"You want him."

Diana said nothing. Whatever she said would be the wrong thing at this point in time. She watched as his shoulders slumped in defeat, and despair...and finally she went to him and put her arms around him. "I do love you both, truly. But for now...let us have him back...please."

She could see that the sudden cessation of desire and rage was pushing him back. Without those strong emotions, he could not hold Vincent at bay, and swayed a little in her arms as she crooned to him softly. She gently stroked his back under his cloak. Her head lay against his broad chest, with the homespun shirt rough against her cheek. His hair lay across her, covering her like a tent as his head rested on hers. She hummed Catherine's lullaby, and eventually his weight leaning into her became too much, and she allowed him to sink slowly to the quilts, where he curled up like a child and slept.

Diana covered him with the loose quilts and went to find Mouse to assure him she was fine. She knew he would not have gone far. *Thank heavens I was able to control the situation.* As Diana suspected, Mouse sat anxiously around the corner in the connecting tunnel. She squatted beside him and smiled as he looked up at her, relieved. "He's asleep. When he wakes...we'll have Vincent back."

Mouse scrambled up, then held out a hand for Diana. "It was...so quiet. Was like...like when Catherine went to him...before. Mouse was scared."

"As long as I do nothing to antagonize him, he will never hurt me, Mouse. It's a

matter of timing...but it's not easy." As they walked slowly back, Diana told him, "Why don't you go back to Jamie and the twins. He will be fine, now. Tell Father, and check on the children for me. Tell them I'll have their father back home soon."

Mouse fidgeted. "Sure? Sure it will be Vincent...when he wakes?"

Diana nodded.

"Okay good. Okay fine. If you're sure. Tell Father...check on kids."

Mouse gathered his quilts, and left one miner's hat and the lamp for Diana. He shrugged and grinned at her. "Don't really need 'em anyway...Mouse found way in dark when little."

Diana watched Mouse as he disappeared around the boulders, desperately relieved that he had not been hurt, and that she had been able to defuse the situation. Totally exhausted, both emotionally and physically, she finally slipped in under the quilts next to Vincent and snuggled against him. Feeling her movement in his sleep, he reached across automatically and put his arm around her, pulling her to him. Diana tentatively touched his sleeping mind, found peace, and was relieved. Finally she, too, slept.



Vincent slept peacefully, dreaming of Catherine and the days before Gabriel. They were walking in the park, her hand in his, and they talked softly, quietly. Such a gentle time. He gazed down at her moonlit face, and she smiled up at him. Something moved in the distance behind her and he glanced up. Coming towards him from the distance, walking slowly and gracefully down the park path was another woman with long, fiery red hair bound into an untidy braid that hung down her back. Her face was classically beautiful, and the love for him that shone from her eyes was also beautiful. He looked desperately from one to the other, and held Catherine closer...almost as though he knew that she could not stay. Her figure became nebulous...diffuse...and finally faded as he cried out her name..."Catherine!"

Vincent sat bolt upright, shaking. He felt a soft touch as Diana's arms surrounded him, and she laid her head on his shoulder. He looked around desperately, calling her name..."Catherine?"

Diana moved her head softly against him and looked up into his face...and reached up to brush the tears away. "No...not Catherine. Only me."

Vincent clutched her to him, covering her with the tangle of his mane. His entire body shuddered with his anguished sobs and hot tears fell on her shoulder.

"Diana...I...dreamed...she was with me, alive...then you were there and I watched her fade away. For a time...it was as though she were truly with me."

Diana sighed, somewhat resignedly. "Perhaps she was. She is always with you, Vincent, and she will never fade from your memory. But she is the past, and I am the present...and the future. I dreamed with you...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrupt the dream...to send her away...it just happened...as it does so often with us. I'm sorry, my Love, to have caused you pain even inadvertently."

Vincent held her at arm's length a moment and simply gazed at her. Her hair was tangled and barely held by the thin strip of leather lacing she had put in it before. Her face was dirty. She looked like a street urchin out of some Dickens' tale, and he laughed as he reached up to rub the smudge on her face. "Whatever happened to you?" Then he looked

around, seeing for the first time where they were. His face took on a harder edge and he looked down at her almost angrily. "Never mind. I do not think I want to know."

Vincent's anger and disgust blasted through their bond as he projected his feelings to Diana. Diana stammered, "But...truly...Vincent. I didn't. He wanted to...but I managed to talk him out of it this time."

He turned to her skeptically, touched their bond more gently, and knew she was telling the truth. He raked his fingers through his mane. "This time...what about last time...or next time? Will there ever be an end to it?" His emotions were tearing him apart as he struggled with his despair...and jealousy. "I do not think I can bear it, Diana. How can you tolerate him?...me?"

Diana threw herself against his chest, clutching his leather vest with one hand, twining the fingers of her other hand in his mane. "I love you, Vincent. This is tearing me apart. When he is here, he is so desperate, so needy...and so *you*...it is difficult to deny him. He needs me so." She looked up at him, her desperation clear in her face. Vincent could feel her need for him to understand. "Remember how you felt about Lena...how you needed to give her some part of your love...because you felt her terrible need?"

Vincent nodded, eyes shadowed.

"This is the same, Vincent...only perhaps it is worse, because he is you. Tell me what to do, Vincent. Please. Whatever you want, I will try to do."

Vincent's arms closed around her gently. He laid his head on top of hers. "I do not know what to tell you, Diana. Perhaps there is no solution. I feel...pulled apart." He gave a rough bark of bitter laughter. "Appropriate, I suppose."

"I refuse to believe there is no solution. I won't lose you...to him. I won't!"

Vincent shook his head. "Diana...when was the last time I made love to you?"

Diana was silent. They both knew the last time had been just before she made love to "The Other" in the Crystal Cavern on their anniversary trip. It had been almost two weeks.

"Well, you have had other things on your mind."

Vincent's eyes were deep shadows, and his voice held more than a hint of sadness. "You do not understand, Diana. He is growing stronger. The more he wants you...the more he is able to get out to you, the less desire I have for you. He is winning. He is taking you away from me."

Vincent felt her reaction to his words... she was appalled at what he was saying, and immediately saw that it was true, and that she had created the problem inadvertently. She began crying. "No. Vincent...no!...What can I do? I cannot always put him off...I know...and you know...that it will not always be possible."

Vincent very softly told her: "It is as Catherine always told me...about the Velveteen Rabbit: She asked me repeatedly if I had become Real yet. I used to laugh at her, but she was right. Her love made me Real...and because of that, I can never be Unreal again. And now...your love has made him Real."

Diana nodded almost imperceptibly...obviously understanding completely. "Yes."

They held each other almost desperately, Vincent rocking her slowly in an attempt to comfort her. Finally, Diana released him and stood. She held out her hand. "Come. I have an idea."

Vincent shook his head, but took her hand and followed her. "Where are we going?"

She squeezed his hand and pulled. "No questions...just come."

Vincent realized where they were going before long...to their pool near the Crystal Cavern. He didn't think anything would help, but he was too depressed to argue. Reaching the pool, Diana put the lamp down and turned to him. Reaching up, she pulled his cloak down over his shoulders, and he let it fall to the ground. Slowly she unlaced his vest and pulled it off, making sure there was as much body contact as possible. She pulled her sweatshirt off, reached up underneath his shirt and grabbed a handful of the heavier pelt on his back and pulled him to her.

Vincent had to smile a little at her determination, and as she rolled his shirt up and pressed her breasts against his chest, he did feel a stirring of desire...their bond was helping. He pulled his shirt off as she unbuckled his belt. He shed his boots and jeans and watched Diana as she slowly removed her sweatpants, rolling them slowly down her hips. Her hair had come down completely and streamed over her shoulders in a bright tide of fire...gleaming in the lamplight. By this time Vincent was *definitely* becoming aroused and Diana stood for a few moments, her hand delicately tracing the ridges of muscle on his chest and stomach... gradually trailing lower. His hands gripped her hips almost convulsively as she pulled away. Laughing delightedly, she dove in a shallow dive into the pool...with him following close behind. She splashed him as he made his way toward her, and evaded him when he reached for her. As they played their game, Vincent felt the tide of desire continuing to rise...eclipsing any worry he had of not being able to love her. When she finally moved into his arms, he pulled her against him, lifting her so she could wrap her legs around him. Holding her close, he loved her gently, the warm water lapping around them, and with their bond they renewed their faith in one another...and in the power of love.



Diana laughed at Vincent as he pulled himself out of the pool, water streaming from his pelt. He shook...somewhat like a dog shaking water out of its coat...and held out his hand for her. She shivered as she stood in the cool air of the cavern. There was no towel to dry off with, and he folded his arms around her.

"I do have one advantage...once I shake the water out, my pelt keeps me warmer. You are like ice." He walked over, retrieved his cloak, and wrapped it around her. "Better?"

She nodded. "In more ways than one." She took his hand and smiled up at him: "God, Vincent...It's good to have you back. We cannot let you become so distant again."

Vincent pulled on his shirt and pants, then sat next to her. He dusted off his feet, then pulled on his boots. "Diana...we have not solved anything...except temporarily. The *problem* will return again...and again. I still know almost nothing about my dreams...about my sister...or Paracelsus' involvement. But perhaps it will be better...easier...if we can continue to stay close...like this."

Diana had warmed up considerably under Vincent's heavy cloak, and she handed it to him, then reached for her sweats. He leaned back against a boulder, watching her through half-closed, sleepy eyes. "You are so incredibly lovely, Diana." A shadow passed over his



face, and she caught the hint of suppressed anger over "The Other." He noted that she had caught the thought and glancing up at her, he quoted:

"Between the idea
and the reality
Between the motion
and the act
Falls the Shadow."³

Diana came to him and sat in his lap, leaning back against him. "Just remember, Vincent...this particular Shadow is a part of you. I just want for you two to be able to blend enough at least to reach a sharing of your lives...with you keeping control. I think he will always be a part of you...and a part of our lives, so you are going to have to accept him...just as I have. I don't think he wants control; he just resents not ever being able to share anything but the rage...and the frustration of unfulfilled desire."

Vincent pushed her away a little, and she turned to look at him. With a very grieved look, he asked: "Must we discuss this now?"

Diana, obviously noting his shift in mood, shook her head. "No. Of course not."

Lying back in his arms, she closed her eyes and nestled her head under his chin. They sought their bond once more, and for a long while they were silent.

Finally, Vincent said quietly: "Silence is a very strange thing, Diana." He played with her fingers idly...comparing her small hand with her square-cut nails to his huge, fearsomely-taloned one. "If you can listen to the silence you can learn many things. Masters spoke of the silence of a great love...and I have experienced that silence twice in my life: once with Catherine, and again with you. At times like this, I feel we can overcome anything."

Turning to him, Diana told him quietly: "We can...as long as we love one another, we can." She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him. Then, rising quietly, they walked slowly back to their campsite next to the river to collect their things.

A SLEEP AND A FORGETTING

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.⁴



As Vincent and Diana made their way back to their own tunnels, Vincent seemed more at peace than he had been for a very long time, which seemed strange to her, since truly nothing had changed. All the problems remained and as he'd said, he was no closer to answering any of the questions he had about his dreams, Paracelsus, or his sister. Finally, she asked him what had changed.

He smiled and answered, "Nothing, really, except that by making love to you I have regained a little of what I had lost."

She cocked her head, puzzled a little. "I'm not entirely sure I understand."

He sighed, then hesitated, as though searching for words. "It was as though every time I took two steps forward, he pulled me three back. The more I desired you...the closer to the surface he came and the more I tried to...to...push him back into the bottle. But if I backed off from you and tried to stay...passive, then the desire he felt for you and his ability to gain control grew stronger...and my desire for you lessened. Any way I went...whatever path I took, he was winning. I feel at peace for now. By loving you I suppose I reinforced my belief that I can still win...still keep control." He shrugged almost sheepishly. "It is a minor victory, but to me, an important one."

Diana slipped her arm through his. "I did learn a few things while he was out this time."

"What? That he is an irritatingly presumptuous bastard? I could have told you that...had you asked."

Diana almost choked with laughter. For Vincent to be so...outspoken...was rare. "No. Not exactly. I learned that he goes to the river when he's lonely, to remember your sister. He loved her..." She glanced up at him, wondering if she should drop her bombshell, and decided she might as well. "Mouse says he made love to her."

They had just begun walking single-file on a narrow path, and Vincent stopped so suddenly she ran into him. He turned slowly...his face hard. "What? Please tell me you didn't say that."

Diana shrugged helplessly. "Well... Obviously you didn't even know of her existence, and he certainly did not know that she was your sister...his sister...if that makes a difference. Paracelsus obviously set you up."

He was disgusted, and said so.

"Perhaps. But try and look at it from Paracelsus' view. If he wanted to set

traits...that was the way to do it. Done carefully, inbreeding does that. Look at it this way...the Egyptians practiced it. Besides...it wasn't your fault...you had no way of knowing...and you didn't do it anyway...he did."

He spun and walked away, and as she followed his stiffly retreating back, she heard him mutter, "...and the Egyptians produced idiots as well."

Diana stumbled after him, angry that he insisted on always looking at anything involving "The Other" or himself from the worst possible angle...he was always so hard on himself...never gave himself an inch. She muttered under her breath, knowing perfectly well he could still hear her. "The Arabs practiced inbreeding for two thousand years on their horses as well, and produced the most magnificent creatures imaginable."

He stopped again and rounded on her...his indignation written all over his face: "I...am...not...a...horse!"

She grinned up at him...at least she'd gotten his attention. "Obviously. You *are* stubborn as a mule, however."

He folded his arms and scowled at her. She could sense his mood lightening as they sparred...as usual. "I assume I am supposed to simply quote Dryden now and make it all better?"

"Well, I don't know," she commented airily, "since I don't know what quote you had in mind."

"Had laws not been, we never had been blam'd;
For not to know we sinn'd is innocence⁵."

Grinning from ear to ear, Diana answered smugly: "If it works for you, it works for me."

Vincent couldn't take it anymore...he laughed. "I give up. I suppose you are right. There is not much sense in feeling guilty or disgusted over something that, as you say, I didn't even do, technically...and do not remember. I still do not have to like it."

"Well, that's the first time you've ever made sense when it came to him." She grinned again. "Just don't start using the excuse that he did it every time you do something I don't like!"

Vincent smothered another grin. "Never." The path had widened and they were able to walk side by side once more, and he put his arm around her.

Diana leaned against him and said quietly, "He said she hasn't come in a long while, and he no longer has any sense of her. Vincent, I think the only empathic tie he *had* was with her, and I think she must be dead. It is no wonder he feels so alone." She watched Vincent for his reaction, but did not touch his mind. He said nothing, but his silence in itself told her that her point had struck home. She hoped that perhaps "The Other's" loss would engender some sympathy towards him in Vincent...to help them move closer to an understanding.

Since Vincent said no more, Diana just kept her mouth shut and continued walking. She could sense that he was mulling over the information he had received and was wondering what to do with it. They still had a long walk back home.



Once they reached the living area of the Hub, Vincent reached out to check the children. Finding them well, he and Diana went first to Father's chamber, where they found Mouse, Jamie, Elliott, and Father in deep discussion...obviously about Vincent.

Vincent stood in the doorway, his bulk and voluminous mantle filling it. "Should my ears be burning?"

They all looked up, their faces both guilty and relieved. Father cleared his throat and started toward him. "Vincent...Thank God you're home. Mouse said..."

Vincent's head swiveled. He stared down at Mouse a moment. The young man's face went scarlet under his shock of blond hair. "Didn't say anything, Vincent...nothing..."

Vincent came slowly down the stairs and hugged Mouse, then whispered in his ear, which caused Mouse to blush even deeper, but he grinned. "Okay good, okay fine. Not mad, then?"

"Of course not...if I cannot trust you, who can I trust?"

Father leaned on his cane and looked from Vincent to Diana, then back again. "Obviously there is more to this story than we have been told, Vincent. Mouse told us very little, but all that matters is that you are home, and safe." He glanced back at Diana. "...and you as well, my dear."

Glancing at Elliott with a look strangely between a smile and a grimace, Vincent sighed. Vincent was very tired, and the shadows from the many candles in the chamber only made him feel more tired. "I suppose you are more confused than anyone here by my behavior." He motioned to the others. "My family knows me...and are used to my occasional...lapses. Diana told me you helped her with the children so she could go after me. Thank you."

Elliott nodded slightly, seeming puzzled by Vincent's behavior. "If there is anything else I can do..."

Vincent shook his head, "No, but thank you for your concern. For now, though, I think Diana and I would like to visit the children, then go to bed. It has been an ...exhausting trip." He glanced at Father, somewhat ruefully. "And I do have classes and chores to handle tomorrow. I seem to recall being censured for falling behind. Perhaps Mouse will forgive me, but I think Michael is going to be greatly relieved that I am back."

Vincent nodded to Father and Elliott, then he and Diana left to visit the children.



As soon as they entered the dorm, all three children threw themselves at Vincent. Vincent could sense Cathy's relief that he was all right again...that her sense of him was back to normal, and Jacob was feeling much the same. Toby was just along for the joyous ride. Vincent all but fell backwards on one of the boys' beds with all three children climbing all over him. All four of them were laughing and Cathy was squealing with delight. They begged to be read to, but instead, Vincent told them a story from his own childhood about himself and their uncle Devin.

Jacob asked, "But uncle Devin is older than you, father. Why was he always in

trouble? Didn't he know better?"

Vincent glanced up at Diana, his eyes sparkling with amusement, and she had to cover her mouth to stifle the giggles. Vincent knew that just thinking of him as a youngster with Devin always did that to her.

Composing himself, Vincent answered seriously, "Yes, Jacob. He did know better, but for some reason, he still had a hard time staying out of trouble." He looked down at the boys and added, "Of course, I was not entirely blameless myself. Now, it is time for you three to be in bed." He picked Cathy up and hugged the boys. While he was tucking them in, Diana came up and took Cathy from him to put her down. He kissed his daughter goodnight, then turned back to Jacob, who seemed worried about something. He glanced over at Toby, who was already falling asleep, and sat next to Jacob. "What is it, Jacob?"

Jacob's eyes seemed as deep as pools as he asked, "You're not going away, too ...like my mother, are you?"

"No, son. At least I certainly have no intention of it. I cannot promise anything. No one knows what life holds for them even tomorrow, but I think I can safely say that I will be around awhile." Vincent knew that their bond told Jacob more from the emotions and intent than his words did, and soon the child was satisfied. Finally Jacob asked, "Do you miss mother?"

The sudden pang of sorrow that hit Vincent made Jacob flinch, and Vincent tried to barricade. "Yes, Jacob. I miss her very much." He ruffled his son's hair briefly and told him, "She loved you very much, though she never was able to be with you."

Jacob was already beginning to fall asleep, but he smiled. "I know. She said I was beautiful. You told me."

As Jacob's eyes closed, Vincent touched his face briefly, wiping away a stray tear that had not dried. He did not notice the wetness on his own face. He was lost in his thoughts when Diana came to him and reached under his mane, caressing his neck. He looked up, eyes a little blurred. "I'm sorry...I didn't hear..."

Diana bent and kissed him, saying softly. "I know. Come. Let's go to bed, Love. It's been a long day."

They walked arm in arm through the tunnels, pausing a moment at Father's door and glancing in: Elliott and Father were deep in a game of chess, and Vincent commented, "Perhaps Father can beat him."

Diana answered, "I wouldn't lay odds on it."

As they entered their own chamber, Diana commented on how filthy they both were. "Our interlude in our pool seems an awfully long time ago. That trip up was long and dusty. Are you up for a swim?"

Vincent opened the wardrobe and took their towels off the shelf, and Diana grabbed her robe.



By the time they made it down to the Mirror Pool it was so late that the chances of anyone coming by were pretty minimal...and that was the way Vincent liked it. They

undressed and slipped into the cool water...quite a change from their volcanic lake. Vincent leaned back and let Diana wash all the dust from his mane, then did the same for her hair. Once they were clean, Diana got out and wrapped in her terrycloth robe and put her heavy socks and fur boots on. Sitting on a boulder, she combed her hair while she watched Vincent swim laps. *I could think of other things to expend energy on*, she thought. After about fifteen laps, he swam up to her and pulled himself out. He started to shake, but she handed him his towel. "If you're going to do that, go over there, please."

"Somehow, if you don't do it right away, it's just not the same..." He grinned and used the towel instead.

After dressing, Vincent sat next to her while they let their hair dry. He wrapped his arm around her to keep her warm, and they discussed Jacob.

"His questions about Catherine took me by surprise tonight. He seldom asks."

Diana stroked his cheek. "Her memory is very close to the surface today, isn't it?"

Softly, he answered, "Yes. I wonder how she would have dealt with the things we have learned recently. Catherine sometimes only saw what she wanted to see...about me. She faced the Darkness when it was needful with incredible courage, but I am not sure she truly understood."

Diana leaned into him, and his arm tightened around her. "Understanding is not necessarily an ingredient of love. Catherine's love for you was pretty unconditional. I somehow do not think any of it would have mattered."

Vincent turned to look into her face, and was quiet, just studying her. With her red hair drying and frizzing up around her face and no makeup, Diana knew she was a far cry from the sophisticated Catherine he remembered. But the love that was mirrored in her eyes and heart was just as unconditional as Catherine's had been...and there was a deep understanding there as well. Tired as they both were, they could feel the desire building, the bond echoing it back and forth.

Leaning over to kiss him, Diana rose to go back, saying coyly: "Thought you'd never ask."

He swatted her backside and replied, "I did not ask...but now that you mention it..."

She grabbed her towel and streaked off down the tunnel toward their chamber with him in hot pursuit. By the time they were in bed, the towels and clothes were all over the chamber. They seldom made love so playfully...and Diana adored it when she could get him to forget everything and just play...even if the forgetting was only for that short time.



After loving one another, Vincent was surprised to see tears in her eyes...their lovemaking had been so playful, it seemed strange to him to see and feel her sadness.

"Diana, please...won't you tell me what's troubling you?" The tears kept falling, but Diana shook her head, and even with their bond Vincent could find out no more...her sorrow was just...there...very diffuse, with no real focus. Even she did not know why she was sad. "It is not Catherine, is it?"

She shook her head. "No. Maybe...No. I think it is just...everything." She cried a little harder, and as he wiped away the tears, she asked, "What am I to do the next time he



is here, Vincent? I can't refuse him..."

Vincent held her close, saying nothing. His bond caressed her, and no words were necessary. What reassurance was his to give, he gave. Eventually they slept, and the bond drifted apart.



Vincent dreamed he was deep down in the raw tunnels near the river. It was quiet, and very dark except for the small amount of light shed by the fungi on the walls. He stooped to drink from the river, and when he looked up, she was there...across the river, beckoning to him. Without hesitation, he plunged into the river and fought the current to get across, his heavy clothing weighing him down. Finally reaching the other bank, he dragged himself out and looked for her, but she was gone. Following her footprints, he found himself going even deeper...toward the area where Paracelsus had kept Catherine. The heat was becoming overpowering, and his wet clothing was beginning to dry. When he rounded the next corner, he was confronted by "The Other."

She is nothing to you. She is mine.

She is our sister.

Even "The Other" seemed upset. *So I hear. It does not matter in any case; she is gone.* He turned away a moment, then looked back, smiled sadly, and told Vincent, *Her name was Lethe.*

Then he was gone, and Vincent woke with her name on his tongue... "Lethe."

Glancing over at Diana, who was still sleeping peacefully. For once his dreams had not disturbed her. Hopefully, he had not disturbed the children either; he reached out tentatively and found them quiet. He laid back, arms behind his head to think. *Lethe. Forgetfulness.*

He slipped out of bed and padded softly to his desk, throwing his cloak around his shoulders against the chill. Opening his journal, he sat for a few moments before beginning to write.

Paracelsus named my sister Lethe...after the river in Hades, whose waters caused those who drank of them to forget all their former life. The symbolism behind the name is obvious. What has become of her? Is she dead?

As Vincent paused a moment, he looked up to see "The Other," and he thought, *I am sorry...about Lethe. Do you know what happened to her?*

Strangely, "The Other" had nothing sarcastic to say. He shook his head.

Vincent asked him: *Why did you not just kill Paracelsus?*

"The Other" shrugged. *I do not remember ever seeing him. Lethe would speak of him, but I do not remember ever seeing him.* With a sad look, he disappeared.

Vincent stared for a moment at the spot where his dark twin had stood, then wrote:

I find myself almost feeling sorry for my "Other Self." Diana has brought me insight into that darker side that I have never had. Perhaps understanding myself...why I am...why he is...will help. Perhaps control will become less of an issue as understanding grows. Of course...as his visits with me grow shorter...I worry that his visits with Diana may grow more frequent...we shall have to see...I still have problems with that.

He sighed and closed the journal. He stood, arms crossed, holding his cloak around himself, staring at his painting in the dark. All the colors were faded to black and white...all the shades of gray, but the beauty was still there. He glanced over at Diana and smiled slightly. He tossed aside his cloak and slid carefully back under the covers to avoid waking her.



The following morning it was business as usual. Everyone had slept well for a change, and Vincent had not pulled a disappearing act, so a normal routine could be followed. Vincent was correct, Michael was grateful to have him back. Teaching all the classes had become a trial. Jeremy had fallen behind in math because Michael had not had time to give him more personal attention, and Eric was having a problem trying to catch up since he had fallen behind when he was having trouble reading. Vincent volunteered to help both of them after classes, and after he had taught his regular classes Father found him helping a struggling Jeremy with an algebra problem. He stood in the doorway as Vincent patiently took him through the process yet again, and finally the boy seemed to understand. Vincent commended him on his hard work and dismissed him to go play.

Father chuckled as the child streaked out the door. "For someone who hates math as much as you do, you do an admirable job teaching it."

"One does not have to love a subject to appreciate the necessity of it, Father, though I fear Jeremy could tell my heart was not in it."

Father sat in the leather chair next to the bed. "I am pleased to see you feeling better...will it last?"

Vincent shrugged, a little irritated, but embarrassed as well. "That is an impossible question to answer, Father. I am sorry I keep disrupting the peace...it is not intentional, I assure you."

"I am only concerned about you, Vincent. You have not been the same for some months now."

Vincent leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, his broad shoulders straining the homespun of his shirt. "I know. This is perhaps a good time to address...your concern." There was no trace of levity or gentleness in Vincent's face as he confronted Father. He walked over and sat on the bed facing Father. "Why is it that you insist on treating me as a child? For years you hid the facts of my...creation ...from me. I could understand your withholding it from a child...but a grown man? Am I not adult enough to hear the things I should know...that I have a right to know?"

Vincent watched Father, but the older man did not meet his eyes. Father fidgeted with his glasses. Finally, when Vincent never moved...never said more...he was forced to look

up. "I am sorry...truly, Vincent. But you must understand." He was obviously struggling desperately to make Vincent understand. "You were...if not happy...before Catherine...you were contented with your life. I put off telling you. Then, once Catherine came into your life, I had other worries." Father watched Vincent carefully, and when he dropped his eyes, he continued. "I...simply could not bring myself to hurt you. Your life became a roller coaster...and has been so ever since. There just never seemed a proper time...or enough need."

Vincent had paced across the chamber, and at this point, he spun to face the elderly man he had always called "Father." He was becoming angry, but he was forcing himself into a semblance of calm. "There never seemed a proper time...what seemly sentiments. Look at me, Father." When Father did not look up, Vincent all but roared..."LOOK AT ME!" Father started at the roar, and looked up. Vincent held out his hands. "Look at your son...How do you think I have felt all these years...not knowing? Not knowing is almost worse than knowing." He spun again and paced with a cat's grace back and forth across the chamber, his rapid movements causing the candles flames to flutter. "Before Catherine I was *not* content, Father. I was existing. Since then, yes...there has been pain...almost beyond bearing at times..." He knelt before Father. "But the joy, Father..." Vincent sat back on the bed and put his head in his hands. Shaking his head slowly, he continued, without looking up. "My life after Catherine died was agony. Then, slowly...with Diana's help, and Jacob's...I learned to look beyond the pain to life once more." He finally looked up and met Father's eyes. "But always there have been the differences hanging over me...and not just the differences, but the agony of not knowing WHY I was different. Just to KNOW, Father...is something. I cannot change what I am...knowing makes it no better or worse...but it is a starting point to begin dealing with it."

Father had nothing to say...there was nothing he could say, and Vincent continued. "I have the dreams...of Paracelsus...of my sister. Did you know her name, Father?"

Father just shook his head dumbly.

"Her name was Lethe, Father. Does that mean anything to you? Can you not see the significance of the name Paracelsus gave her?"

Father nodded. "Lethe. The river of forgetfulness."

Vincent agreed. "Paracelsus ordered me to forget. Diana claims he must have given me some...post-hypnotic command. But more importantly, Father, I would forget my life here. I would forget who I was, who I AM." He forced himself to continue, though it obviously pained him. "Apparently, he planned on using the two of us as...breeding stock...and I have no way of knowing if he succeeded."

Father stood painfully, reaching for his cane. It had been damp lately and his hip was bothering him worse than usual. Vincent reached out to help him. "Come with me, Vincent."

Vincent followed him back to his cluttered chamber, where he dug through a stack of books that had obviously been in the same place for years. He wiped the dust from a large leather-bound book, and dug another out and did the same. At Vincent's questioning look, he answered. "These are Paracelsus' journals. He left them when we had him *escorted* to the perimeter...I do not know if they will do you any good, however. They are written in code."

Vincent leaned against the edge of Father's desk and slowly opened the first of the journals. Father was right...nothing made any sense. He leafed through both of them, and found nothing intelligible. He sighed and closed them. "Perhaps Pascal could help. Perhaps there is some connection between his codes and the pipe codes? He did create both."

Father nodded, though somewhat hesitantly. "Perhaps. You are welcome to try, but I would not hold out much hope, Vincent. Pascal's father tried...but it was useless."

Vincent juggled the books restlessly. So much information...were the answers he needed in these obscure texts? Finally, he raised his eyes to Father's. "Thank you for your honesty." Vincent hesitated a moment, but finally raised his eyes to Father's. "Father...I love you, and I know you love me...but please...do not treat me as though I have never grown beyond just learning my letters. Whether I am a *man* or not...I *am* an adult."

Father nodded. "Yes. You are definitely a *man* and no longer a child."

Vincent nodded. An understanding had been met...Vincent was satisfied. He reached out and hugged Father with his free arm. "Thank you, Father. Now, I must go see Pascal."



Diana and Jamie were washing clothes, using Mouse's refurbished and "adjusted" washing machines. Every time Diana used one, she worried about whether or not their clothes would come out in one piece or several...so far she'd been fairly lucky and it had only "eaten" one of Vincent's shirts. As they worked, Cathy "helped" by playing with the twins. Jacob and Toby had gone with Eric, Jeremy, and Zach to the Reach to watch them skateboard. Eric had promised he would teach them how to skateboard. Diana just prayed for boys that bounced like rubber balls...and no broken bones. The two women talked quietly about Mouse and Vincent.

Jamie told Diana, "I'm not sure what's causing Vincent's problems, but I do know that I'm not the one to ask...there are too many things about him I'll never understand." She shrugged. "To be his friend, you just have to accept him and love him, so...if I can help, just let me know. But I won't push."

Diana was concerned because Joe had sent her a message that he needed her for a case. She'd refused because she didn't want to be away from Vincent right now. She told Jamie, "I'm really afraid to leave him now...he might go off again."

Shaking her head gently, Jamie commented, "Vincent has always gone off by himself, Diana. He'll be fine. You should at least check with Joe on the case. I know you hate to be away from your work completely. I'm not sure what makes Vincent's going away any different this time, but if you say it is, I'm sure it must be. I'm glad, though, that Mouse went with you."

Diana smiled gently at her friend, and commented, "Yes. Mouse knows Vincent probably better than anyone else...except myself. He really *is* a good man, Jamie."

Pausing a moment in her clothes-folding, Jamie glanced up. "You know, I think you and I...and maybe Vincent...are about the only ones who see Mouse as a grown up...even now that he has the twins...and you're right; he is a good man. I'm very lucky."

Diana asked, "Where is he today?"

Jamie pointed with her chin towards the maze. "He's down in the Catacombs again with Elliott." She grinned. "I don't see how Elliott expects to get his business off the ground again if he spends so much time *under* it, but he and Mouse are like long-lost brothers when it comes to building, fixing, and inventing."

Diana said nothing and simply continued folding clothes. She knew why Elliott had been spending so much time here...he was worried about her...and about Vincent. He didn't know what was going on, but he sensed it was serious. In his own unobtrusive way he was trying to at least be available if they needed him...and she knew it was costing him so far as his business was concerned. *I had best have a talk with him.* Diana finished folding the clothes and decided it would take two trips to take it back, so asked Jamie to keep Cathy while she took the first load. As she was carrying the heavy basket back to their chamber she reached out to see if Vincent was finished tutoring Jeremy...and found his thoughts in somewhat of a muddle. He was heading off the other direction. She dropped the clothes off in the chamber, then followed him...and found him in the pipe chamber speaking with Pascal.

"...left them here when he was escorted to the perimeter. Father says your father tried with them at one time, but I thought perhaps you would be willing to try."

Pascal was studiously examining a large leather-bound book and didn't even look up when Diana entered...but Vincent waved her in. She looked up at Vincent questioningly.

Finally, Pascal shook his head. "I don't know, Vincent. I'll look at them of course and see what I can do, but if my father was unable to decipher the code, I really don't see how I can do much better."

Vincent sighed hugely. "I suspected as much. But whatever you can find out will be appreciated, Pascal. Thank you."



About that time, messages began coming in. Pascal grabbed a wrench to tap a reply and was once more lost in the music of his beloved pipes. Vincent smiled at Diana and shook his head. Taking her arm, they left Pascal to his pipes.



As they walked, Vincent explained to her about the books. "I truly hold out little hope that Pascal can do more than his father did, but if he can find out anything...I would be grateful."

Diana walked silently next to him, keeping her thoughts to herself. When he noted both her silence and lack of openness with him, he stopped and turned to her. "What is it, Diana?"

She sighed, then glancing up saw Laura coming down the tunnel towards them. She had come down for a visit, and Vincent was momentarily distracted as he spoke with her, the signing flashing quickly between them. Diana had already visited with her earlier and smiled at their conversation. Vincent assured Laura that he was well despite rumors to the contrary and that when Winterfest rolled around he would, indeed, dance with her when she came back down. Laura's quick smile and fierce hug tugged at Diana's heart. Everyone loved Vincent so. *Why can't he simply value himself for what he is...as everyone else does?*

Laura hugged Diana as well and told her goodbye. They watched as she trotted off down the tunnel toward the nearest subway threshold. Vincent finally turned to Diana and asked again..."Now. What is wrong?"

"Nothing."

Vincent chuckled ever so slightly, the sound a rumble resembling a purr. Diana's stomach flipped whenever he did that...and the stab of desire she felt made her want to scream...or throw him down right here in the middle of the busiest thoroughfare and have her way with him. *I keep wondering when his every move...every word...every sound, is going to stop doing this to me...I hope never.* Vincent was perfectly aware of how he affected her. He smiled gently as she leaned against the tunnel wall as he bent to kiss her.

His voice was soft as he asked, "Are you sure there is nothing wrong?"

Since she knew she couldn't lie to him, she forced her mind back to the initial question. "I just hate to have you in such a fever to find out everything about yourself. Does it truly matter so very much?"

Vincent used his talons to idly undo what was left of her braid...it never seemed to stay for very long...and he liked it better loose anyway. As he did this, he spoke softly to her, his eyes not really seeing her, or what he was doing. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. I am still learning that as well."

She turned to him and forced him to look at her. "Vincent. There are children in the world Above who were conceived in test tubes; there are those who were conceived by rape. Are any of them less human? Perhaps that's not an entirely apt analogy, but what makes you human is what is inside you. We have both of us met men...and women...who are less human than most animals. Can't you just finally appreciate what you are and learn to love yourself as others do?"

Vincent sighed and stopped fiddling with her hair. "I understand what you are saying,

Diana, and I cherish you for the thought...but still, I must try once again to find out."

Diana could sense no terrible worry, or even sadness. Actually, he seemed fairly quiet and pleased. He gazed down at her with those wonderful eyes of his, and it was difficult for her to remember that Jamie was still waiting for her to pick up Cathy.

Vincent, however, picked up her thought, smiled, and said, "Come. Let us go get her, and go watch Jacob and Toby learn to skateboard. Pascal told me Zach was down there helping. It ought to be interesting."



After picking up Cathy and the clothes, they went on down to the Reach, Vincent carrying the basket with him. As they neared the area they could hear the children yelling and playing. Jacob almost flew into Vincent as they came through the tunnel opening. Vincent steadied him as he rocked...almost vibrating with energy.

"Father! Come watch! Zach says we do great!"

Vincent held his breath as Jacob all but launched himself onto the skateboard and flew down the concrete stretch...somehow remaining in one piece. He unclenched his teeth as the child picked up the skateboard and ran back to him.

"Did you see! Did you?"

Vincent grinned, showing all four canines..."Yes. I saw. It was wonderful." Then, Toby, not to be outdone had to show off as well, and both Vincent and Diana braced themselves as he headed fast as greased lightning down the concrete stretch. Vincent found himself actually sweating as the child skittered to a halt at the bottom. As Toby ran laughing and excited back to them, Vincent knelt and scooped both the boys up in a bear hug. Jacob laughed delightedly as he "felt" his father's relief, and Vincent had no choice but to laugh with him.

"Father...do you know how to skateboard?"

Looking at Diana and winking, he said, "Do I know how to skateboard?...Well, let me see that thing..." He took the skateboard from Toby and held it up...pretending to examine it. "It looks very small...but let me try..." He proceeded to take off and perform a few complicated maneuvers that had the older boys cheering, then brought the skateboard back, solemnly presenting it to Toby. He grinned mischievously. "I suppose I had forgotten to mention...I *have* done this a time or two."

Diana was laughing so hard at the look on the boys' faces that she had to sit down. She watched, wiping tears of laughter away while Vincent explained to all of them how Devin had challenged him to learn to skateboard awhile back, and he'd enjoyed it so much he'd continued for awhile, until the novelty wore off. After cautioning the boys to please be careful, he joined Diana. His smug look almost set her to giggling again. "You never told me you were a champion skateboarder. How come I never saw you practicing?"

"You didn't know? Well, it is pleasant to know I can still surprise you...even now. As to why you never saw me..." He grinned. "Well...it's not the sort of thing I *generally* advertise."

Diana hid her smile behind a hand. "Not too dignified, huh?"



Vincent glanced over at Cathy who, in the midst of all the noise and confusion had somehow managed to fall asleep on top of the clean clothes. He picked her up, basket and all, and he and Diana walked slowly back to their chamber. Once there, he put the basket down, then picked Cathy up softly, without waking her and nestled her on his shoulder. "I will take her and put her down. She will be up before supper anyway."

Diana put one slim arm around his waist, pressing against him. She whispered seductively, "See how fast you can hurry back."

This time, it was Vincent who was taken by surprise by his sudden surge of desire. Quickly, he threw up his barrier to avoid disturbing Cathy...or Jacob. With a smoldering glance at Diana, he strode from the room to take Cathy to the dorm. By the time he dropped her off, just thinking about Diana waiting for him was becoming a sweet, aching pain, a contagion that had affected his entire body...and he wished desperately to be able to dash down the tunnel back to the chamber. He forced himself to walk, nodding calmly at Michael and Brooke as they passed, then Rebecca and Cullen...but by the time he reached the chamber he could barely restrain himself. He reached out and checked to make sure Jacob was still at the Reach, then went inside. She was waiting for him, already in bed...with the covers pulled up to her chin. He could feel her combined desire and amusement as he struggled to get out of his multiple layers of clothing, and by the time he dove under the covers to join her, his frustration level was getting fairly high. He had scarcely touched her when suddenly, with a horrified look on his face, he was out of bed as quickly as he had gotten in. He was awkwardly pulling on his jeans, hopping desperately on one foot, and trying to force himself into a space he simply refused to fit into at this particular time.

Diana began laughing helplessly...again...tears of mirth pouring down her face. The whole situation was hilarious to her...and watching the usually dignified Vincent hopping around trying to get into his pants was more than she could bear. She knew...even though she had no bond with Jacob, that the child must be heading this way, and Vincent could feel him. She pulled on her robe, still laughing almost uncontrollably, and he threw her a look of mingled frustration, anger...and irony that was indescribably funny. She was still laughing when Jacob and Toby came in, perplexed by all the hilarity...with Elliott on their heels.

Elliott stopped dead in the doorway and blushed scarlet. He, at least, knew what they had just interrupted. "Oops. Sorry. We were just coming to get you for supper...guess we should go away and come back?" Vincent's deadpan face almost set Elliott to laughing as hard as Diana...who was just now winding down.

Vincent sighed in frustration. "No. Somehow, I think the damage is done for now." Then Elliott *did* laugh, much to Vincent's dismay.

Elliott, still laughing, offered to take the boys on for supper and meet them there. "Jamie and Mouse will be along soon, and Father wanted to visit."

For Father to join them in the common room for supper was unusual, as he usually took his supper in his study. Vincent thought briefly, *Elliott must have made an impression on him...or perhaps it is only that Father has been able to beat him at chess, and he's feeling magnanimous; right now, I wouldn't mind beating Elliott either...but not at chess!*

By the time Vincent was finished pulling on his shirt, vest, socks, boots, and re-belted his pants, Diana was dressed and ready to go. As she stood combing her hair, he

came to her and embraced her so fiercely she thought briefly that her ribs would crack. When his eyes met hers, he had only one word to say. "Later." Then he took her hand and they walked slowly to the dorm to get Cathy for supper.



Supper was a boisterous affair, with a great deal of joking and teasing. Father had, indeed, beaten Elliott at chess and was rubbing it in cheerfully. Elliott took it all with good natured bantering, simply stating he was out of practice and would have to spend more time down here re-educating himself in the finer things in life.

Diana made the mistake of commenting that chess was, after all, only a game...which aroused ire on all sides, and started a heavy philosophical discussion between Vincent, Elliott, and Father...with Father finally commenting: "The chess-board is the world; the pieces are the phenomena of the universe; the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature."

Sheepishly, Diana finally conceded and commented in a small voice, "I'm sorry I started all this...Chinese Checkers is more my speed anyway."

The table talk had been boring to the children and they were beginning to nod off, so Mouse and Jamie offered to take them and put them down before taking the twins back. With a swift glance at Diana, Vincent agreed...almost too quickly. Mouse glanced up and caught Elliott's eye with a somewhat perplexed look...which caused Elliott to choke with suppressed laughter. Father, of course, was completely oblivious and was still regaling Diana with all the reasons that she really should let him teach her to play chess properly.

Once the children were properly kissed and off with Mouse and Jamie, Vincent excused himself and rose. He held out a hand for Diana and asked if she would care for a walk before bed. As they started out the door, Elliott piped up cheerfully from behind. "Mind if I come along?"

Vincent stopped dead in his tracks and turned slowly...about to be angry. Then, realizing he was being teased...mercilessly in fact...he grinned...wider than Elliott had ever seen him do before. He finally managed to reply calmly in his usual silk-over-granite voice, "No. I think not tonight Elliott."



As they left, Vincent was having a problem keeping his temper. He knew Elliott had only been teasing, but he had never liked being teased, though normally he took it with equanimity. However, he could feel Diana's amusement at his situation...and he didn't like being laughed at either...even if it was good natured...and silent. *I suppose I am supposed to be pleased at all the interruptions!*

Diana couldn't stand it any longer...she caught the thought, and that set her off again...she laughed as she ran ahead of him to their chamber. By the time he skidded into the door, she was standing there holding out his cloak for him. "You said you wanted a walk...remember?"

Scowling, Vincent snatched the cloak from her with a swift tug. "Very well. Come

then."

Diana walked swiftly beside him, sorry to have angered him so. But for some reason, even now, the thought of the afternoon's fiasco and supper's aftermath was enough to make her giggle if she dwelled on it. Forcing her thoughts away from that, she waited patiently for him to open the steel door and gate and followed him out into the fresh air of the park. *Perhaps he will feel better out in the fresh air.* They walked silently for awhile, with Diana matching her strides to his. She watched as he lifted his head, scenting everything...sensing everything around him. She noted with startlement that he had not pulled his hood up and his head was uncovered; that was totally unlike him. *Uh Oh.* She reached out to touch their bond...and as she suspected...there was none. This was not Vincent.

Diana heard joggers coming their way and tugged on his arm. He shrugged her off. "Damn it! Come here!" She managed to pull him around. She motioned to the bushes and he reluctantly followed her, allowing the joggers to pass unmolested, though his lip lifted briefly in a snarl. Diana observed his behavior...his general demeanor...and wondered briefly about this. She had never seen him out unless he was in a killing rage or out to make love to her...this was different somehow; she wasn't sure she liked it. He was still looking around...observing everything intently. As he stared up at the moon, she thought for a brief, crazy moment he was going to throw back his head and howl. She pulled on his sleeve again to get his attention. "Come on. We need to go back...it is dangerous to stay out here."

He shook his head. "No. I want to see." He glanced up the path that the joggers had taken, then looked down at Diana. He gestured briefly the way they had gone. "I could have killed them."

Diana sighed and commented, "I know. But you didn't. I'm proud of you. But you have to come with me...now."

He looked puzzled. "Why?"

She sighed again. "Why not?" She took his hand and pulled again, and this time he came with her. Diana opened the gate and rolled the door back, pulling him after her, somewhat like a large pet dog...or cat, if you could imagine one that large. He stood alertly on the other side as she closed off the threshold. When she looked up at him, her mind was running in circles. *Whatever am I to do with him? Put him to bed...maybe if he sleeps....* To him, she said firmly, "It's time for bed. Let's go to bed."

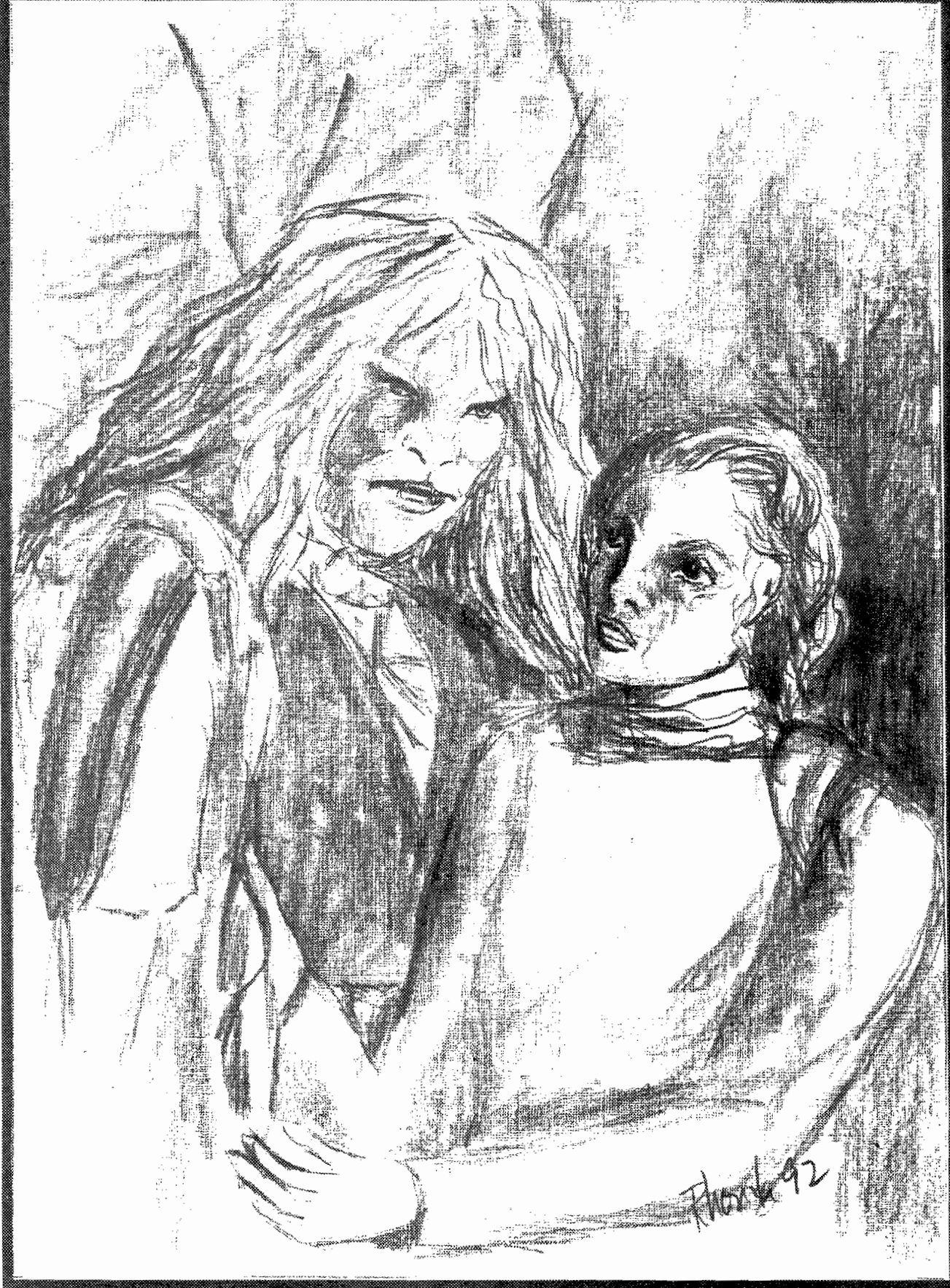
He grinned down at her, but shook his head. "Nice try. He reached out and cupped her breast possessively. "Later. Not now. I want to see the children...his children."

As he turned abruptly and swung off down the tunnel, Diana had no choice but to follow at a run. She didn't think he would harm the children...but she was worried about anyone else who might cross him...Elliott for instance...or even Mary. Scampering sideways next to him in the cramped tunnel, Diana asked, "Why the children?"

He simply kept walking steadily, but commented..."Because he never lets me be with them. He is afraid I will hurt them." He stopped and looked at her with a strangely puzzled expression. "Why would I harm them, Diana?"

Diana fell behind briefly, mulling that over. Why, indeed?

They entered the nursery and walked directly to Jacob's bed. He stood over the boy



for a long while, then hesitantly reached out and touched the child's hair...which curled down into his neck almost to his shoulders...as he wore it long like his father. He turned to Diana. "He looks like Catherine."

Diana watched, intrigued by this entire development. "Have you never seen him before?"

He turned back to Jacob. "Yes...of course. But it is different...seeing him through...him. Catherine was right. He is beautiful."

He reached out once more to touch Jacob, and the child woke, startled. He sat up, confused: he knew this was his father, but he could feel no bond. When "The Other" sat next to him, Jacob climbed into his lap and hugged him. "Did you come to kiss me goodnight again, father?"

"The Other" held Jacob awkwardly, then rested his face against the child's hair, breathing in his scent. "Yes." He kissed him and placed him back on his pillow.

Jacob mumbled, "I love you."

"The Other" brushed Jacob's hair back from his face, and said, "I love you too, Jacob."

Without looking up at Diana, he silently walked across the dormitory to the younger children's area. Before he reached for Cathy, she sat up and looked deeply into his eyes, then held out her arms for him. The small arms held him tightly, and Diana was startled to hear him humming Catherine's lullaby very quietly. When he finally laid Cathy back down, she patted his cheek before closing her eyes and turning over to sleep.

When he stood finally Diana could see his eyes glazing over...he was "losing" himself to Vincent.



Diana pulled at "The Other" again and he followed reluctantly. Yawning hugely, he stumbled down the tunnel after her, but suddenly Elliott rounded the corner, and "The Other" pushed past her. Giving Elliott a rough right-handed shove, he pinned him against the wall with his forearm. "You! You laughed at me!"

Elliott glanced past him at Diana. He seemed confused and unsure as to what to do...not sure if this was a joke or not. Diana knew he probably thought Vincent was drunk...his eyes were unfocused, his speech slurred.

Diana pulled at a cloak sleeve, casting a beseeching look at Elliott...and pleaded with "The Other." "No...it's all right...really. He was joking. It was friendly...he meant well."

"The Other" hesitated...seeming unsure. He was a little more alert, but he yawned again. He released Elliott with obvious reluctance, shook himself, then turned away, almost as though he had forgotten him entirely. He looked instead at Diana with renewed interest.

Elliott glanced up, his look desperate. "Is he all right?..."

Diana nodded...never taking her eyes off "The Other". "Don't worry. He's fine. He's just not...quite himself right now."

Elliott watched puzzled as they walked unsteadily away from him, with Vincent leaning on Diana a little. He grinned as he watched Vincent's hand wander to Diana's backside...and stay there. Shaking his head a little, he commented to himself, *Drunk*

surely. *I didn't know he drank.* He shrugged and headed off toward the guest chamber.



Diana turned down the bed and helped "The Other" out of some of his clothes, leaving his shirt and socks on, then pushed him into bed. As he was falling into the bed, he reached out with one long arm and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her down with him. She fell atop him and realized suddenly that he was back awake...her assistance in divesting him of his clothing must have "reminded" him of why he had come to begin with. He was fully aroused and very capable of staying awhile. His anger at Elliott had begun his awakening and she had finished it. *Damn it! I should've just let him sleep in his clothes!*

He rolled over and pinned her down, one long leg lying across hers, his hands on her wrists. "Now is later." He managed to pull her jeans off, and after making several unsuccessful tries with the buttons, just pulled at her blouse until it tore. "Didn't like that one anyway."

Diana didn't like this at all. It wasn't like last time...and right now she was not particularly in the mood to be mauled. Had he been Vincent, she would have slapped his face for behavior like this...except Vincent wouldn't behave this way...and if she slapped this particular face, the slap she got back might be fatal! He definitely needed an attitude adjustment! "Hey! Slow down...if you want to do this...take it easy."

Frustrated all afternoon, he was not in the mood to slow down...but strangely, he cooperated. Rather plaintively, he murmured with a soft growl, "I want you, Diana. I have waited all day."

Diana thought again about the day's events and almost began laughing...but she didn't think it would be wise. He probably did feel he'd been waiting all day. No wonder he had managed to get out. It was just a shame...because she didn't want him...she wanted Vincent...with his gentleness and joyful lovemaking...not "The Other." And if she let him make love to her...chances were that Vincent would lose out. The trouble was, Diana was beginning to pick up his intense desire. She could sense his need and her body was beginning to answer that need with its own...quite against her will. She could block it if she tried hard enough, but that wouldn't stop him. She gasped as he nipped her at the junction of her thigh and hip...and felt his tongue on the inside of her thigh. She gave up, surrendering herself to his desire...letting it become her own. Groaning, she grasped his mane and pulled him to her, kissing him fiercely. Strangely, she thought several times as she moved with him that she felt Vincent...felt the bond touch briefly...but she was so immersed in their combined desire she wasn't sure. At the end Diana's consciousness exploded outward...automatically reaching for him, and she was sure she felt their bond.



Afterwards, with him nestled against her, she brushed his hair back out of her face, then leaned on her elbow looking at him. He looked so peaceful. She reached out with her bond to touch him, and found only his lightly sleeping mind...completely at peace. She had tried not to disturb him, but he opened his eyes and blinked... smiling softly.


Vincent reached up and cupped her face in his hand. His azure eyes sleepy still, he commented: "Later *did* finally come." He closed his eyes again, cupped her breast, and snuggled in closer.

Diana was confused. *Who did I just make love to? It's getting pretty bad when I can't tell the difference!* She lay back, letting his arm tighten around her, and pulled the quilt up over her shoulders. *I wonder what he'll say when he wakes next time...or if I should say anything.* Then, it occurred to her that she had no scratches...no bruises. For "The Other" to be so gentle was not really in character. Sighing, she gave up trying to figure it out and tried to go to sleep.



BLESSINGS ON THE WILD CHILD

The easy motion of his supple stride,
which turns about the very smallest circle,
is like a dance of strength about a center
in which a mighty will stands stupefied.⁶

 incent woke, stretching luxuriously. He lay peacefully against Diana, but as he lay there thinking, he became puzzled. The events of the preceding night seemed muddled somehow. He remembered supper...and something about the park...and seemed to remember making love to Diana. He knew he had...why couldn't he remember everything? Usually he could remember every touch... every moment. But this morning something seemed to be missing somehow...as with the walk in the park. He stared down at Diana, who slept peacefully...fiery hair tangled and spread over her pillow. Suddenly he had a thought...and sensed a presence. Looking behind him, he saw "The Other" lounging in his leather chair.

Well?

Sliding out of bed softly so as not to wake Diana, he thought furiously at the apparition, *Well what?*

"The Other" slowly unwound his long legs and walked over to Vincent's painting of himself and Catherine. He stood staring up at Catherine. *It wasn't so bad, was it?*

What wasn't so bad? Vincent was still sleepy and none of this was registering very clearly...though he was beginning to have a bad feeling about it.

Sharing. It wasn't so bad. He turned and faced Vincent, and again, his face was neither mocking or sardonic...but merely a little sad. He winked out, and was gone.

Vincent was stunned. He stood there in his long shirt and socks and turned to look at Diana. So now he knew why his memory had holes in it. He tried to get angry, but somehow he couldn't quite muster the emotion. He kept thinking of the look on "The Other's" face, and was experiencing emotions towards him that surprised him...understanding and sympathy. He started to slide back into bed, but decided against it. He dressed quickly and went down to the showers instead.

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As Vincent passed the guest chamber, Elliott was coming out. When Vincent smiled and greeted him, Elliott grinned. "Feeling better, are you?"

Vincent seemed unsure quite how to take that, cocked his head, and finally commented, "Yes. I'm sorry, Elliott, if I was rude. Sometimes I'm not quite myself. Did you sleep well?"

Nodding, Elliott fell in beside him, noting his towel. He realized that Vincent must be heading for the showers. Elliott said, "Wait a moment..." and dashed back to dig for the ragged guest towel back in the chamber. When he came back toting his towel, Vincent looked a little dismayed, and Elliott knew he was embarrassed. It really made no difference. The time Vincent had visited him during a rainstorm and had borrowed his robe, Elliott had

gotten a pretty fair idea of how he looked. Vincent sighed hugely and continued down the tunnel with Elliott pacing beside him. When they reached the showers Vincent tossed his towel over a boulder, kicked off his sandals and pulled off his jeans, neatly folding them as he studiously avoided looking at Elliott. Elliott undressed behind him, tossing his clothes into an untidy pile, so that when Vincent turned, Elliott was already under the shower. As Elliott stepped out of the shower, and Vincent stepped in, Elliott noted Vincent's neatly folded pile of clothing next to his. As he dried, he watched Vincent, knowing Vincent was well aware of his scrutiny. He talked to him in a calmly conversational tone.

"Mouse and I did a pretty good job. This is the first time I've tried it. It's good to have hot water."

Vincent nodded and continued with his own shower. "It is a definite improvement, Elliott. I know Diana appreciates it. She complained about cold showers constantly."

When Vincent stepped out of the shower he seemed to pause a moment, as if undecided, then reached for his towel. Elliott suspected he'd wanted to shake the water out of his pelt...it would have been the logical thing...but he imagined that Vincent was too conscious of his differences to advertise them.

As Vincent dressed, Elliott asked jokingly, "No hangover?"

Vincent seemed confused, perplexed. "Hangover? Why?"

Flustered, Elliott shrugged..."Well...I just thought after last night..."

Vincent stammered a little, "Sorry about last night. I wasn't quite...myself."

"Hey...it's okay...it's just that I've never seen you drunk before. Hope you realize I wasn't really laughing at you...I was laughing more at the situation. It really was kind of funny."

Vincent seemed relieved. He had already pulled on his pants, and pulled his shirt on in one swift motion. "It's all right, Elliott. It *was* funny." He slipped his feet into his sandals, and they headed towards the kitchen for breakfast. "It is early yet, but I am starved."

Elliott paced quietly next to him, wishing he didn't have to leave, but he had appointments to keep today. He was sure people were looking for him already. His stride faltered a moment and he quietly asked Vincent: "You would tell me, wouldn't you, if there were anything I could do...if you needed anything?"

Placing a hand on Elliott's shoulder...just for a moment...Vincent paused. "Of course, Elliott. But truly, I am fine. Do not worry about me...or about Diana."



As Vincent and Elliott were finishing breakfast Diana and the children came in for theirs. After they had the children settled and Diana joined them, she informed Vincent that Joe had sent her another message that he really needed her for the case, and she had decided to go up and see what she could do to help. She told him she'd be gone probably most of the day.

Elliott chimed in..."I have to leave in awhile as well, do you mind if I escort you?" He glanced to Vincent belatedly and asked..."Do you?"

Both Diana and Vincent looked to him. Vincent shrugged finally and smiled...though

somewhat stiffly. "It sounds like a good idea. That way I know she will be...safe." His eyes met Elliott's for a tiny fraction of a second, then his gaze dropped to Diana. He still was jealous when Diana and Elliott were alone together... ever since Elliott had kissed Diana so passionately last year, but he hated to advertise his jealousy. He told Diana. "I would like to speak with you before you leave though, Diana...if I may."

Diana reached for their bond, and when their eyes met, he knew at least some of what had happened last night. She nodded, then said, "If you could get the children settled for me, I will meet you back in the chamber before I go."

Hesitating only briefly, Vincent excused himself and went to claim the children and take them to classes. Brooke was still working with the children Cathy's age, and provided a valuable service for most of the mothers here Below. She took them on excursions and kept them busy with activities for most of the morning, allowing their mothers freedom to do other things. Michael was once again handling the children Jacob and Toby's age...teaching the early readers. Once Diana left, Vincent would go teach his own classes and make his maintenance and security sweep. Mouse was coming with him today.

By the time he had dropped off the children and spoken with Michael about a problem with Toby's behavior yesterday, Vincent found Diana in their chamber getting ready to go Above.

He paused briefly in the entrance. "Diana."

She turned from her mirror to face him. "Are the children settled?"

He nodded and paced across the chamber, coming to rest near the leather chair by the bed. "He was here again last night."

"Yes."

He glanced up, eyes shadowed. "And?"

She sighed and met his eyes. It seemed to Vincent that she was resigned to a disagreement. "And...what do you want me to say, Vincent? Do you want a blow-by-blow?"

He growled a little, but nodded.

"All right. What is the last thing you remember?"

He seemed confused. "I'm not sure. I remember going to the park. But I remember...very acutely at times...being in bed with you...some of it." He glanced at her as though hoping she would agree...that he had been there.

Vincent watched as Diana fidgeted. He reached for their bond, and she touched back gently, trying to reassure him. "I know you were there...you must have been. I felt you several times...especially at the end."

Nodding finally, Vincent agreed...he felt the truth of that...their bond didn't lie. "Diana...that has never happened before...the sharing; at least, not with me. He, apparently quite frequently knows what I am doing...I am usually totally unaware of what he is doing when he is out...and before last night the only time I have ever experienced anything of what he has felt is...when he...kills. When he kills, I feel everything, his emotions... and the victim's...but I am not in control. Diana, it is terrible. I feel everything, every moment...with no control, no way to stop it. This was similar except for the fading in and out, and it has never occurred before. I am not sure if it is a good sign...or a bad one."

Diana finished with her hair, then stood. "Nor am I, Vincent. All I know is that for a time you were together. I cannot help but think that is progress...of a sort." She put her arms around him and drew him to her. She laid her head against his chest as his arms encircled her. The warmth and aura of her love enveloped him. She rubbed her cheek against his shirt, then lifted her face to be kissed. "I hate to leave, but Joe said he needed me, so I suppose I have to go. What are your plans today after your chores?"

Vincent rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes. Her hair smelled clean, with a touch of the shampoo she used. As he spoke his voice rumbled in his chest. "I have no plans other than perhaps playing with the children...and waiting for you to return." He released her and leaned down to kiss her gently. "Stay safe, and give Joe greetings from me. It has been too long since we have seen him."

Just then, Elliott appeared in the doorway. Vincent glanced up and commented quietly. "I see your escort is here." He gave Elliott a long, meaningful look, and said firmly, "Elliott: Take care of her...and remember." Leaning over, Vincent picked up a stack of books he needed for class and departed past Elliott, leaving Diana standing there looking confused.



Diana stared hard at Elliott, "Remember? Remember what?"

Elliott flushed. "A reference to our indiscretion back at Jacob's last birthday...when I kissed you. He doesn't want me to ever forget again."

Angry, Diana started after him, but Elliott put an arm across the door, stopping her. "Let him be, Diana. It's all right. I understand completely, I assure you."

"Maybe *you* do!..."

As they walked through the interconnecting tunnels with the tapping of the pipes constant around them, Diana simmered, thinking, *How dare he!*

Elliott, finally asked: "Are you angry that Vincent reminded me to keep my distance?"

"Aren't you?" she asked furiously.

Elliott chuckled, seeming amused at her obvious anger. "No. Not really. We have an understanding, he and I. I keep away and behave myself and he doesn't kill me. Sounds reasonable to me."

The amused tone of Elliott's answer made Diana laugh...despite the thought of the possibility of Vincent doing just that. The tension broken, they continued companionably along through the tunnels to the subway, where Elliott accompanied Diana to Joe's office, greeted Joe, then left. Diana was glad Elliott was going back to work. She didn't want him neglecting his business for worry about them.



Joe tossed the folder at Diana across the desk, his usually cheerful face somber. "Kidnapping."

Gingerly, Diana took the folder, holding it a moment and fingering the edges before opening it. She hated to start a case. When she'd moved to the tunnels to be with Vincent,

that in itself had been an escape. The pressures of dealing with the horrors here had almost killed her. Getting "into" the minds of the murderers, rapists, and general overall scum had made her feel tainted. She still had not completely shaken her feelings in that regard...even with Vincent's help. However, at the same time, she had a deep need to continue working, for deep down, Diana was a hunter. She needed the exhilaration of the hunt...and sometimes, yes...even the kill. Generally, now, it was better. Joe understood her needs better now that he really knew her, and he was able to act as a buffer between the commissioner and her. When she needed down time, she usually had more of it than she wanted. He obliged her...the least she could do was oblige him. She sighed hugely, steeled herself, and opened the folder.

The picture that stared up at her from the manila folder when she opened it was of a young woman, probably in her early 30's, ash blond, chin-length hair, green eyes. The resemblance to Catherine Chandler was astounding. She was also pregnant. She slammed the folder closed and threw it at Joe. *That's it...I can't do this!* "No, Joe...I can't. Not again."

Joe threw it back at her, scattering the contents on the floor. The picture fell face up and stared accusingly at her. "You have to. We've tried everything else. I held off, knowing what it would do to you. Damn it, Diana...it tears me up. She looks so much like Cathy...then, her being pregnant on top of that...it's hard." He paced over to the window and stood looking out at the city. "I keep thinking... where is she? What is he doing to her? Her husband is going nuts, Diana. We have to find her."

Diana's stomach had contracted into a hard knot. A new case...any case...was hard enough...but *this!* It was as if she were back looking for Catherine's killer again...only this time she had the chance to save her. *How is this going to affect Vincent?...How can I say no?* She bent and picked up the folder and scraped together the pictures and the rest of the file. Silently, she sat down to read it.

Marjorie Reives. 31. Abduction. Letter received with threats; no ransom demand made....

Diana continued reading until she reached the end of the short file. There was very little to go on. She sighed. Back to square one. "I will have to have her things...meet her husband." She looked up at Joe, who still stood staring out the window. "You know what this is going to do to Vincent...don't you? He's going to pick it all up through me."

Joe nodded without turning. "It can't be helped." He turned to her then and picked up his raincoat. It had been raining on and off the past two days. "Come on. I'll take you to meet Jon Reives."

Diana knew then that Joe was not leaving this case to anyone else. She tucked her arm through his silently and hugged the file to her chest. *Okay then...personal vendetta.*

They said nothing to each other as they wended their way through the noisy outer offices to the elevator and down to the street. Joe hailed a cab and they rode, still silent, across town to Brooklyn. Diana sat fingering the file and trying to put what little they knew into perspective. *Why was she kidnapped? Can't be for money... they're not rich...barely*

scraping by as far as I can see. Has to be something else. She didn't want to think what else it could be. She and Joe hadn't said a word to each other the whole trip...both being lost in their own thoughts. When they finally reached the Reives address, Joe opened the door for Diana and she reluctantly stepped out.

"God, I don't want to do this, Joe."

Joe watched her sympathetically. "I know...but please."

"You knew when you called me that there was no question that I would."

Hesitating again only a moment, Diana stepped forward resolutely. Joe knocked on the door, and they waited until a plainclothes officer opened the door. The officer nodded at Joe and motioned them inside.

Jon Reives sat slumped on the couch, his head in his hands. He looked up as Joe entered and briefly his eyes registered hope. "Did you hear anything?"

Joe shook his head. "No. But I brought someone who may be able to help, Jon." He held out a hand behind him and took Diana's hand, pulling her forward. "Jon, this is Diana Bennett. She is a freelance investigator who helps us out from time to time. She is also...a bit psychic...it helps."

Diana still had said nothing. Her analytical mind had been busy cataloging and impressing details in her memory. She knelt in front of Jon Reives. "I'll try to help her, Mr. Reives...but I need to see her things...especially anything she might have had with her when she disappeared. Joe said her purse was at the site with her car. I'll need to sit in the car...and go to the site as well."

Jon Reives turned his grief ravaged face to Diana and nodded. "I'll take you to our room." He stood shakily, and Diana took his arm to support him.

Once in the room, Mr. Reives left Diana alone. She stood for several minutes with her eyes closed, just receiving impressions of the happiness that Marjorie and Jon had experienced here. She moved around the room delicately touching picture frames, Marjorie's brushes and makeup. She sat awkwardly in front of Marjorie's makeup mirror. When she looked into the mirror, she saw a fuzzy image, almost a halo around her own, of Marjorie...so far had she stepped into the other woman's shoes...into her persona. Finally, after a long while she opened the door and asked Joe to take her to the site where she could sit in the car and receive impressions from there. She never said a word on the way and stared out the window at nothing.



Vincent went through his daily routine, teaching his literature class and his math class (much as he preferred not to). Jeremy was beginning to understand algebra better, and Eric was able to help him some, so that took some of the tutoring from Vincent's shoulders. Literature was much more enjoyable. They had been diligently studying "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and the students were enjoying it as much as the teacher. Once morning classes were over, Vincent ate a quick lunch, checked on his own children, then took off to make his security sweep. He checked all the usual trouble spots and found everything secure. He checked with Pascal and the sentries and all was well, though Pascal informed him that Kipper and Sandra had had a falling out and Sandra had asked to be removed from

the Rat Patrol.

Vincent chuckled, the sound rumbling gently in his throat. "Let me guess. Kipper put a rat down her shirt or some such."

Pascal laughed easily. "Who knows? It doesn't matter. You always have at least 10 children on the waiting list. Let Kipper choose his co-leader."

Vincent stretched, leaning on one of the pipes. "Let them hash it out in the next common meeting. It is time they learned some diplomacy. Sandra is too skittish in any case...I had my doubts about her from the first." Suddenly his expression changed...shock registering momentarily.

Pascal noted Vincent's expression. What is it?"

Silently Vincent shook his head, bewildered. "I don't know...something...strange." He paced across the chamber and leaned against the wall shakily.

Pascal went to him, expressing his concern. "Vincent...are you unwell? You're shaking."

Looking down at his hands, Vincent noted that he was, indeed, shaking. He shook his head once again. "I don't understand...Pascal...I felt Diana...felt danger...but I *saw* Catherine...." He swung toward his friend. "Or it seemed so, at least."

Pascal spread his hands and shook his head. "I don't know what to say. Vincent...Catherine cannot be in danger."

Vincent rubbed his temples with his thumbs. His head hurt. "I know that, Pascal. But Diana can be...she went Above to work on a case."

Logical as always, Pascal simply stated, "You can find out, you know...." referring to their bond.

Tentatively, Vincent reached out to touch Diana, and found her to be well...but he found her, also, thinking of Catherine...and also of another who was in danger. He shook himself, and when Pascal placed a hand on his shoulder, the contact brought him to himself. At Pascal's questioning look, he responded, "She is fine, Pascal...only working...as I should be."

Reluctantly bidding Pascal goodbye, Vincent left him to seek out Mouse. He still needed to go with Mouse down to the water tunnels to examine with him the problem with the small pump on the lower level. It was not pumping properly and needed to be replaced.

Vincent found Mouse waiting for him at the Mousehole, anxious to begin. Mouse had spent the rest of the morning with Cullen and a crew of three other men doing the finishing touches on the Catacomb Project.

When Vincent appeared in the entrance Mouse looked up, excited. "Vincent! Finally finished!" He motioned him over to explain the final changes Elliott had made and how it had enabled them to finish earlier than Mouse had anticipated...even with all the delays. Vincent examined the plans and was pleased that Mouse had finally been able to finish the project despite his lack of assistance. He told Mouse so, and Mouse just bobbed his head. "Okay, Vincent. Mouse managed." He looked critically at Vincent. "Still worried, though.... Still not the same...not like before."

They were walking as they talked, taking tunnel after tunnel, going deeper down to the area where the pump was. Vincent finally asked Mouse, "You saw him with her...with the



strange woman down Below, Mouse...the woman who looked somewhat like me?"

Mouse nodded.

"You never told me. Why?"

Mouse nervously shifted his pack to the other shoulder. Without looking at Vincent, he answered, "Didn't think you'd like to hear...besides...wasn't you...was him."

Sighing, Vincent told him, "Mouse, just because I wouldn't like to hear, well...I should have known. Did you ever see her any other time...did you know where she came from?"

Mouse glanced at him with a surprised look. "Sure. Came from Below...with Paracelsus. He brought her...took her away again. Mouse followed once. Could show you."

Vincent stopped suddenly and reached for Mouse's arm. "Show me, Mouse. I have been to Paracelsus' domain before...but will you show me where he kept her?"

"Now?" Mouse looked a little bewildered.

Reluctantly, Vincent shook his head. "No. Not now, Mouse. You need to let Jamie know where you are going...that you'll be away...and I must do the same with Diana and the children." He smiled solemnly at Mouse. "Neither of us is free to just drop what we are doing and leave, as once we could."

Mouse seemed glad Vincent was not upset with him. When they reached the pump, they made their notations of the parts they needed, then headed back. Helpers would begin to try and find the parts. It would take awhile.

On the way back, Vincent again received disorienting impressions from Diana...anxiety, dread, overlaid strangely with impressions of Catherine. When Vincent tried to sort through her thoughts, the muddle didn't clear...in fact, it became worse. By the time they reached the living area of the Hub, Vincent's head was throbbing. He seldom had headaches, but today there had been a dull ache all day, and now he felt as though his head were coming off.

Mouse watched him, his concern showing in his eyes. "You okay, Vincent?"

Vincent started to shake his head, and reconsidered. "No. My head aches, Mouse. I am going to lie down for awhile." When Mouse left, Vincent picked up Cathy from Brooke and took her to Mary. He asked if she could send one of the older boys to corral and watch the boys for him. "I would appreciate it, Mary." He had intended on playing with the children...spending time with them this evening, but right now all he wanted was to lie down. Even trying to use his empathic bond to sense them almost hurt. *Whatever is the matter with me?*

Vincent stumbled into his chamber and lowered himself to the bed. Forearm across his eyes, he lay still as a statue, trying to get his head to clear...trying to block impressions...thoughts...anything. Finally he slept.

Vincent dreamed he was once more searching for Catherine...walking the black, empty, desolate streets night after night. He would reach out and find nothing to guide him...no bond, no sense of her. The sense of hopelessness filled him. Then, he looked up and there was a woman beside him, quietly matching strides with him...also predatory...a hunter in her own right. He glanced to the side and met Diana's eyes, and she told him...*We'll find her, Vincent. This time, we'll find her.*

Diana stepped wearily into their chamber to find Vincent tossing and turning restlessly on their bed. She placed her carryall on the chair and went to him, sitting gently next to him. Reaching across him, she brushed his mane back out of his eyes and watched his eyelids move rapidly in an REM sleep pattern. *Should I wake him?* She hesitated to touch his mind for fear of disrupting a pleasant dream...but at the same time, he did not seem to be enjoying himself, so she lowered the barriers that she kept up routinely...especially Above...and opened her mind for him. Images began flooding in. He was searching for Catherine once more...and this time Diana was with him! She pulled out of the dream and sat shakily next to him, trying to decide whether to wake him. Her own images of Marjorie... her impressions...especially from being in the car...of the time when the man actually grabbed her...were too strong. No wonder Vincent was dreaming of Catherine...she had subjectively been overlaying Marjorie with Catherine all day...from the first moment. She couldn't help herself. Finally, she reached out and shook him awake. "Vincent...wake up, Love."

Vincent came awake immediately, his eyes only a little bemused. "Diana." He rubbed at his temples abstractedly. "I was dreaming..." He looked up, seeming both startled and somewhat apologetic. "I was dreaming about Catherine...searching for her. But you were there with me searching, telling me we would find her this time. It was very strange."

Diana glanced at her watch...it was late, almost suppertime. She had seen Mary and the children on the way in, and Mary had told her that she and Father would be glad to take them with them to Father's chamber for supper tonight. "Vincent, it's late. Come with me for a swim, then let's eat. I have some things to tell you."

They took their towels, Diana picked up her robe, and they left for the Mirror Pool. Few people used it at this time, as most of them were eating. As Diana suspected, they found it deserted. They disrobed and slipped into the cool water. They both swam laps for awhile, trying to rid themselves of some of the tension of the day. Vincent seemed to be feeling better, and Diana had warmed up considerably from the swim. Finally, she stopped swimming and rinsed her hair...watching Vincent as he swam. Sometimes it seemed to her that he was tireless. His smooth strokes took him effortlessly back and forth across the pool. Standing still watching him, she cooled off and began shivering, so she climbed out and wrapped in her robe. She sat perched on a boulder, thinking about her case. When she sat in Marjorie's car she had received impressions left from the man who had taken her, and she knew why he wanted her. He wanted the child. This was becoming too bizarrely similar to Catherine's case... and Vincent was picking it all up...just as she'd known he would. With the problems he was already experiencing, Diana worried what this was going to do to him. Finally finishing his laps, he pulled himself out and deliberately walked far enough away so that he could shake the water from his pelt without wetting her. Chin in hand, she watched him as he walked slowly toward her, trying to ignore how great he looked: she had to keep her mind clear to figure out how to tell him about this case. He picked up his towel and finished drying. She knew he could feel her indecision and was trying not to intrude with their bond. Finally she began telling him about the case.

"This case is different, Vincent."

"How is it different? I sense that you are worried. Are you afraid you cannot help?"

Diana finally unfolded her legs and slipped into her fur boots. She stood and faced him. "No. I think I can help. That's not the problem....the problem is Catherine."

When Vincent raised his eyes to hers, she could tell he was puzzled. "I have sensed Catherine in your thoughts all day. Then, my dream...but I do not understand how Catherine can possibly be a problem."

Diana slipped an arm around him and they began walking slowly back toward their chamber to get ready for a late supper. "The problem is that the woman who is missing resembles Catherine physically. The physical resemblance in itself is remarkable, but in addition, even emotionally she resembles her. I cannot help identifying the two. It's going to be very difficult for both of us."

Vincent remained silent, seemingly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Diana continued. "She is also pregnant."

His stride slowed almost to a stop as he dropped his head. Diana could no longer see his face through the veil of his mane. She could see the tension in the set of his back as he turned from her, and she reached out for their bond...and found him blocked.

He shook his head as he felt her attempt. "I cannot, Diana. Not now."

Diana backed off. She understood. She had felt the same way all day. "It is going to be very difficult for both of us...but I cannot help feeling a sense of hope...that I can help. But if I fail...."

Very quietly Vincent commented almost under his breath..."If you fail..." He glanced at her, the pain evident in his eyes, his face..."If you fail, it will be like going through it all again."

Her eyes met his, and she nodded slowly. "I'm afraid so."

He wrapped his long arms around her and held her tightly. "Then...we simply must not fail."

She nuzzled his neck, rubbing her cheek against the soft fur of his chin. "We? You know Maxwell. He won't be happy with your involvement."

When she looked up, she saw that Vincent's face was set in determination...and so was his mind. "What Joe does not know will not hurt him...or hinder me."

Diana laid her head back down on his shoulder once again, and for a time they simply stood there in the empty tunnel, holding one another as the tapping of the pipes made a soothing background music. Vincent's hand abstractedly stroked her back. Finally he spoke, his voice free of strain or indecision. "Come, Diana. Let us go eat and see to the children. Time enough later for worries."

Diana nodded silently and they went on to the kitchen to see what William still had left.

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By the time Vincent and Diana had eaten and gone to Father's chamber for the children, it was much past the children's bedtime. Mary was just getting ready to take them to bed. When they appeared at the door, all three of the children ran to them. Vincent scooped up the two boys and Diana picked up Cathy, who was wearing someone's cast-off flannel pajamas with feet. She looked like a little red bear. The boys, too, were already



dressed for bed. Diana went to Mary and thanked the older woman for caring for them and made arrangements with her for the following day. "This case is going to be involved. Can you arrange with Brooke to care for Cathy for me, and perhaps Eric and Jeremy to watch over the boys?" She glanced up at Vincent and continued..."I have a feeling Vincent may be otherwise occupied as well, so all the help we can get will be appreciated."

Both Mary and Father assured them that the children would be cared for and for them not to be concerned. Father glanced at Vincent and asked, "Would you care for a game of chess later?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, Father. Not tonight...another time. Goodnight."

As they headed out the door, Father called softly to Vincent. When he turned, Father commented quietly, "Take care, Vincent."

"I will, Father."

As they walked with the children to the dorm, Diana asked Vincent what Father meant, and he smiled gently. "Father is still having a little trouble treating me as an adult...that is all. He is trying."

Putting the children down was simple...they were already half asleep by the time they were put into their beds, and Diana leaned into Vincent as they walked slowly back to their chamber.

Vincent's bond touched Diana, at first softly, then more insistently, and she touched back. Without a word, he began weaving a tapestry of desire around and through her that built slowly and deliciously. Their physical presence was almost not necessary...though once they reached their chamber, they were both ready for a more physical kind of lovemaking. He carried her inside and laid her on the bed. Vincent continued with his non-physical lovemaking as he removed his clothing...Diana's were much easier to dispose of. With the tip of his nail he traced the contours of her body as his lips explored... setting her shivering with delight. When finally his mouth closed over hers and their bodies met, they were both so lost in one another that they hardly noticed as the bond winked on and off as "The Other" came and went briefly.



Diana lay asleep, curled in Vincent's arms, and he reached to pull the quilts over them. He noted that Diana had a small scratch on her shoulder, and he kissed it gently before lying back down. Just as he closed his eyes a rough voice beside him brought him awake with a start. He glanced around cautiously.

"The Other" lounged casually against the end of the bed. *Thanks*, he commented, then winked out.

Vincent just laid his head back down, smiling a little. *Perhaps Diana is right...perhaps control is not the issue at all.* He closed his eyes and slept, nestled against Diana, his arm around her like a shield against the world.

As they slept, they dreamt they were walking the dark city in search for Marjorie/Catherine...Diana was determined to find her and Vincent told her, *Remember, Diana...not even God can change the past...we must do this for Marjorie...and only for Catherine in the sense that it is what she would wish for us to do.*

The following morning as Diana was getting ready to go back Above, Vincent lay across the bed watching her. He was concerned about her subconscious insistence on identifying Marjorie with Catherine...this case had become an obsession already and it was only in its second day. It was difficult on him, as well. Never before during her cases had he allowed himself to become so unwrapped in her impressions...though he had on occasion become involved. This time, it was difficult for him to separate from her...they were becoming almost one entity as far as the case was concerned, and it was disorienting. He was unsure if in the end that unity would help or harm Marjorie's chances. To get the case off her mind at least momentarily, he changed the subject. "'The Other' was here last night."

Diana threw her carryall over her shoulder and grinned at him. "I know. I lost the bond a few times. He didn't stay long, though."

Shaking his head wonderingly, Vincent mused quietly...almost to himself. "He is changing, Diana. At times, I almost like him." His azure eyes met her green ones in one moment of complete understanding.

Again, Diana flashed him a grin. "Blessings on the wild child? Maybe we should name him...I mean...it's not like he's going away anytime soon."

Amused at the notion, Vincent laughed. "What should we name him? Floyd? Horatio? Aren't we trying to make him go away?"

Diana rubbed her nose, grinned again, and told him, "There used to be a cereal commercial on television with a little kid named Mikey. I loved Mikey. They always used to say--*Feed it to Mikey...he'll eat anything*. You feed him everything you can't deal with emotionally. For that reason, he just seems like Mikey to me."

Vincent just stared at her a moment, then smiled. "Mikey...I like it. Of course, he might take offense." He grinned. "Maybe the name alone will make him leave!"

Vincent escorted her most of the way to the subway and spoke seriously with her about the case. "Please try and separate yourself a little. I am afraid for you. You always become enmeshed in the victim's life, but this time it is more than that...for both of us. I am afraid that this could impede our progress...and cause failure."

Diana shook her head vehemently. "No. It is the only way I can work, Vincent. Identifying her with Catherine is just a side-effect...uncomfortable for us, but not harmful to the case."

Sighing, Vincent held her a moment and kissed her. "Take care, then. Remember, I will be with you."

Eyes twinkling with mischief, she replied, "Isn't that going to make it difficult for you to get your work done?"

"Yes, but what's new about that?...Lately I think Father, Mouse, Michael...everyone is about to give up on me anyway. Remember, there is a common meeting tonight. The issue of the Rat Patrol leadership is to be discussed. It ought to be...interesting."



After leaving Diana, Vincent went to the pipe chamber to check with Pascal about

Paracelsus' journals. He stood patiently waiting while Pascal moved swiftly from one side of the chamber to the other. Zach worked right along with him, and few words were needed. When the messages eased off, Pascal nodded to Zach, and the boy took over while his father went to speak with Vincent. He shook his head briefly. "Nothing. Sorry, Vincent. I've tried everything I could think of, but nothing makes any sense."

Vincent leaned harder into the wall. He had hoped there would be something at least. He collected the journals from Pascal. "Thank you, Pascal, for your efforts. They were appreciated." He walked quickly to their chamber and collected Father's journal and took all the books back to Father.

When the books thudded down on his desk, stirring dust, Father looked up over the top of his glasses. "Nothing?"

Vincent shook his head, obviously depressed. He lowered himself into the chair opposite Father. "No. It is only what I expected, but it is still frustrating." Looking up as Father limped across the chamber to put the journals away, Vincent went to assist him. "Here, Father, allow me." Vincent carefully placed the books on the shelves and stood back, staring at them almost accusingly. "So much information...locked away perhaps forever." He met Father's gaze. "Will I ever know?"

"Does it really matter? Think on it, Vincent. Will you be any different if you know? Will the knowledge change who you are...the good, or evil that you may have done in your life? Will it change Diana's love for you or the way any of us, your family, look at you?"

Vincent stood, head back, his mane streaming down over his shoulders. He listened to Father's words, and knew he was correct, but there was one thing Father had not mentioned...whether purposely or not, Vincent did not know. He dropped his head. "No, Father. It will not change any of those things. But I will still have to look at myself...and know. Sometimes I think that in my beginning is my end."

As Vincent started out the door, Father stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Remember, Vincent...we all love you."

Vincent nodded. His head hurt, and he rubbed his temples. It was beginning again: He had been receiving intermittent impressions from Diana...only sporadic, but the overlay was beginning to be disorienting. He hoped he could make it through class today.



Vincent went to their chamber to pick up the books he needed and his notes and left for class. His headache only worsened as the morning progressed. Literature class was not too bad, but math was a nightmare. Finally the classes were over and he met Mouse for lunch.

During lunch, Jamie asked if Vincent would hold Ellie, and he had to refuse; he was afraid of dropping her in his distraction. He tried to explain to them what was happening, and they seemed to understand.

Jamie was most concerned. "Is there anything we can do?"

Vincent didn't dare shake his head...it hurt too badly. He simply answered quietly, "No, Jamie, but thank you."

Mouse was extraordinarily quiet, even for him. Finally he said, "Sorry, Vincent. Is harder with her like Catherine. Will find her...know it." His blue eyes were nearly

covered by his unruly blond bangs.

Vincent put his dishes away then asked if Mouse could help him with his security sweep...he didn't think he could make it alone today. Mouse just nodded, and waved to Jamie.

As they traveled, checking sentry sites and unguarded doors, Vincent noted Mouse watching him carefully. He knew Mouse was concerned and was trying to spare him as much as he could. Once the sweep was finished, however, Mouse suggested to Vincent that he go back to lie down. "Nothing else left...can wait." He walked with Vincent back to his chamber and made sure he was inside before leaving.



Pulling out his journal, Vincent sat to try and record some of his impressions. He opened it and began writing:

So strange...I feel as though I am not one, but four people...myself, Diana, and this...Marjorie/Catherine. I know she is not Catherine, but it does not seem to matter...emotionally she has become Catherine insofar as the rescue is concerned... Diana has become so immersed in her life...and she has confused the two...so for me it is the same. I can barely function at all. All else is being pushed aside in the fever of the search...just as before.

Vincent stopped, rubbed his temples, then rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He closed his journal and started to stand...and never made it any further...suddenly the impressions hit him with the impact of a shovel slamming into the back of his head and all he was aware of were the impressions of Marjorie/Catherine. He dropped the journal and staggered to the bed. Trying to go about his normal routine while receiving these impressions had created a headache the like of which he had never experienced before. Perhaps if he just laid down...just let them come, it would stop hurting so.



Vincent lay on his back, forearm across his eyes. Flashes of visions came and went...a stairway...Marjorie/Catherine in a dark room, in pain...a door opened and there was a flash of light, and in that moment he saw a sign he knew through a window...a glimpse of someplace he had been recently...it teased his memory. "Catherine..." He tossed and turned, lost in the impressions he was receiving. Suddenly he sat bolt upright...he knew where she was...or close enough to perhaps find her. He was out the door in a heartbeat...no cloak, no thought of concealment, and rushing through the tunnels.

By the time he reached the subways his breathing was so ragged he had to stop and rest a moment before even thinking about waiting for a slowing train. The run had cleared his mind somewhat and he was aghast at the fact that he was about to head out Above in daylightwithout his cloak...no caution whatsoever. *Whatever am I thinking of?* He had no choice. He had to wait until nightfall. He found the shadows and opened his mind for

Diana...further impressions hit him...not quite with the intensity of the first now that he had cleared his mind somewhat...and now that he had his own agenda to worry about. He tried desperately to reach Diana...to give her some idea of what he had learned, and he felt their bond touch and deepen. She was still far into her own sort of investigation and had identified so closely with Marjorie that once again it was disorienting for Vincent. It almost frightened him, for at this moment there was very little of Diana there...she was feeling Marjorie's feelings, though she did not know where she was...she had formed a bond with her somehow without ever seeing her...and Marjorie was in labor. *God, not again, please!* He tried harder to break through to Diana...to clear her mind somewhat of her overpowering link to Marjorie. He, at least at this moment, was able to separate Marjorie and Catherine...he didn't know how long he would be able to, but as long as he could, perhaps he could get through to Diana. Suddenly, at last, he was able to touch Diana...only Diana...and he thought he had gotten his impressions of the location through to her. He hoped he had, but he did not dare leave it to chance...he had to go himself.



Finally Vincent dared to look out across the subway tunnel at the clock across the way...it was 9:00 P.M. *Surely it is beginning to get dark by now.* He moved carefully into position to catch the train, almost stumbling over a druggie who was also hiding in the shadows. The man was so high, he only rolled his eyes and turned over. Shortly a train came by, slowing, and Vincent leaped...but just as he did, he caught Diana's intense impression of Marjorie's labor and he faltered. He hit the side of the train, but managed to grab the top with enough purchase to hang on and drag himself on top. He was shaken. *So close...if I had missed!* His left arm was bleeding from catching it on something, but the train was speeding along and he concentrated on the task at hand. He tried to block Diana, but was no more successful than he had been all day. He knew that Diana and Joe were also heading toward the location he had fed to her in their bond.

When the train reached the spot where he needed to get off, Vincent leaped as the train slowed...this time without mishap. As he left the tunnels and slipped into the alleyways it was not quite as dark as he would have liked...especially without his cloak for cover. He slipped along the alley, searching for the location he had seen in his vision. Finally he saw the sign, then tried desperately to triangulate a position ...figuring where the building would have been...if he had seen the sign from Marjorie's eyes. The only building where this would have been possible was straight ahead. He reached out to search for Diana...and could only feel her impressions of Marjorie. He moved gracefully through the alley, with the lights from a nearby neon sign lighting his face far more than he liked. Lights and shadows danced crazily across the angles of his face. Papers blew around his ankles and a cat squalled and ran ahead of him, around the corner. Reaching the building, he looked through the window that he knew Marjorie must have seen through to see the sign, and ducked as a man came through the door to a basement. Suddenly more impressions of pain and fear reached him, and a growl began rumbling deep in his throat. "The Other" was getting closer and closer to release, and between the impressions and his headache, Vincent was not sure he could keep "The Other" at bay much longer...nor was he sure he wanted to.

The man turned and headed back down to the cellar; when he opened the door, Vincent heard a scream of pain and fear that killed any desire for control, and "The Other" roared his release. Crashing through the window, he swung a killing blow at the man, throwing him across the room and leaving him bleeding. He then rushed down the stairs to Marjorie/Catherine.



Vincent heard Marjorie/Catherine scream even louder when, instead of her captor, she saw this nightmare creature barrelling down the stairs. Vincent knew he was covered with blood, and his roar had shaken the room. He swayed, and a look of pain crossed his face. When he looked up at her the light of reason was in his eyes, and he tried desperately to impress upon her that he had no intention of harming her. He fought to separate his knowledge that this was Marjorie...not Catherine...from Diana's impressions.

His voice gentle and soothing as he could make it, he told her, "Please...I did not mean to frighten you...I will not harm you." He glanced up the stairs and commented, almost ruefully..."Your captor is dead, and help is on the way."

About that time another labor pain hit Marjorie, and before she knew it, Vincent had his arms around her, supporting her...encouraging her.

When the pain eased, Vincent said softly, "Will you allow me to help you...at least until the others reach here?...I can help."

The voice, the gentle eyes pleaded with her, and Marjorie nodded.

Vincent had never delivered a child before, but he had helped Father and Mary...he hoped he was not totally incompetent. He tried to keep his mind clear so that he could do what he needed to. He could feel Diana coming and tried directing her. He hoped she and Joe were not bringing half the NYPD with them...but they *could* use an ambulance: Marjorie's child was not going to wait. There was no place to clean up...he was going to have to do this as he was. As another contraction began, he soothed Marjorie and encouraged her to wait to push. "Breathe...no...don't push...not now. Sooo. Yes. Wait." He held her hand and smiled. "Soon. Next time, I think you can push." Another contraction began, and Vincent guided her through it...the child had crowned, but still had a way to go.

"Who are you..." Marjorie panted...

Vincent shook his head as another contraction began. "Not now. She is almost here, Catherine...push."

Suddenly, there was another life in the room, and the child began to cry. Vincent held her a moment, absolutely astonished...glorying in the heady sensation of simply being here...now...at this moment in time. He knew he did not need to cut the cord...Diana and Joe were almost here, and he could hear the ambulance sirens...and it was safer to leave it. Reluctantly, he placed the child in her mother's arms and touched Marjorie's face gently. He looked down at the mother and child...marveling at Marjorie's resemblance to Catherine, and a feeling of joy soared through him. This woman would *have* her child... and live.

Marjorie gazed up at him. "Thank you."

"Say nothing of me...please...I must go." He leaned down and kissed her forehead briefly, then was gone.



When Diana and Joe entered the building they both had their guns out, though Diana had assured Joe that Vincent had been there already. "Great...just what we need...another unexplained dead body."

Joe swung around and saw the body of the man Vincent had killed lying against the wall. "See what I mean. Damn it! Start thinking of an explanation, Bennett, we're going to need one."

They headed down the stairs, Diana tucking her gun in her pants as she saw Marjorie. Joe ran back upstairs and directed the ambulance.

Diana went to Marjorie and asked quietly, "Are you all right?"

Marjorie nodded and looked quickly around. "Is there anyone here?"

Diana shook her head and smiled. "No. He's gone...it's all right. Just don't say anything. Let Joe and me explain everything, okay?"

Marjorie nodded, then looked up at Diana. "He called me Catherine."

Diana nodded, smiling. "I'll explain later."



Diana rode with Marjorie to the hospital, where her husband was waiting. Joe had gone to pick him up. This case had become far too personal for all of them. As they rode, Diana talked to Marjorie about her ordeal, about the baby...about everything except Vincent. When they got to the hospital, Diana lingered off to the side as the EMT's took her inside, then followed, watching Jon's joy as he saw her alive...and saw their daughter. She had told Marjorie she would come see her later at a more appropriate time and talk. Joe came out of the door and threw his arm around her shoulders. "Good job, Bennett." He leaned over and whispered to her and she laughed. "Take you home?" he asked.

"Sure. Why? You want to aggravate Vincent?"

Joe thought a moment, then shook his head. "Naw. He did what he had to do. As usual, NYPD is befuddled. Don't think there are any clear prints. As long as Marjorie doesn't talk, we're okay." He nodded at the car. "You want to ride, or should we walk through the park?"

Diana thought about the distance, but the night air was nice. "Park. Vincent can meet us."

They strolled along leisurely, talking about the let-down after cases like this. Diana shook her head. "Not this time, Joe. I'm really on a high." She explained how intense her impressions had been, how thoroughly she had identified Marjorie with Catherine...and how all this had been transmitted to Vincent. "As he was delivering the baby, Marjorie said he called her Catherine. It has been very hard on both of us."



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Joe walked silently, seemingly deep in his own thoughts. Diana knew that he, too, had identified Marjorie with Cathy. "We never found out why he wanted the baby."

Diana shivered. "Perhaps it's just as well we didn't find out. It's over, Joe. That's what's important...it's over, and they're safe. This time we won."

They entered the drainage tunnel in the park and Diana opened the gate, and rolled back the steel door...to find Vincent standing on the other side, waiting patiently. Without a word he gathered her into his arms, and resting his chin on her head, he gazed across at Joe.

"I am sorry, Joe. Was it difficult?"

"No...there will be questions, but Hey...we got there after the fact. We don't know any more than they do. Right?"

Vincent smiled gently at Joe, then winking at Diana, he said, "Just tell them Mikey did it."

Diana let out an extremely unladylike snort, followed by a fit of giggles, and Joe looked from one to the other, frustrated. "Guess that's an inside joke, huh?"

Covering her mouth to keep from losing it completely, Diana finally took a deep breath and muttered, "Very inside joke, Joe...very inside."

Joe glanced at his watch. "Damn. I'd best run. Told Erica I'd be home by 9:00. Guess I didn't make it, huh? Come see us sometime."



They watched Joe walk off into the park, then turned toward home. They walked a long way before saying anything, then finally Diana spoke. "It's over."

Releasing a long pent-up sigh, Vincent agreed. "Diana, I feel...cleansed, somehow...as though in some way I still blamed myself for not saving her. Are they both well?"

Diana leaned into him, noting the blood still on his arm and shirt from the killing...and noting too the wound in his left arm...the blood clotted and scabbed over already. "They're fine, but you're a mess."

"I know."

She stopped and pulled away, grinning. "Mikey did it, huh?"

He shrugged and looked almost embarrassed. "He must have. I certainly don't remember." He glanced at her and said, somewhat wonderingly, "It is strange.... I truly do not remember. Always I must sit back and watch the killing, sharing it with him, at least on some level. But this time, there is a merciful blankness there. You do not suppose...that he spared me purposefully, do you?"

"You never can tell. You two seem to be reaching a tacit understanding. Perhaps he did spare you...in return for your generosity in allowing him to share last night....what goes around comes around, Love." She pulled back his sleeve and examined his wound, and he winced a little. "Come, let's get you to Father to have that taken care of. It looks as though it could use a stitch or two."

"No. No stitches. We will just cleanse it and leave it." He smiled mischievously. "A dip in the Mirror Pool would probably solve most of my problems."

Diana shuddered at the thought of the cold water tonight. "Not me. How about a nice

hot shower...or at least a warm one?"

Agreeing that might be better, Vincent led her to the showers, but then she realized they had no towels. "I'll go get some. You go ahead and I'll be back before you're finished." Diana left and headed quickly for their chamber, bumping into Mouse and Jamie on the way.

Jamie commented to Diana, "I see you're back. You realize you and Vincent missed the common meeting. Father is upset."

Diana swore, "Damn! We forgot. If this keeps up, Father is going to be forced to discipline Vincent, and part of it will be my fault. Did the problem with the Rat Patrol get cleared up?"

Mouse grinned. "Sure. Had fight though! Middle of room. Neat!"

Diana threw up her hands in frustration. "A fight! Well, what was the result? Did Sandra resign? Did Kipper replace her?"

Jamie sighed. "Yes. Jeremy is now leading with Kipper. The problem was solved. It was nothing, really. Vincent wasn't needed. I'm sure what he was doing was much more important."

"It was...but still, I'm sure Father was upset with him. Oh!...I've got to get moving. Vincent's waiting for me."

Diana left Jamie and Mouse and picked up the towels. Hurrying back to Vincent, she found him already re-dressed in his bloody clothes. "I'm sorry. I was delayed. Why don't you go change, get ready for bed. I'll be there soon."

Nodding, Vincent left quietly. He seemed distracted. Diana hurried with her own shower and headed back. She reached out to touch him, and found him blocked. He has a lot to think about. She walked slowly, tired from the day...and now from the let down after the case, now that the high was dissipating. Tomorrow she had to go talk to Marjorie...then it would be over.



When Diana entered the chamber Father was there speaking with Vincent, and apparently he was not pleased.

"...and once again we had to have council...and common meetings without you. It is unconscionable, Vincent. You simply have to straighten out your life and uphold your responsibilities to this community. I thought once you and Diana married and life settled down you would be more reliable. It seems to depend upon which way the wind blows."

Diana backed out and waited in the hallway. She heard Vincent's hot reply: "The responsibilities which I have not handled have been delegated. The work has been done...except for Mouse's Catacomb Project, which did admittedly take longer than projected...thanks to my lack of participation. Am I not to have any time to straighten out my life...?"

Father's voice broke into Vincent's, "And what about security? Have you been keeping up your sweeps?"

The dead silence that followed that statement was ominous. Finally Vincent's voice came back...harder than Diana had ever heard it. "Have there been any security breaches?"

Did I not kill an intruder only six weeks ago? Or have I not killed enough men for you lately?" His voice went dead...completely emotionless. "Get out, Jacob...Have a council meeting to discuss my dereliction of duty...if I am available I will attend. If not...do what you will."

Father's voice softened. "Vincent...please. Take some time if you need it...but before you do, delegate the responsibilities, then when the time is up and you are due back, forget the past and look to the future."

When Diana heard no further conversation and she figured a suitable time had elapsed, she entered the chamber. Vincent was writing in his journal and barely glanced up when she entered. He did ask if she was ready for bed.

Diana tried reaching him with their bond, but he was blocked. "Vincent...are you all right?"

He stared ahead...at nothing...for a moment, then answered. "You heard?"

Diana came up behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders, then slipped her arms around his neck. "Yes. Is there anything I can do?"

He moved his head back and forth slowly in negation. "No. The problem is that Father is completely correct. I need to apologize. I wish for him to treat me as an adult, but an adult does not neglect his responsibilities. In the morning I will apologize, then I will ask Cullen if he will see to security for me until I return. He delegates responsibility well. He injured his hand yesterday and cannot work any of his projects in any case. I will also ask Michael once again to take the classes. I am sure he will be unhappy with me as well, but he will do it nonetheless. Mouse and I will go to the lower levels and seek out whomever we can find of Paracelsus' followers. Perhaps we can find some answers."

Laying her cheek against his mane, her tears mingling with his hair, Diana said softly, "I will go with you."

Shaking her off as he stood, Vincent crossed the chamber and began blowing out candles. "No. You are needed here. We have been neglecting the children as well, putting a strain on Mary, and taking advantage of Brooke and Michael." He turned to her and opened his arms, and she moved into them. Kissing her upturned face gently, he told her quietly, "I love you, Diana. Without you...without the children, my life would have no meaning. Give me something to come back to. You will be with me in any case. I will try to keep in touch."

"And if you cannot? What if I lose you to our friend...to Mikey? God, what a stupid name!"

Vincent smiled at distress. "At least you will know what happened...and Mouse will be there. They know one another. Do not worry so, Diana."

Diana helped Vincent undress, carefully removing his bloodstained clothing. He winced as she pulled the vest over his wounded arm. "Did Father even check your arm?"

"No. I kept it hidden. There was no need to further upset him."

Diana scowled as she examined the long tear in the muscle. "How did you get this, anyway?"

Vincent handed her a roll of gauze to bandage the wound. His eyes held a touch of amusement behind the pain. "A small matter of labor pains providing a distraction on a train ride."

"Vincent!" Diana was horrified. "You could have been killed!"

"True. But I wasn't." He winced once more as she tightened the bandage. "It will heal. Are you going to see Marjorie in the morning?"

Diana stepped back and took a long look at him. He looked tired, but otherwise seemed fine. She smiled a little. "I suppose I'll see her. I'll explain what I can about you. Do you want to see her again...her and the baby?"

Vincent seemed to hesitate, then quietly he said, "Yes. I would. I probably shouldn't. But truly, I *do* want to."

Diana slipped her hand through his belt and pulled him a little closer. "I don't think we'll get that much blood out of those jeans this time. I swear when I go Above I'm buying you some new ones."

He looked more pained about the jeans than he did about the wound. "But these are comfortable."

Wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her face against chest, feeling the silk of his pelt against her cheek, she chuckled a little. "If they get any more comfortable they'll be indecent."

Kissing the top of her head, Vincent murmured, "Jacob and Cathy are asleep...Father is gone...probably to bed. I do not think we will be disturbed."

Their bond touched, and Diana felt his love surround her...his tenderness...and his desire. She took his hand and led him to the bed. She managed to loosen his jeans...the buttons seeming to take forever. He pulled her sweater off. Holding her close, he bent and kissed her neck, her throat, her breast. He stopped a moment to finish with the jeans and glanced up, eyes twinkling. "If you buy jeans... do you suppose you can manage some with snaps?"



Rolling over, Diana's arm brushed against Vincent's and he drew in a hissing breath. "Sorry, Love."

"It's all right, Diana. It will heal quickly."

Diana expressed her concern, however. "I'm not sure you should go in the morning. That gash was nasty, and I still say it needed stitches." The wound had broken open again and blood had soaked the bandage. "We should have been more careful."

Vincent lay peacefully, eyes closed, right arm thrown back above his head. His red-gold mane was a riot of color on the pillow. "Nonsense," he murmured sleepily. "You worry too much." He opened his eyes finally and gazed at her, and traced her face with his forefinger.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

Softly, gently, he told her, "Why? Only because I want to remember this...your touch, your scent...the way you look with the mark of my love upon you." He brushed the tangled fire of her hair back from her face. His nail delicately traced her lips. "Your mouth opens... and I remember the feel of it on my body. I want to remember how you fit your body to mine...and how my body grows to fit yours. I want to remember everything."

Diana buried her face in the crook of his shoulder... heedless of his wound. He felt

her fear...rising from some unknown source, and cradled her gently. "It is all right, Diana, truly. I do not say this from fear that I may not return, but only because I have never truly said it before...except perhaps in other men's words. I speak words of love to you...poetry that is lovely to me...but so seldom do I simply tell you what you mean to me. You are truly my life...and no matter what I learn..your love will bring me home...so do not be afraid."

Vincent could feel her fear easing as she felt the truth of what he was saying. He tightened his arm around her, though it was obviously hurting him. He lay still, letting her fall asleep listening to his heartbeat, then softly he shifted her from his wounded arm. By this time, the blood had soaked the bandage completely, and he slipped from the bed to try and re-bandage it himself. He fumbled with the bandage with his right hand, becoming more frustrated by the minute. He did not wish to wake Diana, nor did he want to bother Father, or Mary. He heard a familiar voice across the room.

You're impossible. You're even frustrating me. Let me out. I'll do it.

Vincent turned and faced his dark twin. *I don't understand...do what?*

"The Other" grinned. *Dense, aren't you? You can't do it because you're trying to do it with your right hand. Let me do it.*

Vincent pulled out his chair and sat backwards on it. *That makes sense, but I'm not sure how to manage this. I've never...purposefully let you out...and I'm not sure I should trust you now.*

His twin grinned. *Whatever. Go wake someone then. Just thought I'd offer.*

Resignedly, Vincent capitulated. *All right. How?*

Go to sleep. I'll take care of it then.

Vincent slipped the chair back under the desk and walked to the bed. Suddenly a thought came to him. *Leave Diana alone. I'm only doing this so she can sleep. You touch her, and we'll forget the truce.*

"The Other" nodded and grinned. *Agreed.*

Vincent slid quietly back into bed, making sure Diana was not disturbed. Closing his eyes, he tried to sleep, but it took awhile for him to finally drift off.



"The Other" woke and glanced regretfully at Diana sleeping next to him. He had no doubt that Vincent meant exactly what he'd said, and he'd enjoyed his freedom of late...open warfare between them would hinder that. He unwrapped the bloody dressing, gritting his teeth as it pulled the hairs of his pelt and pulled at the scab. With his teeth, he held one end of the bandage and wrapped the other end with his right hand. Again, with his teeth he held one side of the bandage and tore the end so he could tie it, as he couldn't find the tape. Afterwards, surveying his handiwork, he nodded. Vincent would appreciate it...*A few brownie points never hurt.* He wandered around the chamber. Vincent had left a few candles burning, so he opened Vincent's journal and leafed through it, reading.

I will leave in the morning with Mouse. I must find out more about Lethe...what Paracelsus had planned for us, and why. Perhaps I can still find more information about my origin.

*"There is one knowledge which it is every man's duty and interest to acquire, namely, self-knowledge. Else to what end was man, alone, of all animals embued by the Creator with the faculty of self-consciousness? The precept 'Know thyself,' was not solely intended to obviate the pride of mankind; but likewise that we might understand our own worth."*⁷

"The Other" picked up Vincent's pen and wrote in large, rather awkward, handwriting, "Speak with Tamara."

He left the journal open, hoping that Vincent would notice it. Yawning, he went back to bed and carefully slipped in beside Diana...glancing at her once again rather regretfully. He clenched and unclenched his hands and forced himself to turn the other way. *Boring around here tonight.* He laid back, closed his eyes, and fell peacefully asleep.



TO BORROW THE NIGHT

I must become a borrower of the night
For a dark hour or twain.⁸



When Diana woke the following morning, Vincent was already dressed and packing for his trip. He was still wearing his bloody bluejeans, and she made a mental note to be sure to find him some new ones. She crawled reluctantly from under the quilts, pulling up her socks and stuffing her feet into her fur boots. Vincent had smiled gently at her as she woke, but said nothing. Wandering the chamber, Diana hugged herself against the chill and reached for her robe, which was draped across Vincent's desk. As she did, she glanced down and saw his journal lying open. Vincent never left his journal open.

"Vincent--your journal is open, did you want me to close it?"

Vincent raised his tawny head, a perplexed look on his face. "Open? I know I closed it last night."

He put his shoulder pack down next to the bed and walked over to the desk. Glancing down, he immediately noticed the entry made by "The Other." Fingering the pages, he read it over, then slid the journal over to Diana to read.

Diana read the entry, then commented, "It seems Mikey knows *something*. I wonder why he doesn't just tell you?"

Vincent raked his nails through his mane and paced back and forth a few times. "Who knows with him. Perhaps he doesn't really know that much...but he knows Tamara *does*...whoever Tamara is. It is something anyway.

Diana was examining the bandage on Vincent's arm. She looked up at him questioningly. "Did you re-bandage your arm last night?"

Examining the handiwork, Vincent grinned. "Mikey did it."

Diana sat back on the bed, a wondering look on her face. "You two are certainly becoming buddies."

"I wouldn't necessarily term us *buddies*, Diana. It is more of an armed truce...a cold war. We are negotiating terms."

Reaching out to grab hold of his belt, Diana pulled him in closer to her, then traced the muscles of his thigh lightly, running her fingers over the bloodstains. Looking up at him then with an urchin's grin, she asked, "Oh really...and what are the spoils of this *war*?"

Hands spanning her waist, Vincent picked her up and tossed her farther up on the bed, then dove on top of her, pinning her down. The bed groaned with the sudden impact. "Sanity...and you. The sanity I keep...you...well, I don't know...I might have to share *you*."

Diana giggled and squirmed to get loose. "Watch your arm, or you'll break it open again."

There was a long silence broken only by the musical tapping of the pipes and the rumble of a subway car passing somewhere above. Finally, Vincent rolled away with a groan. "I don't have time for this. Mouse will be here eventually, and I'm sure the children will be bounding in here soon to get us for breakfast." He ran his hand down her arm and twined his fingers in hers. With one last kiss, he told her, "I love you, Diana. Remember

that, and all will be well."

About this time, three small bodies burst into the chamber, and Vincent found himself with a lapful of exuberant children. "Gently please, gently."

Cathy patted Vincent's arm and kissed the hurt place carefully. Toby and Jacob were jabbering all together about Cullen and Rebecca planning on taking some of the children ice-skating and could they go?

Diana whisked the children off of Vincent before they could re-open his wound, and told the boys, "I suppose you may go skating with Cullen...*if* he's taking enough adults to ride herd on you young ones. If he needs help, I'll go too. Run and ask him."

The boys were out the door as though shot from bows. Cathy, however, clung to Vincent's hand awhile and stared silently. He picked her up once more. "What is it, minx?"

"Father go 'way?" Cathy inquired thoughtfully.

A little surprised...but not much...Vincent replied, "Yes. For awhile. But Mama will be here."

"Cathy go too?"

Vincent hugged her, cradling her against his chest for a long moment. "No, minx. You have to stay and take care of Mama. Now, let's go to breakfast...Mouse can find me there."



On their way to breakfast, Vincent sent Diana and Cathy ahead while he steeled himself to go apologize to Father. He stood for a time in the tunnel outside Father's chamber. Finally, he stood in the doorway, his bulk filling it. "Father...may I have a word with you?"

Father looked up from his own breakfast, which he pushed aside to roll up some of Mouse's plans for a lift he wanted to install in Father's chambers... which would spare him using the stairs to get to his bed. "Yes, of course, Vincent. Come in." Vincent was embarrassed by his behavior the previous night, and it was obvious to Vincent that Father was somewhat unhappy with his own behavior as well.

Vincent came to stand before Jacob, finally lifting his eyes to the older man's face. "I apologize, Father. In all fairness, I cannot ask you to treat me as an adult if I continue to neglect my responsibilities. However, also in all fairness, though my absences have caused inconvenience, the work *has* been done, so I have not been totally irresponsible."

Father was quiet a moment, then softly told his son, "I apologize as well, Vincent. I realize that things have not been going well for you, and you *have* done your best to cover yourself. I suppose at times we all simply expect too much of you. You *are* entitled to your own life...quite separate from your responsibilities here." His eyes met Vincent's and he continued. "And yes. You *have* killed enough men for me...for all of us...and God alone knows what that has done to you."

Vincent looked away. "I spoke with Cullen earlier this morning, and he has agreed to take over security while I am away. He will delegate patrols and watches and will do the sweeps himself. I realize it is not the same, but it will have to do. Michael has once again

agreed to take all the classes...on the proviso that I take all of them for a time when I return so that he can go Above to visit friends. Mouse is going with me."

Father limped around his desk to where Vincent stood impassively. He put his hand on Vincent's shoulder, and the tawny head turned to face him. "I am sorry, Vincent...for what we have done to you. We never meant to cause you pain--but you must admit, you *are* best suited to security."

Suddenly, it was as though a wall of ice surrounding Vincent crumbled. He took Father in his arms briefly in a son's embrace. Father's remorse and sympathy flooded into him. "I know. Here, in our world, one does what one is best suited for. This is my world...my family. I will continue to protect it. But...as the saying goes, "Any man's death diminishes me."⁹ You have taught me many things, Father. Killing is difficult for me, but I will manage. For now, though, I need to try...one last time...to find out what I can about my beginning...and my sister. If I find nothing, I promise to let the matter drop."

Father grasped Vincent's forearm and nodded acceptance. "Resolve to be thyself: and know, that he who finds himself, loses his misery."¹⁰



When Vincent finally made it to breakfast, Mouse and Jamie were already at the table. He came in at the end of a conversation. Jamie was talking to Diana about preparations for Winterfest. He hadn't realized Winterfest was almost upon them. *No wonder Laura was asking me about dancing at Winterfest.* Pulling out his chair and joining them, he hurried through Williams breakfast, including hot, buttered, blueberry muffins. Going where he and Mouse were going, they would be doing without William's cooking, and that was the *real* hardship. He was fortunate he didn't have to exist on Diana's cooking, as her skills were almost non-existent...Vincent himself was a better cook. He and Mouse said nothing, just letting the conversation slide over and around them. Cathy pestered Vincent quietly for pieces of his muffins, and he took her onto his lap. The child was very quiet, seeming only to want closeness to her father. Vincent stopped eating long enough to hug both boys before they ran off to play, and to tell them goodbye. Jacob's eyes met his briefly, and knowingly, but he smiled. The child had a sunny disposition, and reminded Vincent constantly of Catherine. He worried about few things, unless their bond intruded, pushing the emotions of worries not meant for a child onto him. Before they left, however, he overheard Toby arguing with Jacob.

Toby was complaining rather plaintively, his normally cheerful face almost in tears: "Chris isn't real anyway. Don't know why you won't go to the Reach...or anything. You never want to play with me anymore."

Vincent put his hand out and stopped them. "Who is Chris, Jacob?"

Jacob cocked his head and reached up to brush his unruly chestnut mane out of his eyes. "Just a friend, Father."

Reaching deep into his store of names, Vincent could not think of any "Chris" who could qualify as a friend for Jacob. He glanced at Diana questioningly.

Shaking her head, Diana replied with a smile. "It's nothing, Vincent...an imaginary friend. Many children have them at one time or another."

Vincent released the boys to go prepare for their outing with Cullen, but his thoughts were troubled. "Diana, generally children make up imaginary playmates when they are lonely. Jacob is *far* from being lonely. I could see it if he didn't have Toby...or any of his other friends."

"Don't worry about it. I'll keep an eye on him while you're gone. I'm far more concerned about you, right now."

Vincent stood, turning his head to look down the table at Mouse and Jamie. "I hate to drag Mouse away from Jamie again. She has her hands full with the twins."

Moving gently into his arms, Diana tucked her head under his chin, and his tumble of golden mane fell over her shoulders as he laid his cheek atop her head. He could feel her need for reassurance. He knew she was not accustomed to leaving problems in others' hands to be solved. If she could not grasp it and make the problem hers to solve, she felt helpless. But this was something that only he could find the answer to. Vincent sighed, sensing her feelings of helplessness. She wanted so badly to help him find his answers.

"Please, Diana. Do not worry so. Our deepest inner battles must be fought alone...the most important decisions made alone, and our most painful uncertainties and sorrows suffered alone." Holding her closer, heedless of the rest of the tunnel folk finishing up their breakfast and going about their mornings, Vincent stroked her back and whispered softly in her ear, "Remember last night, Diana. You are my beloved. I will return to you."

Vincent felt her reluctantly release her grasp on his vest and he held her at arms' length. Reaching up to brush a stray tear away, he then stooped to pick up Cathy, who still remained standing next to them. Gazing into her serious azure eyes, slanted elf-like under the equally slanting brows, he asked her, "You will take care of Mama?"

Cathy nodded, then hugged him tightly.

When Vincent finished with Cathy, Mouse--always impatient--handed him his shoulder pack and commented brightly, "All ready!" Mouse was obviously anxious to get back to the uncharted areas far beneath the city. He always enjoyed an adventure of any kind.

Vincent sighed...momentarily having second thoughts. He stood a moment and glanced at Diana, Cathy...looked around the chamber, which was now emptying from breakfast. The sound of the tapping pipes continued musically in the background. *Home.* Touching Diana's face briefly in farewell with one long-taloned hand, he smiled. He didn't say goodbye...just touched her mind briefly in reassurance, then turned and followed Mouse, who was already some yards ahead of him. It took him only moments to catch up to Mouse, and Diana followed briefly...watching the two figures disappear down the tunnel...Vincent tall and graceful, golden mane halfway down his back, and Mouse, shorter, stockier, bright gold, unruly shock of hair...and his face upturned attentively as Vincent spoke to him.



Diana's heart felt as though it were in a vise as she watched Vincent leave. Their bond would allow her to feel him, as long as "Mikey" didn't take over, but she still worried. "Come on, Cathy, let's go take you to Mary and I guess I'll go speak with Cullen and see if he needs help."

Making her way to Cullen's chamber, Diana could hear the children ahead all talking excitedly. They seldom had an excursion Above. She thought about Jacob and Toby on the skateboards.... *Wonder how they'll do on skates?* She rounded the corner to find a milling crowd of at least fifteen youngsters of varying ages, and Cullen answering questions as best he could.

"Diana!" he cried, relieved. "Are you coming along?"

"I thought I might. It looks as though you could use some assistance. Where's Rebecca?"

Cullen's face took on a relieved expression as he looked past Diana..."There! Thank God! I thought I was going to have to do this by myself!" Grinning at the two women, he commented, "Now I've got *two* pretty assistants."

The children took off ahead of them, yelling boisterously. As they followed, Diana asked Cullen about his arrangements for security.

"No problem. Sentries are all set...schedules made out. I'm making my sweep after we get back." He held out his bandaged hand. "I really hate not being able to do my own work, but at least this way, I keep busy. I've handled security before for Vincent, though it makes me uneasy."

Diana could sense his concern, and asked, "Why, Cullen?"

He almost seemed to squirm a little, then answered, "If there should be an intruder...any *real* danger...I'm not going to be as good at defense as Vincent is. I'd have to just sound a general alarm."

Staring straight ahead, voice hard, Diana answered, "No one can replace Vincent when it comes to defense of his home...unfortunately."

Rebecca had been listening to the exchange, and tried to turn the conversation to a lighter note. "The children are ahead of us...already at the threshold. They are so excited!"

For the rest of the day, Diana's attention was occupied with keeping small bottoms off the ice and on their feet. Everyone had a wonderful time.

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The lithe figure traveled silently, cat-like, occasionally stopping to slake his thirst in a pool of water left in a hollow. He stopped to test the air, to scent any presence. There was none. This was his world, but he was leaving it to search for what belonged to him...what he'd been promised so long ago. There was only one who stood in his way. He shrugged his powerful shoulders and snarled. His tangled mane hung in his eyes. Hatred ate his soul, and he continued on his ever upward path. He had waited long enough. Now that The Man had been gone these many years, and he, himself, was now too strong to be kept away, it was time. He had reached the edge of the living areas, above the Catacombs... indeed, he was already almost out of the maze. He heard the wind singing from the chamber ahead.

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Traveling swiftly, Vincent and Mouse were soon through the maze and down into the Catacombs. Vincent had been preoccupied most of the trip, but with Mouse, conversation was not necessary. The deeper they traveled, the more morose Vincent became. He was not at all sure he really wanted to know any further information on his origins, his sister, or anything having to do with Paracelsus. His memories...the ones he had already...were more than enough to test his sanity. However, at the same time, he felt a compulsion that had nothing to do with common sense that was eating at him, forcing him to face these issues. Mouse remained quiet and seemed to sense that Vincent was in no mood for conversation.

They reached the river finally, and without speaking a word to one another, stopped to rest and eat a little before continuing.



After finally gathering the children together after skating, Diana dug deep in her pocketbook and bought everyone hotdogs for lunch. *Getting short again.* Later that afternoon she was going to the hospital to see Marjorie. She had meant to go this morning, but the skating had diverted her. When they finally reached the threshold, Diana asked Cullen and Rebecca if they minded if she deserted them.

"No, not at all." Cullen replied. "Thanks for going along. It really helped."

Diana stooped to hug Jacob and Toby and tell them goodbye. "Be good. I'll be back later."

Jacob hugged her, and clung to her a little longer than normal, and Diana asked, "What's wrong, Jacob?"

Shaking his head, long hair swinging, he said quietly, "Chris says something bad is going to happen."

Diana was unsure how to take this. She assumed Jacob was just worried about Vincent. "Jacob, I'm sure Chris means well, but everything will be all right. Can you feel father? Is he all right?" Diana knew Vincent was fine...just a little preoccupied. Jacob "listened" a moment to their bond, and smiled. "He's okay."

"Then surely everything is fine. Chris is just a worrywart. Go on home now, and you and Toby play."

Reassured, Jacob ran back to the group of children. Cullen had been listening, and commented, "He's just worried about Vincent, is all."

Diana nodded. "I think so, too. But I'm not sure what to think about this *Chris* fellow." She met Cullen's eyes. "Take care of him?"

He nodded and hugged her. "You bet. You go on and take care of whatever you need to do."

As Diana walked off through the park toward the subway, she thought to herself, *Maybe I should talk to Peter about Chris.*



He watched carefully as people came and went at the pool. Hidden in the rocks far above them, he could look down on this peaceful world and hear the laughter; laughter he

had never had the opportunity to share. Resentment and anger burned. Slowly he edged his way down the rocks. Two swimmers remained when he reached the bottom, a boy with wide, near-sighted eyes, who had laid his glasses next to the pool, and a slightly older boy.



Eric was telling Jason a story about his sister, Ellie, as the older boy dried off. He could only see Jason as a fuzzy outline without his glasses. Jason had only recently come Below to live, to escape an abusive foster-home. He and Eric had a lot in common and had become fast friends. A sound behind them caused Jason to look up. "Vincent!" he called out, and ran to the figure...stopping suddenly and beginning to back up... "You're not..."

Eric could hear the fear in Jason's voice, but couldn't see anything except a blur...he was having problems finding his glasses. He saw a massive figure reach out, and heard the savage snarl...and Jason's scream...as the creature picked Jason up and threw him across the cavern against the wall...where he lay unmoving. "Vincent!" Eric cried out...still looking frantically for his glasses. He couldn't understand what was happening.

Eric heard voices...lots of voices...coming from the west tunnel... and when he looked up the creature was gone. He started screaming for someone to come help, and finally found his glasses. When he looked up, Jason lay in a puddle of pooling blood against the wall, and Eric broke into agonized sobs.



When Cullen came through the entrance and saw the body...the blood, and heard Eric's screams, he quickly directed Rebecca to take the children back another way, and ran to the broken body lying on the ground next to the wall. Eric was becoming hysterical, and Cullen had no choice but to take him to Father, leaving Jason where he was. *Dear God...what now!*

When Cullen all but carried the white-faced, trembling, Eric into Father's chamber, Father immediately grabbed his bag and went to him. After examining him, he tried to settle him into his own bed. He spoke quietly to Cullen. "Whatever happened, Cullen? The child is in shock."

Cullen shook his head, and shrugged, perplexed. "I don't know, Father. I heard Jason scream, ran into the chamber by the Mirror Pool, and found Jason dead...thrown against the wall, blood everywhere...and Eric going hysterical on me."

Stunned, Father sat heavily into a chair. "Dead...how..." Then angrily, he swore. "Damn it! Cullen, I thought you were taking care of security. What were you doing?"

Cullen was somewhat stunned by Father's vehemence...though, granted, the circumstances were horrible. "I haven't checked with the sentries, Father...there was no time. I had taken the children skating and had only just returned, but sentries were assigned, and Pascal was checking in as usual. Will Eric be all right?"

Removing his glasses and pressing the heel of his hand against his head, Father nodded. "He will be all right physically. Emotionally, though...I don't know. Cullen, how could this have happened? Check with Pascal...see if any of the sentries noted anything

unusual. What a thing to have happen with Vincent gone." As Cullen headed out the door to see Pascal, Father told him, "Have Pascal put out an all-quiet on the pipes and have the sentries on special alert. Tell Mary to keep the children in the dorms."

Silently, grim faced, Cullen nodded. "I'll go and collect Jason's body afterwards...Father...I'm sorry."

Father shook his head and waved him on, then went back to Eric. The boy was trying to tell him something. "What is it, Eric?"

Eric was crying softly. "Can't be him, Father. Can't be Vincent. Vincent wouldn't kill Jason...would he?"

Vincent! "What do you mean, Eric? Vincent is gone...he went deep Below and won't be back for awhile."

Hopefully, Eric looked up through his tears and his thick lenses. He took his glasses off and wiped his eyes. "Really? Good. Then it couldn't be him. But Father...it *looked* like him. I mean...I didn't have my glasses on, but...but I don't know anyone else who looks like Vincent does...or sounds like him when he's mad."

Father tried comforting the boy, but his own mind was churning.

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Cullen and Pascal talked quietly in the corner of the pipe chamber while Zach monitored what few, sporadic messages came in from sentries. The all-quiet had gone out, and the sentries had seen nothing. Cullen left finally to go move Jason's body to a more appropriate place, until he could be taken to be cremated or taken to the Catacombs. "Poor kid. Never had a chance...not Above, and not here."

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He had retreated down to the maze, angry that he had allowed himself to be chased away. He could smell the blood still that had splattered on him, and the scent was overpowering to him. Snarling, he spun, his rage...at the world...at HIM, almost too much to be borne. This should have been his...it would be yet...or he would kill them all.

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Vincent allowed Mouse to rest awhile, though he was chafing to go on. Finally, when he couldn't bear waiting any longer, he asked, "Are you ready, Mouse?"

Grinning, knowing Vincent was aching to continue, Mouse just answered, "Sure. Ready."

Shouldering their packs, they continued upriver until they reached the point where Vincent had his flat-bottomed boat pulled ashore. They pushed the boat out and once Mouse was in, Vincent leaped lightly in as he pushed off. He poled across the river and pulled the boat ashore. Vincent told Mouse, "You don't have to go with me, Mouse. You've told me where to go...I can find my way."



Phonix '92

The blond head shook furiously. "No way, Vincent. Mouse comes too."

The two friends gathered their packs and continued along the narrow passageway on the other side of the river. Moving single-file, Vincent in the lead, they moved cautiously. The people who lived down here were not friendly to them...they had been led too long by Paracelsus. The heat was increasing the deeper they went. Vincent's golden mane was plastered against his neck and his clothing matted to his back.

"How can people *live* like this?" Vincent asked Mouse softly.

"Have to." Mouse answered matter-of-factly. "Their home, Vincent...like ours."

Suddenly, just as Vincent was about to bark a warning, four huge troglodytes appeared in front of them from side passages. Vincent spun, only to find four more behind them...one of them grabbed Mouse and held him. Snarling, Vincent could feel "The Other" rising to the surface...his rage mounting. Mouse, however, seemed calm.

"Vincent...ask...Tamara."

Mouse's demeanor seemed to calm Vincent, and he saw the absolute logic of Mouse's statement. *Why fight if it is not necessary?* "Can you take us to Tamara? Do you know her?"

A few puzzled looks were passed between the hairy hulks, but finally, the one who appeared to be their leader nodded and gestured for them to follow him.

Mouse paced at Vincent's side, calmer by far than he himself was. He whispered to Mouse, "Paracelsus certainly seemed to prefer *large* followers."

This comment seemed to tickle Mouse, and he had to clap his hand over his mouth to prevent a giggle.

Finally, they were ushered into a chamber where a woman sat at a desk. There were masks hung on the walls...including one of Vincent...and one of Paracelsus. Fascinated, Vincent examined the one of himself...it was not quite him...but close.

The woman watched without speaking, then finally rose and waved the troglodytes away. "So you've come. Why?"

Vincent turned to the woman. "You are Tamara?"

"Yes."

"You made these?" He indicated the masks.

"Yes...and more. Paracelsus used my talents...just as he used everyone else."

"Who rules here now?" Vincent asked.

Tamara leaned against the desk. "I suppose I do. If *rule* could really be the proper term. I care for them, now. Paracelsus chose imbeciles, mainly, to serve him. He did not care for strong-willed servants. He ruled with fear and with the drugs. I was one of the few who were of enough use to him for him to tolerate free-will. After Anna...he cared for me, in his own way. What is it you seek here, Vincent?"

Staring into the woman's face, Vincent said flatly: "Lethe...and answers to some questions about where I came from...how I came to be as I am."

Tamara waved toward him vaguely. "As for the questions, I can't help you very much. Paracelsus always claimed he had created you...but once, during a celebration here, when he was drunk, he told me he'd found both you and Lethe together...so I can't say for sure. But I would tend to believe the drunken Paracelsus more than the sober one. As for Lethe...she's dead these many years...killed by Paracelsus."



The words went through Vincent like knives...though he had suspected as much from what Diana had told him...and what "The Other" had said. "Why?"

Tamara moved over to the mask on the wall...the one that resembled Vincent. "After she gave birth...he found she could have no more children and she was useless to him. As soon as it was expedient, he killed her."

Vincent's eyes widened in shock. "Gave birth!...When...how..."

Tamara gave him a secret smile. "Yes. I forget. It was not *you* who was the father, but your dark twin. You would not have known." Tamara smiled ruefully. "I tried to intervene." At this point, Tamara pulled open her robe at the neck, showing the ragged scar crossing her throat. "I failed...but at least I lived."

Mouse held Vincent's arm...supporting his friend as best he could. Vincent was swaying a little with the shock. "The child. Did it...she...he...live?"

Closing her robe, Tamara walked to the mask on the wall. "Do you not note a resemblance?"

"How old..." Vincent choked. "How old is he?"

"He's 20 years old, Vincent...magnificent. But I think you would not be pleased with him...*he* is *truly* Paracelsus' son. He was fed on hate...weaned on revenge."

"Where is he?"

Tamara's strident laughter filled the chamber. "Ah...now *that* is the question. He left here yesterday. He has become very difficult of late. I have had to cage him to keep him from going above here...to look for you. He will kill anyone who gets in his way."

Without a word, Vincent swung around, carrying Mouse with him...and headed back out the door. Tamara's voice stopped him momentarily.

"Vincent...be careful. His name is Modred."

Vincent stared mutely at her a moment, then laughed bitterly. "Perhaps. But I am no King Arthur."

Mouse scurried beside Vincent, asking questions. "Don't understand, Vincent. Who was Lethe? And Modred? Why are you running?"

Vincent did not answer, and they were not harassed on the way out of Paracelsus' domain. Once they reached the river, Vincent poled them across as quickly as he could, briefly reminding Mouse of his lessons, and the story of King Arthur. He told him of Lethe.

Mouse listened intently, then shook his head. "Still don't understand, really. What difference does name make, Vincent. Your son."

Vincent shook his head, staring ahead. "No, Mouse. Not mine. Paracelsus'. His only *true* son. Paracelsus fed him hate all his life...turned him against me...turned him into the animal he had wanted me to be. As the final irony, he named him Modred. Modred killed his father. The king is dead. Long live the king. Don't you *see* Mouse?"

Mouse just shook his head, his blond shock of hair still damp with sweat. "No. Don't see."

As the boat ground into the shore, Mouse started to leap out, slipped, and fell, crying out in pain.

Vincent swore silently to himself. He examined Mouse's foot...the ankle was sprained. He had planned on going ahead of Mouse, as he could travel faster alone, but now, that was impossible. He helped Mouse to a boulder and shrugged off his cloak and

vest and removed his shirt. Before Mouse could protest, he had torn lengths of cloth to bind the foot...not too tightly...just enough to provide support. Re-donning his vest (which looked a little strange over his torn shirt), and cloak, he helped Mouse to his feet. "Sorry, Mouse, but we have to keep going."

Mouse gritted his teeth, but continued hobbling next to Vincent.

As they walked, Vincent looked up and noticed "The Other" pacing beside him. His dark twin had a strange look on his face.

What is it? Vincent asked.

So...I have a son. What are you going to do now?

Vincent considered carefully, but had to answer honestly. *I truly do not know. I do not know how...how...*

Grimacing, his twin finished for him...*How much like me he is? Or how much worse?* With a tone conveying infinite sadness, "The Other" told Vincent: *You will have to kill him, you know.*

Vincent looked sideways through strands of his blond mane at the apparition, *What do you mean? We...I...or you...how can we kill him? He is ours.*

Shaking his head, "The Other" replied sadly, *No. Think about it. He is MY son. I loved Lethe. Killing him would be to me like you killing Jacob. This time, my friend, if you cannot escape or leave it to me...you are going to have to do the dirty work.*

Vincent was becoming angry...*Yet you don't mind giving me the advice that he should be killed.*

"The Other" spread his hands in his usual gesture of helplessness. *You forget, Vincent. I have other qualities that you have given me besides merely rage and desire. You who are so selfless...always so concerned for others: all of your self-serving feelings of self-interest belong to me! I may be a creature of emotions, but I'm not stupid. Modred is a threat to your world. If that world is destroyed...you are destroyed. If you die...I die. Besides...I hate Paracelsus with all that is in me...and he desired our death through Modred. I cannot kill him...I know that...but you must...and I cannot help.*

With one last sorrowful look, "The Other" disappeared, leaving Vincent with more worries than he'd had to begin with. Since he was slowed by Mouse, he decided to touch Diana with his bond to see how things were with her...and to check the children...at least he could do that much. He found no fear, only excitement from Jacob over the day of skating. Diana was apparently visiting the hospital, as he could sense more of her Marjorie/Catherine impressions...though far less muted. At least all was well with them. He hoped that perhaps Tamara had been wrong, and that Modred had other plans...or at least was slower in getting there than Vincent had feared. He allowed his thoughts to range back to what "The Other" had told him. He didn't like to agree with him, but was afraid he was right. But, if he had to kill Modred...how could he do this? He, himself, had never killed. In essence it had always been "The Other" who had killed...though Vincent had felt and sensed everything through him. This time, if it came to that...he would have to kill in cold blood...deliberately... without the killing rage governing him. *How can I do this? If I do...then truly I will understand how Diana felt killing Gabriel to spare me. I am unsure if I can do it at all.* One thing he and Diana had spoken of was how it felt for him...as an empath...to kill--especially with his hands. What he had never been able to fully explain to her was that

the *feelings* per se, were muted. At the time he didn't understand why; but now, knowing that "The Other" was not empathic, he could understand why. Perhaps that was even why "The Other" was not empathic...another safety valve for him. *But now...now it will be me. No safety valve...no cushioning...and no rage to carry me...killing...my son.* His despair was growing by the minute.



Diana had been visiting with Marjorie, explaining to her about Vincent...at least as much as she felt she could tell her. She had been so involved with her that she had lost the bond with Vincent and had not noted it. When he touched her briefly, and she touched back, she felt his extreme anxiety...and fear. The emotions were jumbled, and the blankness of "Mikey's" presence flashing in and out was also confusing her, but she knew that something was desperately wrong. Marjorie was sitting up in bed nursing the baby, and Diana excused herself, telling her that perhaps she could visit her again, and she would try to arrange a meeting with Vincent.

Hurrying through the hospital and catching a cab to take her to the nearest threshold, Diana worried. She felt Cathy's growing unrest... sort of a vague unease. Once she reached the subway terminal, she had the driver stop, and she paid him...dashing off immediately down the stairs and into the shadows. Once down in the tunnels she all but ran. She noted immediately that there was no tapping on the pipes. *Oh God. They've called an all quiet on the pipes.* She knew that was bad news. She reached for Vincent and found his mind so muddled she couldn't even reach him...at least she didn't think he was reading her. She tried to project her fear to him, and hoped she got through. Passing the first sentry post, she called out, and Alain opened the viewing slot.

"What is it?"

"Don't know." Alain commented. "Something bad happened down Below. Father asked for an all-quiet and we're to pay special attention."

Diana nodded. *Damn. Don't even have my gun! Bennett, you should know better!* She took off at a lope, heading back toward the Hub...to get back to the children.



Mouse leaned on Vincent. "You okay, Vincent?"

Vincent nodded. "Fine, Mouse. How is your foot?" Vincent knew the foot was hurting, because he felt the pain through Mouse, since he was supporting him. He had only asked to make conversation. The pain and Mouse's own confusion were blocking Vincent from reading Diana. It worried him, but he didn't dare stop moving. Knowing the pain Mouse was feeling, he hated having to force him on as he was doing, but he had no choice.

Mouse asked tersely, through lips tight with pain, "Would you tell me how the story ended, Vincent...about King Arthur?"

Vincent told Mouse one version of the story while they moved along. "...Then, when Modred killed Arthur, he himself was killed. Britain was without a king...without its defender. Merlin knew that if the Saxons were aware of Arthur's death they would move in

on England like the sea wolves they were, so he took Excaliber and returned it to The Lady of the Lake...and entombed Arthur where no one would ever find him, so that as far as anyone knew he could return at any time when the people needed him. He tried to give them hope. But even so, the darkness fell upon the land, and the time of greatness was over." Vincent's voice had taken on the sing-song quality of the inveterate storyteller as he lost himself in the story, and Mouse quietly listened. They were nearing the maze, and Vincent was becoming more and more anxious, but he still couldn't force himself to leave Mouse. If Modred found the young man alone and unprotected...Modred would kill him.



In Father's chamber there was an impromptu council meeting with only a few key people. All the rest were delegated necessary duties. Every face there bore the effects of the day, and the tension and fear were palpable in the room. Diana paced furiously, the candlelight seemed to set her hair afire. She was angry at everyone. "It *cannot* be Vincent." She faced the others angrily. "How can *any* of you think that? He has protected you...all of you...all of his life. Besides...I can *feel* him still down below us. He's coming, but slowly."

Father tried to calm her. "My dear, I know how you feel, but even I know that at times Vincent cannot control himself...and Eric *saw* him."

Diana glared at Father. "You! You of all people should know that Vincent would never hurt anyone he loved, or considered a part of your community."

Father raised his eyes to meet her stare, but dropped his eyes. "I am sure you are right, Diana. But what other conclusion could we have come to? Eric *saw* him."

With a disgusted, rude noise, Diana exclaimed, "Eric is more than half blind without his glasses, and he admits he didn't have them on. I don't know *who* or *what* it was...but it *wasn't* Vincent."

Cullen stepped forward and put his arm around Diana. Looking at Father, he commented, "Diana's right. We all know there *has* to be another explanation. We just have to find it...and soon."



He had followed the man who had taken the body farther below. The man had never been aware of him. There were many small openings in the rock walls that led to chambers where cheerful lamplight and candlelight flickered. It was pleasantly cool up here...a preferred change over his home. Leaning in an alcove outside Father's chamber, with his acute hearing he listened to all that was said. *Vincent. That is all they think of. When he is dead, I will take his place, then they will have to think of me. I will force them to do my will.* He snarled softly, but backed farther into the shadows as people began filing out. The woman...Diana, as she was called, came toward him, and as she passed, he followed, staying just out of sight. She would lead him to Vincent. When she stopped, seemingly uncertain, he knew he'd been discovered.



Diana was uneasy. The tunnels were exceptionally deserted with all the extra sentries out, and the children safely tucked away in the dormitories. She had finally felt Vincent returning, though she still could read no more than that, so she headed toward the maze, and wondered about the wisdom of her action. She had her gun, but still she felt uneasy. Eventually she realized she was being followed, and sidestepped into a dark alcove in time to catch a glimpse of her stalker. At first she, too, thought it was Vincent...but then she realized it was not: for one thing, he was too young...for another, though he was powerfully built, his muscle mass was less. She took out her gun and waited, but he obviously knew she was there. She decided to wait for him to make the next move...and hoped he wasn't the patient sort. When he came out of hiding, she gasped in shock at the resemblance. *God help me! Vincent must have looked like this in his youth! Who is he?* Diana reached out desperately with her bond to find Vincent...he was very close, and getting closer. He was still, however, unaware of her danger, or of the intruder's presence. She tried getting through, and succeeded somewhat, though Mouse's pain still seemed to be interfering. About that time, her stalker decided to come out of hiding, since he had realized she knew he was there.

He growled ominously and advanced upon her. However, despite her fear and the certain knowledge that he meant her death, Diana couldn't force herself to pull the trigger. He simply looked too much like Vincent. Then...between one heartbeat and the next...Vincent rounded the corner, supporting Mouse with an arm around the boy's shoulders. He released Mouse to let him sit next to the wall, straightened and called in a wall-shaking roar: "Modred! Here! To me!"

Diana looked from one to the other--raised her gun to fire--and still couldn't. The beast that Vincent had called Modred advanced slowly toward him, snarling and more fearsome in appearance than Diana had ever seen even "Mikey"...or maybe she just saw "Mikey" a little differently now, and her perceptions had altered. Vincent waited, not moving a muscle. Diana was astounded. She would have expected to have "Mikey" put in his appearance about now. *Come on, kid...if ever we needed you, now is definitely the time.* But still Vincent stood impassively...his face a marble mask...no fear...no hate...certainly no rage...but she seemed to see some resignation there. She was afraid to seek their bond for fear it would distract him, but she knew this was Vincent and *not* "Mikey." Finally finding her voice, she called out to Vincent. "Be careful! He killed Jason."



Vincent acknowledged Diana's warning with a nod, and his face grew a little harder. He finally began circling as Modred came closer. The tunnel was wide...there was enough room to keep a respectable distance between them. Vincent waited for Modred to make the first move, and this disoriented the younger man. Modred was working himself into a rage. As he snarled viciously, saliva trailed from the sides of his mouth and dripped from his fangs. He crouched and postured, never taking his eyes from Vincent. Finally seeing his opening, he leapt, seeking to sink his teeth in Vincent's throat. Vincent's hands closed on



his opponent's throat as he sought to keep the fangs from ripping out his jugular...and all the while the younger man's claws were scoring his arms as he sought to pull the hands from his throat. Vincent's arms were tiring, holding the youngster at bay. His wound had broken open once more, and Modred's claws were leaving still more wounds. Vincent had the advantage of weight...not fat, but heavier musculature, but Modred had the strength and endurance of youth on his side. Finally, in desperation, Vincent, too, sought Modred's throat. Behind him, he saw Diana getting ready to fire, but he could do nothing either to stop or encourage her. However, he was ready when the report came: Modred was not...and it gave Vincent his opening. As his teeth closed on Modred's throat and he tasted the copper fire of the blood pulsing in his mouth...down his throat...felt the agony and fear of the dying man...his son, he threw back his head and screamed...a cry of agony...of loss...and despair. Modred fell with his throat torn out...and a bullet in the back, and Vincent lost consciousness.

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"The Other" knelt over the body of his son. The blood smeared his face and shirt front and the scent hung heavy in the air. Diana knew this was not Vincent...she could feel no bond with him. She touched his shoulder, and his feelings of loss washed over her. "Mikey?" The bloody head raised, and Diana cradled the tear-streaked face to her breast. "You okay?"

"The Other" shook his head. "Go Diana. Take the boy...Mouse...take him. Leave me."

"No way. Please...come with me."

"The Other" shook his head. "Go. Vincent will explain later. Leave me now."

Diana went reluctantly to Mouse and assisted him. They made their way past the body and "Mikey." Diana took Mouse to Father, explained briefly what had happened, and asked Father to come check Vincent later...when she could manage to get him back to their chamber. Once she had finished there, she hurried back...only to find the body, and "Mikey" gone. There was no bond to follow, so she could only wait...and hope for Vincent's return.

With tears streaming down her face, Diana went to the dorms to be with the children. She knew they would have felt what had happened.

When she entered the dorm, Jacob and Cathy threw themselves into her arms. "Where is father?" Jacob immediately wanted to know.

Diana knelt, hugging both of them. "I don't know, Jacob. He left for awhile, but I'm sure he'll be back soon...at least I hope so."

Tears were streaming down Jacob's face. "He hurt, Diana. So bad. Then he went away, and I can't feel him. Neither can Cathy. Chris says he's sleeping."

Diana was numb, and her mind was working slower than usual, but finally she remembered Jacob's remark about Chris earlier. "Who is Chris, Jacob? How did he know something bad was going to happen, and how does he know your father is sleeping?"

Jacob just shook his head, puzzled. "Don't know. He just does."

Diana sighed and buried her face in Jacob's tawny hair and hugged both children. Toby just stood by, seemingly undecided about what to do. "Well. Maybe Chris is right, and there's nothing to worry about. Does he say he's okay?"

Seeming to think, and looking disturbingly like Vincent carrying on a conversation with his other half, Jacob finally said, "He doesn't seem too worried. Maybe it's okay." The child seemed relieved, so for the moment Diana blessed this Chris...whoever he was. It was getting late, so since the children had already been fed in the dormitory during the emergency, Diana took them and read to them from The Wind in the Willows until they were sleepy...and she was hoarse. After she got the boys in bed, she held Cathy awhile, cuddling her, then put her down.

Jamie came by and put her arm around her. The twins were asleep here in the dorm and she didn't want to move them, especially with Mouse still in the infirmary. "Where is Vincent?"

Diana shook her head, and the tears started again. "I don't know, Jamie. I can't find him. I don't know what it all means." Diana suspected that Modred had been Lethe's son. It was the only logical explanation.



"The Other" carried the body of his son down to the Catacombs, to the deepest layers, and interred him there. As he stood mourning in front of the grave, he heard a small sound behind him and spun, snarling. Narcissa stood silently...not at all frightened by this other part of Vincent. She had known him from childhood.

"Ah, child. I am sorry. You, too, have lost so much."

"The Other" turned back toward the grave. "Vincent did what I could not."

Narcissa chuckled a little, then apologized. "I am sorry, child. I do not laugh at you, or at de circumstances. I only laugh because de two of you need one another so badly, yet you fight against it. You are the warrior...he de poet and scholar...but you are bot' lovers. There is great passion in bot' of you. I will leave you now, child. Remember your dead...but also remember de living."

"The Other" sat then, huddled against a boulder, cloak wrapped around himself. For a long while he never moved, and shed no more tears. Finally, he stood, stretched, and headed downwards, to a place he knew, that Vincent was not aware of. He traveled for hours, then finally emerged into a cavern where the river cascaded over a cliff in a huge waterfall. He clambered down the rocks to sit next to the river at the bottom, the mist rising around him. He felt the first stirring as Vincent sought to wake. He closed his eyes and finally allowed himself to "sleep."



Vincent sat staring at the waterfall. When he woke, he'd found himself here. It was so incredibly lovely...more so than anything he had ever seen. The magic of the place wove itself into and through him. He had no thoughts about how he came to be here. Nothing mattered. The sorrow and despair...the pain...he had felt at killing Modred seemed eased

somewhat as he watched the water, though he knew the pain would return. The disappointment he felt in finding he would never learn of his origins also came back to him as he thought of recent events. He heard a soft voice calling next to him.

"I have no parents. I make the heavens and earth my parents."¹¹

Vincent looked around, knowing who he would see. "The Other" sat casually next to him, facing away, also watching the waterfall. Vincent brushed the tears away that had gathered on his face. *Mikey.*

That is not my name. Do not call me by it.

What is your name, then? Where do you go when you are not here?

"The Other" grinned...almost mischievously. *I have a name. You know it. There is no need to tell you, and besides...I do not want you to know. A name is power. It is said that if you know a person's true name you can control them. I do not wish to be controlled by you, Vincent.* "The Other" stood and strode gracefully to the edge of the chasm. He threw back his head and closed his eyes, savoring the feel of the mist on his skin. The droplets seemed to gather like jewels in his mane. He opened his eyes and faced Vincent. *As to where I go when I am not here: I am with you sometimes...living your life as an outsider...picking up crumbs left on the table. Other times, I sleep, I suppose, until something wakes me: your anger, desire, jealousy, hatred. At times I wander a dark place of my own making. I have hated you, but Diana...and Narcissa have made me realize that is foolish. Without you, I die...only within you can I have life...and without me, life for you would be a pallid, colorless thing. Think on that Vincent.*

Tell me about Lethe. I have no memory of her. Why is that? I need to know...especially now, after Modred.

"The Other" came to Vincent and sat next to him. They stared into one another's eyes for a long moment. Finally "The Other" spoke. *You have shared Diana with me, so I will share Lethe with you. We did not know we were siblings. It was good to have someone...who was only mine. She, too, was lonely. Paracelsus made sure of that. I loved her...I love her still. I miss her. If Paracelsus were alive, I would kill him again. I hope he is in some Hell where he is tormented constantly! There can be no place horrible enough to put him.* Tears began running down "The Other's" face and suddenly he winked out, as though he could no longer bear the pain...but Vincent felt him...inside.

Staring at the wall, Vincent felt the visions begin..."The Other's" memories of their sister. Events passed before his eyes, and the emotions threatened to tear his soul. They *had* loved, very deeply, and their bond had been strong. Their lovemaking had been savage, but there had been tenderness there as well. With their bond, it could have been no other way. He felt the terrifying and agonizing pain "The Other" felt when Tamara had told him of Lethe's death...his helpless rage at Paracelsus...his confusion and joy in learning of his son...and his despair at losing him. Sliding down next to the boulder, Vincent curled into a ball and cried...like a small, lost child. His pain for Catherine, for Lethe...was almost more than he could bear. His grief and guilt over Modred threatened to swallow him. The disgust he felt at the killing left a foul taste in his mouth. But then, he felt a small, tentative touch at the edge of his mind...Diana's touch, seeking to ease him. He rose, wiping the tears

away with the edge of his cloak, and sighed a huge, shuddering sigh. He felt Diana's love pulling him home.



Diana finally touched Vincent and reached out with her love to ease him. The pain he was feeling was overpowering, and she knew he would have a difficult time in the future dealing with what had happened. But, for now, she felt him coming home, and that was almost enough. She waited until she felt him near enough, then went to meet him. As he emerged from the maze she saw him open his arms for her, and she ran to him, throwing herself into them. He held her fiercely, desperately. "Diana."

"It will be all right," she assured him.

"Yes."

She asked no questions, but merely walked arm in arm with him as they headed back to the Hub.

"I want to see the children."

Diana nodded. "I will wait for you in the chamber."

She left him then, and spoke briefly with Father, letting him know all was well and that Vincent had returned, then she made the chamber ready for Vincent's return. The only candles she left burning were in the candelabra next to the bed. She had gone shopping briefly before seeing Marjorie, and she dressed in a new nightgown...a simple thing, of cotton and lace, but very delicate, that revealed far more than it hid. She reached out to touch him and felt his joy in his children as he stood over them while they slept...feeling too, his sorrow over Modred. *What might he have been like had Paracelsus not reared him?*

When Vincent returned, stepping into the chamber quietly, drawing back the curtains and moving as cat-like and graceful as always, she held out her arms for him, and he moved into them gratefully. He nuzzled her neck, the soft scratch of his fur pleasantly erotic. He murmured to her: "I told you your love would bring me home." He held her at arms' length, eyes moving softly over her body in the thin white nightgown. A slow, sensuous smile spread across his face as he delicately dropped one hand...tracing...barely touching over the gentle swell of her breast. "That is new, isn't it?"

Diana ran her fingers through his tangled golden mane, watching as the flickering candlelight cast shadows over the hollows of his face, and noting the shadowed blue his eyes had become. She knew his pain was still present...something that would work at him again and again in times to come, but for now he was relieved, grateful, very much in love...and wanting to savor all the blessings he had.

"Yes," she replied. "Do you like it?"

With a small laugh, followed by a low, moaning growl, he lifted her and took her to the bed. "I think I would like it better off, right now."

With deliberate care, Diana helped him shed his filthy clothing, and before long, the nightgown followed them, to lie discarded on the floor. He smelled of sweat, dirt, and dried blood...and his own unique scent was overpoweringly provocative to her. He crushed her to him desperately--both of them needing the touch...the closeness. They knelt, facing one



another, exploring one another's bodies as though they were new lovers: each touch bringing a new revelation. Diana shuddered with desire. Her desire transmitted through the bond...with his echoing back to her. Capturing her within the circle of his arms, Vincent laid her back on the bed and continued loving her. Diana could feel tide of passion that rose within him, and she felt also his certainty that if "The Other" was present, he would not intrude...and that if he did, he would never harm her.



When finally they lay in one another's arms, sated from their love, Diana listened to his heartbeat and luxuriated in their bond. Vincent had grown emotionally...she could feel something there...an added strength and self-knowledge. The thought brought her a quiet joy for him; she felt that if he had not found what he had sought, he had at least come to terms with himself.

Vincent's soft, rumbling voice broke the silence. "You are quieter than usual...even your thoughts are quiet. Have you no questions?"

Diana snuggled against him, fitting her head comfortably to his shoulder, and twining her legs around his. "No. You'll tell me when you want to; Mikey said you would."

Vincent grunted. "Mikey. That is *not* his name...or so he informs me. I am not to call him by it."

Amused by the comment and by the undertone of amusement she felt from Vincent, himself, she laughed. "Oh, really? And what, pray tell, should I call him?"

Teeth flashed in the candlelight. "Whatever you wish. Somehow, I think he would tolerate "Mikey" from you...but it would rankle somewhat." Diana could sense that the thought of her continuing to call "The Other" "Mikey" amused Vincent as well...and the fact that his dark twin would tolerate it amused him still further. "He might even answer to it!"

Diana slid from under the quilts and donned her robe. "I think we had best head for the showers...it may take two days to get *you* clean in any case."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Vincent fingered his filthy jeans somewhat mournfully. "They really are ruined, Diana."

She pulled out a new pair of pre-washed corduroy jeans and handed them to him with a small smile.

Vincent examined them and commented with a mischievous grin, "No snaps. Too bad." Trying them on, he found them a fair fit and shrugged. "They will improve as we wash them."

"You're just not happy unless they're in tatters, with patches everywhere. Don't worry, Love...with you, they'll be that way soon anyway."

As they walked slowly down to the showers, the tunnels were deserted and the pipes were quiet. Vincent told her everything he'd learned from Tamara, and from "The Other." "So, I suppose I will never truly *know* how I came to be as I am. I can suspect, hypothesize...but I will never know for sure. As for Lethe, thanks to my other self I now have memories of her...though they are not my own...and I now understand that part of myself a little better. You were right, as usual...he is really not the monster I have felt him to be...at least not entirely...though I still will never trust him."

Diana slipped out of her robe and into the shower, and he followed. She washed his hair for him and scrubbed his back. He luxuriated in the feel of her scrubbing the ridge of hair that grew down his back from his mane. She could almost feel the purr. "I love that. I can never wash there well."

When they got out, Diana grinned and retreated quickly, as he shook, spraying water everywhere. He grinned. "You're getting faster!"

"Have to, with you around!" Her attitude sobering, Diana told him, "I'm really glad that you and "Mikey" are coming to terms with one another somewhat. That cannot but help you to feel better about yourself."

"Oh, have no fear, Diana...we are at least communicating. However, I still find him irritating, presumptuous, and entirely lacking in manners!" He swatted her as she grinned... "And I *still* don't like sharing you with him. It galls me."

Still giggling a little at the look on his face, Diana commented, "I'll try to avoid it, but..."

His growl grumbled a little as he answered for her..."I know...don't say it."

She didn't say a word...but she knew he could still feel her answer through the bond. "...after all, he *is* still you."



he following day when Vincent finally sat with Father to explain all that had happened, he finally spoke with him about "The Other." Father was not entirely shocked or surprised. "I always knew somehow that when you *lost yourself* that was exactly what you did. I just never knew he was quite so well-developed a personality."

Vincent shrugged. "Perhaps he was not...until after Catherine's death. Prior to losing myself in the cave, I never spoke to him. The first speech I had from him was after her death. I have hated that part of myself for so long, Father. It is...interesting...to feel differently. I still do not care for those qualities in myself...I despise the killing rage that takes me...I still fear it...but I have accepted that these are all parts of myself. As for my beginnings, you were right. It doesn't matter. Only what we do with ourselves, how we spend our lives, matters." Sighing, leaning his head back against one of Father's bookshelves a moment, Vincent continued. "The funeral for Jason is later. I must go ready myself."

"He had been with us such a short time." Father demurred. "You barely knew him, Vincent. Perhaps you should not go."

Sorrowful azure eyes turned to Father. "My son killed him. How could I not go? Besides, I knew him...not well, but I knew him."

When Father didn't answer, Vincent turned and left.



The funeral ceremony was short and simple. Jason had not been well-known in the tunnel community, but what few friends he had were there. Eric seemed devastated, and Vincent attempted to comfort him, without success. "I am sorry, Eric, that I was not here to protect him. But he, like Catherine, like Ellie, are safe now. Nothing else can ever harm them."

Eric's thick glasses were spotted by the tears he'd shed. He could scarcely see at all. He shrugged away. He never said a word, but Vincent could feel his anger...directed at him. Diana restrained Vincent from following the boy as he stalked away. "Let him go for now, Vincent."

Vincent knew she was right, but he was frustrated, and torn emotionally. He hated having Eric angry with him, and having him associate him with Jason's death...and there had been fear there as well. Eric feared him now, whereas he never had before. Tears stood in his eyes. He remembered when he'd first seen Eric when Catherine had brought him to them. Catherine had worried that Eric would fear him, but instead he'd been full of wonder, and a gentle acceptance. When Modred had killed Jason before his very eyes...blurred though his vision had been...and the boy had thought it had been Vincent...it had changed his perception. He knew now the beast that roamed inside the man he'd seen only as a gentle friend.

After watching all the ceremony, though he took no part, Vincent left to go sit beside the falls. He worried about Eric and tried to think of what he could possibly do to help the boy, but no solutions came to him. A letter-burning ceremony wouldn't help this time, but

Vincent couldn't think of anything that possibly could. He sat, long legs stretched out in front of him, head down. Blond strands of mane stirred lazily as a stray breeze came in from the Chamber of the Winds. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he neither heard nor sensed Diana as she came up behind him. He started when he felt her hands on his shoulders, kneading tense muscles. Leaning down, she kissed his neck softly, and he leaned back into her as her arms surrounded him.

"Eric will be all right, Vincent. We will all be here for him. Father says he will try to speak with him."

"He fears me now, Diana. Seeing Modred kill, and thinking at the time that it was me, has set him thinking. Eric is no fool. He knows I have killed...he knows *how* I kill. But now, it has become far too real to him...and I cannot even say he is wrong. When I lose myself to my rage, and to "The Other," I cannot say what will happen. I have no control then."

Diana laid her head on his and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "It will be all right, Love. Give him time, and space. Let the hurt and fear ease a little. Soon he will see that you have not changed, that you are still the gentle man he has always known."

Turning, shaking her off, Vincent rose and stalked in a circle, pacing like a panther in a cage. "But I am *not* always gentle, Diana. You and I both know that. I have always tried to keep that rage hidden from everyone here...at least as much as possible. They all saw me when I lost myself before Catherine's death. They were brave, then...but I feared for them. Then, I never hurt anyone..."

"You never have, and I know you never will."

"But after Modred...I know that some of them...Eric in particular...now wonder. This time a creature who looked like me and who carried the same rage within him *has* killed someone from our community...and that creature was my son."

"Few people know that. Only Father, Mouse, Jamie, and Mary."

Vincent gave her a look that plainly said, *I don't believe that*. "How long before speculation brings the rest of them to the logical conclusion, Diana?"

Diana was adamant. "Everyone here loves you. This is your family. I can understand Eric having problems. He is a child who saw a friend killed. But the rest...? No. As usual, Vincent, you are far harder on yourself than anyone else would be."

"Perhaps." He sighed. "Come. William will have supper ready, and we need to go pick up the children."



Vincent and Diana picked up the children from Mary and settled in for supper. After the funeral, it was a muted affair. Vincent felt all eyes upon him as he ate; felt with every bite the eyes upon his fangs...his differences. Diana reached across to take his hand as he buttered one of Williams homemade rolls. When his eyes met hers, she murmured. "It is in your imagination, believe me."

Mouse passed Vincent the vegetables, and tried to cheer him. "Can have my share. Hate greenbeans." But when Vincent glanced up at him, Mouse's smile was tentative...and did not exhibit the guileless joy he usually did when he smiled. Vincent couldn't bear it any

longer. He pushed his chair back, and excused himself.

"I am sorry. Please excuse me. I am not very good company tonight."

Diana watched his retreating back and knew he was heading Above, to get away. *I'll go talk to Eric. Perhaps I can help.*"

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"Eric." Diana called softly at the chamber entrance. Eric sat with his knees up, chin resting there.

"Go away."

Fidgeting at the threshold, Diana debated. "Eric, it's Diana. I'd like to talk with you if you don't mind. I won't take too long."

"Awright. Come on in."

Diana entered the small chamber. Eric and Jason had shared the chamber since Jason had come Below. They'd been so excited to move out of the dormitory and be independent. Diana pulled up a chair and asked, "Do you mind if I sit?"

Eric shook his head, seemingly not too interested in much of anything, so Diana straddled the chair backwards.

"Hurts a lot, huh?" Diana commented sympathetically.

"Yeah." He swung his gangly adolescent body off the bed and knocked a pile of books off the bed with him. He stooped to retrieve them, and stopped momentarily. Diana caught the title: Treasure Island. He commented softly: "Jason liked this one a lot...especially when Vincent read it. He said no one had ever read to him when he was little, and Vincent came every night for a week and read to us."

Diana's hands tightened on the back of the chair. "Vincent's a wonderful reader, and he loves to share with people he loves."

Eric took his glasses off and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He put them back on and looked at Diana. "Vincent was always nice to me, and to Ellie." He looked down at his feet, toe dragging a circle in the dirt floor. "Guess I've been kind of hard on him, huh? I mean...he didn't hurt Jason."

Relieved, Diana said softly, "No. I'm glad you see that. He loves you, and he's been worried about you...and afraid you were frightened of him now."

"Maybe I should go talk to him, huh? Where is he?"

Diana stood. "He's in the park." She reached out to touch Vincent, then put her arm around Eric's shoulders. "Come on. I'll take you to him. I think he went to talk to Catherine."

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Vincent sat cross-legged beside Catherine's grave. He had tended the rosebush, recovered it against the cold, and was now simply talking to her, telling her about everything that had been happening. His preternaturally sharp hearing picked up footsteps even before he realized Diana was on her way.

When Vincent looked up, he saw Diana with Eric. Diana gave the boy a slight push,

then turned slowly and walked away as Eric stumbled forward hesitantly. Vincent didn't move, but he smiled at Eric, and in the moonlight the angularity of Vincent's face and the shadows took away some of the strangeness. Eric hesitated, but finally came slowly up to Vincent, hesitated again, then sat next to him, crossing his long, thin legs in the same manner. When Eric said nothing for a long period of time, finally Vincent spoke softly, his voice quiet and sure. "It's hard, losing people you love."

Eric pulled his coat tighter around him. It was cold. "Yeah. I talk to Ellie sometimes. I guess I'll talk to Jason, too."

Vincent sighed. "It helps. Does Ellie ever answer your questions, Eric?"

Eric wrapped his arms around legs now drawn up to his chin. "Sometimes I think she does. But maybe it's just my imagination." He raised his head and asked, "Does Catherine ever talk to you?"

Vincent glanced at Eric and shrugged. He pulled his own knees up to his chin, and folded his arms across them. "At one time I was sure she did...Diana felt it as well. But now...I don't know, Eric. Perhaps it *is* all in my imagination. But I carry her in my heart...all she was...all we were together, so perhaps *that* is what speaks to me."

They were quiet for a very long time. Finally, Vincent raised his eyes to Eric. "The man who killed Jason, and whom I killed...was my son."

Eric stared silently. Vincent could tell he was shocked. Finally, Eric put out his hand and touched Vincent's. "I'm sorry."

Turning his face to the stars, a tear glistening in the moonlight, Vincent closed his eyes. With the touch, he felt Eric's concern for him. "I'm sorry, too, Eric. I wonder...what would he have been like if I had known about him...reared him and loved him as I have Jacob? He was used as a weapon against me, by an unbalanced man who hated everyone." He shrugged, then glanced at Eric. "It angers me...but the anger helps nothing, and if I let it consume me, then I become...well, I become no better than he was, which would only please Paracelsus, and one way or another his will would be done in any case. The grief also is useless. I never knew him. I had no choice...but I have so many regrets." Eric was still quiet, but the fear had left his face. Now that Vincent had begun speaking, it was difficult for him to stop. "I delivered a child the other night, Eric. The mother was so like Catherine...when I placed the child in her hands, it was as though... Oh, I don't know. It made me feel for a moment as though I had been there when Catherine brought Jacob into the world...as though the child were my own, and as though all of it had been a bad dream. I know it was only a fantasy, but in those few moments...my mind enjoyed a lifetime of memories that could have been. It made me feel blessed...if only for that moment. Do you understand?"

Eric nodded. "Yeah. It's nice to pretend sometimes. Even when you know it isn't true. I pretend sometimes that Ellie never died...but when I wake up, I have to go on without her."

Vincent stood wearily and held out a hand for Eric to help him up. He threw his arms around the boy and embraced him fiercely, then they walked off through the park toward home. "Come on, Eric...it's getting cold, and it's starting to rain. We'd better go home."



After Vincent left Eric, he stopped by the dormitory and read to the children. As usual, any children who were anywhere near came and formed a circle around him. Cathy sat on his lap, leaning into his chest where she could feel the rumble of the words as well as hear them. Her own red-blond mane blended easily with the golden strands from Vincent's own head as he bent his head over the book. He read much longer than usual, trying still to calm himself. The children had always been his salvation. Their acceptance of him, and their joy in learning had always allowed him to transcend the pain of his own differences. Now that he had his own children, that had not changed, but only intensified. Finally, he called a halt to the reading and put his own children to bed, lingering a long while over each bed.



After leaving the children, Vincent walked slowly, meditatively, through the tunnels. Passing the pipe chamber, he found Pascal still working. He leaned in the doorway and smiled at his old friend. He watched Pascal as he listened carefully, then re-routed a message. "It's late, old friend. Don't you ever rest?"

Startled, Pascal glanced up, then smiled. "*I am* resting. Maria's been carping lately...it's more restful here."

Vincent perched on a stool, resting a foot on the rung. "How do you do it, Pascal? You are always at peace."

Pascal laughed and shook his head. "No. Not always. It's just that when I'm *here* I'm at peace. I become involved, and nothing else matters for a time."

Vincent rested his chin in his hand, blond mane obscuring his face. Pascal sat in front of him, listening all the while to the pipes, waiting for problems, or a message needing an answer, or clarification. He told Vincent, "Sorry about what happened, I know that whenever you have to defend us, it hurts. But, Vincent...I don't understand...who *was* he?"

Eyes filled with pain, Vincent only commented, "It doesn't matter, Pascal. He's gone. Our world is safe once more." He squeezed Pascal's shoulder briefly, then left.

Vincent continued wandering, until he found himself in the park. *I need to talk to Devin.*



Devin sat at their dining room table with his textbooks spread around him. Studying was always hard for him. Since he'd married Diana's sister, Susan, and started medical school, he'd had a rough time catching up. Susan had been wonderful, though. She would quiz him later, but for now, cramming was all that could be done. He heard a knock on the window and looked up to see his brother out on the ledge, his dark hood thrown back and long blond hair wet and streaked with sleet. Scrambling up, he opened the window and let Vincent in. "Get in here! It's beginning to sleet out there, man...that ledge is slippery! Diana'd kill me if I let you splatter all over the sidewalk!"

Dragging his heavy cloak over the sill, Vincent stood next to the window, blinking a little in the fluorescent light. Devin flipped a switch and turned off half the lights, knowing

Vincent wasn't used to light that bright. "Sorry. The brighter light keeps me awake when I'm studying. Sit down."

Instead of sitting, Vincent wandered through the living room. He seemed to be listening for small sounds. "Is Alex sleeping? Where is Susan?"

"Working late. Night shift."

Finally Vincent settled into Devin's overstuffed chair next to the fireplace and watched the flames. He folded his hands between his knees, a posture he had adopted when he was a small child, whenever something was bothering him. Devin recognized all the signs. Vincent told Devin, "Don't let me bother you if you need to study."

Devin folded his arms and leaned against the hearth. "Yeah, sure. You come in here, dragging yourself up six stories in the sleet...looking like shit I might add--then flop in my chair and tell me not to let you bother me. What's wrong?"

Vincent sighed. "It's a long story, Devin. I shouldn't have come, I'm sorry." He started to get up and Devin pushed him back down into the chair.

"You're not going anywhere right now. Stay put. Think about it. I'll be right back."

Devin left the apartment and went to the basement. Locating a steam pipe that he knew connected deep enough for Pascal to pick up a message, he tapped a message quickly... *Pascal...Vincent with Devin...tell Diana*. He repeated the message until a reply was relayed, then satisfied, returned to his apartment. Devin knew that with their bond, Diana might very well know where Vincent was...but he also knew she didn't like to intrude when he was thinking...so, he'd decided to play it safe and send a message anyway.

As Devin entered, Vincent looked up and grinned. "Telling on me again?"

"Of course. You're not climbing down this damn building again. We'll wait until it's late enough and you'll go out through the lobby like anybody else, with me." Devin went to the kitchen and made some tea, then brought some in to Vincent. "Now. Tell me."

Taking his time, staring into the flames, Vincent told Devin about "The Other," about Lethe and Paracelsus...about Modred. Devin simply sat back during the long tale and listened, finishing his slowly cooling tea. When Vincent finished and Devin still hadn't said anything, Vincent finally looked up into his brother's face. "Well?"

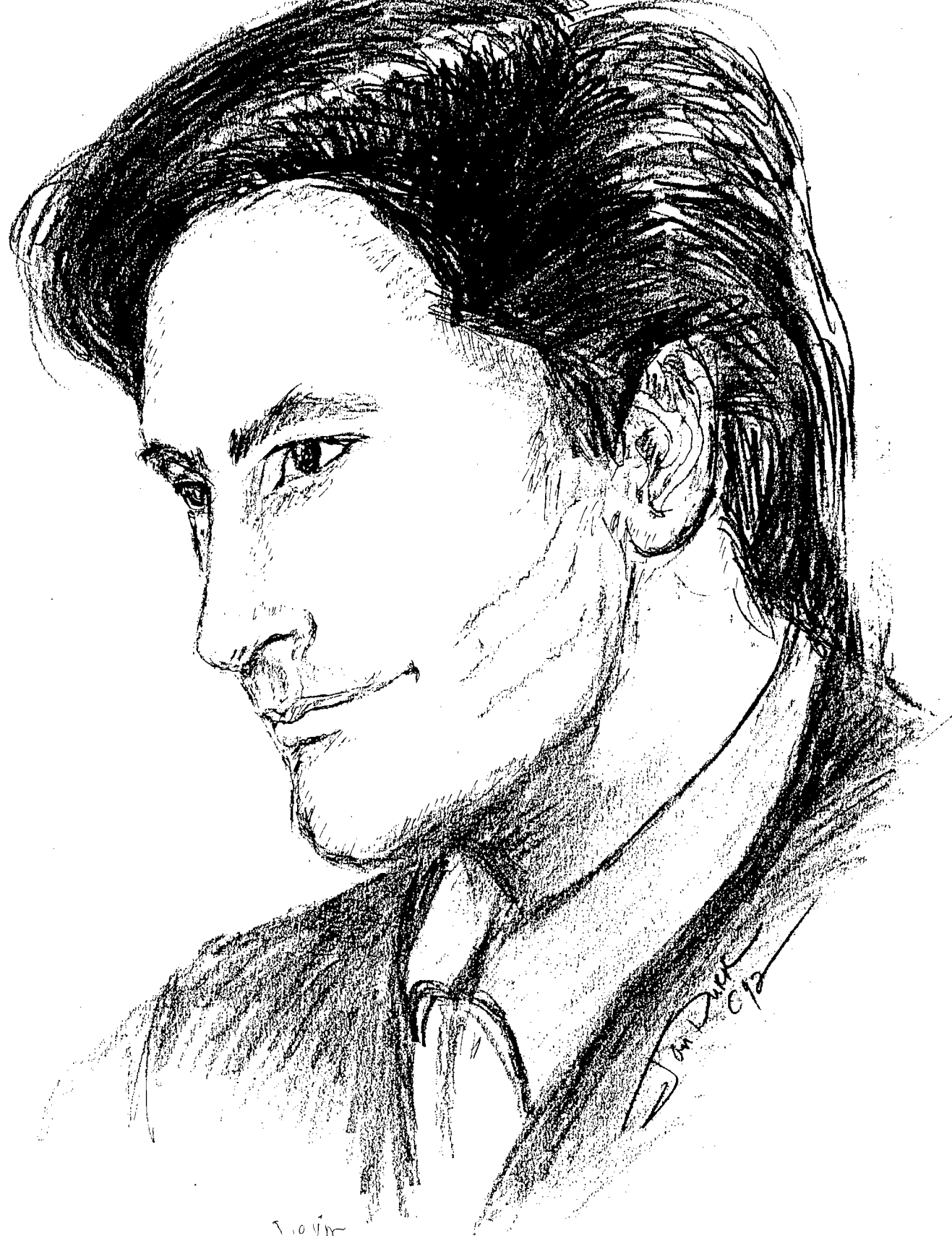
Devin shrugged. "Well what? You were set up. What else could you have done? Reasoned with him? Taken him to your bosom and made him into an upright member of the community? I don't think so. He would have killed you, and probably a lot of other people, not just Jason." He shook his head ruefully. "It's a pretty fantastic story, brother."

Vincent nodded. He went on to tell Devin about Diana's case and how involved they both had gotten, about delivering the baby, and his intense feelings about the whole thing.

Devin shifted on the chair, staring into the flames. "That's tough, too, but kind of nice, in a weird way. You say that while you stood there, holding the baby, you saw all the possibilities of a future that had never happened, but could have been?"

Vincent nodded, seeming a little confused by the shift in Devin's tone.

"Reminds me of the stories of fairyland. Remember? Stories of how someone would go there, and be gone only a moment, but whole lifetimes would pass for them, or they would go and it would seem to them to only be a short while...and they would return to find hundreds of years had passed in the real world. You know...time would be skewed."



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Smiling sadly, Vincent quoted:

We have lost our way and have no token
Left in our hands, and none at home believes
We have heard sweet, unminded melodies,
Touched fairy gold and found it only leaves,
Slept falsely sure in the charmed glade and woken
In a wood where they have cut down trees.¹²

He rose and took his cup back to the kitchen. Devin watched him carefully rinse the cup, dry it, and put it away. When he came back, Devin grinned. "Susan would love you...me, I leave dirty dishes everywhere, drop my clothes wherever."

An amused chuckle was Vincent's response...then he commented, smiling, "I remember. You spent half your life digging under the bed for something to wear. You and Diana would be well-matched as well. Strange, isn't it?" His eyes met Devin's and he said quietly, "Thanks, Devin."

Devin shrugged. "For what? Didn't do anything."

"No. But you're here...and you listened. Do you think it is late enough for you to escort me out?"

Devin grabbed his coat, looked in on Alex a moment, then headed for the door.

"Sure. Come on."

Outside the foyer, Vincent hugged Devin. "Will you be there at Winterfest?"

"Of course. We're all looking forward to it."

Vincent glanced up quickly at the halo surrounding the streetlight. It was still sleeting just a little. With a last nod to his brother, he left quickly, not wanting to linger in the streetlights too long.



By the time Vincent finally made it back to his chamber, it was early morning. The candles were all out, and Diana was curled up asleep under the quilts. With her hair braided, and coming down in pieces, as it always did, she resembled a small child. Her fist was doubled up under her chin, and her knees were drawn up. Vincent yawned, his canines flashing whitely in the small amount of light coming through the stained glass window. As he slowly peeled his way through the many layers of clothing, he watched Diana sleep. It occurred to him that he had not felt the touch of her bond all night. She had carefully barricaded herself to avoid even any accidental intrusion into his thoughts. *She always knows when I need to be alone.* Turning, he carefully lit one candle and sat to write in his journal.

Catherine is gone, and yet not gone. She lives in my heart, in my memories, and in Jacob. Lethe is gone, except in the memories left me by my darker self...and Modred--the child I never knew--gone as well. Diana and I had another child whom I never had a chance to know. Yet...not long ago, I delivered a child to a woman whom...in my delight, I called Catherine. In that moment, she was Catherine, and the child Jacob...and my heart

remembered all the forgotten possibilities. And even now, behind me, love sleeps, patiently waiting. So many blessings. I am now, perhaps more whole than I have ever been.

Looking up from his journal, Vincent watched the play of the faint candlelight over his painting of himself and Catherine. He smiled and told Catherine:

"Fractured, splintered--
Like a broken glass--scattered.
Pieces missing--long lost.
Long have I lived without being whole.
Divisions upon divisions--fragmented--shorn of reason.
Love has gathered together the pieces of my life--
Finally, Catherine--Yes--I am Real."¹³

Vincent stretched, then blew out the candle and headed to bed. Sliding in carefully to avoid waking Diana, he noted that despite the increased chill of the tunnels, she was naked under the quilts. He smiled gently. *Hinting are you?* Diana was always cold. That was one of the few things she disliked about the tunnels, though she seldom complained. Since she wore sweats and sweaters routinely, she had adapted fairly well. But her general sleeping attire was flannel pajamas or his own long shirts...and of course, the ever-present socks. *No wonder she is huddled up like a frightened child.* Vincent had more than once pulled her socks off with his toes while they were making love...making her giggle. He was touched. He knew she had waited up for him, waiting for him to come home, yet not touching their bond to find out when he might be getting home. Softly, gently--barely touching, Vincent slid his hand over her body, touching her abdomen and feeling her caesarean scar from her emergency surgery when she lost their first child. He never deliberately touched or explored her scar when she was awake, or aware, but tonight, with his thoughts so much on his losses...especially his lost children...he felt the need to touch her there. She, too, had lost much. She stirred, and reluctantly, he moved his hand, instead, cupping a breast. He snuggled in closer to her and waited patiently to see if she was going to wake. When she did not, he closed his eyes and sighed. *Just as well, I suppose. It is late. Goodnight my Love.* Gently, he kissed the back of her neck where the braid was tucked under. As the warmth of his body warmed hers, her body relaxed and her legs had stretched back out. He covered her legs with his to warm her further, then closed his eyes and slept...deeply and peacefully.

Vincent woke somewhat later to the exquisite touch of Diana's hands and mouth upon him. She slid across his body like soft water over rock, seeming to touch him everywhere at once. His desire for her rose, and groaning, he tangled his fingers in her hair, holding her where she was for a moment. She chuckled, and when she did, the slight vibration of her mouth and tongue against him sent shudders of desire lancing through his body. She released him for a moment from her sweet prison, then straddled him, leaning down to kiss, and touch with her tongue the soft hollow of his neck. She captured his hands, not allowing him to touch her. The softness of her mouth closed over his, molding to the firm cleft. Her tongue wrapped around his teeth, playing with them. She could feel him seeking their

bond...blocked, and shook her head. With their bond passing the desire back and forth, she couldn't delay the inevitable. A little sweet torture was obviously what she had in store for him. Vincent could feel "The Other" close to the surface and momentarily tried to fight, but then gave in, and allowed the sharing. Now was not the time for open warfare. Finally, Vincent could stand it no longer. Shaking his hands free, he thrust his knee between her legs and flipped her over.

"Now...it is my turn."

His hand sought her warmth, and his mouth followed. She gasped, shuddering slightly. Holding his head and mane tightly, she cried out as he explored delicately, deliciously. Finally, as her block went down, their bond claimed her. Their passion fed from one to the other as he moved rhythmically against her, bending down and closing his teeth first on her shoulder, then more delicately on her throat--marking her gently. His mouth claimed hers as together their desire rose to completion. A low, singsong growl escaped from Vincent as Diana arched her body with his, shuddering with her own release.



Vincent woke several hours later to find himself in the leather chair and no memory of how he had gotten there. He restlessly wandered the chamber for awhile. He had been disturbed by a feeling of sorrow that he could only attribute to his killing Modred. He had killed his son...though the young man had been a stranger to him. He knew it would be awhile before he could even begin to reconcile himself to that. Intellectually, he knew he'd been given no choice. His other self had been correct in that, but, emotionally, he supposed it was going to take longer. Raking his talons through his tangled mane, Vincent watched Diana sleep. *What is it that bothers me so? Is it that I killed my son, or that I was the one who killed him...not "The Other?"* He walked to his desk, lit one candle, then sat to write:

Continuation from earlier: Perhaps I need to speak with Diana. I dreamed apparently, and woke in the chair...almost overcome with sorrow. I know it is because I killed Modred...and how I killed him. To kill like that and feel him die under my hands, his life's blood pouring into my mouth...I have never felt it so strongly. Always before I felt it...but not like this. "Mikey" has been very "considerate" since he left me to kill our son. There have been no outright battles between us; he has not even made any great effort to come out. Even tonight, I felt him...then felt him back off. Consideration from him is almost as disturbing as sarcasm. But...Diana would understand. I need to tell her.

Closing the journal reluctantly, Vincent blew out the candle and padded back to bed. When he slipped in next to Diana, she moved closer, automatically seeking his warmth. Before long, he slept...this time dreamlessly.

THE HAPPY WARRIOR

More skillful in self-knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more, more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence also, more alive to tenderness.

And in himself possess his own desire.¹⁴

It was Sunday morning, and no classes were scheduled. Other than his routine security sweep, Vincent had little he needed to do today, but he was up early anyway. Diana watched him sleepily from the bed as he dressed. "Why the rush, Love. Come back to bed."

Diana heard his soft laughter as, he turned his head so he could see past his burnished gold and copper mane. He commented smugly: "Still not happy?"

Curling up under the quilts, Diana smiled back. Their bond touched softly, like a background melody. "Just greedy I guess."

Vincent picked up his shoulder bag with his tools, and Diana sat up abruptly, alarmed. "You're *not* leaving again!"

Laughing again gently, Vincent swung the bag over his shoulder. "No." He pointed at the entrance to the chamber, where curtains gave their only privacy. "I'm going to build us some doors! Don't you think it's about time?"

Diana picked up the hint of amusement in his words. Years ago he had closed off the upper entrance to the chamber and removed the ladder. At the time, he'd felt the curtains would be enough, as he was well aware of the tunnel dwellers' strict privacy codes, but recently he'd had so many interruptions, been so frustrated, he had obviously decided enough was enough. Lying back on one elbow, Diana grinned. "I think it's a wonderful idea...a little belated perhaps."

Leaning over to kiss her, Vincent replied, "Better late than never."

"Aren't you even coming to breakfast?"

Vincent shook his head. "No. I'll grab a quick something on the way out, and maybe a few of William's muffins to take along."

As he headed for the door, Diana called him once more, softly. "Vincent, wait."

He glanced back, leaning in the doorway. "Yes?"

"You *did* want to see Marjorie again...and the baby?"

His eyes wandering away with a somewhat bemused look, Vincent finally answered. "Yes. I suppose I should, if you think it safe...just to clarify things to myself."

Diana folded her arms over her knees and rested her chin there. "I think it can be arranged. I'll go see her today. Would you like to see her perhaps tonight?"

"So soon? Yes." He came back to the bed and touched her face gently, lifting her chin so she was facing him. "Thank you, Diana."

She captured his hand briefly and kissed the palm, feeling his sudden surge of desire

through their bond.

"Umm." He shook himself. "No. Not right now." Grinning, fangs flashing, he commented: "Not until I fix those doors!"

About then, Cathy flew into the room, followed by Jacob and Toby. "Time for breakfast!" Cathy flung herself at Vincent, somewhat like a guided missile, and Vincent commented ruefully. "See what I mean?"



Diana watched as he kissed the children and told them to be good, then waved goodbye to her. She sighed, and wrapped her robe around her as she slipped out of bed. She began picking up scraps of the boys' conversation and she began to pay more attention. Jacob was still defending his playmate, Chris.

"He is *too* real. Just because you can't see him, doesn't make him not be real."

Toby was adamant. "They why can't I even hear him? And why *won't* you play with me down at the Reach?"

"'Cause he said my mama wouldn't like it...I might get hurt."

That does it! "Whoa, Jacob!" Diana collared the boy and sat him down on Vincent's chair, kneeling in front of him. "Now. Tell me about Chris. Everything. Who is he, how long have you been seeing him?"

Jacob just looked puzzled. "Don't know who he is, Diana. He just came. Said he came to..." He stopped a moment, thinking of the right word. "came to take care of me for mama...kind of like an angel, only he doesn't have wings."

Diana rocked back on her heels, squatting in front of Jacob. She was becoming more and more puzzled. "What does he look like?"

Jacob shrugged. "Like a nice man."

"And no one else can see him?"

Grinning, Jacob shook his head. "Not so far. Isn't it neat?"

"And *when* did you start seeing him?"

Jacob seemed to think very hard, then shrugged again. "Don't know. For awhile."

Toby chimed in, though, with the comment: "He told me 'bout him a few days before Vincent went away. Didn't want to play with me anymore."

Diana frowned at Jacob. "Did Chris tell you not to play with Toby?"

Jacob shifted uneasily on the large chair. "No...it's just that Toby doesn't like him and can't see him, so it makes it hard."

"Well, no matter how hard it is, Jacob, when you get new friends, you should *never* be mean to your old ones."

Tears in his eyes, Jacob looked over at Toby. "I didn't mean to be mean."

Continuing with her discussion, Diana also told Jacob: "And Jacob, I don't think your mama would mind you playing at the Reach with Toby, just so long as you're with older children and you're careful. She would want you to have fun."

Jacob seemed to think about this, then asked, "Can I go now? I'll tell Chris you said it's okay."

Diana sighed. "Okay. Let's go have breakfast."



Sometime later, Diana was sitting on the bed playing Candyland with the children, with Cathy sitting in her lap, when Vincent came hauling a door through the tunnels to lean it against the threshold. They smiled at one another as he began fitting it to the opening. Of course the game was over. Jacob and Toby wanted to "help," so Vincent had them stand off to the side holding tools and having them hand them to him. Cathy watched from the bed, her entire attitude one of skepticism.

After a long while and a great deal of frustration (not expressed, but definitely felt!), Vincent was finally ready to hang the door. Driving pins into the rock wall, he managed to get the huge hinges that Kanin had made for him onto the threshold and fitted to the door. Diana came to help him hold the door, but it weighed so much she couldn't hold it by herself.

"Vincent! We need help. I can't hold this thing by myself." Suddenly, the door suddenly seemed to get much lighter...as though someone were already helping hold it, and Vincent chuckled.

"You seem to be stronger than you thought!"

Diana frowned, but she continued steadying the door until Vincent had it hung, then she turned to look at Jacob. "Was Chris helping with the door?"

Jacob nodded and grinned.

Vincent obviously hadn't paid any attention to the exchange. He was so pleased with the door, he was like a child with a new toy. He exclaimed delightedly, "I'll go get the other one!"

The boys had lost interest, and when Mouse and Jamie came by heading for the Mirror Pool and asked if the children wanted to join them, Diana told them to go on. After they left, she sat on the edge of the bed and chewed her nail. She didn't like puzzles she couldn't solve, and this one with Chris was driving her crazy. It was one thing for Jacob to imagine a friend, but quite something else again for that imaginary friend to help hang a door!



When Vincent returned, Alain was with him to help with the door, so Diana excused herself, telling Vincent she would go see Marjorie. She checked on the children, and Jamie told her not to worry. "When I get tired of them, I'll take them to Mary, or give them back to Vincent."

As Diana left, she muttered to herself, *Why not just let Chris take care of them? He seems to be able to do everything else.*

Finally, as she reached the subway, she managed to put the problem with Chris in the background. She had to figure a way to let Vincent visit with Marjorie and the baby. As she rode the train, her mind was working a mile a minute...making better time than the train. By the time she finally reached her destination, she had at least quieted her mind.

Diana stood outside the Reives' apartment a moment considering different routes Vincent could use to get there without being seen. She knocked. When the door opened,

Marjorie smiled radiantly, reminding Diana so much of Catherine in the photos she had seen of her that once more it tugged at her heart.

"Oh, Diana! I'm so glad you came...please, come in."

Marjorie's joy at seeing Diana was contagious, and Diana grinned. She followed Marjorie into the living room and perched on the couch while Marjorie went to get the baby. When Marjorie brought the baby in and laid her in Diana's arms, Diana felt her old desire for another child tug at her, but she pushed it back. *Vincent would have an absolute fit!* "She's wonderful, Marjorie. What did you name her?"

Marjorie blushed a little. "Well, I wanted to name her Catherine, but since you told me about Vincent's Catherine, I decided that maybe that wouldn't be a good idea. So, we named her Diane."

Diana's eyes misted over a little. "Oh, Marjorie. That's so sweet, but you didn't have to do that."

"I know. But I wanted something that would remind me of him...and you...something that only I would know." She sat next to Diana. "Did you talk to him? Will he see me again?"

Diana finally tore her eyes away from her tiny namesake and told Marjorie. "Yes, but we have to arrange it carefully." She handed Diane back to her mother and went to look out the window. There were wide ledges all around, and it was only eight stories up. *No problem at all.* There was shrubbery on the terraces and no major sources of lighting. She turned back to Marjorie. "Is Jon ever gone at night?"

Marjorie nodded. "As a matter of fact, he's out of town right now. The company sent him to take care of an account. He'll be gone for a few days. He hated to leave, but he had no choice."

"Good." Diana smiled wryly. "I mean...not that it's good he's gone, but good that it will be easier to get you and Vincent together. Marjorie, he wants...no...needs to say goodbye, and to see that you and the baby are well."

Marjorie's blond bangs bounced, obscuring her eyes briefly. She had the same adorable cocker-spaniel look that Catherine had at times, when her hair had been down in her face. She brushed her hair back, and stared at Diana with her sea-green eyes. "Am I so very much like her?"

Diana caught herself staring. "You have no idea."

They talked for a long time, with Diana telling her Catherine's story, and explaining why her own kidnapping had affected Vincent so deeply.

The baby began crying, and Marjorie held her, giving her a bottle. She glanced up briefly at Diana and said quietly, "You love him."

The two pairs of green eyes met and Diana smiled. "Yes." She reached out to touch the baby's tiny fingers. "Our daughter is two now. Catherine's son is five."

Marjorie sighed. "I don't think I could share Jon with a memory that strong."

Standing and retrieving her carryall, Diana simply replied, "Yes you could. Because you love him." On her way out the door, Diana turned and told Marjorie, "I'll send him to you tonight." Then she grinned, thinking back to when Vincent would come to see her in her loft. She'd look up and see him peering down at her through those loft windows and hear his tapping on the panes. *And I'd go running, just like a love-struck teenager.* "He'll

probably tap on the window pane to let you know he's here."

Marjorie gave her a puzzled look, and Diana pointed to the window. "He'll climb up...then tap on the window to get your attention."

Marjorie gasped. "Climb! Up eight stories!"

"Yeah. Don't worry...he does it all the time."



When Diana returned to the tunnels, she passed Father's chamber. Seeing Father sitting at his desk reading, she called softly to him. "Father...good evening."

Looking up over the edge of his glasses, Father smiled. "Diana, dear...come in."

Diana crossed the chamber and hugged him, removing his glasses and placing them on the desk. "You read too much, Jacob Wells. Doesn't Mary fuss at you about that?"

Father put his finger to his lips and rolled his eyes in mock fear. "Shh. Say that too loudly and she'll hear."

Diana raised her eyebrows and asked, "All the way from the nursery?"

He made a sound between a chuckle and a groan. "The woman is amazing. She is very determined to keep me on the straight and narrow."

Diana sat on the desk and leaned across. "Ah. Is *that* why she's still in her own chamber and you are rattling around in here."

"Um." Father blushed. "I like my privacy...she putters."

Crossing her arms, Diana grinned. "I see. Puttering. Puttering is to be avoided at all costs...as are cleaning and organizing." She ran a finger across one of his stacks of books, leaving a thick trail. Rising and tossing another grin at him across her shoulder, she commented, "I'm sure glad I got to Vincent before he was as set in his ways as his father is. Think of all the fun we would have missed! Think about it. There is more to life than reading...besides...you need more activity!" She grinned wider...making Father blush once more.

After Diana was out the door, Father picked up his glasses and put them back on, shaking his head ruefully. *I would imagine those doors will increase the activity level in one chamber around here.*



Reaching their chamber, Diana was momentarily surprised at the door. *Awfully big. Solid. Thick.* She pushed it open. *Ugh. Heavy, too.* When she came in, Vincent was propped up in bed with Jacob and Toby on either side and Cathy in his lap. He was reading them The Velveteen Rabbit. Their eyes met over the top of the book, and she smiled. Sitting down in front of her mirror, she began undoing her braid and brushing her hair. She found herself becoming more and more irritated as she listened to Vincent read. She listened to the story and thought about the implications of that story for Vincent. He had told her so many times about how Catherine had loved the story, and how Catherine's love had made him real...real to himself, and how in her eyes he could see himself as beautiful for the first time. Diana knew that Vincent saw himself through her love as well, but the significance

was not quite the same. *For me*, she thought, *he uses the story to explain how I made Mikey real. Appropriate, I suppose, but not exactly as romantic or as flattering.* She brushed her hair a little harder, her resentment flaring a little. *Cut it out, Bennett. Does no good. Sharing, remember? You share him with Catherine...he has to share you with Mikey.*

Suddenly, Diana realized Vincent had finished the story and the children were asking for goodnight kisses. She hugged them all, kissed them and watched as Vincent herded them out the door. Sighing, she went back to her brooding. She examined her image in the mirror critically, then looked up at Vincent's painting of himself and Catherine. Gritting her teeth, she tried hard to remember what she'd told Marjorie about sharing with a memory. She spoke to Catherine. "I'm sorry, Cathy, but sometimes I have a hard time sharing. Listening to the same stories, feeling the same damned, dogged, passionate determination to always remember. It gets kind of old. Sometimes, anyway." Staring at the painting, she finally said, "And damn you Kristopher! Why'd you have to paint this stupid thing, anyway?"

Diana tossed her brush down, undressed and grabbed her robe. Stuffing her feet into her fur boots, she walked down to the showers before bed. When Vincent got back from putting the children down she would give him the directions to Marjorie's apartment...*and then he can go wrestle with his own damn ghosts!*

Diana lingered in the shower. The water was warmer than usual tonight, and she leaned back into the stream of water, eyes closed, trying to let the resentment flow out of her. She hated it when she did this to herself. As she relaxed, she felt Vincent coming toward her. Opening her eyes, she saw him lounging in the doorway watching her. She reached up, turned off the water and stepped out. He handed her the towel, then wrapped her gently in her robe. They were both very quiet as she stared at him and toweled her hair dry.

Finally, Diana spoke quietly, her voice very controlled and even. "Marjorie is waiting for you. I wrote the address down for you. It's on your desk."

Vincent sat on the boulder next to her and motioned for her to come over to him. When she didn't move, he sighed. He rose and went to her, touched her cheek briefly, then told her, "I will be back before too long...perhaps in an hour or two. We will talk then."

Diana stood watching him as his graceful, cat-like stride carried him swiftly down the tunnel away from her.



Marjorie had been listening all night for that elusive tapping on the window, and when it finally came, she froze. Finally, she moved over to the window and opened it. When Vincent's shoulder came through the window, she was transfixed. Her memories of him simply didn't do him justice. His copper-gold mane was a perfect frame for that strangely gentle face. He paused, sitting in the windowsill, half in--half out. "May I come in"

That voice. She had dreamed about that voice. *That* she would *never* forget. "Yes...I'm sorry. Please. Come in."

Marjorie watched him. She could almost read his thoughts as his emotions played



Ruonda '92

across his face. His eyes moved over her. *Whatever is he thinking?* She cleared her throat and indicated for him to come into the living room.

Vincent followed her, and sat when she motioned to the couch, his eyes never leaving her face. He seemed totally bemused.

Marjorie shifted briefly from one foot to the other. "I wanted to thank you, for everything."

His voice again...gentle, slightly rough. "There is no need. I am glad you are well."

There was a small cry from the other room and Marjorie glanced at Vincent. There was a look of yearning on his face. "Wait. I'll get her for you."



When Marjorie came back into the room, Vincent was standing, waiting.

"Wait...please," he pleaded. "Stay where you are for just a moment."

When Marjorie had stepped into the room, the light hit her just right. The resemblance to Catherine was perfect. For a moment Vincent saw only Catherine holding her child...as she'd never been able to do. He let his imagination wander for a few moments, then sighed. "Thank you, Marjorie."

Marjorie came to him and placed her daughter in his hands. He gazed at the tiny face, then back to her mother. "What did you name her?"

"Diane."

They sat, and while Vincent held Diane, Marjorie told him about herself, about Jon, and about their lives together. The longer he listened, the more she became a person in her own right, and not simply someone who looked like Catherine. When it was time to leave, he thanked her.

"Whatever for?"

His head bowed as he hid behind his golden mane. "For giving me time to re-live a dream...to remember all the lost possibilities."

Marjorie touched his face gently. "You didn't need me for that."

Vincent captured her hand in his and held it a moment. "No. But there is something vivid about flesh and blood that brings a sharper edge to the memories...a clearer vision. Again. Thank you...and goodbye."

"Will I see you again?"

He shook his head and smiled, remembering another time...another place. "No. This is your world. I have no place in it."

He slipped through the window and was gone.



When Vincent opened the new door to their chamber, Diana looked up from the novel she was reading. "How did it go?"

Vincent closed and deliberately hooked the door with the latch. "It went very well. It was good to see them both. The child is adorable. Thank you, Diana."

Diana opened her book again and looked back down. "You're welcome."



Vincent tossed his cloak over the chair and began undressing. He watched Diana as she pretended to read...for he knew she wasn't reading, but only avoiding a discussion. He walked around the chamber blowing out candles, finally leaving only the candelabra next to the bed still lit. Diana's hair shone like fire against the pillowcase and on the satin gleam of her shoulder. Leaning next to her on the bed, he took the book out of her hands and laid it aside.

"Vincent! I was reading that! It was just getting interesting."

"Um. I know. So interesting you haven't turned the page in the last 10 minutes. I *know* you read faster than that." Now that he had her attention, he said gently, "You're angry with me."

Diana looked away. "No I'm not."

His hand reached up and softly caressed her neck under the fall of russet hair, gentle fingers stroking tenderly. "Then why do I sense anger and resentment...if it is not directed at me?" About that time, Vincent felt her block go up.

Diana shrugged. "Just the usual. Just my usual feelings of jealousy and inadequacy. I'll live."

Vincent dropped his hand to the quilt to trace some of the stitching. "You never used to be so touchy about Catherine."

With a touch of sarcasm in her voice, Diana commented, "Of course I was. I just made more of an effort to hide it. Damn it, Vincent...I don't *like* being jealous...I just get that way sometimes. I guess the case with Marjorie just affected me differently than it did you. I was glad we rescued her, and I *did* identify her with Catherine. I hated that Catherine died. Before I met you, my heart went out to her...I was desperate to find her killer...to make him pay..."

Taking her hand, thinking of the night Diana shot Gabriel...with Catherine's own gun...Vincent interjected quietly...a touch uneasily: "And you did."

Diana's eyes met Vincent's...a little hard and cold. "Yes. I did. I ended it. I hunted him down; he's gone, and I'm glad. But in the end I did it for you and Jacob...not for Catherine. I'm glad that this time I got in on the case early, before the victim died...and the good guys won. But your reaction to the whole thing opened a whole new can of worms. I've felt pretty secure for awhile...smug, even. Guess the jealousy snuck up on me."

Vincent settled himself on the bed, then reached out and pulled her, resisting, into his arms. "Then who are you angry with?"

Diana threw her head back, and eyes snapping, she admitted: "Okay. If you must know, I'm mad at Catherine for dying and leaving me with only memories to fight. And I'm mad at me for being mad at her, and I'm mad...and feeling guilty... and jealous...because I have you only by default...because if she *hadn't* died, I wouldn't have you. Okay? Now does *any* of that make sense, or is it just the ravings of a woman in the throes of PMS?"

Tightening his arms around her, Vincent chuckled and buried his face in her neck. The sound rumbled through his chest like quiet thunder. "It makes perfect sense to me." Vincent thought a moment, remembering Diana's feelings as he was reading to the children, and correctly assessing what had begun this withdrawal. "Diana...as for The Velveteen Rabbit, the analogy applies to both you and Catherine...and in your case, not just in relation

to Mikey. Your love brought me back from a despair so deep that nothing was real to me anymore...not myself, not even Jacob...and you have done that more than once. I *do* see myself through your eyes...always. Remember, *beauty is the lover's gift*."15 Holding her at arms' length, turning her to face him, he asked solemnly: "You *are* my lover aren't you? I haven't confused you with someone else?" He looked her up and down skeptically until she burst out laughing.

Wiping tears of relief and mirth from her eyes with the heel of one hand, Diana pushed at his chest with the other. "You're terrible! I can't stay angry when you act like this."

Vincent simply once again tightened his hold, pulling her back to him, hard against his chest. When she was once again lying across his lap and resting her head peacefully on his chest, he placed a soft kiss on top of her head, then rested his chin there, sighing as she nestled against him. He closed his eyes and smiled gently in relief as he felt her begin to relax, and her mental barrier drop. "Don't do this to yourself, Diana. You know I love you, and that my love for Catherine does not diminish that love. You and I have shared more than Catherine and I were allowed to share in the time we had, but that does not diminish my love for her. Each love is separate, unique. You once pointed that out to me...quite adamantly, as I recall, when you first told me that you loved me, on the first anniversary of Catherine's death. If I recall the conversation correctly, you were quite angry with me then for wallowing in my misery."

Diana shook her head a tiny fraction, her face still set and a little angry. Vincent sensed she still wasn't quite ready to give up her anger and hurt feelings quite yet. She commented in a choked voice, "Not angry with you because you were wallowing. Angry because you were neglecting Jacob, and because you couldn't see that someone else loved you as well...me. I was hurt then, too."

Vincent shifted farther onto the bed, pulling her with him so she was sitting fully in his lap. He enclosed her in his arms...a gentle prison. He nuzzled her neck, brushing the soft fur of his face across the skin there, and smiled when he felt the electric-like shock of her desire through their bond...she had inadvertently allowed her block to drop.

She tried to pull away, but was held firmly in his rock-like arms. "That's not fair. First you make me laugh, then you *really* play dirty!"

Vincent stopped what he was doing momentarily, then released one arm long enough to move it to her thigh. Slowly, he inched her nightgown up, with her still struggling half-heartedly. Finally, with a long, gentle sigh, he breathed into her ear, "Well, if you don't want to..." and released her, toppling her off his lap.

Diana sat there open-mouthed as he walked out of the room. "You...You... *rat!*" She flung herself from the bed, grabbed her robe, shoved her feet into her fur boots, and ran out of the room--right into his chest as he stepped back out into the doorway.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he smiled hugely, canines flashing. "Going somewhere?"

Diana stared up into his laughing face...frowned, and stomped her foot down on his...the soft boot the merest tickle to him, especially through his boots. She broke free and ran down the tunnel toward the Chamber of the Falls. Vincent leaned against the tunnel wall and roared his laughter, wiping tears with his sleeve.



By the time Diana reached the Chamber of the Falls, she was out of breath, but she was no longer angry. Of course, she could feel Vincent's amusement...but she could also feel the love behind it. She realized belatedly that he had done what he had to get her mind off Catherine. The grin started very small, but by the time she had walked back to the chamber, she was laughing outright. She managed to compose herself, then walked calmly into the chamber...closing the door behind her and latching it. She looked around, to see Vincent already undressed and leaning against the pillows, pretending to read. His pelt shone like burnished gold in the candlelight--she noted with satisfaction that he'd left his nightshirt off. He looked up, eyes gentle--but amused.

"Did you enjoy your walk?"

Diana dropped her robe, then her nightgown, and Vincent's eyebrow raised. He glanced down at her fur-booted feet. "Incongruous."

Hopping up on the bed, she pulled the boots off and tossed them at him, one at a time. He caught them and tossed them onto the leather chair next to the bed. "No socks?"

She shook her head.

"Interesting."

Nodding, Diana glanced toward one of the new doors. She shivered in the cool air, and goose bumps rose on her arms. "The doors seem to work well."

Vincent's talon traced along her neck, down her shoulder, paused a moment at her breast as he circled it. She shivered a little both with pleasure...and from the chill. He glanced up into her eyes and commented, "Yes. I think they will do nicely." Vincent flipped the covers back, and Diana slid in next to him. Stretching luxuriously, he placed his book on the table next to the bed and snuggled down into his pillow. "Goodnight, Diana."

Diana couldn't take it any longer. "Oh no you don't!" She leaped on him furiously, tickling him, and before long, the laughter died away and the only sounds were those of the creaking of springs and heavy breathing.



Diana lay with her head nestled in the crook of Vincent's shoulder. She could feel him drifting off to sleep, and murmured, "Who is going to blow out the candles?"

He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, then her nose, and finally another on her lips. "Let them burn down. I will take the wax to Rebecca in the morning and get fresh ones."

Snuggling in closer as Vincent pulled the quilts over them, Diana sighed contentedly. *I love you, Vincent.*

"Um. Love you too."



Vincent slept a little restlessly. His dreams were formless; vague images which were at times violent...but mostly there was a pervading sorrow. He woke twice, tears on his

face, with no clear memory of what had awakened him. Whatever it had been, it had not been strong enough to awaken either Diana or the children. Each time, he fell back asleep only after lying awake for awhile, staring into the darkness.



The following morning, they woke--not to the somewhat customary feel of three small bodies vaulting into their bed, but to the somewhat shocking sound of pounding on their door. "FATHER! DIANA! Let us in!"

Diana rolled out of bed and threw her robe on. Yawning, she opened the door and the children almost ran over her in their haste to hop on the bed.

"Father!" Jacob almost yelled... "Why is there a door? Why couldn't we get in?" He looked around in the dark. All the candles had burned down. Vincent pulled out a drawer and took a couple of spares out, removed the wax from one holder, replaced the candle, and lit it.

Diana shrugged, and looked to Vincent. "Well?"

Vincent gathered the children up in his arms and settled them. He looked from one to the other, and Diana leaned against the door, watching him with pleasure as he explained that they had decided they wanted to sleep in the mornings without having children plop on top of them. "After all," he said seriously, his nose scrunched up as he looked Cathy in the eye, "This is *not* Hop on Pop." Cathy giggled. She loved Dr. Seuss...much to Vincent's dismay.

Diana called the children and asked them to please go wait for them in the kitchen. "Father and I will be there soon. Okay?"

"O-kay!" All three of the children zoomed out of the room--and were gone before they knew it.

Vincent shook his head, rose, and dressed quickly. Diana took a little longer, as she braided her hair, taking the candle with her to her mirror. While they dressed, Diana spoke with Vincent about "Chris."

"The whole thing puzzles me, Vincent. An imaginary friend cannot help someone hold a door--as he did me. I couldn't have held that door up by myself yesterday."

Vincent walked around the chamber, collecting all the burned down candles for Rebecca. He thought back over all the incidents when Chris was mentioned, then shook his head. "I don't know, Diana. We will simply have to watch Jacob...pay attention. Perhaps we can solve the mystery." He dumped the wax into a collecting bag, set up one or two other spares around the room. "Are you about ready? I'm starved...and today we have to begin preparations for Winterfest."



Breakfast was exciting and entertaining. The whole chamber was buzzing with plans. Classes were canceled for the next few days, and the children were ecstatic. Vincent was organizing all the men to do repairs in the Great Hall, and the major cleaning. Jamie and Diana were helping Rebecca with the candles this year. Brooke had her hands full with all

the younger children, whose mothers were busy elsewhere. Michael was making his plans for his trip after Winterfest...and making *sure* Vincent would be able to take all the classes. Father and Mary sat with their heads together off to one side, and Diana smiled inwardly, thinking of their "discussion" last night. Maybe eventually those two would get together...or maybe both of them were too set in their ways. She wasn't at all sure that Mary would be any more willing to leave her "babies" than Father would be to leave his books. Suddenly, Linnell, Elizabeth's daughter walked in...and came directly to Vincent. She seemed worried and preoccupied.

Vincent raised his eyes to hers, and asked in a concerned voice: "Is it Elizabeth?"

"No...no. Nothing like that, Vincent. But...there *is* something I'd like for you to see...you *and* Diana."

Diana took Linnell's hand and pulled her down into the chair next to her. "What is it?"

Shaking her head, Linnell answered obscurely, "No. I think it would be best to show you."

Vincent rose and took their dishes back to William. When he came back, he asked Linnell if it would be all right if the children came.

Pausing, seeming to think it over, Linnell finally said, "Yes. I suppose so. I really don't think it's anything...well...dangerous...only strange."

Diana and Vincent threw puzzled glances at one another, then Vincent shrugged. "Lead on, if you will not tell us what the mystery is all about."



The children ran ahead, anxious to get to the Painted Tunnels. They loved looking at the pictures, and knew exactly where to look for their own portraits. Diana and Vincent followed Linnell a little more slowly. When they reached the lower levels of the Painted Tunnels, they found Elizabeth with the children. She was setting them up with canvases and paints to keep them busy. When they walked into sight, Elizabeth raised her eyes and smiled.

"Such busy hands and feet! This should keep them occupied while we show you our mystery."

Vincent leaned over Jacob's shoulder and quietly told him to watch his sister and to behave, then asked Toby to help.

As they were walking away, Jacob chirruped cheerfully: "Chris says he hopes you like the surprise."

Diana and Vincent turned back to stare at Jacob--who was totally oblivious to their reaction. The child was busy painting. Then they stared at one another. Vincent shrugged. "I suppose we should go find out what the surprise *is*."

They quietly followed Elizabeth and Linnell through several tunnels painted with scenes of the tunnel community in various stages of progress. Eventually, the artists stopped and drew their attention to the tunnel wall, then left without Diana or Vincent noticing.

Diana gasped. "Vincent!" Vincent drew Diana to him and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Her eyes glistened with tears, and he wiped them away gently with his thumb.



Sighing, Vincent commented quietly with an undertone of amusement: "Well. Now we know who 'Chris' is."

On the tunnel wall, twice life-sized was a head-and-shoulders portrait of Diana and Vincent...signed by Kristopher Gentian.

They stood for a long while, staring at the painting, and Vincent heard Diana murmur softly, "Thank you, Kristopher."

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Walking, arms around one another, Diana and Vincent returned to the children, to find another figure squatting next to them giving an art lesson. As soon as they came in sight, Kristopher leaped up, grinning. "Well? Did 'ya like it?"

Diana was somewhat speechless. She'd never actually *met* a ghost before. However, Vincent had no trouble finding his voice.

"It's wonderful, Kristopher...however..."

Kristopher looked crestfallen...so woebegone that Diana burst out laughing. It was impossible to remain serious with *that* face in front of her.

Pointing at Diana, Kristopher grinned widely. "*She* liked it. I can tell."

Diana nodded, smiling again behind her hand.

"Kristopher," Vincent began, "It is not the painting. *That* is wonderful. Thank you. What I am concerned about is *what* you are doing here...and *why*?"

The young man sat back down between Jacob and Cathy, crossing his legs...reached over and ruffled Toby's hair. "I'm giving a painting lesson. What else?"

Vincent was beginning to become irritated. He began to see why Catherine had tended to lose patience with Kristopher...it was very difficult to get a straight answer.

"Kristopher, please. What are you *doing* here, and why didn't you let *me*...or even Diana see you before now?"

The young man looked up, seemingly embarrassed. "Well, you know...I was kind of afraid you'd try to make me go away." His smiled lopsidedly. "I kind of tend to get on people's nerves after awhile." He smiled brightly, completely unpretentiously, his mercurial mood a little disorienting for Vincent. "But kids like me!" Then, Kristopher looked thoughtful. "Besides, I got lonely. Mr. Smythe is okay, but I thought it might be fun to see how you were doing."

Diana crooked her finger and called Kristopher. He uncurled his legs, brushed himself off, and came to her...now looking rather sheepish.

"Kristopher, did you tell Jacob that his mother sent you here to take care of him?" Diana asked very softly, so the children wouldn't hear.

"Well...kind of."

Vincent looked almost hopeful. "Did she?"

Kristopher drew a circle in the dirt in front of him.

Vincent sighed. "I thought not." He became somewhat exasperated. "Why did you do that? Why did you lie?"

Kristopher shrugged a little. "I didn't mean any harm. I had to tell him something. I felt if I appeared only to him and told him I was here to take care of him, it would be

easier to hide." He cocked his head a little and looked at Vincent a little strangely. "You were kind of busy. I didn't want to bother you, and I *did* try to warn him...and Diana...that something bad was going to happen. It was kind of hard to be specific. Sorry it didn't help."

Vincent frowned. This was becoming very complicated. "Why didn't you simply tell me?"

Kristopher just grinned, dismissing Vincent's question with a wave. "There you go again. All these questions! I just didn't...that's all. Besides...you already knew." He went to Diana, lifted her hand, then kissed it. "Did the painting make you feel better, pretty lady?"

Diana blushed, but she nodded.

"Good." Kristopher said brightly. "See you later!"

Before Vincent could stop him, Kristopher trotted off around the corner, and when Vincent rounded it...he was gone. When he came back, he shook his head ruefully.

"What's wrong?" Diana asked. "I think he's nice. Might be kind of interesting, having a resident ghost."

Sighing, Vincent chuckled a little. "It's not that. I *like* Kristopher. It's just...." He gestured to the children. "Jacob in particular. I don't like that he passed himself off as a guardian angel sent by Catherine. Kristopher is a pleasant, fun-loving young man, but...he is totally irresponsible. Heaven knows what mischief he is going to cause."

Jacob ran up to them and pulled on Vincent's cloak. "Come look, Father. Chris helped me paint a tree!"

Vincent knelt down in front of Jacob's tree and admired it. It really was fairly good, for an upside down purple tree. He also admired Toby's red blob of a fire engine and Cathy's picture of Mouse. He helped the children clean their brushes, then told them to run take the brushes and paint to Elizabeth. While they were gone, Vincent embraced Diana. He kissed her gently, brushing her straying hair back, then raised his eyes to gaze into hers. "Well. *Did* his picture make you feel better?"

Diana blushed, the color clashing with her hair. "Yes. I have looked at the one of you and Catherine for so long...it's kind of nice to know that there is one of us, as well."

Vincent twined his fingers in her hair, delighting in unbraiding the loose braid. "The painting is lovely...and so are you. It is unfortunate that we cannot have it in our chamber."

Diana twisted around, retrieving her hair from Vincent's hand, and kissed his palm softly. "Darn it, Vincent...I just braided that! You're as impossible as Kristopher."

"Turn around."

Diana turned obediently, somewhat to his surprise, and Vincent carefully re-braided her hair. "I would rather see it down, but I know it is difficult to make candles with your hair hanging in the wax." When she turned, he traced the line of her jaw with his forefinger, then kissed her once more very softly. "Why don't you run on and help Rebecca? I will drop the children off with Brooke before going to the Great Hall."

"All right. See you later?"

"Of course." Vincent watched Diana as she swung off down the tunnel. When she rounded the corner, he sighed and leaned against the wall. He was a little tired already from his previous two nights' restless sleep, and had a full day of heavy cleaning and carpentry

work ahead of him as they prepared the Great Hall for Winterfest. He also had sentry duty later on. Fortunately, no special invitations to Winterfest had to be made this year. Joe and Erica and Elliott all knew to come, and were tentatively expected. In addition, this year he wasn't involved in delivering the candles, and perhaps he could keep Mouse involved enough with other work to keep him out of trouble. He always seemed to have some scheme to make things more organized, or faster, that always backfired.

When the children came back with Elizabeth and Linnell in tow, Vincent explained about Kristopher and told them he truly thought there was nothing to be alarmed about, though they might find a few additions to their walls from time to time. "Perhaps if you provided him with canvases and paint, he would leave the walls alone. He really is well-meaning."

Linnell, in particular was fascinated. "The painting is lovely. I saw the one in your chamber, Vincent, but I never made the connection. I would enjoy visiting with him myself."

"Perhaps you will have the chance. Just remember, he is very unpredictable." Vincent sighed. "Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I need to deliver my brood to Brooke and get to work."



Diana, Rebecca, and Jamie were hard at work making the fancy Winterfest candles. Diana was enjoying herself tremendously; she had taken special pains to learn from Rebecca just how the candles were made, because she wanted to help this year. She was commenting to Jamie: "This is so much fun. I am so totally uncreative...doing this makes me feel...artistic."

Rebecca laughed, the sound like running water in the chamber. She looked up at all the hanging candles somewhat proprietorially. "I know what you mean. That's how I felt the first year I started doing this. Olivia loves candlemaking as well. She'll be glad to get back to helping once the new baby is weaned. Trouble is, then she'll also be back on sentry duty, and she hates that. Maybe Vincent can assign her elsewhere...can you ask him?"

Jamie broke in, commenting on some of the candles that had just been hung to dry, and Rebecca went over to examine them. Diana stood, looking at the candle in her hand. Rebecca's comment reminded her of something she'd been meaning to ask Vincent about for some time. When she'd first come to the tunnels, she'd stood sentry with everyone else, though it made Vincent nervous; but ever since she'd become pregnant the first time, she'd been taken off the roster...and never been put back on. Once she'd weaned Cathy, she'd meant to start back, but things kept interfering and she'd never had the opportunity to push the issue...and of course Vincent would never mention it. *Convenient for him that he does the duty roster. Now that things have settled down somewhat, perhaps I need to take the bull by the horns.* She muttered to herself: "God, I hate to fight with him."

"What?" Jamie said, coming up behind her.

Diana turned quickly, almost knocking a load of candles out of Jamie's hands. "Oh! Sorry." She reached out and steadied her friend, and shrugged. "Nothing important, just I'm about to start a fight with my husband first opportunity, and I'm not looking forward to it."

Jamie cocked her head, her blond hair straggling into her eyes. "If fighting upsets you, why do it?"

"Because I have a perverse sense of humor, I suppose, and I do it so well." She grinned. "Seriously, I keep forgetting to *make* him put me back on sentry duty. It seems like something disastrous keeps coming up to distract me...I forget to mention it, and he, of course, never puts me on. It's not fair to the others, and it really aggravates me."

"He's scared of losing you."

"Yeah, I know. But changing candles, making food pickups, all the other duties are getting tiresome. Not that sentry duty is exciting...it's just different. Shit, Jamie...I'd rather be down laying brick or excavating than doing some of this stuff. That's the best thing about still working with Joe...it's the only thing that keeps my brain going. I have to have brainwork...puzzles to solve." She laughed at Jamie's anxious look. "Hey...don't worry...I'm not planning on leaving because he's boring me to death! Vincent is enough of a puzzle to keep me going the rest of my life...but I *refuse* to be coddled. Would *you* let Mouse tell you that you couldn't do sentry duty, or...or *anything*?"

Jamie scratched her nose with the back of her hand, then shook her head. "No. And I know what you mean. Sometimes I feel like if I change another diaper I'm going to throw up. I'd give anything to be back on the Rat Patrol."

"Exactly. Trouble is, unless I confront him, he'll just kind of let it slide. He doesn't want me to get pregnant again...but he doesn't want me out doing what I do best either. I should be working security with him. Hey! How 'bout that, Jamie?...I'll be the brains and he can be the brawn. 'Ain't togetherness great?"

The deadpan look on Jamie's face almost did Diana in completely as she shook her head ruefully and said: "God. You'll kill each other."



In the Great Hall, Cullen and Vincent were wrestling one of the huge wooden tables back into place after making repairs to it. Mouse and Alain were bringing down the chandeliers so the children could clean them and replace candles. Kanin was all but hanging from one of the beams checking for rot. After finally letting the table down and manhandling it back in place, Vincent stood and stretched. He shoved his filthy mane back out of his eyes, smudging dirt across his forehead. Cullen glanced up and chuckled. "You need a bath, my friend."

Vincent wrinkled his nose. "And you don't?"

Across the room, Mouse yelled: "William's brought lunch!"

Heads raised all over the room, and bodies began gravitating toward the round figure surrounded by food baskets. William thanked the children for helping him bring the lunch and set them to other tasks. He motioned to the end of the table, where Kipper had set up several wash basins and towels. "At least get the grime off your hands and faces." He looked up at Vincent and Cullen and retorted: "I'm not sure even a *bath* will do for you two."

Vincent gleefully reached out to embrace the cook, and William backed off, grinning, hands outstretched. "No, no. No thanks are necessary, I assure you."

When Vincent turned, Cullen extended his arms..."Aw...I'll hug you." Both men laughed, and when Vincent wiped the tears of laughter away, the mud on his face made Cullen laugh even harder.

Sitting down to their lunch, finally, Cullen commented to Vincent: "That's the first time I've ever seen you laugh that hard, Vincent. You must be getting soft in your old age."

Vincent grinned, fangs flashing. He realized Cullen was right. He *had* been laughing a great deal more in the last few years...but still pretty much reserved his outright laughter for Diana. He was still too aware of his differences, to laugh, or smile widely enough to show his teeth. Lately, though, for some reason, differences didn't seem to matter as much. He was, after all, among family. Finishing off his sandwich and pouring another cup of tea, Vincent sat back and groaned. "I ache, Cullen. Please tell me you do too, or I will think I *am* getting old."

"Nope. I feel great." Cullen started to rise, then sank back into the chair with a groan.

Vincent leaned his elbow on the table and observed through half-closed eyes. "I see. You encourage me. At least I'm not the only one who is falling apart."

About this time, Vincent raised his head. He could hear Mouse's voice across the Hall explaining how he was going to improve the mechanism for raising and lowering the chandeliers, and Vincent had this harrowing picture of one of the chandeliers falling in the middle of their celebration. Sighing heavily, Vincent forced himself to rise and go over to restrain Mouse from creating any problems. "Mouse...we could use your help over here..."



Vincent stood under the shower, wishing he could stay in the warm stream for hours, but he knew he couldn't. He washed his hair and showered as quickly as he could so he could so he could get to his sentry site. Normally, he didn't do sentry duty anymore, as such...he did sweeps of all the tunnels, but since they had need of some of the skills of the usual sentries while getting ready for Winterfest, he had scheduled himself as a sentry during several time slots to free these men up for other duties...so, he would do his sweeps in addition to these. Turning off the water, he shook, then towed his hair before dressing. After collecting his things, he stopped back by his chamber before leaving, and was mildly surprised Diana wasn't there. It was late, and he was sure the children would be in bed by now. Reaching out with their bond to find her, he encountered her block instead. He glanced across the chamber at Diana's clock. *I haven't time to look for her...I have to relieve Taylor.* A little irritated, he strode from the chamber toward Brooklyn and Outpost Six.



Diana sat against the tunnel wall, her gun tucked into her pants and a book in her lap. One small candle flickered nearby, allowing her to read. She felt great. Her senses were alert for any movement. Of course, nothing *was* moving, but that was beside the point. She



was ready for anything if it *did* happen. She raised her head finally, listening...then smiled just a little, secret smile, and went back to her reading. She heard Vincent just around the corner and glanced at her watch. *Right on time, of course.* She had sent Taylor back early. He'd had a date anyway, and it wasn't hard to convince the young man that Vincent had sent her. When Vincent rounded the corner, she dropped her book and felt his surprise...and irritation. Carefully, she forced herself not to smile, and just looked up. "You're one minute late."

Vincent sat next to her, one leg stretched out, the other bent. He clasped his hands around his knee. Glancing down at the book she was reading, he commented: "Holmes again, I see."

"UmHm. I like mysteries...I like the thrill of the chase."

"I see." Vincent thumbed through the book, then put it down. "You want sentry duty again."

"Bingo."

"That's not all though, is it?"

Diana grinned. "You're very perceptive tonight."

Vincent shrugged his sore shoulders, reaching across to rub one. He grumbled a little. "It's hard not to be perceptive with you positively *radiating* at me!"

Diana reached up to massage his shoulders, and he leaned back into the pressure. "Sentry duty never *used* to be like this."

Suddenly, Diana stopped her massage and was on her feet...Vincent following immediately. She'd sensed something out in the tunnel even before Vincent had. She extinguished the candle and pulled the brick from the watch-hole. There was a single man walking with a limp through the tunnel with only a flashlight. His pants were ripped where he'd obviously fallen somewhere. As the light swung her way, she covered the hole, then came back up to watch. Vincent was about to have a fit in the background. He could see nothing, but dared not say anything either. She motioned to him to signal an all quiet, and he did. The intruder stopped briefly, startled by the tapping on the pipe, then continued on. She noticed that the man was heading toward a dead-end, and signaled Vincent with sign to go around to the next cross tunnel, just in case. If he got that far, perhaps they could knock him out and take him to another tunnel. She noticed he'd been marking his way with chalk. She figured she could erase those marks and re-draw them, confusing him completely. That way, perhaps Vincent wouldn't be forced into something he didn't want to do. *What the hell is he doing down here, anyway?* She followed Vincent, checking the watch-holes periodically to keep track of the man. As she'd suspected, he'd continued down the dead-end tunnel. He began fiddling with his flashlight, and the light flickered. Diana grinned. She reached for the bond with Vincent...deepened it, and indicated what she wanted...she felt his approval. She saw the man digging in a pack he had...probably for batteries for the flashlight. About the time the flashlight went out, Diana heard a thud, then Vincent's soft call. She lit the lamp she'd carried with her and never used, and joined him in the tunnel. The man was out like a light, and Vincent had him over his shoulder. Diana broke off a piece of the chalk and walked with Vincent as they carried the limp body up several levels, somewhat to the east...to a deserted part of the tunnels...and where any thresholds could be blocked easily. As they walked, Diana examined the contents of his bag. Spelunking

gear...amateur stuff. He had been no real threat, except to the secrecy of the tunnels. Vincent deposited him in a similar dead-end, and Diana marked a mark with the chalk. The hard floor in the tunnels in this area would leave no footprints, so they walked away, knowing that the marks Diana left for him would lead him back to the surface.

Vincent glanced at Diana, and she could feel his approval...and his amusement. "I will go wipe the other marks off on the way back down."

Diana nodded. She would continue to the upper tunnels, marking arrows with the chalk for the man to follow. "Meet you back there in a bit...and Vincent...make sure false walls are put up in this area and kept there for awhile. Unless he's stupid, he's going to be very curious. I don't think he can find his way here again, since he was obviously lost...but it's better to be safe than sorry."



When Vincent reached Outpost Six, he'd erased all the marks except the one in the dead-end. When he removed that one, he went back to the post. He signaled an all-clear for this area and waited for Pascal's response. After receiving it, he relaxed. Apparently no one else was having problems. Leaning against the wall, he thought about Diana. She'd been good. She was always good at what she does. She was a predator, like himself. They made a good team. Most times, he avoided thinking of her that way...as a hunter. Every time he did, he inevitably thought of her killing Gabriel...and of the time early in their marriage when she'd killed an intruder in the tunnels. Both men had been unarmed, and she'd killed them in cold blood...not in the heat of rage, but simply as something that needed to be done. Every time he thought about it...to this day, it made him uneasy. He dealt with it...forced himself to...but he didn't have to like it. He squirmed inwardly a little. After killing Modred, he thought he knew a little better how she felt...about that little piece of soul that gets left behind. Somehow it wasn't the same as killing when the rage took him: there was no pleasure in it...and the aftermath was far worse. But whenever Diana could, she avoided killing...just as he did. Vincent laid his head back against the cold stone and closed his eyes, listening to the darkness. He noted that the regular rhythm of the pipes had picked up once more after he'd sounded the all-clear. Finally, he could feel Diana coming back. He could feel her satisfaction with the night's work. He closed his eyes and waited for her...not sure what to say. He hated allowing her back on sentry duty, though even his sense of fair play insisted he must. The thought of even the possibility of her being in danger disturbed him. He knew she would not accept the less dangerous posts...the ones he normally put the women at. She'd always insisted on the worst areas. He hated when she went Above on cases...though he said nothing. He knew that she knew he hated it, though nothing was ever said between them. However...another thought struck him as well: *In keeping her off the sentry roster...am I protecting her...or am I protecting myself from seeing her as a killer?* When he sensed she was close, he rose to meet her. In the dim light, the two hunters stared at one another. Diana seemed, with her very silence, to challenge him to deny the kinship they'd felt tonight...the bond that had nothing to do with their relationship as husband and wife...as lovers. Finally, Vincent cleared his throat. "Michael will be here soon."

Diana sat, leaned against the wall, and hugged her knees. Where the lamplight picked up the color in her hair, it was bright, but like blood...it was almost black in the shadows. "Well?" She questioned.

Vincent knelt in front of her, arm resting across his knee. "Well what, my heart?"

Diana asked in a level voice: "Well...am I back on the roster or not?"

Knowing he had no choice, Vincent capitulated. "You are back on. You know I disapprove. But, you are right. I cannot cage you, Diana, nor would I see you caged." Leaning over, he gently eased down next to her, and took her hand. When she rested her head on his shoulder, he took her small hand in his and savored the feel of it. He admitted quietly: "You were good tonight. It was a good plan. You saved his life. I might have had to kill him."

Diana lay with her eyes closed. "Perhaps you would have killed him, but probably not. He was already lost. You hadn't lost yourself to the rage...he hadn't angered you, or hurt anyone. You've never had to kill anyone yet who didn't deserve it. He would've been okay. You would've figured out something."

Vincent thought awhile, knowing Diana could tell a great deal of what he was feeling...and thinking. Finally, he asked something that had been bothering him for a long while. "To kill...like that...without the rage, Diana...does it get easier? I mean..."

Diana turned to look at him. She seemed exasperated. "You ask me? Like I'm so very experienced...just because I've done it twice? What you *mean* is...was it easier the second time than the first? No. You mean, now that *you* have killed that way...because of Modred...will you do it again? You are afraid it *will* get easier, and that it will cease to bother you."

"Yes. I don't think I can bear it, Diana...the pain. You are stronger than I."

"You *can* bear it...and you will." Vincent could hear the anger burning behind her words...not anger at him...but at the necessity that forced them to do these things. "You will because you have to. You can kill that way if you must. And no...it won't make it any easier. Will you do it again? I don't know. I think, like myself...you will do what you must to protect those you love...but you will always seek another way. God, Vincent...sometimes you treat me like a damned oracle! *I don't know*. I can't predict the future. Ask yourself...or Narcissa."

Vincent was very silent. There was a thickness between them...not a wall, or even a barrier, but just a heaviness. Finally, he spoke, his voice tired. "Snow told me he always learned their names. I think in a way, that must have been his need to personalize them...to keep some remnant of his humanity."

Diana shook her head. "No. Again, you are being too kind. I never knew the name of the man I killed in the tunnels that day. I never asked his name. I didn't want to know." Her eyes blazed in the lamplight as she continued. "I knew Gabriel's name. Believe me, Vincent...it made no difference. None at all. The soldier doesn't question when he kills the enemy, Vincent. He may regret it, he may even have nightmares over it...but he does it. You and me...we're soldiers...warriors. We react...and we have the strength to do what we need to do." She sighed...the sound regretful. "Even hunting and killing can be a talent, Vincent...even an art. I learned that long ago." She stood, and held out her hand to him. "I hear Michael coming. Let's go home."





No more was said about Diana's sentry duty, or her scheme to be put back on the roster. When they reached their chamber, it was late, and they needed to get to bed. Tomorrow was Winterfest. Almost everything was done, except the final preparations. It would be busiest for William and his helpers tomorrow. Diana sat crosslegged upon the bed, brushing her hair, and Vincent pulled out his journal. He wrote for awhile, until he felt Diana behind him. His eyes closed, and he let his body and mind absorb his sense of her. Soft arms slid around his neck, and hair like liquid fire slid over his shoulders. Softly, she breathed in his ear, "Come to bed, Vincent."

Turning slightly, Vincent spanned her waist with his hands and pulled her down into his lap. Diana touched her lips to the crease between his eyes, then traced the fur on his nose with her finger. Her fingers lightly traced the lines of his face...all bone and angle...beautiful in its symmetry. Their bond sang between them, with all the darkness and the light, and the very air seemed charged. Vincent groaned as he could feel the tide of desire breaking over him like waves upon a shore--with "The Other" in his usual semi-serious battle for control. Diana's voice was husky with her own desire as she whispered to him, "I'm feeling a little predatory tonight...in case you hadn't noticed." She tangled her hands in his mane and pulled his head down for a fierce kiss. The low, heavy, snarl as she nipped his lower lip hard reverberated through the closed chamber. He tasted the blood on his lip delicately with his tongue, shuddered, and eyed her hungrily. He felt as though Diana's desire and his own were swallowing him, but it was not into darkness, but into light.

As he swept her up, eyes blazing, and carried her to the bed, he replied hoarsely, his voice grating with and undertone of a growl: "Yes. But which of us is the prey?"

As Vincent allowed the tide to carry him, he could feel his dark twin meld with him to the point where they were one being for a time. The desire and need shook him with its intensity. There was a storm around him in in him. There was no play this time, and Diana's teeth left their own mark as they both reached as far into the other as their bond and their physical bodies would allow. The battle between Vincent's two halves had become more of a give and take...at least where it came to Diana, and the result of that fusion of wills was explosive.



Lying amidst tangled, sweaty sheets, Diana shivered as her body cooled, and Vincent reached down and pulled the quilts back up on the bed, covering them both. She snuggled, spoon-fashion, back into him as he collected her body with his long arms, holding her close, kissing the bruises and shallow scratches on her shoulders. The last thing she remembered as she drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep was Vincent's husky voice whispering into her ear, "You bring fire to my soul."

Vincent thought sleepily: *...And in himself possess his own desire.*¹⁶



In the city Above, the day dawned miserable and cold. The snow had turned to slush, and it had been sleeting all day. But down in the tunnels, the never-ending darkness was pushed back by thousands of candles and oil lamps, and the festive mood was contagious.

Vincent had left early to finish the final preparations of the Hall, and Diana had gone to help deliver the last remaining Winterfest candles. By afternoon, however, everyone was almost finished, except for William and his crew, who were still working in shifts on finishing touches for the feast.

Elliott walked slowly through the tunnels. It seemed a second home to him now. He wondered what Cathy would have thought of his involvement down here. He stood for awhile on the bridge in the Whispering Gallery, waving at some of the older children as they passed by. He could barely hear the whispers today, with the pipes and the voices here below. Like last year, the pipes were clamorous. *I don't see how everyone doesn't have a headache...they probably do, but they're too polite to say so. Never saw such people.* Elliott had not been down since before Diana's case with Marjorie. He'd been so tied up with his first really big project since re-starting his business that he'd had no time for visits, and neither Vincent or Diana had been up either. He'd missed the visits. *Even missed playing chess with Father.* Elliott smiled to himself. He knew Jacob would *never* let him escape without at least one game. He wondered where he might find Vincent...or Mouse, and stopped Eric to ask him.

Eric pointed toward the Great Hall. "Down there. Still moving stuff around."

"Thanks, Eric."

As Elliott passed through the Chamber of the Winds, he noted that the doors to the Hall were shut, but the bar was not across the door...*Thank God!* It generally took two men--or Vincent--to lift the damn thing. Hauling the door open enough to get in, then getting out of the way before the door could blow closed on him, Elliott was met by an exuberant Mouse.

"Elliott!" Mouse turned and yelled for Vincent. "Vincent! Look! Elliott's come."

Vincent turned from directing the placement of some candelabra and held out a hand for Elliott as he approached. "Good to see you, Elliott. We had not heard, so we were not sure you would be here."

Elliott held up his candle. "This is the only family I have, Vincent. Where else would I be?" Looking around and surveying the Hall, Elliott commented: "Everything looks great. Are you about finished?"

Sighing gratefully, Vincent responded: "Yes. Mouse and I are just now going to get cleaned up." Lifting his head, a moment, he added..."and I think you will find Diana with the children in the dormitory...if you would care to visit."

Elliott grinned. "Is that an invitation to leave or permission to go visit?"

Mouse giggled, and Vincent just smiled. "Neither. You are welcome to come visit while we shower...or go see Diana. You do not need my permission."

"Um. I must be coming up in the world." He grinned at Vincent and asked, "You going to be drinking tonight?"

Mouse piped in..."Vincent doesn't drink."

Neither Elliott nor Vincent said a word...but their eyes met briefly...again nothing was said, but Elliott was a little confused.

They headed off to the showers, Elliott tagging along. He was hoping Vincent would say, or do, something that would give him a clue to his odd behavior the last time Elliott had seen him, but obviously even if Vincent had been so inclined, Mouse's chatter would have precluded that.

Mouse finally finished his shower and left to find Jamie...leaving Vincent and Elliott alone. Again, those azure eyes met Elliott's gray ones. Sighing, Vincent commented quietly. "It's all right, Elliott. Truly. It won't happen again."

Elliott leaned against the boulder while Vincent dressed, watching him...eyes narrowed. "What won't happen again? You don't even remember, do you?"

Vincent shrugged and looked away. "No. Leave it...will you please?"

Elliott started to open his mouth, then shrugged. "I suppose...if I must. But I have to tell you, Vincent...when a friend is in trouble...I don't like to stand aside."

Vincent smiled then...very gently. "I know. But truly Elliott, the trouble is past...and today is for celebration."



Diana was in the dormitory changing the children's clothes for the celebration. The boys were ready and eager to leave, so she let them go with Samantha and Kipper, who were taking a group of younger children with them to the Great Hall to play some games. Sebastian was already here and was entertaining them with some magic tricks. Cathy, as usual, was fighting Diana over her hair.

"No!"

"Yes, Cathy! If we don't braid it, by the time we get through the Chamber of the Winds, it will be everywhere."

Cathy shook her head vehemently.

Diana gritted her teeth and counted to ten. About that time, she heard Joe's cheerful voice behind her. "Hello! And how's my girl?"

Cathy jumped down and ran to Joe. He swung her up and looked critically at her. "How is it that you're not going to Winterfest!?"

Cathy looked puzzled. "Cathy going!"

Joe shook his head mournfully. "No. Only big girls get to go to Winterfest... and only little girls let their hair get all tangled by the wind. Look at Erica and mommy."

Cathy looked from one woman to the other, and Erica of course had her hair done up tightly against the wind...Diana's was braided. "Cathy can be big, too."

"Sure, kitten...but how?"

Cathy squirmed to get down and ran to Diana. She climbed up on the bed and crossed her arms. "Okay."

Diana just shrugged and grinned at Joe. "Thanks."

"I'll put it on the tab. It's always good to have you on the debit side so I can twist your arm when it needs it."

About that time Jacob ran back in the room to pick up something he'd forgotten, and Diana called him. "Jacob."

Jacob skidded to a halt at the door and glanced at Diana. "Yes?"

"Would you please tell Chris to behave himself today?"

Jacob grinned. "Sure."

On his way out, Jacob ran into Vincent and Elliott coming in, and he waved quickly, then ran out to catch up with the others.

The friends visited for a few minutes, then Vincent asked Diana: "Did you ask Jacob about Chris?"

Nodding, Diana laughed cheerfully. "This may be an interesting Winterfest."

Joe asked, "Who's Chris?"

Vincent chuckled, a soft rumble. "Well, Joe...you remember Kristopher Gentian?"

Joe looked puzzled. "Yeah. Dead guy. An artist. I investigated him when he wanted to do Cathy's picture..." Joe's voice trailed away a moment. He'd seen the portrait in Vincent's chamber, but never *really* connected the thought. "Hey...you mean he's not dead! He's here! Damn!...here I thought that painting I bought was going to really be worth something because the guy was dead!"

"Well...no..." Diana interjected. "He *is* dead. He just refuses to go where he's supposed to go. I suppose he's having too much fun here."

Everyone stopped dead and looked at them both in disbelief. "You mean a *ghost*?" Joe asked, hiking Cathy higher as the child wrapped her arms around his neck. "I don't believe it."

Vincent motioned them on, and as they walked, he explained the whole story. "...Then, when Kristopher got bored, he decided to visit me...found Jacob, and presented himself as his guardian angel...sent by Catherine. I was not impressed."

Joe said quietly, "I guess not."

"However," Vincent continued, "he seems to be doing no harm, and the situation has been explained to Jacob. He seems to understand, though he insists on calling him Chris, still."

Elliott finally asked, "Does everyone else know about him?"

Vincent rolled his eyes a little. "Most people have been...informed. Some do not really believe, like Father. Most haven't seen him yet. If he comes today...we shall see." Vincent looked to Diana. "Are Devin and Susan here yet?"

She nodded gaily. "They are probably already at the Hall."



The group moved through the Chamber of the Winds, along with others who were on their way. Vincent pulled the huge doors open for the rest and held them as the others moved through. The music and cheerful noise of voices and children playing greeted them, and became clearer as Vincent closed the doors, closing out the wind.

Soon, everyone was gathered, and Father called them together for the celebration. As they all sat at the huge tables...too many now for only one...Father began...lighting his own

candle and reaching over to light Mary's...and she lit the next.

Vincent's attention focused on Father as he began speaking:

The world above us is cold and gray. Summer a distant memory. Our world, too, has known it's winters. So each year, we begin this feast in darkness, as our world began in darkness.

His deep voice resonating...gentle, but firm, Vincent continued:

Long before the city above us raised its towers to the sky, men sought shelter in these caverns.

Mary's gentle voice continued briefly:

In those days, these tunnels were dark places, and those who dwelt here dwelt in fear and isolation.

Devin spoke next, glancing at Vincent and meeting his eyes: *This was a land of lost hope, of twisted dreams, and despair. Where the sound of footsteps coming down a tunnel were the sounds of terror. Where men reached for knives and rocks and worse at the sound of other men's voices.*

Father began again gently:

At last, a few people learned to put aside their fear, and we began to trust each other...to help each other.

Vincent's voice began once more:

Each of us grew stronger. Those who took the help, and those who gave it.

Tears in his eyes...as there were every year...Father finished.

We are all part of one another--one family--one community. Sometimes we forget this. And so, we meet here each year, to give thanks to those who have helped us, and to remember: Even the greatest darkness is nothing--so long as we share the light.¹⁷

The huge chandeliers had been lit during the ceremony and were now being raised, and after a hushed collective sigh, conversations began once again.

Vincent sat very quietly for a few moments, letting the ceremony, and the feelings of his family and friends wash over him. He wished he could hold everyone here within the circle of his arms...love them, and keep them safe forever. He had learned to share the light in a completely new way in recent weeks...and to share the darkness as well. And he had learned for the first time the absolute truth of what Father said every year. *Even the greatest*

darkness is nothing-- so long as we share the light.



Diana sat with Cathy on her lap, watching Vincent. She could feel his contentment with his life...but mostly...with himself. Important changes had taken place within him in the last month or so. He still had a way to go...and "Mikey" would continue to haunt him in one way or another for a very long time, but Diana felt he understood himself...and his dark side...a great deal better.

The feast continued, and when Diana looked down, and across the table, she was startled to see Kristopher's mischievous grin looking back at her from behind Linnell. He leaned over and spoke to Linnell, and she nodded. Diana pulled at Vincent's sleeve to get his attention, but when she looked back, Kristopher was gone.

"What is it?" Vincent inquired softly.

"Nothing. Just Kristopher. I saw him with Linnell...but he's gone now."

Before long, Jacob, Toby, and a horde of other small children came running up to Father, asking him to please come and tell them a story, and Diana let Cathy down so she could join them. They wanted to hear the story of how Vincent had been found. Vincent rolled his eyes and took Diana's hand. The music was starting, and he led her out to dance. "I don't think I can bear to hear that story again...especially since I hardly know what is true anymore myself."

Diana relaxed against Vincent's broad chest, resting her head on his shoulder as they danced. She thought he might be disturbed, from his comment, but she felt only quiet contentment. He brushed his cheek against hers, the soft fur rasping gently. He whispered. "I think Linnell is keeping Kristopher busy."

Diana raised her head and glanced in the direction Vincent's chin was pointing, to see Kristopher dancing with Linnell. Kristopher glanced up and grinned...then winked.

"I wonder if anyone else has noticed?" Diana asked. She glanced around the room, and noted a few curious looks from people who obviously didn't know Kristopher and wondered who he was. But when she saw Father, he looked the most perplexed of all as he stared at Kristopher over the small sea of smiling children. "I think we'd best introduce Father and Kristopher."

Vincent's chuckle sounded like a lion's purr to Diana...who lay against his chest. "Do you think he's ready for the shock?"

Grinning, Diana raised her eyes to his. "Who? Father...or Kristopher?" She took Vincent's hand, and they went to introduce the tunnel patriarch to their newest member.

Father came along, protesting, but when they reached Linnell, Kristopher was already gone. "All right...where is this so-called ghost?"

Vincent looked irritated. "He was here. You saw him, Father."

Father shook his head, a little disgruntled. "I saw someone I didn't know... that's all. Truly, Vincent, I think you've been spending far too much time with Narcissa. Your imagination is running away with you."

Smiling, Diana quietly asked Father, "And how many of our people...or the helpers do you *not* know?"

There was little Father could say to that.

Vincent and Diana went back to the dance floor, and shortly Elliott broke in with an apologetic, "May I?"

Courteously, Vincent backed off as Diana winked and grinned.

Elliott swirled Diana away, mingling with the other dancers...but keeping an eye on Vincent to judge his temper. Diana's laughter was heartening as she told him, "It's quite safe, Elliott. I promise he won't bite."

Bending his head down to hers, he answered in half-worried tone, "Are you sure? He wasn't too pleased with me last time I was down here."

As the dance ended and Elliott led her back to Vincent, Diana quipped, "I'm sure. He's quite himself again."

As Elliott dropped Diana off with Vincent then walked across the floor to claim a dance from Brooke, Vincent crossed his arms and looked disdainfully at Diana. "I'm *myself* again, indeed. Hmph." He glanced up and saw Laura coming toward him to claim their dance. "Excuse me." Vincent moved gracefully across the floor to meet Laura, and Diana stood watching them dance, enjoying the chance to simply watch Vincent move...he was an absolute joy to watch. The fact that he had no idea how beautiful he truly was, only made it that much sweeter to Diana. Devin came up behind her and put an arm around her.

"Doin' okay, sis?"

"Um. Fine, Dev. Thanks. Susan tells me you're doing well with your studies. I'm sure Father is elated."

Devin shrugged. "Father is pleased, but I don't think he's holding his breath. I don't think he will be totally convinced until I have my diploma, have done my internship, and residency."

Suddenly, Diana heard a cheerful, somewhat mischievous voice in her ear. "May I have this dance, pretty lady?"

Turning, she found Kristopher standing at her elbow. "Where did you go? We wanted you to meet Father."

Spinning her out onto the floor, Kristopher laughed. "If you explain all the wonders and mysteries in life..."

Kristopher's laughter was contagious, and Diana joined in.

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Much later, the festivities over and the crowd dispersing, Vincent and Diana bid their friends goodbye and left to take a walk. They had taken the children to bed earlier. Their walk ended in the Painted Tunnels. It was far too cold and nasty a night to go Above. They stood admiring their portrait. Vincent was quieter than usual, and finally, Diana asked him what was bothering him.

"Nothing, really. Only...I've often wondered why...since obviously Kristopher is still very much visible to us...why Catherine has never come back."

Slipping in under his arm and holding him tightly, Diana murmured. "She has, Vincent. She was here many times earlier in our relationship...perhaps not as *solid* a presence as Kristopher. But Catherine knew her time here was done. Perhaps she didn't

want to interfere...to keep you from going on. Kristopher, on the other hand...."

Vincent shook his head and grinned a little, the tips of his canines showing.

"Kristopher...is Kristopher. Yes. I think, perhaps you're right. Sometimes I think even the Almighty would have a problem getting him to conform."

Vincent sighed hugely, and Diana rested her head against him and murmured, "You are feeling...comfortable. Have you reconciled yourself to Lethe, and Modred...and to not knowing your origin?"

He kissed her softly on the forehead, then laid his great head on hers as they stared at the painting. There was a long silence, and she could feel him considering, and when he finally answered, his voice was steady and quiet. "No. But for now, I am content. Lethe I can handle, I believe. Neither "Mikey," nor I knew who she was. That was merely another of Paracelsus' manipulations. The memories I now have of her have helped. Modred is another thing entirely." He stirred uneasily and looked away as he felt Diana's eyes on him, knowing the bond told her more than he wanted to say; and knowing that nothing needed to be said. She knew. "For the rest...it doesn't matter where I came from, Diana...only where I'm going...and how I get there. I've wasted far too much time worrying about the past, and about things I cannot change. I have always worried about where I came from...what I am. When Catherine came into my life, she and I were both so hesitant, always waiting for someday...and someday passed us by. No more." Holding her close, he bent to kiss her, gently molding his lips to hers, then kissed her once again, more deeply. "Someday is now."

Twining her arms around his neck and standing on tiptoe, Diana murmured in his ear. "Let's go to bed, Vincent. Let yesterday...and tomorrow take care of themselves."

Touching his forehead to hers, Vincent nodded almost imperceptibly. His left arm came up around Diana, the long cloak almost concealing her as they walked slowly back toward their chamber.

Sometimes I can see the past as in the far distance - Something I can't change or even touch.

Other times I feel the past is following me like a shadow.

Then there are times when I feel the past is chasing me trying to catch me.

Am I still living in the past or is the past still living in me?

Keeping memories alive is one thing.

Keeping one's past behind them is another.

However, when light is behind us, our images are cast in front of us, which allows us to see an undeniable shape of things.

* "Retrospect;" David Roewade - Reprinted with permission from "The Spiral Staircase Number Five" - Thank you David and Lyn.



From
Hound of Heaven

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat--and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet--
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."¹⁸

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